

by Nick Benton

Hitchhiking on a San Francisco street corner one night, I talked briefly to the woman who claimed to have started the historic Christopher Street riot in June 1969.

The riot, in New York's Greenwich Village, is pointed to as the beginning of the gay liberation movement, and this Sunday's parades in San Francisco, New York and Los Angeles will commemorate the event.

It began as a raid, the woman described it. She said the police just came barging into the Stonewall, a popular gay hangout on narrow Christopher Street.

The bar was packed and there were a lot of people hanging around -hippies, transvestites, transsexuals- as is usual, along the street, as well.

The police made some arbitrary arrests, and led those they busted, including this woman, out to the paddy wagon as all kinds of people stood around and watched.

Once inside the wagon, she said, she was tightly packed in with others, standing up, and facing the wall. She said she just began to thump the walls with her hands, and that's what sparked it.

Other joined in the thumping and shouting. Then some people began throwing pennies and suddenly, the riot was underway. The people were sprung from the paddy wagon, and the police had to run inside the Stonewall and lock themselves in for safety.

For the next five nights running, people turned out en masse onto Christopher Street, and every time tac squad cars would try to move down the narrow street they would be thwarted by the angry crowds.

After five nights of fighting off the entire New York Tac Squad, the police relented. Gay people had come away with a massive victory.

Word of the riot spread like lightning across the country. What was already a small emerging gay movement caught like wildfire, fanned with the spirit of actual resistance.

Actually, the concept and beginning of organization around radical gay resistance had begun earlier,

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and it had begun in the Bay Area.

It grew out of the dissatisfaction of young gay people with the conservative, anti-progressive trends of established homosexual rights organizations -- namely, The Society for Individual Rights.

Homosexual rights organizations had been in existence as such since the early 1950s -- beginning with the creation of the Mattachine Society (which had as a predecessor, the Bachelors for Wallace which worked during the 1948 presidential campaign). One, Inc., SIR and the Council on Religion and the Homosexual were all organized mainly by white, middle class businessmen with the idea of beginning to ease discrimination through education and open discussion of the issues.

However, with the rise of the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement arose the sensitivity that led to the emergence of Gay Liberation Front movement.

The contradiction between this sensitivity and its urgency and demand for openness and the slow, middle class ways of the established homosexual rights organizations was taken up in the Bay Area by Leo Laurence, writing for the Berkeley BARB.

First writing under a pseudonym, they under this real name, Laurence began to express his dissatisfaction with SIR, which fired him as editor of its monthly magazine and refused to lower its membership limit from 21 to 18.

The BARB, willing to run news of anything running counter to the status quo, gave Leo the opportunity to articulate his views in stories, and an important break came when a picture of Leo hugging Gail Whittington appeared in the BARB.

Whittington, it turned out, got fired as a result of the picture, and the incident provoked Laurence to organize on his own. He created the "Committee for Homosexual Freedom" in the first week of April, 1969, and set out to picket the steamship lines that fired Whittington.

This was three months before

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Christopher Street.

Afterwards, the Gay Liberation front movement flowered, hitting the streets with demonstrations and disrupting conventions. Among the most historic in the Bay Area were the "Purple Hand" incident, when demonstrators in front of the San Francisco Examiner building were hit with ink thrown by newspapermen from above them, and 3 demonstrators were arrested; and the disruption of a meeting of the American Psychiatric Association.

GLF drew its members not from the gay bars, but from the "counter-culture" -- from what was left of the Haight-Ashbury in SF and from what was left of People's Park in Berkeley.

It's mood was revolutionary, and its strongest statement these early months was a consciously-Marxist writing by Carl Whitman, "Refugees from Amerika: A Gay Manifesto."

There was fucking on church altars in Berkeley and attempts to make contact and join in common struggle with the Black Panther Party.

In New York, it was almost no time before GLF split into more revolutionary (GLF) and more civil-rights oriented (Gay Activists Alliance) groups. In San Francisco, the structures of the latter already existed (SIR) and in Berkeley, they emerged with the founding of the Students for Gay Power and, later, the Gay Students Union, on the UC Berkeley campus.

GLF's pretty much fizzled out in the Bay Area by summer, 1970.

GLF in Berkeley was rejuvenated in Fall, 1970 with the organization of a picket at Berkeley's White Horse Inn, the People's Alternative Coffee House across the street from the White Horse Berkeley's only gay bar), and the creation of the Gay Sunshine open collective newspaper and the Gay switchboard.

Hundreds of gay liberationists from all around the country met in November, 1970 in Washington, D.C. with the black Panthers at the abortive "Revolutionary Peo-

In San Francisco, GLF briefly reorganized in response to the police shooting of Charles Christman outside a gay bar in December 1970. However, GLF in both Berkeley and SF died by Spring, 1971, as it did in New York (where it left behind small groups such as the Gay Revolution Party, Flaming Faggots, Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries).

In Berkeley, the coffee house and switchboard folded, and Gay Sunshine ceased being an open collective and was taken, under closed leadership, by Winston Leland to San Francisco. In summer 1971, a group of Berkeley gays put out a "People's Gay Sunshine" in protest of the move, but did only one issue.

In San Francisco, two GAA splinters broke off from the briefly-reorganized GLF, and, after a brief struggle for power between two groups -- led by Ray Broshears and Mike Itkin -- Broshears prevailed and almost singlehandedly carried GAA as an organizational name into his long-standing battles with SIR and the San Francisco police in the downtown San Francisco area.

Now, GAA joins SIR, Metropolitan Community Church (a religious, "the Lord is my shepherd and he knows I'm gay," gay rights organization that started in Los Angeles and has gone nationwide), the Tavern Guild, made up of gay ghetto business interests, and Emmaus House, a switchboard/service organization, in celebrating the Christopher Street West parade.

All are civil rights, service religious or small business interest groups.

The question is: whether the revolutionary gay liberation spirit that Christopher Street originally became a catalyst for?

On the one hand, the sensitivity of the average gay person especially ones caught in the "ghetto lifestyle" towards social issues, in general, and his role in society, and the issues of blacks,

ple's Constitutional Convention." women and the war, has undergone great changes -- just as in the last five years, the success of the civil rights and anti-war movements in changing the heads of the American people has been enormous, so have gay people come a long way.

On the other hand, however, much of the revolutionary sentiment of gay people has been siphoned off into dead-end welfarism, drugs and unproductivity, or else trying to get a share of the pie in the system, -- just as the Yippie Movement, as one example, by its recent announcement not to demonstrate in Miami during the Democratic convention, has decided to essentially cooperate with one of the two major parties of the existing system.

In Berkeley, the destruction of the Gay Liberation Front was a conscious process. It was in response to larger social processes which made it evident that organizing on the basis of the social construct, "homosexuality," was a dead-end proposition that would lead to easy co-optation by an exploitative system that was already politically and economically "homosexual" (one-sex, male, oriented).

In response to the feminist movement, which re-emerged in the United States in the last three years, and its radical implications which don't stop short of revolution to socialism, gay men in Berkeley began to understand that "as gay people, our commonality is not homosexuality. Our only unity is the common, but deeply personal experience of resisting, usually in isolation and terror, the pressures to become a 'man' from the ongoing society" (written by Smedley, in a polemic against residual gay liberation politics).

"The Effeminate" newspaper appeared in Berkeley in Summer, 1971. Two issues subtitled "Gay Males in the Feminist Revolution" came out insisting that "Gay liberation is the discovery of women as people by women and by men," making an essential break with Gay Liberation and pointing a new

way.

"Gay Liberation", states a leaflet by Smedley currently going around Berkeley, "pushed a welfare strategy of revolution; namely, come out in the most nauseous, noxious way possible, win fascist approval as crazy and inherently unproductive, and 'force' the State to support 'the Revolution.'"

But with fascism, and its unemployment, creeping up, the leaflet states, "Gay Liberation falls into the pit it refused to confront: jail, military or police service, and prostitution, overt or covert, are increasingly the only immediate sources of survival for gay people."

Revolution for gay people, the leaflet states, is coming "as we, slowly and hesitantly, push off the dream of 'Gay Liberation' and get down to work, concretely, to push over the pig American imperialist society. Gay people are beginning to seek the means, and the points of real contact, to join all women in the fight against sexual slavery in marriage, against prostitution in every form, and against rape, on the street, at home, in jail, everywhere and, in the greatest and deepest revolution of all, to join women in the great and principal human work, the keeping of the household and the raising of children, the very production and reproduction, of people themselves, ending the FIRST class division in the history of humankind."

"Surely," the leaflet concludes, "as the stranglehold of Gay Liberation Front is eased off gay people everywhere, a new and authentic gay people's politics will emerge to deal with the particularities of our oppression and subsequent exploitation, a politics which will bring us as a strong and vital force into solidarity with all life-affirming forces in the world. Power to the Struggling Femininity!"



GAY-LIB'S FIRST HUG

GAIL WHITTINGTON AND LEO LAURENCE IN MARCH, 1969