

H-Net Reviews

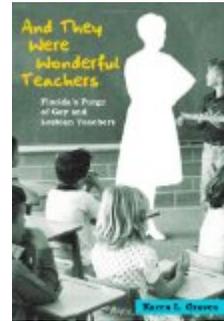
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Karen L. Graves. *And They Were Wonderful Teachers: Florida's Purge of Gay and Lesbian Teachers*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. xxi + 186 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03438-1; \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07639-8.

Reviewed by David Lee McMullen (Independent Scholar)

Published on H-Florida (January, 2010)

Commissioned by Jeanine A. Clark Bremer



The Johns Committee and Florida's Great Teacher Witch Hunt

Between 1956 and 1965, a special committee of the Florida Legislature conducted an extensive investigation that targeted civil rights activists, suspected Communists, and gays and lesbians. Known officially as the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee, the committee was headed by Florida Senator Charley Johns, and, as a result, the committee ultimately became known as the Johns Committee. Committee records were kept secret for almost thirty years. Finally opened to researchers in the early 1990s, the abuses of the committee are coming to light in such works as Karen L. Graves's *And They Were Wonderful Teachers*.

The committee was established "in 1956 in the wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decisions (1954, 1955) with an initial intent to impede desegregation efforts. At first the committee ... investigated members of the NAACP and other civil rights activists" (p. xi). The NAACP would defy the committee, force the issue into the courts, and ultimately claim victory with a U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 1963 that kept the organization's membership records in Florida confidential. The committee's actions did, however, slow the group's efforts in the state and distract it from its primary objectives.

Unable to make headway against the civil rights movement, the committee took a Cold War, anti-Communist turn, seeking to root out Communists in the state. This too produced few rewards. Then, in

"1958 the committee launched an undercover investigation into homosexuality at UF [the University of Florida in Gainesville] that led to the dismissal of more than twenty faculty and staff members and the expulsion of more than fifty students" (p. 6). The committee was now able to justify its existence. It followed up on these investigations with similar, although less successful, investigations at Florida State University in Tallahassee and the newly created University of South Florida in Tampa. However, like the civil rights movement, the university community had very vocal defenders—the American Association of University Professors and the American Association of University Women.

It was at this point that the committee began to concentrate in earnest on public school teachers. "Between 1957 and 1963 the state of Florida actively pursued lesbian and gay schoolteachers, subjecting them to interrogation, fired them from teaching positions and revoked their professional credentials" (p. 10). Committee investigators "perfected techniques of intimidation and harassment" (p. 11). Teachers were pulled from classrooms and interrogated without legal counsel, often with local law enforcement and school officials present. They were not shown the evidence, if any, the investigators had against them; the names of their accusers; or the reasons for the investigation. They were asked to identify their friends, often going back to their college years, and were questioned in highly graphic terms about their sex lives. As Graves states: "the Johns Committee interro-

gated lesbian and gay teachers behind closed doors and used the exposure of public hearings as a threat to pry information from witnesses” (p. 68).

Graves’s book provides a detailed analysis of the Johns Committee’s investigations, with excerpts from actual interviews and comments from many of the people involved. While her primary focus is public school teachers, Graves also provides perspectives of all groups who were subjects of the investigation. This makes the book important not only to scholars of sexual orientations but also to those who study the civil rights movement and issues related to academic freedom. Particularly important from today’s perspective, Graves notes that “the Johns Committee investigation into teachers’ sexuality typified the actions of a government chasing after a narrowly conceived sense of security at the expense of civil liberties. Its entire operation rested on tactics of coercion and intimidation; convictions hung on the unstable trio of hearsay, circumstantial evidence and ‘guilt’ by association. This history illustrates the formidable power of a government granted the veil of secrecy” (p. 46).

Looking back at Senator Johns’s activities, one must suspect that his overriding motivation was the same as U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy’s—blind political ambition. Johns had served briefly as Florida’s governor (September 1953 to January 1955), following the death of Governor Dan McCarty, but was defeated by a moderate oppo-

nent, LeRoy Collins, in a special election after only one year in office. “Johns resigned from the ... Committee in September 1964; he lost reelection to the Florida Senate in 1966” (p. 10). The committee itself folded its tents the following year. But the attacks on homosexuals in Florida were far from over. Graves notes that “little had changed a generation later when Anita Bryant led a successful effort to rescind a nondiscrimination ordinance in Miami” (p. 142). It would be twenty more years before the Dade County ban was reinstated. The committee’s death knell came shortly after it published a report entitled *Homosexuality and Citizenship in Florida* in 1964, more commonly known as the *Purple Pamphlet*. The report contained graphic photographs of homosexual acts and was considered to be pornographic by many who saw it.

Finally, on a personal note, as a historian who grew up in Florida and who attended junior and senior high school during this period, I discovered that I was an unknowing witness to these events. I do not know if I knew any of the teachers involved, although I did have one teacher mysteriously disappear during the middle of a school year. I also worked as a doorman in the Florida House of Representatives during the 1963 legislative reapportionment session and witnessed firsthand the actions of some of the individuals directly involved in these investigations. I must confess that I find myself wishing I had been more observant during these historic events.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-florida>

Citation: David Lee McMullen. Review of Graves, Karen L., *And They Were Wonderful Teachers: Florida’s Purge of Gay and Lesbian Teachers*. H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. January, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25535>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.