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N.4: Undergraduate Internship Program: Spring 2014

Interview N-0029

John Richard Dawkins

27 March 2014

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ABSTRACT – JOHN DAWKINS

John Dawkins was raised in the textile mill villages of Rockingham, North Carolina in the 1950s and 1960s by parents who were both mill workers. Although now retired, he worked in accounting for Deloitte & Touche in San Francisco for 31 years. Dawkins recalls his dissatisfaction with small town life, which helped motivate him to go to college at the University of North Carolina, a rare thing in his family and in Rockingham. He recalls that, after three years at UNC, he was asked to leave for poor grades, but returned after a hiatus of a few years. Dawkins recalls activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s as being focused on workers' rights, including the Foodworkers' Strike, and Kent State. Dawkins describes his social integration into the gay community of Chapel Hill in the mid-1970s, which he says was centered around local gay bars and "tea rooms" on campus. He recalls a lack of police activity or public outcry against these spaces. Although he was not very involved in the Carolina Gay Association, he remembers it as a small organization that served mostly a social function for the campus' gay students. Due to working his way through college, he recalls not being actively involved in campus organizations. Dawkins goes on to describe his move to San Francisco after graduating in 1977, where he found a vibrant gay community of which he enjoyed being a part. He discusses HIV in some emotional detail, noting the way that it impacted his own life and forced the gay community to come closer together. As he discusses the biggest challenges the gay community faces in 2014, he reflects on his complex feelings that he has moved beyond his gay identity as a major focus of his life. Dawkins also describes his relationship with his family and the reasons he has never come out to them. This interview is part of the Southern Oral History Program's intern project focusing on gay activism and life at UNC in the 1970s and 1980s.

FIELD NOTES – JOHN DAWKINS

(compiled March 27, 2014)

Interviewee: John Dawkins

Interviewer: Turner Henderson

Interview Date: March 27, 2014

Location: The Love House, 410 East Franklin Street,
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

THE INTERVIEWEE. John Dawkins was born in Rockingham, North Carolina. He received his Bachelors in Geography from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1977. He worked in accounting for Deloitte & Touche in San Francisco, California, for 31 years. Now retired, he resides in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

THE INTERVIEWER. Turner Henderson is currently a senior undergraduate in the History Department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is an intern with the Southern Oral History Program.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview was conducted in the parlor of the Love House on UNC-Chapel Hill's campus. There were no interruptions whatsoever. Everything besides disclaimers and introductory and post-interview conversation was recorded, with the interview lasting fifty-six minutes. Generally, Dawkins was more than willing to share details and stories from his past. However, his responses, while usually answering the question asked, were often short and to the point, which resulted in frequent questions from the interviewer. The interview broadly focused on his experiences as a gay man at UNC and in San Francisco. He provides some interesting details on the social scene of the gay community in Chapel Hill, specifically talking about the gay bars and tea rooms on campus. He describes growing up in the small town of Rockingham, his struggles to succeed in college, and his development of a large gay circle of friends by the time he graduated. He also characterizes San Francisco after college as a having a thriving gay community, but notes the sobering effect AIDS had on that community and his own life. The interview ends with discussion of his decision not to come out to his family and his current feeling that being gay is no longer a major part of who he is. This interview was conducted as part of a project investigating sexual activism and life at UNC in the 1970s and 1980s.

NOTE ON RECORDING. I used the SOHP Zoom #3 Recorder and adjusted the volume slightly during the beginning of the interview.

TAPE LOG – JOHN DAWKINS

Interviewee: John Dawkins

Interviewer: Turner Henderson

Interview Date: March 27, 2014

Location: The Love House, UNC-Chapel Hill

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]

- 0:02 Introduction: "My name is Turner Henderson and I am here with Mr. John Dawkins..."
- 0:28 Birth in Hamlet, NC; adolescent life in Rockingham, NC. Parents were millworkers. Description of large church family, which he says he did not appreciate at the time, and the thriving mill community in which he grew up.
- 2:11 Dissatisfaction with small town life; desire to move to a larger city in high school.
- 3:08 The role of the textile mill in his family life; lived in East Rockingham, which was comprised of mill villages.
- 5:02 Discussion of first contact with other gay people and realization late in high school that he was attracted to men. Story of buying a gay, soft pornographic book, which introduced him to the idea that others were also gay. Notes that he has still not come out to his family.
- 7:30 Details his plans to go to college, which was rare in Rockingham. Motivated to go to UNC by listening to Carolina basketball on the radio. Had desire to study math at UNC.
- 10:15 Reveals that after 3 years at UNC, he was asked to leave because of poor grades; notes a lack of academic and social preparation for college and dealing with his dad's being sick with a brain tumor. Talks about taking a year and a half off, when he lived in Rockingham before eventually moving back to Chapel Hill to work in the Student Union and reenter school.

- 15:55 Characterizes activism on UNC's campus in the late 1960s, specifically dealing with worker's rights and Kent State, some of which he was personally involved in.
- 19:35 Discusses his return to UNC in the early 1970s and his feeling more comfortable with making gay friends; describes his discovery of a huge gay community in the Triangle area and the gay bars this community was focused around. Doesn't remember any police action or public outcry against the gay bars.
- 24:01 Focus on the "tea rooms" on campus as important places for gay students to meet; thinks these were well-known around campus, and says that there was never any pressure to shut these down. Knows of these tea rooms and gay bars as the only gay-friendly spaces/ meeting places around Chapel Hill.
- 27:31 Discussion of the Carolina Gay Association and his minimal involvement in it; outlines CGA meetings as serving a "cruise" function for gay students to meet.
- 31:53 Describes his decision to study geography in his second stint at UNC. Because he worked his way through school, he was not very involved in student groups on campus.
- 34:15 Details that by 1977, the gay community in Chapel Hill had grown a lot and become more open; describes it as having some racial diversity but also segregation by gender. His gay friend circle was mostly social in nature, with no real political goals.
- 35:58 Talks about his lack of a plan after graduation and how he ended up living in San Francisco.
- 39:11 Discusses the vibrant gay community in San Francisco in the late 1970s and early 1980s and how he found a job in accounting with Deloitte & Touche.
- 41:24 Delves into the effect that HIV had on the gay community both in Chapel Hill and San Francisco, with the lack of knowledge about it creating paranoia. Says that he had a personal scare with HIV, which was a terrifying experience. Labels AIDS as drawing the gay community closer together; with several friends having died from the disease, he volunteered to help other victims.
- 46:37 Notes that as he became older, he became less involved in the gay community of San Francisco, but that the city allowed for him to enjoy being gay without having to be wrapped up in this community.
- 47:40 Describes his retirement in 2009 and his decision to return "home" to Chapel Hill; only a few old friends of his remain in the area, and he has noticed that is hard to make friends as an older retired person.

- 49:52 Analyzes the biggest challenges he sees the gay community facing in 2014; stresses the need to be able to live a normal life without harassment. Goes into interesting discussion of the fact that he no longer sees being gay as a major part of his life.
- 52:05 Reflects on his relationship with his family and the reason he has never formally come out to them as gay; provides anecdotes of indirect discussions about the subject that he had with his father before he died.