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## Screening America's hidden gay history

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**"BEFORE STONEWALL: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community"** is an absorbing, shocking, revealing, humorous and thoroughly compassionate documentary on one of the more necessary and more articulate liberation movements of the era. Fresh from winning this year's Los Angeles Filmex award for best American independent feature (non-fiction), the film is currently at the Roxie for a limited run, through next Saturday.

The guiding philosophy behind Greta Schiller's direction would seem to be enlightenment rather than proselytizing, thanks to both rare and familiar historical footage and a host of first-person interviews with gay men and women who peopled the barricades when they were considered both insane and criminal. That is, when they were considered at all.

There's a sub-text here about stereotypical sex roles in the mass media that one wishes the film had explored in more depth. But the bits of celluloid that Schiller and her team did exhume often explodes with the potency of dynamite. It begins with Ronald Reagan, the actor, in a clip from a drag number from "This is the Army," and moves on to the cliched treatment of homosexuals in any number of forgotten and forgettable Hollywood epics.

Those films shaped and reflected social attitudes, and the victims of that thinking speak loud and clear about their confusion, loneliness and oppression. For every interviewee like the successful novelist Ann Cannon, there was a victim, like the WAC who was dishonorably discharged from the service and, even today, is afraid to expose her face to the camera.

What the movie makes clear is the extent to which homosexual liberation is bound to both national and world events. It took World War II to alter the conventional role of women, move them out of the kitchen, into

slacks, the factories and the armed services. For sheer good humor, you can't beat the delectable interview with a former WAC, who recalls her virtually all-lesbian battalion, and what happened when Gen. Eisenhower found out about it.

The end of the war brought male homosexuals to the urban areas, where they found a degree of tolerance. (Women were not so lucky; 1945 found them behind the stove again.) The McCarthy era drove all minorities back underground. The Kinsey Report revealed the depth of homosexuality in contemporary America. Allan Ginsburg's "Howl" trial made the un-

speakable a matter of popular conversation.

Later, the feminist and civil rights movements and the relaxed, hippie sensibility prepared the stage for the 1969 Stonewall riots, in which homosexuals refused to allow themselves to be persecuted by the police. Nobody in the film, however, risks an attitude of complacency.

In fact, most of Schiller's witnesses have made peace with themselves, if not with a world that still regards being homosexual with suspicion and hostility.



Belle of the ball: a little boy, cross-dressing back in 1931