

# THE ADVOCATE

THE NATIONAL GAY NEWSMAGAZINE

BIWEEKLY

IN TWO SECTIONS

## THE HOUSTON ATTITUDE

SMALL TOWN SPIRIT IN A MAJOR METROPOLIS

### GAY NEWS

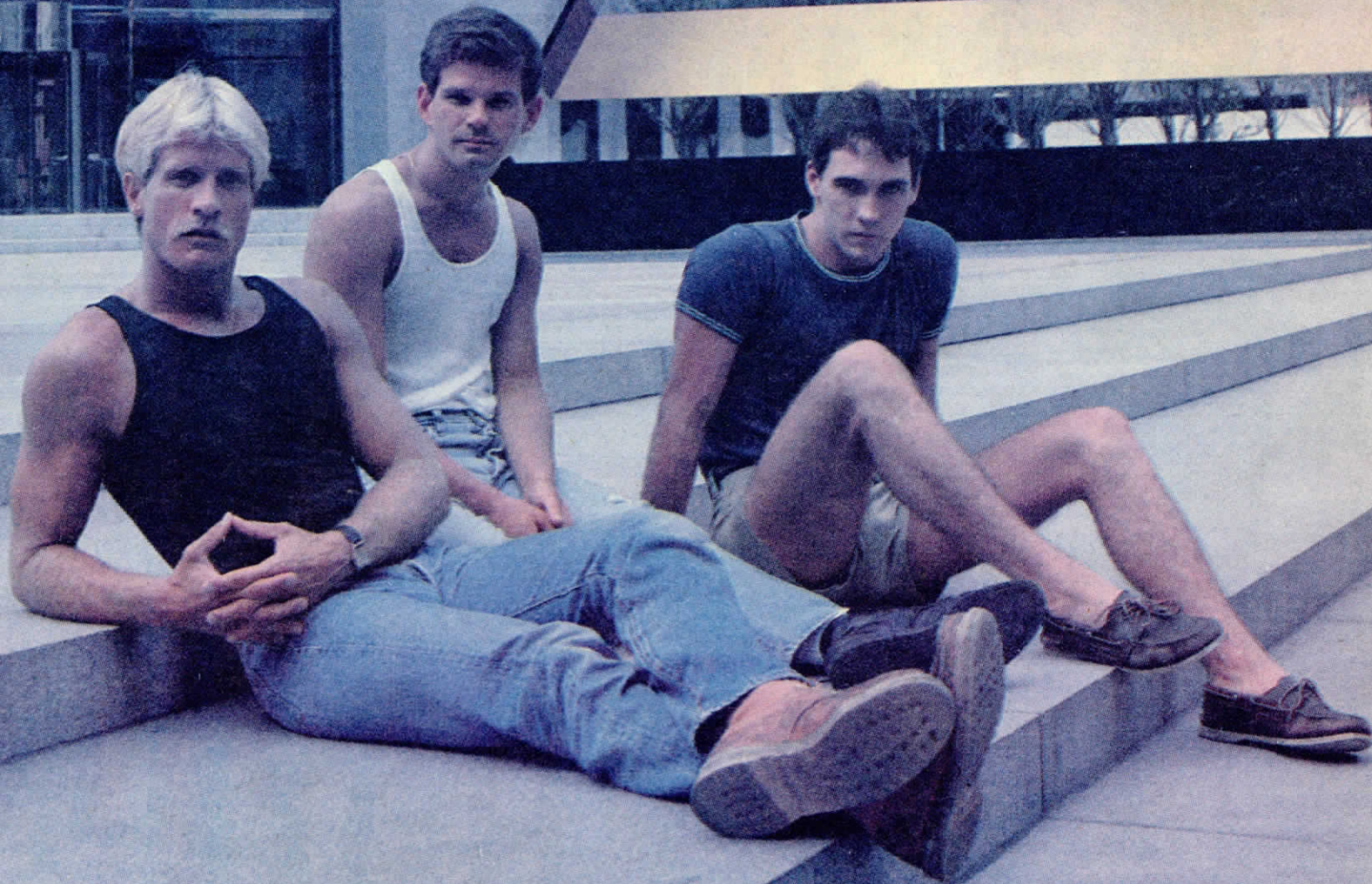
How Well Do the Media Treat It?

### RITA MAE BROWN

Says the Damndest Things

### 'TORCH SONG'

Lights Up Broadway





Socializing at J.R.'s  
Scenes from the annual Diana Awards



# DOWN HOME IN THE BIG CITY

# THE HOUSTON

# A T T I T U D E

BY CRAIG ROWLAND

It was 4:18 p.m., July 20, 1969. The words came through to the Johnson Space Center in "Space City" clearly enough: "Houston! Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed." Houston is the largest city in Texas, Tranquility Base was on the moon and, unless recorded history is incomplete, the Eagle was the first manned spacecraft to touch down on our lunar neighbor, and astronaut Neil Armstrong was the first person to speak between the two spheres. It's perfectly fitting that at this historic moment *Houston* was the first word uttered, because although the city is virtually at sea level, there is probably no place on earth as close to outer space as this 20th-Century, verging on 21st-Century, metropolis that seems to expand as fast as building permits can be printed.

It's a city of contrasts: of cowboys and the Bible Belt mentality, suddenly surrounded by feverish activity in what moments ago was just a frontier town. A

*Craig Rowland, who contributes regularly to This Week in Texas and The ADVOCATE, is scientific publications editor at Houston's University of Texas M.D. Anderson Hospital and Tumor Institute.*

deluge of immigrants here to do business has skyrocketed the population to more than 1½ million, ranking Houston the fifth-largest city in the land. And it sits on the controversial, slick, black ooze that paid for much of it: oil, the source of fortunes, as well as the cause of rumblings between modern nations gasping for gas and others that have only recently climbed off camels and into Bentleys to drive a quick route toward instant leverage in world politics. The "black gold" and its spin-off industries, such as banks, law firms and construction companies, plus the arrival of every retail outlet imaginable, each hoping to soak up some of the bucks, have made Houston the true Boomtown of the nation. "Its [Houston's] economic health is attractive," says City Councilmember George Greanias, "especially for professionals in fields like data processing, law and advertising. But it's not a factory town, it's not for assembly-line workers." The classified section in the Sunday edition of the *Houston Chronicle*, one of two dailies, catalogues the opportunities here. It's fatter than the classifieds in any newspaper in the country. If you don't find a job, your 75 cents won't be wasted: There's enough paper in one copy to take care of the kitty litter box for a year.

Chuck Patrick, publisher of the

statewide gay publication *This Week in Texas*, concurs. "We're recession-proof here," he says. "The economy is solid." He isn't far off target. The Houston Chamber of Commerce reports that in March of 1982 the unemployment rate in metropolitan Houston was 4.9%; the national average was 9.6%. Houston has become a magnet for the adventurous, the disillusioned and the hopeful, who arrive daily from all points in search of a new breath of life, a chance in the Sun

are no zoning laws here. Monuments are limited only by the imagination and checkbook. The outcome is a carnival of high-rises; condominium and apartment complexes; miles of mansions; tree-lined, middle-class neighborhoods bordering huge shopping centers and multitiered parking lots; and the famous "designer" glass and steel skyscrapers. Much of this is interspersed with topless girlie joints, taco stands, gay and straight adult bookstores and bars. Houston is a mecca

***Hardly a week passes without a fund-raiser for a project, clinic or other gay cause. Houstonians will do anything for a party.***

Belt or maybe just a job.

The result of this economy is an international potpourri of thousands of people hustling in as many cars between buildings that weren't there yesterday and are today laid out on land as flat as a massive dining table constantly squeezing in new guests. So far there seems to be enough food for everyone.

But unlike Boston, for example, where you practically have to get a permit to change the color of your mailbox, there

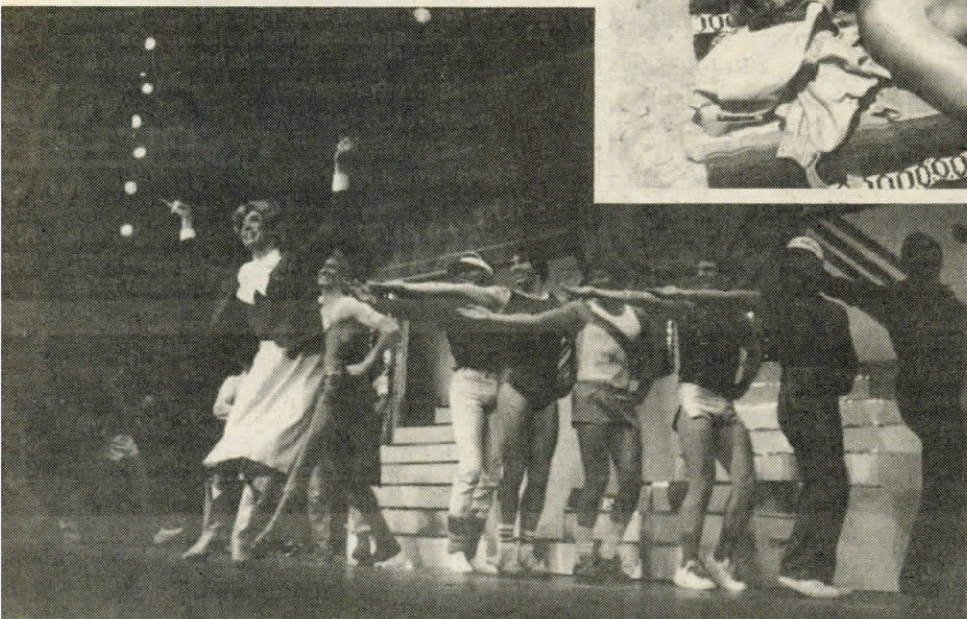
not only for the truly creative builders of stunning and marvelous structures, but also for the types who announce themselves with garish eyesores in colors they must have invented.

With the temperature hovering near a humid 100 degrees for a good chunk of the year, everything is air-conditioned. The downtown office buildings are connected by shop-lined tunnels, so businesspeople can run errands and go to lunch without ever having to feel the day's heat. During the steamy months,

A Texas barbecue



On the beach at Galveston (left); Houston's new mayor, Kathy Whitmire (below)



to those unaware of the underground goings on, the empty streets give the illusion of a city all but evacuated at the height of the work day.

As at any good carnival there are spectacular sideshows, like the "Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo"—the largest in the world—held in the huge event hall, the Astrodome, big enough to have its own weather.

When the original downtown became jammed with construction, the simple solution was to build another. Now we have the Greenway Plaza/Post Oak business district highlighted by the mammoth Galleria shopping complex, where you can live, work (if you have to), go to a different restaurant every day for months and spend all your money in one of the most expensive adult playgrounds in the world.

Because Houston is a horizontal rather than vertical city, with a metro transit system that can reasonably be described as a bad joke, everyone needs a car. At rush hours it appears that everyone *does* have a car. During peak traffic periods a Mercedes can't get you there any faster than a Toyota, so some of the Mercedes crowd have abandoned their 450 SLs for helicopters. The whirlybird overhead isn't necessarily a radio traffic reporter. It might just as easily be Mr. Exxon headed home from work. Enough helicopters

have taken to the air to stir rumors about a crackdown on their use, to reduce dangerous sky traffic.

Lack of foresight seems to be a cause of the congestion both on and above the ground. Without zoning, or any other form of land management, new buildings snuggle up to existing curbs, leaving streets too narrow to handle the increasing traffic. The freshly written development ordinance bill, sponsored by City Councilmember Eleanor Tinsley, will, if passed, effect the first building restrictions ever. Setbacks from the streets will be required, lengths of city blocks will be restricted (at present, many of Houston's streets suddenly become dead ends and then begin again on another block) and facilities for off-street parking must be built.

Meanwhile, an outing in Houston is impossible without a vehicle. One does not browse here except from behind the windowpanes of a vehicle. You choose your particular oasis, drive there, take care of business, get back in the car and head for the next adventure. It's like an Easter egg hunt at first, looking for treasures in a maze.

Thirty years ago, according to OMNI magazine, architect Frank Lloyd Wright suggested to a skeptical design community the concept of mile-high skyscrapers

that, for various reasons, would conserve space, save energy and reduce crime. The idea is no longer so suspect in cities like New York, where a square inch of space is more precious than life itself. Though Houston doesn't need to move upward in that sense, it's a fairly sure bet that someone will build the first mile-high structure here, if for no other reason than to be able to say that the tallest building in the world pierces the clouds over Houston. Big—with all the derivatives of the word—is better. That's Texas thinking.

To manage this energetic and sometimes unwieldy city, Houstonians have hired a new breed of young progressives headed by 36-year-old Kathy Whitmire, who sits on the mayor's throne. Last November she sailed easily past conservative opponent Sheriff Jack Heard. On election night, Whitmire made clear her appreciation of gay support by appearing before an ecstatic crowd of cheering lesbians and gay men at a party sponsored by the Houston Gay Political Caucus (GPC). Some say they are *still* waiting to see that appreciation translated into more than symbolic action.

The following month, another winning human rights advocate, then City Controller-elect Lance Lalor, lit the Christmas tree at a holiday celebration held at Mary's, a gay bar. Many of the 14

city council members have also taken positions in favor of gay rights, and in the last election every GPC-endorsed candidate won office.

The 7-year-old GPC, one of the largest and most influential organizations of its kind, has been credited by many politicians with having one of the toughest screening processes in a city that is big on screening political candidates. A few years ago the GPC was hard-pressed to find a candidate willing to be screened. Now the GPC endorsement is actively sought. Their brochure states: "We ask questions regarding the candidate's stand on any issue relevant to gay rights and their office. We look at the candidate's previous voting records and their base of support. We also consider the chance of their becoming elected and their desire to receive our endorsement." PR on endorsed candidates is mailed out to a list of more than 10,000, ads are placed in gay publications and push cards are prepared and distributed at the polls. Greanias, who carried the heavily gay Montrose area, says of the GPC endorsement, "It was an important element in my campaign. I was very proud of that endorsement."

Whitmire, described as fiscally conservative and socially progressive ("A combination that works," says Greanias),

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has begun to keep her promise to clean up a poorly managed city. One of her first targets was the Houston Police Department, a well-known source of embarrassment to all minorities and to many white liberals. No one was surprised that former Police Chief B.K. Johnson resigned soon after Whitmire landed the mayor's job. Amid amplified controversy, she pushed the appointment of Lee Brown, former commissioner of public safety in Atlanta, until he was confirmed last March by a city council vote of 11-3. He is the first black to head the department and the first chief from outside the HPD since 1941. Greanias says Brown is task-oriented and progressive, and that we can expect to see a reduction in the frequency and degree of police harassment of gays.

In the wake of a wave of police raids on gay establishments in January 1982, Greanias created the Montrose Task Force to deal with problems in police/gay relations. If Brown duplicates his efforts in Atlanta, he will create, or be receptive to, a lesbian/gay task force. Greanias will be more than willing to dissolve the Montrose Task Force if Brown carries through.

Another elected human rights advocate, state Rep. Debra Danburg, offers a cautious appraisal of Houston's political situation as it relates to gays. "Since the lesbian and gay population of the city grows with each day," she says, "I think

organize those folks in the suburbs. This is the quickest way to create big trouble for ourselves."

A new sense of enthusiasm is developing as the city government is transformed into one more responsive to human rights. Meanwhile, the conservatives are casting doubtful glances and growling at those in charge. The local and vocal queen of the ultraright, Geneva Kirk Brooks, repeatedly warns that Houston is about to become another San Francisco, overrun with perverts in office and in the streets. In fact, almost anyone connected to the gay community will say that Houston isn't interested in becoming another San Francisco. We have our own style, we're developing our own model.

**H**ouston's gay community has always been big on organizations, regardless of the philosophy of the local government. The spirit of coopera-

*In Houston's gay community it isn't unusual to find oneself at a dinner party with a lawyer, a doctor, a waiter and a drug dealer.*

it is important to stress the need to immediately register to vote and to join the Gay Political Caucus. Our political clout is our biggest protection against oppression, and it is wise for all of us to remember that although Houston is becoming cosmopolitan, most of Texas is not. Texas still has Section 21.06, the sodomy statute, on the books. Judging from the strict drug laws and the wiretap bill passed in 1981, we had best not become complacent. I believe that there are serious detrimental effects to 'gay ghettoization.' We get lazy thinking we are a safe majority, and we don't

tion and participation is characteristic of this city's homosexual population. One of the more visible forms of involvement is the benefit. Hardly a week passes without a fund-raiser for a project, clinic or other cause. The usual and most successful vehicle for raising money is a party. Houstonians will do *anything* for a party.

Citizens for Human Equality (CHE), a professional community service organization, combines social activity with support for community projects. A case in point is the educational, screening and treatment program implemented by the

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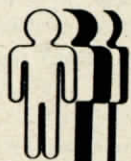
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University of Texas' M.D. Anderson Hospital and Tumor Institute's department of cancer prevention to deal with the recent outbreak of diseases, some deadly, that have zeroed in on gay men in urban areas. Unfortunately, Houston has not escaped this still mysterious problem. When it was learned that the department needed funds to continue its project, CHE was quick to rally support and sponsored a threefold benefit party for the project, for CHE itself and for the Montrose Clinic, which specializes in STDs. The GPC; the Executive and Professional Association of Houston (an organization of gay men who sponsor social and educational activities for their

the auspices of "Daughters of the Davy Crockett Hot Lemonade and Fine Arts Society." It's always a Sunday afternoon affair, a day in drag.

Perhaps the oldest gay group around is the Diana Foundation, soon to enter its fourth decade. This crowd is best known for its annual "Diana Awards," billed as "An award show about an award show," a spoof on Hollywood's Oscar handouts. Close to a thousand attended this year's black-tie event to watch the campy and sometimes trashy parceling out of honors to local talent. One of last year's favorites was actress/entertainer, Mary Hooper, honored for "Best Production"—that is, she produced what nature

**Houston is an energetic adolescent, spirited and rebellious, and like the true teen-ager, it's also flexible, open and casual.**

members); bar owners, managers and staff; and private individuals have all donated time and money to aid the hospital. People in Houston are quick to jump on any worthy bandwagon.

Among the most accessible bar managers is Andy Mills, manager of Mary's, one of the oldest gay bars in the city and the most impossible to categorize. Mills must surely rent a warehouse to store all the hats he wears alternately, and sometimes simultaneously, as a member of countless committees and as a supporter of practically every gay-related project that turns up. In addition, he finds time to conduct the Montrose Symphonic Band, a gay men's group that has performed to gay and straight audiences all over the city.

For the more physically inclined, the Montrose Sports Association (MSA) was created five years ago to promote gay athletics. It boasts more than 800 members, who participate in organized softball, bowling, tennis and volleyball for men and women. Teams are sponsored by bars and businesses, and additional dollars are raised through membership dues and benefits.

On the much lighter side are the annual social galas, which, true to Texas tradition, grow in size each year. About seven years ago a group of 12 friends decided to host a party, at a private home, for buddies who were still buzzing from a week at Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Named Mardi Gras Madness, it has been held every year since on the Saturday following Fat Tuesday, the show-stopper ending the real Mardi Gras. Budgeted at more than \$80,000, this year's circus entertained 3,000 wired refugees from across the country. Proceeds, when there are any, go to such organizations as The Houston 100 Club, established to provide financial aid to the families of police officers killed while on duty. Of course, there are mutual benefits from that contribution. Money has also been given to other community service projects, such as the Montrose Counseling Center, which provides counseling services to the homosexual community.

By early summer you can find even the butchest of numbers combing the dress shops for a pretty dress to wear to the annual "Garden Party & Whore-to-Culture Extravaganza," held under

had neglected. About two years ago friends threw a benefit party to finance her "community chest." Two-grand worth of silicone later and Miss Hooper is in the best of shape.

These are examples—only examples, there are so many—of survival, humor, participation, concern and loyalty. How is this possible in a city with one of the largest gay populations in the country, a city with crime rates at the top of the charts? Why doesn't the anonymity of big-city life lead to cynicism and despair? How can it take on the personality of a small town?

Because Houston is a small town, with all the characteristics of country hospitality. It's an energetic adolescent, spirited and rebellious, and like the true teen-ager, it's also flexible, open and casual. For the talented and ambitious, the social and professional rewards are ample. People don't get lost between the cracks as easily as they do in other cities of comparable size. The town isn't saturated by too many stars. And the fires of camaraderie are kept alive by the positive charge that permeates the city.

Although Rice University, the University of Houston and other institutions of higher learning are parked here, Houston is not an academic center. It's a business-focused city with a pragmatic "here and now" attitude. What's happening today is what matters. This failure to look toward yesterday or tomorrow may explain, in part, the absence of planning that has led to the congestion, the traffic and other problems.

In the gay community, at least, it isn't unusual to find oneself at a dinner party with a lawyer, a doctor, a waiter and a drug dealer. Typically, one's job has little or nothing to do with social acceptance. People are evaluated more on personal attributes than background, wealth or connections. Social cliques exist, but they overlap and cross paths so often, their boundaries become blurred.

The most recently blurred boundary is that between gay men and women. Aside from organizations that bring the two groups together for common causes, mingling of this nature has been rare in Houston. Certainly, gay men and women have independent interests, but there now seems to be evidence of more social interaction be-

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 5)

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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 31)

tween the sexes. Traditionally the bars have catered almost exclusively to men or to women, but not to both in any substantial way. Some bar managers reflect the desires of their customers who want to feel sure they will run into a crowd consisting exclusively of their own sex. For men, The Loading Dock and The Drum are the best examples of separatism. Each enforces a strict dress code that encourages leather, never Lacoste. Men who do not adhere to these guidelines are refused entry. Yet, these bars will temporarily relax the code in order to throw a theme party to raise money for poor kids at Christmas, or to help fund Gay Pride Week. For those who don't like it there are plenty of other spots where you can dress as you like.

Then there are the "in-between" places like the Venture-N and Baja's, which have always attracted men in the majority but also welcome women. Until recently, however, no bar had given the green light to men and women in any obvious way. The first major exception was Kindred Spirits, which features live entertainment during the week. The philosophy of owner Marion Coleman and manager Sandra Floyd is reflected in their door policy. Anyone is admitted—including straights—who is comfortable with gays of both sexes.

Even more recently another bar, J.R.'s Bar & Grill, opened in Montrose and met with instant popularity. Its light, airy ambiance has been a refreshing change from the standard, dimly lit men's bar where you are never quite sure what's going on more than five feet away. From the first night, women, though in a minority, have been readily accepted by staff and customers.

The lesbian/gay-male connection is also evident in the two local gay publications, *This Week in Texas* (TWT) and *The Montrose Voice*. TWT, which entered its eighth year a few months ago, has traditionally devoted its pages to male interests, but now it too has actively solicited the attention of women.

Virtually every city has an area known for its high percentage of gay inhabitants, and Houston is no exception. Though certainly not all, or even most, of the estimated 200,000 to 300,000 gays live in one place, the heaviest and most visible concentration is in Montrose, an area bordering the downtown and covering roughly 25 blocks on each side. Much of this area, once the most fashionable neighborhood in the city, is made up of medium-sized homes set back from tree-lined streets. Steve Krantz in *Skycastle*, his novel about Houston, called the Montrose "a part of Houston's past that was now accepted by those who couldn't afford to live in its present." An interesting comment and perhaps true; surely the Montrose is unlike the glitzy River Oaks megamansion district. But real estate in Montrose has scared many prospective buyers; the minimum price tag for a not terribly impressive home is about \$150,000. Those who can afford to buy here are busy restoring and renovating, while those who can't are renting in one of the many apartment complexes or have taken a house with friends.

On first inspection one expects to see tricycles scattered on the front lawns, collies asleep in the driveways and housewives busy shuttling children or emptying station wagons of shopping bags. Such images do exist, but a Montrose block isn't complete without its gay

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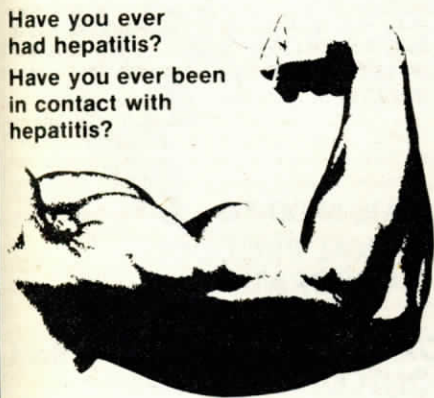
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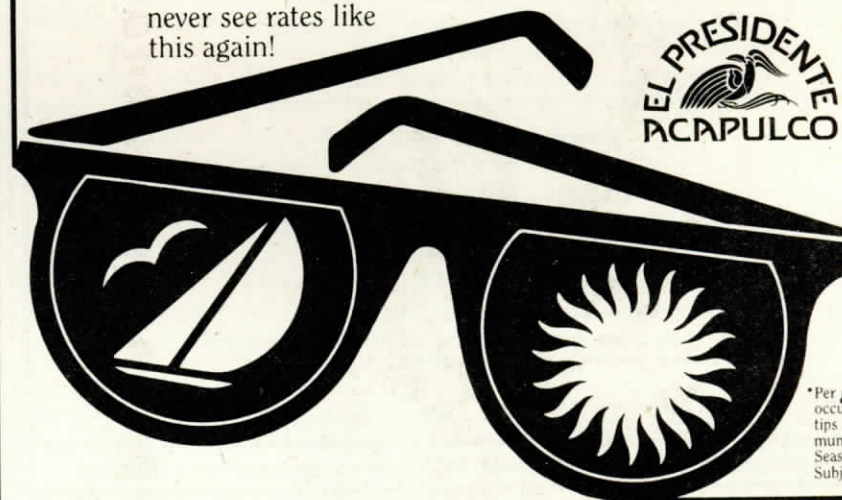
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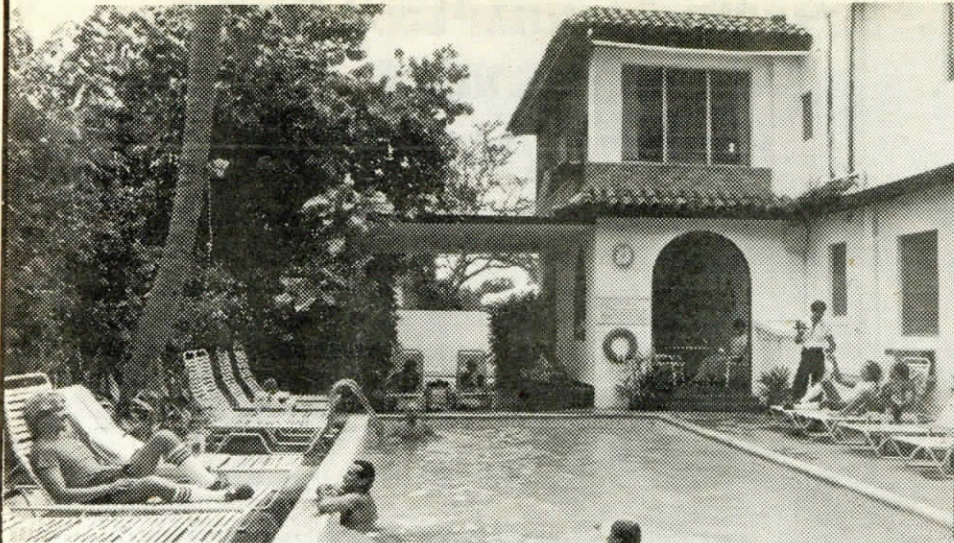
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inhabitants.

Montrose is the most neighborhood-like area in town, with an attitude of upbeat social concern, its own community newspaper, *Inner-view*, and an interest in maintaining or recovering the original architecture. It's where you will find gift shops, unusual restaurants and most of the gay bars.

Westheimer Road—which splits Montrose down the middle before continuing for miles, way past where no one has ever thought of going—is where the action is. Bars, strip joints and neon signs are only a block away from the quaint homes. As usual where there are gay bars, there are also hustlers, prostitutes, drag queens and men with cash cruising in Chryslers. Weekend nights find the strip glugged with cars, fun-seekers and troublemakers armed with bottles, knives and worse—many barely old enough to drive. Mugging of gays is a serious problem, and for this reason it is important to recognize the Jekyll-and-Hyde-like personality of Westheimer and the streets nearby. Mr. Hyde is out at night, just like in the movie. With parking a problem, especially on a Saturday night, you often have to leave the car three or four blocks from your nightspot. Walking three dark blocks alone is not a good idea. An evening rarely passes without several reports of harassment.

The Montrose Patrol was created to address this problem. A group of dedicated volunteers patrols the most dangerous streets on weekend nights, hoping to distract or frighten away the punks. Since the bars stay open until 2 a.m., with the option of having after-hours until dawn, it's a late night for this group. The Montrose Patrol is another organization that survives on benefits, private donations and cooperation.

To Houstonians the world is divided into two parts: that which is inside "The Loop" (part of the freeway system that encloses central Houston) and everything else from there on. Though it's 45 miles from Montrose, we do have our beach. It's in Galveston, the famous port on the Gulf of Mexico. Each spring a dance palace, The Copa, sponsors "Splash Day"—another party—the "official" opening of Coppertone season. A caravan of cars all but empties the city of its homosexual population for this Sunday of saltwater, sun and sandy dancing. Also within driving range are Dallas, Austin, the Texas hill country and New Orleans. We know that there is life beyond The Loop, but it's only for visiting purposes.

Perhaps it's the climate, or the need to wear minimal clothing half the year. Or maybe it's the youthful attitude and age of the people. Whatever the reason, Houston's gay men are a good-looking bunch. Fitness is the rage, and there are plenty of places to get in shape, two of the most popular gyms being Fitness Exchange and Jim's Gym. Both offer clean, modern efficiency, and fine specimens walk out the doors of each. If Whitmire and her group can whip the city into a shape equaling that of the men, we'll have a damn good town.

A cliché pops up on the radio once in a while. The announcer says, "If you don't like the weather in Houston, wait five minutes." Daring to take that into other realms: "If you don't like what's happening in Houston, wait five minutes." You'll see. Something new will have been added while you were asleep.

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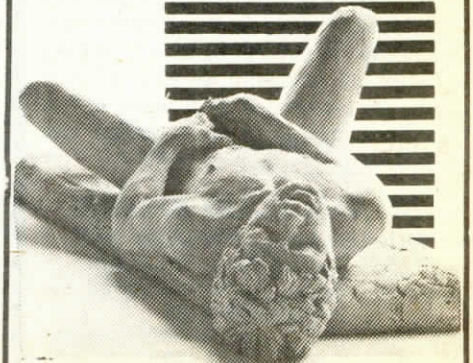
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