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'Stonewall' a moving study of gays

BEFORE STONEWALL: THE MAKING OF A GAY AND LESBIAN COMMUNITY. - Documentary directed by Greta Schiller. At the Nickelodeon, unrated.

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Stonewall - the name of the Greenwich Village bar where gays rioted in 1969 after police crack-

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downs - is one of those convenient historical pivot points. After Stonewall, gay life came out of the closet en masse and gay pride began. Before Stonewall, gay life existed, but covertly. Instead of gay pride there often was gay isolation and bewilderment. As Harry Hay, the pony-tailed founder of the homosexual Mattachine Society, says, looking into the camera: "We didn't have the word 'gay.' We didn't have any words for ourselves at all. When I'd come out in 1930 the word for us was 'temperamental.' We were 'that way.' This is about all they had for us, about all we had for ourselves."

The archival rummagings in "Before Stonewall," designed to provide a historical context for gay life in America, are fascinating. They start in Harlem during the wink-at-the-law 1920s, where tolerance for gays and lesbians is documented in faded photographs, nightclub posters and testimony from such survivors as dancer Mabel Hampton and writer Richard Bruce Nugent. Hampton worked in a club owned by a lesbian singer. Nugent, a contemporary of Langston Hughes, was a figure in the Harlem Renaissance. Their softly jaunty recollections belie the idea of homosexual life lived in a wretched twilight zone.



1943 publicity still for Finocchio's restaurant, San Francisco

Greenwich Village dominates the 1930s, when Hollywood movies such as "Call Her Savage" openly portrayed gay cafe life. "Before Stonewall" intertwines historical footage and present-day interviews with many who made the history, in the manner of "The Good Fight" and "Seeing Red." It cites World War II as a catalyst for a dawning sense of gay community as the war drew together in port cities gays who hitherto were isolated from one another. There's also amusing footage in which we learn how gay men signaled one another with red neckties or matching ties and pocket handkerchiefs. The mood turns somber as we watch State Department

persecution of gays in the 1950s, upbeat as the hippie-flavored 1960s briefly lightened the national mood.

But don't regard "Before Stonewall" as a drag act, even though it makes use of cross-dressing. It supplies useful perspectives and compels admiration for the dignity and courage of many of the figures who made gay life what it is today. Thanks to their heartfelt (and seldom self-justifying) testimony, and the smartly edited old footage, "Before Stonewall" is an affecting study that's certain to deepen the understanding of anyone interested in the roots of gay and lesbian life in America.