

This interview is part of the **Southern Oral History Program** collection at the **University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**. Other interviews from this collection are available online through www.sohp.org and in the **Southern Historical Collection** at **Wilson Library**.

N.3: Undergraduate Internship Program: Fall 2013

Interview N-0023

Stuart Wells

29 September 2013

Abstract – p. 2

Tape Log – p. 3

ABSTRACT – STUART WELLS

Stuart Wells discusses growing up in Greenville, North Carolina and becoming interested in journalism at a young age, in part because of his sexuality. After coming to UNC in the 1970s, he recalls finally feeling that he could be himself. He recounts suffering a mental breakdown his freshman year after coming out to his parents and discusses feeling enormously comforted after joining a Carolina Gay Association consciousness-awareness group that met in the Lutheran Church. Wells discusses the ways in which his sexuality affected his journalism career in small North Carolina towns like Spring Hope after graduating from UNC and, similarly, describes the publication process of Lambda, the Carolina Gay Association's newsletter, including their use of pseudonyms for gay students at UNC. He recalls the support of gay students by religious groups in the 1970s, in particular the Newman Catholic Student Center. Wells also discusses the stereotypes of gay men and mainstream media coverage of gay life during the 1970s. Describing UNC as a welcoming environment, he also discusses town council ordinances against being gay in rural versus metropolitan areas and its similarities to the civil rights movement. Wells also relates the changes in goals since the 1970s--to a focus on more concrete and political goals rather than consciousness awareness--and his optimism for gay rights in the year 2013.

TAPE LOG – STUART WELLS

Interviewee:	Stuart Wells
Interviewer:	Grace Tatter
Interview Date:	Sept. 29, 2013
Location:	Mr. Wells' Home

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

TAPE INDEX

Time Topic

[Digital Recording, Starts at Beginning]

0:01 Introduction: "This Grace Tatter interviewing Stuart Wells, September 29, 2013, in his home. And we're going to be talking about LAMBDA and UNC in the late 1970s."

0:25 Wells was born and raised in Eastern North Carolina, in Greenville. Had a "very conventional childhood." Two older brothers who were a "great influence, particularly in making learning fun." Was a Cub Scout, Webelo. Lost interest when he "became more conscious of the fact that I was not quite the typical heterosexual boy, and my interests started to change"

1:43 Became interested in journalism in the sixth grade. Being an outsider makes the perfect journalist. "Although I could easily fit in and pass as straight," fended many questions from relatives of who he was dating. Because two brothers "met conventional expectations of his parents" he wasn't as pressured. A girl friend asked him to prom but didn't want to lead her on, so didn't go. Threw himself into the school paper.

3:36 Had always worked in journalism, and they needed someone to work on LAMBDA. “I did feel a little funny working for something that was more an activist-oriented newsletter.” Wrote more conventional types of articles, worked on stories at the J-School — essential information, both sides (“if there were two sides”)

4:55 Went to Carolina Gay Association meetings but didn’t volunteer for LAMBDA til junior year. Worked at UNC-TV for work-study

6:40 Would go to Howell Hall (Carroll?) and find a free typewriter to type LAMBDA. Didn’t even know how type. “I was hunting and pecking. So it’s a wonder that I was able to get something out as often as I did.” Did most of the typing, had help stuffing envelopes.

7:51 UNC in the 1970s: “It was just expected that you would get involved, take a stand.” Black Student organization active, most people in a variety of organizations. CGA had support from a variety of professors. More involved with publicity, and didn’t do as much organizing. Arrived in fall of ‘75 to Morrison. Lived in Alexander sophomore year.

9:49 “My first year [at UNC], I felt like it was really where I should be.” Distance from parents, “so I could be myself. Within just a few weeks of arriving there was a party, the Carolina Gay Assoc had just formed the year before that — and they had a dance in the basement of Craige dorm, which was right across from Morrison, so it was even convenient.” Found out about the dance probably through the Daily Tar Heel and maybe a flyer. Maybe saw something in the Student Union.

11:26 Went to dance by himself because his roommate was a conservative kind of guy from Black Mountain, NC. “I don’t remember a lot of hesitation.” But didn’t share where he was going.

12:23 Freshman year is all wrapped up in telling his parents he was gay. Sent a letter and then mother called and was concerned, called classes even to get in touch with him during the day. Finally talked to her from the dorm room. Had already told oldest brother. “All of this was happening. At the same time, I’m taking a full load, and the classes were a struggle...I guess I sort of had a nervous breakdown.” Had to leave UNC in late November and didn’t get credit for some of the classes from his first semester. “And then I gradually made my way back into it. That was a stumble.”

13:59 Joined a CGA consciousness-raising group, and that was “so helpful.” It met weekly in the Lutheran student center. “That was critical to feeling good about myself.” Made him feel confident enough to step out and write for LAMBDA. “At that point maybe I thought I would

be getting a job outside of North Carolina, I don't know" — used his real name, and it didn't catch up with him until four years post-UNC, when he was working in Spring Hope, NC.

16:53 Sexuality never really came up other than in Spring Hope. "If they ever knew, or remembered I was involved in LAMBDA, no one ever brought it up or used it against me later. I don't know if they could've used it against me [...] we were already farther along at that point. I'm surprised on that point, we were pretty far along even in the 1970s. We were supported by churches [...] of course, it was Chapel Hill."

18: 27 Hadn't remembered how few people used their names. Grad students felt more safe using their names.

19:29 Once went down to Wilmington with the CGA because Anita Bryant was speaking. Several carloads went down and protested the speaker. Covered by papers. "I was sort of relieved that I wasn't in a photograph that went around the state." Local people began chasing a group of protestors and every scrambled as quickly as possible. "I sort of thought to myself, 'wow, we're not in Chapel Hill, for sure. [...] I knew it was a topic best not broached after I started working. But during this time I guess it was sort of what college was about, it gives you permission. AND I guess I really took that to heart. It was like, OK, I can be whoever I want to be [...] Maybe if I had thought about it would not have used my name. Couldn't put it on his resumé, even though he did a publication and a radio show for CGA. "But that was a lot of fun" - talking specifically about radio show.

21:54 Expresses remorse that it wasn't a better newsletter, but was limited by time.

22:14 Pulled from other publications, mostly gay publications -- city gay papers from San Francisco. Undergraduate Library got copies of Christopher Street, a New Yorker-style gay publication. RFD published in mountains of North Carolina. Would give more space to calendar items..

23: 47 Maybe there were even more events for gay people in North Carolina in the 70s because people really needed to make connections. Conference was about feeling that you weren't alone; important for people from rural areas to come and connect to 600 other gay people. Politics almost seemed like a sidenote.

24:38 Fewer women — "just a handful." Connected with a number of the women — Karen [...]. Still sees some folks who stayed in the Triangle. Went to pride march yesterday in Durham, but own journalist sensibilities meant that as long as he was a journalist he wasn't that much of an activist. Even the conferences he would attend, but felt more like an observer or participant.

26:28 Issues of CGA were more about funding than discrimination. “I think it was fairly smooth sailing...I think there was a lot of behind-the-scenes support from administrators and faculty.” Remembers history professor giving a speech to a big seminar class saying that college was a time to explore things that you wouldn’t otherwise be able to; specifically mentioned being gay. “My own internal fear that I wouldn’t tell journalism professors that I was working on this because I couldn’t read them [...] After my name was on it they may not have seen it because we mostly distributed to members.”

28:43 Didn’t have sense that he was groundbreaking with the publication (was first of its kind in the nation). Sense that the conference was groundbreaking, at least for the South.

29:40 Would send Lambda to other publications for free, prisoners. Didn’t ever respond directly to prisoners, but organization leadership responded in different ways.

33:18 Had a lot more ideas for stories than actually were written. ‘But I don’t think I had all that much time...I know I always felt like I was struggling to do as much as I did.’

34:14 Edited (“I don’t know if we would even call it editing”) and would throw it all together. Never got that many submissions. “So that gave me a lot of freedom. I could fill it up with whatever I wanted to.” Time was the only constraint.

36:40 Discusses comfort of CGA meeting in churches and having support of churches. He says you felt support at the Newman Center the strongest.

39:00 “My love of journalism overcame worries about the repercussions that might be involved. And also, just the fact that this was my community, whether it was the people I met in my consciousness raising group, or the people I met in the CGA, and so that was my support network and they made me feel comfortable. And maybe we thought, he, maybe change would come faster than it. We really thought change was just around the corner”

39:45 Talks about progress of gay life — once culture changed and people were able to come out to parents, progress expedited. Says progress became visible more in the 1990s.

41:08 Optimism about the year 2013“This year it kind of feels like, it’s over it happened. The battle — even Republicans now...”

43:57 Activism in the 1970s was more about consciousness raising than concrete political goals — “for ourselves, too.” Coming from backgrounds where we had our own stereotypes as gay people about who gay people are. Marriage wasn’t on radar at all.

44:58 First thing was to avoid discrimination in hiring. Town Council put anti-discrimination policies in place; Wells is impressed with how many businesses were on board in Chapel Hill in the early 80s.

46:20 Discussion of stereotypes of gay men in the 1970s. Sissy for men; butch for women. Stereotype that a lot of gay men were pedophiles

47:44 HIs own stereotypes were that gay men had a noticeable accent; that gay men might even wear make-up, dressed in a colorful way. "Some of that's true, that's the only way people knew you were gay. I didn't know it at the time, or I would have tried to pick up on it," but apparently wearing a red tie was a signal at one time.

49:22 Has always noticed lots of gay journalists — Anderson Cooper. Again says that if you feel like you're an outcast, journalism is always a way to stand at a distance. "Socially, I didn't connect that well even with the other gay people."

52:08 Solidarity between minorities. Blacks, Jews, gay people. "You invest yourself in trailblazers."

53:35 Gay issues covered by mainstream media because issues were titillating, but it was exciting for gay people; that you could be interviewed on camera as opposed to being interviewed behind a planter, like in a 1968 documentary by Mike Wallace. Saw coverage and thought, "fantastic, these are my folks!"

57:20 Few black people in CGA. Everyone was drawing upon lessons of civil rights though, in how to get publicity, work at the local level first, etc. But in terms of building coalitions, Wells is unsure they were that far along.

1:00:01 Knows grad students had faculty supports but doesn't recall specific names

1:00:25 Grad students were leaders of CGA; they felt more safe, being in academia, or knew what they were going into -- counseling with a specialization in human sexuality, so they felt safe by being academically oriented.

1:04:23 Distribution of Lambda, sent it out in a plain envelope because it was going to some people who weren't open. Reiterates that he only has good feelings about the journalism school; thinks he could have come out and would have been supported by his professors. Resources of the J-School made Lambda possible. Briefly mentions the Rap group and that was really great.

Also mentions that he would participate in panels on human sexuality, either at Medical School or School of Social Work. People would ask how hard it was to be gay, and Wells was very open about the struggle and his nervous breakdown, that was tied to telling his parents. Instead of hitting the ground running and learning and doing your classes your preoccupied with coming out to your parents and for the first time you're able to -- it was like I had been in a convent or something." Had never had any intimate contact until he came to Chapel Hill.