

Queering the Redneck Riviera: Sexuality and the Rise of Florida Tourism

**Jerry T. Watkins III. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2018. 154 pp., illus.
\$79.95 (hardcover). ISBN 9780813056913.**

“It was far enough from prying eyes . . . they could do things they wouldn’t necessarily do back home in front of the neighbors.”¹

In *Queering the Redneck Riviera: Sexuality and the Rise of Florida Tourism*, Jerry T. Watkins III weaves together the history of the LGBTQ+ community with events happening socially and politically in the Florida Panhandle post World War II. Floridians needed to sell “The Sunshine State” as a tourist destination. However, what if your “lifestyle” went against the promoted “family-friendly” vacationland image? Using oral histories, publications, government documents, and transcripts from interrogations by the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee (FLIC), Watkins tells the story of gay men and lesbians in North Florida as they fought for their place on the Emerald Coast.

The book is more or less chronological, with each chapter building on the previous, beginning with a look at tourism along Florida’s Gulf Coast and its impact on the Panhandle. Local citizens, politicians, and government entities wanted to establish a vacation destination free of “undesirables,” including removing “anything queer” from the state or at least from view.² Watkins contrasts this with LGBTQ+ rights at the time. For most people, this meant keeping their orientation hidden for fear of being outed or worse. He also discusses the FLIC (commonly known as the Johns Committee) established by the Florida Legislature in 1956 to investigate subversive activities and suspected communist organizations. The Committee’s eventual focus turned to “homosexuals,” claiming they were a threat to national security and youth. Subsequent chapters cover topics including crackdowns on gay men’s cruising areas; the importance of gay publications in promoting the area to gays nationwide; and establishing bars and private parties specifically for the LGBTQ+ community. Watkins concludes by looking at how gays and lesbians boosted their political power through the economic impact brought about by their tourist dollars. This new power, coupled with changing attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ committee, helped in queering the Redneck Riviera.³

One of the book’s strengths is telling the history of the Florida Panhandle’s LGBTQ+ community. Researching LGBTQ+ history is challenging, especially for outsiders, given the secretive way many LGBTQ+ people lived before the 1969 Stonewall riots. However, Watkins is no stranger to the area or his subject matter, having grown up as a closeted gay man in Panama City, Florida. *Queering the Redneck Riviera* is not Watkins’s first time writing about this subject. His Georgia State University master’s thesis, *Underneath the Rainbow: Queer Identity and Community Building in Panama City and the Florida Panhandle, 1950-1990*, looked at the development of queer communities along Florida’s Gulf Coast.⁴ Unsure where to start his master’s thesis research,

¹ Jerry T. Watkins III, *Queering the Redneck Riviera: Sexuality and the Rise of Florida Tourism* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018), 4.

² Watkins 4-7.

³ Watkins, 151-154.

⁴ Jerry T. Watkins III, *Underneath the Rainbow: Queer Identity and Community Building in Panama City and the Florida Panhandle* (Atlanta: Georgia State University, 2008).

Watkins returned to the Fiesta Room Lounge—a gay bar in Panama City, Florida, that played a role in his own coming out in 1998—where he connected with the local LGBTQ+ community. Many of these locals, whom Watkins refers to as his “teachers,” were interviewed for his master’s thesis. Watkins incorporated these oral histories into *Queering the Redneck Riviera*.⁵ These oral histories and his use of FLIC interrogation transcripts and interviews give the book a personal and emotional tone.

Besides being an excellent resource for anyone studying LGBTQ+ history, the book’s extensive bibliography lists works around gender, civil rights, Christianity and the Christian Right, and tourism development in Florida and across the country. *Queering the Redneck Riviera* is a much-needed addition to queer history and scholarship, especially since queer history often ignores Northern Florida and the Panhandle. While the book includes a limited number of photographs, not surprising given most LGBTQ+ people were closeted during this period, Watkins does incorporate some images of parties and celebrations, including drag events in the early 1970s. The terminology used to identify people as LGBTQ+ in the book changes from chapter to chapter. At times, this can be disconcerting, and some of the terms may be foreign to today’s readers. In the introduction, Watkins discusses why he chose certain terms for specific chapters, writing, “‘Homosexual’ and ‘homophile’ are mainly used in the early parts of the book while ‘gay,’ ‘lesbian,’ and ‘LGBTQ’ are used later to connote the shift in identity politics.”

Much of the book focuses on gay men, but this is not a slight on Watkins’s part towards lesbians or LGBTQ+ people of color. In his introduction, Watkins writes, “this book is heavily dependent on the actions of White men in the era, and so is not an all-inclusive LGBTQ history.”⁶ At the time, work outside the home and traveling were privileges of White men. Chauvinism and segregation heavily influenced tourism and travel in the region. However, it does not mean the book solely documents gay history. Watkins discusses lesbian establishments and institutions, especially near military bases, as a military career allowed women greater economic and social freedom. Additional research on and writing of histories around the influence of lesbians and LGBTQ+ people of color in the region’s history, and a consideration of why these groups’ roles have been overlooked or diminished, would significantly improve the scholarship around LGBTQ+ history in Florida.

This book will appeal to a broad audience—from scholars studying the relationship between tourism and sexuality to archivists and librarians wanting to learn more about regional LGBTQ+ history. For archivists, a critical takeaway is the lack of materials documenting marginalized and invisible communities in archival repositories. As Watkins discovered when researching his master’s thesis, it is difficult to find primary source material documenting White, cisgender, gay history, let alone material documenting lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, and queer people, as well as LGBTQ+ people of color. Whenever possible, archivists should address this in current and future collecting policies and initiatives, including looking for new LGBTQ+ collections and ensuring existing collections are appropriately identified and discoverable.

Queering the Redneck Riviera: Sexuality and the Rise of Florida Tourism provides a compelling look at the lives of gay men and lesbians in Florida’s Panhandle as the area transitioned from the Redneck Riviera to the Emerald Coast. Do not be fooled by the title; this is more than just another book on Florida tourism history. Watkins brings to light the stories of overlooked individuals and groups that helped shape Northern Florida.

David Benjamin
Head of Special Collections & University Archives
University of Central Florida Libraries

⁵ Watkins, *Queering the Redneck Riviera*, x.

⁶ Watkins, 11.