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Land of 10,000 Loves: A History of Queer Minnesota
by Stewart Van Cleve

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‘Land of 10,000 Loves: A History of Queer Minnesota’ by Stewart Van Cleve

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Land of 10,000 Loves: A History of Queer Minnesota

Stewart Van Cleve

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In a few weeks, Minnesotans will vote on whether or not to approve an amendment to the state constitution which would define marriage as a bond between a man and a woman. The people who constructed this amendment implied that gay and lesbian couples are a foreign, un-Minnesotan element that should be driven from the state. If these fearful straight folks had learned about the existence and accomplishments of LGBT Minnesotans in their history classes, they never would have dreamed of this amendment in the first place. In addition to University of Minnesota Press’ recent publication *Queer Twin Cities*, Stewart Van Cleve’s *Land of 10,000 Loves: A History of Queer Minnesota* would fill a much-needed information gap in our state. Van Cleve, a fourth generation Minnesotan, used to work as an assistant curator at the Jean-Nickolaus Tretter Collection, one of the largest LGBT special collections in the United States, at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis (U of M). Van Cleve had learned about the collection because, as an undergraduate, he had the good fortune of taking a course called “GLBT Social Movements,” where Jean-Nickolaus Tretter himself gave a guest lecture about the collection. Van Cleve could barely conceal his excitement:

I have always been interested in local history, but I never found information on the local LGBT population—it was as if we magically appeared in Minneapolis/St. Paul one day and no one really noticed. When processing the Pride committee records, I was truly thrilled by the idea that I was producing history, in a sense, for future generations to learn from. It then became my life’s purpose to continue working at the Tretter Collection, so I consecutively applied

for research grants, then became a student employee, then I worked on specific projects, and I finally became an intermittent acting curator when Jean went into the hospital [during the summer of 2010].

Van Cleve's academic background in urban studies and public history, combined with his intimate knowledge of Tretter Collection primary sources and his Minnesotan soul, make him—at barely thirty years old—the most capable person in the state (aside from Tretter himself) to write this book. In the Prologue, Van Cleve talks about gay and lesbian relatives in different generations of his Minnesota family, and how this affected his family's perspective on LGBT existence. In the Introduction, Van Cleve gives a detailed history of the Tretter Collection and its holdings, and how his work there inspired him to write this book.

The Land of 10,000 Loves is a compilation of over 120 essays, academic in nature yet conversational in style, organized by theme. Most essays are accompanied by a variety of photographs, illustrations, newspaper clippings, and examples of realia such as Pride Guides. Van Cleve shows his love of queer Minnesota by displaying so many physical artifacts and breathing life into individuals who would have remained unknown and obscure otherwise, such as Lucy “La Roi” Lobdell, a nineteenth century frontier woman who traveled on foot through the woods from upstate New York to what is now Minnesota, and lived as a man in order to earn better wages. The photos of Lucy, the story of her life, and the recounting of her forced exile to a New England mental institution, would give any transphobic person of the twenty-first century a chance to reconsider their beliefs. More importantly, Lucy “La Roi” Lobdell is a Minnesota legend every bit as big and brave as Paul Bunyan.

The book begins with a section on queer existence in early Minnesota, including accounts of Native American “berdaches” from French, English, and American missionaries, the mystery of territorial governor Alexander Ramsey's sexual orientation, the first drag shows in the state, and the rise of gay and lesbian culture in the Twin Cities. While queer existence was criminalized among white and Native American communities in Minnesota, public figures such as Oscar Wilde, Gertrude Stein, and Josephine Baker were warmly received in the frozen North, and LGBT neighborhoods began to form around bars and bookstores. The police and the public health department drew maps (provided in the book) to show the locations of these neighborhoods. While no one familiar with Minnesota will be surprised by queer visibility in the Twin Cities, artifacts such as ACT UP buttons from chapters in small towns such as Mora will raise eyebrows. The vast majority of essays in the book cover twentieth and twenty-first century Minnesota LGBT history through recording the existence of activist, educational, social, and Pride organizations.

Van Cleve is apologetic for leaving out many histories of long-lived LGBT organizations in Minnesota, and admits that he had to “limit, ignore, or—in rare cases—excise information in order to write a clear narrative.” In fairness, a great deal of queer Minnesota history remains unrecorded, or did not make it to the Tretter Collection. As a recent resident to St. Cloud, I have heard stories about some gay and lesbian institutions and organizations that once existed there.

At this time, a queer culture “renaissance” is taking place in St. Cloud—drag, an annual Pride celebration, the rise and fall of gay bars, transgender and LGBT substance abuse support groups, and strong ally support and mobilization to fight against the marriage amendment. Unfortunately, St. Cloud gets a bad reputation in *Land of 10,000 Loves*. While it is true that Steve Gottwalt comes from St. Cloud, and that the Sharon Kowalski case took place in St. Cloud, the LGBT population in St. Cloud continues to grow and thrive. Van Cleve’s book has inspired me to have a conversation with the Stearns County History Museum and record the true queer history of St. Cloud.

Further Reading:

University of Minnesota. (2012). The Jean-Nickolaus Tretter Collection in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Studies: University of Minnesota Libraries. Retrieved from <https://www.lib.umn.edu/scr/bm/tretter>

Wexelbaum, R. (2010, October 28). Confessions of a Librarian (To Be): Stewart Van Cleve [Interview]. Retrieved from <http://www.lambdaliterary.org/interviews/10/28/librarian-to-be-stewart-van-cleve/> and http://repository.stcloudstate.edu/lrs_facpubs/12/