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N.4: Undergraduate Internship Program: Spring 2014

Interview N-0027

Gary Carden

28 February 2014

Abstract – p. 2

Field Notes – p. 3

Tape Log – p. 4

ABSTRACT – GARY CARDEN

Gary Carden was born in Burlington, North Carolina in 1948. Carden entered barber school in Columbia, South Carolina and later finished his apprenticeship in Burlington. Carden had been introduced to gay social life in Greensboro and Highpoint at the early age of 13 and was an important member of the gay bar scene in Chapel Hill. After moving to Chapel Hill permanently in 1970, Carden started cutting hair with his business “Style Unlimited,” and has been a prominent stylist in the Triangle for decades despite a car accident which left him unable to work for multiple years. He describes the transformation of the Chapel Hill gay bar scene as well as his own influence. Carden describes his experience with The Electric Company bar and turning it gay. Carden then mentions his friend Jim McIntyre and his international battle against AIDS. This interview is part of the Southern Oral History Program’s project to document gay activism on and around UNC’s campus in the time of the sexual revolution.

FIELD NOTES – GARY CARDEN
(compiled February 28, 2014)

Interviewee: Gary Carden

Interviewer: Aaron Hayworth

Interview Date: February 28, 2014

Location: Conference Room of the Love House, UNC-Chapel Hill, NC

THE INTERVIEWEE. Gary Carden is a professional stylist and longtime resident of Chapel Hill, NC. After attending barber school in Columbia, SC and an apprenticeship in his hometown of Burlington, NC, Carden moved to Chapel Hill in 1970. Carden has been noted in local newspapers as the “guru of style” and has served many high profile clients, including the mayor, during his time in Chapel Hill. Carden worked to transform The Electric Company to a gay bar and has been an influential person in the Chapel Hill gay community for decades.

THE INTERVIEWER. Aaron Hayworth is an undergraduate student majoring in Southern Studies at UNC-Chapel Hill and an intern with the Southern Oral History Program.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview was conducted in the evening in the conference room of the Love House on Franklin St. There is one interruption in the recording for bathroom break and for Gary to add some whiskey to the 7up he brought with him. There is little background noise in the recording. The interview is taking place after having been rescheduled three times by the interviewee and following several long phone conversations there is a familiarity between the interviewer and interviewee. Gary Carden addressed each of the topics intended by the interviewer and was open to talking about many intimate issues, although he was reserved when giving names of his acquaintances.

NOTE ON RECORDING. Recorded using SOHP Zoom #2. The recorder was stopped instead of paused during the break and therefore the two files were edited together using Audacity.

TAPE LOG - GARY CARDEN

Interviewee: Gary Carden
Interviewer: Aaron Hayworth
Interview Date: February 28, 2014
Location: Conference room of the Love House, UNC-Chapel Hill, NC

Comments: Only text in quotation marks is verbatim; all other text is paraphrased, including the interviewer's questions.

TAPE INDEX

| <u>Time</u> | <u>Topic</u> |
|-------------|--|
| | [Digital Recording, Starts at Beginning] |
| 0:01 | Introduction: "This is Aaron Hayworth interviewing Gary Carden for the SOHP..." Interview to focus on Gary's life and his contribution and experience with gay life in Chapel Hill. |
| 0:27 | Explaining background and being from Burlington and Burlington compared to Chapel Hill with regards to style. |
| 2:04 | Discussion of family life and his father's life as an evangelical preacher and alcoholic. "To do his ministry...he and a couple of other guys... would have a couple shots of whiskey" |
| 5:57 | Mother did full fashion hosiery and put socks together. Mills in Burlington were well kept and women were all well dressed in the work place. |
| 7:10 | Asking about coming out. "We weren't into 'out o-u-t' at that time." Discusses being gay and the secrecy of it during that time. |
| 8:08 | Sister married at a young age and moved to High Point. He went to visit her. |
| 8:38 | Visited with neighbor of sister and stayed up having drinks with him. Neighbor asked him if he was gay and invited him into gay party life and exposed him to a different way of living. "Opened up a new way of thinking for me." |
| 11:14 | Had his first martini at the gay party and helped "Stan" get into drag, which was the first exposure to cosmetology and drag. |
| 12:20 | Went with "Red," VP of Chase Manhattan Bank, to the black nightclub in Greensboro when he was 13. Saw Ike and Tina Turner. Was treated as a VIP because of being with an important person. |
| 13:50 | Came to Chapel Hill the first time for the Tempo Room and the experience of a straight bar going gay at a certain time. Pete Galifianakis poured ammonia on the floor to make the gay customers leave at a certain time. |
| 15:45 | Talks about moving to Chapel Hill in 1970 after his journey to barber school in Columbia, SC and Burlington, NC. Apprenticeship in Burlington, where he was run out of the business because he was taking all of the customers with the new shag/layer haircutting style. |
| 17:58 | Decided to "get the hell out of Burlington" and set up at Carolina Barber Shop where he had a work space. Reflects on the nature of hair cutting at that time because of the trend of long hair in the late 60s and early 70s and how his style helped revitalize the hair styling scene in Chapel Hill. |
| 20:00 | Newspaper did a story on Gary and business became wildly successful and he remained at that location on Franklin St. around 20 years. |

- 20:45 Sister became a hair stylist before he did and Gary was inspired to do things his own way. The nature of hair salons becoming unisex and the innovation that provided to the style community. Grooming became a higher form of work and the cost of the industry raised at the same time.
- 22:23 Style and design is a form of “osmosis” because it involves creating new ideas out of inspiration and tradition. Chapel Hill was a liberal place at that time.
- 24:00 First gay bar Gary ever went to was the General Green in Greensboro. Once while he was with the gay son of a top klansmen, the KKK was marching down Elm St. and they were forced to sneak out the back door. Jokes about the KKK being gay men wearing sheets for drag and speaks about his thoughts on J. Edgar Hoover persecuting gay men.
- 25:54 Dealt with business as a usual person and felt that there was no prejudice shown against him in dealing with business people. Expresses that people didn’t think as deeply about their gay identity at that time, but more on style and that gay people and businesses were spread by quiet word of mouth. “Nobody was going to be that gay during the daytime”
- 29:05 Politics and activism- “I probably did more for the gay community in NC than anybody has ever done...and I’ll tell you why in a minute.” Asks to turn off recorder for break.
- 29:50 Changing the economy and the significance of the style industry.
- 31:00 Talks about changing the Electric Company to being a gay bar to save it from going bankrupt.2500 people showed up on opening day.
- 33:55 Discusses the gay bar scene in Chapel Hill and the decline of the bars. Speaks on renting in New York to escape the Chapel Hill scene.
- 35:00 Separating from the owners of the Electric Company and its decline. Gay bars run out of business in Chapel Hill.
- 37:50 Memories of the Tempo Room burning down and it being replaced with The Temporary. Influence over the gay scene in North Carolina.
- 39:53 Remembers going to the Stonewall in New York before it was raided. Gay life in Chapel Hill was not separated between students and permanent residents.
- 43:00 Naming the business hair unlimited. As many professional people and students coming to the business. Cutting Duke basketball team’s hair.
- 44:13 Not doing many black people’s hair because of not knowing the intricacies of the style.
- 45:49 Cut UNC gay football player’s hair, Joseph Maddox, who was one of the few black people he cut hair for.
- 47:20 Relationships with UNC and Duke students. Story of helping Duke friend’s roommate find gay life. Jim McIntyre and introducing him to being gay socially.
- 51:30 Jim McIntyre founding the Durham Arts Council and eventually going to Carnegie Hall to fund raise.
- 54:10 McIntyre finding out he had HIV and moving to the Big Apple Circus.
- 55:32 Gary speaks about moving to San Fransisco and his car accident on the Golden Gate bridge.
- 58:02 [cont.] Details of the car accident and journey to recover.
- 1:01:45 Recovered over years and slowly transitioned back into work.
- 1:03:00 Still working in the salon and industry.

1:03:49 Closing remarks and leaving behind the message that the younger gay generation needs to know the history of how things came to be. "They don't know a fucking thing about it."
1:07:32 [End of interview]