

# BAR★TAB

# SUMMER SPLASH

INTO THE WOODS ✕ RUSSIAN RIVER R&R ✕ ON THE TAB



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On the cover: Frank offers a drink to  
Kareem in the pool at Casa Dolores,  
Photo: Steven Underhill



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# TAKE ME TO THE RIVER

by Dr. Jack Fritscher

Proud Mary, Rollin' on the River! Grittier than the Catskills, Guerneville is a Dirty Dancing resort where nobody puts Baby in the corner.

Prehistoric two-spirit Pomo Indians, queer Russian trappers (1812), and bachelor California loggers (1840) had no idea the Big Bottom settlement would become Stumptown and be renamed Guerneville after sawmill owner George Guerne, who clear-cut redwoods to build houses in San Francisco. Locals laugh at tourists saying "Gur-nee-ville" the way San Franciscans freak at "Frisco."

Thank the Rainbow Gods, "Gurn-ville" is not the Pines, South Beach, or Palm Springs with their status codes. Diversely eclectic, Guerneville is San Francisco's backyard playground on the fabled Russian River where generations of GLBTs have retreated like Thoreau at Walden Pond to vacation, party, recover, and then retire in woodsy homes near world-famous wineries, while remaining part of the City, ninety-six minutes away.

The 99% need never mind the 1% herd of white male Republican elephants wallowing every summer at Bohemian Grove in nearby Monte Rio. More truly "bohemian," Guerneville, like the Cannes of film festivals, has beauties sun-broiling on its croisette beach, Lazy Bear poolside weekends in its B&Bs, and leatherfolk and discomaniacs remembering its historic bars: Russian River Eagle, Drums, Mineshaft, Highlands disco, and down River Road, near the legendary nude cruising at Wohler Bridge, The Rusty Nail.

Long before Philadelphia Peter Pender pondered purchasing posh property to found Fife's (1977), gays, hippies, pagans, straight red necks, and vegetarians (if pot is a veggie) perfected the un-gentrified good life of River Rats. Conjugating DNA ancestry, Pender's "Fifi's" was a Polkstrasse cocktail lounge. The Woods, featuring Charles Pierce, Sylvester and Sharon McKnight, was a cloned Trocadero. Molly Brown's was the plaid-shirt Ambush, and The Rainbow Cattle Company (1979), owned by a former LAPD cop, spun like a Folsom bar



Gay by nature: river revelers relax in 1978.

Morehead

out of the original RCC (1977) on Valencia at DuBoce.

The Rusty Nail was a lesbian bar originally frequented by SoMa men, including Leatherneck bar owner Allan Lowery. It was owned by three ladies, including the sporty Pat Conway, whose home in the canyon behind the Nail hosted invitation-only penny-ante poker, pool tables, potluck parties, and a hot tub for twelve back when the orgiastic 1970s was a 24/7 cabaret, ole chum!

Eyewitness history is local color. In his book *Folsom Street Blues* (2011), SoMa author Jim Stewart makes beach-read comedy of boozy, cruisy, coked-up Guerneville in "Up at the River." He recorded this exchange around the Nail pool table:

"I'm the token straight guy here."

"I'm the token transsexual. Let's go to your place and token fuck."

I've experienced Russian River culture since 1961 when my Uncle Henry, who danced to big bands at River venues during WWII, introduced me to Buck's Bar (1896) and the mystique of Guerneville. Since the 1890s, San Francisco's faster guys and gals, as well as same-sex jitterbugging soldiers and sailors, arrived by ferry and a long-gone railroad. That transportation will be restored hopefully in 2015, with a new Smart Train, giving city queers easier access by ferry and rail to the gay summer place where the girls and the boys are. \*

Excerpted from *Gay San Francisco*.

For more GLBT History, visit [www.JackFritscher.com](http://www.JackFritscher.com) • 2012 Jack Fritscher