

B Hollowell

A: Marlene and I were in the first Gay Pride March Asheville ever had. I'm not sure if it wasn't the first one in North Carolina. June, 1992.¹

The guy from Village Voice was down. And so our picture was in the *Village Voice*. You know, the *Greenwich Village Voice*, in New York. And this was the picture. (She shows it)

Q: So this was in the national paper.

A: Well, yeah, we were proud. (laughter) And of course, you know, that section of New York has always been very, very open and everything. And this is the picture of our ceremony -- it was in the park in Ormond Beach. And, Leigh, my daughter, standing up for me, and her partner standing up for me, and Marlene's niece standing up for her. Our facilitator, and --

Q: That a photographer?

A: That's -- yeah, she's a friend. She was doing a video. And it is a fantastic video, and I really ought to send a copy to the 'Lesbian Herstory Archives' --

Q: 'Herstory Archives'? Yeah.

¹ The first Gay Pride march in North Carolina was in Durham in the 1980s after a gay bashing.

A: -- in New York. I really ought to send them a copy, I haven't. But they're struggling too. They don't have enough money -- it's hard.

Q: No, and they are insistent that it be volunteer rather than make it connected to some organization that will have --

A: Help them.

Q: -- help them, yeah.

A: Well, that's their, yeah.

Q: That's their way of looking at it.

A: I know.

Q: OK, so I'm going to start by saying a couple of things. This is Kathy Staley, with Browne Hollowell.

A: Hollowell.

Q: On March 10th, 2010. How I usually start these interviews, is asking you your full name, age, birth country, and where you now live. And then we'll go into talking about things more specific to the purpose of this project.

A: Fine. OK, shall I start?

Q: Mhm.

A: OK. Well, my name is Browne Hollowell. About almost 20 years ago, I decided I was over my first name, so I wiped it out and had my legal name be Browne Hollowell. A lot of people know me as Betty, Betty Hollowell. And as Betty Torreyson, because that was my maiden name before I was

married. And, I was born in Washington, D.C., spent most of my growing up time in Maryland. And, I came to Asheville to live in 1992. January the 20th, I moved into my beautiful house, in Kenilworth. And, the reason I came here? Well, I had had two serious relationships, after I was divorced. And I divorced just about the time that I was doing history at Appalachian State [University].
And...

Q: What year was this?

A: 1979 and 1980. I would have stayed and kept on, but I became the curator of a local history museum in Tazewell County, Virginia, of which I am very proud. It's expanded now, it started small. But it's become quite an area history museum. Historic Crab Orchard Museum is the name of it. And Nelle Bundy was the director. So, anyway, I was pretty loose and probably acting like a teenage lesbian. (laughter) Which I'd never gotten to do, you know. Having been married right out of college. However, my daughter was in Asheville, and she was, at that time, a physical therapist. She said, 'You know, you're still living up there on South Mountain in Maryland, and there is nothing between Hagerstown and Frederick that is "out" at all. So why don't you come down to Asheville, I've got a couple of things to show you. Just come for a visit.' I

came for a visit, and I fell in love with Asheville. First thing she did was take me to Malaprop's. (laughter) Everybody has to go to Malaprop's first.

Q: Describe what Malaprop's is, and what it meant for you.

A: What it meant for me was, that Malaprop's is -- or was, I think it still is -- a privately owned bookstore. And they had a big selection of gay and lesbian books, and it was a place where, if you hung around that book section, you'd get to meet people. And I did. (laughter) And I did. Second place she took me, was Tuesday night to CLOSER. CLOSER is an organization for both men and women, and at the time, it had a lot of women in it. Times have changed, there are more women organizations now, and mostly, CLOSER is a place for men, although Marlene and I go there a lot, because that's what we started doing a long time ago. And we have friends there, and I've also noticed that a lot of trans people go there. Although there is a trans group, but anyway, so where are we now? So, I fell in love. I fell in love with Asheville, and I said, 'This would be a great place to live.' And my daughter said, 'I know this person who's fixing to sell her house. Why don't you go take a look at it? I spent the summer there once, taking care of the dog, and it's pretty nice.' OK, I go there. I fell in love with the house. I said, 'How much do you

want?' (laughter) That's one way you buy a house anyway. And she told me. And, I said, 'OK, I'll give you this much now, and we'll close, such and such a time.' And the whole thing worked out great. Then I went to the Music and Comedy Festival, and I met Marlene. And that was the beginning of my having a relationship just with Marlene, and not running all over the place. So I quit being a teenage lesbian. Because that was not going to work with her, you know. Uh-uh, uh-uh, uh-uh. And, what else?

Q: Could you tell me about where you met Marlene? What was the event?

A: Yes, it was called, 'Women's Music and Comedy Festival'. And it went on for several years in Cleveland, Georgia [of White County]. Cleveland is a tee-niny town, in the north part of Georgia which is very close to Asheville, if you look on the map. And, they had a wonderful campground. And so, that's what it was. It was camping out, you had tents, or you had pop-ups, or you know, you had RVs. And a -- just a friend of mine, had said, 'I've always wanted to go to this. Could we go together? It would be nice.' Now, we weren't partners or anything like that, we were friends. So we did. And, as I was coming down from breakfast the next morning, here was this person sitting on the bench, by the path. And she said, 'Hello? Could I

talk to you for awhile?' And I said, 'Sure.' And then she began to tell me, she had seen me in this video. And that was true, and I said, 'Oh my god.' You know, my fifteen minutes of fame. (laughter) The video is called, 'Lesbian Tongues.' And I don't know if you've ever heard of it, or seen it. It's extremely interesting. My partner at the time, Deanie Williams and I, were invited to be on it. And there were a number of very well-known lesbians who are on it, JoAnn Loulan, JEB, Joan Nestle, Minnie Bruce Pratt, that's some of 'em. And if you'd like to have a copy of that, you know, this is possible. Because I don't know -- maybe Lesbian Herstory Archives has a copy, I'm not sure. But, of course, it came out on, what? Tape, yeah. What do they call, VCR?

Q: VCR tapes.

A: Yeah. And we've got one copy now that's on DVD. Which of course can be copied. And, anyway, she said, 'So you were on this video.' And then, she was saying how much she had liked it, and she said, 'I haven't seen your partner.' And I said, 'Well, we separated in 1988', so we sat there and we talked for four hours. Sometimes other people would come up, and we would pretend to be including them in the conversation, but we really weren't. And it was a mind-to-mind thing, it was not, you know, physical, erotic --

eroticism at first glance. It wasn't -- it wasn't that at all. It was mental. And we -- we just had such a great time talking with each other. Now she will tell you that after that, I ran off for the evening with a friend of hers, and so forth, and so on, which is all true. But, that was not something that was a lasting thing, and I was busy over the summer. I was in New York, I was in California. And during that time, I wrote to her. I sent her some poems. I sent her some flowers. I was courting her. Marlene, I mean. I was courting her. And then when I came back home it was around Labor Day, and she said, 'I've got the weekend off. Why don't we go someplace where it's cool? I'm fed up with this hot Florida weather.' I said, 'I live in the mountains, come up.' She did, and I took her on the Blue Ridge Parkway, and I took her down to Looking Glass Falls, and I got this picnic all together for her, on the way, you know. And I made chicken salad sandwiches, and I had real napkins, and (laughter). Anyway, we did fall in love. And decided that we would have a long-distance relationship. But that we would -- and we could have friends, but we would not date other people. That was the understanding. Well that lasted maybe until November, and we got tired of that. (laughter) So by December, we were deciding that we should have a

full-time commitment. And, then I went down to live with her, and our whole idea was that we would have this commitment ceremony which was first to be in May. Then we pushed it up to April, then we put it on the 28th of March. But we would -- all the way up to the very day, if we decided it was wrong, we could call it off. Well, we didn't call it off. And I can't -- you know, I'm not sorry. I am glad for this -- what is it? 1992, what are we on? 18?

Q: 18 years.

A: The 28th of March it will be, 18 years, and the 28th is coming up in a couple of weeks. OK, it's been good. It's really, really been good. And we did our -- we wrote the ceremony ourselves. We had a friend to be the facilitator. And our standup people could have a time to speak also, and it was very beautiful. We dressed and at first, you know, she thought, well, and we both thought, 'I could wear a dress, and she could wear a tux.' Well, very early, like in December, she was up for the weekend for us to do some writing. And she said, 'I've got something to tell you.' And I thought, 'Oh my god. She's got something to tell me. Is she going to call the whole thing off?' And we -- I was driving, and I went into a parking place and stopped the car. And I said, 'OK, what is it?' She said, 'I've

decided, I don't want to wear a tux. I'm a woman, and I want to be a woman at this ceremony. Because we are two women making a commitment.' And I said, 'Gee, that's wonderful!' [Laughter] So, that's what we did. And the very beautiful and expensive trimming that we got for my dress, which was made especially for me, and we also had her blouse trimmed in it too. And, she wore a beautiful suit, ladies suit, you know. And I wore the long white dress. Though it wasn't a wedding dress style. You know, you saw the picture.

Q: Could you describe them?

A: Well, it was just a simple white, long dress to the ankles. With slits up the sides, maybe to the knee. And it was not blousy, but neither was it tight-form fitting. It was a loose fitting sheath. And it had sleeves maybe down to the elbows. It was in Florida, so you know, the weather was very warm then.

Q: It was an outside wedding?

A: And it was an outside wedding, it was in the Ormond Memorial Gardens in Ormond Beach, Florida, which are beautiful gardens. And then we had a reception at the Unitarian Church. And Bonnie, who was making this video of the whole ceremony, also went around and had all of our friends talk a bit, and that's on the video too. There were

probably 55 people at the ceremony. And at least a third of them were straight. And many of them were from Marlene's office, where she had been a -- not actually a CPA, but an accountant. I'm trying to tell the truth here, you know. Let's see, what else, what else?

Q: So y'all move to -- to your house in Asheville?

A: So, she moved up to the house in Asheville, which is what we had planned. And I lived with her down there [in Florida] through the tax season, because being an accountant, she would never leave the office before tax season was over, because it would be a terrible drain on the other people in the office to just leave all of her accounts. No, you wouldn't do that. But anyway, after that, then she came up, and we were in our house in Asheville, and began to live the Asheville life of art walks, and concerts, and CLOSER and Malaprop's and - Malaprop's has these wonderful evening events, where authors come in and tell about their books and things like that. I'm trying to think what else. In '98, we did a Blue Ridge Pride weekend. It wasn't a March, but it was a weekend of open events for people to come to, and it ended up on the Saturday night with a big music concert that I and other musicians had all gotten together. And then after that, we had the reading of all of our friends who

had died of AIDS, because if you remember, in 1998, we knew all these beautiful guys here and we saw them fade away and it broke our hearts. Some of them we had known really well, some not so well. But our friend, Bill Allen, who was a gay man that we dearly, dearly loved, and I worked with him on a lot of other projects as well, and he would not mind my saying his name, although he is no longer with us. He -- I think he's been gone probably by now, about five years. -- I mean dead. Anyway, he was the one who read that night. So, ask me questions, I'm kind of running out.

Q: Could you tell me a little bit about what -- what since you just brought up AIDS, what the situation was in the '90s with AIDS, before the medicines came out, I guess medicines that have helped people extend their lives came out in '97, '98.

A: Yeah, medicines began to be available then.

Q: I'm particularly interested from your view as a woman, were there lesbians and bisexual women helping the people who had AIDS? Or was it pretty much...

A: Back in the early '90s, we helped our friends, and we got over worrying if we would catch AIDS, because we learned that it is mainly through blood, or other bodily fluids, that AIDS is contagious, not by being near an AIDS patient.

Probably, our greatest service was in the formation of Loving Food, first started in early 1991. A group of us, one of our leaders was Bill Allen, started this food bank, called Loving Food, and we got food from MANNA, and other sources, donations, we even had fresh donations, and we would pack boxes, load them in our cars, and take them around to our patients who had signed up. Marlene and I did this for years, and I know some lesbians who are still volunteering at Loving Food. I will email them and see if they would like to talk with you.

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