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IN JUNE 1969, the New York police raided one of the most popular gay bars in Greenwich Village: the Stonewall Inn. For once they met with resistance and then two days of rioting. Stonewall came to represent a watershed for the gay community, not only in America but in Europe.

The film-maker Greta Schiller believes the riot was "like a grassfire that caught hold. No one had fought back before. Until then, there were perhaps 30 small and scattered gay organisations in the United States. Within a month or two of the riot there were thousands." After Stonewall, the deluge: Gay Liberation, Gay Pride, "Glad To Be Gay" and Greta Schiller.

For her latest documentary, however, Schiller — best known in this country for her work on *Greetings From Washington DC* — has decided to look back and titles her film *Before Stonewall*. "We set out to make the film by posing a question: where did today's tenacious gay community — holding public office, publishing its own newspapers, whatever — where did it come from? I figured that was a question that not just gay people, but anybody interested in social change would want answered." The film she has come up with is, as one American newspaper said, a sort of "Roots for gays," a history of a people who have never before been documented in the cinema or in any other media for that matter.

Merging interviews, re-discovered archival material, film clips, and the home movies and snaps of ordinary people, *Before Stonewall* gives a vivid account of life pre-liberation.

Among other things, we get a glimpse of the black lesbian bars in the Harlem of the twenties; the army induction centres of the Second World war — for "induction" read "seduction" according to one gay officer, the perils of the fifties — "McCarthy made a gay person feel like a Mata Hari"; and even a hint of the reactionary horrors of our own day — Ronald Reagan expressing his belief that "homosexuality is a neurosis." The deft mixing of material allows a clear contrast to develop between mainstream images of gay people and how gay people see themselves. Other images are reclaimed for the gay

Gay rights activist Barbara Gittings: from *Before Stonewall*

At the root of the gay life

Greta Schiller's documentary on the lives of ordinary gay people before the liberated days of the 1960s opens in London on Friday. Simon Banner on the making of *Before Stonewall*

was most surprised by the army training films they found. "Those bodies! The angle of the shots! Those films were made by somebody who loved men's bodies. And there weren't any women camera operators."

For most of this century the lives of gay people have in part been secret lives, lives lived in the fear of discovery, and the loss of family, friends and even jobs. One elderly man in the film says he "can never remember a time when homosexuality wasn't a dirty word." A woman recounts the pressure put on her by the army to denounce her lesbian lover, only to find that the Pentagon had in turn betrayed them both. But it is certainly not all gloom. Another woman tells of an early meeting of the so-called Daughters of Bilitis: "I was in a room with 12 other lesbians

for the first time in my life. What a thrill that was!"

As Greta Schiller says: "People tend to know about the Walt Whitmans and the Gertrude Steins, but we wanted to take a look at what ordinary gay people's lives were about and the contributions they made." Easier said than done, of course.

The task of research fell to Andrea Weiss who says she initially relied on the grassroots movement of gay historians which exists in the States. "They helped us put out through the grapevine that we had got funding for the film and that we were looking for people to fill certain slots. We had index cards and said, OK we're looking for someone to explain the situation of gay people in Harlem in the twenties."

Greta Schiller's fascination for the personal collections of scrap books, photographs and memorabilia that they discovered, is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the film, but it was also a source of considerable work and frustration. "We had to track down every subject of every snap and every home movie because we needed releases from everybody who appears. People would say: 'I don't remember his last name,' or 'I think she moved to Canada.' Then when we found them, they sometimes didn't give us their permission. We airbrushed a few of the photos, but we had to leave out a lot of our favourite images."

The vast task of research took about two and a half years and involved as many as 20 assistants. Production took about another 18 months. What makes *Before Stonewall* something of a triumph of dedication over financial constraint is that it cost just \$250,000, the sort of money which wouldn't make the average soap powder advertisement. Much of the funding came from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, who will eventually show the film on its 297 stations, thereby reaching an audience of 20 million people.

In the meantime, *Before Stonewall* has been enthusiastically received at several film festivals, as well as having successful cinema runs in the US. In New York, the film opened during Gay Pride Week.

"Even the straight press liked it," says Greta Schiller. "One of the regular network television stations said: 'You owe it to yourself to see this film.'" For Schiller, such contact with heterosexual audiences is important. "There's no end to the struggle. The significant difference for gay people since Stonewall is that we have a choice: we can choose to fight back. But it's not all roses. There is a very serious right-wing threat in America, and around the world, and it's dangerous."

But gay men and women are, as *Before Stonewall* aims to show, great survivors. "The people in the film are those who have lived through a denial of their most personal selves. In many cases they haven't just existed, they've grown and come out very strong. They've come out fighting. That's what I wanted to portray."

Before Stonewall opens in London at the Metro and Everyman cinemas on Friday.

