

NEW YORK MATTACHINE NEWSLETTER

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GAY RIOTS IN THE VILLAGE

The first gay rioting in history broke out in the early morning hours of June 28, following a police raid on the Stonewall, a club on Christopher Street. Police, led by Inspectors Smythe and Pine, and armed with a warrant, arrived at about 2 A.M. and arrested the management and employees for illegal sale of alcohol. The patrons were ordered to leave, except for a few in drag who were arrested.

The patrons gathered outside, and were joined by other homosexuals and Village residents. The police started behaving with bad grace and the revolt was on. The crowd started pelting the cops with pennies ("dirty copper"), then cans, rocks, and even parking meters. The handful of cops was driven back into the bar and locked in. The crowd then set the bar afire in an attempt to cremate the police (or "cook the pigs", as someone said).

The police put out the flames after vainly searching for a fire exit. Had the place caught on fire during a busy time, the police said, most of the customers would have been doomed, as there were no fire exits. The crowd wouldn't let them out, and were

throwing things into the place at them. One policeman got hit in the eye and another suffered a broken wrist. Reinforcements were summoned, and the Tactical Police Force (NY's "Riot Squad") arrived on the scene.

Street fighting followed and continued for several hours. A number of people were arrested, and more were clubbed by the cops. Some of those beaten were clubbed in the Charles Street station house after having been arrested.

The Stonewall re-opened the next night and has remained open since, serving only soft drinks, although one may bring his own bottle. Crowds gathered outside early that

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Gay riots . . .

night chanting "Queen Power" and "Gay Power." Soon the chant changed to "Christopher Street belongs to the queens. Liberate Christopher Street." Mobs of people -- gay people from all over town, tourists, Villagers, and the idly curious -- swelled the crowds. Soon things got out of hand again, and the TPF was called once more. The nearly 200 cops required several hours to clear the streets, and the TPF again lived up to its reputation for violence and brutality.

The most striking feature of the rioting was that it was led, and featured as participants "queens", not "homosexuals." "Homosexuals" have been sitting back and taking whatever the Establishment handed out; the "queens" were having none of that. The "butch" numbers who were around the area and who participated peripherally in the action remained for the most part in the background. It was the "queens" who scored the points and proved that they are not going to tolerate any more harassment or abuse.

(NOTE: The above was abridged from a leaflet, "The Hairpin Drop Heard 'Round the World," a detailed and wildly amusing account of the first part of the Christopher Street Riots. It was the first detailed account available, having beaten the newspapers to the full story. Copies were mailed with most of the last issue of the Newsletter, but some Newsletters had been mailed before the rioting started, so if you didn't receive a copy, send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to MSNY, and we'll mail you one.)

Sunday, Monday and Tuesday evenings were fairly quiet, except for small outbreaks here and there. Most of the police, except for the TPF, had taken the first two nights of rioting with some good humor. By Monday night, tempers on both sides were short, and animosity filled the air. Some of the police maintained enormous "cool", but others deliberately tried to provoke trouble. "Start something, faggot, just start something," one cop kept telling people. "I'd like to break your ass wide open." After saying that to several dozen people, one man turned and said, "What a Freudian comment, officer!" The cop started swinging and hauled the guy off to a waiting wagon.

Two cops in a car cruised the streets, yell-

ing obscenities at people, obviously trying to start a fight. Another stood on the corner of Christopher and Waverly, swinging his nightstick (speaking of Freudian, watch the cops in the Village caressing and masturbating those billy clubs!) and making smart cracks to passersby. A wildly "fem" queen sneaked up behind him, lit a firecracker and dropped it between his feet.

It exploded and he jumped into the air in a leap that Villella would have envied, landing on a part of his anatomy that one queen called a "money-maker." He got up screaming like a peasant woman and swinging his stick. The queen tossed another firecracker under him, and when it went off a melee followed, during which the cop's badge was lifted. The next day, the badge turned up hanging on a tree in Washington Square Park, stuck into a string of pickled pigs' feet.

When the cops found the badge-stuck pigs' feet, they didn't take them down from the tree -- they beat the pigs' feet to the ground, then picked up the badge.

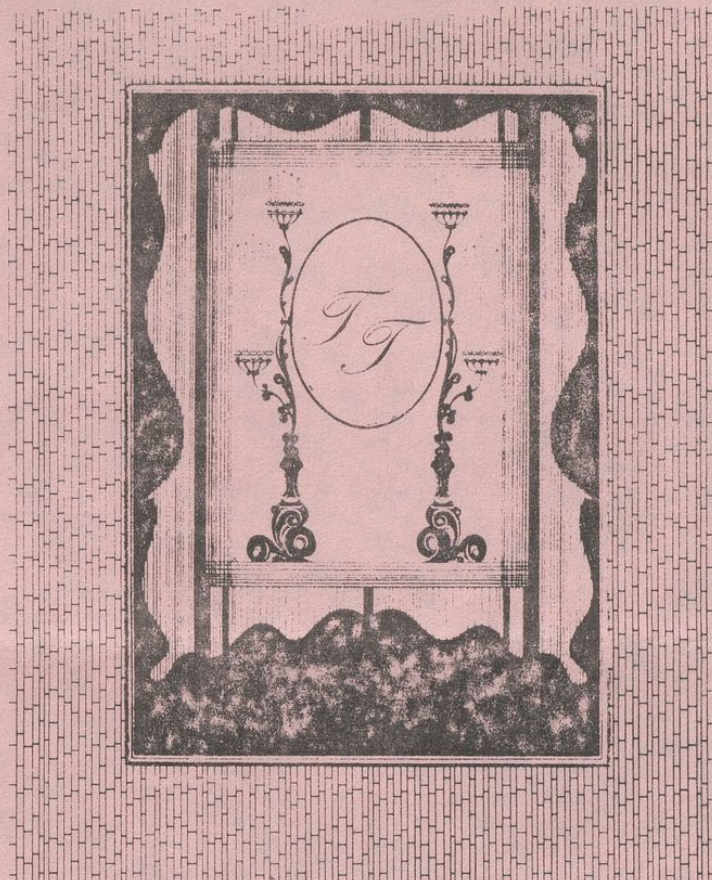
While there's nothing really funny about a man having a firecracker blow up under his feet, there is something eminently satisfying about seeing a cop get scared, jump and land on his backside -- especially if the cop has been after you for years. And even more so as he's a symbol of the cops who used to entrap, who raided bars, and who still harass homosexuals at every opportunity.

Wednesday night, the rioting broke out in full force. Much of the good humour and high spirits of the weekend had dissipated, and the street people were no longer half-serious, half-camping. The cops, who had been caught off-guard and were on the defensive before, had taken the offensive and massive retaliation was their goal.

Some seemed quite ready to depopulate Christopher Street the moment anyone would give them permission to unholster their guns. Failing that, some of them, particularly some of the TPF men, tried to achieve the same objective with their night sticks.

At one point, 7th Avenue from Christopher

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Gay riots . . .

to West 10th looked like a battlefield in Vietnam. Young people, many of them queens, were lying on the sidewalk, bleeding from the head, face, mouth, and even the eyes. Others were nursing bruised and often bleeding arms, legs, backs and necks.

The composition of the street action had changed. It was no longer gay frustration being vented upon unsuspecting cops by queens who were partly violent but mostly campy. The queens were almost outnumbered by Black Panthers, Yippies, Crazies and young toughs from street gangs all over the city and some from New Jersey. The exploiters had moved in and were using the gay power movement for their own ends.

A lot of them were looking for a fight, and had the police not come, they probably would have started the old game of street gangs everywhere, "beating up a queer." The blacks and students who want a revolution, any kind of revolution, were there to exploit. They swelled the crowd and tried to recruit, but "graciously" let the queens take all the bruises and suffer all the arrests. (If they have no more courage than they displayed on Christopher Street, their revolution is a long way off.)

Looting began Wednesday evening. Obviously, little of it was done by people who live in and frequent Christopher Street and environs, because all the most unlikely places were looted. The first shop to get hit was the "Gingerbread House", a toy shop run by a delightful little lady who is a friend of everyone on Christopher. The other shops broken into were also run, for the most part, by nice people, sympathetic to the gay cause and the plight of the street queen.

The really likely places, the "fag shops" that overprice their wares and bleed the gay market for exorbitant prices were left alone. Shops whose managers complain the loudest about the cruising and swishing in the neighborhood were also, surprisingly, left alone. Observers in the know doubt if the looting was done by gay people.

A group of gay people did consider burning down the offices of the VILLAGE VOICE. That paper's editorial policy has long infuriated most homosexuals, as the paper pretends to be "liberal" and avant-garde, but actually

is conservative and uptight about homosexuality. They published two long "put down" articles about the Christopher Street incidents which contributed heavily to the anger that incited the Wednesday rioting after two relatively peaceful days.

Police and others had expected a tremendous influx of people over the long July 4 week-end that started Thursday night. People came in droves but conditions remained generally calm. Sporadic efforts were made to start trouble - by people who can best be described as "outside agitators", by gay people, and too often by uptight cops who tried to start trouble to give them an excuse to start bashing heads again.

Despite those efforts, no major outbreak erupted. It was almost as if everyone had decided that the point had been made and any further action would only bring on a backlash. As it was, everything worked out to give the homosexuals of New York City tremendous gay power. A totally spontaneous demonstration had broken out, and people who are generally considered the ultimate "sissies" had badgered the police, imprisoned some of them, and held off busses full of TPF men for hours. They had shown that they were tired of being kicked around and would no longer stand for such treatment.

The sympathy of nearly everyone in town was with the homosexuals -- even the uptight DAILY NEWS printed a wonderfully amusing and quite long article on the situation, in which they took the side of the queens against the cops.

Had the situation continued much longer, and violence increased, the non-participants, straight and gay, would have been "turned off" and the backlash started. The police would have escalated their retaliation, and the action would have been defeated, more people would have been injured, and the police would have started getting sympathy. As it was, homosexuals have won this first battle, the government and police have been put on notice that homosexuals won't stand being kicked around, and public sympathy for the homosexual cause is growing.

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THE STONEWALL RIOTS
THE POLICE STORY

Naturally MSNY is sympathetic to the gay power movement -- we were trying to gain gay power while many of the people who are just now becoming interested were sitting back, enjoying life, and waiting for someone else to achieve any gains the homosexual community might want.

On the other hand, it was difficult not to feel sorry for the cops who were involved in the Stonewall incident, and their associates who were obliged to explain to the Commissioner how a group of New York's "finest" could be imprisoned in a gay bar for hours and nearly cremated. Imagine the jibes they must have gotten from their brother officers, their wives, and probably even their children! What must it do to a straight guy to have his kid say, "Daddy, tell us about the time the faggots cornered you and tore up the Village"?

When the police began visiting the MSNY office on July 3, their faces and their tired eyes told the whole story. They were in trouble - real trouble - and the situation looked like it might get worse before it got better. They wanted a sympathetic ear and they wanted to know what happened. We tried to help them on both counts.

The purpose of the visits by all of the officers (and there were many of them, including the Chief of the Morals Squad and the two Deputy Inspectors, Smythe and Pine, who had been imprisoned in the Stonewall, among others), was to find out one thing: why did this happen now, and why did it happen over the Stonewall, of all places? What we told them appears in another article in this issue; what follows is their side of the Stonewall story.

At no time in recent history has there been as little police action against homosexuals as in the past three years. Plain-clothes decoys are no longer used to entrap homosexuals. There has been no concentrated effort to close down gay bars as there was during the Wagner years and before.

Headquarters has tried to clamp down on any harassment of homosexuals by policemen on the beat as well, and has had speakers from MSNY address students at the Police

Academy in an effort to help the police (most of whom are, after all, straight and pretty much as ignorant about homosexuality as most straight people) understand homosexuals and our needs.

There has been no harassment of legitimate gay bars, the cops all stated. (A subsequent check with a number of bars, including the Stage 45, Harry's, and others, indicated that these bars indeed had not been bothered for several years.) They do go after places that serve liquor without a license. This has nothing to do with who forms the clientele of the place, but only with the fact that it is illegal to sell liquor without a license. The State Liquor Authority had notified all unlicensed liquor-selling establishments that they must obtain a license by July 1 or stop selling. The Stonewall didn't bother, so they got raided.

Another drive is under way to attack the organized crime syndicate. Many of the gay bars in the Village are suspected of having links with the Cosa Nostra, Mafia, or whatever you want to call it. These bars will be raided if the police get enough evidence to make charges stick. The Stonewall management was also suspected, the police said, of having such ties. That, the lack of a license, and the fact that the place was a health hazard and a fire hazard were the reasons the place was raided -- not that it was gay.

Why had the Stonewall been allowed to operate if it was illegal? That was the question often asked after the last raid.

The police explained that all they can do is make the raid, and impound all the liquor stock, cash registers, and other material that can be considered evidence. They arrest the management, who are booked, have bail set, and get themselves released. The next day, they get a new supply of liquor and open as usual. This happened, the police say, at the Stonewall at least ten times.

The police cannot force the place to close down, because they, like everyone else, have the right to be presumed innocent until a court finds them guilty. Thus, by hiring smart lawyers, and postponing the case again and again, the bar can stay in operation for years until their case comes to trial and the court closes it.

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Police story . . .

Charges are always being made that bars have to "pay off" to stay in business, particularly if they serve a gay clientele. The police say this is possible, but not likely. They try, they said, to keep their men "clean" and check out any charges of shake-downs. Besides, they pointed out, with the legitimate bars not being harassed, there is no reason for them to "pay off" anyone. If they are approached, they should notify headquarters and turn in the culprits. Not only would they save the pay-off money, but they'd win the respect and cooperation of the command.

The Stonewall had chalked across its windows: "How Can Inspector Smythe Drive a \$15,000 Car on HIS Salary?" and charges that the police had "stolen" the money in the safe, a television set, and other items. The police claim that Inspector Smythe is independently well-off ("Not all boys who grow up to be cops come from poor families") and is probably one of the most honest cops around ("He doesn't have to be crooked, he doesn't need the money.") As far as the items taken from the Stonewall are concerned, the police swear they just impounded the money, etc., and counted the money before the Stonewall management and gave receipts for the cash and other items. The television set was reclaimed by a man who said he had loaned it to the Stonewall management, showed the police a receipt, and the cops let him take it.

The police denied any campaign of harassment. They gave their word that they knew of no orders authorizing such a campaign now or in the future. (A local woman lawyer, known more for "ambulance chasing" gay cases than for her honesty, has been spreading a story about imminent crackdowns as a selling point to get bars to employ her.)

They denied that local elections had anything to do with any harassment that might have occurred. They did not deny our charge that Village political boss Ed Koch had involved them in such clean-ups in former years to help win the votes of the up-tight segment of the Village, but said no pressure had been put on them this year.

They asked if we knew of any harassment. Other than that in the Village, we knew of

none. A little probing on our part elicited the information that the 6th Precinct got a new commanding officer about six weeks before the rioting. That rang a bell, because that's about how long the harassment had been going on. The cops who knew the man said he seemed like a fair-minded guy who wouldn't start any harassment campaign.

"Could it be possible that the men on the beat, knowing they had a new commander, and wanting to secure points, started their own campaign to clean up the streets just in case the new boss happened to be driving by?" someone suggested? The police officials agreed that this was a real possibility.

A discussion followed of the police brutality and beatings administered during the incidents on the streets. The police unanimously declined to derend such conduct by the police, other than to remark that when tempers get high, everyone loses some of his control. They pointed out that some very nice, probably law-abiding homosexuals, carried away by the rioting, tossed beer cans and worse at cops. The police, carried away themselves, sometimes swung their clubs too hard and too indiscriminately.

The police force doesn't condone police violence any more than any other kind of violence, and does discipline police officers against whom charges of police brutality are proven. It doesn't help the police do their job if they have the citizens against them, and cops don't like to see the bloody bodies of citizens any more than anyone else does.

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