

# Quietly gay on Main Street

*Lesbian couple retire from Gaylord bed-and-breakfast*

BY TIM RETZLOFF

GAYLORD - One of a handful of gay-owned businesses in northern Michigan closed in early December, completing a mid-life adventure for longtime couple Phyllis Erb and Patricia Teal. The two had operated the Heritage House bed-and-breakfast in the small town of Gaylord, an hour south of the Mackinac Bridge, for five and a half years.

In a part of the state where safe public spaces for gays and lesbians are few, theirs was a valued haven. Heritage House was listed as "Gay friendly" in Damron's and other such travel guides, attracting a small but regular clientele of lesbian and gay travelers.

They bought the inn in 1991 with money they had saved toward a European tour. Pat, 58, was retired from the Ann Arbor Transit Authority after 14 years. Phyllis, six years her senior, had been a wound specialist at University of Michigan Hospital for 24 years.

The women have been lovers since the early 1960s when both were neighbors. At the time they were heterosexually married with children. One would sneak over to the other's house to spend the night. Eventually they each divorced husbands they described as abusive and hurtful, and for 23 years have lived as a couple. They now look forward to a new retirement together in a waterfront home on the Manistee River.

Phyllis and Pat were not expressly out to their straight guests, but did share a bedroom with a single bed. They suspect most straight visitors didn't notice and were unaware. Since both women are grandmothers, guests may not have suspected. "You're either one or the other in a lot of people's eyes," Pat said.

"It's a hell of a lot easier for two older women," Phyllis added. "It doesn't come into their psyche." They were not so much secret as inconspicuous, a seeming necessity in a town of 3,200, where the community might be less than tolerant.

The arrangement may be reminiscent of protective "mixed" bars that existed across Michigan in the 1950s where homosexuals were welcomed yet their presence remained largely invisible to heterosexual customers. "We've never had a bad experience," they said. "It's been a real nice blending of people."

When people called for reservations the innkeepers always asked where the caller heard about the B&B. If it was Ferrari or Damron's or the Women's Traveler, Pat would say, "Phyllis and I are really anxious to meet you." Nonetheless, about ninety percent of their guests were straight. There would not have been enough business to run it as an exclusively gay inn.

Phyllis and Pat remembered their guests with obvious fondness, like the male couple on their honeymoon from North



Pat Teal and Phyllis Erb outside the Heritage House in Gaylord

Carolina who later sent them a rainbow flag. On another occasion two men came from Hawaii. "Those guys were here for two days and we couldn't figure out if they were family," Pat said. Finally, Phyllis came out and asked. They were.

The women recalled only one awkward situation where an elementary school

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teacher and her female partner left when she discovered that one of her students was staying at the inn.

Running Heritage House also helped them to keep in touch with old friends living "downstate" like Martin Contreras and Keith Orr, owners of aut Bar in Ann Arbor. They thus maintained a connection with a larger lesbian and gay community through people who drove up for a stay.

The boldest they've been, followed k.d. lang's appearance at the Interlochen Festival in Traverse City last summer, when they filled the house with women and flew the rainbow flag from their porch. One friend, in the process of discovering herself, was harassed by a neighbor because of the flag. As a result Pat and Phyllis took the banner down. "But we're gonna fly it at the new place," they said with assurance.

The attitude of some townsfolk became clear in Aug. 1993, when a travel agent from Chicago booked a weekend retreat for gay and lesbian families at El

Rancho Stevens, east of Gaylord. Somehow word got to a local Baptist minister named Jon Harwood, who threatened to picket. Although a dozen gay families took part in the retreat, similar excursions never materialized.

The incident had little impact on Heritage House. "The only effect was that we knew we couldn't be open in this town with someone like that," Pat said. "This is Main Street USA."

Even so, both had good things to say about the people of Gaylord. "They've treated us well, supported us, become our friends," said Pat. The hundred-year-old house has been sold to a local religious group which will run it as a home for unwed mothers.

Phyllis and Pat are now anxious to do other things. Owning the B&B had restricted their ability to travel and the extent to which they could be active. The two attend a Friends North satellite group in Petoskey, and would like to become more involved in the extensive but dispersed and largely invisible LGB and women's communities in northern Michigan.

It is evident the two remain wildly in love. "She still gives me naturally curly toes," Phyllis said. When asked, as the two often are, about the secret of their longevity, Phyllis responded, "You have to nurture it."

Pat agreed. "I think you have to take care if a relationship," she said. Of course they occasionally tease each other, but it is always good-natured. "There is never a circumstance where I would hurt Phyllis's feelings," stressed Pat.

"My biggest fear is that life is going by too fast and that someday it's going to end," Pat said. "It'll never be long enough."

"That's why we need to retire and do all these things we want to do," Phyllis added.