

Then and Now: The Origins and Development of the Gay Community in South Bend

Ben Wineland

Walking down the streets of South Bend in 2015, it would be hard to find someone who does not know what the acronym LGBT refers to. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender people have made their way into the national spotlight, and as a minority of individuals who were not always so visible, one might wonder why and how LGBT people broke through the wall that kept them out of the public eye for so long. The Stonewall riots of 1969 were a series of open revolts against police raids on a gay bar in New York City called the Stonewall Inn. This event acted as the explosive push towards what was arguably the beginning of the modern LGBT movement, and brought LGBT people to a level of national visibility. The resistance demonstrated in those three nights became the platform for hopping on the civil rights train that was sweeping the nation at the time.

There is also the matter of local visibility, referring to the LGBT population's exposure to the public, or lack thereof. It is understandable that major urban centers like New York City would lean towards a more liberal disposition, allowing civil rights movements to quickly gain ground there. But, what caused smaller cities that may have had more conservative environments to foster local LGBT communities in contrast to the beginnings of the national movement in these urban centers? The answer is simple: bars. Gay bars were a meeting place, a focal point in which the LGBT community thrived. Activism, entertainment, and a place to belong served as a magnet to LGBT people. Using oral interviews contained within the Indiana University South Bend Schurz Library Archives, this paper will trace the history of South Bend's LGBT community, beginning from the bar scene explosion of the 1970's, through the AIDS crisis of the 1980's, up until the present day. My goal is to identify the origins of the LGBT Community in South Bend, and to demonstrate that gay bars were instrumental in the beginnings of that community and its development since then, specifically in terms of visibility and activism, and also in the context of the national movement that began at Stonewall in 1969.

Prior to the Stonewall Riots of 1969, LGBT people had not been visible on the national level. Following World War II, American society witnessed a considerable shift in cultural attitudes. Change was seen as something to be prevented, feared as a gateway to communist ideology and anarchic values; traditional institutions prevailed in dictating social order. Homosexuals were complete outcasts as particular religious entities swooped in to maintain conservative expectations in American culture. Only twenty years later, the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village, was recognized as a sort of sanctuary for LGBT people in the midst of the oppression they were facing. In that time, being gay was often compared to being a criminal. Sodomy laws in many states were not repealed or struck down until the early 1970's as a result of the activism initiated by the Stonewall Riots, and so police raids were common in the gay bar scene of many major cities. Martin Duberman, a gay man who frequented the Stonewall Inn, stated in a 1999 *New York Times* interview, "Though they were all we had, gay bars were frightening. You never knew what might happen, especially with police raids. The cops treated customers like scum."¹⁹² Patrons, if found to be engaging in any sort of intimate behavior (touching, kissing, holding hands) or drag queens, dressing in clothes of the opposite gender, were arrested and held in jail for days to weeks. Paying off the police so that the bar had less severe raids and more of a notice beforehand was a common practice for the Stonewall Inn, especially during larger events that attracted more people than the usual handful. Several legends exist to explain how the first Stonewall riot began, but general consensus agrees that that the police were being unusually thorough, due to additional involvement by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. The police prompted patrons to produce identification cards, and anyone whose pictures did not match, like the drag queens, were hauled off to the police carriages waiting outside.¹⁹³ However, this time, people were fed up with the routine. They began to shout, resist, and throw whatever they had in their pockets at their oppressors. Craig Rodwell, a Stonewall patron and eyewitness on the frontlines of the crowd, states, "A number of incidents were happening simultaneously.

¹⁹² David Kirby, "Stonewall Veterans Recall the Outlaw Days," *New York Times* (1923-Current File), June 27, 1999, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/109957372?accountid=11653>.

¹⁹³ Martin Duberman and Andrew Kopkind, "The Night They Raided Stonewall," *Grand Street*, no. 44 (1993): 130.

There was no one thing that happened or one person, there was just . . . a flash of group-of mass-of *anger*.”¹⁹⁴ This moment ignited what was arguably *the* beginning of the modern gay rights movement. Years of oppression against LGBT people helped to foster the feelings of anger, frustration, and rage that fueled the fires that night. The riots were not a revolution like the American War of Independence or the subsequent French struggle, where armies fought on battlefields and thousands upon thousands perished. These were a bunch of drag queens and queers, throwing bottles and rocks at a wall of policemen. It was a revolution in the sense that it was the turning point for gays in terms of visibility and activism on a national scale. This rag tag band of people managed to garner the attention of newspapers, media, and most importantly, political powers of the time. Duberman sums up nicely the impact that the riots had on gay activism: “In less than a year, gay liberation was on the agenda for every radical event.”¹⁹⁵ Stonewall was important because it set up a standard for gay bars everywhere to be more proactive in LGBT activism and also function as a gathering place for LGBT people. The gay bar scene explosion of the 1970’s is evidence of Stonewall’s impact, which inspired people to open more bars as centers for LGBT activity.

The origins of the LGBT community in South Bend can be traced back to the gay bar scene of the mid 1970’s into the early 1990’s. Gay bars were, after all, the only place that LGBT individuals could gather in a “safe” and accepting environment, even after the Stonewall riots. The Sea Horse I was the first gay bar in South Bend, opened by Gloria Frankel in 1971, and was the main force that began to draw out a community there.¹⁹⁶ Following Stonewall, gay bars were less private, and definitely less obscured from the public eye than before. Entertainment at gay bars, for example, used to be something that was kept under wraps and spread mostly through word of mouth or by personal invitation. The Seahorse I made fliers for many of its events and shows, which embodied the new kind of confidence and visibility that the Stonewall riots helped to create. The bar was the focal point of the gay community’s beginnings in South Bend, because it was the first open, public place for LGBT people to gather. Gay people finally had a place

¹⁹⁴ Duberman and Kopkind, « The Night They Raided Stonewall,» 132.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁹⁶ Katie M Lee (LGBT Researcher) in discussion with the author, April 2015.

to belong, and this established a certain “identity” that united them as a community.

Gloria was a “wise and intelligent business woman; a friend to all who needed her,” and her contribution to the gay community of South Bend is irrefutable.¹⁹⁷ She opened the first gay bar in the city, and even acted as mentor to subsequent gay bars that opened. The Seahorse I was the first location that Gloria opened, and for a few years it served its purpose as a center for LGBT activity in South Bend. However, the crowds it was attracting warranted a larger space, not only for actual capacity but also for entertainment. And so, Gloria opened the Seahorse II in 1975, which was essentially a reopening of the Seahorse I at a larger location. The interior of the Seahorse II was described as “one of the most well thought out floor plans, it was so beautiful, like Vegas. Black velvet on the walls, mirrors everywhere.”¹⁹⁸ The dark, ethereal atmosphere was like another world for many bar goers, especially because of the extravagant drag shows and performances the bar put on. Drag, in particular, which is an acronym coined by Shakespeare for “Dressed as a Girl,” functioned as a sort of cultural magnet for LGBT people living in cities; the shows were special because one could not perform in drag anywhere else but gay bars, except for very infrequent occasions where pageants or contests were held in rentable or public buildings. The Seahorse II held pageants, which were expensive to host and organize. This was important because these events could not be held just anywhere. The expense of these pageants was indicative of the Seahorse’s success, and also Gloria’s seriousness in creating a space that was not just another gay bar, but rather a gay place. It was also an inclusive nod towards transgender individuals, as many of the pageant contestants were male gender to female gender (MtF) presenting, or transgendered women. Drag, especially for transgender women, was a medium through which they could express their dysphoria and perform as the female they saw themselves to be, as it was still severely dangerous to live as a woman outside of gay bars.

One particular trans woman, Jessica Love, who moved to South Bend in 1987, was a prominent figure of the gay bar scene in South Bend at the time. She worked at the Sea Horse II as a drag performer and made her living by helping bar staff during busy hours. Jessica was

¹⁹⁷ “Gloria J. Frankel Obituary,” *South Bend Tribune*, October 9, 2007.

¹⁹⁸ Katie M Lee (LGBT Researcher) in discussion with the author, April 2015.

originally from New Orleans, Louisiana, but she made the move up north due to some serious violence that had taken place there. She grew up in the bayous, forty-five minutes away from downtown, in a small community that did not tolerate LGBT people. A friend of hers, a trans woman who she did not name, moved away before Jessica to have her gender reassignment surgeries, then came back to take care of her dying grandmother. Her grandmother was the only person who accepted her for who she was, as the rest of her family had more or less rejected her completely. Upon learning she had gone through with her surgeries, this trans woman's family was outraged, and soon after her grandmother passed away, they decided to murder her because of her gender identity. Jessica was quite frank in her interview, saying, "Probably a couple hours after the funeral, [her family] killed her, and the police wrote it up as a car accident. They had strapped her to the hood of her car and cut her tits off, and cut her throat, and all kinds of shit. The police had wrote is up as a car accident, and whenever they did that I told [my friend] that it's time for us to go, we got to get the fuck out of here or we're gonna be like her."¹⁹⁹ Violence like this towards LGBT people was not uncommon. It was also common for police to turn a blind eye in these cases, which led to injustices and frustration in small LGBT communities who had little to no visibility within their local areas. South Bend seemed an attractive spot to Jessica and others like her because of the LGBT population's visibility and a strong backbone of gay bars at the time; people didn't really bother LGBT people there, except for the police.

The police force in South Bend, unsurprisingly, had some "history" with the gay bar scene of the 1980's and 1990's. In the height of the Seahorse's success, police raids were common, just like they were at Stonewall. The problem was when a gay bar became more than just a hole in the wall, it looked to the opposition like hope; a hope for visibility, mainstream appeal, and a point of organization for the gay movement. The police put pressure on the LGBT community because they had power, and they could exert that power in arbitrary ways that set the community back. The police would line up the drag performers, check their I.D.'s, and tell them they were not the same person in the picture, that they were not women. Bradley Bogart, a renowned

¹⁹⁹ Jessica Love, interview by Katie M. Lee, April 19th 2014, MP3.

name in South Bend's gay entertainment scene, was present for many of these raids. "The police would come in all the time, just to walk around and make people nervous. 'Cause it was a gay bar. It was gay."²⁰⁰ Even after Stonewall, police presence in the gay bar scene, especially in smaller cities like South Bend, was accepted as a common occurrence, and gay bars continued to deal with it until the late 1990's.

Despite the pressure from the police, other gay bars had already begun to open in South Bend, some for only a few years, and others that remain open today. These major bars were Vickie's, Jeannie's Tavern, and Truman's. Vickie's and Jeannie's Tavern (1990's) were run by Gloria's "bar children," which meant she mentored them and had considerable control over the activities that happened there.²⁰¹ Those bars functioned in the same ways that Gloria ran the Seahorse, except that she retained the sort of "Queen" status that she may have felt entitled to. Truman's was the only bar where Gloria seemed not to have any stake. Several interviewees agree with the depiction of Gloria as an intense force in the community, but none delve into the history to quite the extent that I can make definitive statements. The consensus is that Gloria had an issue with Truman's for not allotting her the respect she deserved. After all, The Seahorse I was the first gay bar that opened in South Bend, the first club to challenge the city ban on same sex dancing, and also the host of many Michiana Lambda Society events that helped organize the growing LGBT community in the area.²⁰² Up until her death in 2007, Gloria oversaw the gay bar scene of South Bend, and acted as the figurehead "queen" of the LGBT community.

The Lambda Legal Non-Profit Organization, founded in 1973, was an entity with the purpose of breaking new ground for LGBT people in the American justice system, and took on some of the nation's first cases on behalf LGBT people.²⁰³ It set up chapters in different parts of the country, including Michiana, and had a positive reception due to people like Gloria Frankel. Gloria's Seahorse provided a public space for Lambda events, and she monetarily supported

²⁰⁰ Bradley Bogart, interview by Katie M. Lee, March 3rd 2014, MP3.

²⁰¹ Katie M Lee (LGBT Researcher) in discussion with the author, April 2015.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ "Lambda Legal History." *Lambda Legal: Making the Case for Equality*, <http://www.lambdalegal.org/about-us/history>.

getting people in there, and nobody there knew *anything* about HIV and AIDS . . . in the medical community. I'm telling you. And even worse, it was like, nobody seemed like they wanted to know anything about it."²⁰⁶ After the first reported case of HIV by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in 1981, in which five previously healthy gay men's immune systems were "not working," the idea that HIV was something only LGBT people had to deal with had become rampant in the United States.²⁰⁷ Joe Right, an AIDS community worker in San Francisco for the past ten years, stated in an interview with National Public Radio that, "back in 1981 and 1982, before AIDS was called AIDS, it was called 'gay cancer.' No one knew what caused it."²⁰⁸ This is an unfortunate example of the cultural attitude, even in the professional realm, towards HIV and AIDS as something only gay people could be diagnosed with. However, it was not long before the nation responded. In 1982, New York City established Gay Men's Health Crisis, the first community-based service provider in the United States. Over the next few years, more cities, like Chicago and San Francisco, opened community-based services for AIDS relief, and together formed AIDS Action, a national organization in Washington, DC. These major urban centers quickly reacted to the growing epidemic, but smaller communities like South Bend had difficulty keeping up. It was not until 1989 that South Bend became home to AIDS Ministries, a group that operated out of United Methodist Churches in the area. Because it was a priority of AIDS Ministries to remain relatively hidden from the public eye in order to protect the people it was helping, it was not until 1992 that the group actually began to emerge as *the* AIDS relief service of South Bend.²⁰⁹ In her interview, Debra tells a short story about a man with AIDS who needed a bed, and because AIDS Ministries had just received a donation of a few hospital beds, they sent a social worker to deliver one to him. "Afterwards, he calls me," Debra states. "He was very upset; He was very hurt. He was saying they delivered the bed, the social worker came . . . she wouldn't go into the house, she wouldn't shake

²⁰⁶ Debra Stanley, interview by Katie M. Lee, March 18th, 2014, MP3.

²⁰⁷ "A Timeline of Aids," *Aids.gov*, <https://www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/aids-timeline>.

²⁰⁸ Joe Right, Interview by Melissa Block, NPR, 88.1 WVPE FM, May 8, 2006.

²⁰⁹ Debra Stanley, interview by Katie M. Lee, March 18th, 2014, MP3.

their hand . . . she wouldn't."²¹⁰ It is clear that even with research and information coming out of places like New York and Chicago that people across the spectrum did not want anything to do with HIV and AIDS. This created a distinct feeling of shame in individuals diagnosed with HIV, and so many did not seek treatment for fear of being socially ostracized or potentially harmed, which then led to the development of the infection into AIDS. In order to ease this burden, Gloria Frankel opened the Seahorse for free HIV testing and relief services during daylight hours, through the funding of AIDS Ministries.²¹¹ Gloria knew that if the testing was available at her bar, a place where the LGBT community felt at home, they would be more likely to get tested and also become more educated about HIV and AIDS. Such action underscored her role as an activist in the community, as well as her dedication to the LGBT people of South Bend.

Lambda's legal and social activity helped to forward the idea that LGBT people needed rights and protections, even during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980's, which severely hindered that ideology. With AIDS Ministries becoming a well-known LGBT resource into the 1990's and early 2000's, the LGBT Community of South Bend slowly began to make its debut on the stage of public affairs. The 1990's were a difficult time for LGBT communities across the nation because of the vehement opposition towards concepts like gay marriage that had begun to surface. Many states began to pass legislation that specified the legal definition of marriage to be between one man and one woman, and it was not until 2000 that Vermont granted full marriage benefits to gay couples in the form of a civil union.²¹² Other states began to implement the same kinds of civil unions, but many did not grant the same benefits as a legal marriage did, and caused much turmoil in the LGBT community.

In 2006, South Bend had its first hearing on a Human Rights Ordinance that would give LGBT people rights and protections pertaining to workplace discrimination and living conditions. There would be three hearings over the course of the next few years, many

²¹⁰ Debra Stanley, interview by Katie M. Lee, March 18th, 2014, MP3.

²¹¹ Katie M. Lee in discussion with the author, April 2015.

²¹² "Gay Marriage Timeline," *Procon.org.*, <http://gaymarriage.procon.org/view.timeline.php?timelineID=000030>.

in which LGBT people of South Bend gave testimonies about their lives there. Nancy Mascotte, PFLAG of Michiana co-founder, expressed her opinion on the matter to the Common Council. When her son came out to her as gay, she underwent an experience that changed the way she saw LGBT people. "I experienced many LGBT persons living the same values I had instilled in my son. Respect for family, self, and others . . . I found that people live their lives based on values, not orientation. I'm not asking for sympathy for my son or any other LGBT citizen. I'm asking for empathy. I'm asking each one of you to try walking in their shoes."²¹³ Nancy and the rest of the LGBT community rallied to pass the ordinance, and after six years of determined activism, it was passed. The South Bend Human Rights ordinance of 2012 added sexual orientation and gender identity protections to South Bend citizens, enforced in employment, fair housing, public accommodations, and education.²¹⁴ This victory was important because it demonstrated that the LGBT community of South Bend was active and willing to fight for equal rights and protections. The community felt empowered, and future legislation against LGBT people would not go unnoticed. House Joint Resolution 3, an amendment that would have banned same sex marriage in the state constitution of Indiana, even though it was already illegal in the state statutes, attracted a significant amount of attention in the city of South Bend. Guerilla Gay Bar, created in 2013, became an event where bars around the city began hosting monthly "LGBT Nights" so people could meet each other. Led by Michael Lane, founder of Guerilla Gay Bar, the community formed from this event advocated against HJR-3 and also proposed a resolution to the legislation.

Through the network that we built through Guerilla Gay Bar, we were able to send out the word that we were trying to get the city council to pass a resolution against HJR-3 . . . So we got a bunch of people to come together, and we got my councilman Tim Scott to sponsor a resolution basically saying that the City of South Bend says 'Do not pass this in the constitution.' It was a really great experience,

²¹³ Jamie Loo, "Third Gay Rights Hearing Packed with Emotion," *South Bend Tribune*, May 18 2006, http://articles.southbendtribune.com/2006-05-18/news/26967964_1_human-rights-ordinance-gay-rights-gay-couples.

²¹⁴ "Human Rights Commission," *City of South Bend Indiana*, <http://www.ci.south-bend.in.us/government/division/human-rights-commission>.

and again, through the guerilla gay bar we got a lot of people to come and speak in favor of the resolution.²¹⁵

Gay bars acted like a glue that held LGBT people together, beginning with the Stonewall Riots of 1969, through the AIDS crisis of the 1980's, and still today, with whole communities up and arms against legislation that would further inequality for LGBT people. Michael Lane's Guerilla Gay Bar offered proof that, even in 2014, the gay bar scene was influencing activism and visibility for LGBT people in South Bend. With the opening of the Seahorse in 1971 by Gloria Frankel, up until the modern Guerilla Gay Bar group of 2013, gay bars have been instrumental in forming an LGBT community in South Bend. Without them, equality-oriented organizations like Lambda Legal would have had a much harder time establishing themselves as a presence in Michiana, and AIDS relief services would not have been as effective in treating and educating the LGBT community. Gay bars played a central and highly significant role in organizing LGBT people and provided an enduring platform for LGBT activism that continues today.

²¹⁵ Michael Lane, interview by Katie M. Lee, March 29th, 2014, MP3.

