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LGBT Literature and the Twentieth Century: Collection Highlights from the McCain Library & Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi

By Peggy Price

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Introduction

Scholars interested in the publishing history of gay and lesbian literature will find key resources available at the McCain Library & Archives at the University of Southern Mississippi. As Curator of Special Collections, I did not set out to create a collection of LGBT materials, but as I worked with items from writers and others with Mississippi connections I noticed a fair amount of books and periodicals related to gay and lesbian topics on our shelves. Curators always hope for multifaceted research potential with the resources we obtain for our libraries, and I was pleased to discover the emerging opportunities for research in LGBT publication history and all of the possibilities for scholars of cultural studies, literature, political science, history, and many other disciplines. The purpose of this article is to highlight a few significant collections that represent and document the history of publications written by, about, and for LGBT readers. In the stacks of the Mississippiana & Rare Books collections researchers may discover one of the first novels featuring gay protagonists, *The Young and Evil* (1933), an almost complete catalog of gay pulp paperbacks by Mississippian Carl Corley, and an assortment of late-twentieth century feminist materials donated by civil rights activist Sue Sojourner which deal with lesbian issues.

Charles Henri Ford

Native Mississippian Charles Henri Ford (1908-2002) was an openly bisexual magazine editor (*Blues, View*), writer, poet, photographer and filmmaker. While living in Columbus, MS, Ford established in 1929 the little magazine *Blues* and corresponded with significant poets and writers of the early twentieth century. Ford solicited advice from Ezra Pound and involved H.D., William Carlos Williams and many others in the project, including the writer and critic Parker Tyler. *Blues* ran for only eight issues, but the relationships Ford formed through its creation opened to him the accepting and boundary-less culture of bohemian New York and the intellectual circles forming in Paris during that time.

Charles Henri Ford left Mississippi and moved in with Parker Tyler in New York's Greenwich Village. The scene provided Ford and Tyler with the landscape for the novel they co-wrote, *The Young and Evil* (1933), in which they use a modernist, stream-of-consciousness style to capture the eclectic spirit of the neighborhood. According to Joseph Allen Boone, "As a relatively circumscribed urban space where marginal identities flourish, where sexual definitions remain fluid, and where experimentation is the norm, the Village serves as a kind of cultural laboratory for testing alternative identities in the crucial decades of the 1920s and 1930s." [1] *The Young and Evil* has become a foundational text of gay literature in that the novel features homosexual

protagonists and represents individuals comfortable operating without defined parameters surrounding their sexuality.

After American publishers rejected the novel, Ford went to Paris where he was able to find success with Obelisk Press, who published *The Young and Evil* in 1933. While in Paris he became a part of the ex-patriot community and was championed by Gertrude Stein, who provided a blurb for the novel. American customs would not allow the book into the United States for decades, making the original 1933 edition often difficult to find. The McCain Library & Archives has in its holdings a very fragile first edition of the trade issued *The Young and Evil*. Researchers may also read in McCain Library much crisper, newer versions of the text published in 1960 (Olympia Press), 1988 (Gay Presses of New York), and 1996 (Masquerade Books). For those curious about other publications related to Ford, the library houses his published works of poetry, an entire run of *Blues* in reprint, an almost complete run of his magazine *View*, a documentary film, his published diary *Water from a Bucket: a Diary, 1948-1957*, and other materials relevant to Ford's long and prolific life.

Carl Corley

When Curator of Mississippiana and Rare Books Jennifer Brannock learned of gay pulp fiction writer Carl Corley's Mississippi roots (he was born in Florence, MS in 1921), she began actively acquiring his paperbacks for the McCain Library. To date, the library has in its holdings 20 of his 22 novels available for research. Corley's contributions are particularly interesting to scholar John Howard because they sometimes locate gay characters in rural settings as opposed to the urban environments typical of the genre. He writes, "...ordinarily for Corley the urban connotes evil. Though his first novels mostly take place in an idyllic Rankin County, an occasional protagonist makes a regrettable foray into the city. This lapse of judgment or, more commonly, a banishment from the Garden of Eden marks a turning point, a descent." [2]

Howard more closely examines two novels, Corley's *My Purple Winter* (Publishers Export Co., 1966) and *A Chosen World* (Pad Library, 1966), demonstrating how texts not produced as "high literature" or considered a part of the classic canon may still serve valuable research purposes. Howard is able to analyze the fictional text within the framework of his broader enterprise of studying homosexuality in the American South and remark upon similarities between anecdotes from oral histories and situations in the narrative. He discovers many autobiographical elements linked to Corley, along with issues of race and class.

Like Charles Henri Ford, Corley was also an artist but of a more practical nature. He worked as an illustrator first for the Highway Department of Mississippi and later the state of Louisiana designing maps, pamphlets and brochures. Corley used his talent to design the covers for his novels, like *Jesse: Man of the Streets*, seen here as in an installment of the McCain Library's Item of the Month: http://www.lib.usm.edu/spcol/exhibitions/item_of_the_month/iom_nov_07.html. He was also a "physique artist," drawing in the 1950s male figures for fitness magazines, which were an early form of homoerotica. [3]

Sue Sojourner

Sue and her husband Henry Lorenzi served as volunteers in the Civil Rights Movement in Holmes County, MS from 1964-1969. In 1972 they officially changed their last name to "Sojourner." Sue is a writer and photographer. Her documentary photographs from Holmes County have been on exhibit at NYU, the University of Minnesota, and

other places. Sojourner donated her collection of books with her personal papers to the University of Southern Mississippi. The collection of books and periodicals reflects the reading interests of a person actively participating in various human rights movements of the latter part of the twentieth century and first decade of the twenty-first.

The collection of over 400 items should be of interest to scholars and students conducting research in the areas of civil rights movements, women's liberation and feminism, lesbianism and LGBT studies, poetry (especially feminist poetry), feminist literary journals, self and independent publishing in the twentieth century, and the south. The collection includes a substantial sampling of lesbian periodicals from the 1970s and 1980s such as *Lesbian Connection*, *Quest*, *Conditions*, *Feminary*, and one of the longest surviving lesbian literary journals, *Sinister Wisdom*. The donation contains works from feminist and lesbian essayists, poets and fiction writers such as Adrienne Rich, Mary Renault, Rita Mae Brown, Dorothy Allison, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Marge Piercy, and others. Feminist publishers like NAIAD, Shamelessly Hussy Press, alicejamesbooks, and Diana Press are all represented in this collection.

Conclusion

These summaries of materials from Charles Henri Ford, Carl Corley, and Sue Sojourner suggest a few perhaps lesser known opportunities for research from an LGBT angle. Each of these collections of course offers possibilities beyond the limited scope of their relationship to gay and lesbian issues. Those mainly interested in LGBT materials, however, may also find useful works by and about Tennessee Williams, William Alexander Percy, and Kevin Sessums, which are available for research in the McCain Library & Archives.

[1] Joseph Allen Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 264.

[2] John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 201-220.

[3] Preliminary Inventory of the Carl V. Corley Papers, 1930s-1990s, Rubenstein Library, Duke University: <http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/findingaids/corley/>