TWELVE FIGHTING YEARS

HOMOSEXUALS IN HOUSTON, 1969-1981

A Thesis

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by

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ABSTRACT

This study is not a blow by blow history of homosexuals in Houston, but an examination of the growing sense of community felt by homosexuals in the city, that began to appear in the early seventies, and was reflected in their numerous and diverse organizations. The investigation will specifically focus on the political and religious development of Houston's homosexual minority, chapters 1 and 2 respectively. For homosexuals, the development of political power was crucial in removing legal restrictions in order that the rest of the community might flourish. Of course, religion has been a traditional mainstay of community development for centuries, but Christianity condemned homosexuality as a sin. How, then, this study asks, did homosexuals in Houston organize politically, and how did they organize religiously?

The time period covered by the study extends from the Stonewall Riot in New York in 1969, proudly regarded, rightly or wrongly, as the birth of the gay rights movement, to the election of Kathryn Whitmire as mayor of Houston in 1981. However, the historical literature on

homosexuals remains scant even today, and, in addition, as many of the homosexual organizations are volunteer based, recordkeeping has often been neglected. This author, therefore, utilized extensive interviewing within the community as the prime mode of research, supported by the publications of the individual organizations, the city's two mainline newspapers, the Houston Post and the Houston Chronicle , and the community newspapers that have served the homosexual minority since 1970.

In terms of religion, it became increasingly evident that homosexuals had created alternatives to the mainline churches, which had rejected them. However, the different alternatives proved to be neither similar in function, nor purpose, but each served the community. Politically, homosexuals in Houston displayed the same lack of agreement, but had managed to forge an effective organization, the Gay Political Caucus (GPC), that gave them a critical influence in city politics. Together, religion and politics had pushed the city's homosexuals toward an operating notion of community.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1964, Raymond Breton, eminent sociologist, constructed an index of institutional completeness for ethnic communities, charging that the existence of religious groups, newspapers, and welfare organizations reflected a high degree of community development. A full range of institutions was important, he asserted, because it made possible the concentration of social interaction within the group, further enhancing the sense of community.[1] If these criteria can be transferred to homosexuals, substituting common sexuality for racial origin, and if institutional completeness is a reliable indicator of community, then, by 1981, homosexuals in Houston had attained that notion of community. They possessed not only newspapers, religious groups, and welfare organizations, but many other institutions, servicing diverse needs. Bonded together by a shared sexuality, the territorial locus of the homosexual community was centered on the Montrose district of the city.[2]

Montrose had emerged as the focus for the homosexual community in the early sixties. As the white middle class fled an increasingly depressed area, homosexuals moved in taking advantage of the low rents. The high concentration of cheap apartments appealed to the single gay renter. Recognizing potential profit, bars catering specifically to homosexuals proliferated in the area. Although they were not the first such bars in Houston, they were evidence of a cumulative effect that would lead to a full elaboration of gay organizations and commercial establishments in Montrose by 1981. Bars, serving a predominantly homosexual clientele, had existed in Houston as early as the 1920's. The Pink Elephant, today located on Leeland Street, is a legacy of that era. However, fear of reprisal and public condemnation forced many homosexuals to lead a furtive and clandestine social life. The ever present threat of a police raid on a bar elevated the importance of private homes as centers of social interaction until the late sixties.

Although the second world war dislocated traditional social patterns to some extent, it was not until the sixties that homosexuals mobilized themselves into a more effective constituency. The civil rights movement in the late fifties and sixties furnished gays with a crucial sense of direction and purpose. The first period of black protest, dating from the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in Brown v School Board of Education to Stokely Carmichael's 1966 cry for

'black power' was dominated by Martin Luther King, Jr. and his philosophy of non-violence. The charismatic combination blended together to provoke a national atmosphere sympathetic to social reform which, in turn, supplied homosexuals with a growing number of liberal allies.

However, by 1966, impatience and frustration at the lack of response from the white power structure forced many black radicals to abandon the tactics of accomodation in favor of more militant solutions. Weaned on the teachings of Malcolm X and the literary rebellion of Fritz Fanon, they stressed black autonomy instead of integration. The militants celebrated their skin color. Black became beautiful as gay would become good. To be different held no stigma but was a source of pride and a pillar to the sense of community.[3]

Homosexuals borrowed not only slogans from the backs but political strategy. The 'Mississippi Freedom Summer' of 1964 illustrated the degree of importance activists attached to the ballot. Votes translated into influence. Three years later in 1967, a mobilized black vote elected Carl Stokes mayor of Cleveland and Richard D. Hatcher mayor of Gary, Indiana. Homosexuals learnt the lesson well, and would themselves be exchanging votes for political favors in the near future.[4]

White students, too, had grown restless with the values of middle class American, and the prescribed roles that awaited them in adult

life. Their idealism forced them to reject America's entanglement in Vietnam and fashioned a potent anti-war movement. Others, less politically inclined, assumed a cultural militancy that rejected traditional social mores. Women then began to apply many of the critical concepts of revolt inherent in the New Left philosophy to themselves and found their position to be wanting. With the counterculture loosening the historic definitions of womanhood as housewife and mother, political and cultural radicalism triggered a resurgent feminism that added a new perspective to political protest. "Women placed gender alongside race and class as a systematically enforced, socially constructed form of inequality."[5] It was only a short hop from gender to sexuality for militant homosexuals. The bedroom had truly become a battleground.[6]

As homosexual protest increased in volume and became more widespread so did the gay social life. A 1968 bar guide listed 26 homosexual taverns in Houston. In 1981, This Week in Texas , a bar guide/magazine, listed 35 bars, clubs and discotheques catering to homosexuals.[7] As Houston's population expanded rapidly in the seventies, the new urban environment attracted a large number of homosexuals, many of whom located in the Montrose area. They gathered in Montrose, as other minorities had in other parts of the city, seeking protection, approval, and identity with the familiar.

Montrose can be defined a city precincts 30, 32, 33, 34, 37, 38, 39, 60, 123, and 200, roughly an area of 4 square miles, bordered by Allen Parkway to the north, by Interstate 45 to the east, by Shepherd to the west, and by Main Street and the Southwest Freeway to the south.[8] Naturally, not all homosexuals lived within these boundaries, but were spread trhoughout the city. The majority of addresses on the Gay Political Caucus' mailing list were, in fact, outside Montrose.[9] The exact numbers of homosexuals in the city is impossible to determine (census data does not reveal that type of information), but a rough estimate can be determined, using the Alfred C. Kinsey scale and more general census data. Kinsey, the author of the extremely influential Sexual Behavior in the Human Male (1948) and Sexual Behavior in the Human Female (1953), estimated that 5% of the male population of the United States was exclusively homosexual, and between 2 and 3% of the female population exclusively lesbian.[10] Therefore, Houston's 1980 population of 1,594,086 probably included over a 100,000 homosexuals.[11]

Nevertheless, Montrose boasted the highest concentration of gays, including many of the city's leading homosexual activists.[12] Consequently, Montrose proved to be not only the social center of the homosexual community but also the base of its political power. Max Todd, the precinct judge of precinct 37, estimated that the homosexual

vote in his own precinct and precincts 34 and 123 was as high as 40% of the total vote. Precincts 33, 38, 39, and 60 regularly displayed a homosexual vote of 30%. Therefore, today, the Gay Political Caucus can almost guarantee that it will deliver these precincts to the candidates it has endorsed.[13]

In addition, Todd estimated that, citywide, the Gay Political Caucus with its endorsements could influence almost 10% of the vote. Political Scientist, Dr. Richard Murray, of the University of Houston, believed the figure to be lower, roughly 2%, but did agree that the homosexual vote was the second highest bloc vote that could be delivered in the city after the black vote. But whatever the vote citywide, the Montrose vote, whose influence can be more accurately measured, has proved critical on more than one occasion in the past to the hopes of would-be office holders.

Yet the bars still reflected the essential nature of the community. Joseph Harry and William B. DeVall maintained in The Social Organization of Gay Males (1978): "the presence of a variety of such bars [bars catering to homosexuals] may be presumed to be a strong indicator of the presence of a number of nonbar gay institutions."[14] Houston, by 1981, certainly had both bar diversity and numerous other organizations which sought to serve the needs of the city's homosexuals. Harry and DeVall also asserted that community

development was contigent upon the removal of legal and quasi-legal restrictions imposed by the city authorities.[15] Strangely, in Houston, it was and it was not. Legal restriction in the shape of the Houston Police Department had encouraged development rather than hindered it. Nevertheless, their assertion was sound. Houston's homosexuals continually sought allies in City Hall as a means of effecting change.

Communication served a vital function in the development of Houston's homosexual community. Not only did it provide a forum for debate and the exchange of ideas, it encouraged collective identity by increasing the awareness among homosexuals that, indeed other homosexuals existed and in large numbers. Since 1970 a number of community papers had existed in Houston, aimed at the homosexual market, varying in quality and purpose. Usually free and distributed in the bars, they relied on advertising to remain commercially viable. The first publication, Nuntius , began in 1970, and continued to be published until 1977. Basically a bar guide with a minimum of news content, its format became a standard for later community newspapers. LXIX followed the Nuntius format and ran only a short time, from January to July, 1978. This Week in Texas , which started in April, 1976, and is still being published today, was basically a bar guide, too. However, its distribution was statewide and not limited to Houston.

TWT began in April 1975

Other papers attempted a greater news content, striving to raise the consciousness of the average homosexual. The first was Contact , which lasted 17 issues in 1974 and 1975, before being absorbed by the Advocate , a homosexul newspaper with a national distribution. Contact itself had had a national market, although it was based in Houston. Contact's founder, Henry McClurg, quickly established another newspaper, the Montrose Star , whose first issue appeared in July, 1976. Again, he pursued a more news orientated format. In November, 1979, McClurg sold the Montrose Star , and founded yet another paper, the Montrose Voice . Again, the emphasis was on news. Like This Week in Texas , the Montrose Star is still appearing weekly, and McClurg reamins the publisher.[16]

In April, 1978, the first issue of Upfront appeared, a newspaper established by the first president of the Gay Political Caucus, Gary van Ooteghem. Although he was no longer president, he felt that the new leadership was weak, and the paper acted as a forum for his own ideas. In addition, he felt that the newspapers then serving the community, were inadequate because they failed to cover many of the issues van Ooteghem thought important.[17] Van Ooteghem was aware of what the media could do, when he spelled out the goals of his newspaper in the editorial of the first issue.

One of the primary goals is to raise the awareness and

> consciousness of our community through provision of information about issues of national, state and local concern. Many of us exist in a vacuum, unconcerned and unaware of the serious and dangerous conditions that confront us in the larger community...We hope to make members of our community more politically aware if it means just getting out to vote. Staying in the closet never overcame oppression anywhere for anyone at any time in history. We also hope to raise our own awareness by having this paper be a place in which each of us can collectively share our personal experiences of being Gay and hopefully broaden each other's perspectives.[18]

However, despite the editorial rhetoric, Upfront , (in 1980 it became Upfront America) was very much the mouthpiece of one faction within the homosexual community.

The Pointblank Times , too, represented a part of the homosexual community. Founded in March, 1975, by Linda Lovell and Alison McKinney, it addressed feminist/lesbian issues, which the other papers ignored. The Pointblank Times , like van Coteghem's Upfront America , and some of the earlier attempts to establish a newspaper, failed because of a scarcity of finances.[19]

In July, 1977, the Wilde and Stein bookshop opened in Houston on Richmond Avenue. Named after Oscar Wilde and Gertrude Stein, the store provided an array of books, publications and literature, fiction and non-fiction, on homosexuality and the gay rights movement. The first bookshop that catered primarily to homosexuals, the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop, had opened in New York ten years earlier. Charles Gillis, the owner of Wilde and Stein, had been prompted in his venture, because of

his own experiences in 'coming out' in East Texas in the early sixties. He had found no positive literature on homosexuality in the public libraries.[20] Of course, it was not until 1973 that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders, a pivotal event in the campaign for homosexual civil rights. Wilde and Stein was important for homosexuals in Houston because it provided an easily accessible source of literature that approached the issue of homosexuality from a positive angle, engendering a sense of worth and ultimately a sense of community.

In the same year that Gillis opened up the store, the Wilde and Stein radio show debuted on KPFT, 90.1 FM, a radio station in Houston owned by the Pacifica Corporation. The station was a legacy of the late sixties' free speech radio, which had been financed by subscription rather than by business advertising. The show's content related to homosexual issues, but, in fact, had not been the first such show in Houston. KPFT first aired a homosexually oriented program as far back as 1972. In 1973, Chuck Berger, one of Houston's earlier activists, hosted the program, before handing over to Linda Lovell, one of the founders of the Pointblank Times in 1974.[21] On March 6, 1980, the Montrose Star reported that Ray Hill, Houston's earliest homosexual activist, had become KPFT's manager.

Therefore, by 1981, Houston homosexuals had two viable community

newspapers, This Week in Texas and the Montrose Voice , a regular radio program that aired for two hours weekly, and a bookshop that supplied the most up to date material. The two newspapers had a combined circulation of over 20,000, and with the other publications, Nuntius , Contact , Upfront America , LXIX , Montrose Star , Pointblank Times , that had come and gone in the seventies, had helped to instill a sense of community within Houston homosexuals.[22] Communication led to identification, which, in turn, promoted a sense of community.

In addition to the appearance of viable media, and, in addition to the political and religious institutions, both of which will receive closer scrutiny in chapters 1 and 2 respectively, the city by 1981 could boast a plethora of organizations, catering specifically to homosexuals. Surprisingly, however, attempts to establish a community centre have repeatedly failed. The Montrose Gaze, the earliest such effort, opened its doors in October, 1972, but, because of a lack of financial support, closed the next year.[23]

In July, 1978, the Montrose Activity Center (MAC), a non profit organization, acquired its own building on Holman, at the corner of La Branch. Its board of directors had stated that its purpose was to provide a facility for gay groups and organizations at a minimum cost. Other homosexuals, perhaps cynically, believed it was an effort to upgrade the area in which the Center stood to create another Montrose

east of Main, from which somebody was going to reap real estate profits. However, several organizations utilized the facilities, including the Gay Political Caucus, Integrity, a social political organization, A Cappella Chorus, a Church of Christ homosexual support group, the Montrose Players, a gay theatre group, and the Montrose Marching Bank. Consisting of some 18,000 square feet, the building was in immediate need of renovation and repair, for it had stood virtually empty for some time. However, it was not to be. Lack of money led to its demise, but not before controversy erupted.[24]

In late 1979, Family, a group of bar owners, started to finance another community centre, which was established on the corner of Montrose Boulevard and Westheimer. Clearly, the new center would compete with the Montrose Activity Center and split vital resources. The November 23, 1979, issue of Upfront ran an article vehemently attacking the motives and intentions of Family and its spokesperson, Philip Slusser. Why had Family rented premises? Charles Clinton, the author of the angry article, thought he knew. "Dig deeper into the situation and you'll find the actual reason Family rushed out and rented the building was because Phil Slusser was informed he would have to sit on the Board of MAC and work his way up instead of taking it over as he wished to."[25] The article also referred to Phil Slusser's newspaper, the Montrose Star , as a 'rag'. But, of course, the

Montrose Star was Upfront 's major competitor, and, anyway, the owner of Upfront , Gary van Coteghem, had been instrumental in establishing the Montrose Activity Center.

Ironically, the attempts to create a viable community center whose purpose was to engender unity resulted in conflict and disunity. There were clear differences of opinion within the homosexual community, and good intentions were often crippled by the scarcity of resources and support. The bars remained the community centers for many Houston homosexuals. The alternative foundered. Upfront argued in its February 15, 1980, issue, "remember back to the black's civil rights struggle in the 1960s. They began to be a force to be reckoned with only after they became organized. They became organized when they began to meet in central locations - then the black churches."[26] It took a little time for activists in Houston to realize that homosexuals in the city met and socialized predominantly in bars, and that the bars had the same potential function as the black churches.

Throughout the seventies and into the eighties, the type of organizations catering to homosexuals multiplied and diversified. Specific needs, social, medical, religious, political, professional...within the community were recognized, and generally a few determined individuals attempted to fill the gap. Some dealt with specific problems and acted as support groups, others were social with

Annella Harrison

open or exclusive membership, but all were a response to the evolving sense of a homosexual community.

In 1978, Ms. Annelle Harrison established Family and Friends of Gays, a support group to aid the relatives of homosexuals, more specifically the parents, who had problems coming to terms with their children's homosexuality. "We are committed to help other family and friends learn what we have learned, and to help change attitudes and create an environment of understanding so that our gay children can live with dignity and respect."[27] In November, 1980, a Houston chapter of Black and White Men Together was formed. Its purpose was the same as that of the original group in San Francisco, to end segregation and counter racism within the homosexual community. Both organizations attempted to alleviate a problem that became more acute with the growing sense of identity that homosexuals had begun to feel.

The oldest social organization in Houston, the Diana Foundation, was started in 1953. Each year the group produced a show, the Diana Awards, basically a spoof of the Oscar ceremony. However, it was not until recently that the organization has begun to use its resources to help fund other projets in the homosexual community. Other groups followed the social/charitable format. The Colt 45s, who had limited their membership to 30, started in 1976, and have since sponsored a suite in the Ronald McDonald House on La Concha and entertained at St.

Anthony's Convalescent Home on Almeda. "The club's aim is to do good works for the gay and straight community to show people what gay people can do."[28]

The Texas Riders (1969), the Houston Motorcycle Club (1972), the Leathermen (1976), all these groups catered to homosexuals with a specific interest. Organizations like the Astro Rainbow Alliance for the Deaf and the Lamda Center for Alcoholics responded to specific homosexual needs. The Montrose Sports Association (MSA), which became a Texas non profit corporation in May, 1980, appealed to homosexuals who enjoyed organized competitive sports. The idea had germinated the year before in November, when work also began on the articles of incorporation. Article 4 summed up the aim of the group. "The specific and primary purpose is to foster sports competition among the membership for the pleasure and recreation of its members, with special interest for the gay community."[29] Patrick McIlvain, the Association's first Assitant Director added, "MSA is an alternative to bars, baths, and bookstores, centered around sports with a natural social outgrowth. The camaraderie generated by exercise is a lot more genuine than that mustered by martinis."[30] Texas Bay Area Gays and Greenspoint/FM 1960 Friends provided a social environment for those homosexuals who lived ouside the city and away from the mainstream of the homosexual community. The Montrose Players, the Montrose Marching Band, the

Montrose Symphonic Band, the Montrose Art Alliance, were all examples of homosexuals coming together to establish a group on the basis of a particular common interest in an art form.

Admittedly, some of the groups mentioned and others not mentioned fell by the way, but then ambition has a price. Moreover, whatever the nature of the organization, each was symptomatic of the emerging sense of community and fellowship that homosexuals in Houston had begun to feel, sense, and experience. Encouraged by political success, which will be discussed in chapter 1, homosexual vision widened and identified needs that orthodox 'straight' institutions did not serve or did not serve well, because of prejudice or lack of understanding. Two major institutions, serving the Houston homosexual community, were established for exactly those reasons, the Montrose Counselling Center and the Montrose Clinic.

The idea to establish a counselling center dated back to 1978, when William A. Scott brought together a variety of people to discuss several issues. The discussion soon focused on the lack of a mental health facility accessible to and accepting of homosexuals. No mental health agency publicly supported the view that the mental health problems of homosexuals derived from factors other than sexual orientation. Quickly, Scott's two room office on Lovett became the new centre. In December, 1979, the Montrose Counselling Center filed for incorporation

and became a non-profit agency. By 1981, the center's budget had risen from $9,000 in 1979 to $50,000. Its floor space almost quadrupled in the same time period. Financed almost totally by client's fees, which were charged on a sliding scale according to income, the center's growth was witness to its need.[31]

In the February, 1973, issue of Nuntius , an article reported that the Texas State Health Department would be conducting V.D. tests at Mr. Frizby's Bathhouse. The August, 1975, issue of Contact reported that the Texas State Department of Health knew that there was a higher incidence of sexually transmitted diseases among homosexuals attributable to their greater promiscuity. Yet officials had done little to combat the problem until then because the extent of the problem had not been realized. The testing at Mr. Frizby's had been the exception rather than the rule. The new effort was to be headed by Denis Nave, who was sympathetic to the problem and had worked with homosexuals at the University of Texas. The Gay Activist Alliance, a group operating on the University of Houston campus, MCC-Houston, the city's largest homosexual church, and the Lesbian Task Force of the National Organization of Women met with city authorities to establish a routine for blood testing at homosexual locations.[32] Nevertheless, both the Houston Post and Houston Chronicle would report epidemic statistics of sexually transmitted diseases in 1976 and 1977.[33]

It was not until the arrival of Ruth Ravas, fondly known in the homosexual community as 'Mother Ruth', some time later, that a formalized program was initiated. Working with the V.D. Control Program and based at the main clinic on MacGregor, her assigned area included Montrose, where she quickly identified a severe need. Ravas had a very special personality and, "in her own very ingratiating way, [she] got herself into the bars, doing simple screening."[34] She was aided in her task by homosexuals who were interested in the community's health care, in particular David Bonuelos and Michael White, and between them, they managed to educate the homosexual community into wanting a V.D. screening service. In June, 1980, the program secured a mobile unit from the city. The unit was in severe need of a good scrub because it had been recently used in a rabies control program. Not having the treatment facilities, the unit carried out only blood tests and gonorrhea cultures and referred the positive cases to private physicians or the clinic on MacGregor. The program peaked in terms of numbers between the end of November, 1980, and the spring of 1981, testing anywhere up to 90 people a night.[35]

The GPC's Medical Committee under the leadership of David Bonuelos, which was supplying volunteers to Ravas's program, was acutely aware of the limitations of that program. It was this troubled frame of mind that led to the Montrose Clinic. With the aid of Ravas, the Medical

Committee began to work toward fulfilling the idea of a, "free standing medical clinic in the Montrose area that would be free, that would serve the predominantly gay population."[36] Another key figure emerged to support the establishment of the clinic, Dr. Robert O'Brien, a prominent private practitioner in the west of the city. Like Bonuelos, O'Brien had long been interested in the health care of the gay community, and like White, he had been active in Lesbians and Gay Persons in Medicine (LGPIM) a professional support group.[37] In fact, the responsibility for the Montrose Clinic project was transferred to LGPIM from the GPC's Medical Committee in order to de-politicize the issue.

As federal funding disappeared, the clinic planned to handle only sexually transmitted diseases. Dr. O'Brien succeeded in securing the same privileges for the Montrose Clinic (medication and laboratory supplies at a no cost basis from the State Department of Health) that the clinic on MacGregor enjoyed. City Council endorsed the project and on October 6, 1981, the effort paid off. The Montrose Clinic opened its doors for business.[38]

Thus, by 1981, Houston possessed a full array of organizations, social, medical, support, professional, religious, and political which catered predominantly to homosexuals. However, as Harry and DeVall pointed out, full institutional completeness was not a total reality for a gay community without their seceding from the surrounding majority

society.[39] Houston's homosexuals, of course, did not secede, but their institutional completeness was great enough for Jim Veteto, the sales manager of This Week in Texas , to say:

> We have gay owned stores, gay real estate people, gay title companies, gay car dealers. We call it the gay connection...I eat, sleep, live and work gay. I sometimes go weeks without seeing a heterosexual. I enjoy being gay and I know I am not alone. We have a force in Houston that ties us together.[40]

Veteto's lifestyle was definitely that of the minority of Houston homosexuals, but the essence of what he was saying remained relevant. However, for Veteto to eat, sleep, live and work gay, the legal restrictions imposed by the city authorities had to be removed, and tacit approval secured. Chapter 1 of this thesis investigates how homosexuals organized politically to remove those restrictions, many of which had their origins in the Judeo-Christian tradition. For virtually all subgroups in America, the Judeo-Christian tradition in the form of the church had played a particularly conspicuous role in structuring activities, articulating values, and mobilizing opinion. In spite of the longstanding hostility displayed by the church toward homosexuality, religion has continued to play an important role in the life of the homosexual community. Chapter 2, then, asks how, in the light of traditional interpretations of the scriptures, did Houston homosexuals organize religiously?