Invisible Histories Project comes to Mississippi

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Focus Midsouth

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[Above right: Early 1900s ‘chapbook’ written by a young man from Central Alabama. In the photo is almost certainly the diarist himself, Joe Hulse (on the left). The chapbook contains Gay themed poetry written by Hulse to several men that he had relationships with including a poem to ‘Alf’ (original diary entry above right). It is believed that the Alf of this poem is the young man on the right in the photo, and that this photo was taken]
at the Cahaba River near Irondale, Ala. The University of Mississippi is now partnering with Invisible Histories Project to create a similar collection of Mississippi LGBTQ ephemera to be housed on the Ole Miss campus, and later, at additional repositories throughout the state.]

Alf

I remember always one perfect summers day,
When the whole wide world seemed glad and gay;
When the hours trilled by like a happy song—
   and life was sweet the whole day long.
Did the sun shine? No, it was raining fast.
Did the flowers bloom? No; they drooped in the blast.
Did the birds sing? No; they hid in the tree—
   But gosh ogee! You were there with me!
—J.H., 1912

Across three states, Invisible Histories Project (IHP) is preserving LGBTQ history. That two of those states are in the deep South is perhaps what makes this project most extraordinary. Alabama and Mississippi both have a profound history of hate crimes, so for IHP to be partnering with state universities to document the history of this marginalized community, it seems that equity has taken hold in the culture.

IHP’s leaders are on a mission to preserve, collect, and protect the Southeastern United States’ living history of the diversity of the Queer community – both urban and rural, all within 10 years. Joshua Burford, one of its leaders, is an award-winning historian, archivist, and educator with over 20 years of experience creating stronger communities for queer and transgender people across the U.S. Burford is a native of Alabama who grew up in Anniston. He attended The University of Alabama for his undergraduate and master’s degrees.

Alongside Burford is Maigen Sullivan. Sullivan earned her Bachelor of Arts in History
and her Master of Arts in Women’s Studies from The University of Alabama. She is pursuing a Ph.D. from University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). She was the founding organizer of Ladyfest Deep South, a three-day festival celebrating music, film, craft and food from women and queer folks in Tuscaloosa, Ala.

In 2013 Burford began Invisible Histories Project to document the queer and trans history of Charlotte, North Carolina. He then took the work to Alabama, ferreting out oral histories and ephemera from that state’s LGBTQ community. Now, IHP has partnered with The University of Mississippi (UM) to do the same for Mississippi.

Enter UM’s Assistant Professor of History and Southern Studies, Jessie Wilkerson. “In 2017, I wanted to run an LGBTQ oral history project out of my class,” she said. “The class I was teaching started what we’ve been calling the Queer Mississippi Oral Histories Project.
RELAX, BY FRANKIE GOES TO HOLLYWOOD, IS NOW PART OF THE IHP-MISSISSIPPI COLLECTION FROM THE PERSONAL EFFECTS OF THE LATE DJ, CHARLES SMITH. SMITH DIED IN 2008, BUT HAD SPUN THE RECORDS DURING HIS CAREER AT GAY BARS THROUGHOUT MISSISSIPPI. MCDOWELL’S FATHER PURCHASED SMITH’S COLLECTION (MORE THAN 800 ALBUMS) AFTER SMITH’S DEATH. REALIZING THEIR IMPORTANCE TO THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY, HE HAS DONATED THEM TO THE IHP-MISSISSIPPI COLLECTION.

“(Burford) had just started the Invisible Histories Project but was focusing on Alabama. But at that time (Burford) said ‘we would really love to have satellite projects in other places in the South.’ I said to count us in. Amy and I (Amy McDowell, UM Assistant Professor of Sociology), once we had the IHP model, we worked on getting an Isom Fellowship through the Sarah Isom Center to expand that [oral history] project. Eventually we got a (UM) team together with Amy, Jaime Harker (Director of the Sarah Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies), and staff at the (UM) archives and collections. The Center for the Study of Southern Culture has also been supportive, naming the project, as well as immigration, part of its “Future of the South” initiative.

When she met them, Wilkerson said, Burford and Sullivan had been working to secure funding from a Mellon Foundation grant. “They put (the University) on that grant to get a sub award so that we could be a satellite of IHP. We hired a couple of graduate students (to help with the project). The goal is after two years to have 40 interviews, really focusing on North Mississippi and Tupelo, and to collect personal papers and organization documents for the archives.”
OUT
AND PROUD!
UNIVERSITY of ALABAMA
GAY STUDENT UNION
In fact, IHP-Mississippi launched the weekend of October 11 at the 2nd Annual Tupelo Pride festival. There was a kickoff event including a drag show on Friday night. On Saturday, Burford and Sullivan manned a table at the event to hand out information about the project. They were able to meet with locals and ask questions of them like where they’d hung out in the past, and to discuss how to donate items to the collection.

Wilkerson said that her LGBTQ students have been drawn to the project, but that allies have also wanted to participate. People understand it’s a new and exciting thing; in general, any kind of oral history project is, she said. “The students are excited to know the LGBTQ history in their state and the contemporary politics around LGBTQ issues. This is one of the major issues of their day.”

At the moment, The University of Mississippi is the only repository in Mississippi
with the goal of having them around the state. Alabama has been at this a little longer, Wilkerson said, so they already have several repositories throughout their state.

THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI PROFESSORS JESSICA WILKERSON AND AMY MCDOWELL WILL HELP LEAD THE IHP-MISSISSIPPI TEAM.

You can read more on the Invisible History Project at invisiblehistory.org. The IHP-Mississippi collection will be available to view after processing which will take about a year. It will be housed in the Archives and Special Collections Department of the J.D. Williams Library, Room 318.

If you would like to donate to the IHP-Mississippi collection, or if you have stories to share about LGBTQ history in Mississippi, contact Wilkerson at jcwilkers@go.olemiss.edu.
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