



The Un-Natural State: Arkansas and the Queer South

Brock Thompson

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The Un-Natural State is a one-of-a-kind study of gay and lesbian life in Arkansas in the twentieth century, a deft weaving together of Arkansas history, dozens of oral histories, and Brock Thompson's own story. Thompson analyzes the meaning of rural drag shows, including a compelling description of a 1930s seasonal beauty pageant in Wilson, Arkansas, where white men in drag shared the stage with other white men in blackface, a suggestive mingling that went to the core of both racial transgression and sexual disobedience. These small town entertainments put on in churches and schools emerged decades later in gay bars across the state as a lucrative business practice and a larger means of community expression, while in the same period the state's sodomy law was rewritten to condemn sexual acts between those of the same sex in language similar to what was once used to denounce interracial sex. Thompson goes on to describe several lesbian communities established in the Ozark Mountains during the sixties and seventies and offers a substantial account of Eureka Springs's informal status as the "gay capital of the Ozarks." Through this exploration of identity formation, group articulation, political mobilization, and cultural visibility within the context of historical episodes such as the Second World War, the civil rights movement, and the AIDS epidemic, *The Un-Natural State* contributes not only to our understanding of gay and lesbian history but also to our understanding of the South.

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