

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-0024
Sherry Williamson
6 November 2013

Abstract – p. 2
Field Notes – p. 3
Tape Log – p. 4

ABSTRACT – SHERRY WILLIAMSON

Sherry Williamson discusses growing up in rural Columbus County and the belief that her same-sex attraction emerging in late high school was a “passing thing.” She recalls attending Appalachian State University and subsequent transfer to UNC for its journalism program. Williamson also recounts applying skills from journalism school in taking over the Lambda newsletter, changing its layout and content, the use of pseudonyms in the publication, and Lambda’s broad reach throughout the Southeastern Lesbian and Gay Community. She recounts guarding the cube advertising Gay Awareness Week from vandalism and the fear of being exposed to her family and friends after being photographed by the Daily Tar Heel. Williamson discusses coming out to her Pentecostal Holiness parents, rural attitudes towards homosexuality and describes religious places as havens for minorities including the Newman Catholic Student Center serving as a meeting place for the Carolina Gay Association and the Chapel Hill Community Church serving as the location for the CGA prom. Additionally, she discusses the Southeastern Lesbian and Gay Men Conference in Chapel Hill in 1979, a march on Washington for gay rights in 1979, and protests against North Carolina’s failure to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment.

FIELD NOTES – SHERRY WILLIAMSON

Interviewee: Sherry Williamson
Interviewer: Grace Tatter
Interview date: November 6, 2013
Location: Office of Communications, Duke University Divinity School
Length: 71:58

THE INTERVIEWEE. Sherry Williamson was born in 1957 in Columbus County, North Carolina. She was an only child in a working class family. She attended Appalachian State University before transferring to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill because of their journalism program, and she received her bachelor of arts in 1980. While at UNC, she was active in the Carolina Gay Association and editor of Lambda, the newsletter of the Carolina Gay Association, and widely distributed publication throughout the Southeast. Today, she works for the Office of Communications at the Duke University Divinity School, and lives in Durham with her wife (although their marriage is not yet recognized by the state of North Carolina).

THE INTERVIEWER. Grace Tatter is an undergraduate student in the history department and an intern for SOHP for the fall semester of 2013, working on the ongoing project on student activism at UNC. She is also editor-in-chief of Campus BluePrint, a UNC student publication.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview was conducted in the conference room of the Office of Communications at the Duke University Divinity School. Due to the interviewer's clumsiness, an interview conducted the previous week had been deleted; however, Ms. Williamson was eager to talk again, as she believes this history is important. Because of Ms. Williamson's kindly demeanor, and the previous communications between the interviewer and interviewee, the interview had a conversational. At the beginning, she seemed stressed to repeat the same information as she did in the deleted interview, but soon established a natural rapport. She brought more documents to this interview than the last, some borrowed from Stuart Wells. The materials include old editions of Lambda and newspaper clippings from the 1970s, and she occasionally looks through them during the interview (the listener will hear rustling.) Ms. Williamson said she enjoyed the trip down memory lane, and was cheerful even when talking about the pain of not being able to come out to her family. Although the interview is focused on the late 1970s and 1980, contemporary issues of acceptance and politics are also broached.

TAPE LOG – SHERRY WILLIAMSON

Interviewee: Sherry Williamson
Interviewer: Grace Tatter
Interview date: November 6, 2013
Location: Office of Communications, Duke University Divinity School
Length: 71:58

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 is Grace Tatter here with Sherry Williamson at Duke University on November 6, 2013, and we’re going to talk about Lambda and the Carolina Gay Association, and this is actually our second conversation. We had one last week and I deleted the recording.”
- 0:30 Williamson jokes that for the record it was an accidental deleting. Williamson discusses growing up in rural North Carolina, in Columbus parents. Parents were the first generation off the farm; parents did “public work.” Mother worked in sewing factories; father worked as a forklift operator at Georgia Pacific, a paper company.
- 1:42 The expectation was always that she would go to college. The first in her family to go away for college; she did not have role models for going away to a University. Chose to attend Appalachian State University, and transferred to UNC-Chapel Hill because of their journalism program.
- 3:10 Talks about the great values of her home community, and how reading helped her see that there was a huge world out there. “It really inspired in me the desire to go off to college and see what the world was like.” Favorite childhood books were *Johnny Tremain*, *Heidi*.
- 4:21 Anecdote about working on her grandfather’s tobacco and strawberry farm: remembers working in the field and seeing a plane fly over and saying, “one day I want to go where those people go.”

Because of parents sacrifice to send her to college, she was able to have opportunities that they never got to have.

5:25 Growing up didn't think in terms of a lesbian or gay community. Just felt a little different. When she was a senior in high school met a fellow student who was somewhat openly gay. "For the first time I had a word to define some of the things I was feeling and had yet to be able to articulate myself." Label gave her a structure and context to look at own feelings. But when she went to college, she thought it was just a passing thing.

7:21 College experience at App was very typical. There was no association at ASU for gay and lesbian students. Would see women who she thought might be lesbians or gay men, but there was organized group. Came to App at the very tail end of an era that was almost more the late 50s. There was a panty raid on the dorm she lived in, with girls throwing out panties with their phone numbers. "It was like, where am I?"

9:09 Thought she was straight on some level, but when she was looking at the Chapel Hill bulletin she saw the CGA, and she was in her suite at App and made a joke that she was going to join the CGA. Everyone laughed. "It was my own internalized homophobia, and I was just kind testing the waters to see a little bit how people were going to respond, but I knew internally that was one of the things I was going to do, because I was starting a new life, where no one knew me."

10:12 discusses why she chose to study journalism. Editors from the Charlotte Observer came to her class at Appalachian, and she decided that was what she wanted to do. She wanted to write and make a difference in the world.

11:15 As soon as she arrived at Carolina saw a poster for Gay Awareness Week and got involved; enjoyed the camaraderie of people who had similar feelings as her. "CGA was a tremendously valuable organization for me...to help me accept who I was...How to come out to myself."

12:24 Part of CGA's efforts were just social; but also, it helped provide information and was a safe haven and refuge for figuring out who you were.

12:56 When Stuart Wells graduated in 1979, taking over Lambda seemed like a natural fit since she was a journalist in training. Credits Wells with making Lambda a higher-quality publication. Enjoyed applying skills she learned in school to the Lambda.

14:14 Williamson's partner of 24 years was then a student at Radford College, in Virginia; she would read Lambda not knowing she would one day marry the editor.

- 14:43 Lambda was run “as a collective” and she was the head. Looks through old newsletters and remembers how she put in more design elements and make the Carolina Gay Association name larger in the masthead. Goals were to be a non-classist, non-racist, non-sexist publication. Included letters to the editor, but continued a lot of Well’s work as well — a collection of local and national news related to gay and lesbian people; a vehicle to publish CGA events
- 17: 26 A clear sense that Lambda was not only a vehicle for CGA, but served as a visible presence to administration, went to other schools, gay bars in the Southeast. Partner found Lambda because there was one person in her circle of friends brave enough to subscribe to it, and would share it with other folks.
- 19:56 “So it was really cool to know the work that we were doing was affecting other people”; importance of letting people know they weren’t alone. “There was a sense that we were doing something bigger.”
- 20:44 Pseudonym was Lorianne Marcher. Stuart Wells chose to use his own name, and so did a few others. Used it because of fear of backlash from potential employers, but also because she wasn’t out to her family or friends.
- 23:07 Waited several years to come out because she didn’t want a rift with her parents to jeopardize her relationship with her grandmother. Thinks her grandmother would have accepted her, but was worried that her parents would shun her and get her off from grandmother.
- 24:09 Parents attend Pentecostal Holiness church and are religious, but responded fairly well to her coming out. “It’s very very hard for parents because parents have an ideal of how they want you to be...” Rural culture, so they didn’t have another frame of reference to show them “this is how God made me — God, genetics.” Had to remember how long it took her to come terms with her own sexuality and give them that. After a few years, parents came around and accepted her and loved her. “My mother says, I still pray for you about this, and I say, ‘Mom, I take all the prayers you can give me...” Different experience from many of the people she knew in college, who became estranged from their families.
- 26:14 Parents very accepting of her partner. When her father died earlier this year, Williamson’s partner was mentioned in the eulogy.
- 27:11 “I’ve found that change just takes one person at a time. And it just takes knowing one gay person, loving one gay person, and realizing that hmm, we are different, but we’re more alike than we are different.”

- 28:17 Discusses how religious groups are often havens for oppressed minorities. Appreciated that Newman was a place that she could feel safe to be herself. Dances and concerts at Newman; discussions about coming out, being black and gay, feminism, things like that. Important to growth, development, mental health.
- 30:28 Williamson was at Carolina from 1978-80. At that time, no office, had a supply closet in the Student Union. "So we were in the closet."
- 31:10 Doesn't recall consciousness-raising groups; thinks they were before her time.
- 31:42 Organized a gay prom because many of the students in CGA hadn't been out when they went to prom. Her partner at the time, Grace Bulling, organized that and held it at the Community Church at Purefoy and Mason Farms roads.
- 34:23 During her first Gay Awareness Week, Williamson and a group of CGA members (mainly women) guarded the cube advertising Gay Awareness Week overnight, because it had been defaced on other nights. While they were there, a Daily Tar Heel photographer snapped a picture, which made Williamson anxious; didn't want to come out on the front page of the paper. "I was worried my whole career had gone up in smoke." Women from the group approached the Daily Tar Heel editors; Williamson was not front and center in it and it had no repercussions.
- 37:10 Overt discrimination not a big problem in Chapel Hill or on campus. Cites April 8, 1979 Durham Morning Herald article about the fourth annual Southeastern Conference of Lesbian and Gay Men, which was hosted by the CGA that year. According to the Herald article, 600 attended three-day conference. Karen Peterson, leader of CGA, was quoted saying that there had only been minor incidents surrounding the conference.
- 38:55 Conference was a tremendous opportunity for queer people all across the Southeast to gather and learn and build on activism. Powerful to not be the minority. "I don't know if you can imagine this" "It was very validating that there were other people just like me."
- 43:00 Important to have a place outside of bars to meet and socialize.
- 44:06 Always an awareness of making sure that women got an equal place at the table in CGA and organizing. Doesn't recall any conflict, though. Some questions about if lesbians should spend their energy on "patriarchal organizations" but such questions weren't major issues for her. She just appreciated the guidance and support of CGA, members of both sexes.

46:27 Would occasionally go to Triangle Area Lesbian Feminists events in Durham. There was a workshop about the FBI listening into lesbian/feminists conversations. And then there was just a social aspect. Sometimes there would be musical performances.

48:00 Very clumsily worded question about interplay between being a woman and lesbian. Feminism and lesbianism “informed” each other. Marched in Raleigh in support of the Equal Rights Amendment. Was realizing her value and worth as a woman in a patriarchal society at the same time that she was coming to terms with her sexuality. (Didn’t think of herself as “lesbian” thought of herself as “gay”).

50:54 Thought it was a real bummer that she couldn’t be recognized for Lambda. Used skills she learned in the journalism skill during the day and applied them to Lambda, but didn’t feel her safe using her name or getting credit. Now at Duke and UNC there are signs on doors saying this is a safe space for LGBTQ people; they didn’t have that then. Not that anyone was ever negative, she just felt it was something to be quiet about.

51:55 Went to the March on Washington for gay rights in 1979. CGA had a few meetings about it, and organized transportation.

52:59 More talk about Southeastern conference. More than 70 workshops ranging from male rape, spirituality, community action; there were conferences by feminist performers. All states in the Southeast but AK and MS represented at the conference.

53:40 Because North Carolina had not ratified the Equal Rights Amendment, the organizers of the Southeastern Conference did not want to support the local economy and tried to minimize spending.

55:30 Increasing racial diversity was something that was always considered and thought about. Few racial minorities in CGA, but there were some.

56:19 Remembers how excited it was to be in the Metro system of Washington, D.C. before the march and seeing in completely filled with gay and lesbian people. “We are everywhere. Everyone knows and loves someone who is gay, lesbian, or transgendered.”

57:38 If she had lived in a dorm rather than off campus, probably wouldn’t have had the courage to join the CGA.

58:53 Lived with straight people both years, and many of her friends were straight. Her best friend then and now is straight and had been her roommate at Appalachian. The Journalism school world never overlapped with her social life.

1:00:36 Talks about the contrast between visibility of CGA and gay student groups on campus today. Duke's gay student group has a prime location in their student center.

1:02:36 Brief discussion of Illinois becoming the fifth state in 2013 to legalize gay marriage. Williamson was married legally in Canada in 2007. "We're just waiting on North Carolina to do it one more time."

1:05:30 Progress made, and the tools and platforms activists have today.

1:06:30 Story about the girl who used the pseudonym P. Mantis in Lambda (referenced in Stuart Wells interview.) Graduate student who wasn't out to her family and had Marfan's syndrome, giving her an elongated "Praying Mantis" appearance.

1:08:00 Discussion of how grateful she is for CGA and Lambda

1:09:10 Discusses what it was like to leave Chapel Hill and live in a small town (Spring Hope, NC). Within an hour of "the liberal oasis mecca" of Chapel Hill. Talks about how rural attitude toward lesbian and gay people is different than in Chapel Hill or Durham, and how her parents had to listen to unkind things about lesbians. "I was fortunate to live most of my life in pockets where it is ok." After Spring Hope lived in Morganton, which was more accepting because population was more educated and diverse. "But of course I choose to live in one of the more liberal parts of North Carolina and there's a reason for that."