GLHS OHP #00-02 - McCarthy Era Project

TED ROLFS

VOICES of the Oral History Project of GLHSNC

973 Market Street, #400
San Francisco, CA 94103

Telephone (415) 777-5455, #1

Interview with Ted Rolfs
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By Len Evans

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TR: That period of the '50s, I wish I had refreshed my memory with what was going on. It will come to mind, I guess, as we talk.

LE: Well, in a way, I'm glad you didn't 'cause I, I sort of wanted it to be personal, you know, as they come, your feelings and how, things that happened to you. Maybe, maybe you should tell me a little bit about yourself up to the '50s so I have a sense for it.

TR: Oh, that might be a good way to start. I might tell you that I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the third oldest child of a family of nine children. My father, a physician with a general practice. We lived at the largest department store in Milwaukee, the Boston Store. Ah, they were on this trip to Europe after graduating from Yale, and when they were returning on the ship, the gangway was about to be taken up, and the mother stopped the quartermaster and said, but only one of my sons is here. Where's the other one?

And the one who was there said, look, momma, sit down, I have news for you. And the news was that the other one was not going to come, that he had a letter. The other brother had a letter to read and it said, Momma and Pop... they were a Jewish family, there was that way of addressing their parents, I believe. I'm not coming home. I've found my true lover. I'm a homosexual. And when that got to Milwaukee, it was a front page story.

LE: Really?

TR: Yes. And I could see my parents in a huddle. They knew the Stone Twins and when I would come along, they would hush up. And I, I figured that ah they knew then that I was a homosexual. I was browsing through my father's medical library, and found a marvelous discovery of books which made me feel - there were annotations in their books like Hadlock Ellis's case histories and - and Wilhelm Schtechel and Kraft Ebbing and a lot of things. And where there were homosexual topics, they were often marked. And I thought gee, you know, my dad's onto me. And now with my friends, my friend, hitting the front page of the Milwaukee paper, it's time to say good-bye. So I told my father I wanted to leave home. I'd five sisters. I thought I would interfere with their marriages. Some were being courted, and the thought was generally that homosexual was a flaw of genes or something, that they didn't look at us with the kindness of a left-handed person. Anyway, I, I took this book. My father said look, you're uneducated, you're going to ruin us some day to leave home, but if that's your wish, do as you want. You can always come back. So I went to New York. That was 1929. I went on too long with that. But ah, I then, I'll just say briefly that ah I was employed by an English firm of architects and interior designers. The principal was uh Sir Charles Allen, and their offices were in London. And when the Depression hit, they survived for several years. But as it deepened, they returned to London and I was out of work. And by maneuvering, I got on ships in the Merchant Marine. That would be 1934. And I, I sailed, and in 1930, I sailed up until about 1950, which is really the period you're interested in now. I was taken off ship's,
LE: That was the black men's union, wasn't it?
TR: Ah that . . . I began as a sailor working on
deck. There are three departments, you know? There
are Culinary Workers who prepare the meals and take
care of the housing of the people on ships. Then
there's the ah, the sailors, who go about painting and
chipping and steering, and fire watches and so on.
And then the other group is the Black Gang. I thought
it was that that you referred to. They work in the .

LE: I thought, I thought that, I meant, I meant, I

TR: Yes, that was my thought. And when I went to

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I think, two cents. And I would sell that paper on
the waterfront during times when I waited for ships.
And helped to organize a group that later overthrew
the union I was in. In fact, we brought that man to
court and sued and won the case. So that was the
beginning of a new union, one that I expected so much
of. But in later years, it turned out to be just
lousy. The man who headed it retired with a million
dollars and he was, he was so beautiful when he was
young. So idealistic and when he didn't know, he took
answers from people who were communists or socialists
who gave what, I thought, was good advice. And he
took that advice. But later he had the touch of
honey. He was making big money and buying a Cadillac
car and having the union pay for it as a car he needed
and of course, we found there were these rotten things. He's dead now, that was Joe Kern.

LE: Joe Kern?

TR: So ah, I came out to the West Coast and shipped
in the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union, which, at that
time, had a leadership very far to the Left. In fact,
the president of the union, Hugh Bryson, was brought
up on charges as being a communist. There were five
counts against him, that he lied when he said he was
not a communist. Hugh . . . there was a document, I

LE: Well, that's what I'm interested. Now, you say
you, you were, were you kicked out of the union by the
union or by the government or?

TR: I was kicked out . . . the government took me off
as a subversive. Ah, I, I, quoted Truman who spoke of
the action in Korea as being a police action, and that
we shouldn't have any army there, and that we should
work for peace and not extend war. And, and many of
such remarks were reported. And I went to Washington
for a hearing, but no trial. Ah, they, they produced
all sorts of strange things. They claim that I pulled
down the ship's flag from the stern and threw it over
the side. And, you know, I didn't nothing of the
kind. Ah, at the captain's dinner, there would be
little flags about this big that would be put in a
vase on every table with balloons to make it look
festive. And somebody had taken one of those flags,
and broke it from the little mast, and pinned it on
the crew bulletin board with an article from, an
editorial from the Hearst paper which was saying that
ah, fight communism in your union and the Left Wing
movement. And ah, you know, I had the highest
position in the union aboard ship and I said look, I'm
not censoring that bulletin board. Put on it what you
want. But don't put the flag up next to it. And I

LE: Yes, it was part of the Taft-Hartley Law,
wasn't it?

TR: Yes, that was it, exactly. And they, they said
he lied when he signed that document and that had
these other counts. Well, they found him guilty of,
9 of one or two charges. Anyway, he had to do two or
three years in prison. A great wonderful guy, came
from Illinois. Parents were farmers in Illinois. And
a great guy, worked as a cook. And I still have
contact with him. He's ah, in prison, he was
respected by men who were his enemy on the outside,
you know, men who were in the laundry there starched
his shirt collars and gave them extra ironing and did
things. He was, he taught a course in prison in
public speaking and parliamentary procedure and such
things. Today, he heads a big group selling and
buying motels and he's very successful. Has saddle
horses; lives in . . . I forget that horsey community.
name doesn't come to mind. But he made it honestly,
not through the graft in the union and on his own
intelligence. But there were . . . oh, I'm telling
you, well things were the feel of the '50s.

LE: No, you didn't get in touch with him. Were you
kicked out of the union or by the government or?

LE: That was under the Maritime Act, I believe, or
there was some special law denying communists from the
American Maritime Union.

TR: Or communist sympathizers. And they, there
were approximately two thousand people pulled off of
ships, and even on the Mississippi River and the Great
Lakes. They pulled them off, no trials. And when one
of the hearing Coast Guard men said where did you go
to school as a youth? I said I attended a parochial
school. He said could you bring evidence from the
priest that you were . . . I said look, stop there.
You have no more business to inquire about my religion
than you have about my politics. I will not bring a
priest and I have a freedom which you seem to be
suppressing. And that kind of talk got me nowhere. I
said here I am in Washington, DC, the showcase of
democracy. And, you know, that I came here with this
friend who sits with me now, a black man, and we
couldn't find a place to eat in your city. Aren't you
interested in that? I was in a lifeboat with him and
he took command of it, when a white man from Texas

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1 became hysterical with our life. But oh, in
2 recollection, it still fills me with emotion. But
3 they would want no part of that and I like cut the
4 strings too with my talk. There were about seven
5 Coast Guard officers. They're the ones who head the
6 Merchant Marine, you know? But they wanted, they
7 wouldn't, wouldn't give me any consideration.
8 LE: So what was it? It was just a verdict there
9 or was it a hearing that they had set.
10 TR: Well, it was just that I couldn't go to sea
11 anymore. That's the only thing I knew, really. I had
12 been on ships for fifteen years. It was a trade I
13 knew and had a liking - I had an Able Bodied Seaman
14 Certificate. I could sail on deck. I had every
15 rating in the Steward's Department from dishwasher to
16 chief steward. And ah, I liked the work and I was
17 well liked. There, even people in some of these
18 companies tried to get me cleared through the Masonic
19 Lodge or something they belonged to, but nothing
20 worked. Ah, let's see, what might I say of further
21 interest on that subject?
22 LE: This was, that was in 1950's?
23 TR: No, that was 1950, the McCarthy period. And
24 there were repercussions too of the McCarthy period
25 that I may have touched upon that time you heard me

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1 fear that ah, that I, it'd be better for me if I ran
2 for union office if I couldn't be labeled. In fact,
3 the fact that I was gay, I tried to stay in the closet
4 pretty well too . . . and was nominated for union
5 position in this new union that was formed, the NMU.
6 In fact, it'd be well to keep out of that because
7 anyone opposing you in an election would sooner or
8 later find out what you had done in bed with somebody
9 else. That would doom you. So, yes, there were
10 experiences, sexual experiences, and, you know, even
11 then communists were not altogether against
12 homosexuals.
13 LE: Tell me about that.
14 TR: Well, they spoke of ass consciousness, that one
15 shouldn't be ass conscious, but class conscious. That
16 was often repeated. But even ah . . .
17 LE: Specifically talking about gays?
18 TR: Well, by talking about gays, and I knew a
19 number of gays who were communists. You see, the line
20 in those days, or the Marxist line, was not against
21 homosexuals. It wasn't against homosexuals until
22 Stalin came into power. Ah, Stalin had, I think, for
23 something like seventeen years been in either a
24 monastery to study to be a priest in the Russian
25 Orthodox Church, and he carried with him a lot of that

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1 speaking earlier. The Senators and Congressmen had
2 men as their secretaries; there were no women. They
3 had men. And these men, for the greater part, were
4 gay men. And when this great big thing, McCarthy,
5 came down on homosexuals, well Cohen, I believe one of
6 his aides was a homosexual.
7 LE: (speaking too softly to be audible).
8 TR: Yeah. Then they began to fire their
9 secretaries and then women began to come in. And if
10 they were lesbian, you know, it wasn't known or
11 whatever they were. But I met some of these men. Ah,
12 they got on ships, they worked as pursers, they worked
13 in lower capacities in the Steward's Department and
14 some of them worked as stewards on airplanes. In
15 those they were . . . well, I guess today they have
16 men too, I guess, stewards on airplanes.
17 LE: In ah '49, before this was happening, I'm sure,
18 you were probably most concerned with the political
19 ramifications that were coming down. But where, did
20 you have any inkling that there was an anti-gay part
21 of what was happening or?
22 TR: Ah, yes, I was really not a member of the
23 Communist Party but certainly what might be called a
24 fellow traveler. I attended meetings, I was trusted
25 to attend meetings of communists and I had a great

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1 baggage. And it was he who brought back, you know,
2 this feeling that there are Mata Haris, that they
3 could be blackmailed. If you get them in the Party,
4 somebody will blackmail them and then you can't trust
5 them, you know? Ah, they're, they're dangerous. And
6 to this day, although I read in the B.A.R. a week ago,
7 maybe you did too, that in some of the
8 communist/socialist countries, there's a meeting and
9 an opening now coming.
10 LE: I think there's something . . . I didn't read
11 that. I heard something like that.
12 TR: Yes. In one of the late papers, it, it spoke of
13 little groups forming and, ah, it was known where they
14 were meeting and joining, and the police were not down
15 on them. I guess in Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, some
16 of those countries, East Germany. East Germany, I
17 remember.
18 LE: And Poland however.
19 TR: Yes, probably Poland too, they named those
20 countries. And then, and then the representatives
21 from these groups came to some meeting in Holland or
22 somewhere.
23 LE: Hm, I'll have to go look at that information.
24 Yeah, what, we can make a break.
25 TR: Pardon?
1 LE: I said we can make a break, you know, I'm
2 waiting for each socialist country not to be anti-gay.
3 TR: Yes. I thought it most regrettable that ah,
4 that Cuba and all these countries who I was so eager
5 to see changes come through, and then don't Their
6 attitudes were not good toward homosexuals.
7 LE: Well, one thing I hear is the El Salvadoran
8 representatives here from the rebel forces, they've
9 been talking to the gay community and have spoken out
10 for gay rights. And made connection between the gay
11 struggle here and the fight in El Salvador. So it
12 looks like there's an opening there.
13 TR: I hope so. And yet I think of the most
14 machismo society being that Hispanic, Latin group.
15 LE: It'll be a struggle, that's for sure.
16 TR: Oh, it will be a struggle, but there's
17 certainly a lot of beautiful gay Latinos and ah they
18 understand the question and the need. I, I personally
19 put the blame on the Catholic Church too. I was
20 raised as a Catholic, you know, and I think that the
21 Church considers homosexuality, you know, a sinful and
22 mortal sin. So that these young Catholic kids have
23 learned from nuns or priests probably that ah it's one
24 for God to punch a guy in the face who's queer.
25 LE: (speaking too softly to be audible)

1 to look out for.
2 LE: Did you know any gay people in the Communist
3 Party or, or sympathizers at least ah say in the late
4 '40s, early '50s?
5 TR: A man of great influence in my life was ah,
6 Paul Robeson. I think I mentioned him.
7 LE: Your (inaudible) said that you mentioned it or
8 him.
9 TR: Yes. I was working in the Steward's Department
10 on a ship when he was returning from Europe. The war
11 hadn't started but the clouds were darkening and it
12 seemed that it was on its way. He had ah taken his
13 son out of school in the Soviet Union and now he was
14 coming home with his companion, Mr. Brown, and his
15 wife, Islenda, and Paulie, Junior, who was a boy of
16 probably eleven or twelve. I remember his mother
17 saying Teddy, he can speak Russian and he knows some
18 Yiddish and he'll learn his native English well too
19 some day. He'll go to school at home.
20 But ah Paul had been singing at the open coal pits
21 in Wales before those wonderful Welsh singers, you
22 know, welcomed him and ah, though he sang without a
23 collection or passing the hat, they collected funds
24 for - which he sent to emerging African countries.
25 There was great hope that . . . was Doctor DuBois was

1 writing a new constitution for them based on the
2 Soviet Union's constitution and ours and somewhat
3 altered. But that was the inspiration. But Paul
4 Robeson was unknown and I went, and given a dreadful
5 seating in the dining room of the ship. This was a
6 big passenger ship, crew of about six hundred. I was
7 the chairman of the Ship's Committee which was the
8 highest union position. The Engine Department had two
9 elected officials, the Black had two, and the Stewards
10 two, and we met as the Ship's Committee, and I was
11 elected the highest in that job. So I was, I was a
12 spokesman for six hundred more or less, and I went to
13 the Steward and I said, surely the captain's list must
14 have Mr. Robeson listed. He's a very important man,
15 and look where you put him - what they called
16 Chinatown near the heat of the galley, where there was
17 noise and heat every time waiters went in and out the
18 swinging door. So, oh, he said, he said no, he's not
19 on the list. Couldn't put him at the captain's table.
20 I said I wouldn't ask for that. Put him at the
21 Surgeon's table, the Chief Officer's, the Chief
22 Purser's - they're all great tables of eight with
23 important diplomats or people who were getting the
24 grand treatment. At least invite him. He probably
25 wouldn't accept. He's with his wife and son and his
1. I remember some of the Jewish people running on, I remember a woman singing Wien, Wien Nur Du Alein, you know? So lovely from there. And Paul Robeson was asked, you could sing from the balcony to the dinner guests and we'll announce, Mr. Robeson, who you are, you know? After all, he was no ordinary man. He wore many hats, he graduated from Rutgers with a law degree, was the first black man ever chosen for an all-star football team. You know, at the end of the season, they would pick the best player from all the wherever they were playing. They never had a game together but their pictures appeared, and for the first time, they picked a black man for the All American Team at the end of the season. So a law degree, a Shakespearean actor, a great singer, and ah, he had all these great qualities of very important men. But he was stubborn, he wouldn't sing. And then I said, would you sing for the crew? And he did. So he was wounded. He wasn't killed.

2. I suspected there was a Marxist line to it. And he put something that they made next morning and coffee. And I lived there for months. And I would ah, of course, I was given the key to the hideaway there - 126th Street and Lennox, as I remember. And when I went to that place in the morning, about two or three o'clock, the key wouldn't work. And I was so tired and so disgusted, I'd spoken at some union that night, and I'd no place to sleep, and as I walked away, a man came up to me and he said ah, I think, about a five-story building with no white people in it. And I had in my pocket a note from Paul Robeson's apartment. And I said yes, that was that Peekskill affair. And then LE: That was at Peekskill, right? TR: Yes, that was that Peekskill affair. And then

3. Well, when I got up in the morning, some women in an adjoining apartment came to attack me and I had to talk fast. As I recall, they had a toilet plunger or an iron skillet or some weapon. They threatened me with, who are you and how did you get in and I, I said I'm a friend of Mr. Robeson's. I, I have a note somewhere. And when I got that, of course, they were very kind. But they brought me mulberry muffins or something that they made next morning and coffee. And I lived there for months. And I would ah, of course, I heard Paul say that he wasn't a communist, but he couldn't have been closer to it. And he poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into a Left Wing black paper that was available all over the South, certainly there was a Marxist line to it. And he put a lot of money into pushing that and his son, Paulie, married a Jewish girl, and his father wanted him to feel the harshness of being black and suggested that he live in Harlem, and he did. And ah, I kept contact with him for a time. I believe he's an electronics engineer, a very successful man.
Recently as a month or maybe two months ago, given me the benefit of a dental program where I pay a very small amount and the Longshoremen's Union pays for it. So I felt very good about all that. And then when people would come from the Soviet Union on the grand tour, doctors, educators, I was there to show how democracy functioned. Oh, they had a big propaganda setup. Maybe the word propaganda is too harsh. But they were very mindful and proud of their group. Ah, during Easter holidays, they would bring students out of the South, white students. They weren't too integrated in their schools down there. They'd come up on a bus to San Francisco out of Texas or somewhere in the South, of high school age. I would order drinks for everybody and lunch for everybody. They would come to the union hall, and different ones would speak and often I would be called upon as a gardener, and I'm there in my old clothes, and the officers wouldn't dress much better, and how was it to work here and questions, and all the time they would serve Coca-Colas and sandwiches and we had fried chicken and then we'd put them on a bus and took them down to a ship and show them how men worked on the docks and how integrated, you know?

LE: That's great, that's great. So you were in the, worked with Longshoremen from what time?

TR: Fifteen years.

LE: That was from what? Let's see, I'm trying to get the dates.

TR: Well, I, I retired, I retired ten years. I left in 1973, so it would be '73, '63, back in the '50s. I'd worked at this nursery out here for a few years, so whatever it is going back fifteen years from '73. My affairs were in ports, in Hamburg. It was a great outlet for homosexual activity. I'm speaking of the kind before the war. My preference has always, not to men whom I thought were homosexual, but rather I wanted the opposite sex, real men. What I thought, I'm sure then you'll see. But the Germans, prior to the war, in their uniforms seemed so masculine and it was quite an easy thing to go bed with them. Ah, I'm sure you're familiar with some things that happened now. Hitler killed so many of them. Anyway I did, on one occasion, become rather indiscreet. When the ship I was on, leaving New York going through the Panama Canal, our terminal port was Valparaiso, Chile, Valparaiso, Chile, where we down to, I think, to - yes, I guess that was the terminal port. Anyway as the ship traversed the Panama Canal, we hired an auxiliary crew of men. They were Panamanians who were...
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1 paid far below the union scale. There was an, there would be about five or six deck hands who would paint, and men to go in the Black Gang who did dirty work.

2 And then, of course, when the ship came back from the subcontinent up the East Coast - see it was down the East Coast of our country to the Canal, and down the West Coast of South America. When we returned to the Panama Canal, this auxiliary crew of about twelve men would be ah discharged. I always thought they should be organized and on the basis of that, I met with them and began to talk organization.

3 Ah, one of them took my fancy and it went beyond organization. I really hoped that I could arrange to meet him in Panama ashore where we could have sex. I revealed to him that I was gay and he didn't seem to object to it. So one night after I was through working, I was working as a cocktail steward and ship's florist, double job on that ship. After work, I met him. He was through with his duties and we went, it was a hot night in the tropics and we went down below to where the refrigerators are for certain units, and there we sat enjoying a drink. I think it was a Scotch and soda or something like that. Once doesn't drink aboard ship, you know? So we sat there partially undressed when an engineer came in to check something in that area. Now we weren't engaged in sex; that would have followed had he come a bit later. But our clothes were off, at least my shirt and the other man's shirt, and we were reaching that point.

4 So, this was reported to the chief engineer who reported it to the captain.

5 And on that voyage, we had a Coast Guard captain who was to, to rehearse with the crew abandoning ship, lifeboat drill, such simple things like putting on a life jacket, always make a bow tie. I mean, yeah, a bow tie. Seems to silly for a seaman. We never made a bow tie. But in the water you could open that easier than a square knot or something else. He rehearsed such things and we had many fire and boat drills... I wasn't aware the man was on the ship. But when this news came to the captain and instantly the captain was gay, a lovely man, having an affair with the quartermaster. And ah.

6 LE: How did you know that he was gay?

7 TR: Well, the quartermaster told me. Just that he and the captain had been lovers for a long time, had been sailing together for a long time. This was one of the Grace Line ships. And so the Coast Guard captain then told the captain of the vessel that he was glad of the opportunity of showing the captain how a trial should be handled aboard ship, and that I should be brought on trial. For what I had done or was about to do. So I was knocked off of my work, told I couldn't work anymore, and brought up to the captain's quarters, and there appeared the Chief Engineer, the Second Assistant Engineer, the Chief Officer, the Captain and the Coast Guard captain, and here this trial is presented. If the captain can marry people on a ship or baptize, he can also be the judge and have a trial. And it was an awkward thing.

8 I felt so sensitive. I loved that captain and the man he was having an affair with, and I didn't want to betray them and I didn't. And then they reached for me but there was a limit to what they could do. The result was that ah I was logged several days' pay, deprived of work and ah embarrassed because of my leadership in the union. It was made known to the whole crew of six hundred that I was gay. And in those years, that wasn't a very acceptable thing. We were pretty much in the closet.

9 So I got off of the ship. I couldn't have sailed again on it anyway, and tried to get lost by coming out to the West Coast and remained here.

10 LE: And so that's what the trial was. You say you went to Washington for a trial or?

11 TR: Oh that, no, that came later. When I got out here, I sailed without any problem. I changed unions.

12 LE: Oh I see, this was when you were changing unions?

13 TR: Yes. In fact, I might just say this as explanation. They were short of men on the West Coast and they would call jobs in New York. So if you wanted to go one way, you could get a job in that union, National Maritime Cooks and Stewards Union.

14 So I took a job coming back to the West Coast and became active in this more Left Wing union and ah had no trouble to sailing.

15 LE: Were you afraid, were you afraid this would follow you, this ah?

16 TR: Yes, I was afraid that it would. And maybe, years later, in 1950 when I was screened off of ships, it may have been a part of that brochure or whatever they had on me, although they never mentioned it. But I went to court with five other men to try to be reinstated, and I was reinstated after six years, and it cost the union over sixty thousand dollars, which was a lot of money in those days for a union to pay. And ah, but six years later, I was told I could ship again. But my attorney said that he wanted to know if I was gay. He asked me point blank, are you probably 1983.
1. active in the union, and thought that it would
2. undermine my leadership. But I did have affairs
3. ashore with crew members at times.
4. LE: Ah, I see, I was, in other words, it was always
5. off the ship.
6. TR: Right, off the ship, yeah. Except for the one
7. occasion that was leading up to it, and I spoke of
8. that before.
9. LE: But there were people on the ship that knew you
10. were gay? And there were other gay people?
11. TR: Yes, I think so, yeah, other gay men, right.
12. In fact it was said by the Port Steward of the Matson
13. Navigation Company that he didn’t think they could
14. function as cruise ships without homosexuals in the
15. culinary work in the Stewards Department, that they
16. were accustomed to being away from their wives and
17. children, that they were more clever at catering to
18. the public and in general would lend themselves to
19. that isolation of weeks and weeks at sea without
20. contact with women. That was a nice thing to have
21. said.
22. LE: That was during the '50s?
23. TR: Yes, yeah. Yeah, there were attempts made to
24. get me back on the ship, to get me cleared, through
25. the Masonic Lodges I think. Nothing could pull your,

1. they couldn’t buck the government.
2. LE: This man, you said he was with the Matson
3. Lines, he was ah.
4. TR: The manager, yeah, he was the Port Steward.
5. That means that every ship that went out, he would be
6. in charge of the Stewards Department and I think the
7. crew, and the stores they put on the ship, and all
8. their services to passengers and others.
9. LE: And he said that publicly?
10. TR: Yes, it appeared in the newspapers. Yes, it
11. was a very fine statement I think.
12. LE: That was here on the West Coast apparently?
13. TR: That was on the West Coast, yeah.
14. LE: Here in San Francisco?
15. TR: That was the Matson Steamship Company.
16. LE: Uh huh, I’ll see if I can find that.
17. TR: It would be nice if you could find something
18. like that.
19. LE: Then, it’d be in 1950 then, during that period.
20. TR: Yes, it’d be in that period, yeah.
21. LE: Ah, I take it you didn’t divulge being gay to
22. any of your communist friends or . . .
23. TR: Yes, some communist friends knew that I was
24. gay.
25. LE: Tell me about that.
TR: Well, I believe that the communist gays that I met were drawn to the Party, to Marxism, simply because it was a rebellious group working for recognition and acceptance. And that, fundamentally, was the same thing that a homosexual, as we used to term in those days, as a gay person was working for. Acceptance. That somebody would accept one for what one really was without having to obscure it with dating a woman or doing all that, which we used to do to throw up smoke. And these ab gay communists were great guys, I thought. They were better read. There was so much literature poured out. It'd keep you broke to keep up with it. All the pamphlets and all the things that one would buy. Besides there were continual donations for people on strike in different areas. During ah, during the strike period when I was in the National Maritime Union on the East Coast, I, I was sent out to some of the schools like Vassar and Smith and Wellesley to speak. And there were communists there. These young women, and men too at those ivy league schools, from well-to-do families, it seemed that all thinking people at that period - and now this is maybe just prior to the '50s. Gee, they were rebellious people. And I recall the fun of - I would wear my best scrubbed Dungarees and look salty, my name would yell Hey, Riffraff. It was a hell of a moniker because I hoped I was the antithesis like the bald-headed man called Curly or whatever. Because I had to change more frequently and ah be better scrubbed if I was to carry that name - Riffraff. And it stayed with me, as I say now, for all this time.

LE: Okay, when you visited either members or the people here or political acquaintances, friends in the Party or close to the Party, and they knew you were gay, was that ever spoken or was it kept at a distance or were there people that you were close enough that was shared with?

TR: Well, ah, it was never publicly at meetings as spoken.

LE: No, I don't mean at meetings, I mean, socially.

TR: Yeah, socially and individually, there were a number who knew me. And my attraction, while I certainly liked to meet my own kind who were gay, my physical attraction was toward more of a roughneck, less educated and more macho type. As I said, I - I know I've been to sea many times. I've gone to bed with so many longshoremen who are married and had children, but you could fuck them in the ass or you could do all those interesting things and ah if anybody would say look, is that guy fruit, meaning me.

You think that guy could be gay? And they'd beat the shit out of him. I, I, to this day, I just don't try to label people anymore. You can't, really. There were so many, many longshoremen who were gay, tough, rough, could do the most onerous kind of lifting of bales and heaving and hoing and whatever. But ah, let's see, to come to, to go back to your question. Yeah, those were gay and communist, I felt a bond with them. And those who were not gay, but were communist, I did have sex with on occasion.

LE: Well, these were men that you said were presumably straight but.

TR: Yeah.

LE: I see.

TR: I remember a song we sang about the National Maritime Union ah, With Hunter and Gaines we're through. Those were the corrupt leaders. The ballad, as I remember, With Hunter and Gaines we're through.

We'll build up the NMU. With leaders our own, we'll march en masse. Fighting for the working class. That was our tribute - pretty Left Wing though.

LE: Yeah, it is.

TR: But I taught it to many of my shipmates, and
And my experience was in one of those shipwrecks, we abandoned ship and got to Middleton Island in the Gulf of Alaska, where it seemed so precious that we could be around green things and something growing. It meant so much to me. Now when I went to sea after that, I always took a plant with me. It was ah, I don’t know how you can explain a hang-up like that. But I’d take a sweet potato sprouting and hang it, it just stood so that with the pitch and rolling of the ship, it would still be there, but all the time sending out its lovely foliage. And I felt I was safer with something from land - kind of a talisman or something I guess. But ah, how’d we come to that? I have a tendency to digress.

LE: No, it’s - you tell me things about yourself.

TR: But ah, we got to this island during the war, and that’s what made me so angry, that I’d been shipwrecked twice. And, you know, from the time you were shipwrecked until you got to an American port, you weren’t paid anything. You could be in a lifeboat for weeks and deprived of your pay. And I can remember in one of those frightful accidents when the ship hung on the rocks at Scott’s Gap up near, up in Alaska, going into the Bering Sea. The captain said well look, the Coast Guard will take off anybody who wants to leave, but I appeal to those who are brave to stay with me and he said, of course, the ship is badly listed, we’re on a rock. When the tide comes in, we might be lifted and we’d be in a hell of a state, he said. But there, there is an island not too far from here that we could get to in lifeboats. Who’ll stay with me, he said.

And ah, he said anything to say? I said yes, Captain, I’d like to ask, Will our pay continue from this time of your logging the shipwreck? Why, he said, I’m not looking for schoolboys to debate with. I want the sailors, he said. I said well, I’ll stay with you, Captain, but it’s only right that you give us an answer. And he said, of course, you’ll be paid. You’ll be paid until you get to your own port. Well I said, I’ll stay. And I did and, you know, we had to abandon ship. And we got to that island, and there was a house where a man was raising fox.

It was a little island, Middleton Island, it’s on a map. It’s about a mile long and a half a mile wide, and the man had a house where he lived alone. And he died there, and his body was in the house. And he kept a journal. I have it somewhere among my things. I took it with me. He knew he couldn’t make it until the weather changed and a doctor would make a call.
1 He'd call there every six months or so. And the fox
2 got out of their pens and had pups under the floor of
3 the house, and ah, we took the body out and wrapped it
4 in a blanket. It was cold, it didn't ah, it wasn't
5 ah, it wasn't ah, whatever happens to a body when it's
6 dead. So we lived in the house until we were finally
7 rescued.
8
8 But the point of this story is that when we got to
9 the shipping company office . . . we sailed out of
10 Seattle and here we were, those of us who stayed with
11 the captain. The captain said these are the men who
12 stayed with me and went to Middle Island. You see,
13 if you abandon the ship, anybody who goes aboard can
14 claim it. But you keep on it ah, you know, they can't
15 do that. So he said these are the men. And he was
16 just hungry for some laudatory recognition and ah, he
17 said ah, we'll have our pay. And the man representing
18 the shipping line said I want to thank you and
19 congratulate you but, as you know, the law says you're
20 not paid for the time of the shipwreck. Well, days
21 had passed. No pay. And ah, I looked at the captain.
22 You could see tears in his eyes.
23 LE: I want to ask you when you got to New York, you
24 were disappointed, you were hurt, you were, I imagine,
25 frightened. You started going to school. Ah, how
26
27 or?
28 TR: Yes, I think in those years, ah, there were
29 quite a few people going up to Harlem. There wasn't
30 that racial animosity which seems so sharp. We were
31 trying to break down those racial barriers. Oh, of
32 course, there were dangers there too but ah I didn't
33 seem mindful of them.
34 LE: How'd you, how'd you hear about one of these
35 parties?
36 TR: Well, one would tell another, and ah sooner or
37 later you would hear of a place to go. There was a
38 place where a black woman would say, entertain. a
39 lesbian women. In those days, women wore long hair,
40 but a lot of the lesbians had their hair cut real
41 short like black men, you know? And they often wore
42 tuxedos or men's clothing in the street. And this
43 woman, Gladys Bentley, had a huge body, big enough for
44 three people. But on top of it was this beautiful
45 little head with the close-cropped hair. And, and she
46 would sing, a little piano, and pound out songs. I
47 remember the ballad of one:
48 Oh, they take it in the tail up at Yale, up at Yale
49 Oh, they do their concentration while they
50 practice masturbation.
51 Up at Yale, in the tail, up at Yale.
52
53 She wrote things like that. And then we heard about
54 this black woman, lesbian, and the fellows from Yale,
55 when they were coming into The City to go to the
56 theater, especially gay ones said, Hey, let's go up
57 there and hear that song about the Yale gays. And so
58 that spread. There were little dives in the basement
59 like that it was spreading, gayness.
60 LE: When was this, when, what period was that, what
61 time was that?
62 TR: Well, that ran through a rather long period. I
63 found remnants of it there as late as the 1950's, and
64 certainly my introduction to it was earlier than that.
65 LE: Was it in the early '20s when you, or late '20s
66 when you were?
67 TR: No, it would be about '36 or '37, around that
68 time. And there were places too, ah, there was a
69 place - I forget what it was called - a speakeasy
70 place where gay people would go in New York. You paid
71 one dollar to get in and they would put on the table a
72 drink made up of bathtub gin with a little grenadine
73 to give it pinkish color, and it might have a squeeze
74 of lemon. And ah, you sat at tables, you'd, you'd,
75 people that you knew another table would wave you over
76 and you'd chatted like that. And I always played the
77 butch role. In fact, there was a despicable quality
in my personality at a very early age. I keep jumping around, you know, no wonder you lose track. But ah, men I associated with, we felt rather superior to those who were dressing as women or who undulated their hips or - who were so salient in their manner that people would say that guy's a fairy, you know? Well, we tried to pass, smoking pipe, you know, and that kind of thing. And I remember I often got my trade by ah, I kept in my pouch of tobacco some ambergris that I got in Egypt. It's supposed to be from the, oh, it's a morbid secretion from the sperm whale's vomit that fastens an odor or scent, you know? You have heard of it, I'm sure. So I had a little bottle of ambergris or in some concoction that I got in Egypt in my tobacco pouch. And when I saw somebody I like, oh, I smoked a pipe, I'd begin to rub a little of that in my hand, you know, and then move my hand over, 'cause I wanted a butch man. And sometimes he would say Wow, you know, not knowing exactly where the scent came from. You know, it reminds me of some girl I had and she smelled so good when she came out of the shower. I knew I was getting there then. (inaudible) and those were little tricks. As an old man of 76 or thereabouts, it seems...

LE: You'd go out to seaman bars or this, I mean,

(Showing pictures)

That was a boxer. He had kind of a Prexicles type of nose and I kind of put hair on it. Oh yeah, I've... End of INTERVIEW

TR: Well, this would be at a place where we paid a dollar to get in, a speakeasy.

LE: Oh, I see.

TR: In the speakeasy time. I just would show you as a matter (interference) . . . to wonderful parties she gave in New York - even a Catholic priest there. And Ramon Novarro was a good friend of his too, the moving picture actor, and I remember this priest who had a parish in Manhattan, had a basketball team he coached, had a Boy Scout troop in his church. And he said to me, I didn't let on that I had a Catholic background - I thought it would inhibit him. So, he said Ted, that's when I was working with this English firm and I had lovely quarters within the building of their establishment. He said I have a priest in Alabama who wants to come up here and get into the gay world and could he stay with you? And I said yes. And, you know, he was so flamboyant.

He never wore a Roman collar, he dressed in a manner very swishy, and he was out fucking every night - a priest! And still quite able to lead a hypocritical role of going back again. I don't see how they can do it. Their confessions, it was weird.
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