

**Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project
Oral History Initiative**

**Interview with Peggy Shifflett
October 14, 2016**

Interviewer: Gregory Rosenthal

Interviewee: Peggy Shifflett

Date: October 14, 2016

Location: Roanoke College History Department Building, Salem, VA

Transcription prepared by Julia Greider

Total 56:15

00:48 = childhood in Hopkins Gap, Virginia (1940s – 1950s)

02:10 = working at JMU (early 1960s) and attending school at (1967-1970) at JMU;
discovering *Beebo Brinker* books; first lesbian experiences (1960s)

09:44 = teaching at JMU (early 1970s), living in Harrisonburg; moving to Texas and
experiencing the gay scene there (late 1970s)

13:01 = gender presentation

14:00 = Ph.D. work in sociology (1975-1980); interest in history and women's studies

17:06 = teaching at Virginia Tech (early 1980s); encountering sexism and discrimination

19:14 = moving to Salem, Virginia (1980) and finding the gay scene there

20:05 = a women's softball league in Salem

23:16 = lesbian hangouts in Salem and Roanoke

25:04 = getting involved with the lesbian group First Friday (1982)

27:10 = the culture of First Friday (1980s); including problems with alcoholism

32:16 = owning a frame shop in Grandin Village (1980s-2000s)

33:38 = being denied tenure at Virginia Tech (mid-1980s)

36:56 = the culture of First Friday; the Roanoke Valley Women's Retreat (1980s)

40:13 = lesbian attitudes towards gay men

41:56 = attitudes towards gay people in Hopkins Gap and within her family

46:07 = starting a lesbian group focused on education (c. 1989-1991)

51:01 = the evolution of the LGBT movement

00:00

[checking sound levels]

00:16

GR: So my name is Gregory Rosenthal, and I'm here with Peggy Shifflett, and it's October 14th, 2016, about 1 PM, and we're at the old Farmers Bank building on Main Street in Salem, which is now the Roanoke College History Department building. And we're doing an interview for the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ History Project oral history

initiative. So Peggy, I thought we would start and maybe you could tell us about where you grew up, where you were born, that sort of thing.

00:48

PS: Okay. Well I was born in Harrisonburg, Virginia, but lived in a place called Hopkins Gap, which is in the Allegheny Mountains, very isolated, probably a generation behind even the Harrisonburg community. I am the oldest of five children, and my dad worked in a feed mill. My mother was a housekeeper. We were fairly poor, but we survived on things that we grew in the garden, and hunting, and that kind of thing; we survived. I went to school at Mount Clinton Elementary School, started in 1947, and then was at that school until I was a sophomore in high school, and then they consolidated three schools into Turner-Ashby High School, and that's where I graduated in 1959.

1:56

GR: Okay, so the 1940s and '50s is when you were growing up, your early childhood. What was your high school like, for example, in the 1950s?

2:10

PS: In the 1950s? I was sort of a loner because I knew by that time that I was surely attracted to women, and I had no idea what it meant, but I knew that I didn't want to share it with people. That I would be in deep trouble if I did.

When I graduated high school, I can't emphasize how alone I was in the world. I remember going home and standing on the front porch and longing to be somewhere else where I could be different. I graduated high school and got a job immediately at what was then Madison College¹ as a secretary, and I used to go downtown in Harrisonburg for lunch, and I picked up a couple of lesbian Beebo Brinker² books [*laughs*]. You know Beebo? And I started reading these love stories and I thought – cause those weren't very good love stories. I mean they were pretty rough on each other, the relationships. So I stayed in the closet because I thought "I don't want to live like this." But anyway, it was those books that made me realize who I was, really.

Then I started looking up the term "lesbian" in the dictionary, and it's a woman who likes women. So I started to come out, but all by myself, there was no one in Harrisonburg that I knew that I could relate to. So from there I became a teacher in an elementary school, and then I got a call from my boss previously, when I was working as a secretary, got a call from him – well meantime, I quit the secretary job and got a degree at JMU [James Madison University].

And I met a woman while I was in an English class, and it was just like, *click*. We had not really a sexual thing, but just a making-out kind of relationship, and I remember when she moved away I was devastated. And so I was walking down the street in Harrisonburg and my doctor's office door was there, and I just walked into the doctor's office and said, "Look, I think I'm queer." And he said, "Oh, you're not," and he asked me about my sex

¹ Now known as James Madison University (JMU).

² A lesbian pulp fiction series by Ann Bannon.

life, and I've been with men, and I said, "Well yeah, I tried that." And "Where did you try it?" and all this stuff and then he said, "You ought to go get you a nice hotel room sometime with a man, and it'll work out better for you." Well I thought that was bad advice, so I just went out and grieved until I got over her.

And then there was another time when I opened the front door at our home, and there was this girl, and suddenly it was like the two of us were just clicking. So we had a short-term thing. When did I really – I guess it was in English class – now I backed up there, and I'm coming ahead now. The woman I met in English class had eyes like Elizabeth Taylor. [*laughs softly*] Lavender, you know. And we had a short thing, and then she moved away and got married, and again I was devastated.

And so, after that, I came out at my job, cause the man that called me while I was teaching elementary school wanted me to come to JMU. He was going on sabbatical and wanted me to teach a year there. So I did. I took that on, and I was teaching with another woman. We were joint teaching a class. And I came out to her. And she was like, "Whoa," you know. "My sister's gay."

6:49

GR: So let me stop you here just to get the chronology right. You were in college at JMU. Do you remember when you graduated?

6:59

PS: Sixty-nine [1969].

7:00

GR: Okay, so late sixties? And it was then at JMU when you had these first relationships?

7:08

PS: Mm-hmm.

7:10

GR: So from '59 when you graduated high school to – when did you enter JMU?

7:17

PS: I was a secretary there for seven years and entered in about 1967 as a student, and took 21 hours a semester because I wanted out. So I graduated '69, and I went to teach elementary school in Louisa County.

7:36

GR: That story when you walked by your doctor's, or you went into the doctor's office and you said, "I'm queer," did you use that term?

7:44

PS: Yes. That's all I knew.

7:50

GR: And from the fiction that you were reading, that's where you encountered the term "lesbian"?

7:59

PS: Yes, the term lesbian in those books. Which was about the same time I went to the doctor's office. But I didn't know what he thought. I just used the word "queer." Yeah, that's where I learned the term "lesbian." Then I started looking it up and doing research, as much as you could in those days, on what lesbians were, some famous lesbians, and the Isle of Lesbos. I thought, man, I've got to go there someday [*laughs*].

8:36

GR: I do want to ask you about that later in the interview, about your interest in history and how that tied in, but we can get there as you move through the story.

8:44

PS: Okay.

8:45

GR: What did you major in at JMU?

8:47

PS: Undergraduate, social sciences, where you took eighteen hours in the social sciences, so I got a concentration in sociology, so my degree was in social sciences. And then I immediately took a master's degree and finished that in a year while I was teaching, and that was a concentration in education and sociology.

9:11

GR: Did you know students at JMU who were "out"? How did you meet other queer women there? Was it just happenstance?

9:27

PS: Just happenstance. There was no way, no place, no one that I knew of who was gay. No organizations.

9:38

GR: So after you graduated – well you graduated, you did a master's, and then you said you were....

9:44

PS: Teaching at JMU. For four years I taught there. And then I went to Texas. Well I met a person. My last year at JMU I met a woman, and she was in school as well, and so we got together. That was my first real relationship. And we went to Texas Tech, and we studied sociology there for a year. And then we moved down to Texas A & M the following year. I got my Ph.D. and she got her master's degree. Then we broke up.

10:23

GR: So you were in Texas in the '70s?

10:26

PS: Seventy-five [1975] is when I went to Texas. Got my Ph.D. in '80.

10:32

GR: Was there a gay scene there? Well, let's step back actually. People were starting to come out around here, we know, in Roanoke, around '71 [1971] was the first gay liberation group here. I don't know about Harrisonburg. But as you moved out of college and the master's and then into teaching, and I guess you stayed in Harrisonburg until '75 [1975]. Was there a developing scene, was there a lesbian community, were there people that were coming out, or did you still feel largely isolated? Just you and your partner, or was there starting to be some kind of—

11:13

PS: Well there were some students who recognized me, that came to me. But there was no organized scene. I had maybe two students who came to me during those four years, and said, "Hey I know that I am," and you know, that sort of thing, and "I think you are," [laughs] at which time I said, "Yeah, I am." But no organized—and that was up to '75 [1975], still no organized groups that I knew of. And not on campus, for sure.

11:49

GR: Were there any places to go out in Harrisonburg?

PS: [*shakes head*]

11:54

GR: No bars, no restaurants, nothing.

11:58

PS: Nope.

11:59

GR: So what was it like in Texas? Was it different?

12:01

PS: Yeah, in Texas I got to go to gay bars for the first time and dance and met people and experimented and stuff like that.

12:16

GR: Tell me more about it. What was it like to go to a – were they mixed, were they gay men and lesbians, were they particularly lesbian bars?

12:28

PS: Lesbian bars, as I recall. But I think I went to mixed bars, too. But it was a college town, College Station is the name of the town, so we had several bars. I came out to a couple professors on campus. You know, like I had to come out, they probably knew [laughs]. It's like I always said, I could put on an evening gown and I'd still be a dyke [laughs]. Or I'd look like one.

13:01

GR: On that topic, was there a certain way that you felt like you wanted to present yourself, or that you felt like you had to present yourself to identify as lesbian?

13:16

PS: No. No, I just dressed sort of like I do now, all the time. What do you call it, not casual clothing, but... what do you call just a standard—you know, just clothing, could be male or female. I would prefer that. I was miserable when I was working at the college, at JMU, and had to wear high heel shoes and dresses. Miserable.

13:46

GR: As a secretary, or also—

13:48

PS: As a secretary. And I guess as a professor probably. At that time we still had to wear dresses. [whispers] God, it was awful [laughs].

14:00

GR: You got your Ph.D. Tell me more about that. What propelled you to want to keep going in grad school? What did you study? What were you interested in?

14:15

PS: I studied sociology as a general field, and then within that, the sociology of food use, and then the study of rural sociology. So rural food use sociology. And when I was ready to do my dissertation, I wrote a grant and was funded by the USDA. At that time an enormous amount of money, 55,000 dollars, to do my research, which brought me back to the mountains where I grew up. And I interviewed rural elderly people to see what their eating habits were and their perspective on the future and that sort of thing, and that impact on food habits. It was quite a story.

15:01

GR: That sounds awesome [both laugh]. Were you interested in history then, or was that not fully developed? Were you reading history, exploring?

15:13

PS: I was reading everything I could get my hands on. I was particularly interested in Native American history, Appalachian history, and Western [history], like the West. And not so much in Virginia history because I always resented the Civil War. I just thought it was the dumbest thing that ever happened in the world. I took a course in it, Civil War—I just thought, how stupid. But I've always been a history buff, but didn't major in it.

15:52

GR: Were you aware of or interested in women's studies—

15:57

PS: Oh yeah.

15:58

GR: Or women's history?

15:59

PS: Mm-hmm, women's history. Forgot that part.

16:01

GR: Tell me about that. Did you take any classes, or were you reading?

16:05

PS: Mostly reading, cause when I was in undergraduate school, there was no course called women's history or black history or—those things came in the seventies. So as much as possible I read about women's history. Wondered why it wasn't in our textbooks. Stuff like that.

16:31

GR: And let me ask too, while we're still on the seventies, this time period, were you reading any gay publications? Were there any newspapers or newsletters, or gay periodicals or anything like that that you were aware of? Were there any gay bookstores in Texas, or anything like that?

16:53

PS: No, I didn't.

16:55

GR: So not a lot of published literature that you were encountering around this.

16:59

PS: No. May have been there, but I didn't see it.

17:06

GR: So you came back here for field work and then what happened after your degree?

17:11

PS: I was hired at Virginia Tech in the sociology department. I was in the department with two women and mostly men, and it was very sexist. Very sexist. And of course I'm still isolating myself, so I overheard people call me the Iron Maiden and that kind of stuff. And I tried to socialize with them, but I didn't care for their way of socializing, so

therefore I didn't do it. So I did, I went to Tech, did my job, came home. And that's it. Then I was denied tenure.

17:57

GR: Okay. When you say you were isolating yourself, you mean you weren't "out" at Tech, you weren't—

18:04

PS: No, no, I wasn't out in the department. I'm sure they knew. And I didn't socialize with other faculty members.

18:18

GR: What about the other women in the department? Were they allies?

18:21

PS: There was one woman named...

18:25

GR: We don't have to—

18:26

PS: Yeah, I don't remember. Who I think knew, and she invited me to her house a couple times and we had dinner and that sort of thing. But she was married, but I think was a very open person, but we never discussed it.

18:44

GR: When did you start at Tech, do you remember?

18:47

PS: 1980. All of 1980.

18:51

GR: And were you, if you don't mind me asking, you had a partner in Texas but that fell apart?

18:57

PS: Fell apart, yeah, so I was single at that time.

19:02

GR: So what was it like sort of coming back, but this is not Harrisonburg, this was a new region. What was it like showing up in—were you living in Blacksburg?

19:14

PS: No, I did for about two months, and then I moved to Salem.

19:19

GR: Okay.

19:20

PS: Cause I thought there was more life here. And there was, at that time. More life, and I got on a softball team [*laughs*]. And there's where I met my circle of friends to start with.

19:33

GR: Great, so tell me about—well, I'm so curious, tell me about Salem from fall of 1980 and early '80s, but also we've heard a little bit about a softball league, I guess that played at Oakey's Field here.

19:50

PS: Mm-hmm.

19:50

GR: Maybe if you could tell me a bit more about, first of all, why did you think Salem was an interesting place, because you know, when I moved to Salem from New York, I was like, what is this place? [*laughs*] So I'm curious to know what Salem was like in the early '80s.

20:05

PS: Well, I moved up here—I had one connection to a lesbian who lived in Roanoke. And she told me about things like the ball stuff, and you can go and watch, or you can play. So I really wanted to get out of Blacksburg and come here. I thought I would be more anonymous from my job there. I was a little scared about my job. So I met women here. We had flings and stuff like that, and one of them actually tried to blackmail me. She was going to call Tech and tell them I was a lesbian, and I said, “You know, here's the number. Call. I won't be blackmailed.” And I don't think she ever called. So I got into the ball game scene. Lot of drinking going on. I wasn't a heavy drinker. I drank some beer. People would come to watch the ball game and then they would drink themselves into passing out, and be up on the bank when everybody left. Women. So people would be concerned about them but it didn't seem to be a whole lot of concern. Nobody went up and got them and took them home, as far as I know. I wasn't concerned either, cause I thought that was stupid [*laughs*]. So there was a lot of drinking.

21:45

GR: You played in the league or you watched on the—

21:49

PS: I played in the league. I was a pitcher. I couldn't run very fast cause I have short legs, so they always yelled at me. I could hit the ball, but I couldn't get to first base on time [*laughs*]. But I was a hell of a good pitcher. I could drop that thing right in there and they didn't know where it came from. Right over the base.

22:13

GR: We heard that with the softball league here, a lot of the players were not “out,” per se, but you knew that some of the players on the softball team were gay, and probably some of the women were straight. What was your perception of that? Was softball a place where you could reliably meet other queer women?

22:39

PS: Mm-hmm. Yeah, you could. There were straight women that played with us. They were aware of our situation. A lot of breakups happened on the ball field, and people would come in and find their girlfriend with another girlfriend. There’d be a fight. That happened quite often. A lot of the relationship issues were played out right there, and you also met people there. So nice things happened there, and breakups happened there as well. So it was sort of the décor of our existence as lesbians.

23:16

GR: Let me ask you about the drinking culture, cause you brought that up. Someone mentioned to us this place Taylor House in Salem. I don’t know if that sounds familiar. [*PS shakes head no*] There was a lesbian-owned restaurant on West Main Street or something like that. But were there places that you all went to drink? You said people were watching the ball game and drinking on the side and drinking into oblivion, but were there bars in Salem? Were there restaurants in Salem?

23:48

PS: The only one that I know of, and I never have been there, was The Coffeepot. And that was actually open to lesbians in the ’40s [1940s] and ’50s [1950s] as well, down on Brambleton Avenue. A lot of the older lesbians, even older than me, or my age, would tell stories about going down there on Friday night with their girlfriend and drinking. So The Coffeepot was a hangout for lesbians.

24:18

GR: You never went but you heard some of the older folks tell stories?

24:21

PS: Mm-hmm, well I heard them say, “We were at The Coffeepot last night.”

24:26

GR: Interesting. What about in Roanoke? Did you go into the city of Roanoke? Were there places there? Did you go to The Park?

24:33

PS: I did, later on in life, after I met a partner. We would go down. We’d wake up at 2 a.m. in the morning and say let’s go dancing, and then we’d go down there and dance till dawn [*laughs*]. More than one time. Maybe ten times. Yeah, we went to The Park.

24:54

GR: There was obviously a lot of gay men there too.

24:58

PS: Mm-hmm.

24:59

GR: But was it a place that you felt comfortable? Was there a significant amount of women also?

25:04

PS: Not a significant amount of women. I was partnered, so I wasn't looking too much at the women. But I had an attitude toward them, actually. Like, I don't want to meet anybody that hangs out at the bar all the time. And I was really worried about the drinking that went on. And later on, when we talk about First Friday, I'll go deeper into that, if we are. But then First Friday. It was 1982 that I went to my first Friday. It was in someone's house. That's where we met. We met in people's houses, and this one was out in—I think out in Catawba. It was fairly far away, the first one I went to. And I noticed two women there that night, and I ended up with one of them. It was going to be one or the other [*laughs*] that I was going to try to date.

26:06

GR: You went on your own?

26:08

PS: I went with two friends. One of them is still my dear friend, and the other one moved away. But they were partners, and they knew I was new into the community. Or newly out in the community. I had lived here two years already. And they said, "You need to get involved with First Friday." So I said, "Okay, take me." So we met somewhere and they drove me. So that night, I saw the person I wanted to be with. One of two. [*laughs*]

26:40

GR: And it worked.

26:41

PS: It worked.

26:41

GR: It worked out.

26:43

PS: It worked for seven years, and we're still really good friends. She lives in Vienna, Austria, now. So I get to visit her once a year at least.

26:55

GR: What was your impression after you went for several months? Did you start to go regularly to the house parties?

27:05

PS: Yes.

27:06

GR: And what was your impression of that cohort of people, of the First Friday group?

27:10

PS: Well, it was very open, but stratified. Do you know what I mean? There were the kind of wealthy lesbians, and then the working-class lesbians. But that never was a problem. We had that one thing in common. We got along very well. But I just thought, it's a place to get drunk. It really was a place to drink, and that was sort of the culture. It was like, how much beer can we consume tonight? Dancing, we did dancing. There was one person who was a clinical psychologist, who was the center of attention. She was a heavy drinker, still is. And so people emulated her a lot, even in dress. So it was like a bunch of little children looking for leadership. Or looking for somebody to look up to. Bunch of little gay women.

28:28

GR: What was the dress like? Was there still any semblance of a kind of butch-femme dichotomy?

28:35

PS: Oh yeah, butch-femme. Now the femmes—she was femme, so the femmes copied her. The butches just went like me, blue jeans and a shirt.

28:50

GR: Why do you think—cause you've mentioned this—you can answer this if you feel comfortable—why do you think that such heavy drinking was part of the lesbian community, the lesbian scene?

29:07

PS: Well, I have my theories. It was painful. You're hiding your pain, and you're being a macho at the same time. We had retreats. We started that probably in '85 [1985]. We started renting a camp, a girl scout camp the first time we did it, up in Christiansburg. We rented a girl scout camp, and we'd go there and we had gay Olympic games, and we spent the whole weekend, we'd have a big feast on Saturday night.

Those were really fun, but the major thing that was hauled there was beer. And I actually split with First Friday ultimately over that. Because we were making money to provide food at the retreat, and some of us were working really hard to make that money, and then a pickup truck load of beer would come in. I mean stacked. And I just didn't think it was right for me to be working for people to drink. People would come from miles around, from all over Virginia, to come to our retreats, and they'd bring their partners. And their partners maybe were on the wagon. And they'd fall off the wagon at the retreats. Then we'd get complaints—"if y'all didn't serve so much beer, my girlfriend wouldn't be drinking again." Although that wasn't the case, but we were still accused of that. So I got really angry about that. And then it was like, when the retreat was over, the

beer truck drove to the houses of the main ringleaders. And they just drank it the rest of the year. Free beer. So I got really angry about that.

31:31

GR: I'll go back to the retreat, cause I've got more questions about that. But you're mentioning some of the houses of the ringleaders. Was Old Southwest, was that neighborhood a big—you know, around Highland Park—was that a central area?

31:45

PS: Highland Park? Yeah, that area. It was very big. And a lot of the leaders—and non-leaders—lived in those areas. That was the cool place to live. Old Southwest.

32:02

GR: Did you ever live there?

32:06

PS: No, I lived close to there. I lived in [the] Grandin Road area. Owned a couple houses over there.

32:16

GR: And you had a frame shop.

32:18

PS: I did. How'd you know that?

32:20

GR: That's how I found you to contact you, actually. I mean, I know you through the [Salem] museum, but we have some copies of *Skip Two Periods*, which was the newsletter for First Friday.

32:32

PS: [*laughing*] Right.

32:33

GR: And you have an advertisement in there for Marilett Frames.

32:36

PS: Frames. That was my girlfriend's first four letters and my last four. Marilett Frames. It was my first date with her, actually, I went to Blacksburg to pick up some pictures that a friend of mine that I taught with up there wanted me to frame for her. I didn't know anything about framing, but I said, "I can do it." So we drove up to Blacksburg and we met this woman and picked up her framing and brought it back, and then we figured out how we were going to do it. Well, it turned out to be pretty good [*laughs*]. So we started a little frame business in the basement of our house on Maiden Lane. And then I continued it for years. Twenty-some years. I just quit maybe two years ago, framing.

33:33

GR: Did you start that up while you were still at Tech?

33:36

PS: Mm-hmm.

33:38

GR: So I wonder if you could go back to that. It sounded like your experience at Tech was really awful. Just that the culture of the department—

33:46

PS: Yep.

33:46

GR: If you feel comfortable talking about it, do you want to talk about the tenure—how the Tech thing ended?

33:59

PS: Well, I went up for tenure at the appropriate time, five years into my time there. And I was denied. Even though I had brought in grants. It was a very painful time. Brought in grants, published articles. There was a couple people in the department who said that my work was not real sociology. And they denied me tenure. But there was also a reputation there in that department, “we will never tenure a female.” That was said. It was told to me. “We will never tenure a female.” And it was years before they did. So I was denied tenure. It was the best thing that ever happened to me, truly. And so within a week I had a job at Radford, with a promotion and a 6000 dollar raise. And I was very happy over there. So I didn’t even have to stay my last year.

I really don’t know what the problem was at Tech except it was full of male pigs. I mean, chauvinist pigs. One of them came down the hall after I was denied tenure, and I was packing my office, and he said, “Let me help you with that.” In a way that was like, sooner you get out of here, the better. I don’t know what it was. But people told me that it was said that I didn’t do real sociology, cause I was studying food habits and rural, Southern, and all that. So it was the best thing that ever happened. My department chair was very upset, because he liked me and thought I did good work. My outside reviewers said it was some of the most creative work they had ever seen.

36:08

GR: It sounds like sexism was rampant.

36:10

PS: Rampant. It was.

36:14

GR: Do you think that homophobia was also part of that?

36:17

PS: Mm-hmm. I do. Cause I was referred to as the Iron Maiden. Which is, you know, big, strong, dyke woman. That's the term we used to use. Which, you know that, yeah.

36:35

GR: You weren't the kind of woman that they would tolerate.

36:43

PS: Mm-hmm. And the first woman they tenured after I left, which was some years later, ended up marrying one of the pipsqueaks [*laughs*].

36:56

GR: So let's go back to First Friday. It's a social group. Would you say that it was also political? Was there ideology to First Friday about lesbian feminism, or separatism? Were you talking about these ideas?

37:18

PS: We did. There was some politics involved. I know it was very good for people, overall. Very, very good, cause it was a place where you could be yourself. For me it was very good. Cause it was a place I could go and be myself and meet people. And some of the people are still my best friends, that I met at First Friday.

37:45

GR: Did you ever host one at your house?

37:48

PS: Yes, one time. And when the people started putting cigarette butts out in my carpet, I didn't host anymore [*both laugh*].

38:01

GR: Lot of different behaviors [*both laugh*]. Let's go back to the retreats. What did you like best about the retreats? Did you like the gay Olympics? I imagine there were workshops?

38:20

PS: Workshops, yeah.

38:22

GR: What were some of the things that you remember most fondly about the retreats?

38:30

PS: I turned out to be the major cook. So that was kind of fun, cooking for four hundred people and roasting chicken and stuff like that. I enjoyed the Olympics. I loved watching the antics, cause we had some very creative people in First Friday who could just be the biggest clowns you have ever seen. The dynamics between women, I've always been interested in watching that, as a sociologist. What's going on here? Cliques, and that kind

of thing. But I think getting away to a woodsy kind of place and just being who you are – I mean, some of us stripped down, some naked, some down to the waist, and ran around doing Olympics. That was just freedom, that's what it was. And I remember kind of grieving when we'd come back home. Like, oh, I miss that.

39:35

GR: How would you characterize the types of women who came to the retreat? Did straight or questioning women come? Cause I guess it was called the Women's Retreat, not lesbian.

39:49

PS: No, the Lesbian Retreat.

39:51

GR: Oh, was it pretty clear it was—

39:53

PS: Very clear it was lesbians. But we had questioning women come.

39:57

GR: And what about bisexual women?

40:00

PS: I'm sure.

40:00

GR: Just within First Friday, were bisexual women respected?

40:02

PS: Yeah. They were there.

40:13

GR: Keeping up on this trend, what was the general attitude toward the gay male community, would you say, within First Friday? Was there cooperation?

40:25

PS: Some. Some special guys that we liked. Gerry Jennings was one. There was one that I taught with at Radford. What was his name? It just slipped in and slipped out. It'll come. Who was very good. Very cooperative. He'd invite us to his house for dinner, as couples. He had a partner. So we did some neat things. And he always joked and said that he liked to have lesbian friends cause they had pickup trucks and they could haul things for him. And I did, I built him a fence [*both laugh*]. There were good times, pretty good times.

41:23

GR: There was a bowling league, too, in the '80s [1980s], were you aware of that?

41:27

PS: No. I should have been. It must have been a whole different group. Cause if it was the First Friday group, I would have known.

41:35

GR: It wasn't a lesbian thing, I think it was mixed men and women.

41:38

PS: Mixed men and women.

41:39

GR: Yeah.

41:40

PS: No, didn't know.

41:44

GR: Did you go to any of the first pride festivals down in Wasena [Park]?

41:51

PS: I did. The first couple, I went.

41:55

GR: What was that like?

41:56

PS: Well, it was again like a mini-retreat, where you could walk and feel like you could be who you were. But now, I don't care now. I'll walk wherever I want to. I feel damn proud [*laughs*]. But there was always this fear that maybe people didn't like you, or that you might get hurt by people, by crude men.

I heard these things growing up. Like I heard my brother say one time that all gays should be lined up and shot. He said it right to me. And people where I grew up felt very strong about it. There was one lesbian in the community that I knew of, and I knew it because I had this gaydar thing with her. Went to elementary school with her. Her name started with an L, that's all I'll say. I was about thirteen years old and she would come to my grandma's house when we were there on Sundays for dinner. That's a midday meal. And I wouldn't even—I couldn't be around her, cause I knew there was something emanating off her that was going to get on me, and my mother would know [*laughs*]. But she was raped, and all kinds of things done to her. No wonder I didn't want anyone to associate me with her. But she was.

43:38

GR: How was your relationship with family members over time? Did you break from your family?

43:46

PS: Broke from my family. Left them up there. I'm the only one that ever left, to this day. Except for my niece, who lives in Salem. But I was told by my sister—it's when that woman down in Florida was leading all the—what was her name, the singer?

44:09

GR: Anita Bryant.

44:10

PS: Anita Bryant was leading all this anti-gay stuff [in the late 1970s]. My sister said, "I would go down there and march with her if I could!" And I said, "Oh, why would you do that?" And she said, "Just because. I hate gay people." And I said, "What if you found out there was one in your family?" She said, "If you're trying to tell me you're gay, I don't want to hear it, and you will never see my children again." So I said, "Well, in that case, I won't tell you."

And then one other time, after my dad died, I thought it was time for me to come out to the family. So we went to visit his grave. My sister and I were coming back across the mountain. I stopped on the top of the mountain and I said, "There's something I really have to share with you." She said, "If you're going to tell me you're gay, I'm going to throw up." And I said, "You know, in that case I'm not going to tell you" [*both laugh*]. Cause she didn't want to hear it so bad, that when I told her, she didn't recognize it.

So it's always been that way. And then I have a niece who's gay and a nephew who's gay. And my niece here in Salem with me is well aware. She defends me with her parents, which is my sister. My niece defends me and says, "Got nothing to do with who she is." That sort of thing. So I never came out to them. I tried to come out to my mother after my daddy died, and I did come out to her. I said, "Mom, I'm gay." And she said, "Oh my God, I'm glad your daddy didn't live to hear that." We never talked about it again after that.

46:07

GR: When you stepped away from First Friday, it was still going I guess a little bit?

46:15

PS: Yeah it had died down quite a bit, but I started another group with a couple other women. An alternative group where we had speakers. It was sort of an educational kind of group, to have in fairly famous people who were gay to come in and do lectures and stuff like that.

46:43

GR: Tell me more about this.

46:45

PS: We started at the public library downtown, on Jefferson, and there were about five of us who said, "We're tired of this crap." Because I thought, and we thought as a group,

that First Friday had deteriorated to just booze. And that we wanted to have an alternative, where you could go be who you are and actually get some education, and participate in discussions. That went on for quite a while.

47:17

GR: Like a couple years, or?

47:19

PS: Couple years.

47:21

GR: What was it called?

47:23

PS: I don't remember [*laughs*].

47:26

GR: Maybe you have some old flyers somewhere?

47:28

PS: I might have some, I don't know. No, I know I don't. I don't.

47:34

GR: [*laughs*] Tell me more about what kind of programs you put on. You invited speakers. What were some of the topics of discussion? Was it about raising people's consciousness, raising awareness?

47:46

PS: Yeah, yeah. Professors from Tech, in English, women's studies groups, who would come and talk about gay literature, stuff like that. I can't remember their names and wouldn't call them if I could cause you told me not to [*both laugh*].

48:12

GR: Was this always at the public library?

48:15

PS: Always at the public library.

48:16

GR: For a few years.

48:17

PS: And we got up to—maybe we had fifteen or twenty people who'd come. And men were welcome as well, if they wanted to come.

48:27

GR: But the topics were women's studies.

48:30

PS: Women's issues, gay issues. Yeah. Things that we thought would educate people. We also did some Saturday activities. We were interested in gay women with children, cause gay women couldn't bring children to First Friday, so they couldn't come a lot of times. So we had activities out at Douthat State Park. We'd go out and do horseback riding. Stuff like that.

And out of that group, an interesting thing I think, that I was very proud of, cause I have all these skills, and did them. I could do gutters, I could do electric, I could do plumbing. Cause I used to buy houses and fix them up and sell them. So I had all these skills. So I started this workshop where, if a woman, a lesbian, had something wrong at her house that she needed repaired, we would meet and all get together and go repair that for her. And then in the meantime, everybody's learning that skill. So I was trying to disseminate my skills out to other women to make them independent of men. Of calling in a plumber. They could do it themselves. So that lasted a year.

50:01

GR: So let me just see if I have the chronology right. You got involved with First Friday in '82 [1982]. You went to the women's retreat for the first time in '85 [1985], you said.

50:10

PS: Probably '85, yeah.

50:11

GR: And you stepped away maybe in sometime like the late eighties? So would you say your group—

50:20

PS: I'd say we stepped away probably in the mid-nineties. No, no, no, that's a lie. Probably around '89 [1989].

50:36

GR: And your group may have been like '89, '90, '91, that time.

50:40

PS: Mm-hmm.

50:41

GR: The first pride festival [in Wasena Park] was '89 [1989], so that is a reference point. So around that time?

50:46

PS: Yeah.

50:48

GR: Interesting.

50:49

PS: But when we offered those kind of things, we got people who had never been to First Friday. They came for the educational aspect of it.

51:01

GR: So we're coming to kind of the last bits of our time. What happened then, as say we move into the nineties, First Friday dissolves, or your group goes for a couple years. What happened then? Were you still interested in creating a lesbian community? Or did you find that people were isolating more?

51:26

PS: They were isolating more. More long-term relationships. Those kind of people don't tend to go out on Friday night. I was in a long-term relationship at that point, for ten years it lasted. I did a lot of traveling with my partner. We traveled all over the United States. Then about 2004, I got back with what I call "The Devil." We'd broken up [*laughs*] and then we got back together. The Devil, yeah, in a female form. That was pretty rough, again for a year. And then we ended that one. And since then, I've just kind of bounced around. And now it's been 2009 since I've dated anybody. Not interested anymore.

52:28

GR: What do you think about the progression of LGBTQ whatever—the progression of this movement over time? Is there still a place for lesbians within whatever we call LGBTQ? Is there still a lesbian community, per se? How would you look at, say, the last twenty, thirty, forty years? What's different from the eighties to now, in your opinion?

52:59

PS: Well I think in the eighties, we felt like we had to group. You had to have your gay men and your gay women. Now I think you can just be gay, or be whoever you are. And I tell people, young ones, "whippersnappers" I call them, that "you really owe me some thanks, buddy. Cause we made it possible for you to walk down the street and hold your girlfriend's hand." So I think it's more open now. I don't think people are as scared as we were, physically scared of being hurt. I hope not. I think it happens, but it's not like it used to be. Maybe we were scared for no reason. I don't know.

53:53

GR: When we were just walking over here from lunch, before we met you, we saw a couple, two girls, on campus holding each other, sitting down on a bench. I noted that walking over here. Maybe you wouldn't have seen that on a college campus back in the day.

54:11

PS: Oh no. And you still notice it, but I think we're coming to a point where it won't be noticed. You might glance over and say, "oh." You might not even glance. It's like you

don't notice everybody on the sidewalk, and I think it will come to that not too distant future, where you don't notice two women kissing or two men kissing, or holding each other. I think with the gay marriage thing it's really an exciting time for us. I have a young friend, she's about 32, and we talk. And she just got married in July and I'm thinking, "wow, that's something." And I was congratulating her and telling her, "You've got me to thank" [*laughs*].

55:07

GR: Do you think that anything's lost in the progression of more rights, more equality? Do you think that there's anything, from your perspective, that you think was better about the way gay life was then? Was there a different sense of togetherness or something? I don't want to put words in your mouth. Is there anything that's lost, that's come along the way in the way that gay community has changed, or gay life has changed?

55:46

PS: No. No. No. It's kind of like freeing the slaves. That had to be good [*laughs*]. That had to be better.

56:04

GR: On that note, I want to thank you so much, Peggy. I think it's a great way to end the interview. Thank you so much for this.

56:11

PS: You're welcome.

[END]