

What Was It Like 25 Years Ago?

by Lisa J. Church

Gays and Lesbians, like all other human beings, are social creatures by nature. We gather together freely these days at concerts and community churches, benefits and awards ceremonies, picnics and parades, and at bars and restaurants throughout the greater metropolitan area, all openly publicized as "in honor of," or "in celebration of," or readily catering to the Gay and Lesbian community. We have so many options available to us today, that it is sometimes easy to forget the stigma and isolation endured by our Gay and Lesbian brothers and sisters in the past. But we've all heard the stories.

Twenty-five years ago, Gay and Lesbian bars and gathering places did exist. But they existed more or less in secret, were advertised as "open to homosexuals" only by word of mouth. Because rumors about the clientele at many of these establishments abounded among the heterosexual community and the authorities, most of the Lesbian and Gay patrons were forced to enter and leave in as clandestine a manner as possible.

"Almost all of these places had back doors that opened on the alley," says Jay Martin, a local real estate agent who has lived in Kansas City most of his life. "We came in and left that way so we couldn't be seen from the street. It wasn't that we wanted to do it that way, but we had our jobs to consider."

People were often fired outright at that time simply because they were rumored to be homosexual, and the police often detained or questioned men and women they saw leaving Gay bars. Adrienne Ames, a local businesswoman, tells the story of two women who were stopped by the police as they left the Colony, a popular Gay bar on Troost Avenue in the 60s:

"One of the women was a schoolteacher and the other worked for a judge," Ames recalls. "Well, one night they

were stopped coming out of the Colony and the police arrested them both, took them downtown and harassed them pretty bad. They finally let them go, but the next day, someone called the judge and the school and both women were fired. I thought that was so sad," Ames says. "I didn't see either one of them very often after that happened."

Even though it could be dangerous to go to Gay establishments, people still have very fond memories of the places where Gays and Lesbians often gathered in the sixties.

There was the Rail Room across from Union Station, a bar which catered to the railroad workers during the day but was transformed into a Lesbian hangout at night. For nearly ten years, the Rail Room also played host to an all women's band, The Rail Runners.

"We formed there," says Aggie Wheeler, one of the band's founders. "So we decided to call ourselves the Rail Runners after the name of the bar." Wheeler, the current owner of Jamie's, says the owner of The Rail Room, Ray Mitchell, created a safe environment for the women. "Men could come in there too," says Wheeler. "But he didn't want them causing trouble... trying to pick up women and such, so Ray took care of us."

Other bars such as the Jewel Box, the Tent (also known as Arabian Nights), The Ivanhoe Cabaret and the Terrace, were widely viewed as having some of the finest live entertainment around. And on Saturday afternoons, so the story goes, a sign was always placed on the door of the Colony, which read, "Private Birthday Party," while the Gay and Lesbian customers held day long tea dances inside.

For men and women who chose not to attend bars or formal establishments, the homosexual community was still very accessible to some. "Almost every night," says

Jay Martin, "there was an after-hours party going on at somebody's house. And people had parties regularly in their homes. Invitations were passed on by word of mouth."

Invitations were also passed word-of-mouth for large gatherings which took place at a variety of locations in the country around Kansas City. "We didn't advertise those parties in any way. We used to have big parties at different places," says Adrienne Ames. "And sometimes we'd have a hundred people out in a field, all of us having a great time."

The bond formed in the community during this time also gave rise to lasting organizations such as the 10-400 Club, a service organization assisting individuals in need within the community. The club will hold its 20th annual picnic near Holt, Missouri in June.

As the sixties melted into the seventies, a large number of Gay and Lesbian-oriented businesses and organizations have appeared in Kansas City. Some have lasted but many have disappeared. The Tent, now the oldest Gay bar in Kansas City, still operates from its original location. Other old standbys have moved.

The growth in number of these establishments is clearly a sign of the changing times. From the late sixties through the 90s, the Gay and Lesbian community has become increasingly vocal, visible and vital. The social experience of Gays and Lesbians in the 60s may seem hard for us to fathom now; the suspicion and isolation, the sneaking in bars by way of the back door are experiences most of us will thankfully be spared. But it is important to remember that the foundation of our present-day freedom was carefully built by those Gay men and women who were not spared.

THE MAKING OF A COMMUNITY

by Scoop Phillips

Every year Gay and Lesbian communities across the country organize parades and celebrations commemorating the anniversary of the 1969 "Stonewall Riots," generally considered the birth of today's Lesbian and Gay rights movement. It may come as a surprise to some that there was an active, even nationally organized "homophile" movement prior to Stonewall, and even greater amazement to learn that Kansas City's Gay and Lesbian community played a key role in the years leading up to Stonewall.

The concept of a "Gay" movement was more than a century old when the Stonewall Riots occurred. In 1867 Karl Ulrichs, speaking to a group of lawyers in Munich, Germany became the first person in modern times to publicly declare himself a homosexual. At the same meeting he called for rights and the modern movement was born.

In 1924 Henry Gerber, influenced by the movement in Germany, formed the Society for Human Rights in Chicago. The group existed for only a few months, but the Gay and Lesbian liberation movement had come to America.

A handful of organizations developed in the ensuing years, but none ever moved much beyond being a social organization or discussion group. Then, in 1950, political activist Harry Hay and a handful of friends formed America's first viable Gay organization—the Mattachine Society.

Formed in Los Angeles, Mattachine soon birthed chapters in Chicago and in cities along the eastern seaboard. Two years later ONE, Inc. was also formed in Los Angeles. In 1956, The Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), the nation's first Lesbian organization, was formed in San Francisco.

By 1965 the east coast organizations had formed a loose confederation, the Eastern Conference of Homophile Organizations (ECHO). Homophile was a term coined to present a more accurate image of Gay and Lesbian people as whole persons rather than the more traditional term homosexual.

decided Kansas City needed to be represented. He contacted ONE, which sent representatives to Kansas City to meet with Shafer and other. Shortly before the February conference, ONE of Kansas City was formed. At the conference, held at the State Hotel (now demolished), ONE of Kansas City had

Homophile Organizations (NACHO) was born.

The members of ONE of Kansas City decided, shortly after the February conference, not to formally affiliate with ONE, Inc., and the organization's name was changed to the Phoenix Society for Individual Freedom. Phoenix became legally chartered early in 1967.

By 1968, Shafer had purchased a house at Linwood and the Paseo which Phoenix members turned into one of the few Lesbian and Gay community centers in the country and the only one in the Midwest. Phoenix House included printing facilities, a lending library, meeting space, and a hot-line. *The Phoenix News and Views* had progressed from a newsletter to a regularly published magazine distributed free of charge through the bars. It acted as the voice of and to the community.

In January, 1968, the Kansas City Metropolitan Inter-Church Agency agreed to establish a task force on homosexuality. Later, representatives were asked to serve on the Metropolitan Police/Community Relations Committee, a city commission designed to improve relations between the metropolitan area police departments and the city's minority communities following intense racial unrest in 1968.

Meanwhile, Barbara Greer, using the name Gene Damon, had become the editor of *The Ladder*, DOB's magazine. For several years this premier Lesbian publication was edited in Kansas City.

At the 1967 NACHO (pronounced nay-ko) conference the organizers decided to form a national clearinghouse of Lesbian and Gay publications. Phoenix was selected as the home and operator of the clearinghouse.

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Phoenix House, one of the few Gay and Lesbian community centers in the country in 1968.

The center offered meeting space, counseling and other services. The building, no longer standing, was at Linwood Blvd. and The Paseo.

At a regular meeting of ECHO in New York, with guests from the west coast organizations, it was decided that some type of national alliance was needed. A national planning conference was scheduled for February of 1966 in Kansas City, which was selected because "it was mutually inconvenient to everyone." Drew Shafer, reading of the upcoming meeting in *ONE Magazine*,

three representatives: Shafer, Al Greathouse, and Larry Hungerford. The three joined 36 other individuals, representing fourteen organizations, for two days of meetings on February 19 and 20.

A decision was made that an ongoing alliance needed to be maintained. A second conference was scheduled for later that year in San Francisco and the North American Conference of