

## Town Hears Cha-Ching in Gay Wedding Bells

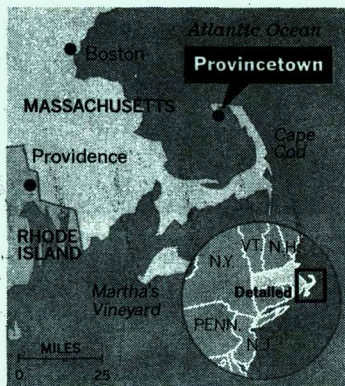
A Massachusetts beach resort is planning for the big day — by marketing same-sex nuptials.

By ELIZABETH MEHREN  
Times Staff Writer

PROVINCETOWN, Mass. — A thick blanket of snow carpeted the main avenue of this resort at the tip of Cape Cod on Saturday, lending a false sense of winter serenity. So quiet was Commercial Street that one of dozens of shut-tight establishments posted a sign lamenting: "Closed. Too Cold To Shop."

But behind the closed doors, the inns and restaurants and town offices of this famously Bohemian community were buzzing as Provincetown prepares to reinvent itself as the gay Niagara Falls. Thanks to a state Supreme Court decision that will make Massachusetts the only state in the country to permit gay and lesbian marriages, Provincetown hopes for a tidal wave of same-sex wedding ceremonies.

Barring intervention from the state Legislature — and the wording of the decision last week from the state's highest court makes that unlikely — town clerk Douglas Johnstone could begin issuing marriage licenses to gay and lesbian couples as early as May 17. Massachusetts requires a three-day waiting pe-



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riod, so the "I do's" could start here on May 20, just as the crocuses are bursting behind white picket fences.

"We're getting ready for it as best as we can," Johnstone said before pausing to field the latest phone inquiry from around the country. E-mails also are pouring in, diverting Johnstone from his normal workload of handing out hunting permits, dog licenses and voter registration forms.

With an office staff of "one and a half people" — the clerk in this town of 4,000 shares his assistant with several other departments — Johnstone and tourism director Patricia Fitzpatrick plan to enlist volunteer "ushers" to help with the anticipated crush on May 17.

On Friday morning, the pair huddled in town hall to sketch designs for lavender T-shirts

that on one side will read: "Provincetown — Gay Wedding Capital," and on the other: "Ushering in a New Harmony." Fitzpatrick said that, while the grooms-and-grooms and brides-and-brides apply for their licenses, she plans to pipe in "wonderful wedding music" and serve heart-shaped cookies.

"I think many people in the community — both gay and straight — are going to want to help out, because this is such a historic event," Johnstone said.

A spirit of openness has drawn artists and writers to Provincetown for many years. Novelist Norman Mailer chose to live in "P-town," as the village is known. The Provincetown Players nurtured dramatist Eugene O'Neill and his first productions. Stanley Kunitz, the nonagenarian former U.S. poet laureate, still tends his garden in Provincetown in the summer.

The welcoming qualities of Provincetown helped turn it into one of the summer's best-known destinations for gays and lesbians. Half of the town's year-round residents are gay or lesbian, according to Fitzpatrick. During the beach season, she said, the figure swells to 70%, "maybe higher."

But the tradition of tolerance long predates the town's current demographics, many residents are inclined to point out. It was in Provincetown Harbor that the Mayflower first dropped anchor



RON SCHLOERB Cape Cod Times

**COMMERCIAL STREET:** A parade is held in Provincetown. Half of its year-round residents are gay or lesbian. During the summer, the figure swells to 70%, "maybe higher."

in the New World in 1620. For five weeks, before sailing on to Plymouth, the ship rested in Provincetown while land scouts unsuccessfully sought a source of fresh water.

Aboard the vessel, William Bradford helped draft a document outlining the rules of governance for the Pilgrims as they settled Massachusetts. The Mayflower Compact served as John Adams' model for the Constitution of Massachusetts, and in turn for the U.S. Constitution.

Bradford and his pilgrims were fleeing repression, and at the heart of the compact was an insistence on equality.

"So here we are on Bradford

Street," said Lynette Molnar, co-owner of Provincetown's Fairbanks Inn, "and 300-plus years later we are making history again."

In a parlor where Out magazine sits alongside copies of Martha Stewart Living, Molnar said scores of same-sex couples have held commitment ceremonies in the converted home of an 18th century sea captain. "But we have never used the 'w' word before."

Now Molnar is actively marketing gay weddings — offering everything from a "pop-the-question" package to a "Here Comes the Bride"-type ceremony. "In the spirit of who we

are," Molnar said she also has designed what she calls "the tres gay" wedding option — featuring dancing and other flourishes.

Up the road at the Crowne Pointe Inn, co-owner Tom Walter said the calls about same-sex weddings have been "out of control," especially since the court clarified its decision last week.

"Usually we average seven to 10 [heterosexual] weddings per year," Walter said. "Now we are averaging seven to 10 [gay and lesbian] wedding requests per week."

Regardless of the gender of the partners, Provincetown weddings tend toward the inventive, Walter said.

"They're not like the typical weddings of Sally and Joe in the Midwest. You're not going to see too many sit-down dinners and 16-tier cakes," he said. "It's more like a ceremony on the beach, followed by a fabulous cocktail party."

Walter said he did recall hosting one wedding where the groom wore a tuxedo and the bride wore a long white gown. Within 15 minutes, he said, they had peeled down to their skivvies and jumped into the hot tub, along with many of the wedding guests.

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Although the Rev. Alison Hyder too has been inundated with inquiries about scheduling same-sex marriages, she said the legalization of gay unions would have little effect on the way she does business: "All that will happen is that I will have another piece of paper to sign, and more questions to ask and answer."

The price is the same, too, Hyder said — she charges \$300 for her services and the use of the big white church — whether it is called a wedding or not.

In her four years as minister at the Unitarian Universalist Meeting House here, Hyder said 87% of the nuptial rites she has conducted have involved lesbian couples, 5% to 7% have united straight couples "and the rest have been gay men."

Hyder said she uses virtually identical language for weddings and commitment ceremonies. The exception is what she chooses to pronounce the couple as the ritual concludes, Hyder said.

"I have said 'wife and wife,'" she said. "But more often, people choose something like 'partners for eternity,'" a phrase she admits has a slightly funereal overtone.

Far from somber, the hoped-for matrimonial avalanche is likely to make this resort even cheerier.

Business owners are ecstatic, as they hope for a lucrative industry growing up around gay and lesbian marriages. Indeed, Rick Murray, the owner of the Crown & Anchor Inn and tavern on Commercial Street quipped Saturday that all the town needs is a beach-front wedding chapel.

"A little chapel of love on the beach — I think it would be great," Murray said before turning serious and adding, "The one thing we don't want is for any of this to turn tacky."

But humor is as much a part of Provincetown as the salt-sprayed air or the drag queens on roller blades. Comedian Kate Clinton plans to perform weddings, calling herself "The Irreverend," and after the vows she will host the entertainment. Performance artist Jay Critchley plans to offer "septic ceremonies," weddings in the huge abandoned septic cylinder he refurbished and now uses for opera and theater.

All the festivities can only enhance the worldwide reputation of Provincetown as a haven for inclusiveness, said innkeeper Molnar.

"This is a watershed moment. It is personal and it is political," she said. "This is how you change society." When the weddings start, when people bring their parents and their grandparents and their aunts and uncles to Provincetown, hearts and minds will be changed."