

REMEMBERING EDWARD

By Tim Retzliff

Sometimes a traditional obituary alone just doesn't cut it and a more personal remembrance is in order.

When loved ones die, it feels as if part of us is ripped away from this planet along with them. The loss of a gay loved one is particularly acute in a society where we're not supposed to have gay loved ones or even be gay ourselves. When the loved one is a precious gay elder the absence can resonate to the core of our identity.

Since I learned that my dear friend Edward died at age 83 sometime in the early hours of April 11, 2006, I've experienced deep emptiness. I first met Edward in 1990, when I was 26 and he was about to turn 68. I had just started to research Michigan gay and lesbian history and had traveled down from Flint to use the Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan for which he was curator. He made such an impression on me that I recorded the meeting in my journal.

This is from September 9, 1990:

Forgot to mention the older man, early 60's, name of Ed Weber, in the Rare Book Room yesterday when I was looking at ONE Magazines. After talking some odd shit about Australia early on having a very open same-sex society and people who criticized it being in danger of being ostracized, and about Mark Twain's personal secretary having this rather frank correspondence with Walt Whitman, he told me about growing up in Rochester, New York and knowing he was different and having no problem finding willing partners, ("I especially loved the Italian boys," he told me. "I think to an extent we're attracted to our opposites, and I wasn't all that athletic. I wasn't into sports. So I would be attracted to these athletic, virile boys. I definitely had a thing for the Italians."), and about stumbling onto this bar called the Rustic something which his partner at the time found out about when some guy at the factory called him queer and asked if he hung out there. The partner, to save face, had to fight the guy. But he and Ed went exploring in the seedy section down by the river where the railroad tracks were (sounds like Flint), and the place was empty on the weekday except for this skinny boy, probably 18 because New York had an 18-year-old drinking age, with bright lipstick and make-up, "like something out of Oscar Wilde," he said. Ed's friend went back the following Friday, though, and the place was packed with servicemen and he danced with several (this was during World War II), and he took one to the YMCA. I'm amazed at these older men who so freely tell about their escapades.

This first encounter described in my journal was a template for my later interactions with Edward. Over the years, I got to know this kind man, first as a library patron and researcher, then after moving to Ann Arbor in 1995, as a colleague and friend. I came to relish the cross-generational exchange, blessed to enjoy Edward's camaraderie, blessed to witness his spirit of resilience. And oh how his eyes twinkled with mischief!

Once on the U of M Diag, my pal Scott was admonishing me for passing up the chance for sexual frolic in Ann Arbor's Arboretum with a newfound friend. "Everyone's had sex in the Arb!" Scott insisted. Just then Edward came strolling by. "Why, I bet Ed Weber has had sex in the Arb," Scott said, at which point he stopped Edward and asked, "Have you ever had sex in the Arb?"

Edward paused for a moment, characteristically, then calmly, teasingly said, "Yes." He then recounted meeting a young man at a New Year's Eve party in 1960 and the young man cajoling Edward into taking a ride in his car and parking along the bank of the Huron River in the winter snow.

My partner Rick and I spent many a night getting buzzed from wine in juice glasses as Edward shared his vast CD collection, the three of us listening to Schubert or 1920s recordings of the Irish tenor John McCormack. Edward lived on the top floor of his house with its low ceilings, crammed with clutter, mounds of mail on the table between three chairs in dim-lit alcove, his sweet pooch Missy often asleep beneath the aquarium by the stairs.

Such visits were like traveling into the past, experiencing a sensibility from yesteryear, at once refined and formal and so much more risqué than yesteryear was supposed to be. Edward had a 19th century aesthetic but remained impatient with conventional morals. He often boasted of being a proponent of free love. I've often imagined our nights with Edward as akin to the evening conversations the aging Walt Whitman had with his young admirers.

There's a photograph of old man Whitman with his wild bushy beard sitting in his garden surrounded by children. Edward once shared a black and white photo of himself in his early twenties in a thoughtful pose sitting on the edge of a river in upstate New York. For some reason I associate the two images, two amazing minds and spirits in the outdoors that they loved.

I cherish the memory of taking Edward on perhaps his last visit to the Arb. With take-out sandwiches from Zingerman's, Edward, Rick, and I lounged on a blanket listening to Gershwin through small cheap speakers plugged into my Discman. I remember thinking at the time how wondrous it was that Edward had been visiting the Arb for half a century. I wondered at all the tales he could tell.

Now that my loved one, my beloved gay elder is gone, I wonder at all the tales he lived.

