

Pride History Group Oral History Interview with John Witte

Interviewer: Michael Mullins

Date of interview: 5 June 2024

Location of interview: Mayfield West

Reason for interview: Gay & Trade Union Activism and Pride History Group

Restrictions: None



Time	Summary	Keywords
0:15	Early memories. Happy. Family lived in camping reserve in South Murwillumbah. Dad built a tent. Parents didn't have a job. Wide variety of people. I was a precocious child. Dirt poor. I had an argument with my father. He bought me a truck for Christmas but I wanted a doll. A really uneasy relationship with my father. I remember getting into trouble for going over to the next door neighbour's toilet and covering the walls with shit. Dad eventually got a job. Quite a nice childhood but mum and dad had nothing. Our relatives would refuse to visit us because we lived in the poor area. I remember being naughty at school. I used to draw quite well. Mum was quite proud of me. Had to balance this with outbursts of naughtiness. They took a shine to me because I was very smart. Dad was told we had to move out of the campground because we'd been there 10 years. Moved to a farm.	Childhood Campground
5:45	Dad was a truck driver. I had to raise the other kids. We had to pack our school bags and walk down the road. I was the responsible one. Dad was an alcoholic and a gambler and bashed mum. It was a hard childhood. I had a whole galaxy of feelings. Basically bisexual. Confusing. I did well at school. But obviously I had a problem. Pudgy. A good boy. High school was interesting. Not homophobic.	Family Responsibility
8:28	I was sexually mature at 9. More advanced than the other kids in the class. I was incredibly unadventurous sexually. They'd talk about wanking but I'd already taught myself. Because we were poor I didn't fit in. I couldn't declare I was gay until I got to university.	Sexual maturation
10:42	1971 was my first year at university. School was difficult. Relating. I was inarticulate. Some teachers were not on my wavelength but my art teacher was. I got a good mark and so I got into university. I wanted to get out of Mullumbimby. It was quite dead in those days. The dairying industry was depressed.	School University
13:46	I applied to go into Wesley College. Too costly. I did Fine Arts. Didn't do much sexually until second year. A man in my Psych class who was gorgeous. Female house mate I confided in. She wanted a relationship with me so I had to sort that out. I went out to gay places with other people in the house. As far as gay lib was concerned, I worked up enough courage to talk to some gay	Gay places Share house 33A Glebe Point Road CAMP Gay Lib

	lib people at the uni bar. It was a middle class thing. I was working class. A lot of it was getting over the hangups about homosexuality. 33A Glebe Point Road. Camp or Gay Lib. Different organisations both associated with that address. Revolutionary zeal.	
19:19	I didn't really do Oxford Street. I wasn't looking for sex. The first time I had sex was after a Gay Lib meeting. Chatted with a young man who was just at the pub for a fuck. We had a fuck. It blew my mind. Once you have sex for the first time, the world changes. I proudly announced that I had finally had sex, to a straight friend.	Sex
22:00	The guy I had sex with was gorgeous, a surfer. Later I saw him with his girlfriend. He was very experienced. Regarding cruising, I was terrified. In 1973 we did the Gay Pride March. With my adorable friend Craig. A lot got arrested. We interrupted a very solemn ceremony. The police went crazy. I just went home and felt depressed. The energy of the march was incredible. An important step. Telling the world that you were a homosexual. Everybody in the gay scene was promiscuous. Pre-AIDS. I met a guy called Richard. Straight. A Maoist. Killing time waiting for a visa to go to China. I went over the UK. Told him I was in Gay Lib. He was horrified. Sheffield.	1973 Gay Pride March Ideology
29:29	London. We swapped numbers. It was about sex rather than politics. Brixton Gay Lib group. I was introduced to their Faery Politics. A lifestyle built around being gay. An old shop. Basement was a gym. I met a guy called Jamie. The beginning of an intense two or three week relationship. It was when sex meant something. It was more tutoring. Sex was something more spiritual. The full orgasm of anal sex. Something that wasn't considered in Sydney. It had to end when I came back to Australia. We kept in contact with letter writing. In the early 80s he was one of the first to come down with the virus.	London Faery Politics Jamie Deeper sex
34:30	Phil was in the British Communist Party. I would keep going back to see him. He had his own life. Back in Australia I was a different person. Very relaxed. A happy life. It was a joy to come back. Finished my arts degree. Lived in a house with Chris O'Doherty. All straight. It was quite horrendous. I even got bashed within the group. We were all drunk. Balmain Town Hall dance. A few homophobes. Hadn't resolved their sexuality. I was outraged by corruption and safety in the workplace. It was horrendous. I became a union rep and took on leadership of the sub-branch. Many Arab-speaking colleagues.	Communist Party Share house Union
39:56	I became well known as an out gay leftie. I didn't make an issue of being gay at work. A huge number of gays but many were not out. Before I stood for the sub branch secretary, I talked with my Arab backers and told them I was gay and would they still	Work

	support me. They said yes. I revived the metropolitan station assistants' section.	
43:17	There was a point when they came down to our meal room. Peter French the secretary of the guards was a member of the Communist Party. There were funds secured for a rationalised freight system and there were still jobs for us. I was more involved with this kind of issue than gay lib and similar.	Work battles
46:15	Coming back to Australia – 1976. Lex Watson and Garry Wotherspoon had set up Gay Liberation Front (focused on law reform). The 2 nd Homosexual Conference in Sydney. Meetings with Wran. Lex had a focus on organising conferences and creating money making schemes. I got more involved with thinking about change. Moving from middle class liberation politics to working class. My unions background was very influential. A lot of cases of people being victimised in the workplace. I brought some ideas back. Pushed the idea of a gay trade union group.	Gay Liberation Front 2 nd Homosexual Conference Lex Watson Garry Wotherspoon
50:11	This was around 1976-78. The 4 th Homosexual Conference. Lance and Ron Austin talked about Mardi Gras. I said we're busy with the Conference. We were going to have the day march and that was it. I said we're not having a Mardi Gras. That's how the Mardi Gras got off the ground.	4 th Homosexual Conference
52:14	We knew what the police were going to do. We dressed sensibly so that we could be dragged along the street without having our skin torn. Ron Austin was a Hunter boy and a trainee priest. He knew about the religious implications of Mardi Gras. He also had training in Fine Arts. Had taught art in a community setting. He was in a relationship with Lance at the time. Crossover between politics and culture. This was also about stopping the drift from political involvement to the bars.	Mardi Gras origins Ron Austin
56:12	They wanted people committed to change. One group happy to keep marching but Lance was creative as well. Ron was inspired by watching US daytime pride parades on TV people being themselves. Drag queens was a problem, it was seen as exploiting women.	Commitment to change Creativity
58:14	Drag had always been a camp thing. But some of the drag bordered on misogyny. I can't remember seeing anybody in drag at Mardi Gras. It was a cold night. The gay trade unionist movement didn't die. It was basically me organising and writing the newsletter. It sparked enough interest. When the Gay Rights Lobby started, they were cosyng up to Barry Unsworth. They took the issue to Wran. That happened at the same time that AIDs was around. Conflict between left and right. Wran came through with the compromise. Unsworth was on side because he had a gay son who had committed suicide. His support for law reform was very important.	Drag Gay trade unionists Neville Wran Barry Unsworth

1:05:00	They'd rubbish me in the union for being head of the gay sub-section. There were more important issues than equality for homosexuals. We did have a gay railway social group. People like Wally Cowan, a really good trade unionist. We had a float at Stonewall Day. Michael Chesworth formed a rail workers' group.	
1:09:00	Break	
1:09:29	Conservative gays hated the movement. They said they were disgusted with what we did in the street. Gave homosexuals a bad name. They wanted respectability. They wanted our group to be just a social group. Sydney had a large organised camp scene. Social groups. Largely underground.	Respectability
1:12:08	Living together behind closed doors. The whole world was self-contained. Law reform was rocking the boat, so they didn't support it. Both Lex and Craig were about coming out and fighting for law reform. Wran was on side all the time but couldn't win over his own MPs. The police said they were going to come down heavily on parties. You can't touch us because of separation of powers. The police continued to tackle Club 80.	Law reform Police
1:15:06	Craig et al focused on law reform. Dropping charges. Fighting the police. Wran had outmaneuvered the police, on the anti-discrimination bill. There was also the Church, the Anglican Church particularly, who were not supportive.	
1:17:46	We got law reform in. In my union we wanted privileges. One colleague Michael modified the railway uniform – tight pants, etc. Wearing makeup. Coming up against centuries of railway culture.	Railway union
1:20:47	The momentum in the left of the union had slowed down in the late 80s. I had left the station assistants' section. I did training in personnel management. I applied for a job as an assistant station manager.	
1:24:08	The 78ers. On the 20 th anniversary we sat around and talked about what we were celebrating. The political aspects had been scrubbed from history. We wanted to bring it back. We talked to the media as the 78ers. The three of us got into the SMH. My boss at North Sydney Station saw the photo and said he didn't want me in his workplace. So I was sent to Milson's Point. It was a station with a lot of cultural issues: homophobia. Then I eventually got a station master's job at Wollstonecraft ahead of my retirement in 2011.	78ers
1:28:38	The 78ers kept pushing to highlight the origin of Mardi Gras as a political process and emphasising the police bashings.	Mardi Gras as political
1:30:00	The Pride History Group. 1997. The 78er story had to be told. How did we do it? We got an oral history account of the night, that it was a riot. It turned into a book that laid out the story of what happened on the night. That was the bible. There was a whole thing about producing a history and photos for publication.	Pride History Group

	That was a lesson we learned. In 2003 it was the 30 th anniversary of the first Pride March. We went through the same thing again, or recording stories. The Pride Centre in Hutchinson Street. After this forum, someone had a box of memorabilia from 33A Glebe Point Road. There was a lot of stuff that could be preserved and act as the foundation for a story.	
1:34:26	We resolved to have an archive. Eventually the penny dropped that it wasn't so easy. There was a lot of expertise. Bruce Carter was the main person. He was the local historian at Leichhardt Library. Fabian gave us a lot talk and said it was going to be expensive: a reality check. We were an archival organisation. But there was also oral history, which is where Bruce came in. It seemed to be more feasible than having an archive. We met and talked about what equipment and grants we needed.	Archiving Bruce Carter
1:38:06	We wasted a lot of time on archiving when it wasn't going to work out. At Benledi House, we wanted space for an archive. Robert French came in. Rosie Block from the Oral History Organisation offered her expertise. Joe Rocca created our first web page. We wrote MOAs with other organisations.	Oral History Association Robert French
1:30:43	Ratio of men to women. Women involved but most of the early interviews were with men. The project of the lesbian venues. Two fabulous women involved. A women's booklet 'Out and About'. Based on oral histories. At one stage we had more lesbian interviews than male ones.	Lesbian book
1:43:05	Garry Wotherspoon and Lex began a project of teaching us how to do oral histories. The idea was that instead of leaving the oral histories in the cupboard for other people to find, we put them into histories. I would do a log. We'd pick out themes, then do a book.	Oral histories
1:45:26	The oral history textbook. We keep going back to that. Regular contact with the Oral History Association. We also had photographs in all these books. Most of the books weren't suitable for libraries, but some did get out. Also The Bookshop. About the technologies, Rosie was an ardent fan of tape recorders. There was at least one famous failure. Regarding forms, we use the Leichhardt Library form. Regarding ownership, that stays with the person. That's important because if the organisation owns the copyright, it can use the recordings in whatever way it wants. We abide by the Oral History Association ethics. We had to establish trust.	Books
1:53:47	There wasn't a chronology of the Sydney movement. The Pride History Group chronology. Absolutely invaluable. It needs to be kept up to date and corrected. The name of the group. There were assumptions we were associated with Pride the organisation. But that's not true. We were going to become a sub-committee of Pride, but they collapsed before they could	Chronology Benledi

	give us an answer. They collapsed but we continued on. We eventually got a place at Benledi, around 2007.	
1:58:18	The structure. Before Robert came on as secretary, I was secretary, president and treasurer. I was quite pleased that he volunteered. Di Minnis was also involved for a while. Joe Rocca was doing the website, which struggled until more recent years. The domain name we used changed a few times. Now things are getting done!	Admin officers Diane Minnis Joe Rocca
2:02:10	Big events? The 78ers. Like a sub-group within PHG. It was devolved and eventually got a life of its own. Camp as a Row of Tents. The launch. Ken Garrett gave us some silent films.	Events
2:06:16	Media enquiries, and people expecting PHG to provide a service as if it had paid staff. The good thing is that the more it goes on line the less we have to be worried about providing a service. The chronology. It goes on for reams. It peters out around 1994 or 1995. Debate about what's included. Activism, dance parties.	Media enquiries
2:09:44	Enmities? There are always disruptive people. There's a story that one person destroyed Sydney University's gay archive collection. But PHG has ways of containing such people and channeling their energies elsewhere. The group now has incredible cohesion.	Cohesion
ENDS		