

Before Stonewall: A Personal Journey

by Jewelle Gomez

Last year in the space of two months I had Easter Sunday brunch with Bruce Nugent in Hoboken, a Japanese dinner with Audre Lorde in the West Village, tall, frosted drinks with Mabel Hampton in the Bronx and capuccino with Dale Jo in a Soho loft. I also interviewed by telephone Barbara Grier in Florida, Red Arabateau in Oakland, Anita Cornwell in Philadelphia, an Episcopal minister in Washington Heights and a former Army sergeant in South Carolina. I was not preparing an article on gourmet eating in out of the way places but doing research for the documentary film, *Before Stonewall*. These people are all homosexuals who have been openly gay for more decades than I've been alive, and as is often the case with family reunions, even with relatives you've never met before, sitting down to eat is a form of communion. Each of them shared their own history with me in order to open up a past which has been denied by modern society and to shed some light on the path to our future.

Bruce Nugent is a member of the board of the Harlem Cultural Council and was a contemporary of Langston Hughes. His work, some of which was openly gay, appeared in print along with that of Hughes and other notables of the Harlem Renaissance such as Zora Neale Hurston and Countee Cullen. His recollections gave me a new perspective on writers I've admired and new encouragement for my own work. The hijinks and low drama Nugent recounted was not much different from stories I'd heard from my grandmother or read in fiction or seen in films, except that Nugent and each of the others

represented homosexuals as active, intelligent adults who took for granted their right to a full and prosperous life. This is a world away from the wretched, twilight existence imagined by Freud and pseudo-psychologists from the 1920s to the present.

When the Stonewall riot occurred in 1969, I was living in Boston and preoccupied solely with the Civil Rights and anti-war movements. I did not understand Stonewall's significance until about ten years later. The road to that understanding was a long and circuitous one; the identification of a political/social commonality is never easy for oppressed peoples.

herding of real people like buffalo, the sight of the U.S. cavalry breaching a hilltop ceased to bring a cheer to my lips.

In the sixties black nationalism made clear my connection to Africa and introduced a wealth of cultural treasures, some of which were already a part of my life, although they had never been identified as explicitly African. The influence of Martin Luther King Jr. and Fannie Lou Hamer revealed the direct link for me: Africans, American slaves, black southerners, black northerners are one people, a fact that distorted history books could not conceal indefinitely.

Later the growth of feminist consciousness provided a context for my lesbianism.

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When I was a child I rarely watched TV or movie westerns after my great grandmother told me she had been born on an Indian reservation in Iowa and had to eat corn every day of her young life. It was a simple story told repeatedly (often the case with older folks) to entertain me while she combed my hair. Once it clicked in my head that this was a true story, that the John Wayne ethic had sanctioned the

The other movements chose to stay on the road followed by the powerful majority: deny homosexuality and it will not be a problem. But once feminist theory postulated the existence of a world where women could be responsible for themselves and each other, free of the restraints of chauvinism, my reality as a black, lesbian, feminist was confirmed. It all sounded a lot like the way the women in my family had all tried to live their lives.

Since I have begun participating in the annual Gay Pride march and other public activities it has become clear that the gay rights movement has the seeds of a truly broadbased human rights coalition. Even though the movement is still plagued with sexism and racism, homosexuality does cross all barriers, real and imagined. Gays are black, white, brown, red, rich, bourgeois, poor, capitalists, communists, socialists, nationalists, academics, artists, laborers, professionals, old, middle-aged and young, left handed, right handed and physically disabled. Homosexuality has existed since recorded history. No repression, either overt or subtle, has ever made it go away. Working on *Before Stonewall* gave me the opportunity to meet people who had survived and surpassed attempts to discredit their existence. Whether any political movement can unify such a disparate group for the purpose of insuring human rights for all people is still a question. The process, though, is one that will have an impact on every grass roots political movement in the future.



Drag party circa 1959, San Francisco.

Before Stonewall's documentation of the lives that led up to the consolidation of the movement spans eighty years of social history that is not easily recaptured. For every Mabel Hampton or Barbara Grier there are hundreds of others unable or unwilling to articulate their participation in the struggle for gay pride. Their absence is attributable to a multitude of specifics. The public school teacher who assisted me in devising a basic chronology of American history to use as a framework for the research refused public acknowledgment for her help. She feared a school official might see her name and she would lose her job. Harry Otis is identified on film reminiscing about his youth but the wealth of photographs he'd been collecting for 50 years of himself and his gay friends were not available. Several years ago he'd left



Photo of young man taken circa early 1930s.

them with his friend and instructed him to dispose of them if anything ever happened to him. When he was hospitalized for a serious illness his friend burned them. He survived but his need to protect his companions left a gaping hole in our history. The research of this type of documentary is riddled with frustrations like these.

Andrea Weiss, *Before Stonewall's* primary researcher, met impediments at every turn yet managed to amass a body of photographs, film strips and home movies the size and range of which has never been matched before. There were three primary types of difficulties. Most archives had no category labeled "homosexuality" so locating relevant material was part detective work, part fishing. Andrea would look under "dancing" and after wading through many files she would come upon a folder containing photos of women or men

dancing taken decades ago. She had to extrapolate from traditional sources, assuming as is always chanted during the Gay Pride march, "we are everywhere!" Once she made that assumption she cast her net wide and pulled in the big ones, like the newspaper clipping from the 1930s about a Broadway actor who sued a woman for stealing his girlfriend!

Filmmaker Sandy Zeig helped Andrea search for a print of a film entitled *Children of Loneliness* which was reportedly very explicit in its representation of gay life. After weeks of work they could only conclude that no print of the film had survived. No one had deemed it important enough to save.

All too frequently there was a pot of gold at the end of the hunt but the owners refused to sign a release form. After locating a beautiful home movie of a lesbian wedding in the early 1960s the now divorced bride refused permission to use the film. Twenty years later the issue of secrecy was still predominant. The loss of this material is even more stinging when you realize that the amount of research and documentation of gay men far outweighs that of gay women.

The only easy finds came when Andrea looked for commercial film material. Vito Russo, author of *The Celluloid Closet*, provided her with numerous leads. The winner (for my money) is a clip from the 1923 film *The Sailors* in which a gay cow-

THE LADDER

A LESBIAN REVIEW



It wasn't until around mid-1965 that women's faces appeared on the cover of *The Ladder*, the publication of Daughters of Bilitis (America's first lesbian organization). The "for sale to adults only" was the subject of much debate within the organization.

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The director of *Before Stonewall*, Greta Schiller, is responsible for shaping this mass of information into a coherent production which will entertain and educate the public television audiences. The idea that 80 years of history could be crammed into a 90-minute film was intimidating but she fought for the chance to do it. Cinema is traditionally a "man's world" so she knew she'd be out there on her own. Once she took on the task the other problems were never ending: how to find the shape of the film; what is and is not important in a wider view; how to use archival material along with the recent interviews; whether or not to use a narrative voice; who is her audience; and how much to explicate for them.

She is still struggling with these questions as she continues in the editing of the film and raising money for its completion. "Although I did spend a tortuous part of my time not doing research but convincing some gay men that they had to take women seriously, the process of the film itself is a monument to coalition politics. The film was funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the NY State Council on the Arts and individuals as diverse as the family membership I mentioned earlier. Some donors were financially comfortable gay men and women who tossed off checks easily; others came faithfully to *Before Stonewall* benefits with rolls of quarters to pay for their drinks.

The Stonewall riot took place 15 years ago on a narrow, West Village street when I was in another state. It has been a long road for me to get to Stonewall. Many others travelled their own complex routes to this reunion. It is their survival and the particular sharing of their past which makes the path ahead of us better lit, and less treacherous.

*Ed. note: *Before Stonewall* will be telecast sometime in early 1985 on PBS.

Donations are still needed to complete *Before Stonewall*. Checks should be made payable to: Center for the Study of Filmed History, 67 Gansevoort Street, New York, N.Y. 10014.

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Two women in the Air Force during the McCarthy era. (One of them received an undesirable discharge for being a lesbian.)



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