

'Before Stonewall': History Helps Build Community

By George S. Buse

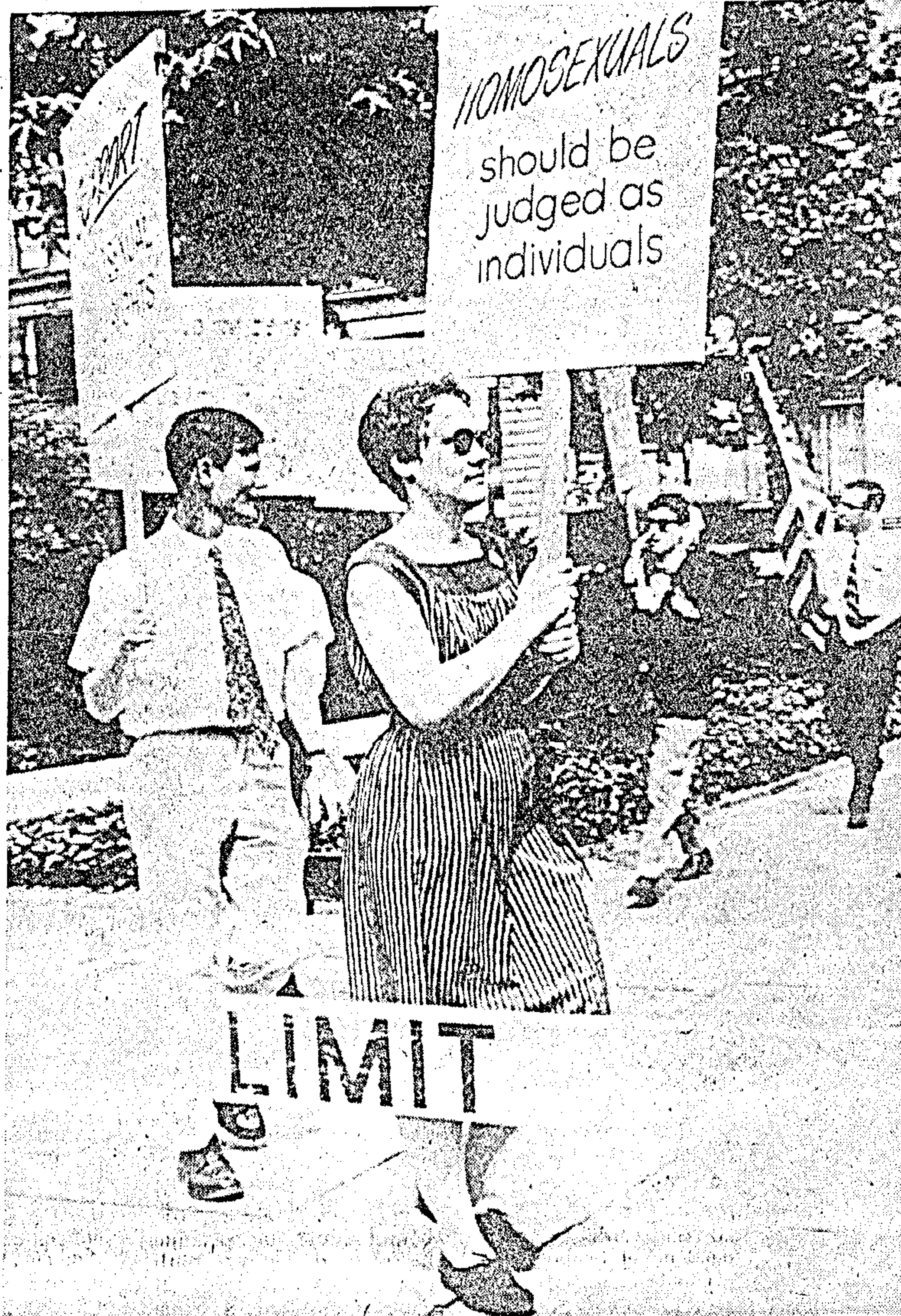
It is thoroughly dismaying to be a pre-Stonewall gay who played a supporting role in the film *Before Stonewall* and to realize how egregiously ignorant most of the general population continues to be on the subjects of homosexuality and gay and lesbian expectations.

Such ignorance, of course, is nothing new to pre-Stonewall lesbians and gays. Ignorance kept us in hiding from a menacing society. It stalked our days with the fear of discovery that would cost us our jobs, our family affiliations, our peace of mind, our freedom to be and act as ourselves. But the truth about gay and lesbian living was unknown in those days. It has never been merely a question of *who*, but also of *what* is in the closet. When the truth itself is in the closet, ignorance is free to roam around at will.

But these are the 1980s, and the Emmy Award-winning documentary *Before Stonewall* has been shown in theaters, and has been seen on public TV across the country. Yet, ignorance still roams, whether in the pulpits of our churches, in the Chicago City Council or at the 1988 political conventions—or up and down the street where you live.

Before Stonewall, though, has turned into a powerful weapon against this ignorance, because it is a truth-telling documentary film. It also is a well-crafted, finely written and superbly edited piece that has won itself an important place among contemporary documentaries about the gay/lesbian experience.

Now the film has a companion in book form. *Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community* is a tautly-written, revealing and compact little study guide to the film. Its authors, Andrea Weiss and Greta Schiller, research director and film director, respectively, review the film's contents, reveal how it was researched, tell why and how the film was made, in general take us behind the scenes of its creation. They call the book a "historical guide" to the film, but the term "study guide" also fits. Not only is the book an excellent medium for people who have seen the



Barbara Gittlings (front) of the American Library Association was a pioneer for justice.

film and wish to recall its message, it is also an introduction for those who have not seen it, and, who, after reading the

book, will want to do, so. It also is a guide for groups using the film *Before Stonewall* as the basis of classroom

study or group discussion. It includes a discussion guide, with provocative questions, suggestions for class assignments, and a reasonably comprehensive bibliography.

But these are the technical aspects of the book. Behind its publication is the film itself, which recreates the history of gay and lesbian culture from the "twilight days" after the turn of the century to the Stonewall Rebellion on June 27, 1969, the BC/AD demarcation of our gay and lesbian history. The film is a highly successful attempt to capture and possess our history, without which our community could not exist. The film, and its guide companion piece, represent what Gabriel Marcel meant: "I am obliged to bear witness because I hold, as it were, a particle of light, and to fail to do so is the equivalent of extinguishing it."

I felt the impact of Marcel's maxim five summers ago when I leaned on a rickety desk, looked straight into the camera and engaged in some serious conversation with Greta. I was a reporter then for *GayLife*, and the old office on Clark Street was the sound stage. Greta was the combined interviewer/interrogator/director, and the longer we conversed, and the crew filmed, the more certain I became that this documentary itself was going to make some history.

It has, resoundingly. Partly funded by PBS, it has appeared in local television markets around the country (Channel 11 has, by my count, shown it twice), and it has appeared in movie houses as well. The success of the documentary makes it difficult, and perhaps somewhat self-serving, for me to review the book. I am caught somewhere between the person who has seen and deeply appreciates what this film means to our community, and the person whose face appears on the screen, and whose observations were considered worthwhile enough to be included.

The face on the screen has brought me a kind of celebrity with which I am not altogether at ease. The term applied to me may even be a bit fatuous given that

continues on page 9

continued from page 7

people like Barbara Grier, Allen Ginsberg, Dr. Evelyn Hooker and Frank Kameny are also in this film. I haven't been exactly playing in their league. But, if Warhol was right and we all are given 15 minutes of celebrity in a lifetime, I'll go along with the term.

Mine came last October on the day of our Lesbian and Gay March on Washington. A group of my friends and I were in a Chinese restaurant near Dupont Circle that evening. While I was eating, two handsome young men kept staring at me, and one of my companions made a very acceptable remark about "cruising." It turned out, truth told, that they were from Portland, Oregon, and they were using *Before Stonewall* as the basis for a study series on gay issues. I learned all this after they worked up enough nerve to come up and ask me for my autograph, which I obligingly gave. Fifteen minutes of celebrity isn't bad, and I felt very proud that I was a part of the film that was doing so much to dispel ignorance, and to capture our lesbian and gay history for this younger generation who will be around when I am gone. It was more than merely a moment of personal gratification. It was also a humbling moment: *Before Stonewall* is the sort of legacy we who come from those early days should be leaving behind. The lesbians and gays who represent our future must be informed by our past. We who lived through the long ago eras when our identity was submerged in a menacing, silent fear are alive to relate the truth: You are not completely an individual without a community, and you have no community without a history, and *Before Stonewall* brought those truisms together in a Chinese restaurant in Washington, D.C., on the day we all marched for our rights.

I also feel proud to be in the company of two other Chicagoans who were chosen for the film. Marge Summit was still operating His 'n' Hers at the old stand under the Addison Street "L" platform. Who knows how many hundreds of entertainers got their chance to be seen on her stage—the result of her generosity. The Rev. Grant Gallup is one of the leaders in the Episcopal support group, Integrity. He has been a civil-rights activist going back to the black movement in the early 1960s, as well as the women's movement, and, of course, the gay movement. One cannot ask to be in better company than this.

I cannot review the film or the book nor comment on all of the remarkable people chosen to tell their stories in this film. They are campy, and sad, and courageous, and committed, and painful, and playful, and they all tell how a beleaguered and brave people survived to prove to a hostile world that gays and lesbians are healthy, worthwhile, creative and productive people worthy of our full and accepted participation in the American scene.



The author, George Buse, in uniform.

The film moves from the early part of the century, the "twilight years" that include an emerging gay community in the 1920s and '30s to the War Years and post-War Years of the 1940s, and, then, the dark Fifties, the McCarthy era that saw a renewed attempt to oppress gays in the persecutorial atmosphere created by Sen. Joe McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee. The movie takes us into the tumultuous Sixties when civil rights turned the country inside out and upside down, and left the land better and freer for its minorities. The film ends with the Stonewall Revolt. A vital story had been written, a history told, while other stories, and another history of the gay and lesbian freedom movement were ready to be written.

I have one caveat with this material, though, and it has to do with that era in the film with which I am most identified—World War II. There is an ebullience about the film's treatment of women, and especially lesbians, who broke the bonds of small town attitudes and their constricted values. Whether in the military or working in war plants, American women in large numbers then learned that they could be free of financial and emotional dependence on their families or on marriages, that they could work and live independently and that a wide range of alternatives to domesticity were open to them. They lived in same-sex housing, whether in Army barracks or rooming houses, and they experienced a heady new freedom.

Even gay men were involved in this new liberation. Leaving behind their small towns, they became acquainted with the gay bars of the big cities. The bohemian life of Harlem, Greenwich Vil-

lage and San Francisco in the 1920s broke loose and invaded every large city in the 1940s. Some gay men were the beneficiaries—if they were lucky enough to have been stationed near large cities that were not completely dominated by the military (San Diego, for example, was one large armed camp) or if they also were lucky enough to have spent the war "stateside."

The *Before Stonewall* depiction of the War Years is only half-right. There is a dark and brooding world beyond the sanguine life of the war-liberated woman—lesbian or non-gay, Henry Kissinger's Law is quite correct: "Everything is more complex than it appears."

The truth is that World War II was essentially a male-adventure, as far as the military goes, anyway. There were 16 million people in uniform then; fewer than one million were women. Though some were in forward areas or in London during the blitz, the vast majority were stationed in safe zones far from combat areas and near large cities. Millions of men, on the other hand, served aboard war ships or in isolated overseas outposts, and a minority of them actually saw combat. Gays in these duty stations had to be more furtive, frightened and isolated than they had been back home.

I served in a combat Marine regiment as a bandsman-turned-machine gunner. I joined up to prove that being gay does

not mean being effeminate, but I paid a price for that decision. In that macho setting no one who was gay could afford to be even suspected. Had the men I barracked with, sailed overseas with, and trained with ever suspected what I really was, I would have been mauled and brutalized before the enemy on Iwo Jima would ever have had a shot at me.

This is a part of WWII forgotten in *Before Stonewall*, and is largely forgotten in our gay history. It is part of our history we also must capture and possess. War is always a brutal business. It is much more so for gays than for non-gays. If you are found to be a gay soldier you have no allies, no friends—only enemies.

That objection registered, I go back to my premise that *Before Stonewall* is an important re-telling of our earlier lesbian and gay history. It encompasses in an hour or so the richness of our culture, and the importance of our contribution to the larger culture of our country. Seeing it is a bracing experience. It gives us hope that, despite the fact that ignorance still roams about so freely, we are letting the world know the truth about gays. To quote myself in the film in connection with my membership in Mattachine: "We helped each other come to the realization that we're not bad people; we're good people."

Before Stonewall is a film we have needed. I am proud to be a part of it.