

## *Preface to the 2014 Edition*

**C***herry Grove* is the story of how a small strip of a barrier island off the Atlantic coast near New York City, nothing more than a sand spit, really, became the premier lesbian and gay summer colony in the world, and the only one that has a large gay majority, between the years 1930 and 1990. How could such a vibrant community have been created under the oppressive conditions that existed for gay people at that time? There was no written account, so I decided to research the Grove history myself.

All around me, intimately connected despite the absence of the Internet at that time, was a network of other gay and lesbian intellectuals like Jonathan Ned Katz, Allen Berubé, John D’Emilio, Martin Duberman, George Chauncey, Elizabeth Kennedy, and Madeline Davis, to name just a few, who were re-creating, via slide shows and books, the histories that we had never learned in school and were starving for. For us this was a labor of political conviction and love, not necessarily a career move. For one thing many of us were scholars outside of universities; even those of us who were academics had no certainty that our work would be accepted as legitimate.

Looking back, I still find the work that my generation of gay liberationist intellectuals created a mighty proud achievement. We respected LGBT people of varied experience and with their support as narrators and archivists, we produced an outstanding body of work using empirical and theoretical approaches that have both descendants and ongoing power. Specifically, each time I open the pages of *Cherry Grove* I think “well done.” I hope that others will have similar pleasure in reading this history.

People often ask me if—this book having proved my fascination with and attachment to Cherry Grove—I still summer there or at least visited regularly. The answer as of this writing, nineteen years

after the book appeared, is no. The reasons why are as complicated as life always is, but the deaths of most of the elders whose memories made this book possible, and of whom I had been so fond, figured largely.

Of the two women whom I loved most, the patrician beauty Kay had already died in 1989. I could hardly pass her cottage without weeping. Then, in 1997, my closest Grove friend, the petite, exotic, and canny German refugee, Ruth *Peter* Worth, committed suicide at the age of eighty-one.

During the period between ending the fieldwork and interviews upon which this book is based, and its publication in 1993, my relationship with Amber Hollibaugh, to whom *Cherry Grove* is rightly dedicated, as she supported the work in every possible way, came to an abrupt end and I began going to a log cabin in the Catskills with another woman.

*Peter*, who had always had a crush on Amber, and who was appalled at our breakup, left her Grove cottage and a sum of money to Amber, while she charged me with disposing of her papers, possessions, and ashes. *Peter* had been a beloved and intriguing figure to Grovers, and I'm sure they mourned her death sincerely, but the aftermath was fodder for enjoyable boardwalk gossip. The owners and long-time renters in Cherry Grove form overlapping networks through which news spreads fast—as you will discover in these pages—and if I had continued to make the Grove my second home there would have been no escaping the ghosts and the gossip surrounding events that to me were less welcome than kidney stones.

In addition, my partner Holly Hughes, whom I had met in 1995, also had a Catskill summer place, and as for beaches, she preferred Provincetown, where we visited from time to time. Eventually we both got jobs in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The upshot is: I had not set foot in the Grove since 1996.

To see how the Grove looked now I needed to revisit. So on June 25, 2012, Holly and I boarded the train for Sayville, the jumping-off point for the Grove ferry. This is the way that most day trippers access the Grove, but I had only done it once before, back in 1966.

We got up at 6:30 and took a cab to Penn Station: dark, low ceilinged, and unwelcoming. I was now eligible for a senior ticket—\$32 for round trip—which was like a handshake with the elders I had known in the 1980s, when I was in my forties.

After changing trains in Jamaica, we were held up for hours in Babylon because of bad weather farther east over Long Island and missed our 11:30 ferry. But when I grouched to Holly that it was a hassle to get to the Grove this way she countered, "It's easy, you can get there by public transportation." She's right. Try that in Palm Springs or Key West.

We were ferried from the train station to the ferry depot by an indifferent bus driver and, after standing around for a half hour, bought ferry tickets from a bored teenager who seemed to enjoy informing me that the advertised senior tickets were only available through a card provided by the county office back in Sayville. We were hungry by now and bought overpriced sandwiches at the ferry depot restaurant.

These misadventures reminded me of some aspects of the Grove that I had come to dislike. Because the Grove is on an island, accessible only by boat, prices for everything from Cokes to construction are high and there is minimal competition. And, although "Death to Fags" is no longer spray painted on the train station wall, the citizens of Sayville still seem faintly hostile, as expressed in indifferent service. Though of course locals have always been annoyed by the summer people, upon whom they also depend, regardless of sexual orientation. Several people in the Grove told me that Sayville now "loves" the Grove and expresses pride in its reputation as the "gay mecca."

At the ferry restaurant we sat next to two tables of attractive young minority men and women with wheeled coolers, once so derided by Grove owners, beach umbrellas, and a little dog in a carrier. A young blond guy and his graying lover, also accompanied by a small dog, sat in another corner holding hands and whispering. When at last we boarded the ferry we talked with a young lesbian couple from New Jersey about motor homes. They wanted to rent one to go to the Michigan Women's Music Festival and were vacationing in the Grove for a couple of days at Dune Point, where Amber and I had first stayed and where we had been surprised that the police came quickly to remove some harassing straight men.

At the dock we were met by Jan Felshin and Edrie Ferdun, who greeted us warmly and put our bags into one of the ubiquitous radio flyer red wagons for the short trip to their home. One aspect of the community's charm is the lack of any roads or gas-powered vehicles, with the exception of the diminutive fire trucks. Back in the 1980s

Jan and Edrie taught me a lot about Grove lesbian history, especially lesbian history. Over the next two days they brought me up-to-date, introduced us to some of their friends, accompanied us to a party, as well as put us up in their charming upstairs guest quarters. Readers should bear in mind that with one exception discussed below, people I talked to were over sixty; much younger Grovers probably have varying views.

Over the forty-eight hours of our stay, several changes struck me. People estimated that about half of the houses are now occupied by women, and, just as significant, several key leadership positions are held by women. "There are lots of business-minded, super-competent women out here now who know how to run things," Jan told me. A restaurant on the ocean is now owned by two women who are retired cops. They both look like attractive, savvy working-class women of middle age and own a house on Lewis Walk called "Venus Envy."

There is a new umbrella organization: The Cherry Grove Community Association, Inc. Both renters and owners can join and hold offices, so there are no longer the conflicts between renters and owners that were such a notable part of Grove history. The Property Owners are a subset that is not tax exempt, but the Arts Project and other arms of the CCCAI are tax exempt. I saw on a bulletin board that the Dunes Fund is still active. The height and health of the dunes on the ocean side are vital bulwarks against storms. There are nine volunteer community organizations now, supported by various fund raisers. The most colorful still is the annual blessing of the houses, when Grovers in drag visit each house and solicit donations. And of course there are other benefits throughout the season; for example, the women who own the last bayside house to the west hold a Concerned Women of Cherry Grove benefit each year to raise money for breast cancer.

Jan and Edrie had invited us specifically on Monday because that night Gay Nathan, who had once been Kay's lover and had eventually bought Kay's cottage, was throwing a party on her deck; it rained, however, and the party moved across Gerard Walk to the home of Joan Van Ness, who was the star actor in the storied events of 1993 when, dressed in a gown and wig, she had been the first woman to win the Miss Cherry Grove drag contest. The party was similar to ones I had known: all white (with one exception, I'll get to that), middle-aged, and elderly Grove homeowners, men and women, casually but neatly dressed, sipping cocktails, eating finger food, and ex-

changing Grove gossip. Except that many of the Grovers of the 1980s were gone. One exception was one of my interviewees, *Rose* Levine, the celebrated local drag queen, who is still writing the Grove social column for the *Fire Island Tide*. Rose was full of fun and demonstrated that he can still do a high kick.

*Rose* and I reminisced about outstanding drag performers of the past, especially Richard “Dickie” Addison, whose camp performance of the Dying Swan, with his friend Jack Richter, had been as crazy, beautiful, funny, and tragic (at the height of the AIDS epidemic) as the best moments of Charles Ludlam’s Off-Broadway Ridiculous Theatrical Company.

*Rose* complained that there were no talented young drag queens in the Grove. They are all into glamour and lip synching. I have heard this complaint throughout gay male culture since the 1960s, so I took it with a grain of salt. Besides, I had heard that Tom *Panzi* Hansen, an outstanding performer, was still around (unfortunately not while I was there). I also saw posters advertising the visits of such pros as Hedda Lettuce and Sybil Bruncheon. But I did not hear of any more of the grand drag parties that had been so much a part of the Grove’s past.

Gay Nathan had thrown the party for a visiting friend of hers, but as it turned out, quite a few people wanted to tell me how much they loved my book and how pleased they were that it would be reissued, proposing a Grove party and book signing to mark the event. I suggested a repeat of the Grove history slide show that I had done at the Community Center after the first publication in 1993. And of course *Rose* took my picture with party guests for the *Fire Island Tide*.

Another notable change was that when many people introduced themselves they pointedly described the person with them as their husband or their wife and held up their fingers to show their wedding rings. Some had got married in Canada, others during the California “window,” still others just since New York State legalized gay marriage. All were smiling and fairly bursting with pride and when asked if they felt different since marrying, said yes. Tim Webster and David Bullock, with whom we would spend the next morning, said that being married had given them a sense of permanence and security during David’s life-threatening kidney cancer.

As we left the party the rain had abated, and Gay took us across to see what had been Kay’s house. From the outside it was still the

modest white wooden cottage; inside, however, they had raised the ceilings, modernized the kitchen and bathroom, and added better closets. Gay proudly pointed to the “orange naugahyde couch” on which Kay and I had sat so many mornings, though it was no longer orange—she had recovered it.

As we were taking leave I stroked the green ceramic cat that clung to one corner of the house. “Kay always put the cat in place to show she was at home,” I remarked. Gay corrected me: “Kay was always at home. She put the cat out when she first came for the summer and it stayed there until she left the island.” That was what I had meant but her reaction, which she later repeated to Jan and Edrie, showed me how important it was to some Grovers to have their homes and history in print, and how concerned they were that I get it right.

We spent the next morning with Tim Webster and David Bullock in their beautiful bayside house, Finesterre, which, as its name implies, is the very last house in the Grove before the Sunken Forest, which is a National Seashore. I had been to Finesterre once before to interview a man I called “Ed Bridges” in the book. Ed had sought me out for the interview, wanting to be sure I got his perspective, which was very class conscious and closeted. I had not met his partner, David, at the time. After Ed’s death Tim entered the picture and he and David have been together for many years.

David and Tim couldn’t have been more hospitable and open, both were retired, and both said they were no longer closeted. Our talk with them brought out two issues of particular importance in the Grove: ecology and the fear of losing gay dominance in the Grove. The previous day we had noticed with dismay how much erosion has occurred along the Great South Bay. In fact, a boardwalk leading into the scrub forest between Fire Island Pines and the Grove, named the Meat Rack because it is the locale for cruising, used to be over land but is now over the bay.

According to David and Tim, the drastic erosion started in 2002 after a particularly bad Nor’easter. Alarmed, a group of homeowners on the eastern end hired local contractors to put in bulkheads but failed to get permits for the work.

David then tried to get five houses on the western side to join together to put in bulkheads. But the women who had bought Natalia Murray’s old house, and, who, several people told me disapprovingly, are Republicans, panicked and began work on a bulkhead, but were

reported to Brookhaven, the county seat, probably, David speculated, by the late Maggie MacCorkle who was thought to dislike the “Republicans,” and whose house was kitty corner to theirs. The rabbit women, so called because their house is named “Lapin” and they have a pet rabbit, were told to cease work and were fined.

Meanwhile, David was told he could not get a permit until the county could study it thoroughly. This went on for three years and during that time Finesterre (and presumably all the unprotected bay-side) lost thirty feet of land to the bay. Finally homeowners were told they could put in “gabion baskets,” which are bundles of stone held together by wire webbing, and the remaining houses did so, which has slowed the erosion.

*Peter Worth* used to advise me against buying in the Grove, saying it was “built upon the sand” that was sure to be washed away. But with the rising sea level, barrier islands are the most vulnerable canaries in the mine for all coastal regions of the United States.

Meanwhile the dunes on the ocean side are the site of some house renovations and new construction. We had seen a gigantic house, seemingly the size of an ocean liner, bigger even than most homes in the more affluent Pines, under construction. The owners are said to be a straight couple with two daughters, who have told inquiring Grovers that they only bought in the Grove because ocean-front land was cheaper, and for no other reason. This did not go down well, given how attached Grovers are to those “other reasons” for coming there.

Some thought that real estate was cheaper in the Grove than elsewhere on Fire Island because there was so much commotion going on in the downtown almost every weekend: Miss Fire Island, Liza Minelli, the Grovettes vs. Copettes volleyball game, and so forth. I was surprised, as people used to say that property was cheaper in the Grove because of the stigma. Or else because it was more expensive since gay people had so few choices. Whether it is cheaper or not is an objective question that any realtor could answer. There is now a representative of the big real estate firm Prudential Douglas Elliman in the Grove. Houses I saw advertised were asking mostly in the high six figures, whether in the Grove or the Pines.

Several gay people told me that the straight couple, who are renting while their enormous house is being built, are very unfriendly, even nasty, and there are fears of straight people flooding in to take

advantage of the supposedly lower real estate prices. Ever since the Grove became majority gay there have been worries about straights invading and/or taking over, so this is not a new threat.

As far as the arts are concerned, I presume that the annual Art Show, which features Grovers' photographs and paintings, still exists. More important to the lifeblood of the Grove is the theater. Tim and some others wanted the community to do serious plays, not just funny ones, and there have been some productions. Gay Nathan, who had bought Kay's house from Martha, did a production called *Gertrude Stein and Her Companion*, in which she played Stein, and it was well received. A Grover named Richard laFrance wanted the Arts Project to form a resident troupe, but too much commitment was demanded and it folded. So laFrance formed his own troupe and they have put on some productions. The camp theatrical tradition has also been augmented by other genres. There is now a group called the Oceanaires who play classical music and put on a concert each season. It includes locals and also imported musicians and, I was told, plays at a high level.

I also wanted to know if the Grove was now more hospitable to LGBT people of color. In chapter 6 of *Cherry Grove* I considered how the original white Protestant settlers were succeeded by white middle- and working-class Italians, Irish, and Jews in the 1960s.

During the 1980s there were no homeowners of color except for a couple of partners of white Grovers, and I found no renters at all. There were plenty of minority day trippers, but they were somewhat feared and avoided by white Grovers, and none seemed to have gained a foothold. So when a friend gave me an introduction to two African American renters, I made sure to connect with them.

Chas Bennett Brack and his partner Robert are both in their forties and the products of prestigious educations; both are professionals; both are "clean and sober" and met the owner of their house through NA meetings. The owner only wanted to rent to others in the program.

Chas and Robert share the house with other black men. Chas told me that he loves the Grove—so much so that he wants his ashes scattered here—and feels that whenever he is here something profound happens. He also feels safe because there is an AA meeting now every day of the week. (During the '80s I think there were only three.) But



he thinks it's still racially segregated. Even though he frequents the AA meetings, he does not feel very welcome there.

Chas thought now there might be one other house rented by men of color. I saw several people of color on the walks, but of course they could have been day trippers. At the Gay Nathan cocktail party there was a young black man who told me that he “helped” the two white gay men he was with “with the house.” But he clearly wasn't just “help” since he was invited to the party, where he looked bored stiff.

Chas mentioned the Grove Black Out party as the biggest event of the year for the black gay circuit. I hadn't known there was a black gay circuit, so later I looked it up on the web. Chas told me lots of women attended Black Out, and there were plenty of women in the website photos. Black men think of the Grove as a lesbian place, Chas said, so most wouldn't think of renting there.

When I told Jan and Edrie about Chas saying that black gay men thought this was a lesbian place, they nodded and said the Grove does have that reputation. They knew about Black Out, and I asked if there was any racist reaction toward it from white Grovers. They said that the first event was held on the beach without any planning, so there was no monitoring and people were peeing in the bushes, falling down stoned, and leaving garbage. The community was upset until the organizers subsequently went through proper channels, setting up port-a-potties, proper sound systems, communicating with the local business owners, and so forth. Edrie thought that some of the initial negative reaction was probably racist, but it was hard to know. I am hopeful that in the future the Grove will gradually become more racially diverse.

Jan showed me a Grove newsletter, and to my surprise there was a notice of the fourteenth annual Cherry Grove Pride Parade. Nothing like that existed when I was here, no notice of it at all. I was in the Grove in 1986 when the Supreme Court, in *Bowers v. Hardwick*, ruled that gay people had no right to privacy and that state sodomy laws were justified by “tradition.” Amber and I felt isolated in our anger since there was no public reaction. It was the height of the AIDS crisis, so many Grovers were sick or caring for the sick, yet fear and shame made the *Hardwick* decision into a private problem. Lurking inside the joy and pride that people took in their summer town was still the sense of huddling together on this sand strip surrounded by

a hostile America. I thought of that as people were showing off their wedding rings at Gay Nathan's party in 2012. Queer people still suffer many disadvantages, but are now more integrated into American life. In this book you will find that gay life before the twenty-first century, however difficult, was also full of laughter, theatrics, sexuality, and love.

Ann Arbor  
September 9, 2014