

An East-West Ticket

**An Interview with Louis Dorsey
by Dan Smith**

Dan: Your name is...?

Louis: Louis Dorsey, and I'm from New Orleans.

D: Tell me something about your parents?

L: I don't have particularly fond memories of my father, but I have his name: Louis Dorsey. My mother's name was Althea—a very kind woman. She was always having potlucks. She'd create a party/diner atmosphere for people who would come and bring just a little bit, but you could all have a big meal with a whole bunch of people.

D: Do you have brothers and sisters?

L: I have his, hers and theirs. Father had four; mother two; then they had two, of which I'm one. So there are eight children. I have contact with everybody, who are all sisters. Mother's children don't contact father's children and father's children don't contact mother's children; but I contact all three groups.

D: Did you go to grade school in New Orleans?

L: Yes. As a child, I went to a Catholic school named St. Catharine's, which was right across the street from Charity Hospital. Charity Hospital was a huge, gigantic structure that had two large colonnades of buildings. When I was a kid, the left column was for the black people and the right column was for the white people; and when I went there, I had to go around and enter from the back where black people entered. There was an archway in front of the building, and you went in on the right side for the non-blacks. I was never in those right buildings where all the white people were.

I was a very happy kid. I lived a long way from school, but would pocket my bus fare and walk. There were five or six of us along the route that knew each other, and we had sort of a system: "Meet me on the corner at such and such a time." And we'd all walk to school and home together. I remember those people and still see their faces as children.

D: Any other interesting stories about grade school?

L: It was a Catholic school, so we had to go to church, and I never liked the church part. One day we went to church for Lent, but I didn't want to go. So after we got there, I snuck out the window of the church. As I was backing out the window, I backed right into the priest who was in the hallway. He punished me. My penance was to go back to church and stay after school several days. But I thought that was pretty funny.

I enjoyed school, but always felt stress when we had big affairs. When I was really, really young, they would have these dance things where boys and girls were paired together, and I felt very uncomfortable. I didn't understand at the time that I was gay. I just knew that I didn't like to be in that environment. As I got older—like high school—I recognized that I was gay; but I did all the things that you are supposed to do. I made friends with girls who would go to the party with me or go to the dance with me; and when I look back at those pictures, I realize that the girls I chose have become lesbians!

[Louis laughs] I think we had a camaraderie going there where we didn't have to worry about going to the prom and worrying about the drunken affair between a boy and a girl. Besides, being a black person at that time, it wasn't a good idea to let the people know that you were gay; so I kept my mouth shut. That might be one of the reasons I ended up in California: because I was running from that as an adult.

D: Any interesting stories about going to a dance as an adult?

L: I went to Boulder in the late '70s with a friend. His friend was graduating from school and needed to bring a date to the dance. There were no black people at that school and he wanted to make a big splash. So he asked my friend if I could come to the dance as his date. It was probably one of the most nervous things I've done in my life. But I got all dressed up, and he got all dressed up. They called the couples' names to come out onto the floor to do the dance, and he and I walked out onto the floor and danced at his graduation dance.

D: Was there any reaction?

L: Well, a lot of regular man-and-woman couples preceded us and they were cheered; but when we came in as a couple, there was silence. The dance started and we danced one dance. Even now, I can feel that tension; the nervousness that there was this face that was different among the crowd that was so different 'cause there was two men dancing on the floor. You know, this was in the '70s.

D: What was the name of your college?

L: Southern University in New Orleans; and I finished at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. I took Accounting and finished in Accounting. In '78, I came out here for the summer and never went back.

Then one thing led to another, and I ended up in Venice, California, working for a bank. Then I did UPS and Post Office, and finally ended up in MUNI, where I'm now.

D: What do you do there?

L: I work in the Computer Data room. We monitor the system and take care of problems with the computer. We deal with problems that might come up during the day (and they do come up everyday), and we solve them: accident where a person has or hasn't been run over; a blockage accident; a disabled vehicle; a power thing; a physical obstruction--all of those kinds of things are in the realm of what we do.

Part of my job is to document all irregularities of a day and all the data entry kind of things. I work from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. and, at 3 a.m., all of the software that's been created for that day's work is captured, miniaturized and put into software package which is then available for people in remote locations to analyze if they want. I do that every day. I've been working for MUNI for over 30 years.

D: So did you ever go on any vacations?

L: Oh, it would be very difficult for me to talk about my travels because I have actually traveled a lot. In 1988, I traveled around the world for a year with a good friend who

lived in France at the time. We went to Germany, France, Austria, England, Spain...pretty much all the European countries. Then to Japan, Singapore, Thailand, Burma and India. The ticket was an East-West ticket. You could travel continuously in one direction going in a circle. If you went sideways, you had to pay your own trip; but 90 percent of the time we didn't have to worry about airfare, and we traveled very inexpensively... hitchhiking, riding motorcycles and bicycles. I've also been to Morocco and China. In fact, if you mention a country, I've probably been there. My favorite place to go is somewhere where they speak French because that's my favorite language of all. That's the one I can struggle through the best. My daddy spoke Cajun French and I lived around people who spoke Creole.

D: Tell me about one of your latest trips.

I went to the inauguration of Obama. My cousin, Michael Tomas, who lives in a suburb of Washington, invited me. His place is only a 10 to 15 minute drive from central D.C. I arrived at 2:00 a.m. the morning of the Inauguration, got off a plane, ran to the car, drove to his house, took a shower, slept for 2 hours, and then we got on a train and went into D.C.

And it was massive, just massive. To get into the train was a quarter mile long line. It took us two hours just to catch that train. When we got off at a central stop, it was so massive that we couldn't get out of the station for 35 or 40 minutes.

When we emerged out of the subway, people were packed shoulder to shoulder. I generally get anxiety attacks around people, but during that whole time, I was just comfortable. No one seemed to be angry or excited or pushy or whatever. I think we all felt that we were in the same boat.

It was very cold and I had on like two pairs of pants and thermals, a fur hat and gloves, and two scarves. I deliberately hadn't eaten or drunk liquids 'cause I didn't want to be trying to find a bathroom. Michael's wife, who knows D.C. well, pulled us through crowds and crowds of people. We got to the other side of the Smithsonian, and at that point we just couldn't get any further. We got locked into this pier of people. All along those roadways, there were busses sitting still with their engine running for people to go for refuge to get out of the cold. They had special rooms for seniors and the elderly and they all had big monitors in them.

Obama came on to give his inaugural speech; and it was just a mass of silence. Then there was this reverberation of his voice coming from loudspeakers placed throughout the whole city. If he said, "I the President," you'd hear, "I the President-dent-ent-ent-nt-tt."

I've never understood the Presidency of the United States. I think it's an awful job, but I've paid more attention to it since he became president. My interest with him is just the curiosity that a black man made it to that level in the United States, which still has major issues with race. It was quite a thrilling experience for me, and I stayed in D.C. until the weekend after the Inauguration.

D: Did you ever have a lover?

L: I went through a period of just being out there, running around, sleeping with different people and not giving a good credence to a relationship. I still sort of regret Yo Yo Abello, a Filipino who was in my life in the '70s—at the time I was not adult enough to understand and appreciate the wonderful person he was.

I met a person 14 or 15 years ago that I still have a relationship with; but I don't call it a love relationship, and I don't know why we have the kind of relationship that we have. He lives in Oakland and I live in San Francisco. We see each other two or three times a week. We go to parties, dinners and vacations together, but we don't identify as lovers; but people who are close to me see him as my lover.

D: How did you come to square dancing?

L: My roommate, David Holloway, who's in Western Star, told me about it 2 years ago. At the time, I didn't connect it with having seen the group before, but later remember seeing them at the Castro Street Fair 2 years in a row. I also had gone to a big gay event where Rich Reel was introducing square dancing. David's mention of square dancing finally got me curious enough that I came.

I have such a warm feeling for some of those people—like Elise for example. This round she's doing the boy's thing, so I get a chance to dance with her because I can only dance with people who do the boy role. I also like dancing with Mimi and Kathy; and have this kind of warm feeling for Rich and his lover, Tony.

I think I can be very verbose as a person only when I know you a long time. But with Western Star, I'm very comfortable.

D: Thank you.

L: You're welcome. We've done a good job.