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Style
The Philadelphia Inquirer Sunday, August 1, 1993

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Rehoboth's Poodle Beach *is known as a gay mecca. Activists are lobbying among the town leaders for more acceptance of homosexuals.*

The CHANGING TIDE in REHOBOTH

Gays began frequenting the resort town 10 years ago, gradually making their presence known. The reception has been mixed. By Karen Heller

REHOBOTH BEACH, Del. — Only 28 precious miles of Delaware meet the Atlantic, and the state guards them like jewels. The wide, opalescent beaches have been kept pristine and underbuilt compared to what has happened in much of neighboring New Jersey and Maryland. Delaware's most popular resort, Rehoboth, was founded by Methodists as a campground a century ago. For most of its life, this was a tiny town trapped in time, as removed from much of the Jersey Shore as Iowa. The name Rehoboth, from the Bible, means Room Enough For All.

But for many of this resort's 100 years, that was not so. The restaurants in the nearby towns of Millsboro and Selbyville didn't serve blacks until 1963. It was not a haven for recent immigrants or second-generation Americans. Many Jews felt out of place. Rehoboth remained sleepy, distinctly Southern, insulated from change.

While Ocean City, Md., became a big honky-tonk, a seaside metropolis swollen with tenement-like apartments, Rehoboth was militantly old-fashioned, its mantra "a family resort." The young, unattached and preternaturally social, in search of group houses for a score or more, were steered toward neighboring Dewey Beach, still a mecca for the brew-and-cruise set.

Rehoboth was not for them. The main attractions were Dolley's saltwater taffy and caramel corn, Thrasher's french fries, Kohr Bros. frozen custard. The clothing shops on Rehoboth Avenue, the main strip, sold golf skirts and madras slacks. Entertainment meant John Philip Sousa at the band shell and Skeeball at Playland; for an eternity, nine plays for a nickel. Going out for foreign cuisine meant pizza. Beer was something one drank at home.

Though Rehoboth was "the nation's summer capital," a favorite beach for Washingtonians, no one would confuse it with the Hamptons or Cape Cod. Chic, it was not.

So it was something of a surprise when, about 10 years ago, Rehoboth became one of the nation's leading gay and lesbian resorts, a destination for homosexuals from Washington, Baltimore and Philadelphia, who felt unwanted at most beaches south of Fire Island and north of Key West.

Rehoboth is still a family resort. There are Candy Kitchens — and $17-entree restaurants. Rehoboth still has Skeeball (now a quarter) — and a gay dance club open weekends until dawn. There are still concerts at the band shell — and drag volleyball games at the gay mecca, Poodle Beach.

Rehoboth sure has changed, and then again, not.

■

"The first time I went to Rehoboth was 1976. You didn't speak the word *gay*," says Charles Algard, a Philadelphia hairdresser. "I went back in the early '80s and it wasn't much better. Of course, it wasn't cool to be young down there, either."

By then, Joyce Felton had opened the Blue Moon, a haven for gays at sundown. "This was a sleepy, mid-Atlantic town that had a lot of potential," recalls Felton. "I don't think there were more than 15 restaurants. Now, there are well over 100."

In December 1991, Steve Elkins helped found CAMP Rehoboth, Create a More Positive Rehoboth. "Our primary mission is to

See **REHOBOTH** on H3



A surf scene in Rehoboth. *The Delaware shore town was founded by Methodists as a campground a century ago.*

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In 'family resort' of Rehoboth Beach, homosexuals push on for acceptance



When Joyce Felton opened the Blue Moon, *"this was a sleepy . . . town that had a lot of potential," she says. "I don't think there were more than 15 restaurants. Now, there are well over 100."*

REHOBOTH from 1E

create a more inclusive community," says Elkins, who worked as an administrative assistant in the Carter White House and for then-Democratic National Committee chairman Robert Strauss before moving here. He now owns and manages the Surfside Diner, the Westside Cafe, and the Strand, the gay club that stays open until dawn.

Four summers ago, the Strand fueled a controversy here, pitting old Rehoboth against the new, when it was denied a liquor license. Gay supporters accused the town government of trying to shut the club down, which did not happen. The Strand is still open — but without a liquor license. Now, it's fighting new pressure from a noise ordinance.

"We're not a Key West, a Fire Island. We do not want to be separate," says Elkins, sitting in the Blue Moon at sundown. "We like being included. CAMP Rehoboth is not strictly a gay and lesbian organization."

If there is a sense of community here, Elkins also acknowledges there is division. "Yes, there are two Rehoboths. The world of Rehoboth Avenue is foreign to me," Elkins says, even though his two restaurants and club are located on the main street. "There are all these T-shirt stores with terrible quotes against women and some really horrible jewelry stores. I'm interested in businesses that bring some life to the community." His strategy is not to back down, not to make Rehoboth a world of parallel lives, but to make the gay presence felt and a permanent part of the town's life.

At its best, "Rehoboth brings this wonderful diverse tapestry of all sorts of people from different backgrounds," says Felton, who, during the last decade, has become a spokeswoman for the resort's largely male gay population, though she herself is straight. "At its worst, I have seen some very repressive and divisive things happen here. There's a lot of internal networking to rout out the gay community. There are ordinances specifically written to get the gay community."

City Manager Greg Ferrese, the town's highest-paid official says, "Rehoboth is for everyone. I have no problems with anyone's lifestyle just as long as they obey the ordinances."

Joe Platerote, a hairdresser from Baltimore, runs a group house on Silver Lake with fellow gays and straights. "Gays have a lot of money. The people down here want our money," says Platerote. "They don't want to live harmoniously with us. The government here makes it kind of difficult. It does not make us feel wanted." Yet he comes every year, and has for 12 years. His Rehoboth house rents for a third of what he figures it would cost to have a similar property on "the gay utopia" of Fire Island.

All that style, and the money it generates, would mean more almost anywhere other than here. Rehoboth's real-estate taxes are based on 1968 assessments; the average annual property tax is $300. Business licenses are cheap: $270, double for restaurants that serve liquor. Water rates are low. Because this is Delaware, it doesn't matter whether you buy a slice of Grotto Pizza or a $100 silk blouse at Sasso, the sales tax is the same: zip. The town's largest source of revenue is quarters. "Parking meters bring in more than a million dollars in revenues," says Ferrese, who has a full-time staff of 72 that swells to 200 in the summer. "Parking tickets will bring in $460,000 to $480,000."

Usually, many gays say, they feel safe, secure and, for the most part, welcome in Rehoboth. But there are occasional signs that the town has changed too quickly for some, such as bumper stickers that read, "Let's keep Rehoboth a family town."

Gays assert that some town officials and businessmen — who declined comment — ignore their problems, that one of them said "a little discrimination never hurt anyone" after the worst gay-bashing incident in years. Several times recently, people have cruised by the Blue Moon yelling anti-gay epithets. The police force, under Chief Craig W. Doyle, has been quick to fine the offenders. This summer, CAMP Rehoboth led its second annual sensitivity-training session with the police. "The cops around here are incredible," says Babo Janssen, manager of Lambda Rising, the gay book store. "Craig Doyle has been a godsend."

■

But the police cannot be everywhere, and this spring Rehoboth experienced perhaps the most serious gay-bashing incident in its history. In the first hours of Sunday, May 16, Randy Reed, Jeff Coffey, Bill Cherrix and two other friends were sitting on the Boardwalk after going to the gay club the Renegade, when they were taunted by five males calling them queers and faggots. At first, they ignored the group, then Coffey said, "We aren't here to cause any problems. Leave us alone." They did not.

When one of the gay men decided to leave for his car, the taunters ran across the dunes in pursuit, and the gay man's friends followed to protect him. By the time the friends arrived, the gay man was gone. But not the assailants. Coffey was hit in the back of the head with a bottle. Reed was slugged with a baseball bat. As Reed staggered, beginning to lose his balance, Cherrix reached out to hold him up and that's when he got smashed hard with a bottle. "Blood just gushed everywhere," Reed recalls. "They shattered his skull."

Today, Reed has nine staples and a 2½-inch scar in the back of his head. Coffey's skull is marked by 16 lacerations. Cherrix has only 40 percent use of his right arm, a plate in his skull, and a hole in his head the size of a golf ball. "He knows what he wants to say but can't verbalize it," says Reed, adding that Cherrix will never return to his job as a bartender. "He has a lot of bitterness, a lot of anger." Before the assault, Reed and Cherrix were not "out" to their families. "It was a very traumatic ordeal," says Reed.

The three juveniles already have been tried. Family Court Judge Battle Robinson has delivered tough sentencing. Donta Vickers was found guilty on four counts: second-degree assault, conspiracy, carrying a concealed deadly weapon and use of a deadly weapon in the commission of a felony. He received the maximum sentence of two years in a juvenile home. Javaughn Waples was found guilty of second-degree assault and sentenced to two years' strict probation. Mark Custis, found guilty of second-degree conspiracy, is awaiting sentencing on Aug. 16, his 18th birthday. The two adults charged await trial on Aug. 24.

Reed, a salesman who lives an hour away in Maryland, does not come back here. "I used to go nowhere else but Rehoboth, but now I go to Ocean City or Assateague," says Reed, conceding that they're not known for their gay communities. "It's not that I don't feel safe. It just sets you back." He has no complaints about how police handled the matter. Neither does CAMP Rehoboth. The town government is another matter.

Because the attackers were black, and lived about half an hour inland, and the victims were white, some people viewed the matter as racially motivated and an incident that barely involved Rehoboth. "Those were outsiders who beat them up, minorities who beat up gay people," Ferrese, the city manager, says.

"Days after the event, nobody seemed to know about it. I went ballistic. The mayor, the city manager, they did not seem to know thing one about these kids," Joyce Felton recalls. "I was told it was not a gay issue and I had blown it all out of proportion." Steve Elkins remembers discussing with a commissioner whether it was a racial or anti-gay incident. "Who cares?" Elkins recalls telling him. "It was a hate crime. Treat it as one."

Elkins continues to go to court, covering the trials for the CAMP Rehoboth newsletter. "But it's old news to most of Rehoboth. Nobody has been there from the government to speak on behalf of the city," he says.

Since then, Elkins says there have been three more incidents of gay bashing. Two were just outside the Rehoboth Beach Police's jurisdiction. In the third, which occurred a block from the beach, a man getting out of his car was called anti-gay names and hit on the back of the head. The assailant was not found. "The city cops have been great, the state police have not been so strong in their reaction," Elkins says.

The late sun splashes across the open yellow porch of the Blue Moon, where Elkins sits, still dressed from the courtroom, out of place in his slacks and turtleneck in a sea of men in shorts and sandals. "In many ways, it has gotten better here," says Elkins, who three years ago made Rehoboth his year-round home. "I love it here."

But if old Rehoboth thinks things are quieting down, Elkins has other plans. "We're keeping our agenda on the front page, in front of the commissioners, in front of the police, in front of the city fathers and mothers so they will not close the closet doors," he says. "We're a part of the community, and they're a part of it with us. We're not going to sort of sit back and watch the community regress."

And the agenda is expanding. "The our next big battle," Elkins says, "there's not a single black person registered to vote in all of Rehoboth."



It's karaoke-in-drag night *at the Westside Cafe. Lance Gibbs takes the mike, while master of ceremonies Howard Hicks rests.*

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