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#### **N.4: Undergraduate Internship Program: Spring 2014**

Interview N-0030

Henry Phelps Gates, Jr.

20 March 2014

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## ABSTRACT – HENRY PHELPS GATES

Dr. Phelps Gates was born in 1940 in Los Angeles, California, but moved to Boston at a young age. After attending boarding school in New Hampshire, Dr. Gates attended Harvard University and later pursued graduate work in classics at Princeton University, where he was awarded a full scholarship for linguistics. After earning his Ph.D., Dr. Gates taught in the classics department at the University of California at Davis before joining the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1971. While a professor at UNC, Dr. Gates met his future wife, a UNC graduate student. Dr. Gates and his wife, a bisexual woman, were divorced after a short period of marriage. As a young man, Dr. Gates revealed that he was gay to his mother, but never told his father, as he believed his father would have been uneasy with the idea. Also while at UNC, Dr. Gates began attending the gay Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, advertised locally as Lambda AA meetings. Dr. Gates became an alcoholic while in graduate school, and attributes his alcoholism to stress about finishing his dissertation rather than conflict over his sexuality. Dr. Gates details how the first meetings were held in an apartment over a butcher shop in Carrboro and how the meetings moved to the Newman Center. According to Dr. Gates, the gay AA meetings were welcomed by the Newman Center's priests, many of whom were also gay. In other parts of the interview, Dr. Gates reveals meeting places on campus and near Chapel Hill where he could find gay partners. He also compares and contrasts the different gay communities of Chapel Hill, New York, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. Additionally, Dr. Gates discusses his fears and experiences with the AIDs epidemic in the 1980s and his relationship with colorful gay activist Faygele Ben-Miriam. Finally, Dr. Gates reflects on the gay community of Chapel Hill today, his own interaction (or lack thereof) with it, and his political stance on issues such as gay marriage and homosexuality in the military. This interview is part of the Southern Oral History Program's research into gay and lesbian activism on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the 1970s and 1980s.

FIELD NOTES – HENRY PHELPS GATES  
(compiled March 25, 2014)

Interviewee: DR. PHELPS GATES  
Interviewer: Katie Crook  
Interview Date: March 20, 2014  
Location: Dr. Gates' home, Chapel Hill, North Carolina

THE INTERVIEWEE. Dr. Phelps Gates is a retired classics professor from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He completed his undergraduate work at Harvard and graduate work at Princeton, before taking a teaching position at the University of California at Davis. Dr. Gates began teaching at UNC in 1971, but left in 1979 to pursue a computer programming career with a Maryland-based company. Despite being a gay man, Dr. Gates was briefly married to his wife Prudence in the early 1970s. During his time in Chapel Hill, Dr. Gates attended gay Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, which met in the campus' Catholic Newman Center. At these meetings, Dr. Gates found a gay community with which he was comfortable. During the interview, Dr. Gates reflects on many aspects of Chapel Hill's gay community, including places to meet gay partners and the AIDs epidemic. Dr. Gates is now retired but still very active. He is an avid hiker, having hiked the Appalachian Trail, and he takes five mile walks each day. In addition, Dr. Gates both completes and creates acrostic puzzles in his spare time. Dr. Gates lives with his partner Ian, with whom he has been since 2001.

THE INTERVIEWER. Katie Crook is an undergraduate junior history and political science double major at UNC. She hopes to write an honors thesis in history next year and attend graduate school for a doctorate in history. Katie is an undergraduate intern for the Southern Oral History Program.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview was conducted in the home of Dr. Phelps Gates in Chapel Hill, at his kitchen table surrounded by hundreds of volumes of books on numerous bookshelves. Dr. Gates was a very willing interviewee, though he perhaps seemed nervous in the beginning. There were few interruptions during the interview. Toward the end of the interview, Dr. Gates' partner Ian responds to several questions directed to him by Dr. Gates. This is noted in the tape log. Also toward the end of the interview, Dr. Gates leaves the table to bring back an example of an acrostic puzzle. A faint swishing sound can be heard throughout the interview, as this is Dr. Gates fingers nervously brushing the table.

NOTE ON RECORDING. I used the SOHP's zoom H4N recorder #2.

## TAPE LOG – HENRY PHELPS GATES

Interviewee: Dr. Phelps Gates

Interviewer: Katie Crook

Interview Date: March 20, 2014

Location: Dr. Gates' home, Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Comments: Toward the end of the interview, Dr. Gates' partner Ian Ewing contributes a few comments. Interviewer has noted it in the tape log.

### TAPE INDEX

#### Time

#### Topic

[Digital Recording, Starts at Beginning]

- |      |   |
|------|---|
| 0:01 | Introduction: "My name is Katie Crook, and I'm with the Southern Oral History Program..."   |
| 0:22 | Reflections on where he grew up, what his family was like; born in Los Angeles, but moved to Boston at a young age, where he grew up; left for boarding school in New Hampshire, majored in classics at Harvard with post-graduate work at Princeton.   |
| 1:24 | Believed that majoring in linguistics would help with the national defense (garnered him a full scholarship at Princeton); discussion of graduate work and working as a professor at UC Davis and UNC   |
| 2:20 | Discusses relationship with family and two half-sisters; humorous story about circus trainer-sister, Anne; "the two girls treated me as a little doll;" reflections on the realization he was gay, "coming out" to family (never to father, who died while he was in college)                           |
| 4:00 | Reflections on how father would react to sexuality ("it was a different time"); differences in gay communities between New England, California, and New York; "everyone was in the closet;" discusses the gay bars in New York, San Francisco; discusses the dawn of the gay community in San Francisco |
| 5:36 | Discusses marriage to a lesbian woman in 1973, lasting relationship with her (now his ex-wife); reflects on "aura of social acceptance" to accompany marriage; reflects on faculty at UNC, whether or not they knew he was gay (emphasizes that few people were "out")                                  |

- 7:15 Interviewer asked about interviewee's knowledge of UNC's "sexual revolution" on campus at 1970; discusses awareness of gay community at UNC
- 8:15 Discussion of Dr. Cecil Wooten, best man at Dr. Gates' wedding; first "out gay" person on faculty; discusses tension between sexuality and professional life; "it would be like being a poster child" (to be a gay, classics professor)
- 9:56 Discusses why he left UNC in 1979; reflects on his interest in personal computers and computer languages (APL); reflects on STSC company that specialized in mainframe computer language; this company offered him a job, due to his linguistics training
- 12:23 Reflects on differences or similarities on tolerance of gays between the humanities world and the technology world; reflects on the one gay man he met working at the technology company; discusses the gay scene in Washington and San Francisco as compared to UNC's gay scene; mentions the Tempo Room as the only gay bar in Chapel Hill; mentions gay bars in Durham, Raleigh ("the glitter gulch")
- 15:10 Discusses substance abuse in the gay community; possible problem with gays meeting only in bars, might encourage alcoholism; when asked about his own alcoholism, he responds "It just sort of got me;" does not believe his sexuality influenced his drinking, merely his stress of finishing his dissertation; attributes part of his alcoholism to genetics ("Cousin Pete" was an alcoholic)
- 16:50 Reflects on how he got involved in Alcoholics Anonymous; anecdote about learning of AA meetings from a graduate student friend [can hear nervous hand shaking, rubbing the table]; friend Jim invited him to AA meetings, after wife had left
- 19:17 Talks about basement of Murphey Hall being the hotspot for gay meetings on campus; alcoholic friend Jim Lewis was "cruising the basement of Murphey Hall" when he ran into Dr. Gates to invite him to AA meetings
- 20:25 Reflects on the beginning of the gay AA meetings, where they met, how it was conceived; "people were a lot more open about being gay in AA;" discusses how the meetings first began in Juan's apartment over a meat market in Carrboro
- 21:48 Discusses the Newman Center, which was "staffed mostly by gay priests;" contemplates on why priests enjoyed having the AA meetings there; reflects on the end of the meetings after seven or eight years (people moved away and many members died of AIDs; feeling eventually felt there was no longer a need for a specific "gay" AA meeting); reflects on "gay separatism" and the gay community, which was a reason for starting the gay AA meetings

- 23:25 Reflects more on the gay separatism; “us versus them” mentality in the mid-to-late 1970s; mentions his rotating leadership of the meetings
- 24:11 Discusses nature of the meetings, with what issues people struggled; discusses how AA works and how certain topics related to the gay members’ lives; reflects on composition of gay AA meetings – all were gay, advertised as “Lambda group” so “everyone knew it was the gay meeting”
- 26:02 Mentions AA sponsorship; reflects on gay friend Jim Lewis (with whom he had an affair) and warm relationship with Lewis’ wife; speculates about Lewis’ relationship with his own wife; talks about Lewis losing his job in the 1950s due to the Communist witch hunts; reflects on his own experience with Communism as a gay man (never felt threatened, per se); “a lot of the Red Scare was really a gay scare in disguise”
- 28:50 Reflects on how AA meetings were advertised (though not in gay bars or Murphey Hall); discusses how “being gay” was becoming more and more accepted in the 1970s; eventually, his sexuality “just stopped being an issue”
- 29:52 AIDs epidemic; reflects on 1980s and his own fears; “it was definitely a time of serious worry;” [can hear nervous hand shaking]; “it was just the terror out there lurking in the woods somewhere;” reflects on how he would look in the gay newspaper “The New York Native” for the number of AIDs cases in North Carolina, which grew over the years (beginning in the mid-1980s)
- 32:10 Mentions reading gay newspapers, how he got access to them (subscriptions, given away in gay bars); asked about increase in gay bars/flourishing of the gay community
- 33:22 Reflections on finding gay partners at the rest stop on I-85; difficulty of finding gay partners; discusses where to meet gay partners
- 34:45 Asked about the dating life of gay community; reflects on his long-term relationship with Faygele Ben-Miriam, the first man to apply for a gay marriage license in the state of Washington; relatively lengthy discussion of Faygele’s activism and feisty personality
- 37:32 Reflects on lesbian attendance at AA meetings (non-existent); speculates on separate lesbian community and the Durham gay and lesbian bar; discussion of bisexual wife, her attendance at UNC; reflects on “irony” of gay AA meeting in the Catholic Newman Center; mentions “gay, alcoholic priests”
- 40:14 Discusses gay AA meetings as more than just an AA meeting; it was a meeting space for gays; mentions social life associated with the AA meetings

- 41:05 “Gay community” today in Chapel Hill; reflects on his distance from a “gay community;” “the whole concept of the gay community seems like something that was outdated almost;” reflects on the “gay and gray” movement through the SAGE organization (Seniors in a Gay Environment)
- 42:52 Reflects on generational gap between gay community for young people and lack thereof for older people; speculates on how younger people have more of an interest in gay community; reflects on acceptance of gays in Chapel Hill (does not see an acceptance problem); recounts only one incidence of hostility against gays; briefly mentions Southeastern Gay and Lesbian Conference [partner Ian chimes in with a brief response]
- 45:14 Mentions the Carolina Gay Association, partner Ian does reflect briefly on the organization; discusses the helpfulness of the CGA and its social functions; demographic of group
- 47:06 Discusses support of Chapel Hill mayor Mark Kleinschmidt and political stance on gay marriage and gays in the military; reflects on country moving in the “right direction” in the area of gay marriage; discusses discouragement after passage of Amendment One; speculates on the future of gay rights
- 48:43 Reflects on legislation of the 1970s and 1980s regarding gays; mentions occasional arrests of gays; homosexuality as a “crime against nature;” asks partner Ian about raids on gay bars, to which Ian briefly responds
- 50:17 Reflects on sexual identity and how sexuality plays a role in identity; reflects on alcoholic, gay identity; how he would describe himself
- 51:03 Asked about other interests; mentions love of hiking, hiking the Appalachian Trail off and on for five years; reflects on “barefoot hikers group,” of which he was a leader; discusses his love of creating “acrostics” [he gets up from the table to bring interviewer examples of acrostic puzzles]
- 52:55 Reflects on how he met his partner Ian (at a gender-neutral country dancing night)
- 54:34 Asked about anything else he would like to share, to which he responded “I think we’ve pretty well covered the territory.” Ends with interviewer thanking interviewee.