

INDUSTRIAL STRENGTH QUEER

Forging Community in the Heartland Wasteland

Most outsiders know Flint, Michigan from Michael Moore's 1989 documentary *Roger & Me*. The film, a postmodern take on the American Dream, caricatured a city gasping for life in the 1980s following the closure of General Motors auto factories. This exaggerated portrayal of economic desolation includes at least three Flintoids who are gay or lesbian, none identified as such, their queer sides concealed. Beneath the film, indeed beneath the city itself, lies a queer subtext begging to be read.

Janet Rauch is the "color lady" in *Roger & Me*, the woman who matches fabrics with personalities. She began to accept herself as a lesbian while Moore was still filming. Off-screen she divorced her husband, became active in Flint's lesbian and gay community, and began a life with her female lover. "A lot of people think that Flint is nothing but factory workers," Rauch says, "but I see Flint as really making progress."

Oct. 16, 1980

Five frigging months to 17. I can wait. I have been deeeepressed lately. I had a dream a night ago of my kissing G., rather lustily in the French manner. It shook me up and I spent much of yesterday recovering from the disillusionment. ... I am not sure of my sexuality, but just as soon stay celibate than make any further mistakes.

tive director of Wellness HIV/AIDS Services, Flint scares people into thinking they can't act independently or achieve for themselves. "If you have a track record of feeling like your only value comes from what you *do* (a la working in a GM plant), it's very hard to step beyond your boundaries."

Amidst corporate dominance and economic crisis, Flint's lesbian and gay communities have seen a sort of flowering. A dozen residents, inspired by the second March on Washington in October 1987, returned to Flint motivated to action. Larry Wing, for instance, lost his job when the Fisher Body plant closed two months after the 1987 march, but helped organize the PRIDE Gay and Lesbian Community Center, and co-founded an invitation-only discussion group called Stonewall Forum.

Organizations formed, bars opened, policies changed, closets rattled. Attendance to the 1993 MOW increased at least fourfold. In April 1990 the city council unanimously passed a non-discrimination ordinance. A hate crimes ordinance followed three years later. What does the experience of this working class town show the rest of the country? How can a small, reputedly dying city experience unprecedented growth in queer activism?

Feb. 27, 1981

And so the ordeal is over. I am alive and well. So tired. They took me in a room and made me barf. The nurse came in with my coat saying my friend had to go...

Flint, like much of eastern Michigan, enticed masses of people with high-paying assembly-line jobs. Gays and lesbians came here for livelihood, not lifestyle. They had to carve out their own mecca. By the 1950s, the height of the postwar auto

boom, a local gay bar culture had emerged. Near the posh Durant Hotel a cluster of bars hosted a mixed clientele of heterosexuals and covert homosexuals. Among these nightspots was a "redneck" bar called the State, acquired in 1950 by a gutsy lesbian named Melva Earhart. When urban renewal forced her to move in 1960, Earhart opened a first-class showbar featuring gala drag shows in the shadow of a Chevrolet factory.

In 1968, the State fled downtown to its present location on Dort Highway and dropped all pretense about being a mixed



Melva Earhart with customers at the State Bar, late 1950s.

bar. Today the other mixed Flint bars of the 1950s are gone and the Durant has long been boarded up — much of the surrounding neighborhood leveled to make way for AutoWorld, Flint's failed \$70-million theme park.

Besides the enduring State, Flint's other gay mainstays are the Copa, a downtown disco-era club with "gay nights," and the Merry Inn, the only gay establishment in town with gay owners, a male couple together over twenty years. In October 1994 a heterosexual haven called Contos became Club Triangle, and this September the Short-horn restaurant transformed into Studio 910. Whether the city can sustain five gay bars remains to be seen.

Orla Smithson, who inherited the State after his cousin Melva's death in 1985, acknowledges that new bars have affected business, but notes that customers have started coming back to his bar after satisfying their curiosity. Like the Merry Inn and the Triangle, both of which have recently done remodeling, improvements are underway at the State: new furniture, new lighting, a twenty foot sign out front and a softball field out back.

Carlos Perez, who recently stepped down as interim Director of Student Life at the University of Michigan-Flint, senses that local lesbian and gay people seem comfortable only in a bar atmosphere, and then only when they've had a few drinks. Because of this perception, he never felt welcome.

Apr. 12, 1982

"There's a right time and a wrong time to have sex. This is the wrong time." He was so nice about the whole thing. ... Oh, this is all so weird. I needed to meet R. He is the all I've looked for, and very strangely I am not hurt really that I cannot have him.

Flint did not get its first gay organization until a local Dignity chapter was launched in 1975, five full years after groups formed in Detroit, Ann Arbor, and Lansing. Its initial strong ties to the Catholic Church, and later to the Epis-

copal Church as a joint chapter with Integrity, loosened as the group became primarily social, drawing mostly middle-aged men from varied class backgrounds.

Garry, now 27, moved to Flint from the south to attend college, then held a salaried job there until recently moving to the metro Detroit area. In his process of coming out, Dignity/Flint gave him an important support network. "They are my Michigan family," he says. Garry served as Dignity's last president before the eighteen-year-old group disbanded in the summer of 1993. Garry attributes the demise to burnout, impatience, and an ongoing, misguided quest for the "perfect event." One of the few blacks involved in Flint's predominantly white queer organizations, Garry regrets that Dignity failed to attract more African American members.

Dignity's birth was followed in 1977 by Moonrise, an exclusively lesbian organization, in 1977, and in 1980 by Redeemer Metropolitan Community Church, under the stewardship of Rev. Lin Stoner. The Unitarian Universalist Church often provided instrumental space for these groups to meet. The early 1980s welcomed "Face the Music," a locally-produced women's radio show, and Crossroads, one of the earliest transgender organizations in Michigan. When Moonrise folded in 1984, it was soon superseded by a group called Just Friends led by Ches Bauer.

In the late 1980s a new generation of groups organized, including a young adult group called One in Ten, Gay AA, a P-FLAG chapter founded in 1988, and the Gay/Lesbian Advocacy and Support group (GLAS) begun at UM-Flint that same year. With the 1990s came Stonewall Forum, the newly-formed Mid-Michigan Bears, and, at the forefront, PRIDE Community Center, started in October 1991.

Often seen by Flint's gay men as a lesbian group because of strong involvement from women, PRIDE nonetheless succeeds where previous attempts at coalition faltered. A lesbian and gay



U.S. Rep. Dale Kildee poses at a fundraiser with a reunion of those who lobbied him during the 1993 March on Washington.

Economic decline has left Flint, with 140,000 residents, little more than a husk. Much of its downtown has been torn down or abandoned. Its population has plunged in recent decades and crime infests the city. All the while the heavy hand of General Motors commands. Until the recent resurgence of the auto industry, the threat of additional plant closings constantly loomed.

According to Robert Bader, execu-

BY TIM RETZLOFF

COVER STORY

switchboard, an Over (and Under) 50 men and women's group, and a recently initiated Under 30 men's support group all serve to help people heal wounds inflicted by society.

Carol Fallis, a straight attorney in nearby Fenton, is unabashed about her support for gays and lesbians. "I'm in a great position because I have little to lose except the respect of those I don't respect," she says. An honorary adoptee of the gay community, she has concern about PRIDE's capacity for advancement. "As one leadership burns itself out, others step forward and the organization continues," she says. "To the extent that we use people up then that inhibits its growth."

Nov. 7, 1983

After a hairy day at work I decided to go to the Dignity dance. ... At the next table was a young man, rather weird looking, a tail of hair in back, pretty brown eyes, an earring, very social. ... I went over to talk. "How are you doing?" and all that stuff. Somehow we started holding hands.

Despite antagonistic letters-to-the editor, periodic raids on homosexual activity at rest stops, and incidents such as the county clerk's denial of a marriage license to two men in March 1991 or a homophobic fundraising letter sent by the regional Boy Scouts in August 1994, gay/straight relations in Flint show signs of progress.

Straight hostility is offset by allies like U.S. Representative Dale Kildee, a Democratic incumbent who survived the Republican onslaught of the 1994 election. After years of concerted local lobbying, Kildee last summer signed on as co-sponsor of the Federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act. The lesbian and gay community, in turn, contributed almost \$3,000 to the congressman's re-election campaign in a Sunday afternoon fundraiser.

Earlier this year Flint station WEYI-TV carried a three-part series on Flint's gay and lesbian community. For its part, the *Flint Journal* often covers hometown queers as curiosities, like Jacquin Stitt, a pre-operative transsexual man who won a *Ladies Home Journal* contest as an Oprah Winfrey look-alike, then later went on to host a program on local cable TV. At times the *Journal's* coverage borders on being irresponsible. Four years ago the paper ran an inflammatory article on the State Bar parking lot, notorious for its late-night cruising. Two years later it followed up with a feature on the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival which misrepresented the presence of S/M at the annual gathering.

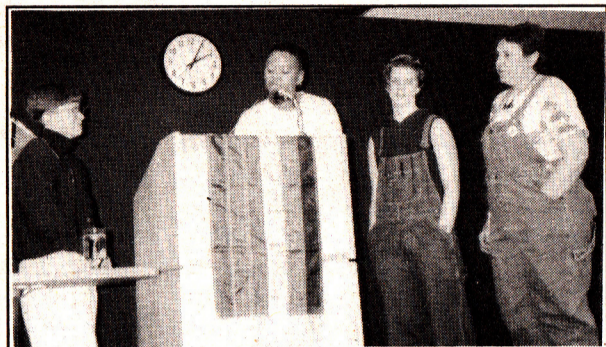
More seriously, the *Flint Journal* caused unnecessary panic when it exposed the AIDS death of a Flint firefighter, contending in a front page story that he contracted the disease on-the-job and posed undue threat to others. When Copa owner Bill Kain died in February 1991 the *Journal* published an obituary saluting his civic spirit, yet

failed to note that AIDS was the cause of death listed on his death certificate, a silence which negated the potential risk to some of Flint's gay and bisexual men.

July 23, 1984

I called M. Monday evening, because we were going to go to the beach that day. I'd tried since 11:00 a.m., to no answer all day long. He said he forgot. He had an AA meeting in Lansing, said he'd call me back. ... I hate being someone's cum rag.

Lillian Ferguson, interim pastor at Redeemer Metropolitan Community



Vivien Zazzau greets Candace Gingrich at UM-Flint last April.

Church, believes trust is the biggest challenge facing lesbian and gay communities. While some bridges have been built between women and men, between white collar and blue collar, between bars and groups, deep fissures pose continuing challenges.

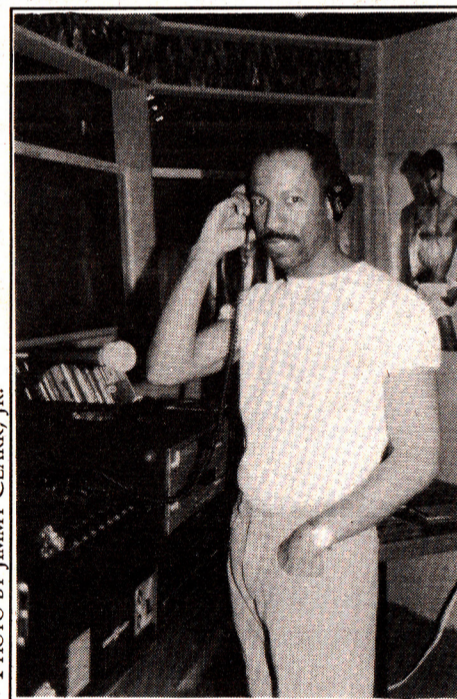
With minorities making up nearly half the population, racial tensions cleave the city. Among Flint queers the *de facto* segregation is replicated. Vivien Zazzau, 35, a student at UM-Flint and current president of GLAS, suspects she is the only out black lesbian on campus. "We hurt ourselves a lot because we're racially divided," she says. Zazzau sees African American lesbians and gays as doubly isolated. "If we're to progress as a people we've got to realize that prejudice is prejudice."

Except for a few short-lived black gay bars in the late 1970s and a strong Sunday night presence at the bygone Hot Rock nightclub, African Americans have been barely visible in Flint's bar scene. Instead a strong tradition of private parties continues among African American lesbians and gays. Denny, a 37-year-old worker at AC Rochester, helped organize an all-black cabaret ball last spring at the Ukrainian Hall. He is a leading force behind a new effort called Portraits of Prestige in Progress, modeled after similar clubs in large cities. A POPP-sponsored Valentine's Ball in February drew over 250. Until POPP's pre-Halloween cabaret, a partial fundraiser for Wellness advertised in all the bars, this aspect of gay life in Flint was almost invisible to the white members of the LGB community. Denny hopes that POPP can help bring black and white gays together.

A newer division is between those with disease and those in denial. Over 200 cases of AIDS have been officially diagnosed in Flint, and from 400-600 people are estimated to be infected, with gay and bisexual men still a major, growing segment of those diagnosed. "Rob-

ert," a 31-year-old gay man who discovered this summer that he has full-blown AIDS, keeps his diagnosis secret to avoid being hurt by gossip. "I call a gay organization and they're shocked that somebody with AIDS is calling them," he says, explaining his view that Flint has stuff for gays, but not for people who are sick. The only support he receives is from Wellness. "The Wellness people are the greatest. If you have any problems at all, they take care of it," he says. As he struggles to live with his illness, he is disturbed by the rampant denial of others. "People are so stupid in this town. They think that it's still not here."

Some schisms are impossible to anticipate. A couple years ago circumstances at the UU Church caused a great divide among Flint queers that has yet to mend. Toni Brinker, 30, who moved to Flint in 1989 when she and Janet Rauch set up a home together, was volunteering in the PRIDE office at the UU Church when a member of the Church of God, a small fundamentalist congregation which also rented from the UU, placed what Brinker describes as "inflammatory, hate-filled" anti-gay literature so that she couldn't help but see it. A battle ensued over the incident and the presence of the Church of God in the UU Church. The UU parish council voted to let the fundamentalists remain.



Christopher Ryan, DJ at Studio 910

For Brinker, the council's action said that the fundamentalists' right to worship in the UU church overrode her right to not be confronted with hate.

Rev. Charlotte Cowtan, a stalwart lesbian activist principally responsible for securing Flint's non-discrimination ordinance, was minister of the UU Church at the time. She argued for a higher level of tolerance: tolerance even for the intolerant. Cowtan has since received much hate from gay and lesbian people who did not share her side of the issue. She stepped down as parish minister and has backed away from most activism. "I've given my quarts of blood."

Sept. 14, 1985

There was an extensive article in [the newspaper] on AIDS. It is quite frightening. ...

So far I haven't known anyone with the disease, but it seems almost inevitable. I could have it, and I could infect whoever I have sex with. And I'm kind of afraid. Just when I start enjoying life...

From the viewpoint of many of those interviewed for this article, the most dominant player in Flint's lesbian/gay/bi communities is The Closet. Working class culture may say "Live-and-let-live," but it also says "Don't talk about it." Even with a city ordinance and non-discrimination policies within the United Auto Workers and at GM and UM-Flint, few local queers will risk being open. Charlotte Cowtan observes that "in the Flint community the majority of the people who are out are people who have nothing to lose."

"Tod", 51, a gay male professional married to a woman, is in the closet except to a small circle of friends. Because there is still much love in his marriage and his relationship with his kids that he doesn't want to give up, he expects to remain closeted. Tod's contact with Flint's gay community was primarily sexual and fleeting at first, cruising mall restrooms, occasionally visiting one of the three X-rated video arcades. He forms relationships more now, and meets men through the America On-Line computer service.

From the heterosexual vantage point of Carol Fallis, professional gays in Flint are extremely closeted, which means that PRIDE and Wellness are chronically underfunded. People in a position to endow those institutions don't do it. People with the most resources are not involved.

Vivien Zazzau knows a lot of lesbians and gays at UM-Flint who are not out, and supports them. It is not an act of cowardice to be closeted, she maintains. People have to eat and feed their families. For herself, though, Zazzau finds the closet unhealthy: "I want people to like me or dislike me for what I am."

Rob Bader chides state and national leaders for acting as if a sizable portion of gays were not still in the closet. "The leadership of the lesbian and gay community on the state and national level does not understand, or seems to not care about, the real issues affecting lesbians and gays on an everyday basis on the local level," Bader says. To Bader, such narrow vision makes it difficult to achieve a place at the table to negotiate change that is truly needed.

June 30, 1986

Today the Supreme Court, in a 5-4 decision, ruled that the state has an interest in telling a consenting adult that he cannot engage in private consensual sodomy. Sexual privacy, in this instance, is not protected by the Constitution. ... It's a big crock.

The University of Michigan-Flint has replaced General Motors as a beacon of promise and hope. Education, not an automotive job, now offers the possibility of a better life. Not surprisingly, the

See Industrial,
page 25

*Industrial,
from page 11*

spirit of openness often inherent in an academic setting has provided a welcoming, nurturing atmosphere unlike any other in the city. The result is an increasingly visible queer presence.

UM-Flint's first Awareness Day in March 1988 sparked the formation of GLAS and a continued campus activism. A landmark 1991 study on lesbians and gay men within the University system led to increased library resources, national speakers like Joe Steffan and Candace Gingrich, and a chancellor-appointed Task Force on Sexual Orientation. Ongoing efforts culminated in the opening last October of an LGB Center. Unfortunately, with its lesbian director currently on maternity leave, its future may be in doubt.

*Oct. 10, 1987 (Washington, DC)
Wow. Incredibly fantasmic. ... I'm having a great time. And my feet are sore. ... There are gays and lesbians all over the place...*

When "Robert" returned to Flint after living in New York, he experienced horrible culture shock. He thought the town was so hick. "Now I'm hick," he says. Still, if not for his dying mother, he would be elsewhere. Carlos Perez, interviewed before leaving Flint for a new life in Miami, longs for a strong gay community. "I've never had that in Flint." He felt naked here, he says, and desires a setting where he can be outspoken if he wishes. "I'm kind of arro-

gant about being spic and queer." Through the years many Flint queers have fled, finding hometown life intolerable.

Others remain. People stay because of work, family, and friends. Lillian Ferguson feels she was called to Flint and insists, "They're not going to chase us away." Robert Bader just bought a house. Charlotte Cowtan, Larry Wing, and Vivien Zazzau all expect to remain. Also staying is Janet Rauch, Michael Moore's "color lady," who, after appearing in the *Roger & Me* sequel *Pets or Meat*, cajoled Moore into donating \$300 to PRIDE.

Flint, Michigan (affectionately known as Wasteland Flint) may not be special, but it mirrors the problems and possibilities of Anygaytown, USA. Its voices deserve to be heard. It is a place to grow up, it is a place to come out, it is a place to survive. In reflecting on potential cities in which to live, former PRIDE director Carol A. Chaney remarks, "Flint is just as appealing as any of them, because where you live is what you make it."

Epilogue: July 25, 1994

It was one of the most wonderful moments of my life. ... He took off his sunglasses and we just embraced against one of the columns. Then he said it: "I love you, Tim." "I love you J," I said. We giggled.

Tim Retzloff, contributing writer for BTL and a lifelong resident of Flint, recently moved to Ann Arbor to live with his lover J.