

Out in Central Pennsylvania

The History of an
LGBTQ Community

A book review by Mary C. Foltz Associate Professor, Lehigh University

What was it like to be out in central Pennsylvania in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s? How did LGBTQ people in our region build community and fight for equality in ways that connected with our queer and trans siblings' efforts in major urban centers? Who were the rabble-rousers, change-agents, and community-builders that led the way in Harrisburg, York, Lancaster, and other central Pennsylvania cities? William (Bill) Burton and Barry Loveland have answers to these questions in their important new book titled *Out in Central Pennsylvania: The History of an LGBTQ Community*.

They reveal community organizing and activism in small urban centers and rural areas differed from work in New York City and Philadelphia even as LGBTQ people drew inspiration and resources from prominent metropolises. For example, Burton and Loveland provide details about LGBTQ people prior to the Stonewall uprising who felt isolated in central Pennsylvania but nevertheless found ways to build community in bars, cruising spots, and friendship circles. In the 1950s and 60s, gay men visited the establishments like Clock Bar in Harrisburg, the Tally Ho Tavern in Lancaster, the My-Oh-My in State College, or Atland's Ranch outside of York. Lesbian bars opened in the 1970s in the region with the Silhouette, later called D-Gem, in Harrisburg and the Sundown Lounge in Lancaster. While bars created opportunity to meet other LGBTQ people, Burton and Loveland show that members of our community sought to build political, social, and cultural spaces outside of these spaces as well. Burton writes, "Without the benefit of urban attitudes, protections, amenities, or defined neighborhoods, sexual minorities in central Pennsylvania had no choice but to find other ways to unite and build their community" (3).

Beyond the social life provided in bars, the 1970s proved to be a fruitful time for activists in the region. LGBTQ religious organizations like Dignity/Central PA and MCC of Harrisburg took a strong leadership role in developing social and spiritual events to nurture LGBTQ people. Leathermen's organizations like Pennsman, lesbian publications like the Lavender Letter, and university organizations like Homophiles of Penn State (HOPS) also played important roles in creating social and political networks for LGBTQ people to build community and begin to advocate for political and social change.

Throughout their historical account

of LGBTQ organizations and leaders of central PA, Burton and Loveland provide valuable narratives that everyone of us living in the state will cherish. They tell us rich stories about how central Pennsylvanians worked to ban discrimination in employment based for sexual orientation or gender identity during the 1970s in state government, worked with the Pennsylvania Council for Sexual Minorities and the Rural Gay Caucus to continue to fight discrimination in employment and to promote education about LGBTQ people, and built effective community responses to the AIDS epidemic through construction of hospice centers and assistance organizations. Burton and Loveland offer moving stories about the bombings of a LGBTQ bookstore in Lancaster called The Closet in 1991, pride festivals, and marches that show the resilience of our communities as we forged ahead to claim civic space, civil rights, and prominent cultural institutions despite persistent homophobia and transphobia.

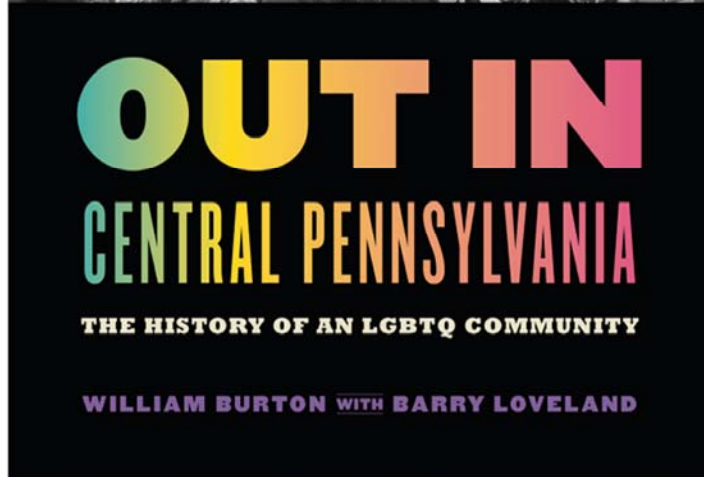
As they take readers into the 21st century, they prove that LGBTQ activists and communities in the region provoked major social and political change; their work created a strong foundation and resource for the continuation of their work for new generations of LGBTQ people. Further, their book pays homage to so many leaders that warrant celebration in book form for their transformative labor on behalf of LGBTQ people. As there is no national liberation movement without regional activists

and organizers, Burton and Loveland offer an important amendment to LGBTQ histories that center upon New York City and San Francisco. *Out in Central Pennsylvania* is this season's must-read book for our community as it powerfully shows how LGBTQ people in our region contributed to the national movement while making regional change from which we all benefit today.

An Interview with Authors Barry Loveland and William (Bill) Burton

Mary Foltz: Why did you decide to write a book about LGBTQ communities in central Pennsylvania?

Bill: I think the importance of this book is because when you look at LGBT history you think about gay life first of all in big, urban areas. And then when you look at books that have been written about rural areas, or non-urban areas, they talk about singular instances of activism or coming out stories. But these books never were about how a community developed. And that was what was so striking, I think, about what we wanted to accomplish



with this book. Our book is about non-urban areas with no civil rights protections, no gay neighborhoods, and how people found each other and how they built their community.

Barry: The value [of our book] is that it shows how people in the LGBTQ community could come together in these smaller places and make such a big difference in terms of acceptance in the national context. Because it's a lot easier to convince people in Manhattan that the LGBTQ community has value and should be celebrated. But in places like Selinsgrove, or Williamsport, or Lancaster, or other places that are small and more conservative, it's a lot more work for activists to start changing minds and hearts of people. And [our book] shows that there was so much going on in these kinds of places. People were doing small things that would be noticed in their community and would start changing the kind of attitudes that have evolved over time. We've made such good progress over the course of 50 or 60 years. But that progress wouldn't have happened just in small pockets of big cities. It had to happen nationally. And so all of these people working in small places made that happen.

Mary Foltz: What are some of the most important stories that your book shares about LGBTQ activism in central PA?

Barry: I am thinking about the surprising things that you find in these small places like the AIDS hospice in York, PA. There were almost no AIDS hospices around the country when Joy Ufema created that York House hospice. And Joy is probably considered the mother of the hospice movement. So, having someone in central Pennsylvania, in a

small community outside of York with that kind of notoriety is really moving. Because she dedicated that period of her life to the hospice care of AIDS patients, she made central PA an important part of the national picture of AIDS activism.

Bill: I was struck by the anti-discrimination fights in Harrisburg, Lancaster, and York and all the people that led those fights and the LGBTQ organizations in these small cities. But these people are not well known, and they had the bravery and the grit to stand up and say, "We're going to fight for these ordinances." There also is the story of a LGBT bookstore in Lancaster called "The Closet" that was bombed twice. Nancy Helms told us the story of her bookstore, which was her whole life, and then the bookstore bombing and the pain of that. During the time of the store bombings, I was in Boston and we had three gay bookstores and nobody would even think about bombing them. It is just so shocking to me.

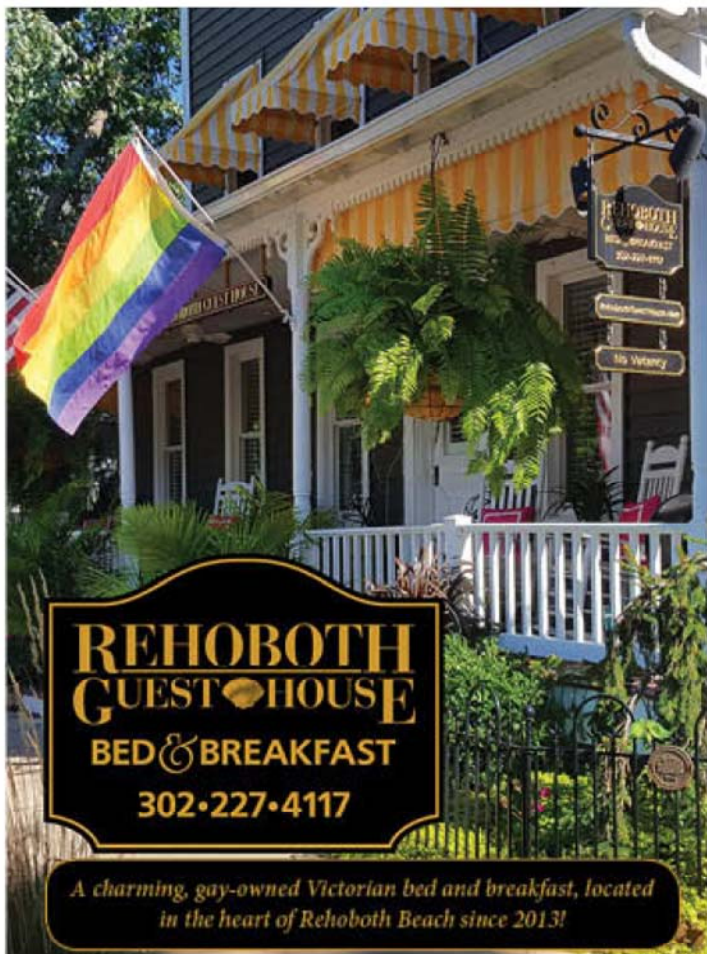
Mary: Your book has so many important stories about the development of LGBT community spaces in a conservative part of our state. I hope many people will read the book as it truly is a moving account of central Pennsylvanians building organizations and businesses that support LGBTQ people.

Barry: I hope because there are so few books that talk about rural parts of the country and LGBTQ communities that this book will strike a chord with people.

Mary: I know it will strike a chord with many! Thank you both so much for your work on this important book.



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