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Documentary on gays proves to be emotional challenge for makers

While trying to tell the truth about gay history in America, *Before Stonewall* occasionally must rely on fiction. Not often, according to co-director and co-producer Robert Rosenberg. But the documentary does employ a certain amount of dramatic license.

"We tried to get things that would really give a glimpse of what gay life was like in the past," Rosenberg said shortly after his film was screened at the Filmex film festival in Los Angeles. "Like, something that would show life in a gay bar. Because those things were the hardest to get. People's home photographs and stuff like that, pictures of them and their friends over, a couple of friends, maybe — that was easy."

But to depict a lesbian bar, Rosenberg had to use a clip from a 1969 movie — *The Killing of Sister George*. "Actually," said Rosenberg, "*Sister George* was one of the

from the closeted 1920s to the more open 1980s. The turning point for gays, according to the filmmakers, came when a police raid on the gay-oriented Stonewall Inn in New York's Greenwich Village sparked massive demonstrations by militant homosexuals. Quite simply, they were mad as hell, and they weren't going to take it anymore. *Before Stonewall* shows us exactly what they had to take.

Rosenberg was inspired to make *Before Stonewall* by such recent compilation documentaries as *The Good Fight*, *With Babies and Banners*, and *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*.

"Both *Babies and Banners* and *Rosie the Riveter* touched very slightly on lesbian issues," Rosenberg said. "But they brushed most of them aside. And I knew from my filmmaking contacts that one of the women in *Rosie the Riveter* was a lesbian. But they never dealt with it. And I thought to myself, 'God, even in these films that are meant to be uncovering and reclaiming history that's been lost for the United States, they're not reclaiming my history.' These, quote, radical, unquote, filmmakers are still brushing aside my history because they're heterosexual and they wouldn't take those risks for those films.

"And I thought, well, really, we should uncover our history in a film like that."

Rosenberg, who has provided production services for many independent features, began researching *Before Stonewall* by interviewing gay historians, authors and social analysts. He soon joined forces with two other independent filmmakers: Greta Schiller, who served as co-director and co-producer on *Before Stonewall*, and executive producer John Scagliotti.

Even after obtaining funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, The New York State Humanities Council, "a couple of small foundation grants, and a lot of grass-roots fundraising," the film-

makers found it difficult to obtain certain footage.

"CBS News unfortunately wouldn't give us access to a Mike Wallace *CBS Reports* from '66 that was on homosexuality. It's a film in itself — it's quite hysterical. But they don't like to give people access to cut up their stuff and put it in their film.

"And then, there were certain groups of people that were hard to get to interview for the film. The older people were harder. And in general, women were harder than men, especially when they were older.

"I was in San Francisco and Oakland, and someone I met in Oakland said, 'Well, there is a group of like over 50, closer to 60 black lesbians who are sort of a social network.' And she called them up, and asked if any of the people would be interested in doing the film. Absolutely not. The professional women were school teachers, librarians, whatever. There's no way that they would agree to be in a film like this.

And that was frustrating. In fact, there were whole areas that were sort of censored from."

Still, Rosenberg and his collaborators were able to line up enough interviews, and acquire enough films and archival footage, to present a balanced, well-rounded history lesson. And the reaction so far, he said, has been most gratifying.

"The most unexpected reaction is when straight people have come up to me and just raved about the film and how important it was. Not just that they learned something, or they liked something. I remember one person involved in the exhibition marketplace. I kept thinking, 'She must be a lesbian' — but I know from other people that she wasn't. And she was just saying that it really was one of the most enlightening films she had seen all year, and that it really meant a lot to her, that she really was moved by it. And that's a very heartening kind of reaction."



films that accounted for a large percentage of our archival budget. In a documentary like this, where you have a limited budget, the Hollywood films are the most expensive to purchase."

Before Stonewall, which was awarded a special prize for merit at Filmex, will be shown at 9:15 p.m. Sunday at the River Oaks Theatre, as part of the 1985 Houston International Film Festival. Comprehensive and exceptionally well-made, the film uses detailed interviews, archival footage and clips from period films to trace the history of gay culture in the United States