



*Coming Out
of the
Magnolia Closet*

**Same-Sex Couples
in Mississippi**

JOHN F. MARSZALEK III

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For Larry
and

For all the same-sex couples in Mississippi who are changing
hearts and minds daily by simply being themselves

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 3

PART ONE

Chapter One. Community 39

Chapter Two. Religion 94

Chapter Three. Families 121

PART TWO

Chapter Four. Meeting. 147

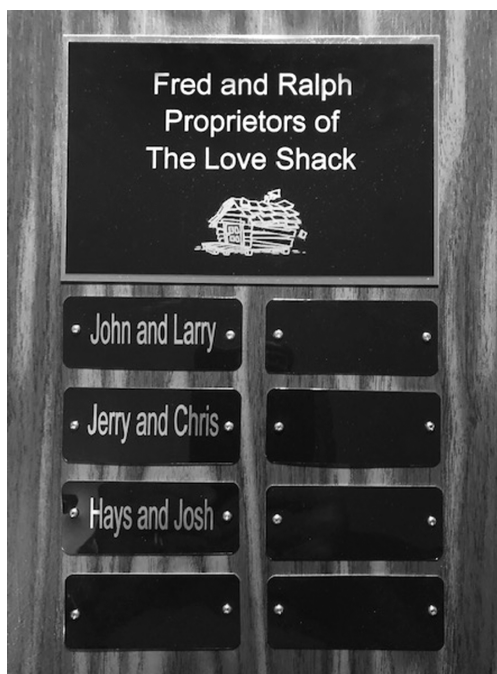
Chapter Five. Marriage 175

Conclusion. Why Stay in Mississippi? 205

Meeting

After I bought my house in Columbus, I wondered how I would meet potential boyfriends. There were some gay faculty that I knew at my graduate school alma mater, Mississippi State University, some twenty minutes away, but it seemed like all of them were either already in a relationship, closeted, or we just didn't click. One of my gay friends described Columbus and the surrounding area as a "doughnut" for single gay middle-aged men: there are the young gay college students at the nearby universities and then there are the gay men who are in relationships or are closeted. Left in the empty space are the few single men. The ones in the middle come and go; in fact, of the gay men I know who grew up in the area or went to the university, most have moved on to a big city in the south such as Atlanta, Birmingham, Dallas, New Orleans, or Memphis. Even Tennessee Williams, the gay playwright who was born in Columbus, only came back to visit.

Every week the Columbus gay happy hour group met. I had been going regularly but had not met anyone to whom I felt drawn or attracted. Going to the happy hour groups was like riding a roller-coaster. Some evenings there would be a large group of men from the surrounding area, a mix of young and old, professional and nonprofessional, closeted and out of the closet. I would leave the happy hour feeling connected to a community and feeling positive about staying in Mississippi. Other evenings, only a few people would show up, and they would be people with whom I had little in common. For example, there was the occasional older married man who was closeted, but



Plaque provided to Fred and Ralph from three couples.

wanted to, as he told his wife, “hang out with the boys.” There was the Air Force officer who looked around the room several times when he came into the bar to make sure he did not know anyone.

Often, I found the only thing we all had in common was that we were gay. Although the group met on a Tuesday evening, it met in the back room off the bar of a Mexican restaurant. Tuesday’s were slow at the restaurant, but some locals would still come into the bar. Word spread that the “gays” were meeting there on Tuesdays. It often felt like being in a fishbowl, with the locals curiously peering into the room as they walked by. Not surprisingly, people seemed less on guard and were more likely to join the group when people hosted the happy hour at their homes.

Fred and Ralph, the first gay couple I met in Columbus, held their annual Christmas party for the happy hour group at their house. That evening I saw Larry. I was instantly drawn to him both emotionally

and physically. Wearing a Tommy Hilfiger shirt and Levi's, he was leaning against the kitchen counter. He had dark black hair with sprinkles of grey on the sides and a five o'clock shadow on his face. His brown eyes were kind and genuine. I began to approach him and then I paused.

I recognized him. My heart skipped a beat. I had met him over fifteen years ago when I was a graduate student at Mississippi State University. I had just started dating Michael with whom I ended up spending the next twelve years. We met Larry and his boyfriend at a party. I remembered being attracted to him and wanting to know him. Experiencing guilt that I would be drawn to another man when I was on a date with Michael, I suppressed my feelings.

Now here he was again after all this time; after my spending twelve years with Michael; after my finishing graduate school and moving away; after evacuating back to Mississippi and buying a house; after all this time. Here he was. We immediately clicked. Several months later, he moved into my house. As time went on, it became our house, both legally and emotionally. We sold his house across the border in Alabama and used the money to do extensive renovations.

Larry and I were not the only couple who met at one of Fred and Ralph's parties. Two other couples who live in the area met at their home. Fred and Ralph have been together almost fifty years. After Fred and Ralph were legally married, the three of us couples took them out to dinner and gave them a plaque for them to hang in their home entitled "The Love Shack."



When a single, heterosexual person moves to a rural area in the South, it is not uncommon for community members to introduce them to potential opposite-sex dating mates, especially through their churches. It would be a rare occurrence in small-town and rural Mississippi for community members to ask a newcomer about their gender dating preferences before introducing them to people. We are still years away from a society, at least in the rural South, in which gay people feel safe to be fully out in their communities

and in which community members seek to assist them in meeting potential friends and partners.

Although same-sex marriage is legal in the United States, we continue to live in a heterosexist society in which people often assume that others are heterosexual, and if they are not, they should be. The extent to which gay people face heterosexism, prejudice, discrimination, and even violence differs based on one's environment. It is obviously more pronounced in a state like Mississippi that had to be forced by the Supreme Court to recognize same-sex marriage and that has no protections for people who are not heterosexual. According to an analysis of polling data, the Williams Institute (2019) estimated that only 3.5 percent of the population in Mississippi identifies as LGBT, including those who identify as transgender. Mississippi ranks forty-second in percentage among all states and the District of Columbia (DC) between a high of 9.8 percent in DC and a low of 2.7 percent in North Dakota. Consequently, the normal struggles people encounter when they enter the dating pool are compounded for gay people. In addition to entering a much smaller dating pool than heterosexuals, they must figure out who is in the pool in the first place and navigate the risks that come from being gay in our society.

When I lived in Wilton Manors, known as the "gayborhood" of South Florida, I could walk from my house to the gay bars, coffee shops, community center, and gym to meet other gay people. In fact, most of my neighbors and many of my coworkers were openly gay. In other words, it did not take much effort to meet other gays and lesbians. I could practically run into a gay person walking down the street! At the time, I was in a relationship; however, if I had wanted to go on a first date with someone, I could have chosen many restaurants where it would be stranger to see a heterosexual couple than a gay couple.

Meeting other gay people for friendships, relationships, and/or sex requires a resourcefulness and courage that is different for most heterosexuals in rural areas and for those gay people living openly in a place such as Wilton Manors. It requires finding or constructing

places to meet others like you and acknowledging, at least to them, that you are gay. The more open people are about their same-sex desires, at least to other gay people and allies, the more likely they are to be introduced to others like them. However, being “out” carries risks. In Mississippi and many other rural areas of the country, people can be denied housing and fired from a job simply for identifying as nonheterosexual.

In describing the experiences of “LGBT-identifying youth” in rural America, Gray (2009) wrote that they must balance “the logistical needs to fit in and conform to the familiarity that structures rural life” (p. 168) with a need to be visible and experience LGBT culture. Similarly, my narrators described a push and pull between fitting into their rural and small-town communities, while expressing their sexual orientation identities through connection with other gay people. Connecting with others requires accessing or constructing “queer spaces,” in other words, spaces created when two or more gay people meet (Howard, 1997a; Schweignofer, 2016). Queer spaces are constructed to provide safe spaces for gay people to be themselves and support each other, away from the heterosexism and homophobia that many face in their daily lives (Lewin, 2018). Whereas, a queer space may be an institution such as a gay bar or bookstore in an urban area, it can also be something that is created in the moment. It can be an impromptu meeting between two friends, an unexpected meeting between two people at work, or a planned gathering such as a party.

Accessing queer space in rural areas often means having to travel in and out of one’s home community (Howard, 1997b). The queer space, itself, can be either public or private, as rural gay people construct their own gay communities out of previously nonqueer space (Schweignofer, 2016). For example, several years ago a single gay man and his single lesbian friend rented a public boat house on the Tombigbee River between West Point and Columbus. They invited all the gay people they knew to a “boat house party” and encouraged others to spread the word. Their goal was to bring as many gay people as possible together to expand their potential dating pools

and meet new friends. Over a hundred people showed up from across north Mississippi and Alabama, creating a private party on public land, a gay community for the evening.

GAY PARTIES

There is a “well-documented” history dating back to the 1920s of the importance of parties for gays and lesbians seeking to meet each other and to develop a community when few or no other social institutions for lesbians and gays existed (Bérubé, 1990; Howard, 1997b; Watkins, 2018). These “gay parties” were hosted by other lesbians and gays, usually white men, because it was difficult for single women and African Americans, even those with the financial resources, to own homes, due to segregation and discrimination (Watkins, 2018, p. 87). Gay parties afforded gays and lesbians a place to congregate outside of the public eye during a time when police actively sought to inhibit the efforts of gay people from congregating. In his history of lesbian and gay life in the mid-1900 Florida Panhandle, Watkins wrote that “the mixing that occurred because of the gay parties was between the local and the nonlocal. Through the gay parties, people forged friendships and made connections that spanned the South” (p. 89). In addition Watkins noted that in areas with no gay bars, parties were often gender mixed and sometimes racially mixed.

Gay parties were not entirely safe, especially if they were large, more public parties or if they caught the attention of neighbors. Being arrested risked having one’s identity as lesbian or gay exposed to family and employers (Howard, 1997b). In his interview with Howard, Barry Kline, a white, gay man who lived in Birmingham, Alabama, after he returned home from serving in World War II, described his arrest in 1962 during a police raid of a house party. The arrest led to his name and address being published in the local paper.

One way that Mississippi gay parties of today are similar to the gay parties in the past as described by Watkins (2018) and Howard (1997b) is that people still commute to the larger parties from

outside their local areas. A LGBT professional group for Starkville and Mississippi State University has regular potluck gatherings at the homes of members willing to host with people regularly bringing friends from outside the area. Occasionally, a gay person with a large enough home will host a party for a holiday or special event such as a birthday, and people from out of the area will spend the weekend at the home or with other friends in the area. Recently, two couples, one gay and one lesbian, hosted a party in the combination gym/assembly hall of an old school building, often used for weddings and other special events, in the countryside outside of a small town in north central Mississippi. The party featured a staffed bar, food, dancing, and a drag show on the stage. People came to the party from Tupelo, Columbus, Starkville, Oxford, and as far north as Corinth.

All of the examples I've described included both lesbians and gay men, and sometimes included bisexuals and transgender people. I believe that having a small community of LGBT people along with no bars or other social institutions means that people are less likely to segregate by gender here, as I have encountered at gay parties in urban areas. Nevertheless, there is still segregation based on socioeconomic class and race. Although the large parties I have attended in north Mississippi are racially mixed, the majority of the attendees are white. I imagine part of this has to do with the hosts generally being white and middle class to upper class, along with the social segregation based on socioeconomic status and race that seems to be common in the South. Alicia and Rae told me that a few young, black gay men in north Mississippi will throw dance parties at an old fairground with African American gay people attending from near and far.

Of course, I am only describing the large gay parties in which hosts encourage their friends to bring other friends, sending an invitation through a Facebook group or email list. There are obviously many other dinner parties and gatherings that are limited to smaller groups of friends, which means they are less likely to be gender and racially mixed. In addition, when someone is not throwing a party,

many of the towns that anchor a micropolitan area have weekly happy hours or dinner groups. At the Columbus happy hour, for example, several regulars drive an hour or more from their rural areas to attend. Without a major metropolitan area in a 120-mile radius, the micropolitan becomes the hub for people to meet.

Sophie and Faith

Sophie and Faith (introduced in Chapter One) are the couple who invited me to lunch at their farm. Before they officially became a couple, they were acquaintances from the many gatherings and gay parties that had occurred among the lesbians in their area of south Mississippi. A common friend encouraged them to meet for a date. They had their first date in a public, planned space and solidified their relationship at a gay party hosted by Sophie. In turn, at the parties they have hosted together over the years, they introduced at least one other lesbian couple, as Fred and Ralph did for Larry and me in Columbus.

“How did you meet?” I ask.

“Well we’ve known each other for a long time,” Sophie replies. “[Our friend] Tammy pretty much was kind of putting us together. Tammy is a matchmaker”

“Yeah,” Faith nods her head. “Tammy pretty much did it. She called me one night, and I was folding clothes. I remember, she said, ‘Are you in? I want to ask you something.’ And I said, ‘What?’ And she said, ‘Would you be interested in dating somebody?’ And I said, ‘Why?’”

“See, Faith wasn’t with anybody.”

“And she said,” Faith continues, “‘Well, you know, I think Sophie’s ready to start dating.’ So that went on for about a month, and then finally Sophie called me wanting to know if I wanted to go to the show.”

“Oh that’s right,” Sophie replies, “I asked if you wanted to go out to the movies with me.”

"Movies. Mm-hm. So then we went to the movies."

"We went to see Big Momma."

"Big Momma," Faith repeats laughing.

I remember that they are referring to the comedy, *Big Momma's House*, in which actor Martin Lawrence portrays an FBI agent who works undercover in disguise as a large, southern grandmother known to her family as Big Momma.

"Yeah, I love comedy. So, I go to the bathroom. She's gonna get some popcorn and a Coke . . ."

"Coke . . .," Faith repeats.

"I gotta tell this," Sophie says, sounding amused as Faith nods her head smiling. "So she's gonna get some popcorn and Coke. Now, I don't know her that well, you know. So I go to the restroom; I come out and she has spilled this gallon of Coke all . . ." Sophie's voice trails off into laughter.

" . . . on the floor," Faith finishes.

"And I thought, 'Oh my God. What am I getting myself into?'"

The three of us laugh in unison.

"I mean it's everywhere!" Faith exclaims.

"She said, 'I don't know what happened.' I was just like, 'Well just go into the movie wet.' You know she did. Bless her heart."

"I did. So, we started seeing each other."

"I should have known then you were the spiller."

"Yep. And I haven't stopped."

"She hasn't!"

"And we love Big Momma. We've seen it a hundred times."

"So you sat there and laughed together on your first date," I say.

"Yeah!" they say in unison.

Shortly after, Sophie threw a party at her farm, and they kissed for the first time. Today, they mark that day as their anniversary.

Faith says, "We got a picture of that on our dresser, that first party that we're actually together."

"It was an outside party," Sophie adds. "We probably had fifty people here."

"We did. We started 'em, because people just kind of drifted away."

"We started 'em because, you know, I was taking care of Daddy, and she was taking care of her mother, and we couldn't see anybody; we couldn't go anywhere."

"Or do anything."

"Or do anything, and I said, 'Look, we just bring 'em out here to the house.'"

"So we started having parties, so we could see people."

"We were having cook-outs, but then we starting having house parties," Sophie explains.

"Yeah," Faith agrees. "And we couldn't travel or go nowhere so the parties was our vacations, more or less."

"We just brought everybody to see us," Sophie says chuckling.

"Mm-hm. A lot of these people would not have seen each other if it hadn't been for us having the parties."

"Have any other people met out here at the parties that are in relationships now?" I ask.

"Well, there's Pam and Cindy," Sophie replies. "We've had some potentials that didn't pan out."

"You could be new matchmakers," I say humorously.

"Oh yeah," Faith says laughing.

"But see now we've reached the age where everybody we know is with somebody," Sophie says more seriously.

"Partnered up, yeah. I would say everybody's pretty much either never gonna be with nobody or ..."

"Or they're happy in their relationship," Sophie finishes.

MEETING IN A BAR

Since at least World War II, gay bars have been a place for gays and lesbians to meet each other for friendship, sexual encounters, and/or romantic connections out of the public eye (Bérubé, 1990; D'Emilio, 1998). Like house parties, they offered a place for people to let their guards down and to connect with a community. Nevertheless, it could be risky to go to bar, because homosexuality was illegal and

police frequently raided gay bars unless owned by organized crime that paid off the police. Consequently, according to Escoffier (1997) gay bars were a part of a “closet economy,” usually “black market operations” and “located in neighborhoods that were segregated from everyday business and residential activities—industrial areas, red light districts, among bars catering to sailors, or on an isolated road in rural areas” (p. 128). It was not until the period after the New York City Stonewall Bar riots in 1969 that bars became part of what Escoffier terms a “liberation economy” in which gays and lesbians owned bars and other business in the open.

In Mississippi, Howard (1999) noted that gay bars were located in downtown Jackson in the 1940s and 1950s until police raids led them to become “clandestine operations situated on the city periphery” into the 1970s. In the 1980s, Howard reported that Jackson usually had one to two bars open at the same, including bars catering exclusively to African Americans. Not until the late 1980s did other areas of the state such as Hattiesburg, Meridian, and the Gulf Coast have exclusively gay bars, although Howard noted that queer people would congregate at bars “sympathetic” to them (p. 97).

In 2019, Jackson had one of the few and largest official gay bars in the state. Wonderlust is open only three days a week and features drag shows and live DJ dance parties (Garner, 2018; Wonderlust, 2019). Biloxi also had Just Us Lounge (2019), advertised as the oldest gay bar still open in Mississippi, with weekly karaoke and drag shows. People also continue to travel to the bars in cities of neighboring states, especially, Memphis, New Orleans, and Birmingham. In other areas like Tupelo and Starkville, local bars will occasionally allow gay groups to host “drag shows” on their slow nights. The drag shows feature “drag queens” (i.e., gay female impersonators) from large cities such as Memphis who dance and lip sync to music. There have also been bars that have come and gone in the state, such as the bars outside Tupelo, Meridian, and Columbus over the years, including two where the next two couples met.

I remember going to the bar outside the Air Force base in Columbus when I was in graduate school in the early 1990s. The bar

was not open for more than a year and was housed in a dilapidated building. The bar did not have a liquor license but sold sodas and beer. There was no running water, and the urinals were filled with ice. A bouncer carefully screened people at the door for IDs and to ensure they were not there to harass the customers. The sheriff and his deputies would frequently show up to ID people and to ensure there was no liquor on site. The bouncer would alert the bartender when the sheriff's car pulled into the dirt parking lot. The bartender would announce to the crowd that they needed to hide any liquor they brought into the bar. As a young graduate student, I felt extremely nervous as the sheriff and his deputies walked through the small bar and eyed us.

Keith and Mark

Keith and Mark (introduced in Chapter One), the couple who said that they live in the “gay house,” met at *Rumors*, a gay bar that sat at the crossroads of Old US Highway 45 and County Road 300 in Shannon. *Rumors* was featured in the 2006 documentary *Small Town Gay Bar* (Smith & Ingram, 2006). Shannon is a town of less than two thousand people; however, when the bar was in full swing, a typical Friday or Saturday evening might include people from Tupelo, Columbus, the surrounding area, and the nearby universities. It is no longer open, although it made news in 2013 when a lesbian woman filed a federal lawsuit against the town of Shannon for refusing to grant her a license to reopen the bar (Ward, 2013). The case was later settled outside of court, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center (Clark, 2014).

Rumors was a small wood-framed, ranch-style house on a concrete slab. It made a perfect rectangle, although at the front the v-shaped roof dipped down over a four-foot concrete slab porch that ran the length of the house and was held up by five wooden posts. You could almost imagine a cowboy riding up and tying his

horse to one of the posts. The front door was in the middle of the house. It did not have a swinging door but a frame of bars similar to the entrance to a jail cell or what you would see at a business in a hard area of New Orleans. The house was painted white, although it had faded and badly needed a paint job; unmanaged plants grew along the left side of the house behind the electric box. Through the windows, security bars could be seen behind the glass ensuring that nobody could go in or out. A mixture of grass, weeds, and dirt led from the road up to the front porch. In the evening, it was somewhat dark on the porch with only two small lights on either side of the front door.

If the house had ever been divided into rooms, the walls were long gone; several black metal poles ran down the center of the bar, replacing what must have been a load-bearing wall. The entire inside of the building was visible when you walked through the front door. However, there was a bathroom and a dressing room for drag queens who regularly performed in the evenings. Metal flashing served as wainscoting on the walls, below the wood-topped bar, the little cashier/identification check station to the left of the front door, and the dj booth. Rainbow flags covered various windows and the front door, and a few pictures of divas could be spotted on the painted white-paneled walls. One corner had been designated as the dance floor/drag stage with a disco ball, a spinning red emergency light, and a mirrored wall. A few small tables and plastic chairs were scattered off the dance floor.

Keith was at *Rumors* with some friends one Saturday evening on the eve of a Superbowl when Mark walked into the bar. He was not hard to notice.

“He was wearing a pink leather, fringe motorcycle jacket. He says it’s red but under the lights it looked pink,” Keith remembers. “I said to myself, ‘Any man that’s man enough to wear a jacket like that up in here is the man for me.’”

Keith walked over to Mark and introduced himself. They were the only two people in the bar who knew who was playing in the

Superbowl. They struck up a conversation and never left each other's side for the rest of the evening. The next day, Mark called Keith on the phone. Although they both planned to watch the Superbowl, they talked right through it.

"There was no doubt that we would be a couple," Keith says. "It was truly like that. I mean, I know that's very rare but it was truly like that."

Keith continues, "I think we both had matured as gay men and as men and as people. Mark had been in a bad relationship, and I had been in one that had turned bad. We weren't just looking for anybody. We were looking for the right person to make the right fit for us, and once we met, we were the right fit for each other. Mark had just made the change from moving to New Orleans and coming up here. He'd been here about a year, and I had been back here about two years."

Keith tends to be the communicator for the relationship, but Mark jumps in and recalls his memory of that night.

"I found out that there was a bar there, and I went and found it. I walked in, and I looked around this whole room, and it was a complete . . ."

Mark pauses for a moment and looks off in the distance.

" . . . Coming back here was a complete cultural shock for me after having lived in the French Quarter for so long."

"I saw that there was only one person in the bar that I wanted to meet," Mark continues, "and it was Keith. And the next thing I know I found him standing next to me. I hadn't been there but a few minutes."

Keith jumps back in.

"Part of the charm of the bar is that the regulars knew where to get so you could see everybody as they came in. All the single guys stood in the place that you could watch and see as they came in."

"There's only one little entrance," Mark interjects.

"Mark had to take his coat off and give it to the bartender and do all that kind of stuff, and by the time he got turned around, I already spotted him," Keith says.

"So," Mark says, "we struck up a conversation and it was just a fluid, ongoing process that was just . . ."

He pauses to find the right words.

"You know, I may have the ability to walk into the bar with a pink jacket on, but I'm not the most social of conversationalists at times. And it just was easy, just complete. And then we started talking and we never shut up."

When they first met, Keith and Mark were both living with their parents. They were only able to see each other on the weekends. In fact, for two years they lived together only on weekends, in hotels or a friend's home, and lived with their parents during the week.

"We stayed in every motel in northern Mississippi," Keith recalls.

"I'd pick him up every Friday," Mark says.

" . . . and stay 'til Sunday," Keith adds.

Mark continues, "And Sunday I'd drop him off and come home. It just wasn't how I'd been and how life was supposed to be. It wasn't gonna stay that way. It was gonna change. Keith was in with his parents twenty miles that way. I was with my parents twenty miles south, and Keith, at the time, didn't drive, and I would pick him up every Friday, and we would live together every weekend, and that went on for two years. And this house came up for sale, which was halfway between the parents, and I saw it for sale . . . and it was . . . I just was tired of living only together on weekends."

When Mark next saw Keith, he said, "Guess what? I bought a house."

"He went and got his stuff, and I picked him up, and we moved in with the mattress on the floor," Mark says.

I jump in a little surprised. "And you didn't even know what the house looked like until you got there?"

"Before he actually signed the papers—yes, he brought me to see it," Keith responds.

"He wasn't real happy," Mark exclaims.

They begin to laugh and look at each other.

"We're kind of exaggerating—just a little bit," Mark says mischievously.

“But he basically told me,” Keith says more seriously. “‘I bought a house,’ and I said, ‘Okay . . . Where? What does it look like?’”

Jerry and Karl

Jerry and Karl (introduced at Chapter One), the young couple who showed me pictures from their wedding, met at a bar named Crossroads after first seeing each other at Karl’s work. Crossroads, which is no longer there, was located in the woods outside Meridian. I remember going there once with friends when I was in graduate school. We had to look for a dirt road once we took the Savoy exit off Interstate 59. It was known for the goat that was tied up outside one of the trailers that was the bar. If the goat was there, the bar was open. If the goat was not there, the bar was closed. Like the bar in Shannon near Tupelo, this bar was featured in the documentary *Small Town Gay Bar* (Smith & Ingram, 2006).

Before they met, Jerry was dating another man in north Mississippi, driving back and forth on holidays and weekends. He said that when he met Karl, he immediately called and broke up with the other man. At the time, Karl was a receptionist at a hair salon. Jerry came into the salon one day to talk to the owner.

Jerry begins to laugh and says, “Karl was beyond the counter. I always tease him because everybody has these great songs in their relationships. Our song is *Devil in the Blue Dress* because when I walked up to the counter he was singing *Devil in a Blue Dress* and doing his dance.”

I can’t help but laugh along with them at this image.

“But I had just went to the Miss Mississippi Pageant Saturday night and their theme was *Devil in a Blue Dress*. I think I was technically showing somebody one of the moves when he walked in. I asked Jerry later how he knew I was gay, and he said, ‘That was a pretty good sign!’ Well, if it wasn’t a clue with the dancing, I *was* a receptionist at a hair salon, so that was clue number two.”

We all continue to laugh boisterously. It's obvious they both have good senses of humor and enjoy telling a story. Their laughter is infectious.

"I can remember I told Jerry when he was leaving, 'Well, you can come back and see me anytime.' You know, he actually didn't! Didn't you call me?"

"I called! And I was gonna ask if you wanted to go get some lunch or something and the girl who answers said, 'He's gone out with one of his friends to a club in Meridian tonight.' Jerry knew where to find him, because there was only one gay bar in Meridian or the surrounding area for that matter.

After that first date, they never looked back. Today, they have two anniversaries to celebrate: the day they met and the day of their wedding.

MEETING ONLINE

The internet has provided a new queer space for people to find each other. People meet on internet sites such as Gay.com, Craigslist, Grindr, Zoosk, and Facebook, depending on how out they are to others. Sites like Grindr, that are frequented both by those who openly identify as gay and by those with same-sex desires who do not necessarily identify as gay, are similar to the "tearooms" of the past: places such as rest stops, bathrooms of public buildings, and movie theatres, and described by historian Brock Thompson (2010) as "a place forged by reputation and facilitated by gay men seeking anonymous sexual encounters without further involvement emotionally" (p. 121). Tearooms became "queer spaces" that offered men not only sex but a community to meet friends and partners (Howard, 1997a, 1999, 2009). Facebook and other social media sites that promote discussion of political issues are similar to the feminist groups and lesbian separatist communities through which some lesbians connected in the 1970s (Thompson, 2010).

Sociologist Amin Ghaziani (2014), in his book *There Goes the Gayborhood?*, pointed to the internet as one factor, along with increased acceptance of gay people in society, that has led to the decline of gay bars and other institutions in the traditional “gayborhoods” of large cities. Gay bookstores used to be a place I would immediately visit when I went to New Orleans, Atlanta, or Birmingham, but they have disappeared like many other bookstores across the country as people have turned to the internet to order their books. I wonder if the same is true of gay bars in rural areas?

On the other hand, the internet can also be viewed as what Mason (2015) described as a “queer information highway” for those people who would otherwise be isolated (p.1). It provides opportunities for gay people in rural areas to connect, whether it is for sexual encounters, political activism, building communities, or for meeting others to date. For example, I regularly receive emails from an organizer of the weekly happy hour in Columbus. A Facebook group for LGBTQ people notifies me about upcoming parties, political events, and local news in the Golden Triangle, a three-county area including the cities of Columbus, Starkville, and West Point.

Bob and Matthew

Bob and Matthew (introduced in Chapter One) first met online at Gay.com, a popular dating website for gay men. Matthew was a student at Mississippi State University in Starkville, and Bob was a student at Ole Miss in Oxford. They went on their first date in Tupelo, sixty-seven miles north of Starkville and forty-seven miles east of Oxford. Although it’s a city of just over 35,000 people, it’s a hub for the surrounding area because it’s the location of the North Mississippi Medical Center, one of the largest nonmetropolitan hospitals in the United States, and it’s the location of the most retail chains and restaurants in northeast Mississippi. For people living in rural areas or smaller towns, going to Tupelo feels like going to the *big city*.

"We had a funny first date," Bob tells me. "We messaged for about two weeks on the internet, and then I finally said, 'This is just taking up too much time. Why don't you just give me your number so we can talk on the phone?'" It was around nine o'clock at night when I called him, and we were on the phone until almost two in the morning before I said, 'Okay, we need to go on a date and meet in person.'"

The date began at Vanelli's, a well-known restaurant in the area, having been around since the mid-1970s. It advertised itself as a Greek and Italian restaurant with prices and fare not unlike an *Olive Garden* chain restaurant. It was always packed on the weekends before being ravaged by the tornado that swept through Tupelo in April 2014.

"Our first date was the day after Valentine's Day, so it was really nice timing 'cause everything was half price," Matthew says as I nod.

Matthew turns to Bob and says, "And so . . . what was it? You gave me roses?"

"I gave you roses," he responds flatly.

"I walk up to him, and I have a potted mum in my hand," Matthew says, as Bob and I laugh. "Bob looked at them and said, 'That's really romantic there.'"

"Well I'm sure you meant well," I say to Matthew. I turn to Bob, playing along with the banter, and ask half seriously, "Did you really say that after he brought you flowers?"

"Well . . . no . . . I don't think I . . . I just said, 'Thank you.'"

"Thank you," Matthew repeats mockingly.

"To preface this though, we had had the discussion on the phone of both loving flowers, and how I love having houseplants around. So there was a justification behind it. I just thought it was a very odd first date gift," Bob laughs.

"There's not much at Wal-Mart in Tupelo in February, but there were still mums. Don't ask me how," Matthew says.

"I still to this day don't know how they had mums in February," Bob responds. "It was an interesting first date. Then we went back to Oxford, and he spent the night. He didn't go home until Sunday! And I don't think from then until now we've been apart for more

than three or four days at a time. He would come to Oxford when he got out of class, spend the night, and drive back the next morning. Then a couple days later, I would do the same thing and drive to Starkville.”

“We became used to driving,” Matthew recalls.

“We just commuted back and forth between each other’s apartments,” Bob says.

MEETING AT WORK

The next two couples met unexpectedly at work, creating unplanned, public queer spaces. Meeting another gay person at work would seem to require either being out, not being out but being comfortable if people assume that you are gay, or being able to flirt with someone who you think might be gay. However, being “out” carries risks. As I noted earlier, in Mississippi an employer could fire someone from a job simply for identifying as nonheterosexual. In fact, in Chapter One, narrators provided several examples of workplace discrimination. Alicia recounted how she was fired when her manager learned that she had married another woman. Rae complained that she is continuously passed over for promotions even though she knows she is qualified and has more experience than other workers. Many of the other couples stated that they were not out at work, because it felt too risky.

Noah and Terrance

Noah and Terrance (introduced in Chapter One) are the young male couple engaged to be married. I ask them how they first met.

“We were on the same work team,” Noah explains. “We had similar interests.”

Terrance recalls noticing Noah the first time he saw him come into the office, because he felt drawn to his eye color and lips that

reminded him of a Russian man. He assumed that Noah was gay, because Noah showed up to work on Halloween wearing a pink Power Ranger costume based on one of the superhero movies. Noah, on the other hand, was not sure about Terrance's sexual orientation.

"I thought he was African, because of his clothes. I didn't know that Terrance was gay until he hit on me. He knew, because I didn't necessarily flaunt it, but I didn't deny it. And Terrance's personality is to be quiet and just soft spoken, fun. But he was mysterious to me. I didn't know if he was or wasn't. It was Halloween, and we had a costume contest at work. I dressed as a pink Power Ranger." Noah chuckles as he recalls his costume. "Terrance walked by me, said that I had nice legs."

"So, y'all met at work. Where did it go from there?" I ask.

"Well, I had a previous lover at the time," Noah responds as Terrance nods, "and so Terrance and I were just friends at that point. We were great friends. He was a great guy to talk to. I think that the reason a lot of people love us and respect us and look at our relationship as something is because a lot of people did not start off as friends. Our friendship was, you know, him and I having some similarities like we both do drag shows and stuff like that. We both like the same genre of music—he was more of a Britney fan, I'm more of a Beyoncé fan. We both love [Lady] Gaga. He taught me a hip-hop and stuff, right? The first time we went out, we played tennis together. After we did some choreography in the parking lot because he was a dancer; so he taught me [Lady Gaga's] 'Telephone.' We did 'Telephone' together in that Wal-Mart parking lot. We actually did our last [routine] for some of my friends who was here last night. We always dance to stuff together. He always teaches me different dances and stuff. I love to dance. I'm also more of a stage actor, but I love to do stage work and stuff. He's more of a performer in general."

"So y'all were friends for a while before you officially became a couple?" I ask.

"Yes," Noah replies. "About three or four months we were good friends, and I kept talking about him to all my other friends, because

he was awesome. And I knew that he was single, and I just started realizing that maybe I should give him a chance; 'cause I realized I started liking him, and I knew he liked me already; so I left [the other guy]!"

Alicia. and Rae

When they first met, Alicia was working in a restaurant, and Rae was working for a supply company that had a contract with the restaurant. She was delivering supplies on the day they met in 2011.

Rae says she was unloading the supplies from the truck and "minding my business," before Alicia playfully interrupts her as Rae laughs.

"She was running her mouth like, 'You sure ain't doing no work. You wanna come do my job for me?' I'm like, 'You're so smart. Naw, you have it.' And a year . . . exactly a year later, I was working for another restaurant. And she came into my restaurant, but at that time she was in a relationship, so. . . ." Alicia's voice trails off.

"How did y'all know you were both gay when you saw each other?" I ask.

"I didn't," Alicia replies. "No. I had two children. I was back and forth with my son's father. I had been with him for eight years. But you know, I kinda had a question like, 'You really don't do it for me.' You know what I'm saying? Like, it's something missing between us; like something ain't clicking. And when I met Rae, we started out being friends. We were friends for a little bit over a year and then I was like, 'I think I like her.' And I was like, 'Am I gay? I don't think I'm gay.' [And I said to myself,] 'She's gay, Alicia. You think you're ready for a gay relationship?'"

Rae interrupts her laughing and says, she was like, 'I ain't fooling with you. You fixing to mess my head up,' and I was like, 'Man, I'm good person. Just give me a chance.'"

"But you were so young."

"I wasn't that young. You're crazy!"

They both laugh together before Alicia says, "My momma said, 'I knew you was a little curious.' I said, 'How did you know that?'" She said, 'Just how you act.' 'Cause I just treated guys like entirely different, you know, it was entirely different. Now it feels right. Now I'm a homebody. I don't go nowhere 'cause now I am complete."

"Like you feel settled." I remark.

"Exactly. Exactly. You know, I just had to find out what I was looking for. When I did date guys, I'd just date one guy and I would just stay there. Lord knows I mistreated them real bad, because I wasn't very sexual and, you know, I didn't want you to touch me. No kissing; no none of that. It's not like it is now."

"Like going through the motions or something," I say.

"Exactly. I was doing what society say you're supposed to do. You just kind of roll with the motions, rolling with the motions, yeah. Following along what everybody thinks you're supposed to. And so I talked to my kids. I made sure that this is actually what I was about to do."

"How old are your kids?" I ask.

"My little girl is about to be fifteen, and my little boy is eleven."

"So when did you tell them?"

"Me and Rae had talked for a year and I told Rae, 'My little boy, he like everybody. He don't meet a stranger. My little girl, on the other hand, . . . oooooooweee,'" Alicia says making a sound to indicate that she knew it would not be easy. "I didn't have any trouble though. When she met Rae—the very first time she met Rae—Rae fit in like a glove," she says clapping her hands for emphasis. "Like she had been there all the time. And my little girl don't like nobody."

"You must be good with kids," I say to Rae.

"I love kids. I love kids. I met her for a birthday party. I came to the house."

"Yep, she came to the birthday party."

"The second time I met her she said, 'I wanna see your house.' And so she came in and she looked around and was like, 'You stay in a big house by yourself?' I like, 'Yeah.' She was like, 'I want that room,' out of nowhere.

“And I was like, ‘Now I need to pick out a room!’” Rae says, leading them both to laugh heartily.

“And [before this happened] I’m thinking ‘Lord, please don’t let this little girl go in here and say the wrong thing, because it’s new. It’s new to me and it’s new to her.’ But when I tell you, Rae just fit like a glove; She just fit like a glove.”



The Mississippi couples created queer spaces within an environment that encourages and even, at times, demands their silence through lack of protections afforded to heterosexuals. A few of the couples even met at work, creating a public queer space that eventually led to one of the women losing her job. Unlike most of the other couples I have interviewed, both of the couples who met at work were in nonprofessional jobs at the times of the interviews. On the other hand, most of the narrators who were in professional jobs stated that they were not out at work, because they were not sure how it would affect their job security or the way their coworkers treated them at work. In addition, all of the narrators in professional jobs identified as white. Consequently, I wonder if being openly gay might risk losing the privilege afforded to white Mississippians who do not “rock the boat” by not being visible as lesbian or gay.

In the case of the two couples who met at work, both Noah and Rae told me that they do not care what others think about them. Rae describes herself as being “masculine” and commented to me that she is often mistaken for a “young boy.” Noah stated that he doesn’t “flaunt it” but also does not hide aspects of his personality that others might assume indicated that he is gay. For example, he wore a pink Power Ranger outfit to work, something I am certain that few southern, heterosexual men would have the courage to do! Although Noah and Rae describe a freedom in being able to be themselves, later in the interview, Rae wondered if she has been passed over for promotions because she is an African American, “butch lesbian.” Terrance admired Noah’s ability to not care what other people think about him but also worried about him being

too flamboyant in public at times. I think Terrance's admiration of Noah but his own reticence of being too "out" reflects the conflict for many of the couples in this book, including my own experience as a gay man living in the rural south: being true to one's self versus protecting oneself from real risks.

Most of the couples met in queer spaces that were not at their places of employment or even in their home communities. For gay people living in rural areas, where the population is less clustered compared to metropolitan areas, commuting may be the only way to access or construct queer spaces to broaden a small dating pool. Although the internet has provided another means for gay people to meet who might not have encountered each other in the past, it also means that they will likely meet other people who do not live nearby. Bob and Matthew met on the internet but each had to drive over an hour to see each other in person. Couples who met at the bars drove from their communities to the remote locations outside micropolitan areas. House parties and local happy hours continue to draw gay people across county and even state lines.

Driving from county to county and even state to state, as I did when Larry owned his house in Alabama, is not unlike what Howard (1999) described about queer Mississippians before the internet. Howard wrote that there was constant "movement" by queer people across the state from house parties to bars in the cities. In particular, he noted that cities were "centripetal, but also centrifugal forces—locations from which emanate any number of forays and journeys, many of which are short term, leading to a variety of opportunities for encounters, meetings, and rendezvous" (p. 14). These movements from small towns and rural areas to the cities, to bars, to house parties and get-togethers in neighboring towns, continue today.



After talking to Larry on the phone regularly and meeting at the weekly happy hours, I decided it was time for us to go on a real date. Larry met me at my house on a Friday evening to go out to dinner at a restaurant on the shores of Columbus Lake and the Tombigbee

Waterway. When he arrived, I had company. I had invited my good friend Heather and her partner, Melissa, to dinner with us, because I was nervous about going out on a date. Larry seemed too good to be true, and I didn't trust myself not to jump into another relationship for the sake of a relationship. I wondered if he was really this kind and real. I needed a second opinion from someone I trusted.

The next day after our double date, Heather told me that she and Melissa had decided that "if you don't keep Larry, you're crazy." I called Larry that afternoon and invited him to meet me at their home. I had told them I would make pizza for their young son, who was having a spend-the-night-party. Larry assisted me in the kitchen as I made the dough and put together the pizzas. After dinner, I talked with Heather in the kitchen, as Larry and Melissa played video games with the boys. He was so easygoing, so warm with the boys. Everyone seemed to gravitate to him.

After our first date, we continued to date for about four months before we considered moving in together. Larry lived across the state line outside of Vernon, Alabama. He had inherited the small, ranch-style house from his great-aunt and had been living there since I first met him back in graduate school. The house was on a two-lane road in the country. We began to spend more nights together than we did apart, yet we still had separate houses. After work, Larry would drive out to Alabama to check on his dog, Sparky, and then head back to Columbus. Sparky was a cute little white terrier whose name described his energy. I wanted to hug him the first time I met him. Like many other dogs in the country, Sparky lived outdoors and would come running out of a nearby field when Larry drove up. He would follow Larry into the house for a dog biscuit and then rush back out the door. Larry said Sparky hadn't wanted to stay in the house since he was a puppy. The first time I met Sparky, he walked around me, easing up to sniff my hand before darting off if I made the slightest move. Eventually, he discovered that I was safe, and we became fast friends.

I began to worry about him being all by himself in the country while Larry stayed with me in Columbus. I'd say, "Larry, maybe you should stay out in Alabama tonight so that Sparky is not alone." And

he'd respond, "John, Sparky won't stay in the house anyway." On the weekends, we would stay out in Alabama, and Sparky would follow us around everywhere we went except for inside the house.

I was still nervous about the idea of Larry and me moving in together. I still remembered how trapped I felt at the end of my last relationship and did not want to lose the freedom I had discovered in having my own house. On the other hand, I missed Larry when he was not there. One weekend, I suggested that we stay in Columbus rather than Alabama, because of a party that we'd be going to Friday night. I suggested, though, that we go out to Alabama and bring Sparky back with us. I couldn't stand the thought of him being alone all weekend. If he wouldn't come in the house, he could at least stay in the backyard. Larry was concerned that Sparky would not want to stay in a fenced-in backyard when he had the run of the Alabama countryside, but he agreed to give it a try.

Sparky loved riding in Larry's truck, and hopped right into the cab when we called him. We drove back to Columbus with Sparky in my lap. When we arrived at my house, I whistled to him to follow me into the house. To Larry's amazement, he followed us around the house and then went to sleep by our feet as we watched TV. Sparky had apparently decided that he and Larry were there to stay, that I would not be leaving Mississippi, at least not now. Over the next month, we spent weekends moving Larry's belongings to my house and combining households.

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