



Before Stonewall

The Making of A Lesbian and
Gay Community

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Mention the words "family", "tradition", "history" or "ancestry" and you're likely to uncover many people's emotional Achille's heel.

In the case of gay men and lesbians, the emotions may be doubly strong, since sometimes "coming out" has gone hand in hand with discovering that blood is not always thicker than water.

While family ostracisms may be more of an exception than the rule these days, in the days before the riots of Stonewall, in 1969, being homosexual meant being treated and even treating oneself as something less than human.

Before Stonewall documents the determination and courage of some gay men and lesbians not to take this kind of treatment lying down, which eventually, as a result of their fighting spirit lead to the formation of the Gay Liberation Movement.

Through archival clips of homosexuals since the 20s and present day interviews with gays and lesbians who lived through that period, Greta Schiller and Robert Rosenberg's documentary film creates a sense of "family" and ancestry with these sexual pioneers.

FILM

It's moving and disturbing to see and hear what these previously unknown surrogate "family" members had to endure for our freedom.

That last sentence (in spite of its sincerity), is also deliberately meant to sound like the sort of thing parents (citing their war experiences) have been known to say to their children to discourage them from homosexuality.

Ironically then, in *Before Stonewall*, we discover that it was precisely as a result of the mobilization of man and woman power during the Second World War that allowed many homosexuals to realise that they were not alone or sub-human.

The war experience thus, is no longer something that can only be used by parents to chastise their children's "ungratefulness" and dismissal of tradition by becoming openly gay. In fact the war can be seen to be as the very thing that served to pave the way for the formation, in the 50s, of the first formal gay organisations in America, namely the Mattachine Society and The Sisters of Bilitis.

There are many such ironic eye-openers in *Before Stonewall*, making it imperative and compulsive viewing. It is also likely to be very controversial with those who do see it because of what it does and does not focus on, but any such discrepancies are secondary to the fact of this film's existence. It is the first film to record the existence of a gay history.

Family reunions (which is what this film finally comes down to being) are not everyone's idea of a "rage", because of all the emotions that are likely to "come out".

Unlike some family reunions that bring out many indiscriminate

emotions about being gay, *Before Stonewall* brings out probably the most valuable and important emotion anyone can possess: that of belonging. So, there's every reason to see this film.

•David Arthur-Simons.