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Gay and Lesbian Life at Colby 1969-1974

The history of a gay and lesbian student community at Colby seems to point to the difficulty of visibility. For students who were able to find others like themselves, their group of lesbian and gay friends had to remain underground. For students who were grappling with their newly found, socially stigmatized sexuality, the experience was isolating if they did not know where to find others like themselves. This paper seeks to address the social forces that kept sexually variant students from expressing their sexual identities openly on campus. Part of this difficulty is attributable to the compulsory heterosexuality assumed by general American society at the time, manifested in the silence or outright hostility directed against homosexuals. Naturally, Colby students replicated this assumption. Some of the students we interviewed seemed to internalize compulsory heterosexuality, while it was forced upon others. Religion and psychology were two methods of enforcing heterosexuality that were relevant to the people we interviewed. Another significant obstacle to visibility was Colby's location and the nature of Colby's student body. Waterville, unlike more urban cities, did not have a history of gay life, and thus an established gay community or gay identity into which one could be socialized. Colby, as a small, homogenous and isolated space, posed difficulties in establishing a gay community as the population to draw from was small and regulated.

Negotiating Religion and Homosexual Identity

For students with strong religious identities, reconciling the inherent tensions between their sexuality and religious beliefs posed an obstacle on the path to self-acceptance. Such a

struggle characterized Euan Bear's and Nancy Snow's experiences at Colby. Both women were members of the Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, a fundamentalist Evangelical group on campus and began a relationship in October of their senior year. Nancy said she spent a lot of effort "trying to reconcile being a Christian with being gay... I really didn't think that the Bible, as it had been portrayed to me, could really be reconciled with being gay."¹ Later in the year, they were asked not to come to Fellowship meetings. The other ICF members, some of whom had been close friends, began making their opinion of homosexuality known. Nancy and Euan, roommates for the year, received many informational pamphlets about the sin of homosexuality under their door and in their mailboxes. The ICF eventually got copies of the women's class schedules and began escorting them between classes all the while telling the two women to accept Christ and save themselves from eternal damnation. This pressure from the religious group was difficult to handle, because it was persistent and coming from people with whom they had previously been friends. Eventually, Nancy said, "I pretty much began to revise my entire theology, and reject that fundamentalist outlook,"² because the religious beliefs were just not compatible with her lifestyle. Both Nancy and Euan also discussed a friend, "Henry," who was in the fundamentalist group and was also struggling with his sexuality. He struggled with reconciling his (homo)sexuality with his religious beliefs. Nancy believed that it he was in constant turmoil, feeling free but extremely guilty and sinful when he accepted his homosexual feelings, and morally correct yet repressed when he denied them.³

When talking about her religious fundamentalism, Euan referred to a "religious wind that swept through the country."⁴ Evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity rose in popularity in during the decade following the sixties, a backlash against the "free love" sentiment. One of the popular teachings was self-discipline, which included sexual restraint, meaning abstinence until

marriage and condemnation of homosexuality.⁵ Evangelical religious groups believed that the Scripture was absolute. They “held that the Bible condemned homosexuality as impure, that marriage required heterosexuality because God ordained it to produce children, and that only heterosexuality was natural while all other forms of sexual desire were sinful.”⁶ This mentality explains the harsh judgment that Euan and Nancy faced from the Intervarsity Christian Fellowship. The student group was supported by a national fundamentalist organization called The Navigators, whose goal is to “advance the Gospel of Jesus and His Kingdom” by helping others to find Christ.⁷ They believe in the “truth and sufficiency of the Scriptures,” meaning that they take the Scriptures as the word of God and the absolute truth, and interpret homosexuality as a damning sin. This belief served as a large obstacle to self-acceptance and coming out as a homosexual for students involved in or associated with the fundamentalist movement. Nancy and Euan eventually decided to reject this religious teaching and embrace their lesbian relationship.

Psychology and Compulsory Heterosexuality

“Robert Newman” describes Colby as a tumultuous transition period in which he came to terms with his homosexuality. Robert was deeply troubled by his “homosexual feelings” and sought psychological help in order to “become straight.” “I was uncomfortable with [my sexual orientation] which is why I was seeking to be straight, date more, be successful with girls. I didn’t want to be gay because there was no good role model or self-image.”⁸ The Colby counselor referred Robert to a psychiatrist at Maine General Hospital. The sessions did not seem to be helpful, as Robert’s “mental turmoil about [my] gay feelings”⁹ led him to take the semester off. During his semester off in Boston, he saw two psychologists in Boston for preliminary consultations. However “neither were welcoming or warm about gay feelings”¹⁰ and Robert

stopped seeking their help. This suggests Robert perhaps was looking for affirmation about his gay feelings.

When he returned to Colby, he attended sessions on and off for the rest of his Colby career with the school psychologist who was also Robert's psychology professor. While Robert was driven to the psychologist by his conflicted feelings about his homosexuality, their sessions together served as a forum to vent other existential problems in addition to Robert's homosexuality. The psychologist at Colby suggested aversion therapy as a "cure" for Robert's homosexuality and Robert voluntarily complied. According to Robert, he was connected to a dry cell battery and allowed to look at pictures of a male undressing and a female undressing. If he lingered too long on the man undressing, he would receive a shock. Robert tried this therapy a few times but finally gave up, since it did not seem to cure him. By the end of his junior year, Robert decided to give himself permission to act on his homosexual feelings. He concluded, "I should try to act [on my gay feelings], this seems to be how I'm really feeling...I'm not being true to myself. I've tried being straight."¹¹ He came out to two of his frat brothers, one who was accepting, the other was more neutral, but grew distant. He admitted to the one who grew distant that he was attracted to him.

The practice of psychology was just one aspect of a cultural matrix that mandated heterosexuality. Anything other than heterosexuality was deemed a disorder, homosexuals were regarded negatively, and doctors sought to erase or cure homosexuality. Health was synonymous with heterosexual. According to psychology at the time, from around the 1940s to the 1970s, heterosexuality was the "natural" drive, as it was biologically programmed, and homosexuality was assumed to be a "psychopathology."¹² It was also assumed that homosexuals were unable to be happy and healthy, and thus their homosexuality was an unwanted condition.¹³ Aversion

therapies, such as the method used on Robert (called Faradic therapy) were used well into the 1970s.¹⁴ These views were being challenged as early as the mid 1950s with Evelyn Hooker's study on "normal male homosexuals" and later in the 1960s by homophile activists agitating to have homosexuality removed from the DSM.¹⁵ However, the prevailing notion that heterosexuality was natural, while homosexuality was a sickness to be cured carried clout in the psychological community. The psychologists Robert encountered were apparently of this line of thought, as they did not provide a gay affirmative model of psychology. Robert said in another time and place he could have found a psychologist who would have given him hope about the life that could be led as a gay man.

Gay Identity and the Urban Setting

During Robert's time at Colby, he heard about gay cruising areas in Boston on a TV news report. He frequented this area several times while he was on vacation from Colby, but was very tentative: "I was very afraid to even stop the car, but I made some acquaintances."¹⁶ He mostly just walked around and talked with the men he met. Once Robert graduated from Colby, he and a straight friend went to San Francisco. Robert had heard about San Francisco's reputation as a "gay mecca," and he went to there in order to come out: "I was hoping to experience the gay life out there away from home."¹⁷ In San Francisco, Robert "found a positive gay life."¹⁸ Being able to see gay people being literally out without shame and out in the gay sense of the word had a transformative impact on Robert. Seeing this in opposition to the image of gays as hiding, unhappy people that Robert was familiar with, allowed him to come out and believe he could lead a fulfilling life as a gay person.

Steve Shuman attended Colby from 1969 until 1971 and then transferred to Emerson College in Boston. He cites his "burgeoning sexuality" as part of the reason he left Colby for a

more urban setting.¹⁹ His group of friends included men and women involved in theater many of who identified as gay, lesbian and bisexual. However, Steve still felt stifled. He said gay students could not express their gay identity freely, that they needed a kind of “mask.” His theater friends could attribute their behavior to their area of study instead of their sexually variant identities. While at Colby, Steve was involved in the anti-war demonstrations and opposition to college authority. However, he said this was “a distraction from what was happening inside. I was extremely frustrated by the closed environment Waterville presented. I needed to escape that.”²⁰ He described Colby as “operating in a bit of a time lag. The social changes evident in large urban areas post-Stonewall hadn’t reached Colby.”²¹

He left Colby after three semesters, and spent a semester in Israel, where had had several sexual experiences with both men and women. At this time, Steve thought of himself as a bisexual, but he describes this as a “safety net” to his eventual identification as a gay man. When he arrived at Emerson College, he found a large out gay population and an active gay student group. It was at Emerson that he came out as a gay man having found a visible community and support, both in the college and in the city. In Boston, he felt the impact of Stonewall and gay liberation as he saw gay organizations and gay pride celebrations, gay history projects, gay community groups undertaken by the city’s gay population. Emerson and Boston served as gay affirming places, allowing Steve to explore and become comfortable with his gay identity.

Although college allowed Steve and Robert to experience a gender segregated environment away from the constraints of family, which would theoretically have given them ample opportunity for finding other gay people,²² the nature of Colby’s composition and location seemed to make this impossible. Perhaps because of the trope of urban areas as gay centers, gay students would have gone to colleges in large cities. It is certainly what Steve did. Urban centers

such as New York City and San Francisco have a history of gay subcultures dating back to the 1920s.²³ While it would be misleading to say rural towns have no gay communities, it is much harder to establish such a community. Urban centers provide anonymity, a huge mass of people and a large amount of territory with the potential to be claimed. Although gay men and women fought hard battles for small districts, or even a single cafeteria or bar, these spaces allowed gay men and women to engage in a shared and *visible* gay experience. This need for a shared and visible identity, community and history seemed to be vastly important to Steve's and Robert's experiences, knowing that such things existed enabled them to come out. Just as important as visibility was positivity: gay people who were proud and out. Steve had found gay people at Colby, but they hid behind a mask. Robert only knew of homosexuals as unhappy and hiding individuals, and he knew that homosexuality was unacceptable. Boston and San Francisco allowed them to see a positive aspect of gay life into which they could be integrated.

Heteronormativity and Gay Invisibility On Campus

When asked about the presence of other sexually variant students on campus, all of our interviewees said that there were very few or none of whom they were aware. Additionally, social factors made them feel compelled to keep their sexual difference secret. All of our interviewees mentioned fraternities and sororities dominating the social scene. Ward Briggs '73, experienced an "us versus them" sentiment socially. He and his friends referred to themselves as the GDI frat (the God-Damn Independents). Meanwhile, Robert joined a fraternity, and became good friends with his frat brothers, but to be included in the conversations that his frat brothers had about women, Robert often played along, actively concealing his sexuality. He and other interviewees even experimented with heterosexual relationships and sex, trying to deny their sexuality and be "normal."

From the fraternities and the student body in general, none of the interviewees recalled any outright hostility towards homosexuals. However, certain instances reflected a lack of acceptance. For example, students tore down posters advertising the Bridge's first meeting and their dance. It seems there was not an outwardly hostile environment, but it was not welcoming either. Nancy and Euan, once they decided to openly date, still would never hold hands or kiss in public, while heterosexual couples did. Institutionally, Colby ignored the existence of sexually variant students. There were strict rules about male/female relationships, but none addressed homosexual ones. For example, male students could not be in female dormitories after a certain hour and vice versa, and when they were allowed to visit the door was to remain open and at least three legs had to be touching the floor, recalled Ward. No such rules existed for same-sex relationships. Another realm in which homosexuality and gender issues lacked presence on the College campus was in academic discourse. The first women's studies class was offered during the 1973-1974 school year, and during the period on which this paper focuses, there were no classes about sexuality.

The absence of any gay role models or safe spaces was cited by most of the interviewees as the reason they were uncomfortable with their sexuality or did not come out during their time at Colby. "Robert" said he knew of one professor and one student who were gay, but neither served as role models. He said that even the media lacked homosexual presence. Steve also talked about the lack of role models. Even though he said he knew various groups of gay, bisexual, or sexually experimenting people, he said he did not feel comfortable coming out, and said he wished they had been "a safe space," a teacher, student, or group, with whom he could have felt comfortable enough to come out.

Conclusion

In the early 1970's, homosexual students at Colby faced many obstacles to accepting and expressing their homosexuality on campus. Coming out as a gay or lesbian is a very individual experience, and these oral histories run the gamut of sexual experience. The five alumni interviewed were coming from different backgrounds and were at different points in their self-discovery and self-exploration. For some, coming to terms with their homosexual identity was the difficult first step. Some struggled to reconcile their religion with their sexuality while another sought psychological help to cure his homosexuality. The pervasiveness of compulsory heterosexuality was not only evident in religious and psychological discourse, but the social scene dictated by the fraternities and sororities at Colby. This atmosphere of compulsory heterosexuality led to homosexual students feeling uncomfortable with their own sexuality and often unable to come out. The lack of a gay organization (until 1974, institutional support, and "out" faculty or staff also left students lacking a "safe space" or gay role models. Despite the Gay Liberation and other radical movements gaining momentum nationally, Colby's attitudes towards homosexual students and homosexuality seemed unaffected. Although the anti-war movement took root at Colby, there was a direct investment as there was an ROTC recruitment facility on campus and this was an issue of national importance. Gay Liberation was more localized to a small minority group, many of whom were not at Colby. Part of this is attributable to Colby's small size and rural location. Waterville and Colby did not have a gay community that would be plugged into national happenings.

In many ways, the gay experience at Colby reflects the gay experience in the United States. The effects of the transformative upheaval that was gay liberation were not immediately apparent in gay and lesbian life. Many still struggled with a socially, medically, religiously stigmatized vision of themselves and their sexuality. These experiences add a layer of

complexity to the legend of Stonewall and gay liberation. While hugely important and transformative, and essential to the narrative of gay identity, these events did not universally make life for gay men and lesbians less difficult.