

emails and dances: 2SLGBTQ+ history in the late 1900s



EPISODE DESCRIPTION

Fiona is joined by Evelyn Bradley as co-host in this episode all about 2SLGBTQIA+ history on the Island. We discuss how and where members of the queer community gathered in the 1970s to the 1990s (think: emails and word of mouth invitations before the internet came into play), and what our history might look like if it wasn't heteronormative.

Features guest interviews Dave Stewart and Treena Smith.

Peers Alliance youth programming:
<https://www.peersalliance.ca>

Ocean sounds. Rowing in canoe. Beach PLZ music introduces.

Welcome to The Hidden Island – a podcast where we talk about local Island history. My name’s Fiona Steele, and I’ll be your host for this journey.

Stay in the canoe. Rowing sounds. Ocean. Light wind.

Fiona: Today, we're doing something different. I'm not just sitting alone and talking to an empty room. Evelyn, can you introduce yourself?

Evelyn: Absolutely. Hi, folks. My name is Evelyn Bradley. I run a diversity, equity and inclusion firm here in PEI. And I'm really excited to be talking about queer history today.

Fiona: Yeah, we've got some exciting interviews planned. First up, we talked to Dave Stewart, who was the director of a film series called "Before Grindr: the secret social history of gay and lesbian PEI." He's also an avid 2SLGBTQIA+ advocate. Now, we talked to David but a lot of things. But one key takeaway was this idea of how straight and heteronormative our history is.

Fiona: But to shift a little historical, something that I heard is, were so quick to be like, 'No, this historical figure can't have and queer in any way.' And you know, we see this with figures, even Island ones like L M Montgomery, there's a common discord saying maybe she was queer. We don't know. Why is it problematic that we assume they have to be straight? And why is it bad to wonder at their identities?

Dave: Evelyn, does it go with a lie, we've been lied to thing that you were talking about earlier?

Evelyn: I feel like it goes to what we picture in our minds when we think of like nostalgic moments. I think the problem is, historically speaking, nostalgia has looked like white, straight, comfortable couples. And I think that in our heads, when we find something that we love, and we just decide that something is family friendly. When we say the word family, it looks like white, straight kids, country; it looks a certain way, in most of North America. And I think that in a lot of ways, specifically, when we're talking about these historic figures that defined PEI, we couldn't possibly think of them as being queer, because then we don't see ourselves in them anymore. Or for some of us, we see ourselves in the more and we're 50. And we're happily married. And we're not unpacking that, right. And so it gets a little deeper into the psychology of what makes us feel like we're home. And I feel like for a lot of people, a lot of these historic things and PEI that like define PEI as quintessential PEI, the idea that they could be fringe for some of us is too much, you're asking too much.

EPISODE SCRIPT

Bold = interview quotes

Italics = sound effects

Regular = narration

Evelyn: My brain can't take it, right, seven generations here and now you're telling me that this is the thing? Absolutely not. I refuse. And it's an interesting moment, because we don't see ourselves anymore. And if we don't see ourselves, but this is definite, like indefinitely, who we are, then what do we do?

Dave: When you were talking about L M Montgomery and the possibility that she had, she was lesbian or bisexual? I think you're right. There's nothing more powerful than nostalgia, like really, and we don't want to mess with the nostalgia. But the fact is, if this is so about her, you're learning, you're not losing her. I think people are scared of losing their nostalgia, you're not it may be shifting a bit, but you're learning something deeper about that person that may inform their writing.

Evelyn: Right? And it's implied nostalgia, it's not even actually nostalgia. It's the implied nostalgia that we think we're supposed to have when we experience these stories, right, and when we see this writing.

Dave: and we know that she was a woman who struggled in her life, right, like her life wasn't rainbows and things, but she wrote about, I mean, Anne's a cool character, she, you know, bucked back against the system. She didn't want to just float through life easily, right? And don't tell me that her relationship with Diana wasn't more successful than her relationship with Gilbert, correct?

Evelyn: Correct. And I just can't wrap my head around why we limit the success of even our fictional women. Right? Like, why does the only thing we root for is for Gilbert. Like I want, like, Oprah kinds of success for Anne and you guys want Gilbert. I'm confused. Okay. But I do want to say the thing that it's interesting to me is we've been talking about this concept, and it's all been from a very white perspective. Because in the island find we're all very white. And it would be I would be remiss if I didn't at least acknowledge the fact that like, we have to remember that there were other things at play when we talk about queer identity, including but not limited to, people of color, and like the fact that there is, to my knowledge, and Dave you can correct me if I'm wrong, but I can't find anything on Black queer history on the island, nothing. There is nothing on that population.

Dave: Now, when I was looking at, you know, just white or anybody come to me, I couldn't go earlier than the late 70s.

Evelyn: Yeah. And that's fascinating because it's not that families weren't here. And so for me, a little bit of a side project for me, it's kind of digging into, like, where are those silence Black queer voices? And why don't we know them? And, you know, I will argue that Anne probably should have grown up to marry a Black lesbian. But that's just my personal opinion.

Evelyn: But seriously though, we don't talk about that. And we don't talk about interracial relationships on this Island at all. It's almost relegated similarly to the queer identities, we're just going to put all these other relationships in a corner, we're not going to talk about them. And so when people see me and my white wife, they're like, what's happening over there? And these are the adults, not the kids, right? And you're like, Yeah, this is confusing for you. Because you've never seen one of these identities, let alone 17 of them mash together in this relationship. And so it's a lot to take in.

Dave: Well, and I think what's important, and based on, you know, what you say in history is that we need to look at these things so that we have our true history. We don't have a version of history, we have as close to the truth version of history as we can have. And that history does not look like what we've seen it look like on PEI for the last, and we talked about this before we started recording. Our history is not that long. I mean, it is with the Mi'kmaq, but it's not with people who moved here. Yeah, you know, yeah, it's not that long. So we have room to, we have room to go back and correct that. And I do, I do think it is correcting because for too long. Again, it goes back to those role models. And that's why it may be important that LM Montgomery was a lesbian if she was lesbian is so that 12 year old Tanya, who's out writing her story, right now can see a role model like her somebody who came before her. So she knows where she comes from. I think that's why history is important. I think you come from your parents, Evelyn, but you also come from a Black community, you also come from the southern community, you also come from the queer community, and all of those things make us who we are. It's not just one assumed thing.

Evelyn: And what does it look like to get on the same page about our collective memory? Because when you said that, just now the immediate thing that popped in my mind is collective memories. And we don't have a comprehensive collection of those memories. We look at history, don't think about them as collective memories. And so what does it look like if we build that kind of implied nostalgia around collective memory as the construct, as opposed to building it around this idea that history has to look and be a certain way, and love that doesn't have to be pretentious. History doesn't have to be pretentious.

Fiona: I love that. it's not a road where you have to go this way. It's like, these are all the memories around this time.

Dave: Yeah. I think history is very much a living thing, right? As we're proving right now, by having this conversation, because we're looking at what's been established. And we're saying, no, no, there's so much more and it's still going on. We're making history today. You know, like, what the queer community is doing now with our expansion of our understanding of what our community is. I mean, when I grew up, I knew of one trans person, the concept of nonbinary did not exist, in you know, in my world purview, and now we're leaving this history that we're creating by by fighting for rights for having these conversations. We are literally creating history right now.

Lo-fi music to transition.

Evelyn: We also spoke with Treena Smith, the Director of Community Impact in 211. At United Way, Treena Smith is originally from PEI and spends her days in rural PEI doing outreach work for 2SLGBTQ+ members in rural areas of our community.

Fiona: Okay, and we brought you here to talk about queer identity. We were just getting into that about the difference between then and now. So you grew up in Prince Edward Island, right? What was that like?

Treena: Awesome. Yeah, yep. Now in terms of like queer identity, there was certainly no talk of queerness. And even that word queer

Evelyn: denotes like,

Treena: yeah, like, it's not that I'm not comfortable with it, but it's certainly because my grandmother would use it for weird. Yeah, right.

Evelyn: It was derogatory.

Treena: And it wasn't derogatory, it was just strange.

Evelyn: Oh, yeah, like othering?

Treena: Othering. Like it was just like, well, that's queer. Like if it was just something odd,

Evelyn: like a quagmire.

Treena: Like it was just like, that's queer. My grandmother would say that or, but then I know a lot of particularly gay man, like friends of mine who grew up with queer being very derogatory, right. And so they're still not comfortable with the word queer. So when I was yeah, we didn't talk about queerness. Like you talked about gay. Yeah. Okay, I heard that word. Didn't really know what it was because there was certainly no information around it. And of course, we had like, Encyclopedia Britannica. Right, right. physical books that would come - no, Google - that would come like a year after they were printed. So the information so that, you know, so that would be a stretch in terms of like, so the only real information we would have there, you know, at the Confederation Centre Library, there would have been a section on like sexuality, right, which would have been like, nobody went,

Evelyn: Oh, my God. Well, if you went, everyone would know,

Treena: you would just go quickly, quickly walk down the aisle, right? Because it was only it wasn't even a whole aisle. But it was just like a certain, you know, section of books. And it would be everything from like, I don't even I can never remember talking about gender, right? Light in the way that we talked about it now. But it would be you might see a book on gayness or, like, but it would be sometimes it would just be like, birthing information, right? Or like books on like, pregnancy or books on like, so things like that. But there would also be books on like, Well, what we would say now is queerness, but it would be more titled probably like, yeah, gay. Yeah. Something

Evelyn: something gay, or borderline kind of like mortifying. Right? Like, the encyclopedia of gay.

Treena: Right, like that. Right. And so you'd like that would be the only information that we would see. And then yeah, but there was no queerness like that. You would never say that in the context that we would use it now. Right.

Evelyn: Right. Right. And so what was it like finding community here? If there was nobody said anything, nobody didn't any - like, I just envision you and your friends having like a secret handshake with the queers on the other side of the Island.

Treena: No, do you know what it was? Not kidding. I went to Colonel Gray High School in Charlottetown. And there was probably a group of us, kind of my closest friends and there would have been maybe nine or 10 of us all now would identify as queer it was. So it's so bizarre. I actually, I actually thought we were pretty cool. But apparently, we weren't, we weren't at all. But all of us would identify either as lesbian or gay men, or queer in some fashion. So I guess we just found each other. We certainly didn't use that language. In high school. We certainly didn't, I certainly didn't know we were, I was gay. I knew. We knew we were different, like in some fashion, but certainly not around. You would never use that language now. So that I graduated from high school in 1989. So that would have been like, yeah, like late 80s. We would have been in high school. And so yeah, I mean, it was like kind of like the, you know, socialists, like NDP, right, that kind of fraction, right? So more kind of left wing, like political. And then it was, like, more into like university. So I did my undergrad here at UPEI and would have been, yeah, like Baba's Lounge was just opened, so above Cedars. Right. So they expanded and they just opened Baba's. So that was kind of like, more of like, My people, right. So again, it wasn't even like, it certainly wasn't known as a gay bar or anything like that. But it was just a little bit different people that would go there. Yeah. And that's where, you know, I first met kind of, you know, the drag queens, right of the 70s and 80s. Right, they just be kind of hanging off the side of the bar. And that's where we would get a lot of the information and find out about dances and find out about, like, those sorts of things. And it was mainly on that level. It was mainly like dances at the Queens Arms Hotel.

Treena: And once you're there, you're there. Once you, once somebody knows your name, then you're invited to the potlucks and you're invited to the the bar like we'd have like well I can't really remember that. But they would have like pub nights, so you'd be invited to those things because you would, they would know who you were. And so yeah, we either call or email. Like, even email was like, Yeah, you email. But it was like dial up. Oh, yeah, there was no phones, like there was not like wasn't, you know, text me or have a group chat or? Right. Yeah. So somebody would have to have your email and

Evelyn: how do you build a community that way?

Treena: We did. I felt it was a, I feel that it was a stronger community than what I have now. Yeah.

Evelyn: Really? Why do you think that is?

Treena: I don't know. Probably because we're lazy. I don't know. I really don't know. But there was certainly more things happening. Because if I felt there's more things happening. However, when I look around today, I think there's a lot of things happening for youth. I don't know, because I'm not a youth. So I don't know if there is, but there certainly is way more information. But I don't know if it's the right information. Right, you can find anything you want on the internet. But the problem is, you can find anything you want on the internet. So whether it's beneficial information, I don't know.

Evelyn: So one of the interesting things that Treena brought up was this question of what's currently being done for youth? And I think that this is fascinating, because there are lots of programs right now available for 2SLGBTQ+ identifying youth in our area, from Pride Scouts, to a Writing Club, to even just a queer youth drop in where they can pop into the Peers Alliance office during the week, and have an adult to kind of talk to and communicate with. I think we're building community here in a really unique way. And we're meeting people where they are. And so when Treena and Dave both talk about what it looks like to define community and look at community from all of these different kinds of lenses and optics, I find that we're doing that today in a way we weren't 20, 50, even 10 years ago.

Fiona: Yeah. And you saying that reminds me of a clip right at the end of our talk with Treena, where you folks were talking about how for the first time, neither of you had involvement with the Pride Parade and your organization's did the work?

Evelyn: Yeah

Fiona: let's play that clip.

Treena: There's lots of organizations that are doing amazing thing. Yes. However, this was the one of the first times I'm over the age of 50, I'm 51. And this was one of the first times that I wasn't involved with my workplace being in the Pride Parade. I didn't organize it.

Evelyn: No, neither did I.

Treena: And neither did you. The two most 'out' people at our job
Evelyn: Did not organize the pride parade.

Treena: We did not organize, I did not make a email, I did not call
Evelyn: Nope, the straight allies in our office decided, yes, this was something that they valued. And instead of putting the emotional labor on the two openly gay people in our office,

Treena: I didn't order the t shirt.

Evelyn: Nope. They just took care of - everybody, they asked opinions for sure. And we're like, Would you do you have the emotional labor to like talk about this, which I just think is interesting. Because that's my whole job is to talk about diversity. And somebody was like, no, but do you have the emotional capacity to talk about a t shirt? Like, what? Yes.

Treena: Like I sent an email to them and thanked them. Yeah. Because I, I'm, I was always responsible for like, thinking about it and planning, which I'm, and I'd have to think about a month in advance, which would never happen. And so I'd be last minute ordering T shirts for Executives. And I, the T-shirts were ordered before I even literally knew we were going in the pride parade. And I was like, yes. This is amazing. So I do see people and businesses and organizations doing things like that I think more often, I don't know. That was my first experience. And it was lovely. I mean, yeah, it was great. It was great. To have that happen. Yeah. Instead of us saying, okay, yeah, we need to go in the Pride Parade. No, it is important. Yes, of course. It's important. And yes, we should be there. And because of it for nothing else optics and right. Like all of the things this was it was already done. Yeah. And I was like, Oh, we're going into Pride Parade. And they're like, Yeah, show up. Saturday. I'm like, Oh, great.

Evelyn: I have a cooler. Like that. Was it? That was it. Yeah.

Fiona: That's really interesting. Yeah. That's a nice.

Evelyn: I thought it was it was funny. I thought that to the other day, I was like, the most like outwardly like, in house, openly queer we didn't

Treena: I didn't touch anything. Nope. didn't touch it. So that's amazing.

Evelyn: I volunteered some contributions, because I was like, we need popsicles, because it's gonna be hot. But like I didn't like yeah, no, we didn't do anything.

Treena: Showed up. It was amazing. So that's what I think the last 20 years right has done or longer, longer than 20 years but

Evelyn: perfect example

Treena: But this is what all of that hard work when I'm talking about these things does. Is that it's not always the people in the community that have to do the things. Now we have allies that that know it's important to show up to those to support our community. And that's important. Yeah. So that's what all the hard work was for. Like when I see that I was like, 'oh, okay, that's great.' Alright, like that's good. So it was all worth it right? And not that the work is over because it's so not but yeah

Evelyn: It's an interesting milestone. We're looking at a historical point where PEI used to be versus where it is today. I don't think a young Treena thought, you know what gonna be doing? Nothing. And my CEO is gonna coordinate everything for pride, and we're gonna go and order T shirts,

Treena: and pay for them

Evelyn: and pay for them and not make it performative, right? Wild.

Fiona: Change is happening,

Treena: change is happening, it is happening. Of course it is. In front of our eyes whether we want it to or not.

Theme music comes up.

Fiona: I hope you enjoyed this episode of queer history on Prince Edward Island, we're only just scratching the surface of possible stories.

Fiona: Thank you, Evelyn for your time in co-hosting this episode with me. Feel free to find us on social media or at peimuseum.ca. On our website, you can donate or purchase a membership where you can check out all seven of our museum sites across the island. Just to note all those programs Evelyn mentioned earlier on. I'll provide links in the episode description so you can check them out. Thanks to innovation PEI and Skills PEI for your support, along with their official sponsors: Beyond the Brim Consulting, Upstreet Brewing, and Confederation Centre of the Arts. Finally, shout out to Adam Gallant for our theme music. Talk to you next time on the hidden island.