

Oral History of Thomas M. Edwards

Q: This is Tape 1 of an interview with Thomas M. Edwards conducted by Roland Schembari for the Oral History Project of the Gay-Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California. I'm going to start at the very beginning and ask you to tell me when you were born.

A: 28 October 1931.

Q: And where you born?

A: Oakland, California.

Q: Can you describe the area that you grew up in.

A: In Oakland, I grew up in what is called the Rockridge District above Lake Temescal. We moved from there on December 7, 1941, and moved to Tuolumne County, California, when I was ten years old and I claim Twainheart in Sonora as my home town.

Q: We just had a walkthrough. Would you like to describe the area in Tuolumne County in more detail.

A: It's mid-level high Sierra Nevada, and it was a little town of 200 people. It was very rural. One school, two rooms. When I graduated from Twainheart Elementary School in 1945, I was matriculated into Sonora Union High School, which at that time had a population of 2,000, and Sonora is a typical motherlode gold mining town.

Q: What was the makeup of the population there?

A: WASPish. That's probably about the best word I can describe. Tuolumne County is even today very WASPish, but Twainheart of 200 people were just basically they were mill mining and gold mining workers, and in Tuolumne County, in Sonora of Tuolumne County which is the county seat, was much the same thing. Basically WASPish.

Q: How large was your family?

A: I had a mother and father and I had one sibling, a brother.

Q: What did your parents do?

A: My mother and father everything I'm discussing now is after our move to Tuolumne County. My mother and father operated a retail furniture store in Sonora.

Q: And what was your ethnic background?

A: My mother is Scotch Mormon. My father was Irish Catholic.

Q: I was going to ask your religious background next, but you gave me that, didn't you?

A: Not quite. I'm an atheist. I left the Roman Catholic Church in 1959.

Q: We'll talk about that more later, I think. What was your family's attitude toward sexual matters?

A: It was never discussed in the house.

Q: When did you realize you were different?

A: Before we moved to Tuolumne County, at the age of five, I had my first homosexual encounter with two twin boys that lived near where we lived, and from that point on I always realized I was different.

Q: What was your reaction?

A: I don't remember. I don't remember.

Q: This is kind of going over the same ground. Where were you? You said it was Oakland before you moved to Tuolumne, your first experience. And when did you act on this? Would that have been first time?

A: That would have been the first time.

Q: How long did it take you to come to terms with this realization?

A: I would say into my late teens. I graduated from Sonora High in 1949 and I entered the University of Santa Clara in 1951. I came out in 1952. So some time between '49 and '51, I was becoming comfortable with my own homosexuality, although I was acting on my homosexuality in all of my preteen years.

Q: Did you try to change?

A: No.

Q: When did you realize you weren't the only one.

A: In high school in Sonora. I grew up with, there were a couple of gay kids in Twainheart and there were a couple of gay kids in Sonora High. We all interacted together, so unlike a lot of people, I never really thought that I was the only one.

Q: Whom did you tell?

A: Well, the kids that I was talking about, and as far as telling anybody in my family, when I was, I would say, 15 or 16, and I told my aunt and uncle, who also lived in Twainheart, and my grammar school teacher.

Q: How do you identify yourself? What term do you use?

A: In what regard?

Q: I guess in regard to your sexual identity?

A: Exclusively homosexual since preteens.

Q: Do you ever use the term 'gay' or 'queer,' or any of the other?

A: I use all of them. I'm not prejudiced in that regard.

Q: You've already talked a little bit about this, but the next question is, did you discuss gay-lesbian things with family, friends, who, and you've mentioned --

A: I had an aunt and uncle who were very, very close to me. They were part of the 200 population of Twainheart. I discussed it with them very thoroughly that I knew I was homosexual and asked them whether I thought I should tell my parents. They both thought it would be ill-advised at that time. I didn't come out to my parents until I was 21.

Q: Were you out at work?

A: I have been out since the age of 21 in any job I had. In the United States Army, where I was drafted after I came out, it's hard to for me to imagine that I was ever anything except out.

Q: OK. Did anti-gay jargon hurt you?

A: Yes, it did. My hesitancy on that is that as I matured, it hurt me less, to the point where now I consider the source. But as I was growing up, especially from certain people, I was raped as a teenager, and anti-gay jargon, or anti-queer jargon in those days, it really hurt me.

Q: The next question that follows is, did you experience harm, abuse or sexual harassment because you were gay, and you mentioned this rape. Were there any other incidents?

A: The rape, of course, was the most violent. That happened when I would have to

estimate I was 15 years old. I may have been 16. It was the summer. Did I suffer any other violence? Yes, I was beaten up a couple of times by what we, in those days, used to call "queer-bashers."

Q: Did you have brushes with the law?

A: Never. I had an uncle who was captain of the Tuolumne County Highway Patrol, California Highway Patrol, who was also a confidante of mine. And I have never had any brushes with the law regarding homosexuality or anything else.

Q: Now you said that you came out when you were 21. That's quite phenomenal, especially at the time. Could you talk about that a little bit?

A: Well, I don't know that there's really much to say. On my 21st birthday, I was still a student at the University of Santa Clara, and I think this goes a lot to my upbringing. I have always tried to be as honest as I can about anything, and I knew I couldn't live a lie and all I was really doing was suspicions confirmed on the part of anybody else.

I knew that I couldn't -- the word "closeted" wasn't in existence in those days -- but I knew that I simply could not live a lie. I wasn't happy with myself. I was absolutely miserable scooting back and forth between gay bars, the White Horse Inn up on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, and Oakland rather, and hiding things. I just simply had to come out. I just simply told my friends at the university, and on my 21st birthday I went home and told my parents.

Q: What was their reaction?

A: Their reaction then, as it was from all the time subsequent, was ambivalent. I could never gauge whether they were really accepting me or just saying they accepted me. There were no recriminations. However, let me give you an ... example. My late lover committed suicide in August of 1975. My mother came down to be with me. And I had thought that she had accepted my late lover, just as I know she accepted my present lover. After she helped me dispose of Mr. Foster's personal effects, she went back to our home town and said to our family physician and a couple of business associates, "Now that David is dead I know Tommy is going to find the right girl and go straight."

Q: [Laughs]

A: Yes, it is funny. But that remark in 1975, 23 years after I came out, evidences what was really my mother's attitude. I never knew from one day to the next, and mother was dominant in our family and, although I do suspect my father was gay, I had strong suspicions of that all my life because he was even more accepting of me than mom was, but I believe that what I've just told you there really shows you what their reaction was.

Q: What about in your work situations, and you said you entered armed forces. How did your being out affect your jobs and your relationships in the armed forces?

A: Not one bit.

Q: You were very fortunate.

A: Yes, and I'll tell you another reason I think I was very fortunate. This was in the so-called McCarthy era. You know of my political writings. I am a great supporter of the late senator's. And I can tell you that I felt no harassment, I felt no problems whatsoever, and in my military company in the headquarters unit, there were half a dozen of us that were out. And this supposed to be when McCarthy was supposedly routing out all these nasty queers. I found none of that whatsoever. So I will reiterate that in any job situation that I've ever had, in the military or at any other time, the only problems I have ever had have been in my own home town.

Q: We're going to change the subject briefly. Have you ever been in love?

A: Homosexual or heterosexual?

Q: It just says 'being in love,' so you can say ...

A: I'm deeply in love with my present lover whom you have met. We've been together for 20 years. I had a lover who committed suicide. I was in love with him. And then between that lover and my current lover, there was another lover which I thought I was love with, but I think really was an infatuation. It only lasted a few months.

Q: What was your longest relationship?

A: My current relationship of almost 20 years now.

Q: How old were you when you had your first love affair?

A: That was in high school, so I would have to say it was some time between the ages of 16 and 17. He and I not only carried on sexually, but we developed a deep emotional feeling toward one another.

Q: What were your adult living arrangements? Alone, with family, with lovers ... all three, or just ...

A: All three.

Q: All three. Were these relationships monogamous or open?

A: Every relationship that I have had has been monogamous.

Q: Were there clearly defined sex or social roles?

A: No.

Q: Where did you meet people?

A: Bars, social situations, political functions · I guess I ... the whole gamut of where you can meet people?

Q: Do you like living alone?

A: No.

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Q: Were you ever married?

A: No. You're talking in the conventional sense.

Q: Yes.

A: Yes, that's what I thought.

Q: What kinds of work did you do?

A: Well, I'll go backwards. When I met my present lover, I was a humane officer for the local Humane Society where he was a kennel master. Before that, I managed a pet store, and then before that I was in furniture, and I was also in the finance business. That's about -- that's it.

Q: How did being gay affect your choice of career, or did it?

A: It never had any influence whatsoever.

Q: Did you separate your gay life from your work life at all?

A: Well, only in the extent that I never worked in a gay environment, so obviously when I was working in a finance company, there was never any connection. There was never any reason to.

Q: You've already said you were out at work, right?

A: Always.

Q: Did being gay help your career at all?

A: It neither helped nor harmed it.

Q: Was there family pressure around your work or career?

A: No..

Q: How much of your social life was gay, how much straight?

A: Well, since I came out at 21, all of my social life was either gay or mixed. Before I came out, living in the environment that I did, it was pretty straight.

Q: Where was your main social life? For example, private parties, bars, baths, etc.?

A: I have never been to the baths and I think private parties and bars sums it up.

Q: How large were your friendship groups?

A: Ranging from a very few ... Actually, it depends upon how you define word 'friend'. But if we go the accepted sense, I will say ranging from very few to quite a large group.

Q: Did they contain both men and women?

A: Yes.

Q: How did you find where to go?

A: I don't know that I can answer that. I mean, somebody would say, "Let's go to this bar" or somebody would say "Let's go to this show," or I might suggest that we go to this bar or this show. I mean, it was just what you'd find in normal intercourse.

Q: How did you have fun?

A: By that's not an easy question. I don't know who thought this question up.

Q: No one has signed this and said that they're responsible for this question, so I don't know.

A: I simply had fun being myself and accepting other people as they are.

Q: Describe your first time at an all-gay event.

A: I first of all, I don't remember when my first time at an all-gay event was. I'm not trying to be deliberately evasive. I suppose it would probably have to be when I stumbled up in the White Horse Bar, on the Oakland-Berkeley line, was the first all-gay event I ever was at, and I had a false ID. I felt very comfortable being around my own.

Q: I didn't realize the White Horse was that old.

A: Sure is.

Q: It's still there.

A: I know it is.

Q: We've already discussed some of this, but they seem to want to go back to it. When was your first sexual experience?

A: When I was five years old.

Q: Could you discuss sex with your parents?

A: No. As a matter of fact, it was impossible. I tried. That is why, as I said earlier, I turned to my aunt and uncle.

Q: Were your first experiences scary?

A: Anxious, yes.

Q: And did you feel guilty?

A: There were times in my preteen and early teen years that I did feel guilty, but I never tried to correct myself.

Q: How did you cruise?

A: Actually, I have done very little cruising in my life. When I cruised, it was generally in the bars.

Q: Were you ever molested while young?

A: I told you I had been raped. I was never molested by family, although there was time there were overtures made, but only the rape incident sticks out in my mind.

Q: Did you have relations with the opposite sex?

A: Yes, this is rather comical. Twice. Friends of mine took me to a whorehouse to try to straighten me out. It was a huge joke.

Q: Did you ever go through psychotherapy to be cured?

A: That's an interesting question. I had a breakdown when my the lover I had

before the lover that committed suicide. He and I were broken up by another gentleman, and I tried to jump out of an airplane. This is not considered good behavior, you understand. I made threats about committing suicide. So my parents had me -- I was over 21. I was in my 20s. And my parents had me hospitalized. In the state hospital, I have the paperwork here. Ostensibly, to help me through this depression. But they had talked to some quack family psychiatrist who said that in that hospital they will cure him. Well, I was committed by a judge, and the judge was a good friend of mine. And I asked him, I said, "Ross, I don't want to be cured of homosexuality." He said, "Don't worry about it, Tom, they won't." And when I got to the hospital, the interviewing psychiatrist, I broached the same thing with him. He said, "That doctor doesn't know what the hell he's talking about." And this was in 1961. So that's been the only attempt, so to speak, to straighten me out.

Q: Lesbians and gays have seen great changes in status since Stonewall. How have they affected you?

A: I don't know that they have really affected me at all. Because I don't look at Stonewall as a landmark date in my own life, so I don't think it's affected me at all.

Q: What do you think of these changes?

A: I view them both positively and negatively. I think that the general public has become much more aware and there's a greater degree of tolerance, but I don't like the separatism that some of these changes have wrought. For instance, I was the first gay merchant here on Castro Street back in the '60s, and the idea for those of us then was to assimilate, and now you see separatism. You see separatism particularly between lesbians and gays. So I think that .. and I don't approve of the so-called gay agenda, which definitely branched off from Stonewall.

Q: How did the beat generation, the hippies and the civil rights movement affect you?

A: I don't believe at all.

Q: Would you want to be young now?

A: No, no, no. Because if I were young now, I wouldn't have had the experiences that I have had, and I value the experiences that I've had, and I know - I wouldn't want to be young now, not at all.

Q: What do you think of Act Up, and Queer Nation, and other radical political gay groups?

A: I think that they do inestimable damage to us, what we used to be called the gay movement. I think they give us a black eye. I don't approve of them, and I think they're juvenile.

Q: How has the AIDS epidemic affected your life?

A: To the degree that I can say that my lover and I have more straight friends than we have gay friends. I've lost some very, very close personal friends, one member of my family. It has affected us terribly. We are both HIV-negative, and we participated in the San Francisco men's study operated by the University of California. We felt that was one way we could do our part.

Q: OK, that's the end of the already-typed-up questions. So now I'm going to go back. When did, you say you were at the University of Santa Clara, did you complete your degree program?

A: Yes, I took my bachelor's degree with a major in political science. I was graduated in 1954. I was almost immediately drafted.

Q: This was during the Korean War, or after?

A: Right at the closing moments of it. I have what's called the Korean Ribbon, one of the awards that I received. And then I went back into the University of Santa Clara and entered law school. One of my classmates in both undergraduate work and in law school is a name that you may very well know, John Vasconcellos. He's a very good personal friend of mine. And after the first year of law school I was having some problems which had really nothing to do with our conversations here, and I transferred from the University of Santa Clara law school for a very brief stint at USF, and I decided that I really didn't want any more academics, and I certainly was not fit to be a lawyer. I don't know how much further on that you want me to go.

Q: So was that when you moved to San Francisco?

A: That's exactly when I moved to San Francisco.

Q: And that would have been in 1954?

A: '59.

Q: '59, OK. What was the city like in '59?

A: Cleaner. There were a few gay bars. Of course, the Black Cat, and I think the Mississippi Mule was open at that time, and there was Finnoccio's. That's about the only way I can answer that question.

Q: Can you talk about how it's changed over those years from 1959 to the present. And you mentioned being the first openly gay merchant in the Castro. Can you talk a bit about how the Castro has changed over the years?

A: Well, the Castro has, I think, changed negatively. I'll go into my first merchant bit here in a moment because I had a feeling you'd bring this up. In 1964, the lover that committed suicide and myself opened a card and gift shop. Although the Missouri Mule was in existence around the corner on Market Street, we operated this shop as the first openly gay - I was openly gay, my lover was in the closet, this is part of the reason he committed suicide. I was openly gay and I got involved in the merchant's association, and in Mission Station police-community relations, where the commanding officer was one of my dearest friends. I had many friends in the police department at that time. And our purpose - they went and brought other gay merchants in - and our purpose in those days was to prove that we're just as good as anybody else. We don't want favorable treatment. We just want equal treatment and to be respected for what we are. And we were reaching the point of a good assimilation. And then along came a man with whom I had love-hate relationship by the name of Harvey Milk. And he decided we queers were better than anybody else. And you see the outcome of it now. You see the Castro as it is now.

In a word, the Castro has become ghettoized. And I find that, you know, some of these gay movements like you mentioned to me before you can see in some of the letters to the editors in the gay paper, "The Castro is Ours." And I think that kind of separatism creates ill will and homophobia rather than creates acceptance and respect.

Q: One of the things that you're most famous for are your letters to the editor. How did you get started writing letters to the editor and, perhaps, in addition to how you got started with that, you could explain your political development - how you came to your politics as well.

A: Well, the letters to the editor, I'll start with that first. My first letter to the editor was to the San Francisco Examiner when Harry Truman fired Douglas MacArthur. That was back in 1951. My second letter to the editor was when I got out of the service in 1956, when I was supporting - this was to the Chronicle - when I was supporting the write-in movement for Senator Joseph McCarthy for president. Because although I voted for the Ike-Nixon ticket in both '52 and '56, I felt that Mr. Eisenhower was a little bit too liberal for me. And I just kind of picked up the habit and starting in the '60s, I really started writing regularly, and I guess that the editors considered some of what I have to say presenting different viewpoints. I now have published over 6,000, which I think is - I've got volumes filled around here with letters to the editor. I enjoy it. I respect the editors and I think they respect me, and I obviously don't have all of them printed. But it puts outside my views - it puts my views out to other people - and I write to hope that people will rethink their positions, whether they agree with me or not. You notice some people don't agree with me, they challenge me. And I enjoy writing and I enjoy putting my ideas out. Now that flows logically into my politics, which are - I had a priest at the University of Santa Clara say that I had the greatest political mind of the 12th Century. Well, I am slightly right of center, but that goes back to my deep, deep abiding love and respect for the United States and for the Constitution and the fact that I do believe that the conservative movement, particularly in the Republican Party, offers the singular best hope for the United States. I started developing politically. I came from a political

family. You have two objects surrounding you here who came from a former governor and senator of the state of California, Hiram Johnson. His grandson had a lodge in Twainheart. He was one of the 200 people up there. These were originally in that lodge. And I've always been interested in politics. My first active campaign was in 1940 before we left Oakland. Always out carrying little things around campaigning for always the Republican candidate. A couple of times I've been tempted to move to the Libertarian Party, but I find that the Republican Party stands for the ideals that I think are best for the United States. I do not like, and I don't respect the so-called gay leaders, politically correct though they be, who say all gays must vote this way. I place my patriotism and allegiance to the United States above my own homosexuality. I have said this in letters and I have said so on talk radio. The present incumbent of the White House I detest because he's a cowardly draft dodger and I went in when I was out of the closet. I don't know why he shouldn't serve his country like everybody else does. And the politics of the present Democratic Party, or Democrat Party, rather, to me is nothing but a poor mirror of the Soviet Union. Did I step on some toes there?

Q: No, it's OK. What do you think of the present state of the Republican Party and how do you feel about the influence that the Christian right has on the Party at this moment?

A: I feel the Republican Party is and ought to be a big tent. I don't feel that the influence of the Christian right is any more disproportionate to our party than I think the influence of the secular left. I admit, I always have felt that the secular left dominated the Democratic Party as I've just said from Franklin Roosevelt right on down the line -- but you have good people in the Democrat Party, too. And I think that these tend to counterbalance one another. I am not -- as a gay man, I don't fear the influence of the Christian right in the Republican Party because the Republican Party's history is such that it does not tolerate intolerance. And with the exception of -- well, there's a few Democrats that I voted for -- Jack Urtola is a good friend of mine -- but I think those are your mainstream Democrats, not the type of people who we have in the White House or Franklin Roosevelt. Harry Truman was a very patriotic man. He didn't let the secular left influence him too much. I counterbalance them, if I've made any sense at all.

Q: You were in the military and you never had any problems in it, but many gays and lesbians have had a lot of problems in the military, and I wondered if you had any comment on the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy and what's been happening in the military to gay people over the years?

A: Well, let me back up. I can't find it. I don't have a computer. We're only poor Republicans, we can't afford computers. If I could find the article that I wrote in the Sentinel, I could best identify my response, but I'm not going to waste your time looking for it. When I went in the military and also those gays who were with me in the military -- I can't speak for all of them, of course, I don't presume to -- there was no such thing as a gay movement. We were drafted, we did our duty, we accepted our discharge, we conducted ourselves well on the base. Any extracurricular activities, if I may, were done off the base and out of uniform. We were not gay, we just were draftees who happened

to have that of our lives. Today, it is changed. You have these gays that are demanding these things and are demanding them while in uniform. They're staging these protests. This codification of "Don't ask, don't tell" was stupid. Before, you know, you did things -- you behaved yourself as a soldier and you lived by the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Now in "Don't ask, don't tell," this hypocrite of a president that we have succeeded in codifying behavior that had never been codified before. So now your radical gays who are in use the gay agenda to agitate for things that they shouldn't be agitating for things while in the military. I guess I maybe sound a little bit confused here, but I don't - I thought that Mr. Clinton, if he had signed that executive order when he was first inaugurated dropping the bar, would have been one thing. But consistent with his character he chickened out, and now he made the circumstances worse, and a lot of those people who like Margaret, I can't think of her last ..

Q : Calamar

A: Thank you. During the time that he said he was going to sign this order and the time that "Don't ask, don't tell" was enacted, a lot of people felt that it was safe to come out and agitate for certain things. So he got them trapped in this mode. I don't like "Don't ask, don't tell." I think when you go in the military you should be what you are, but don't become an activist or an advocate. Your duty is first to your military, not to your sexual orientation. Did I step on any toes there?

Q: No.

A: I'm not afraid to say, but I don't want to insult my guest at the same time.

Q: What about a group like Log Cabin Republicans? How do you see them fitting into things?

A: Interestingly enough, I was the founding co-chair of the forerunner of the Log Cabin Republicans. It was Concerned Republicans for Individual Rights. A young gentleman who is now deceased by the name of Tom Eisenberg and I were the founding co-chairs of that organization. One of the goals of the CRIR was - basically what my goal was as the first merchant in the Castro, the first gay merchant, you know assimilation, respect us for what we are, here's what we are, we're out of the closet, but we're working for the good of the United States through the Republican Party and trying to show you that we are no different than anybody else. I dropped out of Concerned Republicans for Individual Rights because Tommy and I got married and I removed myself from political and public life altogether. Since the other organization became assimilated into Log Cabin, I have not had much to do with it except what I read in the papers. One of the big people in the gay Republican movement here, who I think I will respect by not mentioning his name, is a real headstrong gay activist and I find that if he is reflective of Log Cabin, it's very destructive. I like the idea of gay Republicans working within the Republican Party, but I don't like the idea of gay Republicans any more than the religious right taking over from the big tent attitude of the Republican Party, and I think much of what Log Cabin does - for instance, on the Matt Fong thing

that has just come up. So what, I don't care if Matt Fong gave this guy some money. He's a lot better than the gal we have in there now. But the San Francisco branch, of course, being radicalized, being here in San Francisco, went right for it and withdrew their endorsement. So I don't really have that much use for the local leadership of Log Cabin, but for the national ideals of Log Cabin I do.

Q: Is there anything that we haven't discussed that you feel you want to add while I try to think of any other questions that I might have?

A: Well, first of all, I want to mention one thing to you, Roland. I don't want you to sit and feel you have to manufacture questions for me. If you think that we have reached a logical end where nothing more can be said, I understand that. I think there's one thing that I would like to emphasize because Tommy and I being -- you know, I post our letters to the editors in the windows and our political side -- we're truly an endangered species right here in the heart of the Castro. I think there's something that I would like to emphasize that was only touched upon. And I get a little agitated. Maybe I should take one of my pain pills. The fact that you're gay should not be the overriding factor in anybody's life. At least, it hasn't been in my lover's or mine. I've been out longer than he has. He came out just four months before we got married. These people who see things through a gay blinder that if you're gay, you've got to vote this way, you've got to support this, you can't support that -- I find is terribly self-destructive to the individual and to the whole concept of the acceptance of the homosexual in America. I don't have the book. I'm sorry, it's out of print, too. Do you remember a book by a pseudonym, Donald Webster Corey, *The Homosexual in America*.

Q: I read that when it first came out and I actually met him.

A: Did you? I never really understood why he used a pseudonym, by the way.

Q: He was married and had kids. He was not really out.

A: Then it sort of defeated the whole purpose of his book.

Q: It was little bizarre.

A: It was bizarre. In one chapter in that book -- and that book came out I think in the '50s or early '60s ...

Q: Early '60s.

A: Early '60s, yes. Mr. Corey, in far better language than I could ever use, said basically this: All we want is acceptance. You don't have to like us. Just accept us and remember that we're in your family, we're all over. Basically that has been what I have felt and, when you have these, I call them radical gays, I don't know what they really call themselves, saying that if you're gay you have to vote this way, or you have to do that. I think that's one of the worst things in the world that could happen to the homosexual

movement, if there is such a movement. And Tommy and I have wiped human feces and dog poop off of our windows because we're not afraid to speak our politically conservative mind. And gay people – and I think this is the sum and substance of what I'm telling you – was also averred to in the book that I've just mentioned, "The Homosexual in America." Gay people who have for so long suffered intolerance at the hands of the ignorant masses, consumed as they are by their Christian dogma, did I get all that in. Gay people, of all people, should be tolerant and respectful of other people's views and other people's rights and other people's way of living, orientation or what have you. I find today's gays and, you know, the age difference between Tommy and myself, you met him – but gays in their twenties and thirties, and even in their forties, are some of the most intolerant people I've ever known, and I think this wrong. We, of all people, should want to have as our mantle or mantra, whichever you prefer, tolerance. But boy, oh, boy, your young gays don't have it today, and we're living proof right here in the Castro.

Q: I have two more questions and I think that will end it. The first one goes back to something you mentioned earlier, that is, that you're an atheist and that you left the Catholic Church in 1959, did you say? Could you talk about that a little bit?

A: Well, sure. I left the Church. I was starting to leave the Church when I was in Europe. The reason I left the Catholic Church had nothing to do with being gay. As a matter of fact, I was in a Jesuit monastery in Europe. I took a leave from the military. And I really wanted to become a Jesuit. So strongly was I influenced by the Jesuits at the University of Santa Clara. I was a very devout Catholic. I like to think of myself, we all have our frailties, I went to confession. When I went to Europe, when I was in the military, I did a great deal of traveling through Europe. I was very lucky. I saw almost all of Western Europe. And I saw the tremendous hypocrisy in the difference between the way the clergy live, the way they preached to the laity to live, but that's the way the laity lived. And I started becoming disillusioned with the so-called social practices of the Church in Europe. And from that point, my faith started eroding. I began to see Catholicism as really an evil, as a mind-controlling evil in the same way as colonialism. I came back from the service, entered law school in Santa Clara, and my faith really began to get pretty badly shaken, because I saw the activism of the priests here in the United States greatly paralleling that in Europe. I hadn't really been aware of it before because I hadn't seen Europe. So in 1959, after moving to San Francisco, I made a conscious and deliberate decision to renounce the Church. I threw my rosary and missal on the steps, I did it dramatically. That church in North Beach, not Francis of Assisi, but St. Peter's and Paul, and I no longer believe in any religion at all. I find them to be all evil except Judaism. I have great admiration for the Hebrew faith. That's my devolution, as it were, from a practicing Catholic. And Tommy is a former Catholic, too, but he left the Church for other reasons that I really am not sure of.

Q: What do you think about the Church's current position on homosexuality and the current Pope's attitudes towards it.

A: I don't think the Church's position on homosexuality has ever changed. I know a lot of gay priests, by the way. Jesuits and secular. I don't know how they can live with their own hypocrisy, but that's their problem, it's not mine. The Church's position on homosexuality is absolutely unrealistic. Homosexuality was never specifically condemned by Christ and in your orthodox Greek church, homosexuality is openly practiced as it is in the Anglican Church. Witness what you have going on at Grace Cathedral here. But the Church, meaning the Catholic Church, their position on homosexuality is blind, it's stupid, it's ignorant – it's based on ignorance. I don't even know that it's worthy of discussion because they're not going to change and we're not going to change, but they should come to the reality, again, of tolerance. Though some local parishes like this one here may practice tolerance, deep down underneath they haven't changed at all. When I was the first openly gay merchant here back in the mid-'60s, the battles we had with the church ... I'll digress here for just a moment because this is symptomatic of that about which we are speaking. Do you remember the J Car murders?

Q: Oh, yes, yes, now I know what you're talking about. That was before my time in San Francisco but they're very famous.

A: The kids from this parish church here, Holy Redeemer, carried little cards, "Kill a Queer for Christ." I saw these cards. Some of my cop friends showed them to me. So there's your answer on the Church. I think it is an evil institution, and it is a deplorable institution, but I respect its Constitutional right to exist in the United States.

Q: Also you have mentioned a couple of times being married. And one of the big issues today seems to be marriage for same sex partners, and there's a Constitutional amendment that's going to be voted on in Hawaii and Alaska this coming November 3rd. How do you feel about marriage for same sex partners?

A: Well, quite frankly, I use the word 'marriage' as for Tommy and myself rather loosely. We are not married, obviously. I really. I think the institution of marriage is a farce. I think people could go into a committed relationship and need neither the approbation of the church or state to make that a valid relationship, so I say that Tommy and I are married in sort of whimsical sense that we consider ourselves married. And into a hell of a battle with my mother over this a couple of years before she passed away. But -- can I interject something here?

Q: Sure.

A: I told you about my parents' attitude toward me, that I was never sure. Mom had to accept Tom. She didn't want to, because my going with Tom gave lie to her statement which I referred to you that, you know, now that my late lover is gone I'm going to go straight. But Mom developed such a love for Tom because he helped me sober up that, on her deathbed, my brother attended my mother on her deathbed. She died in her own home the way she wanted, and she said --I couldn't go up there because of my allergies and my illness -- that's beside the point. She said, 'I want my two Toms to scatter my

ashes where Tommy -- me being Tommy -- wants his ashes scattered up in the Sonora Pass. I bring that little aside up to show you that -- mother was a Mormon, and boy, they're as anti-queer as the Catholic Church is -- after awhile, you can prove yourself even to the most obdurate minds. I just brought that little aside up to show you. So Tom and I, we scattered our mother's ashes up there.

Q: It seems to me there's more going on with the marriage thing because there are two aspects to it. One is the legal part of it, the kinds of property things and so on that are part of being married, that gays don't have access to and we have to go through convoluted ways to deal with property arrangements and so on because we're not recognized legally. And then the other thing is the commitment thing which you talked about, and somehow there seems to be this tradition that you have to be blessed either by the state or by the church before your commitment to each other can have any validity. So I'm asking you to sort of ..

A: Let me go to your first part first about the complications of property and personal effects. I had a letter printed in the Chronicle oh, two, three, four years ago, I don't know, which addresses this. If a gay couple, again, let's just use Tommy and myself. Or you and your lover, you said that you and your lover had been together for 25 years. I don't mean to intrude upon your lives, so I'm going to strictly remain with Tommy and myself here, but I'm sure there's some parallels. You can draw up, and it's not complicated -- you can draw up all legal documents necessary to preserve everything that you have in the event that one predeceases the other, as I am going to do, because I have almost died a couple of times. And all of our documents are drawn up and are tested, so I don't have any problem with the distribution of our bank accounts or my trusts or any of this nature or property -- we don't have any real property, we have a little personal property, and a new car, things of this nature. You can hold these things in joint tenancy, you can draw up your durable powers of attorney for health care, or your general powers. And this addresses all of those things, so you don't need the approbation of the state, because these things are tested in a court of law and they're totally legal and valid, both.

The second point, as far as the commitment is concerned, you know, they say you have to have a -- clergy or state or whatever it is they say. That's a bunch of garbage. You have not only in gay life, but in straight life too -- probably more than they want to admit it you have straight couples that cohabit for many, many years without the sanctification of the state and the clergy, but their lives are just marvelous and they spawn and give us all sorts of little boys that turn into queers, as they will. So I don't believe that a person's commitment to one another, or a couple's commitment to one another, needs a state or a church to make it any more enduring. Tom and I have had our marriage tested primarily due to health and financial problems -- not now, financial problems, but early on -- and my health, which is deteriorating rapidly. And I couldn't find a more devoted lover, and I know, for instance, you and your lover, 25 years, without going into the intricacies of your relationship with your lover -- as between these two households, there is 45 years that is almost half a century. I'll bet you there's an awful lot of people who have marriage licenses in city hall that haven't lasted one third that long.

Q: Well, we know that's true because of the divorce rate.

A: That's exactly right. So I don't believe, and I -- my mother and father had a very strange relationship. I, like all firstborn, came along awful goddamn

Q: This is Tape 2 of an interview with Thomas M. Edwards conducted by Roland Schembari for the Oral History Project of Gay-Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California on October 29, 1998. You were finishing up your thoughts on marriage.

A: I think the institution of marriage is an anachronism and that it is not needed and that I therefore don't understand why gay people are pushing so hard for something which really doesn't have any meaning to begin with. And that's consistent with what I had said earlier.

Q: While we were changing tapes, you mentioned that in the early '60s, you were part of the Kinsey people's interviews with people here in the Bay Area, and I wondered if you'd like to talk about that, because it sounded interesting to me.

A: It was actually in the late '60s. It may have even lapped over into 1970 itself. But the Kinsey Institute was doing a follow-up on its various works dealing with human sexuality and they ran notices in the gay press and also little notices in the gay bars. They wanted volunteers, both for interviewers and interviewees. And it so happens that, as a secondary degree I have a degree in psychology -- and I signed up to be an interviewer. And a couple of gay girls were running it here out of Bloomington, Indiana, they were out here. They were in the tower -- one of the cathedral towers down there. And I interviewed -- each interview lasted about four hours. This is rather parallel to what you and I are doing. And I don't recall how many men I interviewed, ranging from identifying themselves as exclusively gay or not knowing. Some of them were in the closet, some were out of the closet. They had signed up through gay bars and the gay newspapers at the same time. The range of the interview strikingly paralleled the initial questions that you had prepared for me, and I met Reverend Phyllis Edwards, who was ordained by Bishop Pike here. She was one of the interviewees. And all of our information went back to the Kinsey Institute in Bloomington. And I found it very interesting. I think that the project lasted about a year. Now that's basically my recollection of it. As far as the substance of the interview, you can say that the first questions you asked me about my sexual encounters and my realization about myself and my family's attitude and my friends' attitude and employer-employee relationship were strikingly similar. I thought about that when you first started questioning me.

Q: One of the things we haven't really talked about, and I just thought of it, are some of the personalities in the gay San Francisco community over the years and also some of the organizations, and I'm thinking particularly of people like Paul Hardman and Ray Broshears and Del and Phyllis (that's Del Martin and Phyllis Lyons) and Harry Britt. Harvey, of course, you mentioned in passing, Harvey Milk, and Tom Ammiano. Some of the groups like Pride and SIR and the Council on Religion and the Homosexual. I'm probably forgetting things.

A: Well, of all of those people that you have mentioned, the only one that I have not met personally or recall an acquaintance is Tom Ammiano. I have never voted for him and I never will vote for him. SIR, I was a member of SIR, and a matter of fact Bill Beardemple, who was one of the founders of SIR, he founded the San Francisco Sentinel for which I was the "resident conservative writer" as you and I have alluded to before. Harry Britt. I thought he was unsuited man for an unsuited job, and he just really didn't know what he was doing. Dell Martin and Phyllis Lyon, I honestly respect them. I don't really like them, but I respect them for their pioneering efforts, and I have a great -- and I do respect them and I've written about them several times in my letters to the editor. You mentioned the Council on Homosexuality and Religion. That was one of the adjuncts, one of the sponsors of the Kinsey study. They worked with that. And one of its founders was Tom's and my personal attorney, John Wall, who is a dear friend of mine and who ran for supervisor back in the early '80s. What are some of the names that you've mentioned? Well, I'll tell you something funny. Harvey Milk, when my late lover committed suicide, he was one of the first people, he was there. I was running for supervisor at that time, and the head of my campaign was a police inspector. Harvey and I were running at the same time. I drew enough votes from him that he didn't get in that time. He was one of the first people to come to my door, and a couple of years later when his lover hanged himself, I was one of the first people to contact him. Harvey and I didn't really like each other, but we did respect one another. Now, who else did you mention?

Q: Paul Hardman.

A: Oh, I liked Paul. Paul also worked for the Sentinel and SIR, and he was a good friend of Bill Beardempl, and he had an adorable little very fru-fru house down there on the corner of Pacific. Paul and I didn't really get to know each other. He was a little out of my class. I don't say that disparagingly. We just didn't have that much in common. Was there somebody else that you mentioned?

Q: There may have been, but I can't recall. One of the groups that Paul Hardman founded was the Alexander Hamilton post of the American Legion.

A: I was asked to join that and I was going to be sponsored by another gay luminary, name Henry Lelcu. Henry passed on a couple of years ago, I believe it was. He lived on 21st Street. I never did join the Alexander Hamilton post of the American Legion. I guess I'm just not a groupie. I have great respect for what the post has done, and then, too, at the time that I was asked, Tommy and I were settling into our relationship, and I don't do any outside activities any more, except my letters. You remember Henry Lelcu?

Q: Yes, I know the name. But didn't he have a lot to do with the bar scene?

A: Yes, he had investments in practically all of the local bars around here.

Q: I thought so. I never knew him but I knew the name.

A: Were there any other names that you had ...

Q: You mentioned the Black Cat. I wondered if you knew Jose at all?

A: I knew him vaguely. He wouldn't know me. He's getting up in years now. I mean, I'm 67. Jose has got to be - I have the article here in the paper from Life magazine back in '64 which mentions the fact that when Jose ran for supervisor he was the first one. I shook hands with him at a couple of gay functions and that's been about it. That's all I know of him.

Q: Is there anybody that I'm forgetting that you might want to remember and talk about?

A: No. I could probably bore you with an awful lot of people who, you know, that have come in and out of my life and whom I've known here in San Francisco, but no, not particularly. I would leave it up to you to be the name suggester, the name dropper.

Q: I know one of the names that I've mentioned and just because he's always been such an intriguing character for me. He was one of the first people that I met when I came to San Francisco and I don't know whether that was a good thing or a bad thing. And that was the Reverend Ray Broshears.

A: Oh, yes. Oh, my God. There's a picture in up and over Tommy's and my bed of Michael Delaney, a very good friend of ours, a former roommate of ours who died of AIDS, and that's one of the deaths that really cracked me up badly. But Reverend Ray and I -- he used to write about me in his little rag, and he -- Ray Broshears is the man that gave me the nickname "the fascist faggot" because of my right-wing views. And yes, I'd socialize with Ray and would go to political meetings and we were always on opposite sides of the table, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively. He died in about the same year Tommy and I moved in here, about '81 or '82, and Ray was a very colorful man. He was a nonordained minister of a nonexistent church. He ran his little -- not shelter for the homeless, but he was one of the precursors of that. But, yes, I always -- sometimes in Kim's newspaper, which was yours, but I'll refer to it as Kim's now, I'll allude to myself as "the fascist faggot" because Ray was the one that gave me that name. I remember him very well.

Q: Well, I can't think of anybody else, and maybe this is a good stopping point, although it's kind of strange to end it with Ray Broshears.

A: I'll tell you, wherever Ray is, and I don't know where he considers what, I think he would consider it something of an ironic point that in an interview of this nature that his name would come up as it did, particularly in the house of "the fascist faggot."

Q: Well, it's interesting. He's buried in Golden Gate National Cemetery in the Presidio.

A: I didn't know that.

Q: Because he was a veteran and that's where he wanted to be buried and that's where he was buried.

A: I didn't know that. I have opted -- I have burial rights too in the National Cemetery, but I think people other than myself deserve them, so Tommy will scatter my ashes up in the Sonora Pass. There's a little site up there. I didn't know that about Ray. That, by the way, is a beautiful cemetery. It's one of the most beautiful spots in the city.

Q: That's it.