



Sinclair Russell, 73, left Haliburton County as a teenager and would develop a design and decorating career that would take him around the world.
CHAD INGRAM Staff

Growing up gay in Haliburton County

by CHAD INGRAM
Times Staff

In his more than seven decades, Sinclair Russell has witnessed a seismic shift in societal attitudes toward gay people.

Russell, 73, was raised in the hamlet of Carnarvon in Haliburton County.

However, he and his siblings were born at Toronto Western Hospital.

“My mom would not have any babies up here,” Russell says. “She said, ‘no, we’re going to the city.’”

His mom was born Mable Prentice and her mother was a Pritchard. The Prentices and the Pritchards were both founding families of Minden in the 19th century.

“So, I’m related to half the county,” Russell quips.

His father, also named Sinclair Russell, ran a refrigeration business that serviced the county’s lodges. He was also a musician – he had a dance band called Sinc Russell and the Nighthawks – and a restaurateur, constructing the Carnarvon building that today houses The Peppermill restaurant.

As a boy, Russell figured out that he was a bit different than most of his schoolmates in the small community.

“I’ve always had an interest in males, especially athletic ones,” he says. And while it may be common for young people to be curious about the same sex at one time or another, “Most boys grow out of it,” Russell says. “I did not.”

The family moved to Oakville for a few years when Russell was in late elementary school, and then back to Haliburton County for most of his high school years.

While he didn’t trumpet his sexuality from the hilltops, Russell doesn’t believe it was a big secret at school.

“I used to do a lot of the obvious things,” he says. “Like in high school, I decorated all the proms. So, that was a pretty big giveaway, right there. But all of that became my career.”

Russell’s keen sense for design and decor would eventually shape the course of his life.

While his sexuality may not have been a secret at school. “I was never bullied or harassed,” Russell notes. “I noticed a lot of the boys thought I was a bit of a sissy, but that’s about it.”

And while he wasn’t bullied or harassed, Russell still felt different, and that difference was isolating.

“That’s why I left,” he said. “I knew I wasn’t going to get anywhere around here. I’ve always been creative. So I went to the city.”

In his late teens, Russell moved to Toronto to live with his sister, rounding out his high school education at York Mills Collegiate.

Toronto was a revelation.

“So, by then, I discovered there were other homosexuals in the world,” he says. “It wasn’t just me.”

For a while, Russell lived with his mom’s sister, his Aunt Alice, before getting his own apartment.

“It used to be right behind Maple Leaf Gardens,” Russell

says. That part of the city, the Church and Wellesley area, is now known to many as the Gay Village.

While Russell never directly “came out” to his parents, they were aware of, and supportive of, their son’s sexual identity.

“Sex was not something we talked about in my family, period,” he says. “And certainly not any kind of deviant sex.”

“One time, my mom did say to me, ‘How come you know so many boys, and no girls?’”

“I said, ‘Anybody who asks as many questions as you do, might sooner or later hear an answer they don’t want to hear.’ So there was never another question. I wasn’t going to lie.”

So while the words were never directly spoken, “It was understood,” Russell says. “Absolutely. Then all of my friends were welcome. Most of them were at my mom and dad’s funerals. Anybody was welcome.”

His sexuality was common knowledge throughout his family.

“Everybody knew I was gay, and I just became Uncle Sinful,” Russell jokes, explaining that his nieces and nephews would simply call him, “Uncle Sin.”

Russell’s first gig was at Simpson’s department store in Toronto, where he worked in the display department.

The Simpson’s chain would eventually be bought by the Hudson’s Bay Company.

In his 20s, he spent a three-year stint in New York City, where he was the display director for a small department store along the city’s famed Madison Avenue.

“Then, I moved back to Toronto and worked for Eaton’s,” Russell says. “The reason I went to Eaton’s was they were in the process of building the Eaton Centre, and I thought that’d be kind of interesting.”

Russell also worked for Estée Lauder, and was a partner in a company called Seven Continents, which designed fabrics.

“I got to travel the world,” Russell says. “I went to Thailand several times.”

He then took a job with a Baltimore company, designing Christmas decor for shopping malls around the world.

“So I became sort of the son of Santa,” Russell laughs.

That job would also take him to various points around the globe and he spent 15 years based in Baltimore.

During that time, he was also doing gigs in Toronto, designing decor for lavish galas such as the Brazilian ball and opera ball.

“I did all the decor for those,” Russell says. “It’s really a one-night show. You spend all this time and effort to put the stuff up and, a few hours later, you’re taking it down.”

After a colourful career that allowed him to trot the globe, Russell would eventually come home to Haliburton County, first to the Russell homestead property near Carnarvon and then, three years ago, to downtown Minden, where he owns a building along the main drag.

Throughout his lifetime, he’s watched the rise of the gay rights movement, the legalization of same-sex marriage in

Canada and many other countries, and the growth of Toronto’s Pride celebration into one of the largest in the world.

“It’s very, very different from when I grew up,” Russell says.

But there are clearly proverbial miles to go.

Last year, following an act of homophobic vandalism in Haliburton Village and a massacre at an Orlando nightclub within days of one another, Russell founded the event Minden Pride.

“So, that was really my kick-off,” he says. “I went to the township and I said, ‘We’ve got to do something.’”

The Pride flag was raised outside the Minden Hills township for the first time and picnic in celebration of inclusion was held along the Gull River.

This year, Minden Pride includes a full week of events, which begin with a flag-raising outside the ceremony outside the township office at 10 a.m. on Monday, Aug. 21.

“It’s not really all that much about being gay,” Russell says of Minden Pride. “It’s about being inclusive to everybody. We don’t expect the world to turn gay. We just want everybody to be accepted.”

