More than a century ago, rural queers were invisible. Thankfully, this same-sex couple had a camera

By MEREDITH J. BATT and DUSTY GREEN

Cub and Len in a hammock at the family home of Len Keith. Photo from Provincial Archives of New Brunswick.

While LGBTQ2S+ history goes back millennia, our records of it tend to focus on urban experiences, leading us to believe that rural queers didn’t exist. They did. But without the critical mass to create institutions like bars, associations and clubs—or the freedom granted by the anonymity of city living—they tended to be discreet about their lives, making it harder for us to see them across time.

We would probably never know about Len and Cub, a queer couple living in rural New Brunswick in the early 20th century, if it wasn’t for the self-timing camera. Self-timers started to become more widely available in Canada around 1917, just in time for Leonard “Len” Olive Keith to use it to document the halcyon days of his relationship with Joseph Austin “Cub” Coates.

Born Dec. 14, 1891, Len was eight years older than Cub—their families were in neighbouring villages about 50 kilometres west of Moncton, a 40-minute drive nowadays. Len’s family owned a match factory and grist mill, and their prosperity is probably why the family could afford a camera with a self-timer in the first place. In 1911, Len’s father became the first person in his village to own a car. Then seen as a “rich man’s playing toy,” the vehicle provided Len with more mobility and freedom than his peers; he’d take Cub out for rides.

In their new book Len & Cub: A Queer History, Meredith J. Batt and Dusty Green use Len’s photos as a window onto the lives of the two men and what it would have been like for them in the context of their time. Batt and Green are co-founders of the Queer Heritage Initiative of New Brunswick, which is dedicated to collecting and preserving the records of LGBTQ2S+ history in the province, including conducting oral history interviews, in this excerpt, they write about who the men were and how they might have thought about themselves.

Leonard Olive Keith and Joseph Austin “Cub” Coates were both born in the rural community of Butternut Ridge (known today as Havelock), New Brunswick, at the end of the 19th century. Len was an amateur photographer and automobile enthusiast who went on to own a local garage and pool hall after serving in the First World War. Cub was the son of a farmer, a veteran of the First and Second World Wars, a butcher, a contractor and a lover of horses. The two became neighbours and developed a close and intimate relationship with each other. Len and Cub’s time together is documented by the many photos taken by Len showing that the two shared a mutual love of the outdoors, animals, alcohol and adventure. As many amateur photographers do, Len photographed what was important to him, and Cub’s prevalence among the hundreds of photos is striking and impossible to ignore. The photos taken in the 1910s and 1920s show the development of their relationship as Len and Cub explore the wilderness of Havelock and spend time alone together. Unfortunately, these adventures would cease when Len was outed as a homosexual by community members in the early 1930s and forced to leave Havelock.

Cub, however, remained seemingly untainted by scandal and stayed in Havelock until 1940, when he married Rita Cameron, a nurse born in Chatham, and relocated to Moncton after the Second World War. He would go on to become a prominent figure in New Brunswick’s harness racing circles before his death in 1965. Len never returned to Havelock, residing near Montreal before succumbing to cancer in 1950. Len’s photos were donated to the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick decades after his death by Havelock resident and local historian, John Corey, who had purchased the albums at the Keith family’s estate sale in 1984. Growing up, John heard stories of Len and Cub from his father, Roy Manford Corey, who had been a classmate of Len’s. When John donated the albums to the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick in 2011, he described the pair as “boyfriends” — a term noted by the archivist in the collection’s finding aid. The archivist also noted, after a conversation with John, that Len had been “driven out of town for being a homosexual” by a group of Havelock men. This anecdote is written on an envelope containing a photo of one of the men responsible for Len’s outing.

Even with the remaining records of Len and Cub’s lives, loose ends and ambiguities abound. As time passes, anecdotes fade, records crumble and living contacts pass away, a certain amount of reading between the lines of history is necessary. Still, it is remarkable that these photos exist at all. To end up housed at the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick decades after his death has been “government permission” for what they were doing, in his letter, Pugh describes Chevrin subsequently bringing “a large tank-like vehicle that would lower a portion of its body to ground level at each seismographic testing point. It then violently shook the earth in order to record seismographic readings.”

Pugh is convinced that Chevrin’s shaking of the earth damaged his home. “Several years later an NB Power heat programmer found an abundance of mortar failure in the concrete block portion of our basement,” he wrote. “That mortared block section was laid by professionals, but we could only surmise what caused the leaks” that required extensive repair work.

Pugh also tells the Premier that his neighbour “has intercepted numerous people over the years; some carrying equipment into [Pugh’s] fields” and that “we’ve also had at least two suppose helicopter landings of unknown origin. Both quickly left after being sighted.”

Pugh’s farm and woodland is near several well sites that were among the first to be fracked in New Brunswick. “We can watch the late night excess gas flaring show from our deck, and wonder where the next batch of contaminated underground wastewater is going to eventually travel.”

Pugh also complains to Premier Higgs that the government is “keeping us in the dark” and adds that “I don’t know what other powers Bill 75 could give them unless they want to dig and tend us before they work.” He describes Bill 75 as “another boot on the neck giving more power to the big biz government coalitions that continue to run this province and this country.”
development without intense scrutiny as to why two men or women might be spending so much time together. Queer historians tackling this early period, such as George Chauncey, John D’Emilio and Colin Spencer, provide insights into the ways that the Second World War is filled with examples of men having sex with men without reflecting on how their sex lives might shape their "identity" or "state of being." Be it German military recruits in 1910 who weren’t concerned with "talk of homosexuality, they just did it," discreet middle-class gay New Yorkers posing as "normal" men or queer boys from the American South who “did not sit around and have interrogative conversations about being gay...[y]ou just did it, and didn’t do too much speculating.”

Len and Cub lived in a complex era, but in some ways their love may have been less complicated than our own. While same-sex desire was stigmatized by religion, queer sex was prohibited by law, and to live and love openly was virtually impossible for same-sex couples. So how might the boys have understood and interpreted their same-sex attraction? Would they have been liberated at all by any notions of stigma around queer sex and love?

While the queer subculture of New York’s nightlife was on an upswing, and society’s moral policing of gender was weakening in the 1930s as the stigma around queer people pious, patriotic, masculine standard and homosexual men, firmly entrenching heterosexual men as the norm. By mid-century this policing had led to pursue their affections. By the early 1930s, North Americans were starting to explore traces of same-sex relationships in rural areas. It has been perceived as truly queer in the derogatory sense, an attraction is important to keep in mind as we explore where you did it mattered, and who knew about it, but the boys no doubt took precautions to hide the true nature of their affections. Yet, same-sex desire was virtually impossible for same-sex couples. So how might their love may have been less complicated than our own. While same-sex desire was stigmatized by religion, queer sex was prohibited by law, and to live and love openly was virtually impossible for same-sex couples.

Excerpts were originally published in Len & Cub: A Queer History, 2022 by Meredith J. Batt and Dusty Green. Reprinted by permission of Goose Lane Editions. The following text originally appeared in X Magazine on March 30, 2022.

Day of Mourning honours 14 workers in New Brunswick

By SUSAN O’DONNELL

For the labour movement in many countries, April 28 is a solemn day to honour workers who died on the job. The 14 workers who died in New Brunswick in 2021 were inconspicuous acts of bravery that made histories that had no impact on the lives of two young rural New Brunswickers.

More than a century ago, rural queers were invisible experiences from this period is scanty. It is clear Len was written with Cub, and Len and Cub, Len and, John Corey, who donated Len’s collection to the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, grew up in Havelock hearing about Len and Cub, and who preserved traces of these records, making a point of remarking to the archivist during the donation process that the pair were "boyfriends" and that Len and Cub’s relationship developed without much worry over their love being discovered. Many of the photos supports this narrative and show the means by which Len and Cub were allowed to blossom in time and place: the lengths they would have gone to conceal the true nature of their affection.

During Len and Cub’s formative years, the terms homosexual and heterosexual were not part of the vernacular of the villagers of Havelock. Such definitions of sexual orientation were largely reserved for use by early sexologists working to develop new models of decoding human sexuality. Still, an absence of language or classifications to define oneself did not mean that same-sex desire was, "unnatural," or, "non-procreative sex" was stigmatized by religion, queer sex was prohibited by law, and to live and love openly was virtually impossible for same-sex couples. So how might the boys have understood and interpreted their same-sex attraction? Would they have been liberated at all by any notions of stigma around queer sex and love?

While the queer subculture of New York’s nightlife was on an upswing, and society’s moral policing of gender was weakening in the 1930s as the stigma around queer people pious, patriotic, masculine standard and homosexual men, firmly entrenching heterosexual men as the norm. By mid-century this policing had led to pursue their affections. By the early 1930s, North Americans were starting to explore traces of same-sex relationships in rural areas. It has been perceived as truly queer in the derogatory sense, an attraction is important to keep in mind as we explore where you did it mattered, and who knew about it, but the boys no doubt took precautions to hide the true nature of their affections. Yet, same-sex desire was virtually impossible for same-sex couples. So how might their love may have been less complicated than our own. While same-sex desire was stigmatized by religion, queer sex was prohibited by law, and to live and love openly was virtually impossible for same-sex couples.

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