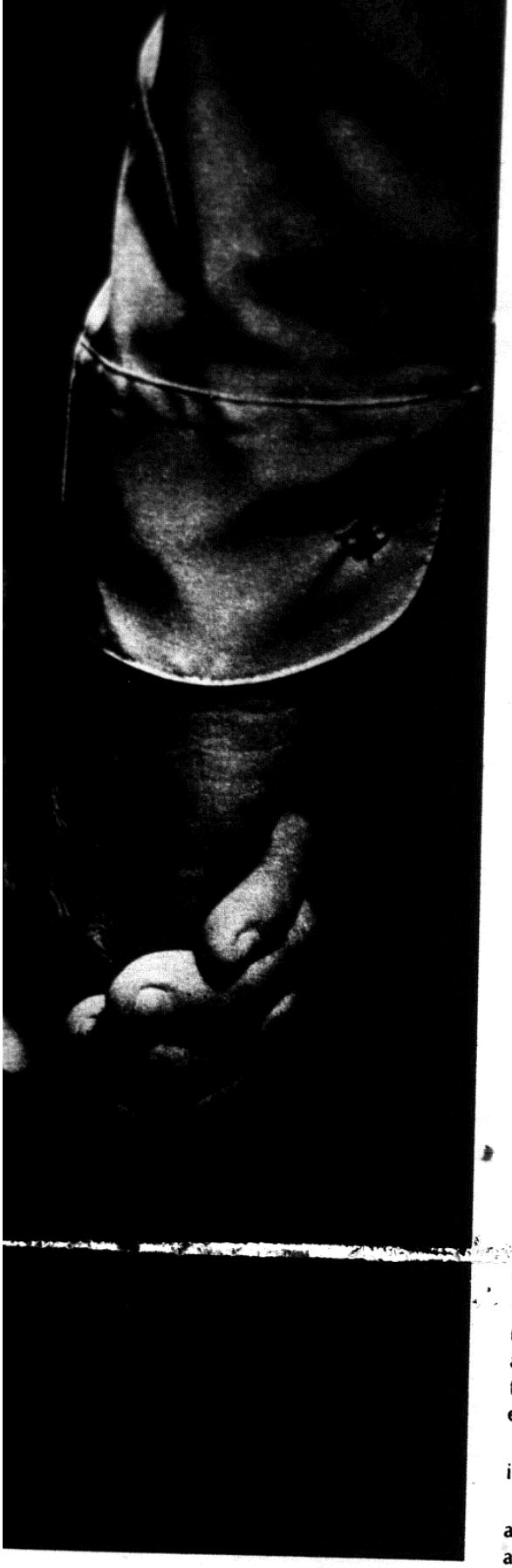


Houston's twilight world

By HAL WIMBERLY

A STRANGE and not very wonderful world exists in Houston where boys meet boys and girls go with girls.

It isn't very wonderful to the vast majority of people who are considered heterosexual—that is, those who like people of the opposite sex.

But to an estimated 15,000 Houstonians the nether world of homosexuality is an everyday way of life.

[illegible] bars—quiet except for music from the juke boxes. Boisterousness is mostly absent. No one seems to pay any attention to the expressions of fondness. The bars are fairly crowded Thursday through Sunday nights.

One such smoke-filled "gay" bar is near downtown Houston.

Wrists in that bar, as well as in about 13 others in town, are noticeably limp. Laughter is a bit more highly-pitched. Still, sturdy men are there with wire-tough beards and wrists too strong to hang limp.

One night recently, a young man looked over the patrons he saw drinking.

"I see seven men here," he said, "who are married and have families. They have wives and children, but still they come here because they like other men—sexually."

NOT TOO far away there's a quiet spot where girls are girls and women go there to meet with them, drink with them—go home with them.

The woman who owns the place is blunt about her Lesbianism. She is stout and wears her gray hair short, like a man's.

"See this girl here," she says, gesturing. "I've been married to her four and a half years . . . Both of us have been married to men. We just happen to prefer our own sex as far as living is concerned."

Lesbians seem more willing than male homosexuals to display their emotions. It isn't considered a breach of Lesbian etiquette for girls to hold hands, to kiss and to dance together. Any straight male who might drop in soon finds his blandishments to be for naught. It doesn't take long to get the picture in a Lesbian bar. As in the male hangouts, the biggest crowds appear Thursday through Sunday.

where boys meet boys and girls go with girls



Photographed by DELL VAN DUSEN

Male homosexuals along what Houstonians call "Peculiar Street" in "Homo Heights" very near downtown are willing to talk about what the "straight" people call queerness.

"So what's wrong with it?" one asks. "Any person who is of age certainly can make up his mind about which way he goes. I'm 'that way' and I don't think I'm wrong," he added.

Shocking to straight people is the information from those who are "that way" that many seemingly ordinary men and women have an affinity for persons of their own sex.

SO-CALLED straight people don't know it, but the Houston Police Department has an "unofficial" policy condoning the existence of bars and clubs where homosexuals meet together.

"Frankly," a vice squad officer says, "we like them to stay together in their own places, as they are doing more and more. We don't want them scattering to places where straight people go.

"It's the trend all across the nation. Houston is no different. Homosexuals are a fact of life. They're coming out in the open more than they used to, probably because there isn't as much stigma attached to their activities as there used to be.

"Unless we have complaints that juveniles are involved, or that overt acts are in progress, we don't do anything about them. Let them stay together—that's the way we like it."

Homosexual males are a frequent police problem because they are preyed upon by blackmailers and thieves, especially if they have prominence in the business and financial world.

Another problem is the "hustler."

Hustlers are of different types. Some are simply male prostitutes who sell their wares as in the oldest profession in the world. Others linger in areas where homosexual men congregate and rob them when the street is dark and lonesome enough. It isn't unusual, either, to see young hustlers waiting on street corners near gay bars.

Police watch for these types, however. One gambit the hustlers use is to wait at bus stops. That's a legitimate place to wait and the frequency with which hustlers are picked up by males might be shocking to most Houstonians.

JUST recently a man who owns a gay bar near downtown hired two men to roam the streets at night near his establishment and do battle with "hustlers" who were plaguing his customers. Incensed at the number of customers who were attacked [illegible] toughs to hustle the hustlers. The word soon got out and the muggings ceased.

One young man, who operates a show in a gay bar that features female impersonators, says most bar operators have learned to screen out the hustlers and send them on their way. "It isn't really a problem," he says, "once you realize the problem exists. Hustlers are easy to spot and easy to get rid of. It's out on the street where you have to be extra watchful."

The same man claims to have produced and directed shows featuring female impersonators in most of the nation's large cities.

Best estimates of the number of gay bars in Houston are that 14 cater to homosexual males, some 10 to 12 are "semi-gay" and three bars and clubs are frequented almost entirely by Lesbians.

A number of restaurants are haunts for both types, especially after bars close. One on what they call "Peculiar Street" is almost exclusively populated by homosexuals after 1 AM each day. Several other [illegible] city have a high incidence of homosexual patronage in the early morning hours.

Consider this scene that occurred just recently at one restaurant. A beautiful young woman, dressed in hip hugger pants and a blouse that left her midriff bare, rushed up to a handsome, masculine-looking man in his late twenties.

She kissed him on the lips. He laughed.

"You shouldn't do that, darling," he said. "Someone might think I'm straight."

Strange things happen on Peculiar Street, in Homo Heights. ■