

Gay artists, farmers flock to Prince Edward County

Drawn by the greenery coupled with the open-minded culture

JULIA STEINECKE
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

CONSECON, ONT.—“This lamb was born yesterday,” says Bill Stearman, leading me to a dimly lit pen where a white curly-haired youngster circles around her mother, looking for milk. Malibu and 60 other lambs will begin their lives this year at the Willow Garden Shetland Sheep Farm.

Bill is one of the growing number of LGBT farmers, artists, and business people settling in Prince Edward County. They're drawn by the greenery, the century homes just begging for a designer's touch, the vineyards and the open-minded rural culture.

Bill has been raising sheep here for seven years; he's found a new way of life, as a farmer who happens to be gay.

“In the city, most of my friends were gay and most of what I did centred around that. Here, most of what I do centres around sheep farming.”

Being single in the country is different, but not worse. “There isn't the same pressure as in the city. I wouldn't be sitting here in my overalls: in the city, you have to be perfect. If you walk down Church St. you have to wear the right clothes and have the right body from the right gym. Here, you can just be you. I have gay and straight friends, I have family; I'm not lonely.”

Bill grabs his pails of grain and we go to the open-air dining area.

“Sheep! Sheep!” he calls, and dozens of woolly puffballs on legs come

running. Older lambs jostle with ewes and rams — the food disappears in minutes.

Bill says he's seen more homophobia in cities such as Toronto and Belleville. “It's comfortable here and you don't have to worry. There's a person with a beard and breasts who happily walks down the main street in Picton and nobody cares.”

Carlyn Moulton, who co-owns the Oeno Gallery nearby, calls it the “So-What Factor,” and says people are bonded much more by things other than sexual orientation.

Carlyn and her partner attend a couple of potluck dinners every month, something they never did in the city. They've helped organize a potluck dinner party (there is no other kind, apparently) for me to meet some gay and lesbian community members.

When we gather, at a sumptuously renovated Greek Revival century home, the conversation quickly veers away from anything related to being gay or lesbian. It seems the more significant social identities have to do with how you feel about ATVs running amok on county roads, an issue that was hotly debated in a town-hall meeting in Picton a few days ago.

Bruno François and Jens Korberg moved from Toronto in 2005, and are hoping to get their first commercial harvest from their vineyard this year (www.theoldthird.com).

“We have a better social life here and we go out more often, to potlucks and dances,” says Bruno. “We have more friends than we did in the city and our friends are more varied.” Jens says they're going square-dancing tomorrow night.



JULIA STEINECKE PHOTOS



Lake on the Mountain Provincial Park offers a fine view of Picton Bay, with the Glenora ferry bringing visitors from Kingston.

Left, sheep farmer Bill Stearman gives Breeze a little extra attention at Willow Garden Shetland Sheep Farm.

Food is a county-wide obsession

COUNTY from T8

"We went a month ago and it was so much fun."

Pat Hacker and Marie Frye own the Slickers Ice Cream shop (www.slickersicecream.com) on Bloomfield's Main Street, and they're aware that some locals have difficulty defining their relationship.

"But anyone would pull us out of a ditch, anytime," says Marie. They're more renowned for their ice cream, which comes in flavours like rhubarb ginger and basil.

The topic of food keeps coming up; it's clearly a countywide obsession. Local restaurants and supermar-

kets are suppoing regional farming and foodproduction with spectacular reslts for the visitor. During my sht stay I taste local rainbow trout, raple syrup, lavender goat chees and chipotle pepper chocolate brk. Local wines are growing in routation and the county is a newDesignted Viticultural Area, alloing vintners to label local winess "VQA Prince Edward County."

I opt for herb:tea when I drop in to the B and Bwned by Kenneth Noble and GarVickers. It's a carefully restored Victorian mansion in Bloomfield witantiques and flowery wallpaper (www.bbcanda.com/538.html). Ken and Gary

are fiercely in favour of the kind of social integration I heard about at the dinner party. Only about 5 per cent of their guests are gay or lesbian and they don't approve of all-gay guest houses. Their relationship has never been an issue, but they know of gay folks who are not so well accepted, usually because they don't get involved in the community.

"I'm quite mouthy," admits Gary. "If they'll accept me, they'll accept anybody."

Julia Steinecke is a freelance writer. Her trip was subsidized by Taste the County. (www.JuliaSt.net)



JUST THE FACTS

WILLOW GARDEN Shetland Sheep Farm (www.willowgarden-shetlands.com) welcomes visitors and Bill is planning to open a self-catering guesthouse on the farm.

THE OENO GALLERY (www.oenogallery.com) has daily art exhibits and special events. There's a waterfront guesthouse with an outdoor hot tub.

OTHER LGBT friendly lodgings can be found at Henderson House, www.bbcanda.com/4952.html, and Covent Garden, www.coventgarden.ca/bedandbreakfast.htm.



TINY BLOOMFIELD has an especially high concentration of gay- and lesbian-owned businesses on Main Street.

FOR GENERAL information, visit www.pec.on.ca