Flags are powerful things. Just ask Eddie Izzard. Flags have laid claim to continents. They’ve been shot to the moon. And American flag couture has been all the (jingo) rage since autumn 2001. Yet for all their power, flags are delicate. Even the hardiest banner is easily cut or torn, facilely bleached by the sun, or readily—God forbid—set aflame.

Cut to Meade, Kansas, a town that, prior to this summer, had been known primarily as the place where the Dalton Gang Museum hideout and escape tunnel are located. In early August, not long after a petty theft had occurred at a local inn, rumblings started to percolate through the tiny burg. Local truck stop patrons were alarmed. Not alarmed over the petty theft, but alarmed at what was stolen.

It was a flag. But as most everyone knows by now, this was no ordinary flag; it was a rainbow flag—a gay pride rainbow flag—cut down from its pole in the early morning hours of July 31, after the local newspaper dutifully alerted the residents of its rainbow symbolism.

In no time, the news of the pride flag’s disappearance reached national media. Bloggers blogged “flag flap” updates till their fingers bled. LGBT media, CNN, and news magazines were all titillated by the missing polyester rectangle.
JR and Robin Wright own the bed and breakfast on Highway 54 known as the Lakeway Hotel. The rainbow flag flying outside the Lakeway was a gift from their 12-year-old son, Anthony. Anthony has Asperger’s Syndrome, a neurobiological disorder that causes deficient social and communication skills. The gay pride banner went up after the young man's visit to an outdoor fair near his grandparents' house in California. He sent it back to Meade as a present to his parents. The Knights sent their son to California because they felt he was not treated well in the local school district.

JR Knight says he knew of the flag's significance to LGBT rights, but decided to fly it in the name of unity and friendship. Several "sweet Christian people" told him the flag was sinful. According to JR, the Knights have received threats from the local radio station, a pastor, and Keith Klassen had this to say, "To me, it's like running up a Nazi flag in a Jewish neighborhood." The restaurant within the 10-room hotel has lost business. Commenting on the brouhaha, local resident Bob Mabery said, "It's ruined the city of Meade."

JR Knight told KWCH-TV of Hutchinson-Wichita, "Any gay or lesbian people that do stop by will be treated with the best service." He wrote the following in a thank you email to his supporters:

Our new rainbow flag will serve a different purpose. It will stand for the very thing that they (those opposing the flag) wanted it to stand for: Gay Rights, Gay Pride, Human Rights, Equality of the Sexes, Equality of the Races, Diversity, Unity, Peace, The International Cooperative Alliances, The Inca Banner, The Flag of Cusco, Peru, The Wizard of Oz, God's Gift to Mankind, and everything else that the homophobic, bigoted, ignorant people of the world fear.

The uproar over the flag prompted the southwest Kansas branch of the Kansas Equality Coalition (KEC) to hold its Sunday August 13 meeting at the Lakeway. KEC supports the Knights "for standing up to discrimination by continuing to fly (the) rainbow flag despite a backlash by some," said Anne Mitchell, chair of the southwest chapter of the LGBT rights organization.
Days before KEC meeting, another criminal prank was perpetrated against the Knights. Early in the morning on August 11, a brick inked with the word "fag" was thrown through a plate glass window of the hotel. A second brick bearing the phrase "Get the f__ out of town," was found on the sidewalk. Meade police and the Meade County Sheriff's department are investigating the incident.

Thomas Witt, chair of the Equality Coalition, remarks, "Violence and intimidation are always wrong. We know that our fellow Kansans are fair-minded people who will stand up and reject acts of hatred and intolerance against their neighbors."

News that the father of two Meade boys brought the pair to the Lakeway Hotel on August 11—where the young men confessed to stealing the inn's rainbow flag—has put an end to one mystery in the tiny prairie town. The boys apologized to the owner, and said they would provide a replacement for what they had stolen.

The identity of the person (or persons) who hurled a brick through the Lakeway's window is still unknown. Proprietor JR Knight said he has spoken with MTV representatives who might visit Meade to report on the mischief and hullabaloo. As of press time, the anti-gay Phelps clan plans to picket the bed and breakfast on August 27. When the Phelps show up to picket you, you know you’ve arrived. Can godhatesmeade.com be far behind?

Sadly, the Knights believe that their son will never be safe in Meade; they will probably sell the hotel property, or convert it to another use as they move to reunite with their son, leaving southwestern Kansas, where tolerance is scant. In 2005, eighty-nine percent of Meade County voters said “yes” to the amendment that bars same-gender marriage and civil unions in the state.

On the Web: lakewayhotel.com