Farm Boys
Fellows, Will

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PART 2

Coming of Age Between the Mid-1960s and Mid-1970s
Boy in Farmyard, by Jeff Kopseng, based on a photo courtesy of Tom Rygh

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THE BLOSSOMING of America's sexual revolution and counterculture movements represented the beginning of the end of what Henry Bauer referred to in his interview as “the dark ages of sex.” *Life* attempted to shed some light in a 1964 article, “Homosexuality in America,” which declared, “A secret world grows open and bolder. Society is forced to look at it—and try to understand it.” This article, in a popular photo-news magazine that was a fixture in many rural homes, presented homosexuality as a seamy and unfortunate kind of life. Nonetheless, it served as an important eye-opener for fifteen-year-old Doug Edwards, growing up on a farm in central Indiana, and for Harry Beckner in Nebraska, who was twenty-seven years old and married with two children.

In 1967, CBS television aired a similarly dismissive special report on “The Homosexual.” *Newsweek* described the efforts of an organization of San Francisco clergy to overcome the Bible’s “heterosexual bias” in their ministries. Also that year, the television show “N.Y.P.D.” became the first network series to portray gay characters. “Where has Hollywood’s sudden vivid interest in homosexuality come from?” *Time* asked in 1968. “It comes from what’s happening all around,” replied John Schlesinger, director of “Midnight Cowboy,” a movie about a male prostitute. “Everybody does more or less what he wants to these days, and no one says anything about it.” However, *Time* observed that Hollywood’s chance to enlighten the public was undercut by the fact that “most of the homosexuals shown so far are sadists, psychopaths or buffoons.”

In 1969, *Time* reported that a federal task force headed by psychologist Evelyn Hooker had concluded that “homosexuality presents a major problem for our society largely because of the amount of injustice and suffering entailed in it.” *Time* observed that “the report comes at a time when homosexuals are more visible and assertive than ever. . . . Americans can now recognize the diversity of homosexual life and understand that an undesirable handicap does not necessarily make everyone afflicted with it undesirable.”

Also in 1969, *Time* published a major article, “The Homosexual: Newly Visible, Newly Understood.” It gave the reader a glimpse of the diversity of gay and lesbian lives, included a range of views on whether or not homosexuality was a sickness, and acknowledged the inconclusiveness sur-
rounding the “what causes it?” question. “Homosexuals have never been so visible, vocal or closely scrutinized by research,” Time stated. “The militants are finding grudging tolerance and some support in the ‘straight’ community.” The article stated that “homophobia is based on understandable instincts among straight people, but . . . also . . . innumerable misconceptions and oversimplifications. The worst of these may be that all homosexuals are alike.” The article concluded that America was challenged to come up with ways to discourage homosexuality without making life miserable for “those who cannot be helped, or do not wish to be.”

The first television drama to focus on homosexuality from a non-homophobic perspective was “That Certain Summer,” a made-for-TV movie that aired in 1972. However, television shows in the early- to mid-1970s also portrayed gay men as sexual predators and lesbians as murderers. Farm boys who liked to read and could get to a library or bookstore might have discovered such gay-positive novels as James Kirkwood’s P.S. Your Cat is Dead and Good Times, Bad Times, Gordon Merrick’s The Lord Won’t Mind, or John Reid’s The Best Little Boy in the World.

Compared to the men who went before them, those who came of age between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s generally had less difficulty coming to terms with being gay. A more liberal social climate lessened the pressure to marry, which made it more likely that a gay man would figure out that he really was gay before he found himself hitched. And America’s sexual revolution increased the likelihood that he could envision a life apart from the heterosexual mainstream. Though limited in scope and usually negative in tone, the growth of gay visibility in the mass media helped to foster the idea of a distinctly gay way of life. But it was apparent that this kind of alternative lifestyle would have to be lived clandestinely, or as part of a fringe community in a large city, and neither of these prospects seemed feasible to many men. An empowering sense of gay community and a more open, mainstream gay identity were just beginning to develop.

David Foster gives a candid account of the emotional and sexual passions and frustrations of a highly romantic adolescent. Some may be repelled by his descriptions of bestiality, but his story is an important illustration of how a socially isolated teenager found an outlet for his sexual urges. In contrast, wet dreams constituted Doug Edwards’s only sexual outlet until he learned to masturbate at age eighteen, and masturbation was his sole outlet until his first sexual encounter with another man at age thirty-nine. The insularity of German farm communities figures prominently in what Larry Ebmeier and Martin Scherz say about the ways in which their childhoods have influenced their lives. Richard Kilmer exam-
ines the comfortable middle ground he has found between rural and urban; Tom Rygh ruminates on the assets and privations of his small-town life.

Mark Vanderbeek reflects on his efforts to achieve, as an urban professional, the solid self-identity and support he felt as a Nebraska farm boy. Abusive parents are the focus of Heinz Koenig’s and Frank Morse’s accounts. In contrast, Bill Troxell celebrates his grandfather’s gentle influence. Dale Hesterman and Everett Cooper, both recently divorced, examine their hard-won gay identities and the hurdles they faced—for Dale extreme social awkwardness and a poor body image, for Everett the blinders and baggage of a rigorously fundamentalist religious upbringing. John Berg, never so burdened, recalls with fondness his first date—with another teenage farm boy.

Notes

6. “Coming to Terms.” Time: October 24, 1969, p. 82.