Steve Gay

Born in 1959, the ninth of ten children, Steve grew up on a dairy farm near Waterloo, in Dodge County, southeastern Wisconsin. He lives and farms up the road from his parents' place with his lover, Jim Lawver. Steve and Jim's life as a farm couple is the focus of this brief narrative.

MY MOM AND dad are from the old German straight-and-narrow school of thought. I haven't had much of a relationship with them since my oldest sister took it upon herself to tell them I'm gay. I talk to them, but I don't get invited to holidays or anything with the family because they don't want Jim there. I let it be known that if Jim was not welcome to come along with me, I preferred not to come at all. Jim has pretty much come out to everyone in his family, and I've been included in every one of their holidays since we've been together. His whole family comes to our place for Easter every year, and last year they were here for Christmas too.

Jim and I have been together for eight and a half years. We were introduced by a mutual friend at Rod's, a gay bar in Madison. We were probably in lust when I asked him to move in with me after a couple of months. It wasn't until about a year later that we really started to get to know each other, so we've had a lot of rocky roads. I think the way my family reacted probably made us stay together more than anything. After my father found out about Jim and me, he said, "How long do you think this is going to last anyway? You know, gay relationships don't last very long."

At one time, Jim and I were the gossip of Waterloo. "There's two gay men living outside of town." In a small town it spreads like wildfire. Being as open as I am, it doesn't bother me that everybody knows and thinks it's their business. In a small town that's what you've got to put up with. Maybe a year ago, there was some gossip going around that Jim had AIDS. How that got started is beyond me, but I guess everybody's got to be talking about something. I think they're done talking about us now. Hell, there are lots of gay people living in Waterloo that they don't even know about.

Jim and I used to go to a pub near town—kind of a rough and tough bar that gets a lot of farmers and roughnecks. I think most of them knew we were gay. A couple times when we've been there and heard things said about us, I've looked right back at them. There's one idiot who was a year
behind me in high school who was really drunk one night, and he was saying things like, “Hey, Gay, why don’t you come over here and suck my cock?” When I looked right at him, he looked the other way. I thought, you’re just a drunken asshole—but I couldn’t believe that the other people there who knew me didn’t tell him to shut his mouth. A couple of them were fairly friendly with Jim and me, but they just sat there and let him say what he wanted to.

I’ve always wanted to farm, but not driving tractors or milking cows. I enjoyed working with livestock, and I really liked hogs. When I graduated from college in 1981, I came back home to the farm because my dad had a good opportunity for me to get started. For me, hogs are a pleasure to work with, at least for another fifteen or twenty years. Jim works for me and has to take orders from me when we’re working outside. We’re together twenty-four hours a day, which is very stressful at times. Sometimes we want to wring each other’s necks, but it’s nice, too, because we’re on
the same schedule so when we have time off we can go and do things to­
gether.

It seems like a lot of our gay friends put Jim and me up on a pedestal. They think so much of us and of the fact that we’re on the farm and that we’ve been in this relationship for so many years. We don’t feel like we’re anything special, because we know everything we’ve had to go through to get here. Through a lot of hard work and dedication, this is what we have. Fifteen, twenty years ago, I would never have imagined that I would be as happy with my life as I am now, and that I could be the way I am. We can be something society says we can’t; we can act like we’re married and have a total life together. When a farm feed company holds a meet­
ing, the invitation is usually addressed to the producer and his wife. Most of the time, my invitation is addressed to Steve Gay and Jim. They prob­ably have an awareness that we’re gay, but it’s never talked about and I never make a big deal out of it. I just kind of let things go as they go, and people can think what they want. As open as we are about it, I don’t know how many people really know.

Our gay friends think it’s just wild that we’re pig farmers. There are probably more gay farmers than we realize, but most of them aren’t open about it like I am. I guess it’s just the strong-willed part of me that some people have and some don’t. You’ve got to say, hey, my life is going to be what I want, it’s going to make me happy. If other people don’t want to contribute to that, well, then they won’t. If they can’t handle it, that’s too bad. It takes a lot of will and self-determination to go against your family and friends—to make people see you differently than they used to. It takes some gay people a long time to build up to that. They have to feel so much torment and depression to make them finally do it. And some people just can’t do it. Instead they’ll torment themselves for the rest of their lives, for the sake of all those other people.