

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

**Interview with Myer S. Reed
October 21, 2019**

Interviewer: G.S. Rosenthal

Narrator: Myer S. Reed

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Transcribed by: Megan Reynolds, Kierra Burda

Duration: 1:13:49

Index:

0:00 = Introduction and childhood in Southside Virginia (1947–1950s)

2:54 = First experiences with sexual activity in childhood (1950s)

6:10 = School & childhood, relationship with parents, exploring his sexuality (1950s-early 1960s)

11:59 = Attending college at William & Mary (1965-1969)

15:57 = Attending graduate school at Tulane (c. 1969-1972); experiences in New Orleans; coming out as gay (during summer break in Williamsburg, 1970); gay literature and pornography

22:02 = Gay life in New Orleans (early 1970s)

24:00 = Description of PhD dissertation in Sociology

26:42 = Teaching at the University of Virginia then at Radford University (mid-1970s)

29:35 = Visiting the Trade Winds for the first time (1973); renting an apartment in Blacksburg

34:39 = Dating and gay community in Roanoke in the 1970s

36:53 = Bars, discos, and dance bars in Roanoke (1970s); the Roanoke Police Department Vice Squad, and undercover cops at The Trade Winds

41:25 = Gay people at Radford University

43:13 = involvement with the Roanoke Valley Gay Alliance / *Blue Ridge Lambda Press* activist community (1980s-early 1990s)

48:25 = Early AIDS/HIV Crisis (1980s); impacts in D.C. and in Old Southwest, Roanoke; forming an AIDS Support Group, meeting at his house on Lake Drive SW

57:05 = Becoming a licensed professional counselor; working with gay clients

1:01:13 = Retiring from Radford; dealing with the death of his father; suffering a heart attack (late 1990s); moving to Phoenix, Arizona in 1997

1:10:35 = Starting the Gay Supper Club in Roanoke (late 1980s-early 1990s)

00:03

GSR: This is Gregory Samantha Rosenthal. I'm here with Myer Reed. We're at the Roanoke Public Library, the downtown branch at Elmwood Park. It's October 21, 2019, and this is an interview for the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project Oral History Initiative. Thank you, Myer, for being with us.

00:25

MSR: Absolutely.

00:27

GS: So, we want to start with your childhood. Where did you grow up and what was that like?

00:33

MSR: I grew up in what is Southside Virginia, which if you drew a line straight down from Richmond, [you'd] hit the North Carolina line. That's where I was born. I grew up outside of a little town called La Crosse. I mean, a little town, 700 population. I lived in a little community that was straight out of the 19th century, called Marengo. There was a famous battle that Napoleon had, [in] Marengo in Italy, and for some curious reason they named this little stop along the road Marengo. It was a good place to grow up. It was a very gentle, secure, protective place until I came out and then, you know, that story. But it was very wonderful growing up. I had a lot of neighbors who were very warm and parenting to me. Not disciplining, just watching out and encouraging and being very nice to me. *[Material removed from transcript at MSR's request.]* But there was just an incredible underground—sexual underground—in this very remote little community. I was aware of a lot that was going on, just from my own experience and the children that I knew, very experienced. They would talk and gossip and what have you, but that's too much to get into.

02:54

GS: Are you saying that you were aware, from a pretty young age, of homosexual activity?

03:01

MSR: Oh yeah, that is what I had. And I had a boyfriend once, in Phoenix, [Arizona,] who laughingly used to say that he was eight before he was seven.

03:16

GSR: I don't know what that means.

03:18

MSR: He was 'ate,' he had had oral sex...

03:19

GSR: Oh.

03:21

MSR: ...before he was seven. I was seduced early on by a guy who lived behind us and his uncle had been abusing him, guarantee it, I knew. He never said it out right, but, one plus one, I knew what was going on. And then later on, that was when, I guess, I was about seven or eight. Later on, there was a guy who moved into the neighborhood, a basketball player at the high school we were in and he seduced me. And, I don't know how much [directness] you want...

04:20

GSR: It's your level of comfort.

04:23

MSR: He's now dead. Both of them are dead, curiously. And this guy had been having sex in the town, La Crosse, with buddies there. Came down—he missed his buddies, so to speak—so he kind of introduced me... he introduced me to a broader range of sexuality than I had had. To be frank, he wanted to be screwed. He was like, at the time, twelve/thirteen and he was already very familiar with that [*MSR addition to transcript: anal sex*]. Strangely, [we] had never heard of lubricants. So, for about four years, we almost daily had sex.

05:14

GSR: Wow.

05:15

MSR: Yeah.

05:16

GSR: This is, you were in elementary school?

05:19

MSR: We didn't have a middle school where we were. It was like late elementary school, [it] was maybe seventh grade through sophomore year. So, that was my introduction to being... well, the word "gay" wasn't used.

05:37

GSR: Right. I imagine that none of this world was people who identified as "gay."

05:44

MSR: Oh, heavens no. Once I suggested to him [*MSR addition to transcript: the basketball player*] that I might want to give him a blowjob, and he said... oh, he was horrified. He said, "oh no, only queers do that." Goodness, I have been screwing you for years now, but that was not something he'd ever heard about, being queer.

06:10

GSR: Let me ask you also about your school and your community at that time. Was it segregated. This was in the [19]50s?

06:16

MSR: Completely segregated [*MSR addition to transcript: despite the near 50/50 composition of the county*]. All the schools I went through were segregated, even undergraduate school. There were only very, very few black people [at William & Mary].

06:30

GSR: And your family... well, I'm imagining the experiences you had, you were very tightlipped about at the time?

06:41

MSR: Oh, yeah. There [was] no one to talk to about it.

06:45

GSR: What about girlfriends? Did you feel an expectation?

06:50

MSR: My mother did. My mother felt an expectation [*laughter*] and I think she sensed early on that I was different and going to be queer. And boy, [at] twelve years old, she gave me a shotgun for Christmas and I was furious. I knew exactly what that meant. [It] meant straighten up. Even at twelve, that was very clear to me. I understood what she was doing. In seventh grade, there was like some little seventh-grade prom at the end of the year and she lined up someone, some girl for me to take, and took me there, and blah blah blah. But I resisted. My father never really intervened in those ways and was protective of me, I think [*Material removed from transcript at MSR's request.*] [*MSR addition to transcript: But in the 1950s homosexuality in boys was believed to be the fault of the mother.*]

08:24

GSR: Was he masculine?

08:26

MSR: No, he was a gentle man, and I mean that in a very true way. Kind of soft-spoken and very polite and in a true way, a gentleman. He ran what was called at the time a country store and it was the country store in the area. And as a kid, I started working there when I was at least eleven years old. And I really kind of liked the experience. I liked the jobs I had, like placing items on the shelves. The delivery trucks would come and they would put them out in the back area and then I would have the job, generally the evenings, afternoons, placing those cans and whatever else on the shelves. I would get the strangest kind of satisfaction out of that. Organizing, having the straight lines. I have always had a merchant side of my experience. My career is really academic, but I was a merchant as well. I can tell you about that. [*Material removed from transcript at MSR's request.*]

09:51

GSR: So, let me ask you, just before we kind of finish childhood...

09:58

MSR: Oh, we're finished with childhood [*laughter*]?

09:59

GSR: Yeah, we want to get to Roanoke, too. So, when you were in high school, you know finishing up high school, are you saying that you didn't really date anyone, then? You didn't date girls and you certainly didn't date guys.

10:16

MSR: No. The one girl that I asked to both proms, junior, senior proms, turned out to be a lesbian. Surprise, surprise. "Birds of a feather..." we know that story.

10:30

MSR: What do you remember about what you thought about your identity at the time? Did you have any way to map that, any terms, or you just thought, "gee, I'm different. I wish I liked girls." How did it feel at that time?

10:49

MSR: It's hard to remember those things. When I was chairing the sociology department at Radford—that's getting way ahead in the story—I interviewed a guy named Rick Troiden who was also being interviewed at Miami [University] of Ohio. He had done his dissertation, and was going to publish it as a book form, on coming out, and I almost could recall the name of the book but I can't right now. He used [a] phrase to characterize what people did when they were acting gay, but not out. And he said you would "bracket that experience in consciousness." It was over here. You didn't probably label it and it was protective not to label it. It's like the buddy who wanted to be screwed, but he couldn't identify with the term "queer."

11:59

GSR: So then you went to college in the late [19]60s? What was happening there?

12:07

MSR: Someone was watching over me because... I went to William & Mary undergraduate, and the guy who I was assigned as a roommate with was gay. He wasn't out; he was in the same kind of position. But there was a recognition of familiarity there, and his closest friend, named Rick, still is a great friend of mine today. He lives in Palm Springs. He comes over to Phoenix [Arizona] to visit every so often and I really love the man. There developed a friendship with about eight people and all but one of them turned out to be queer.

13:09

GSR: So you kind of knew it, but you didn't name it? Or did you name it at the time?

13:14

MSR: No. I certainly knew the name by that point. I think you could find the word [*MSR addition to transcript*: "gay" or "homosexual"] in the general press more often. I remember in high school going to the library and sneakily looking up the word "homosexuality" in a dictionary. So I had somehow come across that term. That was [when I was] like a junior in high school [mid-1960s].

13:44

GSR: You graduated, what year did you graduate?

13:46

MSR: [19]69.

13:47

GSR: Okay.

13:52

MSR: I graduated '69 from William & Mary undergraduate, and '65 from high school.

13:57

GSR: So then what was the next step for you?

14:00

MSR: What, after they graduated...?

14:01

GSR: After William & Mary.

14:03

MSR: Oh... [pause] I started fishing for graduate school money and at that time, boy was it plentiful. It's amazing to me how people have to borrow so much money to go to graduate school [now]. I got a National Defense Fellowship. I applied to Vanderbilt and Tulane and a number of other places. Well, Tulane offered me the most, and wowie, that's New Orleans, that's an exciting place! As much as I loved Williamsburg, it was tame, not that I was used to excitement in any case, cause I'm from Virginia. But it was very romantic. So I thought "yeah, I'll go down there." But they not only offered me a National Defense Fellowship, which paid me handsomely, but they also offered me a teaching fellowship. Jeez. You know, so I saved enough money out of my first two years of graduate school to go to Europe for about a month. I should [not] write about that now because people's experiences with college loans are so incredibly painful. But that tells you about the shift in public funding of education.

15:44

GSR: So it sounds like you went straight into grad school?

15:49

MSR: Yeah.

15:50

GSR: So, summer/fall of '69, you landed in New Orleans?

15:53

MSR: Yes, in my first car, a Volkswagon.

15:57

GSR: What was New Orleans like, how did it change you?

16:01

MSR: Oh it was so hot! I drove down there in August, cause classes were gonna start in September, and as soon as I got down there I went to the dormitory and I checked in and all that stuff. And then I thought, "I think I'll go down to the market." [*MSR addition to transcript: the French Market.*] Well, this was August, like mid to late afternoon, and I literally got sick, nauseous, from the heat because that little Volkswagen didn't have air conditioning. Heavens no. Good grief. So, anyway, I wound up in a dormitory there—graduate dorm—and I stayed there for three plus years in that dormitory.

16:45

GSR: And what was the state of your sexuality or your sexual identity at that time?

16:51

MSR: It improved [*laughter*].

16:53

GSR: At William & Mary it was still... you were...

16:57

MSR: I came... I'll tell you how I came out. One of the good jobs that students could get at William & Mary was for Colonial Williamsburg, driving the tour buses. They paid well, it was a nice comfortable job, and two, three of my friends that were all queer had rented an apartment and I had finished for the summer at Tulane and wanted to come back to Williamsburg because I had a lot of romantic feelings for Williamsburg. And stayed with these guys that I liked a lot. And the first night I was there my friend, Stan, said "I got to go out and get some [milk], why don't you come ride with me?" I said, "okay." On the way back, Stan says, "There's something I got to tell you. Mike, Mike, and I [are] queer." And [at] that time to hear the word "queer" was striking. Now it's the more acceptable term, because it is more inclusive but not at the time. You advanced when you said "I'm gay." But it's okay. That was a very interesting confession and it was like wow, wow... I'm finally going to have some friends who are gay. But that wasn't my first thought. My first thought was, and the first thing out of my mouth, was "well I've had some experiences in that direction but I'm not going there." Big lie. And he says "oh well. One of the two Mikes has a nice porn collection. He would want to show it to you." And I said "alright." So [they] were all at work the next day, and guess where I was? I went into his closet, and looked for that collection, and found it. Oh boy [*laughter*]! I had never had such [eye] candy, you know?

19:11

GSR: There's so much there. I mean, I'm really surprised that he used the word "queer."

19:16

MSR: I am too.

19:17

GSR: It was a slur, right? It's derogatory.

19:19

MSR: It was a slur and that's kind of where he was, or what he'd had to grapple with.

19:28

GSR: And your response to him, saying “I have some experience, but...” Did that come from a place that, at that time, were all of your experiences the abusive ones, or had you started to have positive ones?

19:44

MSR: [*interrupting*], Well, I have to tell you that my experiences, I wouldn't describe them as abusive. I had one guy, a man who worked for my father who I would say, when I was about fifteen, once tried to abuse me. And I said no. But those other experiences—the first guy, he was being abused and he was simply replicating what he had learned, including passing on the same threats that his uncle was passing onto him, he passed onto me. But I never thought of the experiences with those two guys as being abusive. [*MSR addition to transcript: They were age mates and it was mutual fun and pleasure though not without anxiety.*]

20:37

GSR: Yeah. [*pause*] So, when you talk about going back to William & Mary to see your friends, back to Williamsburg to see your friends, was that your first summer back, do you know?

20:47

MSR: That was the first summer... that I went back to William & Mary...

20:49

GSR: So, 1970?... So—[with] my historian hat on here—so by 1970, you've had the Gay Liberation Front and some of these groups out of Stonewall [Uprising] have started to come out, and there's some newsletters going around. Was that at all part of your friends' journey to coming out as queer or was it something you were becoming aware of when you were at Tulane? That there was new groups or new publications coming out?

21:19

MSR: Yeah. I was a long-term and early subscriber to the *Advocate*, but I can't remember when I started that. I think it was after I had come back and taken the job at Radford. I had my own place when I started subscribing to that.¹ In New Orleans, I could go into that history, but you're looking for Roanoke. But it was... New Orleans had been historically a queer city. A place where people from all over the South could come and feel somewhat safer to be out.

22:02

GSR: When you were in New Orleans did you explore bars? Did you explore cruising? Is that part...

22:09

¹ *The Advocate* began publication in 1967. MSR suggests the early 1970s for his initial subscription.

MSR: I didn't explore... I've always been a bit of a coward, you know? I didn't do a lot of cruising. I would stare at guys. Oh god, did I stare at guys. But in terms of learning where you could pick up a guy, I wasn't into that because I simply lacked the courage or something. I don't know. But one night, I remember, that I had gone... one of the oldest bars in New Orleans was Lafitte in Exile. It may even still be going. I think it started in the [19]40s. And it was famous for its triangular bar, where you could—boy, you could make a lot of eye contact with the three sides. It was packed. It was a Saturday night but it took me forever. I rode around and around and around in the French Quarter before I had the courage to park the car, or even find a space, and go in there. It was more than an hour of getting my gumption up to go in and I did, and I'm not going to tell you that story. It kind of worked out but it was funny-awkward. But I think that was the one experience of going out. But there were guys in the dormitory; there were guys around me that were out. One of my professors at Tulane wasn't really out, but everyone knew he was gay. He was alright and he would give me the wink, you know, kind of to let me know it's okay.

24:00

GSR: So, you did your coursework and stuff at Tulane, and then your dissertation. Did you say that you were only there for three or four years?

24:10

MSR: Well, let's not make that dissertation so quick... [*laughter*] I completed my course work and then I made the classic mistake of graduate students. [*Speaking towards student assistant in the room*] I hope you're listening. I selected a dissertation topic that was way too big to eat. Oh gosh. And it was suggested to me by one of the best people, one of the most well-known people in the department. And it was an interest of his and I didn't have any competing idea in my head on what my dissertation was going to be. Anyway... [*pause*] the topic was going to be on the sociology of the history of the sociology of religion. The sociology of science piece, in which I would take all of the articles that dealt with religion in the major three [or] four major journals of sociology starting in 1895 and up to 1970, and develop an analysis questionnaire sheet to review them, and then looking for a variety of dimensions. The most important dimension was, was this person, who wrote the article, a religious professional? And therefore, in an institution that might be restricting what he could explore and what he could say, or she could say. But it was mostly hes. Not surprisingly, you can find a variety of things that would track with being a religious professional, including not really doing anything that was any way critical of the institutions. This is too much to go into. I wound up doing 400 hundred pages.

26:29

GSR: Wow.

26:30

MSR: Wow is right! And I don't think I've read that sucker since then [*laughter*].

26:35

GSR: So tell me about leaving New Orleans. What was the next step? Did you start teaching somewhere?

26:42

MSR: The man I was doing my dissertation under took a position at the University of Virginia. They wanted him, so I went there with him. I was his underling, you know. So I went with him there and they gave me some nighttime teaching to do. I was there for a year, year and a half, and finally... [pause] my mentor learned that there was this position opening up at Radford [University]. What was happening in the state of Virginia in [19]73 was that the state was giving a lot of money to the state colleges and universities to expand them because there was so many students, post-war babies coming on the scene.

27:51

GSR: Was Radford co-ed at that time?

27:54

MSR: No, it had just gone co-ed. But it had... historically it had been a women's teaching college.

28:04

GSR: So you showed up at Radford...

28:06

MSR: ... interviewed for the job, got it...

28:10

GSR: ... not out, I'm sure, when you applied for the job?

28:13

MSR: No. Oh no, that was out of the question.

28:16

GSR: So you were in the Sociology department? How long were you at Radford? Sounds like it was a big...

28:23

MSR: 23 years. I didn't go looking. I have to tell you though, within the first few months of my being there, I was out. I was completely out. Meet another gay person and "oh, I am too" blah

blah blah. But not out to the department, but they all knew. We don't hide much from folks, particularly if gayness is coming more into people's consciousness. There was this old woman at the department who described me, so I heard, as a "well-known homosexual on campus" [laughter]. I should have been fearful of this, but I wasn't. I laughed like you laughed.

29:21

GSR: Tell me about starting to create a gay life in Southwest Virginia, after you landed in Radford. Did you pretty soon hear about Roanoke and was Roanoke drawing you in?

29:35

MSR: I already knew. I already knew about the Trade Winds, which was the [only] bar that was open then, historically supposedly one of the oldest in the state. When I came down from Charlottesville to interview for the job, [and] I made it to the Trade Winds. I stayed in Roanoke and [went] to the Trade Winds. Whoof... Thinking back on that, how oppressive that was. [Material removed from transcript at MSR's request.]

30:15

GSR: What was it like? The Trade Winds. What was the crowd like? What do you remember?

30:21

MSR: Well, the first thing to know is, of course, you know—you already know—the ground floor, that was a restaurant, where those two Italian brothers ran a restaurant.² And I have a little thing to interject here. I just recently read some more history of the Italian experience in the United States. You probably already know that there not only were Blacks lynched, there were a good number of Italians who were lynched. [Material removed from transcript at MSR's request.] [T]hey were seen to be not white. They were dark. [pause] So, historically, supposedly, the [gay] bars of New York, and any major city, were run by Italians and the explanation has always been, I think, that it's because of their connections to the Mafia, maybe. A little bit of prejudice there, and their link to the police because of the number of Italians who became police. But okay, that's probably true, but I wonder how much of that openness to having gay bars was beyond just exploitation and something about being able to identify with other men who had been so rejected—men and women who had been so rejected.

32:09

GSR: Yeah, and we've heard people say—they're all deceased to my understanding—that two of the three brothers who ran the place were assumedly gay.

32:20

² N.B.: other oral history narrators in the LGBTQ History Collection have suggested that the Georges were Lebanese-American rather than Italian-American.

MSR: I didn't know that.

32:22

GSR: That came up in other interviews and it was like, why, why did they run this place? Who knows? It's just hearsay. So you go down into the basement, through the back...

32:34

MSR: Yeah, I went to the back and I went into the basement. Of course, going into the basement has its own connotations. One time my father was gonna have a discussion with me about sex, I don't need to go into that. He said, "why don't you come with me down to the basement." Oh jeez. Here we go! How about that association? *[laughter]* I went in there and there weren't many people there. There were local folks and I didn't know anyone and I wasn't always the boldest about meeting people. It was, at least, it said to me that you can meet people here.

33:24

GSR: So how did you start to find a gay community? A sense of community?

33:29

MSR: I also have to say that when I interviewed at Radford, I looked at the town of Radford, oh, please forgive me, and I said "no, I can't live here. I cannot live there." I was coming from New Orleans and from Charlottesville. I knew I couldn't do Radford. I took an apartment in Blacksburg, and I just assumed I would probably be meeting guys there. And I did, but not being someone who was out cruising wherever availability is, I met people mostly through, I think, going to Roanoke, to the bars.

34:20

GSR: Yeah, I imagine in Blacksburg there is a lot of Tech people. Virginia Tech mostly.

34:27

MSR: Yeah. But they had their gay people, too, you know. Not everyone there was an engineer *[laughter]*. I'm sorry, that's stereotypical.

34:35

GSR: So did you live in Blacksburg then, most of your twenty-some years?

34:39

MSR: No. I lived there for several years and then I had a boyfriend who was working for Norfolk and Southern. He was a clerk—he's still alive. In the Norfolk and Western / Norfolk and Southern railroad bureaucracy, there were no jobs for women, I don't think. All the clerks, *[like]* secretaries, were men. So I met him, and the question became, he had his own house here in

Roanoke, and I was living in Blacksburg. So if I decided that, why don't I buy a house that's halfway between us, and so I don't have so far to go, or maybe he can come and live with me. And he did, we were together for three or four years [*MSR addition to transcript: in the little town of Shawsville.*]

35:41

GSR: And so tell me more about getting involved with the Roanoke community. I'm assuming you met your boyfriend at the time in Roanoke?

35:52

MSR: Mhmm.

35:53

GSR: So were you going to other bars? Did you become aware of an activist group or community?

36:01

MSR: Yeah, you know, there was a lot of knowledge floating in the air. And I was meeting people, not necessarily to trick, but just meeting other gays in a variety of contexts. I can't recall a lot of the specifics of it, that was some millions of years ago.

36:23

GSR: Did you ever go down to right here [*GSR gestured out the window towards Bullitt Avenue, formerly a gay cruising area in the 1960s and 1970s*]?

36:27

MSR: No, no I didn't. I was aware of that, but no, I never actually... that wasn't me to be able to make that cruising.

36:37

GSR: Yeah, the cruising block here.

36:40

MSR: Yeah, that was a missed opportunity [*laughter*].

36:42

GSR: There are a lot of stories.

36:46

MSR: I love Larry Bly's story about looking down from the hotel.³

36:53

GSR: Well, let me name some other bars... or some of the discos? Did you go to the discos?

37:00

MSR: [*MSR addition to transcript*: Three days ago] when we came in, we [were] driving around town, and we passed by the Last Straw. And I had just a real gush of positive feelings; it's a church thing, I think now, fortunately my mind blanked that out, but I saw the building and I was aware of that place. That came later, and you will know the specific date which that came. But in terms of my history, what I recall is that there was the Trade Winds, which was not great, and I think the Last Straw developed. I liked that a lot. It was a cozy place. It was so small that it forced people to be more open with one another and more outgoing, and it was fun. It was never a raunchy place, although none of the bars were, you know, there wasn't any... if you wanted to have backroom sex you'd have to go to D.C., as far as I know anyway.

38:10

GSR: Not at the Park or...?

38:11

MSR: I'm sure it happened, but I wasn't aware [*laughter*]. Good Virginia boy that I was.

38:23

GSR: Did you like the dance clubs or did you prefer the...?

38:27

MSR: I remember there was a place called Murphy's. Murphy's was run by an older straight couple, I remember, but before that there was a bar owned by several [*MSR addition to transcript*: straight] guys.

38:45

GSR: The Horoscope?

38:46

MSR: The Horoscope. Oh, that was when disco finally came to Roanoke and they opened that dance bar. You weren't going to dance in the Trade Winds. Well you could... I should tell you that story. They opened that third floor up [at the Trade Winds] at some point and made it a dance place. Well, of course, the State of Virginia, in all of its liberalism, made it illegal for

³ See Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, "Oral History Interview with Larry Bly," March 1, 2016, Virginia Room, Roanoke Public Libraries.

homosexuals to dance with one another. And I recall being there on a Saturday night and looking around and you can pick out... I knew nothing about the [Roanoke Police Department] vice squad, but God, when you're dressed like you're going to a Baptist church and you're standing there in the middle of a queer place, you're going to stand out boys!

39:43

GSR: So these are undercover police?

39:45

MSR: Yeah, and I thought... it made me angry. I wasn't fearful; it made me angry that they were there. And that was more and the more the reaction that people were feeling, gay people were feeling. Not just in New York City, but all over I think there was something welling up that we ain't gonna take that anymore. They didn't wind up arresting anyone to my knowledge, but anyway. It's a lot of history here.

40:19

GSR: Yeah, it's interesting to hear about the vice squad because we have some stuff we've found about the police department and their efforts to entrap gay men, I mean right down here [on Bullitt Avenue] in the cruising [scene], and they would pose as tricks or whatever. But it's funny in your story because it sounds like they posed so poorly, if you're going to try to blend in...

40:44

MSR: No, because they were just looking for guys who were dancing, that alone was enough [to arrest you]. They're not looking for guys who were picking up someone, they were looking for guys who were dancing so they didn't need to be too... but people continued to dance in front of them so I don't know what they were thinking and what they were up to. I'm sure you must have heard the rumor that was very active during the time of all the voracious police crackdowns on gay people in this city, was that the chief of police's daughter was lesbian. Have you heard that one?

41:24

GSR: No.

41:25

MSR: I tell you, that was the most active rumor about at the time, and he could not accept that.

41:32

GSR: This was 1970s-ish?

41:34

MSR: Uh huh. Early [19]70s, yeah. So, but I had a dean, my dean, one of the first times I was at a bar after I started teaching at Radford, a young girl came up to me—because I think she was in her late teens/early twenties—and she identified herself as the daughter of that dean. And I thought, “Oh my goodness, how should I take this?” But she was very out and very friendly. Talked about the struggles with her dad, but he wasn’t going to throw her out, and that [she] knew. So I didn’t ever feel threatened by him, though I know that when I tried to hire Rick Troiden, that he didn’t get hired, and he was clearly the most impressive candidate out of several that we had to consider. And this dean made it a point to say to me like that Troiden wasn’t going to make it, and he said, “And you understand why?” Well, I think he was trying to say, well Troiden was too out because he was doing his dissertation on this topic and was planning to write a book, so that the University wasn’t ready for that degree of openness. [MSR addition to transcript: A curious side note is that a few years later rumors developed that our long term university president had a boyfriend in Richmond.]

43:13

GSR: Let me move forward in the conversation to the 1980s...

43:20

MSR: Wow, wow, wow, wow... skipping so much.

43:22

GSR: So we’ve been looking at a lot of the *Blue Ridge Lambda Press*, the ‘pink pages,’ and your name was frequently in it, particularly there’s an advertisement for your—did you have a private practice of counseling and stuff?

43:34

MSR: Oh, we are jumping ahead... Yeah.

43:38

GSR: So I guess my question is, were you involved with the *Blue Ridge Lambda Press* people?

43:45

MSR: I have to say, and put this one on the record, that you’ve already interviewed him, but Gerry Jennings was the backbone of a lot of stuff that got accomplished in the gay community. My name might have been mentioned here and there as someone, that’s because I was very out, and I was outspoken, and I had a professional position, and therefore my voice had more weight maybe than some other people’s. But I was not good at organizing and I did not really contribute that much. I did my job of being outspoken, and at two points I was particularly outspoken and that is, we had Mary Boenke, who you know from Parents [and Families of Lesbians and Gays], PFLAG, and my friend Allison... you’ve got to interview her. The two of us and Sam Garrison

and Gerry Jennings, I think, went to have a conversation with the mayor, and he was not.... He was not a friend of our community.⁴

45:16

GSR: We can talk about public officials.

45:18

MSR: Oh we can? Okay, he was not a friend of the gay community. And there was, I forget, you know you forget the sequence of things, the issue of amending the city's ordinances so that gay people would not be discriminated in city...

45:42

GSR: Employment.

45:43

MSR: ...employment. That was on the table. We had gotten that on the table. So there was a meeting, I don't know where it was, there was a council, city council candidates were there and it was an open forum to ask them questions. There was like about nine or ten of the active gay people in town who were there. And I say that I wasn't very involved, but sometimes I was the one who had the guts to say something, and I had the big mouth to speak. And so I stood up and I made sure that that was a very open agenda, and that the gay community was very eager to have the support of the city council. And it didn't happen right away, but in time. *[Material removed from transcript at MSR's request.]*

46:54

GSR: I've heard about that forum... I think it was 1990. Does that sound right?

47:00

MSR: There was another time, it might have been at the same forum, when all of a sudden I had a mic put in front of my face. And the guy [who] was interviewing me [had] been told that I would speak up for one of the channels here, and, you know, I said what I had to say. And went home, and my partner at the time and I turned on the TV and there was this interview, and it starts out, "Myer Reed is gay." *[laughter]* Can we just say these things quietly, dear? *[laughter]*

47:48

GSR: On television.

⁴ See Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, "Interview with Gerry Jennings," February 23, 2016, Virginia Room, Roanoke Public Libraries; Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, "Interview with Mary Boenke," October 6, 2016, Virginia Room, Roanoke Public Libraries.

47:49

MSR: Yeah! I wasn't ready for that I thought, "Oh boy!" But it's okay, everyone knew. It was alright for me to do that. It had no repercussions, it really didn't.

48:00

GSR: Did you have tenure, and did that make you feel protected?

48:04

MSR: I did. I did have tenure. I started out as an assistant professor and then I pretty quickly got associate. It wasn't too long before I was a full. And there wasn't a lot of... If there was whispering in the background, I don't think it was allowed to get anywhere.

48:35

GSR: Let me ask you about HIV and AIDS, that was becoming a bigger concern in the [19]80s at that same time. What was Roanoke like? What was the world of that here?

48:50

MSR: Well, I have to take a breath, because as you well know, that was like all of a sudden this very dark cloud descend[ing]. And yes, we heard about the "gay cancer." And we heard about it in San Francisco and New York. But then we heard about it in D.C. And you know, D.C. was a favorite place for gay men who wanted to have a bigger playground to go [to] on the weekends. The Lost and Found was the most popular bar, but then there were the baths. It was a time of great liberation for gay men. And we were feeling our oats, and to have that bastard of a disease come into our party was just... I mean if I had any any thought of resisting doing this interview, it was us getting to that point because it's stepping back into a time. It's just hard for anyone in that time to tell you what that's like, although you probably know something of it. [*Material removed from transcript at MSR's request.*] [*MSR addition to transcript:* All of sudden we had flocks of friends dying.] It was nothing like what the guys in D.C. or San Francisco were experiencing, like everyone they knew was ill, but I was living in Old Southwest. I had moved from the house that I had bought before up in Charlottesville—that's a different story—to coming here, and Old Southwest was like a little gay ghetto. "Yay, we're almost in the big city," you know, "gay neighbors, wow isn't that strange and different and wonderful." This is a liberated zone. So we were concentrated, a lot of folks were concentrated there. And they're just... too much... Can we stop a second, I have a name to mention?

51:33

GSR: Maybe after, we don't want to break it.

51:36

MSR: Okay, I'll tell you the name later. A guy who I still maintain contact with because he's on Facebook—that's where all the old folks are—he could tell you a lot. His partner... oh, he was such a sweet man. And he was active. His name was Curtis. Curtis was one of the first. There were some very popular guys, they were very handsome, who we all either had had sex with or wanted to have sex with at some point, and they were all getting killed. If you, of course... these things became clear very quickly that if you had been in a passive [role], favored being a bottom, the terms we use, you had much greater risk. None of that was coherent, but I hope the emotion is there.

52:55

GSR: It was. No, it was coherent. How do you feel like that the AIDS crisis changed you or changed the community, people's behaviors changed? Or were you involved in any of the local AIDS advocacy stuff?

53:16

MSR: I was asked. I was asked. There was a woman who was a clinical psychologist at the VA [Veterans Administration] System, and the VA System got the first AIDS patients here. They were mostly guys who had been involved in the military and came back. Or they maybe got them because there was a physician at the VA who early on began to specialize, and became really the major spokesperson for the medical community on how to deal with AIDS. And this clinical psychologist was at the VA. She called me one day. And I had developed—I haven't told you how I developed my practice, but anyway I had a counseling practice. She called me and she told me that there was a need to have a support group run, and she would like to have my help in doing that as an out gay man, and she was a straight woman, and so she wanted me to help. And of course the first thought in my body was run away, but what could I do? I had to say "yes, I will." And I don't know how long we ran that, a couple years maybe? A little bit more? For a period of time they met at my house, because there was nowhere else to meet. But then there were a number of the guys who were uncomfortable meeting at my house, and I understand that. So somehow an alternative was developed, and I really don't know what we did at that point. But it had gotten beyond the point where there were like three or four or five or seven guys there, you know, there that the community was having much more of a problem, issue with AIDS.

55:23

GSR: Do you remember if this group had a name, were you called something? Or it was just...?

55:30

MSR: I think the AIDS Support Group. There was nothing formal to it at all.

55:36

GSR: And it was in Old Southwest, in your apartment there, or your house there?

55:39

MSR: No, oh heavens. We're talking about gays in their twenties and thirties at that time, we were changing the world by remodeling every available house. So I had three of them that I remodeled, and I was out on Lake Drive at that point in time. Do you have any idea where that is? Behind Lewis Gale Hospital. One of the first suburbs ever to be developed in Roanoke was out in that direction. And they built these lakes, there are three lakes out there, which were meant to draw people way out into the country like that, so they put these houses around these attractive lakes where they can go rowing in their boats with their children. So I found a house out there, loved it. It was a mid-century modern before that term was being used, and it had been owned by a local TV personality here in the [19]50s called Uncle Looney [*laughter*].

56:50

GSR: Never heard of him.

56:52

MSR: No, no you wouldn't have. Ask someone who was here in the '50s. Everyone knew Uncle Looney. And we found wigs and stuff left behind by Uncle Looney.

57:02

GSR: So that's where you had the AIDS support group?

57:05

MSR: Yeah. Which wasn't convenient for everyone but damn, that's what we had. That's what I could offer. Back to counseling, what happened there is when I started getting more seriously involved in relationships, I realized that I lacked some skills or I needed something, some help. So that was the first time that I went into therapy for myself. And turns out I wound up seeing this man that I'm still in contact with today. He was head of the family therapy program at Virginia Tech, and the family therapy program there was very good. So when I got through doing that, through counseling with him, I decided I'm going to get training in family therapy because it fits very naturally with sociology. And Jim was very welcoming of me, and over a period of four years I went and jumped through all the hoops, took the classes, did this, that, and the other, got the outside training, dah dah dah, to get licensed. At that time there was no family therapy license—there is and has been for the last ten years or so—but it was a licensed professional counselor, which is what you became. So I did that. So that's why I had that practice and that's why that ad was in the paper. But this was always done in addition to never dropping a thing at Radford.

59:00

GSR: I wonder if, did you attract LGBT clients to your practice?

59:05

MSR: That was a large part of it. And there were other counselors who knew that I was gay and so they might refer people to me, but there was those ads and, you know, gossip in the community. And most of the issues you know what people would come for. They came mainly for the relationship with their families and the rejection that they were already experiencing, or fearing rejection if and when they came out. Sometimes it was couples, kind of a marriage therapy thing.

59:42

GSR: Sounds like you might have been the first licensed counselor to be there for LGBT people who needed that here, does that sound right?

59:56

MSR: I think I can say that. There were a couple others that came along and are still here and do great jobs. My mentor in the family therapy program had a gay son, I didn't know it at the time, but he had a gay son. So he had had some familiarity with dealing with gays in his family. That was helpful to have that, but there were people I encountered, not necessarily at Virginia Tech but elsewhere when I kind of got involved in family therapy things, who were really bothered by the idea of someone who was gay being involved in family therapy. "What would you know about families?" Excuse me. Didn't grow up like topsy, you know?

1:01:08

GSR: So we're at about an hour that we've been talking.

1:01:11

MSR: Not hard for me cover in an hour.

1:01:13

GSR: Yeah, and so I was wondering if we can talk about leaving Roanoke, when you left Roanoke, and just what are some of the later stages of your life so far that you've experienced, and how it's shaped your identity as a gay man?

1:01:37

MSR: That's a broad question. Well, the state offered a buy-out, when I was fifty years old. It was a new trend that was beginning across corporations and in state offices, and it was: let's get rid of the more expensive, older—in case of academia, tenured—faculty and let's hire new, all-but-dissertation graduate students. And pay them much less and not worry about tenure. So the state offered the buyout, and that was in October I think it was, and I didn't debate it long, I was really so ready. I was so ready. I had some income from the therapy program practice, not much,

and I had been doing my hobby, in addition to all this stuff, in my free time was antiquing. And I had developed a business in antiques on the side, and I had decent income from that. So I knew that I could make it somehow. And I just was tired of doing what I was doing. I took it, and it was an eventful year. That was in April. I was set up to, about mid-April, to teach my last classes. And about two, three weeks before classes were to end, my father died. And that was a really difficult thing because I'd always had, like any gay man or any gay woman, a difficult time in my relationship with my father. And he was the one... my mother wanted to disown me, she did, and he prevented it. Something I find very curious is, I knew that a primary support for my mother was our pastor out of the little country church that they went to. And my mother was a forceful person, and I know she was bending his ear about her son being queer, and wanting support for all of her hostilities. And, as I learned later, that man, that pastor, within about two years after my father died, came out. He had three daughters, young kids, and he came out. And I had so much anger towards him, because you know, son of a bitch for supporting her in her hatred, but good god he was a country minister, and lo, little did I know. I could look at the man and I could tell you, "Sorry, forgive my prejudices, but you're queer." *[laughter]* But I didn't, I couldn't, but that's what happened. And he's somewhere on the earth and last I heard he had a partner. Well, bless his heart, that's good. And I know you have had your karma, don't worry about it, you've had your karma already.

But anyway, so my father died, and I went down for the funeral, that was in South Hill, you know, La Crosse, and the first night I was there I had a heart attack. The next morning, I had a heart attack. Talk about events. So my sister who was in the habit of calling the rescue squad regularly because for my father, because he had so many ailments towards the end of his life. So she called them [9-1-1], bless her heart. *[Material removed from transcript at MSR's request.]* So there I was *[MSR addition to transcript: at a little local hospital]* and at a crucial moment they gave me a new drug that would break up the blockage, and I made it through that, and the next couple of days they sent me to Richmond for advanced care. I've not had another one, now I've had some cardiac procedures done since then just to keep the thing clean, but that was a hell of a lot happening. And within two weeks, I just coasted out that semester. I went back and maybe I taught a few classes, but I was not fit for anything. So anyway, sorry to end on that note, but that's kind of what happened. And then I realized that, as I was recovering from that, and that took less time than one would think, my partner and I at the time had been going to Phoenix for professional reasons—for my professional reasons, I was going to psychotherapy conferences out there, but we also loved being out in Arizona. So in February, after that April ending of my career, I decided I went back to Phoenix and was enjoying having a good time and thinking. And then I was at a gay bed and breakfast and there was a friend of the owner there, he was realtor. So I made the mistake, opened my big mouth and said, "How's housing cost here?" Well here we go, we were off to the races. You don't ask a question like that to a realtor, so he showed me around town. So I call[ed] my partner then and I said, "I think we can be moving out here and I think I found a house." *[laughter]* I was a tough guy to live with, you would get bombshells like

that. Of course I had no intention of doing it without him, unless he was going to be joining me. But he had his CPA [Certified Public Accountant], and there was some small CPA firm he was working for here. And he was openly gay as well, and he was a little fearful. He was really a bright fellow, and he really needed a bigger pond to swim in professionally. So he was gung ho and it was very unnerving for him. Are we out of time?

1:09:46

GSR: No, it's just the sirens that are apparently really loud.

1:09:52

MSR: That should have happened when I mentioned my heart attack. *[laughter]*

1:09:56

GSR: So that was late [19]90s, right? When you left?

1:09:59

MSR: '97 is when we moved to Phoenix. And I've been there now for 19 years. I think I've done the math. And we like it a lot. It's hell, come July and August, it's hell. And my partner and I—the current partner—my partner then and I split maybe seven years after we got there, hope no one's adding this all up. And I met Bill, and we've been together for 15 years, married for five.

1:10:35

GSR: Is there anything else you want to make sure that we know about Southwest Virginia and gay life?

1:10:41

MSR: Oh, I'll tell you one thing that I've not seen mentioned, maybe someone has, it wasn't earth shattering, but it was a little fine of an attempt to create a more decent life for gays. And that was John and I and another couple, long living in Florida, created something called the Gay Supper Club, it was never very formal, you know. We would run a little ad in the *Blue Ridge Lambda Press* or something like that, I think, I don't recall, but the whole point was we would contract with a restaurant to open up the restaurant just for gay people, and that was an effort to find restaurants that would open up for gay people. I'll tell you, more times than not, it was minority owners—the Brazilians and Chinese and Japanese—that opened their doors. And they were good business people, they could say, "Hey, that's a group we wouldn't mind having spending money here." So anyone, it was both men and women, and anyone who wanted to come. And I think it was a set fee, so that excludes a lot of folks who can't afford that set fee. But it was like, I don't know, a dinner for \$15, and there were buffets. I'm not clear about the prices and everything, but as long as you made a little bit of income you could afford it. And that

went well for a period of time; we didn't have any of them that fizzled out. There would be twenty, thirty, forty or more people. It felt good to do that.

1:12:52

GSR: Was this in the '80s? '90s?

1:12:55

MSR: I'm going to say late '80s/early '90s. And you need to check that fact with some other folks who were involved.

1:13:05

GSR: We can check the *Blue Ridge Lambda Press*.

1:13:09

MSR: We started it, but after a while other people get on board and help, and I just can't remember who that league of people were. But the community got it going which was good.

1:13:27

GSR: Anything else you want to share about this region?

1:13:35

MSR: [*pause*] I'll call you later. [*laughter*]

1:13:37

GSR: Okay.

1:13:39

MSR: I'll have another five hours' worth.

1:13:41

GSR: Really? Well, it was so wonderful to have the opportunity to do this interview with you.

1:13:45

MSR: Okay, thank you very much, I appreciate it.

1:13:47

GSR: Thank you.

[END]