

Gay life

Bill Hull interviewed by Chris McGinnis, June 21, 2001. Interview K-0844. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

As you read...

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How old was Bill Hull when he knew he was gay?
2. How did he feel about being gay?
3. Who else in his family was gay?
4. Why did Hull believe his mother knew about his sexual orientation?
5. Did Bill and his mother ever talk about his sexual orientation?
6. When Hull went to UNC in Chapel Hill, how did he meet other gay men and women?
7. Did Hull feel that he was accepted at Chapel Hill? What does he say in the interview that tells you this?
8. Why did Hull never become involved in the gay rights movement?
9. How did Bill describe gay life in Chapel Hill in the 1950s? Does his description surprise you? Why or why not?

Because he and all of his siblings were gay men, Bill Hull felt that his sexuality was not unusual. But in the 1950s and 1960s, discretion was vital to southern gay men, he says. Publicly acknowledging one's homosexuality could result in economic recrimination or physical violence. In these excerpts from a 2001 interview, Hull describes his coming-out experience as a teenager and the impact the liberating Chapel Hill atmosphere had on gay males.

Note: The audio interview contains mild profanity that has been deleted from the transcript.

Being gay in the 1950s

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Chris McGinnis

Why do you think that the gay civil rights movement then came out? Do you think that there were real issues; they just were not quite as extreme as the black community was experiencing?

Bill Hull

I think that the gays when I came along—having been born in the 40s and I never came out, I just found other gay people and I finally figured it out. I did not really feel—I felt special, private, secret, a subculture. I was not that involved in the movement for gay rights, I always had the right to execute them if someone didn't—I was never—how am I going to say this—I always felt special. People treated me like I was special, because I was gay. It was sort of that funny uncle scenario that happens in the South. “There are gay people, and we love them, and they are all sweet,” and all of that. I never felt oppressed, I never felt discriminated against. To be honest with you, I never got that involved with the gay rights movement, other than as a—well; I just didn't participate in it.

Chris McGinnis

You were a supporter, perhaps?

Bill Hull

I was a supporter, but I didn't feel oppressed. Susan Sontag, did an article, what was it in the late 60s or 70s describing what camp was¹

Chris McGinnis

Right.

Bill Hull

The crowds that I was hanging around with were devastated, they were like, “She has exposed our lifestyle!” It was just a secret, well, it was not a secret, it was just a very erudite communication level, association signals that one had. We were a subculture and proud of it. I mean, I always knew that I was gay from the sixth grade on. I knew that I was special; I knew that I was different. It was a very special secret. So, I never felt like I had to come out and fight my way for acceptance and all of that. Being part of a family that is like what, seventy five percent gay. [Laughter]

Chris McGinnis

Oh, in terms of your nuclear family.

Bill Hull

Yeah, my nuclear family. I was not different, the one straight brother, he was the weird one. [Laughter]

Chris McGinnis

Well, I guess that he was the exception then.

Bill Hull

So, I just always felt like I was who I was, and people accepted me for who I was. I was not necessarily effeminate or that overt. I was discreet, always discreet. I just felt very special. So, I was impressed with the civil rights movement, but I did not feel like that it affected me so personally as it just did generally. People who got in trouble because of their sexual preferences and inclinations or just their nature.

His family

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Bill Hull

Even my mother knew that we were all gay.

Chris McGinnis

It just wasn't spoken about.

Bill Hull

But she would have just have killed us if we had to confront it. As I said, I had my first boyfriend when I was fourteen years old and he was twenty-seven. I spent a lot of time with him. His mother was not very mentally stable and one weekend, when I was staying with Ronnie, and my mother loved him dearly, but it was just sort of an unspoken thing.

Chris McGinnis

Right.

Bill Hull

As long as it was not slapped in her face.

Chris McGinnis

Everybody was happy and nobody was getting hurt.

Bill Hull

Everybody was happy and this woman came up to the house and threw a brick through the window and called my mother and told her that her son was queer and that he was sleeping with her little baby boy and blah blah blah blah. Yes, in the middle of the night. Maybe midnight on a Saturday night. My mother called and said for me and Ronnie to come home, for me to bring Ronnie with him, she wanted to talk with us.

Chris McGinnis

Oh my.

Bill Hull

We went to her and at that time of the night she was in bed reading with her glasses on and she called us up and she said that we needed to talk about something and I thought, “Oh [*expletive deleted*], here it comes.” Because I was not ready to come out, to me it was a quiet, nice wonderful secret.

Chris McGinnis

Right.

Bill Hull

I was very special; it was like being a fairy like Tinkerbell.

Chris McGinnis

Right.

Bill Hull

It was not some social thing that I had to deal with. Her approach to this whole situation was that this woman had called and she couldn't believe that a mother would be so horrible to do what she did and to try to hurt her child and in turn hurt hers. That she could not live with that meanness that this woman had provoked and the agony that she was trying to bring on both of the families and that she suggested that our friendship be a little more discreet and that is all that she ever said about that.

Chris McGinnis

How incredibly spectacular.

Bill Hull

It was wonderful. But if I had said, “Mother, I am gay.” She would have said, “Well, I can't live with you.” It was her culture.

Chris McGinnis

Right.

Bill Hull

That is just the way that it was in the 60s or then late 50s.

Gay life in Chapel Hill

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Chris McGinnis

All right, so we were talking about how Chapel Hill was a gay friendly town, how it was very accepting. Some people have talked about it being more laissez faire, more than—

Bill Hull

Very much so, very much. Something in your original paper that I did not see, which was something that was made very evident to me was talking about going to my first gay party ever on Chapel Hill on Meadow Brook Lane right behind that cow or whatever it is that Sunshine Biscuit place up there. There was this wonderful house and everybody that I met there, I am still good friends with. But, the next day, the Monday that I went to my first orientation, I went to which was, to me, the most wonderful place in the whole world was Lenoir Hall. That cafeteria was at that point, in 1963 of September was the meeting place of everyone to plan out their schedules. I went there by myself, sat at a table with my tray of food, two people that I had met the night before came up to me, no they had seen me there, I did not meet them, they came up, mentioned that they had seen me at the party and could they join me. I said, of course, we became instant fast friends and I missed the rest of orientation sitting there because people would come in, pull up another table and before I knew it, dinner was being served and there must have been twenty five or thirty people there, meeting, talking, meeting me, welcoming me to the community.

Chris McGinnis

And they were all gay people?

Bill Hull

All gay people, and faculty and students. It was wonderful.

Chris McGinnis

Isn't that amazing.

Bill Hull

I have never felt more accepted and more real in my entire life.

Chris McGinnis

Wow, that is very impressive.

Bill Hull

I would go to Lenoir Hall, you ate all of your meals there, and there was invariably just tables of people there that would all pull the tables up to this big enclaves of gay people, some were outrageous, we were hootie, we were loud and not one ever looked at us—

Chris McGinnis

No one ever batted an eyelash.

Bill Hull

No one ever batted an eye. It was wonderful. Lenoir Hall to me was sort of like my introduction to Chapel Hill Society, other than the gay party that I went to the previous Saturday night of my Monday orientation; I knew probably a good portion of the spectrum of Chapel Hill gay people.

Chris McGinnis

So the gay community was very integrated then and very—

Bill Hull

Totally integrated.

Chris McGinnis

Were those, were these professors openly gay, or did they—

Bill Hull

Yes.

Chris McGinnis

Did some of them have wives?

Bill Hull

They were not openly gay, they were just obviously gay. I mean, they were not cruising and accosting people.

Chris McGinnis

[Laughter] I didn't mean it that way.

Bill Hull

I know, but they were not, in any way, no. They were openly gay and probably less openly gay than they might have been ten years before I got there, because Chapel Hill in the 50s, I understand was really quite outrageous—

Chris McGinnis

In terms of repressive?

Bill Hull

No, as far as people being flamboyant—

Chris McGinnis

So, people were even more outrageous.

Bill Hull

Yeah, maybe so, people were sort of—well, you could get away with it in Chapel Hill.

Chris McGinnis

And that was during McCarthyism².

Bill Hull

Yes, was it ever. It became almost a counter reaction, I think.

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Notes

1. Camp refers to a gay subculture. The term encompasses the gestures, body language, dress, hair styles, and coded language used by gay men and women to communicate to others who are part of their subculture that they are also gay.
2. During the early 1950s, Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin claimed that large numbers of communists and Soviet spies were active in the United States, particularly in the federal government. The House Un-American Activities Committee held hearings to try suspected communists. Many of those suspected had no connection at all to the Communist Party or to similar political movements but had simply been accused by people who disliked them, either personally or politically. McCarthy was not involved in the hearings, but he became the public face of anti-communism by accusing civil rights leaders, Hollywood actors, artists, and a wide variety of other people of being communist sympathizers. McCarthy was eventually censured by the Senate, but not before “McCarthyism” had reached the level of hysteria across the country.

Gay men and women — or anyone suspected of being gay — fell under special scrutiny, in part because it was believed that they could easily be “turned” by Soviet spies who threatened to “out” them. In most states, homosexuality was illegal and a gay person could serve time in jail.