

# **Pre-Stonewall San Francisco: How Organizations and Resistance to Police Raids Prefigured the Stonewall Riots**

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## **Why San Francisco?**

New York's Stonewall Riots are widely regarded as the single most important turning point in the history of the gay rights movement in America. They are seen as having transformed gay communities all throughout the country and signaled the beginning of the modern fight for gay rights. The riots began when, after years of discrimination against gays and gay bars in New York City, police raided a popular gay bar in Greenwich Village called the Stonewall Inn. Following several arrests, a riot broke out between the police and the crowd. The next day, thousands gathered in front of the inn to protest, and when the police showed up another riot ensued. By that time, millions of Americans had heard about the turmoil and several cities held protests of their own. The Stonewall Riots produced a never-before-seen reaction from gay communities throughout America, and suddenly the country had a sizable and visible queer population.\*

Unlike other cities, San Francisco already had an active gay community prior to the Stonewall Riots. The protests in San Francisco following Stonewall were not surprising because people there had been protesting in support of gay rights for decades. There was no sudden emergence of homosexual organizations in San Francisco after Stonewall because those groups already existed. This then raises the question, "Why did San Francisco already have such a large and vibrant

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\* Throughout this paper, I use the term "queer," along with the terms "gay," "lesbian," and "homosexual," to encompass a wide range of people who identify as a sexual or gender minority.

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queer community before the Stonewall Riots?” While there are several factors that could help answer this question, historians disagree on exactly what these factors are. Allan Bérubé focuses almost exclusively on the presence of gay and lesbian soldiers and sailors in the city. Nan Alamilla Boyd mentions this factor, but also draws attention to the police harassment that led to civil and legal resistance from the queer community. Walter Frank, on the contrary, emphasizes the impact of negotiations with tolerant police and politicians. He and Vicki Eaklor also point to the 1950’s Beat culture scene, which made the city more inclusive of outcasts. Despite their historiographical debates, these same historians agree on many factors as well, from the formation of several queer organizations to the Stonewall-like raids that occurred in the city.<sup>1</sup>

It is true that the influx of gay and lesbian soldiers and sailors during and after the Second World War provided San Francisco with a sizable queer community and strains of gay culture that set the stage for future growth and action. However, this group only provided a foundation for later progress; it was not the direct catalyst of this progress. After the arrival of these servicemen, several organizations were created in San Francisco that began to advocate for the homosexual community. As these organizations expanded their size and influence, they helped bring the city’s gay community together and increase its visibility. Additionally, police raids on gay bars in the city, similar to the raids that sparked the Stonewall Riots, spurred extreme resistance and made headlines, further uniting the gay community and drawing national attention. This combination of strong, united activism and public attention attracted other gays and lesbians from all over the country to San Francisco.

### **Gay Servicemen and Veterans Flock to San Francisco**

During the Second World War, hundreds of thousands of gays and lesbians served in the military. In fact, Alfred Kinsey, a renowned biologist and sexologist, concluded from his wartime surveys that there were between 650,000 and 1.6 million gay soldiers (out of approximately 16

million total soldiers).<sup>2</sup> Like any other soldiers, they left their hometowns and ventured to military bases all across the country. People who had struggled with their sexuality in isolation met many other soldiers just like themselves and began to form small communities in various cities. These men and women, once trapped and unaware that homosexuality even existed, were able to explore their sexualities and discuss their identities in their new lives as servicemen and women. This is not to say that the military itself was accepting of gays and lesbians. In fact, official military policy prohibited gays and lesbians from serving openly in the military and even banned all personnel from entering some of the queer bars in San Francisco.<sup>3</sup> Instead, gays and lesbians serving in the war were, for the first time, able to meet other homosexuals and build small strains of gay culture in the cities they inhabited.

Those lucky enough to be stationed in San Francisco discovered traces of a preexisting queer culture and a generally accepting atmosphere, perks that were not as prevalent in other cities. By the 1940's, popular gay bars like Finocchio's, the Silver Dollar, the Black Cat Café, and the Top of the Mark had established an active gay nightlife that attracted lots of soldiers.<sup>4</sup> Many of these nightclubs were right next to Broadway Street, a hub for entertainment and tourism, and this location helped acclimate the rest of the city with the queer community. Additionally, these clubs differed from their contemporaries in New York in that New York's State Liquor Authority heavily regulated the sale of alcohol, while no strict regulatory body existed in San Francisco.<sup>5</sup> As such, queer nightlife was less restricted by regulation and police intervention, allowing gay bar culture to grow. Gay servicemen also found the city to be very inclusive. As gay soldier Bob Ruffing recalled, "The people who lived in San Francisco... were awfully good to servicemen. I remember a woman... [who] used to have a [gay] party once a week. There were many of them throughout the city."<sup>6</sup> The thriving nightlife and tolerant atmosphere allowed San Francisco's queer culture to progress much faster than gay communities in other major cities. As historian Vicki Eaklor asserts, "It is logical to begin [the gay rights movement with] San Francisco... because so many strains of culture and subculture met there." She believes that a flourishing "queer pres-

ence” during and after the Second World War was one of the first of these strains and thus set the foundation for San Francisco’s enormous and vibrant queer culture in the 1950’s and 1960’s.<sup>7</sup>

While active servicemen in San Francisco greatly expanded the city’s gay community and culture during the war, many veterans also flocked to the city after the end of the war. Some, like Bob Ruffing and Bert Gerrits, settled permanently in the city after being stationed there. Others, like Pat Bond, had never set foot there before but moved to the city after hearing of its booming queer culture.<sup>8</sup> The war had given many gays and lesbians the opportunity to be themselves within small queer communities, so after its conclusion they flocked to San Francisco in search of an even larger community. These veterans found what they were looking for, and “immersed [themselves] in the gay night life that flourished in San Francisco... after the war.”<sup>9</sup>

People like Ben Small, who was “much more prepared to be an up-front homosexual once [he] settled... in San Francisco,” also became more active in the community than they had been during the war.<sup>10</sup> Now free from the burden of hiding their identity from the military, some formed small advocacy groups and promoted political and social change. For example, gay veterans organized a rally in San Francisco on Armed Forces Day in 1966 to protest the exclusion of homosexuals from the military.<sup>11</sup> While this advocacy had no major immediate impact, it did help pave the way for future organizations to develop. The physical presence of gay servicemen and veterans in San Francisco, the spirited culture they developed, and the political action they began to organize laid the groundwork for the increased activism that transformed the city’s queer culture in later decades.

### The Emergence of Queer Organizations

During the 1950’s and 1960’s, several queer organizations emerged in and around San Francisco. A few of these groups, such as the Mattachine Society, began elsewhere and then developed branches in San Francisco. However, the majority of these organizations originated in San Francisco and kept their headquarters there as they spread

throughout the country, making the city's queer community the most politically and socially active community in the nation by the middle of the 1960's. This flurry of political activity attracted other queer people to San Francisco and increased the visibility of the city's homosexual community.

As early as the 1950's, homosexual organizations began popping up in San Francisco. One such group, the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), began in 1955 as a lesbian activist organization dedicated to helping lesbians integrate themselves into society. Much of their work, whether it was public discussions about lesbian issues or legal support for lesbian bars, increased the visibility of lesbians in San Francisco. If the city's press wasn't publicizing the DOB's efforts, their monthly newsletter, *The Ladder*, succeeded in doing so. As Boyd points out, *The Ladder* became their "[literal] ladder to public visibility and social mobility."<sup>12</sup>

The Council on Religion and the Homosexual (CRH) was another San Francisco-based organization working for the queer community. Founded in 1964 by Glide Memorial Church and the founders of DOB, CRH aimed to bring together various homosexual activists to educate the religious community and make it more tolerant of gays and lesbians.<sup>13</sup>

According to their 1964-1967 progress report, CRH spoke with leaders of various religious groups about queer issues, and many of these groups adopted pro-gay changes as a result of these discussions. For example, in March of 1965, CRH convinced Bishop Pike of the Protestant Episcopal Church to create a "Joint Committee on Homosexuality for the Episcopal Diocese of California." The committee worked to get rid of laws banning homosexual sex, improve police treatment of homosexuals, end discrimination against gay bars, and foster conversations about queer issues with members of the law enforcement and religious communities.<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, CRH co-sponsored a national theological conference about homosexuality in San Francisco. The event was held in 1967 at the same time as the Second National Planning Conference of Homophile Organizations, another San Francisco-based conference that brought to-

gether homosexual activists from all over the country.<sup>15</sup> CRH also met with the Department of Defense and both state and federal congressmen, and supported the political campaigns of local gays and lesbians.<sup>16</sup>

Their extensive work throughout these years was publicized in radio programs, television shows, and several national publications, including *Newsweek*, *Time*, and the *Wall Street Journal*.<sup>17</sup> This news coverage was yet another way CRH made the nation aware of San Francisco's pioneering queer community. As the organization gained prominence, their membership drastically increased and they created branches in places like Honolulu, Chicago, and Philadelphia. As co-founder Dr. Clarence Colwell stated in an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, "a large number of the homosexuals disenchanted with organized religion [found] their way" into CRH.<sup>18</sup> All of this work was mentioned in CRH's progress report, which potentially exaggerated their achievements in the hopes of receiving more donations. Yet, the sheer size and scope of their efforts, exaggerated or not, undoubtedly led to national recognition and contributed to the dynamic activism of San Francisco's queer community.

The Society for Individual Rights (SIR), also formed in San Francisco in 1964, was another prominent organization operating in the city before Stonewall. It focused on community support and political activism, and like CRH quickly garnered national attention. From S.T.D. prevention initiatives to homosexual voter registration programs, SIR had an enormous impact on San Francisco's homosexual community.<sup>19</sup> SIR also released a monthly magazine, *Vector*, which detailed recent stories and upcoming events in the San Francisco area. An event calendar in their April 1965 issue conveys just how active SIR was in the city. Bowling nights, camping trips, dance groups, and political planning meetings were just a few of the activities that filled every day of the monthly calendar. In fact, the only day without an event was listed as "a day for whatever [members] used to do before SIR came on the scene."<sup>20</sup> While *Vector*, like CRH's progress report, aimed to please current members and attract new ones, the numerous events and services listed in the publication nevertheless indicate

SIR played a big role in socially uniting San Francisco's homosexual community and increasing its political strength and visibility. Historian Walter Frank agrees in his book *Law and the Gay Rights Story* that "in its combination of political and social activities . . . SIR [provided] a social outlet for the gay community and [insisted] on its rights." In doing so, he believes the organization "very much anticipated" the successful homosexual activism that followed Stonewall.<sup>21</sup>

### San Francisco's Stonewall

Prior to Stonewall, many raids on gay bars in San Francisco, similar to those that led to the Stonewall Riots, sparked outrage and helped unite the city's homosexual community and encourage activism. The most significant of these incidents occurred in 1965, when police raided a New Year's Eve Ball sponsored by the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, and several attendees were arrested. The New Year's Eve Ball was a private event held at California Hall attended by some 600 gays and lesbians. Although the San Francisco police department had promised to stay clear of the dance, they stationed police and squad cars by the entrance and plain-clothes officers took pictures of everyone entering and leaving. When the police were asked to leave, they responded by arresting four of the attendees for interfering with police work and two others for disorderly conduct. By the next day, CRH had organized a press conference where they criticized the police for their actions and gained national media coverage.<sup>22</sup> The organization also sent letters to the mayor of San Francisco, the U.S. Attorney General, the Vice President, and the President. Vice President Hubert Humphrey actually sent a response back assuring them that the event would receive attention.<sup>23</sup>

Because CRH was so quick to release their version of the story to the press, much of the media coverage was pro-gay and anti-police. Articles like Donovan Bess's "Angry Ministers Rip Police" in the *San Francisco Chronicle* had few quotes in support of police yet incorporated many quotes from attendees that made the police behavior seem completely unjustified and discriminatory.<sup>24</sup> Political cartoons like Len

Devereaux's "Making Task" in the *San Francisco Observer* mocked police by claiming that they had no reason to arrest anyone.<sup>25</sup> As CRH President John Lewis put it, "Thorough coverage of the event by the news media brought society's unsatisfactory treatment of the homosexual to the attention of the American public."<sup>26</sup>

Homosexual activists got another victory when the trial against the four attendees accused of interfering with police activity was halted by the judge, Leo Friedman, who stated "It's useless to waste everybody's time following this to its finale."<sup>27</sup> In addition, after pressure from a heated front-page editorial in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the San Francisco Police Department issued a formal apology and admitted they had made a mistake. Although the other two men arrested were eventually convicted of reduced charges, overall the event was a major victory for San Francisco queer activists. Prominent gay journalist George Mendenhall believes that the event "opened the door for a lot of things.... It made people aware of the gay community, and it woke up a lot of people to accept [homosexuals]."<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, raids at the Tay-Bush Inn in 1961 and Compton's Cafeteria in 1966 enraged the city's queer community and inspired further political action. The Tay-Bush raid, in which more than 100 homosexuals were arrested, spurred a media frenzy and brought discrimination against the queer community into the public eye.<sup>29</sup> The incident at Compton's Cafeteria actually produced a riot, as patrons fought back against police quite violently. This riot also generated a lot of publicity and was the first major incident involving transgender people. Eaklor appropriately describes it as a "turning point in transgender activism."<sup>30</sup>

While historians Vicki Eaklor and Walter Frank disagree about some of the specific factors that made San Francisco's gay population so large and visible prior to Stonewall, both mention the raids as important causes. Eaklor believes that these two riots were major milestones for San Francisco. She sees the reaction to the New Year's riot as the first

time a capable organization existed and was able to respond effectively to such an incident. Frank compared the police's mistakes during the Stonewall Riots to police errors at the New Year's Eve Ball, as he believes this comparison is another example of how pre-Stonewall San Francisco anticipated post-Stonewall America.<sup>31</sup>

### **Lessons Learned from San Francisco's Pre-Stonewall Activists**

If one considers San Francisco's pre-Stonewall gay community successful in advancing the gay rights movement, many lessons can be taken from that time and applied to the current fight for equality. The tactics of today's activists differ sharply from those employed by the original homosexual organizations like DOB and CRH. These early groups started grass roots movements and worked together on initiatives and events. They acted boldly and crossed lines no one else had crossed, garnering national publicity as a result. While modern-day organizations are working at a time when many barriers have already been broken and the majority of the country is accepting of gays and lesbians, they could still benefit from implementing these strategies. Because of the recent success of current organizations, these groups have not felt the need to join forces or try innovative ideas. However, the gay rights movement, and marriage equality in particular, is going to encounter harsh resistance as it inches closer and closer to full equality. The most conservative Southern states and the most homophobic religious groups are not simply going to give up, and current tactics will not be enough to overcome this opposition. Thus, today's activists will need to work together and devise fresh solutions in order to reach their final goal. They have much to learn from San Francisco's pre-Stonewall queer community, one of the first and most successful attempts to advance the rights of gays and lesbians in America. ●

## Notes

1. Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 111, 125-126, 248; Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2003), 15-19; Vicki Eaklor, *Queer America: A People's GLBT History of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: The New Press, 2011), 117-118; Walter Frank, *Law and the Gay Rights Story* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 28-30.
2. Bérubé, 3.
3. Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965*, (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2003), 117-119.
4. Bérubé, 125.
5. Boyd, 49.
6. Bérubé, 111.
7. Vicki L. Eaklor, *Queer America: A People's GLBT History of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, (New York: The New Press, 2011), 117.
8. Bérubé, 248.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Rally Flyer*, 1966, in *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two*, by Allan Bérubé (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 208.

12. Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 168-170.
13. Charles H. Lewis, "A Progress Report: 1964-1967," 1967, 4-5, Box 1, Florence "Conrad" Jaffy Papers 1952-1984, James C. Hormel Gay & Lesbian Center, San Francisco Public Library.
14. *Ibid.*, 5-6.
15. *Ibid.*, 6-7.
16. *Ibid.*, 9-10.
17. *Ibid.*, 10-11.
18. John Dart, "Cleric Urges Church to Give Homosexuals Aid," *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 1967.
19. William E. Beardemphl to SIR members, November 10, 1964, 1-2, Box 1, GLC 80, James C. Hormel Gay & Lesbian Center, San Francisco Public Library.
20. "Society for Individual Responsibility Event Calendar," Vector, April, 1965, vol. 1, no. 5, p. 5, Box 1, Evander Smith-California Hall Papers 1965-1978, James C. Hormel Gay & Lesbian Center, San Francisco Public Library.
21. Walter Frank, *Law and the Gay Rights Story* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 29.
22. Lewis, "A Progress Report," 3.
23. "C.R.H. Protests Mardi Gras Police Action," Vector, April 1965, vol. 1, no. 5, p. 3, Box 1, Evander Smith-California Hall Papers 1965-1978, James C. Hormel Gay & Lesbian Center, San Francisco Public Library.

24. Donovan Bess, "Angry Ministers Rip Police," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 3, 1965, Box 1, Evander Smith-California Hall Papers 1965-1978, James C. Hormel Gay & Lesbian Center, San Francisco Public Library.
25. Len Devereaux, "Making Task," cartoon, *San Francisco Observer*, May 10, 1965, Box 1, Evander Smith-California Hall Papers 1965-1978, James C. Hormel Gay & Lesbian Center, San Francisco Public Library.
26. Lewis, 3.
27. "Trial Halted on Technicality," *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 12, 1965, Box 1, Evander Smith-California Hall Papers 1965-1978, James C. Hormel Gay & Lesbian Center, San Francisco Public Library.
28. George Mendenhall, interview by Nan Alamilla Boyd, in *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2003), 198-199.
29. Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, 213.
30. Eaklor, *Queer America*, 118.
31. Frank, *Law and the Gay Rights Story*, 28-29.

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