

Quiet Fire: Memoirs of Older Gay Men

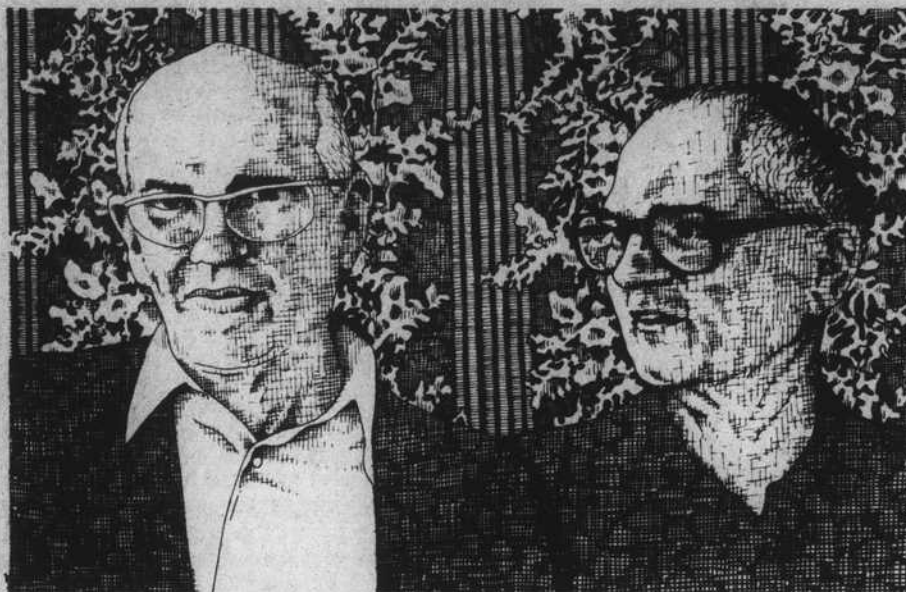
by Keith Vacha

My writing of *Quiet Fire!* turned out to be an adventure that surpassed my most hopeful expectations. No camera was required on this trip but the eye of the mind, no ticket needed but the desire to listen and understand. The journey led me to find friends and family where I only vaguely suspected there were any. It was learning, though not in the way one learns the icy facts of a text — my learning came through hours spent witnessing and sharing experiences with older gay men. My initial objectives were to gain insight into the history of gay persons in the 20th century from a highly personal perspective, to unearth a "sense" of role models from among those I would meet and to break down the stereotype of the sad and lonely older gay in America. I accomplished all three goals.

The people I talked to were born near the beginning of the 20th century, a period that still subscribed to notions of Victorian sentimentality laid on top of a puritan ethic. Regardless of the lack of sexual information available at that time, most of these men knew that they were "different" from an early age. The luckier ones were able to find others like themselves. Overall, it was a world of great danger and secret liaisons. The short-lived flamboyance and testing of restrictive norms in the 20's was followed by the great stock market crash and depression. Radcliffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, published in 1928, remained for many gays the only clue that there might be others of their kind. The years leading up to World War II were, for most, a time of charade and secrecy. Gay bars developed primarily during wartime and the first political organizations which were to precede the present day liberation movement came shortly thereafter.

Most of the participants of my book have taken a backseat to the youth-oriented gay culture that has become America's visible prototype of what gays are all about. But the aging of the younger liberationists, recent trends in the study of aging and the maturing of the liberation movement have coalesced to reverse this trend. Gay elders are slowly stepping forward to add a sense of heritage and vitality to one of the most diverse minority groups.

Still the stereotype of the sad, lonely older gay man who is forced to seek out young children is a prevalent notion. One might even go further and say that the stereotype is that



Keith Vacha is the author of a new book, *Quiet Fire*, a collection of 17 in-depth interviews with older gay men from all walks of life and professions, recalling the days before Stonewall and gay liberation. Vacha works as a social service administrator to the elderly on the West Coast. He is also a writer and illustrator whose work has appeared in *Fag Rag*, *Gay Sunshine*, *Mouth of the Dragon*, *Vector* and *California Living*, among others. His poetry was recently published in the anthology, *Son of the Male Muse*.

older gay men don't exist, they burn out like a candle at both ends, they die, they vanish, kaput! When I explained the purpose of my book to people, a few honestly commented that they did not know that there were older gays. Unfortunately, a few older gay men buy part of this package themselves, viewing themselves as the fortunate exception to what older gay men are like.

Through stereotyping we are led to believe

that the bulk of our lives beyond the few years of youth are characterized by loneliness, degeneracy, inactivity or general ennui. The vast majority of gays who could disprove these beliefs are not given media coverage. Instead, as with all minorities, the media flourishes by finding and focusing on the sensational rather than the usual. Gay events are most often symbolized by the "Amos and Andy" image of the gay man in drag. The gay media itself often

reinforces youth orientation in an effort to sell their products or promote patronage.

A small but growing body of gerontological research has been especially helpful in exploding the stereotypes surrounding the older homosexual. Contrary to prevalent mythology, most older gays are found to have a wide range of interests, including lovers, ex-lovers, friends of all ages and occasionally children who compose the self-selected "family network." Researcher Deborah Wolf notes that most gay people learn early in life that they must be able to fend for themselves, whereas many heterosexuals are not faced with a massive dose of independence from the support of blood family and society until old age. Then their spouse and same-aged friends may have died, their children moved away, and they are left without the skills needed to live by themselves. Often the widow is unaccustomed to the ascribed "masculine" chores of providing upkeep on the home while the widower may be unaccustomed to cooking, cleaning or shopping within a fixed budget.

Quiet Fire is meant to complement statistical research by presenting a personal, easily readable approach to the subject, to show the vast diversity among older gay men. There is, of course, no such thing as a "representative sampling" of older gay men. To seek one would be as ridiculous an ambition as to try to locate a representative sampling of older heterosexual men in America. At best, after examining all research results we may come away with a better insight into who these older men are. Adding to this impossible task is the fact that persons grow more individual with age and more unlike one another as a result of their differing experiences.

The subjects for my book were solicited by way of advertisement (newspapers, fliers), organizational contacts and, most successfully, word of mouth. Only a handful responded directly to the cry for subjects. I met a few at parties and even met one sitting at a bus stop. In other words, the occasion of the "professional respondent" was minimized.

I refrained from interviewing the leaders of the first gay organizations because I wanted to keep away from a political orientation. The focus was on those unaccustomed to the limelight, the unsung heroes of daily life, in

continued on page 11

'Silent Pioneers' To Air

Silent Pioneers, a half-hour documentary offering a portrait of the 3.5 million gay and lesbian elders in the United States, will be shown on WUNC-TV on Friday, August 9 from 10:30 to 11:00pm. The eight women and men profiled represent a cross-section of regional, ethnic, racial and professional backgrounds. They live in small towns and urban and rural communities across America. In moving testimonials, the men and women in the film share the pain of self-discovery and the liberating joy of coming to terms with their sexuality in an era when homosexuality was not tolerated at all. The generation portrayed in the film has battled constantly for self-esteem and survival in a "straight world."

ADVERTISERS WELCOME

The *Front Page* is always on the lookout for new advertisers. **Some rates:** Full Page \$162; Half Page \$87; Quarter Page \$50; Eighth Page \$32; Sixteenth \$19. Other sizes are available. In many cases, there are small production charges in addition to the cost for space. **Terms:** payment by certified check or money order in advance. Credit only to established, approved clients. Call us for a complete rate card, or for further information. **Better yet, call us to place your ad. Thank you!**

Next Issues	On The Streets By	Ad Deadline
July 23-Aug 12	Tuesday, July 12	Friday, July 12
Aug 13-Sept 9	Tuesday, Aug 13	Friday, Aug 2

(919) 829-0181

DON'T MISS AN ISSUE!

If you don't pick up *The Front Page* by the weekend, you might not get one! A year's subscription (22 issues), mailed in a plain, sealed envelope, costs only **\$10.00 (bulk rate)**. If for some reason you desire speedier service or extra protection, you can opt to pay **\$18.50 (first class postage)**. A subscription guarantees you won't miss a single issue!

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____

Zip _____

Make check or money order payable to *The Front Page* and mail to P.O. Box 25642, Raleigh, N.C. 27611. Sorry, we cannot invoice for subscriptions.