


2016

Dick Hanson and Bert Henningson: Rural Activists in the 1980s

Cory Schroeder

University of Minnesota - Morris

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/horizons>

 Part of the [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schroeder, Cory (2016) "Dick Hanson and Bert Henningson: Rural Activists in the 1980s," *Scholarly Horizons: University of Minnesota, Morris Undergraduate Journal*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/horizons/vol3/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarly Horizons: University of Minnesota, Morris Undergraduate Journal by an authorized administrator of University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. For more information, please contact skulann@morris.umn.edu.

Cory Schroeder
November 18, 2015

Dick Hanson and Bert Henningson: Rural Activists in the 1980s

Although the title of this presentation may seem relatively straightforward, I encourage you all to think a little deeper about two important words in the title of this presentation: rural and activists. Questions that come to mind include: what does it mean to be rural? What does a rural individual look like? What is activism? Who can be an activist? Can you be rural and an activist? Does rural activism look different than other forms of activism? Maybe most importantly, can someone be an activist for more than one cause? If you asked Dick Hanson or Bert Henningson that question, I think they would tell you yes. What about those other questions? How would Hanson or Henningson answer those? I'd argue that would they answer those through their daily lives and interactions with people from rural Minnesota and politicians in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Dick Hanson was born in 1950 and was raised on a family farm six miles south of Glenwood, Minnesota. He would never leave the area for a significant amount of time. As part of their book *Powerline The First Battle of America's Energy War*, Barry Casper and (then professor) Paul Wellstone, interviewed with Dick Hanson about the power line controversy that angered and mobilized farmers

across West Central Minnesota. When asked about how his family got into farming, Hanson said, “my father bought the farm... in 1946. It was 183 acres.” He goes on to say, “By 1963 we had 473 acres. We’ve been dairying almost all the time. It started with a couple dozen cows and then building onto that.”¹ Farming was an integral part of Hanson’s life and he noted that he “started milking cows when [he] was a second or third grader.”² Hanson graduated high school in 1968 and headed to Alexandria’s vocational institute to study in their “agricultural salesman and marketing program.”³ Hanson’s activist roots did not just stem from within himself, but rather they started with his immediate family. Hanson stated, “I became very active in the National Farmers Organization (NFO) and it was a whole family thing – attending meetings and rallies.”⁴ Eventually, Hanson took after his father who, “spent a lot of time organizing.”⁵ In an interview with the Minnesota Historical Society, in 1979 Hanson discussed his time with the NFO. He stated, “One year I worked with the legislature as a lobbyist for the National Farmers Organization in St. Paul. Then one year I worked as [an] organizer for

¹ Barry M. Casper and Paul David Wellstone, *Powerline: The First Battle of America’s Energy War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 258.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 259.

⁴ Ibid., 260.

⁵ Ibid.

nearly a year in southern Minnesota organizing for the NFO. I was working on and with a livestock collection point in Makato.”⁶

As previously mentioned, the power line project was a hot button issue for farmers in West Central Minnesota. Many farmers opposed the planned power line running from the Twin Cities to Underwood, North Dakota, because it passed through their properties and took away good, arable land. Wellstone and Casper put it best when they stated, “to many Minnesota farmers, however, one powerline has become a powerful symbol – a symbol of America’s willingness to sacrifice its rural citizens to feed a gluttonous hunger for energy.”⁷ The power line’s planned path through West Central Minnesota changed a couple times over the years as the farmers protested and fought against it. One of the farms that was originally going to be crossed by the power line was the Hanson farm. That changed and, in January of 1978, surveyors were sent to the Lowry area to map a path of the proposed power line. In the map on the screen, you can see where the various routes were mapped out. The blue arrow shows the final route, which is just south of Lowry.⁸ It still stands there today. Many of the residents of the area were not happy to see the surveyors there and in a testament to their activist roots, many got arrested.

Dick Hanson along with seven others “stood together in the middle of the snow-

⁶ Richard A. Hanson, interview by Edward P. Nelson, *Minnesota Powerline Oral History Project*, Minnesota Historical Society, February 14, 1979. Transcript, 33.

⁷ Casper and Wellstone. 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 125

covered field and were arrested.”⁹ Nina Rutledge, one of the eight that were arrested remembered, “they took us all to the Glenwood jail and took mug shots and fingerprints. It was very trying.”¹⁰ In a bold though, maybe not surprising move, “Dick Hanson announced he would fast until Governor Rudy Perpich called him.”¹¹ Hanson himself recalled the incident when he noted, “Wednesday I was arrested and he called me up on Monday and he said he didn’t know about it until he read about it in the morning paper on Monday.”¹² Hanson later alludes to the idea that Perpich had heard about the arrests earlier but Perpich was stalling until enough pressure was forced upon him to call Hanson. The power line controversy became one of the most significant movements Hanson involved himself in. In 1979, Hanson reflected on the power line controversy and the so-called ‘Rutledge 8’, and I am going to play a small portion of an audio clip for you all from his interview with Ed Nelson of the Minnesota Historical Society.¹³

Like many activists in the 1970s, Dick Hanson ardently opposed the Vietnam War. He wanted to apply for conscientious objector or C.O. status in front of the Pope County draft board, but originally, one could only apply for C.O. status on grounds of religious objection, and Hanson knew he wouldn’t have a strong

⁹ Casper and Wellstone. 207.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Richard A. Hanson, interview with Edward P. Nelson. 73.

¹³ Ibid. *Play Clip. Part 2, 77:18-78:18*

enough case in that regard. He then went to school and applied for an agricultural deferment, which allowed him to avoid military service. When the time came, he applied for C.O. status and was denied. However, changes in federal legislation caused new membership on the draft board so, Hanson applied a second time and was approved for C.O. status on the grounds of moral opposition. In his interview with Wellstone and Casper, Hanson stated, “I told them I would go to jail before I would go to war in Vietnam.”¹⁴ The local draft board mentioned to Hanson that he could serve his time in Alternative Service in California. The California Ecology Corps was established by Governor Ronald Reagan in 1971 to “enhance the environment and provide a useful work force to enable draft objectors to serve the state.”¹⁵ Hanson served as a firefighter in the corps and also noted that the “backbone of the firefighting unit in California [were] prisoners and convicts.”¹⁶ Hanson served seven months in the California Ecology Corps and received a salary of \$15 per month.¹⁷

Once back in Minnesota, Hanson devoted himself to statewide and nationwide politics. In 1978, Hanson worked as the campaign manager for Alice Tripp’s gubernatorial campaign. Tripp was an activist from the Glenwood area and

¹⁴ Casper and Wellstone. 261.

¹⁵ N. A. “Reagan Announces Creation of California Ecology Corps.” *St. Petersburg Times* (St. Petersburg, FL), Apr 28, 1971. 10-A.

¹⁶ Casper and Wellstone. 261.

¹⁷ “Reagan Announces Creation of California Ecology Corps.”

remained a close friend of Hanson's. In a profile of Hanson from "Out Here!", a gay newsletter for upper Midwest Minnesota, it's noted that while working for Tripp, "[Hanson] had his first contact with gay activists who were working in the political sphere" (1 Out Here!). In 1980, Hanson decided to run for the Democratic National Committee, as he was a member of the Minnesota DFL party and attended their convention. In a pivotal moment in his life, Hanson decided that before he could stand in front of the DFL attendees and argue why they should select him, he publically announced he was gay for the first time. Mark Chekola, the author of the profile on Hanson noted his, "openness was a gamble since his roots in Glenwood are strong and he planned to stay there" (1). Hanson would stay in Glenwood where he would continue to fight for farmers' rights. I want to put Hanson's story aside for a moment and pose another couple of questions. Was Hanson a gay farmer-activist or was he a farmer- activist who happened to be gay? Hanson's identity in the early 1980s was now even more complicated than before. In the Out Here! profile, Hanson discussed the personal side of coming out when he said, "I feared I couldn't find anyone" (1 Out Here!).

Little did Hanson know that two years after coming out as gay, he wouldn't find just anyone, he would find his life partner - an activist, a farmer, an academic and more importantly a man with a caring heart. Bert Henningson was four years older than Hanson and grew up in Ortonville, a rural farming town an hour

southwest of Morris. Henningson headed off to college in 1964 to the University of Minnesota Morris. He studied History and was heavily influenced by Dr. O. Truman Driggs who we now honor with the annual Driggs lecture. Henningson followed in Driggs's footsteps when he chose to pursue a Ph.D. in agricultural history and economics at the University of Arkansas, the alma mater of Driggs. Henningson's academic background reflects how he was more of an academic and intellectual who tended to think things through on a deeper level before acting.

Like the Hanson family, the Henningsons instilled the value of activism in their son Bert. As a family, they attended various National Farmers Organization meetings in the early 1960s. These meetings certainly influenced Henningson's perception on agriculture, not only academically, but also politically. Once, at the University of Minnesota Morris, he would become involved in various activist movements.

Henningson, like Hanson had similar views of the Vietnam War. However, Henningson had joined the Army National Guard in 1966. In time, Henningson applied to be honorably discharged and would be granted C.O. status like Hanson, but the process was very different and dragged out. In 1969 Henningson was applying for C.O. status through the military. The military ultimately had the authority to decide if Henningson could be discharged on the grounds that he wanted to be a conscientious objector. He needed letters of support in order to

achieve his desired outcome. Of the six people that submitted letters, the most notable two were former Chancellor John Imholte and O. Truman Driggs. In his letter, Imholte wrote, “Lt. Henningson is a person of strong character and high integrity” (letter from Imholte). Other documents Henningson used as support included articles he wrote for *The Vanguard*, the student newspaper at UMM. Henningson served as the editor-in-chief for part of his tenure at UMM and published several articles condemning the Vietnam War. For the October 13, 1967 edition, Henningson wrote an article titled, “Vietnam is not Hell – its Worse” (*Vanguard* 1967 page 2). Henningson would successfully receive an honorable discharge from the military in 1972.

He helped with various political campaigns in the late 1960’s including Eugene McCarthy’s campaign in 1968. In 1976, Henningson worked for the Congressman Bob Bergland but eventually quit working for Bergland when he became the Secretary of Agriculture under President Carter. From 1977-1980, Henningson served as the agricultural advisor to Rick Nolan who was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. Henningson advised Nolan on various issues that farmers across the state of Minnesota and in Nolan’s district were fighting for. Nolan decided to not seek reelection in 1980 and Henningson then took some time off to finish his dissertation.

In 1982, Henningson was reading a book that profiled Dick Hanson in it and wanted to meet him because Hanson worked with the NFO, the McCarthy campaign and also attended the University of Minnesota Morris. The book in which he read about Dick was called *Powerline the First Battle of America's Energy War*. In an article for Equal Time News, Henningson was quoted as saying, “where else would I find anyone with the same interests.” They finally met at a district DFL convention in the spring of 1982, and it was at this point that, their lives together began. Bert and Dick, farmers, activists, objectors to war, and gay men would find that the biggest political and social challenge they would fight would be the one that would take their lives in a different direction – up.

In his article about agrarian identity and the powerline controversy, John Byczynski argues that, “farmers believed that they were their own bosses, independent and free from the dictates of others” (315 Ag Hist). He compounds that by saying, “farmers felt a deep, spiritual connection to the land” (315). Dick and Bert fit his argument quite well. They didn’t let the government or power companies run over them, they stood up to ‘the man’ and fought for what they valued. Additionally, they rooted themselves in Glenwood and rural Minnesota. Many gay people left the rural areas in which they grew up in and ventured off to gay urban hubs in California and New York. Dick and Bert had a sort of spiritual connection to the land. The rural landscape is what brought them together in the

first place. Like Dick realized shortly after coming out, there were not many gay men willing to stay in rural Minnesota. As the pair began their lives together on the Hanson farm in the summer of 1982, they would turn their sights on fighting for gay and lesbian rights. By 1983 Dick helped to form the Gay and Lesbian caucus of the Democratic National Committee and the National Association of Gay and Lesbian Democratic Clubs. In 1983, the two men were featured in a story by Newsweek magazine about gays reacting to the AIDS epidemic. They were also profiled in *The Advocate*, a national gay publication in 1983. The title of the article, “Dick Hanson’s Multi-Issue Commitments a Rural Activist” highlighted the two men and how they faced discrimination and how to a degree they were invalidated by the gay rights movement because they were rural. Hanson is quoted as saying, “where we probably get discriminated against the most is in the gay rights movement itself, because we’re rural. Some people say gay rights is strictly an urban social issue” (31 *Advocate*). The author of the profile, Mark Chekola asks the reader “why does this discrimination happen?” (31). This brings us back to a question I posed at the beginning of this talk: can you be an activist for more than one cause? Hanson responded to that question as well. He noted, “some activists imagine ‘you have to be for one issue – that if you’re for gay rights that has to be your one issue. They claim I can’t be multi-issued and speak for the farm issue, the power line and gay rights at the same time” (31). Dick and Bert would not let that

stand in their way, and they continued to fight for the values they believed in across the state of Minnesota.

By 1984, the hog farm Dick and Bert lived and worked on was starting to face economic hardships. The banks wouldn't give loans to unmarried couples, and legally, they were barred from getting married. Bert ultimately found work at the University of Minnesota Morris as a history professor teaching courses focused on agriculture. Working at the University allowed them to have a secondary income to support their farm. In an interview with Charles McLaughlin, Bert describes the event surround the financial problems of the Hanson farm. *play clip tape2sideA 32:20-34:40*. Around the same time, Dick would go back to school at UMM to finish his degree in political science, he also decided to run for the U.S. Congress from the Second District in 1984 (Equal Time 1984), though he would not win the DFL nomination and Hanson noted, "they didn't think the district was ready for an openly gay candidate" (equal time 1984). In 1985 Dick would finally graduate from UMM.

By late 1985, their lives changed dramatically; Dick had fallen ill. "His skin broke out in herpes rashes. A related virus ate at his optical nerves. He frequently ran fevers as high as 104 degrees and more frequently lay huddled under heavy blankets as icy rivulets of sweat soaked through to the mattress. Sometimes he had diarrhea, while other times he would go two or three weeks between bowel

movements. His weight plummeted from 160 to 112” (Aids in the Heartland). That quote is from a series ran in the St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch in the summer of 1987 called “AIDS in the Heartland.” Journalist Jacqui Banaszynski and photographer Jean Pieri decided to profile Hanson and Henningson to highlight and put faces to the AIDS epidemic affecting the heartland. On April 8th, 1986 Dick and Bert went to the Red Door Clinic in Minneapolis and received the news that Dick had AIDS (AIH). The statistics at this point in time “show[ed] that 80 to 90 percent of AIDS sufferers die within two years of diagnosis” (AIH). These horrifying statistics were surely known to the pair and Banaszynski noted, “Henningson gathered Hanson in his arms and said, ‘I will never leave you, Dick’” (AIH). Bert would keep his promise. Two months later, Bert was also diagnosed with AIDS.

Throughout the AIDS in the Heartland series, Banaszynski and Pieri were able to capture the most intimate moments of the two men’s lives. It becomes clear that the two men fell in love and fell hard for each other almost immediately. “They exchanged vows privately [their] first summer while sitting in their car under the prairie night” (AIH). Banaszynski also teases out the personalities of both the men. They are both different in many ways: “Henningson is bookish and intense... a professor and essayist. He is a doer and organizer. He charts the monthly household budget... itemizing everything from mortgage payments to

medicine to cat food” (AIH). In comparison, “Hanson is more social, an easygoing, non-stop talker with a starburst of interests. He has a political junkie’s memory for names, dates and events, [and] thrills in company” (AIH). They seemed to complement each other quite well even though their demeanors were different.

Spirituality played an important role in Hanson’s life. Although he knew he could not justify himself being a C.O. on religious grounds during the Vietnam War, spirituality and religiosity grew in importance for him. Hanson stared death in the face twice in 1986 when he caught pneumonia and nearly died in the summer and again in December of that year. During that year, he was hospitalized for a total of 42 days in Minneapolis. On Christmas Eve of 1986 Dick surprised doctors and was able to be released from the hospital. He noted, “I put myself in God’s healing cocoon of love and had my miracle. I call it my Christmas miracle.” Hanson would continue to say, “I don’t want to come across like Oral Roberts, but... I believe that God can grant miracles. He has in the past and does now and will in the future. And maybe I can be one of those miracles, the one who proves the experts wrong” (AIH). God did not grant another miracle for Dick however, and he would pass away on July 25, 1987. Dick did not want to be defined by AIDS, and two months before he died, he gathered up enough strength to address a special session of the Minnesota Senate including 47 senators and nearly 200 other spectators. He said, “My name is Dick Hanson and I have AIDS, but I am more

than a statistic. I am a human being. I love and need to be loved. I live with hope and don't take it away from me" (Equal Time 1987 obit).

After Hanson's death, Henningson would become a more spiritual individual as well. He noted, "Dick is there for me, not just on the other side, but here, now. That's something I find very comforting. And I know if I end up feeling more and more ill, there'll be someone out there waiting with an outstretched hand. And I have a very good idea who that'll be. So I won't be alone." By April of 1988 Henningson had already wrote his own obituary. In a follow up story with Bert in 1988, Banaszynski noted, "he... [left] a blank for the date of his death" (AIH 1988). Bert reflected on the last few weeks of Hanson's life and told Banaszynski that Dick "was haunted by visits from the other world. Dead relatives, most frequently his mother, would come to him in dreams, seeming to bid him to cross over" (AIH 1988). Banaszynski goes on to note that Henningson never received any sort of visits like Hanson, but when Henningson gained enough strength from a near death experience in February of 1988, he had an idea for a short story. She opines that, "as he tells it, it sounds more like a dream or a vision or, perhaps a wish." The story he wished for goes as follows:

"It was Christmastime, at the midnight service... The whole family went – Mom and Dad and Jim and Bonnie and Danny and I. Pastor Will was giving the service and people were singing hymns. And in the middle of it all, I suddenly

heard this voice. It was Dick. I could hear him, clear as anything. I looked around the church, then looked back and there he was, but only I could see him. I got out of the pew and went to him and we walked up to the front of the church together, singing. He said, 'I'm here to take you with me if you want to go.' What was nicest about it was I could actually see him and he was the same old Dick, before AIDS. When you think about dying, you see those clear images of people who've gone before, but you don't know what physical presence they'll be in. What was beautiful about it was that I realized yes, indeed you do get to have the presence again. You're not just some electrical impulse floating around the universe. So when he asked, and I could see I could have it all back again, I was ready. And He took my hand and we ascended."

Bert Henningson took Dick's hand and ascended on May 19th, 1988.

Dick was 37 years old when he passed away and Bert - 42. Their lives were cut short due to an illness that to this day we do not have a cure for. We have a lot to learn from these two men. Their story is one of compassion, companionship, love, and perseverance. They did not get to see the significant progress our country has made in terms of gay rights and acceptance of gay and lesbian people since 1988, in addition to the medical advances we have made with respect to HIV and AIDS. Although Dick and Bert did not need the government to officially recognize their vows they took in 1982 under the prairie night sky, I am sure they would have

been fighting for marriage equality in Minnesota and would have been overjoyed to witness the historic Supreme Court ruling this past summer. There is one more thing that I would like to leave you all with. It is a letter that Bert wrote to Truman Driggs on October 15th, 1985.

Dear Truman,

Many years ago, you advised me to listen to my heart. I resisted taking the advice fully, thinking my own confused and conflicting designs somehow could be harmonized in one body and soul (it reminds me of President Franklin Roosevelt's valiant – some would say foolhardy – attempts to blend opposite points of view).

Perhaps the most weary aspect of teaching and advising young people is that you can lead mulish ones like me to water but you cannot get them to drink. Finally, after many years of failing to find a balance, your words of advice returned: Listen to your heart.

I did at last, and realized what you meant.

Sincerely,

Bert Henningson

Whatever your calling may be, whether it is activist in nature or not, following your heart seems to be the best route to take and that is what these two men did – followed their heart.

In Henningson's obituary, then Minnesota Commissioner of economic development Mark Dayton reflected on Bert. He said, "He taught me a lot. Bert was a passionately committed man" (Obituary). I think Dayton hit the nail on the head and we, still today can learn a lot not just from Bert, but also Dick. Their story is one of love, passion and authenticity. They were their true selves at the time when being gay could have meant a death sentence. They were activists for causes that at times were hopeless. But in the end, they were simply authentic. If there is something that we can take away from these two men, it is to be authentic.

Their legacy has carried on in various ways throughout the years. Until 2002, the Minnesota AIDS Project's lifetime achievement award was named in their honor. It would be renamed to honor their friend and ally, Paul Wellstone. Today, professor Roland Guyotte is still the administrator of the Henningson book fund for Briggs Library. The fund is intended to purchase books about gay rights as well as rural and agricultural issues. The latest token to honor their memory will be the quilt piece featured in UMM's production of *The Normal Heart* that will be added to the Names Project like the ones hanging here in the gallery. Lastly, I hope

the memory of these two men, whether you knew them personally or not, will be taken with you in your daily lives.

I would like to conclude this presentation with a couple thank yous to people who have supported this project. First, I would like to thank Ray Schultz for initiating the play *The Normal Heart* and bringing the AIDS Memorial quilts here to UMM. Next, thank you to Michael Eble for working with me on the exhibit about Dick and Bert that is here in the gallery. Also, thank you to Steve Gross for supporting this project in the UMM archives and the West Central Minnesota Historical Research Center and passing it along to me to help with. Additionally, this project would not be the same without Steve's help in framing the lives of these two men in the grander scheme of things. Thank you to Roland Guyotte for telling many stories about these men and also political actions in West Central Minnesota during the 1970s and 1980s; without these recollections, the story would be missing major parts. A huge thank you also goes to Jacqui Banaszynski, who agreed to talk to me by phone about Dick and Bert. Without her impeccable story telling ability, we would not have the Pulitzer Prize winning *AIDS in the Heartland* series and the lives of Dick and Bert would only live on in memories that people have of them. Lastly, I would like to extend a thank you to my boyfriend Nathan Schmid for being an unwavering supporter, sounding board, and diligent editor, throughout this project.