On his early love for books

Larry Lingle: We had a fine Carnegie Library and I didn't know it. It closed, but they recently reopened it. But anyway. My mother would take us there. My mother was a reader of sorts, but I could only get into the children's section. That's another interesting thing, while we're talking about books. We had no children's books when I was a child none whatsoever nobody read to us other than my grandmother. The thing was, my brother was a year older and he started school. There was no kindergarten in those days. In fact, our school system was grade school through the seventh grade and high school from the eighth grade through senior year. So there were only two schools. When my brother went off to grade school, they were always telling him that we looked so much alike. In pictures that I look back on, we didn't look alike at all. But anyway. We were both the same size. I was always envious if he got anything I didn't. So my mother actually taught me spelling and reading when I was five so that I would keep up with my brother. I think at that point was when my brother started resenting me. That only increased when, about that same period of time, I outgrew him. My brother, unfortunately, didn't take after my father’s side of the family which were all six feet. He was only 5'7''. Before I started shrinking with age, I was 5'9''. At some point after that, because I was always at the library, I remember I really got along with the librarian. Her name was Miss Lamb. Her brother was the Circuit Judge at the time in my hometown. She let me into the adult section before I was of age to do so. What she didn't know is that I immediately went to the card catalog and looked under the word homosexuality. So clearly I knew what that word was. I went to every book that it referred to. I could tell you - everything written about homosexuality in the late 1940s was extremely negative. It told me right off the bat that I was diseased and incurable, and that the only way to respond to it was suppress it. That was a lesson I got very early.

On Lobo as a community space

LL: Yeah, we got that early on in the tore. Particularly, early in Dallas when a lot of people were still in the closet. They really enjoyed coming into a place where they could actually be themselves. I mentioned, that prosecutor who turned out to be a video customer. In Houston we probably made a much greater effort to make it comfortable for ever body. Particularly when we had the coffee shop, people would come in we didn't discourage people from sitting there for as long as they wanted. We provided free Wifi. I was barely using a computer myself at that time. I wanted it to be that kind of place where people could come in, and that's why ... to be quite honest I made an attempt to be visible. I remember one time, Armistead Maupin, the writer, I had him sign a bunch of books. I didn't think anything about it, but one day in the gay press there was something about him being in town. I was standing in my store and it was pretty busy, and this guy came up with one of Armistead’s book and he wanted me to sign it. If you've never seen a picture of Armistead Maupin we do look something alike. We're both old and tacky. At the time
I also had a mustache like Armistead, so he just thought I was Armistead Maupin. I felt terrible disappointing him! Laughs. I guess I could have written Armistead Maupin and he wouldn't have thought twice about it. But yeah that's one thing I thrive for. Even, in a lot of times, lesbians said they weren't comfortable because of the adult material. That's why, when I moved to Montrose we completely separated the two. There was just a doorway that led to the back. You could shop anywhere in the front. We did get more women shoppers at that point. We had straight customer come in particularly for our greeting card. I had a neighbor on Avondale, a straight couple, who would come in to buy greeting cards and go in the coffee shop and have coffee. That kind of thing, I really liked. Where people felt comfortable.

On his many connections in Houston

LL: Literally after I came out I located that gay group in Dallas and got involved. Later less involved, because as I mentioned before, too Bill and I kept running into this Dallas attitude that, by the nature of our store even some gay people didn't socially accept us. In Houston, it was a lot easier. We got a lot more involved here. Lobo always contributed to various gay functions. We sponsored a softball team for a while, things like that. I wouldn't remember, except Noel Freeman who was a recent president of the Caucus. I don't know if you've run across him at all. He was president for three years. Noel had been in the service, but when he got out he went to A&M got in the Corps, and announced he was gay. They kicked him out of the Corps. I'm not sure what it was but Noel wanted to go to Washington or something to protest and he was looking for support. Lobo underwrite his trip. I don't remember what we gave him, but enough to fly up, stay there and come back. He had reminded me of this recently; I had forgotten about it. There was that thing with The Times of Harvey Milk film, where we gave $5,000. How we ever afforded that, I don't know. But I always, you know, we had an obligation. And I wanted to. I didn't do it out of ... I wasn't forced to. I wanted to do it.

On the rise and decline of Oscar Wilde Bookshop

LL: At the time I had a signed Oscar Wilde first edition I had some Gertrude Stein letters, some Tennessee Williams stuff ... I had a lot of Tennessee ... I had bought back in Houston, much earlier, an entire collection some lady had put together of Tennessee Williams’ signed books, laminated books, letters, just. .. I paid $15,000 for it. But anyway, I had most of that left, I decided to put a lot of these thing up there to sell, and just a general section of used gay books, as well. And then Kim stocked the front. We had a good selection fairly quickly. Initially we got some traffic. In fact, we got free publicity because... you remember the guy John Waters who does films? It turn out. .. I never saw him when I was there, but he turned out to be a regular customer and he was being interviewed for The New York Times, or The New York Magazine and he did an interview and he mentioned one of the reasons he liked Greenwich Village was because one of the place he liked to go was the Oscar Wilde Bookshop because he found all these obscure first editions of Tennessee Williams. The big advantage for the store there was whatever Kim sold, the money stayed at Oscar Wilde. Basically they got all this free stock, like the Oscar Wilde signed first edition went for 5,000, and the store got to keep all of it. It wasn't profitable, but at least it was doing fairly well. But then 9/11 happened, and everything below 14th Street was cut off for several weeks which included, of course Christopher Street where the store was. That just decimated the business, particularly even afterwards surprisingly, a lot of Oscar Wilde traffic was from foreign tourists. That, was just pretty much cut off for a while. Now there was a program, here businesses that were hurt by 9/11 could apply for money, and
Kim assured me she was doing it, but it turned out she never did. We just never really came back from that, 9/11, by, um 2001. Less than 2 years later it when, to me, it was just a losing proposition. I was losing money hand over fist.

LR: The store eventually closed in 2003, correct?

LL: Yeah. February. Actually, I took three of the guys from here. We went up to New York. The idea was that we would close it, rent a truck and put all the stock in it. But when I got up there, Kim had been contacted by, first of all news places from Japan to Russia, which was amazing. It generated a lot of press, most of which mentioned me unfavorably for closing it.

LR: Why do you think that was?

LL: I guess the attitude was it being historical, how dare I close it? Like I was supposed to continue losing money to keep it open. Whether they knew it or not, I already knew it was affecting the Houston store, because more and more I had to keep sending money up to Kim to not only cover the store rent, but I covered half of her apartment rent the entire time six years. And so that was a drain on me down here.

**On factors attributed to the decline of his industry**

LR: Any specific factors...?

LL: The Internet. An old customer I ran into not long ago pointed out - well he mentioned it online I didn't run into him, it was on Facebook - he mentioned to me in a message that he liked renting videos at Lobo but now he can get those videos free online. If somehow I miraculously kept Lobo going, it still at some point would have gone under. What few books we did sell there weren't that many. But people, gay bookstore simply cannot survive in this day and age. There's just not, you know, I guess what your really need to say is that the gay community has become a assimilated which frankly ... I'm an old codger, I don't really like that it has. But it is true, and that's what some people want. They want to get married and have kid and live in the suburbs. That's fine if that's what you want, I guess. I could never picture myself doing it.

**On the nature of looking back**

LL: I think at the beginning remember I told you that one of the things I was hoping for when talking it out was that I might see some things more clearly. The one thing that hasn't clarified in my mind is why I stayed in the closet so long. It's the biggest regret of my life, knowing all those year that I was gay. But if the first thing the stealing in Missouri had not taken place, I most likely would not have married Bunny. That would have brought me out of the closet sooner. Then you think, 'What if?' If I had come out much earlier I might have ended up in some place like New York, and I might be dead. You never know. Although, I have to add I don't know if you’re aware, they discovered that a very, very small percentage of gay men are immune to HIV because they lack a certain enzyme that is needed by the virus to attack the white cells. In fact, one person who discovered that and it led to some of the really big jumps in medicine. I've often wondered if I were tested whether it would be true because I’ve been exposed. Bill was HIV, one of the two Hispanic guys that I messed around with had HIV and died of AIDS, and there were others. I don't know how I lucked out.