

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Walter Morris Welch

COLLECTION: 4700.2116

IDENTIFICATION: Auburn University bachelor's and master's graduate; Longtime employee of LSU's Department of Residential Life (1971-2000).

INTERVIEWERS: Whitney Craig, LeBrian Patrick

SERIES: Baton Rouge's LGBTQ Community: Then and Now

INTERVIEW DATE: November 10, 2009

FOCUS DATES: 1970s - 2009

ABSTRACT:

Tape 3968

Introduction; Welch born in 1945 after VE Day; grew up in Chattanooga, Tennessee; has one sister, both parents are deceased; graduated from Chattanooga High School; bachelor's in electrical engineering and master's in business administration from Auburn University; space race of the late 1960s; his draft number was 325 so he was never called up for service; taught one year at Troy State University, then came to LSU to pursue doctorate in business administration; spent three years in doctoral program and working in Kirby Smith Hall; decided to leave program around the time a position opened in the housing office, which he moved into; community involvement began in the 1990s with First Thursday and the Lambda Group; Lambda Group had a community center, held monthly meetings, sponsored Pride Fest aka Fall Fest, had a building on Florida Boulevard; older leadership left and younger members could not sustain it, so he rotated of the board; also involved with Louisiana Gay Political Action Caucus (LAGPAC) aka Equality Louisiana, and Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN); with GLSEN, had hearings before the school board on forming Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs; he became a spokesman for the community, frequently interviewed on WRKF; closest thing to a statewide organization is Forum for Equality; is currently president of First Thursday and active with Metropolitan Community Church (MCC); has lived in Baton Rouge since 1971 after graduating for Auburn in '69 and brief teaching stint at Troy State; when Welch was in high school, there were not any "out" LGBT students; "so you didn't go through being labeled"; he was in choir and orchestra, played French horn; teasing was sexual humor but not about LGBT issues; he didn't identify as gay at that time, he had several girlfriends; began to pick up on his identity in college; working as an electrician's helper in a paper mill, had access to old magazines, like *Grecian Guild Pictorial*, that included images of male physique; was preparing for a band performance at Florida State University when news of JFK assassination spread; didn't have gay or lesbian friends at Auburn because it was so small; description of

Auburn's campus and cruising the grounds or restrooms; kids in high school today have a very different environment than what he had in terms of organizations for gays and lesbians; isn't sure how or when he heard about the Stonewall riots, that was certainly not the beginning of LGBT activism but perhaps the beginning of the modern activist era; he's pretty much out to everyone in his life; his sister had long since figured it out; his nephew had voiced acceptance of gay people, so he told him everything; recently learned that a cousin of his is lesbian; there was no social networking when he was younger; while at Troy State and dating a bar manager, had to leave dinner in a hurry because the bar was being raided by police; ran into several occasions in Baton Rouge where police came into bars, he considered it a form of harassment; after-bar parties in the 1970s and 80s were common; LSU Police and Dean of Students would sometimes go on aggressive campaigns that appeared to target gay community on campus; for fun, going to bars on the weekend, having themed parties; First Thursday became a social alternate to bars and the church; oldest LGBT organization in Baton Rouge is the Krewé of Apollo, second oldest is MCC, followed by First Thursday; he was on staff at LSU when first gay student organization was created, that morphed into Gays, Bisexuals, Lesbians, and Supporters United (GBLSU); Spectrum Alliance came about and had a Safe Space campaign, was also instrumental in inclusion of sexual orientation in university employment policies; remembers controversy when Marty Pfeiffer applied for a GSA club at McKinley High School, some school board votes against it, but laws were clear that it had to be allowed; incident in another state where a school banned all student clubs rather than allowing a GSA; Glenn Ducote was involved with the Baton Rouge Area Gay Political Action Committee (BRAGPAC) in the 1980s; remembers a male couple that operated a cooperative house for a Catholic order, one of them was a lawyer and the other taught at a Catholic school; Welch began doing radio interviews through his association with that couple; Joe Traigle is a leader with the Capital City Alliance; Baton Rouge LGBT community has always seemed disinterested in non-social aspects; he feels they are a more economically privileged group that keeps to themselves; they don't turn their back on things and have been supportive, but they let things come and go; example of Bob Patience trying to start a group that would merge calendars of events from various LGBT organizations and not getting much cooperation; Steve Ransom, one of the founders of the Lambda Group, was one of the few activists willing to be quoted in the *Reveille*; other activists in the local community and nationally; apathy in Baton Rouge because people are more involved in their own life and because the state and city are very conservative; Baton Rouge has not been a gay mecca, so a large gay community hasn't formed; New Orleans has been fertile ground for the LGBT community; meeting one of his long-term partners through friends who lived in Colorado; partner moved to Baton Rouge and enrolled at LSU and has some difficulties with rising tuition rates, so Welch helped him with expenses; partner returned to Colorado for summer, but did not return to LSU because he had been feeling ill; was eventually diagnosed with AIDS, died in 1989; in summer of 1983, LSU hosted the Special Olympics and Welch was in charge of housing 5,600 people; another relationship was long-distance with someone he met in Washington State; Welch assumed he was HIV positive but didn't do anything about it until 1986 or '87, did not go on medication until 1995 or '96; having HIV shut him down romantically; "the stigma attached to it, you didn't really want to tell much of anybody"; practicing safe sex and telling partners; he has people that are there for him, he rents rooms in his house so he's rarely sitting alone; used to feel comfortable approaching people in bars but not so much anymore, looking for someone to go home with doesn't interest him that much; current hookup websites are very youth-oriented; he doesn't see a lot of comradery between generations today, feels there was more of that back

when everyone was thrown together in the bars; he has two generations of family below him, all his elders have passed; younger gays taking an interest in political activism; impact and storyline of Harvey Milk film; as an aging gay man, he sees progress and other people stepping in to carry the torch; fight for LGBT civil rights has been much more compacted in time than fight for African American and Women's civil rights; interviewers are seeking information on how LGBT community in Baton Rouge has changed over time; Welch cites realization that major events in his lifetime aren't relatable to younger people, for example, Kennedy assassination, controversy over the Vietnam War or the first Gulf War; example of technological advances in LSU housing, going from Hollerith cards to computer mainframe tracking demographics; changes to dorm construction and configuration mirroring changes to home lives of students, for example, getting rid of stall showers and toilets for more privacy; conclusion.

TAPES: 1 (T3968)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 1 hour, 15 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 31 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: Biographical data form; Correspondence

RESTRICTIONS: None