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WHEN THE BAR WAS THE ONLY PLACE IN TOWN



by Ellen Klages

What is a gay bar?

--Is it "a place frequented by the most depraved type of men?" That's how *The Dash*, a notorious Barbary Coast saloon was described in 1908.

Or is it a place with a softball team?

--Is it "a favored hangout for 'A Certain Kind of Sailor,'" as *The Old Crow*, which was San Francisco's oldest gay bar when it closed in 1980, was once described?

Or is it a place to go and cruise on a Friday night?

--Is it "a hangout for teenage girls seeking sex deviation thrills," as the police claimed when they raided *Tommy's Place* in 1954?

Or is it a place to meet your lover before you go to dinner or the movies?

Throughout San Francisco's history, the gay bar has been all of these. Many of the "landmarks" of gay history are the bars, baths and clubs where, over the years, people who were homosexual went to be with other people like themselves. Bars are not the stuff that history is usually made of, but they are clearly important to the development of gay communities.

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WHEN THE BAR WAS THE ONLY PLACE IN TOWN

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Every neighborhood had its bars, places where people who have something in common with each other go to socialize. In eras when there were no such things as "gay neighborhoods," as there are today, gay bars created a sense of community by establishing a "neighborhood" feeling that came from a common, shared identity rather than geography. A bar's existence attested to the presence of a gay community able to support it. Once bars were opened, they contributed to the growth of the community by their visibility.

In a pre-Stonewall, pre-liberation San Francisco, the bars were virtually the only public places where gays could meet openly as gays. The existence of the bars can be seen as a positive statement of identity, and of gay-identified territory. In order to make this positive statement, in order to assert any kind of public gay identity, patrons of the bars also had to make themselves vulnerable to police harassment and surveillance. To socialize with their "own kind" in a world where they had to "pass" as straight in order to survive, gay men and women subjected themselves to great restrictions and greater risks. Two women could greet each other with a kiss on the cheek on the street; the same act inside a gay bar could lead to their arrests. But by having the courage to take such risks, even in the face of police raids, they won themselves the first of our "gay civil rights" - the right to assemble, in public, as homosexuals. And that right was won in the bars.

Bars have been a part of daily life for many gays for over fifty years. But then, as now, the bars were the focus of life for only a handful of individuals. Most gays lived in homes and apartments and worked downtown just like everyone else. But they went to the bars to be with other gays. With the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, as the speakeasy disappeared, the bar appeared on the social scene, and developed quickly into a prominent gay gathering place. *The Old Crow* opened after repeal, as did *Finocchio's*, which then, as now, featured female impersonators for audiences of gays and tourists. Several other bars opened soon after, including *The Big Glass* on Fillmore, which was the first Black-owned gay bar in the city.

In 1936, the first Lesbian bar in San Francisco (and among the first in the United States) opened at 140 Columbus Street. *Mona's* is remembered fondly by many women as an informal place with barrels as tables and sawdust on the floor. Waitresses wore suits and sang parodies of popular songs. When *Mona's* moved to 440 Broadway in 1940 the bar was still frequented by Lesbians but was clearly aiming for the tourist trade. The marquee declared "Where Girls Will Be Boys." In 1949 *Mona's* moved to 473 Broadway and became *Mona's Candlelight Club*, though its importance as a Lesbian bar declined.

Gay historians have recently suggested that World War II served as a national coming-out experience. Uprooted from their homes in small towns, women and men found themselves in sex-segregated institutions - the military and the war plant. For them, a gay bar was the first experience of a world in which their own values and feelings made sense. They flocked to the bars to feel "at home." Particularly in San Francisco, a Pacific port of debarkation, this mass coming-out was reflected in the appearance of many specifically gay-oriented bars and establishments.

The Black Cat, which had opened in the thirties and had become the favorite nightspot for artists, writers and other "free spirits," evolved into a "queer bar" during mobilization for the war. Its status as a hangout for male homosexuals was well enough known that the Military Police declared it off-limits, and the San Francisco Vice Squad began conducting minor raids.

During the war years and immediately after, other well-known San Francisco bars had their own special attractions and clientel. *The Claridge Room* was an upstairs bar on Maiden Lane, conveniently near Union Square, whose

bushes were famous for soldiers' last romances ping out. *The Rickshaw Cocktail Lounge*, near was a mixed Lesbian and gay male bar. One remembers that it was frequently raided by the who were called out whenever a butch would play for making a pass at her femme. More genteel thought that *The Beige Room*, a mixed bar on Broa the tunnel, with its musical reviews and "classy" ers, was THE place to take a special date. *The Paper Union*, had a varied history and clientel, and had a n when few other bars did.

In the early 1940's, some hotel bars became meeting places for gay men. *The Orchid Room* and *Room* in the St. Francis and *The Top of the Mark* in t Hopkins were very popular gay bars during the wa ever, with the end of the war came an end to toler hotel bar managers. *The Oak Room* discouraged th clientel by serving drinks to suspected gay men on a which read, "Your patronage is no longer apprec

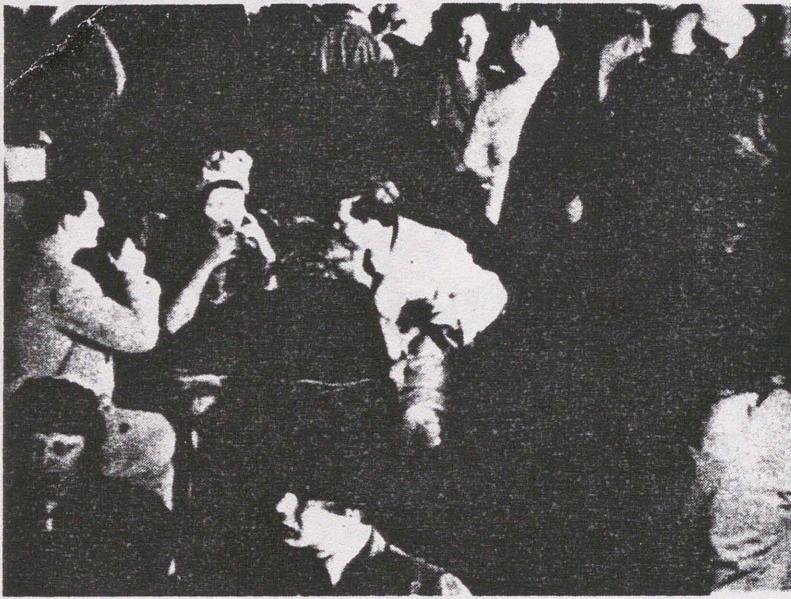
After the war, many Lesbians and gay men rema San Francisco rather than returning home when they mustered out of the service. Their new gay identities San Francisco a more viable community to live in than in which they might have to pretend they were not hom uals. New bars opened to serve the City's growing population. *The Red Lizard*, a gay men's piano bar, open the late 1940's on the site where the Transamerica Pyr now stands. *Anne's 440 Club* opened at 440 Broadway *Mona's* became the *Candlelight Club*. *Anne's* was a n club where Johnny Mathis and Lenny Bruce, among oth performed. *Anne's* was reportedly owned by a Lesbian, had a largely Lesbian clientel, although it was more a nightclub than a gay bar.

In the '50's the growth of the Lesbian and gay commun in San Francisco lead to a proliferation of gay bars. As result, the general public became aware of what had been previously "invisible" segment of the population. Seven periods of legal repression followed, during which the ba were raided and closed merely for being public gathering places for homosexuals. The struggle for gay civil rights centered on the right of the bars to exist as specifically ga establishments.

The Black Cat, a victim of similar raids during the wa years, became a focal point in the fight against the legality of gay bars. In 1949 the California Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) Department attempted to shut down *The Black Cat*. The ABC declared that it was a "disorderly house" used as a "meeting place" for "persons of known homosexual tendencies," and revoked its liquor license. The bar's owner, Sol Stouman, called on his employees and, more importantly, his patrons, to raise money for the legal defense of *The Black Cat*. In 1951 the California Supreme Court ruled, unanimously, that mere "patronage of a public restaurant and bar by homosexuals" was not sufficient reason to revoke the bar's license. The patrons of *The Black Cat* and a burgeoning gay community had worked together and, for the first time, had won the legal right to gather openly, as homosexuals, in a public place.

The Black Cat was by no means alone in its fight against legal repression from the ABC and harassment by local police. During the summer of 1956, a police drive to clean up the City resulted in the temporary closing of a number of bars including *Ethel's Cocktail Lounge* (Market); *The Crossroads* (Steuart); *The Paper Doll* (Union in North Beach); *Miss Smith's Tea Room* (Upper Grant, THE place for Lesbians to be seen after work or on weekends between 1954 and 1959), and *The Copper Lantern* (Upper Grant).

A similar drive in 1957, aimed at Tenderloin bars, closed *The Frontier Village* (Eddy) and *The Spurr Club* (Turk) on the grounds that they were "resorts for sex perverts." The latter was raided again in 1959, along with *The Nob Hill* (Polk). A newspaper account stated that *The Nob Hill* acted as a



Interior of The Black Cat during the 1950's

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gathering place for male homosexuals and "lewd acts" were permitted to take place on the premises. *The 585 Club* (Post); *The Fez* (Turk); and *The Hideaway* (Eddy) were also closed in this drive.

By the end of the 1950's gays in San Francisco were beginning to organize and feel pride in themselves and their culture. The rest of "society" wasn't as enthusiastic. Another wave of closures occurred in 1960 when the *Criterion Lounge* (Geary) and *The Handlebar* (California) were raided in January. *The Silver Dollar* (Eddy) closed in May. *The Ensign Club* (One Market), which opened in the late 1940's, was ordered closed in July. *The 57 Club* (Powell) also had its license challenged in 1960.

Jack's Waterfront (Embarcadero) and other bars filed suit in 1960 against certain San Francisco police officers for their demands of pay-offs. Also included in this episode were the *Have One* (Bush St.), *The Fang Club* (Post), *The Castaways* (90 Market), and *The Handlebar*. The "Gayola trial" ended in the acquittal of the officers charged.

The *Tay-bush Inn* (Bush at Taylor) was the site of the biggest gay bar raid in San Francisco history. In August of 1961, 89 men and 14 women were arrested. Although charges were dropped and the judge criticized the police for their actions, Mayor Christopher praised the police and called the raid "justified."

In 1961 charges were filed against *The Jumpin' Frog* (Polk) and the *Hideaway*, alleging that these bars were hangouts for homosexuals. The same year *The Why Not* opened in the Tenderloin, becoming the first gay bar to cater to the leather crowd. The second gay leather bar, *The Tool Box*, was more famous and successful. It was the first to open South of Market (4th at Harrison). An article in *Life Magazine* (June 26, 1964) entitled "Homosexuality in America" featured a two-page picture of the interior of *The Tool Box*.

The caption noted that the men pictured wore leather jackets to "emphasize their masculinity and scorn effeminate members of their world."

The end of the struggle of *The Black Cat* came in 1963 when its final appeal to the State Supreme Court was denied. On Halloween night, over 2,000 people gathered on Montgomery Street for *The Black Cat's* final party. Herb Caen noted that it was "the biggest crowd in town, stretching from Washington to Pacific." The crowd included drag queens and business men, college students and mink-clad society matrons, men in T-shirts and boots, and tourists - all gathered to show support for the cause of gay civil liberties and to say goodbye to a San Francisco institution. At midnight, Jose stood on the steps of the bar and led the huge crowd in a "rousing rendition" of "God Save Us Nelly Queens," the anthem of an era. And then *The Black Cat* closed its doors forever.

So, what is a gay bar? It is difficult to trace the history of a social entity that has been all but invisible for most of its existence. A bar is just a storefront where drinks are served; its identity depends on the people who go there. A bar is a "gay bar" because its clientel is gay. In times when people chose not to identify themselves as gay, because of legal and social stigmas, it was a matter of some discretion to tell which bars were "queer bars." It was a risk to inquire, and even more of a risk to go to one.

Looking back from the vantage point of 1989, it is even more difficult to tell. There were no guides, no bar papers, no ads for gay bars. Now, as then, we are dependent on word of mouth to find those bars. Then information came from a friend or sympathetic cab driver; today it comes from the stories and memories of the men and women who went to the bars in the '30's, '40's and '50's.

There are no written histories of the bars in San Francisco ... yet. We need your help. We need your stories, your photographs, your cocktail napkins and matchbooks. Help us rediscover the bars... and our history.

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This article first appeared, in a slightly different form, in Unity and More in '84, the 1984 San Francisco International Lesbian/Gay Freedom Day program. It is reprinted with permission of Ellen Klages. Ellen is currently writing a history of Harbin Hot Springs and would like to hear from anyone with information or memories of the resort. She can be contacted at P. O. Box 782, Middletown, CA 95461.

NEW YORK GAY LIBERATION FRONT REUNION PLANS

June 1989 marks the twentieth anniversary of the Stonewall Riots and the start of New York Gay Liberation Front (1969-1971). Two reunions are being planned this year for the women and men who were involved in GLF-NY. In San Francisco there will be a reunion party and public forum on Memorial Day weekend (May 27-29). In New York there will be a reunion party and march contingent during Gay Pride weekend (June 24-25). People are still needed to help coordinate the events on both coasts.

For reservations and information, contact: GLF-NY Reunion, c/o N. A. Diaman, Box 14051, San Francisco CA 94114, or call Nikos (Tony) Diaman at (415) 775-6143.