

SAPONATE

Interview With Tony Saponate

CCQAP

Narrator: Tony Saponate [TS]

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 29 minutes. Interview starts at 0:00:10.1.

Transcript prepared by: Mary Waters, Steven Ruszczycky

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0:00:10.1 Dylan Michael Canterbury Baker [DB]: We're here today on behalf of the Central Coast Queer Archive Project in the home of Tony Saponate. Mr. Saponate, I thank you very much for being here. And the date is October 16th, 2021. So I wanted to ask you, can you tell me where you're from? And where did you grow up?

0:00:09.3 Tony Saponate [TS]: From California, San Francisco. I actually grew up there in the Excelsior District, which is an extension of North Beach area, which, uh, kind of like a suburb at the time as San Francisco built in the forties. So there was a little neighborhood, there was an Italian neighborhood called the Excelsior District, and it's a two-bedroom home, and we had five in our family, I was the oldest, and my mother and father, and dad did... I don't know how much you wanna hear about this, but... Dad was a tug boat man out in the bay there, and also he was a taxi driver, and then when I was growing up, he became a warehouseman at The Emporium, and my mother was a bookkeeper. So they had three of us, one year after the other, born in '59, and then my brother and my sister after that all born in August, the first week of August: 4th, 6th, and 9th, and then two, a brother and a sister that came later. And I don't know if you want me to elaborate more or what you wanna know about...

0:00:37.2 DB: You mentioned you come from an Italian family, how did that influence you growing up and your view on life?

0:00:37.2 TS: Well, I don't think that it influenced me very much, let's put it this way, my dad, my dad was an only child and both his parents died when my mother and father got married, one went before the marriage and one after the marriage, and so the influence was pretty much gone. And my father was speaking American to us and he never spoke Italian to us and my mother was Irish and

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German, so I don't feel like I got very much influence except for maybe the disciplinarian side of what he was doing was being a... You know, was that Italian? Ah, there's the phone, don't worry about it. And then my mother was Irish and German, grandmother's named Lunkenheimer and her father's name... My mother's father's name was Loftus. They were Catholic. And my dad actually didn't participate too much in it, but he went... Went along with my mother being Catholic, and it went back to her mother and father.

0:03:36.7 DB: Growing up in a Catholic church, how did that... What influence did that have on you? And how did it affect you?

0:00:37.2 TS: I'd say that the first few years, because I was... Looking back, I was in that transition that the church was going through, which was Vatican II, which began in 1959. And so I was kind of caught up in the middle in the grade schools, so I got to witness the pre-Vatican and the Vatican II... And I must say it was quite a difference because the poor nuns there were unhappy and they were trying to do the disciplinarian thing, and it affected all of us 'cause we got some pretty good stern... If we weren't even trying to do things that were bad, but if they were perceived to be bad, you were rapped on the knuckles, you were... I mean, everybody has heard this, you were grabbed by the collar and dug nails into your skin. And so when you see the next nuns come in and they don't have the full habit, they had a half habit, and so that they can show their hair more, they don't look like they're all closed up, and I think there was a lot of jealousy between the older nuns and the younger nuns, 'cause younger nuns got to have more religious freedom and take kids out to field trips and do more things with them on a personal level, I got to see both of it, which is... I think it was pretty interesting. I didn't get stuck with a strict disciplinarian through that whole period.

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0:00:37.2 DB: Considering... You were at a Catholic school, but you were also in San Francisco.

Were you aware of gay people, or culture at all in school or just the city as an area?

0:00:37.2 TS: At the time, as most people know, back in the 70s, there was... Everything revolved around... If you didn't know about gay people, you were probably living on another planet, lots that people were coming in from different places. In the United States, also around the world, to come to San Francisco, it was a place to be recognized and accepted to a degree, it was rough also because there was a lot of people who came from broken families, and they were trying to find a place to live, how to survive. And there was a lot of influences of drugs, and the community had gotten enough structure, there was a community, but not enough structure to encourage relationship. But at the time, I was able to find MCC church near the Castro was a gay couple who were trying to help others with relationship, instead of all that was going on with the AIDS epidemic. There was a lot of things that need to be pulled together.

0:07:08.6 DB: I also wanted to ask what role did your family play in you growing up and were they accepting of gay people or who are... How was all that?

0:07:20.0 TS: Well, that's very interesting because I would have thought my dad would have been upset about it since he was such a strict disciplinarian and orderly... Clothes and socks rolled up and every time you came home your bike or whatever, had to be in the exact place. So, I always thought of him as he comes home, he reads his paper, basically, he doesn't associate with the kids, my mother... And my mother is there to be there for all of us, and he's doing his job... But the interesting thing, when I came out, was that my mother, after I told her, and I was about... I'd say I was about 16 when I told her and she said to him, she said to him, mind you, she had to go to... We

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had added an extra bedroom to our two bedroom, so all of us could live together, but she went into the bedroom, they stayed... They had to go through ours to get to theirs, and she said to my dad. Did you know that Tony is gay, Tony came out and he told me... And I heard him say, well, whatever makes him happy, that's okay. And I said, whoah! And I got over here, and then she comes back out... And I told her, I heard that. And she said, yeah, but I don't know what it means to me. And she says, does that mean that because I'm a woman that you don't love me. And I said, Mom, and I said, you're my mother, of course, I love you. And my mother has always been great, she's always stood by my side, and she'd always tell me... Never to say a lie, and I can handle it, you know? Whatever it is, I love you. So... And so I trusted her on that, but she'd always say how accepting she was, but you could kinda tell that it wasn't quite... But she started finding out more and more people, even her, she found out her, the teacher that she worked with, 'cause he was teaching preschool, and she was doing special ed., that her teacher was gay and had a partner, and when she told the other teachers... Because she was wondering what the reactions were... They said, Well, at least he's not caught up in violence or drugs or things like that, and the things that are... She finally came around, especially, especially when I was narrowing down with a relationship, and I've always wanted a relationship, I just... Couldn't find people who are ready to settle down. And I think maybe that's enough for now... Does she want me to go into more? But anyway, so that's my mother and my father, and I'm thankful that I had the mother and the father that I had coming out. Although I think a lot of it was easier because we all had been struggling at the time, my dad trying to hold the whole family down with a warehouse man salary, and then we had a lot of various medical issues in the family with schizophrenia with my brother, and scoliosis in the back and juvenile diabetes with my other siblings, so we were just at the hospital often in, and since we all suffered together, we all couldn't say no to each to each other. I mean, that was sort of like the littlest problem was that I was gay.

0:11:15.4 DB: Okay. And I wanted to ask too, considering you were in San Francisco where you just haven't... Were you able to find more gay culture and have, as you mentioned, you wanted a partner and a relationship... Were you able to do that more?

0:11:31.7 TS: Well, I must say it was very difficult coming out, and even though it was San Francisco, you have to remember that a lot of these people in different areas coming to San Francisco, were bringing all their issues with them, and so when you went out to a bar, you didn't see people that were getting all the needs that they needed from their parents, and so they ended up on drugs, and so there wasn't enough attention to building relationships, it was... It was kind of like a playground. But people started to become more and more aware of what it means to have relationships when AIDS came around... It was dangerous. It was dangerous and I was caught up for a couple of years, and I never bought the drugs, but I was handed something here or there, and they'd say oh, well try this or that, so you try this or you try that, and then you'd find yourself kind of going into a place that you know you better get out of, so you better drop your friends who are influencing you and that took a lot of work too and plus, it helps to have wonderful friends around you that care about you, and so you start to drop... The people that you realize are not helping you anymore, it's a difficult transition too... 'cause some people that aren't... I don't think of people as bad, they just were caught up in their situation, and I try to do what I can to help, but when they admit that they can't go any further... I have to go further, I have to go beyond. But I can still listen, I can still be there, but I'm not gonna do the kind of things that you wanna do.

0:13:37.1 DB: Did you ever wanna get involved in any kind of LGBTQ activism of that sort?

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0:13:46.8 TS: I think it was absolutely necessary at the time, yes, it definitely... And I had been with the Catholic Church to... My mother always said you have to be at the church until you're able to leave the home and be on your own, so at 17 at least be with the church, and so I was... And then she thought it'd be a good idea that I'd be on my own at 17, and she could see that with the rest of the family, that all of the needs that were there, that I needed it, that I deserved a chance to see what it was like to be on my own. And so, yes, activism, that's one of the reasons for going to MCC. And also I was focusing on other communities, spiritual communities, and basically the biggest activism was when I met Bart, and he actually filled that space for me that I was still... I still valued and respected the traditional religion, it just that, the traditional religion was not being personal to me, it was treating me as more as an object and not just gay, I mean, this was a lot... And a lot of people in the Catholic Church, we didn't have coffee hours like they do with the Episcopal church where you can meet and socialize afterwards it, many of them just went home right after the communion is, okay, my job, my duty is done. But Bart was into the Episcopal church, and he's got his story to tell.

0:15:31.9 DB: Now getting back to you after you went on your own, how did that affect you?

0:15:39.3 TS: It's interesting how much you can do when you don't know as much of the world out there as you do afterwards, but I must say that I think a lot of life, a good life has come to me through being aware of those things that are available to you, that you take advantage of them, since I was in the San Francisco in that lower class, middle class home, and I was coming out and trying to become myself, I had to find ways, and so the way to reach out was through the CB radio that I had put in, and my dad... I don't think he knew that I put the wire antenna going out into the backyard, but... And I got to have a CB radio, my sister, and I would be on there, and I met people on there, and they helped me to find a job, 'cause one said they got openings down at Bank of

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America. So I said, well, that's great, I'll go because my mother thought it'd be good to be on, so I went down there and, kinda scary, but you know this, I did it, and I was about 16 and a half, just out of high school, and I started there doing tracings and adjustments and filing. And back to your question, you wanted to know about coming...

0:17:23.8 DB: Being on your own and how that affected...

0:17:37.2 TS: Well, it affected me in that I stopped to think about just amazed how much I did, considering what the family was going through, and I knew that my mother needed help at home because of the family, my dad left the picture when I was 17, he had to go to... Board and care, because of manic depressive and I hate to put all this out, but I mean, it is reality, and he had to be... So I knew my mother was on her own, and so after a couple of years of being out on my own renting with a deputy sheriff from Illinois that I talked to on the CB radio. At the time, he was a very nice guy. I would come back and help her out, and then go back out and rent again, or stay at the place I had been for... Well, I couldn't stay there again because every few months you had to try to find it, I'd been to three or four different places in the city and with different people, big challenge.

0:18:47.5 DB: When did you go on your own and you... Whatever things were you trying to be involved with?

0:18:48.5 TS: On my own... I don't think I really started actuating myself... I was very good with my finances and I didn't have any debt, and up till 29, I stayed at the bank for 10 years, and I got pretty good training there, although I had to stay within the bank I was working at when the testing

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and development was going on in the 70s, they had a main frame area that had hyper-channel links throughout the city with... They were just doing fiber optic links, and I was in the group that was handling bringing down the systems and bringing them up, these IBM 3370 computers, batch operating computers with users on them, but the bank had problems. They had to get rid of people. I was the youngest in my department, and a lot of people there had seniority and they had families, and so they made it difficult for me, so I had to leave, and I could have fought it, but considering all the situation, I decided that it's time for me to be on my own, and I wasn't ready to be hurt, I felt like I was being harassed indirectly, and I wasn't ready to go through that fight because it wasn't clear enough... Path, so we decided to start something else. And that was in 86.

0:20:28.5 David Weisman [DW]: Okay, if I might, I just had a question on... You mentioned you're working at a large bank and without broaching the subject, do you believe at the time, what was a major employer like that's approach to LGBTQ employees, and were you able to be out at the job that you had...

0:20:50.2 TS: Well, you know. Some of the employees... I would say, half of the employees knew that I was and they were okay about it, and some of them were nice about it... Some of them are really nice. Actually, the ones when I first came in, in the mid-70s were really nice, but the managers are of all sorts, some were just really cool and others were... Well, they had some gay people working for them and they were treating them pretty badly, and I had to sit back and watch that, and I didn't like what I was seeing, it was... Interesting enough, all this was happening, I was working just a few blocks away from the Civic Center where the Dan White situation, was going on.

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0:21:49.4 DW: For the sake of an audience coming later on, who may not know that 'cause this archive will exist into the future, maybe you could back into that story a little bit.

0:22:00.2 TS: Well, Harvey Milk was there and there was some altercation... Being at the time that I was the age that I was at the time, I can't tell you as much details, but I know one thing is that, and some others, was that when the killing... When it happened, they had closed down the bank and we couldn't leave till after midnight and so this whole thing was going on right, right next to the bank, and everybody was fully aware of the tensions that were going on at the time with the gay community and the politicians. They had the vigils, it was another thing that brought gay people together, was having these vigils and having a way of forming a more mature community, so I'm not sure much more you would want to know about it, I kinda saw that transition in the Castro from like a slum community to a more mature, business oriented community with outreach to gay people, so I saw both sides of that too...

0:23:32.9 DB: Okay, and getting back to the 80s, could you tell me essentially the lead up to how you met Bart?

0:23:40.0 TS: Well, I was going out to places and I was finding out that I didn't really connect with a lot of these people because they were... Oh, they're in their cliques or their groups, and it's like you can't... Can't muscle in on... You can't easily meet people, or I think because they were afraid of meeting people also, but in any case, I got tired of going out and finding that I couldn't meet someone who was willing to enjoy life and have... Share a life together, and you know that night that I met Bart, I finally said to myself, and I really said it to myself with meaning, I said, you know what, I deserve a relationship. I think I've earned it. It's like after I was 29, after so many times

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going out and I finally took ownership, it's like, you know, yeah, I need... I want this, I need... And just at that time was, I was walking out of the place, Bart was coming down the stairway, and we both latched eyes on to each other, and he always has this great energy with his bright smile and happy face, and he didn't look like he was caught up in a clique. And I could just... We went dancing.

0:25:19.0 DB: We'll pick it up on you all's couple interview. I wanna thank you so much for...

0:25:28.3 DW: If I might, I just have a question, since it is a Central Coast archive project. And I'm sure we may get to that, but had you... Growing up in the Bay Area, had you had any knowledge of the Central Coast, had your family vacationed, had you gone to Morro Bay, or was this eventually gonna be a big surprise to you? And you can address that to Dylan.

0:25:47.1 TS: It was the biggest surprise in my whole life... The only thing I could think about the Central Coast was when my dad would take us... We actually drove all the way down to Los Angeles to go to Disneyland, and we had to come through this area, and this area was so... You know, it was so rural California back, back when nobody... You can't get any more rural than we are here, and I never thought I'd be living out here. But I love nature, and I'd always paint paintings of nature, and that was my getaway when I was a kid, was my mother encouraged me on painting, many paintings of nature and anyway, Bart was a blessing to me.

0:26:53.8 DW: That's 1989 just after you're 29. How many years is it between then and when you get to the Central Coast, and where did you spend the time in between...

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0:27:05.5 TS: Well, Bart, as he already had the ranch here when I met him in '88, but he wasn't able to live there quite yet, and so we were managing on... This should be part of the interview when we're talking together, I think.

0:27:26.1 DW: Is there anything else that you can think of that relates to that first part of your life... Your experiences that you might have forgotten to ask or you might wish to share.

0:27:41.4 TS: The door closes us out there.

0:27:42.7 DW: There's a ghost. Anything about what the San Francisco life in the 80s... You mentioned briefly in passing, AIDS was going on, did you get involved in activism specifically around that at the time?

0:27:58.3 TS: You know, at the time it was, I had enough going on with my family and my mother and keeping up with hospital appointments and such, and trying to deal without a dad, us dealing together. My mother had to go back to work, so I had to... I couldn't do a lot of activism, but I was able to be at the MCC and with that couple, and we were able to share experiences of... They were able to share experiences of what it's like to live with another person, and actually... I think one of the most important things I saw was out on the street, on the Castro, when I saw two men actually holding hands with each other, it's like, okay, there's something real about this now, it's not just... This is a way of living that is not sustaining me, and also the gay community needed to see that people committing their lives to each other and to bettering themselves and to helping each other through all their struggles. That's what we all needed. And I think we've done it. We'll talk about that more when I talk with Bart together on what the activism part was, is that I was able to have

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more activism at the time.

0:29:49.1 S1: Okay, I think we're good to wrap it up and we'll pick this amazing story back up with you all interview together, I wanna just thank you so much for allowing us to re-interview you in this beautiful home and on this beautiful ranch. Okay, thank you, appreciate you. Thank you very much for a humbled that you guys are doing this for us. And it's a blessing to us. Great, very grateful.