

The Lavender Scare and the Homosexual Purge at the University of Southern Mississippi: A
Game of Interactive Fiction

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Game Link: <https://appa-dipdip.itch.io/the-lavender-scare-and-homosexual-purges-at-the-university-of-southern-mississippi>

The Lavender Scare:

From the late-1940s to 1960s the United States government investigated thousands of their employees for one purpose: find, fire, and even arrest any queer people working for the government. In the wake of World War II, young people began moving to cities in droves and, in doing so, found themselves in a world so unlike the rural towns many of them grew up in. In the densely packed, yet intensely anonymous city streets it was much easier to pursue same-sex relationships; due to the increase in same-sex activity, however, queer people began to receive much more attention than in the past. By 1948, Congress had passed a law maintaining that anyone who acted on same-sex desire in the nation's capital would be arrested and labeled mentally ill. As the country's awareness of queer people began to rise, so too did the threat of communism. In 1950 Senator Joseph McCarthy gave his infamous speech on the Senate floor, wherein he claimed to know of 205 communists working for the State Department. Two of these "communists" were gay, and McCarthy explicitly linked homosexuality and communism by stating the mental instability of homosexuals was so severe that they were either already communist or would be the most easily swayed by communism. A week later, the results of a

quiet investigation into queer employees (which actually began in 1946) by the Senate Committee on Appropriations ousted 91 homosexuals, claiming them “security risks.” The public media latched onto these two announcements, and soon the general public put homosexuality and communism together. Thus begins the Lavender Scare – long lasting anti-gay practice and policy instituted over the course of just two decades. Following the announcements two congressional investigations launched, dead set on rooting out homosexuals within the government.

The first of these was The Wherry-Hill Investigation; it took place from March to May of 1950 and was led by Senators Kenneth Wherry (Republican) and J. Lister Hill (Democrat). During this investigation the head of the DC Metropolitan Police Department’s Vice Squad, Lt. Roy Blick, claimed that of the 5,000 homosexuals living in the city, 3,700 of them were federal employees. 90-100 queer employees were thought to have resigned during this time, and it was also revealed that 13 of the original 91 ousted homosexuals had been rehired; from that moment on a system was put in place to confidently flag homosexuals in their personal files.

The Hoey Committee Investigation occurred next and cast a much wider, lasting six months and using a larger variety of resources to maintain their goal. A report was issued after the investigation that regarded the last three years of congressional work. The report, titled *Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government*, claimed to have detected over 5,000 homosexuals; according to the report homosexuals were “generally unsuitable” and deemed “security risks.” The report did not call for any new legislation, however the effects of the report combined with the Wherry-Hill investigation culminated in enough evidence for President Dwight D. Eisenhower to sign into law Executive Order 10450, “Security Requirements for Government Employees,” in 1953. This order explicitly added sexuality into

the criteria for job requirements in the government, thus effectively banning queer people from pursuing jobs within the government, as well as causing queer employees who had not been detected yet to not heighten their stations at work in order to remain invisible.

It is estimated around 5,000 employees lost their jobs during the Lavender Scare, and many more likely lost their reputations and human securities. Executive Order 10450 thrived in full force for twenty years, though in 1973 the Supreme Court ruled that queer federal civilian employees who did not require security clearances could not be fired purely based on their sexuality. It was not until 2017, however, that President Barack Obama lifted Executive Order 10450 in its entirety.

The Homosexual Purges at the University of Southern Mississippi:

Around the same time as media attention began to really attach to the purging of homosexuals from the government, so too did another purge occur just a few states over. From 1955-1965 the faculty and students at the University of Southern Mississippi underwent homosexual investigations, with the goal of ridding the campus of any and all queers. President William D. McCain was President of the university, known then as Mississippi Southern College, during this time and was the main perpetrator of these investigations alongside some select faculty, namely the Dean of Students, James R. Switzer. The investigators employed a number of ways of rooting out homosexuals, including secretly recording student and staff interviews, noting those who frequented the French Quarter in New Orleans, and depending largely on gossip and rumors that swirled in and around campus. Over 200 staff and students were fired or expelled and given 24 hours after their notice to leave campus entirely.

The Game:

The Lavender Scare and Homosexual Purges at USM serves as an interactive game of literary means. In the first half of the game you play as a gay man employed by the State Department in the Spring of 1950. The timeline follows McCarty's speech, the ousting of the 91 homosexuals, and finally the Wherry-Hill investigations wherein the player finds out what their fate is depending on the choices they made throughout the game. The second half takes place at USM during the late 1950s, at the height of the homosexual purges on campus. This time you play as a college student being interrogated by Dr. Switzer concerning the sexuality of a known friend of yours and reveals the outcomes of the purge as it occurred. All of the stories you will experience – though technically fictional – are based on real histories that occurred both at a national level and a local one.

This is a choose-your-own-adventure style game, so all your choices matter. You decide where you end up, and thus the fate of your game is up to you. Have fun!