

Mississippi Burning

Lesbians: Intolerance in a small town

BRENDA HENSON GOT THE MESSAGE early on the morning of Nov. 8 as she dug a ditch on her new 120-acre farm in Ovett, Miss. She was readying the site for Camp Sister Spirit, a women's retreat she cofounded last summer with other community activists from nearby Biloxi and Gulfport. They're planning an educational center that will offer workshops on racism, sexism, family violence and the empowerment of "womyn," as they spell the word in their newsletter. Her daughter discovered the dead dog tied to their mailbox. It was a female, shot in the stomach, with tampons stuffed under its body. "The message," says Henson, "was, 'Get out, bitches.'"

Residents of tiny Ovett want to banish Camp Sister Spirit for one reason: Henson and many of her 40 cofounders are lesbians. Last Monday evening virtually the entire town (250 out of 300) packed the one-room community center to discuss how the feminists might be driven away. Most based their objections on religious grounds and concerns for the safety of the area's young women. "These people could pick up our little girls and take them to this place and do whatever they want with them," said Clint Knight, father of an 11-year-old daughter. "My mama passes that driveway every day and so does my sister, who is six months pregnant," says Ricky Cole, a young farmer. A state representative, John Ellzy, volunteered to research sodomy and cohabitation laws—even building codes—to find a basis for the camp's removal. Wanda Henson, Brenda's partner, says the town's fears are unfounded. "We're social agents, not killers or destroyers."

The dispute has turned Ovett into a wellspring of paranoia and potential bloodshed. The Hensons (who live on the farm with 20 other women) say they have received dozens of harassing phone calls. They also report nightly shotgun blasts on the periphery of their scrubland property, located off an old logging road and blocked by a locked lavender cattle gate. "We have guns and we know



BEVIL KNAPP

Under siege: The Hensons on their farm in Ovett

how to use them," says Brenda Henson. "There are a lot of nervous women out here with trigger fingers." Jones County Sheriff Maurice Hooks says he has increased patrols in the area but has turned up nothing worth investigating. But last week the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, citing "an explosive situation," asked Attorney General Janet Reno to intervene with the Justice Department's Community Relations Service, which usually mediates racial disputes. Justice is reviewing the request.

The ugliness in Ovett echoes another recent dispute pitting small-town intolerance against increasing gay visibility. Last

week, in Williamson County, Texas, county commissioners backed away from their rejection of tax abatements for Apple Computer because of a company benefits package that provides health coverage to gay and lesbian couples. After prodding from Gov. Ann Richards, the commissioners offered other financial incentives that cleared the way for the company to bring a service center to the area.

Those who know Camp Sister Spirit's founders claim they would be an asset to Ovett. Social-service providers in southern Mississippi say the group, which includes doctors, lawyers and teachers, has spent the last 10 years running not-for-profit programs to feed the hungry, clothe the poor and shelter battered women in Biloxi and Gulfport. "They are the most open-minded and helpful individuals I've met," says Katherine Fennell, director of emergency assistance for the Catholic Social and Community Services in south Mississippi. "I just wish that everyone . . . could see how many of the nurses and doctors and teachers who help them and their children are gay and lesbian," says Wanda Henson. "There are a lot of us out there." For the moment, the only thing the citizens of Ovett see is something to fear.

BILL TURQUE with KEVIN GRAY in Ovett,
ELLEN LADOWSKY in Washington and
PETER ANNIN in Houston

Mystery: A Double Suicide Smacks of a Scam

ONE THING IS CERTAIN about Adam and Elena Emery's disappearance last month: they'd had enough of the Rhode Island justice system. The day he was convicted of chasing and stabbing an innocent man to death for side-swiping his car, Adam, 31, and his wife, Elena, 32, of Warwick, bought matching black sweat suits and 80 pounds of strap-on exercise weights. After a meal, they parked—and were last seen in—their green Toyota on the Newport Bridge, 20 stories above Narragansett Bay. The engine was still warm when police arrived. On the front seat were Adam's ripped credit cards, his wallet and Elena's pocketbook and white high

heels, but Adam and Elena were gone.

As the police began their search for the couple's bodies, this picture-perfect suicide scene began to fuzz. No one on the busy bridge had seen them leap. At Kelly's Sporting Goods, Adam, purportedly in his last hours, had balked at the total on the register. Elena, only 125 pounds herself, had struggled to carry a 20-pound bag out of the store. How, police want to know, did she scale the bridge's high railing, thus weighted down, so quickly that a passerby didn't spot her? Most incongruous for some is the place they shared their final meal: Burger King. "It wouldn't

have been my choice," says state police Capt. Robert McQueeney. When the police search, employing sonar, computerized maps of the bay floor and a human-detecting dog, failed to turn them up, a warrant was issued for Adam's arrest for violating bail.

The couple's families insist the suicide makes sense. "When the verdict came, that killed them," says Elena's sister Maria Williams. "Adam could not live with being known as a murderer." The relatives, looking to settle the matter, spent about \$15,000 for a further sweep of the 140-foot-deep waters. They bought only more suspicions that Adam and Elena are on the lam.