

# Remembering Gay Life in the '30s

*The following is an edited excerpt from an oral history interview with Jack Pierson, conducted by Tim Retzlaff. Pierson, a former General Motors employee and collector of art prints, talks about gay life in Flint during the 1930's. He also describes meeting Robert Purcell, with whom he moved to Manhattan following World War II. They shared a life together for thirty-eight years until Purcell's death in 1976. Pierson has since returned to Flint, where he now lives in retirement. This interview is published with Mr. Pierson's permission.*

I was born October 11, 1913, the last of my family to be born in a house. I spent most of my childhood in Civic Park, in a General Motors house, which, by the way, were bargains for their time. But GM had to do something. They had to house their workers. There wasn't any housing.

I was in the first class to graduate from Flint Northern [High School]. So far as I knew, there weren't any homosexuals at all at Flint Northern. There was one guy, who later married, who quite possibly was bisexual.

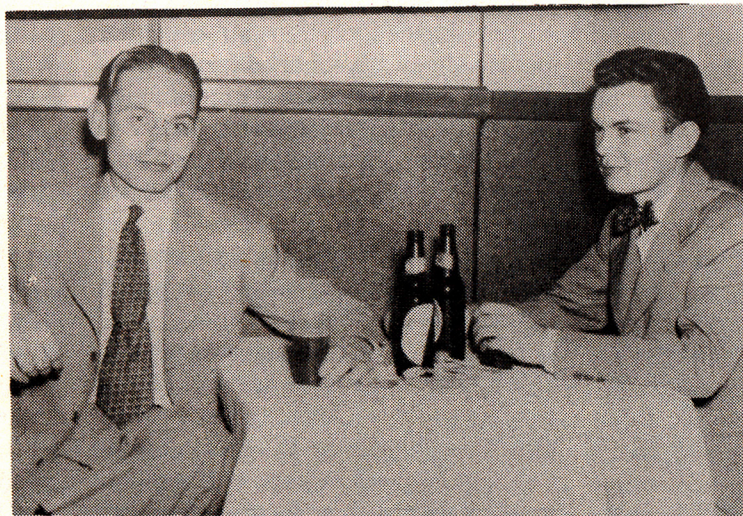
I managed to go [to junior college] one year on money I made washing dishes in the summer for a buck a day. I had had sexual encounters before then. It becomes a little difficult for me to remember the first time, but it probably was in the Ritz Theater, and I never reciprocated. But I wasn't silly enough, as some guys are, to not realize that I was homosexual. I didn't pretend that I wasn't, like people still do, sometimes. Like, so long as they are the inserter, well, they're not gay.

I [got] into trouble at school. I didn't have any money, and I wasn't quite sure who I was politically. I had read *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*. I had no idea that Oscar Wilde was a homosexual at that time, but it impressed me. And right afterward, George Bernard Shaw's *Socialism for the Intelligent Woman*. Those two books impressed me very much, and I decided that's what I was. Religion had gone by the way. I refused to join the church when I was twelve because, although at that time I believed in God, I didn't like Him. [laughs]

I had been reading about Jasper Deeter who had a theater in the countryside outside Pittsburg. I was all very upset about my letting people suck my cock all the time and my troubles in school, and my not knowing who the hell I was. So I sold my typewriter, and I sold all my textbooks, and I set out for Pittsburg. I was just going to appear on Jasper Deeter's door and say, "Here I am. I'll do anything. I'll scrub the floors. Just teach me." By the time I got to Pittsburg, I had changed my mind, and with my tail between my legs, I came back to Flint. I didn't have anything to

eat except three Tootsie Rolls, and I stretched them for three days. That was a terrible time.

Back in Flint, I met Barbara, who was the secretary of the Young Communists



**Jack Pierson and his life companion Robert Purcell visiting a Detroit bar in the late 1930s.**

League. And of course I was enormously impressed by Barbara. I had never met a girl like her before in my life. She believed that women had just as much right to sexual love and enjoyment as men. Barbara recruited me, of course, into the Young Communists League.

Through Barbara, I met what might be called part of the homosexual intelligentsia in Flint at that time. There was no real community at all, but there were small cliques who had house parties. Barbara introduced me to two boys. One was the fire chief's son, so he had a little money, more money than guys like me had. The other had his own apartment—completely private. There was a third boy who was extraordinarily beautiful physically. He was part American Indian, but he hated it. He hated his mother for having gone with an Indian guy. And he also was quite an intellectual.

I just didn't know anybody else. I never talked to anybody else. One of the things I disliked about the people I went with—and I went with *many* people—was that they praised my cock, you know, but nobody ever said anything about me. And I left them immediately, I just ran. To them, that was part of my masculinity. I was this strong, silent guy, you know.

But I ran because I was afraid they would want reciprocation, and I didn't want to do that. I needed an older guy and many of these men were older men. If somebody had talked to me like a person, you know, I would have been enormously pleased. But nobody ever did.

I got another bee in my bonnet. My father and mother had a cabin up north, and I thought I'd go up there and hang around for a while. And, I told the Indian boy, the half-Indian boy. When I

told him about my plans, he wanted to come with me. Well, I did warn him, but he insisted. It was wintertime. We had trekked all the way up there, which was backwoods practically then, you know,

only to find that the doors were locked. We had to break a window to get in. The stove had been dismantled [laughs]. There were very little bed clothes, so we slept with a mattress on top of us. And here's this, in his own mind, very sophisticated boy, you know, who knew all about everything I didn't know about, being put through this torture.

In the middle of the night he was snuggling up to me,

which I enjoyed, but then he said, "Don't you want me?" Well, I didn't know what he was talking about. So, I just didn't do anything. Well, that disgusted him very much. [Later] I stayed overnight with [him] and I was introduced to sucking cock and getting a cock up my ass, neither of which I enjoyed. Well, he didn't know what to make of me.

My friends in the Communist Party finally tumbled to the fact that Jack wasn't like other guys, but they insisted on considering it sort of an aberration, something I could get over. One of my friends once told me, he said, "Jack, all you need is a bottle of wine, and go up to Saginaw and find a whore." Well, I didn't know why I had to go to Saginaw. There were plenty of whores in Flint. Anyway, that was one of his suggestions.

Now we get to Bob, and Willson Park. That was a rendezvous. I found out about it myself by accident. I didn't know that people met there and had sex there, but I just happened to be there after dark once and it became apparent. It was wooded, and it slopes up, and dug into the slope were johns. There were benches all along the park. It was very well lighted on street, but there were not quite so many lamps in the park itself. You were partially concealed from anybody coming along quite effectively.

Robert was sitting on a bench right on the street under a streetlamp, just on the edge of the park. I'm quite certain he knew very well what was going on there, but I also think he was a little scared.

I had been there before, and had had guys give me sex there. Most of the time I didn't even know who they were. Like I say, I ran away right away. I just didn't want to be a cock, I wanted to be a whole person.

And Robert was sitting there and I sat down beside him. He was, to me, the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen in my whole life, you know. Gee whiz, I mean I was a little fascinated with the Indian boy. I thought he was very beautiful. But I didn't get swept away by him really.

So I sat down and we started to talk, and he had just graduated from high school, or maybe he hadn't yet. Anyway, he told me he wanted to go to Baker's Business College. Of course he didn't have a penny to his name, he couldn't go anywhere. But that's what he told me. And then I got up, and he got up too, and so we just walked down the street. I don't think either of us so we just walked down the street. I don't think either of us said, "Do you want to go for a walk?" or what, we just let out.

And we went down across the creek where that was all wild, you know. And we just walked, and I took his hand, and he didn't take it away. But I thought, "Gee, this is just a baby." I was six years older than he. He was nineteen, I was twenty-five. I felt, oh, "What kind of evil man am I?" So we just parted and I came home. And I thought about him all the time.

There used to be in the south end a bar and the woman—I don't know if she owned it or not, but she ran it—was named Mamie. She was a black woman. And, for some reason or another, I think it was early in the week, almost everybody in there would be gay. A lot of times everybody would be gay. Sometimes there might be a sprinkling of... And then you watched yourself a little.

This guy used to kind of show me off and act as though we were having sex, really. We weren't. But, anyway, I wanted very much to be in love with somebody, so at one time I said to him, "You know, I don't like you anymore, I love you." The minute I said it I was sorry I said it. I didn't really love him.

Well, what had happened in between, I had gone to this restaurant called the New Deal Cafeteria, and it was an all-you-can-eat place. And quite good food. So I came in and sat down to eat and I suddenly looked across, and, my God, there was Robert. Well, my heart just leaped, you know. And I thought, "There that nice guy is." I kept looking at him, and I didn't want to stare at him, so I kept looking away. Suddenly I look [and] he was gone.

I went out, and thought, "Oh hell. I guess I'll just go home like always." So I start. All of a sudden Robert appears. He'd gone home and gotten a coat.

Well, we kept looking in windows and one thing or another, and finally I said, "Hello again," and he said, "Hello." Then I really did it. I invited him to stay overnight at the Y[MCA]. So we did. And it was wonderful.