

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

**Interview with Lisa Lamphier
July 17, 2023**

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Interviewee: Lisa Lamphier

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Transcription prepared by Katie Stueckle

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00:02

KS: This is Katie Stueckle interviewing Lisa Lamphier for the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project. We're at the Williamson Road Public Library on July 17, 2023. Lisa, can you tell me about where you grew up?

00:17

LL: I'm from Boston, Massachusetts.

00:22

KS: What was your early childhood like?

00:34

LL: I don't know how to describe it.

00:38

KS: Have any siblings?

00:39

LL: Yeah. I have— had— a sister and two brothers.

00:53

KS: As you were growing up, when do you think you first realized that you were gay?

00:57

LL: Oh, probably around the age of ten. [laughs] Just now I can... I officially came out when I was thirteen. I think that's when a lot of people come out is right around thirteen. That's when they— the other girls— are noticing boys and I'm noticing the girls. I started really struggling with my feelings around the age of twelve. But thirteen I knew it. I was just like, okay, that's who I am.

01:32

KS: Did you come out to yourself? Or did you immediately also come out to other people?

01:37

LL: Well, it's hard to remember. It sort of happened gradually. There were kids at school that were teasing me and calling me a lesbian. And one day I just said, yeah. At which point I met the other kids that were lesbians and started going steady with Frankie. [laughs] And we would kiss in the hallway, just to upset people. And it's funny too, because we all sat... we didn't really talk about being gay, but we all sat at the same lunch table. So I don't know. I mean, we were kids.

02:33

KS: [laughing] Some things never change.

02:34

LL: You don't say nobody takes us seriously. But there was this one boy, Lenny, that, you know, pretty good friends with sat at the lunch table. And years and years later, I ran into him and he was just like, this tall, beautiful gay guy. [laughs]

02:44

KS: When did you end up leaving Boston?

02:52

LL: Well, let me see. I left and came back. I left Boston— I came back to Boston a couple of times. I left home when I was fifteen and I went to New York City. I was essentially kicked out for being gay. So I went to New York City, figured that was the place to go, but I didn't stay there. I ended up going on to Providence, Rhode Island where I lived for about a year, and then I came back up to Boston. And I was back in Boston for about a year, and then I went out to Iowa City. And I went from Iowa City up to San Francisco, back to Iowa City, then to Des Moines, and from... Des Moines back to San Francisco. And then from San Francisco back to Boston. [laughs] And then from Boston to here, and this was the last stop. I was twenty-four. I was fifteen when all that started. I was twenty-four when I moved to Roanoke.

04:15

KS: And you were able to find community, other lesbians in all of those places?

04:21

KS: Yes, yes. Everywhere I went there were huge, tight knit, friendly, lesbian communities, much friendlier than they are now [laughs]— no, seriously, I went to Des Moines and I did not know a soul there. But I decided I wanted to be... I was in Iowa City and I decided I wanted to be in a bigger city so I just packed up and went to Des Moines, did not know one person there. Found the club, walked into the club, a woman came up to me and said “You're new here.” And I said, yeah. She said, let me introduce you around. And I mean, instantly, I had a community, I had friends.

05:11

KS: What brought you to Roanoke?

05:15

LL: Well, the girlfriend I had at the time was from Virginia, she was from Norton, Virginia. And she was kind of wanting to come back here to be closer to her family. But I was the one that was really pushing for the move. I was looking for, you know, get out of Boston, find some other place, I wanted to buy a house and you know, things that I wasn't going to be able to do up there. So we actually came down here and investigated Roanoke a couple years before we moved here. So that would have been... we moved here in '81, so that would have been... late '70s. And we didn't... we weren't here long enough to really find the lesbian community or anything. But we did things like, [laughs] I went to the YWCA of all places and asked them “where are the lesbians” and they said, “Oh, well there's these couple clubs down here.” And I'm like, oh, okay,

and I checked- we checked- Gay guide you know, back then there were lots of periodicals and stuff that kind of networked people together, so we knew it would be okay here.

06:44

KS: Do you remember what those clubs were that they directed you to?

06:47

LL: No. By the time we came down here The Park was booming.

06:51

KS: And you-

06:52

LL: I think The Last Straw... I think they said The Last Straw and another one. But I don't remember anymore.

07:03

KS: And when you arrived here, like, permanently in '81, where did you go looking for community and lesbians?

07:14

LL: The Park, yeah, we went to The Park. We weren't there a lot because we were in a little monogamous couple and she didn't want us to have friends 'cause friends make you break up [laughs] but whenever like, we would have visitors come- we had friends that would come visit us and we'd all go to The Park as a group. But it wasn't really till we split up that, you know, we started really connecting with other... with community. So we started going to The Park and going to First Friday and meeting other people.

07:57

KS: Where do you think most of your community really came from? Like where do you feel like you met the most friends?

08:14

LL: The Park.

08:19

KS: And do you have any particular stories from those, those friends from the club that you remember?

08:32

LL: Well... I feel funny telling these stories. [pause] There used to be an older crowd or women that hung out at Backstreet, I remember that. And I went in there one day and got a cup of coffee. I didn't drink, I quit drinking when I was twenty, had been in the club since I was fifteen, I needed to quit drinking. [laughing] So I'm sitting at the bar with my little cup of coffee and Big Anne was hanging out with this group of older women. She was younger than them, she was... late thirties, I believe. And this was summer of '83. Anyway, she came over and started talking, at some point she said, so you got a butch? And I said no. And she said, you do now. And I was like, thinking okay... but she wasn't really the one I wanted, but she claimed me. So she went around and 'you don't touch, that one's mine'. Yeah, that's what dating looked like forty years ago. [laughs]

10:06

KS: Do you feel like that was a lot of your dating experience?

10:09

LL: Yeah, pretty much, pretty much she just, you know, ran off- ran off the other- and you gotta you gotta kind of picture this: I was in my twenties, I was drop dead gorgeous, you know, I'd go into the club and all the heads would turn and, you know, I don't miss that. But because you know, it attracted... it was not a nice thing to say, but it attracted all the assholes. You know, the ones that wanted the pretty girl. And I loved Big Anne, I did. I loved her. I miss her a lot. She died fifteen years ago. But yeah, we practically- and she was the bouncer at The Park. [laughs] I forgot that part. She was the bouncer at The Park. She was a really good bouncer because she was crazy. Some guy pulled a gun and she said you better hope that thing made- is made of chocolate because I'm gonna make you eat it. [laughs] But yeah, back then in '83 I practically lived at the club there all the time, I loved to dance. And a couple of years later, I got with Nancy. I met her at the club. She was a one night stand that got out of hand. I was living in my own place, and really not wanting to get into another relationship.

11:57

LL: But I had brought Nancy home. I had done that a couple of times before. And she'd always got up and left. And this time she was like, so wanna go to K&W flea market? [laughs] And the next thing I knew, you know, we're buying a house and, and she was a bit of a social bunny. And we were, let's see, we were together for six years. We were socializing, I counted at one time, we were socializing with fifteen other couples and an assortment of singles. And nobody stayed single very long. And it was you know, the couples all didn't necessarily know each other. But I mean, we knew a lot of people. I look back now and I just think, wow.

13:06

KS: Do you feel like that group of people congregated at your place? Were there other places that you spent a lot of time with that group?

13:14

LL: Yeah, I mean, we kind of went to each other's homes. It's kind of like what couples did, you know, couples that socialized with couples... we'd have cookouts and Superbowl parties and what have you and like... some of the couples we met at the club, some of them we just met through other people or Nancy met them at work, some of them we met at First Friday and... I dunno, I don't know what else to say about that.

14:01

KS: Your wedding at The Park. Do you want to talk about that?

14:11

LL: Oh! Okay, yeah, Big Anne and I got married, we had like a wedding and a... we had an Episcopal priest at the wedding, that married us, and Dale let us use the bar like, before hours and we had this beautiful wedding. And... that marriage didn't last very long. I had to leave.

14:58

KS: Was that the- the ceremony itself, was it in like, the bar or the basement of the bar?

15:05

LL: No, it was in the bar.

15:10

KS: What year?

15:16

LL: '84. Or it might have been '83. No, it was '84. Yeah. I can't remember the exact date anymore, but it's '84.

15:30

KS: And then, I mean, also in the 80s, First Friday was active, and you've- you did some things with them. About how frequently do you feel like you went to those events?

15:41

LL: Well, they had like a once a month thing. And I usually went- not always, but usually. I went to the retreat every year.

15:54

KS: Are there any particular stories that you would like to share from those events?

16:07

LL: I can't think of anything.

16:14

KS: All right. And then... First Friday, stopped at the end of the '80s-ish. Do you remember what that was like? The end- the end of that organization?

16:33

LL: No, not really, because it seemed like it'd just kind of fizzled out. I was disappointed when they stopped having the retreat. And when there was no more newsletter. [pause] But my life had completely changed by then. So I wasn't really that involved in First Friday anymore.

17:06

KS: When you say your life had completely changed, what do you mean by that?

17:09

LL: Nancy and I split up. And I went and bought my own house, and where I'm still living for the past- it's been the past 31 years. And, you know, once I was like, no longer part of this couple, I wasn't really part of that whole social scene neither. So you know, it was kind of starting over from scratch.

17:41

KS: In starting over, how did you find new people?

17:47

LL: Same way I found before, going to the club.

17:49

KS: Back to the club?

17:51

LL: Yeah.

17:52

KS: And you were able to find more community? New people?

17:55

LL: Yeah. Yeah. And there were always new people, you know, people that had just moved here or had just come out. The first woman I dated after Nancy was in the process of divorcing her husband. And they were like best friends. You know, I'd be hanging out at her house. And when

he got off work, he'd come over and sit and we'd- the three of us would be sitting there watching the news together and then he'd finally say, "well, I guess I'd better get home, I'll see you later." And he'd go home to his girlfriend, [laughs] you know, and she'd say, yeah, yeah... she said, "we were married for years, but really, he's just my best friend." So that was Lydia. [pause] So yeah, but I never- it was never like it was before. Because after that, I didn't really get into another established couple. Not for... ten years.

19:19

KS: Were there any other organized groups that you were a part of in that time?

19:24

LL: Let me think... no... no, not really.

19:39

KS: And kind of in- in those decades, 80s, 90s, do you feel like your community circle included, like gay men? Or were you fairly set with a group of lesbians the whole time?

19:57

LL: Mostly lesbians. I have had a few gay male friends here and there that, you know, never anything real close or- I recently, I had a gay male friend, recently this past few years, because we worked together, but he just passed away last year, so I don't have him anymore.

20:32

KS: In your perception, how do you feel like the gay man and lesbian communities in Roanoke interacted over the years?

20:42

LL: I don't know. I mean, I think it kind of depends on- on the people, but you know, I've always seen that there seems to be, there seemed to be, you know, a lot of interaction between- at least friendliness between- gay men and lesbians.

21:09

KS: And then, in the last 20 or so years, what's it been like dating, finding community, being gay in Roanoke?

21:22

LL: I don't know because I'm not a real social person, myself. I aged out of the club. I mean, I stopped going when I was... before I was forty. And like, I'm sixty-six now. I'm trying to remember... I think, my ex wife and I, when we got married, we went to The Park once. And

from what I understand The Park isn't what it used to be. It's not... honestly don't understand how lesbians socialize now, like where do y'all meet? How do you meet up?

22:07

KS: What has your community, like— where have you been finding people in the last couple years?

22:18

LL: I haven't. There are the people that I've been in my life forever. I mean, I've got Theresa that I've known for close to fifty years now. I've got Anna that I've known for 35 years. I've known Donna for 25 years. And then Teresa's wife, Allison's been on the scene for 30 years. And... there's my ex wife, who I've known for... I guess, ten years... and that's it. It's just... but I used to have a lot more friends but you know, they die. Nancy died last year. Big Anne's long gone. Lydia died. And then, you know, there's been a few that I've just kind of lost touch with. I used to have a whole lot more friends.

23:34

KS: What do you think the future of gay community looks like in Roanoke? Whether for you or for the younger generation?

23:42

LL: I have no idea. [laughter] I don't really understand how it's done now. I mean, everything is online. It's like I'm dating online now. And I've done that before, I met two of my girlfriends online. But that was like twenty years ago. And there's good things about that and there's bad things. The good thing is that you have privacy, because, like, Big Anne couldn't have claimed me [laughs] if I had met her on a dating site. You know, she wouldn't be able to interact with the other people and run the other women off. Like dating sites, you have private conversations with people. When you met people at The Park, it was like you were in a fishbowl. No privacy, and everybody's talking and everybody knows what everybody is doing. [laughs] So you know, it's not all bad, it's like there's good and there's bad in that. But I don't really understand how it works now, like how younger lesbians, how they connect, how they— or do they even need to? I mean?

25:05

KS: We can talk about that later. [laughs] And are there any things that you feel like I haven't asked you about that you're interested in talking about?

25:20

LL: Let me think... not really. You know, I feel like I ought to be able to contribute more to this but— I don't know, I can tell you about my marriage.

25:41

KS: If you would like to.

25:43

LL: Judy and I were the first, the first same sex couple to get a marriage license in Roanoke.

25: 50

KS: Really!

25:51

LL: We were on the six o'clock news. And if you Google my name, you can find a video of us being interviewed. [laughter]

26:01

KS: Oh, famous?

26:03

LL: Yes, yes, that's what I've— and I was really shocked because every other- every other place. People were like, lined up at the courthouse, and they were celebrating and it was like this big deal. We got to the courthouse, and we just sat there in the car waiting for anybody else to arrive. We were the only ones. And I said, “well, I guess everybody got married in another state.” [laughter] Well, we were getting ready to get married in another state. I mean, we were making the travel arrangements and everything. And suddenly, it was announced that it was legal here and we're like, oh, I don't have to go to Maryland. I can just go downtown! So that's what we did.

26:53

KS: And you were on the six o'clock news for it... first same sex marriage license in Roanoke.

26:58

LL: Yes. And I felt funny about that. Because I felt like— I mean, we had been dating for a year. And here they were interviewing us and I'm thinking this shouldn't be us. This should be like one of these long-term couples, like a couple that's been together for forty years, and they're finally able to get that marriage license.

27:21

KS: How long had you two been together at that point?

27:24

LL: We'd been in— for a year. I mean, we'd been dating for a year. And you know, we, we've been engaged. And I mean, she started asking me like two months in to marry her and I was like, no, I don't even know you. And then like, time would go by and she'd ask me again, and I'd go, no! I think finally she said, “when are you going to marry me?” And I said, okay, I'll marry you. So, yeah, but we had originally planned to go out of town and get married somewhere else where it was legal ‘cause it wasn't legal here. We figured, well, eventually, the ball would roll in this direction and then we'd already be married and I think that's what a lot of women did. They just went somewhere else and got married. But to this day, I don't really understand why we were the only couple at the courthouse and then I thought, well, maybe the others will arrive later. I found out later that there were only like three other couples that day.

28:39

KS: The other same sex couples, or in general?

28:40

LL: Same sex. I mean, yeah, there were only like three other same sex couples that showed up that day.

28:59

KS: Well, I'll ask again. Is there anything else that I haven't asked about?

29:16

LL: No, I don't guess so. I lived here for forty-some years and I still feel like I'm not really from here. So I don't know anything about this place. [laughs]. But, you know, I came out in the '70s. And, wow, that was a time to be a lesbian. I was dating this woman who actually came out in the 1950s. And she was living in rural North Carolina in the 1970s. She was actually passing as a man. She had took her girlfriend and— supposedly she was going to be losing her children for being gay. So she took her girlfriend and all the kids and moved to rural South Carolina, where she passed as a man and everybody just thought they were family. And she got a job managing a gas station. She managed to meet other lesbians in rural North Carolina, because she subscribed to a newsletter. There were hundreds of them back then. And I asked her which one it was, and she couldn't remember. And I'm thinking, well it might have been the Ladder or the Well or you know, one of those. I don't know, ‘cause she couldn't remember. But, she said that she got a visit from the FBI because she was on that mailing list [laughs].

31:07

LL: But that's what I'm saying about the 1970s, it was just all of the— it was— I think it was like this lesbian explosion. I'm sure it had been building up, you know, I'm sure this started right after World War II. But the '70s is when like, the whole club scene and the social networks were

so strong and so explosive, I mean, like I said, as a teenager I could go anywhere and meet other lesbians instantly. I miss the '70s. [laughs]

31:51

KS: What do you think changed that?

31:57

LL: I don't know. I think that, social acceptance, it's like... I think that's part of it, but I also just think that's where the world was then. We had— a lot of things were exploding, you know, like civil rights and you know, people were getting— feminism— you know, people were becoming conscious about things and people were like, networking and we didn't have the internet yet [laughs] so we were actually out there talking to each other, you know, instead of doing this [laughs].

32:43

KS: Fair enough.

32:46

LL: Yeah, I mean, you know like every time you turned around there were like, gatherings for this, that, or the other.

32:57

KS: Yeah, the internet has definitely changed the way a lot of people communicate.

33:05

LL: I think there's a whole lot less real-life socializing. You know, 'cause like, when I went to Des Moines I found like, this instant lesbian community but I also found other things there, like a food co-op where people were, you know, meeting up and exploring vegetarian cooking and, you know, this kind of... It's like, you know, I just don't see a lot of... connection anymore.

33:53

KS: Yeah... I think you're probably right. [laughs] Well, I'm basically out of questions so...

34:01

LL: Okay.

34:02

KS: It's been lovely interviewing you [laughs]... thank you so much for your time, and I'm going to turn this off now.