

= Black Cat Bar =

The Black Cat Bar or Black Cat Café was a bar in San Francisco , California . It originally opened in 1906 and closed in 1921 . The Black Cat re @-@ opened in 1933 and operated for another 30 years . During its second run of operation , it was a hangout for Beats and bohemians but over time began attracting more and more of a gay clientele .

Because it catered to gay people , the bar became a flashpoint for the nascent homophile movement . The Black Cat was at the center of a legal fight that was one of the earliest court cases to establish legal protections for gay people in the United States . Despite this victory , continued pressure from law enforcement agencies eventually forced the bar 's closure in 1964 .

= = The original Black Cat = =

The Black Cat opened in 1906 , shortly after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake . In the early years , the bar was located in the basement of the Athens Hotel at 56 Mason Street in San Francisco 's Tenderloin neighborhood . This building still stands today and is now the Bristol Hotel . When entrepreneur Charles Ridley acquired the bar in 1911 , he turned it into a showplace for vaudeville @-@ style acts . Over the next several years , Ridley and the Black Cat came under increased police scrutiny as a possible center of prostitution . In 1921 , the bar lost its dance permit and closed down .

= = Beats and bohemians = =

With the repeal of Prohibition , the Black Cat re @-@ opened in 1933 at 710 Montgomery Street , again under Ridley 's proprietorship . Sol Stoumen bought the bar in the 1940s . In the early years of Stoumen 's ownership , the Black Cat was a center for the bohemian and Beat crowd . William Saroyan and John Steinbeck were known to frequent the establishment , and part of Jack Kerouac 's seminal Beat novel On the Road is set in the bar .

= = Growing gay clientele = =

While the Beats continued to congregate at the Black Cat into the 1950s , in the years following World War II , more and more gay people began patronizing it . The varied crowds mixed and gay Beat poet Allen Ginsberg described the Black Cat as " the best gay bar in America . It was totally open , bohemian , San Francisco ... and everybody went there , heterosexual and homosexual All the gay screaming queens would come , the heterosexual gray flannel suit types , longshoremen . All the poets went there . " By 1951 , the bar was placed on the Armed Forces Disciplinary Control Board 's list of establishments which military personnel were forbidden to enter .

The bar featured live entertainers , the best known of whom was José Sarria . Sarria , who began as a waiter , wore drag and entertained the crowd by singing parodies of popular torch songs . Eventually he performed three to four shows a night , along with a regular Sunday afternoon show , with Sarria performing full arias . His specialty was a re @-@ working of Bizet 's opera Carmen , set in modern @-@ day San Francisco . Sarria as Carmen would prowl through popular cruising area Union Square . The audience cheered " Carmen " on as she dodged the vice squad and made her escape .

Sarria encouraged patrons to be as open and honest as possible , exhorting the clientele , " There 's nothing wrong with being gay ? the crime is getting caught , " and " United we stand , divided they catch us one by one . " At closing time , he would lead patrons in singing " God Save Us Nelly Queens " to the tune of " God Save the Queen " . Sometimes he would take the crowd outside to sing the final verse to the men across the street in jail , who had been arrested in raids earlier in the night . Speaking of this ritual in the film Word is Out (1977) , gay journalist George Mendenhall said :

" It sounds silly , but if you lived at that time and had the oppression coming down from the police

department and from society , there was nowhere to turn ... and to be able to put your arms around other gay men and to be able to stand up and sing ' God Save Us Nelly Queens ' ... we were really not saying ' God Save Us Nelly Queens . ' We were saying ' We have our rights , too . ' "

Sarria became the first openly gay candidate in the United States to run for public office , running in 1961 for a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors . Sarria almost won by default . On the last day for candidates to file petitions , city officials realized that there were fewer than five candidates running for the five open seats , which would have assured Sarria a seat . By the end of the day , 34 candidates had filed . Sarria garnered some 6 @, @ 000 votes , shocking political pundits and setting in motion the idea that a gay voting bloc could wield real power in city politics . As Sarria put it , " From that day on , nobody ran for anything in San Francisco without knocking on the door of the gay community . "

= = Police harassment = =

In 1948 , the San Francisco Police Department and the Alcohol Beverage Control Commission , in response to the Black Cat 's increasing homosexual clientele , began a campaign of harassment against the bar and its patrons . Bar owner Stoumen was charged with such crimes as " keeping a disorderly house " and the State Board of Equalization suspended the bar 's liquor license indefinitely . In response and on principle , Stoumen , who was heterosexual , took the state to court . In 1951 , the California Supreme Court , in *Stoumen v. Reilly* (37 Cal.2d 713) ruled that " [i] n order to establish ' good cause ' for suspension of plaintiff 's license , something more must be shown than that many of his patrons were homosexuals and that they used his restaurant and bar as a meeting place . " This was one of the earliest legal affirmations of the rights of gay people in the United States . The court qualified its opinion , however , by stating that ABC might still close gay bars with " proof of the commission of illegal or immoral acts on the premises . "

In response to this legal victory and based on the " illegal or immoral acts " language of the opinion , the state passed a constitutional amendment creating the California Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) . The California State Assembly in 1955 passed a law authorizing broad powers for the ABC to shut down any " resort [for] sexual perverts . " The Black Cat was shut down under this authority , along with a number of other establishments . In a test case involving an Oakland bar , *Vallerga v. Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control* , the California Supreme Court struck down this new law as unconstitutional . This decision was not a complete victory , as the court noted that had the ABC 's revocation been based on " reports of women dancing with other women and women kissing other women " it might have upheld the law . Homosexuals , therefore , had won the right to assemble but only if they agreed not to touch .

Police and city officials responded to the increasing visibility of the Black Cat and other gay bars in the city , and the Black Cat 's success in court , by increasingly cracking down , staging more frequent raids and mass arrests . One favorite tactic was to arrest drag queens , since impersonating a member of the opposite sex was , at the time , a crime . Sarria responded by passing out labels for the drag queens to wear reading " I am a boy " so it could not be claimed they were impersonating women .

= = Closure = =

By 1963 , following some 15 years of unrelenting pressure from the police and the ABC , Stoumen decided he was no longer able financially to sustain the fight . The cost of his long legal battle was more than \$ 38 @, @ 000 . Sarria tried to enlist the owners of the city 's other gay bars to help Stoumen pay his legal bills , but none offered any assistance . The ABC lifted the bar 's liquor license in 1963 , the night before its annual Halloween party . After a final defiant Halloween celebration at which only non @-@ alcoholic beverages were served and an attempt to survive on food and soft drink sales , the Black Cat closed down for good in February 1964 .

The site is now the location of Bocadillos , a tapas @-@ style restaurant . On December 15 , 2007 , a plaque commemorating the Black Cat and its place in San Francisco history was placed at the site

