

Karen L. Graves
*And They Were Wonderful Teachers:
 Florida's Purge of Gay and Lesbian Teachers.*

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In *And They Were Wonderful Teachers*, Karen L. Graves tells the story of Florida's Legislative Investigation Committee, known as the Johns Committee after its head Senator Charley Johns, which between 1956 and 1965 conducted investigations into the NAACP as well as the lives of individual civil rights activists, suspected Communists, and gay men and lesbians in Florida's education system. Graves uses recently released transcripts of the Committee's interrogations to examine the investigations and the resistances to them. She suggests that lesbian and gay schoolteachers were less able to combat the Committee's campaign because of the lack of public accountability in the investigation of teachers and because of the lack of professional and institutional support they received.

The Johns Committee was established in 1956 to combat desegregation and its initial investigations were of members of the NAACP and other civil rights activists. While the campaign had an impact on the NAACP, that organization was able to mount a successful legal challenge to the investigation and in 1963 the US Supreme Court ruled in favour of the NAACP in Florida against the Committee. The Committee also mounted a campaign against alleged Communists.

In 1958, the Committee launched an investigation into homosexuality in Florida's university system, resulting in over twenty faculty and staff and more than fifty students being purged from the University of Florida in Gainesville. Similar investigations took place at Florida State University in Tallahassee and at the University of South Florida (USF) in Tampa. USF faculty and staff in particular were able to limit the impact of the investigations because of strong support from university associations and because the proceedings were public.

The Committee also focused its attention on homosexuality within the public school system and between 1957 and 1963 it actively pursued lesbian and gay schoolteachers. It is this campaign that is the major focus of Graves' book. Graves analyzes the experiences of eighty-seven teachers whose cases are represented in the extant files of the Johns Committee. She shows that the Johns Committee, school administrators and the teachers' professional association largely supported each other's efforts to rid the public school system of gay and lesbian teachers. Teachers were interrogated in secret and without legal counsel, were asked to provide details of their social and sexual lives, were pressured into revealing the identities of other lesbian and gay teachers, and were fired from their teaching positions and had their professional credentials revoked.

The campaign against lesbian and gay schoolteachers differed in several respects to the Committee's other campaigns. The secrecy with which the campaign against teachers was conducted significantly reduced the possibility of teachers being able to mount successful resistance. Whereas the NAACP challenged the Committee in the courts and USF demanded open campus proceedings, "Schoolteachers hauled before the Johns Committee alone, without counsel or time to think through a testimony strategy, could not demand an open hearing, either in court or within the halls of the academy. Public knowledge of their personal lives would have led to their certain dismissal from teaching and exposed them to physical danger" (94).

Nor was there any legal recourse for schoolteachers. Graves suggests that, "while cultural resistance and unlawful arrests greeted civil rights activists at every turn, *de jure* segregation *had* been overturned and the First and Fourteenth Amendments *did* apply to their case. No laws existed to protect gay and lesbian citizens...." (95). In fact, any teacher who dared to challenge the investigation in the court system would have been at risk of prosecution under Florida's sodomy laws.

A 1959 amendment to the Florida statutes improved the situation somewhat by requiring the Board of Education (BOE) to investigate before initiating revocation of a teacher's certificate, rather than revoking the certificate before the hearing as had previously been the case. The BOE's revocation of several teachers' certificates was challenged in the courts on the basis that the BOE had not complied with the law because Remus Strickland, the Johns Committee's chief investigator, was allowed to conduct the investigation, and he was not an employee of the BOE. The case made its way to the Florida Supreme Court, which reversed the revocations, but this did not mean victory for teachers, as the Court remanded for new proceedings to be conducted in compliance with the statute. At every turn, the authorities seemed keen to remove "suspect" teachers as quickly as possible.

The other factor in schoolteachers' treatment was the nature of their profession. The Committee's campaign was in keeping with broader campaigns against homosexuality. Educational authorities, the court system and gay and lesbian teachers' own colleagues largely agreed with and participated in the anti-homosexual campaign of which the Johns Committee was simply a very vocal element in Florida. Graves demonstrates that the nature of the profession of teaching, with its emphasis on teacher morality as an influence on children, its feminization, and the institutionalization

within teaching of conservative sexual norms, made teachers particularly vulnerable to the investigations of the Johns Committee. Teachers were seen as “guardians of the dominant ideology” (xvii), resulting in conservative views dominating education broadly and more specifically regarding all matters of sexuality. Teachers suspected of homosexuality therefore received little support at county or state level, although Graves does discuss several cases in which parents and members of the public voiced opposition to the anti-homosexual campaigns.

Although she could have provided more detail on the Committee’s negative impacts on the NAACP and other civil rights activists, Graves makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of Cold War campaigns against homosexuality and to our knowledge of how teachers are seen as uniquely positioned to support or subvert dominant ideology. In the case of Florida teachers in the 1950s and 1960s, that meant that they were also the focus of a somewhat more successful campaign against perceived social threat than were other groups targeted by conservatives.