

AMERICAN FILM

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Independents

Gay Old Times

In 1969 angry patrons of the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village fought back when police raided the bar in what became the starting point of the Gay Liberation movement. Most films about gay history have focused on the years that followed, but two new documentaries, *Before Stonewall* and *Silent Pioneers*, explore gay lives before that watershed event. Both films are touring European festivals this spring and will be opening in U.S. theaters soon.

Before Stonewall—by Greta Schiller, Andrea Weiss, and John Scagliotti—asks what fueled this sudden burst of political energy. The film, three years in the making, answers not with a narrow history of gay civil rights but through the hidden story of a vital American subculture.

The archival research that went into the project yielded a special blend of the personal and the social image. At first librarians told researcher Weiss that “we don’t have anything on homosexuals.” But the historical treasure hunt began to pay off with hours of material when index headings such as “Cross Dressing,” “Greenwich Village Street Life,” and “Police Raids” were consulted. The filmmakers built an ad hoc network of contacts around the country who screened and collected Super 8 films, photos,

and magazine clippings that had been solicited through gay publications.

The social confidence of the gay community has risen to the point where the filmmakers felt they could afford to be frank—and humorous. Since the military has long been a focus for gay people attracted to a same-sex work community, the film includes lots of unfamiliar barracks lore. Annoyed at the threat of a lesbian purge of the WACs during World War II, a sergeant recalls in an interview how she told Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower that he would be losing most of a battalion, and one with an admirably low rate of AWOLs and illegal pregnancies. He decided the war effort ranked a higher priority. Another veteran remembers how the gay community called the draftees’ gathering point the “seduction center.” The army and World War II brought gay people together, a step toward awakening a group identity.

Soon after the Kinsey Report gave gay people hope by estimating that they might number twenty million in the United States, a moment of political stress came. Senator Joseph McCarthy not only hunted pinkos and fellow travelers; the ugly underbelly of his hate campaign was a homosexual purge of the Civil Service that may have caused as many as a thousand firings.

This political terror was echoed in homosexuals’ social fears of being discovered. When *Stonewall*’s subjects tell of drawing the blinds and locking the doors to discuss being gay, they now appear abashed at just how fearful they were at the time.

As a branch of fifties Bohemia, the gay community had its heroes and martyrs. The *Howl* obscenity trial of Allen Ginsberg became a rallying point where claims for sexual freedom and creative freedom met. To lightly illustrate the times, the filmmakers unearthed photos of girl Beats that look downright trendy now. And uncowed by the precepts of the current politically enlightened, they observe that “camping it up,” with its exaggerated role playing, was simply the gay parody of straight fifties culture, which also exalted macho-meeek polarities.

—Kathleen Hulser



Before Stonewall: the first gay march, 1965.