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Queer Twin Cities by GLBT Oral History Project

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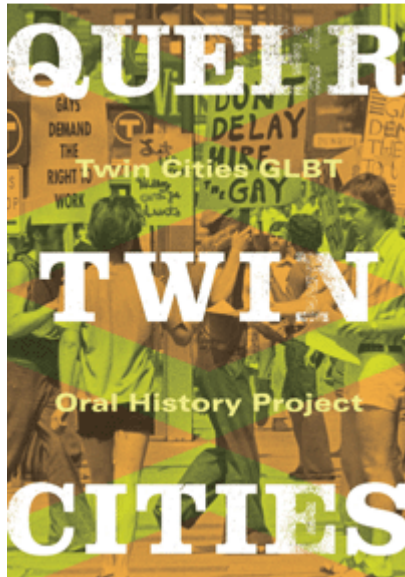
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‘Queer Twin Cities’ by GLBT Oral History Project

Posted on 16 Jan, 2011 by Rachel Wexelbaum



[QUEER TWIN CITIES](#)

by the Editorial Board of the Twin Cities GLBT Oral History Project
The University of Minnesota Press
Paperback, 9780816653218, 332 pp.

In Minnesota, understatement is a virtue. Minnesotans value the ability to endure and make do, preferring to drive a regular car “like everyone else” even if they can afford a BMW convertible.

A polite, honest, hardworking person who participates in community events and talks with their neighbor about the weather will fit in well in Minnesota, regardless of where they were born or who they find attractive.

For this reason, the concept of “coming out” in Minnesota, as well as the evolution of LGBT community and LGBT activism in Minnesota, takes a slightly different path than in more aggressive cities like New York or flamboyant cities such as Los Angeles.

Queer Twin Cities (The University of Minnesota Press) is the first book to address the history of the LGBT population in Minneapolis, St. Paul, and surrounding communities within Minnesota.

Most LGBT Americans associate “gay America” with San Francisco, Los Angeles, or New York City; few are aware that 2001 U.S. Census figures reveal that the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan region has one of the highest concentrations of gay and lesbian couples in the United States (Human Rights Campaign, 2004).

Minnesota is also the home of two major LGBT civil rights figures: Steve Andean, a University of Minnesota graduate who founded the Human Rights Campaign, and Allan Spear, one of the first openly gay Americans to serve in a state senate, who got the 1993 Minnesota Human Rights Act—one of the most comprehensive non-discrimination laws in the nation—passed as law.

From the end of the nineteenth century to this day, LGBT Midwesterners received a warmer reception in the Twin Cities than in other parts of the state, and for this reason Minneapolis is often called “The San Francisco of the Midwest.” In spite of this oasis of tolerance, LGBT Minnesotans continue to fight for state legalization of their relationships, domestic partner benefits, and safe schools, completely unaware of their state history. The time for this book has come.

The Editorial Board of the Twin Cities GLBT Oral History Project, a collective composed primarily of doctoral students and American Studies/history faculty from the University of Minnesota and other research universities, compiled *Queer Twin Cities* with the intention of erasing the myth expressed by Jennifer Pierce that “the Midwest is the place of gay suicidal despair.” The project began in 2003, when two University of Minnesota doctoral students in American Studies and English (Jason Ruiz and Dorthie Troefen) and two professors (Kevin P. Murphy and Roderick Ferguson) both submitted research proposals to collect oral histories from LGBT individuals in the area. The newly combined team wanted to find out “how sexuality is constituted and makes meaning about queer relations in the Twin Cities.” The book also illustrates that the Twin Cities LGBT community is a diverse one; three chapters are devoted to LGBT people of color, one chapter specifically addressing Two Spirit people.

The GLBT Oral History Project collected over 100 interviews with LGBT Twin Cities residents; passages of the interviews were used as evidence to support research findings in 11 chapters about different aspects of the Twin Cities LGBT experience. The researchers explain, in great detail, the challenges of recruiting and interviewing LGBT people for their project. In the beginning, the researchers limited their study to subjects at least fifty years old who had lived in Minneapolis or St. Paul for at least thirty years.

In order to collect stories from a sufficient number of transgender Minnesotans, however, the researchers had to loosen up their limitations. They also discovered that the University of Minnesota requires a separate Institutional Review Board (IRB) application for oral history research with transgender subjects due to their status as “medicalized subjects” perceived as a vulnerable population. The researchers wrote a chapter in the book devoted to the history of transgender and transsexual research at the University of Minnesota as a result of what they had learned. Graduate students, psychologists, doctors, and others who collect sensitive information from human beings will find these chapters valuable for their own practices.

Queer Twin Cities highlights many positive, surprising phenomena that took place in Minnesota, starting off with a chapter on the homosocial relationships of lumberjacks. Apparently, the British comedy troupe Monty Python really was singing about a Minnesotan lumberjack who liked to put on women’s clothing and hang around in bars. Due to their working conditions, lumberjacks were actually encouraged by the state to foster male friendships so that they would stay on the job.

Some of the male friends would dress as women to entertain the others. This early history of tolerance may have led to the proliferation of gay bars in Minneapolis with little persecution from the police, as compared to the number of violent police raids in Los Angeles and New York during the same time period. According to Jason Ruiz, "...Stonewall was not a moment of universal consequence for queers [in Minnesota]." Few bar raids or bathroom sting operations existed in the memories or newspaper archives of Twin Cities LGBT memory, but AIDS was a problem, as well as substance abuse and relations with residents of poor neighborhoods experiencing "gentrification".

Unusual for academic works, the paperback version of *Queer Twin Cities* is larger than standard format and has QUEER TWIN CITIES in huge print across the front cover. It is a challenge to those who believe that LGBT people have played no part in Minnesota history. Size and layout of the book, however, would make some not-yet-out Minnesotans uncomfortable carrying it out in the open. This book could get a high school student from less gay-friendly regions of Minnesota (including certain suburbs of the Cities) harassed unless it came with a brown paper bag cover to camouflage it among their other school textbooks. And yet it would be a high school student or teacher who would greatly benefit from the existence of this book, to learn that LGBT Minnesotans are good neighbors, and that a true Minnesotan is tolerant.

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