

She was looking for a retirement project. She found ‘lesbian paradise.’

In “The Pagoda,” Rose Norman details a lesbian-feminist community that thrived in Florida for over 20 years.

By Lena Wilson

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Barbara Lieu, left, and Lavender Lieu pose as tourists in 1988. Graphics Ink, a lesbian-owned business, produced this as postcard that was sold in gift shops in St. Augustine, Fla. (Nancy Hovater)

In 2010, Rose Norman found herself staring down a whiteboard with six potential writing projects. She’d recently retired from 27 years of teaching college English, but that didn’t mean the Alabama native was going to stop working.

One of those projects, an effort to preserve the accomplishments of Southern lesbian feminists, would come to define the next chapter of her life. In 2012, Norman co-founded the Southern Lesbian-Feminist Activist Herstory Project. She has since conducted more than 100 interviews, guest-edited six issues of the lesbian quarterly Sinister Wisdom and written an almost-400-page book.

THE PAGODA:



A LESBIAN COMMUNITY BY THE SEA

ROSE NORMAN

Women who remember The Pagoda from the old days will revel in details of the development of this amazing community along with the complex dynamics involved. Women who have never heard of The Pagoda will find a gift in this fascinating piece of our lesbian herstory.

—Merril Mushroom

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/books/2024/05/11/pagoda-rose-norman-lesbian-history-book/>

That book is “The Pagoda: A Lesbian Community by the Sea,” in which Norman, now 74, tells the story of a nexus of lesbian-feminist spirituality and culture in St. Augustine, Fla. She relies on 58 interviews and several decades’ worth of archival material — among them, newsletters, guestbooks and VHS tapes — to give readers a glimpse of, as guests called it, “lesbian paradise.”

Norman got her first peek at Pagoda history in April 2013, when she interviewed six former residents who went on to form another community called Alapine. She immediately knew there was enough material about the Pagoda for a book. The project “took off like a wave,” she recalled. “Like you’re almost caught in a riptide. It just kept getting bigger and bigger.”

The Pagoda was founded by two lesbian couples in 1977 and remained a lesbian community until 2000. At its largest, it consisted of 12 cottages, a duplex, a two-story house and a swimming pool. The big house, dubbed the Center, hosted concerts, plays, art shows, religious rituals and guests from all over the country, including cultural giants like the poet Adrienne Rich and the filmmaker Barbara Hammer.

The community had an auspicious beginning. Morgana MacVicar, Suzanne Chance, Rena Carney and Kathleen Clementson were looking for theater space when Chance spotted the newspaper ad that would change lesbian history: “seaside cottages for sale, \$6000.”

“It seemed to almost happen to us — a gift from the Goddess,” MacVicar wrote in 1978. In fact, an entire religion fell right into their laps. When the women were looking for a way to legally solidify their women-only status and achieve tax exemption, Toni Head, the founder of the Mother Church, was searching for someone to take over operations. Pagoda residents jumped at the chance, renaming the Mother Church to the Pagoda-temple of Love.



Rainbow Williams at the altar in Persphone's Garden at the Pagoda. (Emily Greene)

“There was no place, really, at that time, that had a community like ours,” MacVicar said in a phone interview. “Where lesbians could have the safety of being in women-only space, and cultural and spiritual stimulation.”

Norman’s “The Pagoda” captures the ideals and challenges that defined the community. Some of the Pagoda’s polarizing stances on female separatism, bisexuality and BDSM were hotly debated in similar spaces throughout the country. But the Pagoda’s unique status as a lesbian resort, cultural center and church led to even more granular disputes. Vacationers and residents approached the space with different attitudes, leading to occasional friction. (On one occasion, a fight about sexual ethics broke out after one visitor left a bloody handprint, outlined by erotic writing, in the guest book.)

Some residents took issue with the community’s dedication to spirituality and activism. The Pagoda’s commitment to women-only affordable housing put it consistently in the red. One might be tempted to downplay these struggles in 2024, when there have been many advances in rights for women and queer people. But these women were essentially pilot-testing a new era of female existence.

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“I’m not old enough to remember when we didn’t have the vote, but I am old enough to remember when I couldn’t get a credit card without a husband’s signature,” said Barbara Lieu, who arrived at the Pagoda in 1978. “When you couldn’t get a mortgage, no matter how good a job you had.”



Rose Norman. (Beth Karbe)

Residents never advertised for the Pagoda outside of lesbian-specific networks and newsletters, but their dedication to maintaining the community space was as bold as it was invaluable.

The Pagoda’s grand opening took place on Nov. 19, 1977, mere months after Anita Bryant, the anti-gay activist and orange juice spokeswoman, successfully campaigned to repeal an ordinance against anti-gay discrimination in Dade County, Fla. Carney performed a mocking monologue as Bryant, which started with her singing and throwing oranges into the audience.

Even as they were seeking new ways of living on their own terms, lesbian feminists fueled social and legal progress for other marginalized people — including in the South. But the Southern Lesbian-Feminist Activist Herstory Project, which paved the way for Norman to write “The Pagoda,” began when one of Norman’s friends, a writer known as Merrill Mushroom, observed that these efforts have largely gone unrecognized.

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“I do think it’s important that women’s stories not be lost,” Norman said, “especially when their stories are so interesting.” Though she didn’t visit the Pagoda until after its heyday, Norman was sensitive to the fact that she was writing about her own peers. At times she worked on the book from Carney’s Pagoda cottage, which Carney still owns to this day. “I keep thinking that someone should write the novel version,” Norman said. “I had to leave out a lot that maybe was too personal to include.”

Lena Wilson is a writer based in Brooklyn, where she lives with her girlfriend and two senior dogs.