

UC Santa Cruz

Out in the Redwoods

Title

David Thomas: Out in the Redwoods, Documenting Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender History at the University of California, Santa Cruz, 1965-2003

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Authors

Thomas, David
Reti, Irene H.

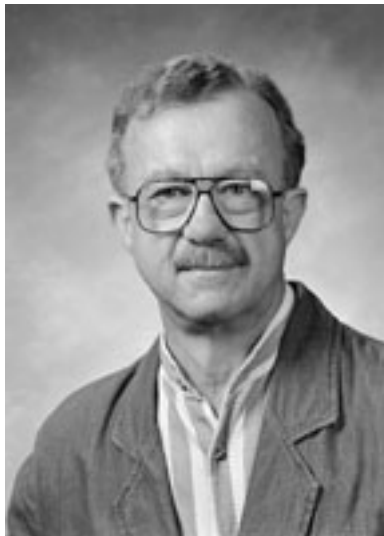
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DAVID THOMAS



Interviewer, Irene Reti: *David Thomas was interviewed on November 8, 2001 at the Regional History office in McHenry Library. Thomas was a professor of politics at UCSC from 1966 to 1999. He taught Sexual Politics: Gay Politics, the first regular gay course taught by a faculty member at UCSC, and one of the first in the United States.*

Thomas: I was born in 1934 in Grinnell, Iowa. I think of my life as having three geological layers. The first, and the most basic, was my Midwestern childhood and youth. I grew up in Iowa and Wisconsin, for the most part, also a little bit in Nebraska and Ohio. I came from an educated family of what the English called the clerisy. My family were teachers, preachers, librarians, people like that. My grandfather was a very eminent Congregational minister, my mother's father. I was born in Grinnell, Iowa. Then we moved around, lived in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. My father died when I was twelve.



We moved back to Grinnell. We lived right across the street from Grinnell College. I liked the college, and I wanted to go to a place like that, but not across the street. So I went to Oberlin College in Ohio, which was very similar, academically serious. A Midwestern kind of place. Co-ed, with a distinguished liberal political tradition, the first co-educational college in the world, and the first college to give degrees to African Americans. So that's my Midwestern layer.

Then I spent ten years in the East and in Europe. I went to graduate school at Harvard, and I was there from 1957 to 1960. I spent a year in London right after college at the London School of Economics. Then in 1960 to 1962, I did dissertation research in Stockholm, and was back at Harvard 1962 to 1966, when I was a teaching fellow. In 1966, I switched again and came to Santa Cruz, right at the beginning, not the first year, but the first year of Stevenson College. I was one of the founding faculty of Stevenson, and spent my entire career at Santa Cruz, from 1966 to 1999.

Reti: What brought you to UCSC?

Thomas: I wanted a change. I had always been attracted to the West, ever since I first visited it the year after I graduated from high school. I fell in love with the West, and got it in the back of my mind that if it worked out, I wanted to end up there sometime. This was in the years when UC Santa Cruz was just opening. Enormous publicity and prestige, and people in higher education were very excited about it. I know a number of my friends who were graduate students at Harvard were interested. I had been a teaching fellow for David Reisman, who had a particular connection with Santa Cruz, had written about it. He was writing about higher education in those years. So when the opportunity arose, it just seemed very exciting. The capstone was that in February of 1966, the winter before Stevenson was to open, there was a weekend retreat organized by Charles Page and Sheila Hough, the early leaders of Stevenson. We flew out of an ice storm in Boston, and came out into one of those glorious winter days. It was just so beautiful it was dazzling. That pretty well sealed the idea of coming to Santa Cruz.

I arrived in September of 1966. My only regret at that point was that virtually all of my friends were on the East Coast. I thought, well this is a great place but I'll never see my friends again. After three days, I remember waking up and thinking, I like it just fine here. And of course sooner or later all my friends came out to visit. So that was a good choice to come to California. I belonged here.



Reti: At one point did you come out?

Thomas: Well, that was later. I was of this generation born in the 1930s. I have a number of same-age friends, and friends slightly older, who married, went through contorted and difficult marriages, ended up divorced, and came out years later. I never did that, though I tried to for many years. I tried to be straight, go straight. I had had an intimate relationship with my best friend in high school. But then I went to college. All that I was trying to put behind me. So that when I came here I was thirty-two, and I was not out. In fact, I was still marginally even trying to be straight. It didn't happen until another seven years or so. For me, coming out, as for most people of my generation, was a much more protracted period. The year I came out, 1973, was also the year that I got tenure, which perhaps had something to do with it, I think, not in terms of a cold, material calculation, but more in the sense of having a certain security. 1973 was a big year because I got tenure, I bought a house, and I began a long-term, four-year relationship. All that happened within six months, so that was a serious turning point. Through the 1970s, I was out socially, but I was not yet out politically, or in my work.

Ray [Martinez] and I lived together on Branciforte Drive from 1973 to 1977, and during that entire four-year period we did not know a single other gay couple. It was still that buried, that closeted [a time]. I was out to my colleagues. We were out to his family. But we didn't know anybody else. There were no clubs, no Gays Over Forty, or political clubs, or anything. All that came in the next decade. That didn't come until the 1980s. It seems almost prehistoric now to think back on that. We weren't tied into San Francisco. We knew some individual gay singles, and we had many straight friends. I was out to my colleagues, and he was out to his family. But we had no gay community to speak of in that period.

Reti: Wasn't there a men's gathering at Louden Nelson? I was talking to John Laird about this.

Thomas: When he and I first saw each other? That was almost certainly 1979. That was when it started, just at the end of the 1970s. John had been a student of mine. During the first six months of 1979 I had a sabbatical, and that was the first time that I lived in San Francisco, and explored urban gay life for the first time. When I came back to Santa Cruz that summer, there was the meeting at Louden Nelson. Quite a few people there, probably forty or so, and I don't even remember who called it now. I was there and John was there. We both looked at each other. [laughter]



Reti: How was it being out to your colleagues in the 1970s?

Thomas: There was no overt hostility, and most of the colleagues who had been good friends beforehand remained good friends, with one exception. One person who had been a very good friend basically couldn't handle it, and dropped our friendship. But that was the only case. My department was not particularly hip or groovy. But the people who were good friends in the department stayed that way.

Reti: At one point did you start being out to students?

Thomas: It was a series of steps, which I think is typical of people my age. It goes much faster today. It was when I first taught my course. I think that was winter of 1981 that I first taught the course [*Sexual Politics: Gay Politics*]. I've been asked many times elsewhere around the country, "How did you do that? That must have been a terrible fight and so on." I wish I could make it a more dramatic story, but it really wasn't. The policy in my board was that when a new course was proposed, it was brought up at a board meeting. We were all boards then. I still use the board language. I've never gotten used to [the term] *departments*. The chair brought it up at a meeting, and in effect, if nobody raised any objections or discussion the course was automatically approved by the board.

I wrote about this once. I said, "My course was brought up. It lay on the table like a dead fish; no one said anything, and it was approved. It went on to the next level, the dean's level. It was approved. It went to the Committee on Educational Policy. It was approved. And that was that. There was never any objection raised." I think already it was sufficiently the tenor of the times, the Santa Cruz ethos, and the idea that a tenured professor is entitled to teach anything he wants as long as it's compatible with the department's needs—all those things made it virtually automatic. I don't know if I had proposed it five years before when I was an assistant professor... I couldn't have. I wasn't psychologically there to do it. I don't know if it would have gone through. But at this point it went through. No one has ever to my face raised an objection. There have been a few letters from parents or whatnot, but basically, getting it approved was not that big a deal. The biggest deal was me having the courage to do it, and to decide I wanted to do it, that I wanted to commit time and my professional reputation to doing it. That was the big hurdle. The bureaucratic part was not a big deal.

Reti: Tell me about the course.



Thomas: The course is probably my major contribution to queer life at UCSC. It was very interesting. Some place in my files I have a tentative piece that I wrote about having taught the first fifteen years of it. I taught it from 1981 to 1999, not every year, but at least every other year. I think I taught it nine or ten times.

Reti: It was called *Queer Politics*?

Thomas: Well, that changed. I think what's interesting is the way it kept changing, both in terms of my conception of it and in terms of the student response. The first year I taught it, it was called *Sexual Politics: Gay Politics*. There were several lesbian students in the course, and they told me that the name wasn't appropriate and I ought to change it. I agreed with them. Then it became *Sexual Politics: Lesbian and Gay Politics*, which it was for a number of years. Then around the middle of the 1990s, I changed the title again, to *Sexual Politics/Queer Politics*. It tracked the changes that were going on nationally. The first couple of years were still what I called the cautious, guarded period. My main anxiety was that nobody would show up, or three or four people would show up and it wouldn't meet the bar. But eleven people, which was enough, showed up the first year.

It was a mixed class, mixed both in terms of men and women, but also mixed in terms of queer and straight, which surprised me at first. There was a guy in the class who was clearly the best student in the class, the best-looking guy in the class (everybody was interested in him), and self-announced straight. So both I and the rest of the class were very interested as to why he was there. Eventually, I got to know him quite well; in fact we are still friends twenty years later. He had a wonderful reason for being in the class. He was the fourth of a seven-child Catholic family; he had older twin brothers, both of whom were gay, and he was interested and supportive of them. I was very careful not to make self-declaration any kind of a requirement, but over the years you learn that straight students have a way of announcing themselves. Virtually always from then on, from a quarter to a third of the students were straight. It was often that kind of a reason, a family connection. In time, I had a mother of a gay son, a daughter of a gay father, people with [gay] siblings. Or, what I came to call facetiously, and not pejoratively, "the injustice collectors." There was a vicious homophobic psychiatrist back in the 1950s, I think this was Irving Bieber, and one of his diagnoses was that what was wrong with homosexuals was that they were injustice collectors, that they were constantly protesting the injustices done to blacks, even before themselves. Somebody who had been involved said that the biggest closet of them all was the civil rights movement, because there had been so many gays involved. So there was even some truth in what Bieber said, though



he said it in a pejorative way. But now you got to the point where there were straight kids for whom the queer cause was an injustice. They might be kids who would also be taking women's studies courses, and courses about blacks and Hispanic Americans, and they were taking their queer course to go along with that. That was always interesting to me. I was always very pleased and proud that there were straight kids taking that course.

In the early years, there were several students who really wanted to take the course but were afraid to have it on their transcripts. There was concern for parents, concern for future employers, graduate school. Who knew? It wasn't cool to be out as an undergraduate in the early-1980s, much less earlier. So I quickly devised a ruse in which I said: "For anybody who wants to take this course and doesn't want it on their transcripts, I will give it as an independent studies course and I will garble the course description— this is about gender, whatever—so that nobody will know what it was really about." For the first six years, there were always one or two or three students who took that option. By the early-1990s, I offered that option and nobody was interested; it just fell away in the 1990s. The last ten years I taught the course, I just dropped it. I mentioned it in passing, but nobody felt they needed it. That was another kind of change.

So the first couple of years the class was small, the attitude was guarded, cautious. Then in 1983, we arranged for Dennis Altman, the well-known Australian gay writer, to be a Regents lecturer on campus, which was quite a big deal, an openly gay writer who would be a Regents lecturer. He and I co-taught the course. That year the course jumped way up in enrollment, and really got publicity. Dennis Altman gave a Regents lecture, and Sheldon Andelson, who was a big gay moneybags honcho in southern California, whom Jerry Brown had appointed to the UC Board of Regents (Andelson owned gay bathhouses), came and introduced the lecture and was entertained at the chancellor's. So we made a big splash in 1983, with the chancellor, the Regents' lecturer, a co-taught course, and the like. From then on, the course was much larger. It ranged in size over the years, I think, from nine to over sixty.

In the middle years, you got into a lot of internal politics. There were years in which the men and women were snarling at each other, I mean so badly that the class could hardly function. And then to my initial surprise, (but ultimately I got used to it) I was often attacked. I was attacked in the class for not being radical enough, or not being lesbian-sensitive enough, or not being other minority-sensitive enough. I tried to respond to all



of these things, but you get it in a class like that. People bring a lot of intense feelings and attitudes to a class like this, and they are acting out. That's part of the benefits of the class, that they are able to talk about these things in a way that they couldn't. Those were wearing years. I didn't know where I would be attacked next! Here I thought I was putting myself out in teaching this class, and I was getting attacked for it. [laughter] But I developed a tough-enough skin, and there were always people who really appreciated the class.

The men and women's thing... Sometimes these things were spillovers from campus gay politics. Campus queer politics were pretty intense in the later-1980s in terms of stuff going on in the organized student groups. Conflicts from those classes, from those groups, would spill over into the class, gender issues, sometimes totally irrelevant issues as far as I could tell, which faction of the group should be in control of the organization. That was a 24-hour-a-day fight.

From the late-1980s on, the course always had more women than men. Part of it probably had to do with the fact that it did get women's studies credit. I was an auxiliary member of women's studies, and I was always on good terms with Bettina Aptheker and Helene Moglen. Women's studies majors took the course. Sometimes they did their senior thesis project in association with my course. That initially was a huge surprise to me, but it continued until the very end. I think the last time I taught the course, in 1999, it was two-thirds women to men in the course. I learned a lot about lesbian history and lesbian theory along the way. But then you got the other kinds of minority issues, the issues of black, Hispanic, and Asian minority presence within queer communities, and that had to become a larger topic.

I was board chair [of politics] several times. When I was chair, I usually didn't have time to teach the course. A couple of times I arranged for other people to teach the course, [like] Wendy Chapkis. Allan Bérubé taught a related course one time when he was here. The last few times I taught the course as I was getting close to retirement in the late-1990s, were the biggest surprise of all. It was as if all the emotional intensity just went out, just like a balloon. It was like this course, of all things, had just become another normal course. It was just another course. There were mostly queer students, and some of them were out; some of them had been out in high school. I remember the first time when a student, that was in maybe 1991, when a male student wearing a dress showed up in class. I thought, oh boy, this is something new. This was somebody who had been



out for three or four years in high school. And to somebody of my generation, maybe yours too, being out in high school is just so mind-blowing.

The last two times in the 1990s, they were just lovely classes. Nobody was wrought up. They weren't angry at one another; they weren't angry at me. They could discuss the issues at a level of deliberation and sophistication that hadn't been [possible] before. The last time I taught it, in 1999, I just thought, I'm so glad to go out on this note because this is one of the loveliest classes I've ever taught. They were bright and engaged, but it was normalized at the same time. There was just no more anger. It wasn't that they weren't concerned, but it didn't have that ferocious intensity that it had had for so many years, either repressed or open.

Reti: Did bisexual or transgendered issues come up?

Thomas: Oh yes. Of course. I didn't mention that. That also came in the 1990s. I don't think transgendered was ever an embodied issue. I'm not aware of transgendered students... Maybe one. But bisexuality certainly did become a major issue, and I devoted a great deal of attention to bisexual issues.

Reti: Are you aware of any other classes like this at other universities nationally?

Thomas: Well, I've been active in the Lesbian and Gay Caucus of the American Political Science Association from its founding. I was one of its founders there. I think we had our first national meeting in 1984, but it didn't really get together in a serious way until 1989, and since then it's been an active caucus within the association. We've had our own panels, we have our own issues, and we have a lesbian and gay rights presence in the association.

There is someone at Ohio State University who has taught a comparable course, a more formal political science course, for about as long as I have. We have joked about who taught first. I think I taught the year before he started. But as far as I know we are the first, and the only two who have taught a long-standing course. Political science is not the most open and welcoming of disciplines. I think probably there has been more of a presence in literature than in any other standard academic subject; some in history. Within political science, in terms of courses, it's been more political theorists. But rather than being a whole course, it's more likely to have been a section of a larger course in



minority politics or something of that kind. But I am not only the local founder, but one of the national founders of a course.

I'm sorry [the course] is not going on here. I didn't really expect that the department would have hired somebody just to teach that course. But it would have been nice had it continued. I think on the other hand, there's probably, though I haven't looked at this year's catalog, I would hope there were enough courses around to meet some kind of interest.

In the 1990s, along with this kind of almost genial acceptance that I found in my class, I noticed a considerable decline in political engagement on campus over gay and lesbian issues. That goes along with a general lessening of intensity. I think that's understandable, because it's largely a benign environment. Of course, there are incidents, and there are freshmen and others who arrive with nasty attitudes that still get expressed. But basically it's a benign environment. And certainly the institutional structure of the campus is against homophobia. If there is an incident, the counselors and the dorm people and the provost move in. This is true at other campuses. I read something about Yale not too long ago, that there's almost no gay queer political presence at Yale because most people think it's accepted at Yale. It's no big deal.

Reti: Back in the days when you first started teaching this course, do you think that there was any connection between the principles and philosophy of UC Santa Cruz, and the acceptance of this course?

Thomas: Oh, very much so. You wouldn't have gotten a course like this on most campuses, and certainly not a course that was simply approved without question, the way mine was. I think that very much had to do with the fact that this campus was founded in the 1960s, and while it was never as wholly of the Sixties as some people thought, the ethos of the Sixties continued to live. Gay and lesbian liberation were also creatures of the Sixties. They came at the end. It's what happened just at the end of the Sixties that lasted. It was the second wave of feminism, the environmental movement, the gay and lesbian liberation movement. They all started at the end of the Sixties, and they all continued.

Reti: Were you involved with any of the student gay and lesbian organizations as a faculty adviser?



Thomas: Indirectly. Early on, I decided that I wanted to make my main contribution academically. Insofar as I might be needed, I would certainly pitch in elsewhere, but I also tended to shy away from the role of personal adviser or counselor. In some cases it happened. Students would come to you and you don't just say, go see your adviser. I remember being absolutely stunned when a student who was a good student came to me with a doubly-late paper, and I wanted to find out what was going on. He said, "Well, I had some bad news. I learned that I've tested HIV-positive."

Reti: Oh my God.

Thomas: The real world kept intruding. I don't think I was ever the formal adviser. I think in many ways the students really wanted to do it on their own. In some of those feisty years in the 1980s, I don't think students would have wanted a faculty adviser. They were too busy fighting each other and I wouldn't have wanted to be involved in trying to sort out the fights, especially when they were men versus women.

I'm still in touch with some of the students I've had over the years. I've had some very nice feedback from students. They say, "This course changed my life. It was just so wonderful to have a course like this. I can't believe anybody offers a course like this." [There have been] fewer of those comments in recent years as it became more normalized. But despite all of the conflict and tension that I received in those middle years, I'm very gratified at having taught the course. I think it did make a difference. And it was important to me. It was important in my own growth as a person, as a gay man, as a scholar. It was important for me to bring a scholarly seriousness to this subject which once was a non-subject, and couldn't even be talked about. I always made a point of saying, "This course is like all other courses, and this course is like no other course. This course is like all other courses in having standards, in having expectations. But it's like no other course, because it deals with things that are deeply intimate and deeply troubling. And we will negotiate between the fact of this course being like all other courses, and this course being like no other course."

Reti: Do you think that there should be a lesbian and gay studies major?

Thomas: I don't, actually. I guess I am a retrograde on that. I think, like most people who have been involved in this kind of stuff for twenty-plus years, we have a very deep ambivalence about identity-centered majors. On the one hand, identity is one of the big issues of the age. It certainly should be studied and studied profoundly. But whether it's



the best sort of thing to major in, I'm not sure. I do think there is a danger of it becoming a kind of cheerleading group. But I'm ambivalent, because I'm certainly not opposed to women's studies. I think women's studies is absolutely necessary, and has had a marvelous impact on, not just its own students, but on the whole liberal arts enterprise. So why am I in favor of some and not of others? That's hard to say. I think at some theoretical level that, important as it is, sexual orientation is not the right differentiating criterion for a major. It should be studied. There should be lots of courses in different departments. Probably there should be a minor. Berkeley has now a minor. But I personally am not ready to take the step, though it will be very interesting to see. I know a lot about the state of the subject across the country, and it will be very interesting to see in those few places where there is a major, what comes of that. I'm sure there will be some good work in what comes of it.

Reti: Was there an effort to start a major like that on this campus?

Thomas: There was talk about it. But I think actually most of us at the time... That was probably ten years ago, at some particular moment of flare-up and interest and engagement. Another thing that we did, is over the years we've brought various visitors who've had a lot of impact. Dennis Altman was probably the first. There have been some important women. Then Nancy [Stoller] brought Vito Russo for two different years, and Vito had a huge impact, a wonderful man. I think it probably was at the time of Vito's visit when there was so much interest. He was so charismatic. There were students who were very much in favor of a major, but I don't think there was any faculty member who really wanted a major at that point. I specifically remember Carter [Wilson], and Nancy, and I agreed that we should push this gradually, incrementally, get more courses, but that we didn't want to go for a major at that time. Since then, I don't believe there's ever been a major push. Certainly, I haven't heard it from students in recent years. I don't know if there is a broad distribution of courses. I haven't looked at the catalog. I hope there is. There isn't a politics course. But there are community studies courses, because both Nancy and Carter taught relevant queer courses over the last decade.

Reti: Are there any particular students who come to mind?

Thomas: No, I can't remember any particular names, but I do remember being delighted about six or seven years ago. For the San Francisco annual [Gay Pride] parade they always have a theme, and this is all decided by a big, messy community process. That year, the theme was "Year of the Queer." That was the first time they'd ever had the



word *queer* in the title. And there was this enormous uproar which went on in the queer publications, the *Bay Area Reporter*, the *Bay Times* and so on, for about six months, people debating this. There were people who hated it, and said they wouldn't attend a function called queer. It was a very generational kind of thing. It tended to be people, especially men over forty, for whom it was just too hateful a term. It was not a term that could be turned, like *gay* could be. It was more like *nigger*. It's too hateful to be turned. They won't have anything to do with anything called *queer*. And other people were saying, "Oh, *queer* is great. It's everything. You are not stuck in a particular identity. It's gay, bi, trans. You name it up the kazoo. Who cares what this old foggy generation thinks? We're here. We're queer. Get with it!" [laughter] And I recognized the name of a former student, who wrote one of the best and wittiest letters on the subject to the *Bay Area Reporter*. It was just so sharp and clever. She didn't get it from me. But I was just so pleased. There's one of my students who's out there.

I was involved in lots of administrative committees about gay and lesbian issues on campus. For a number of years, and it may still exist, there was a chancellor's committee on gay and lesbian affairs, that included administrators, counselors, faculty members, and students. I was on that committee for a number of years.⁴

Reti: Under which chancellor?

Thomas: Well I remember [Robert] Stevens. I don't know if there was a committee under [Robert] Sinsheimer.

Reti: Was he supportive of that kind of thing?

Thomas: Yes. The only chancellor that I know of who was homophobic was Dean McHenry, and there's no doubt about that. I think that just shows the difference between the Sixties then, and our view of the Sixties. McHenry was a very progressive man in many ways in terms of the college system. He had all kinds of good ideas about education. But his social attitudes were very conservative. He opposed co-educational living in the dorms. I was involved in that issue way back in the first couple of years at Stevenson. I learned about it from my provost at Stevenson, Charles Page.

⁴Thomas is referring to the Chancellor's Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Campus Concerns Committee (GLBCC).



Then many years later after McHenry was retired, I flew into Washington, D.C. for the 1993 March on Washington. I came back and I wrote an article about that in the *City on a Hill Press*. I had a big button [that said] “Out and Proud in 1993.” There was some kind of a big faculty reception. Dean and Jane [McHenry], whom I had always been on pleasant terms with, were both there. They both stared at my button. I said something like, “Oh yes, I was there. It was a great rally.” I remember Jane kind of said, “I bet you were.” I think Dean just turned around and walked away. The Sixties were liberated in some ways but not in others. As we know, even in the Haight in San Francisco, the Summer of Love was not particularly the summer of gay love, the summer of 1967 in San Francisco. That was largely heterosexual merging and melding. The gay stuff was going on, but that wasn’t part of the ethos. That wasn’t part of the ideology.

I spoke a number of times at the annual queer rally in May on campus. I worked with Nancy Stoller. I also worked hard on her tenure affair. I was speaking at a very dramatic academic senate meeting that involved that.

Reti: So Charles Page, the founding provost of Stevenson, told you Dean McHenry was homophobic?

Thomas: To be explicit here. (He wouldn’t mind now. He’s dead, alas.) He was actually a bisexual, and he hired more than one gay faculty member, whether knowing it or not. I mean I didn’t know it myself. Though he told me later he knew it. [laughter] But he hired several other gay faculty members.

Another early important member of the Santa Cruz campus... This is secondhand, but I have heard from more than one source that Page Smith was quite homophobic. He was [the] founding provost of Cowell, who was a great legendary figure, and did many good things here. The Cowell people all revere him. But as far as I know, he hired no gay faculty members, either out or closeted. A man who was not a faculty member, but a fellow or a graduate student, told me that he [Smith] used to tell tales in the Cowell Senior Commons room about fag-bashing back when he was young. So even at Santa Cruz, there was a changing of generations.

After 1981, since I taught the course, I was the most visible out gay faculty member. There were a number of women, Bettina Aptheker and Nancy Stoller, and others over the years. But I was the most visible out gay male faculty member. I never berated people for not being out, but it was interesting trying to encourage some of the others to be a



little more out, whatever they were comfortable with. For instance, we never, I don't know if it's changed to this day, we never had but one faculty member in the Natural Sciences who was out. And he wasn't even a regular faculty member. I'm sorry to forget his name. He was such a nice man. He was a regular lecturer in botany, lived over in Los Gatos with his lover, and sang in the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus. He died of AIDS some time ago. He was a really sweet guy. He was out and supportive. But he was the only natural scientist that I ever knew of.

Bill [Shipley] and I have known each other... We're not intimate but we're old friends. We were both in Stevenson from the beginning. I think there's a generational difference between Bill, and his good friends like John Halverson, who died several years ago. They were both totally out socially, although Bill of course was also married and had a family. But they were never political in any way. Bill has had a very interesting life. Right in there was a certain kind of generational difference, because I was political in a way that they weren't. I never condemned them. I understand that different people are different places. But when things got really hot politically, they were not involved.

Staff were often supportive. And probably, I'm just speculating here, I would guess in percentage terms probably more of them were out than faculty. I particularly worked with people in the library for many years. Over the years I had this wonderful annual session with Dave Kirk. All those years that I was teaching, he was building up the video collection. A fabulous collection. And in those years that I was teaching my course I had a legitimate claim to some course-related monies. So every year, for twelve to fifteen years, I would get a few hundred dollars from the politics board and bring it over to Dave, and we would sit down and go through the catalogs and decide what we wanted to order that year. So I had a small part in helping to build up that collection as well.

Wayne Mullin [a librarian] was fairly active in staff gay things. And several women were active, Jacquelyn Marie. Needless to say, I never had any trouble getting the books ordered that I wanted. I helped build up the HQ76 section.⁵

Reti: Do you remember Alan Sable?

Thomas: Well, that's a bit of a sorry story, because I knew Alan Sable only very, very slightly. His tenure troubles came up before I was out, although I was probably getting

⁵This refers to the Library of Congress subject category number for cataloging books in gay and lesbian studies.



close to coming out. Then he went public in a big way and made a big deal of it. People who liked him and wished him well thought that he had not handled it in the right way. I was not involved. I didn't know him all that well. I remember being bothered by the issue. At one point, he attacked closeted faculty members who were not out on the front line supporting him. I assume that that was partly directed at me. That bothered me a good deal. I thought about it, and I don't think it was true because it was still... I can't remember the exact dates. I would have to match the dates of what he was doing against where I was. I was changing every year.

Reti: I believe it was around 1977.

Thomas: I was by then out socially, and not out politically. I was an associate professor. I was not involved. What one heard... These things are so easy to fudge. What one heard was that his written work didn't stack up to the sociology department standards, which could be true. The sociology department was not one that would have been particularly hostile on gay grounds. But those were also the 1970s. McHenry had left. Probably no openly gay person would have gotten tenure under McHenry. I think he was that fierce. That's just speculation from what I've heard. So I had tenure. I was out socially. I was not involved with that issue. I was not yet politically gay. I was just socially gay at that point. So I really don't know whether that was a genuinely homophobic issue, or whether he was denied tenure on legitimate grounds and he raised the issue. It could be either way.

I like academic novels, and one of the best ones of all times is Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe*, which is an academic novel of the 1960s set in a small liberal arts college. There's a klutz of a professor who is about to be denied tenure and he realizes this, so he comes out as a Communist. At that point he has to be protected under civil liberties, and all of the faculty rallies around him. It can work both ways. I've been involved on the inside of enough academic cases to know that they are so complicated, and there are certainly possibilities of prejudice. There are also certain safeguards. But unless you are really on the inside of an academic case, you really don't know the reason. It's very easy for people on the outside to think it's on prejudicial grounds. In some cases it is. It's very hard to sort out. You have to be judicious in terms of Academic Senate things. That kind of became my specialty. I was on the Privilege and Tenure Committee, and chair of that committee for a time, where you look at academic tenure cases and personnel cases. I was also on the Sexual Harassment Charges Committee for several years, where you had to weigh things. You get legitimate charges, and you get bogus charges.



Reti: Do you think that lesbianism was an issue in Nancy Stoller's tenure case?

Thomas: I think it may have been. Certainly not at her department level. It might have been at a higher level. On the other hand, I am an old friend of one of the members of the budget committee at that time, who was certainly not the least bit prejudiced on those grounds, and he said it was writing. That's all there was to it, was writing.

Reti: Do you know what happened to Alan Sable?

Thomas: I do. He went back to get professional training as a therapist. And he has been a therapist in the Bay Area for many years now. Maybe in the city. I have actually physically seen him on a couple of occasions.

I was also involved in town stuff, gay political stuff with John Laird. There were several different gay political organizations. We attempted to found a separate gay democratic club, which I don't think lasted very long. I was involved in that.

Reti: The Freedom Democratic Caucus.

Thomas: Yes.

Reti: I didn't know how long you had lived in San Francisco.

Thomas: My involvement with San Francisco began in 1979, that first six months that I spent a sabbatical up there. I was in the Dan White riot at City Hall, and that whole spring had a great deal to do with politicizing me as a gay person.⁶ Obviously I was already political; I was a politics professor, even though I mainly taught theory. But that was kind of the final push to politicize me in a gay way. It was after that that I came back, went to the downtown meeting for the first time, went to the Santa Cruz gay parade, and then within a year and a half taught the course for the first time. From then on, I did have a presence in San Francisco. I kept a room up there in a shared apartment and I often spent weekends. But I didn't move to San Francisco full time until 1994, and even then I

⁶On May 21, 1979, because of a technicality of California law, a jury found Dan White guilty of manslaughter, rather than first degree murder, in the double assassination of Harvey Milk and George Moscone in San Francisco. Dan White was sentenced to seven years and eight months in prison. The resulting violent protest that evening came to be known as the "White Night Riot" - the first gay riot since the Stonewall Rebellion ten years earlier.



continued to teach here one quarter a year for five more years. So I was Santa Cruz-centered until 1994, really.

Reti: Please say more about your involvement in the Santa Cruz community.

Thomas: I knew a lot of people. I was always in close touch with John Laird. Another close contact was Terry Cavanaugh, who was actually a tenant of mine out on Branciforte for a couple of years. Later on, he was one of the founders of the Santa Cruz AIDS Project, as was my former lover, Ray Martinez, who later was Carter Wilson's lover. Terry was later the campus AIDS educator for five years. I was more involved directly in politics than with AIDS, but I was supportive of both [kinds of work].

I didn't play a large role in town. I was a mid-level officer in those clubs, like membership chairman for couple of years. I was on the executive committee and went to meetings. I don't know that those clubs ever really took off in a serious way. I think there was maybe not a big enough base for them. They were trying both to be a queer club, and to be a presence within the Democratic Party, at least the Freedom Democratic Club was. I'm not sure that there were enough people beyond the core group of a dozen or twenty to really make that go. For a number of years, I went occasionally to the monthly potluck suppers of the Gays Over Forty group, which is, I think, one of the oldest gay groups in the area that did go back maybe into the 1970s. It had some very interesting people in it, like Lou Harrison, for instance, Lou and Bill [Colvig.] The annual Christmas party of that group was usually held at their place in Aptos. I was not part of the gay volleyball game. [laughter] I know John was part of that. It was a good organization.

Reti: I'm trying to get an impression of the Santa Cruz area as a place to be gay over time. Are there memories of particular places?

Thomas: Oh sure, I have very fond memories of Mona's Gorilla Lounge. Have you heard of Mona's?

Reti: Yes, I have.

Thomas: Not only did I go there a number of times, but I met two different lovers there, eight years apart. That's where I met Ray Martinez on the night of his twenty-fifth birthday, when I was close to forty, in 1973. And then years later, in 1981, I met John Popovich, who was over in Monterey, whom I was with for a year. Mona's was a funky



roadhouse, an unpretentious place. Later, I went to the Blue Lagoon. Then I suppose someplace along in the 1980s I stopped going to bars. I was sometimes coupled but more often not. For a single gay man of a certain age, San Francisco had a lot more social opportunities than Santa Cruz. I had many straight friends in Santa Cruz, whom I still have. I was always warmly received, and felt genuinely welcomed. But when it came to gay social life, it tended to be either coupled, or the singles [who] were much younger. One of the reasons I stopped going to gay bars locally was because I didn't particularly want to be seen by my own students.

Reti: Sure. It's a small town.

Thomas: So that was one of the reasons why I started shifting my social life to San Francisco in the 1980s and 1990s. Carter Wilson, and Ray [Martinez] were amongst my best friends, and I spent many, many evenings in parties and festivities with them, and with a circle around them. And as I said, I enjoyed, not as a regular participant, because after a while I was usually gone on Friday nights, but I also enjoyed that gay forties group. I don't know if it's different with the women, and I think it usually is, but I don't think the gay male faculty members as a whole sort of hob-knobbed together. Well, John Halverson was another good friend, and I would do things through John, and occasionally with Bill. But there were not regular social gatherings where most of the gay male faculty members would get together. I think the women... Well, women are often better at networking, not to utter a cliché. [laughter]

Reti: What are you working on now?

Thomas: I have lots of interests. I am really enjoying retirement. I pursue a lot of interests that I didn't pursue before. I do continue my interest in gay and lesbian politics, and gay and lesbian political theory. In September, the American Political Science Association had its annual meeting in San Francisco. Our caucus had a meeting, and I went to that. I find that I read less theory, and more history and literature. That's one of the changes of retirement.