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Stonewall To Raleigh...

Commentary by Jim Baxter

"Stonewall to Raleigh" is the theme of this year's Lesbian and Gay Pride March and Celebration. 1989 marks the 20th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, an important milestone in our lesbian/gay history. Some have called the riots "The Boston Tea Party" of our movement.

The custom of officially celebrating "Gay Pride" — day, week, month or what have you — in June began in New York City, where in 1970 the first annual Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade was held on the anniversary of the riots. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, in *Lesbian/Woman*, recalled that first year: "An estimated twenty thousand gay brothers and sisters (with a smattering of straight supporters) marched 'out of the closet and into the streets.' There were banners, flags and signs... there were men and women from all over the east coast. The New York march ended with a rally in Central Park."

There was a parallel event on the west coast. "Californians also marched in Los Angeles in what Morris Knight called a 'joyful, folksy, funky street parade.' Reaction on both coasts to the marches was good," according to Martin and Lyons, "both from the public watching and from the media. It was surely an indication that the homosexual was on the move. Shouts of 'say it loud, gay and proud,' 'two-four-six-eight, gay is just as good as straight!' and 'Gay Power' set the tone for a drive to freedom which will not be denied."

Ten years later, during June 1980, I wrote an article for *The Front Page* trying to explain the whole idea of "Gay Pride" and the history of the movement, concepts I was sure were foreign to most of my readers at the time:

"For the past eleven years — in various cities throughout the United States — all or part of the last two weeks in June have been reserved for the commemoration and celebration of 'Gay Pride.' What on earth is this quality known as 'Gay Pride?' What does the phrase mean? And, since here in North Carolina we have no such celebration, can the idea of 'Gay Pride' have any meaning for us?"

This was written during the first year of publishing *The Front Page*, and much, of course, has changed since then. There were Pride events in Charlotte and the Triangle area in 1981, and there were sporadic efforts in subsequent years. Then in 1986, a Gay Pride March and Celebration was organized in Durham. Although originally intended to be local in scope, it quickly became a major event with statewide participation.

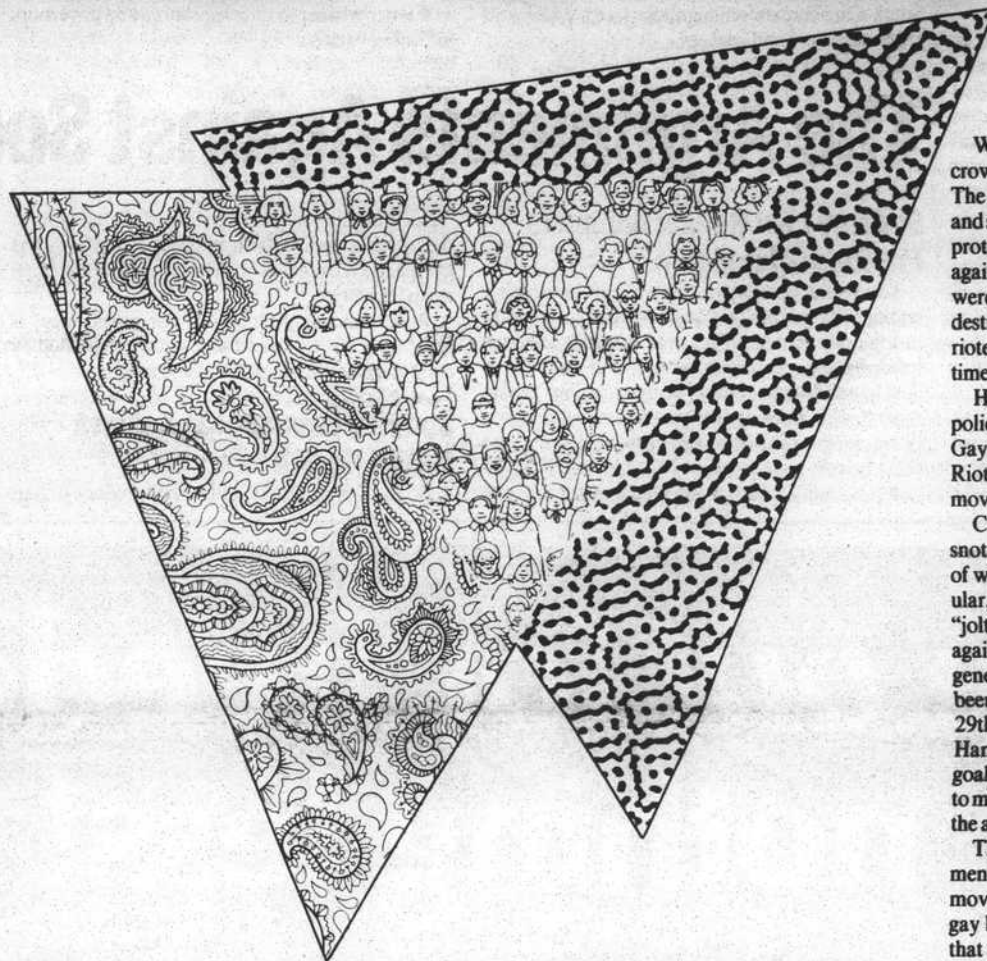
There was another successful march in 1987 in Durham and then in 1988 in Raleigh. This year, Pride '89 organizers hope to see at least 5,000 in attendance. This will double the number of lesbians, gay men and supporters who were in Raleigh last year.

So, it's obvious that Gay Pride *does* have meaning for us here in North Carolina. On the occasion of the Stonewall anniversary, however, it's important to look back at the last twenty years and to understand our history. With that in mind, I'm reprinting portions of the article — updated and corrected — that first appeared in *The Front Page* in 1980:

The Hairpin Drop Heard Round The World

"Barricades were set up and manned, bonfires flamed and there were three days of street-action," Martin and Lyon wrote about the Stonewall Riots, adding that "at one time the gays had 'liberated' an area two blocks wide and three blocks long.

"This marked the beginning of open and overt physical battle by the homosexual against the forces of society which have for so long kept her/him from true humanhood. No more polite discussions, no



Twenty Years Of Pride, Struggle & Liberation!

more secret societies, no more concern about the 'image.' *Gay is Good!* Once the bottle containing the genie is open, it is not easy to get the genie back in the bottle. The homosexual is out of the bottle — you will not get him/her back in!"

How did all this come about? The Stonewall Riots began on June 27, 1969 in New York's Greenwich Village, and lasted the better part of a week. The Stonewall Inn itself was located at 53 Christopher Street. On that particular evening, a Friday, the New York Police Department dispatched a squad of eight officers to raid the premises for an alleged infringement of the liquor laws.

According to Lige Clark and Jack Nichols, in *I Have More Fun With You Than Anybody*, "The Stonewall was a dingy Mafia-run club which had been operating without proper licensing for more than three years, without police interference and with full official knowledge. Payoffs by underworld figures kept cops from conducting such raids, but on this glorious occasion, payoffs or no, the boy's in blue chose the wrong evening."

"New York was in the midst of a mayoral campaign," John D'Emilio explained in *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, "always a bad time for the city's homosexuals... offering scantily clad go-go boys as entertainment, [The Stonewall] brought an

'unruly' element to Sheridan Square, a busy Village intersection. Patrons of the Stonewall tended to be young and nonwhite. Many were drag queens, and many came from the burgeoning ghetto of run-downs living across town in the East Village."

In the past, the patrons of Stonewall — like patrons of other gay bars — submitted to the New York Police Department without a word of protest. In the weeks just preceding, the police had successfully raided other local bars: the Snake Pit, the Sewer, the Checkerboard, the Tele-Star and others.

The Stonewall was closed that night, employees and a few customers were arrested, and the rest of the patrons were escorted out. But, instead of dissolving into the night, grateful for having escaped, they stayed to witness the events. A crowd gathered. As the police put the club's bartender, bouncer and three drag queens into a paddy wagon, onlookers began to jeer and catcall.

When an officer attempted to steer the last of the patrons, a lesbian, through the crowd to a nearby patrol car, she put up a fierce struggle. And suddenly the scene became explosive.

For the first time in (known) history, the patrons of a gay bar reacted with anger and rebelled against a police raid. Puerto Rican drag queens, "bull dagger" dykes, gay youth and street people fought back, with beer cans and bottles, with sticks, with bricks, with

torn-up parking meters and trash cans. The police were forced to barricade themselves inside the bar until further assistance arrived.

When the NYPD reinforcements did arrive, the crowd was dispersed and a few arrests were made. The next night, however, a Saturday, crowds of gays and sympathizers gathered near Sheridan Square to protest the vice squad action. The police trooped in again; there was another confrontation. Some gays were clubbed, others engaged in the sort of property destruction soon to be known as "trashing." The rioters shouted "Gay Power," perhaps for the first time anywhere.

Heavy rioting, and more confrontations with the police, continued to occur over the next four nights. Gay people had *fought back*, and the Stonewall Riots quickly became a symbol for the start of a new movement: gay liberation.

Coverage of the event in the media, including a snotty article in the *Village Voice*, spread the word of what had happened. The *Voice* article in particular, according to Don Teal in *The Gay Militants*, "jolted awake an only half-remembered outrage against straight society's bigotries in those older, generally conservative 'Boys in the Band' who had been out of town on the weekend of the 26th-28th-29th tanning their thighs at Cherry Grove and the Hamptons. And, as a slur, it posed a challenge and a goal for those younger \$90-a-week gays who'd had to make do with Greenwich Village and who'd seen the action."

The riots had an important effect upon younger men and women already involved in the mass movements of the 1960's. "Activists appeared with gay banners at the many anti-war demonstrations that erupted during the fall of 1969," according to John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman in *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*. "At colleges and universities, gay students rallied openly alongside other campus radicals. Soon, these young gay militants were taking the message of their movement into the heart of the gay subculture."

Already existing organizations concerned with civil rights for homosexuals were quick to seize the moment and energize their memberships in the wake of the Stonewall Riots. But, more importantly, new and different organizations were being formed. Within a month after the Stonewall Riots, the Gay Liberation Front was formed in New York City. GLF was radical and committed to resolving the problems of all minority groups — blacks, Cubans, Chicanos, etc.

Not satisfied with this approach, others in New York City talked of forming a group based solely on homosexual liberation, one that would focus all its energies on that one issue. In November, 1969, the Gay Activists Alliance was formed. The group would be radical but dedicated to "responsible actions," without violence.

A Sit-In With Style

Less than a year later, GAA was presented with a prime opportunity to stage an action. The September, 1970 issue of *Harper's Magazine* contained a cover story by Joseph Epstein entitled, "Homo/Hetero: The Struggle for Sexual Identity." In it, Epstein attempted the sort of sympathetic liberal viewpoint common to sophisticated magazines of that period — Norman Mailer had even written one! Epstein's "tolerant" viewpoint, nevertheless, prompted him to write that nothing could make him sadder than if any of his four children were to become homosexuals, because "cursed with no clear cause," they would be "condemned to a state of permanent niggerdom among men."

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