The South I Fled

A scion of the Percy family reflects on the emergence of gay activism in the 'closeted' South.

Lonely Hunters
Edited by James Sears
Westview Press.
317 pages. $28.

By William A. Percy III

When I started teaching in New Orleans and then in Baton Rouge, I lived a double life: professor by day, gay man by night. Fear of discovery and of the dismissal that could follow stalked my forays to the French Quarter and even more to the two gay bars in Baton Rouge, a smaller and less anonymous city. But it also heightened a sense of outrage, in me and others like me, that an even more visible target. The Baton Rouge Morning Advocate and the campus newspaper printed my picture repeatedly, along with stories about the teach-in. If I remained at Louisiana State, I felt certain that my enemies would find out about my gay life and have me removed from the university and perhaps even imprisoned.

I was not imagining things: Many professors and employees had recently lost their positions in Florida schools because of the witch-hunt of a legislative committee that Sears records in chilling detail. Known as the Johns Committee after its chair, State Senator Charley Johns, the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee began in 1957 to remove as many gays and communists as possible from the state's classrooms.

What was I to do? Most of my family had chosen to live out their lives in the South, including my famous cousins Walker Percy and William Alexander Percy. "Uncle Will," as we called William Alexander, would certainly today be dubbed gay. In his flourishing years, from the 1910s to his death in 1943, wealth and connections had protected him from scandal, although his town of Greenville, Mississippi, knew of the many young men, black and white, whom he befriended. I could not have contented myself with Will's closeted existence (and note in retrospect how often Uncle Will traveled to faraway places, including Mediterranean isles where homosexuality is accepted). And so, in 1966, I felt I had no choice but to leave the South, as so many other gay Southerners have before and since.

James Sears' newest contribution to our ever-expanding body of knowledge about gay and lesbian Southerners does not tell my particular story or that of other gay men and women living in Louisiana. (Indeed, it is a peculiarity of the book that the gay mecca of New Orleans does not figure at all.) Rather, drawing heavily on testimonies culled from interviews and correspondence, Lonely Hunters focuses on the period 1948-1968 and an effort in Florida to drive homosexuals from the state's schools and universities; the role of gays in the fight to desegregate businesses in Chapel Hill, North Carolina; and the extraordinary career in Charleston, South Carolina, of Gordon Hall, later Dawn Pepita Hall. It is, nevertheless, the story of the same drama we lived in our part of the South: the riveting portrait of men and women terrorized, murdered, fired, radicalized, or forever closed.

Sears's most vivid pages cover the evolution of Pat Cusick's Student Peace Union at the University of North Carolina from dormitory discussions and films on world peace to picketing the segregated...
I was a student at the university, but I decided to drop out. I was feeling overwhelmed and stressed by the workload and the expectations of my peers. I felt like I was not getting the support I needed to succeed. I decided to take a break from my studies and move back home. I spent the next few months working odd jobs and trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. I realized that I needed to take a step back and reevaluate my goals. I eventually went back to school, but with a different perspective and a clearer sense of purpose.
College Cafe. They chart not only the dramatic flowering of sit-ins, marches, and speeches that followed the picketing but also a particular interaction, or lack thereof, between the desegregation movement and evolving gay identity. (This was some years before the Stonewall rebellion in New York City and the gay rights movement.)

Supporting integration did not imply openness about one’s sexuality. Cusick had acquired a black lover in the sit-ins, and as Sears’s interviews make clear, Cusick’s frustration with having to keep that affair secret became an unconscious motive force behind his Peace Union. It was hardly safe for it to be otherwise. I can attest that in Louisiana the same atmosphere that heightened our anger against injustice also held most of us mute and inert regarding our own liberation.

Not that we had many allies among other men who would today identify themselves as gay. Most gay whites remained quite conservative on the racial issue and firmly closeted within Southern society. Furthermore, Sears’s sources confirm that there was little overlap at the time between gays in the civil rights movement and those few Southerners, like Richard Inman of Florida, who began agitating in the late 1960s for gay rights. Drawing on interviews and correspondence between Inman and Frank Kameny (founder of the District of Columbia chapter of the Mattachine Society, the nation’s first gay rights organization), Sears documents Inman’s effective struggle to have homosexual acts decriminalized in Florida. But even Inman refused to employ civil disobedience because, he said, he would have certainly found himself alone on the picket line.

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Lonely Hunters chronicles the lives of many quiet heroes and some fascinating eccentrics. Gordon Hall of Charleston, who later became Dawn Pepita Hall (and who was the bastard of Vita Sackville-West’s chauffeur and one of her aristocratic friends), is one. Carson McCullers visited Hall in Charleston, as Sears relates, and perceptively exclaimed to Gordon, “You really are a little girl.” Gordon agreed. Surprisingly, Gordon’s later sex change was accepted in Charleston—but not her marriage to a black fisherman.

Sears does not mention the equally colorful life of Reid Erickson, another remarkable Southerner by any measure. After the death of her father, a successful maker of wooden bleachers in Baton Rouge, Erickson began to dress as a man, eventually underwent a sex change, and generously financed research on gay and transsexual issues, including the work on sex change operations by John Money, a physician at Hopkins (whom Sears does mention). A former country club in Los Angeles was purchased by Erickson to house the ONE Institute, a pioneering attempt by the homophile movement to provide practical legal information and to educate homosexuals about their history. Erickson also gave Vern Bullough large grants to complete such volumes as his Sexual Variance in Society and History, which brought attention to the role of culture and religion in sexual behavior.

Sears also might have written more about the bisexual Carson McCullers from whose novel The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, he borrowed his title. Such people do not figure in his book, with its politically correct tone, which seems to have been modeled on a libel suit against the author that goes back a few years.