

Interview With Mark Plants

CCQAP

Narrator: Mark Plants [MP]

Interviewers: Dylan Michael Canterbury Baker [DB], David Weisman [DW]

Interview Date: October 16, 2021

Location: The ranch of Tony Saponate and Bart Bartosh, San Ardo, CA

Length: Approximately 15 minutes. Interview starts at 0:00:10.9.

Transcript prepared by: Elias Simons, Steven Ruszczycky

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0:00:10.9 DB: We are here today on behalf of the Central Coast Queer Archive Project interviewing Mark Plants. Mr. Plants, thank you very much for allowing us to interview you.

0:00:19.6 MP: My pleasure.

0:00:21.0 DB: So to kick things off, can you tell me where you're from? And where did you grow up?

0:00:26.7 MP: Well, when people ask me that question, I usually say, specify a year, that I spent most of my time in Ohio, Colorado and California, also lived in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Wyoming. So it's a peripatetic existence.

0:00:46.2 DB: Well, where did you live primary, growing up?

0:00:49.7 MP: I lived in Ohio till I was 11. Then we moved to Colorado. I went to high school and college in Colorado. I got my driver's license in Colorado. So I still think of Colorado was home, but I am married to a Detroit native who won't live where there's snow. So we're not going to Colorado any time soon.

0:01:18.2 DB: So, the next question I have for you, growing up, did religion play any role in your family in life?

0:01:25.8 MP: Since my father was a Methodist minister, I think I would have to answer yes to that

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question. It was probably as far removed from fundamentalist religion though as you can be, so... My parents emphasis was always "how are you treating other people?" And the injunction to love your neighbor as yourself. Umm, I know when my sibling and I outgrew our clothes, they didn't just go to Goodwill, my mom looked around and said "is there anybody that could use these clothes?" When they were hiring a babysitter, they would say "who could really use this money?" So I grew up with that kind of religion and not the kind of religion that says if you do A, B or C, you're condemned to hell forever.

0:02:17.4 DB: Okay. Growing up, were you aware of gay people, gay culture or anything of that sort?

0:02:24.8 MP: Not at all. So the reticence that persons of the cloth discussed sexual matters with their kids was... Well, it was just reticent. There was just no discussion of it. And... So no, I didn't probably until really high school, have any concept of what being gay was.

0:02:58.5 DB: And in high school, what were you being exposed to... And you were in Colorado at this point for high school?

0:03:04.4 MP: Yes. In the town where we lived at that time, I remember there was this guy named Bernie. I never met Bernie, but I remember very clearly some newcomers had come to town, and some of the long-time residents had told them, "you wanna steer clear of Bernie." And I didn't know what that meant, and I knew that I shouldn't ask about it, but in retrospect, I think I have a pretty good idea now. So that was probably my first exposure to someone who was gay.

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0:03:45.5 DB: And so the way you're phrasing it there was kind of not really, a lot of gay culture, not really a lot of acceptance in your town in Colorado?

0:03:53.7 MP: No. There wasn't a... Well, it's typical of small towns everywhere, I think, but yeah. There was no gay presence at all.

0:04:03.9 DB: And you mentioned you went to college and... Where did you go there? Where did you go?

0:04:08.8 MP: It's a little state college called Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado, southwest corner of the state. And that's... It was great because they were on a trimester system, every other college in the state had a 50-minute hour... Fort Louis College had 55-minute classes, and so they got done at the end of April, I thought "this will be great, I can have another summer job for another month besides, beyond everybody else." So it was good, there was... Even there, though, there was not, I mean there were rumors about people, and there was a certain intellectual acknowledgement that homosexuals existed... I actually brought my book of essentials of abnormal psychology, and so this is like 1975, and there's a section in there about homosexuality, and there's actually a picture of a same-sex union ceremony, of course, marriage was not on the horizon for another quarter of a century, but looking back on that, I think that's very interesting. And I also had a sociology professor who, again, in retrospect, was probably lesbian, she would come to come to class wearing bib overalls and a flannel shirt, and she gave us an essay question once about you know, right now the state only supports two-person heterosexual marriages. What would some of the implications be if there were expansion into the... If it were expanded into same sex, and even she thought, you know, multi-person marriage. So there was that... There was that kind of acknowledgement, but...

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And I was completely closeted and I thought I would get married and have kids some day.

0:06:09.0 DB: And while attending College, what did you study?

0:06:12.8 MP: I studied Spanish. Why did I study Spanish, you might ask. A legitimate question to be sure. When I was in high school, I was an exchange student in Saltillo, Mexico. And while I was in college, I spent half a year abroad in Cuenca, Ecuador and so my goal was to go to the United Nations and be a UN interpreter, and as you can see, I ended up on the wrong coast, so that's... And I graduated with a 3.8 GPA because I aced every Spanish course I ever took.

0:06:53.3 DW: Could you swing your legs to your right a little. Yeah, just a little more. Little more, there we go, that's it. Thank you.

0:07:03.0 DB: So after college, What did you do?

0:07:05.6 MP: So I did what every rural Coloradan does, which is go to Denver and get a job. I had a couple of sort of deadend jobs, once I got there. I took a temporary job at Mobil Oil's office in Denver, and that temporary job turned into 18 years. So it was a good deal for me, and, you know, I had a chance to prove myself. I was in the accounts payable department, and I was very... I was surprised that I enjoyed this so much because I thought, you know, accounting was just putting little numbers in little squares all day long, and I thought, "no, I'm not gonna do that," but... One of my colleagues pointed out to me, people are always interested in how much money they have so accountants will always be in demand. So I did that account, mostly accounting work for Mobile. Mobile is how I got to California. I was in Santa Fe Springs in the greater LA area for three years,

and then I was at the oil fields right up the road here in San Ardo. So I lived in Paso Robles and that's how I came to San Luis Obispo County.

0:08:25.7 DB: OK, well you already just answered the question. Something I also wanted to ask you, when you came to this area, did you see any kind of LGBTQ culture, anything of that sort? Whether it be in Paso Robles, SLO or even San Ardo.

0:08:44.3 MP: Not in San Ardo, no. It's interesting because I was so inhibited, even living in Denver and living in Los Angeles basically, I was really not very active. And I did... I knew where the book store with gay porn was in Denver, so I dropped a few dollars there. I went to the gay pride in West Hollywood, and I did, I think, three years of Gay Pride 10K runs, but I was not really active. So when I came here, ironically enough, one of the things that I became aware of was this group called the Dolphin Group, and I can't even remember how I heard about this, but looking back on this, the Dolphin Group was pretty typical of the time in that there's nothing that says gay about it. And so you have to know that it's a gay group. So I did a few things with that group and I had also joined a Great Outdoors group, which was a gay camping, hiking, group focused on gay men. I think... I don't remember if there were Lesbians there, but umm, I joined that group too. So those are the things that I did. And I also heard about... There's a gay bar in San Luis Obispo called Journeys Inn. I went to Journeys Inn. Side note, I met Edward Albee at Journeys Inn... And the other thing, I guess I can say this, the other thing that I heard about Pirates Cove, and the thing that interested me was there was no crossover between any of these activities. You know, the people I met at Great Outdoors didn't go to the Dolphin Group, the Dolphin Group didn't go to Journeys Inn, nobody at Journeys Inn went to Pirates Cove, so I thought there must be a pretty big gay community here because there's all these people that I'm meeting, and there's no cross over...

0:11:05.7 DB: Well, before we finish out, can you tell us how you came to meet to Mike and how that all came about?

0:11:12.0 MP: Well, it was actually through Great Outdoors, and in addition to their camping and hiking, for some reason on this particular occasion, they had sponsored a volleyball game, and I, in my youth, was fairly proficient, at volleyball... I went down there and that's where we met. And there was no real spark then. Went on... Forward several months, and I went to a safe sex workshop that Mike and some of his colleagues at ASN AIDS Support Network was putting on, and when he saw me there, he came up and he wanted to hug me and I wanted to go "wait, do I know you?" And then the third time that we met was at the Renaissance Fair, and he had gone with some friends of his and I had gone by myself and I just went "God keeps putting this guy in my path... I should do something about this." So that was when the relationship really stuck, and for the first three years before we had our first commitment ceremony, every time the Renaissance Fair came to town, it was our anniversary.

0:12:41.9 DB: What a wonderful anniversary.

0:12:42.8 MP: Yes.

0:12:47.4 DB: I think we're good to end it here and we'll pick back up shortly with you all together.

0:12:51.4 MP: Let me just... I wanna go back to my college days. I wanna tell this story because I think it's a great story. So one of my drinking buddies in college had a girlfriend, his girlfriend had a

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roommate, and the roommate's name was Gay Brothers, and so I knew that Valerie, my friend's girlfriend, had a couple of older brothers who had already been through college, and I was so surprised because it's one semester, Valerie just started talking about Gay Brothers, this and Gaye Brothers that and Gaye Brothers said this, and I thought, "well, I guess her brothers are out of the closet now, and that's nice, but I don't understand why she's making such a point about it," and so my conclusion was she was trying to get some kind of reaction out of me, and of course at 22, I was just way too sophisticated to give her any kind of reaction. And so in retrospect, you know Gay Brothers went to the salon and got a manicure there were things that should have clued me in, but I already knew what I knew, which was that her brothers were gay, right? So this went on and I went on in my delusions until Gay Brothers worked at the snack bar and the student union, and something came up about that one day and I said to Valerie "your brothers work in the snack bar?" And she says, "not my brothers, you idiot... My roommate Gay Brothers." And the light comes on and I never did tell her that I thought her brothers were gay, 'cause those farm boys would have probably come around and kicked my ass. That's one of the instances of how I was just so suppressed, and I thought that maybe she was trying to reach out to me. But no it was, I was just wrong the whole time.

0:14:50.6 DB: Alright.

0:14:49.3 DW: Well, thank you for sharing. Now, don't get up.