



"New Girl/Old Girl Wedding" at Arkansas State Teachers College, now the University of Central Arkansas, circa 1930. *Files of Author.*

INTRODUCTION

Outing Opal, Outing Arkansas

To repent is to own oneself entirely.

—SOREN KIERKEGAARD

Let me start with telling you this. She was actually my great-aunt, my grandmother's half sister, but everyone, including me, referred to her as simply "Aunt Opal." I have few memories of her that are entirely my own. The vague recollections I do have of her are of a kind woman who was fanatical about college football, especially her beloved Arkansas Razorbacks, and who always gave me circus peanuts the few times my grandmother took me to see her. Beyond this I remember nothing. I have no memories of Jerry, the woman with whom she lived for most of her adult life.

Suddenly in my late twenties, some time after Opal and Jerry had died, I was desperate for more memories. Coming out as a young gay man, first to myself and then to my family, involved a coming out as a family. A few years after I had come out to my parents, they began to reveal details about our extended family altogether new to me. My father, stoic but still deeply emotional in his own way, told me that Aunt Opal was most likely a lesbian. Subsequent talks with aunts and uncles only confirmed his suspicions.

I was enthralled. I peppered cousins, aunts, and uncles with questions seeking any details, any personal memories they could share about Opal and Jerry. No one really had any. Opal and Jerry, my father later explained to me, were always kept at a distance from the family, not primarily due to a suspicion of a taboo same-sex attraction but more so because my grandmother's side of the family always annoyed my grandfather. He saw them as poor and unsophisticated and did not want any of them around. Now, more than twenty years after her death in 1986,

no one can really recall precisely where she is buried or whether Jerry, who died a short time afterward, is beside her.

I wish I knew more, but I don't. My drive and determination to learn more about my family's queer lineage inadvertently began to unearth episodes of Arkansas's queer past. This project began in graduate school and coincided directly with my own coming out to my family. As I struggled with my personal identity, my own private history, I discovered that Arkansas had its own queer leanings. Poked at and made fun of by the rest, Arkansas as a state has always struggled with how to define and defend itself against the rest of the nation. Arkansas, along with the South in general, has long been considered a redheaded stepchild of the union, a poorer cousin of sorts. Its long-standing state motto, "The Land of Opportunity," was commonly a source of ridicule within and outside the state, mainly because Arkansas afforded little economic opportunity to citizens compared to more prosperous neighbors. After years of both informal and official debate, the motto was dumped for one that could ideally tout the state's positive aspects and lure the highly prized tourist dollar.

Branding the state proved to be serious business. The Arkansas legislature debated the topic in the late 1980s. The state's leading newspaper, the *Arkansas Gazette*, opened a "nickname the state" contest. More than a thousand entries were submitted from citizens across Arkansas. Possible slogans ranged from the comical "Arkansas: Not as Bad as You Might Think" and "Arkansas: Now Tick-Free" to more serious and catchier slogans that, it was hoped, would attract visitors and their wallets. Some suggested "The Diamond State" as a nickname, as Arkansas, with its diamond mine open to the public, was the only state where one might find a diamond in the rough. The question of how the state would redefine itself was the order of the day.¹ Among myriad entries, state officials narrowed the contest down to three possible slogans. I have adopted these slogans and use them as three part titles for three distinct queer Arkansas histories: The Diamond State, The Natural State, and The Land of Opportunity.

The Diamond State

That Sunday morning in the summer of 1956 was hotter than usual, even for Arkansas. While most Arkansans sat fanning themselves in

church, ten-year-old Robert Howard sat on the side of the road.² It was an act he had played out before, but something was different about this day's running away from home. He had adopted not only a new look but also a new identity to accompany it. Young Robert became a little blonde girl. He often modeled his sister's dresses. He enjoyed taking strolls around his hometown of Marvell, Arkansas, in those same dresses and donning the small, blonde wig he had ordered at the downtown five-and-dime. No one paid it any mind. No one gave the boy any trouble. Nevertheless, Howard wanted nothing more than to leave his home in the Arkansas Delta.

Throwing a few of his favorite dresses into a suitcase, he sat on the side of the road, thumb out, intent on hitchhiking to anywhere with anyone willing to give a little blonde girl a ride out of town. On Sunday morning cars were scarce. Finally, after some time, a black family traveling south to New Orleans to identify the body of a slain relative stopped to pick up the young hitchhiker. The family had driven the distance from Chicago to southeast Arkansas without incident or any real notice by anyone on their journey southward. Determined to keep it that way, they hid their white companion in the back of the car, placing Howard under blankets and quilts as they drove through the small towns and swamps of Arkansas and Louisiana.

Having dealt with their grisly family business in New Orleans, the group headed back north to Illinois and home. Approaching the town of Marvell, they tried desperately to convince their little blonde companion to come home with them to Chicago and live as a member of their family. She declined and was dropped off outside the town limits not far from where she started a few weeks earlier. Taking off her wig but leaving on the dress, Robert Howard made the walk home along those old familiar town roads where he in a dress had become a familiar sight. He was not entirely sure if he was able to fully pass as a little girl, never determining whether the black family had known or simply did not care whether he was a boy or a girl. He passed for the time he was with them, and he was tempted by their offer to let him live with them as their child in the big city. However, during their journey on the back highways along the Mississippi, he grew homesick for Marvell, Arkansas. It was his home, and though he had run away, all he wanted to do was run back.

Robert Howard's story is our first foray into Arkansas's queer past. Small-town drag shows were a tremendously popular means of rural entertainment and community fundraising, and little Robert most certainly would have been exposed to them at an early age. By the time Howard was an adult, drag in Arkansas, with glitzy showcases of queer talent in queer venues, would have changed from a means of rural entertainment to the principal means of gay community expression. Part one of this book will illustrate, through an analysis of the politics behind the performance of drag, how Arkansans used gender-bending numbers not only as an outlet for both subtle and explicit queer expression but also to showcase for those in attendance a number of social messages that ranged from racial subjugation to identity pride.

The Natural State

The fact that he was from Chicago made him a bit of an outsider already, but if his northern breeding were not suspect enough, the fact that unmarried Wellington Stephenson traveled with a black servant made him even more so. Stephenson arrived in Harrison, Arkansas, in the Ozark Mountains, on the morning of January 3, 1926, in his new position as the president of the North Arkansas Railroad. He troubled locals with his "city-type" mannerisms but probably much more with the company he kept.³ Jesse, a black man Stephenson referred to as his "servant," lived right in the house with Stephenson and cooked all his meals. From the beginning, the townsfolk were suspicious of the relationship between the two men. Whatever it might have been, it surely was unacceptable. Though the two would live together in Harrison for another eight years, Stephenson never gained the respect and, indeed, acceptance of the local rank and file in that north Arkansas railroad town. Finally, his superiors cited poor job performance and dismissed Stephenson from his position during the depths of the Great Depression when the railroad industry began to bottom out. The railroad had brought Stephenson, his big-city mannerisms, and his black male lover to Arkansas, and those in Harrison never treated Stephenson as anything but an outsider. Perhaps he could have passed living with another male, a white male. Many southern men managed to live together discreetly as confirmed bachelors, just as women lived quietly together as spinsters or old maids.

But Stephenson's queer combination of being from the dreaded north and having not just a male companion but a black male companion could not be ignored by the people of Harrison. Ultimately they could neither accept nor overlook these transgressions.

After the Second World War and as mobility increased, Arkansans found pride in the natural beauty found in the rolling hills of hardwoods and pines around small towns like Harrison and hoped to trade on it with the growing number of tourists moving across the country. But with the defining of the natural of course comes the defining of the unnatural. "The Natural State," the slogan that Arkansas would eventually settle on, illustrates the state's almost constant preoccupation with the natural and the unnatural. What is unnatural in the Natural State was continuously undergoing renegotiation and redefinition. Indeed, *unnatural* came to be used synonymously with queer desire, but this was not always the case. The unnatural and the abnormal, part two will demonstrate, changed along with societal discourse and cultural paranoia in an ongoing production of human difference by a larger heteronormative society. This part will focus on the Arkansas sodomy statute, exploring issues of power, resistance, and increasing gay and lesbian visibility in the state. Arkansas lawmakers distinguished themselves as the first in the nation to throw out their sodomy law in deeming it outdated and unnecessary. Then in a stunning reversal a year later, the sodomy law was rewritten to specifically address homosexuality, reflecting a trend of nascent queer visibility during the turbulent decade of the 1970s. The law was a peculiar means of discourse in society. Shown in this section, the sodomy law, with its in-flux definitions and applications, stood as a barometer of what society saw as abnormal and unnatural.

The Land of Opportunity

During the 1683 French expedition from Canada south along the Mississippi River, the explorer René Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, himself said to be intimately fond of his young and handsome valets, encountered tribes of Caddo Indians in what was then the Louisiana Territory. La Salle's aide, Henri Joutel, made a curious entry into the official log: he wrote of what he called the "hermaphrodites," male Indians who expressed and acted upon same-sex desires.⁴ This is the only reference

found in Joutel's journal to the homosexual identities of Indians who "passed among" the tribes in the Arkansas Territory. One thing is certain: the larger tribes in Arkansas had no real qualms with what we could consider gay Indians. The specific "hermaphrodite" encountered by Joutel later became the personal guide to La Salle's expedition.⁵

One of the few references I could find to same-sex desire in pre-Arkansas, that part of the Louisiana Territory that later became Arkansas, indicates that queer Indians were treated at worst with a passing disregard and perhaps as full and valued members of their tribes. This suggests to me that in the land that would become Arkansas, there was opportunity for the expression and larger acceptance of queer desire and sensibility long before Europeans would leave their mark on the land. As part three will illustrate, queers from both within and outside the state's boundaries eventually would construct, defend, and maintain personal spaces closely linked to their identities, whether they were simply a discreet queer bar in the basement of a hotel or, in one instance, the entire city limits of a tourist town in rural Carroll County. In any case Arkansas would be a "Land of Opportunity" for many gay people. By chronicling the establishment of rural communes, gay and lesbian tourism, and queer capitalism, this final section will focus on issues of creation and maintenance of gay and lesbian space, community, and queer expression and visibility in the age of queer capitalism.

But why a "queer" Arkansas? Many times throughout this work, I employ the word *queer* when speaking of both same-sex desire and identity in Arkansas. Throughout the text I use terms such as *gay* and *homosexual* interchangeably to describe an identity, using *homosex* to reference an act. When the term *queer* is employed, it is meant as far more than simply shorthand for gay and lesbian Arkansans. Used here, *queer* is meant as a descriptor, encompassing those who would claim to be gay or lesbian as well as those who engage in homosexual sex but would not or could not necessarily label themselves as such. I see *queer* acting as an umbrella used to summarize these various complicated identities as they are revealed in this work. Also, as seen in the events that unfold in subsequent chapters, *queer* can be seen to signify acts—not just identities—in certain cultures that contradict societal norms, whether by means of sexual, gender, or racial transgression.⁶ It is not my intention to comb through Arkansas history, waving some sort of post-Stonewall magic

wand, christening this person gay or that person lesbian. The identities and acts I have encountered here are far too complex at times to be labeled as simply *gay* or *lesbian*. There, *queer* can come in handy.

Each part provides an analysis of queer episodes of Arkansas history. Each will also detail a period of transformation, a queer segue from one period to the next within these sections. Also, within these pages, the queer histories are presented chronologically. Generally, histories are far more accessible this way. But I intend to steer clear of offering any timeline of a shared queer past. Any such timeline gives a false impression that history moves in a linear, progressive fashion so that we may look back and subtly scoff at the way things used to be. Arkansas was never behind; Arkansas never played catch-up to modern alternatives found elsewhere in the nation. Rather, Arkansas offered and operated under specific social and cultural conditions that shaped it as an alternative modernity.⁷ To have a dialogue with these modernities, new parameters of discussing sexuality and desire become necessary, parameters that allow us and our historical gaze to look beyond rigid boundaries of homosexuality as the only framework in which to view our past. The alternative queer modernity I offer here will question and adjust the use of sexual topography to include alternative queer lives that operate outside the dominant mode of addressing queer histories within the large “privileged metropolis.”⁸ This approach, by using a spatially defined rural environment, Arkansas, will illustrate that while urban queer lives were enjoying a new modernity after the Second World War, this modernity was never fixed or confined within the urban framework. Arkansas, this work will prove, operated within its own framework of modernity, buttressed by and defined within specific cultural circumstances found in the rural South.⁹ Being there, Arkansans were able to construct enabling spaces in which to negotiate sexuality and desire. Once a friend asked why gay southerners do not simply pack up and leave for the city. Many do. I did. Many can’t. Moving takes money. More importantly to note is that many don’t want to move. There are certain things about southern culture—the closeness to the land, church on Sunday—that so many do not want to give up to be another face in the city. It is their version of modernity that they cling to. No other will do.

Within the borders of twentieth-century Arkansas, queer Arkansans were regularly able to create and cordon off physical spaces which were their own, spaces ranging from backwoods drag clubs to lesbian

communes tucked away in the Ozark Mountains. These venues were often protected from the intrusion of straight Arkansans and their social norms. Beyond these enclaves, expressions of queer life often were seen within larger straight communities where they were given casual and often unspoken approval of some deviation from accepted sexual norms. Encroachment of queer individuals and spaces in Arkansas came about when the larger heteronormative society within the state, in a postwar adjustment of social attitudes and perceptions, restructured what exactly Arkansans should see as deviant and threatening. Also, as the Second World War ushered in the civil rights movement, only then was queer really politicized. Only then, in the postwar reconstructing of America's families, their homes, their jobs, and the roads that connected them, would queer become a deeper transgression in Arkansas. It is at this time that the state began a rearticulation and transference of fear that had less to do with racial transgressions and more to do with sexual ones. It is here, as we will see in *The Diamond State*, where rural drag shows performed in churches and schools lost their popularity, only for drag to reemerge decades later in gay bars across the state as not only a lucrative business practice but also as a larger means of community expression and articulation. It is at this point that, as will be seen in *The Natural State*, the sodomy law is rewritten, with the same language once used to condemn interracial sex now used to denounce sexual acts between those of the same sex. During this time, illustrated in *The Land of Opportunity*, lesbians from across the country, seeking peace from the growing animosity toward queer sexuality, retreated into the Arkansas hills to construct communities on their own land and on their own terms. These disparate sections come together to form a large narrative on southern history and will illustrate the complex contradictions that are characteristic of gay life in a southern context.

This work will focus on ideas of community and community building. I will illustrate the relationship between identity formation, community articulation, political mobilization, and cultural visibility within a proper contextual background and historical episodes such as the Second World War, the civil rights movement, post-Stonewall visibility, and the AIDS epidemic.¹⁰ How these episodes work to redefine and renegotiate cultural understandings will also be addressed. For example I will examine how

queer Arkansans, within specific cultural conditions, build sustainable queer communities within seemingly hostile southern environments.

In examining these cultural and social circumstances that shape daily queer lives in the South, this work builds upon John D’Emilio, George Chauncey, Estelle Freedman, Esther Newton, Lisa Duggan, and, more specifically, John Howard. In his collection *Carryn’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South* Howard offers up the “three Rs,” three useful analytical rubrics of race, religion, and the rural that cannot be avoided when speaking of southern life.¹¹ Race and religion shape the daily lives of queer Americans, but more so and in different fashions in the South. The rural landscape, the fabled and feared backwoods of America, is more complicated as it shapes both race and religion. In Arkansas, a state where so much of daily life deals with land and land extraction, the varied topographical regions found in the state produce varied populaces. Arkansans shape the natural landscape, and the natural landscape is constantly writing itself on the landscape of the body, from the callused hands of the Ozark plowman to the dirty, sweaty faces and sun-baked necks of the Delta cotton pickers. All Arkansans, all queer Arkansans, sit within the same larger state boundary, under the same political system, but the lay of the land produces a law of the land that shapes rural lives perhaps more than any other factor. No one map of Arkansas will suffice. Clearly, no one map of gay Arkansas will do either, as there is a need for multiple queer mappings across multiple and varied landscapes. Indeed, the varied landscapes across the South produce different queer results, and this work builds upon many who have detailed queer lives in the rural. John Howard is chief among them.

The rural lives and landscapes presented here depart from rural histories like those found in John Howard’s hugely important *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*. The most important of these departures stems from Howard’s assertion that the majority of queer lives in Mississippi operated under a norm of “quiet complacency” offered by the larger heterosexual/white society. Though this may well have been true for queer Mississippians, it seems that queer Arkansans demanded something different than what Howard deems a “culture of quiet accommodation.”¹² Simply judging from the photographs explored later in drag productions as early as the 1930s, the word *quiet* would hardly work to accompany *queer*. But at other times queer life was extremely quiet. Queer Arkansans

lived and negotiated around these contradictions every day. Beyond this, these pages will work to construct a more complete history of the queer South beyond the entirely male (and largely white) study that Howard has given us in that it seeks to include the queer rural woman.

In finding queer on the landscape, let us turn to the land itself. Arkansas, as the nation's twenty-fifth state, has always been concerned with its land in some capacity, seen in both the old and new state mottos touting the land in either the opportunity it affords or the natural beauty it offers. This diverse land is seen in five distinct geographical areas.¹³ Little Rock, the capital, sits almost dead center in the state. It is a city where the streets in one fashionable, upper-middle-class neighborhood are named for presidents but manage to skip Lincoln and pick up again at Grant. To the north toward Oklahoma and Missouri lie the Ozark Mountains covering most of the northwest quadrant of the state. To the south of the Ozarks sit the Ouachita Mountains. Dividing the entire state is the Arkansas River, carving out the Arkansas River valley as it flows between the mountain ranges from the Oklahoma border and then turns more to the south at Little Rock to flow across the flat Delta region toward the Mississippi River. The fertile Delta is a vast wedge of land running the length of the state's eastern border on the Mississippi River inward to a point east of Little Rock. Below the river and Little Rock, the Gulf Coastal Plain is wedged between the Delta and the Ouachita Mountains and runs to the southern border of Arkansas. All of these regions shape Arkansas culture and politics.

The diverse regions and landscapes found in Arkansas produce diverse and, at times, divided communities. The stark economic and social variances within Arkansas produce tensions between the agricultural southeast and the industrial northwest over interests still very much tied to the land. Focusing on smaller communities within the larger boundaries of the state is absolutely necessary not only to bridge these gaps between regions but also to examine common and contrasting aspects of race and class found within smaller communities across the state. With this in mind, this work is creating a community history. I do not intend to simply offer more historical threads in the overall tapestry of Arkansas history. Instead, I have created a specific past that seems to have been lost in a fit of queer aphasia. To achieve this, I have depended heavily on oral history. Just as so much of southern culture is passed down orally, so too does this work rely

primarily on the spoken rather than the written word. Difficulties in researching a project of this nature were abundant. Oral histories not only helped to solve many of these problems but also played an essential role in building the textual framework for the arguments found here.¹⁴ This work uses oral histories to record personal experiences and larger community histories that would otherwise be lost. The South as a region seems to constantly replay history so that the past never really passes in the South. Battles over the use of the Confederate flag, civil rights issues, controversial laws against teaching evolution in the classroom, as well as issues of sex and sexuality are all written across the South's tortured brow and are constantly revisited by both layperson and legislator alike. As I articulate these histories here, people will have their own memories of them. We differ in that I intend to collect them, bring them into a proper context, and share them with my fellow queer Arkansans in an effort to work against any aphasia, to write these histories again across the landscape of the South but this time in a queer voice and from a deeply personal perspective.

Even while constructing this history, my intentions remain quite selfish. In digging up what I could about my queer lineage, in an effort to own myself entirely, I discovered a queer past that moved beyond my family. Nevertheless, this work remains a highly personal journey. All good history is in some way personal, and how it is important to the historian, I believe, must be articulated. In keeping with that, I will remind the reader throughout this work of its personal meaning to me, my personal take on things, as well as my own queer history as it relates to this work. I came to realize that a better understanding of myself over time provides not only a better understanding of those who came before but also a possible connection to people and places now gone.

What legal scholar Casey Charles calls "autohistory," this relaying of the personal, shifts historical perspective to invite the audience into a constant conversation with countless others within and outside the text.¹⁵ It is a journey that began with the outing of a relative I hardly remembered and became a personal memory of a private and now public queer Arkansas.

Most importantly, throughout this work, I was always reminded of Opal and never deviated from her legacy as my interest grew into a larger focus. And for that, I am grateful to her.