

CONTENTS

Map of Kansas ix

Introduction: A Strange Feeling in Middle America i

Part One—The Defeat:

The Marriage Amendment Years 17

1 Trouble in Topeka 21

2 Heartbreak in Trego County 41

3 College Towns and Rivalries 57

Part Two—The Dustoff: Battered Activists Organize 75

4 An Awakening in Wichita 79

5 Pioneers in Western Kansas 95

Part Three—The Comeback:

Three Cities, Three Losses, and a Year of Wins 117

6 They'll Take Manhattan 121

7 Springtime in Salina 142

8 The Once and Future Hutchinson 158

9 All Points Bulletins 179

Part Four—The Transformation:
As Gender Identities Evolve, So Does Kansas 203

10 Kansas City Royalty 207

11 Trans Kansas 220

Epilogue: Forever Kansan 241

Acknowledgments 253

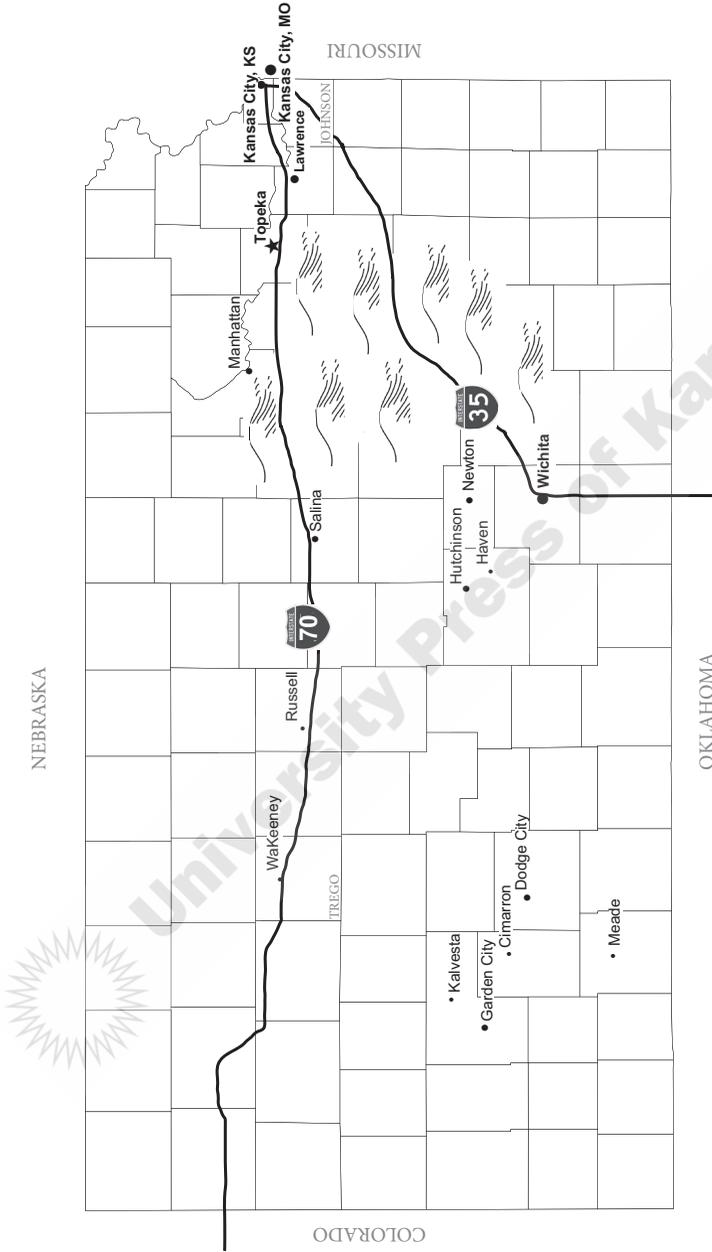
Notes 255

Selected Bibliography 275

Index 277



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Major locations of people and events in No Place Like Home: Lessons in Activism from LGBT Kansas. Credit: Emily Levine



INTRODUCTION

A STRANGE FEELING IN MIDDLE AMERICA

When I was a kid growing up in Nebraska, during summer and Christmas vacations my parents loaded us into a brown Ford Country Squire station wagon and pointed it due south toward Oklahoma City, where my grandparents lived. The trip was eight tedious hours, most of them on two-lane Highway 15 through Kansas.

I came to know the towns along the way only as time stamps on a long drive. Three hours in, Clay Center, the first real town, looked like a Norman Rockwell painting. Forty minutes later, when for a while the highway was also the main drag of Abilene, my dad would pull into an A&W Drive-In where a teenaged girl dressed in orange and black polyester and wearing a change belt delivered Papa Burgers, Mama Burgers, Baby Burgers, and root beer floats to the station wagon window. Back on the road we passed billboards advertising the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum and the Greyhound Hall of Fame, though we never spent precious daylight stopping to check them out. An hour and a half farther south, the highway joined Interstate 35 and we finally picked up speed, zooming around the vast edge of Wichita, where people lived in trailers with yards big enough for horses. From there it would be two more agonizing hours to my grandparents' house in Oklahoma City, but the air was starting to feel warmer, thicker, with the smell of iron-red dirt.

In those days Kansas was a place to get through, and if I was lucky I would sleep for most of it. This is not to say that the state was boring, just that no kid has patience for a long drive. But in those hours when I couldn't sleep, I'd be mesmerized by the passing landscape. It was not so different from Nebraska: farm fields on both sides of the road; rows of tall green corn in the summer and lines of stalk stubble poking up from the snow in the winter; sections marked by stands of cottonwood farther out, where I pictured creeks running; white frame houses where I imagined people like my grandparents lived—soft, gray-haired women who kept their candy dishes full and tanned, pipe-smoking men who drove pickup trucks and would take a girl pond fishing and give her sips from a cold Schlitz can. I'd read my obligatory *Little House on the Prairie*, which hadn't made that landscape sound like a place you'd want to live, but when I looked out at the wide-open horizon it was cowboys I thought about, their toughness and free spirits. Out here, a girl could go anywhere.

So I left. By the time I was eighteen my feelings about the Midwest were much less romantic, my feelings for women much more so. Like so many other gay kids from mid-America, I lit out for the promised land of San Francisco. A college degree later, I headed for the East Coast. Grad school seemed like a reasonable excuse to hang out in Boston, where I would also discover the gay vacation mecca of Cape Cod's Provincetown. But as soon as I got the credentials I aimed my little pickup truck—a '75 Ford Courier, mustard orange, holes in the floorboards—back toward the West Coast. I got halfway.

Stopping in Kansas City was a strategic decision: I had spent a lot of time in gay bars on both coasts and had grown friendly with some of the beer-drinking athletes who competed every year in the national Gay Softball World Series. There were teams from all over the country, and everyone said Kansas City had the prettiest girls. This turned out to be true enough, but it was the prairie, I remembered, that I'd always been in love with. Is it so inconceivable that a gay girl would give up the endless supply of lesbians and the utopian politics of the Bay Area for the straight, repressed Midwest, for no other reason than summers are supposed to be hot and humid? Home is a complicated thing.

I arrived in Kansas City in 1990 and began building a career as an alt-weekly journalist. As a reporter for and later editor of the *Pitch*—owned

for part of that time by Village Voice Media—I worked for an organization dedicated to advocacy journalism, and my staff and I were intimately familiar with all manner of characters and dynamics, political as well as cultural, in a metropolitan area that sprawled across a state line: Missouri to the east and Kansas to the west.

It's never been an easy border. In their beginnings, Missouri was a slave state and Kansas was a free state. Civil War skirmishes in these parts remain legendary, and the region still fights variations of those battles. In the 1960s and 1970s, when black kids began to outnumber white kids in public schools in Kansas City, Missouri, the typical white flight wasn't just to suburbs but to suburbs in Kansas: being in another state allowed these citizens to distance themselves even further, psychologically and politically, from their metropolitan area's racial concerns. When the University of Kansas Jayhawks play the University of Missouri Tigers, local sportswriters call it a "border war." So do politicians when one of the states dangles tax breaks in an attempt to lure a big employer to the other side. All of which is to say: it's a great place for journalism, and one of the places where we did our best work, and had the most fun, was Topeka. The capital city of Kansas was stocked with legislative characters who enjoyed stoking turn-of-the-twentieth-century culture clashes.

We weren't the only ones watching, of course. Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* provided the nation with a prescient, bestselling crash course on how conservative politicians wielded social issues to convince people to vote against their own economic interests. As Frank entertainingly noted, the state wasn't always a stronghold for far-right conservatives. In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, he writes, the place "crawled with religious fanatics, crackpot demagogues, and alarming hybrids of the two, such as the murderous abolitionist John Brown, who is generally regarded as the state's patron saint, and the rabid prohibitionist Carry A. Nation, who expressed her distaste for liquor by smashing saloons with a hatchet."¹ Frank lifted his book's title from fabled Emporia, Kansas, newspaper editor William Allen White's 1896 essay of the same name, a screed against the state's populists who in those days were leftish. The widely circulated socialist newspaper *Appeal to Reason* was published in the small town of Girard, where Eugene Debs accepted the Socialist Party's nomination for president in 1908.

It's fun to imagine an alternate history in which Kansas remained the intellectual home of America's leftist activity. But the next Kansas-grown presidential candidate was the state's Dust Bowl governor, Alf Landon, a liberal Republican who had the misfortune of running against Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936 and "gained lasting fame for his landslide defeat," according to his *New York Times* obituary.² Landon had won only eight electoral votes, from Maine and Vermont, losing even his home state. By this point, writes Kansas historian Craig Miner, "there were signs . . . that the rest of the country found Kansas and Kansans more humorous than profound."³ Miner is talking about politicians, editorial writers, and real-life events, but we all know it was a South Dakota fiction writer who cemented the state's unending status as a joke, thanks to another Depression-era phenomenon.

L. Frank Baum published *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in 1900, but the movie came out in 1939 and to this day, "not in Kansas anymore" remains a punch line, one with particular relevance for LGBT people. Dorothy's journey from the boring black-and-white farm and its traditional family to the Technicolor big city, accompanied by weird companions initially considered defective but ultimately becoming heroic examples of self-acceptance, is less a metaphorical than a literal representation of the gay experience in the twentieth century. Almost as soon as the movie came out, "Are you a friend of Dorothy?" became a coded question to help gay men identify each other.⁴ And gay men's well-documented love for Judy Garland deserves all due respect for its role in the Stonewall Riots, when patrons of the fabled bar, mourning Garland's death and in no mood to be harassed, decided they would no longer tolerate police raids. Certainly "Somewhere over the Rainbow" would be a contender for the gay national anthem if there were such a thing. But embracing the story requires being in denial about its ending. For countless LGBTs who left loving families seeking brighter futures among more diverse populations, "home" is likely fraught with unpleasant memories and other painful emotions.

That's certainly true for Sandra Stenzel, who grew up on a farm in rural Trego County, Kansas. In the mid-eighties, a career move took her to Austin, Texas, which felt like "the most wonderful place in the world."⁵ When her father died and she inherited his land, Stenzel went back to the place

she loved—only to find that her home was now a dangerous place. “The Oz crap,” Stenzel said,

haunts those who leave as well as those who stay. It makes it easy not only to trivialize the state as populated by a bunch of hicks—which it is—but it also trivializes and stereotypes the people who manage to escape and never look back. I always had to fight that image. Even as a seasoned professional, once people found out I was from Kansas, I was immediately pigeonholed.

It’s not as if the state hasn’t produced figures of great national esteem, including one president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and another legitimate presidential candidate, Senator Bob Dole, both pillars of moderate Republicanism and neither particularly jokeworthy (except during Dole’s brief role as a Viagra spokesman, which even he joked about⁶). In fact, lost to the state’s reputation at the turn of the twenty-first century as a laboratory for far-right fiscal and social causes is the previous half century it spent being a model of moderation, governed as often by Democrats (two of them women) as it was by Republicans. It’s a state that sent another moderate Republican, Nancy Landon Kassebaum (Alf Landon’s daughter), to the US Senate for nearly twenty years.

Kassebaum left the Senate in 1997, the same year Sam Brownback arrived there, elected in a special election to fill Dole’s old seat. Brownback had spent just two years in the US House of Representatives. In November 2015, Kassebaum, then eighty-three, told *Wichita Eagle* reporter Beccy Tanner that she “saw change coming, and not just in Kansas.”⁷ Kassebaum had returned to her family farm in Morris County after the death of her second husband, Senator Howard Baker. “If she were to run for office now, she said, she doubts whether she would make it out of the primary,” Tanner wrote. Kassebaum blamed social media. Its users’ fixation on finding statements that could be twisted out of context had turned campaigning into *Entertainment Tonight*, she said, adding, “That’s why Donald Trump has caught on.” Dole had made a similar observation a couple of years earlier, telling *Fox News Sunday* host Chris Wallace in 2013 that neither he nor Ronald Reagan would have “made it” in the current Republican Party.⁸

It's too soon to know, fully, how America's political evolution has been influenced by the Koch family, which may turn out to be the state's most significant contribution to global history. The family has grown exponentially more powerful and sophisticated than it was in 1980, when David Koch ran as the Libertarian Party's candidate for vice president (or in 1958, when patriarch Fred Koch helped found the John Birch Society, hosting local chapter meetings in his home). Amid the emerging body of journalism on this topic, two books serve as primers: Daniel Schulman's *Sons of Wichita: How the Koch Brothers Became America's Most Powerful and Private Dynasty*, from 2014, and Jane Mayer's *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires behind the Rise of the Radical Right*, from 2016. Both books show how brothers Charles and David have, as Mayer puts it, "altered the nature of American democracy."⁹

Using Kansas as the rooster atop his national weathervane, Frank dates the Republican Party's extreme rightward swing to a series of events five years before Dole's unsuccessful 1996 campaign for president. "The push that started Kansas hurtling down the crevasse of reaction," Frank argues, "was provided by Operation Rescue, the national pro-life group famous for its aggressive tactics against abortion clinics."¹⁰ One of those clinics was run by George Tiller (murdered by Scott Roeder in 2009) in Wichita. In what is now known as the 1991 "Summer of Mercy," tens of thousands of abortion opponents descended on the city for protests, arrests, and, most significantly, organizing. In Frank's account, the pro-lifers took over the state's Republican Party infrastructure, ultimately allowing conservatives to wage a class war disguised as a culture war.¹¹

The Republican Party marched rightward, with abortion providers and LGBT people its primary targets. So it was no surprise in 2005 when 70 percent of Kansas voters passed a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage; that percentage was essentially the same as a similar vote in Missouri a year earlier. That it was predictable made it no less painful.

A few weeks after the Kansas vote, I headed to a family gathering in Oklahoma City. In adulthood I'd made my own drives south through Kansas dozens of times. From my home in Kansas City, the route to Oklahoma City was a couple of hours shorter and more diagonal than the straight line my parents had taken from Nebraska, and it was interstate

the whole way. Instead of that two-lane highway through Clay Center and Abilene, I-35 took me through the starkly beautiful Flint Hills, that vast stretch of rolling tallgrass prairie, once the bottom of an ocean, now studded with cliffs of the limestone and shale that made it inhospitable for growing crops—and thus preserved the last remnant of what the Great Plains looked like before it became America. This landscape had always felt sacred.

Now it felt hostile.

Like tens of thousands of other gay Kansans—and hundreds of thousands of LGBT people in all of the states that banned same-sex marriage in those years—I was heartbroken.

Every once in a while, politicians here will reinforce their red-state worthiness by tossing out “San Francisco” as a synonym for “gay.” The Kansas Secretary of State, a Republican named Kris Kobach (architect of controversial voter-fraud myths and anti-undocumented-immigrant laws around the country) did this in 2012: “If a person wants to live in a San Francisco lifestyle, they can go there,” he told the *Kansas City Star*. “If they want to live a Kansas lifestyle, they can come here.”¹² Whatever “a Kansas lifestyle” is, shouldn’t LGBT citizens be allowed to live it just like straight people? Are we crazy for wanting to? *No Place Like Home* answers those questions.

Given Kansas’s backwater reputation, readers outside the state, and maybe even inside it, might be surprised to learn that its proportion of LGBT people in the population is not dramatically different from bigger states with larger cities. The Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, a think tank that compiles extensive data on LGBT populations as part of its policy research, teamed up with Gallup in 2013 to survey adults across the country to estimate LGBT population percentages by state. They put Kansas at 3.7 percent, in the same league as Indiana, New Jersey, and New Hampshire; just above Ohio (3.6 percent); and just below Illinois, Michigan, and New York (3.8 percent). LGBT people make up a full 10 percent of the population in the District of Columbia; they are the most lonesome in North Dakota, at just 1.7 percent.¹³ With Kansas’s overall population of 2.9 million, this would put the state’s LGBT population at 107,300.

A growing body of work is beginning to document, analyze, and contextualize the histories and contemporary lives of LGBT people far from

the coastal big cities with which we have historically been associated. In the academy, a handful of scholars are liberating us from the idea that our movement could only have happened because of, or owes its progress solely to, the much-documented and discoursed twentieth-century concentration of gay populations and cultures in big cities. In *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*, Scott Herring sets out to chart, through analysis of various literary, artistic, and other cultural artifacts and phenomena, how “non-urban identified queers . . . have coped with, navigated, mourned, side-stepped, muddled through, menaced, and rearticulated the onslaught of queer urbanisms through the twentieth century.” Kansas shows up in the fiction of Willa Cather, where Herring finds characters whose emotional choices signify “freedom from metronormative constraints.”¹⁴ The LGBT Kansans I came to know while researching for *No Place Like Home* were in general less “antiurban” than simply proud of their prairie or small-town homes—perhaps they’re beneficiaries of a foundation laid by Herring’s more aggressive antiurbanists, who, he concludes, “have been making every space—not always the metropolis—a Lesbian and Gay space.”¹⁵

That’s a point Carol Mason approaches from the opposite direction in *Oklahoma: Lessons in Unqueering America*, which contextualizes some notorious examples of homophobia in, and nationally known homophobes produced by, Kansas’s neighbor to the south. Most intriguingly and entertainingly is Anita Bryant, whose “Save Our Children” campaign made a bizarre stop in Wichita in 1978. Mason comes to an admittedly “meandering conclusion” regarding economic and cultural forces that inspired Christian conservatives to adopt “an antigay identity . . . by decentering supposedly urban attitudes and glorifying white-washed small-town life,” an identity that now purports to represent all of America—falsely, because, as Mason shows, “country is always a little queer.”¹⁶

How Kansas’s own most notorious homophobe and his extensive family assisted, if indirectly, in Mason’s Christian “unqueering” of America gets close examination in *God Hates: Westboro Baptist Church, American Nationalism, and the Religious Right*. Rebecca Barrett-Fox spent extensive time inside the Westboro compound, learning the Phelps family’s ways and even traveling across the country to their funeral pickets. She applies deep

knowledge of religious history and doctrine to explain the far-reaching influence of Kansas's most notable cultural export. By employing tactics most observers found despicable, Westboro actually gave cover to a generation of religious leaders whose homophobia sounded acceptable compared to the Phelps's. "The Religious Right has deployed multiple strategies to distance itself from Westboro Baptist Church," Barrett-Fox notes. "Its goal is to use the Westboro Baptist Church as a foil to construct itself as compassionate to gay people but critical of gay sex. In other words, by characterizing Westboro Baptists as 'haters,' the Religious Right can recalibrate the scale of homophobia so that its own homophobia is seen as moderate—as, indeed, compassion rather than hate."¹⁷ Politicians, I would add, used the same tactics, and much of that homophobia is now codified in public policy.

Other pioneering scholarly work includes Mary L. Gray, Brian J. Gilley, and Colin R. Johnson's *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies* (in which Lucas Crawford's essay, "Snorting the Powder of Life: Transgender Migration in the Land of Oz," finds Baum's *The Marvelous Land of Oz* [a sequel to *Wizard*] to be "a compelling tale of transgender and mobility, one that replaces Kansas-loving Dorothy with gender-crossing and soon-to-be rural-expat Tip")¹⁸ and Johnson's *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America*. Other studies mark our place by focusing on single states, such as Gray's *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*, which concentrates on Kentucky; Stewart Van Cleve's *Land of 10,000 Loves: A History of Queer Minnesota*; and, from Kansas's near-neighbor to the southeast, Brock Thompson's *The Un-Natural State: Arkansas and the Queer South*.

Kansas's neighbor to the northeast, Iowa, gets journalistic rather than scholarly coverage in Tom Witosky and Marc Hansen's *Equal Before the Law: How Iowa Led Americans to Marriage Equality*, an essential record—and reminder—of that midwestern state's crucial role in the long legal battle. When the Iowa Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in 2009, it became only the third state to do so, after Massachusetts and Connecticut, adding territory to an inconsistent legal landscape for LGBT citizens that would widen in the years ahead. Gary Martens and Larry Bunker of Salina, Kansas, experienced this firsthand when they celebrated their nineteenth

anniversary in February 2013 with a trip to Des Moines to get married. Driving home after the wedding, Bunker remembered, “We hit the state line and realized, okay, we’re not married anymore.”¹⁹

Showing how the legal landscape ultimately evened out is Debbie Cenziper and Jim Obergefell’s *Love Wins: The Lovers and Lawyers Who Fought the Landmark Case for Marriage Equality* (in which someone, presumably a Westboro member, makes an appearance as plaintiff Obergefell arrives for his climactic legal argument: “Protestors had already gathered in front of the Supreme Court when Jim tumbled out of his car in a new tan blazer and raced toward the building, past the young man whipping a Bible above his head, past the old man shouting ‘God hates fags’”²⁰). Obergefell’s story is set in Ohio, where Cincinnati’s antiabortion and anti-LGBT battles predated those that played out in Kansas, particularly when Cincinnatians passed an ordinance protecting gay people from discrimination in 1992, only to see it repealed by voters the next year.

It is perhaps appropriate that the full account of middle America’s contribution to the nation’s far-from-finished LGBT equality movement is arriving state by state, written by individuals who saw stories or fields of study and simply went to work presenting the material to their particular audiences, whether the writer was a journalist or a scholar—or a mother, as in the case of Judy Shepard, whose *The Meaning of Matthew: My Son’s Murder in Laramie, and a World Transformed* was a bestseller in 2009. Though this approach has resulted in uneven intellectual terrain, some of it deeply mined by academics, some of it simply plowed by journalists—I’m clearly in the latter camp—our self-directed, localized efforts mirror the state-level work of activists, particularly here in the Midwest, where our legal and legislative battles are typically fought without help from the national LGBT organizations and our results are also uneven. Out here, the hard work of changing hearts and minds falls to individuals who carry it out family member to family member, neighbor to neighbor, coworker to coworker.

The ongoing need for documentation of this work is crucial. *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle*, by Lillian Faderman—one of our movement’s preeminent historians—surveys the gay rights movement in America from the 1940s through the book’s publication in 2015, providing an

invaluable wide-angle view that, due to its scope, cannot focus too long or too narrowly on middle America. Nowhere is the need for *No Place Like Home* more obvious than at the end of Linda Hirshman's prematurely titled *Victory: The Triumphant Gay Revolution*, a 2012 primer on gay political history weighted toward the East and West Coasts. In her epilogue, while championing New York's legalization of gay marriage, Hirshman jokes: "Of course, New York is not Kansas, but the New York vote may be the turning point for this last, hardest-fought issue."²¹

Clearly, somebody needed to tell the story of Kansas.

This project began on June 26, 2013, a Wednesday. In Washington, DC, that morning, hundreds of people were waiting outside the Supreme Court Building when Justice Anthony Kennedy announced historic rulings in *United States v. Windsor* and *Hollingsworth v. Perry*. The first decision, named after its charming elderly lesbian widow plaintiff, Edie Windsor, had overturned the Defense of Marriage Act, giving equal treatment under federal law to same-sex couples who'd been married in the states where such marriages were legal. The *Perry* decision had overturned California's Proposition 8, a ban on same-sex marriage in that state. The crowd's jubilation was so loud it floated through marble: "A muffled cheer pierced the quiet in the Supreme Court chamber," Dana Milbank wrote in the *Washington Post*.²² The euphoria rippled three thousand miles to the west, where it was 7 a.m. and people had been waiting in front of San Francisco's city hall, hallowed ground for the gay rights movement. Later, on Castro Street, music and dancing would go on all night.²³

Here in Kansas City, it was different. After work that day, a couple hundred people gathered at a small park in front of the federal courthouse downtown. I saw a few people I'd known for years: The university professor, beloved by all of his students, with whom I had volunteered in the local chapter of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation in the nineties. The retired TV news producer with whom I had served on the contest committee for the Kansas City Press Club's annual Heart of America Journalism Awards. The comedy performer who had been part of the Kansas City Coalition against Censorship in the Tipper Gore days, now the host of a weekly music program on the community radio station. An ex-girlfriend who'd survived breast cancer.

But the fact that I didn't know more of the people around me was a consequence of my settled-down, middle-aged life with a partner of ten years. Clearly, many of the kids on the lawn that day had no experience of life before AIDS, or before the Supreme Court's *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision, which, as late as 1986, said it was constitutionally legal for the state of Georgia to arrest a man, in his own bedroom, for having consensual oral sex with another man. Back in 1987 and 1993 I had marched on Washington with hundreds of thousands of my gay brothers and sisters, and in those days gay marriage was not on the list of things we cared about.

As I listened to the speeches that day, the strangeness of the moment hit me: We were celebrating Supreme Court rulings that legally changed nothing for gays and lesbians here or in many other states—Perry applied only to California, and *Windsor* bestowed federal benefits to same-sex couples who were legally married, which could only happen in twenty-one states. None of us could have anticipated how quickly marriage equality would be legal everywhere; instead, I figured we were in for a long slog. And I wondered what had become of the Kansans who had fought the marriage amendment battle here a decade earlier.

Kansas had started its constitutional amendment push in 2004, but here the inevitable dragged out for two years. In the Kansas legislature, the two-session struggle to send an amendment to voters would be one of the last internecine battles between vanishing moderate and ascendant conservative Republicans. Prominent megachurches seized the antigay territory held by the Westboro Baptist Church. And gay people, blindsided, weren't in any kind of organizational shape to fight.

Those are the sad events I recount in the first section of this book. Titled "The Defeat," this section's three chapters visit distinctly different parts of the state, connecting key individuals who live with lasting consequences of their activism. In Topeka, Tiffany Muller found herself at the center of a battle against not only the Phelps family but the entire state legislature. In rural Trego County, having returned from Austin to her family's farm, Sandra Stenzel was one of the only openly gay people in the western part of the state; she spoke up against the amendment and lost her job. And in the liberal haven of Lawrence, Diane Silver and Bruce Ney clashed over strategy with Christopher Renner, an activist from the rival

college town of Manhattan. Theirs was ultimately a futile battle to stop the Kansas legislature from finally sending the marriage amendment to a statewide ballot in April 2005.

But I knew that since the defeat, LGBT people had made quiet and sometimes surprising progress in Kansas. I suspected that Kansas was the perfect place to tell a story of America at a turning point. That story is, in one sense, a rejoinder to *What's the Matter with Kansas?* Frank depicted a political future, one that is still playing out nationally and might (or might not) have climaxed with the 2016 election of President Donald Trump. But Frank's argument left off in 2004. That is where *No Place Like Home* picks up, showing how LGBT activists have countered his portrayal of a ruined place. Here, well below the national media's radar (except for those occasions when news out of Kansas made for a good joke on *The Daily Show* or CNN needed to interview someone straight out of a central casting call for "politician from Kansas") and worlds away from the national gay rights organizations that threw big money behind high-profile legal battles, were a few disorganized and politically naïve citizens who, realizing they were unfairly under attack, rolled up their sleeves, went looking for fights, and ended up making friends in one of the country's most inhospitable states.

That story unfolds throughout subsequent sections. Part two, "The Dustoff," visits first the state's biggest city of Wichita and then its western high plains, where Dodge City is not a movie set but a real town and an unlikely place for LGBT advocacy. Connecting these two places are the activists who formed the Kansas Equality Coalition, a statewide LGBT rights organization (they later simplified the group's name to Equality Kansas, which is the term I use throughout the book for consistency and clarity). From his home base in Wichita, an introverted but newly enraged computer consultant named Tom Witt became a statewide political leader, cajoling a rural psychologist named Anne Mitchell and a transgender farm laborer named LuAnn Kahl, among others, to establish an outpost and raise LGBT visibility in the rural southwestern part of the state, earning allies in the process.

Part three, "The Comeback," profiles activists in Manhattan, Salina, and Hutchinson, showing LGBT citizens and their allies in those cities

moving beyond the failed marriage issue to seek basic protections from discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations. In these efforts, from 2010 to 2012, hard-fought successes were inevitably followed by depressing reversals. Despite their exhaustion, however, activists began to see evidence that even when they lost at ballot boxes, they were winning in other ways. In Manhattan this included more transgender-friendly policies and the establishment of a full-time LGBT student resource center at Kansas State University, the state's land-grant university. In Salina it meant the city's first LGBT pride celebrations, where attendance exceeded expectations, solidifying the existence of a new and supportive community. And in Hutchinson it involved not only political challenges to Democratic Representative Jan Pauls, the longtime promoter of anti-LGBT state policies, but also the formation of a gay-straight alliance at Hutchinson High School. The final chapter of part three, titled "All Points Bulletins," follows the rapid events of 2014 and 2015 as ten years of activism by LGBT Kansans and their allies throughout the state began to pay off.

Their work moved the state in unexpected ways, as becomes clear in part four, "The Transformation," which profiles transgender activists who made headlines here years before Caitlyn Jenner's *Vanity Fair*- and Hollywood-chronicled transition in 2015. The experiences of women such as Sandra Meade in Kansas City and Stephanie Mott in Topeka, along with others elsewhere, suggest how the rest of the country will ultimately accept a gender-nonbinary future that it is only beginning to recognize.

Over three years of road trips around Kansas, on highways and stretches of interstate I'd never seen—not as a kid in the back of my parents' station wagon or as an adult driving up and down I-35 to family visits in Oklahoma—I came to know people with deep roots in Kansas who loved their state profoundly. Some of their experiences are newly documented every month in the *Liberty Press*, a glossy-covered newsprint magazine published for decades now by Kristi Parker in Wichita, its four thousand copies distributed throughout the state (sometimes, still, via regular mail in plain manila envelopes). The *Liberty Press* wasn't just an important source of information during my reporting; it had been a lifeline for some of the people I met.

Other key stories have become part of the historical record thanks to University of Kansas librarian Tami Albin's invaluable *Under the Rainbow: Oral Histories of Gay, Lesbian, Transgender, Intersex and Queer People in Kansas*. It is there, for example, that a man named Gilbert Baker recounts his childhood in Kansas. Born in Chanute in 1951, Baker remembers growing up "in a very sort of 1950s black and white way."²⁴ After a "horrible" time as a gay kid in high school, he went to college for a year, was drafted and served two years in Vietnam, then moved to San Francisco, where he would create the antithesis of that black-and-white childhood: Baker was the designer of the LGBT movement's iconic rainbow flag. "I'm just this guy from Kansas that had the stroke of luck to be the one to make the flag, and . . . sort of pulled the sword from a stone," Baker told Albin in June 2008, when he was in Lawrence briefly for a speaking engagement. By then he had settled in New York and was a man of the world. When Albin asked if he ever came back to Kansas, Baker said, "Never," then amended, guessing it had been twenty-five or thirty-five years since he'd been here. But even during this quick visit, he could see the place had changed. "When I lived here I was alone," he said. "Now there's a community, so that's wonderful."

No Place Like Home shows some of that community still under construction, while much of the state remains unfriendly. "Many young people, if they have the resources to get out of Kansas, they do," notes Equality Kansas's Tom Witt. "They don't stay in Wichita, Dodge City, or Hutchinson. They'll go to Denver, Chicago, or Houston."²⁵

Here are the stories of some who have remained, staking their rightful claim to the Kansas lifestyle.

