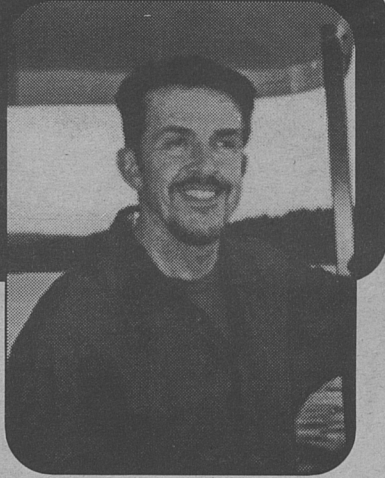


# Stonehenge to Stonewall

by Charlie Emond



## Stepping to a Different Drummer

**"I want to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life"**

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was born in Concord, Massachusetts, where, except for a stint at Harvard, he lived all his life. This sad-eyed misogynist wrote a lot about his relationships with other men, including his mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, with whom he lived for a few years. His journal and writings show a lack of interest in conventional romance and underline his "fundamental attraction to other men."

Curiously, Massachusetts seems to have produced an exceptional number of gay and lesbian poets, novelists and authors. And from lesbian couples in "Boston marriages" to the romantic fling of Hawthorne and Melville in the Berkshires, it appears that something happened in Massachusetts after its foundation by the sexually repressed Puritans in their dreary black outfits. (I'll have more on them next time.)

It is also ironic that the pilgrims' first landing in America as they sailed into Cape Cod Bay was at Provincetown. Today's historic marker is equidistant from downtown P-town, bedecked with rainbow flags and men in drag, and a very popular nude beach. If the Pilgrims had only known!

**"I have seen glimpses of a serene friendship-land"**

At 22, Thoreau spent the summer of 1839 sailing and going on hikes with 11-year-old Edmund Sewell. He was enraptured, and wrote an elegant poem to the boy called "Sympathy." He wrote in his often mysterious journal, "I have within the last few days come into contact with a pure, uncompromising spirit... impossible not to love." It is indicative of the naiveté of the times that the boy's parents were delighted with this attention. (Today, they would call the police!)

Thoreau's biographers explain that Henry just mixed up his pronouns and he really meant to praise the boy's sister in the poem. (Those pronouns can be so tricky at times!) This sister, Ellen Sewell, is the "love interest" in Henry's life

that proves his heterosexuality. Ellen soundly rejected his marriage proposal, and he never made another, but the fact that he tried seems to convince most people that he could not have been gay. It doesn't take much, you know.

**"For if the truth were known, Love cannot speak"**

Henry found considerable comfort in thinking about the Greeks and their "love that dare not speak its name," and especially about such famous same-sex pairs as Damon and Pythias (Phintias). "For how many years have I striven to meet one, even on common manly ground, and have not succeeded?" he yearns. (The lament of every man looking for Mr. Right!)

"Boys are bathing at Hubbard's Bend," he writes with delight, commenting on their nakedness. In another place, he gets altogether too excited by a mushroom the shape and size of a phallus. At that famous cabin on Walden Pond, he is entertained by hunky railway workers, including one Alex Therien, to whom he reads Homer's account of the famous Greek lovers Patroclus and Achilles. His abiding interest in manly things and lack of interest in women was much remarked upon by those around him.

**"My friend is the apology for my life"**

Thoreau had also spent a summer in another little cabin in New Hampshire with Charles Wheeler, a friend from Harvard, but there is certainly no long, happy relationship, or any explicit references to having sex with another man. His sex drive was sublimated, speculates one critic, in his love of nature. He was certainly a tormented soul who puzzled over male/male friendship and love, but he was a lot less puzzled than his friend Emerson, who carefully went back and edited out every possibly gay reference in his own writings—including mention of a family with the last name "Gay."

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was born in Boston and entered Harvard at the age of 14. In his senior year

there, he began his journal with notes on a fellow student, Martin Gay of Hingham. He writes, "We have had already two or three long profound stares at each other... I must know him."

But Emerson went on to marry Ellen Tucker in 1829. After she died two years later, he became a minister for a while, and then devoted his life to becoming a famous American writer. He never remarried. He was the one who encouraged Thoreau to "seek solitude" and lent him the land on which to build his cabin.

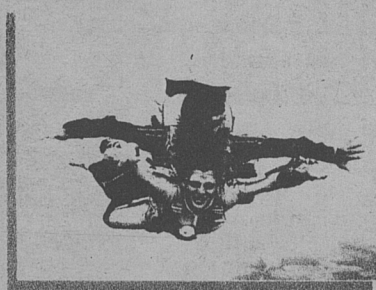
**"(I) know the better why brooks murmur and violets grow"**

In 1856, Thoreau went to New Jersey to visit the gay poet Walt Whitman. Here was a kindred soul who sang both the beauty of the natural world and his fellow men—a "Comrade in Nature." He was as impressed with Whitman as Whitman with him, but the meeting was awkward because of the other people present. Even so, Henry called Walt "a great fellow."

Thoreau left us a lovely poem about two sturdy (read "masculine") oak trees side by side, unable to touch except underground, where "their roots are intertwined." He considered male friends a part of the "friendliness of nature," and dreamed of an idyllic community of men out in the woods, or perhaps on Cape Cod bay. Hey, which of us hasn't, at one time or another, wanted to withdraw from a society into which we don't fit? As the archetypal outcast from society, Henry would have understood and loved gay P-town.

**Next time: Lavender Pagans and Naked Puritans**

*For More Information: This gay history column is the 34rd in a series that began in prehistory. Jonathan Ned Katz' Gay American History has the rest of the story. If you are a new OITM reader, or have not followed this column from the beginning, you might want to catch up by checking the OITM Archives at [www.mountainpridemedia.com](http://www.mountainpridemedia.com) and clicking on "Stonehenge to Stonewall."*



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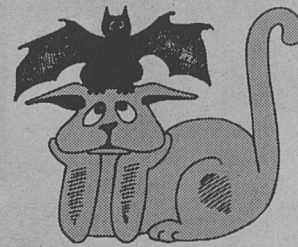
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