

INTERVIEW WITH BESS 1

SIDE 1

K: I'll ask you some more questions. But like last time, you should feel free to go off in any direction you want to, just go right away. I want to start with just some basic things. What year were you born?

B: 1919.

K: When is your birthday?

B: September 12.

K: OK. That's good to know.

B: Yeah, I was 73.

K: I wouldn't have believed it.

B: I had to take, the other day, what was that, at the night of the Gala, somebody didn't believe. No. SOOL had a birthday party for 3 of the women and [S] was there. And I said, I'm older than [S]. Oh, no you're not. So I got my driver's license out and showed them. [S] was saying, Yes she is, yes she is.

K: Well, I was trying to figure out from the conversation we had last time how old you were. Sometimes you said you were 2 years older than this person, or whatever, and I couldn't believe you were that old. You are so strong.

B: Yeah, well, we were dancing, and somebody says, you're that old and you dance like that? I said, that has nothing to do with age, honey. Cause I was jiving when I talked about holding a lady and all that kind of stuff see. I said, when you get the ladies in your arms you forget your age. But, yes, I'm that old. Some days I feel like it, but seldom. Because I do a lot of things. You know, I don't believe in sitting down. Now that thing, it's interesting, but I don't stay with it too long. Bones get old and tired and creaky. I get up and go do something else. I don't know whether they call that an old, the lady, the teacher said something about it. See, when you get older you can do this. I said, Huh-uh, don't say that, because this is just one of the things I'm doing. So she took it back. Cause everybody in the class were young women. But I think you are as old as you feel. There are days I feel like I could get on a tractor, I say don't. But I feel like I could. When you have lots of interests, I think you, and you keep up with things. I have an interest in children too. That helps. Especially, I just really gotten to know this son here, since I've been here. I never really was too close to him, cause he was a kind of quiet boy. No, and his brother was noisy and into everything, and would take him by the hand, so I

Interview with Bess, 1

2

never really got close to him until I moved here. And I found out he's been a lot of fun. He's funny. He just had a birthday, just Tuesday, 23rd. He was 41. And boy I had a good time with him. But then he said, you know, he told me, you know you've always been a fun person. I said, I have? He said, even when you got on us for things, he said, you were a fun person. He said he and his brother discussed me all the time about the difference. The difference between me and their friends' mothers and fathers.

043

So he said, we had a good time growing up. We enjoyed it. And so, maybe that has something to do with it, I don't know. Or just me. But my mother enjoyed life. My mother did not sit down. She worked, she loved to dance, and anytime there was a dance my mother was gone. And my brothers and I were always busy, dressing her up. She looked good. And off she went. We had to clean up our room after she left, because everything was everywhere. But she enjoyed her life. And when she got to California, she was always gone somewhere. We never knew where, I never knew where she was, we would get a card from her, cause she went all over the world. She did everything she wanted to do. So maybe I get that natural.

K: Where do you go dancing?

B: I haven't gone.

K: You haven't gone since you've been here.

B: No, I guess at the Galah, I find out, some of the women threatened to take me. Some places. I went to someplace we went after an SOOL meeting when I first got here, at the Center, and after the meeting all the women went to someplace down there on Colfax. I don't remember the name of it. And was dancing. Went to two places, both of them on Colfax. And one was a mixed bar. and I just sat and looked at that. I danced a couple of times. And the other one was a restaurant bar. There was dancing. I didn't dance, but we just went in after the meeting. Other than that I haven't gone. We danced up at this retreat. Lots of dancing up there. But that was way into the night see, and I had been invited to a birthday party at one of the cabins, so I left the dance and went to that. Other than that, I haven't danced. Well, we danced at the party the other night at SOOL. Some girl, woman who lives out way over there in that other part of Littleton, that new section, where you get lost winding around those streets if you don't know where you're going. And she had a 3-level place, basement, and we danced down there . . . Somebody told me, you don't move like an old lady. I said, I'm not bones . . . old lady. I just like to dance. I taught my boys how to dance. My brothers. And taught my brothers. My mother taught me and then I taught my brothers, and then I taught my boys. And the one here is an

Interview with Bess, 1

3

excellent dancer. Beautiful. In fact, that's how he met his wife. In dancing class. So, do you like to dance?

K: Yeah, I love to dance.

076

B: Yeah, I kind of forget age and everything when I'm dancing.

K: Where does SOOL meet?

B: SOOL meets at this Carolyn's house over on Downing. They always use her house. This last, the other day, they had the party at somebody else's house because it was a birthday party and they wanted to dance and the house was bigger and she was giving the party. It was for her lover who live, you know, they have their own mobile there. But they always meet at this one woman's house. They are just about, they are a little over a year. Because the first time I went they were having their first anniversary party, and that's when [S] invited me to come. So every time I go there's some new women there. I guess they bring their friends.

K: Yeah, I'm going to have to send some that way too. Some of the women I've interviewed.

B: I saw in the Festival book an advertisement for another group of SOOL's. I don't know who they are.

K: Up in Boulder?

B: Yes, that's where it is.

K: Yeah, they're starting one.

B: They're starting one.

K: Yeah. Do you have Carolyn's number?

B: I imagine I do. Somewhere. If I can remember what that last name is. Carolyn what? Have to go through my book.

K: Oh, well, don't fuss about it.

B: No, while I'm sitting here. I think something's going on between [S] and Carolyn. I saw them at the party. At the party they were dancing together. The first time I didn't pay any attention. And then the 2nd time, one of the girls and I were dancing and we looked at them and then looked at each other. We started giggling. Cause they were moving like this is more than just dancing. So, cause I don't have good sense. Eventually, I'm going to ask [S]. I know she has a lover. She said something like that up at, yes, it was [redacted]'s house where we had that.

K: Oh, [redacted], yeah.

B: Yeah. Well, it was her birthday and somebody else's. Oh, Carol. That's the wrong Carolyn. That's DWC . . . Go on I'll find it, it's in here somewhere. What else are you asking today?

110

K: OK. Really, really early on, before you realized you were gay, did you have crushes on your teachers?

B: Yes. I liked my English teacher.

K: Your English teacher?

B: Yeah. But I didn't do too much about it because, you know, as I told you I was in . . . I loved my English teacher, thought she was so pretty. And her English was impeccable. I just listened, and she's say, Miss . . . I'd say, yes? And ask me a question. I didn't know what the lady was talking about, I was so busy gazing into her but I had such a bad reputation of being a clown in class, you know, the kids never thought anything about my acting crazy when she'd call on me. So nobody ever suspected. I had a crush on one of my girlfriends. We all ran, you know the little bunch I told you about that we ran around together?

K: Yes.

B: But nobody said anything because girls were expected to run around in groups together like that. You went everywhere together. You didn't go with boys. And when you went to a party one mother took all the girls and another mother drove all the boys and then usually there were 5 or 6 parents sitting around, and somebody brought you home. So you didn't get a chance to, except what we called the wild girls. That we envied. Cause they could do what they wanted to. But that's about as a youngster. When I was in college I had a crush on my French teacher. I think she knew it too. She never let me come to her room. And I would always tell her, I need some tutoring. She had other girls come in there to be tutored, but she never let me come in to tutor. But those are the only ones that I remember that I really, I can remember how I felt. And she was so hard on everybody in class. When she asked students who wanted to come for tutoring, I raised my hand but she never worked out, never worked out anything where I could get there. They accused me in school of going with my roommate. Miss Cuffaty. I liked her. We were just real good friends. And because we were roommates and we didn't have boyfriends on the campus, they assumed that we were lovers. But then they didn't call it that. They had terrible names. We were queers, and all that sort of stuff . . . what they call the girls. They had a bad name for girls.

158

K: Did they use dyke?

B: No, they didn't use dyke.

K: . . .

B: Yeah. That's what they called them. Maybe that is this child's name. I'm in the S's already. But it didn't bother me because they didn't know what I was doing. They couldn't see what was going on. Nothing was really going on in my dormitory room, cause most of the time, Danielle was over to her best girlfriend's room. And then the second year, my cousins were there, and I was usually with the two of them. Whom I'll see soon, since . . . family reunion. First one we've had on, well we never had one on my mother's side and she didn't have any relatives. In Atlanta, Georgia, in August. It's going to be hot as blazes.

K: Oh.

B: And . . .

K: I can always call and get it from [S] if you can't find it.

B: Yeah. I just don't, I'm on the V's and W's. I don't think . . . anyway what was I talking about?

K: Family reunions.

B: Oh, yeah. I'm going to take my two little monsters with me. Their mother and father can't go cause they can't, they just would have come back from their regular vacation, which is already set, because they have a time share. And they can't take off any more time . . . do you know Carolyn?

K: I think I may have spoken with her once. But only by phone so I don't really know her well, but I'll call [S] and I'll get her number from [S]. Because some of the other women I've interviewed I think would be interested in this group and I want to give them Carolyn's number so that they can talk to her and feel more comfortable about going.

B: Just talk to [S].

K: Yeah.

B: They can talk to [S].

K: Yeah, they can just talk to [S].

Interview with Bess, 1

6

B: Yes.

K: [S] will know the address, that's for sure.

B: Yes. She has the number and she will, she's the one, you know, who told me to come and then a couple of weeks, the last time, before two other women came who were new to the area. and [S] had invited them.

K: OK, all right. So then I'll just have them call [S].

192

B: Yeah. And then a little French woman came. She's one cute little thing. I think, and [S] was the one who brought her.

K: OK. Well good.

B: Yeah. I don't have, I don't have the number.

K: OK. So when you were at college and these accusations were made, was it brought up to the school, or was it just what people were saying behind . . .

B: No, just on the campus.

K: On the campus.

B: Just people would say things on the campus to you. The girls in the dormitory would say, Why Bess why don't you, I never see you with any fellas, don't you like so-and-so and so-and-so? I don't know. I'd say, yeah, they're all right. All of them are all right. When I got ready to go to the freshman dance, I had a big sister there. Everybody had a big sister. She was a junior. Turned out after, we found out we were related, and she had a brother who was in the freshman class. So she told him to take me to the dance, cause I didn't have any boyfriend to go. I wasn't interested in getting one. So I went with him. Other than that, the fella I married was on the campus too. But he was a senior. He was going with a senior girl there. I used to talk to her. I used to talk to all of them. One thing, I worked at the library, so I got to know almost everybody. It was a small campus too. But I never had any boyfriend per se. Or anything. I ran track. I played tennis. I played basketball. I really didn't have time.

K: You were busy.

B: Yeah, I've always kept busy. Maybe that was my saving grace. So I never was accused of, except sometimes some girls would say, we don't ever see you with any fellas. I'd say, so what? I always had a smart answer. As I said, even on the campus I had a bad reputation, see I was still a clown. So they didn't, they really

Interview with Bess, 1

7

didn't bother me too much. I guess they found out that what they said didn't hurt me, or didn't bother me, and I didn't back off, I always had an answer. Then my sophomore year, my cousin was there, the one I told you? Oh, I'm going to see her. I thought she was dead. I'm going to see her. And she was the belle of the place. Redhead. We called her the Coca Cola Bottle, because of her shape. And the boys just hovered over her. They were always after her. So they didn't have time to look at me. I was just the other Spears. Well, she was Spears too. And she'd come and tell me about all the things she was doing. And I just listened. I've always been a good listener. I don't know what - the girls will come to my room and just talk, talk, talk, talk, talk. For one thing, they never heard it again. Cause I'd forget half the stuff they told me. And they felt like they could always come in my room. Of course, my roommate never stayed in there. She stayed with her friend. Her clothes and things, she couldn't get her clothes and go back down to her friend's room. By the time I got to Prairie View, I was two years older than everyone in my class. You know I told you my mother made me stay out?

K: Uh-huh.

237

B: So I was of legal age. So nobody really bothered me about boyfriends. Or girlfriends. And on that campus for the first year my brother was there. And he I don't know, I guess I never really got badgered about my sexuality, I guess. As it was, I was always into managing things. I ran the homecoming and was into the pageant and that kind of stuff. I didn't have time for that. As I said, I was older. So they didn't bother me. My roommate my junior year was the tennis champion, runner up in the Negro Tennis League, so I was practicing with her. It didn't bother me.

K: Sounds like you just didn't let it bother you.

B: Oh no. I didn't have time. Too many things to do. I had learned that early, you know. Not to let too much bother me. Or you'd always be down in the mouth. Life, that's one thing my mother said, life is too interesting. I don't know whether she did that deliberately, no she lived it. So maybe I just followed her example. Unconsciously I was doing the same thing she was doing. Cause I like people, and because I was older, I had a number of friends on the staff. And see, so many of the faculty people were friends of my mother's. That might have been a saving grace too. Because I'd go to their homes for dinner. And then I had a way with little children. And they had a preschool there and I was always in and out of the preschool. And I worked, because I told you, my mother wouldn't give me any money so I had to work for it. So it kept me out of trouble. I looked at a lot of it. But I didn't do anything about it. In a school in those days, very little that you did was not known by somebody. Sure

Interview with Bess, 1

8

you had to stay out of trouble, if you didn't want it to get back to the faculty or your family. But I really didn't think about that part. I was just too busy having a good time. Getting my grades and studies and that sort of thing. So I was at that time, my last years, I was on my own. My mother was gone. She closed up the house and left.

276

K: So it seems like you really accepted this about yourself. It didn't cause you a lot of anxiety or trauma.

B: Yeah. I think my mother knew. My son and I were talking about it. And he says, he says I'm sure now, when he used to go from the service to visit with her in Los Angeles and my name would come up, certain things she would say about me and Rita. He said, there's no way she could not have known. And I think she deliberately did not say anything. I guess in those days it wasn't, you just didn't talk about it. There were certain taboos in the South, certain things you just did not discuss, even if you were well-acquainted with it, you never discussed it with other people. Maybe your best friend. But I never heard any of her discussions. Now that lady who was my hairdresser, who lived with the nurse, they were very good friends of my mother's. There is no way, because when I was in Chicago, when Miss Nighten died, my mother wrote, was in California. She used to go, when she'd go back to Houston, she'd stay with him. And she wrote and said that whatever, I've forgotten the woman's first name, was very cagey. And very wise. She adopted Mrs. Horton to make sure that none of the relatives of either side came in and took anything from Miss Horton. Miss Nighten was older. And she was a nurse. And Miss Horton was my hairdresser. And I wanted, you know then I said to myself, I wonder why my mother is writing me and telling me this. But she, because my mother was a businesswoman. She might have, I figure maybe she's looking at it from a business angle. But the fact that she gave me all the details made me stop and wonder. So and I'm sure my mother, that she was not ignorant of the fact of lesbians. You just didn't say anything, didn't call it by its name. So I guess she just in a way tried to tell me, whatever I do, be sure I'm . . . with it. Which I was. Now when she really got to know Rita very well, they talked business. She never talked with me but they talked about you know, what if something happens to one of you, what are your plans and that sort of thing. I didn't know that until she was gone back to California. And one day, way later, Rita said something about Oh your mother and I, we've discussed that. She was just as bad as my mother. She didn't talk about anything out. You'd have to drag it out of her. I said, you did? She says yes, we've discussed that whole business of what will happen. So I'm sure she must know. But she is just cagey. She didn't say anything to me about it. . . . act the fool and leave her say the wrong thing or get mad with her or

whatever. I wouldn't have, now that I look back, but she probably had no way of knowing that. So she didn't say anything.

325

K: Tell me more about this hairdresser. And her friend.

B: We lived not too far from them, and my brothers on Saturday night, we had to walk to the big grocery store. And we'd take the bicycle. And we'd go by their house on the way. When we came back we'd have, I'd have two bags and my little brother would have one and my big brother on the bicycle would have 2 on the handlebars. And we'd stop at their house, always we'd stop, and they'd have you know children, they'd have lemonade and cookies and that sort of thing. And we'd sit and talk and they'd talk with us, Miss Horton would be there because Miss Nighten was, being a nurse, she was in and out. And but my brother, we'd just talk about everything. When I'd go to the beauty parlor, Miss Horton would talk with me about my boyfriends. I'd say, I don't have any boyfriends. I think they all tried to steer me away from lesbianism. Because she constantly would tell me, you should get a boyfriend. I said, I don't want a boyfriend. Why? I don't want to be bothered, I said, after my brothers I don't want to be bothered with them. That was always my reason. After my brothers I don't want to be bothered with boys. Boys are yucky. In due time. This is all through high school. And other than that, she wanted to fix my hair all fancy. No, I don't want all those curls and all that stuff. Just you know, just fix it and braid it up. And she'd try to get it - I couldn't stand that. Your mother said, I said, I don't care. It's my hair and if you fix it like that I'm going to comb it all out. Which I would do sometimes. She would fix it curls. I had very long hair and I couldn't handle it and that's why my mother got tired of doing it so she sent me to her. It was just down the street. I'd walk down the street . . . braid them all up. That's why I cut it off as soon as I got away from home. I think in their way they tried to turn my interests. I never did anything with any girls in high school, cause I was with these 5 girls. There were 5 of us and we were always together. It just wasn't necessary to, I felt it wasn't necessary to go single out one. I liked one of them particularly, but I made no advances because I guess, you can't get that bird, so just forget about it. So I, cause I was always with them. Where one went the other 4 went, so it wasn't necessary to go looking for somebody else. I was just happy being in that company, that's all. I had a good time growing up, since I was with 4 other girls all the time . . . and the girl from Atlanta. That's the only time I went to Atlanta. When I came back through St. Augustin's I stopped at her house in Atlanta and stayed a couple of weeks. And I hope I can track her down when I get to Atlanta. I'd like to know where she is. She was the one I was keen on. I heard she got married and all that sort of thing. But I didn't chase any girls. And I was in athletics too. I was busy. Summer

Interview with Bess, 1

10

camp. Oh, there was another woman. [X]. I won't forget her name. The YWCA camps. When I wasn't in church camp I was in YWCA camps. I was first as a participant and then as I got older as a counselor. This woman, [X], I heard from her for years after I left Houston. I'd write back and forth to Miss [X]. I loved that lady and I think she knew it. And so I always was available to go to camp and be a counselor as I got older. Just being, I think I have a little picture of her around here someplace. And even after I got to Chicago, I still wrote her. Wrote her till she died. She was writing. I'd discuss things that were going on. Never said anything about my calling. Just whenever I wrote and told her what was going on, she'd write and make some suggestions, or just write. And she came to Chicago once with some kind of conference with the Y and I saw her then and I took her out. By that time I was married and we talked about that, and I told her you know, I didn't like being married. And she really tried to counsel me to try to do something about it, stay in it, that's the best thing, she said, and she'd always say, don't be like me. And I'd say, well I want to be like you.

408

And I think everybody I knew who was gay that I know now, tried to steer me not to be gay. I don't know. I'm not aware of anybody else who was gay. Miss Geeskey was. I didn't realize that until I had gotten away. That was the church's young people - I told you about her. She and her friend. And I went out there and saw this other lady, I said oh-oh. But I really wasn't too conscious of the relationship, cause I was so busy trying to, worrying about me getting into school, that I wasn't aware of a lot of little things, I'm sure I should have picked up. But as years went by I realized, well that was a gay couple. But you see people, people didn't talk about gay people, men or - now the only thing about the men, you, they talked about the fags. Because these men were so obviously feminine, cause they seemed at that time to make themselves more feminine than they really were. And they really put a bad name on the gay world way back then. Cause they'd always act and do something crazy and stupid. But they didn't talk about gay women. You didn't hear anything about gay women. You didn't hear anything about lesbians. You didn't even hear the word. I had to go look it up.

K: Did you?

B: Yeah. Cause I got my hands on The Well of Loneliness way back there. And I just found it the other day. I pushed it back somewhere.

K: Is that right?

B: Yes. It's falling apart. Nobody talked and nobody in my mother's circle, even when I'd listen, they never discussed - Miss

Interview with Bess, 1

11

Nighten or Miss Horton - except by their first names, Mary and whatever the other woman's name was. But never their relationships. So you never really heard. I never heard. Now I don't know what other people, I never heard any of that. So I really didn't have any guidelines of what to do for myself. Play it by ear and see what happens.

450

K: But these women were living together, just in your town, wherever you lived.

B: Mmm-hmm.

K: Were they looked down upon?

B: No, that's the thing. Everybody, no, Miss Horton's chair was always full with people going to get their hair done and this, and Miss Nighten was a supervising nurse in one of the big hospitals there. They had their own home. I don't know whether they had parties or anything like that, because remember these are grown women, my mother's age, and I'm in high school. So some of that, see, I wouldn't know what was going on. But when they were spoken of it was not disparagingly at all. Both Miss Nighten and Miss Horton had been to my mother's house for dinner, sometimes just drop by. They'd sit out on the porch and talk, because the kids, I'm off playing, trying to beat up some boy. Like I told you, my yard stayed full of boys cause of my brothers. Or over to Ina's, I'd go down to her house and all the girls were down there. But no one ever said anything about, I don't know what happened. I'm sure Miss Geeskey, because she was very well respected in the Episcopal Church, cause she was head of all the young people's leagues in all the churches. You know Texas is divided, it's so big, into different districts. She had the Central District. Houston. She used to, and she was all over driving everywhere, and after she came to my church and met me and I said something about my mother being a dressmaker, she started bringing some of her things to mother, and mother started making clothes for her. And I'd go peek, watch her get her clothes on. I'm supposed to be busy. Mother would call me to come and bring something, very happily I would go, so she got to know me. I guess she liked me, and that's why she invited me over to her house. I know mother talked about her to me. Talked about me to her. Or she would never have invited me to come over. And it was through Miss Geeskey that I got to Saint Augustin's. Otherwise, my mother wouldn't have let me go that far. But she trusted Miss Geeskey, so I'm sure that if she trusted her enough to let her influence her about my going to college, I'm sure there was nothing that she though wrong with her lifestyle.

K: Right. And it wasn't like with the haircutter, where you always had to have a chaperon, right?

494

B: No, no, I went on. She told me how to get there on the bus. And I went on over there. And Miss Geeskey's hairs was like yours, back there, beautiful cut. I love that haircut. And she wore suits, cause women didn't wear pants. But she'd always wear, my mother was making suits for her. And she was kind of heavy in the hips, because mother, I helped mother in the shop. So when she's cutting out material, she would say to the other women in there, you know, watch the pants, for the seam allowance for the hips. And I'd say, yeah Miss Geeskey really has some hips. And mother would say, yeah, you have to watch for that. You know, nothing but what she'd say about anybody else. Course when she'd come for a fitting, I'd make it my business to be out there, cause I liked the lady. And she'd come to our, she'd have to go around to all the different service leagues, groups, and I was president two years. And she'd come for special things we'd have. And no one in the church said anything about her. Not wanting her to come as a leader. She certainly was well-respected in the diocese or she wouldn't have had that job. And when I went over to the house, she just recently moved into that house with that lady, they had been together, you could tell that. Let's see, see, I'm in high school. Miss Geeskey had to be in her 30's then. She had to be. Because, yeah, she was about the same age as my mother about that time. So I guess she'd been living like that all her life. All her adult life anyway. I don't know what her friend did. I have forgotten. I probably was told, but I have forgotten what she did. I guess I wasn't impressed with her. People in those days just didn't you didn't hear. Now I don't know what was done in the white community, except for my mother's customers coming in and talking. But nothing like that was ever discussed. And in the society my mother was in, you just didn't talk about those things, even if you knew, you didn't discuss it. I don't think they ignored it, they just accepted it as a fact and that was, and if you liked the person that was it. I was trying to think of, and certainly Miss [X] at the Y, was, oh the mothers were thrilled with her, and she had all their daughters. Cause we would go downtown and go to the Y, she'd take us to camp, we went on camping trips. In the summer we went for summer camp. And she was responsible for all of us. And you know those parents, if they thought, they wouldn't have let all those little girls go. But I know I wouldn't, and I know the place was loaded, and I know after I finished high school I went as a counselor. Those two years I came back and couldn't go that summer? I worked as a counselor at the camp.

K: Did Miss [X] ever marry?

B: No, she never did.

552

K: Did she have a friend?

B: I don't know. I really don't know, cause we weren't invited to her house. And there was no talk. So you had no way of knowing. All we know is Miss [X], and parents certainly liked her. They'd come on visiting days. There was never, nobody ever snatched their girls out for anything. So apparently she had a good reputation, whatever she was doing privately. In those days people didn't discuss other people's personal business too much. I know when my mother came back from Chicago, divorced, I only heard one person once say something about the gay divorcee. They just didn't talk about it. She was divorced and that was it. And she was dating. She was out dancing all of the time. And when they had social gatherings, in the colored society, everybody went. Children, everything but little babies. So you learned the social graces and you heard everything. I guess we did, cause we ran all around everywhere. But if something happened with a family, a misfortune, you'd hear a lot of talk about it. Groups would rally, if they needed help, and give them help. Churches would rally, give them help. But they never discussed the people's personal lives. I guess I was fortunate in that I was in that particular group. We had a lot of, had a number of mixtures. But I guess that was par for the course, being in the South, from slavery. Like Ina and Benny's grandmother was white. Everybody knew it. Miss Inez was her only child. That was their mother. Everybody knew that. I used to go with Ina and her sister to collect rent. She had, in . . . she had these row houses, and her grandmother had a lot of those row houses, and she and her sister and I would go and collect the rent and take it over to her grandmother's. And I could - when I walked in and met her grandmother, there was no shock. It was just, this was her grandmother. Everybody knew she was white. And I don't, as far as I could hear, nobody - [to a pet? I'm sorry, I'm talking, get down.]. The only thing, it was just a fact. But there was a fact about a lot of families in the South like that. It was something you couldn't do anything about, so you either, and Ina and Benny looked like they were white, but their mother, the father was colored, so naturally, that's what the law was. So they were in colored schools. And you just accepted it I guess. I guess they accepted that like they accepted anybody's lifestyle. They had a number of men and women who lived together, they were not married for one reason or the other. But nobody ostracized the children, or talked about them in school. Kids didn't make remarks about them. I guess it was just the era. Didn't have that. "The Way We Were," I don't know; or maybe the South, depending on the part of the South. Because I have since, remember the fellows I told you about in San Diego?

K: Yes.

Interview with Bess, 1

14

B: Now, one of the fellows is from Mississippi. And his family owns all the whole little town, everything in the little town in Mississippi. And it's a mixed up family. And he's older than I am, and he's grown up there and all of his family. Nobody discusses who belongs to whom, cause almost everybody is related to everybody, white or colored, because of way back in slavery time. So that's about the only other, you now, person I know, that I know for a fact that nothing was talked about, because Bill has told me about it, and they laugh about it. And when they go back, he's had a sister who just died and they went back for the funeral. And I said, "Well," he says, "you know everything was there. All the white and all the black, we were all there, cause nobody knows who's related to whom there," cause it's just one little town. And nothing was said about it. The state troopers all know them when they start driving in in the car, you know, they know their name and where they're going and who they're related to and so they have never had any racial problem. Because it is so mixed up. But it's just something that you don't discuss. It just is. And that's it. They know Bill's gay. They'll tease him. Sometime the troopers say, hey Bill you're not married yet? He said, yeah, you know I'm married. . . . they'll say, well, where is he? Just like that, no problem.

K: Is that right?

659

B: Mmm-hmm. This is in Mississippi.

K: That's amazing.

B: Sometimes Cornelius has gone with him. And then they want to know, Who is Cornelius, cause he doesn't look anything like any family members. And so Bill says, this is my partner, my life partner. So, no problem. Well, I guess in Houston where when I was with somebody, maybe the adults said things like that, I just don't know. All I know is I heard nothing. And the women that I did know now were lesbians, apparently were accepted. Cause they went to the social gatherings. They weren't ostracized. Now I don't know when they had dances, maybe they just didn't go, I don't know. Maybe they didn't go. Or maybe they did go. Who knows? I'm not one to say they didn't. Cause by the time my mother got home, you know, we were dead to the world. Couldn't ask her questions. And I don't think we would have asked her certain questions, not my mother, and I don't think any of the other girls either. That was just the, I guess just the times were so different. Everything's out and everybody now is into everybody else's business.

692

K: Did you ever hear the term "Boston Marriage."

B: No.

K: No. OK. Cause around the turn of the century, it was much more traditional for middle-class women, women who could support themselves in some way, either had money and income, to live together. Particularly on the East Coast, say around Boston. And it was quite acceptable. It was quite accepted. Of course, no one thought they were really doing it, you know, and so I was just wondering if that might have been partly what was going on.

B: No, never heard - we had a number of women teachers who lived together. Especially in the rural areas. But that was almost planned, because when they were hired they were hired to live at this house. And they lived together. So some of them might have been lesbians. You have no way of knowing. But they were expected to live together and not marry. And not marry. Cause when they got married they lost their jobs.

K: Right, right, so it was a way for them to save money and be respectable, you know, not being at home.

B: My mother's adopted mother had a sister, who taught out in the rural areas. And she was Mrs. Smith. She had been married but her husband was dead. And she lived in one of those houses and taught. She'd come in about once a month, back into Houston and spend the weekend. And didn't go back. But she didn't have any children with her. My aunt and her sister kept her children. But she lived in a house like that with a lot of, with a number of, not a lot because in the country you didn't have but maybe 2 or 3 teachers. And I know as soon as you got married, you had to give up your job. She did that for years. So maybe that was the same type of thing.

K: So do you think people knew what was going on, and just didn't say anything? Or do you think the thought never even occurred to them.?

734

B: I think in some instances the thought never occurred to them because it was tradition for certain things to be done a certain way. And I think in other cases, if people knew, they wouldn't talk about it because for one thing, if they liked the person they didn't want them to lose their jobs. Just like the colored people who passed. We knew them, but we would never let on that we had any idea who they were, to keep them from losing their jobs. Because we knew they had given up family and everything to get a decent job. They had to move out of the colored area. And had to live a white life to keep the kind of job they had. And some of them had children in college and they wouldn't, they didn't want to lose those jobs cause they wanted to keep their children in

Interview with Bess, 1

16

college. So I guess in the South you learned how to keep your mouth closed about a lot of things.

K: That's interesting.

757

B: Yeah. And I imagine there must have been. There had to be lots of lesbians living together and people never knew it.

K: It's interesting. Cause some of the women I've interviewed, who were from like small towns in Colorado or Kansas or something, have said that you know, they just, when they started realizing the feelings that they were having, they thought they were the only ones in the world. They had never heard of any such thing. They know their parents have never heard of anything, no one knew anything about this. But it seemed like in your life it was kind of different.

B: Well, there certainly were those 3 I told you about. I'm sure there must have been many more. But I think it was just the whole atmosphere of that era where you just didn't talk about those things. I sort of believe that I came up in a time when you tried not to make people unhappy. Cause we didn't have a lot of scandal. We were so busy fighting segregation, I don't think they really had time to get into people's personal lives. I can't remember, my mother told me some things about some of the women who were her classmates she grew up with, but that was only in reference to my avoiding those same pitfalls. Never just gossip.

K: Never in a mean way?

B: No.

K: What kind of things did she, was she warning you about?

B: Oh, doing what I'm supposed to do. I think she was trying to keep me from going over with the ladies, cause it was always problems with marriage

803

END OF SIDE 1

BEGIN SIDE 2

000

B: . . . she was telling me about how Ina's mother married her Dr. Whatever-his-name-was, the dentist, who was one of mother's best friends was his fiancee and Miss Inez was the Chairman. She was going to marry him. And the announcements were out for his

Interview with Bess, 1

17

wedding to this - I can't think of the lady's name. And she enticed him to go out with her and got pregnant and being the kind of man he was he married her instead of his fiancée and everybody, the little group, was all upset about it. And had this son. And he told her that something was wrong after this boy was born, something was wrong with the wedding. Something was not legal about it and for them to do it over again so the child would not have to suffer. And she got this divorce and he promptly went and married the girl that he was engaged to. Because she tricked him. Everybody knew she tricked him into getting married. Cause she wanted him. She wanted - but my mother was telling me that. She said, you know, this is not the sort of thing you do. And this was Ina's mother. And then of course he married this girl he was supposed to marry all along and, but he took care of the boy. They never had any children. And she said, it was just a pall over their marriage, all of their lives. Just the idea. And although the people didn't like Miss Inez doing that, they thought you know she was so wrong, her children, Miss Ina and Benny, the girls I'm running around, were never hurt by it. Nobody ever denied them any of the benefits of the social group. And then Miss Inez married. She finally married another man and they were accepted. But that was just something my mother told me to try to show me, you don't do things like that. Other than that, she never told me about anybody else.

030

K: Now how about on one hand these women were living together, and everything seems to be quite fine, they were perfectly happy, and were accepted. But at the same time, it seems like they were trying to steer you away.

B: Yes, they were. They always were talking to me about, You'll make a good mother. And all that kind of stuff. And I'd say, yaak! And I'd say, I'm going to adopt boys. I'm not going to have any children. I'm going to adopt a football team. Nine of them. I would say that all through high school, because "Bess, what is your future?" I'd say, I'm going to adopt 9 boys. Never once did I ever say I was going to get married. Never. And they used to sit on me for that. When we would go over a little past Miss Nighten's house, they'd give us this lemonade and cookies. She'd say, ". . . when you get married." I said, I'm not going to get married. "Oh, but you should get married. All girls should get married." And it never dawned on me to say, "But you're not married." Just never thought, so I guess I never heard anything negative about her.

K: Right. So isn't that kind of perplexing that on the one hand it all seemed to be, you know, they were living their life very happily, but they didn't want you to go that way.

043

B: Yeah. And they had parties, cause we were taken to them. And people were there. And Miss [X] used to say, well, when you, you know, she'd talk to all the girls at the Y, When you're married and you had health classes and all this other stuff. But none of the girls, even the older ones than I, would ever say something about, Why haven't you married, Miss - ? You just didn't say things like that. You didn't ask those kind of questions of adults. Boy you were in trouble if you smart mouthed. It was terrible. So I never thought about it. But now, in later years, I said, that's what they were all doing, telling me you know, I should get married. Because I was not inclined. Because I was very loud and vocal about, I'm not getting married. I don't want to get married.

K: That's interesting too, because today a young lesbian might be embarrassed to say anything like that. But you felt perfectly comfortable telling everybody you had no intentions.

B: Yeah. No intention at all. I would always say - They'd say, don't you want some children? I'd say, yeah, you know, I can adopt some. There's plenty of them out there to adopt. And I always said I wanted to adopt boys, which was interesting since I didn't want to get married. But I grew up with brothers. I think that had a lot to do with it. And my mother had no sisters or brothers, so I had no aunts. So I just had my girlfriends, and they were always talking about the boys. And I was the one setting up the meetings. They were with me. Oh, we were at Bess . . . And then Mama wouldn't know that they are meeting me and then going off with the boys. See, I was the fixer upper. But I loved doing that, as long as I didn't have to go with them. I'd take their bikes. We were supposed to go bike riding. And I took their bikes and they'd go off and meet the boys and I'd hold their bikes and they'd come back and get their bikes and be coming home. Where were you? We was at That was all right. But they knew - I guess they knew I was not off with any boys, because I was so loud with my dislike of boys. Oh, shucks, I've got enough. And some of them had brothers. But my yard stayed full of boys because of my older brother. And I got sick of them . . . Mother says you have to go to dances. You have to dance with a boy. I said, that's all right, I'll dance by myself. But when I did go I danced with the boys because that was the thing to do. Most of the time they'd say, Stop leading. Well see, I taught my brothers, so I'd lead. And the first fella, I was thinking about him the other day. The first fella I really went out with was bisexual. It wasn't till years later that I discovered that, but when I came back from Saint Augustin's, my brother had this teacher that kept coming home talking about Mr. Green, Mr. Green, Mr. Green. So I said, who in the heck is Mr. Green? So one day, he left his lunch and my mother told me to take it around to the high school, so I went over there, and he happened to be in Mr. Green's class. And I took it in. He says, or you're Bess [redacted]. I said yes.

Interview with Bess, 1

19

So then he called a couple of days or so later. Came over and took me to the show. We got to talking and by that time, I didn't really know enough about what was going on. And we got to be very good friends, and everybody you know, said, well Bess finally has a boyfriend. My brother - What you want to go out with that sissy for? See, that's what they called him. I said, he's not sissy. Oh, yes he is. All the kids at school know he's a sissy. I said, well, he's a good friend of mine. And the very fact that they were down on him, see, I went out with him. We just talked and had one grand time. Well, he was bisexual. And we talked about that. And he was supposed to be my boyfriend. Everybody was happy except my brother. He didn't like that. And I stayed friends with him all through college. He was still teaching. And I was in Fairview. And then he went to the service, and I'd write, and he came home. And I came home the weekend and we just had a good time.

094

We'd go dancing, just a good buddy. I met his parents and his sister and brother. And I liked them. And his mother, his mother didn't care for me. He was her youngest child and she thought I was going to take her youngest child away from her. Her sister, brother and father did, and wanted us to get married. And I told her, I said dear, I don't want to get married. And she wasn't married or her older brother wasn't married, none of them were married. And the father wanted somebody in his family to get married. None of them. Bill had been engaged to a girl who died the month before they were to marry. So he just wasn't interested. Helen had never really gone with anybody. I think because of her size. She was about, she must have been six-six, and in that day and time you know, you didn't find too many men who were that tall. And he and I discussed it when I was in Chicago and he was in the service. He came to Chicago to visit. When he came to Chicago he stayed at the house where I was, but he wanted to know where the gay bars were. I didn't know, but my landlady knew. So she directed him, and my music teacher who was gay - I told you about her. He met her and she took him out to the bars, cause I wasn't going. I was a teacher, you know, at school, I would lose my job. But my brother was, my brother was death on him. He liked him before I started going out with him. Then "He's a sissy, everybody at school knows he's a . . ." By that time, things like that were said in the high school. They liked him. He didn't lose his job. It was just talk.

K:K: And about what year was that?

115

B: That must have been 1940. Yeah, about 1940. Cause I was between schools. 1940. I was between Saint Augustin's and Fairview. That was 2 years. Cause I didn't go back to school

Interview with Bess, 1

20

until '41. '39 and '40. Cause I came home in '38, so it was those 2 years. But that was the only so-called boyfriend I was ever supposed to have had. I'd go, I'd go with him to his cousin's house. And I'd play the piano. And he used to be back with his male cousin. But I guess that was a cover-up for him with his family. I was a cover-up. That was all right with me. So I could play the piano and they had good things for me to eat and they'd have books I'd read, stay over there 2 or 3 hours and then he'd take me home. But even then we didn't discuss what he was doing. I thought, I have a bad habit of being for the underdog. Anybody that's down on somebody, I make it a point to try to keep them satisfied and happy and have someplace to talk. And he was a good looking man, so when we did go out, we made a good looking couple. People would say, ooh, look at that, ain't that a nice looking couple? And when he came to Chicago, my cousin there, who was a singer, called him the Sarge. They liked him, my cousins did you know. They thought something was going to happen. Until my cousin talked with his accompanist and discovered huh-uh. She was gay. And she lived with her friend. And that's how I met her. And knew that she was gay, because she had been with the one who accompanied my cousin on his concert tour. And he said, he'd get notes from the women backstage and he'd ask Harriet, shall I and she'd say, no, that one's for me. And so then he told me that so then I knew. So I was taking piano lessons from her. So I really got well-indoctrinated on the pros and cons of lesbian life with her cause she and her friend told me all the pitfalls to look for. How to react. Cause I was young. See, I wasn't married. What was I? 23? When I came to Chicago.

149

K: 23. And that's when you met her?

B: Yes. And she and Alice, they had been living together umpteen years, ever since she left the concert stage with my cousin. And I asked him, I said, you know, I'd like to take some piano lessons. He said, well, Harriet will teach you, and he called her and made arrangements and I started going over with her. And I looked at this lady and I said to myself, oh-oh. And then after I'd been going and taking lessons a number of times, we got to talking personally and when she found out that I really didn't care about fellows, then she really told me how to look for things, what to look for, what to be careful of, how to conduct myself, in the lesbian world. And I'm grateful to her for that. And for years and years I'd go to see her after she got older, and they still were living together, and finally they both died.

160

K: What kind of advice did she give you? What did she tell you to look for?

Interview with Bess, 1

21

B: Well, I was young you know. And she told me about what fellows would try to do especially if they found out I was lesbian. They'd you know, make me go to bed with them, cause some men take a delight in getting a woman who was inclined not to. And situations to keep myself out of. And I did. Kept myself out of them. And how to approach a woman.

K: How did she tell you to approach a woman?

B: I can't remember, but I remember these things that she said.

K: Tell me what you remember.

B: Oh, she was telling me how to look at them first, you know. Mannerisms. Haircuts. That's the first time I became conscious of the haircuts. I hadn't paid any attention to hair before.

K: And what was particular about lesbian haircuts?

B: Well, most of the time she said they were short. Cause hers was and so was Alice's. And I said, really? I said, I always wanted mine short. She says, well, it's a dead giveaway sometimes. And if you don't want to give it away, and I let my hair stay long a long time. Hated it, but I let it stay long, longer than, you know, it was down to here. But when I went in bars she even told me how to go into the bar and not offend when the fellows came up. Things to say. General things to say to keep them from getting too friendly. Well, mother told me that. So she just reemphasized it, plus I didn't go to any lesbian bars. But you found them in the regular bars because certain jobs you couldn't be caught in a gay bar. Well then it wasn't difficult for me to tell who was gay. I guess cause I just kind of turned into male, cause of all the males that were around me when I grew up. And I had no children. They always liked me. I had more male, gay male friends. I guess because I never downgraded them. I never really downgraded anybody for that matter. So I could go, well I went to the bars a couple of times with her and just watched how she acted. She was very well-liked, cause invariably she'd get on the piano and start that blues. Cause she was an excellent pianist and the blues were the very thing during the war, and she'd play those and the place would go up in smoke. And I'd just go with her. I guess learn by association. That was all. And Alice would say, Don't take that baby. Don't take that baby with you. She's too young to go there and Harriet would say, she's never too young to learn. She's gotta protect herself. Yeah, and some old man in the neighborhood broke into the back and raped her. Wanted to tell us, let her know what a real man was like. Boy she was furious. And took her, they had these two big Airedales. Clubbed the Airedales. And then raped her. Alice wasn't home. If Alice had been home, he'd been dead. Cause Harriet was small, but Alice, cause she would have shot him I'm sure. Anyway, they got him

though later on. He was somebody in the neighborhood and they knew these two women were lesbians and lived in this apartment.

209

K: So did they go to the police about it?

B: Oh, yeah. She didn't back down. Alice was furious. Alice wanted to get her hands on him. The police had to protect him from Alice, cause she swore she was going to kill him. Somebody else got him though, and cut off his tingle.

K: Really?

B: Mmm-hmm.

K: Because of something else he had done?

B: Yes.

K: Or what had done to her.

B: No, something else he'd done. He was known for raping any woman he could get. So he'd go into the house. And see they had those 2 big dogs and they figured, you know, but he clubbed the dogs. And see Alice was out at work. I don't remember what Alice did, but Harriet was always home, because she was always, she gave piano lessons, she was always there. But anyway, they were, I was fortunate. I had some really nice people who told me and took me under their wing for a lot of things. See my mother wasn't in Chicago. I was there by myself. Maybe they felt like they had a protective job or whatever. And I was lucky that they were the kind of people that they were. Told me things to keep me from getting in a world of trouble. Cause see, I told you, I was bad. I could have gotten in plenty of trouble. And then I started teaching and of course, I had to back up on a lot of things. Cause in those days, honey, I had a problem with, let's see, I had been married and divorced and I was tutoring. And I was tutoring this man's - who was in the service who was at one of those installations there in Chicago, I've forgotten which one, on the lake - and he had 5 or 6 children. Had a lot of boys. And I met him through a girlfriend. And he found out I was a teacher and he says, they'd moved around so much he asked me if I would tutor one of his boys. I told him, yes. So I was in this big building and somebody in the building would see him coming in, bringing his child, and they told his wife that he was running around. And the wife had been in a mental institution. I didn't find this out till later. She wrote to the Board and said I was trying to steal her husband from her 5 or 6 children. I forgotten what it was. A big mess. And by that time, see I wasn't . . . she had Clark, the name Clark, cause the people in the building thought . . . as Mrs. Clark. Well, at the Board I was Miss Spears. And it took them a couple

Interview with Bess, 1

23

of years almost to track who Clark was, was Spears. And I had a letter to come down to the board to answer these charges this woman had written. That I'm trying to steal her husband. Of all people, her husband. So that's how it interfered with your private life. And I had to go find this fella. In the service. Which took quite some doing. To get him to write a letter explaining that his wife had been in a mental institution, that I was tutoring one of their sons, to keep them from firing me. It was a big mess. I went down, what is this for? Well, you're going under another man's name now. And you're in the public school system and that's not allowed for you to go around with a married man. I said, I'm not going around with a married man. Then they produced this letter. I said, I was just tutoring their son. So I had to go and locate this fella and get him to write this letter to keep my job. So if you're just going with a man, think what they would have done if they had known I was living with a woman. That's one reason why Rita and I said, oh, no, we'll wait. Cause Irwin was in 2nd grade when I met her. Until the boys are gone and off and then we moved together. Didn't have any problems.

K: So you waited over 10 years.

265

B: Yeah, yeah. When he went to the Marines, I waited another year. And Kent finished and went to Illinois. And then that's when we moved together. Kent was 18 then. We were talking about that the other day.

K: And that was so, they still might figure something out, but at least nothing would have been said to the kids?

B: Right. Nothing would have been said to anybody, because they'd figure she's never been married, my children are gone, college. I had children, that was the saving grace in some instances. The fact that I was married. And now they have a big house so why not combine. So that's what a lot of people thought too. I don't what my colleagues ever thought. Nobody ever said, well people didn't say anything to me. Cause they definitely could see that we definitely did more than live together. Plus they came to our house. They were guests there. And whenever anybody invited either of us to anything, it was always Rita and Bess, Bess and Rita. They never figured we'd bring any men with us. They never asked. Social things that we had at my school she was always invited to, and I invited her. They just expected her to come and when she didn't show up, everybody, Where's Rita? And I'd say, oh you know how Rita is. And they'd say oh, we know how Rita is. And she didn't socialize too much with members of her faculty, just a few. And then they would come. We'd both go. It was fun. It was nice. I enjoyed it. Now that I've gotten into SOOL here, I'm back in the swing, so I feel like I'm not missing a lot. I don't have a life partner, but I enjoyed it. Every

Interview with Bess, 1

24

minute of it. I don't regret anything that I did with Rita. Even the bad parts. It was a lesson. Lots of lessons. Lots of lessons. It was good. I wouldn't repeat it, not the way I was, with what I know now. Some things I wouldn't do.

K: What would you do different?

301

B: Well, one thing, I'd insist on being a little bit more open.

K: Would you?

B: Yeah. She was so afraid. As I was talking with Cornelius the other day in San Diego; we were talking and he said, All her life she has been the closeted type. Even though everybody in show business knew that she was lesbian, she still would back off. They'd go, they'd say, come on Rita, go to the party. Oh no. She'd go back to her hotel room and sew or do something. She wouldn't go to the parties. And Bill would tell her, well, you know come on we'll meet some ladies there. No, no, no, no, no. See she never wanted to be lesbian. That makes a difference. And she hasn't accepted it yet. We talked about it. She said, yeah, but you were married, and I said, That doesn't have anything to do with it. It was a marriage of convenience and to keep from being bothered. Well, how could you do it? I said, I did it because of circumstances. Well, I just couldn't do that. I said, well, you're different. That's your personality. You couldn't do it. I did it because I'm the kind, I want people to leave me alone. Especially my mother. Let me alone so I can go and live my life. Your mother was dead. You were fortunate to have your mother. I said, huh-uh. Not the way she stayed on me. But when I look back on it, maybe it was the best thing for my kind of personality. But somebody said, you got the lottery, would you go get her? This was just recently. The last time I told you I'd go get her? I wouldn't now. She still would not accept the fact. She wouldn't go to the SOOL meetings. She wouldn't go to Galah. She wouldn't, I'm going down there and sell tee shirts and wear my tee shirt. And she wouldn't do things like that. She wouldn't go to the parade. I would be in the parade, except I don't think I could do the walking. But I'm going to be down there in my shirt and waving my flag.

K: Good. I'll see you there.

333

B: My banner, or whatever it is they're going to give me. And I definitely will be at Galah, cause I've signed up for 3 days to sell tee shirts, 4 days. Three with DWC and one with Galah. So I'll be down there Thursday, Friday, Satur, no, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, selling tee shirts. Very, very evident

Interview with Bess, 1

25

what I am. And in Los Angeles and I met those girls? I went to the Gay Pride Festival. I didn't go in the parade cause I didn't know anybody, but I was down there in and out of the booths and meeting people. And that's how I got to meet those women who did that documentary on lesbians. Cause they saw me and asked me if I would consider being in it. Rita wouldn't do anything like that. She was in, when we were in New York, now she knew lots of lesbians and gays in New York. There were just 2 fellows who would come back and we'd visit the gay fellows. And all the women and groups that she told me about when she was growing up, I would say, Why don't we go, why don't you call your friend? No, never called. She went out to her sister-in-law's house to see her sister-in-law and her brother. She wouldn't let me go. She says, if she sees me with you she'll know. I said, what makes you think she probably doesn't already know? Especially your brother. No, she'd go by herself. And that's one of the reasons. Too many of that sort of thing started happening and I said, you know, this isn't a good life. I don't like hiding. If I am, I don't go brazenly out and that sort of thing, but life's too short. We're retired. What's wrong with us, if I touch you when I'm out. Oh, I can't do that. . . . What difference does it make? I'm not hugging and kissing you in public. So since I've been here now, even since you were here the last time, I know now I wouldn't go and try to get her to come back. Cause I wouldn't feel. My feelings for her are the same, but I would not be comfortable with her now out here. I couldn't get her to go to SOOL and clown and carry on and hug all the women. Rita would just sit there. She wouldn't - she'd talk. She's not anti-social. But she wouldn't probably go only one time. And she wouldn't go down to the Denver Chorus at all, once she went once, and saw all those women there. That's my feeling. Now, maybe she'd fool me. But I'm not going to take that chance. I'm enjoying what I'm doing now. I'm not looking for anyone. I think I've passed the stage where I feel like courting somebody. I'll just enjoy the group's company. Everybody in the chorus knows me anyway. Well they would, because I'm the only . . . anyway, so everybody knows who I am. But they've invited me to parties at their homes. Which is, you know, that's nice, I go, I have a good time. So why mess that up? So I'm going to stay single. Hug them all. You know, I get lots of hugs at the chorus you know, they come in and come down and say, Bess, where were you last week? We missed you. I didn't go last night. I was just too tired. I'm going tonight. Plus the last night is for the skit and I'm supposed to be in the skit. As long as I don't have any lines. Show what the support people do. One thing. I used to take a chair out and put it down and go back out and get it. That's good enough. That's part of the skit.

K: You don't have to practice that too much.

Interview with Bess, 1

26

B: Yeah, well you have thought when they practiced that so much the other night, I thought I'd go through the ceiling of that place. The rest of the other people, the fellows would forget their lines and then they'd say something and the women instead of listening they'd go uproar, you know, and you couldn't hear the next line. And the woman was having to tell them you know, you're on stage, let the audience laugh. We had such a good time laughing at some of the things the fellas were saying. So, that's a lot of fun. I enjoy that. If I get my tag. I have to go tonight to get my, they won't let you in Boettcher without that tag. I'm supposed to get it tonight or there'll be a skit without me.

K: I'm just making a note to myself to remember to get those tickets. Are many women from SOOL going to be in the parade? Or go to the parade?

B: Oh, well see, [S] is a member of that. I'm sure she has told them all . . .

K: [S], the ringleader.

B: Uh-huh. They better all be there, either in the parade, or I don't know whether they're gonna. I know [S] with, you know walking, like she probably won't be at the parade, but they'll be all on the sidelines.

K: You know, next year we're going to have to get together a car. Cause I keep on hearing women say, oh, I'd walk in the parade but it's a little bit too long. So next year we'll have to get together a car.

B: Oh, really?

K: So everybody can drive in the parade? Wouldn't that be good.

B: That would be fine. I'll ride in it.

K: That would be fun.

B: I just can't walk it.

K: Yeah, it's a long way. It's a long way.

418

B: Long way, because Tish, the manager? Is going to walk in it, and she was saying, come on Bess. I said, girl, I can't walk that far. She said, well, are you going to be on the side? I said, yeah. Wear your tee shirt! I said, you know I'll have my tee shirt on. And she said, OK, I'll wave at you, cause she's carrying a banner. She was all hep. I want to carry a banner. So they got one for her. And some of the other support groups, but they

Interview with Bess, 1

27

are younger. They're going to march. I just can't do it. I got to find out where it is first. She said, Cheesman Park. I said, I don't know where Cheesman Park is. So I've got to get directions for all of it. I don't even know where this Executive Tower thing where I'm supposed to have the booth.

K: Do you have a car?

B: Mmm-hmm.

K: OK.

B: And I've got to find out where to park. So I'm going to night. Cause there's no meeting tomorrow. Then Saturday morning we're supposed to be at Boettcher all day long. So, I'll have to get all that information tonight. But I've been there every night this week but last night. Cause they were practicing at both places. And the Festival Chorus was practicing. That's the women, the men and the harmony.

K: The harmony, the mixed chorus. Yeah.

B: Beautiful sound. Gorgeous sound. And all them together doing the skit. And the support groups had to work, cause we had music, we've had tee shirts, we had to give out all the bags. We had to go, last, when was it? Last Saturday, 9 o'clock, I was at this hall with all these other people. Three hours on my feet, walking up and down these tables, bagging all the materials for 3,500 people. Cause of all the people coming in. We had to have these bags ready for them with all the information that they needed. Plus condoms. And the girls and I . . . threw 5 or 6 condoms in the bag instead of 1. They'd say, oh, he needs more than 1. And the Festival Book, big beautiful book. Plus all the activities and the advertising and Tattered Cover gave the, they gave little shopping bags. So we just went down filling up these shopping bags, 3 hours. But we got it all done by 11:30. We had all of them done. Otherwise we would have had to go back Sunday morning. But we finished. A lot of fellows came down. And there were only 3 support people from my group. The rest of them didn't come. So we worked. So that's the kind, see I like doing that kind of stuff. Rita would never go down and do anything like that. Hmmm-mmm. Retired or not. Even if I told her that back in New York, Nobody's going to see you, you're not teaching. Well, she was. So this teaching is a thing with her. Education. But now last time I heard from her she said she wasn't teaching, cause she'd got sick. But see I, teaching now, I'm at Ames. If they see me, I don't care. If they say anything - I doubt if they would - even my principal would not say anything. I told her I wasn't coming back this year. She said, I'm not going to sign your resignation. She wouldn't sign my resignation. I said, I've been here 3 years and I'm tired of little children. There's only one woman I know over there who's lesbian, she and her lover have been in Colorado

Interview with Bess, 1

28

27 years. They came from Oklahoma. She's the only one who buys my - I sell my tickets to her for the concerts. And she's been over here. Well, once I took a look at Carol. Her name is Carol. Once I took a look at Carol when they came in her, I said, oh, I know. And then later we talked. The other teachers, whom I like and they like me, I don't think it would make them any difference. That's my feeling. And they may know. Cause I don't say anything. Course we were at this, down at the retreat . . . were talking. A number of the women, of course, have little children. And we were discussing that. And it throws a lot of people off, the ordinary man and woman, when a woman has a child. They don't think lesbian.

494

At first. Until later, that they hear other things. But having children throws off a lot of it. Of course, now there's so many women who are opting to be married, not to have children, that you really have to be careful what you say, cause you really don't know. So I think if I were a young person now, I wouldn't be much different I don't think. I might be worse. See you get me to talking. You have to stop me you know.

K: OK, then you have to, shall we stop around 11 or 11:30?

B: 11:30. I'm going to pick her up at 12:30.

K: So what time do you want to stop?

B: Well, I need to get dressed. That's my problem. I'm going to wear the same thing. She had hers done. She was so vain, the electronic stuff you know? I'm too chicken for that. I don't go for anything that hurts. Where I have to do it every morning, and some time in the evening when I go out. And it bothers me. Not that it's, I don't care about anybody knowing it's there. But just the feel of it is yucky. Cause you do. Shave it off every day. And it's sticky.

K:K: Stubble.

B: Yes. Ooh. So I need to do that. If I forget in the evening, and I happen to, of course, I'm not embarrassed, it's just I don't like to feel it. I guess I'm selfish. I don't like me to feel it. Somebody will say, oh, Bess what's all that stuff. I'll say, that's a beard, dear. But see, they think she's crazy anyway. So it's all right. My little grandchildren when they were small, Grandma you have a mustache. I did. I had a mustache. I said, Yes. Well, only men are supposed to have mustaches. I said, what makes you think I'm not a man. Well, you're a Gamma! I said, well, I've got a mustache. And they think, they didn't know what to make of it. I'd say, yeah, you want to feel it. Yeah. And they'd come feel it to see if I had - they thought I'd drawn it on there. It's real. And they'd pull the hair. I've only been

Interview with Bess, 1

29

shaving it recently. I wanted to see what I'd look like. Cause I've always had it. My mother had it, very heavy. And my father's oldest sister, [redacted], and she had coal black hair. And I used to go to Chicago and go in her house and she had me pull these - I'm sure it hurt, cause she mentioned, she was an older woman. So I guess it's maybe on both sides, I get that. And Rita used to say, that hates my skin. So that's when I started shaving.

542

K: So go back to this woman, Harriet? Sounds like part of what she told you was how to be safe around safe men. And then part of what she told you was how to be with other women.

B: Right. She told me some of the things to say. Some opening words, you know lines. And like I said, I was crazy when I was young, and so I tried them. I'd go into them and I'd say.

K: What did you say?

B: I don't remember the things I'd say.

K: You don't remember?

B: I think they have just become a part of me now, because when I was at the party the other day, the other night, and they got ready to dance, and I said something about - I started dancing with somebody and they were way out here. And I said, what are you doing way out there? Are you straight? What are you doing at this party? If you're not straight, why are you supposed to be like that? They just cracked up. I don't know where I learned that. They just laughed. They said, Bess has started again. And then dancing, I'd do certain things and where did you learn how to do that? I said, I guess I've always known how to do things like that. Or somebody would make a statement and leave an opening and I'd jump right in, you know. Those are the types of things.

K: What would you say, now you went with her to some regular bars.

B: Regular bars, because she'd only go to straight bars.

571

K: But you would find some lesbians at those bars?

B: Oh, yes, you'd find some there. Cause she knew a lot of them see. And then others, then she steered me free, away from the leather type people. She'd say look over there, and see that girl? Well, that's the kind you stay away from. That you'd get in trouble with those. They are into orgies and all that kind of stuff. You don't want to get into that. Well see, for a young

Interview with Bess, 1

30

woman that's good information. Because see, I didn't know, I had never been given any information about the clothing. I didn't even know what they meant when they said leather. So those are the sort of things she told me.

K: And what kind of clothing did lesbians used to wear?

B: You wore dresses. Everybody. Nobody wore pants. Very few lesbians wore pants. Now Harriet wore them in the house, but when we went out we went in dresses.

K: Dresses. And were these bars colored bars or mixed?

B: They were colored bars.

K: They were colored bars.

B: In Chicago, you know, them colored bars in Chicago way back there you didn't go into. I don't ever remember going into a mixed bars in my early days. Later, after the war, there were bars you went into, but then I wasn't bar hunting then. There were a few that I went into in connection with going to dinner. But you didn't go into the bars that were just bar bars during the war. The colored bars, mostly all of them were south side. Cause Joe Louis had a bar called The Club Delisse. That's where everybody went. And we'd go sit on the stool, you could see everything in there. And we'd go sit there. That's where I learned how to drink everything. Rum and coke was the thing at that time during the war. And you'd drink rum and coke. You'd drink that all night long, and you'd meet all kinds of people. And sometimes my cousin would go. He knew a world of people because of being in the arts, entertainment field. And he'd say, this is my little cousin from Texas. He'd deliberately try to get the fellows to come over and we could dance with the fellows. I didn't want to dance with those men. Say, "What you want, the ladies?" I said, "Well." So that's when he said, I've got Harriet on you. But we'd go and then after I got married, we still went to the Club Delisse. Cause my ex would go, he liked to go, he drank. So we'd go sit there. And then I started getting bored with the club scene altogether, the nightclub scene after it all. Wasn't getting anywhere going to the club scene, and times were tight and money was short. I wasn't for spending it on, but before that Harriet and I would go sit on the bar - Alice never went with us. Just the two of us. I can't even remember what Alice did. I don't know. Can't remember.

636

K: Did you ever know any or see any butches or fems? Was that a colored thing?

B: Yes, but they weren't called that.

Interview with Bess, 1

31

K: What were they called?

B: They were just, what did they call them? I never heard Butch or Fem until I got to Los Angeles. Never heard the words used. What did they say? In Chicago. I don't even know whether I heard them referred to by any name. But there was one of them. I don't even think Harriet ever said, gave them a name. She would point to someone and say, Look out for that one, that's not your type. You want a lady. That's what she would always tell me. And I don't even remember her using either of those words. I guess it didn't come out until later. Maybe during the sixties.

K: Maybe later, yeah. So that whole community then was separate from what you would get involved in.

B: Yeah. See I was in the school system by that time.

K: Right. So you weren't . . .

B: No, I wasn't, and then by that time I wasn't even going to regular bars, because they frowned on you being found there too often. It was puritanical really, this, the board of education's members. You had to toe the mark, worse than when you were at home with your family. Because they'd fire you. And once you got fired from the Board you couldn't get, for whatever reason they gave you, you didn't get your job back. You had to do something else. See and I worked the graveyard shift during the war at General Electric and then taught in the day.

K: You didn't have much time for running around in bars.

B: Really and truly. No. Because I only had a few hours between the time I left at 11 o'clock at night until 9 o'clock the next morning to go to school. So you had a lot to do. So that might have been what's kept me out of trouble. And then later I had little children. I really didn't have any time to do anything. And I got involved with the boys with scouting and camping and that kind of stuff so I didn't have any time to go looking for the ladies. I kept my eyes open. That's why I saw Rita. But I had to wait, biding my time. I knew that after I met her, that's the kind of lady I want. So I just courted her off and on and then when we talked about it, she said, she'd always say, But you got children. You married and you got children. I said, Not married anymore. That used to make me mad. But you are a married lady. I said, Not anymore. But you have children. I said, OK, well, they're going to be with us forever.

703

K: Now, why was she so opposed to being with a woman that had been married?

Interview with Bess, 1

32

B: That was something she said she would promise herself all her life. She would never have an affair with a woman who had children, who had been married.

K: Because she was afraid they would go back to men? Or because she was . . .

B: That was another thing she said. Anytime a woman has been married, she will go back to a man. And that's exactly what Gwendolyn did. After she started living with me, she went back with a man. I told her everybody wasn't like that. I said, I wouldn't go back to them. I said, you know the circumstances. She never believed me. Well Vi got married. So now that I am free of it, what make you think I'd want to go back to that? Oh, just her belief coming out, that once you had a man you always want a man.

K: Now, did she think that, that women who had never been with men were more real lesbians than women who hadn't?

B: Right. She used to say How could you bring yourself? I said, I didn't bring myself, I just allowed myself. I said, it was just something that had to be done and I just did it. But there was no feeling. No emotions. I said, you've met mother. Would you want her on your back? She said, Well, no. I said, I was just sick of that lady. And I wanted her to quit badgering me. All the distance from California to Chicago, she still badgered me. That was, those were the times we'd fall out, when we'd have that discussion. And then she'd say, well I don't know what I'm doing now. I just said I'd never be with a woman who's been married before and with children. And then she'd go through this business of yeah, I can see one sometimes she said, but why would you have two? Why would you go back? I said, oh Rita, circumstances make you do a lot of things. And with me, I said, you know I like peace and tranquility. And I got tired of . . . telling me what I should do and I'm disappointing her, so I decided to go on and marry this man. And then when I had this one child and she kept yakking about it, don't rear up a single child. Cause she was an only child. And growing up there were many reasons she'd, you know, say See, my mother should have had more children. And she said, because there's a void in my life with no brothers and sisters, no aunts and uncles of course. My mother had no brothers and sisters. And when you grow up here you can see some reasons for it. So she said you shouldn't rear one child. So I said, OK, I'll go back and have another child. Will you shut up? Yes. So I did. And she shut up. Rita didn't believe that. I said, well when we go out there, ask her. She did. Mother told her. But even then, when she'd get angry she'd bring it all up again. But she just, the whole, the whole behind Rita's actions with me is the fact that she never accepted herself and I did. Even though I got married, I accepted what had to be, got it done, got it out of the way, and then went on to live the kind of life I wanted to. She never could. Now

Interview with Bess, 1

33

even though she likes the boys - she especially likes the older boy - she doesn't care too much for Kent because he would sit and just look at her. He didn't do too much talking, but he's listening to everything. And don't ask me why she resented his marrying a white girl. With her family as mixed up as it is, coming from Trinidad, East Indian, Italian - her father's Italian. Her Grandmother's Chinese. How she could, why she got so mixed up? And she had hangups. I said, Rita, you, of all people. Well, there are other colored girls. I said, well that's the girl he fell in love with. That's who he married.

799

END OF SIDE 2

END OF 6/25/93 INTERVIEW