

**“Behind the Masks:”**  
**LGBT Lives at Oberlin College from the 1920s to the Early 1970s**  
By Joey Plaster (OC 00)

<b>Introduction</b>	
Preface	3
Methodology, Identity, and Language	5
Themes	8
Acknowledgments	11
Oral Histories	12
<b>The Interwar Period: Shifting Boundaries</b>	
Introduction	15
A “Pre-history:” Separate Spheres, <i>In Loco Parentis</i> , and Romantic Friendships (before WWI)	16
“We Did Not Know What to Call It:” Same Sex Expression and Sexual Liberalism (1920s)	18
Fears of Homosexuality, Sex Education, and Resistance to Social Rules (1930s)	20
Lived Experiences of Same Sex Desire (1930s)	23
<b>WWII Veterans: “A Whole Gay World Had Come Out”</b>	
Introduction	25
George Brenner and a Gay History Circle (late 1940s)	26
Robert Wood, the Seminary, and the “Throne Room” (late 1940s)	27
Frank Burton, Fear of Reprisal, and Gossip Networks (late 1940s)	29
Bars and Barns: Off-Campus “Gay Worlds” (late 1940s)	31
The <i>Kinsey Report</i> , Sexual Identity, and Oberlin Tearooms (late 1940s)	32
<b>Professor Fredrick Artz and the Cultural Stance of the “Queer” (b. 1894, d. 1983)</b>	36
<b>1950s/Early 1960s: Homosexuals as Mentally Ill and Homosexuals as “Musical”</b>	
Introduction	42
A “Queer” College: Political Liberalism and Social Conservatism (1950s)	42
An Oberlin Diary (1948-1953)	45
Homosexuals as “Musical” and Conservatory as Haven (1950s/early 1960s)	47
Homosexuals as Mentally Ill (late 1950s/early 1960s)	50
A Gay Theater Circle: Camp Sensibility and <i>The Boy Friend</i> (early 1960s)	52
<b>1960s: Civil Rights, Social Rules, and the Sexual Revolution</b>	
Introduction	56
The Civil Rights Movement and LGBT Identities (late 1950s/mid 1960s)	57
The Challenge to <i>In Loco Parentis</i> , Campus Masculinity, and Administrative Anxiety (1960-1970)	60
Classroom Interventions (1960s)	66
Off-Campus Gay Worlds (1960s)	67

“Oh, Needs-a!:" Camp and “Drag” Names in the Conservatory (mid 1960s/early 1970s)	68
Roger Goodman and John Thompson: A Therapeutic Relationship and a Senior Perspective (1964-1968)	72
<b>Early/Mid 1970s: Gay Liberation, the Women’s Movement, Black Power, and the Left</b>	
Introduction	76
Oberlin Gay Liberation (1971)	77
Gay Liberation Dances (early 1970s)	81
Lesbianism and the Women’s Movement (early 1970s)	84
The Women’s Collective (1972)	87
The Human Development Program and Intern for Homosexual Concerns (early-mid 1970s)	88
Black Power and LGBT Students (early-mid 1970s)	89
<b>Epilogue</b>	92

## Introduction

### Preface

At the end of their first semester in 1960, a small group of Oberlin freshmen signed a remarkable letter to the *Oberlin Review* in protest of the mandatory sex education seminars they had attended. In the strident, irreverent style that would come to characterize campus rhetoric in the late 1960s, they objected to their instructors' "unquestioning conformity, Victorian morals," and "dusty pronouncements of the dangers of Communist infiltration if our sex codes are relaxed."

The students, at least a few of whom were "red diaper babies," or children of Communist Party members or other leftists,<sup>1</sup> also offered what was for the time a radical defense of homosexuality. It was the "narrow minded attitude" expressed by their instructors—"that [homosexuals] ought to be pitied, rather than looked down upon"—that "in fact, makes homosexuality the problem that it is," they argued. "Only if homosexuality is accepted as a natural social phenomenon...can we approach the problem objectively, if we agree that this is a 'problem' after all."<sup>2</sup>

Two weeks later, professor of English W. Arthur Turner responded incredulously to the letter, which he told the students was so "offensive" that it "ought to make your parents ashamed of you." "For me, and many others who have been at Oberlin since you were in rompers, and longer," he wrote, "your letter seems...rude and silly." Moreover, "in terms of the Christian morality upon which this country—and this college—were founded, the implications of your letter are simply immoral."<sup>3</sup>

This particular debate appears to have ended with Turner's letter, but the exchange stands at a watershed in Oberlin College's lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) history—looking back at the college's socially conservative roots, but a harbinger of the movements for sexual freedom that were to come in the 1960s and early 1970s. The letters also illustrate the complex mixture of paternalism, political liberalism, student radicalism, and conservative Christian morality that shaped LGBT people's experiences of Oberlin, to varying degrees, during the time period this narrative addresses: the 1920s to the early 1970s.

This set of values is consistent with Oberlin's Christian activist background: founded in 1833 as an evangelical Christian settlement in the West, the college was also a pioneer in coeducation, one of the first in the U.S. to admit students regardless of race, and a key player in the national abolitionist, temperance, and prohibition movements. In more recent years, some have claimed that Oberlin's early "progressive" commitments have been extended to LGBT issues and individuals. *Out* magazine, after noting the college's "legendary" early political history, named Oberlin "the best small school in the country for gays" in 2004,<sup>4</sup> and in 1993, *Newsweek* similarly dubbed the college a "gay mecca."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Personal communication with Henry Klein and Jason Walker (both OC 60).

<sup>2</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 12/2/60.

<sup>3</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 12/16/60.

<sup>4</sup> September 2004 *Out* magazine.

<sup>5</sup> Eloise Salholz, et al., "The Power and the Pride," *Newsweek*, 6/21/93, 54-60. "On a few campuses around the country, straights have found themselves on the defensive. 'Once in a while you'll hear a first-year

This was not true of Oberlin during the 1920s to 1970s. While the college would gradually shed its Christian focus, beginning as early as the late 1800s, its view of sexual morality was constrained by this heritage well into the 1960s, if not beyond. As at other schools, Oberlin administrators and faculty acted *in loco parentis* (literally “in place of parents”) to shape students’ moral and social development, enforcing a host of restrictive social rules, mandatory religious instruction and sex education programs, sex segregated campus residential zones, and choreographed heterosexual interactions. As the sex seminar exchange suggests, the Oberlin students we now group under the “LGBT” umbrella were most often considered by their academic parents to be objects of pity, immoral, weak-minded, and/or mentally ill. At Oberlin and elsewhere, they were subject to punishment, expulsion, loss of status, and even arrest.

Despite this, LGBT students and faculty created rich campus worlds and social networks. Oberlin was neither “akin to a large closet” before the 1969 Stonewall riots, as the otherwise informative Oberlin LGBT oral history collection *Into the Pink* asserts—nor were all LGBT Oberlinians “coping with confusion, aloneness, or ...finding a cure.”<sup>6</sup>

While a profound sense of stigmatized “difference” weighed heavily on many minds, not all LGBT Oberlinians internalized feelings of immorality, mental illness, or deviancy. Few were as bold or “political” as the freshmen signers of the sex seminar letter, but many students and faculty accepted their sexual desires or gender difference, and some even recast their stigmatized “difference” as a sign of a privileged or elite relationship to style and talent. And even though the consequences of campus exposure were serious, few reported being completely isolated or “closeted” at Oberlin. Many instead spoke of “wearing a mask” that could be strategically removed in gay circles, or of creating “secret societies” or “clubs.” I found that vibrant gay male campus social networks have flourished as long ago as the 1930s, sometimes flamboyantly so, but more often just below the surface of their fellow Oberlinians’ recognition. Evidence about bisexual women and lesbians is less conclusive, as discussed in the “Methodology, Identity, and Language” section.

This narrative seeks to unearth the worlds hidden “behind the masks” of LGBT Oberlin students and faculty. It also offers a view of Oberlin’s history through a “queer” lens, touching on the LGBT-related significance of campus civil rights activism, the influx of World War II veterans, the Conservatory of Music, the campus feminist movement, and the decades-long debate regarding social rules and the *in loco parentis* campus community model. As such, this narrative is influenced by the effort to reclaim stories of pre-Stonewall LGBT lives and debunk what historian George Chauncey has called the myths of “isolation, invisibility, and internalization.”<sup>7</sup>

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student slightly upset about being called a breeder or something,’ says Robin Russell, a recent graduate of Oberlin College in Ohio, considered to be a gay mecca by many young homosexuals. The annual Lesbutante Ball is a command performance for lesbian couples in their butch and femme finery.”

<sup>6</sup> Oberlin College Alumni Office, *Into the Pink: An Oral History of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students at Oberlin College from 1937 to 1991* (Oberlin College, Ohio, 1996), Introduction.

<sup>7</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, urban culture, and the making of the gay male world, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 2. See also John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

## Methodology, Identity, and Language

In addition to materials from the Oberlin College Archives and secondary sources, this narrative is based on over seventy oral histories conducted with Oberlin alumni, faculty, administrators, and residents of the surrounding area—all referred to in this text as “narrators.” The oral histories were collected by the snowball method, in which narrators are asked to identify people they knew, those narrators asked to identify people they knew, and so on. The “seed” narrators were contacted through the Oberlin Lambda Alumni “Out List.”

The snowball method is crucial for uncovering “hidden” social networks, but it does have limitations. Most graduates from classes before the 1970s on the “Out List” are men, for instance. Because gay men and lesbians did not generally socialize as such until after the early 1970s, the majority of these men were unable to provide names of lesbian and bisexual women. Additionally, of the women I did interview, especially those who graduated before the feminist movement of the early 1970s, many did not consider themselves to be lesbian or bisexual when they were students and/or were not part of lesbian or bisexual networks or friendships. They were therefore also frequently unable to identify additional women narrators. As a result, I have interviewed few women for this project.

Oberlin was (and remains) a primarily white school in its student and faculty makeup. Largely as a result, I have also interviewed few African Americans, only one Latino alumnus, and no narrators from other non-white ethnicities. This is especially true of classes before the late 1960s. Despite Oberlin’s early history of abolitionist agitation, the college did not hire an African American faculty member until the late 1940s,<sup>8</sup> and aside from a brief swell after the Civil War, African Americans made up no more than three to five percent of the total student body until the late 1960s. Due in part to student and alumni pressure and the impact of the civil rights movement, the administration began to recruit students of color at this time, and the percentage began to slowly increase.<sup>9</sup> In 1971, African Americans made up seven percent of the college and the faculty voted to approve a massive recruitment effort with the goal of fifteen percent students of color by 1975 (a goal that former president Robert Fuller believed the college met).<sup>10</sup> Oberlin also enrolled token numbers of other non-white ethnicities before the 1970s; a handful of Japanese American students were accepted during World War II, for example.

As such, this narrative is primarily a history of white, young gay men at Oberlin, especially before the 1970s. It is my hope that women and people of color will help enrich and expand the record of Oberlin’s LGBT history through the website feedback forums, which can be found at the end of each narrative section. Readers are also encouraged to post general comments or more in-depth personal narratives in the Share Your Story section on the Oberlin LGBT History website ([www.oberlinlgbt.org](http://www.oberlinlgbt.org)).

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<sup>8</sup> James Oliver Horton, “Black Education at Oberlin College: A Controversial Commitment,” *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 54, No. 4. (Autumn, 1985), pp. 477-499; 494.

<sup>9</sup> For percentages of African American students at Oberlin until 1940, see W.E. Bigglestone, “Oberlin College and the Negro Student, 1865-1940,” *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Jul., 1971), 198. Figures from the 1940s to 1971 are based on rough calculations from the yearly totals that appear in the 1960 Alumni Registrar, figures from the 1960s from Ross Peacock, Director of the Office of Institutional Research, and minority student records from the Records of the Secretary.

<sup>10</sup> *Newsweek*, 11/8/71, 68. Robert Fuller, Oberlin president from 1970 to 1974 (email to author). In 2004, percentage of African American students at Oberlin was again down to seven percent.

Another result of drawing narrators through the “Out List” is that, at the time of the interviews, the vast majority strongly self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered. They did not necessarily identify as such at Oberlin. Similarly, some Oberlin graduates who now identify as heterosexual did not necessarily identify as such as undergraduates. College was a period in which students were considered to be somewhere in between children and adults, and many had not yet settled on their “adult” sexual identity. “Experimentation” may then have been more widespread in a college environment. In retrospect, more than a few narrators (especially women from earlier classes) also felt they were “naïve” about their sexual identities at Oberlin.

This “naivety” may have been due to narrators’ ages or the profound silencing of LGBT topics they recalled in classrooms, the press, and everyday conversation before the 1970s. But it may also be due to the fact that the heterosexual/homosexual classification scheme, now so entrenched that most people take it for granted, was far less rigidly defined earlier in the twentieth century. Historians have convincingly shown that the categories of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual—all identities based on the sex of sexual partners—are relatively new classification systems.

Historian David Halperin has maintained that, “there is no such thing as a history of male homosexuality.” He instead argues that there are histories to be written of at least four different but concurrent “prehomosexual models of male sexual and gender deviance,” including “friendship or male love” and “passivity or inversion.”<sup>11</sup> Historian Martha Vicinus similarly names “two major paradigmatic forms of lesbian behavior, namely romantic friendships and butch-femme roles,” in addition to a “modern lesbian identity” based on sexual object choice.<sup>12</sup>

I touch on two of these “prehomosexual” models in the Oberlin narrative: “romantic friendship” and “gender inversion.” “Romantic friendships,” which may or may not have incorporated sexual expression, were common, and not stigmatized, among nineteenth century men and women in the U.S. They were common on college campuses, even coeducational schools such as Oberlin.

Under the “gender inversion” model, same sex desire was seen as an indicator of a larger stigmatized crossgender identity. A woman’s attraction to another woman would be seen as one sign of a “masculine soul in a female body,” for instance, not necessarily as a sign of a “lesbian” identity. In the first third of the twentieth century, in fact, popular magazines rarely distinguished between transexualism, same sex desire, or crossgender

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<sup>11</sup> David Halperin, “How to do the History of Male Homosexuality,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 2000 6: 87-123. The four categories are effeminacy, pederasty or “active” sodomy, friendship or male love, and passivity or inversion. Interestingly, he notes that effeminacy has traditionally been a sign of *heterosexual* excess. These models all “derive from a premodern system that privileges gender over sexuality,” he argues, but continue to exist “alongside of (and despite their flagrant conflict with) a more recent homosexual model derived from a modern system that privileges sexuality over gender.”

<sup>12</sup> Martha Vicinus, “‘They Wonder To Which Sex I Belong’: The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity,” *Feminist Studies* 18:3 (Autumn 1992), 467-497; 470. Overlapping histories of female homosexualities, she writes, include “teenage crushes, romantic friendships, Boston marriages, theatrical cross-dressing, passing women, bulldykes and prostitutes, butches and femmes, and numerous other identifications which may—and may not—include genital sex.”

behavior.<sup>13</sup> Historian George Chauncey has illustrated a shift only in the 1930's, 1940's and 1950's from a division of men into "fairies" and "normal men" (based on their gender identity or "active" or "passive" sexual role) to a division of men into "homosexuals" and "heterosexuals" (based on the sex of their sexual partners) as the way working class people New Yorkers understood and categorized male sexual and gender behavior. He suggests that this shift occurred at least two generations earlier in middle class culture.<sup>14</sup>

The majority of this Oberlin narrative covers a time period in which the homosexual/heterosexual division was well established as the most popular way of understanding sexual identities among the middle class—the class to which most Oberlin students and faculty belonged. Yet the "gender inversion" model persisted. At Oberlin, same sex desire was closely associated with non-normative gender expression (and vice versa) well past the early 1970s. More that a few narrators, especially from earlier classes, expressed the belief that men could be considered (and consider themselves) "normal" or "straight" even if they had sex with other men—as long as their gender presentation was conventional and they played the "masculine" role in the sexual act. This belief was consistent with "prehomosexual" divisions based on gender identity, described above.

Language is closely related to the subject of identity. There were a large number of terms used to describe identities that we now group under the umbrella of "LGBT" at Oberlin, in narrators' memories and archival documents. These included the euphemistic, such as "friend of Dorothy," "Mr. King," "artistic," "one of these," "gay," and "musical;" terms that described not only sexual preference, but also crossgender identification, such as "fairy," "queen," "pansy," "dyke," "faggot," "bulldagger," "effeminate," and "Needsa" (a unique Oberlin invention, short for "Needs-a-dress"); and the clinical, academic, or moralistic, such as "homosexual," "abnormal," "lesbian," "queer," and "man-despiser." Some narrators had no words to describe themselves at Oberlin or resisted the language that was available to them.

Using modern terms to describe past behavior runs the risk of erroneously ascribing modern identities to people in the past. When possible, I use the terms people used to refer to themselves at Oberlin. I sometimes use the umbrella term "LGBT" to refer generally to same sex desire, expression, and identity, as well as gender transgression—be it camp behavior, cross-dressing, or transgender expression. When talking specifically about homosexual male experience, especially after World War II, I use the word "gay," a code word that appears to have become popular on campus among World War II veterans and became more widely used by gay men starting in the early 1960s.

I use the term "lesbian" to refer to women who were exclusively sexually and/or emotionally attracted to other women. This term appears to have not been widely associated with same sex desire at Oberlin until well after the 1920s, and some women graduates were not aware of the term as late as the 1960s. I use "bisexual" to refer to men and women who

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<sup>13</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002), 32. They covered "cases of crossgender identification, intersex, homosexuality, and transvestitism, sometimes without distinguishing among them, and they frequently depicted them all as interrelated pathologies in need of a medical cure."

<sup>14</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 13.

were attracted to both men and women, and “transgender” to refer to any crossgender expression. Few, if any narrators recalled using these terms at Oberlin.

### Themes

This narrative begins in the 1920s, just after World War I ushered in a new “sexual liberalism” among middle class Americans, and ends in the early 1970s with the advent of a national gay liberation movement and second-wave feminism, both of which popularized modern, “political” models of LGBT identity. Only when detailed histories of other colleges are available will we have a good sense of what was common and what was unique to Oberlin during this period. Yet there are a number of themes that stand out from narrators’ memories and archival evidence, many of them closely related to the “uniqueness” and character of Oberlin in general.

During the 1920s to the 1970s, Oberlin was known for its progressive race relations, traditions of campus radicalism and academic excellence, and its exceptional music conservatory. Oberlin also lacked traditional college social institutions such as fraternities and sororities. These qualities were understood by many outside and within the institution as being feminine, effeminate, odd, “queer,” or even overtly homosexual. The same qualities also appear to have attracted students, staff, and faculty who were themselves atypical, including those who felt a profound sense of sexual “difference.” Tony Wells (OC 62), a gay Conservatory student from a small Kansas farm town, recalled that he enrolled at Oberlin “because I instinctively knew that I would be nurtured there along with other highly intelligent, talented misfits.”

Some LGBT narrators recalled a politically progressive campus that was nonetheless socially conservative, citing strictly enforced social rules and anti-gay student attitudes and administrative policy. Still others felt that Oberlin’s political and intellectual nonconformity extended to the sexual sphere, or that the college at least offered freedoms that were unavailable under the watchful eyes of their parents. Narrators’ differing experiences may be partly the result of the overwhelming public silence about LGBT lives and sexuality on campus before the 1970s—one point agreed upon by all narrators. It may be that the void left by this silence meant that students’ individual backgrounds, temperaments, and contact with other LGBT people played a crucial role in shaping their experiences of Oberlin before the 1970s.

Certain campus programs and majors also appear to have been more closely associated with LGBT social life than others. The Conservatory of Music in particular was strongly associated with male effeminacy and homosexuality, both on and off campus, from at least the 1930s. This was not simply due to the larger cultural association of music with homosexuals—so strong that “musical” itself was a euphemism for homosexuality during this period. The Conservatory *did* serve as a haven for many LGBT individuals and as a magnet for campus LGBT life and culture. Gay Conservatory students and faculty sustained alternative kinship, support, and mentorship networks, cultivated a unique Conservatory LGBT culture complete with its own history and folklore, and nurtured sensibilities that facilitated the rejection of cultural, religious, and psychological norms that served to stigmatize them.

While Conservatory musicians were often ridiculed as effeminate or irrelevant “fairies,” their status as artists possessing “talent” in one of the country’s top conservatories also brought them considerable praise. Historian Nadine Hubbs has shown how the parallels between being “musical” and being gay allowed for some “slippage” between the two categories, “open[ing] up possibilities for a deprecation of the former, an appreciation of the latter, and even for the existence of some special correlation between the two.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, for some, being “musical” and gay at Oberlin meant being members of a special class—or a “glamorous fraternity,” as one gay male graduate from the class of 1962 put it.<sup>16</sup>

Theater programs also provided a refuge for gay students. Some narrators involved with Oberlin’s theater world formed what they now characterize as “secret societies” or “clubs.” Like musicians in the Conservatory, some also recast their sexual “difference,” popularly associated with mental illness or sin, instead as a sign of a privileged or elite relationship to style and talent. The camp behavior employed by some of these students also functioned as a “solvent of morality,” Susan Sontag wrote in 1964, “neutraliz[ing] moral indignation, [and] sponsor[ing] playfulness.”<sup>17</sup>

In a twist on the *in loco parentis* college community model, particular gay male professors also acted as gay “parents” to shape, anchor, and nurture gay male circles at Oberlin. History professor Frederick Artz, for example, regularly discussed gay literature and culture at his home with groups of gay liberal arts students in the late 1940s. Music theory professor Robert Melcher, while married and with children, nonetheless served as a confidante for and discreetly shared books and articles on homosexuality with at least a few students from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. English professor Stan McLaughlin, the director of the Oberlin Dramatic Association, “created the kind of social atmosphere in which you could be relaxed with a bunch of guys, learn some of the lore of the campus, [and] stories about people in the past,” one gay male graduate from the class of 1966 recalled. The fact that few women taught at Oberlin before the 1970s may help explain why lesbian communities on campus were less visible and perhaps less cohesive than gay male communities.

LGBT Oberlinians also had changing relationships with off-campus communities in Cleveland and elsewhere. Halloween parties held at a rural Ohio farm in the late 1940s drew hundreds of costumed young gay men and lesbians from all over the state, including Oberlin. In 1962, a gay theater circle attracted Cleveland gay bar patrons to their campy (and hugely successful) campus production of *The Boy Friend* by posting flyers advertising the “gay musical comedy” at area gay bars. In the early 1970s, gay organ majors regularly performed “Divine Follies” with gay priests at a Cleveland Catholic church, while residents of the newly

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<sup>15</sup> Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 137.

<sup>16</sup> In this way, they may have shared traits with the often homoerotic Cambridge’s “Apostles,” a secretive society of mostly undergraduates that takes its name from the idea that its members are supposedly the twelve cleverest students at Cambridge. Richard Dellamora, writing about Alfred Tennyson’s social circle in the early 1800’s, observed that their “sense of shared superiority...might prompt the view, as it did in a later generation, that members of the Apostles possessed a higher or different morality from that binding ordinary men.” Dellamora, Richard. *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 1964. Reprinted in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982), 105-19.

formed Women's Collective spent nights at an Akron lesbian bar. Certain houses in the town of Oberlin also developed "gay" reputations; one faculty widow, the president of the local Women's Christian Temperance Union, appears to have rented her extra rooms to successive groups of all-gay boarders from the early 1950s until the 1980s.

All of this is not to say that, before the 1970s, Oberlin was a "gay mecca." While the administration appears to have favored a laissez-faire approach to same sex sexuality, there were times when it did police and punish gender and sexual nonconformity. Some narrators reported discriminatory hiring and admission practices, homosexual witch-hunts, and expulsions.

Policing of gay male students was often fueled by anxiety about the campus "male image" and what the administration perceived to be the negative effects of effeminate men on their efforts to raise funds and attract quality high school graduates (most often identified as male in Admissions Committee minutes). Ironically, Oberlin's traditional strengths—its exceptional music conservatory, commitment to admission regardless of race, and traditions of student activism and academic excellence—were often cited (in Committee minutes, for example) as potential liabilities.

As I suggested above, the "femininity" of the Conservatory, the limited racial "mixing" in campus housing, student leftist politics, and intellectualism could and were read as odd, "queer," or overtly homosexual by those within and outside the institution. Administrative reaction to these associations and efforts to create a more "masculine" and politically moderate campus occasionally came to the surface. The most dramatic example, perhaps, is a 1969 Admissions controversy, in which "questionable comments" were found men's applications, "ranging from the political persuasion of admissions candidates to masculinity."<sup>18</sup>

The administration was possibly more anxious about heterosexual cross-racial desire than same sex expression, taking direct measures to discourage dancing, dating, or even socializing between male and female students of different races as late as the 1960s. Historian James Oliver Horton has written that "the heart of the argument" against African American enrollment at Oberlin in 1835 was "the often unexpressed sexual fear of racial integration of a coeducational institution,"<sup>19</sup> suggesting that Oberlin's sexual politics were in fact shaped by race from the beginning.

Oberlin administrators acted *in loco parentis* to shape students' moral and social development, enforcing a host of social rules restricting and supervising interaction between the sexes. At least by the 1930s, the administration had also established gendered residential zones on campus; women's dormitories and rooming houses were almost exclusively south of College Avenue, while men's dormitories were north of College Avenue, with academic buildings concentrated in the middle. At the same time, the administration choreographed closely supervised heterosocial interactions. Male students generally went to women's dorms to eat meals, for instance, often sitting boy-girl-boy-girl.

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<sup>18</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 2/25/69.

<sup>19</sup> James Oliver Horton, "Black Education at Oberlin College: A Controversial Commitment," *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 54, No. 4. (Autumn, 1985), pp. 477-499; 481.

Strict supervision of interactions between sexes and races may have overshadowed and helped open possibilities for same sex expression on campus. A graduate from the class of 1928 felt that the strict sex-segregation of dorms and curfews for women facilitated male-male sexual expression for example, a claim that narrators from later years echoed.<sup>20</sup> For this reason, campus sex-segregation was also often a source of anxiety. Fears of homosexuality would in fact fuel student resistance to campus sex-segregation and social rules and inform administrative efforts to shape student social and sexual norms (through Oberlin's first sex education program for male students, for instance). Especially before World War II, some students and faculty felt sexual attractions were profoundly modifiable; they feared that a sex-segregated campus and lack of heterosexual dating options could lead to an increase of homosexuality or other "perversions."

The history of the debate around social rules and *in loco parentis* at Oberlin unfolds parallel to the history of the emergence of modern LGBT campus communities. In the 1920s and 1930s, organized student resistance to social rules and sex-segregation appears to have begun in earnest—just as the modern model of homosexuality gained popularity and the campus moved from a homosocial to heterosocial student culture. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the successful student dismantling of *in loco parentis*, the end of social rules, and the creation of coed dorms coincided with the emergence of the national gay liberation movement, the formation of Oberlin's first gay student organization, and the beginning of a new era in LGBT lives at Oberlin and beyond.

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<sup>20</sup> Email from Peter Nicholson based on his conversation with Pratt Spelman, 11/13/05.

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### **Oral Histories**

Robert Durand (OC 34), in New York City, June 2000  
Frank Burton (pseudonym; OC 49), by phone, Nov. 23, 2004  
George Brenner (pseudonym; OC 50), by phone, Nov. 15, 2004  
Doug Cooper (OC 50), in New York City, June 23, 2000  
Michael Miller (pseudonym; OC 50), by phone, Sept. 9, 2004  
Robert Wood (Graduate School of Theology 51), by phone, Mar. 30, 2000, Nov. 7, 2004  
Donald Havas (OC 52), in New York City, July 6, 2000  
Al Mather (OC 52), by phone, 2000  
Luke Warmer (pseudonym; OC 53), by phone, Aug. 10, 2000; San Francisco, Aug. 4, 2004  
Raymond Donnell (OC 53), in New York City, July 12, 2000  
Peg Morton (OC 53), by phone, Sept. 11, 2004  
Roger Smith (pseudonym; OC 55), by phone, Sept. 11, 2004  
Bobbi Keppel (OC 55), by phone, Aug. 17, 2004  
Lawrence Bandfield (OC 55), by phone, Oct. 18, 2005  
David Thomas (OC 56), in San Francisco, Aug. 9, 2004

Bill Vance (OC 56), in San Francisco, Oct. 24, 2005  
Allan Spear (OC 58), by phone, Aug. 18, 2004  
Thomas Tibbetts (OC 59), by phone, Apr. 26, 2005  
Joani Blank (OC 59), in Oakland, CA, Aug. 22, 2004  
Larry Palmer (OC 60), by phone, Sept. 23, 2004  
Jim Mosher (OC 62), in New York City, June 21, 2000  
Stephen Calvert (OC 62), by phone, May 30, 2000  
Ralph Hanes (OC 62), in New York City, June 14, 2000  
Donald Downs (OC 62), by phone, 2000  
Leonard Gibbs (OC 62), by phone, 2000  
Michael Heintz (OC 63), by phone, Sept. 6, 2004  
Robert Stiefel (OC 63), by phone, 2000, Sept. 12, 2004  
Beverly Ball (OC 63), in New York City, July 2, 2000  
John Thompson (director, Psychological Services, 1964-91), by phone, Mar. 27, 2000  
Herb Zeman (OC 65), in Oberlin, Ohio, Oct. 2, 1999  
Ken Sherrill (professor, 1965-67), by phone, Sept. 16, 2004  
Howard Spendelow (OC 66), by phone, Sept. 5, 2004  
Martin Beadle (OC 66), by phone, Sept. 6, 2004  
Tom Copeland (OC 66), by phone, 2000.  
Athena Tacha (curator, Allen Art Museum, 1966-73), by phone, Nov. 9, 2004  
George Langelier (Dean of Students, 1966-88), in Oberlin, OH, Nov. 22, 2000  
François Clemmons (OC 67), by phone, Aug. 23, 2000  
John Dawson (OC 67), by phone, Sept. 9, 2004  
Fred Silverman (OC 67), in San Francisco, Aug. 31, 2004  
Roger Goodman (OC 68), in Oberlin, OH, Oct. 1 and 4, 1999  
Mike Underhill (OC 68), by phone, Aug. 20, 2004  
Martha Shackford (OC 69), by phone, Nov. 12, 2004  
Charles Bergengren (OC 69), by phone, Sept. 3, 2004  
Michael Jarvis (OC 69), in San Francisco, Mar. 24, 2006  
Ann Matter (OC 71), by phone, Aug. 25, 2004  
Barry Smith (OC 71), by phone, Aug. 7, 2000  
Ruth Spencer (OC 72), by phone, July 29, 2005  
Holly Boswell (OC 72), by phone, Aug. 12, 2004  
Peter Klein (OC 72), in New York City, July 15, 2000  
Misha Cohen (OC 73), in San Francisco, July 4, 2005  
Stella Graham (OC 73), by phone, May 3, 2005  
Loey Powell (OC 73), by phone, Aug. 18, 2004  
Jay Gorney (OC 73), in New York City, June 28, 2000  
Pat Clawson (OC 73), by phone, Mar. 20, 2000  
Tom Riis (OC 73), by phone, Aug. 13, 2004  
Philip Himberg (OC 73), by phone, Aug. 24, 2004  
Jim Harrington (OC 73), in Oberlin, OH, Oct. 1, 1999  
David Hearst (pseudonym; OC 74), by phone, Aug. 27, 2004  
Bill Pfeiffer (OC 74), by phone, Apr. 24, 2000  
Robert Fuller (president, 1970-74), in Berkeley, CA, Aug. 29, 2004  
Ricardo Barreto (OC 74), by phone, 2000; by email Apr. 6, 2000  
Keith Reas (OC 74), by phone, Nov. 27, 2004  
Christa Rakich (OC 75), by phone, Aug. 13, 2004  
Randy Weiss (OC 75), in San Francisco, Sept. 13, 2004

## Written Communication

David Fisher (OC 51), July 7, 2004  
Jim Humphreys (OC 61), May 1, 2000, July 24, 2004  
Tony Wells (OC 62), July 31; Aug. 1, 20, and 30; Oct. 31, 2004  
Jeffry Piker (OC 62), July 29, 2004  
Gale Kramer (OC 63), July 26, 2004  
Timothy Hansen (pseudonym; OC 64), July 16, 2004  
Eileen Howell (OC 70), July 24, 2004  
Richard Bentley (OC 70), July 29, 2004  
Dominique Vasseur (OC 73), Sept. 2, 2004  
Martin Garro (student, 1971-73), April 18, 2000  
David Neiweem (OC 75), Oct. 24, 1999  
Jeffrey Mostade (town resident), May 1, 2000

## The Interwar Period: Shifting Boundaries (1920s-1930s)

### Introduction

As in other parts of the country, Oberlin experienced profound changes in relations between the sexes and thought about homosexuality during the interwar period.

Before World War I, college students spent most of their time with others of the same sex, even at coeducational institutions such as Oberlin. This was due both to the social rules enforced by the college administration, which acted *in loco parentis* (literally “in place of parents”) to restrict interactions between the sexes, and to the values of student culture itself. Classrooms, dormitories, chapel services, and student social lives were segregated by sex at Oberlin—as was the campus itself (women's rooming houses were located almost exclusively in South Campus and men's dormitories in North Campus). In part due to the separation and differing expectations of the sexes, “romantic friendships” and physical affection among students of the same sex, as well as the use of cross-dressing, were ordinary and non-stigmatized parts of men's and women's campus life.

After the social disruptions of World War I, as male and female students began to share more interests and medical models of homosexuality gained popularity, the traditionally homosocial arrangements and “romantic friendships” that characterized Oberlin in the nineteenth and early twentieth century began to be associated with “abnormal” homosexual desire. By the 1930s, new fears of homosexuality would fuel student resistance to campus sex-segregation and restrictive social rules. They would also inform administrative efforts to shape changing student social and sexual norms, through Oberlin's first sex education program for male students, for instance. Some students and faculty felt sexual attractions were profoundly modifiable; they feared that a sex-segregated campus and lack of heterosexual dating options could lead to an increase of homosexuality or other “perversions.” (Fears primarily related to male students; women were considered to be without strong sexual desire.)

It was not only those who were hostile to same sex expression that believed homosexuality was a universal potential. Robert Durand (OC 34) was aware of his same sex desires from a young age and recalled that he felt same sex attractions were common among his peers. In the late 1930s and 1940s, the administration gradually conceded to some of the student demands for heterosexual dating options, while the traditionally homosocial student culture gave way to new heterosocial conventions and a modern model of “homosexual” identity became increasingly popular. These developments would undoubtedly lead to the profound sense of “difference”—stigmatized, and in a few cases exalted—that would come to characterize the lives of LGBT narrators from later years.

I have uncovered no evidence of any wide scale administrative purges of homosexuality at Oberlin during the interwar period, as there were at other colleges and universities, such as at Harvard in 1920.<sup>21</sup> At Oberlin, anxieties about cross-racial sex and heterosexual expression may have overshadowed fears of campus homosexuality, especially before the 1930s, and may have even helped open possibilities for same sex expression.

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<sup>21</sup> See William Wright, *Harvard's Secret Court: the Savage 1920 Purge of Campus Homosexuals* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005).

## A “Pre-history”: Separate Spheres, *In Loco Parentis*, and Romantic Friendships (before WWI)

As in other co-educational institutions, Oberlin faculty and administrators acted *in loco parentis* (literally “in place of parents”) to regulate and supervise interactions between male and female students, enforcing women’s curfews, bans on opposite-sex dancing, and a host of additional social rules. Until the 1890s, two-lane wooden sidewalks in Tappan Square prevented men and women from holding hands, while a wide central aisle separated the sexes in coed classes. For a number of Oberlin’s early utopian years, students were prohibited from consuming pepper, tea, coffee, and meat in an effort to subdue their “carnal passions.”<sup>22</sup> Mandatory daily chapel and Bible study courses, two required Sunday church services, and bans on alcohol and tobacco also shaped campus life in the early evangelical community.<sup>23</sup> These regulations were not only imposed from above; students themselves valued separate campus spheres for men and women and embraced Oberlin’s evangelical mission.

The administration and students also generally held differing expectations of the sexes. While Oberlin men were prepared for careers, many in the ministry, Oberlin women were trained to be devout mothers and wives, often of Oberlin men.<sup>24</sup> Women were channeled into a special curriculum that omitted Greek and calculus until 1841 and were strictly forbidden to speak at public gatherings until the late 1800s. Expected to have a “civilizing effect” on college men, women waited on male students during dinner, washed and ironed their clothes, and tidied their rooms until the 1840s. According to James Fairchild, Oberlin’s president from 1866 to 1889, women could “not perform the duties of a public profession.” He viewed co-education instead as “a practical movement in harmony with the prevalent idea of woman’s work and sphere.”<sup>25</sup>

Due in part to the physical and ideological separation of the sexes, friendships between those of the same sex were often passionate affairs, and easy physical affection was engaged in without any sense of impropriety. The friendship between Antoinette Brown (OC 1847, OTS 1850) and her classmate Lucy Stone (OC 1847) was probably typical of the “crushes” or “romantic couples” common and not stigmatized among young American women in the nineteenth century. In a letter to Stone in 1849, Brown wrote, “Someone asked me the other day if I thought Lucy loved me as well as ever & I replied emphatically that I *knew* she did. I shall not ask you if that is a *truth of certain knowledge* for my own heart will answer.”<sup>26</sup> Describing a walk on Oberlin’s Pleasant Street boardwalk, where the two strolled together as undergraduates, Brown wrote:

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<sup>22</sup> Ronald Hogeland, “Coeducation of the Sexes at Oberlin College: A Study of Social Ideas in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,” *Journal of Social History*, 1972 vol:6 iss:2 pg:160 -176; 170.

<sup>23</sup> John Barnard, *From Evangelicalism to Progressivism at Oberlin College, 1866-1917* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), 30.

<sup>24</sup> Between 1837 and 1846, 97.5 percent of Oberlin’s women graduates married, and 65 percent of these married Oberlin men. See Louis Hartson, “Marriage Record of Alumnae for the First Century of a Coeducational College,” *The Journal of Heredity*, XXXI, (Sept., 1940), 406, from Ginzberg, Lori D. “Women in an Evangelical Community: Oberlin, 1835-1850,” *Ohio History* 1980 89(1): 78-88.

<sup>25</sup> Oberlin College Archives, Student Papers, Kate Peterson, “Women in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Oberlin,” 5/11/71.

<sup>26</sup> Carol Lasser and Marlene Merrill (Eds.), *Soul Mates: The Oberlin Correspondence of Lucy Stone and Antoinette Brown 1846-1850* (Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College, 1983).

Thoughts of you steal over me every time I walk that way particularly if it is evening & at no time is your memory brighter sweeter & dearer to me than then. O how glad I should be to have your arm around me & my arm around you & to walk with you again on that narrow plank even at the risk of slipping off into the mud.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly defined gender roles may have also contributed to the use of cross-dressing in theatrical performances and other venues as a way of burlesquing the perceived differences between the sexes and reinforcing a group identity. The male cross-dressing at a 1907 Y.M.C.A. “stag” performance, attended by President King, for example, was described as “virile good fellowship among the men.”<sup>28</sup>

Eyebrows were only raised—and the administration only stepped in as surrogate parent—if students showed signs of “inversion” in everyday behavior. This appears to have been the case in 1878, when William Darwin (OC 1880) was “summoned before” President Fairchild after dressing in women’s clothes. In a letter to Fairchild, Darwin’s mother insisted that her son “only meant a little harmless fun not considering how a wicked world would construe it.” But she was also aware that a “wicked world’s” interpretation of Darwin’s cross-dressing—sexual inversion—was a serious offense. “Please give me the worst,” she asked Fairchild. “Do not spare a mother’s feelings if you think it not best for Willie to continue at Oberlin.”<sup>29</sup> It appears that Fairchild decided against expulsion; Darwin graduated from Oberlin in 1880 and later worked as an interior decorator in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he died in 1937.<sup>30</sup>

It was not until the 1890s that Oberlin began a loosening of social rules—decades after most colleges had done so.<sup>31</sup> The sidewalks in Tappan Square and the library became coed, women were permitted to speak at public gatherings, and students were even allowed to play cards. These liberalizations were part of a larger displacement of religious with intellectual goals as Oberlin shed its utopian past in an effort to become an elite college like those in the Northeast. In 1906, the rule requiring attendance at Sunday services was revoked, and Monday classes began to be scheduled in 1915, requiring study on the Sabbath.<sup>32</sup>

Historian John Barnard has written that the growing popularity of organized athletics, the fine arts, and “polite society” among Oberlin students during this time signaled a “loss of unity” on campus, but also “created an opportunity for greater personal freedom.” This was a personal freedom that the majority of students chose not to exercise; it was not until the social disruptions of World War I that students as a whole rebelled against the “restraints of righteous living.”<sup>33</sup> Student resistance to sex-segregation and social rules in the interwar

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 2/25/1849.

<sup>28</sup> Oberlin College Archives, 1909 *Hi-O-Hi*.

<sup>29</sup> Oberlin College Archives, President Fairchild papers, December 9, 1878.

<sup>30</sup> Oberlin College Archives, student records.

<sup>31</sup> John Barnard, *From Evangelicalism to Progressivism at Oberlin College, 1866-1917* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), 24. By the 1870s, many colleges had achieved a relaxation of social rules. According to Barnard, the fact that “a large body of rules minutely regulated all aspects of social relations” at Oberlin invited criticism or ridicule from outsiders.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

period would be informed by changing relations between the sexes and a growing association of stigmatized homosexual desire with the traditionally homosocial campus conventions of the post-war era. This is detailed in the following section.

### **“We Did Not Know What to Call It:” Same Sex Expression and Sexual Liberalism (1920s)**

The social disruptions of World War I, the feminist movement, the increase of mass commercial leisure in the nation’s cities, and the sexual expressiveness of middle class youth signaled the decline of an older marriage ideal and the formation of a new sexual ethos in the 1920s.<sup>34</sup> Sex was “the problem of the age,” according to one lecturer at Oberlin in 1929. “The flapper and the flaming youth, the misunderstood husband and the mistreated wife, birth control and eugenics, True Story magazines and sex novels, are all occupying constant public attention.”<sup>35</sup>

During the 1920s, Oberlin remained a socially conservative Protestant institution, in its self-description and in its faculty and student makeup. But some students, encouraged by national developments and Oberlin’s growing focus on intellectual over religious goals, increasingly began to object to women’s rules and administrative paternalism. In 1922, two years after women’s suffrage, a student encouraged her classmates to “assert our rights as women in the academic world as we are doing in the political.”<sup>36</sup> In 1924, a student protested the “set of rules of bewildering and sometimes exasperating complexity” that “hemmed in [the] Oberlin woman.”<sup>37</sup> Two years later, while one undergraduate admitted that student automobiles led to “much breaking of the rule against men and women riding together,” he protested an administrative vote on automobile regulations that placed “every student in the role of an irresponsible child.”<sup>38</sup>

The administration voted to lift the ban on dancing between men and women and smoking (for men only) in 1919,<sup>39</sup> but was resistant to most changes and clearly anxious about student heterosexual expression. They appear to have been most uneasy about socializing, dating, and dancing between men and women of different races. A confidential 1920 memorandum from the Acting Dean of College Women to President King read:

We ask [white women] to receive colored women as close associates in their student home, but would swiftly put a stop to the slightest intimacy between white girls and colored men...Oberlin has always counted upon the tradition or instinct which keeps

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<sup>34</sup> See John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

<sup>35</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 11/5/29.

<sup>36</sup> *Oberlin Critic*, 3/11/22. The same year, claiming that “intellectual and moral or social freedom go hand in hand,” another student wrote against the “spirit of repression...expressed in our manifold legislation,” especially related to women. The student also noted that “the question of revising the student discipline related to women has of late been under serious discussion.” (*Oberlin Critic*, 3/4/22).

<sup>37</sup> Publication unknown, Spring 1924. While “in the realm of thought she is supposed to be able to cope with some of the most weighty problems, in her conduct she finds her actions guided by a set of rules which determine every move she makes.”

<sup>38</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 6/12/26.

<sup>39</sup> Willard Warch, *Our First 100 Years: A Brief History of the Oberlin College Conservatory of Music* (Oberlin, 1967), 37.

the opposite sexes of widely diverse races apart. This is as it should be, but just how far may social relations be wholesome and natural between groups whose intermarriage would be disastrous?<sup>40</sup>

Anxiety about heterosexual expression, especially cross-racial sex, may have overshadowed fears of campus homosexuality and helped open possibilities for same sex expression during the 1920s. Leslie Pratt Spelman (OC 28), for example, recalled that sex-segregated dorms and women's curfews facilitated male-male sexual expression on campus, a comment echoed by narrators from later years.<sup>41</sup> Not only dormitories, but also the campus itself remained segregated by sex in the 1920s and 1930s: women's dormitories and rooming houses were located almost exclusively south of College Avenue, men's dormitories were north of College Avenue, and academic and administrative buildings were concentrated in the middle.<sup>42</sup>

Spelman and other men who had sex with men did not necessarily identify as homosexual. In a 1994 interview, Spelman recalled that he knew he was "different" from the other boys in his small Michigan town but "knew nothing about what we now call being gay." Instead, Spelman saw his "difference" primarily in terms of his gender expression and artistic interests. "Instead of engaging in the usual friendships and activities of small town boyhood," he recalled, "I despised sports, read poetry, and dabbled in art."<sup>43</sup> He also played organ for several local churches during high school, and would enroll at Oberlin as an organ major in 1922.<sup>44</sup>

Spelman was aware of male-male sex on campus, but learned nothing at Oberlin about "what we now call gay." "There was gay activity," Spelman recalled, "but we did not know what to call it. We were rather naïve. It wasn't in the news—there was no TV, and such actions were not discussed."<sup>45</sup> In retrospect, Spelman felt he was "naïve" as a young man, but it's important to keep in mind that his lack of knowledge may also reflect the fact that the homosexual/heterosexual classification scheme most people now take for granted was not yet widely popular.

Historian George Chauncey has illustrated a shift only in the 1930's, 1940's and 1950's from a division of men into "fairies" and "normal men" (based on their gender

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<sup>40</sup> Oberlin College Archives, Frances J. Hosford memorandum, 1920, Bohn Files.

<sup>41</sup> Email from Peter Nicholson based on his conversation with Pratt Spelman, 11/13/05.

<sup>42</sup> See 1936 map at <http://www.oberlin.edu/archive/resources/photoguide/maps.html> and descriptions of buildings at <http://www.oberlin.edu/archive/resources/photoguide/chronindex.html>.

<sup>43</sup> *Chiron Rising* #62, June/July 1994, interview by Jim Kitchen. A colorful character, Spelman later discovered Buddhism, studied organ in Paris in the early 1930s, became a Quaker, and was blacklisted as a pacifist during World War Two.

<sup>44</sup> The words "artistic" and "musical" were in fact euphemisms for any effeminate or homosexual sensibility in U.S. men at the time. Furthermore, popular "musicosexual taxonomies" cultivated among gay musicians have identified organists as among the musicians *most* likely to be "that way." See, for instance, Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 123. In Ned Rorem's camp assessment, first articulated in 1948 in an informal conversation with Dr. Alfred Kinsey, male harpists, choir directors, and organists are "all gay." Given this information, and without drawing any hard conclusions, it may be worth noting that, in 1920, Oberlin's organ department, in which Spelman enrolled two years later, was recognized as the largest in the world. (Willard Warch, *Our First 100 Years*, 33.)

<sup>45</sup> Letter from Leslie Spelman to Peter Nicholson, 8/31/96.

identity or “active” or “passive” sexual role) to a division of men into “homosexuals” and “heterosexuals” (based on the sex of their sexual partners) as the way working class New Yorkers understood and categorized male sexual and gender behavior.<sup>46</sup> While Chauncey writes that this shift occurred earlier among the middle class, Spelman’s comments suggest that he understood his “difference” primarily in terms of his non-normative gender identity; it’s possible that he may have also subscribed to a classification scheme that divided men based on gender identity rather than the sex of their sexual partner. [For more about different “prehomosexual” models of sexual and gender identity as they relate to Oberlin’s LGBT history, see the “Methodology, Identity, and Language” section in the Introduction].

It is also true that, despite the increased sexual awareness across the country, Oberlin students remained socially conservative and religious, and were not necessarily well informed about sexuality. Only half of the “representative [male] college group” surveyed by psychology professor Raymond Stetson in 1925 knew what “birth control” referred to, while two-thirds felt there was “harm in petting.” Only one received information on sex from his parents.<sup>47</sup> While Professor Stetson himself was aware of books on same sex sexuality, and in fact shared a house with history professor and fellow “bachelor” Frederick Artz from 1924 until Stetson’s death in 1950, his survey included no questions about same sex sexuality—an even more “unspeakable” subject.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, for many at Oberlin, the word “lesbian” invoked nothing but the homeland of the poet Sappho, if the name of a women’s literary club—the Oberlin Lesbian Society—is any indication. The 1903 *Hi-O-Hi* explains: “Since Lesbos was the home of Sappho who founded what may be called the first women’s literary club, the name was considered appropriate for the first society among the young women of the academy.”<sup>49</sup> Founded in 1903, the Lesbian Society remained active until at least 1912, after which there is no record of the club in the *Hi-O-Hi* or the Oberlin Archives. It may be that the homosexual implications of the term “lesbian” had become more public and popular at Oberlin by that time.

### **Fears of Homosexuality, Sex Education, and Resistance to Social Rules (1930s)**

The “naïveté” about homosexual identity discussed in the previous section would be more difficult to maintain by the early 1930s, after a short-lived “pansy craze” swept major U.S. cities<sup>50</sup> and homosexuality made its way into popular literature such as Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and plays such as Mae West’s *The Drag* (1927). The visibility did not escape Oberlin’s attention. In a 1933 sex education lecture, chemistry professor

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<sup>46</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*.

<sup>47</sup> Oberlin College Archives, Raymond Stetson Papers, 30/13 Box 1, “Letters and Notes on RHS’s broad interests,” “Summary of Group Thinking on Sex Questions,” 4/12/25.

<sup>48</sup> Oberlin College Archives, General Faculty Minutes, 4/10/33. The bibliography created for a group Stetson was involved with, which may have been constructed by Stetson, included authors such as the homosexual utopian socialist Edward Carpenter, and sexologists Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing. See also the section on Frederick Artz.

<sup>49</sup> 1903 *HI-O-HI*, p. 109.

<sup>50</sup> The “pansy craze” was a brief public flirtation with effeminate, campy male performers and female impersonators at nightclubs who incorporated homosexual innuendo into their acts. See Chauncey, *Gay New York*.

James McCullough cited “increased divorce, lowered birth-rates, increase of abortion, [and] the appearance of homosexuality on stage and screen, and in magazines.”<sup>51</sup>

The heightened visibility took place during a time of profound shifts in thought about homosexuality and same sex socializing in the nation and on campus, partly reflected in the Oberlin yearbook, the *Hi-O-Hi*. In the teens, twenties, and early thirties, male/female couples were rarely pictured together, and physical affection was depicted only between women or between men. During this time, “romantic friendships” and affection between students of the same sex was common and not stigmatized, as discussed in the pre-World War I section.

Towards the mid 1930s, as medical models of homosexuality gained popularity and men and women began to share more activities, same sex affection was increasingly associated with stigmatized homosexual desire. Photos of same sex groups in the *Hi-O-Hi* began to give way to images of distinctly modern conventions based on opposite-sex socializing and dancing, hand holding, and “romance.” Student demographics also began to shift during the 1930s, with more students coming from the urban East, resulting in growing religious and cultural diversity.<sup>52</sup> This was also perhaps a student body more likely to hold modern beliefs about homosexuality and demand opportunities for heterosexual dating and socializing.

As the traditionally homosocial arrangements that characterized Oberlin in the nineteenth and early twentieth century began to be associated with “abnormal” homosexual desire, fears of homosexuality would fuel student resistance to social rules and campus sex-segregation and inform administrative efforts to regulate changing student social and sexual norms. Like the prominent sex educators of the 1930s, some students and faculty felt sexual attractions were profoundly modifiable; they claimed that a sex-segregated campus or a lack of heterosexual dating options was enough to awaken students’ same sex desires.

In his writings about the mandatory sex education lectures for freshman men that he began in 1930, physical education professor W.R. Morrison offered the following “scientific” example to illustrate the learned nature of sexual behavior and the importance of “establish[ing] right [sex] habits” among Oberlin men:

Male rats placed together in one cage without females will become homo-sexual. They will carry on intercourse among themselves. Even though both male and female rats are in the cage the young males will try to copulate with either sex at first. The reactions to sex advances are very different and the young male rat soon learns to select the female.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 12/5/33.

<sup>52</sup> “Campus Life at Oberlin 1930-1945,” *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, Winter 1998, Geoffrey Blodgett (OC 53), [http://www.oberlin.edu/alummag/oampast/oam\\_winter/campuslife.html](http://www.oberlin.edu/alummag/oampast/oam_winter/campuslife.html).

<sup>53</sup> Oberlin College Archives, Morrison Phs Ed Sub II, Ser 1, Box 2 p2. “There are some persons who have attempted to defend the homosexual practice,” Morrison wrote, alluding to popular sexologists such as Havelock Ellis. “They seemed to have overlooked the fundamental fact that there can never be a homosexual society, the practice will always be restricted to a fringe of society and for that reason there will always be a conflict for the homosexual.” According to Morrison, “secretive sex acts such as masturbation and homosexuality not only fail to satisfy sex needs but are distinctly harmful to one’s personality and character.”

Like the “young male rat,” the Oberlin male student also spent most of his time in sex-segregated environments. The administration’s new sex education program for men was then an effort, in part, to prevent male students from becoming “homo-sexual.”<sup>54</sup> It is not altogether surprising that Professor Morrison, the man who, in 1935, praised the Nazis as “a movement” that would “revive all that was good in Germany” and “cleanse the country of all vice and crime,” was also the man who spearheaded Oberlin’s sex education program, created in part to cleanse the male student body of what he called “sex abnormalities and perversion.”<sup>55</sup>

Morrison characterized homosexuality “not [as] an inherent characteristic due to some biological peculiarity,” but “simply an anti-social habit.” It was “most common where the sexes are segregated,” he felt, in settings such as the military and boys’ and girls’ schools. Morrison’s writing reflected the beliefs of social hygiene sex educators of the period, who, according to historian Jeffrey Moran, “rested their hopes on the insight that the human sexual instinct, unlike the animal’s natural urges, was profoundly modifiable.”<sup>56</sup>

Similarly, for students writing in the Marxist student publication *Progress*, the sex-segregation of the Oberlin campus was enough to produce a “maze of homosexuality and other abnormalities,”<sup>57</sup> while restrictions on heterosexual dating could populate the campus with female “man-despisers.”<sup>58</sup> “Such a thwarting of biological drives,” read one 1934 article, “is impossible without the development of numerous forms of perversion.”<sup>59</sup> As a solution, they called for the end of social rules and championed “companionate marriages,” which redefined marriage in more egalitarian terms, consistent with the new conceptions of women’s equality advanced by the suffrage movement.<sup>60</sup>

The administration made concessions to students’ desires for more liberal rules—to a very limited degree. In 1934, while the faculty voted to continue the 11:00 women’s curfew and 8:30 curfews for freshmen women, and rejected proposals permitting dancing in dorms, they did agree to allow co-ed seating at the (still) mandatory chapel.<sup>61</sup>

They appear to have kept a check on interracial displays of affection. A 1937 handbill written by “The White Students of Oberlin” claimed that after a black male and white female

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<sup>54</sup> Oberlin’s sex education program was part of a national “social hygiene” movement that became popular after World War I. In 1924, Oberlin’s general faculty voted, at the suggestion of physical education professor W.R. Morrison, that President King be asked to “appoint a committee” to cooperate with the American Social Hygiene Association, an organization key to producing sex education policy in the early 20th century. See Oberlin College Archives and Jeffrey Moran, *Teaching Sex* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 32.

<sup>55</sup> “Nazis Cleanses Germany,” *Oberlin Review*, 2/5/35. “What we want to understand is how these [sexual] problems arise,” Morrison wrote, “how sex behavior develops; and what causes sex abnormalities and perversions.”

<sup>56</sup> Jeffrey Moran, *Teaching Sex* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>57</sup> Oberlin College Archives, Student Publications, *Progress – A Magazine of Controversy*, 12/15/33.

<sup>58</sup> *Progress*, 1/12/34. “Should a couple prefer not to see a movie or go walking,” one student wrote, “they are allowed the great pleasure of sitting before a silent radio in an already crowded living room presided over by the eagle eyes of the matron.” (*Progress*, 1/19/34).

<sup>59</sup> *Progress*, 12/15/33.

<sup>60</sup> *Progress*, 12/15/33. See John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, p. 265, for information about “companionate marriages.”

<sup>61</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 11/16/34.

student shared a dance at a Men's house "rec," the Dean of Men "called the colored man in to talk the matter over with him," advising him "in effect, to remember [his] 'proper' position in our social set-up."<sup>62</sup> Whether the administration stepped up its regulation of homosexuality and gender transgression as these subjects gained campus attention is unclear.

### **Lived Experiences of Same Sex Desire (1930s)**

It was not only those who were hostile to same sex expression that believed homosexuality was a universal potential. Robert Durand (OC 34), who was aware of his same sex desires from a young age, also felt same sex desire was common. His memories are a contrast to narrators from later years, many of whom reported feeling hopelessly "different" and "alone."

As a high school senior in North Carolina, he recalled that he "fooled around" with the majority of the neighborhood boys. "The sex interlude was not too long, but we went sailing through it," he recalled, laughing. Even though adults "frowned upon" these activities (Durand assumed his mother knew), his two brothers "thought nothing of it," and he and his friends openly recruited new playmates. When he asked boys if they were interested, "some of them said yes, some said no," Durand recalled, but there was no fear of a violent rebuttal, nor was there the stigma of homosexual identity associated with the sex. "I didn't know the term [homosexual], and I didn't think of it that way," he remembered. "You were just assumed to be regular, and that means heterosexual...and in a sense we regarded ourselves that way."

At Oberlin, Durand was "isolated living with relatives in the town" and did not hear much talk about homosexuality. But at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where Durand majored in economics before transferring to Oberlin, "there was always talk of homosexuals." Those that "acknowledged that they'd done it" spoke relatively freely about their experiences in Durand's recollection, and "their attitude towards it wasn't too much different than mine; they were not worried much about this." Underlying this attitude was the belief that "almost all of us were attracted to each other," and that people's decision to act on their desires "was a matter of degree and a matter of how much repression that was going on." In Durand's view, these ideas were accepted by most people he spoke with, "whether they did it or not, and my belief at the time was that a hell of a lot of them did it at one time or another in some degree."

At the same time, congenital models of sexual identity that treated the "homosexual" as a discrete percentage of the population, such as those put forward by sexologist Havelock Ellis, influenced others on campus. In an address to a student group in 1933, chemistry professor James McCullough quoted Ellis approvingly, stating, "both the strength and the direction of the individual's erotic impulses are largely dependant on...endocrines [secretions of the gonads]." McCullough closed his speech by asking students to "understand the persons whose attitude toward the sex life is different from your own...If we crush them and

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<sup>62</sup> Oberlin College Archives, President Wilkins, Box 58, 'Negroes.' The Dean's "strong disapproval" also prevented a bi-racial rooming arrangement, according to the handbill, while the Dean of Women "advised two white girls not to go to Cleveland in the company of a colored girl."

spoil their experiment in the name of precedent, morality, religion, we prove nothing except that we are afraid to wait for the true outcome.”<sup>63</sup>

In a similar vein, economics major Bob Diehm (OC 37) remembered living with a group of self-identified gay men at Oberlin. “We knew who the [gay] students were usually,” he recalled, “and they knew who we were.”<sup>64</sup> There was always gossip, Diehm remembered, most of it centered on the Conservatory. ““Everyone knows about them,”” people would say; ““that place is full of queers.” And then there would be more specific talk about who was and who wasn’t.”<sup>65</sup> The Conservatory of Music, founded in 1865, would continue to be a focal point for gossip and a haven for homosexual men and women well into the 1970s. [The role of the Conservatory as a haven and magnet for LGBT people is discussed further in sections concerning the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s].

Like Durand’s, Diehm’s memories suggest a sense of relative ease about his same sex attractions, which would become far less common among narrators from later years. “I’ve never even thought about getting married [to a woman],” he recalled. “It’s all right, but not for me.”<sup>66</sup> With one of his gay roommates from Oberlin, Diehm moved to New York City and participated in the varied gay culture the city offered during the 1940s and 1950s. In 1975 he co-founded Integrity, a national organization for gay Episcopalians, and also took an active role in the formation of the organization now known as the Oberlin Lambda Alumni.

In the late 1930s and 1940s, the administration gradually conceded to students’ demands for heterosexual dating options and the traditionally homosocial student culture gave way to heterosocial traditions. At the same time, the modern model of “homosexual” identity gained increased popularity. All of these developments would undoubtedly lead to the profound sense of “difference”—stigmatized, and in a few cases exalted—that would come to characterize the lives of LGBT narrators from later years. The shifts would also lead to a stronger sense of a shared “gay” identity and more cohesive LGBT campus circles, especially after the disruptions of World War II, discussed in the following sections.

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<sup>63</sup> Oberlin College Archives, McCullough papers.

<sup>64</sup> Oberlin College Alumni Office, *Into the Pink: An Oral History of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students at Oberlin College from 1937 to 1991* (Oberlin College, Ohio, 1996).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* The phrase, “Everyone knows about them, that place is full of queers,” is attributed to Diehm by Allan Spear.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

## WWII Veterans: “A Whole Gay World Had Come Out”

### Introduction

World War II relaxed the social restraints of peacetime and exposed a generation of young people to new ways of life. For LGBT people, the war constituted a “national coming out,” according to historian Allan Bérubé. Gathered together in military camps, gay, and smaller numbers of lesbian service people “often came to terms with their sexual desires, fell in love, made friends with other gay people, and began to name and talk about who they were.”<sup>67</sup>

From 1946 to 1948, veterans comprised the majority of all males in colleges across the country.<sup>68</sup> Stories from three of these veterans—Frank Burton (pseudonym; OC 49), George Brenner (pseudonym; OC 50), and Robert Wood (GST 51)—suggest the impact the war had on gay and bisexual life at Oberlin. The three students were considerably older than traditional undergraduates and had matured quickly during the war. In the service, they and other veterans they befriended at Oberlin had sexual experiences with other men, and some were “brought out” into a gay social life. As such, veterans were much more likely than other students to act on their desires, understand their same sex attractions as a sign of a “gay” identity, and form friendship networks with other gay and bisexual students and faculty.

The arrival of veterans appears to have contributed to the formation of a number of gay circles, many of which coalesced around prominent gay professors or departments of study. Brenner was part of group of gay history and liberal arts majors that formed around Professor Frederick Artz, for instance, and it was rumored that English professor Stan McLaughlin, director of the Oberlin Dramatic Association, had a similar circle. Wood recalled a flamboyant gay group made up primarily of Conservatory students. All of these students claimed campus space for themselves, including entire dormitory halls and off-campus houses.

Because of the social condemnation of homosexuality and the serious consequences of exposure—expulsion, loss of status, even arrest or state-enforced lobotomies—gay narrators were secretive about their circles, dated women, and developed heterosexual personas to “mask” their gay lives. The fact that none of the three narrators remembered knowing each other suggests that individual gay circles may also have been insulated from one another. But not all LGBT students were discreet. The campy “fairies” and “screaming queens” associated with the Conservatory were by far the most visible expression of campus homosexuality during the late 1940s. Their brilliance, in turn, helped hide more conventionally gendered gay circles.

All three veterans explored off-campus gay venues that proliferated during World War II, such as bathhouses and gay bars in Cleveland. Two narrators also made their way to a uniquely Ohio event: annual Halloween parties at a rural farmhouse, attended by costumed

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<sup>67</sup> Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York: Plume, 1991), 257.

<sup>68</sup> Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 185.

gay and lesbian revelers from across the state. These on- and off-campus “gay worlds” were vital spaces where LGBT students could find sympathetic friends, lovers, and sexual partners, share information about gay culture and history, and simply “be themselves.”

None of the three narrators were aware of lesbian social networks. The fact that few women taught at Oberlin in the post-World War II years may help explain why lesbian communities on campus were less visible and perhaps less organized than gay male circles. Another reason may have been the student gender ratio; after a predominantly female presence during the war, males made up roughly sixty percent of Oberlin graduates in 1949 and 1950.<sup>69</sup> Narrators did recall more than a few gay African Americans, even though African Americans made up no more than about four percent of the total student enrollment during the late 1940s.<sup>70</sup> Wood remembered an African American voice major who was part of a group of primarily gay Conservatory students and Brenner recalled “any number of gay, black men at Oberlin” who “didn’t stick together” but “were all a part of a larger [gay] group.”

While the three veterans understood their attractions to other men, more or less, as signifiers of a “gay” identity, not all students did. As in the interwar period, the boundaries defining sexual identities were contested, and many models of male sexuality and gender difference continued to exist alongside another. Male students who did not adopt sexual identities, did not want to associate with gay people in a social space, or simply wanted a quick, sexual “outlet,” sometimes found a meeting space in campus restrooms. Others simply had “encounters” without understanding them to constitute a core part of their identity.

### **George Brenner and a Gay History Circle (late 1940s)**

George Brenner (pseudonym; OC 50) was the only child of a white, middle class family in New York State. His father was a wholesale jeweler until World War II, when he began manufacturing war items, and his mother, an Oberlin graduate, was active in the Methodist Church and the Foreign Missionary Society. Brenner enrolled at Oberlin in 1944, where he majored in history.

“At Oberlin,” he recalled, “I felt I was the only [gay] person in the world [and] kept all my feelings to myself.” He maintained his secrecy after being drafted into the Army in 1946, serving in the Military Government in Seoul, Korea. But two years later, more mature after his service, he returned to the Oberlin campus, where “it took practically nothing to bring me out.” He soon “discovered a whole gay world had come out. And that was the wonderful revelation for me,” he recalled. “And I joined them.”

The highly respected professor of history Frederick Artz (OC 16) was a central part of this “gay world.” Like Brenner, he also felt that veterans played an important role in creating cohesive gay campus circles. “The astounding thing for [Artz] was, before the war and really all through the war, there was no gay life whatsoever at Oberlin,” Brenner recalled.

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<sup>69</sup> Oberlin College Archives, 1960 Alumni Registrar.

<sup>70</sup> Figures are based on rough calculations from the yearly totals that appear in the 1960 Alumni Registrar, figures from the 1960s from Ross Peacock, Director of the Office of Institutional Research, and minority student records from the Records of the Secretary.

But after the war, gay and bisexual veterans “would kind of identify him [as gay] and be friendly, and he would reciprocate and say, ‘come to tea,’” Brenner recalled, laughing.

Out of these interactions emerged an unofficial gay “tea” group that met at Artz’s house in the late 1940s. Professors regularly invited students from their department to their house for conversation and tea—usually served by the professor’s wife. As such, “teas” were a part of the *in loco parentis* community model, which treated the college as a “family” made up of student “children” and faculty/administrative “parents.” Artz, who shared his house with psychology professor Raymond Stetson, appears to have made use of this tradition in order to create and nurture an alternative campus “family.”

His group discussed the gay worlds emerging in metropolitan areas such as New York City and read the gay literature that proliferated after the war, such as Gore Vidal’s *The City and the Pillar* (1948) and Malaparte’s *The Skin* (1949). “Most of them had tragic endings,” Brenner remembered, “but it was exciting nonetheless.” The “teas” were also ways to meet other gay students. “[Artz] had a wider range, and he would invite students to his home that I’d never met before,” Brenner recalled. “And it turned out we had the like minds.”

Students also created their own social spaces. In the late 1940s, Brenner and other gay liberal arts majors occupied the entire top floor of the new men’s dorm, Burton Hall, which had opened in 1946 to accommodate the influx of veterans. The top floor was made up of about a dozen rooms—less than half of the rooms that made up each of the bottom three floors. Because of its secluded location, the floor allowed gay men an unusual amount of freedom. “At night we would leave all the doors open, [and] we’d go from room to room, socializing and talking and laughing and carrying on and that kind of thing,” Brenner remembered. “Everybody was just kind of excited to be able to be yourself, to come out, to have a group that you identified with, where you could really make true friends.”

Because of the serious consequences of exposure—possible expulsion, loss of status, even arrest—these circles and meetings were carefully hidden from others, and Brenner and his friends were careful to mask their gay lives. “We certainly never let anyone know that we were gay that was not in our circle,” he remembered. “And we would go to, I think, to all kinds of lengths to not to have it known.” Brenner was dating a woman, for instance, as were most other members of his group, in an effort to project a public heterosexual persona.

They were not so successful, however, to avoid rumors. Doug Cooper (OC 50) remembered hearing that “there were homos living up on the top floor” of Burton. Fighting his own attractions to men at the time, Cooper made a point of staying away.

### **Robert Wood, the Seminary, and the “Throne Room” (late 1940s)**

Born into a Christian family in Youngstown, Ohio, Robert Wood (GST 51) was already twenty-five years old when he enrolled in Oberlin’s Graduate School of Theology in 1948. He had served as an infantryman in the Army, was wounded during the invasion of Italy, and spent twenty-two months recovering in military hospitals,<sup>71</sup> for which he was

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<sup>71</sup> “Honoring those who served in the armed forces,” *Waves*, 6/99.

decorated with the Purple Heart and a Bronze Star.<sup>72</sup> It was also in the Army that Wood had his first sexual experience with another man, though he wasn't "brought out" into a gay social world until his undergraduate years at the University of Pennsylvania.

One of Wood's reasons for attending Oberlin's Seminary, which trained students from the college's founding until 1966, was to counter the anti-gay messages he had heard expressed by Christians at Penn. "I happened to be in a meeting one time when they started quoting all the negative verses in the scripture about homosexuals, and that sort of frightened me," he recalled. "I realized they were using these texts to bash me and other homosexuals, so I decided that when I went to Seminary, I would learn my Bible as well or more than they did so I could use the scripture to confront them."

Finding only books in the Seminary library that associated homosexuality with "perversion, sin, and sickness," Wood later decided he would have to write his own. After graduating, and spurred by the anti-gay backlash of the McCarthy era, Rev. Wood lectured at meetings of early homophile groups such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, and in 1960 published the groundbreaking book *Christ and the Homosexual*. Hailed by the gay press as a "pioneer for gay rights in America," he is the subject of a forthcoming biography.<sup>73</sup>

It was with Oberlin in mind that Wood created two fictional characters for *Christ and the Homosexual*, David and Paul, who "had met in college when both were among the great influx of veterans getting an advanced education under the G.I. Bill." They first ran into each other at the "corner soda shop," roomed together their senior year, and by graduation were "deeply and passionately in love."<sup>74</sup> The fictional couple remained together for life in a "homosexual marriage."

Among gay students on the actual Oberlin campus, "promiscuity was the run of the mill," Wood remembered. "Although there were some that hung around together," he recalled. "You'd see them at the hamburger places, there was just one movie house in Oberlin at the time, I might see them there or at the Allen Art Museum or walking on campus." While "you never quite knew how close or how meaningful the relationship was...there were some who were trying to make a little more lasting friendship or commitment." His personal preference being monogamy, Wood began a "one-gender marriage" with the American abstract artist Hugh M. Coulter in 1962. They remained a couple until Coulter's death in 1989.

Soon after enrolling at Oberlin, Wood met a flamboyant piano major named Jack Challenger (OC 52) in the magazine section of the Carnegie library.<sup>75</sup> "It wasn't very difficult to recognize each other, that we were both gay men, without being terribly obvious," Wood recalled. As an undergraduate at Penn, a gay friend had informed Wood that the Oberlin Conservatory was "full of queers," and Wood was "finally happy to meet one," he recalled, "because I figured Jack could introduce me to some of the others on campus."

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<sup>72</sup> "A Pioneer in the Pulpit," *The Advocate*, 12/4/90.

<sup>73</sup> Steven Law, *The Story of Bob*. (not yet published)

<sup>74</sup> Robert Wood, *Christ and the Homosexual* (New York: Vantage Press, Inc., 1960), 38-40.

<sup>75</sup> Challenger would later become a concert pianist before dying of AIDS related complications in 1984, according to Wood.

Challenger didn't disappoint. He was one of three gay Conservatory students that lived in a large room on the top floor of Burton Hall that appears to have served as a social hub for gay Conservatory students. It was called the "Throne Room," Wood remembered, "because that's where the queens hung out." By the time Wood began frequenting the room, it was a tradition, passed down through successive classes of gay Conservatory students. In contrast to his austere seminary quarters, the Throne Room was "decorated with lovely drapes and flowers on the center table," Wood remembered. "They were very swishy about it." They also held frequent parties; at one graduation bash, Wood recalled close to thirty male students "camping and kissing" while saying their goodbyes. (It appears that, due to its unique architecture, Burton's top floor was a haven for several gay male groups during the postwar years, such as George Brenner's circle.

The campy Conservatory "fairies" were a contrast to the more subdued gay circle Wood had been a part of at Penn and were often too public for his liking. "When I went to the Throne Room and it was all private I was more at ease," he recalled, "but if I'd see one on campus or going to the library or something I didn't always feel I wanted to be seen with them." Wood remembered them dressed "with long, flying scarves, and the limp wrists and the hollering across the street, 'Hello deary and honey, and when am I going to see you again?'"

The visibility of the Conservatory "fairies" were not entirely lost on the rest of the dormitory, Al Mather (OC 52) remembered. "On an icy, sleety morning someone posted a large sign over the front door [of Burton Hall] to be seen as you exited which said, 'Due to inclement weather, all flights to the Con are cancelled today,'" he recalled. "Clearly a slur." [The role of the Conservatory as a haven and magnet for LGBT people is discussed further in sections concerning the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s].

Wood also recalled that the open effeminacy was "a contrast and helped me to hide a little more myself, simply because I didn't fit that stereotype." And despite the secretiveness and fear of reprisal among many students, Wood remembered that camp jokes were discreetly used to support each other and add a "family touch" in a hostile environment. The Conservatory rehearsal building, Browning Hall, might be remarked on to extend the private space of the Throne Room ("browning" being slang for anal sex):

Walking across campus, you'd see a gay fellow you knew...and he might say, "Bob, have you been to Browning lately?" And I would say, "Well, the Seminary students have no reason to go over there." And he would say, "Oh, you *must* go over to see what you're missing!" Just a little camping as we passed each other on campus, with little remarks like that for a moment, letting our hair down, and hoping that nobody else heard what we were saying.

### **Frank Burton, Fear of Reprisal, and Gossip Networks (late 1940s)**

As a serviceperson during the war, Frank Burton (pseudonym; OC 49) felt that he and other gay and bisexual men "were able to not only lead a double live, but so freely, that people looking right at us never saw it." He remembered, for instance, a "very masculine" serviceman easily picking him up in a pub, all the time surrounded by ostensibly heterosexual bar patrons. Burton contrasted this "freedom" with the post-war McCarthy era, at Oberlin

and other parts of the country, in which LGBT people were increasingly “unmasked” and punished. But while it may have been easier to maintain a “double life” during wartime, exposure was still disastrous. Burton recalled that one Army friend “ended up in the stockades” after he was reported as gay.

At Oberlin, where he returned from service in 1946, Burton was part of a loosely organized cluster of friends whose primarily shared interest was sex with men, in contrast to Wood’s and Brenner’s groups that also organized around a shared sense of identity and culture. The latter groups “probably evolved out of the actual studies,” Burton said, “and I wasn’t a good student back in those days.” Instead, Burton “used to go out and get drunk all the time, and carried on with a wild crowd.” He felt that the tension of leading a “double life” led him to drink, but this did not mean that he internalized negative social views about homosexuality. “It was just natural for me,” Burton recalled. “I just felt like, I wish I had more freedom.”

Burton was not alone. Even as many gay students and faculty developed rich gay circles and networks on campus, most were secretive and cautious in public, and developed heterosexual personas to “mask” their gay lives. At Oberlin, “you just had to play a role; that was all there was to it,” Burton recalled. “And you were always in danger...of placing yourself in some sort of social jeopardy.” The consequences were very real. In 1939, Ohio had become one of the first states to enact what became known as a “psychopathic offender” law, which made it legal to subject people convicted of criminal activities such as sodomy to possible institutionalization and “cure.” Lobotomies were not unheard of, and as late as 1971, claims were made that many of the sex criminals sent to the Northwest Ohio’s Lima State Hospital for the Criminally Insane were kept there well beyond the time they should have been and frequently abused.<sup>76</sup>

Burton also knew of a student who was expelled from Oberlin after being reported as a “queer”—a fate that befell growing numbers of gay and lesbian students at American institutions in the two decades after World War II. His closest gay and bisexual friends “thought it was a travesty,” and were frightened, he remembered, yet “they were scared all the time anyway. You were scared to death that you’d get on the wrong side of the authorities.”

In order to protect each other and make sense of campus events, gay and bisexual students exchanged information by word of mouth. In other words, they gossiped, an invaluable mode of communication during a time in which no printed information about LGBT campus life was available. Brenner recalled speculating with his friends about a faculty member who “ran through the woods and killed himself,” for instance. They concluded he was homosexual; “Why else would you do that?” Gay and bisexual students also shared information about faculty and administrators who were perceived as threats. When Burton spotted a faculty member identified by students as hostile to homosexuals at the notoriously cruisy Everard Turkish Baths in New York City, he also “passed that all around” at Oberlin. “And then the consensus of opinion [was that] he was trying to protect himself by pointing fingers at everybody else,” Burton recalled.

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<sup>76</sup> [www.sodomylaws.org/sensibilities/ohio.htm](http://www.sodomylaws.org/sensibilities/ohio.htm)

### **Bars and Barns: Off-Campus “Gay Worlds” (late 1940s)**

The need for most gay students to “play a role” or “wear the mask” around heterosexuals meant that “dropping hairpins” (suggesting that one was “queer” rather than “normal”—the most common words used by gay people and the general public in the war years) or pulling out every last pin and “letting one’s hair down,”<sup>77</sup> was often reserved for off-campus venues.

Despite Oberlin’s ban on student automobile use, some students made their way to gay bars, which proliferated in large and medium-sized cities such as Cleveland and Akron during World War II. In an era that criminalized homosexual socializing, most of these bars—including a lesbian bar situated directly across the street from the Cleveland police station—paid off the police and strictly regulated same sex dancing and affection to avoid raids. Cleveland gay bars generally barred nonwhites. As a result gay African Americans generally entertained in homes, although there was one gay African American bar on the far east side of Cleveland.<sup>78</sup>

Despite restrictions and discrimination, many gays and lesbians felt “gratitude at just having the space where one could relax and be with one’s own kind,” one patron later wrote in an essay on the post-war Cleveland bars. Bars helped shape a sense of gay identity that went beyond the individual to the group, provided support systems, and offered a respite from the stress of the “double life.” It was this “curious combination of exploitation and liberation [that] helped define the mood in gay bars [in the 1940s].”<sup>79</sup>

Robert Wood (GST 51) frequently made his way to the Cadillac Lounge, a small piano bar in downtown Cleveland. It was “a strict bar,” Wood remembered—likely the reason it stayed open from at least the late 1940s to early 1960s. Dancing or walking from table to table was prohibited. A raucous night at the Cadillac consisted of patrons in suits and ties sitting at tables and singing popular party songs. Still, it was “really a place where you could be yourself, and not have to wear the mask, and you could talk and camp with some of the other gay fellows.”

Some bars in this period devised elaborate systems to avoid police crackdowns, especially if dancing or other illegal activities were involved. George Brenner (pseudonym; OC 50) remembered an establishment that required patrons to wear a handkerchief in the top pocket of their jacket. “And as you walked up the stairs [to the bar],” he recalled, “you would pull it out, and they had a little pigeon hole they would look through. If you didn’t [pull out your handkerchief] you were not admitted, but if you did the right signal, why the door opened and in you went.” On the top floor, men in suits danced in couples to romantic songs like “The Bluebird of Happiness.” This was “unbelievable in those days,” Brenner recalled, and likely the reason the bar was raided and closed soon after it opened.

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<sup>77</sup> Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire*, 6.

<sup>78</sup> Emitt Vicar, Interview with author.

<sup>79</sup> John Kelsey, “Cleveland Bar Scene in the Forties,” in Karla Jay and Allen Young (Eds.), *Lavender Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 147. Originally published in 1978.

On the other hand, female impersonation shows at the Zanzibar were reportedly advertised in mainstream daily papers.<sup>80</sup> Frank Burton (pseudonym; OC 49) was invited to the Zanzibar by a “worldly” heterosexual woman he met while based in Texas, and Cleveland resident Emmitt Vicar remembered companies from New York performing full-length drag operas for a crowd of mixed patrons. The visibility of both drag bars and flamboyant Conservatory majors suggests that highly colorful and effeminate men were allowed a limited freedom as entertainers during the post-war years.

Burton also patronized an Elyria bar where he was told he could “pick somebody up.” When he walked in, he found three members of the Oberlin football team seated at the bar. “I got out of there as soon as I could,” he remembered. Back at Oberlin, one of the football players “start[ed] to make remarks at me. And so I said to them, ‘Well what were you guys doing there, you know?’ And he wanted to get physical [violent]. He said, ‘I’ll knock your teeth down your throat’...And this is the way it used to be played.”

Socializing was not limited to bars or even urban locations. In the late 1940s, students attended annual gay and lesbian Halloween parties advertised by word of mouth and held at a large, secluded farmhouse in rural Ohio. “You would plan months ahead of time getting there,” Brenner remembered, “and you were determined to make it, because it was such an important event.” Brenner recalled hundreds of young people from across the state, attired in drag or costume, dancing and socializing as an impromptu band played. He and others wore masks at the event, a literal manifestation of the figurative “masks” most wore in their everyday lives, but Brenner embraced the safety they provided. “You could go to this event...and be anonymous,” he recalled. “You would have masks on, and nobody could tell who you were or where you were from [laughs]. And you felt so safe, and you felt so alive, and you felt so delighted to be a part of this big organization.”

Wood attended two Halloween parties, but remembered fewer masks and more open displays of gay sexuality. After a snowstorm led to a blackout at one party, he recalled a small crowd of young gay men playfully pestering the electrician as he shimmied up the electric post. The farmhouse’s remoteness may have had something to do with the lack of reticence. “It was so isolated that nobody knew how to find the place,” Wood remembered. “And so people would draw rather crude maps of how to find it.” A gay dentist from Cleveland known as “Doc Gage” owned the property, according to Wood. After paying a five-dollar admission fee, “some people stayed for twelve hours... You could bring your beverage with you, whatever else you wanted.” In contrast to his gay campus circle, Wood also recalled a small number of women. After the night of heavy snowfall, he remembered some “husky women, real dykes, pushing the young queens’ cars out [of the snow].”

### **The *Kinsey Report*, Sexual Identity, and Oberlin Tearooms (late 1940s)**

Among other questions from male students during a 1947 Oberlin sex education lecture were a few about homosexuality. One read, “Does the fact that a man appears effeminate have any bearing on his being a homosexualist? If so, what causes it?” Another asked for “estimates on the prevalence of homosexuality.” The definitive, terse answers,

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<sup>80</sup> Emmitt Vicar, Interview with author.

ostensibly from the instructor, were “Endocrine imbalance” (irregular secretions of the gonads) and “2%,” respectively.<sup>81</sup>

Historian Allan Bérubé has shown that World War II helped popularize the idea that the “homosexual” was a minority, or a discrete class of person.<sup>82</sup> And the 1947 sex education answers do contrast with Professor Morrison’s early 1930s sex education musings, in which he characterized homosexuality “not [as] an inherent characteristic due to some biological peculiarity,” but “simply an anti-social habit.”<sup>83</sup> But as in the 1930s, the boundaries defining sexual identities were contested, and many models of homosexual identity continued to exist alongside each other after World War II.

For instance, Luke Warmer (pseudonym; OC 53) recalled sexual encounters with two masculine male students—one of them a “wiry” football player and both of them dating women—whom he later characterized as “normal” and “straight.”<sup>84</sup> Warmer felt that “a guy can have a guy go down on him and he still remains straight. He’s really attracted to women and he has no trouble with women.” Warmer classified these men as “normal” based on their “insertive,” “male” sexual role and overall masculine gender presentation, not based on the sex of their sexual partner (namely Warmer, a male).<sup>85</sup>

This way of understanding sexual identity was widespread enough that Alfred Kinsey mentioned it in his bestselling 1948 book *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, better known as the *Kinsey Report*. He dismissed the tendency of some men to define their sexual identities according to the sexual role they played, and wrote instead that all “physical contacts with males [resulting in orgasm were] by strict definition... homosexual.”<sup>86</sup> Kinsey was advocating a “modern” homosexual identity that privileged the sex of the sexual partner over the gendered sex role that person played. [For more about different “prehomosexual” models of sexual and gender identity as they relate to Oberlin’s LGBT history, see the “Methodology, Identity, and Language” section in the Introduction].

Warmer’s position that the masculine men with whom he had sex were “normal” is perhaps more tenable if the authoritative campus position was that “homosexualists” constituted a very small number of effeminate men with glandular disorders. But this point of view expressed at the 1947 sex education seminar would also be called into question by the *Kinsey Report*’s most shocking finding: the higher-than-expected incidence of

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<sup>81</sup> Oberlin College Archives, Physical Education files, “Questions from men.”

<sup>82</sup> Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York: Plume, 1991).

<sup>83</sup> Oberlin College Archives, Morrison Phs Ed Sub II, Ser 1, Box 2. Morrison’s writing reflects the beliefs of social hygiene sex educators of the period, who, according to historian Jeffrey Moran, “rested their hopes on the insight that the human sexual instinct, unlike the animal’s natural urges, was profoundly modifiable.”

<sup>84</sup> Luke Warmer email to author, 8/10/2000

<sup>85</sup> Historian David Halperin argues that different “models of male sexual and gender deviance”—such as the “inversion” model of homosexuality which privileges gender identity over the sex of a sexual partner—have existed “alongside of (and despite their flagrant conflict with) a more recent homosexual model derived from a modern system that privileges sexuality over gender.” (David Halperin, “How to do the History of Male Homosexuality,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 2000 6: 87-123).

<sup>86</sup> A.C. Kinsey, W.B. Pomeroy, C.E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia, PA: W.B. Saunders, 1948), 623. From Halperin, “How to do the History of Male Homosexuality,” 111.

homosexual behavior among American men. His 1953 study of female sexual behavior reported similar results.

Kinsey's statistics helped many gay and bisexual Oberlin students counter feelings of isolation and make sense of their same sex attractions. "Am I or not," Warmer asked in a diary entry in 1948. "The Kinsey Report says 1/2 of the male population has had homosexual associations. Now certainly God didn't make a third of the population (male) abnormal, which is what the report found."<sup>87</sup>

Conservatory student Michael Miller (pseudonym, OC 50) read the *Kinsey Report* at Oberlin; it was the first he had seen information about homosexuality in print. "I would say that's among the most positive introductory discussions," he recalled, "that there were as many homosexuals as there were." But if Kinsey advocated a "modern" homosexual identity (based on the sex of one's sexual partner, rather than gender identity or sexual role) he also believed in a spectrum of sexual behavior. The famous "Kinsey Scale" divided this continuum into seven points, "0" being completely heterosexual in behavior and "6" being completely homosexual in behavior. Miller would have fallen somewhere in the middle. He had dated women in high school, and was "madly in love" with a drum majorette, but also "fooled around" with other boys on his neighborhood baseball team and in the Boy Scouts.

Miller continued to have sexual encounters with other male students on campus, but he did not consider his attractions to be a core part of his identity. "There was an element that this was ersatz or you know, eventually I would get serious with a woman and get married," he recalled. In fact, at the time of Miller's interview, he and two of the three men he had sex with on campus were married with children. As Miller's comment suggests, college was a period in which students were still considered to be somewhere in between children and adults and may have not settled on an "adult" sexual identity. They were also perhaps freed from some societal conventions and given more opportunity to "experiment" than they would in later years. College, then, may have been a time when more people were engaging in homosex, yet fewer people adopting gay identities.<sup>88</sup>

There were then many "types" of same sex sexual and non-normative gender behavior and identities at Oberlin, many different social circles, and many different meeting spaces. If some flamboyant Conservatory "queens" threw parties in the Throne Room and some butch "gay" or "queer" liberal arts majors met at Frederick Artz's "teas," those students who did not adopt sexual identities, did not want to socialize with gay people, or simply wanted a quick, sexual "outlet," may have found a meeting space in campus restrooms.

The lavatory on the first floor of the Carnegie Library was "the only sex we'd ever have and it was rare," Doug Cooper (OC 50) recalled; "getting caught would not have been a cool move." Cooper himself was reacting against cultural stereotypes that equated homosexuality with effeminacy. During the first week of his freshman orientation, Cooper, a Spanish major, was assigned an effeminate organ major as a roommate. "And damned fool that I was, I asked to be transferred out of there immediately."

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<sup>87</sup> Journal entry dated July 23 1948, property of Luke Warmer.

<sup>88</sup> Thanks to Martin Meeker for making this point.

Double bass major Donald Havas (OC 52) also visited the men's restroom in the bottom of Rice Hall, where "there was always some kind of activity going on." He did not identify as gay at the time, and believed that "certainly not everybody down there looking was gay." Many of the male students with whom he had encounters at Oberlin have since married and raised families, living a "heterosexual life." Havas feels that sexual encounters in campus bathrooms were simply an "outlet" for youthful male sexual energy, in lieu of heterosexual activity that was strictly regulated by the administration.

By the sixties or earlier, the idea that men who had sex with other men could consider themselves to be "normal" or "straight"—regardless of what sex role they took or how masculine they were—would become far less tenable, and these students would largely be understood to be "closet queens" unable to accept their gay identities. This was due to shifts in the way people understood sexual identity. While same sex desire would be closely associated with effeminacy (and vice versa) in later years, the "modern" conception of the homosexual/heterosexual classification scheme would continue to gain popularity after World War II.

## Professor Fredrick Artz and the Cultural Stance of the “Queer” (b. 1894, d. 1983)

Of all the Oberlin professors identified as gay by narrators, Frederick B. Artz has been the most widely remarked upon. Known for his acerbic wit and “colorful” mannerisms, Artz taught courses in European intellectual history at Oberlin from 1924 to 1961 and published several significant works of scholarship, including *The Mind of the Middle Ages*.<sup>89</sup> The late Professor Geoffrey Blodgett called Artz “the most distinguished scholar ever to teach history at Oberlin College.”<sup>90</sup>

He was well known for more than his academic standing. The campus buzzed about Artz and his alleged male lovers as early as the 1930s, according to Bob Diehm (OC 37). Artz was a subject of “Throne Room” gossip in the late forties, and his “long-time friendship” with psychology professor and fellow “bachelor” Raymond Stetson, with whom he shared a house for twenty-six years, was well known. In the fifties and sixties Artz was also widely, if not universally, thought to be homosexual among gay students and faculty. This was *not* because Artz was “openly gay” or “out of the closet”—concepts that did not structure gay and lesbian lives until the late 1960s. Rather, Artz seemed to have cultivated a specific cultural style, incorporating a highly affected sophistication and sharp wit, that could easily be read as “queer” by those in the know while simply being considered “odd” or “colorful” by the more naïve.

Artz “gave new meaning to the word ‘arch,’” Jim Mosher (OC 62) recalled. “He had this imperious, bitchy arch-ness that he just *loved*. Coming from a more worldly background, you’d see it in retrospect as having been gay; I mean, a kind of wry wit, an intellectual preening [with] a Noël Coward-y twist to it.” Allan Spear (OC 58) agreed. “I don’t believe he ever told anybody that he was gay,” Spear said, “but he was certainly a queen.” Artz’s self-designed house was

filled with wonderful works of art that he had collected during, he would always tell you, his forty-second trip to Europe...He would sit on a throne in his very ornate living room, and you would sit on the ottoman in front of him. You were literally sitting at the queen’s feet. And he was very affected, and clearly by the standards of the day a classic queen, so in that sense he lived a flamboyant kind of life.<sup>91</sup>

During Artz’s Oberlin career, gay men were largely considered to be mentally ill, immoral, child molesters, objects of pity, or simply irrelevant. As I detail later in this essay, the ambiguously sophisticated “queer” persona Artz cultivated served to deflect criticism and censure while at the same time inviting recognition from other gay students and faculty. For instance, George Brenner (pseudonym; OC 50) recalled that gay veterans “would kind of identify [Artz as gay] and be friendly, and he would reciprocate and say, ‘come to tea.’” Out of these interactions emerged a regular “tea” group that met at Artz’s house, which discussed the gay worlds emerging in metropolitan areas and the available gay-themed literature—

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<sup>89</sup> Frederick Artz, *The Mind of the Middle Ages, AD 200-1500: An Historical Survey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953, 1980).

<sup>90</sup> Professor Geoffrey Blodgett, “Historian’s Notebook: Artz House,” *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, 11/8/79.

<sup>91</sup> Oberlin College Alumni Office, *Into the Pink: An Oral History of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students at Oberlin College from 1937 to 1991* (Oberlin College, Ohio, 1996), 17.

remarkable for a time when the subject of homosexuality was rarely broached in the classroom outside the context of mental illness or deviancy. Beginning in the 1950s, Artz also tactfully maintained what one professor called an “apostolic” succession of gay student roomers at his house. In this way, Artz discreetly helped anchor and nurture gay campus circles and individuals while also retaining his academic status and—despite malicious comments behind his back—at least the public respect of his colleagues.

Born in 1894 in Dayton, Ohio, Artz’s early recollections were of cranberries and popcorn strung on the Christmas tree, Sunday school, and long summer vacations at Clear Lake, if his self-published pamphlet *Memories of Childhood and Youth* is any indication. He was in awe of his father, a “remarkable” businessman with a “sunny, good-humored, and outgoing nature,” though he admitted that he inherited his father’s “mysterious periods of nervous depression.”<sup>92</sup>

Artz enrolled at Oberlin in 1912 as a history major. There he began a lifelong friendship with classmate Don Love, best remembered for his twenty-four year tenure as Secretary of Oberlin College (1938-62), and also widely assumed by narrators to have been gay. After graduating in 1916 Phi Beta Kappa, Artz taught for a year at Antioch College and then enlisted with the American Red Cross as an ambulance driver, serving in France until the end of World War I. Artz would meet Professor Stetson in Paris after the war (discussed below) and France was later to be Artz’s special field of academic interest; he returned there and to other European countries thirty-two times in his life.<sup>93</sup>

It was during World War I that Artz began to identify with and act upon his sexual attractions to men, according to George Brenner (pseudonym; OC 50), who remained one of his life-long friends after graduating. Historian George Chauncey has also identified the 1910s and 20s as the period during which the cultural style of the “queer” originated among middle class men. In contrast with the style of the “fairy,” the highly effeminate approach more prevalent in working-class culture, the style of the “queer” was employed as “gay men created a place in middle-class culture by constructing a persona of highly mannered—and ambiguous—sophistication.”<sup>94</sup> (“Queer,” the term these men commonly used to self-identify, wasn’t necessarily considered to be derogatory, Chauncey writes; according to one man in the 1920s, “it just meant you were different.”<sup>95</sup>)

As evidenced by his frequent trips to Europe, his “affected,” “imperious, bitchy archness,” and his ornate living room filled with works of art, antiques, and other status symbols, like the “queers” Chauncey describes, Artz may have had “an acute perception of the degree to which gender and class status were interdependent and mutually constituted in [the] culture.” For example, forms of speech, dress, or behavior that might be ridiculed as effeminate or inappropriate for a “real” man in a working class or perhaps a corporate environment could be valued as worldly or cultured in an academic or “artistic” atmosphere, such as Oberlin. “This made it possible for men to try to recast gay cultural styles that might be read as signs of effeminacy as signs instead of upper-class sophistication,” Chauncey

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<sup>92</sup> Frederick Artz, “Memories of Childhood and Youth 1894-1924” (Oberlin, 1964), 44 pp.

<sup>93</sup> Oberlin College Archives website.

<sup>94</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, urban culture, and the making of the gay male world, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 101 and 106.

<sup>95</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 101.

writes. While “the adoption of such styles did not entirely protect queers from ridicule for gender nonconformity...it did allow them to recast, denigrate, and dismiss such ridicule as a sign of lower-class brutishness.”<sup>96</sup>

Artz’s sharp tongue, a central part of his persona, must have also protected him from scorn. Robert Neil (OC 53) remembered Artz “pontificating in grandiose terms on the value of studying history” in his introductory course while pointedly ignoring a freshman boy who was insistently waving his hand in the air. After a few minutes, Neil recalled, “the Great Man looked down and remarked soothingly: ‘It’s all right, young man. You can go without permission in college.’”<sup>97</sup> According to another tale circulating among gay students in the 1950s, Artz spotted a closeted Conservatory professor with wife and daughters marching behind, and remarked to his companion, “There goes proof of the immaculate conception.”<sup>98</sup>

Artz must have also counted on his academic standing at the college to avert criticism or censure. He may have even selected Oberlin for this reason; David Thomas (OC 56) remembered Artz telling him that “[he] chose to be a big frog in a small pond.” Thomas also recalled Artz’s “well-honed epigrams,” “strong sense of style,” and the beautiful daffodils he tended in his garden.<sup>99</sup> “But he wasn’t willowy,” Thomas insisted. “And he was very forceful in his opinions, which were not stupid opinions—on matters of culture, on matters of historical interpretation, matters of politics. He did not hesitate to speak his mind.” In the early 1940s, for example, when campus debate mounted over the proper response to Nazism, Artz spearheaded campaigns and published articles in national journals denouncing fascism.

It was in Paris, immediately after the end of World War I, that Artz became acquainted with Raymond Stetson, then chairman of Oberlin’s Psychological Department. Twenty-two years his senior, Stetson was in France on sabbatical studying speech movements and phonetics, an area for which he gained an “international reputation.”<sup>100</sup> Stetson was later part of a group of Oberlin faculty that petitioned for a “Committee on Sex Education” in 1931, which described him as a “psychologist frequently consulted by students with such problems and...one acquainted with the literature of the subject.” Their bibliography, which may have well been constructed by Stetson, included authors such as the homosexual utopian socialist Edward Carpenter and sexologists Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>97</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 6/11/66.

<sup>98</sup> Oral histories with Larry Palmer (OC 60) and Anonymous. The Conservatory professor was Robert Melcher. This tale is likely apocryphal, as Artz would surely have known the difference between the “virgin birth” (that Mary remained a Virgin when impregnated) and the “immaculate conception” (that Mary was born without Original Sin). The fact that there were various forms of this story circulating—in one version of the story Artz is addressing a class and looking out of a window in Peters, in another he is with a friend in Tappan Square—is another reason to doubt it.

<sup>99</sup> One of Artz’s favorite sayings, “pronounced with twinkling eyes” while tending to daffodils in his garden was, “There are fairies at my bottom in the garden,” according to a German professor who taught at Oberlin in the late 1950s. This, of course, adding a “gay” touch to an already “gay” song: Beatrice Lillie’s “There are Fairies at the Bottom of My Garden.”

<sup>100</sup> *Oberlin News Tribune*, 12/7/50.

<sup>101</sup> Oberlin College Archives, General Faculty Minutes, 4/10/33. The Committee’s circa 1930’s conclusion reflects how little they accomplished: “Society as a whole will not permit free speech. Oberlin still represents conservative opinion. The cause will be lost by premature action on the part of too progressive a group, especially one self-constituted...The conclusion admits the Problem, existing in society, and at the same time admits the Friday-Night Group’s utter defeat in attempting to solve it.”

In contrast to the gregarious, “colorful” Artz, the *Oberlin News Tribune* described Stetson as “a shy and modest man, shunning publicity and society almost to the point of being a recluse.”<sup>102</sup> Artz himself recalled Stetson’s “great feeling for ‘*le mot juste*,’” and his “vivid way of saying things. He once said to me, ‘Herr Artz, you are always either set-up or up-set!’” Artz later wrote. “All in all, he was the keenest and most gifted person I ever knew well.”<sup>103</sup>

The two men began living together in 1924, immediately after Artz completed graduate work at Harvard and started teaching at Oberlin. In 1940, they moved into a home Artz himself designed, located at 157 North Professor Street. In all, they would live together for a twenty-six years. Yet little information exists about the relationship between the two “bachelors.” Artz’s papers in the Oberlin College Archives “contain virtually no information on his personal life after he came to Oberlin,” undoubtedly a result of Artz’s own sense of privacy and the unwritten social contract that forbade direct acknowledgement of same sex relationships and love.<sup>104</sup>

“[Artz’s] prestige and the taste with however that relationship was handled was impeccable,” Raymond Donnell (OC 53) remembered. “It was not something that was just splattered out in people’s faces.” In this way, Artz also reflected the “cultural stance of the queer,” which embodied “the general middle class preference for privacy, self-restraint, and lack of self-disclosure;”<sup>105</sup> a preference that would later come to be identified, in Donnell’s words, as “all that ‘closet-y’ stuff.” “Yes, I guess it was ‘closet-y stuff,’” Donnell recalled, “but also there was a great deal of civility and compassion involved in some of that. [A] consideration of people’s privacy.” Some of this “civility and compassion” is revealed in the more than fifty condolence letters Artz received upon Stetson’s death in December 1950—some of the few personal items Artz retained in his Archives papers.

“Only a few days ago we sent a Xmas card to you and Professor Stetson,” began one letter, “and yesterday mother wrote me of your long-time friend’s death. We are with you at this time of grief and sorrow... We know how great the loss was that you sustained.” Another former student expressed his grief, quickly adding it was “nothing to the stimulating companionship you...men had at 157 No. Professor.” While one well-wisher acknowledged that “neither one of you was ever given to any outwards signs of affection towards each other,” the author nonetheless “knew” that “you both must have cared greatly for each other.” One friend noted that he could “understand what a great difference this will make in your life.” Another former student wrote:

It must be extremely lonely for you without him. He liked to tell about the man who commented, when you decided to live together, ‘That’s just what they both deserved.’ And he liked to make frantic motions on the table, descriptive of your temperament. But certainly the combination of your two personalities must have become so

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<sup>102</sup> *Oberlin News Tribune*, 12/7/50.

<sup>103</sup> Artz, *Memories of Childhood and Youth*, 44.

<sup>104</sup> The Oberlin College Archives website tell us only that the two “shared a passion for the local Cosmos club.” [<http://www.oberlin.edu/archive/holdings/finding/RG30/SG175/scope.html>.]

<sup>105</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 106.

thoroughly fused, with the years, that its dissolution leaves you a stranger in your own house. My sympathy and friendship are yours, for what they might be worth.<sup>106</sup>

After Stetson's death, Artz began to rent out his spare room to students—most of them gay. Artz “was always proud of his ‘apostolic’ succession of gay roomers,” recalled one German professor who taught at Oberlin in the late 1950s. The students were “exposed to much European culture in Artz’s home,” he recalled, remembering Artz’s “huge book-lined living room with very beautiful antiques, and a wonderful old music box which used cylinders.”<sup>107</sup>

Larry Palmer (OC 60) roomed at Artz’s house during his senior year. Artz, he recalled, “could be the most exasperating person, but underneath everything he was very kind and generous human being, and extraordinarily lonely after Stetson died.” Palmer felt one incident in particular illustrated Artz’s character. Palmer’s long-term boyfriend, Roy, spent the night during one of his first weekends living in Artz’s house. The following morning, “there was a knock on the bedroom door,” he recalled. “And Freddie, with his dirty old apron on, came bustling in and said, ‘Here’s breakfast youngins.’ And he brought us breakfast in bed [laughs]...And he said, ‘Now, children, we need to talk...Roy: you’re not going to be able to sleep here because the neighbors will talk.’” Palmer successfully negotiated for more frequent visits, but Artz’s outlook, according to Palmer, again reflected the cultural stance of the “queer”: “It’s okay to be queer—nelly—but don’t flaunt it.”

Artz may have become bolder toward the end of this life, according to Ken Sherrill, a professor in the government department in the late 1960s. “It was well known he was leaving everything in his possession, which was fairly substantial, to the college,” Sherrill recalled. “And when a gay person got into trouble, he would threaten to disinherit the college.” Gay faculty and students also knew to go to him if there were any problems with the administration, Sherrill recalled. “I suspect that the college never [responded] to his threats to disinherit them,” Sherrill said, “but they did respond to his moral authority.” In classic queen fashion, Freddie Artz in fact spoke on the “decline of morals and manners among college youth” at the 1966 Alumni Luncheon.<sup>108</sup>

During his years at Oberlin, Artz is believed to have taught over 7,500 Oberlin students, of whom at least eighty-five went on to become historians themselves. As a teacher, Artz was renowned for his encyclopedic mind and skill at synthesizing several disciplines—music, art, literature, and theology—to express broad themes of western history. Palmer remembered Artz “polish[ing] those lectures right up to the very end.” A year before his retirement, Palmer recalled hearing Artz, at 6:30 in the morning, “upstairs in his bedroom declaiming and reading through the lectures and making corrections and so on.”

In 1964, three years after his retirement, Artz’s former students honored him with *A Festschrift for Frederick B. Artz*, a published series of historical studies. Artz is now also honored by a chair in the History Department and a research grants program in his name. His collection of 10,000 rare books, maps, and manuscripts can now be found in the Allen Art Museum and Oberlin College libraries.

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<sup>106</sup> Oberlin College Archives, 30/175 1985/8 Box 4, Series II Correspondence, Artz papers.

<sup>107</sup> Anonymous oral history with the author.

<sup>108</sup> Oberlin College Archives.

Artz died on July 20, 1983. Then History Department chairman Robert Neil (OC 53), a friend of Artz's and another confirmed "bachelor," partly attributed to Artz the fact that in the period since 1920 more students at Oberlin had gone on to professional careers in history than from any other undergraduate institution in the country. "But Fred was more than an inspiring teacher and internationally known scholar," Neil wrote. "To his many friends in town and thousands of former students he was simply 'Freddie Artz'—an Oberlin institution for over half a century. We have lost a truly colorful character."<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> "Frederick B. Artz, 88, retired professor, dies," publication unknown, 7/21/83.

## 1950s and early 1960s: Homosexuals as Mentally Ill and Homosexuals as “Musical”

### Introduction

In the atmosphere of paranoia that characterized the cold war era, national security itself seemed to depend on masculine authority and the solidity of heterosexual families. Americans were prompted to look for evidence of foreign infiltration by searching for the “enemy within.” Homosexuals, believed to be immoral, mentally ill, improperly gendered, and untrustworthy, became some of the chief scapegoats of the period, enduring increasing police harassment, witch-hunts, suspicions of disloyalty, and dismissals from jobs.<sup>110</sup>

Narrators from this era, overwhelmingly male and all white, agreed that Oberlin’s music conservatory, historic commitment to racial justice, student leftist politics, and campus intellectualism gave the college an unusual—even “queer”—reputation. But their memories of the college’s social atmosphere and their experiences as LGBT people were often quite divergent. Some recalled a socially conservative campus with strictly enforced social rules and anti-gay attitudes. Other narrators felt that Oberlin’s political and intellectual nonconformity extended to the sexual sphere and offered freedoms that were unavailable under the watchful eyes of their parents.

Narrators’ differing experiences may be partly the result of the overwhelming silence about homosexuality (and sexuality in general) on campus during this period—one point agreed upon by all narrators. It may be that the void left by this silencing meant that LGBT students’ individual backgrounds, temperaments, and contact with other LGBT students and faculty had more to do with their experiences of Oberlin during this period than others. Two women narrators who now identify as bisexual and lesbian also suggested that the pervasive silence about (homo)sexuality may have been one reason that they did not recognize their own sexual attractions towards women when they were undergraduates.

Many male narrators internalized societal views that equated homosexuality with mental illness, deviancy, and sin, and—to varying degrees—isolated themselves from other gay students and faculty. For these narrators, the premium put on “being normal” and the stigmatization of any kind of “difference” during the cold war era weighed heavily on their minds. Other narrators instead associated their “difference” with an elite relationship to style, sophistication, and artistic talent. The Conservatory of Music and Oberlin’s theater programs were havens for these students and faculty and magnets for campus queer culture. There, many formed what they now characterize as gay “secret societies” or “clubs,” and cultivated sensibilities that countered the popular consensus on morality, gender presentation, and sexuality.

### A “Queer” College: Political Liberalism and Social Conservatism (1950s)

It has been a theme in Oberlin’s history that the college’s traditional strengths—its exceptional music conservatory, history of progressive race relations, and traditions of

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<sup>110</sup> See Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) and Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

student activism and academic excellence—have also been recast as weaknesses and sources of administrative anxiety. This may have especially been true during the 1950s. At a time when homosexuality, effeminacy, Communism, and other forms of “subversion” bled tautologically into one other, the “femininity” of the Conservatory, the limited racial “mixing” in campus housing, student leftist politics, and campus intellectualism could and were read as odd, “queer,” or even overtly homosexual, both on campus and off.

In 1950, for example, Oberlin’s Admissions Committee discussed “the anti-Oberlin feeling created...by an Oberlin student who had talked to a group of Indianapolis students about...the wonderful Inter-racial atmosphere of Oberlin and the fact that colored and white roomed together.” The Indianapolis group felt “Oberlin was queer” and that “they would not want to come here if this situation existed.”<sup>111</sup>

In Allan Spear’s (OC 58) experience, Oberlin’s strange (or “queer”) reputation was explicitly connected with fears of effeminacy and homosexuality. Raised in a Jewish family in Michigan City, Indiana, Spear was attracted to Oberlin’s politically charged, academic atmosphere. But his father, who was hoping for a more “manly” state school, had heard from a business associate that “Oberlin was a very strange place,” Spear recalled.

And [my father] asked, ‘Why in the world do [you] want to go there? They don’t have fraternities, it isn’t a normal college, they have really weird kids and all they do is sit around and talk about intellectual things.’...And I said, ‘That’s exactly why I want to go there.’ And I said, ‘I’m not like everybody else.’ And this was kind of the fateful line...And then, later on, my father [said], ‘Well I have to ask you something. When you said you’re different from everybody else, you wanna be different from everybody else, are you a homosexual?’ So [my parents] thought I was going to this really weird place that was going to turn me into a homosexual.

Spear felt that Oberlin *was* an unusual school; the stereotype of 1950s college students as the “Silent Generation” did not ring true for him of Oberlin. He recalled participating in pickets of local barber shops and bars that discriminated against African Americans and appearances by folk singer Pete Seeger at his campus cooperative, for instance. Yet, if Oberlin had a “queer” tinge and its students were politically vocal, it appears that LGBT people *were* silent about their sexual attractions and identities. Spear himself spoke out for the rights of others, but kept his homosexuality a closely guarded secret.

During the 1950s at Oberlin, Spear recalled that homosexuals were considered to be “ridiculous, frivolous people with effeminate manners,” “threatening” sexual predators, “artistic” or “musical,” and mentally ill—popular characterizations that were “somewhat contradictory with one another, but all negative.” Spear recalled furtively reading books on sexuality in the campus library in which homosexuality “was always dealt with within the context of abnormal psychology”—a message he internalized, ultimately seeking therapy after graduating.

Roger Smith (pseudonym; OC 55) also internalized societal views that equated homosexuality with mental illness, deviancy, and stigmatized effeminacy. His freshman-year

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<sup>111</sup> Oberlin College Archives, Admissions Committee minutes, Feb 3, 1950.

roommate, an “obvious fairy,” suffered a “mental breakdown” and left Oberlin mid-year. “This complicated my life,” Smith recalled, “because I thought that everybody that had these feelings...must be mentally unbalanced.” Smith himself felt he had “grave, sinister thoughts and desires, and should and would be rejected by anybody that I would share them with.”

Even close friends kept their sexuality hidden from one another. While college students Bill Vance (OC 56) and David Thomas (OC 56), both valedictorians of their high school classes, “spent hundreds of hours” with each other as undergraduates, they both kept their sexual attractions to other men a closely guarded secret. In high school, Thomas had maintained a discreet sexual relationship with another young man in his small Iowa hometown. But he imagined homosexuals to be depraved individuals, like dope addicts or alcoholics. Thomas, instead, was highly intelligent and driven, and at Oberlin, he was “determined to put that [high school relationship] behind me and to go straight.”<sup>112</sup>

For Vance, keeping his sexuality a secret was a source of terrible anxiety. “We all lived in such intense relationship with each other,” Vance recalled. “[There were] long bull sessions every night [and] always the danger of self-exposure.” A religious young man, Vance was “praying against” his homosexuality and “agonizing over [it] at night.” The “sheer agony” of the perceived conflict between his sexuality and his religious values ultimately led him to question organized religion and the concept of sin. Ironically, Oberlin’s required courses in religion also made him “far more skeptical” of organized religion, and the School of Theology building itself opened his eyes to same sex campus activity. “I remember going into the men’s room there, and at this time there was a lot of gay graffiti, and there was ‘for blow tap toe’ written on [the stall],” Vance recalled. The occasional tapping “scared me,” he remembered; “I’d get out of the booth and run away.”

Peg Morton (OC 53) and Bobbi Keppel (OC 55), two women graduates from the college who now identify as lesbian and bisexual, respectively, also recalled limited discussion of campus homosexuality. They felt that the overwhelming silence about sexuality may have contributed to the fact that neither woman recognized her sexual attractions towards other women when they were undergraduates—a statement echoed by women narrators from the 1960s.

Living “in the midst of a core of campus radicals” in Pyle Inn, which became Oberlin’s first student co-op in 1950, Morton recalled two women rooming together in a decidedly romantic fashion. “I remember some sort of a mild comment at one point, and my mild reaction,” Morton said. “Nobody seemed steamed up, it was just what two of our friends were doing.” Still, Morton—who now identifies as lesbian—felt she was exclusively attracted to men while she was a student. “Our hormones change as we get older, so that might be part of it,” she said. “If I had known about different kinds of sexuality I wonder whether my sexuality would have been different.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Thomas would later teach one of the first gay political courses in the nation [[http://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/oir.exhibit/david\\_thomas.html](http://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/oir.exhibit/david_thomas.html)], at UC Santa Cruz. He does recall a Conservatory student who lived off-campus in a relationship with another male student: one indication that not all gay students isolated themselves from one another.

<sup>113</sup> Email to author, 4/30/00. “I think I was fully heterosexual for many years, although I don’t know if that would have been the case if I had known about homosexuality. I might have gone either way, and was always a tomboyish sort. I was drawn into the feminist movement in the early ‘70s, was in women’s groups, volunteered at a Women’s shelter, etc., got divorced and after that associated mainly with women.”

In Bobbi Keppel's introductory psychology class, homosexuality "was just one of those things that was mentioned as essentially a mental illness," Keppel recalled. The only overt gay circles or people she encountered were abroad, during a year of study in England. During a visit to the French Riviera, a woman who had ties to a fellow Oberlin student's family introduced Keppel to an expatriate community of gay male artists fleeing harsh sodomy laws in England. "I got a very, very positive introduction to queer culture," she remembered. "I'd say my friends in France did a good job of undoing [the introductory Psychology class]."

But Keppel was not aware of any same sex attractions while she was a student. It was only later in life that she came out as a bisexual and later yet when she became a bi activist and author (her "coming out" story appears in the book *Bi Any Other Name* and her photo appears on the cover of *Getting Bi*).<sup>114</sup> "I feel that my life has been so enriched by being bisexual," she said. "Sometimes I wonder if Oberlin had been a friendly place for queer folks, is [my awareness] something that would have changed for me?"

### **An Oberlin Diary (1948-1953)**

Students spoke freely about heterosexual relationships and conquests, but Conservatory student Luke Warmer (pseudonym; OC 53) did not discuss his "difference" even with his male sexual partners, confiding almost exclusively in the journal he began at the age of seventeen, at the death of his father. In his Oberlin entries, he described his trysts and attractions in great detail and mused about everything from music to human behavior to the nature of sin and homosexuality.

At the time of his last interview, at the age of seventy-five, Warmer successfully maintained a sexual and romantic relationship with both a man and a woman. But as an undergraduate, he had a difficult time reconciling his sexual desires with the strict gender roles, characteristic of the era, that defined men as dominant and women as passive. "I will not become a man," he wrote in a March 11, 1951 entry, "until I realize women are ornaments and must be handled as such with respect, or interest. And in being ornaments to his essence, they make a man a man."

If Warmer felt that female accessories confirmed one's masculinity, he seemed to have believed that sexual experiences with men had a feminizing effect. In a July 23, 1948 entry, he wrote that sexual attraction to girls "brings out the man in me, gives me a feeling of mastery and domination," while with men, "I feel weak [sic], with a thin, nervous, surface feeling." He wrote of his attraction to women as a "Power" that he might "lose" or "drift away from" in a September 27, 1949 entry, and again described homosexuality as a weakness, or something an "immature" or "undeveloped" man might "take to," in a December 12, 1951 entry, relating a sexual encounter with a vagrant.

His writings about music were also filtered through the era's gender roles and colored by the cultural association of music and musicians with effeminacy and sexual

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<sup>114</sup> Hutchins, L. & Ka'ahumanu, L (eds), *Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual people speak out* (Boston: Alyson, 1991) and Robyn Ochs and Sarah E. Rowley (eds.), *Getting Bi: Voices of Bisexuals Around the World* (Cambridge: Bisexual Resource Center, 2005).

nonconformity. “Most men are not artists, but business men,” he claimed in a March 3, 1951 entry, “because there it is easier to be a man and live in ascendancy over the work.” In a March 14, 1949 entry, after listening to Debussy’s *La Mer*, he wrote about the connection between music and a “debauched” sex life and feared for both his musical and sexual future—“not separately, but combined.”

At the same time, Warmer later recalled in an interview that music also ultimately helped him disregard social norms and convention.<sup>115</sup> Music was another “world” he could enter, with its own sense of time, meaning, and morality (or lack thereof), which may have destabilized the “naturalness” and inevitability of everyday social norms. “During the middle of the last movement of the Haydn,” he wrote of a Cleveland Symphony concert in December 7, 1948, “I suddenly realized that I hadn’t made a slightest movement since the music had begun and that it seemed as if not one second had elapsed between then and the beginning, as if time had completely stood still.” Music could also be a near sexual experience: “During the Ravel,” he wrote, “I had an orgasm of the mind.”

His Episcopalian upbringing soon went out the window as he questioned conventions such as organized religion and sin, especially as it related to sexual expression. “Sin is that which harms you,” he argued in a February 14, 1952 entry after describing a sexual encounter in a Conservatory men’s room. “But to repress the sin instead of entering into it is not virtuous. So enter it. There are times when sin does not harm and it is not sin.”

His blissful descriptions of his attractions and “affairs” with male students and staff also often seemed to overshadow his anxiety about being a “man.” One February 16, 1949 entry was devoted exclusively to describing a head “so deserved to be loved that all I could think of beside the head itself, and its owner, of course, was my yearning to have the part of a woman.” In a February 10, 1949 entry, Warmer effused about the “strange and wonderful... way I’ve fallen in love” with a male student.

“I was shaking like a leaf with nervous excitement,” Warmer wrote in a February 22, 1949 entry, waiting for a young man to visit his dorm room. “What I am wondering intensely about is the future of this affair,” he wrote. “There seemed to be a relationship between us beyond the physical.” Yet there was rarely a moment when he or his affairs were not aware of the consequences of their encounters: “When he was leaving,” Warmer wrote of the next morning, there “was fear of guilt in that outside my door he was back in society which might discover.”

At times, Warmer imagined himself bucking convention altogether. “[T]here’s such a thing as living unafraid of others,” he wrote in December 27, 1948 entry, practicing a speech he planned to recite to a high school friend with whom he had had a long, unacknowledged sexual relationship.

I’m not trying to defy others, I just want to show that what other people think shouldn’t effect you or anyone, one must be free, it only makes a difference when it

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<sup>115</sup> “I think because I was already into music and color and the senses I soon disregarded the Episcopalian upbringing I was given, and paid no attention to religion or for that matter convention,” he said. “That didn’t, however, make me bold in being open about my [sexual] preferences since it was anathema to the other boys.”

involves others, and especially when it harms them[.] But this does neither... What you're doing is not wrong for you're following only instinct and surely that can't be wrong—it could in the eyes of convention, a word I'm beginning to hate—even if it weren't instinct, no difference.

In the end, Warmer did not follow through with his speech. But his entries are proof that, despite the silencing of same sex sexuality and relationships, the fear of exposure, and the social stigma surrounding effeminacy and homosexuality, students were smoldering below the surface, imagining other worlds.

### **Homosexuals as “Musical” and Conservatory as Haven (1950s/early 1960s)**

By the 1950s, the Conservatory of Music had been strongly associated with male effeminacy and homosexuality for decades. “Everyone knows about them,” Bob Diehm (OC 37) recalled students saying in the 1930s; “that place is full of queers.”<sup>116</sup> This was widely assumed to be true even outside Oberlin; as an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, a gay friend informed Robert Wood (GST 51) that the Conservatory was, using the same phrase, “full of queers.” The association was so strong that Steven Calvert (OC 62) “didn't look for gay people in the college. For me, it was just something in the Conservatory.” “Musical” was a euphemism for “homosexual” at the time, he remembered; “I think I took it a little bit too literally.”

This association of the Conservatory with “queers,” remarked upon by virtually all narrators, was partly the result of the larger cultural association of music with effeminacy and effeminacy with male homosexuality. But the frequent jokes and gossip about “fairy” musicians also had a concrete basis: the Conservatory *did* serve as a haven for many homosexual students and faculty and as a magnet for campus queer life and culture. Like the larger world of twentieth century classical music, the Conservatory sustained alternative kinship, support, and mentorship networks, and was a relatively hospitable space for LGBT lives.

Larry Palmer (OC 60) recalled a feeling of camaraderie among gay male students in the organ department as well as an important friendship with a gay Conservatory professor. The son of a Presbyterian minister and high school teacher raised in a small Ohio town, as a freshman Palmer fell in love with fellow organ major Roy Kehl (OC 58), a “lovely, moody” boy who would become his boyfriend and remain so for the rest of Palmer's Oberlin years. Kehl in turn introduced Palmer as “a friend of Dorothy” to Professor Robert Melcher (OC 32), a “virtuoso theory teacher” who would become Palmer's main confidant, mentor, and friend among the faculty.

Melcher, who Palmer affectionately described as “a little wizened, bald-headed man,” shared information about homosexuality, such as articles and books he had collected on the subject, that Palmer and Kehl would not have otherwise had access to. He also passed on Oberlin's own gay folklore, sharing stories about homosexual musicians such as W.G. Breckenridge, a colorful professor of piano who taught at Oberlin from 1890 to 1934.

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<sup>116</sup> Oberlin College Alumni Office, *Into the Pink: An Oral History of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students at Oberlin College from 1937 to 1991* (Oberlin College, Ohio, 1996). This phrase is attributed to Diehm by Allan Spear.

Another of Melcher's stories concerned the campus origins of one of the most nationally revered musical pairings at the time, between a French baritone and his celebrated accompanist, an Oberlin graduate. In the early 1950s, the baritone appeared as a part of Oberlin's Artist Recital Series and was housed at the Oberlin Inn, where the pianist was working a student job as a waiter. According to Melcher's version of the meeting, it was "love at first sight." The student was asked to turn pages at the recital, and following graduation was invited to France to become the baritone's permanent partner—both musical and personal. Melcher, Palmer recalled, "was so happy at the sheer romance" of the story. Other narrators recalled hearing about the meeting as well; the story circulated among Conservatory students at least until the mid 1960s. As such, Melcher was part of the dissemination of a unique gay Conservatory folklore passed down through generations of students and faculty.

Like Palmer, Thomas Tibbetts (OC 59) found a role model in his voice teacher, Howard Hatton, who "ran around with some of the better-known gay luminaries" and was one of the "notable, very well-placed homosexuals" Tibbetts recalled at Oberlin. Unlike Palmer and Melcher, their shared homosexuality was an unspoken subtext to their relationship, Tibbetts recalled.

In contrast to the experiences of many of his contemporaries, Tibbetts had maintained a full, rich gay social life from the time he was in high school, finding gay men in all the major institutions of his "very conservative, Republican, semi-rural" hometown of Marietta, Ohio. He met gay students at the town's college, who used code words like "musical," "lavender," and "gay" to determine each other's homosexuality, and was "brought out" by a high school friend who told him "what went on in metropolitan areas, what a gay bar was, and [who] the gay people in history were." They also went "exploring" at male cruising grounds such as picnic grounds, bookstores, and library and department store tearooms in larger towns in West Virginia. A religious young man, Tibbetts played organ in many of the local churches, which he also found were "very cruisy, fertile playing fields for gay people."

While Tibbetts felt homosexuals were commonly characterized as "mentally deranged queers who wanted to corrupt young children," he ultimately rejected this message after coming into contact with this diverse group of homosexual and bisexual men. He also soon found a double meaning in the Episcopal hymn, "I Sing a Song of the Saints," written about "the joyous saints/who love to do Jesus' will." "You can meet them in school, on the street, in the store," it goes, "in church, by the sea, in the house next door;...and I mean to be one too."

At Oberlin, Tibbetts majored in economics but devoted most of his energy to music and theater. While he found the Conservatory to be a relatively safe space for gay men, he soon learned that "musical" did not always mean homosexual. "I had come to think that every light-footed, effeminate, lisping male musician was certainly queer," he recalled. "Now being a more enlightened person, I know that that is absolutely not true, and that you can get yourself into embarrassing situations if you make that assumption." Through his involvement with music and theater, Tibbetts did become friends with a number of gay students, with whom he would listen to recordings, chat in the coffee shop, and attend concerts. During his senior year, he lived with a group of gay friends in an off-campus house owned by the President of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. The home appears to

have housed groups of primarily gay Conservatory students from the 1950s well into the mid-1970s, another indication that the Conservatory propagated gay “culture” and traditions robust enough to be passed down through successive student classes.

The Conservatory served as a magnet for queer life and culture at Oberlin, just as the classical music world did for the nation as a whole. For those who felt a profound and stigmatized sense of sexual “difference,” music was often an emotional salve, historian Nadine Hubbs has argued, or an “abstract” channel for “sublimation and expression of forbidden desires.” Being nonverbal and “abstract,” music has also been characterized as “value-free” and without “truth claims,” and was therefore especially attractive to homosexuals and other stigmatized groups.<sup>117</sup> Immersing oneself in the world of music could also destabilize the “naturalness” or inevitability of social norms that stigmatized homosexuals in the worlds of religion, psychology, and politics. Luke Warmer (pseudonym; OC 53) recalled that discovering the worlds of “music and color and the senses” helped him to disregard “the Episcopalian upbringing [he] was given...[and] for that matter convention,” as discussed in the previous “Oberlin Diary” section.

Young men drawn to music may have been ridiculed as effeminate or “irrelevant” fairies, but Conservatory students’ status as artists possessing “talent” in one of the country’s top music schools also brought them considerable praise. The strong cultural associations of musicality with homosexuality also allowed for some “slippage” between the two categories, Hubbs has argued, and “open[ed] up possibilities for a deprecation of the former, an appreciation of the latter, and even for the existence of some special correlation between the two.”<sup>118</sup> In this way, Conservatory student Tony Wells (OC 62) recast social views that equated homosexuality with pathology by associating homosexuality instead with an elite relationship to style and artistic talent. “We homosexual Conservatory students thought we were becoming members of the same elite, glamorous fraternity as Tchaikovsky and Proust and Gide and Cocteau and Francis Poulenc and Samuel Barber and Aaron Copland and Ned Rorem,” Wells recalled.

This is not to say that the Conservatory was a homosexual utopia. In the mid-1950s the Conservatory hiring committee rejected at least two applicants because of their homosexuality, according to Raymond Donnell (OC 53). Donnell, an alumnus applying for a position as the Associate Director, was one applicant. The other was an internationally renowned female vocalist, Donnell recalled. “This had to do, not with witch-hunting, but with views about mores, and that people who are now called gay were a bad influence on students, and a corrupting one.”

In this environment, Palmer remembered Melcher being “riddled with guilt and afraid that he’d be found out.” Homosexuality “was totally illegal,” he recalled, “so it really did make a difference when you’re realizing that you’re part of a criminal culture.” As a student, Palmer wasn’t troubled, “but I think certainly for the faculty people, and the mature people at Oberlin, it must have been a great burden trying to live in the shadows of the time.”

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 100

<sup>118</sup> Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 137.

In this climate, gay Conservatory students and faculty worked to bypass official administrative regulatory structures by policing themselves and other gay people. Melcher, for those who knew about him, was “sort of a lifeline if something did happen,” Palmer recalled. During Palmer’s senior year, for instance, a newly hired organ professor tried to “put the make” on a gay student who did not appreciate the attention. In order to sidestep the need for administrative interference, the student went to Palmer, who in turn went to Melcher. Melcher then “took [the professor] aside and [told him] this was not going to work, and he didn’t lay off trying to harass [the student], there would be very, very serious consequences.”

Even during a rabidly anti-homosexual era, the Conservatory sustained alternative support and mentorship networks, its own gay folklore and sense of history, and tools to counter anti-homosexual beliefs. It was therefore a relatively hospitable space for LGBT lives.

### **Homosexuals as Mentally Ill (late 1950s/early 1960s)**

Especially in the late 1950s and early 1960s, many male narrators recalled being so disturbed by their attractions to other men that they sought psychological help. Mental health professionals, as well as the general public, considered homosexuality to be a mental illness at the time, and it was listed as such by the American Psychiatric Association in their *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders* (DSM) until 1974. Other Oberlin students internalized this message but did not seek help. For these narrators, the premium put on being “normal” and the stigmatization of any form of deviancy or “difference” during the cold war era weighed heavily on their minds.

Gale Kramer (OC 63), who considered himself “a flawed heterosexual,” went “secretly and ashamedly” to the county mental health clinic in Elyria. “I probably appeared quite sociable,” he recalled, “while feeling desperately different inside.”

Jim Humphreys (OC 61), a mathematics major, “was Phi Beta Kappa, summa cum laude...but deeply depressed about my sexuality when I graduated, which no one at Oberlin was helpful about,” he recalled. “I only knew that I wanted to be ‘normal’ like everybody else. There wasn’t much in 1950s culture to help me understand what I was going through, so my perceptions of other people were very limited.”<sup>119</sup>

Tom Copeland (OC 66) recalled visiting the psychologist hired by faculty in 1959 who held office hours at Oberlin’s Health Services two days a week.<sup>120</sup> “I said, ‘I am homosexual and I don’t want to be,’” he recalled. “I think those were my exact words.” The psychologist gave him the names of two therapists in Cleveland who were trained in what later became known as “conversion therapy,” but Copeland had no way of getting to Cleveland and subsequently let the issue drop.

Michael Heintz (OC 63), a piano major who recalled campus rallies in support of Fidel Castro—and who remembered his parents’ fears that Oberlin would “turn [him] into a Communist”—nonetheless felt Oberlin was socially conservative and hostile toward

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<sup>119</sup> Email to author, 24 Jul 2004.

<sup>120</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 9/25/59.

homosexuals. The general campus consensus was that homosexuals were “sick, unnatural, [and] perverted,” he recalled. Homosexuality was “something that was absolutely undercover, and not recognizable *at all*,” he recalled. Not surprisingly, Heintz was “deeply conflicted” at Oberlin. “It tore me apart,” he recalled. “I didn’t know which way to go.”

Donald Downs (OC 62), a violin performance major from outside of Boston, also remembered a socially conservative campus. “That’s a time when they locked women up at night,” he said. “You still put a jacket and tie on for dinner and things were very organized socially. So all those reminders of how you were supposed to be were there. But it was still a lot more open and had a lot more possibilities than back *home*.”

Downs was aware of an “exotic” and “knowing” “Lounge Crowd” that met in the Conservatory basement to smoke cigarettes, and he had “affairs” with a few male students, but “I knew something was wrong,” he recalled. “The only possibility I knew about male-male or female-female sexuality or anything different [than heterosexuality] was filtered through that whole overlay of the McCarthy era and these terrible fears everybody had.” The images of “Communists, perverts, [and] the invader from within...combined with a really narrow suburban white middle-class focus in the 1950s on being materially well off and moving in a very strictly limited and controlled direction.” These views convinced him that “I wasn’t going to fit in,” and that not fitting in “wasn’t alright.”

Leonard Gibbs (OC 62), a violin and French horn major from west of Cleveland, discussed his sexuality with Downs, but had affairs with women “to try to change myself.” Other than seeing a psychologist at the medical center his freshman year, Downs was his only confidant.

Robert Stiefel (OC 63) remembered seeking guidance from the college doctor at Oberlin’s Health Center his sophomore year. “I was near tears and I was scared and I needed some kind of help,” he remembered, “but there wasn’t any.” After making his confession, the doctor told him, “you’ve had a perfectly good bringing up, this is just a phase you’re going through, and you should be ashamed of yourself for thinking these things, cause you’ll disappoint your parents,” Stiefel recalled.

Remarkably, some gay students did reach out to help Stiefel. On the outskirts of a Gilbert and Sullivan theater group during his senior year, Stiefel remembered a member of a gay theater circle talking one night about how he came to terms with being gay and telling Stiefel about a particularly “understanding” and “sympathetic” student that he could talk with.<sup>121</sup> Stiefel writes about his experiences at Oberlin and his bittersweet friendship with classmate Michael Lynch, later a prominent gay activist in Toronto, in an essay available on the Oberlin LGBT History website ([www.oberlinlgbt.org](http://www.oberlinlgbt.org)).

### **A Gay Theater Circle: Camp Sensibility and *The Boy Friend* (early 1960s)**

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<sup>121</sup> The student lived with his boyfriend on campus; they are still a couple. This student gave Stiefel the courage to tell his best friend about his homosexuality, a very significant step at the time.

Although circumspect, members of a small theater circle in the early 1960s were much less likely than others to understand homosexuality as a mental illness, instead associating it with a privileged relationship to aesthetics, wit, and style.

The circle was not exclusively male *or* gay. Beverly Ball (OC 63), a heterosexual woman, quickly became a vital part of the circle after immersing herself in the Oberlin Dramatic Association her freshman year, soon earning the moniker “La Reine Mère” (ostensibly French for “Queen Mother”). “I actually preferred the company of my gay theatrical friends,” Ball recalled. “They were more fun and there was kind of a secret we all had—it was like a little club.”

A letter from a fellow student to Timothy Hansen (pseudonym, OC 64), a flamboyant history major involved in the circle, suggests the group’s character. “Dearest, darling [Timothy],” it begins,

Needless to say, I am absolutely thrilled to death and devastation with your charming offer. Needless to say, I will be honored and delighted to accept the role, and I promise to use my famed talent and sensitivity to execute it in the best manner possible. Needless to say, I will return on the eighth...because I just simply adore having my picture taken. Since all is needless to say, I shan’t say more.

The letter was signed, “Passionate Love, Sophie Tucker,” using the name of the flashy and dynamic performer who claimed to be “The Last of the Red Hot Mamas.”<sup>122</sup>

Camp was clearly important to the circle. In her landmark 1964 essay, “Notes on Camp,” Susan Sontag defined camp as the “the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.” “To camp is a mode of seduction,” she wrote, “one which employs flamboyant mannerisms susceptible of a double interpretation; gestures full of duplicity, with a witty meaning for cognoscenti and another, more impersonal, for outsiders.”<sup>123</sup> Camp ultimately helped gay men, “outsiders” in the larger world, define themselves as “insiders” of their own secret world. Members of the theater circle embraced the “club”-like characteristic of their gay campus world.

“Much was below the radar of most of America; but that was always OK with me,” Hansen remembered. “I loved the ‘secret life’ aspect of 1960s gay life; I rather miss it, in fact.” Jim Mosher (OC 62), a government major who arrived at Oberlin from a boarding school in Wisconsin, described the theater circle as a “secret underground society.” “You knew other gay people and you knew that you had a secret bond that the rest of the world didn’t know about,” he recalled. “There was an excitement, it was a little bit subversive, a little bit underworld...and being hidden was part of the fun. It’s hard to imagine from today’s perspective, but there was a real positive side to the oppression.”

The circle may have been able to capitalize on the public’s naïveté and find the “positive side to the oppression” in part because many associated homosexuality not with

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<sup>122</sup> Oberlin College Archives, Student Papers.

<sup>123</sup> Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 1964. Reprinted in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982), 105-19.

mental illness, but with sophistication and artistic talent. “We were happy, budding aesthetes,” recalled Tony Wells (OC 62), a Conservatory student from a small Kansas farm town. In his memory, gay life at Oberlin “was wildly sexy, romantic, and *fun*.”

The group gathered at an off-campus bar called Don’s to gossip and—Oberlin being a dry town—drink 3.2 beer (“It was just like dishwater,” Ball remembered). When a French theatrical company whisked through Oberlin their senior year, members of the theater circle paired off with them for the night; Stephen Calvert (OC 62) ended up with the famous executive producer, who eventually invited Calvert to stay with him in New York City. The group also occasionally found their way to Cleveland gay bars, and Ball and Wells hitchhiked to New York City, where they made their first stop at Julius, according to Wells, “the famous Greenwich Village gay bar with picture windows proudly open to viewing from the street.” The famed French baritone and his accompanist who met at Oberlin in the early 1950s returned to campus for a recital that the circle attended, the story about their campus romance still circulating.

Perhaps most importantly, the group held campy theater rehearsals with the outrageous director of the Oberlin Dramatic Association (ODA), English professor Stan McLaughlin (OC 22). McLaughlin taught at Oberlin since 1925, directed the ODA from 1935 until his retirement in 1961,<sup>124</sup> and helped create a sense of cohesion and continuity for gay student theater circles.

Mosher remembered visiting McLaughlin at his house often for drinks (“in cold weather it was rye,” he recalled, “and in warm weather it was orange blossoms”), to cry on his shoulder about relationship problems, learn about Oberlin gay life in the 1940s and ‘50s, and borrow gay-themed books. “He was the first person that sort of gave me a picture of what it was like to live as an adult gay person,” Mosher remembered. “I credit him with getting me through life sane.” In the same vein, Howard Spendelow (OC 66) remembered McLaughlin, then retired, holding “salons” for gay students. “If you went down to Stan’s house, you knew you were going to have fascinating conversation [and] really great music,” he recalled. “He created the kind of social atmosphere in which you could be relaxed with a bunch of guys, learn some of the lore of the campus, [and] stories about people in the past.”<sup>125</sup>

In 1962, when most members of the circle were in their senior year, they produced *The Boy Friend—A Gay Musical Comedy of the ‘20s*, to the wide acclaim of the Oberlin community. At a time when “gay” was still largely a code word and the community underground, the student staging of *The Boy Friend* was a remarkable production; it brought together a group of primarily gay male students, showcased a camp sensibility (however coded) both for Oberlin students and Cleveland gay bar patrons, and was at the same time wildly entertaining.

“I loved ‘The Boy Friend’ from absurd beginning to ludicrous finale,” one student wrote in a *Review* article. “It is fast, funny, and delightful, and it should be enjoyed, not

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<sup>124</sup> Oberlin College Archives website.

<sup>125</sup> According to the Oberlin College Archives website, McLaughlin died after a long battle with leukemia in West Germany on May 13, 1985 and was survived by William Baltes, a “close friend” who shared a house in Germany with McLaughlin for over twenty years.

analyzed. The show is a spoof of the 'twenties musical, and every corny line and irrelevant song is, and is meant to be, gloriously ridiculous. The plot is silly; the chorus dashes on and off for no known reason; the characters constantly break into tender song and are as rapturous at the final curtain as the audience."<sup>126</sup> *The Boy Friend* was, in other words, very camp.

The musical "lends itself to extreme camp, and that's what we did with it, in a very not-so-subtle way," remembered Beverly Ball, the director of the largely gay male cast. "That element of *here I am honey* was right out there and it was a very gay show." She also felt that the gay students "were liberated by it in a way, because it was totally okay to camp it up and be a hoot and a holler." Wells recalled being "outrageously campy and fey in the 'title' role. By this time in our young lives, I think most of us had decided that it was chic to be homosexual. I know that I was certainly flaunting it."

Set primarily in "Madame Dubonnet's Finishing School for Fine Young Ladies," the musical is a heterosexual love story about an English heiress and a delivery boy. But the musical, itself a spoof on '20s musicals, might also be interpreted as a lampoon of heterosexuality. In a romantic duet between the two leads, for instance, Jim Mosher remembered that Wells ("a little bit of a lisp—a little too much of a lisp") and "Suzie," the female lead, hold hands, "but they never look at each other. They are so concerned with looking out at the audience...they're obviously actors with egos up the wazoo...And Tony is looking out at the audience with his big Colgate smile and Suzie is looking at him and then all of the sudden, when he turns to look at her she looks into the audience. So never do their eyes meet throughout this whole romantic duet."

These memories suggest that while the production may have been "absurd," "irrelevant," and "silly," as the *Review* claimed, the camp employed in the production can also be understood as a cultural strategy that helped gay students to undermine and make sense of social views that served to stigmatize them. In "Notes on Camp," Sontag reminds her readers that "every sensibility is self-serving to the group that promotes it." Homosexuals, who she called the "vanguard" of camp, "have pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense," she wrote. "Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness."<sup>127</sup>

At least parts of the audience were in on the joke. On a run into Cleveland for theater props and lighting equipment, Mosher and others posted fliers at gay bars advertising the "gay musical comedy." "We had some of the *strangest* audiences turning up in Hall Auditorium to see that show," he remembered. Robert Stiefel (OC 63), who heard a rumor that "the whole male cast of *The Boy Friend* was gay," recalled a "sense of camaraderie, and...a sense of electricity in the cast," at the performances he attended. "They got that point of the play," he remembered, "which is to appear naïve but actually be highly sophisticated...Looking back on it, the gay sensibility is what something that made theater so exciting and so fun."

At the same time, the theater world, like the Conservatory, regulated its homosexual presence. At a summer around 1958 at Cape Cod with Oberlin's Gilbert and Sullivan troupe,

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<sup>126</sup> Oberlin College Archives, Dick Candee scrapbook, *Oberlin Review* article by Geoff Ward.

<sup>127</sup> Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 1964. Reprinted in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982), 105-19.

Thomas Tibbetts (OC 59) was called into the office of the producer, a professor of French at Oberlin. “He wanted to know what I knew about all this homosexual activity that he’d been hearing about,” Tibbetts remembered. “And the first thing I thought was, am I going to get the third degree about myself? But I very shortly discovered that suddenly I was supposed to become his inside confidant and whistle-blower, which was not my preferred role.”

## 1960s: Civil Rights, Social Rules, and the Sexual Revolution

### Introduction

The 1960s were a time of intense conflict over political authority, racial equality, sexual self-expression, and personal autonomy. At Oberlin, LGBT people helped shape these debates. The momentous changes in student culture in turn influenced the ways LGBT students thought about themselves as individuals and, more significantly, as a group.

The civil rights movement, which galvanized the Oberlin campus in the late 1950s to mid 1960s, profoundly impacted the way many LGBT people understood their stigmatized sexual “difference” and ultimately helped pave the way for political action based on a minority model of sexual identity. Starting in the mid-1960s, the college also began working to increase African American enrollment, leading to a more cohesive African American community—one that at least one African American narrator characterized as welcoming to LGBT students.

In the latter part of the decade, the campus hippie and drug cultures’ celebration of sexual pleasure and personal “authenticity,” along with the increasingly radical anti-war, racial justice, and student movements, led some LGBT narrators to be more candid about their own sexual identities. As in the tumultuous interwar period, fears of homosexuality also influenced and shaped the contentious campus debate around social rules, administrative paternalism, and campus sex-segregation in the 1960s. In the early 1960s, the administration continued to act *in loco parentis* (literally “in place of parents”) to police and regulate male-female student behavior through a host of social rules. Students would successfully dismantle these campus traditions by the late 1960s and early 1970s, which would coincide with, and create an environment relatively conducive to, the founding of Oberlin’s first gay student organization in 1971.

The Conservatory of Music and campus theater programs remained havens for many LGBT students during the 1960s, and the more flamboyant among them increasingly claimed public space for themselves. Theater groups gossiped in the snack bar and outrageous musicians held court in the new Conservatory Lounge, using camp and “drag names” to create a protective in-group, come to terms with their sexual identities, and pressure closeted gay and lesbian students to “come out” into a gay social world. While these flamboyant queens could, and did, include women of all sexual persuasions in their circles, their world was a decidedly male one. Before the women’s liberation movement of the early 1970s, lesbian circles appear to have been much less cohesive and visible than gay male circles.

Gay students and faculty continued to visit off-campus venues, but they appear to have become less important as gay campus circles and spaces became more accessible. Students also increasingly brought LGBT themes to the forefront of the classroom during the 1960s, often angered by professors’ silencing of the subject.

While some administrators embraced ‘60s student radicalism and were relatively sympathetic to LGBT students—most notably John Thompson, the director of the newly formed Oberlin Psychological Services—the Carr administration as a whole was extremely

anxious about the questionable “masculinity” and political “impulsiveness” of the student body. These anxieties would come to a head during the 1969 Admissions controversy, in which “questionable comments” were found men’s applications, “ranging from the political persuasion of admissions candidates to masculinity.”

The controversy, sparked, arguably, by an effort to erase homosexuality from the campus, ironically had the effect of broadening campus discussion of LGBT people. In the context of the controversy, students characterized homosexuals as a class of person wrongly discriminated against, grouped gay students along with political radicals and other “outsiders,” and identified gay people as being among the vanguard of those pushing the “liberal limits” of the college and larger culture. These were all significantly positive characterizations in the context of a leftist, anti-establishment student culture, and an indication that homosexuality was beginning to be thought of as a “political”—rather than “moral” or “psychological”—condition by the end of the 1960s.

### **The Civil Rights Movement and LGBT Identities (late 1950s to mid 1960s)**

Oberlin had been a major terminus of the Underground Railroad and a hotbed of abolitionist activity in the nineteenth century. The 1858 Oberlin-Wellington Rescue, a key event in the national abolitionist movement, has even led one historian to dub Oberlin “the town that started the Civil War.”<sup>128</sup> In the late 1950s and 1960s, while African American students made up no more than 3% of the student body, the civil rights movement rekindled these early commitments and galvanized the Oberlin community. As early as the late 1950s, white Oberlin students began attending semesters at Southern “Negro Colleges,” and in the early 1960s large numbers of students participated in Cleveland sit-ins, picketed segregated Ohio businesses, and participated in fund drives to send money to the South.<sup>129</sup>

LGBT narrators who devoted themselves to the civil rights movement felt, in retrospect, that they had special reasons for doing so. The movement profoundly impacted the way these Oberlin students and faculty understood their stigmatized sexual desires, and ultimately helped pave the way for political action based on a minority model of LGBT identity.

Allan Spear (OC 58), a white, Jewish history major, enrolled at Oberlin in part because of its activist reputation. He soon joined the campus NAACP and participated in pickets of local barbershops and bars that discriminated against African Americans. For a semester during his junior year, he attended Fisk University, a primarily African American liberal arts institution in Nashville, Tennessee, and came back to Oberlin “all fired up about civil rights,” he recalled. During his senior year, he took what he believed was one of the first African American history courses offered at a predominantly white college and he went on to write his graduate school dissertation in African American history.

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<sup>128</sup> Nat Brandt, *The Town That Started the Civil War* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990).

<sup>129</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 2/24/59. In 1964 nearly half the student body participated in the “Freedom Fast,” in which the dining company donated unused meal money to the drive. *Oberlin Review*, 2/21/64, “1200 Students Sign Up to Fast for Civil Rights,” from Alicia D’Addario, “In Search of Community: The Oberlin Student Movement, 1961-1968.”

[<http://www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/DAddarioHonors/DAddarioHonors-Title.htm>]

His involvement in the civil rights and, later, the anti-war movement “certainly did have an impact [on] how I later viewed myself when I came out as gay in a political context,” Spear said. “I began asking questions about myself and began to relate my activism to growing awareness of my own homosexuality, and the fact that this was not a pathology, but it was a minority status.” In 1974, Spear became the first openly gay male legislator in the nation. He served for many years in the Minnesota Senate, ultimately as President, and was the chief Senate author of Minnesota’s 1993 GLBT rights bill, extending protection from discrimination in employment, education, and housing to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Minnesotans.

Jeffrey Piker (OC 62) became involved with civil rights activism as a high school student in Cincinnati, and it remained a major focus for him at Oberlin. He also attended Fisk University for a semester in 1960, during the time of the Nashville sit-ins. In retrospect, Piker felt he had unique reasons for participating in the movement. “One basis of at least some of my strong personal commitment in that area,” he wrote, may have been an “internal displacement of my personal worries and fears about my own marginality [or] ‘abnormality’ based on sexual orientation.” It was “at exactly the same time when I started to realize that I was sexually attracted to other boys and that this was not...a ‘good’ idea [that] I was also taking up the cause of fighting discrimination against black people,” he recalled. Decades later, when he “came out” in a gay political context, he also began to organize in his local LGBT community, “much as I had done over many years in race relations issues.”<sup>130</sup>

In this way, white LGBT students unable to speak out about their own oppression may have taken up the cause of others—in this case African Americans, and primarily those in the South. White LGBT students’ participation in civil rights activism was also complicated by the sexual politics surrounding the movement. White supremacists had historically justified segregation by characterizing African Americans and, to a lesser extent, their white supporters, as sexually suspect. Historian John Howard has shown how white supremacists fabricated cultural stereotypes such as the “lusty Jezebels” and “hypersexualized black male rapist,” and branded white liberals as “traitors to the race” prone to race mixing, miscegenation, and sexual deviancy.<sup>131</sup> White LGBT people may have felt a special affinity to African Americans and their supporters in this context. Additionally, as in the cold war era, the stigmatized identities of “homosexual,” “Communist,” and “civil rights activist” often bled into each other, and white supremacists used these associations to discredit the movement.

Ken Sherrill experienced this rhetoric first-hand as a graduate student involved in marches, sit-ins, and voter drives at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill in the early 1960s. “Imagine,” he said, “a 20-year-old kid from New York marching down a street in North Carolina as some people in a crowd shouted, ‘New York Jew-nigger-loving-commie-queer!’ This, literally, happened.” Sherrill, a gay, Jewish, New York native, recalled being “stunned at how they could know a total stranger so well” and “shuddered at the sheer hate that was invested in each of those words.” As a government professor at Oberlin from 1965-67, Sherrill and a small group of white gay and bisexual faculty occasionally talked about the fact that they were fighting for the rights of others but not for their own. Gay activism “was

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<sup>130</sup> Email to the author, 7/29/04.

<sup>131</sup> John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 143.

not something that anybody was optimistic enough about to contemplate taking political action,” he recalled, though “some of us were talking about doing something about it one day.”

African American LGBT students’ relationship to the civil rights movement was perhaps even more complicated. Starting in 1963, the Special Education Opportunities Program, though a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, began working to increase the enrollment of people of color for the first time in Oberlin’s history.<sup>132</sup> The numbers of African American students steadily increased through the end of the decade, which made possible, among other things, a more cohesive black campus community.<sup>133</sup>

For François Clemmons (OC 67), raised in a working class black family and a predominantly African American community in Youngstown, Ohio, arriving at the overwhelmingly white Oberlin was still a “cultural shock.” A voice major at Oberlin, Clemmons also threw himself into civil rights organizing, participating in protests at Woolworth’s lunch counters and other segregated spaces in Elyria, Lorain, and Cleveland with fellow students, both white and African American. He also met Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during one of the three times King spoke at Oberlin in the 1960s, which Clemmons remembered being “one of the most influential moments” of his life.

A young, gay African American man in an overwhelmingly white environment, Clemmons felt less estranged from Oberlin’s “close-knit” black community than he did from the primarily white gay worlds he encountered, witnessing racial discrimination at some Cleveland gay bars and subtle racism among white gay Oberlin students. On the other hand, the religious community in which he was raised characterized homosexuals as immoral and weak-minded, and Clemmons had internalized their belief that “gay people could not be very bright or brilliant...or artistic leaders of their community.”

In this context, Clemmons’ friendship with Glover Parham (OC 67), a fellow African American voice major active in the campus black community and widely known to be gay, was crucial. Raised in an upper class, educated family in Birmingham, Alabama, and the valedictorian of his high school class, Parham was “erudite in his ways,” Clemmons remembered; “I always felt like a disciple.” Parham introduced Clemmons to gay African American writers such as Langston Hughes and made him aware of the Harlem Renaissance “and all of the writers that turned out to be gay.” They also “talked an awful lot about writers like James Baldwin who had traveled all over the world, who had been involved in the civil rights struggle with Dr. King [and] that this great man was gay.” The friendship did much to dispel the anti-gay beliefs with which Clemmons had grown up, and nurtured both his black and his gay identities.

Clemmons became even closer with Glover as an upperclassman, and later visited his family. “Once [Glover] opened his arms and his heart to me, his whole family did,” Clemmons recalled. “His family was the dream family I had hoped for.” Parham himself

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<sup>132</sup> James Oliver Horton, “Black Education at Oberlin College: A Controversial Commitment,” *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 54, No. 4. (Autumn, 1985), pp. 477-499; 496.

<sup>133</sup> Delia Pitts, “Faculty Approves Black Program,” *Oberlin Review*, 12/6/68, from Alicia D’Addario, “In Search of Community...”

called Clemmons “my devoted friend and my family’s ‘adopted son.’”<sup>134</sup> Glover, one of the founding members of Oberlin Lambda Alumni, died of complications related to AIDS in 1995.

Martha Shackford (OC 69), a white music education major at Oberlin, also felt she had special reasons for participating in the civil rights movement. The daughter of two English teachers who were both “extremely liberal” and active in the civil rights movement, Shackford applied to Oberlin “because it was the first college to accept women and because it was the last stop on the Underground Railroad, and it didn’t have sororities or fraternities,” she recalled. “So you can see there’s something else working there [laughs].”

Shackford felt she was “incredibly naïve” about her sexuality at Oberlin. “I had no words for it at all,” she recalled. “I was in major turmoil about it, but I didn’t know what it was. All I knew is that I was falling in love with the wrong people.” When she “came out” to herself at the age of twenty-five, while teaching in a lower income black area in Philadelphia, “it suddenly became very, very clear to me why I was obsessed with the whole black thing,” she recalled. “It was because I myself felt oppressed, but didn’t know why.”

### **The Challenge to *In Loco Parentis*, Campus Masculinity, and Administrative Anxiety (1960-1970)**

In 1960, a small group of first year students wrote a remarkable letter to the *Oberlin Review* in protest of the mandatory sex education seminars they had attended. “Our main objection to these two venerable doctors,” they wrote, irreverently referring to the seminar instructors, “is that we were required to return with them to the days of unquestioning conformity, Victorian morals, and the dusty pronouncements of the dangers of Communist infiltration if our sex codes are relaxed.”

The students—at least a few of whom were “red diaper babies,” or children of Communist Party members or other leftists—also offered what was for the time a radical defense of homosexuality. “Dr. Jean’s attitude toward homosexuals, ‘that they ought to be pitied, rather than looked down upon,’ is the kind of narrow minded attitude which, in fact, makes homosexuality the problem that it is,” they argued. “Only if homosexuality is accepted as a natural social phenomenon, as it is in England, can we approach the problem objectively, if we agree that this is a ‘problem’ after all.”<sup>135</sup>

Two weeks later, Professor W. Arthur Turner responded incredulously to the “offensive” letter in a manner consistent with the *in loco parentis* community model, which empowered faculty to act as “parents” to students. “To me, and many others who have been at Oberlin since you were in rompers, and longer,” Turner began, “your letter seems immoral, rude, and silly.” Moreover, “in terms of the Christian morality upon which this country—and this college—were founded,” he wrote, “the implications of your letter are simply immoral.”<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Oberlin College Archives, Glover Parham papers.

<sup>135</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 12/2/60. The students were likely referring to the Wolfenden Report (1957) and consequent legalization of homosexuality in England.

<sup>136</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 12/16/60. The exchange also illustrates the diversity of opinion about homosexuality on campus: the very liberal attitude that homosexuals should be “pitied rather than looked down upon,” the

Students would give Professor Turner far more reason for offense in the following years. The sex education letters stands as a harbinger of the student radicalism, sexual expression, and increased visibility of LGBT people—as well as administrative anxiety about these developments—that would characterize the Oberlin campus in the 1960s. The letters also suggest, rightly, that protest against paternalistic administrative efforts to shape student male-female socializing and sexuality would be linked to growing acceptance and visibility of LGBT people and issues on campus.

A host of administrative restrictions still defined student heterosociability at Oberlin in the early 1960s. Male students could only visit women in their dormitories from 2:00 to 4:00 on Sunday afternoons, and eagle-eyed house mothers patrolled the halls with rulers to enforce regulations that rooms be open at least twelve inches and that couples have three feet on the floor at all times. Women had 8:30 P.M. curfews, and “parietal forms” could be completed by parents to restrict their behavior even further. Girl-boy-girl-boy seating, prayers, and a starchy dress code were observed at meals, and the administration banned alcohol and student automobiles.<sup>137</sup>

As early as 1959, a student called for a “change from prudish attitudes” on campus to “a more positive attitude towards man-woman relationships.”<sup>138</sup> By the mid 1960s, the level of student discontentment with social rules was extremely high. Involvement in the civil rights movement had a dramatic impact on many students’ perceptions of their own place in society and their ability to create change, and their challenge to the *in loco parentis* community model would only become stronger as student movements focused on the Vietnam War and racial justice became more powerful.

As they had in the 1930s, fears of homosexuality informed debate about social rules. A 1963 report from Harvard University Health Services, sent to President Carr, claimed that “liberalizing” social rules could lead to “tragic end[s].” According to the report, the generous coed visiting hours at one university led a sophomore male, goaded by his roommates, to a “failed” sexual experience with a female student. “He brooded about his failure and became increasingly convinced that he was hopelessly perverted.” “Overwhelm[ed]” by “fears about

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students’ radical belief that homosexuality should be “accepted as a natural social phenomenon;” and Turner’s faith in the “Christian morality upon which [Oberlin was] founded,” which ostensibly considered homosexuality to be “immoral.”

<sup>137</sup> Oberlin College Archives, Student Papers, Gretchen Sampson, “The Decade the Rules Changed: Social Rules at Oberlin College, 1960—1970.”

<sup>138</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 2/13/59. The student suggested “certain architectural changes, such as benches under trees, reopening and patrolling against prowlers at the Arb, and more secluded lounges.” This suggestion may have eventually been taken up in the early sixties by the administration as they set up “semi-private quarters” where, as George Langelier, then chairman of the Joint Men’s and Women’s Boards, put it, “a student could study in privacy and, perhaps, kiss a girl.” According to the Chronicle, “Langelier said the board realizes the need for facilities where students can find ‘privacy without isolation,’ but does not consider Saturday night open houses, or approving student cars the solution to the problem.” (Oberlin College Archives, Carr Presidential Files, “Controversial Issues.”) What the paper dubbed Oberlin’s “kiss-study-kiss plan” led to the resignation of one of an assistant Conservatory professor.

being a homosexual,” the student visited the psychiatric clinic, where, happily, “treatment was successful in restoring this boy to his emotional health.”<sup>139</sup>

President Carr, a political liberal and civil rights activist inaugurated in 1960, may have had this cautionary tale in mind when he defended social rules in his 1962/63 Annual Report. “Oberlin’s students come from a society that increasingly approves of the automobile by the high school student as a means of mobility as well as a way of achieving privacy,” he wrote, “and thereby the opportunity, indeed, the necessity, to make earlier decisions...concerning sex and alcohol.” Despite changing social mores, Carr supported *in loco parentis*, a concept by then under attack by students as well as national courts.<sup>140</sup> “When patterns of contemporary student behavior reach the point where they are in serious conflict with a college’s traditional qualities and purposes,” he wrote, “that college would seem to have both the right and duty to seek to influence and regulate student social life in an attempt to bring it within limits deemed consistent with the institution’s own character.”<sup>141</sup>

This sounded much like Professor Turner’s note about the “Christian morality upon which this country—and this college—were founded.” It may have been a battle cry. The next semester, two men were suspended for alcohol possession and use. Within hours of the news, 400 students had gathered in protest.<sup>142</sup> According to one narrator, a Dean called a student to his office to dissuade an inter-racial relationship around the same time, creating a “campus scandal.”<sup>143</sup> And in May 1964, the faculty voted to discontinue the “Saturday Night Calling Hours” at women’s dorms that they had approved the year before, which also led to protest and increased student pessimism about the possibility for change through “proper” campus channels.

Two unverified stories circulating among gay students during the 1963/64 school year suggest that the administration’s “duty” to “influence and regulate student social life” also included policing the most visible manifestations of campus gay life. Howard Spendelow (OC 66) remembered hearing a rumor “that apparently one year the Admissions Office decided to...weed out some of the most obnoxiously overt flaming faggots.” According to the story, this move backfired: “The organ department got really pissed off, because they didn’t get any good students.” (At the time, organists were considered to be among the musicians *most* likely to be gay.<sup>144</sup>) A year after he graduated, Jim Mosher (OC 62) also recalled hearing that one of the more “outrageous” theater queens was called into the

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<sup>139</sup> Oberlin College Archives, President Carr Papers, 2/9/2 Box 20, V Student Life, 8 Subject Files, Sex Education. “Sex Mores in Transition,” by Graham B. Blane, JR., M.D. Harvard University Health Services: (1963).

<sup>140</sup> By the early 1960s, national courts largely abandoned *in loco parentis* in favor of contract law for ruling on disputes between students and educational institutions, especially after the landmark *Dixon v. Alabama State Board of Education* decision in 1961. Partly in reaction to free speech movements, other changes came as courts recognized that students at public colleges and universities were entitled to First and Fourth Amendment rights.

<sup>141</sup> Oberlin College Archives, Carr Presidential Files, 1962/3 President’s Report, 19.

<sup>142</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 10/17/63.

<sup>143</sup> Interview with Anonymous.

<sup>144</sup> Popular “musicosexual taxonomies” cultivated among gay musicians have identified organists as among the musicians *most* likely to be “that way.” See, for instance, Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America’s Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 123. In Ned Rorem’s camp assessment, first articulated in 1948 in an informal conversation with Dr. Alfred Kinsey, male harpists, choir directors, and organists are “all gay.”

Dean's office to "name names." The student "kind of looked at the back of his nails and said, 'Why certainly Dean Holderman; shall we start with faculty and administration?'" According to the story, the "inquiry [then] immediately stopped."

If these anecdotes point to students' apprehensions about anti-gay administrative policies, they also suggest a plucky confidence in what these students perceived to be their important—indeed, invaluable—role in the institution. In fact, some gay students hardly felt that they were a minority—for them, gay sexuality seemed to encompass the entire college. Howard Spendelow (OC 66) remembered "some rainy winter days [when] we would sit in the snack bar and do circles of who knew who and even who had slept with who...I can remember with some degree of accuracy, exercises like that that ending up with a hundred names."

These conversations occurred in the context of an increasingly sexualized and politically militant campus culture. In 1964, a student led contraceptive coop was formed, which later became the Oberlin Sexual Information Center (SIC), and in 1968 the Oberlin Clinic began to offer birth control.<sup>145</sup> By the mid 1960s, some students violated federal law by crossing into Canada to send medical supplies to the Vietnamese, and many attended anti-war demonstrations in Cleveland, New York, and Washington, D.C. Hundreds of students also participated in sit-ins and anti-war protests on the Oberlin campus itself.<sup>146</sup> In the most dramatic of these, over fifty college students surrounded the car of a Navy Recruiter in the town of Oberlin in October 1967. In time, the number swelled to just over one hundred, and police sprayed the students with fire hoses, smoke, and finally tear gas.<sup>147</sup>

These protests garnered national media attention and altered the tone of student protest against campus social rules. While women's curfews were eliminated in 1966,<sup>148</sup> few major changes had been made to social rules by the late 1960s.<sup>149</sup> Each faculty rejection of increasingly compromised student proposals resulted in growing aggravation among students. In May 1967, several hundred students staged a rally and all night vigil in favor of liberalized rules for off-campus housing.<sup>150</sup> An anonymous handbill released after the faculty's rejection of their proposal vividly expressed students' displeasure:

We will no longer allow those clowns who live in a dream-world to make rules for us.  
We will no longer let prudes and perverts stifle our lives. We hereby declare ourselves

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<sup>145</sup> Oberlin College Archives, Student Papers, Naomi McClure Griffiths, "The Emergence of Birth Control at Oberlin College."

<sup>146</sup> These included a sit-in at Finney Chapel in May 1966 in response to Oberlin's administering of the student draft deferment test, and another in the lobby of Wilder Hall in February 1967, surrounding three Air Force recruiters.

<sup>147</sup> Alicia D'Addario, "In Search of Community: The Oberlin Student Movement, 1961-1968."

[<http://www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/DAddarioHonors/DAddarioHonors-Title.htm>]

<sup>148</sup> Oberlin College Archives, Carr Presidential Files, "Controversial Issues." According to a senate survey, 86% of the students approved ending upperclassmen curfews. The same year, in classic queen fashion, Professor Frederick Artz spoke on the decline of morals and manners among college youth at the annual Alumni Luncheon.

<sup>149</sup> That year, according to the Oberlin Review, Oberlin received a "C-" from Playboy magazine for its "general posture toward social rules." Bob Jones University was the only institution ranked below the Yeoman, the Review reported, "a place where southern belles turn out the lights at 9:00 p.m. and wear their dresses above the shoelaces." ("One hundred years of sex," *Oberlin Review*, 4/3/74.)

<sup>150</sup> "Where to Live?" *Oberlin Review*, 9/19/ 67, 18, from Alicia D'Addario, "In Search of Community..."

independent of those fools who think that love and loving can be legislated. We will fuck when we want to fuck, we will live where we want to live. We hereby declare all College regulations, null. If we are caught, we will not obey, if we are punished, we will not ascend to the punishments... We hereby categorically declare our freedom.<sup>151</sup>

The calls to “fuck who we want to fuck” and militant declarations of “freedom” also impacted the way LGBT students thought about their own sexual lives. Roger Goodman (OC 68), influenced by his immersion in the campus drug culture, radical activist circles, and what he called the “blatant faggotry” of his small Conservatory circle, made the radical step of publicly declaring his homosexuality in his 1968 “senior perspective.”

The campus hippie culture, of which Goodman and the majority of Oberlin students considered themselves to be a part, also pushed the boundaries of acceptable manliness. What was once a signifier of homosexuality—long-haired, “soft” men—became a symbol of rebellion, infused with the virtue of manly resistance to authority.<sup>152</sup> For “straights,” as non-hippies were called, this was an unacceptable development, and one sign of the college’s and country’s decline. A newspaper clipping about a 1967 campus sit-in, ostensibly sent to Oberlin by an alum, carried a hand-written comment about a young man walking over protestors to military recruiters: “The greatest of all. A wonderful healthy young man. Look at those faces below—We need more like him.”<sup>153</sup> The anti-war protesters “below” were, by implication, sickly or lacking in masculine health.

The administration, under President Carr, who had earlier in the decade “chided students for what he termed ‘public demonstrations of affection,’”<sup>154</sup> was clearly filled with anxiety over the “effeminacy” and political radicalism of the male student body by the late 1960s. In 1969, for example, the Admissions Committee discussed the “capable student athletes who had been admitted to Oberlin...but who had decided to go elsewhere.” This led to a general conversation about the “concerns of broadening the pool of male applicants.” One Committee member suggested that “something had to be done to alter the image of Oberlin as ‘that girls’ music school.’”<sup>155</sup> Given the overwhelming association of homosexuality with the Conservatory, it’s not difficult to imagine the unspoken inference being “that fags’ music school.”

As an aside, the perceived opposition between (effeminate) gay students and (masculine) student athletes—not limited to the late 1960s—is of course a false one. It could also be destructive. Michael Jarvis (OC 69) was a captain of Oberlin’s swimming and diving team, the second Oberlin swimmer to earn All-America honors, and in 2004 would be inducted into the Heisman Hall of Fame. He was also in “massive denial” about being gay and made several suicide attempts at Oberlin. “Part of the problem I had with being gay is that I felt like I was masculine and I was attracted to men who were masculine,” he recalled.

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<sup>151</sup> Oberlin College Archives, “Student Radicals” File, 5/11/67.

<sup>152</sup> Thanks to Terence Kissack for this comment.

<sup>153</sup> Oberlin College Archives, “Student Disruptions,” 2/9/1, 2/9/2, Box 4.

<sup>154</sup> Oberlin College Archives, Carr Presidential Files, “Controversial Issues,” the *Chronicle*, date unknown.

<sup>155</sup> Oberlin College Archives, Oct 24 1969 Meeting of the Committee on Admissions and Relations to Secondary Schools.

“So that doesn’t quite fit that stereotype [that gay men were effeminate and] could have been part of the confusion at that point.”<sup>156</sup>

Administrative anxiety over campus masculinity, student radicalism, and the increasing visibility of flamboyant gay male students came to a head in 1969—at the height of admissions selectivity and nationally publicized student radicalism at Oberlin. The first student members in the history of the Admissions Committee discovered “questionable comments” on roughly 10% of men’s applications, “ranging from the political persuasion of admissions candidates to masculinity,” and eventually leaked the information to the *Review*. The comments found on the interview sheets, reprinted in a February 1969 *Review* article, included:

1. ‘Here’s our classic case. A National Liberation Front Member. Every cliché at his grasp. Very difficult to pin down. Never a straight-forward answer. Outspoken. Very factual in approach. Active in all movements...He doesn’t show me much. It’s an R (reject) all the way.’ [His SAT scores were verbal, 643, math, 530. American history achievement, 800.]
2. ‘Well, this kid certainly won’t help the male image on campus – it’s too late even for hormones!...Nothing against him, but I’m not sure I want to take responsibility for sending our girls another one of these.’
3. ‘I am sure his good sense and Quaker-like attitude will help toward control of campus impulsiveness so common these days.’<sup>157</sup>

In the weeks following the leak, a picket line and information center were set up in front of the Admissions office, the chairman of the Committee on Admissions met with the *Cleveland Press* and the *New York Times*, and a “Senate Letter on Admissions” was sent to all parents, trustees, and presidents of regional alumni clubs.

The controversy, sparked, arguably by an effort to erase homosexuality (strongly associated with effeminacy) from the campus, ironically had the effect of broadening the campus discussion of LGBT people. At a Senate meeting following the disclosure, for instance, there were “angry outbursts from various members of the audience,” according to the *Review*, including one senior who called the “questions about religion and homosexuality...absolutely shocking and unexplainable.”<sup>158</sup> The *Review* also published an article by the campus SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), which argued that the admissions controversy was only one example of the larger role Oberlin played in producing student “products” essential to the perpetuation of U.S. “class stratification.” Radicals, along with “freaks, homosexuals, and other ‘deviants’ are pushing the liberal limits on

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<sup>156</sup> Jarvis saw Marlon Butts starting his sophomore year, at Psychological Services. “First we tried the straight angle, and then realized that wasn’t working,” he recalled. They then switched over to “acceptance of who I was.” The swimming team also became the “healthy family” he had never experienced at home.

<sup>157</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 2/25/69. Two months later, the committee finished a review of the controversy, stating that they had “found no evidence of discrimination in admissions on the basis of political activism or views, religious background, or masculinity.” They promised a “new, more explicit, interview form” to rectify the situation (*Oberlin Review*, 5/30/69).

<sup>158</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 2/28/69.

individuality,” they wrote. “They are unlikely to meet the necessary specifications of the Oberlin product.”<sup>159</sup>

Just four months before the June 1969 Stonewall riots and the birth of the modern gay liberation movement, these public statements characterized homosexuals as a class of person wrongly discriminated against, grouped gay students along with political radicals and other “outsiders,” and identified them as being among the vanguard of those pushing the “liberal limits” of the college and larger culture.

Under pressure from students and alumni, President Carr resigned at the end of the year. By this time, the student movement had all but won the war on social rules and *in loco parentis*; earlier in 1969, students and administrators agreed upon the creation of several coeducational dorms after reviewing similar housing systems at colleges and universities such as Stanford and Michigan—a decision made famous by a 1970 *Life Magazine* cover article.<sup>160</sup> The changes in student social, sexual, and political life, the successful attack on the college’s role *in loco parentis*, and the increasing visibility and “politicization” of LGBT identities would create an environment conducive to the founding of what would be the college’s first gay student organization, Oberlin Gay Liberation, in 1971, marking the beginning of a new era in LGBT student life.

### **Classroom Interventions (1960s)**

Oberlin was first and foremost a place for learning. Yet LGBT students rarely saw themselves reflected in classroom material.

“It’s what was edited out in our education at Oberlin [that] seems so bizarre now,” Bill Vance (OC 56) recalled. “Even in Freddie Artz’s class, [we took] a whole year of Western intellectual history without any sense that there was an interesting homosexual dimension to it, that you should even think about such things when you get to Michelangelo and Shakespeare and so on.” As a specialist in American literature later in Vance’s life, dealing with Walt Whitman’s Calamus poems “was just a natural part of what you had in your curriculum.” But at Oberlin in the 1950s, any mention of homosexuality in the classroom was “very, very rare, and always with a negative connotation.” This “made it much more difficult,” he recalled, “when there was no historical or public affirmation of people who felt the way we do.”

Often angered by professors’ silencing of the subject, students increasingly brought LGBT themes to the forefront of the classroom during the 1960s. Peter Klein (OC 64) remembered an Early Renaissance Art course in which one gay student, “particularly offended by th[e] professor’s silence and denial to address issues of homosexuality in Florence,” wrote a limerick on the room’s hidden chalkboard before class. When the board

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<sup>159</sup> “Admissions: More than meets the Eye,” *Oberlin Review*, 3/4/69. “Oberlin produces a very important product, a commodity that is essential to the functioning of a society which is based upon class stratification. This product is the Oberlin graduate, neatly channeled to fit into the middle positions of society, and to accept his role in the class system without question... Individualism is groovey and is cultivated in a liberal institution – but only to a point... It is dysfunctional to admit students who are so ‘far out’ that they might seriously question the entire basis of their training...”

<sup>160</sup> “Co-ed Dorms: An intimate revolution on campus,” *Life Magazine*, 11/20/70.

was revealed by the professor part way through his lecture, the class “roared with laughter to his shock and embarrassment” at the following verse:

There once was a Florentine homo,  
Who sculpted St. John for the Duomo.  
After a year, they found he was queer,  
Ad hominum, ad hoc and ad homo.<sup>161</sup>

Timothy Hansen (pseudonym; OC 64), a flamboyant student involved in Oberlin’s theater world, used the gossip he picked up from other gay students in a sociology term paper that “made use of soc-babble and ‘friendship’ charts” and “actually documented who was sleeping with who (without real names).”

Martin Beadle (OC 66) recalled writing a paper on “The Rights of Homosexuals” for his senior-year criminology class. “As I look back,” he said, “I realize that I was furtively trying to find out about my people.” In the Carnegie Library,

the books on homosexuality were locked in a gray locker, like a gym locker. [The librarian] unlocked the locker, got out the book I needed, put it on the counter and pushed it across the counter with the back end of her pencil, and gave me a huge scowl. This was the first time I ever read about gay people and their lives.<sup>162</sup>

Roger Goodman (OC 68) also intervened in classroom discussions, drawing on his knowledge of historical figures such as Tchaikovsky and Gertrude Stein.

I didn’t allow professors to get away with not naming it... When we’d look at Michelangelo’s *David*, and the professor would talk about the beauty of the body, and isn’t this wonderful, and how could a man create such magnificent male beauty as the *David*? And I would say, “It’s because he love boys! Because Michelangelo was a gay man, so he knew the bodies of men—intimately.” Or we’d be talking about the paintings of David Hockney of naked boys swimming in swimming pools... and no mention of Hockney being gay. And I would say something in class about it and how it reflected who David Hockney was. Or talking about Gertrude Stein in an American Lit class and not talking about her being a lesbian and I would say, “How can you talk about *The Autobiography of Gertrude Stein*, written by Alice B. Toklas, without recognizing that they were life partners?”

“I loved being the Oberlin College scandal,” Goodman recalled. “And why not extend that scandal into the classroom, where truth needs to be told?”

### **Off-Campus Gay Worlds (1960s)**

Off-campus gay venues became less important to LGBT students as on-campus spaces became more visible and accessible. But students and faculty still visited places such as the

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<sup>161</sup> Email to the author, 9/4/05.

<sup>162</sup> Oberlin College Archives, Student Papers, Deborah I. Cane, “The Birth of a ‘Gay Mecca’: A Queer History of Oberlin College 1954—1983,” p 13.

gay-owned Club Baths in Cleveland, founded in 1965, which even offered student discounts.<sup>163</sup>

In 1971, the Club Baths' founder told the *Lorain Journal* that "many Oberlin College students are gay and come to Cleveland for contacts."<sup>164</sup> Roger Goodman (OC 68) "knew [organ major] Bart [Pitman (OC 70)] went to the baths," he recalled. "And there was a great mystique to that...Bart would flaunt his KY jelly in his back pocket, and we knew he was headed for Cleveland." Pitman "would just come back some times in the morning the next day, and I'd see him in the Con lounge and he would just say, [languidly] 'My dear...So. Much. Fucking.'"

Cleveland bars also remained destinations. One, called Jack's, was a "couple of doors down from the police station in the back alley, and it paid off the police," Ken Sherrill, a government professor from 1965 to 1967 recalled. Another bar, owned by two lesbians, "played 'Strangers in the Night' sort of 24/7," Sherrill said, "and everybody danced to Frank Sinatra. And they had one of these balls on the ceiling...that gave off this soft light, romantic light, as they danced." The bar was "underground," he recalled; "there were occasional brawls."

François Clemmons (OC 67) made his way to gay bars with some other "closet queens." Like Cleveland bars in the 1940s, he found that some discriminated against black men. He was also frightened about the consequences of exposure. "In those days you were always afraid the police were going to raid them," he recalled. "There was always that feeling. They were a little bit like dives, you know, they were not cutting edge discos yet, and there was always this partial feeling of surreptitiousness, that you were sneaking off of Oberlin's campus to go to a *gay bar*...and that if you were caught there might have been repercussions."

In the mid 1960s, a faculty/staff person *was* arrested on homosexual charges in Cleveland, as then Oberlin Psychological Services director John Thompson remembered. "Because of the terrible prejudice rampant at that time in our society about homosexuality, the entire matter was kept 'under cover,'" he recalled. "My role was one of serving as a consultant to the Dean of Students and the President in attempts to have this matter handled in a 'medical' rather than a judicial way."<sup>165</sup>

### **"Oh, Needs-a!:" Camp and "Drag" Names in the Conservatory (mid 1960s/early 1970s)**

In 1964, a new, neo-Gothic Conservatory building replaced Warner Hall, the imposing stone structure that had housed the school of music since the late 1800s. The new

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<sup>163</sup> John Loughery, *The Other Side of Silence* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), 22.

<sup>164</sup> The 1971 *Lorain Journal* article "Homosexuals Are Challenging Society" was the impetus for a file on gay students in the Dean's office. The founder of the Club Baths, a "national leader of the homophile movement," is quoted as saying that "There are many homosexuals in Lorain County. Many of my customers are from Lorain and Elyria. Many Oberlin College students are gay and come to Cleveland for contacts."

<sup>165</sup> John Thompson, email to the author, 4/26/00

building may have helped foster more public, defiant expressions of gay male sensibilities. A small group of flamboyant gay students soon appropriated the left corner of the new Conservatory Lounge, next to its floor-to-ceiling steel-reinforced quartz windows: a space strategically chosen for its visibility and proximity to the building's main entrance.

"I remember Steven Lord [OC 71] would stand in the Con Lounge," Roger Goodman (OC 68) recalled, "with his hand...on his mouth, and one hand on his hip and he'd watch these [closeted] men walk by. And he'd go [Snap! Snap! Snap!] with a sneer on his face...Cause we really wanted everybody out. *Out out.*" According to Goodman, his group's caustic camp behavior was intended in part to draw people "out of the closet," a phrase widely in use by the time. The group dubbed one "closeted" young man "Needs-a," short for "Needs-a dress" to this end.

"Needs-a dress" was very femme, but "Needs-a dress" never said anything about being gay. So there would be all these faggots standing in the Conservatory Lounge...and he would come walking through...and Steven [Lord] would say, "Oh, Needs-a!" And then he'd put his hands up to his mouth like this and say, "Do you think she'll *ever* know who she is?" And we'd laugh...We had the sharpest senses of humor and the sharpest tongues, and we could destroy with a word if we wanted to.

The term "Needs-a" soon became part of a unique gay Conservatory culture passed down through successive student classes; by the early 1970s, the term would be used to indicate any person who was closeted to other gays, Bill Pfeiffer (OC 74) recalled. By this time, "Needs-a" was, in turn, one of many "drag names" used by Conservatory queens in part to encourage other gay students to "come out" into a gay social world. Like Goodman, Jim Harrington (OC 73) recalled that a "touch of cruelty" was often involved. "People were still given drag names even if they weren't out," he said. "Much to their disapproval."

Arriving at Oberlin from a conservative, affluent family in Pennsylvania, Harrington quickly found his way into one of the Conservatory's more flamboyant gay circles, made up primarily of organ majors, and dubbed himself "Mildred." Christa Rakich (OC 75), an organ performance major from a "very conservative" Roman Catholic family in Connecticut, also part of the circle, was named "Wolfgang" (as in Amadeus, and because she studied German). "For me, [the drag name] was sort of a gentle cajoling out of my straight persona," she recalled. Drag names were then both part of students' rejection of conservative social expectations and an attempt to create a gay Conservatory in-group. "We left behind our 'straight lives,' with straight families and conservative backgrounds," Harrington remembered, "and [the Conservatory] is where we felt comfortable being ourselves, camping around, using drag names, [and] doing really outrageous things."

For Rakich, Harrington, and many others, drag names were an almost religious rebirth out of their old (straight) life and into their new (gay) life. Harrington's lengthened drag name was in fact "Mildred the Baptizer," because of the role he took in "christening" other students. While "drag" (or more precisely, camp) names were likely used earlier at Oberlin, they flourished during the 1960s and early 1970s. They were used not only to bring closeted gays "out" to other gays, but also to create an in-group and help gay and lesbian students come to terms with their sexual identities. They were often based on pieces of music (two boyfriends were dubbed "Chloe" and "Daphne," for example) or individual

characteristics (a young man from the South was named “Magnolia,” for instance, while one black organ major was dubbed “Sheba”—as in “Queen of”).

Ann Matter (OC 71) was soon christened “Parsifal,” after the Wagner opera, “because I was innocent in a way,” she remembered, “or at least that was the camp explanation.” A religion major, Matter was attracted to the Conservatory camp culture’s focus on aesthetics, music, and literature—in opposition to the earnest, politically active world associated with the college. “We were there at Oberlin during a really desperately serious time with all the anti-war stuff and these very self-righteous agitators,” she recalled. “We, the queer students really, saw ourselves as having a sense of humor about life, of not being so deathly serious, of being more ironic.”

While the Conservatory camp circle could (and did) include Matter and other women of all sexual orientations, Matter remembered it being a decidedly male world. “Some men would say terrible things [like]... ‘women stink like fish,’ [or] ‘oh cunts,’” Matter recalled. “It was still this kind of campy misogyny that wasn’t... vicious or anything. But I felt enough of a difference about how my difference isolated me and their difference gave them a world.” Although Matter knew of some lesbian upperclasspeople, such as the cellist Scotty Banks (OC 69), Matter’s girlfriend Lynn was the only lesbian she knew well at Oberlin. At the time, there were still few women professors, no “out” lesbian professors, and no strong feminist movement at Oberlin—all reasons why lesbian social circles may have been less cohesive or visible in the late 1960s.

While Matter was critical of the gay camp world, she also understood that the gay men “were young people who understood that they were different and they were trying to make their way in the world.” Matter felt gay Conservatory students used camp and drag names as a coping strategy. “It was about making a little wall around ourselves,” Matter remembered. “We spoke our own dialect and we had our own jokes... We had all the Noël Coward periphrastic ways of referring to ourselves like, ‘she’s a vegetarian,’ or ‘he’s very musical.’” As in earlier years, gay students created an in-group for protection, deflecting negative attitudes by equating homosexuality with sophistication and talent.

In the early 1970s, the Conservatory Lounge remained a hub for these highly theatrical, campy musicians, Rakich recalled. “I remember seeing graffiti on a bathroom wall in the Conservatory that said, ‘The Con Lounge: coming soon to a theater near you,’” she said. “It was almost like, if someone could have filmed the goings-ons on the Con Lounge, you’d have the makings of a soap opera right there.”

Even LGBT students who eschewed the campy, theatrical Conservatory world or were not “out” to other gays considered the Conservatory to be a haven. For Richard Bentley (OC 70), a piano major from Florida, the Conservatory was a “safe house.” “I had absolutely no reason to venture ‘outside,’ he recalled. “I was conflicted enough about being gay that the feeling of ‘safety’ at the Conservatory was enough to keep me from going anyplace else.”<sup>166</sup> The Conservatory also remained closely associated with LGBT people in college students’ imagination. Herb Zeman (OC 65) remembered the following joke circulating during his

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<sup>166</sup> Email to the author, 7/29/04.

senior year: “How do you separate the men from the boys in the Conservatory? With a crowbar!”<sup>167</sup>

While Raymond Harvey (OC 73) disliked what he called the lack of “sincerity” among the “flamboyant, fun-loving” gay musicians, he also nonetheless found the Conservatory to be an important social hub. “While I was here...I locked right into a very committed relationship through my junior, senior, and fifth years here,” he recalled. “We knew we were committed to each other, but we didn't see anyone else doing what we were doing, and I think that we struggled a lot because everyone else was just sort of campy and having fun.”<sup>168</sup> Of course, camp and commitment were not mutually exclusive; David Hearst (pseudonym; OC 74), widely acknowledged by narrators to be one of the campiest students in the Conservatory, began a relationship at Oberlin that has continued to the present day.

Though other gay students may have disapproved, it was the campy queens who were the public face of gay Conservatory life, and one of the major reasons that the school of music remained a haven and magnet for campus LGBT culture. “Drag” names and camp behavior were expressions of their sense of “difference” and part of their efforts to create community, but music itself was perhaps most central to their lives and sense of identity. Historian Nadine Hubbs has written that while LGBT identities were pathologized and stigmatized, being musical was “sublime and transcendent, and as such largely beyond reproach.” Similarly, LGBT people “deemed to possess talent in this rarefied art...were thereby rendered exceptional and transcendent, if not vindicated.”<sup>169</sup>

This seems to have been the case for Roger Goodman. As a young man deeply disturbed by the culture’s condemnation of his sexuality, Goodman recalled that his only emotional outlet before enrolling at Oberlin was his piano. “And so I became, at least interpretively, a child prodigy,” he said. Goodman felt that his interpretation of musical works was directly linked to the pain of growing up gay in a homophobic culture. At a student recital at Oberlin, Goodman recalled students being “uncomfortable” with his unusual interpretation of a Brahms piano piece. He later heard Stephen Lord respond to student criticism with the following statement: “Well you may not like it, darling, but you can’t argue with it, *can you?*” For Goodman, this one-liner captured the spirit of his gay Conservatory circle.

“We were the ones you couldn’t argue with interpretably in our music,” he recalled. “We may not have been the best technicians, but we were the best musicians in the Conservatory.” This “made us feel special,” Goodman said. “And it made our closet doors disappear. Not just open up, but disappear.” Gay musicians’ “talent” could then be a source of personal pride that might overshadow the shame of their stigmatized sexual identities. Their sense of musical superiority might also prompt the view that they possessed a higher or

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<sup>167</sup> He also remembered a story about a woman who arrived as a freshman voice major who was told that there were a large number of lesbians in the Conservatory. “During her first lesson with her female voice coach, she was told to lie on her back on the floor while the coach put her foot on her abdomen and told her to breathe,” Zeman recalled. “Obviously she was scared out of her wits thinking she was about to be raped.” Email to the author, 10/8/99.

<sup>168</sup> Oberlin College Alumni Office, *Into the Pink: An Oral History of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students at Oberlin College from 1937 to 1991* (Oberlin College, Ohio, 1996).

<sup>169</sup> Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 177.

different morality from that binding “ordinary” people. “We were the special ones,” Goodman recalled. “We were the ones the other Conservatory students looked to for our gifts, for our talents.”

Many organ majors had, perhaps, a more flamboyant, playful approach to their musical and gay identities, but they also expressed their “unusual” sexual and gender identities through music. Some, such as the outrageous George Lamphere (OC 72), “had amazing falsetto voices,” Christa Rakich remembered, “and would just sing these enormously high descants at full volume” while playing organ at church services. “I mean just blaring it out above a full congregation, really turning heads. And in the environment of a religious ceremony, it was really quite outrageous behavior [laughs]. And yet, musically completely successful.”

Some organ majors, such as David Hearst (pseudonym; OC 74), also performed “Divine Follies” with gay priests at a certain Cleveland church where one organ major worked a part time job. A cross between the campy “theater” of their everyday lives and religious ceremony, gay organists and priests performed the Latin liturgy in the empty church, slightly intoxicated, complete with incense, copes and miters. The church was their stage, and “what is liturgy but good theater?” Hearst asked rhetorically.

Gay Conservatory students also lived together in off-campus houses. In Jim Harrington’s senior year, he and a handful of other gay men lived in a house owned by Esther Bliss Taylor, who Harrington characterized as “a charming old woman around eighty.” A widow of a professor and the President of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, her only regulations, no alcohol and no women, appear to have attracted an all-gay house from the early 1950s until her death in 1980—one more example of a unique Conservatory culture passed down through successive classes of students. Thomas Tibbetts (OC 59) lived with a group of gay Conservatory friends in Taylor’s house in 1959. Raymond Donnell (OC 53) also lived at the house, shortly after Mrs. Taylor’s husband, a physics professor, died in 1948 and she began taking boarders. Did she know these young men were all gay? Harrington believed she was “totally clueless.” Donnell, on the other hand, felt Taylor “was a very bright cookie.” Her coded comments about Professors Artz and Stetson, both of whom she had known for quite some time, led Donnell to believe that she was well aware that her boarders were gay.

### **Roger Goodman and John Thompson: A Therapeutic Relationship and a Senior Perspective (1964-1968)**

Roger Goodman (OC 68) arrived at Oberlin a “very fat, very socially awkward, highly egocentric and yet frightened Jewish pianist,” he recalled, “among all the other frightened, fat, egocentric Jewish pianists.” Deeply conflicted about his sexuality, he, like other gay students during the period, sought counseling with a campus psychologist. “I told him that I was a homosexual and I didn’t know what to do with this,” Goodman remembered. “I was crying my eyes out.”

The psychologist, John Thompson, refused to “cure” Goodman. Instead, he shared the path-breaking work of Evelyn Hooker, which questioned the mental disorder model of homosexuality, and explained that Goodman’s internal struggle had led him to “truths and self-knowledge” that “most students would never have to even think about.” This was

remarkable for a man in a profession that still considered homosexuality to be a curable mental illness.

By all accounts, Thompson was a remarkable man. A young, liberal psychologist, he was the first director of Oberlin Psychological Services, which formed due to overwhelming student demand in 1964, the same year Goodman entered as a freshman. Thompson was well suited to the politicized student climate: during the mid-1960s he gave a campus talk titled “Revolution,” and another on the history of “racist oppression.” In the 1966 *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, he extolled “Voltaire’s notion that good and bad are not absolutes,” called “Marxist Communism...an excellent form of government for the peoples of the world,” and celebrated the “heterogeneous population” of the college, where “our freshman boy” with “notions about virile, red-blooded, 100% American males... finds himself with a roommate who can cry, who admits to having affection and tender feelings, who enjoys reading poetry, listens to classical music, [and] says he’s not sure how he really feels about girls.”<sup>170</sup>

In therapy sessions, Thompson “began to teach me that being gay was a beautiful and wonderful thing,” Goodman recalled. This helped Goodman develop a sense of self-worth and the courage to come out to some friends during his second semester. Oberlin “was a wildfire word-of-mouth community,” Goodman remembered. “So all I needed to do was tell a few people, and they told a few people, and they told a few people... ’til everyone on campus knew.” Goodman immersed himself in the campus hippie culture, became the lead singer of the drug culture-inspired band, the Ant Trip Ceremony, found a home among the sharp-witted campy queens in the Conservatory, and participated in the heady protests of the civil rights and anti-war movements.

Goodman also spoke about his experiences as a gay man in Thompson’s Abnormal Psychology classes as an upperclassman. Michael Jarvis (OC 69) recalled being in a class in which Goodman regaled students with tales of “size queens” and other anecdotes picked up from trips to New York City and a semester abroad in London. Thompson was “quite iconoclastic,” Jarvis recalled. “I think he probably enjoyed the shock value of that kind of presentation by Roger.” Jarvis also recalled that at least a few of the Psychological Services staff were gay or bisexual themselves. One female psychologist lived off-campus in a triad with her husband and female lover.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*, February 1966.

<sup>171</sup> The triad was remarked on by a number of narrators, including former President Robert Fuller. Thompson and others’ iconoclastic views were not reflected in his annual reports to the administration. His 1964/65 report listed homosexuality under “Sexual Deviation,” a subset of the “Sociopathic” category from the second edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). It was not until 1974/75, reflecting the removal of homosexuality from the list of mental illnesses in the third (1974) edition of the DSM, that the new category, “Homosexual Concerns” was created in Thompson’s reports, along with “boyfriend/girlfriend problems,” “loneliness,” and “identity conflicts.” (Oberlin College Archives, Psych Services Acc 12/ Box 1.) In the 1974/75 report, Thompson noted that Psychological Services was working with the recently founded gay student group, “doing what we can to better educate the community in a new understanding of homosexuality.” As Thompson recalled in an interview, “I was reared in such a fashion that I had learned to think for myself. What society said wasn’t necessarily something I accepted. I didn’t rebel against it, I didn’t fight it, but I didn’t take it down whole hog either... That didn’t mean that I threw it out.”

Thompson himself felt Goodman's most "significant" act as a young, politicized gay student was his 1968 senior perspective, in which Goodman publicly declared his homosexuality, an unprecedented step and a very radical act at the time—a year before the advent of the modern gay liberation movement. A tradition in which graduating seniors discussed their four years at the college, Goodman titled his senior perspective "Is He or Isn't He?," a campy appropriation of the mid-60s Clairol hair color commercial ("Does she...or doesn't she? Only her hairdresser knows for sure").

"Part of him was scared to death," John Thompson remembered. According to Thompson, a faculty/staff person had been arrested in Cleveland on a homosexual charge a few years earlier and almost fired from his job. Despite Psychological Services' confidentiality policy, an Oberlin Dean had also demanded information on a gay faculty member from Thompson. In 1969, a year after Goodman's perspective, the first two students in the history of the Admissions Committee would discover "questionable comments" on about 10% of men's applications, "ranging from the political persuasion of admissions candidates to masculinity." "So, you know, Roger was right about being worried," Thompson said. "It was a time when there wasn't any support."

"That was 1968 and the country was in turmoil," Goodman recalled. "Oberlin was a hotbed of radicalism...and the one thing nobody was talking about was queer stuff... There was no place for a queer man to be queerly involved with that radical movement." Goodman then characterized his senior perspective as "a finger pointing session: 'This is my experience over four years, and you think you all are so radical, and in fact, you are conservative, and bigoted, and biased, and you don't give a shit about me or my people.' Because I was beginning to have a sense of my people at Oberlin."

Charles Bergengren (OC 69), one of the twenty to a hundred people present (narrators' memories differed) at the perspective in Wilder Hall, remembered it being "breathtakingly radical and breakthrough." "The whole concept of being open, of being liberated, was just so electrifying," he remembered. "I certainly perceived it in the context and in the genre of an avant-garde work of art, like some Jackson Pollock painting that would just completely change perception and consciousness."

The perspective was the first time Goodman's Ant Trip Ceremony band-mate George Galt (OC 69) recalled him making a public declaration about being gay. "This was not a secret," Galt recalled, "but to say it out loud in a room was incredibly radical." He recalled Goodman opening his talk by thanking John Thompson for his support and guidance over the four years. The main message Galt remembered from the talk as a whole was, essentially: "I'm gay and I'm happy about it."

Goodman in fact taped the perspective for Thompson, who used the recording in his Abnormal Psychology classes for the next few years. After Thompson stopped using the recording, he sent it to Goodman, who was then involved with the Chicago Gay Liberation Front and living in a gay collective based on the writings of Mao Ze Dong. At that point, "my politics were far more radical and far less sexist than they were on the tape," Goodman recalled. "I was embarrassed by it, so I unrolled it from the reel and tossed it into the garbage."

At the time of his last interview, at the age of fifty-three, Goodman credited Thompson as being “the first man who accepted me just as I am, with no judgment of any kind.” Goodman arrived at Oberlin “the most self-hating, self-loathing worm,” he recalled, but Thompson “*loved* me. And that enabled me to love myself.” “It would be an honest thing for me to say that some of the very best years of my life were the years I lived here as a student, learning to be a faggot,” Goodman recalled. “An honest to God in-your-face faggot.”

## Early/Mid 1970s: Gay Liberation, the Women's Movement, and the Left

### Introduction

In earlier decades, gay male students and professors had maintained rich, “underground” campus social circles, and some had visibly expressed their sense of “difference” through flamboyant camp behavior. But it was only after a national gay liberation movement emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s that significant numbers of gay students “came out of the closet,” or openly declared their sexual identities to heterosexuals in a political context. The women’s movement, which swept the Oberlin campus around the same time, also led women narrators to openly declare their identities, and for the first time they recalled lesbian and bisexual campus circles and activism. For both gay men and lesbians, these developments reflected a new political, rather than moral or psychological models of LGBT identities, and, as historian John D’Emilio has written, “quintessentially expressed the fusion of the personal and the political that the radicalism of the late 1960s exalted.”<sup>172</sup>

In the early 1970s, lesbian and gay students at Oberlin held campus dances, published articles and magazines about gay and lesbian issues, held “consciousness-raising” groups, spoke out about sexism and anti-gay attitudes on campus, and formed important political organizations that endure today. Oberlin Gay Liberation, founded in 1971 as Oberlin’s first gay student organization, endures through multiple name changes as the Oberlin Lambda Union. The Women’s Collective, co-founded by a lesbian couple in 1972, endures as the Baldwin Cottage Women's Collective.

The early 1970s also saw institutional commitments to these students’ ideals. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual narrators remembered the Human Development Program—a radical departure from earlier campus sex education efforts—as empowering courses that helped them explore and start speaking openly about their sexual identities. While the chartering of gay student groups was an incredibly contentious issue across the nation, this process was relatively stress-free at Oberlin. This was undoubtedly facilitated by the new focus on student autonomy and sexual freedom after the dismantling of the *in loco parentis* community model, but was also thanks to a liberal administration under Robert Fuller, Oberlin’s progressive “boy president” from 1970 to 1974. In 1974, Fuller also approved funding for an Intern for Homosexual Concerns, a student position designed to advocate for LGBT people at the college. The same year, after the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), Oberlin Psychological Services announced that it was “doing what we can to better educate the community in a new understanding of homosexuality.”<sup>173</sup>

The women’s, black, anti-war, and student movements overshadowed gay and lesbian activism at Oberlin in the early 1970s, but developments on these fronts also contributed to changes in LGBT student life. An Ad Hoc Committee on the Status of Women was formed in 1971 as the women’s movement swept the campus, leading to increases in numbers of women professors and the formation of a new women’s studies option. Also a result of the

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<sup>172</sup> John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 235.

<sup>173</sup> Oberlin College Archives, Psych Services Acc 12/ Box 1, 1974/75.

women's movement, many women narrators who now identify as lesbian or bisexual recalled important personal transformations and increasingly visible lesbian and bisexual campus individuals and circles. In 1971, President Fuller also launched the college into a massive recruitment effort to increase the numbers of students of color on campus. As numbers of black students increased and the Christian rhetoric of the civil rights movement shifted to the language of separatism and revolution, it also appears that the "live and let live" attitude that seemed to have characterized black students' relationship to LGBT people in earlier years also changed. Black nationalist students increasingly associated homosexuality with white supremacy and American imperialism towards the mid 1970s, and stigmatized black LGBT students accordingly.

The move towards separatism in student movements also highlighted rifts between and within various self-defined groups, even if they held many common beliefs. Narrators recalled that lesbians and gay men rarely socialized as such, yet both the feminist and gay liberation movements expressed a belief in sexual fluidity. While both movements appear to have been dominated by white students, they also allied themselves with other movements on the Left such as the black power movement. Politicized gay male students also criticized campy students associated with the Conservatory, who had been the most visible manifestation of campus homosexuality until the early 1970s, for what they perceived to be their sexism and lack of political awareness. Yet it was in part due to flamboyant students' visibility and efforts to secure campus space in the 1960s and earlier that gay political organizations were able to emerge when, and as easily as they did.

The contentious relationship between different self-defined groups at Oberlin—gay and straight, women and men, college and Conservatory, people of color and white, town and gown—would remain contested territory in the following decades, as identity politics became the dominant lens with which to view the college community.

### **Oberlin Gay Liberation (1971)**

Informed in part by New York City's June 1969 Stonewall riots, and inspired by black power, women's liberation, and student movements, the gay liberation movement exploded across the country in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Coming "out of the closet and into the streets," as one gay liberation slogan demanded, loosely organized groups such as the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) critiqued the police, psychiatric, and legal establishments through direct action, street protest, and media activism.

Campus organizations were among the vanguard. While a handful of discreet student groups influenced by the homophile movement were established as early as 1967,<sup>174</sup> campus gay liberation groups formed after the summer of 1969 were wholly different. University of Chicago's GLF, founded in December of 1969, picketed a "notorious" Chicago policeman, brought legal action against the police department with the local ACLU, and held the city's first gay dances, "attracting up to 2,000 at a time." By 1970, the University of Kentucky had a class about gay liberation politics with the consent of the administration and the University

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<sup>174</sup> Brett Beemyn, "The Silence Is Broken: A History of the First Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Student Groups," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* (2003, Vol 12; Part 2), 205-223. Columbia chartered the nation's first gay student group in 1967 and Cornell the second, in 1968. Students in these groups used pseudonyms and did not engage in overt campus political activity.

of Colorado at Denver gay liberation group held “organized guerrilla theatre” spectacles “for educating college students on campus.”<sup>175</sup> The gay liberation movement consisted primarily of men; most students involved with gay liberation politics at Oberlin were also gay men.

There may have been early gay organizing attempts at Oberlin. Ken Sherrill, a government professor in the late 1960s, recalled a conversation with Andy Meltzer (OC 69), who said that “he’d gone to see [a] Dean...[in 1969] about having some kind of space for gay and lesbian students in the Student Union building.” The administrator allegedly responded, “What do you need that for? You already have the cafeteria.” Sherrill’s anecdote suggests that administrators may have been dismissive of politicized gay students’ demands, but it may also be an indication that gay male students had already successfully and visibly claimed public campus space, such as the cafeteria, by the late 1960s. Gay students had in fact claimed space in the snack bar and Conservatory Lounge in the mid and late 1960s, if not in an overtly “political” manner.

It was not until March 1971 that the *Review* reported that about forty students met in Wilder to discuss the formation of a gay student group, prompted by “a common feeling that the College gay community meets with an oppressive type of tolerance and general intolerance of homosexuality.”<sup>176</sup> A month later, John Adams (OC 71), an African American voice major who had attended the meeting, introduced the college community to the gay liberation movement in a full-page article titled “an expression of love—gay liberation widens the scope of human relationships.”

The Gay Liberation Front (GLF) has been formed all across the country to fight the enslaving lies and myths which America hopes to perpetuate. We are following the example of the Third World and the Women’s Liberation movement in rejecting what we are told we must be, and fighting for an alternative to this oppressive society... We are going to have to spend a lot of time talking openly to each other about our lives, our doubts, our fears, and our encounters with “straight-walled” fronts... called people. **We are going to come to confront, then rip apart the anti-homosexual notions that even our best friends hold against us.**<sup>177</sup>

Pat Clawson (OC 73), who was also among those at the first organizational meeting, would ultimately write the charter for and co-found Oberlin’s first gay student organization, Oberlin Gay Liberation, or “Gay Lib,” as it was more commonly called. A tireless Marxist rabble-rouser who served on the editorial board of the *Activist* and joked that he spent more time protesting the Vietnam War in Washington than on the Oberlin campus, Clawson had already founded student organizations such as the Oberlin Radical Coalition and the Anna Louise Strong Union, one of whose chartered purposes was to “overthrow the American government.” Clawson saw gay activism as “part of the general strategy of liberation,” he later recalled in an oral history.

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<sup>175</sup> Donn Teal, *The Gay Militants* (New York: Stein & Day, 1971), 204, 215, 216.

<sup>176</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 3/19/71.

<sup>177</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 4/16/71. According to his obituary, Adams later “sang on Broadway, the White House, and sang the parts of Porgy and Crown in ‘Porgy and Bess’ at Radio City Music Hall.” He died in 1988 “after a long illness.” (Oberlin College Archives)

According to its charter, which needed the Student Life Committee's approval before the organization could become a student organization, Oberlin Gay Liberation sought, among other goals, "to seek freedom of sexual expression and an end to sexist oppression of gay people... , to eliminate the harassment of gay people as evidenced by open hostility and by covert sexist attitudes, [and] [t]o help gay people have an open and full sex life by sponsoring social events."<sup>178</sup>

This last goal—like "overthrowing the American government"—was illegal; "consensual sodomy," which included any same sex activity, was not legalized in Ohio until 1972. The Oberlin community was not unaffected by this law; around 1971, a key administrator was arrested in Cleveland on a sodomy charge, according to Robert Fuller, Oberlin's president from 1970 to 1974. Fuller was not aware of the incident until Dayton industrial leader Jesse Philips (OC 37), a "very powerful" trustee who at the time was funding the construction of what would become the Philips Gymnasium, "came to me and said I had to fire the guy," Fuller recalled. Fuller called Philips' bluff, the issue never reached the Board as a whole, and the administrator was not fired.<sup>179</sup>

In this context, the chartering of gay liberation groups was a controversial issue, even on liberal college campuses. According to a national 1974 survey of gay student groups by the National Gay Student Center, 29% of the responding organizations had "either failed to obtain recognition or had had problems obtaining it" and approximately 20% had "resorted to litigation to obtain recognition."<sup>180</sup> By 1970, the Florida State University GLF had not received recognition from the administration, the University of Michigan GLF was denied access to Student Union, and New York University's Gay Student Liberation was denied space for a gay dance.<sup>181</sup> Still, by 1971 there were recognized gay organizations at more than 175 colleges and universities nationwide.<sup>182</sup>

Given the contentious nation-wide atmosphere and Ohio's sodomy law, it is remarkable that Oberlin Gay Liberation's charter was approved in October 1971, five months after the initial organizational meeting, "without too much trouble," the *Review* reported, "although there was some legal question whether the [Student Life Committee] would be condoning sodomy by their actions. They concluded they would not be, since the organization was basically educational in nature."<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Oberlin College Archives, "Gay Liberation" file, Starr papers, Series 17, Box 3.

<sup>179</sup> By October 1970, the *Outlook Reporter* reported that the Gymnasium "has been named for Jesse Philips."

<sup>180</sup> The survey was by the National Gay Student Center, a project of the U.S. National Student Association. From GLBT Historical Society Archives, Ephemera, National Gay Student Center, "changes in Gay student rights" newsletter, date unknown.

<sup>181</sup> Donn Teal, *The Gay Militants* (New York: Stein & Day, 1971), 204, 215, 216.

<sup>182</sup> Brett Beemyn, "The Silence Is Broken."

<sup>183</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 10/1/71 [from [www.sodomylaws.org/sensibilities/ohio.htm](http://www.sodomylaws.org/sensibilities/ohio.htm): Ohio was one of the earlier states to enact a psychopathic offender law and, although the first such law was vague as to its applicability to sodomy, a court interpretation held that any act of sodomy could fall under its scope. Ohio never enacted a sterilization law, although there were numerous attempts. Undaunted by a lack of legal authority, Ohio prison officials undertook sterilization of sex criminals before their release from prison, a policy that lasted until it was publicized and became the recipient of much public criticism.]

George Langelier, Dean of Students from 1966 to 1988, recalled working behind the scenes to make sure Gay Lib became a student organization after its charter was approved. "Every [student] group had to have a faculty advisor," he recalled. "I thought this group might have trouble getting an advisor, and they did, at first." Langelier approached Tom Bechtel, the Dean of Men, who would eventually agree to become Gay Lib's first faculty advisor, along with dance instructor Brenda Way. There were "times when [Bechtel] would tell me that he and his wife would get kidded about playing this role," Langelier recalled. "Remarks would be made...always in jest, but nevertheless, it suggested the community certainly had a long way to go with regards to being adjusted."

A string of *Review* articles written in 1971 by students involved in the Oberlin Gay Liberation projected a militant tone, expressing a belief in a sexual continuum and making connections to other movements on the Left, such as women's liberation. John Adams' full-page article, which explored the intersections of "AmeriKKKa[n]" capitalism, "male supremacy," black liberation, and "proud" homosexuality, was one of the first. An article by Pat Clawson and Oberlin Gay Liberation co-founder Gary Keeper (OC 73) titled "Gay Lib moves out of the closet" was published a few weeks before the organization's charter was approved,<sup>184</sup> and Clawson's "The False Fear of Homosexuality" appeared the next month. Patrick Broome (OC 71), the president of his graduating class and a student involved in Gay Liberation, also included a reference to Oberlin's "homosexual community" in a fiery speech at the 1971 Alumni Luncheon that attacked Oberlin for its complicity in what he called the "Great American Nightmare" of racism, sexism, and war.<sup>185</sup>

Despite the rhetoric, narrators remembered Gay Lib as being primarily a social organization; nobody was "committed to the cause," Clawson recalled. Oberlin students may have been less active around gay liberation politics than students at other colleges because of the Oberlin's geographical isolation from large urban LGBT communities, the relative "tolerance" of its intellectual, liberal student body, and an "out" gay presence that narrators recalled being dominated primarily by "apolitical" Conservatory students. Oberlin Gay Liberation, made up primarily of male students, did set up a counseling service, created a library with "movement literature," and held "consciousness-raising groups" and gay liberation dances by 1972.<sup>186</sup> Reflecting the organizational structure of the Left, there were no elected officers and a rotating chairmanship.

Of course, simply holding open, visible social events changed the face of student gay lives. In his 1971 article, "Come Out, Come Out, Wherever you are!," Karl Spahn (OC 75) wrote about "openly associating with other Gay Lib members in the Wilder main lobby; asking at the main desk for the key to the G.L. office; dancing with other boys at the G.L. dance; mentioning my membership in G.L. to a friend; [and] selling cupcakes at the G.L. bake sale." For Spahn, this was less of a political act than a "benign cycle of therapy." "[T]he more I do for Gay Liberation," he wrote, "the more it does for me by making me less

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<sup>184</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 9/17/71.

<sup>185</sup> The Oberlin community was relatively silent about these developments, though there were some negative responses. One student responded with a parody article entitled "Moving out of the doghouse: Bestiality Liberation" (*Oberlin Review*, 10/12/71). Another student called gay liberation "a reflection of a general cultural outlook that declares truth and morality to be meaningless or non-existent." He disagreed, claiming that "only God has the authority to declare a given act right or wrong," and that "God...has said that homosexuality is wrong" (*Oberlin Review*, 9/24/71).

<sup>186</sup> Oberlin College Archives, "Gay Liberation" file, Starr papers, Series 17, Box 3.

uptight about publicly acknowledging my homosexuality.”<sup>187</sup> Tellingly, he also argued that “militancy is not appropriate for Gay Liberation in Oberlin. What we must combat here are not the hangups of the community so much as the hangups of homosexuals themselves, for these latter persist in full force even in a relatively tolerant social environment.”

Oberlin Gay Liberation (OGL) became the Oberlin Gay Union (OGU) a few years after it’s founding, reflecting the larger national shift from liberation to identity politics. Christa Rakich (OC 75), who created and filled the newly formed role of president around 1974, recalled that the “‘U’ seemed less intimidating than ‘L’. ‘L’ had a connotation of anger, or justice-demanding, and we just wanted to be inviting and friendly—not militant.”<sup>188</sup> The Oberlin Gay Union today endures, through multiple name changes, as the Oberlin Lambda Union.

### **Gay Liberation Dances (early 1970s)**

The gay liberation dances, attended by students of every sexual preference, were the most public and popular of Oberlin Gay Liberation’s activities. Gary Keeper (OC 73), who had “mainstream Oberlin politics,” according to Pat Clawson (OC 73)—“at a time when mainstream politics meant participating in sit-ins when military recruiters came to campus,” he clarified—was the main force behind the dances. They provided an opportunity for gay people to “test the waters,” Bill Pfeiffer (OC 74) remembered, and were “an effort to become visible on campus, thinking that prejudice would be reduced if people found out that somebody they knew and cared about was gay.”

According to Dean Langeler, the organizers were concerned about the first dance in the ‘Sco, which was held just after Gay Lib’s charter was approved in October 1971. “I told security I wanted them to have a very adequate staff on duty that night,” he recalled, “and I didn’t want them in the Student Union but I wanted them nearby.” The concern was well founded. During the dance, a high school student began a fight with an Oberlin student and a “full-fledged ruckus blossomed,” according to the *Review*, leading college security to shut down the dance.<sup>189</sup>

At the second Gay Lib dance, Pfeiffer and what he described as a “very big lesbian,” were appointed as bouncers, and President Fuller and his wife arrived in a gesture of support. Given the contentiousness of the issue around the nation, the Fullers’ support was remarkable.

The fight may have reflected a town/gown rather than a gay/straight split, or it may have been that the two were closely related. Peter Klein (OC 72) recalled that many of his gay friends faced harassment or violence from high school boys from the town. He remembered one “physical attack” that occurred in the old Carnegie Library, with “police [and] a lot of people breaking it apart.” On the other hand, for gay town residents like Jeffrey Mostade, a teenager when Gay Lib was founded, “Oberlin College and its GLF were *very* important to the communities surrounding Oberlin...No other places could one

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<sup>187</sup> Karl Spahn, “Come Out, Come Out, Wherever you are!,” *Oberlin Review*, 12/3/71.

<sup>188</sup> Email to the author, Christa Rakich, 11/19/05. She also recalled that Professor Melcher offered her “books on gay subjects” when he discovered she was chairing the Gay Union.

<sup>189</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 10/12/71.

see/hear(taste/smell/feel) another open gay person.”<sup>190</sup>

The dances were one of the few Gay Lib activities that drew large numbers of Conservatory students, who were generally characterized as “apolitical” by narrators. As such, the dances were rare meeting spaces for the campy Conservatory culture and politicized gay groups, which Pfeiffer felt were “almost like two different worlds.” The groups’ sensibilities *were* different in many ways. If Conservatory queens, in general, felt homosexuality was an exclusive, in-group identity and relied on camp as a coping strategy, gay liberationists expressed a belief in a sexual continuum and preferred direct political confrontation.

LGBT Conservatory students, in general, “thought of themselves as non-political,” organ and German double-major Christa Rakich (OC 75) recalled. “The Conservatory people had, not exactly more imagination, but they lived in their imaginations more,” she felt, “whereas the college people were more practical oriented.” Conservatory student David Hearst (pseudonym; OC 74), who attended the gay dances, nonetheless found Gay Lib meetings to be “very boring” and disagreed with “those that thought we should be out there all the time with signs and buttons and everything...because I was comfortable and I felt very accepted.”

On the other hand, some LGBT college students criticized the Conservatory camp culture for what they characterized as its sexism and lack of political awareness and “pride.” “Homosexuality is not a Conservatory affair,” Jay Gorney, a college student involved in Gay Lib, wrote in his 1973 *Review* essay “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Faggot.” “The Con, however, does encourage the attitude of gay man as Punchinello: He can camp, but not too much. He should be out enough to be amusing, but never really proud, open. The Con is afraid of strong, free gays.”<sup>191</sup>

Martin Garro, also known by his drag name “Sister Blanche of the Agony of Jesus,” felt gay Conservatory students often lacked political awareness as well. After two years at Oberlin, in 1973 he transferred to Columbia University, where he found the use of drag names to be a more overtly political act “meant to mock the male patriarchy and ‘macho’ posturing,” he recalled. At Columbia, “there were frequent debates over whether the use of drag names was progressive or counterrevolutionary.” While there were similar debates at Oberlin, “in general...gay life...was dominated by the Conservatory types, who tended not to think in political terms.”<sup>192</sup>

The divide between campy and “political” gay male sensibilities at Oberlin mirrored national gay scenes. Historian Esther Newton has argued that there are two historic “gay” sensibilities: a “camp/theatrical” sensibility and an “egalitarian/authentic” perspective. While the former sensibility is “associated with the greater dramatism and more expressive gender roles of the upper and lower classes, as opposed to the restraint—not to say dullness—of

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<sup>190</sup> Email to the author, 5/1/00.

<sup>191</sup> *The Review*, 5/15/73. “Oberlin homophobia is worse than at Ohio State. It’s a hell of a lot easier to deal with honest bigots than with a bunch of patronizing liberals.” “On Male Lesbianism: If men in general (and male egos in particular) become more repulsive, I swear I’ll start sleeping with women, which would make me **not** straight, but a male radical lesbian.”

<sup>192</sup> Email to the author, 4/18/00.

middle-class domestic life,” the latter perspective “springs directly from middle-class democratic and bourgeois ideology” and shaped the nineteenth-century institution of “romantic friendship,” the feminist movement, and the gay liberation movement.<sup>193</sup>

Still, a story from Jim Harrington (OC 73) suggests that camp and political action were not necessarily mutually exclusive, and that gay liberation dances served as a site for both. Leading a tour for prospective students and parents past Wilder Hall, where students were preparing for a Gay Lib dance in 1972 or 1973, “one really campy queen, who had a beard,” caught one mother “looking rather disapprovingly at him” and “rais[ing] her eyebrows” at the idea of a gay dance,” Harrington recalled. The queen “caught her doing that gesture, came over to her and said, ‘Darling, I love that dress. You *must* send me the fabric.’” The mother was “absolutely disgusted,” Harrington recalled; “I *don’t* think her dear little boy came to Oberlin.” The story suggests that, despite their stylistic differences, campy queens and gay liberationists shared a belief in the importance of being visible and “coming out” as gay individuals. I have also argued that, by visibly claiming campus space in the 1960s and earlier, campy queens laid the groundwork for a politicized gay campus presence.

It may have been the case that the students most in need of gay dances and other Gay Lib events were also the ones who felt they were not able to “come out.” Richard Linn (OC 72), a self-described “jock” from an upper middle class Jewish family in suburban Boston, wanted “so badly to go to the [Gay Lib] meetings,” but was afraid to be seen by his friends. Mainstream media depictions of homosexuality, such as the 1962 movie “Advise and Consent,” which he saw on television as a high-schooler, or the 1968 movie “The Sergeant,” about a predatory older homosexual Sergeant, which he saw at Oberlin, “contributed to my image of a gay life being sad and sleazy,” he recalled. Linn kept his identity hidden at Oberlin, and “internalized the perceptions to the point of thinking I was a freak.”

Similarly, Ricardo Barreto (OC 74) felt pressure from other gay students to be “out,” but felt it was important that heterosexuals, especially his fellow residents in Spanish House, think of him as a “straight arrow.”<sup>194</sup> Raised by an affluent family in Mexico, he recalled that most students with Catholic backgrounds viewed Gay Lib with “great skepticism,” and that gay Hispanics were “terrified and wouldn’t be caught dead at gay events.” “If anything, the Hispanic men on campus spent a great deal of energy distancing themselves as much as possible from gay student life whether in fact they were gay themselves or not,” he recalled. “But the fact that one heard rumors from friends and acquaintances indicates there were cracks in the wall.”

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<sup>193</sup> Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 84-85.

<sup>194</sup> From a 3/30/06 email to the author: “Spanish House was a very attractive dorm for Conservatory students. So in fact there was a large contingent of gay men coexisting with an increasing number of American Hispanics in addition to those interested in the language and the students from Latin American countries who tended to be from somewhat to very affluent backgrounds. So indeed the sexual tensions in the house were quite complex, made more so by the cultural backgrounds of a growing population of Hispanic students burdened as they were by their homophobic catholic/cultural backgrounds. To make the connection even more interesting, Spanish House dining hall had a vocal and highly visible contingent at lunch and dinner which was Conservatory based, many of whom were known gay members of the Conservatory community.”

Black students felt Gay Lib “was a white thing by and large,” Barry Smith (OC 71) recalled. “And the gay African American students weren’t going into [the black student organization] ABUSUA announcing that they were going to the [Gay Lib] dance.” While Smith felt those involved with Gay Lib were “incredibly brave [and] wonderfully outrageous,” he “was not ready to take that step.” The black community was “were not pro-gay folks” in general, he recalled, but “if you question any family, you’ll find a cousin, a brother, a sister, somebody back up in there. So it’s sort of like ‘live and let live,’ but publicly ‘No, I’m against it.’ It was that kind of hypocrisy going on.”

Holly Boswell (OC 72), a composition major in the Conservatory then living with a male name and appearance, felt that there was no place for her sense of “difference” at Gay Lib events. While she felt comfortable with the hippie “gender-bending” on campus, there was “virtually no cultural context in which to view [transgenderism],” she recalled. “It would have appeared to be totally freakish...to bend one’s gender that radically.” She only later became a prominent transgender activist, fusing her interest in ecology (awakened at the first campus Earth Day in 1971), spirituality, and transgenderism in her group “Kindred Spirits,” an alternative spiritual community for transgendered people.<sup>195</sup>

### **Lesbianism and the Women’s Movement (early 1970s)**

Many women narrators who graduated before feminism’s “second wave” were unaware of or unable to understand their sexual attractions to other women. Many began to identify as lesbian or bisexual only after graduating, often as they became involved with the women’s movement and began to see women in relationships with each other.

“When I was in high school I had a terrible crush on a woman French teacher and thought I might be a lesbian,” Devon Clare (OC 64) recalled. “But I guess at Oberlin I forgot all about that...There wasn’t a women’s movement around, and I really needed that to come out...I had to see other women falling in love with women to realize that was what I wanted.” Not only were same sex relationships virtually invisible on campus, the Oberlin administration also “kind of pushed heterosexuality by having us freshman arrange ourselves around the dining room table ‘boy-girl-boy-girl-boy-girl,’” she recalled. “‘Gracious living’ they called it.”<sup>196</sup>

Judith Klavans (OC 68) “never knew what the word ‘lesbian’ meant until I was well into my twenties,” she recalled. The lack of visible lesbian couples or individuals at Oberlin contributed to this. “Even in the ‘60s at Oberlin, no one would ever admit gay-ness or lesbian-ness,” she recalled. “Such behavior was reason for expulsion, or at least for ostracization and exclusion.”<sup>197</sup> Kristan Knapp (OC 70), who “grew up in wheat fields and asparagus patches” in Oregon, also “wasn’t aware...of my sexuality before I came [to Oberlin].” None of her campus experiences changed this; Oberlin was “so het” that lesbianism “had not occurred to me,” she recalled.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> She also founded the Trans Support Group in Asheville, N.C. in 1986, and is currently an organizer with Southern Comfort, a national transgender political conference.

<sup>196</sup> Oberlin College Alumni Office, *Into the Pink: An Oral History of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students at Oberlin College from 1937 to 1991* (Oberlin College, Ohio, 1996), 8.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 62

Stories from women narrators begin to change as the women's movement swept Oberlin in the early 1970s, encouraging both personal and institutional changes. The feminist maxims that "sisterhood is powerful" and "the personal is the political" inspired "consciousness-raising" groups, defiance against a historically male-dominated student activist culture, increased visibility of women's sexuality and lesbianism as an option. The Ad Hoc Committee on the Status of Women in 1971 also helped produce substantial changes in representation of women in faculty positions and the beginning of a Women's Studies option at Oberlin.

Stories from Misha Cohen and Stella Graham, friends from the class of 1973, suggest how the women's movement may have increased the visibility and cohesiveness of campus lesbian circles and individuals' awareness of same sex desire.

Cohen arrived at Oberlin in 1969 from a middle-class Jewish family in Coral Gables, Florida. "One of the things that happened when I went to school is that I immediately became a vegetarian," she remembered. "And I immediately met all the people who were women's liberation people." At anti-war organizational meetings, men still took the dominant and most vocal roles, but there were also some "women who finally got up in the middle of everything and stopped everything from happening and started talking about sexism." She knew some of these women were lesbians, "but there was no talk about that," she recalled.

She also began a close friendship with a dorm-mate who eventually became her girlfriend. "Then everything was really clear," she recalled. "Once something like that opens up for me, I realize, I learn everything about it." By this time, Cohen had access to women's newspapers, women's liberation books, and leftist newspapers that discussed the emerging gay and lesbian liberation movements. She read then voraciously. Cohen also became politically active on campus, but did not remember any lesbian or bisexual-specific organizing and felt that lesbians remained relatively closeted. "I remember when my girlfriend and I walked across campus and we decided to hold hands, that was this huge statement. There was nobody who did that... We got really a lot of pointing, so it was a difficult thing to do."

Stella Graham told a similar story. The oldest of four children of a Presbyterian minister and housewife, she was raised in Richmond, Virginia. By her junior year she decided she wanted to be a physical education teacher. The female P.E. teachers "just seemed strong, they seemed to have a lot more freedom in how they interacted with the world," she recalled. "[There was] just a joy that I felt there." Her senior year, she began an "affair" with a married, twenty-two-year-old female physical education teacher, and when Graham enrolled at Oberlin in 1969, her partner left her husband and job and followed.

Soon after, while listening to a call-in show on a Cleveland radio station, "I heard a woman talking who said she was a lesbian and she was with [the Cleveland chapter of] an organization called Daughters of Bilitis," she recalled. "And I came to. It was the first time in my life I had ever heard somebody talk about people like me... It was such a freeing experience, to finally know [that] not only was there one other [lesbian], but there were apparently there were several others." Graham wrote the woman a letter and received

brochures, newsletters, and a copy of *The Ladder*, the national Daughters of Bilitis magazine in return.

After their initial “opening-ups,” Cohen and Graham would become friends through their involvement in the campus women’s movement, participate and speak out as lesbians in the Human Development Program, and help found the Women’s Collective. Graham would also spearhead the Intern for Homosexual Concerns, a paid college position created to advocate for gay and lesbian students.

The increased publicity and visibility of lesbianism clearly altered women’s narratives at Oberlin. But the relationship between the women’s movement and lesbian politics was contentious, and one that was mirrored at Oberlin. Many feminists and feminist organizations, such as the National Association of Women (NOW), originally sought to distance themselves from lesbian causes and organizations because they felt any association would pose a threat to the emerging women’s movement. Similarly, Eileen Howell (OC 70), who only began to identify as a lesbian after graduating from Oberlin, felt that the women’s movement would be endangered by openly including lesbians.<sup>199</sup>

A national turning point and a founding moment of lesbian-feminism took place at the Second Congress to Unite Women in New York City in May 1970, which was “zapped” in a humorous protest by a group of women who would later come to be known as the Radicalesbians. Their manifesto, “The Woman-identified Woman,” distributed at the meeting, would be reprinted in the 1972 Oberlin publication, the *Review rip-off*, a feminist parody of the *Oberlin Review*.<sup>200</sup>

Anne Raver (OC 71) also wrote the association between the women’s movement and lesbianism in a 1971 *Review* article titled “Loving Freely.” She noted that some had attempted to discredit women’s liberation by labeling such groups “as lesbian societies.” These labels reflect “the repression of a free expression of love between two members of the same sex,” Raver argued. Like the campus gay liberationists, she championed a sexual continuum. “If anybody were allowed to fall in love with anybody,” she quoted from *Women-A Journal of Liberation*, “the word ‘homosexual’ wouldn’t be needed; it’s used now only to set people off in separate categories, artificially, so they’ll know who to be afraid of—each other.”<sup>201</sup>

Christa Rakich (OC 74) also recalled that “a lot of the self-discovery process for lesbians was wrapped up in identifying as a feminist [and] establishing independence from men.” But the political rhetoric “made things rather confusing: am I a lesbian because I hold a political belief of...self-reliance [and] strength? Or am I gravitating toward those beliefs because I am a lesbian?...Can I be homo-emotional but not homo-sexual? If I reject the roles—I do the dishes, he takes out the garbage—am I rejecting men?” In 1974, as president of what was by then called the Gay Union, Rakich did not herself identify as lesbian. “People talked a lot about a continuum at the time,” so her orientation was a “total non-issue,” she remembered.

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<sup>199</sup> Email to the author, 7/24/04.

<sup>200</sup> Oberlin College Archives, Student Publications, “Review Rip-Off,” 11/14/72.

<sup>201</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 3/9/71.

Using the terms “bisexual” or “questioning” was also less threatening for some, she felt. By the mid-1970s, a group of women were holding a weekly “lesbian rap group.” When they changed their name to the more innocuous “bisexual or questioning women’s discussion group,” they upped their membership from a couple of women to a couple dozen, Rakich recalled. “So I suspect that I was not the only person who wasn’t really willing to identify wholeheartedly as gay,” she said, “but at the same time just wanted that door open just another inch maybe.”

### **The Women’s Collective (1972)**

In the fall of 1972, Misha Cohen (OC 73) and her girlfriend helped to found the Women’s Collective, and her friend Stella Graham (OC 73) became the dorm resident. Roughly nineteen women lived at Thurston House, a small, two-story house, where they held weekly meetings, tended an organic garden in the back, and participated in “consciousness-raising” groups. “We had to process everything,” Cohen remembered. “Every single thing we did, we had to do collectively.”

“It was a place that had a very clear feminist agenda,” Loey Powell (OC 73) recalled. “Those of us who were engaged in the anti-Vietnam War stuff...experienced what women did all over the place. The guys were running the thing, they really didn’t want us around, and they certainly didn’t want us in decision-making positions. So there was a fair amount of resentment.” The Collective was then a challenge to the traditionally male-dominated campus activist culture and also the “seed” for a number of feminist projects. Graham, for example, began publishing the newspaper *Coming Out*, a national women’s movement newspaper that explored issues such as women’s health and lesbianism. The *Review rip-off*, a 1972 feminist parody of the *Oberlin Review*, also began at the Collective. The house was also headquarters for organizing around unequal facilities in the newly built Phillips gym. The Collective also held women’s dances at the house, complete with 3.2 beer from the local convenience store and Rolling Stones and Grateful Dead on the record player.

There was at least one couple living at the Collective, but only a small number of residents identified as lesbian. Still, the idea that “sisterhood is powerful” was popular, and “it would have been very un-PC to criticize someone for being a lesbian,” Graham recalled. “More likely you could be criticize for not being, or for not trying it, for not at least be open minded about the possibility of it.” Christa Rakich (OC 74) remembered “ardent feminists” involved with the Collective who wanted to be lesbian because it was the “purest feminism.” “For some of them, it wasn’t so much about being gay as wanting to reject stereotypes,” she recalled. “This was perceived as threatening by some of the ‘really gay’ lesbians who were looking for a real relationship, and not wanting to be an experiment for someone who was really straight.”

Women of all sexual orientations from the Collective occasionally patronized a lesbian bar in Akron. It was “dark, smoky, [with] pool tables, [and a] juke box,” Graham recalled. “I have pictures of women in leather pants and shades in this dark bar at night...it was rebellious, it was scintillating, Here we were at a lesbian bar, being the very hip, savvy adults that we were.”

The move toward separatism in the national women’s movement, which partly reflected the sexism of many gay men, meant that most lesbians and bisexuals associated

more with heterosexual women than gay men. As early as the late 1960s, “women-only spaces were incredibly important,” Kristan Knapp (OC 70) recalled, “and there were a lot of women who came along and said that they could not share any emotional or psychic energy with men at all, regardless. There were some lesbians here who constructed a very tight, enclosed society for themselves...[and] felt that our interaction with gay men compromised us.”<sup>202</sup> Cohen also recalled “there was [not] a lot of cross-over between women and gay men.” She herself was so removed from gay males that she doesn’t recall the existence of the primarily male organization, Oberlin Gay Liberation.

The Women’s Collective moved to Mallory House during the 1980s and finally to Baldwin in 1991, where it endures today as the Baldwin Cottage Women's Collective.<sup>203</sup>

### **The Human Development Program and Internship for Homosexual Concerns (early-mid 1970s)**

Gay and lesbian students remembered the path-breaking Human Development Program, founded in 1970 by biology professor Maureen O’Hara, as empowering courses that helped them explore and start speaking openly about their same sex desires and gay and lesbian identities.

During these courses and seminars—radical departures from earlier sex education efforts on campus—participants watched explicit heterosexual and homosexual sex films, talked openly about masturbation and gay and lesbian sexuality, and even, on occasion, gave each other foot massages. “The first foot massage I’ve ever had in my life—that’s what we did in one of the classes,” said Misha Cohen (OC 73), who, along with an “out” gay male student, was one of the first to facilitate class discussions as a group leader in the spring of 1970. “Through that whole process for me was when I really became in touch with my own sexuality,” she recalled. “It was a real turning point for me...I really started confronting my own stuff internally.”

Stella Graham (OC 73), who became a group facilitator around 1972, recalled conferences held in Cleveland for ministers and counselors, meant to “help people start talking about sexuality.” “It really was a sexual revolution,” she said. “People going, ‘Oh, I’ve got a body. It’s fine, it’s sexual, it’s wonderful—I want to talk about it!’” For Graham, this was also personally liberating. “It was just hugely exciting for me to be able to be there saying, ‘Hey, I’m a lesbian and I love women, and I’m okay,’ she recalled. “It was very heady. I got a lot of strokes for being a lesbian and being out.”

Loey Powell (OC 73), raised in a liberal family with close ties to the United Church of Christ, began facilitating forums in 1972. While she did not identify as lesbian at the time, “I remember writing in a journal or a paper [for the class] that I don’t think I’m gay, but you know, I won’t close a door on that.” While she would “do anything” to spend time with one of her basketball teammates, “I never had words for it,” she recalled. Most of her teammates were dating men at the time, “but our primary emotional attractions were with each other, or other women.” Powell, and much of the basketball team, only came out as lesbian after graduating. “I remember going to my 15<sup>th</sup> college reunion, and there were five other women

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<sup>202</sup> *Into the Pink*, 58.

<sup>203</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 2/26/99.

I played basketball with for three or four years. All of us were lesbian, and only one of us...self-identified as a lesbian during college,” Powell recalled.

Randy Weiss (OC 75), a College student raised in a Jewish, middle class family in Florida, was involved in the Human Development Program in 1973. During one class, “I decided I had to come out,” he recalled. “Suddenly, I was like the gay person in the class, and I thought, I can do this. I’m perfectly happy being a gay person and telling other people about my experiences.” A year later, Weiss became Oberlin’s Intern for Homosexual Concerns, a position funded by the college at President Fuller’s approval and spearheaded by Stella Graham. As the Intern, Weiss helped organize a campus conference on Homosexuality and Bisexuality, which grew out of the previous year’s conference he had helped organize on “male liberation” (a male counterpart to women’s liberation).

Dean of Students George Langelier proved to be an ally to Weiss, as he had been to Oberlin Gay Liberation. Langelier “could not only tell me things that he wouldn’t feel comfortable saying publicly,” Weiss recalled, “but he could also help me, let’s say strategize.”

He made me think of ways to make people more comfortable with homosexuality and the topics that we were discussing...I was a kid, I was nineteen at the time that I had this job...and he was a mentor in a way. I never thought of that really, ‘til just this moment, that he must have taught me a lot about how you talk to people, and how you talk to people in such a way that they’ll listen to you, that they’ll like you, so consequently they’ll want to help you.

There are “engineering geniuses [and] musical geniuses,” Weiss recalled, “and George Langelier was a social genius.”

### **Black Power and LGBT Students (early to mid 1970s)**

The percentage of black students at Oberlin, which rarely exceeded four percent from 1900 to the mid-1960s,<sup>204</sup> rose from roughly three percent in 1966 to eight percent in 1972.<sup>205</sup> Responding in part to student pressure, President Fuller launched the college into a massive recruitment effort in 1971, with the goal of fifteen percent students of color by 1975 approved by the faculty (a goal which Fuller believed they reached).<sup>206</sup> Among other things, this made possible a more unified black community; in 1969, for example, the Afrikan Heritage House, or Afro House, was established as a program dormitory and center for the campus black community.

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<sup>204</sup> “Oberlin College and the Negro Student, 1865-1940,” W.E. Bigglestone, *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Jul., 1971), 198-219.

<sup>205</sup> Figures from the 1940s to 1971 are based on rough calculations from the yearly totals that appear in the 1960 Alumni Registrar, figures from the 1960s from Ross Peacock, Director of the Office of Institutional Research, and minority student records from the Records of the Secretary.

<sup>206</sup> *Newsweek*, 11/8/71, 68. When Robert Fuller began his presidency in 1970, “there was already student lobbying to drastically increase the percent of blacks,” he recalled. Kiyoshi Ikeda, a Japanese American professor of sociology and head of the Committee on Admissions, was also a major player. “He and I in cahoots worked out, on a napkin in the snack bar, how to do this and how to pay for it,” Fuller recalled. “[Ikeda] had been working on it before I got there, and suddenly he had the support of a key administrator.” Their plan was put to the General Faculty vote in 1971.

The recruitment effort also accompanied changes in campus race relations, as the Christian rhetoric of the civil rights movement shifted in the mid and late-1960s to the language of separatism and revolution. Across the nation, according to historian Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, “black students felt under intense pressure to identify themselves with other blacks and to adopt a militant posture.” The combination of “high visibility, elevated ambition, academic insecurity, and militancy made these complicated and difficult years for black collegians, especially those on largely white campuses.”<sup>207</sup> For black gay men, this difficulty was intensified, especially towards the mid-1970s.

“Everything had become an issue,” Barry Smith (OC 71) recalled of Oberlin. “And in some ways you kind of wished you could have a little privacy.” A communications and studio art major from an upper/middle class black family in St. Louis, Smith thought Oberlin Gay Liberation “was incredibly brave [and] wonderfully outrageous,” but he “was not ready to take that step.” He did involve himself with the Oberlin College Alliance for Black Culture (OCABC), founded in 1967, which later became ABUSUA, a student organization that endures today. Black students in ABUSUA felt Gay Lib was a “white thing by and large; that’s what I was hearing,” Smith recalled. “And the gay African American students weren’t going into ABUSUA announcing that they were going to the [Gay Lib] dance.” Black students were “not pro-gay folks,” Smith felt, “but if you question any family, you’ll find a [gay] cousin, a brother, a sister, somebody back up in there. So it’s sort of like ‘live and let live,’ but publicly ‘No, I’m against it.’ It was that kind of hypocrisy going on.”

Ruth Spencer (OC 72) used the same phrase—“live and let live”—to describe Oberlin’s black community. Raised in a “well respected black family” in a small town in Southern West Virginia, Spencer’s mother a college professor and her father a high school principal. As a young woman, she was “tomboyish,” played sports with the neighborhood girls and boys, and didn’t like “frilly” clothes, but she also knew there was “a certain persona” she had to maintain in order to conform to community and family standards.

A psychology major at Oberlin, Spencer played in the women’s basketball team, where she was aware of a number of lesbian teammates. But she was “not really having any significant internal inquiries” regarding her own sexuality. Like many Oberlin students in the early 1970s, she “underst[ood] sexuality to be a continuum,” but would have nonetheless identified as heterosexual. It wasn’t until the late 1970s that she came to identify as lesbian. “I think it’s a conscious choice I made,” she said. “I’ve been with and experienced both men and women, and in the end I prefer to be in a relationship with women,” she said. “I’m not saying it’s a choice like do I buy a blue suit or a brown suit. It’s not that level of choice, but something much more intricate, much more sophisticated, and much more inter-psychic.”

The “live and let live” attitude Smith and Spencer recalled of the late 1960s seemed to have faded towards the mid-1970s, as the campus black community grew and militant separatism became more popular. Tony Stafford (OC 76) remembered eating lunch with a white male student he had long admired from a distance, when “there was a voice that said, ‘Excuse,’” he recalled. “And I turned around and saw there were seven Black women. And they proceeded to say, ‘What the hell are you doing? What the hell are you doing?’ all to me.

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<sup>207</sup> Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 241.

It was the most terrifying experience in my life. It was like, if you were a Black male, you should be at Afro House; why are you sitting here with a white man?" But while there was intense pressure from the black community, there was "no place for gays" at Afro House. "I always thought of marching together, all the Black homosexuals, and marching down to Afro House," Stafford recalled.<sup>208</sup>

In the mid-seventies, an article appeared in the *Review* equating homosexuality with white supremacy and American imperialism. Students harassed and left a dead chicken outside the room of one black gay man who lived at Afrikan Heritage House. The student reportedly wrote a reply, published in the *Review*, in which he talked about misperceptions of gay men in the black community.<sup>209</sup> Later, after "an outrageous practice of 'outing' black students to the African American community in general in the hopes of scaring them back into the closet," David Neiweem (OC 75), a white student active in the Gay Union, recalled meeting with friends and "a relatively sympathetic" Dean Langelier to work towards a solution. Langelier also remembered the meeting:

There was a speaker that came to campus and argued the position that white people tried to make black people gay as a form of genocide. And there was a white student who brought a black student to my office. The white student did most of the speaking and told me that there was a lot of harassment going on in Afrikan Heritage House...those students had gone to that lecture and felt completely put down. And it was so troubling that they weren't coming out of their rooms. They had gone into isolation.

Karen Dennis (OC 76) felt that the campus anti-Bakke coalition, a broad-based group of organizations protesting the famous "reverse-discrimination" case, marked the beginning of a frank dialogue between different student groups. As a white delegate from the Gay Union, she discovered "that for a lot of Black students...Gay Union was an alien place and not a safe place." In her opinion, "that had a lot to do with what we had gone through politically in the world, the politics of separatism and nationalism."

Through the coalition, "we had to learn to talk to each other—people who had not talked to each other all their lives," she recalled. "I thought because we all had the same fears that this was going to become hostile and horrible." Instead, "it was a very liberating experience." Soon after, the Gay Union screened a film about the first openly gay minister ordained by the United Congregational Church, and for the first time in Dennis' memory a substantial number of black students came to a gay-sponsored event.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Oberlin College Alumni Office, *Into the Pink: An Oral History of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students at Oberlin College from 1937 to 1991* (Oberlin College, Ohio, 1996), 66-68.

<sup>209</sup> *Into the Pink*. I was not able to find a copy of this letter in the *Review*.

<sup>210</sup> *Into the Pink*, 69-70.

## Epilogue

In place of a formal conclusion, I write here about my own experiences at Oberlin in the late 1990s as they relate to the college's LGBT history. People interested in an overview of the "Behind the Masks" narrative can look at the Themes sub-section and the introductions to the various narrative sections. For information about LGBT Oberlin life after the early 1970s, see *Into the Pink*.

"Behind the Masks" closes after the birth of gay liberation and second-wave feminism—momentous events, but hardly the death of the beliefs about gender and sexuality that characterized earlier decades. I grew up in a conservative Florida town believing my attraction to other boys was an indication that I was mentally ill or somehow "unnatural." I was aware of other gay people in my arts high school and the town's small classical music world, but not among the congregation of the local Presbyterian church I attended regularly with my family. It was at a summer music camp in North Carolina that I kissed a boy for the first time—my first real social/sexual awakening. I remember that he later defended gay sexuality in a letter by associating it with artistic and musical talent. I also remember that when my mother found this letter and others, she responded by sending me to a psychologist. Twenty plus years after Stonewall, the idea that homosexuality was a sign of mental illness and the belief that it was somehow related to artistic talent, themes discussed in this narrative, were alive and well.

I applied to Oberlin because of its coop system, its Conservatory, its "unusual" leftist reputation, and—though I was myself relatively conflicted—because I heard that it was a gay friendly school. I was not disappointed. "Queer" students, as they generally called themselves, were not only plentiful; they were also vocal and, like other Oberlin students, highly politicized.

I met my first boyfriend at a student-run class on LGBT issues during my first semester, played violin in the Conservatory Orchestra, ate at the vegetarian Fairchild Coop, eventually majored in history. That summer, playing in a light opera company in Wooster, Ohio, I immersed myself in queer theory and history. The material was a revelation. For the first time, I read about activist groups such as ACT-UP, the Lesbian Avengers, and Queer Nation. I listened to Morrissey's *Bona Drag* non-stop and read Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* three times (and even came close to understanding it). I consumed gender theory, queer biographies, and film. I emerged with a completely different understanding of sexuality and history, and returned to the campus angry, energized, and prepared to participate in campus queer organizing.

This narrative ends in the mid 1970s, as identity politics became the dominant lens through which people understood the Oberlin college community. This remained true of the late 1990s. What had changed, at least from my vantage point as a white male, was that much of the tension between identity groups described by narrators of the 1970s seemed to have been replaced by open discussion, analysis, and appreciation. I took women's studies classes with Professor Anna Agathangelou, a fiery socialist feminist who taught students to look at the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality. I worked with a collective of queer students on a full-length documentary exploring the divisions of race, class, and gender in Oberlin queer communities. With many of the same students, I also helped publish

*undisclosed recipients*, a student publication with the same purpose. During my senior year, I began this narrative as a private reading with history professor Carol Lasser, after a summer interning at San Francisco's GLBT Historical Society.

The general student climate towards LGBT students was liberal, though I sometimes (perhaps self-righteously) felt that, as art major Jay Gorney wrote in 1973, "Oberlin homophobia is worse than that at Ohio State. It's a hell of a lot easier to deal with honest bigots than with a bunch of patronizing liberals."<sup>211</sup> Drag Ball was by far the biggest and most popular campus event of the academic year, drawing students of every sexual persuasion to Wilder Hall (the old Men's Dormitory) in drag, saran wrap, and body paint. But some students also criticized the Ball, part of the annual Transgender Awareness week, for being "blackface for trans people" (see "invocation from the drag king" in *undisclosed recipients*, for example). I also felt that the administration was generally supportive of queer students—to a point. Oberlin made headlines by hiring openly gay athletic director Michael Muska in 1998. But the same year the faculty also rejected the SMBD Club's charter status, an indication that the college was perhaps more squeamish about sexually transgressive student groups (or more frightened about losing alumni funding) than they were in the early 1970s, when Oberlin Gay Liberation was easily approved as a student organization.<sup>212</sup>

I saw no direct evidence of the Christian thought that shaped the college in earlier years, but I did feel that Oberlin as a whole remained relatively puritanical—certainly not the "far-Left paradise of agitation, Marxist activism and sexual licentiousness" described in David Horowitz's conservative *FrontPage Magazine*.<sup>213</sup> The only evangelicals I encountered were those from outside the college who criticized Oberlin's gay affirmative policies. "God Hates Fags," best known for picketing Matthew Shepard's funeral, paid a visit to the campus during my senior year, partly in response to the hiring of Michael Muska. Students organized a massive counter-demonstration with the support of the administration. Brother Jed, a local anti-gay evangelical preacher, also made periodic visits to Tappan Square. Some tried to argue directly with him, but one of my favorite memories of Oberlin is of the day when Corey Dargel and Yvan Greenberg turned Jed's tirade into a piece of *sublime* performance art, described in a wonderfully quirky review by composer Pauline Oliveros.

Conducting the oral histories and research for "Behind the Masks" was part of a personal transformation that Oberlin nurtured. It's been an incredibly edifying experience, providing me with models of LGBT adult life, reinforcing my confidence in the power of social activism, and inspiring pleasure and pride in queer resiliency and inventiveness. My hope is that the narrative will continue to expand and grow as Oberlin students continue to invent new, queer ways of interacting with the world.

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<sup>211</sup> *Oberlin Review*, 5/15/73.

<sup>212</sup> In a 1998 *Cleveland Plain Dealer* story, physics professor John Scofield said of the SMBD Club, "If this kind of thing continues, I think it will make it more and more difficult to recruit mainstream American kids." *The Plain Dealer*, 9/11/98.

<sup>213</sup> "Radical Activist U: Oberlin College," Jean Pearce *FrontPage Magazine* 11/5/03.