

"CHERRY GROVESTORIES"

SEPTEMBER 5, 2017

TRANSCRIBED BY: WORD OF MOUTH (DY)

00:00:45

Male : I always dreamed about Cherry Grove as a gay Shangri-La.

00:00:55

Male : We arrived at the dock and I looked down and I saw all these people men in Speedos and high heels and I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

00:01:09

Male : Cherry Grove was always the best kept secret in the whole gay world for decades and decades.

00:01:37

Male : The first time I came to Cherry Grove was the summer of 1943. I wasn't born yet, but my mother came over that summer.

00:01:48

Male : As a kid I came over here the family had property here in 19 -- it was the end of World War II, 1944, 1945.

00:01:56

Male : I first came here in 1951, maybe for a day or a weekend.

00:02:00

Female : 1954.

00:02:03

Male : 1955.

00:02:05

Male : 1956.

00:02:07

Male : In the summer of 1957.

00:02:11

Male : 1957 I was 20 years old.

00:02:13

Female : 1958.

00:02:15

Male : Probably in '58 or '59.

00:02:20

Female : About 1961, '62, '63.

00:02:26

Male : I came in 1963 and I fell in love with it.

00:02:31

Female : I came for my first visit in 1968.

00:02:35

Male : The late '60s.

00:02:36

Male : The first time in 1970.

00:02:39

Male : 1972. I was 17.

00:02:42

Male : Early to mid '70s.

00:02:44

Female : 1977.

00:02:46

Female : 1977.

00:02:49

Male : I remember because that was the year after the
Bicentennial.

00:02:53

Male : 1982.

00:02:55

Male : 1983.

00:02:56

Male : I believe that I first visited Cherry Grove in 1999.

00:03:00

Male : In 2002.

00:03:02

Male : I came in the summer after 9/11.

00:03:04

Male : 2004.

00:03:05

Female : My first gay trip was in 2005 and my first girlfriend brought me and it was incredible and really eye opening. I had just come out as gay and it was really life changing for me when I appeared.

00:03:47

Male : One common story is that there were pirates on Cherry Grove.

Male : Recently?

Male : No. [LAUGH]

Male : Pirates, recently. That would be fun.

Male : Years ago.

Male : I would imagine it could be.

[00:04:00]

Male : Well there used to be ship wrecks along the coast and where there pirates, possibly. Fire Island got its name by people that were ship wrecked here in the early days and would light fires on the bay coast to tell the people on the mainland that they were here and they were stranded.

00:04:21

Male : They claim it was called Fire Island because the pirates would set fires on the island and lure the ships in and then murder the ships and steal the goods. That's one of the lores.

00:04:31

Male : [SOUNDS LIKE: Troy] Dickerson was a World War, let's see World War I veteran and he had a wonderful series of - - of short stories and one of the stories that he had was of Mr. Smith who was supposedly here in the 1600s who was a pirate and who lived someplace in this area of Fire Island. We don't know exactly where.

00:04:56

Female : They say there is treasure on Fire Island. People through the years have come up with coins.

00:05:01

Female : When I used to take my walks every morning which I can't do anymore, but I would always be looking for the chest of coins or something, but never found it and no one else has as far as I know.

00:05:12

Male : When there's fog at night the pirates come into the meat rack out of the fog and murder people.

Q : Have you ever seen one?

00:05:19

Male : Um, yes I did, but he didn't kill me.

00:05:31

Female : In the old, old days when there was no wagons and no people and there were just people over here building I guess they were - - I guess they would harvest hay over here and ship it off. I think that was one of the things that they did do and in order to do that they had to have horses to take the carts of hay to the - - to the boats. And there were a couple of guys over here that had brought a horse over on a barge and the horse died.

00:06:00

And they didn't know what to do with the horse so they were just sitting around drinking quite a bit wondering what to do with it and they decided that they'd bury it. So they dug a hole and they buried the horse, but they didn't dig the hole deep enough and the four legs was sticking up out of the - - out of the earth. So these guys just sawed the legs off.

00:06:30

Male : My grandparents first came to Cherry Grove like 1918 and it was very rural at the time and they - - they rented for six years and they realized that they had discovered paradise. So they bought the property where my house is now and we've been here ever since.

00:06:52

Male : The [UNINTELLIGIBLE] families built the original cottages and - - and brought them over.

Male : Right.

Male : Bought huge stretches of - - of the community, the [SOUNDS LIKE: Durias's] and the Green's and the Girard's, other family names and they'd buy whole stretches from the bay to the ocean.

00:07:08

Male : My aunt owned property here and we came over to help her open up the houses and close up the houses so as a little kid it was mostly off season. My jobs were to clean the, the chimneys because kerosene was the only - - there was no electric. The only way of lighting at night was the kerosene and so I cleaned the chimneys. I got to dig the garbage holds. Over here we had outside burning the west end. If you dig in your yard all of a sudden you'll see it crunch because you'll be hitting old rusty cans or what not from things that were left

over from back in the earlier days before we had garbage service.

00:07:41

Female : When I first came here we did not have electricity. We did not have running water. We had to pump water up to tanks on top of the house and we'd all be at the beach. The first one home would have a hot shower. The rest of us would not.

00:07:56

Male : I just find the fact that there was no electricity until the '60s very interesting. I can't imagine living without electricity. I can't imagine putting on a drag show with a generator in here in the community house. Can you imagine putting your makeup on to Aunt Mary? Some of them were beasts as it is. Can you imagine without lights what they looked like?

00:08:23

Male : The fire department consisted of everyone. If there was a - - there was a post with a big round ring on it which was

a railroad tie bent into a circle with a hammer hanging and if there was a fire you would ring this gong.

00:08:44

Female : Living with my family it was kind of touch and go. I was only like 23 so we would go out to Ocean Beach for the day and dance at the hotel. Then we moved to Ocean Bay and I rented there for two years. I loved the whole idea of Fire Island.

00:09:04

Male : I don't think I knew what it was. I think I - - I - - I knew that it was a queer community and I was a kid from the South Bronx who knew I was gay, but didn't know what that meant.

00:09:24

Male : It was just different than any place that I probably had ever been and it was. I stayed with Dick Hall and Michael Sanchez and I stayed there about four or five weekends, but I was a guest that never wanted to leave.

00:09:42

Male : We find Captain Hawkins who had keys to houses and get together and he'd find a house for us for twenty bucks a weekend.

00:09:54

Male : A lot of people stopped using their houses in the summer and that's when the rentals started. The next generation is the local people who inherited the houses began to sell them to the renters.

00:10:07

Female : Maggie and I rented the town home and then a bunch of the guys and I would share each when the whole summer starting in May through September was \$125.00.

00:10:23

Male : I met a guy and he knew about Cherry Grove. I never heard of the place so we came out here for a weekend and we stayed at the hotel. And there was an awful lot of dancing in those days.

00:10:48

Male : There was nothing but men out here. You had one or two women I think, but essentially it was nothing but men, of young men in their 20's and 30's. And coming out here with a boyfriend was like going to a whore house with your wife.

Q : Were women allowed to dance together?

00:11:17

Female : No, no more than guys were.

Q : So what was the policy?

00:11:22

Female : The policy was then when the bartender whistled or starts doffing himself, the women would quickly find a male partner and get up and dance. It was the same in the city.

00:11:36

Male : Like up at the Ice Palace, they had a juke box and but dancing you had a dance with maybe three guys and one girl. They always had a girl in the dancing group and if the cops came in the lights went on and right away it stopped or we just stayed dancing with the girl.

00:11:59

Male : I've been in the shows since 1955. It's 60 years on the calendar, but I've been performing for 61 years in the, this is my 61st season. It was very hard at the beginning because people, someone, I'm not even gonna mention called me the singing Jew. And then there was - - there weren't that many Jewish people out here then, but I bought my house early on.

00:12:32

Anyway, but there was somebody who was, he had, you know, he owned a house on the ocean. He was very wealthy, gig shot with people around him all the time. They came to the theater and I was in a show and they were sitting in the first row and when I started to sing they all put their newspapers up in front of their face and I stopped the song. And I ran across the stage and I grabbed the newspapers and I threw it at them. And the audience went wild and then I started my song all over again.

00:13:52

Male : When I was in high school my best friend showed me that he saw in a magazine a picture of two boys holding hands on a beach in a place called Cherry Grove and - - and I was very interested in that because, um, I was gay and didn't know it,

but I knew that I would be very comfortable and very at home in a place like that. So I went to the store where the magazines were and sure enough there was a picture of two boys on the beach in little bathing suits going to the water holding hands.

00:14:34

Male : In the '60s it was amazing because you did see people coming to Cherry Grove from all over, all over the world just to meet other gay people.

00:14:45

Male : Hello Dolly was blaring out of all the windows.

00:14:51

Male : I had heard that it was a gay party town that was free and promiscuous and fun.

00:14:57

Male : To me Fire Island was sex and booze. That was, you know, I could have as much liquor as I wanted, have as much sex as I wanted whenever I wanted it was extraordinary.

00:15:09

Female : I was scared shit of it in plain English, but I heard this was an island of all gays and it was sinful city supposedly. You know you hear all these things.

00:15:27

Male : What is the meat rack?

00:15:28

Male : What is the meat rack?

00:15:29

Male : What is the meat rack? Well you could describe the meat rack; the meat rack was sex haven.

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Male : We all started getting prepared to go to the rack about ten o'clock and do all sorts of cleansing and gargling, filing your fingernails. [LAUGH] Getting everything together, the poppers, the handkerchiefs before you went out.

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Female : I don't think I can really say what the meat rack is because I have never been there.

00:16:02

Female : There's a little path that goes through because people who were to go from the Grove to the Pines used this same trail. Such little trails that people can go off and be alone. Some people prefer not to be alone. They like to show everything.

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Male : I don't like that term and I never have, you know the meat rack.

00:16:21

Male : Before I came out I heard the Ice Palace and I thought it was like a freezer and then I heard of the meat rack and I literally thought it was a place where they hung meat.

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Male : The meat racks are where tell people who come to visit don't go there unless you're looking for a homosexual experience.

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Male : It's like a circus. You see all different types of things going on.

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Female : It's known for having people that perform sexual acts. I think mostly at night although I caught a glimpse in the day time.

00:16:57

Male : When I first came in the '70s it was the - - it was the time of, you know, liberation of course and free sex.

00:17:06

Female : When I was younger I used to go to the Belvedere and walk up to the Belvedere thinking I was going to the rack and I wouldn't have the balls to pass the lions. [LAUGH] I would turn around and go back home.

00:17:22

Male : One Sunday morning I came out of the house and there was a guy named [SOUNDS LIKE: Mitty Madigas] and I thought hi Mitty, how is everything? How was the rack last night? Oh Mae you don't know what I went through. And I said what? There I was working on a nice big piece of meat and some ditsy queen went and pulled it out of my mouth. So I bit him on the hand.

00:17:56

I said oh I said he's probably dead by now with the poison in you. And later in the day I met another friend Daphne and I said Daphne how was the meat rack last night? Oh, wonderful, but some ditsy bitch bit me and I said - - so I said I think you better go to the doctor and get a shot. [LAUGH]

00:18:21

Male : We did go there once when we were living here in the winter and it was the dead of winter. It was snow, the bay was frozen, there was snow on the ground and we went into the meat rack expecting to see - - to find out what was there. It was a pretty wooded area and we were amazed in January there were a couple of men in there - - just mind boggling.

00:18:48

Female : I know what it's like out here in the winter because I've been out here in the winter. I spent - - actually Bobby and I spent several Christmases here. We always used to spend Thanksgiving, but when his mother was alive we were taking care of her so we had to go back, but we did spend a couple of Christmas - - Christmases here after that. And it was absolutely breathtaking beautiful and lovely with no people. It was heaven, real heaven.

Q : There was this whole myth that there was something called the donut rack.

00:20:07

Female : Never, never.

Q : So it didn't - -

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Female : No, no.

00:20:12

Male : I heard that there was a donut rack and that, but I don't know if it was true or not. It certainly is a legend around here that there was.

00:20:21

Male : I don't think that's true 'cause I'm not a lesbian.

00:20:25

Female : I heard about it also and there were several women who exchanged partners after a party, but that was that.

00:20:34

Male : The meat rack was on towards the Pines and the donut rack was the [SOUNDS LIKE: George Salas] haven. That's where they said it was, but I don't believe it and I don't remember. I mean I remember the - - the - - the statements about it, but I don't think it - - it ever happened.

00:20:51

Male : Lesbians don't cruise publicly.

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Female : No, there was never a donut rack. There were maybe 24 lesbians present when we were there.

00:21:08

Male : I had a lover who was trying to impress me so he was -
- they were having the bartender awards out here on Fire Island back in the day. They used to have bartenders awards every month and they used to travel bar to bar and have these big parties and it was here at the Ice Palace. So he rented a limousine and, um, stocked with liquor and weed and all kinds of stuff and we got in the limo and drove to Fire Island and went to the Pines by mistake and back then the taxi here on the island was in a dune buggy as opposed to boats.

00:21:42

So we had to walk to the ocean and call a dune buggy and travel along this beautiful beach in the full moon. It was absolutely magical. And then we landed at the Cherry Grove and walked up into the Ice Palace to this massive drag show. It was just a

night I'll never forget. It was just spectacular and right away I knew this was the place for me.

00:22:16

Female : You know drag shows were really non-existent anywhere else and the people that came over to the shows this place was mobbed. Even back in the early '60s I worked at Pat's Restaurant for a while and the people came down from Ocean Beach and they'd all sit at a big table and they would keep saying when are the boys coming over with their funny hats and I would make up stories and I'd say oh they're not coming in tonight. It's a big party down at the other end of the beach. So nobody will be in tonight because they would sit there for two or three hours waiting to see people that were stranger guests than they would ever seen.

00:23:00

Female : There was that feeling that this was our place and back then it was very important because we didn't have a place and we didn't feel like we fit in anywhere.

00:23:23

Male : This was before the Stonewall riots and I - - I worked at Stonewall before the riots in 1968 so it was illegal to be gay and so we would come out here to Fire Island to meet other gay people and everything 'cause we used to meet in the streets in Manhattan and three or four people could congregate in one corner and try to be friends and we'd be arrested and brought to jail for homosexual crime and we couldn't congregate on the corner.

00:23:53

Male : The oppression against the gay community, the lesbian and gay community was so severe that you couldn't tell you family, you couldn't tell your job, you had to be constantly closeted so the importance of Cherry Grove was that it was a safe haven where people could come and be gay, hold hands with your boyfriend and - - and hang out with other homosexuals as they called us. And I think in that it helped to create a community that didn't necessarily exist in the city for instance.

00:24:23

I mean the major communities were either private, upper class communities or the bars. You know there was always a network of

gay bars usually owned by the Mafia back in the '40s, '50s and '60s and '70s and that's all there was.

00:24:37

Female : It was - - it was a very different world back then in the gay world, you know. We were still hiding. I was still jumping out of bathroom windows from gay clubs that were being raided. So the fact that this existed literally 55 miles out of New York City seemed like paradise.

00:25:04

Female : Maggie and I always palled around with much older people, you know, and they just welcomed us. As I said Natalie brought me up and she was 35 years older than I and a very good friend. I met [SOUNDS LIKE: Janna Flander] through her and a lot of the literary groups. Maggie and I gave a party when our house was finished, [UNINTELLIGIBLE] Murray called us and said darling I'm not going to be here. I'm in Rome. But someone is renting my house and I want you to go over and invite them to your party and I said who is that?

00:25:40

And she said Tennessee Williams. And I said oh my god how wonderful. Went over the night of the party and said Mr. Williams would you like to come to our party? Then it's our first night. I would love to and please call me T. He was the first one to show up and the last one to leave. During the evening people would come over and say is that who I think it is? And I'd say who do you think it is? Tennessee Williams and I said well just keep it quiet.

00:26:09

Male : There was a tremendous emphasis on party, home parties, house parties, theme parties.

00:26:14

Male : Well when I first came here there was a huge costume party and in fact our house there were no trees, there was just sand and they once had a party and they had a road going from Belvedere into our yard and some queen came as Peter Pan, but got stuck in the middle and for about an hour screaming. Someone arrived in a barge shaped like a swan full of muscle men. They were really very elaborate. There was an MGM party with them with their favorite star. One person I remember

coming being carried with a liter and had dry ice underneath with a little smoke rising.

00:26:52

Male : I thought they were born here at the, um, at Club Atlantic which is Sand Piper. I saw Della Reece was at the hotel.

00:27:04

Male : We always went every on Friday and Saturday evenings to the, the Monster and we'd stand around outside. There were butcher chairs and couches on the side and we called them Wicker Row and we'd sit there and there would probably be like 30 or 40 of us standing around outside. There was one guy there that we called Papa Bill and if you opened his vest and talked to him he had all these little pockets with all these anal nitrate and poppers and things there that you just bought off him on the spot and it was - - it was like wide open.

Q : How far do you think Cherry Grove was to sexual liberation and the LGBT movement in general?

00:27:45

Male : Well I think it was very important in terms of sexual liberation, but it was absolutely missing from the gay rights movement.

00:27:51

Male : Well certainly Cherry Grove was gay liberation before it happened in the city. There's no question about that. People came out here in the city when they were living in very fine gay life in the city and you came here and you - - you were able to be a gay or lesbian on the walks and you felt a kind of wonderful relief from social pressures you might be feeling at your job or in any other part of your life in the city.

00:28:17

Male : I suspect the [SOUNDS LIKE: Madigan Society] and the people active in that type of - - of movement and of course Stonewall was what led to gay liberation more than Cherry Grove.

00:28:37

Male : I personally found the residents of Cherry Grove wanted nothing to do with the LGBT movement back in the '70s and

'80s. They wanted to be complacent in their little gay haven. So I - - I personally found it as a youth, gay youth back then that it was a challenge getting people involved into the movement or wanting to do anything, even with the AIDS crisis they just wanted this to be the perfect little haven. I think many famous people stayed here and visited here.

00:29:05

Gilbert and, you know, Larry Kramer and different people, but as a community I think that individually people participated, but as a community it did not.

00:29:19

Male : We were sitting on our bed just saying, you know, why are gay people upset, everything is fine. And not realizing that in a way we were in our little ghetto.

00:29:34

Female : I think it was very important and I was then involved with saying to having these wonderful people who [UNINTELLIGIBLE] at the women's dances and the freedom that we had that night, the very first dance and all of it together,

Stonewall and the march in Washington for women was very important.

00:30:02

Male : I had read about Fire Island in a book when I was in middle school or high school. The book was called Rainbow Boys and it was all about gay men on the East Coast and they talked about going to an island where everyone was gay and I was like this doesn't exist. When I first came to Cherry Grove I slept on the beach in a tent. I was 16. I lived at the hotel when I started working here.

00:30:28

Male : I had a girlfriend in high school who came with her family once to look at the drag queens and she told me a story on the phone once like saying there's men there who dress like women and everybody gets really drunk and they have sex with each other. I remember her telling me the really long story on the phone and me thinking how am I gonna respond to this without giving myself away.

00:30:53

Male : There was something to me about Fire Island that I had this kind of preconception that it was a little played out. It was a little kind of like passé and something from a previous generation.

00:31:08

Male : I first came to Cherry Grove as a visitor. I was staying in the Pines and I wondered down to Cherry Grove and David gave it just the once over, but it just seemed like a bunch of, you know, fag queens and Dashiki's and Judy Garland music and a lot of drunk people and it looked kind of tawdry. Over time I began to understand that it was the people ion Cherry Grove that ultimately won me over.

00:32:00

Male : Every house had a name back in the day.

00:32:06

Male : Bangkok, Bottoms Up, Spank You Very Much.

00:32:10

Female : My house now is called [SOUNDS LIKE: Balik's Passion]. Before it was called A Kookoo's Nest.

00:32:15

Female : Something in the wolf, Denison in the Wolf.

00:32:18

Male : My name, Mae Bush ferry view because you could see the ferries from the house.

00:32:24

Male : Well my house is called Roseland because of my persona Rose Levine and I've been Rose Levine since I arrived here in Cherry Grove so when I bought a house I put a sign up Roseland and it's still Roseland.

00:32:44

Male : You had a home called the Valley of the Pods which that was because and everyone in the household joined AA and at six o'clock at that time everybody slowly left the beach and left their homes and kind of wandered like that movie Valley of the Pods.

00:32:59

Male : The one that Judy and I live in is called Happiness Is, the little bit around the corner that was an out house back in the 1800s before they barged it over here. It is called Small Comfort. It is small.

00:33:15

Male : Other names, Boys in the Attic, Above and Beyond, White Swallow which they made them change, Lickety Split, which they made them change.

Q : Who made them change it?

00:33:32

Male : The community. They said ease it up a little bit.

00:33:39

Female : I see people stopping in front of Pride House and they're taking pictures. I heard some people say this is the house that was named after the Gay Pride Day and I stopped and I said no it's not. I said it was Pride House and Prejudice House

and Prejudice House is the one down at the foot of the - - of the dune right next door.

00:34:00

Male : Hansel and Gretel, Roman Holiday always had a big crowd and nice people. Years ago a lot of people stayed in groups and kept coming back every year. Everybody became a friendly family so we got to know who was who and what was going on.

00:34:14

Male : Old timers would come up to me and said I - - I remember this wonderful party, this wonderful orgy that happened in this house. My house I guess before it was named Ole where there was this leather group and this black group; it was called [FRENCH].

00:34:32

Female : Well if I sell my house I'm taking my sign down.

00:34:44

Female : Years ago I was very friendly with the hairdresser who had a long braid in the back of his hair and he wore a hat

and he had an accent. I can not ever reveal his name today because he wanted to sue me 'cause I told the story on stage using his name. So I can tell the story if it's my story, but I can't use his real name so I just refer to him as Asshole. So the Asshole came to me on the beach and said darling I'm having a dinner party and I'd love you to come.

00:35:24

And he used to always walk around with this little capuchin monkey that was this big. It was beautiful and I loved it and it used to always come sit on my shoulder. I used to pet it. I never had a problem with this frigging monkey. Can I curse here and there?

Q : Of course.

00:35:37

Female : Okay. So he invites me as Bella to go to his house. All right Mary, I can't eat that much when I'm dressed as Bella, you know what I mean? I wanted to enjoy myself. So I go to his house and I've been to his house other times for pool parties, but this is a special dinner, a big party you should say. And he told me who was gonna be there, Liza Minnelli,

Claudette Colbert and this one and that one. I said you're so full of fucking shit. I know that he does hair of famous people, but this is where I had to go.

00:36:07

And sure enough all these people were there, Liza Minnelli, Claudette Colbert, the writer of some big movie, whatever it was, whatever he said and the food was delicious and the shrimps were this big. So after I made a pig of myself eating all the shrimps I had to go fix myself up because Bella was coming apart. So I went upstairs to the bathroom and I started to fix myself and I looked down and who do I see on the side of the bed out of the bathroom was this cage with a blanket.

00:36:40

It was the worst thing I ever did in my life to take off the blanket. I took the blanket off. And when I took the blanket off I see the little [SOUND EFFECT] as sweet as could be. I went oh, oh, and he remembered me. So I opened up the door and he just jumped into my arms and this monkey was just delicious, all right. Mary, enough is enough. I had this monkey in my arms 15 minutes at least. I go to put it in the cage and it doesn't want to get off so I says come on.

00:37:15

I go to put it in the cage and I go to slam the door on it and the monkey held on to the door and the cage and within one second became a vicious bastard because he opened his mouth and I saw these teeth I never saw before. [SOUND EFFECT] Oh, I jumped back and what the fuck am I gonna do now? I go to pick it up and he jumps up in the air and it lands on my head into the wig, the nails were and I couldn't get him out of my hair. I couldn't do it. I didn't know what to do. I was starting to freak out now.

00:37:49

I was on my hands and knees and I said this is how it has to be. I took him still on my head and I threw him forward so he would land on the bed. He landed on the bed, broke away from me and the wig, had to see the wig when it was done, it was horrible. And I threw him in the cage. When he ran [SOUND EFFECT] against it fuck you and I slammed the door and his arm went limp and I seen him cry now in the arm. As god in heaven I covered him, I fixed Bella up beautiful over again. I went downstairs and I said I'm leaving now. I have to go.

00:38:23

No Bella, no we're having this, we're having that. I said well maybe I'll stay a couple more shrimp. So I'm on the beach the next day with my Bain de Soleil No. 4, I'm tanning my whole body and all of a sudden I see Asshole walking with his monkey in his arm and I put my head down, maybe if I was sleeping, but looking out with the little corner of my eye and I see the Asshole, the monkey and the monkey had a sling. [LAUGH]

00:38:51

I said oh dear Jesus, oh dear Jesus. Bella, Bella and I said oh hi, yes; look what happened. Do you know anybody went upstairs in my room last night? I said I did to fix myself up, but I didn't hear nothing strange. I said why, where was the baby? Right there. Oh, I didn't even notice. Right there. Oh, really. No, the monkey's arm and [STUTTERS] I said oh that's a shame. All of a sudden somebody that I didn't know, it must have been a big shot called this Asshole's name and he gets excited to see them.

00:39:25

I thought it was something to do with California, whatever show he was going to do. He turned around and he said here Bella and

throws the monkey in my arms. The monkey looked at me and I looked at the monkey and I knew the monkey remembered me. Well I got the biggest [SOUND EFFECT] freaking out all over me. She grabs the monkey back, she said you, you broke my monkey's arm. And I never saw her again.

00:39:56

Male : At one time this was in the '60s you had to show that you were staying with somebody here in Cherry Grove before they'd let you off the boat. They just wouldn't let anybody off the ferry.

00:40:17

Part of the thing was trying to protect the community. The reason why they were doing this was to prevent the unsavory types from coming over and beating up the guys, the gay guys. Guys used to come by on motorcycles and in automobiles and scream at us, oh fucking faggots and stuff like that at the train station.

00:40:51

Male : Drag queens used that to hide their clothes underneath the boards of the houses in order to, uh, because it was illegal to dress like a woman.

Q : Have you ever heard any horror stories about Cherry Grove?

00:41:09

Male : Horror stories, yeah. Some guy was murdered on Doctor's Warf.

00:41:14

Male : [SOUND LIKE: The guy] in Limerick, do you know the house Limerick? Rough sex, he was the piano player at the Monster. And they were having rough sex. The guy that he was with, it's not funny, the guy that he was with stuck a sock down his throat and he gagged to death.

Q : And that's true.

00:41:36

Male : But they never found out who it was.

Q : And it's true.

00:41:39

Male : Yes, it's a true story. What do you think, I make these things up? [LAUGH]

00:41:48

Male : When I was working at the Monster there was this guy going around setting fire to houses. He would set a fire on one side of town, then go to the other side of town and set a fire under - - under somebody else's house and it had everybody in a total state of panic. A maid in the Ice Palace was cleaning his room and found flammable fluids under his bed. The police came and arrested him and quietly took him off the island early in the morning before anybody could see who it was 'cause if they had they probably would have lynched him.

00:42:29

Male : Years ago there was a young man who was robbing people and he was finally caught and thoroughly kicked around by some of the local residents who were very glad to have the

police come and take him away. The - - the evildoers over here meted him a very strange justice.

Q : Were you ever worried about getting in trouble in Cherry Grove?

00:42:55

Female : No. Just once they said they were doing a thing on the boat checking everybody's bags for drugs and marijuana. So yeah they didn't have sniffing dogs at the time so I put my little wig on my head and I stuck the [UNINTELLIGIBLE] to my wig inside and I just looked like I had a bubble hairdo. What can I tell you?

00:43:17

Male : There was an author out here one time and he was going to do a - - write a novel about murder in the meat rack and we all went crazy. Don't you ever do that because it will give some nut the idea to do it.

Q : Do you remember people being arrested in the meat rack?

00:43:39

Male : Oh yes I remember people being arrested; three guys that lived with us.

00:43:49

Male : In 1965 I had a guest and I was doing a show and he was supposed to meet me at two o'clock in the morning after the rehearsal. That's how we used to - - we'd rehearse. I'm waiting and waiting. I go home. Anyway he never showed up. The next morning since we never had telephones at that time in the house I got a telephone call from the telephone booth downtown and he was in jail on the mainland.

00:44:20]

He went out last night and he did a little cruising I guess and there were plain clothes policemen and he might have touched him so he was arrested. I had to send a thousand dollars over to the mainland to bail him out and it was terrible.

00:44:40

Male : During the '60s there were raids by the Suffolk County Police Department. It was something that happened with some regularity. In those days the meat rack was all the way up to Marilyn Walk.

00:44:58

Male : When we found out there wasn't gonna be a raid just upset and why don't you just leave us alone, you know. They - - we don't do it in front of them and but they, uh, have come in our territory now.

Q : Were you ever worried about getting in trouble in Cherry Grove?

00:45:23

Male : Yeah, I was. And in a way this doesn't - - I don't think speaks very well for me. The danger at the meat rack - - that's one of the things that attracted me to it.

00:45:37

Female : Frankie McNamara, he was a queen that was out here. He has since passed and I was very friendly with him and he was ten years older than me. There were times when people would go to the rack, that was the known place of course and one time they came, all the cops, not the Rangers, the cops with flashlights and flood and whatever and started to grab the

people and handcuff them, half naked, half undressed, whatever it was.

00:46:07

Frankie was naked in the rack, completely bare ass naked. I go like a girl, you have no sense. And she laid under the walk that leads you into the rack. Under that she was completely naked in the water hanging out. Then she floated herself out to the bay and floated and floated herself down to [SOUNDS LIKE: Aaron] Walk and she saved herself.

00:46:40

Male : It was very disheartening to see these poor boys just sitting on the dock at 7:30 in the morning waiting for the police boat in handcuffs. They would do it on purpose so people would see them.

00:47:01

Male : They used to take you downtown, chain you to the post, the telephone pole and arrest you, but they humiliated you. It was humiliation. And then the next day in the newspaper they would write a whole article about who got caught

in the rack, your name, your address, your telephone number.
That was real discrimination.

00:47:35

Male : I was out in the rack and all of a sudden headlights in a row off of the beach; this went on. There were two, two, four, six, eight headlights just went on. I knew it was a raid and I could just see my career going up in smoke if I got caught. And I got - - maybe it was my legal mind that went to work.

00:48:05

I said well I know you can't go south because that's where [STUTTERS] the headlights are. And I don't know whether - - I didn't know whether they were trucks, automobiles, jeeps or what. All I knew that they were these headlights shining from [STUTTERS] the dunes into the rack itself. I also thought that if it was well prepared that maybe there was somebody at each exit.

00:48:42

There was an eastern exit that came into the Grove and there was a western exit that exited into the Pines so there might be a cop standing there at the exits to catch you as you tried to get out. So that left only one direction to go and that was north and the only thing north was the bay. So I headed for the bay, grabbed a couple of reeds, broke them off and got into the bay and sat down in the muck and mud of the bay with the reeds.

00:49:18

And I sat there until the sun came up. I did not get arrested. [LAUGH] So I don't know who did that day, but I never did thank god.

00:49:37

Male : I remember one morning in August [STUTTERS] this friend of ours knocking on the door very excited, couldn't get his words out and [STUTTERS] he kept stuttering and we said, you know, say something. What is it? And he said the meat rack was raided last night and Marilyn Monroe died.

00:50:16

Male : When I first came there was still a lot of the old timers that had come through there. And what struck me was that

they would talk about it with humor. There was one that I knew him because he was the lover off a good friend of mine. Years later I heard the story that they had met by taking refuge under the basement of the house due to the raid of the meat rack.

00:50:44

Male : The guy who ran the Sea Shack kept a box of - - of money that whenever somebody was arrested he had his lawyer in [SOUNDS LIKE: Sabo] go and bail them out.

00:51:04

Male : It was a wonderful straight couple out here, [SOUNDS LIKE: Jim and Marie Fallon]. Marie came out when she was two years old in Cherry Grove and she died in '92 so for 90 years she came out here. Jim was a lawyer in Sabo and he represented the gay men who were arrested.

00:51:26

Male : Thank god for some of the locals that would go to bat for them and bail them out. Of course by that time the newspaper had your name.

00:51:42

Female : Ed McCarthy mainly; he - - he took care of a couple of people and got them out of jail and Jim Fallon and these were straight men. They were not gay and they were protecting - - as they said that we're protecting the boys.

Q : Tell me a little bit about the invasion.

00:52:22

Male : The invasion, well the invasion started in 1976. It started, um, there was a drag queen in Terry Warren who was an icon out here. She was a great performer in the bars and in - - in the theater here and she went to the Pines for dinner one night and John White. She went to the Blue Whale and John White asked his maitre'd to ask her to leave because it was a family restaurant. And, uh, they wouldn't allow her in because she was a drag.

00:52:52

Terry more or less lived in drag even when he wasn't in drag. He looked like he was in drag and he came back and it enhanced the rift between the two communities. I mean the people always looked at us like the Pines was the Upper Eastside and the Grove was the West Village. And - - and there was always that

competition that went on and I think that sort of enhanced the feeling of distrust and dislike between the two communities. I mean it just inflamed it.

00:53:27

On July 4th we were having a party and the subject came up and I remember we were watching television and it was during the Bicentennial and they had a massive flotilla going up and down the Hudson River. It was spectacular.

00:53:54

And the conversation went on about John White and what he did and how disgraceful it was and how could someone in a gay community be so closeted and closed minded. How could he do that to his own? How could anyone do that to their own? And it just sort of inflamed everybody. I don't know who said it, but someone said well we should go and show them and why don't we have a flotilla of our own in our bay and it just went on and on so we all decided to have a little "panzamonium" as we called it.

00:54:40

Male : When I was homecoming queen I used to decide to do something and I would call everybody up and say we're all meeting at the pool and we're all gonna be Esther Williams today or we're all gonna meet in the meat rack and we're gonna have lunch. So we used to have a lot of these events. So now this was to become an event. We all got on the phone and said we're going to invade the Pines; everyone has to be in drag, meet so and so at the dock. We're all meet at the water decks. So it was sort of an event. And everybody dressed in drag and there was a small number of us and we went to invade to show how dare you do this to one of our own.

00:55:17

And we had no idea what to expect, but we went and it was very well received. It was rather an exciting afternoon and we just decided to do it every year and now it's grown to what it is.

00:55:31

Male : Terry Warren and Suzie, they were the only ones and Jimmy Murray let go in drag. Her and Suzie did drag shows out her before the rest of them did it. Then we've had the ball and everything. Terry died 25 years ago.

00:56:02

Male : Before the Pines had the Pavilion and the dancing before that, everybody came to Cherry Grove to the Ice Palace and dance. They all came from the Pines. And so the liquor was turned off at 4:00 or 5:00, but everybody stayed and continued dancing 'till dawn; sometimes Sunday night, myself you run down to the ocean, throw yourself in the ocean and come back. And a good number of us were on minor drug kind of things. You had the attitude to keep going.

00:56:26

And in the mornings, I remember walking out to the beach and here were - - it seemed like 500 guys walking back to the Pines. The sun was coming up. They all kind of glowed. It was just - - it was marvelous.

00:56:58

Male : And it hit like a nuclear bomb.

00:57:01

Male : Whole houses were wiped out.

00:57:04

Male : When we'd come out on a Friday night from working in the city we'd hear Joe died, Al died, Steve died, five or six of our friends had died that week. Any of us were vulnerable.

00:57:17

Male : We used to keep track of the people we knew who died of AIDS and we stopped counting when we reached a hundred.

00:57:26

Male : I think it devastated the community. It was such an eye opener to so many people in the early, early times to start seeing everybody change. I mean people - - people were changing physically and it was such a visual, I mean if you lived in New Rochelle or - - or Jersey City or something and [STUTTERS] read about the AIDS epidemic it might not have affected you so much, but out here you saw your neighbors losing a hundred pounds or - - or getting Kaposi Sarcoma on their face or and I think it was devastating. People didn't know what to do or how to handle it.

00:58:01

Female : People felt that if you got off the boat you were gonna get AIDS.

00:58:06

Male : There were definitely people running around here scared.

00:58:14

Male : A lot of people at the time looked the other way especially at the beginning of the epidemic. We didn't know what caused it. It was then later on it was established to be blood born and there were a lot of people that thought that maybe mosquitoes would carry it.

00:58:36

Male : We invited some straight relatives out here and they came home thinking it was sort of a leper's colony. They saw people very, very sick.

00:58:46

Male : The fact that I'm 87, I'm damn glad to be here because there are an awful lot of my contemporaries who didn't make it I can assure you. I - - I could go right down Lewis Walk practically and - - and I'm sure I could give you a half a dozen names of people who died.

00:59:04

Male : Uh, my friend Paul, Paul; he was in our house around people in that house for a long time, Bella and I and a bunch. Our friend Joey, [SOUNDS LIK: Joey Ivan, Al Gene and all, uh, Jackie Arao], many, now I could go on, I could go on.

00:59:26

Female : The guys I spent so much time with, they were good friends and it was heartbreaking when they died.

00:59:38

Male : Boys started dying, all the men who owned homes started to die off. Women were all making a lot more money at their jobs - -

00:59:48

Male : And there was a slogan at the time, uh, men die and the women buy.

00:59:54

Female : Women started to have the kinds of jobs where they made the money to be able to come out here and there was more opportunity to do that because of the demographic changing.

01:00:06

Male : There was a real time when this town was torn. Gay men were dying of AIDS and lesbians were moving in.

01:00:13

Male : I remember the memorial service, the listing of people, you know, 16 names long that had passed along.

01:00:22

Female : Two pages of names for the memorial service every year, two pages, lost a lot of friends.

01:00:34

We all kept saying was it is not fair to die from sex. That's a ridiculous reason to die.

01:00:45

Male : Oh I think it put us to a protracted mourning period and a period of cohesiveness and coming together. We discovered

a sense of responsibility and caring for each other that we were less aware of prior.

01:01:22

Male : I think we, um, out here more than in the city found a lot of compassion for AIDS and HIV people. I don't know why that is, but that's how I found it. I know in the invasion for instance, um, people who were ill felt very free to come and participate in the invasion. It was a free day to have fun and I know in the city people often didn't go to public events because they were so self-conscious, but I think out here on the island we all loved each other so much that there was a certain freedom about the experience.

01:02:05

Male : The thing I loved about the meat rack is that I've heard from other residents here is that so many people who passed away had their ashes spread there and that to me just speaks volumes, like that is the final place that they wanted to be.

01:02:23

Male : I probably was lucky because I did have a long term relationship and that's probably what, um, why I'm alive today.

Q : Has the meat rack changed over the years?

01:02:47

Male : Yes, it has. Well I haven't been there lately to be perfectly honest, but, um, so I don't know how much it's changed, but I remember in the '70s it was packed on both sides of, you know, Cherry Grove and the Pines and a very active place and I think the activity lessened over the years. I don't think it is what it was, but, um, it's still there.

01:03:10

Male : People are still joking about the meat rack. There's five people out there. There's 20 people. You know it's not like - - like it's in its heyday of - - of gloriousness I thought.

01:03:20

Male : I mean there used to be a complete free for all in the best possible way. Um, and I think, you know, that was probably tempered a bit with the - - with the AIDS crisis.

01:03:32

Male : My fear is that the Internet has made the meat rack obsolete.

01:03:36

Male : It has changed over the years and I feel like with Grinder and Scruff and all of like the gay apps no one really needs to go out and see each other anymore and it's all just social media interaction and they police it now.

Q : What do you think about people not being able to lay naked on the beach or them writing tickets in the meat rack?

01:04:02

Male : It's not the free island that we had.

01:04:19

Male : There's a lot less freedom allowed here in Cherry Grove in certain ways. I find that any of the freedoms that used to be enjoyed for free you can still enjoy, but they're

mostly in venues like the bars and restaurants in town at nights where you're allowed to take off your clothes and have sex on stage and do whatever you want as long as you pay the cover or you're participating in somebody making money off of it. I find that there are much less opportunities to do that in the traditional places that was done in Cherry Grove like the meat rack or even on the beach.

01:04:55

Male : If nudity upsets you, you shouldn't come to Fire Island. This is our place to be free. Men can take their clothes off if we feel like it.

01:05:09

Male : Recently it seems there has been a kind of heightened enforcement of [STUTTERS] regulations about nudity, about loitering in the meat rack and it seems like very on the surface it seems a little homophobic.

01:05:36

Male : Because we've gone right back to the way things were, boy, 50 years ago.

01:05:44

Male : The more that we as gay people become assimilated into the rest of the population the more the subversive or the underground or the - - the things that we did, um, that - - that straight people object to and still object to will be cracked down on.

01:06:11

Female : I don't consider the meat rack public. That's the way I look at it. It's like I knew about that from, you know, like [STUTTERS] from the first season I was here and we didn't go there. It was - - it was that simple.

01:06:30

Male : Government and governmental agencies love to exercise their authority. It's still and reason sometimes that they feel like they're in existence.

01:06:45

Male : Why don't they go find some of these terrorists that are bothering us? I think the terrorists are doing more harm than having sex.

01:06:56

Male : I do wonder like what is the tradeoff that we have now that we are so much more accepted; that we can get married in every state, you know, like there used to be a kind of renegade quality to being queer. And as that lessens, you know, I feel like those kind of liberties that we can take might get diminished.

Q : Do you think that Cherry Grove is as important now as it was in the '50s?

01:07:38

Female : To me it's very important. I survived it here through all the years. I felt that I was accepted in this community of Cherry Grove and this is where I live. I may not live here twelve months out of the year, but for the six and a half months I'm here this is my home. These are my friends and this is my community. I just love it here.

01:08:01

Male : I think the biggest argument that you'll hear or discussion that you always here is that, um, you know gays can go anywhere in the world so they don't need a destination and I

actually disagree. The reason I come here is because it's a community of my fellows.

01:08:18

Female : Even though there is more widespread LGBT acceptance, you know, it has been really powerful for me as a queer woman to be here and to all of a sudden be like oh even in New York City where I live I don't feel as fully comfortable being out as I do here. When I'm out with my partner at dinner at a restaurant even in the part of Brooklyn I live in, which is very progressive there is still a layer of shame and a layer of like that's so subtle and so deep.

01:08:47

I don't even notice it until it's removed. And when I come here it's sort of like in the negative, the absence of that makes me aware that it was there in the first place.

01:08:57

Male : Now you can kind of be gay anywhere is what people think, but even you can't; in the streets of New York you can't be gay. You're called a faggot and this and that everywhere.

01:09:06

Male : You don't have to worry about the judgment quite as much and it's like that's always been the draw.

01:09:11

Male : I think it still retains, um, its - - its - - its tradition, its importance, um, simply because it reflects - - it reflects I think the - - the entire history of - - of - - of the gay movement.

01:09:27

Male : I've lived in New York most of my adult life and I've seen neighborhoods gentrify and change and shift the value that they bring to a community and I feel like that is happening here, but I don't think anyone knows what the next era will be for Cherry Grove, like it might become a straight community it seems to me.

01:09:57

Female : Being the majority is - - is a different kind of experience and it's important I think that we have that experience and I think it's important that we preserve and honor

and build upon the culture and the roots that were laid down in the 1950s.

01:10:34

Male : I really appreciate what the people did 50 years ago, you know, to maintain this for us. So I - - I would just say, you know, like keep it for the - - the next set of kids.

01:10:49

Male : I remember my parents telling me they walked to school barefoot and I always think when I'm talking to young gay people it's the same thing; you know when I'm telling them what it was like when I was young. So I try to avoid saying something like that because in 50 years it's going to be something completely different and it's gonna morph into something wonderful, but probably very different than we know it today.

01:11:20

Male : One of my favorite things is like walking on the beach at night. I get to connect with nature. It's quiet, there's no one around. It's just like you and nature and so I

feel like if I could never come back the last thing I would want is like a night beach walk.

01:11:34

Male : If I could never return to Cherry Grove then I would die. [LAUGH]

01:11:40

Female : I - - I don't know; maybe start writing little notes to myself, memoir.

01:11:49

Male : Watch a sunset on the - - on the Great South Bay, uh-huh.

01:11:59

Male : I would want to kiss the little chameleon that I have on the door there and wish it luck, wish it has luck.

01:12:09

Female : I think have my ashes thrown in the bay. That would be it.

01:12:21

Female : I would have to walk the beach to see the ocean.

01:12:29

Male : I think just look back and think of all the good times.

01:12:35

Male : The best thing that I've ever gotten out of Cherry Grove is the relationships that I've formed with other people so I think that that's how I would enjoy my last time here is being with the people here.

01:12:47

Male : Kiss my house goodbye. [LAUGH]

01:12:50

Female : I - - I don't know what it would be because I hope that day never comes.

01:13:40

Male : The last thing I would like to do in Cherry Grove if I can't return I keep singing, keeping writing my column. I - -

I - - I - - I'm not - - I'm not leaving. [LAUGH] [SINGING] I
feel a song coming on. It's a melody full of the laughter of
children out after the rain.

01:14:10

I hear a tuneful story ringing through yah, love and glory,
hallelujah and now that my troubles are gone let those heavenly
drums go on drumming 'cause I feel a song coming on.

[ROLLING END CREDITS]

[END OF TAPE]