Gay Masquerade: Male Homosexuals in American Cities, 1910 to 1940

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GAY MASQUERADE: MALE HOMOSEXUALS IN AMERICAN CITIES, 1910 TO 1940

by

Steven L. Lewis

A Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
Department of History

Western Michigan University
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Prior to 1900, American scientists struggled to formulate a sexual norm. Their categorization of sexuality ironically led to the creation of a label (homosexual) by which individuals created and expressed a sexual identity at variance with the newly created norm.

By 1910, the climate of moral reform (Progressivism) led to the discovery (and documentation) of a homosexual subculture in larger American cities. With Chicago and New York City as examples, the author documents the growth of this sexual underground in the period between 1910 and 1940. Using primary sources such as diaries, letters, autobiographies and novels, the world of the homosexual, with its cafes, speakeasies, and public "cruising" areas is re-created. Attention is given to various codes (especially language and dress) that served as a mark of this subculture. The study underscores the attitudes held by society.
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The author wishes to dedicate this paper to the memory of Gregory Sprague, whose untimely death has deprived the field of history of a great teacher. His friendship is sorely missed.

Steven L. Lewis

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Gay masquerade: Male homosexuals in American cities, 1910 to 1940

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Western Michigan University, 1988

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the last decades of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, Americans and the American way of life underwent rapid transition marked by the rise of large, metropolitan areas and the waning influence of a rural way of life. The rapid industrialization of the United States after the Civil War witnessed the creation of a system that depended upon the extension and full development of railroads; the development of new mechanical technology; and the existence of cheap, centralized pools of labor. With overt appeals to an individual’s desire for better opportunities, cities experienced an extensive migration from the farms as well as an influx of immigrants from abroad.

Behind an aspiration for a better life often lay a profound and intrinsic desire that fed their hopes and dreams. The Industrial Revolution that offered a dream of material prosperity also conjured up an ideal of a boundless freedom to live according to one’s beliefs with the least interference from anyone, be they individuals or institutions. Whether escaping the isolation of rural, small town America or hardships of a village in southern

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or eastern Europe, individuals by the thousands came year after year. Many, if not most, did not find their ideal of boundless opportunity and freedom. Not a few met up with failure, isolation, and ruin, becoming enmeshed in what turn-of-the-century reformers would later call the "urban underbelly."

And so it would be with those individuals now known as homosexuals.1 Driven equally by the desire to "make good" as well as by an intense, internal, often unexpressed desire to find sexual and affectional fulfillment, homosexuals saw the city, whether New York City, Chicago, Boston, or some other place, as a haven of anonymity and opportunity, freedom and escape. From the 1880s onward, these sexual outcasts came in ever-growing numbers and with an ever-growing awareness of their "peculiarity" to the city of their dreams.

It is within this same period that a small number of Americans, especially in the psycho-medical field and the social purity movement, first reported the existence of male degenerates living in a nether world of slum and prostitute, hobo and criminal, bohemian and free lover.

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1 As discussed later in the text, the development of psycho-medical terminology as well as popular slang creates a difficult and complex issue in communication for the historian. Therefore to arrive at a consistency and clarity throughout the text, the term "homosexual" will be used exclusively to signify male same-sex relationships, affectional as well as sexual.
The people of this twilight underground, either out of lack of opportunity or personal defiance, could not and would not fit into a rising middle-class standard of respectability and conformity soon vocalized in the many elements that made up the Progressive movement. These reports would go largely unnoticed, as did homosexuals themselves, until a ground swell of moral reformism with its vice commissions and campaigns overtook the American city in the early 1900s.

With the advent of the campaign to fight vice and corruption, the general public perceived city life to be dominated by a general decadence that included widespread prostitution and red light districts, gambling halls and bars, bribery and blackmail, and horrendous living and working conditions for immigrant and native alike. More important, this campaign slowly exposed a more forbidden arena of city life: the existence of "whole colonies of sexual perverts" who lived in a hidden world of bars and brothels, cafes and salons, yet worked and socialized within society in general.² Such revelations proved to be distressing and disgusting to the citizen reformer of that day. In spite of attempts to eradicate this "social

evil", this urban underground defiantly took root in many cities and towns over the next three decades.

Prominent examples of this underground are Chicago and New York City--two different yet similar urban areas whose environments encouraged the creation of a supportive atmosphere in an oftentimes intolerant and intolerable world and thereby served as connecting points for a male homosexual network. With a large and sometimes vocal and visible bohemian underground, lenient and frequently corrupt city governments, widespread slum and vice areas, and growing national reputations as places of adventure and pleasure, New York City and Chicago easily attracted the farm boy or immigrant lad seeking freedom from traditional structures.

With their Greenwich Village and Towertown, their Harlem and Levee areas, New York and Chicago illustrated and illuminated a society within society with its own set of rules and regulations, institutions and gathering places, behavior and attitudes. To protect itself, yet

3 Due to the breath of the subject under discussion, the author limits this study to male homosexuals without seeking to imply the lack or insignificance of a female homosexual subculture that most certainly existed and prospered alongside that of the male culture, yet with its own distinctive set of institutions and behavior. See Judith Schwartz, Radical Feminists of Heterodoxy: Greenwich Village 1912 - 1940 (Norwich, VT.: New Victoria Publishers, Inc., 1986.); Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1981).
this underground developed a finely-tuned code by which homosexuals could pass at will and with some ease between the world of work and the world of play, the world at large and the world of outcast. This code, which included slang, dress, and bodily movements, served as a key in obtaining entrance to a world of bars, cafes, turkey baths, salons, cabarets and nightclubs, buffet flats, public cruising areas (parks in particular), masquerade balls, and sex circuses.

In semi-clandestine undergrounds, homosexuals in Chicago and New York City created a set of motifs that characterized, with given variations, the homosexual underground in the rest of the United States. The use of language as a code, with its puns on words, self-parody, and adoption of female or gender based names, became both a common denominator and a self-creation of "camp" that allowed full expression of expected and assigned behavior. It became easy to adapt bodily movements to fit the spoken language, to adopt feminine walk, falsetto voice and "limp wrists", to use cosmetics to accentuate the more feminine physical appearance. These adaptations fit public and private images of what homosexuals were and how they acted. While these affectations could call attention to the homosexual, oftentimes the behavior was conducted within certain unspoken, agreed upon areas, i.e., the private company of friends; carefully selected bars and
cafes known to be tolerant of said behavior; and public cruising areas such as parks and "tea rooms" (public rest-rooms), that allowed open signals for other homosexuals. The adoption of clandestine behavior afforded freedom to explore this forbidden world while avoiding the critical scrutiny of society. Understanding this persona of paradox is important at arriving at a more complete understanding of this underground.

Currently available original or primary sources fall into several categories. The first and perhaps largest available sources are the records and personal accounts from the fields of psychology, medicine, law, and journalism written by non-homosexuals reporting on a phenomenon alien to their understanding of sexuality. These reports were based on first-hand studies of individuals whose behavior was judged to be sick, maladaptive, or sensational by the writer and often the individual under study as well. A large majority of homosexuals never came in direct contact with the professionals whose works make up the bulk of these reports. Unfortunately those who generally did were from the poor and working class, not the middle or upper class. Yet with caution and wariness, these documents offer many clues to this culture and often present colorful, if misunderstood, personal descriptions.
Another group of primary sources are the hard to find, but not rare, accounts written by observers friendly to and "in the know" about this subculture. Often disguised in vague, ambiguous language, these sources present implicitly and explicitly a detailed picture of the cultural setting within which this homosexual community existed.

And then there were the homosexuals themselves. Increasingly aware of their sexual and affectional differences, a small, daring minority began to create a written body of fictional and nonfictional work that expressed their search for fulfillment. While much of this work remains unpublished or lost, the remnants of the poetry, novels, uncensored diaries, the anonymously-written magazine articles, and the private letters that remain give a lively voice and intimacy to this underground.

Add to this the growing fascination and concern by psychologists and doctors, writers and journalists, lawyers and reformers and one arrives at a more complete and complex picture of the exchange taking place between heterosexual and homosexual worlds, an exchange often marked by misunderstanding, erroneous assumption, hostility, and fear.

Through examination of these sources, the author aims to reconstruct a homosexual underground in New York City.
and Chicago over a period of three decades, 1910 to 1940, and show the development of a viable sub-culture with its various nuances in style and taste reflecting geographic, generational, and class differences. Within these differences lay a commonality that superceded the sexual/affectional element. The commonality of outcast and outlaw, of maverick and bohemian, of anonymity and suspicion, of visibility and obscurity played a role, immeasurable and abstract to a degree, in building the bonds that solidified this subculture. This paper seeks to tell the collective story of those nameless individuals who created and inhabited that underground. By narrowing the focus to Chicago and New York, the author strives to give a representative picture of this world without denying the variations that occurred not only between Chicago and New York City but with other American cities as well.

Examination of current research underscores the lack of a narrative, interpretive history of this subculture. While Jonathan Ned Katz in his excellent books, Gay American History and Gay/Lesbian Almanac, gives not only a theoretical standard from which present and future historians may work and expand upon but serves as well as a depository of original documents, his work does not
attempt to give a narrative history of homosexuals. Building upon Katz's pioneering works as well as a large amount of on-going research in women's history and gender studies, current works generally focus on the theoretical structures of earlier homosexual history.

The current debate within the study of Gay history focuses on two methods of interpretation. The first argues that since all sexuality is a biological given, homosexuality per se has always existed within society; that if sexuality per se is a biological given then there exists throughout time a constant classification by which to study all sexual behavior; that the creation of an awareness or consciousness of sexual difference was non-essential in the development of homosexual subcultures; and that therefore the creation of a name for homosexuals is relatively unimportant in the development of homosexuality.


The second school of thought argues that whereas all sexuality is a biological given, sexual differences (especially homosexuality) could only exist within an explicit awareness of said differences; that such explicit awareness could be created only through an explicit classification of all sexual behavior; that such creation depended heavily on the rise of the modern large city; and that it is erroneous to use the label of homosexual to describe those people who practiced same-sex activities before the mid-nineteenth century.7

Whereas both schools of thought merit attention, this work seeks to follow a third or middle course. Essentially, the author proposes that, while all forms of sexuality are a biological given, the individual and collective awareness of sexuality changes in constant relation to the cultural and geographic setting of a given period of time. All sexuality, then, is situational. Moreover, same-sex activity did indeed exist before the rise of an implicit classification of sexuality existed. However, the rise of an awareness of sexual differences, as

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differences, as well as the modern city, was essential to the creation of a twentieth century homosexual subculture. More importantly, the oral traditions and myths of earlier generations served unknowingly as points of reference and points of resistance in the development of this consciousness. Therefore only the facts can give the full story of the changes occurring in the sexual mores of American culture in the period between 1910 and 1940.

It is in these three decades that homosexuals felt comfortable enough to give explicit expression to a full range of behavior, perceptions, emotions, and ideals. Therefore, the era served as a watershed between an almost invisible homosexual world and the contemporary, highly articulate, variegated, visible homosexual world. At the heart of this story lies a struggle to break out of a rising standard of sexual normalcy and define how homosexuality would be expressed and celebrated in individual and collective form.
CHAPTER II

SCIENCE AND THE CREATION OF SEXUAL NORMALCY

Prior to the late 1880s, American society lacked a standard by which to judge sexual and affectional behavior of any kind. While the physical act(s) of sodomy could be condemned and severely punished by civil and, more frequently, religious authorities, enforcement was irregular and infrequent. The continuous movement of people into largely unsettled areas of the country with minimal civil and church government created situations where survival determined morality. When and where enforcement did occur, sexual prohibition was carefully tied to equally offensive crimes that could be more readily proven in a court of law. Given a hesitancy to regulate individual behavior in other areas of social transaction, Americans showed little desire to interfere in the private area of sexual behavior and preferred to surround the issue with the taboo of silence.

Although expected to marry and father children, a male in the eighteenth or nineteenth century easily indulged in sexual and affectional variation without attracting society's attention or condemnation. Whether single or
married, many individuals probably continued their same-sex activities past bachelorhood. Yet none would have considered themselves to be a sodomite or homosexual.\textsuperscript{1} Therefore, individuals remained as mute as society to this phenomenon even while engaging in it. Without a basis for acknowledging sexual differences, these predecessors of today's homosexual subculture lacked a key element for the development of a more communal bonding along lines of their differences: they had no linguistic or psychological categories in which to place themselves.

Confronted by a steady erosion in established religious authority and tradition, the emergence of an urban, cosmopolitan way of life, and the influx of foreign immigrants with their socio-cultural traditions, American society in the late nineteenth century experienced a rising desire to regulate social and personal behavior according to certain acceptable standards. That these new standards were basically class-oriented, ambiguous, and reflected only a small vocal minority were mute points in a decade that saw the growth of a temperance movement, a growing demand for

\textsuperscript{1} Generally used only by church and legal courts in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries, the terms sodomy and sodomite did not enter popular usage until the last decade of the nineteenth. It is important to note that the later use of these words were given broad connotations through their application to any non-reproductive sexual act.
restrictions on immigration, and a campaign to protect the female prostitute through state regulation. Set amidst the fears, phobias, and concerns of that era, the call to find and develop a standard of sexual normalcy that fit the needs of a growing society seemed necessary and urgent.

The growing popularity in America of science and the scientific method of observation encouraged the spread of psychology with its desire to study and classify the variations in human behavior, including sexuality. First fueled by reports that "there is in every community of any size a colony of male sexual perverts," the American search for a common denominator and terminology by which to study this phenomenon was further encouraged by the translation and introduction of European, primarily German, medical works. In the decades after 1890 there occurred an acrimonious debate within medicine, psychology, psychiatry, and sexology over the issues of sexuality, masculinity, femininity, gender, and normalcy.

The attempt to define and classify sexuality rested on the need to determine what was normal human sexual behavior. The foundation for an intellectual construct of normalcy rested uneasily upon the principle that all

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sexuality had the act of procreation as its basis. This belief underlined the new science's roots in a Judeo-Christian morality and a failure to address the growing issue of sexual activity for pleasure within and without marriage.

Working without a clear understanding of sexual behavior in general and variations in particular allowed for a morass of conflicting terms that fed misunderstanding within the various fields of research. Urning, the third sex, the intermediate sex, and the phrase, "a woman's soul confined in a man's body" were coined or adopted to describe specifically same-sex behavior by a small minority within this fledgling field. The introduction of the terms homosexuality and heterosexuality failed to further simplify matters in that both originally described the same non-reproductive sexual act in all sexual activities. Oftentimes, however, same-sex behavior was categorized with such other sexual variations as rape and bestiality in broad generalizations of perversion, degeneration, and deviation.

Eventual acceptance of the terms homosexuality and heterosexuality, coupled with the words normal and abnormal, symbolized an uneasy dichotomy within scientific circles. This dichotomy inherently arose from the creation of standards by which to judge and label behavior. To arrive at a standard definition, individuals began to
propose characteristics by which to judge all sexual behavior.

By the turn of the century, the issue of gender roles became a cornerstone in the search for a sexual norm. In reaction to a growing suffrage movement and an influx of middle class women into volunteer organizations, social issue campaigns, and the job market, the scientific community arrived at a transitory consensus that drew upon the myths and stereotypes of the proper spheres of activity for men and women. Biological characteristics assigned to women included nurturance, emotionalism, sexual passiveness, and physical weakness. Along with these factors went the socially assigned roles of wife, helpmate, and mother. Women who were non-emotional, sexually active, aggressive, and intellectual were masculine and suspect of sexual deviance.3

Men who showed the biological make-up of women, i.e., emotional outbursts, sexual passivity, unassertiveness, etc. were considered effeminate and suspect of sexual deviance and identified as congenital homo-sexuals.4 Those men who went as far as adopting the assigned


behavior of women, i.e., housework, care-giving, interest in the fine arts, etc., were given the label of acquired sexual deviancy. Whereas the former were viewed as victims of inherent deformities, the latter—in adopting the role of women—were believed to have acted freely and maliciously. According to one eminent doctor,

There is no doubt but that this type of degenerate is a reality. He is a freak of nature who in every way attempts to imitate women. ...They are emotional and affective. ...They take feminine names, use perfume and dainty stationery...and in many instances they wear women's apparel.5

These types of homosexuals were "by no means mental defectives" and many "had a good education" and came "from respectable families."6 Moreover, careful attention by the mother to a young child's behavior would prevent the development of this perversion.7 As for adult individuals, the medical practitioner had an obligation to force a change in their behavior if at all possible.

Disagreement over the terms congenital and acquired (non-congenital) behavior prevented a consensus in usage within the medical-psychological field. One vocal group held that all deviate sexual behavior was treatable if


6Ibid., 370.

not fully curable. Treatment included a variety of methods that ranged from water therapy to psychoanalysis, hypnosis to castration. Few such efforts were reported as effective or successful.

The second influential group argued that neither category of sexual deviance was treatable and that the best action was to convince an individual to abstain from any sexual activity so as to avoid further corruption of society.\(^8\) That an individual's sexual behavior affected the morals of society was a belief widely held in the medical field. While this line of reasoning appears to have been popular with homosexuals, there was evidence pointing to a dismal success rate and added burden of guilt when an individual succumbed to physical desires.\(^9\)

As science arrived at a common denominator for sexual normalcy by the early 1900s, the terms deviate, invert, and homosexual found a more precise usage in describing all same-sex behavior. The failure of these pioneers in sexology and psychology to recognize fundamental differences in behavior led to the eventual


identification of all homoerotic desires with sexual acts. Due to a belief that any sign of affection underscored a latent desire to commit a sexual act, the open expression of love by a man for another man came to be viewed as unnatural and thus taboo. The innocuous expression of affection towards a member of one's sex that prevailed throughout much of the preceding century therefore became suspect and forbidden in the twentieth. Having major ramifications for both heterosexual and homosexual, this attitude held a position rarely challenged within and outside medical and psychological circles. As late as the 1930s only a few individuals publicly acknowledged the diversity of behavior incorporated within the label of homosexuality. Speaking before an annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association, Dr. George S. Sprague stated that

In the very definition of the word homosexuality there is occasion to pause, for the old definitions, 'morbid sexual passion towards the same sex' or 'sexual perversion toward the same sex,' are not sufficiently inclusive....The trouble is that only a genital instinctive attitude of mind or behavior is indicated, as if all there was to homosexuality was gross erotic practice or the mere wish for it.\(^\text{10}\)

Sprague's critique of the usage of the word homosexuality found few supporters.

Most members of psycho-medical field accepted as fact that homosexuality was a sexual deviance that required treatment; that a cure was possible in at least some cases; that the appearance of biological and socially assigned traits and behavior in the wrong gender were signs of deviant behavior; and that all sexual deviations posed a grave, moral threat to society. Most professionals, nonetheless, found discovering and treating the suspected individual a difficult proposition. In spite of fear that wider knowledge of homosexuality would encourage growth of the practice, experts sought to inform and educate the professional classes, and at times the general public, while maintaining strict control of the information.

This small but significant acknowledgement of the existence of homosexuals by the psycho-medical field, as well as by the legal profession, moved out into an ever widening area of concern and interest—to society in general and homosexuals in particular. Paradoxically the scientific search for a modern objective sexual standard gave homosexuals themselves a structure, a conceptualization of who and what they were. Though the types of proscribed and described behavior might not fit a particular individual, many homosexuals consciously or unconsciously adopted the behavior assigned to them— if only to create a basis for identification by others.
Most important, this new standard gave a homosexual an inner psychological point of recognition. The individual then had a means to understand and explore his emotional and physical attractions. This inner identification served as an impetus to break out of these new norms and create an individual and collective consciousness that became the foundation for a homosexual subculture.
CHAPTER III

NINETEENTH CENTURY ROOTS

Although a few historical studies point to the existence of a same-sex underground in American cities as early as the 1700s, first hand reports on this mythical world first surfaced only after the mid-nineteenth century. In a letter written on a visit to the United States in 1871-1872, a foreign visitor noted that the unnatural vice in question is more ordinary than it is here; and I was able to indulge any passions with less fear of punishment or persecution. The Americans' tastes in this matter resemble my own: and I discovered...that I was always immediately recognized as a member of the confraternity.

1 In his pioneering work, Sexual Variance in Society and History, Vern Bullough describes a world of "sodomites" in eighteenth century New York City with their cafes and Molly Houses (male brothels). This world apparently flourished in and around the financial area of Wall Street in the period from 1720 to 1770. See Vern L Bullough, Sexual Variance in Society and History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976; Phoenix Books, 1980), 515. Also see Charley Shively's Calamus Lovers which gives a detailed picture of homosexual haunts in New York in the 1850's. One popular bar was Pfaff's frequented regularly by the American poet, Walt Whitman. Charley Shively, Calamus Lovers: Walt Whitman's Working Class Camerados (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1987), 13-14.

2 Bullough, Sexual Variance, 607.
Public investigations into the issue of vice naturally led to the "discovery" of sexual perverts and their haunts in the larger cities. While no known reports exist that specifically speak of a homosexual underground in Chicago before 1900, investigations in New York City confirmed the existence of a widespread male sexual underworld as early as the late 1880s. Unnoticed by all but a few medical practitioners, the stories that lay within them offer clues to the development of a later subculture that arose without historical knowledge of these predecessors yet contained a rich oral folklore and myth concerning these early antecedents. Moreover, the institutions of the homosexuals living in Chicago or New York in the 1910s onwards evolved from this earlier period and therefore perpetuated many assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors of these unknown individuals.

By the year 1890, New York City sported a number of bars catering almost exclusively to the homosexual. Beyond these bars, there existed few other known institutions where homosexuals could come together as a group. The knowledge of the existence of these bars appears to have been limited to a small circle of adventuresome individuals. The Columbia Hall, The Golden Rule Club, and The Artistic Club were intimately connected to a highly active street life where male prostitution flourished.
The most well-known bar or club was Columbia or Paresis Hall which flourished roughly from the mid-1880s to the early 1900s. Located at 392 Bowery (off Fourth Avenue, south of Fourteenth Street), this club consisted of a "modest bar-room, (with) a small beer garden" behind and on the upper two floors, small rooms that individuals rented for an hour or a night.\(^3\) A gathering place for female impersonators with upper and middle class backgrounds, Paresis also attracted a growing number of male prostitutes who solicit men for unnatural purposes...These male degenerates solicit men at the tables, and I believe they get a commission on all drinks that are purchased there, they get checks.\(^4\)

The nightly entertainment included a show with music and comedy routines staged by men in feminine evening dresses and cosmetics. In describing a visit to Paresis Hall, a state undercover agent stated that the show consisted of several "degenerates" who, accompanied by


piano, sang "songs with immoral lyrics" that encouraged immoral dances and other acts of depravity.⁵

Eventually Paresis became so infamous that it "bore almost the worst reputation of any resort of New York's Underworld."⁶ Writing his memoirs twenty years later, one homosexual recalled that

_preachers in New York Pulpits [sic] of the decade would thunder philippics against the 'Hall', referring to it in bated [sic] breath as 'Sodom'...even when (I) was an habitue, the church and the press carried on such a war against the resort that the...politicians who ruled little old New York had finally to stage a specular [sic] raid.⁷_

Due to this public outcry and the threat of police action, the Hall eventually refused to tolerate any male in female attire, yet continued as a homosexual haunt with connections to a large male prostitution ring.

Within the Bowery itself, there were several clubs less known but as flamboyant clubs similar to Paresis. One was The Artistic Club on 56 West Thirtieth Street, owned by a Samuel H. Beckard, which catered exclusively to male prostitutes. Unlike the "Hall," however, the police closed The Artistic as a disorderly resort. Other bars included The Black Rabbit, The Manila Hall and The

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⁶ Lynn, Autobiography, 146.

⁷ Ibid.
Palm. All flourished briefly and then closed, though a few merely changed names, locations, and sometimes clientele.

An early, flamboyant character of New York's underground, Earl Lind, also known as Junie Lynn and, later, as Ralph Werther, published a volume of memoirs and several articles in the 1920s on his early life as an "intermediate." Writing years after the actual events, Lynn may have exaggerated the extent and color of this underground. Nonetheless, these memoirs serve as a guide to the mapping out of the development of a homosexual subculture. At the request of his doctor, Lynn proceeded to make public a very private journey of one homosexual through the labyrinths of guilt, suppression, discovery, and exploration.

Arriving in New York City sometime after 1890, Lynn found himself drawn to those quarters where "sexual perverts" were tolerated. Amid the denizens of the bars and slums, Lynn led a life of male prostitute and female impersonator. As a "streetwalking fairie", Lynn "promenaded the Fourteenth Street bright-light district and the bowery" and often came under harassment from the police.\(^8\) Lynn recalled that he

wandered more widely, and in some respects flaunted my androgynism to a greater extent, than any other female-impersonator of my day. I took greater chances than any other, except in the appearing in

\(^8\) Ibid., 150.
public places in feminine apparel... Never for a moment did I forget the possibility of being arrested....I was even hypersensitive in this matter...this hypersensitiveness probably saved me, since others of my type were continuously being arrested....

One of Lynn's earliest and favorite haunts became the Paresis Club. As he records:

On one of my earliest visits...I seated (sic) myself alone at one of the tables. I had only recently learned it was the androgyne headquarters -- or "fairie" as it was called at the time. Since Nature consigned me to that class, I was anxious to meet as many examples as possible. As I took my seat, I did not recognize a single acquaintance among the several score (of) young bloods, soubrettes, and androgens chatting and drinking in the beer garden.

Lynn reported that, in early January 1895, he was approached by three men, whose aliases were Roland Reeves, Manon Lescaunt, and Prince Pansy, with an invitation to join

a little club, the Cercle Hermaphrododitos. For we need to unite for defense against the worlds' bitter persecution...We care to admit only extreme types--such as (those who) like to doll themselves up in feminine finery.

Lynn made frequent visits to an undisclosed room rented by the Cercle where a small number of homosexuals gathered to converse and promenade in female attire. The exact purpose of this club, the extent of its membership, and the duration of its existence remain unknown. If Lynn's

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 152.
memoirs are correct, then the Cercle would have been the first homosexual social organization in America.

In an attempt to change his sexual desires, Lynn spent a number of years in institutions undergoing various treatments. In hope of permanent relief from his physical desires, Lynn finally agreed to undergo castration and hormone treatment. Disappointed and angry with the treatment's failure, Lynn returned to life on the street. As a more flourishing homosexual underground began to take root, Lynn withdrew significantly from the scenes of his earlier life and, out of bitterness, again underwent hospitalization and psychoanalysis. After the publication of his memoirs, he simply disappears.

In a sermon in late 1892, the Rev. Charles H. Parkhurst decried the growing menace of vice and corruption in New York City and its connection to city government. Under a scathing attack and public ridicule initiated by Tammany Hall, Parkhurst, accompanied by a private detective, went on a three week tour of the city's underworld. One resort to which Detective Charles W. Gardner led Parkhurst was The Golden Rule Pleasure Club situated in a four story brick house on West Third Street.

We entered the resort through the basement door....The proprietress, a woman know as "Scotch Ann" greeted us....The basement was filled up (sic) into little rooms, by means of cheap partitions which ran to the top of the ceiling from the floor. Each room
contained a table and a couple of chairs, for the use of customers of the vile den. In each room sat a youth, whose face was painted, eye-brows blackened, and whose airs were those of a young girl. Each person talked in a high falsetto voice, and called the others by women's names.12

Informed that the young women were male prostitutes, Parkhurst retreated swiftly to the street outside with the comment that he "wouldn't stay in that house for all the money in the world."13 Infuriated by this experience, Parkhurst became a vocal critic of the spread of moral decay and a vigorous champion of Anthony Comstock's Society for the Suppression of Vice.

Influenced by the campaigns of Parkhurst and Comstock and by political rivalry, the Republican-dominated New York legislature appointed a special committee in 1898 to investigate vice conditions in New York City. Known as The Mazet Committee, this special investigation heard extensive testimony on the prevalence and spread of sexual perversion in and around the Bowery; the haunts catering to these "moral degenerates"; and the failure of the police to enforce state laws concerning disorderly houses and "unnatural sex acts." A heated exchange between State Senator Mazet, chairperson, and Police Chief William S.

13 Ibid.
Devery underlines the growing visibility and openness of a small minority of homosexuals.

Q. What about those male degenerates that frequent the Manilla? Did you hear about that?...Do you know what a male degenerate is?  
A. I presume I understand what you mean...I have heard about people of that class frequenting those places.  
Q. Have you heard, then, that there are male degenerates upon the Bowery in sufficient numbers to be noticeable?  
A. No, I have not heard that...  
Q. Do you know that what they do is a felony...punishable by imprisonment for twenty years?  
A. I don't know anything of that kind...14

Later testimony of a George P. Hammond of the City Vigilance League noted that male prostitution and the "unmentionable crime have increased wonderfully (sic) within the last six months." In further questioning about male resorts, Hammond admitted that "on the Bowery alone there is to my knowledge certainly six places. There are other places where they have them" In regards to male prostitutes, Hammond replied "they exhibit themselves and solicit. I have seen them solicit, and they have solicited me."15 When examined by the committee, Mayor Robert A. Van Wyck refused to acknowledge the existence of "male harlots thronging the streets", refuted Hammond's charges, and stated that he had never

15 Ibid., 299.
heard of sexual perversion nor knew the meaning of the term.

The committee's conclusions on the eradication of sexual perversion was ambiguous. The outcome of almost two years of investigation was the recommendation to strictly enforce the Raines Liquor Law which forbade the licensing of disorderly resorts. Although the city made half-hearted attempts to enforce this recommendation, few homosexual bars were permanently shut down and the larger problem of male prostitution seems to have been ignored. The issue of sexual perversion soon became forgotten amidst the larger issues of that era.

In spite of evidence of a growing sexual underground and a public outcry led by a few staid citizens, this underworld remained invisible and unknown to a majority of people, including homosexuals. The bars and brothels that existed did not, nor could not, serve as catalysts in the development of a general community due to a need for anonymity. Most importantly, there existed no open dialogue between homosexuals nor any means to create such dialogue. A lack of a popular, underground literature prevented acknowledgement of the existence of other like-minded persons. Later creation of a literature portraying homosexuals would break through this shroud of silence and individual isolation and thereby serve as a bridge in acknowledging a collective presence.
CHAPTER IV

EXILES IN BOHEMIA: HOMOSEXUALS IN TOWERTOWN IN THE 1910s

With the publicity surrounding the anti-vice campaigns of Parkhurst and Comstock, the investigations of the Mazet Committee, and the notoriety of the Wilde trial in England, a new spirit formed in the psyche of many homosexuals. Seeking the relative safety of the city, homosexuals began an exodus to Towertown, Chicago's bohemia. Here, individuals found refuge in which one's behavior was rarely questioned or rejected. Throughout the first decades of the 1900s, Towertown, as well as Greenwich Village in New York, served as incubators for a homosexual underground. Thus, a symbiotic relationship formed between bohemian and homosexual that allowed for the free interchange and adaption of a set of behaviors, attitudes, and lifestyles.

Although reputedly encouraging eccentric behavior and a "free love" attitude, earlier American bohemian enclaves remained a legend more than a reality. Influenced by various European movements, a new generation of artists and writers struggled, by the 1900s, to replace Victorian inhibitions and restrictions with a more personal,
uniquely visionary and American voice. This generation sought an art that emphasized a radical social consciousness that directly affected and contributed to American society and culture. An unspoken freedom developed, moreover, that tolerated behavior of all kinds. Here, then, was the rare opportunity to express openly one's homosexuality.

The easy-going life of bohemia attracted students from the Chicago Art Institute, the University of Chicago, the various small music schools, and other cultural and educational institutions. The excitement of living among a community of diverse people who valued the eccentricities, talents, and differences of each other served as a major attraction for homosexuals. Most homosexuals met through a network of parties, art studios, the workplace, and street solicitation. This private world offered the individual privacy and safety. Yet many openly expressed their homosexuality through flamboyant behavior adapted from the bohemian culture in which they surrounded themselves.

Named after the Chicago Water Tower that had withstood the 1871 fire and which stood at the center of this enclave, Towertown, by the early 1900s, sported a flourishing culture of bookstores, cafes, art galleries, and studios in run-down storefronts set among walk-up flats and cheap boarding houses. The area was bordered on the north side by the Gold Coast, an area occupied by the
nouveau riche; on the east by the Loop and the Levee; and on the south by a growing European ghetto. Situated south of Chicago Avenue and defined by Erie, Ohio, Huron and Superior Streets, Towertown encompassed an area approximately one half-mile in radius. An extension of this area lay to the south at 57th Street and Jackson Park among the decaying, ornate wooden buildings built for the 1893 Colombian Exposition.

In correspondence to the English sexologist, Havelock Ellis, an American homosexual, living in a "large midwestern city," told of life in this sexual underground of the early 1900s.

The world of sexual inverts is, indeed, a large one in any American city, and it is a community distinctly organized — words, customs, traditions of its own; and every city has its numerous meeting places: certain churches where inverts congregate; certain cafes well known for the inverted character of their patrons; certain streets where, at night, every fifth man is an invert.¹

This unknown man gave further testimony to the richness and visibility of Chicago's homosexual community.

...The inverts have their own 'clubs,' with nightly meetings. These 'clubs' are, really, dance halls, attached to saloons, and presided over by the proprietor of the saloon, himself almost invariably an invert, as are all the waiters and musicians. The frequenters of these places are male sexual inverts (usually ranging from 17 to 30 years of age); sightseers find no difficulty in gaining entrance;

truly, they are welcomed for the drinks they buy for the company -- and other reasons. Singing and dancing turns by certain favorite performers are the features of these gatherings, with much gossip and drinking at the small tables ranged along the four walls of the rooms. The habitues of these places are...inverts of the most pronounced type...completely feminine in voice and manners; though I have never seen any approach to feminine dress there, doubtless the desire for it is not wanting and only police regulations relegate it to other occasions and places. You will rightly infer that the police know of these places and endure their existence for a consideration; it is not unusual for the inquiring stranger to be directed there by a policeman.²

Growing public concern with corruption and vice led to the unwilling formation of the Chicago Vice Commission in 1907 by then Mayor Frank Busse. The commission represented a coalition of concerned leaders from business, religion, education, and social circles. Similar to other agencies that arose in New York, Hartford, Boston, Philadelphia and New Orleans, the Chicago committee was motivated by a middle class desire for conformity in public and private behavior. In noting the spread of the various immoralities of fellow Chicagoans, the 1909 report made the first public mention of sexual perversion in Chicago, specifically Towertown which had become the gathering place of whole groups and colonies of these men who are sex perverts, but who do not fall in the hands of the police on account of their practice, and who are not known in their true character to any extent by physicians because of the fact that their habits do not, as a rule, produce bodily disease.³

² Ibid.
³ Vice Commission, Social Evil in Chicago, 296.
Numerous reports were given on the existence of boarding houses in Towertown that rented almost exclusively to young men of the "counter jumper variety" (homosexuals who worked in dry goods or department stores). The report also noted the prevalence of cafes and saloons where these "perverts" congregated. Although forbidden by law, many individuals solicited in women's clothes ("full drag") on the streets of Chicago. Others modified the "drag" by wearing only cosmetics or small items of feminine apparel such as scarfs. "Two of these 'female impersonators' were recently seen in one of the most notorious saloons on X street," the Commission's investigator reported. "These 'supposed' women solicited for drinks, and afterward invited the men to rooms over the saloon for pervert practices." In further testimony, the committee heard of a bar where "a much applauded act was that of a man who by facial expression and bodily contortion represented sex perversion, a most disgusting performance. It was evidently not at all understood by many of the audience, but others wildly applauded."4

Many of these men, the report exclaimed, solicited openly for sexual partners on the busy streets of the Loop. When a medical student with apparent knowledge of this underworld presented such "lurid" facts, the

4 Ibid., 297.
committee hired an independent psychologist from New York to organize an independent study of sex perversion. At the recommendation of same student, the investigator put on "a red tie and walked down the east side of State Street between four and five in the afternoon." With "his hair almost standing on end," the gentleman was accosted by some fifteen to twenty men seeking to have sex with him.\(^5\)

In conclusion, the commission hazarded to estimate the number of homosexuals living in Chicago to be around twenty thousand. Moreover, the report called for strict enforcement of city and state laws against vagrancy, disorderly resorts, and dress code. It also called for modification to state laws in regards to sexual perversion:

\[...\text{it appears that the law...should more definitely recognize the dangers of this latter day growth of degenerate traits. It should be so altered and made specific, under the guidance of scientific men who understand these practices, as to make it clearly understood that society regards these abhorrent deeds as crimes. Better definition would probably make it more possible to readily obtain conviction when desirable.}\(^6\)

However, the Commission doubted "whether any spread of the actual knowledge of these practices is in any way desirable." Furthermore, educators, clergy, government officials should dwell on "the purity and wholesomeness

\(^5\) Ibid., 296.

\(^6\) Ibid., 298.
of the normal sexual relationship" which would then discourage spread of sexual perversion.7

The lenient attitude of Chicago's government to homosexuals was a tolerance based on corruption and greed. Two notorious members of city council, Michael "Hinky Dink" Kenna and John "The Bath" Coughlin controlled the First and Second Wards, which included Towertown and the Levee, through graft, bribery, favoritism, and an occasional show of force. While the growing public demand for clean government persuaded Kenna and Coughlin to be less ostentatious in their public actions, both continued to play major roles in the buying and selling of political favors and offices, including the mayorship. With the election of their confidant, William Hale "Big Bill" Thompson in 1915, the campaign to purge the city of unsavory characters and reputation came to a halt.

Owner of several bars that catered to Chicago's "low Life" including homosexuals, Thompson began immediately to strip away the vice squad's powers. After a short but futile battle with "His Honor," the city council revoked funding for the police anti-vice division. Yet the Mayor readily capitalized on the growing distaste for government graft. To an underworld threatened and distressed by attempts to close the red light district, prosecute

7 Ibid.
homosexuals, and enforce state and local liquor laws, the Thompson political machine generated money through the sale of protection and privileges.

One traditional privilege that continued was the First Ward Ball. From the earliest days of this century, the main social of the city was the annual masquerade ball sponsored by Hinky Dink and The Bath. Protected by the city police, the ball's attendants were treated to a rollicking good time watching homosexuals promenade in "drag." The notoriety of the Ward ball became such that by 1912, Hinky Dink was hard put to find a facility large enough to hold it.

While the Chicago Vice Commission remained influential in the city's politics, Thompson and his successors ignored, for the most part, the commission's continuing investigations. While the red light district was cleaned up (but not shut down as the reformers believed) and the First Ward ball, by 1918, no longer received "official" sanction (but did not cease to receive police protection or "unofficial" city support), Chicago continued in its tradition of government by corruption. Defeated in the 1919 election by a reform candidate (who continued his predecessor's abuses), Thompson made a spectacular comeback in 1923. His re-election signaled that Chicago again was to be a wideopen town.
From 1916 into the early 1920s, The Seven Arts Club, a popular homosexual haunt, flourished in the nether world of Towertown and the Levee. Owned by Ed Clasby, a well known homosexual who wore extravagant clothes and spoke in a high lisping voice, The Seven Arts first introduced many individuals to Chicago's extensive sexual underground. The few existing reports emphasize that only the most daring and knowledgeable heterosexuals frequented it. As master of ceremonies of the nightly drag shows, Clasby's lewd, risque remarks concerning homosexual and heterosexual acts often offended the more innocent clientele. A typical Clasby retort concerned Oscar Wilde who "was a sodomist. A sodomist is one who enlarges the circles of his friends."\(^8\)

Started by Jack Jones in 1915, The Dill Pickle Club at 18 Tooker Alley became a showcase for the expression and debate of radical ideas and behavior. While catering to Chicago's large hobo population housed in the immediate area of Washington Square, The Dill Pickle found a willing audience in the bohemian and homosexual quarters of the city. On any night of the week, a mixed crowd listened to the famous, infamous, or unknown debate the merits of current popular topics. The carnival atmosphere that

prevailed allowed the homosexual the freedom to openly and visibly give expression to one's beliefs as well as behavior.

One of the most popular and riotous debates took place in the spring of 1918 over the issue of sexual perversion. In a good natured, humorous debate, Dr. Ben Reitman defended the merits of homosexuality against the arguments of an unknown opponent who, when the issue was put to the audience, lost hands down. Another presentation on sexual abnormalities was given by Dr. Magnus Hirschfield, world renown German sexologist. The combined popularity of the subject and Hirschfield drew "perhaps the largest mob ever to press into the club's auditorium."9

Few individuals could afford to speak out openly in defense of homosexuals or to acknowledge the existence of their underground. One who risked the ire of friend and foe alike was Emma Goldman, who gave the first known public defense of homosexuality in America. Like her friend and former lover, Ben Reitman, Goldman consistently espoused and lived a social anarchist philosophy based upon years of experience with the down-trodden and the outcast. Personally familiar with homosexuals and their difficulties, this Russian-born immigrant refused

9 Ibid., 236-240.
to believe that one's sexuality should be of concern to anybody except the individual.

As student of a Professor Bruhl in Vienna in the early 1900s, Goldman learned of the medical and psychological views on "urnings" (male homosexuals) and "Sapphites" (lesbians). Repulsed by the views espoused, "Red Emma" pursued a continuing interest in the difficulties faced by these sexual outcasts. Finally, in 1912, she publicly addressed the issue for the first time. However, she addressed the issue most forcefully in a 1915 tour, especially in Chicago and Portland, Oregon.

In her autobiography, Living My Life, Goldman recalled that a number of homosexuals attended her lectures and waited afterwards to see her. She stated that

the men and women who used to see me after my lectures on homosexuality, and who confided to me their anguish and their isolation, were often of finer grain than those who had cast them out.\textsuperscript{10}

For Goldman, the "pitiful" stories she heard "of years of struggle to stifle what they had considered a disease and a shameful affectation" underscored how dreadful was "the social ostracism of the invert." Yet many stated that her lectures had set them "free" by giving them "self--respect."\textsuperscript{11}


\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
Even after her deportation from the United States in 1919, Goldman continued to speak publicly and privately on behalf of homosexuals. In an article written and published in 1923 for the *Yearbook for Sexual Intermediate Types*, Goldman reinstated her philosophy and beliefs.

It is a tragedy, I feel, that people of a different sexual type are caught in a world which shows so little understanding of homosexuals, is so crassly indifferent to the various gradations and variations of gender and their great significance in life. Far be it for me to evaluate these people as inferior, less moral, or incapable of higher feelings and actions...

Preceding Greenwich Village by two decades, Towertown served as point of entry to a clandestine world of bohemian and homosexual that eventually became a national network. Many of Towertown's serious artists (Floyd Dell, Sherwood Anderson, etc.) moved to Greenwich where they believed that a true artist could prosper in the hodgepodge of New York City. Likewise, homosexuals were lured by rumors of opportunity and freedom. The institutions of the drag ball, the street cruising, the labyrinth of male prostitution, the hidden coda of language and dress that became pervasive by the mid-1910s had their roots in Chicago.

CHAPTER V

DANCING ON THE LEVEE

Bordered by Lake Street on the north and Twelfth Street on the south and extending from the Loop to Racine Avenue, the Levee's main stem was Madison Avenue with Halstead and Clark Avenues as secondary thoroughfares. Embracing the old red light District, the Levee bordered the slums to the south, Towertown to the west and near north but did not encompass them. With a notorious reputation for shady characters, this area housed a large male transient population where both male and female prostitution openly flourished with the knowledge of the police.

The life of a homosexual in Chicago (as elsewhere) was not always easy, although far better than the isolation of the farm or small town. The large city offered new opportunities to an individual; yet another set of dangers came with leading a double life. The less wary individual was prone to robbery, mugging, jack-rolling, and blackmail. Even experienced homosexuals fell prey to undercover policemen who either arrested or blackmailed the individuals.
In an autobiography published in 1930, Clifford R. Shaw told of his experiences as a young man on the streets of Chicago and indulging in the exhortation and mugging of homosexuals. Living in the heart of the Levee, Shaw recalled being solicited by homosexuals on numerous occasions. "As I'd walk along Madison Street," Shaw wrote, "there'd always be some man to stop me and coax me into having sex relations with him."1 Refusing such requests at first, Shaw admitted that later

Others approached me and tried to get me to do immoral sex acts with them. I had already learned that a boy on the road was a constant victim of sex perverts. I yielded to them a few times but the act was nauseating to me....2

Encouraged by these propositions, however, Shaw often posed as a homosexual as way a to make easy money. Later he organized an extortion ring headquartered in Grant Park to entrap the unsuspecting individual. The Jack-Roller gives a vivid, detailed account of one such incidence.

A fellow stopped me and asked for a match. I accommodated him, and he started a conversation. He was about eight years my senior, and big and husky....He invited me to have supper with him up in his room...he was a kind guy, with a smile and a winning way, so I went up to have supper on his invitation. We ate, and then he edged up close to me and put his arm around me and told me how much I appealed to his passions. He put


2 Ibid., 89.
his hand on my leg and caressed me gently, while he talked softly to me.

I had to wait a few minutes for my buddy to come to help put the strong arm on this man. I couldn't do it alone. My buddy had followed us all the time and was only waiting for a chance to come to my rescue. Finally, he came and we sprang into the fellow with fury. He started to grab me and my buddy dealt him a heavy blow.3

Through rationalization and repugnancy of homosexuality, Shaw justified his actions.

We found thirteen dollars in his pockets. Since he had tried to ensnare me I figured I was justified in relieving him of his thirteen bucks. Besides, was he not a low degenerate, and wouldn't he use the money only to harm himself further?"4

Due to a reluctance to report the crime to the police, victims often became repeated targets.

The night life of the Levee centered around the park and the street. An early pick up area, Grant Park, near the Art Institute in the downtown area, offered a relatively secluded place for homosexuals to meet and hang out at night. With a fresh air camp for hobos, the problem of "homosexual association and practices of men and young boys" became a particular pressing problem.5

Grant Park's reputation became so widespread that "gangs" of homosexuals often formed around the leadership of a charismatic and physically attractive individual.

3 Ibid., 85-86.

4 Ibid.

5 Walter C. Reckless, Vice in Chicago (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933), 266.
One group became popularly known as the "Blue Birds" whose unnamed leader was a slender, dark skinned youth in his early twenties. Along the park benches at the lake's edge, a group of 12 to 15 males, ages varying from late teens to mid-twenties, gathered nightly awaiting this leader's arrival. When he appeared, word spread that "Here comes the Blue Bird" and each individual positioned themselves as to attract his attention. Parading up and down the lake promenade, the youth inspected his followers, bestowed compliments, engaged in small talk, and, after an hour or so, chose his partner for the night. The other young men then paired off.6

Homosexual groups such as the Blue Birds were not gangs in the literal or more common usage of the word. A gathering of homosexual friends with similar tastes and inclinations, the Blue Birds serve as an example of bonding prevalent in this world of strangers and anonymous sex. With only a goal to find a sexual partner, these gangs rarely engaged in other criminal activity.

A popular gathering place for the large transient underground, Washington Square became headquarters to a wide range of soap box orators whose antics gave the park the nickname, Bughouse Square. Espousing various social and political theories along a wide continuum, these

ators attracted a large homosexual, bohemian following to the Levee. Even in the 1910s, the most favorite speeches dealt with sex and included defenses of sexual perversion. Washington Square proved to be a central location for male prostitutes. A number of cafes, bars, baths, and other homosexual places also flourished along the perimeter. Such popular places as The Dill Pickle Club, and The Seven Arts Club were directly off of the Square.

A familiar face to many inhabitants of "Hobohemia," Dr. Ben Reitman, social anarchist, proponent of birth control, former lover and confidant of Emma Goldman, remained an outspoken champion of society's "underdogs" throughout his life. With an office on Bughouse Square, he dispatched free medical attention to hobo, prostitute, and homosexual alike. Having led the life of a hobo in his earlier years, "the Hobo King" (a nickname given to him by friend and foe) was keenly sensitive to the existence of homosexuality among the large, transient hobo population headquartered in Chicago.

With an acute sense of observation, Reitman was also intimately aware of Chicago's homosexual underground and thereby lent a friendly ear and advice to many of his homosexual clients. Inspired by the stories heard, Reitman wrote several unpublished poems explicitly dealing with a
homosexual's life. One poem titled Dick shows the scope of Reitman's knowledge.

Dick was a little blond artist;  
Weighed 117, talked like a girl.  
The vulgar called him a sissy,  
the wise, a fairy.  
He admitted he was a homo;  
He painted well, made a good living.

One night he was walking in the park,  
Met a "chicken" -- a young fellow.  
Dick began to monkey with him.  
A bull who was hiding behind a bench grabbed Dick.  
The "chicken" was a stool.  
The Police dragged Dick to a little house in the park.

A couple of park policemen beat him up and bawled him out.

They took Dick's card, his watch and eighty-five dollars.  
That he promised to pay forty more in the morning.  
That night Dick wanted to, but was too sick to kill himself.

The next day the stool collected the forty.  
A few days later he trimmed Dick for another twenty-five.

So Dick left town and went to work in a town he hated.  
He said: "Why did God make me so?"7

In an unpublished article written in the late 1910s, Reitman noted widespread existence of syphilis among homosexuals and demanded a frank discussion of the problem as well as better treatment of homosexuals by society.8  

7 Burns, The Damndest Radical, 218.  
8 Ibid., 260-261.
In a memoir written in the 1930s, Sherwood Anderson recalled his early life in Chicago at the turn of century. As a struggling writer, Anderson formed a close platonic friendship with another, older man that awakened deep feelings of confusion in Anderson. Discussing this relationship, Anderson noted, "But he had got hold of something in me. When we were together we did not always talk seriously." Anderson and his friend often walked through crowded business streets of Chicago's West Side. We were in West Halstead Street, in Madison Avenue... Sometimes we walked with John's arm about my shoulder and occasionally we passed men who turned to laugh at us.

I know now that they thought we were two fairies but, at that time, I had never heard of homosexuality. I was a little embarrassed when we walked thus, feeling perhaps something in the eyes of people we passed, something in their thoughts of us walking so, that made me uncomfortable. There was nothing in the feeling we had for each other. Of that I am sure.9

Shortly after the demise of this friendship, Anderson became involved in a discussion group that espoused radical ideas then arriving from Europe. One evening the challenging issue of homosexuality provoked the writer to discuss his feelings. His apparent tolerance received critical scrutiny by his peers who viewed his motives as an attempt to destroy the masculine or father image.

The author recalled "that at home, in our town, there had been... certain men and boys who were somewhat feminine. We others had called such boys 'sissies'." However, working at a warehouse within the Levee, Anderson "had for the first time seen homosexuality that was unashamed."10

It had happened that in that place I worked a part of the time on an unloading platform at the warehouse door. The warehouse was on a street on the near North Side and in a house farther down the street several men lived together.11

He described in detail the harassment and scorn that his fellow dock workers heaped upon the homosexuals.

They came by our platform sometimes in groups, they had painted cheeks and lips. The others, the workmen and truckmen on the platform with me, shouted at them.

'Ah, you Mable.'
'Why, if that isn't Sweet Little Sugar.'
The men passing, who were so much like women, giggled at us. There was a tall German who worked beside me. He began to swear.

'If one of them made a pass at me I'd knock his goddamn (sic) block off,' he declared.12

The author himself remained quiet and distant to all the nightly commotion but wrote that "it is difficult now,...after the years, to remember just all I did feel on that occasion when first I came face to face with a fact (that existed) in many other human lives...."13

10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 339.
12 Ibid., 339-340.
13 Ibid., 340.
One evening, alone on the dock, Anderson was approached by a young man with rouge and eye make-up who wished to speak with him.

'Don't you want to come and see me some night?'
I didn't answer, was a little shocked and even frightened.
'I have had my eyes on you. You do not shout insults at us as the others do. You know where I live. Do come some night. There is so much I could teach you. He went off along the street, turning to throw a kiss at me, and I stood dumbly staring at him. 14

Afterwards, he pondered the experience.

What did it all mean? I felt a strange unhealth within myself. I was not angry and am quite sure that, when this happened, I felt even a kind of pity. There was a kind of door opened, as though I looked down through the door into a kind of a dark pit, a place of monstrous shapes, a world of strange unhealth. 15

Anderson later used these experiences to write two short stories, "Hands" in the volume Winesburg and "The Man Who Became a Woman" in Horses and Men. Both stories were sympathetic to the plight of the homosexual living in a society that did not understand their behavior.

The bars of the Levee attracted a rough, bawdy transient crowd apparently unoffended by the presence of homosexuals, especially male streetwalkers. Several regularly staged shows of female impersonators, usually after hours. Others were reputedly connected, physically as well as financially, with brothels. Homosexuals there-

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
fore often solicited partners then retired to available rooms adjoining the bar. "Circuses" were also popular in the brothels of the Levee.

Mayor of Chicago in the teens and the twenties, Big Bill Thompson's underworld connections remain unclear. However, "His Honor" owned, through second parties, several of the more notorious dives that flourished throughout 1920s. Protected by kickbacks to police and city councilmen, Thompson's saloons indulged in numbers running, prostitution of both types, and, after prohibition, the illegal making and selling of alcoholic beverages. Owned by Big Jim Colosino, confidant to Thompson and protege of Hinky Dink Kenna, X restaurant at 22nd and Wabash proved popular with the inhabitants and visitors the Levee. Other attractions included Freiburg's and Buxboun's on the north side of 22nd Street. At 22nd and State, Malborough House rented rooms at $5 a hour.16

16 Smith, Chicago's Left Bank, 140.
CHAPTER VI

RADICALS, REFORMERS, AND HOMOSEXUALS:
GREENWICH VILLAGE IN THE 1910s

But nobody questions your morals,
And nobody asks for the rent,—
There's no one to pry if we're
tight, you and I,
or demand how our evenings are
spent.
The furniture's ancient but plenty,
The line is spotless and fair,
O life is a joy to a broth of a boy
At Forty-two Washington Square!¹
John Reed, The Day In Bohemia

In the early 1900s, Greenwich still retained a large
middle class population amidst a small but growing number
of bohemians. Situated on the west side of Manhattan,
Greenwich sported an atmosphere of a small town closed in
upon by its larger neighbor. With narrow streets,
brownstones, and old fashioned street lighting, the
Village offered an atmosphere of a foreign, specifically
European, paradise that was associated with the term
"bohemia". From 1900 to 1910, the influx of artists
pushed out a majority of the regular residents which led
to cheap

¹ John Reed, The Day in Bohemia or Life Among the Artists (New York: privately printed, 1913), n.p.
to cheap rents, the mushrooming of cheap hotels and restaurants, and the creation of a tolerant society.

In the second decade, Greenwich Village served as the home for a number of writers and artists espousing radical reforms of American culture and society. With a focus primarily on the creation of a new perspective in art and government, these pre-war bohemians embraced a tolerance and acceptance for all types of social behavior including homosexuality. One observer commented that "eccentric behavior was favored even by the more serious artist or writer and public display or discussion of the most private matters was treated with tolerance and openness."2

It is in this milieu that homosexuals found a "niche" for themselves without the fear of rejection or more serious consequences. Drawn to New York from Chicago's Towertown, individuals found an environment to explore the creation of a personal freedom. This tolerance served as well to draw the "uptown" groups of "tourists" out for a good time in the twenties.

A favorite haunt of Greenwich bohemia was the cafe where debates about art and politics, love and sexuality, personal freedom and society were given up in a heady mix

with beer and wine. Hungry for freedom, the bohemian tolerated homosexuality and perhaps believed in the stereotype of the homosexual as creative.

A popular institution in the Village before the First World War was the salon Mabel Dodge held in her apartment directly off Washington Park. Having married a man several years her senior, Dodge spent a number of years in Italy being bored as a wife. Upon her return to the States, she took up residency in the Village in hopes of "finding herself" or at least some way to cure her boredom. With a real desire to be open to the new and unusual, Dodge invited to her apartment, and made friends with, the leading literary and radical bohemians. Encouraging heated exchange of ideas and philosophies, the salon took on a mythic aura. For many individuals, homosexual and heterosexual alike, it was at Dodge's that they first heard any defense of homosexuals and their right to live as they chose. A favorite and frequent visitor, Emma Goldman continued to address the issue of homosexuality without hesitation. As many of Dodge's coterie were homosexually inclined, Goldman remarks had a profound effect on a small minority and became incorporated into the popular myths of the homosexual underground. It was here, too, that the defense of personal freedom over social reform was first expressed. It was a philosophy
that came to dominate the feelings of many individuals in the twenties.

Nightly, the inhabitants of the Village were entertained on the street by homosexuals carousing from bar to bar. Some dressed in female attire and sought partners by loitering in Washington Park or along the dimly lit streets that were a trademark of the Village. Most appear not to have indulged in "drag" but many used make-up and adapted effeminate behavior to draw attention to themselves. The more "respectable" classes, mostly middle and upper professionals, could not be identified through behavior or dress but only by the places frequented if the observer was "in the know."

A homosexual living in the Village could easily feel at home dining at the small cafes that dotted the area. One of the more renown and tolerant was Polly's, a restaurant on MacDougal Street and situated below the Liberal Club. With sparse furnishings and candlelight, Polly's became the archtypical picturesque restaurant. Frequent by artist, poet, radical, and homosexual, conversation at Polly's centered around social issues, including homosexuality. Conversations started in the basement overflowed upstairs into the Liberal Club.

By day "a delightful French" hostelry, The Brevoort Hotel changed, at the magic hour of eleven o'clock at night, into the "quintessence of the Spirit of the
Village!" With a basement cafe, The Brevoort became an "undiscovered Mecca" of the Village. Homosexuals who frequented this speakeasy was delightfully described by a contemporary observer as

men who are, variously, affectedly natural or naturally affected, but who are nearly all of them picturesque, and, in spite of their poses, quite in earnest, after their queer fashion. They are all prophets and seers down here...Their poses are merely poses; they are (sic) their almost childlike way of showing the prosaic outer world how different they are.3

Perhaps "just a shade too much conventionalized," The Black Cat nevertheless had a solid reputation for toleration and an easy-goingness attractive to both bohemian and homosexual. Unlike other restaurants in the Village, the Cat was "one continual and all-pervading roar -- a joyous roar, too" that filled "the big, smoke-filled, deafening room" all hours of the day or night.4

In writing about the Black Cat, Anna Chapin pointed out that

you would (sic) better check what prejudices you have as to what is formal and fitting, and leave them with your coat at the entrance. Not that it is disreputable...It is just--Bohemian! Everyone does exactly what he wishes to do. Sometimes, one person's wishes conflict with someone else's, and then there is a fight, and the police are called...however, this determination on the part of each one to do what he wants to has no violent results.5

3 Anna Alice Chapin, Greenwich Village (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1917), 211-213.
4 Ibid., 217.
5 Ibid., 218.
Moreover, the cafe featured a "real pianist, not just a person who plays the piano" who would "tactfully strike up 'It's Always Fair Weather' when...a crowd of young fellows sit down at a table" or "'There'll Be a Hot time in the Old Town Tonight' to welcome a lad in khaki."\(^6\)

Other cafes and bars that probably attracted "the intermediate sex" included The Dutch Oven, The Village Kitchen, Will o' the Wisp Tea Shop, and The Mad Hatter. With their eccentric names and often eccentric decor, these haunts encouraged the fantastic and flamboyant in the behavior of proprietor and clientele alike. Such atmosphere was more than conducive to an individual whose sexuality placed him on the outside of society. As one contemporary observed of homosexuals:

> They accept the pretending, play-acting spirit as a perfectly natural -- no, as an inevitable -- part of life, and, with a certain whimsical seriousness, not unlike that of real children, they provide for it.\(^7\)

Sporting waiters in pirate costumes and a decor with hidden rooms, The Pirate's Den at 8 Christopher Street became an early haunt. Owned and managed by Don Dickerman, a libertine who espoused a personal brand of anarchism, The Den disguised its homosexual motif with a bohemian flare for the bizarre and the outrageous. Nightly, the waiters would "kidnap" and hold for ransom an unaware

\(^6\) Ibid., 219-220.

\(^7\) Ibid., 231.
ly, the waiters would "kidnap" and hold for ransom an 
unaware customer until friends brought another round of 
drinks. Waiters also engaged in private fights and 
invited guests into the back rooms for private enter­
tainment. The goings-on of the Den made it a very popular 
"tourist" attraction by the mid-twenties and an 
underground circuit for male prostitution.

Known variously as the "Hell Hole," "The Bucket of 
Blood," and "Wallace's," The Golden Swan at the corner of 
Sixth Avenue and West Fourth Street had a long existence 
that preceded Greenwich bohemia. Opened at the turn of the 
century, "Hell Hole" had a colorful, unsavory reputation 
due to a history as a gathering place for gangs from the 
Bowery. Although the gangs had been "tamed" by the early 
1910s, the nickname and reputation added a touch of color 
and adventure for local and tourist alike. One of the few 
places where women openly smoked cigarettes, this bar also 
served a clientele of street-wise homosexuals, who sought 
rough trade. With eccentric dress and exaggerated 
mannerisms, these individuals fit perfectly with the image 
and atmosphere of the "Hell Hole." Equally dirty and 
notorious was Luke O'Conner's at Greenwich Avenue and 
Christopher Street with similar connections and appeal to 
the sexual underworld.

With the extension of the subway to the Village and 
Sheridan Square, a number of "uptown homosexuals" dis-
covered the quaintness and simplicity of the Village. Sheridan soon had a reputation as a homosexual haunt with cafes and bars offering anonymity to the stranger seeking contact with Village homosexuals. The subway station at the Square became a notorious point of contact for easy sex that proved extremely resistant to attempts by authorities to clean it up. The Committee of Fourteen in New York City further reported on attempts of a police inspector to close

> a particularly objectionable burlesque show....After a lengthy examination by a city magistrate the proprietor and male performers were held for trial. It is to be regretted that an application for a jury trial was granted, for though an indictment was found, a conviction by a petit jury is very much less likely than if the trial were in the Court of Special Sessions.

Situated in the basement of an elegant mansion on Sheridan Square, The Purple Pup catered exclusively to homosexuals, especially the theatrical and upper classes. Sporting a "most exclusive and aristocratic" atmosphere, The Pup purposely managed to cultivate a feeling that "there is something mysterious about it." Although the habitants of Greenwich rarely went to Harlem in the 1910s, there were a number of clubs that appealed to the

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9 Ibid.

10 Chapin, Greenwich Village, 220-221.
on Sixty-second Street. Nicknamed "The Jungles Casino," the wild atmosphere of this rathskeller was second only to The Daisy Chain in the 1920s. Situated near the piers, Casino attracted a number of homosexuals who frequented the piers in search of a partner.

Staged yearly by the radical magazine, The Masses, the "Pagan Ball" was a fund-raising event held at Webster Hall, a large, spacious hall (located on East Eleventh Street) with private boxes overlooking the dance floor. First staged in 1916, this masquerade ball attracted bohemians and homosexuals who came to celebrate the "free spirit" of Village. Beginning at midnight and lasting to dawn, these balls created a community atmosphere for a diverse population. The homosexual in drag mingled with the heterosexual without any acknowledgement of differences or threats to hinder a free exchange of ideas and fun. At the end of one such ball, a small band of costumed revelers climbed to the top of Washington Arch, in Washington Square, to proclaim the "free republic of Greenwich Village, dedicated to 'socialism, sex, poetry, conversation...anything so long as it was taboo in the Middle West.'"11 The most famous, the Pagan Ball was, however, only one of many costume affairs held in the Village throughout the teens. The Masses also reputedly

Village throughout the teens. The Masses also reputedly ran several articles that called for toleration and understanding of homosexuals and the repeal of all laws in regards to sexuality.

While contemporaries either exaggerated or downplayed the carnival atmosphere of bohemia in later memoirs, Chicago and New York's bohemia influenced and was influenced by the presence of a developing homosexual subculture within its borders. While encouraging the flamboyant behavior of homosexuals, bohemia in turn adapted the behavior and later the institutions of this subculture.

By 1919, a number of homosexual meeting places had appeared in the Village. Many of the individuals living in Village worked part-time (if at all) and lived primarily from day to day, or more usually from night to night, in the cafes, bars, and tea rooms that began to flourish in this concentrated area. The studio apartments that earlier entertained such radical illuminati as Big Bill Haywood and Emma Goldman now entertained a free wheeling society of homosexuals who threw "rent parties" for their friends.
CHAPTER VII

SPEAKING THEIR LIVES: HOMOSEXUAL SLANG AND DRESS

In order to communicate with discretion, homosexuals developed a special vocabulary or slang. This slang allowed for identification and served as an entrance to the blossoming sexual underground. The Chicago Vice Commission report of 1909 noted that

They have a vocabulary and signs of recognition of their own, which serve as an introduction into their own society. The cult has produced some literature, much of which is incomprehensible to one who cannot read between the lines,...one of the songs recently ruled off the stage by the police department was inoffensive to innocent ears, but was really written by a member of the cult, and replete with suggestiveness to those who understood the language of this group.¹

Playing with word meanings and connotations was particularly important in the lingo of this sexual world. A stranger who overheard a conversation between homosexuals would have difficulty in either following the literal meaning or in gleaning the innuendos and connotations from the speech.

In a recent autobiography, Donald Vining recalls

¹ Vice Commission, Social Evil in Chicago, 297.
vividly and humorously the language of this subterranean world.

The gays now thought by some to have been closeted didn't whisper about their lives in public, either. They might confuse the straights by using women's names when they gossiped in restaurants ('Oh Vivian's such a fickle bitch. She's had more husbands than Gloria Swanson') but they didn't lower their voices. On the contrary, they might very well play to the gallery. Looking out of the corner of their eyes, they might hide their meaning in gay jargon and camp innuendos but at the same time they wanted people at least to suspect that these laughing creatures were the outlaws.

'I adore seafood. Gorge myself whenever the fleet's in. But I can't abide fish.' they might say, and any gay man would instantly know the speaker was turned on by sailors and turned off by women, while the puzzled Mr. and Mrs. Readers Digest, listening in, would assume this was a discussion about food preferences. 'I can't be bothered with jam', one might say and those not in the know would conclude that he liked only butter on his bread, never imagining that he was really saying he didn't suck men who felt above reciprocation. Even the presence of a policeman would not intimate the campers. Gays were very showy in their talk earlier in the century. They simply used a language of their own and enjoyed using it...much the same way that blacks enjoy confusing whites with jive. If a canny straight understood or thought he understood what they were really saying, the attitude of gays was 'So sue me' and they went on their merry way.2

Given the nuances and innuendos important in the development of a homosexual slang, language served as a way of building a sense of belonging to a diverse underworld. Differences in word usage existed from city to city, social class to social class, and generation to generation. Yet each group could readily recognize and

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appropriate the words and labels of the different subgroups. Language became a way of identifying mannerisms, sexual preferences, behavior, and attitudes. With a particular infliction of a word, the homosexual was announcing to those "in the life" that he was part of their world.

Drawing upon interactions with the hobo, the female prostitute, and the criminal, the slang developed and used by homosexuals readily created different innuendos and connotations for similar words and phrases. The widespread use of similar terms in cities as Chicago, New York, San Francisco, and New Orleans underscores the existence of a network that grew as individuals moved from, say, Chicago to New York, or New York to New Orleans. Although each generation and each geographical location developed their own meaning of words and added new terms to this rich coda of homosexual life, a general knowledge of the more basic terms gives a descriptive picture of life in this underworld.

The motifs found in New York City and Chicago, with variations, deal with the conscious and unconscious creation of a collective and individual mask that afforded protection yet gave comradeship and solace. The term "counter-jumper" serves as an excellent example. First used as early as the 1860s, the term by the early 1900s specifically described a homosexual who worked in a
department store and often used that position to make sexual contacts. To an outsider, however, the term held no connotations.

A derivative of word *Gai*, French slang for prostitute, "gay" became a code word for homosexuals in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Tradition credits the American writer Gertrude Stein as having first used and popularized the word in this manner. Used by a small elite, this connotation found general acceptance in the homosexual community only in the late 1930s and 1940s.

Phases such as "in the life" or "in the know" meant that one was a homosexual aware of the vast underworld bars, cafes, baths, etc. "Fruit" was a homosexual while "ripe fruit" was one actively looking for a sexual partner. "Temperamental", "queer", and "faggot" were other terms used to differentiate homosexuals from heterosexuals who were known as "jam." "Auntie" or "wolf" was an older man interested in younger men called "punks" or "chicken." "Butch" (masculine) and "swishy" (feminine or effeminate) were words describing particular mannerisms. "Bull dagger", "bull dyke", or "dyke" were labels to describe lesbians.

The homosexual underworld readily adopted and created an elaborate set of terms to describe sexual acts and preferences. Eschewing the medical terminology of "passive", "active", and "effeminate," this underworld
terminology allowed for a greater variation in individual proclivities and behavior. "Plain sewing" (masturbation), "browning" (anal intercourse), and "Frenching" (oral intercourse) are just a few of the terms used to describe sexual acts. A "john" was a rich man who financially kept a younger man in return for sexual favors. A variation on this term, "angel" meant a masculine homosexual who kept an effeminate partner. "Brownie" and "gusel" often described the passive partner; "turk" or "jocker", the active partner. An individual active in sodomy and passive in oral sex was considered "trade." Male brothels were known as "peg houses" and "blind pigs." A "tea room" was a public lavatory frequented by individuals for the purpose of sex. Similarly, an "orchard" was a park known as a "pick-up" place. A male prostitute was a "peddler" and to seek monetary gain from sexual encounters was known as "peddling." To actively seek partners was known as "cruising." "Dirt' described a heterosexual who used sex to entrap and blackmail individuals.

Homosexual slang created a colorful terminology that embraced the stereotypical belief that all homosexuals were effeminate. "War paint" referred to the use of cosmetics. "Queen" was a name for any homosexual although the word eventually came to signify effeminacy. "Drags," "hems," "Velvets," and "dolled up" referred to the wearing of the attire of the opposite sex. A "doll" preferred the
clothes of the opposite gender. While "fairy (fairie)", "queer", "pansy" and "fruit" became words of denigration when used by general society, these words originally described, without judgment, types of behavior or mannerisms of an individual.³

Female names became a generic way to describe other homosexuals or individuals suspected of being homosexual. The prevalence of terms such as "Nancy", "Mary", and "Nellie" underscored an association of homosexuality with effeminacy but, more importantly, was rarely viewed as offensive. Only when used by outsiders did the terms take on derision and disrespect.

As with language, dress took on an important mark of identification for homosexuals. In his pioneering study on homosexuality, Sexual Inversion, Havelock Ellis noted that "of recent years there has been a fashion for a red tie to be adopted by inverts as their badge. This is especially marked among the 'fairies' (as a fellator is there termed) in New York."⁴ Ellis then quoted extensively from a private letter written by an American correspondent.


⁴ Ellis, Sexual Inversion, 299.
'It is red,' writes an American correspondent, himself inverted, 'that has become almost a synonym for sexual inversion, not only in the minds of inverts themselves, but in the popular mind. To wear a red necktie on the street is to invite remarks from newsboys and others -- remarks that have the practices of inverts for their theme. A friend told me once that when a group of streetboys caught sight of the red necktie he was wearing they sucked their fingers in imitation of fellatio. Male prostitutes who walk the streets of Philadelphia and New York almost invariably wear red neckties. It is the badge of all their tribe. The rooms of many of my inverted friends have red as the prevailing color in decorations. Among my classmates, at the medical school, few ever had the courage to wear a red tie; those who did never repeated the experiment.'

Although many individuals remained invisible unless arrested in connection with a disorderly saloon or public solicitation, the more flamboyantly dressed individuals readily received public attention. The report of the Chicago Vice Commission dwelt on the fact that in this community there is a large number of men who are thoroughly gregarious in habit; who mostly affect the carriage, mannerisms, and speech of women; who are fond of many articles ordinarily dear to the feminine heart; who are often people of a good deal of talent; who lean to the fantastic in dress and other modes of expression, and who have a definite cult with regard to sexual life...Many of them speak of themselves or each other with the adoption of feminine terms, and go by girls' names or fantastic application of women's titles.

In the heyday of the twenties, homosexuals adopted purple or lavender as a sign of their difference. The wearing of this "feminine" color prevailed mostly among

5 Ibid., 299-300.

6 Vice Commission, Social Evil in Chicago, 297.
the bar crowd and those who cruised public facilities. The more outrageous adopted lavender shirts and pants; the more conservative, neckties, scarfs, and socks. Like previous generations, the adaption of a particular color or style of dress served for shock value, notoriety and as a signal.

The elaborate rituals that came, through word of mouth, to regulate the collective behavior of homosexuals was important in bonding together these elements that made up this subculture. Dress and language were important tools in developing a society within a society by which individuals gained easy access to this world. Often flippantly and humorously, the homosexual outsider adapted the stereotypes of society as their own and created what later generations called "camp." This creative adaption allowed for a diversity of behavior that honored individual differences and preferences.
CHAPTER VIII

LIFE OUT ON THE STREET: HOMOSEXUAL PROSTITUTION AND SOLICITATION

An extensive network of public pick-up areas appears to have grown considerably from the early 1900s onward. Through word of mouth, instinct, or coincidence, individuals found their way into this hidden labyrinth. As one contemporary points out, most individuals denied their participation in public sex or solicitation and often decried its prevalence. Moreover, the public arena appears to have drawn a different class of homosexuals than the bars, private parties, or even the peg houses. The act of public solicitation developed into a highly ritualized behavior. One homosexual in the 1920s, by the alias of Reginald M., left this testimony on the mating ritual of homosexuals.

At times I pick up men on the streets....A queer person can almost instinctively sense another....On the street all queer people look at every man that passes. One look is enough. They keep on walking and then look in a window. If a man is interested he will stop and look back. No normal man will turn to look at another.¹

¹ George Henry, Sex Variants: A Study of Homosexual Patterns (New York: Paul B. Hoeber, 1941), 398.
Therefore the "mechanics of meeting a homosexual" were simple. One only had to promenade certain streets after dark to find a sexual partner. In the Annual Report for 1920, the Committee of Fourteen, a private agency investigating vice conditions in the city, mentioned that

reports...indicated an increase in perversion, the soliciting therefor seems to be principally upon the street, the two exceptions being a motion picture theatre in the central part of the city and the other a saloon on the lower east side. A raid upon this latter place on a Saturday night in July, resulted in the arrest of thirty degenerates, who were later all convicted....²

The most visible, notorious form of solicitation was in the form of male prostitution. Though many homosexuals solicited sexual partners in public, only a minority used sex for monetary gain. Those who made a living on the street were usually introduced to the life of a prostitute through early experiences in a brothel. Once an individual's notoriety and youthfulness wore off—sometimes within six months, sometimes, several years—one found themselves unemployed and on the street. For many individuals, heterosexual and homosexual, prostitution became an attractive, easy way to make money. One observer noted that there was "a large traffic in heterosexual or bisexual men who are willing to sell their bodies for prostitution." The man, himself a

homosexual, stated that homosexuals "are preyed upon because they are timid and don't wish to bring in the aid of the law."3

One heterosexual left written testimony to his life as a prostitute in Times Square where he "met them (homosexuals) on the streets and in the theaters" and learned about homosexual life. I worked a little but most of my money came from homosexuals who were willing to buy my services....It was just a case of knowing them. Eight out of ten times I can pick them out....I can't explain. It's just a knack of knowing who has the money and who hasn't.4

Whereas a male prostitute's clientele were homosexually inclined men, many prostitutes themselves were heterosexual and therefore considered "rough trade." However, many unemployed homosexuals "of the painted kind" also turned to prostitution.5 One individual told of his experience:

Then I lost my job and had no money and a boy who dressed as a girl said I could come and stay at his house. Men about forty or fifty years old used to pick us up on the streets or in saloons...I didn't like them but just did it because I needed the money. I had a lot of affairs because I needed the money. I used to frequent the speakeasies and drink and drink.6

Nevertheless, given the variations and diversity in this underground, one often found individuals masculine in

3 Henry, Sex Variants, 154.
4 Ibid., 457.
5 Ibid., 154.
6 Ibid., 432.
dress, speech and attire who did not fit stereotypical images nor were they "rough trade."

Most of the clientele of male prostitutes were middle and upper class professional men, sometimes married, who left no record of their feelings towards their behavior. However, one individual expressed clearly his horror at "paying for what was readily available."

I get a kick out of buying a meal for a man but I refuse to give money when asked. I have contempt for them for they are prostitutes...and I dislike men in women's clothes. It's silly and I have no use for it. I dislike effeminate men.7

Another popular public cruising area in New York was Broadway and Times Square. Broadway sported a heavy traffic in male prostitutes who sought the out-of-town visitor as prey. Many had police records and often either rolled their client or used blackmail to enhance their monetary gain. Max N., an anonymous homosexual who participated in a study of homosexuals by Dr. George Henry in 1920s, described the dangers of cruising:

I have learned to be cautious about having anything to do with the hustlers that hang around Times Square or Central Park. They have sex for money or to get a chance to rob someone. They feel sure that no charge will be made against them because the victim doesn't want to run the risk of being involved in homosexual scandal.8

7 Ibid., 154.
8 Ibid., 410.
Situated in less prospering, transitional neighborhoods bordering a city's downtown and tenderloin district, male brothels ("peg houses") flourished in Chicago and New York from the late 1880s onward. Only when attempts were made to clean up the segregated, red-light districts did these houses come to the attention of the public. In 1905, the Committee of Fourteen in New York reported on the existence of "disorderly houses," in the area of Cornelia and Bleecher Streets, where "the chief attraction was perversion."\(^9\) In its first report issued in 1909, the Chicago Vice Commission briefly mentioned "houses of ill-repute" where men dressed as women and solicited for sexual partners from the clientele or on the street.\(^10\) Unaffected by the decline of the old segregated districts, peg houses continued to flourish openly, if discreetly, and serve a clientele of middle and upper class men. A peg house attracted publicity when raided and then only if a prominent citizen was arrested.

Discreetly hidden in family-style brownstones, a brothel often sported ornate furnishings, live musical entertainment, and, especially important in the 1920s, a well-stocked liquor cabinet. Adapting customs and regulations of their female counterparts, male prostitutes

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vied for the attention of a paying customer in a relaxed, yet strict environment. That monetary gain was the goal is underlined in one contemporary's account of his visit to a house:

Last year a homosexual friend sent me to Will G. He was in a house run by two college men and people were coming and going all the time. I didn't know what it was all about until I was there three hours. The host then took me aside and explained that these men were for sale. He knew that I had no money and he told me that they would take my teeth out -- that they were mercenary. It disgusted me. I can't see how a man submit to such things. They were all youngsters in their early twenties and late teens. I'm willing to try anything once but I just can't go to a man and have relations. I expect a little sympathy and mental toleration -- so nothing happened.11

Another individual spoke frankly of his early life as a member of a brothel.

For a few months I entertained and got money from sailors in Brooklyn. Most of the time I got them drunk. It was a place where only boys and sailors went. It was very notorious. The boys painted up and it was just like a male whore house. It was very popular.12

This same man left a vivid description of his later career as proprietor of a peg house.

Finally I met a sailor who liked me and I went home with him. He offered to take care of me and not run around. I lived with him for four years. I did the cooking and cleaning. Sometimes I dressed as a woman. I was very much in love with him.

At his suggestion we started a male whore house. We ran this together until two years ago and then we split up...He got jealous of me and beat me up.

Since then I've been running the place alone. I'm the proprietor and I furnish male prostitutes to my

11 Henry, Sex Variants, 179.
12 Ibid., 179.
clients. I have eight or ten boys working for me. They average twenty years of age and they are tall, strong, and heavily built. Few of them are homosexual and they have relations with men in order to earn money. I get the boys by cruising Riverside Drive, Forty-second Street, the parks, and the cafes.

...I get in conversation with a likely boy, explain the racket to him, tell him what money it's possible to make and take him on trial. If he is satisfactory I usually keep him a few months or until his novelty wears off. Some of these boys have mistresses and a few have wives and children whom they support with their earnings.

I clear about a hundred fifty a month. I get about half of what a client gives to a boy for the privilege of going to bed with him or taking him home. The lowest rate is two dollars to the boy and a dollar to me. An exceptional customer, about one in ten, may give five or ten dollars to the boy and half that much to me.

All kinds of sex are available at my place but the more frequent calls are for active fellatio and passive sodomy. Occasionally there are men who simply want to caress the body of a beautiful young boy and once in a while there is a call for a boy to beat a client.13

Blackmail and police harassment were dangers of the profession. Oftentimes such boys blackmail or threaten the clientele. To avoid such occurrences, a proprietor tried "to get a more honorable class of boys" who could be trusted.

Many of my clients have been coming to me for several years. They return to me because they know my boys can be trusted and because I have frequent changes and always some new boys.14

The "right" connections often prevented police raids or infiltration by undercover agents. "For some time I have

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.
paid nothing for protection," one informant stated, "because I have several friends in political and police circles. They always come to my aid...\textsuperscript{15}

Many individuals who solicited for sex were not prostitutes. By the 1910s, homosexuals had created a highly ritualized behavior by which to recognize and, if interested, contact each other for sexual encounters. This ritual included walking particular areas or streets, frequenting well known public places such as parks, theatres, restrooms, and writing on public walls. According to one unidentified individual, eye and body movement were important in identifying other homosexuals.

All of the homosexuals have a woman's intuition. They meet on the street and spot each other easily. They are apt to betray themselves with a glance of the eye. Their walk differs much. Many of them are not the least bit effeminate.\textsuperscript{16}

Thus, the most public of places became, with caution and the use of innuendos, arenas where individuals met and bargained for sex.

With dim lights and isolation, public parks offered homosexuals secluded, relatively safe places for friendship, comraderie, and sex. In New York City, Riverside Drive and Riverside Park were notorious cruising areas. In the novel, \textit{The Young and Evil}, Charles Ford and Parker

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16} Henry, \textit{Sex Variants}, 154.
Tyler gave a descriptive scene of this private world. After going to a party Karel and Frederick (the main characters) take a bus to the park in search of sexual partners. Upon arriving, the two friends, one in drag, are approached by "a crowd of sailors and civilians...calling out things." Attempting to escape, Karel and Frederick ran into the traffic on Riverside and then into the park.

Karel said ooh and Frederick cried ohooh. Then they were on the park space and on the gravel and almost by the buildings.

When Karel did turn around they were leaping at Frederick and him. He saw Frederick get swiped. One swung, one sailor, at Karel who had to run then across to two automobiles parked where some people were ...Keep away from him the men in the cars said ...The men in the cars said you shouldn't be out on the Drive at this hour.

Karel turned and saw Frederick lying on the ground...He saw him get up and move...He ran forward a little and as he took Frederick by the arm he saw two of them run at him ...the two chasing them were gaining on them.

The audacity, the cussedness Karel thought....17

Arrival of the police saved the two friends from further physical attack. Both, however, were arrested along with their attackers. Charged with disorderly conduct, all spent the night incarcerated awaiting court appearances.

In court, when Frederick demanded an attorney "the magistrate who was white-haired, shrewd-humored, stooped, small-faced waved him aside and (Frederick said later).

After testimony by the detectives and extensive questioning of Frederick and Karel, the judge said:

Discharged and Karel didn't have to lean forward to hear it.

Frederick started going toward the cells but someone pushed him into the aisle with Karel...Then the magistrate leaned over and said sweetly but be more careful next time.\(^{18}\)

Besides Riverside, Central and Bryant Park were well known for places to pick up partners. One homosexual recalled that:

In Bryant Park I saw a lot of effeminate boys. I thought it was very awful. They called each other "he" and "she." One of them said to me, "This man says you're very sweet" and I said, "Oh, you're one of them too." I got up and walked away.\(^{19}\)

Another informant reported that "Bryant Park has been a meeting place for years. Every now and then the police back the van up and clean it out." The dangers of being accosted were underlined by a man who stated that "once a man in Central Park tried to beat me up. Another time late at night a fellow tried to take off a new overcoat I had."\(^{20}\)

Due to the transient nature of many homosexuals, a favorite cruising area was the local YMCA. Offering cheap rent and temporary shelter, homosexuals in Chicago and New York found the "Y" a chance to meet like-minded persons.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 183-185.

\(^{19}\) Henry, *Sex Variants*, 443.

\(^{20}\) Henry, *Sex Variants*, 474; 433.
who either were not familiar with the local scene or chose not to be involved with it. Walking up and down the halls or using the common showers, an individual looked for the hidden signs: the way one walked, dressed, and the language or terms used were all keys of entry into this world.

During my treatment I’ve been living at a Y.M.C.A. It’s almost impossible to stay there. One night when I was coming in at 11:30 p.m. a stranger asked me to go to his room. They just live in one another’s rooms although it’s strictly forbidden. Some of the officials are in the racket. One of them made a pass at me. He was obviously homosexual. This Y.M.C.A. is for transients but one further uptown is a more elegant brothel, for those who like to live in their ivory towers with Greek gods. If you go to a shower there is always someone waiting to have an affair. It doesn’t take long. A glance by one of them is enough to warm my blood.21

Yet there were real dangers in trying to make contact with an unknown stranger. One report described the misfortunes of a homosexual as well as that of an unsuspecting soldier.

A soldier who had recently returned from France and had just been discharged visited one of the branches of the Y.M.C.A. and inquired if he could obtain a room for the night. He was told that there was no room. A young man happened to be near who overheard the conversation, and as the soldier turned to leave the building the young man accosted him, saying: 'I see that you are looking for a place for the night. I have a nice room which I occupy during the day. I work at night. If you care to, you may use my room tonight.' The soldier, thinking that the young man was interested in him because he was one of Uncle Sam's defenders, readily accepted. They went to the room, and after fixing the bed for the soldier his benefactor bade him

21 Ibid., 199-200.
good night and went to bed. He was awakened during the
night by finding the other man committing sodomy upon
him. The pervert was nude, but when detected had pulled
the sheet off the bed so as to cover himself. The
soldier snatched the sheet from the other's person and
noticed that the fellow was covered with a rash. After
punching the man from one end of the room to the other,
he took him to the station and had him locked up. One
can imagine the soldier's state of mind when he learned
his benefactor had syphilis.22

Besides the YMCA, other places frequented by homo-
sexuals were the Turkish Baths. In Chicago, the baths were
located in the Levee and frequented by a large immigrant
population. With their male attendants, the baths became
notorious for their homosexual clientele and employees.
One man named "Daniel O" reported that "I worked in a
men's club for a year and then had an argument. They
always kept after me for sex."23 Like the Y, this
institution was generally visited by those in the upper
classes who avoided the flourishing bar and cafe culture.

One Turkish Bath in New York City had a long career
that ended only in the late 1970s. Established amidst a
large Italian neighbor around 1920, The Everett Baths had
already become a legend among homosexuals by the thirties.
This bathhouse became popular after the original
management changed and the foreign clientele lost inter-

22 Lichtenstein, "The 'Fairy' and the Lady Lover,"
370-371.

23 Henry, Sex Variants, 432.
est. Individuals were first introduced to the homosexual world through the baths.

More dangerous were the public restrooms scattered throughout a city. In New York, one notorious "tea room" was located at the subway terminal at the corner of Broadway and Forty-Seventh. Nicknamed the "Sunken Garden," this public cruise area was described as "a dirty, dingy hole-in-the-wall where "every time you go down there to pee you hold on with both hands or somebody will take it away with you." 24 Another was located at the 57th Street subway station.

Homosexuals seeking partners in tea rooms faced harassment and arrest from Department of Sanitation police who used undercover agents to entrap unsuspecting individuals. Originally used in earlier attempts to eliminate female prostitution, decoys were readily adapted to help control the new menace of sex perversion. Many accounts describe the dangers of the tea room. One individual, for example, explained that

many people do the highly dangerous thing of stopping in subway toilets to meet and perform. The very prominent and well educated and refined do this. The police are very much aware of that and keep it in check. All subway and elevated toilets have homosexual data written on the walls. 25

24 Ibid., 196.
25 Ibid., 154.
One homosexual told an interviewer of his personal misfortune.

Shortly after I saw you the last time I was sent to the city prison. It was a stupid trick. A big black man showed me his penis and two men jumped on me and carried me off. I was charged with disorderly conduct. They put me in one of clinical wards. It was just a homosexual brothel. They painted and wore pajamas, tore sheets up and made dresses for themselves. Half of them were normal young criminals who heard about this ward and thought they wouldn't have to work here...they came out making their living by prostitution.26

A particularly favorite haunt of homosexuals was the theater, especially the risque vaudeville circuit where public solicitation appeared easier to camouflage. The theater district of Broadway sported a number of shows and late performances that encouraged individuals to engage in this ritual of seeking sexual partners.

I've got in trouble with the police a couple of times. When I first came to New York a man at the movies put my hand on his penis. He was a large man and older than I was. After a while he said he was going to take me some place -- to the police station. I was frightened and cried and pleaded to be let go...I was given six days or twenty-five dollars. I took the six days.27

Another individual noted that "I used to like the lights of Broadway. The night life was always alluring. I would get very excited...At nineteen I had an affair with a detective and was arrested...I was given a suspended sentence."28

26 Ibid., 200.
27 Ibid., 433.
28 Ibid., 264.
Anything might happen on Broadway at night. What's more, it frequently does. Fights and flirtations,...kisses and knocked-out teeth. Crowds shuffle by in endless streams. Straggling, drifting crowds. There lounges a racketeer. Song writers, college boys, pansies, big shots, bootleggers, all slide past. Dim, painted eyes and underslung jaws, Lips plastered heavy with rouge. Across from the Palace a blue-jowled yegg (tourist) swings on a chorus fag.29

Besides male prostitutes and half-empty theaters, Broadway sported numerous private clubs and restaurants whose clientele were middle or upper class. In writing about a homosexual client, Dr. George Henry described the life of the more affluent homosexuals.

Tony's popularity has spread from the Italian quarter, through the Harlem cafes frequented by white men, to the bars in the Fifties. He now patronizes night clubs well know to the elite among the homosexuals. His recent successes with this more discerning clientele make him think that he has for a long time wasted himself in Harlem. For some time he has enjoyed the luxury of downtown hotels instead of the dingy rooming houses where his earlier admirers took him.30

Having heard of the famed Broadway night life, one British visitor sought to explore this underworld in its entirety.

This was a well-known theatrical speakeasy, frequented by actors, supers, stage-hands, and what not, very democratic. Not far away is a shop which keeps open all night and displays in its windows such unusual wares as eyebrow pencils, nose putty, eye-shadow, and moist rouge. At the bar were one or two

30 Henry, Sex Variants, 424.
life. One debauched-looking fellow offered to show me sights that would skin my eyeballs. But my companion dismissed him as a bar-room hanger-on.31

Lined with "old fashioned brownstone houses," Fifty-second Street from Fifth Avenue to Seventh Avenue had "a blind pig or speakeasy hidden away somewhere." While some were elegant and ornate, others "were just a one-time bedroom without beds." And all the resorts served the "same bad whiskey."32

Located at 240 West Fifty-second Street, The New Lido flourished on a reputation of good food, lively conversation, and an atmosphere of sexual ambiguity. The clientele at Tony's, 59 West 52nd Street, gained a reputation as "effete" due to the fact that a majority were upper class homosexuals. Other favorite haunts included The Hollywood, The Salon Royal (Texas Guinan's former club), The Silver Slipper, and Sloppy Joe's.

That this seamier side of life was accepted but discussed little among homosexuals remains a mute point. This underworld created an uneasy myth of sexual promiscuity that allowed for easy access of sexual partners in the most public of places. Except for an occasional scandal or arrest, the general public remained unaware of this


dal or arrest, the general public remained unaware of this network and the sexual innuendos openly displayed.
CHAPTER IX

LIVING IT UP IN TOWERTOWN

Towertown, Towertown
where all the boys go down
Whoops, go down
Whoops, go down.¹
Popular Homosexual Jingle.

As the heady days of pre-war Towertown gave way to the thrill seeking days of Prohibition, the old bohemia with its artistic and radical concerns gave way to a carnival atmosphere of speakeasies and buffet flats, Freudian analysis and male prostitution, decadence and eccentricity. With cabarets, all-night theaters and cafes, and numerous small dance halls that introduced jazz to white Chicago, North Clark Street, the heart of Towertown, became known as the "little white way."²

Drawn by an open tolerance, acceptance, even encouragement of eccentric, often socially disapproved behavior, homosexuals steadily moved into the studios, walk-up flats, and boarding rooms vacated by the artist


and the radical. A homosexual impressed acquaintances and friends alike by moving to this area. The back alley store fronts that housed bookstores and art galleries slowly gave away to sleazy, dimly lit speakeasies that catered to and tolerated such public expression of homosexuality as same-sex dancing.

The growing openness of at least a minority of society to frankly discuss sexuality and perhaps experiment with various forms reflected changes also occurring in the homosexual world. As one observer noted, "Sex in all its forms has become the topic of the day. Those in the position to know have said that sex is the only topic and activity among their friends."³ Although often prejudged by one's moral and ethical values, the testimony of a homosexual artist echoes this observation.

Everywhere I go everybody is homosexual. I sit and paint on the ground floor and men stop and try to make dates with me. At the hospital where they had me under observation two of the doctors were homosexual. Married couples and everybody are having homosexual relations. The world is going crazy.⁴

One critic of Towertown's bohemian atmosphere also remarked that one might follow any cab and watch "two men or two women fondling each other" any time of day.⁵

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⁴ Henry, Sex Variants, 348.
⁵ Zorbaugh, The Gold Coast, 100.
As commentator on life in Towertown, Ernst Zombaugh noted that "nearly everyone plays a role, wears a masque" in the bohemian village where "self-expression" was a ploy for the "most bizarre sort" of behavior.6

Towertown's debates on free love and its reputation for promiscuity, coupled with its unconventionality and anonymity, attract to its studios many individuals who are not bohemians, but who seek in Towertown escape from the repress conceptions of the larger community. ... Many forms of sex behavior... find a harbor in the "village." Many homosexuals are among the frequenters of "village" tea rooms and studios.7

Life in Towertown often centered around the cafe where intense discussions were pursued on life, art, and sex. It was not an uncommon sight for homosexuals to be seen or noticed among the bohemian regulars. One contemporary witness reported on a visit to a cafe where

A group of 'homos' from the South Side also came in. They drank tea and talked loudly of labor. One was a beautiful boy with red hair and a dead white skin. He was a blouse maker. Another was named 'Alonzo.' He claims to be a Spaniard, but the village suspects him of being an octoroon, and will have nothing to do with him.8

Cafes with such exotic names as The Wind Blew Inn, The Blue Mouse, and The Green Mask flourished due to the presence of a large homosexual clientele. During the 1920s and 1930s, Thompson's, a Chicago chain of restaurants, attracted such a clientele. The two located in the Loop

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6 Ibid., 96.
7 Ibid., 100.
8 Ibid., 96.
restaurants, attracted such a clientele. The two located in the Loop and on the Near North Side specifically were known as places where homosexuals socialized and cruised.

Throughout the decade, The Dill Pickle remained a favorite haunt for homosexual and bohemian, hobo and prostitute. With Prohibition, the waning of "Hobohemia," and the demise of Towertown's artistic influence, The Pickle lost the freshness and intellectual excitement of earlier years. Most importantly, the clientele changed. Looking for sex and liquor, the crowd lost interest in radical debates, lectures, and presentations. The club therefore became a cruising and pick-up place for the more adventuresome. Male prostitutes competed for customers with their female counterparts on the street outside and often inside as well.

Located near The Dill Pickle Club on Tooker alley and The Radical Book Shop on Washington Square, Ye Black Cat Club was a successor to The Seven Arts Club. Ye Black Cat served at first as a semi-private club for the more affluent elements of the homosexual community. The club often procured sexual partners for the regular clientele.9 By the late twenties, Ye Black Cat lost its earlier glamour and exclusiveness and gained a reputation for its

9 Ibid., 90.
numerous drag shows and for the street people who frequented it.

Located in the heart of Towertown, Diamond Lil's was a popular, exclusive homosexual dance hall that flourished throughout the twenties. Named after a Mae West play, Lil's attracted primarily a bohemian crowd who, avoiding harassment from authorities, engaged in same-sex dancing in the back room of the establishment. The manager was reputed to have been an outlandish man who went by the name of Diamond Lil and always wore a red tie and an imitation diamond stick pin.¹⁰ Other places included The Coal Scuttle and The Gold Coast House of Correction. Both "were dingy, out-of-the way places, marked by an ostentatious bohemian poverty -- catch penny devices to lure the slummers who nightly crowd the district."¹¹ Among the slummers were homosexuals who worked in the Loop and sought connections in the easy going atmosphere of the "Village." One informant described public cruising in such a bar.

At a bar it is simple. You have a few drinks, look over the crowd, see someone you like and then buy him a drink. The most frequent contact is through liquor. I don't care for it and I never get drunk...I don't need alcohol to get amorous desires but I like to get others elated by drinking.¹²

¹² Henry, Sex Variants, 398.
Due to its proximity to the South Side, Towertown had roots in the jazz culture of Chicago. While more segregated than their counterparts in New York City, numerous speakeasies of the South Side were readily available to the homosexual. There appears also to have been a separate black homosexual subculture that flourished both in Towertown and the South side but access and intermingling of the two groups remained restrictive.

Although documentation of upper-class homosexuals remains problematic due to the infrequency with which they came to the attention of public authorities, two well-known places that catered to these individuals were The Chicago Athletic Club and Gerard's. Begun in the early 1910s, The Athletic Club was a private facility that had private rooms to rent to club members. These rooms were often used by the professional elite (businessmen, professors, etc.) to engage in homosexual relations. Similar to many exclusive restaurants in Chicago, Gerard's, on State Street south of the Loop, served as a very discreet meeting place for homosexuals especially before and after cultural events. The better-known speakeasies were Bert Kelley's Stables, The Tent, The Paradise Club, The Little Club, and Chez Pierre. With singing waiters and jazz, The Paradise offered individuals
an atmosphere of abandonment and unconventional experiences that included the staging of "drag" shows. Attracting a fast-spending after theater crowd, The Stables and Chez Pierre gained reputations as hangouts for upper class homosexuals.

The average inhabitant, however, could rarely afford to frequent the various speakeasies and dives of Towertown. With a large number of students and poorly paid counter-jumpers, some residents therefore readily adopted the rent party. Borrowed from American blacks, this social event allowed an individual, for a small fee, to attend an evening filled with music, dancing, food, and sometimes sex. Throughout the bookstores, cafes, and studios, posters announcing the next rent party went up daily. For homosexuals, these parties offered myriad opportunities to meet sexual partners in a safe, relaxed atmosphere, unlike the bar or street.

One anonymous individual described a friend's experiences at a Sunday afternoon "tea at the home of a well-known Villager."

There was a large group there. The men were smoking and talking in one end of the room, the women in the other. There was a good deal of taking one another's arms, sitting on the arms of one another's chairs, and of throwing an arm about one another's shoulders.13

13 Zorbaugh, The Gold Coast, 100.
the men were fondling one another, as were the women. A man he had met that afternoon threw an arm about him. He got up, went over to the acquaintance who had brought him, and said, 'I'm leaving,' When they got out on the street he asked, 'What sort of a place was that, anyhow?' 'Why, I thought you knew,' his companion replied, 'the best-known fairies and lesbians in Chicago were there.'

In their walk-up flats along Clark Street and Madison Avenue, homosexual rent parties became an institution that eventually evolved into the more decadent "buffet flats" of the late twenties.

This easy going atmosphere of bohemia discouraged individuals from taking a public, political stance on behalf of homosexuality. Moreover, an unspoken fear of loss of job, family, friends, even one's life proved an even stronger deterrent. One exception, however, underscores a growing desire of some individuals to lead lives of dignity and privacy without the threat of social approbation. Having served in the occupation of Germany after WWI, Henry Gerber, a German-American born in Chicago, was exposed to and encouraged by the growing visibility of the German homosexual rights movement through subscriptions to several "homophile magazines" and "several trips to Berlin". Nevertheless, no evidence

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14 Ibid.

and "several trips to Berlin". Nevertheless, no evidence exists that Gerber had any direct contact with leaders such as Magnus Hirschfield.

Returning to Chicago in 1923, Gerber realized "that homosexuals themselves needed as much attention as the laws pertaining to their acts." Upon deciding that a social organization could help eliminate individual isolation, Gerber's friends "advised against my doing anything so rash and futile." Undaunted, Gerber wrote a declaration of purpose for a Society for Human Rights (English equivalent of the leading German homosexual organization). However, Gerber found few individuals willing to entertain the idea of membership.

The average homosexual... was ignorant concerning himself. Others were fearful. Still others were frantic or depraved. Some were blase.... Many... told me that their search for forbidden fruit was the real spice of life... We wondered how we would accomplish anything with such resistance from our own people.

In spite of this response, Gerber recruited six friends to join the Society which was chartered by the state of Illinois on December 10, 1924. Believing that the largest number of homosexuals possible ought to be reached,

16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
members printed two issues of a magazine, Friendship and Freedom, no copies of which are now known to exist.

Highly idealistic and ambitious, the Society had a short, bittersweet history. Unable to attract support, Gerber's organization languished until a member's wife discovered minutes of a meeting and reported the names of members to the Chicago police. Arrested on "morals' charges, Gerber and his fellow pioneers suffered the loss of jobs and families, which, in one case, led to suicide. Upon losing his job with the post office, Gerber rejoined the army for a short period and then drifted aimlessly from city to city, job to job.18

In the 1930s Gerber again spoke out more forcefully, more loudly, more angrily, in a series of articles printed in The Chanticleer, a small underground magazine with a radical flavor. While believing in and acknowledging the existence of a homosexual community and the need for political action, Gerber appears to have not recovered from his earlier disappointment. Living until 1972, Gerber did not actively participate in the early homophile organizations that proliferated after the Second World War except to write articles for One Magazine.

18 Ibid., 7-10.
Chapter X

Pleasure, Sex, and Art:
Homosexuals in the "Village" in the Twenties

Way down south in Greenwich Village
In this Jung and Freud and Brill age
People come with will paralysis
For the balm of psychanalysis. (sic)
Here the modernest complexes,
And the intermediate sexes.
Fairyland's not far from Washington
Square! ¹

Greenwich Village Blues

By the end of World War I, the atmosphere of Greenwich changed from the pursuit of art to the pursuit of pleasure, privacy, and personal freedom. The days of radical art and social reform died with the government prosecution of The Masses and the reactionary atmosphere of "The Red Scare." As the movement of artists from Chicago to New York ebbed and the writers moved to such places as Paris or on to employment in the more traditional publishing houses of the city, a vacuum was created into which a new type of bohemian moved. While homosexuals had been visible and tolerated earlier in the Village, the twenties witnessed broader acceptance and a greater appearance. It was in the twenties that Greenwich

an unspoken mecca for the dilettante seeking unbridled freedom.

In an extensive study of life in Greenwich Village in the 1920s, Caroline Ware pointed to the passing of the "old Village" with its emphasis on artistic and social change to explain the new reputation of the Village as a "pick-up joint" and a land of "exotic flavor." Moreover, Ware noted that "as sex taboos broke down all over the country," the Village consciously or unconsciously sought to stay ahead of the "suburbs." The pursuit of the unconventional led to "a new phase in the Village's reputation."

When public attention had been called to homosexuality by the suppression of "The Captive" and "The Well of Loneliness," the Village became noted as the home of "pansies" and "Lesbians," and dives of all sorts featured this type....The disappearance of smoking as an issue, the spread of drinking, and the passing on from free love to homosexuality were only the more obvious of the manifestations which were successively adopted to mark the outposts of revolt. 2

Ware further stated that "by 1930, promiscuity was tame and homosexuality had become the expected thing." Noting the popularity of a speakeasy called Jo's owned and managed by a Lesbian, Ware re-emphasized her perception through the description of the clientele "with pale faces and circled eyes who drank heavily." Sometimes a customer

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2 Ware, Greenwich Village 1920-1930, 95-96; 236-241.
played the piano while same-sex partners "danced in the crowded aisles between the tables." Offering nightly performances, "a favorite entertainer was a 'pansy' whose best stunt was a take-off on being a 'pansy'." To encourage an intellectual atmosphere, the proprietor established two nights a week for discussion on any subject. "The group's major preoccupation...sex and drink" were usually chosen as topics with the views of homosexuals eagerly solicited.3

A more cynical, colorful commentator, Max Bodenheim, poet and bohemian extraordinaire, wrote extensively in his memoirs on the prevalence of homosexuals in Greenwich.

Homosexuality is often the badge of the true Villager but he wears it outward, like a carnation in his buttonhole, while the pseudo-bohemian hides his inversion from public scrutiny...

The Village artist with homosexual leanings is considered a normal citizen of his community. That is why he resents the 'bourgeois' homosexual who is not a functional part of Village life and seeks to stand on his head with creative inverts, thus making them look ridiculous and eccentric.4

Throughout the 1920s, a number of bars and cafes in the Village catered to the homosexual. Existing reports describe the openness of homosexuals in both behavior and dress. A melodramatic novel set in Greenwich and Harlem, The Scarlet Pansy, by Robert Schully, offers an

3 Ibid., 252-253.

exaggerated yet vivid picture of this nightlife. A description of a visit to an unnamed cafe underlines the ease and openness by which homosexuals interacted publicly with each other and heterosexuals:

Two (men) had their arms around each other. Another wore make-up and talked in falsetto voice. The others looked and acted quite normal, perhaps too virile and masculine. Their laughter filled the sparse room and showed a nonchalance towards others. At a corner table two men held an intensely intimate conversation.5

However, public expression of same-sex affectation often lead to tension and conflict, even with other homosexuals. In a campy aside, one individual remarked on the presence of one of the men at the corner table.

"Mary, I would think money would be harder to earn these days. You're not young anymore. At least, you don't look it. Honey, find a man who will take care of you and leave the streets to the rest of us."6

This retort lead to a fight in which the speaker was beaten "pitifully," receiving a black eye and a bloody nose. The ruckus lasted momentarily and then the cafe returned to an ambivalent atmosphere of nonchalance.

The ever popular Pirate's Den flourished throughout Prohibition. One account describes the ambience of this speakeasy:

It is rather a boyish night club. All the waiters are disguised as pirates of the 18th century, and


6 Ibid., 101.

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except for their mild eyes and blameless mouths are a fearsome looking crowd. They stage scenes from 'Treasure Island,' and ship brawls, they fire shots, break into outrageous talk, start old-fashioned disputes and clash cutlasses. The den is dark.7

One cafe/bar housed in a basement flat off of Christopher Street was the Cafe of Fallen Angels. While little information is available on this active nightspot, most contemporaries implied in their written memoirs that Fallen Angels was one of several speakeasies and cafes where the clientele was predominantly "of the intermediate sex." Frequentured by the more "eccentric, bizarre" habitants of the Village, Fallen Angels remained a local gathering place attracting few "up-towners".8

For the uptown homosexuals, however, who came to the Village for fun and sexual pick-ups, The Lavender Club was a well-known night club. In Shaw's NightLife, Lavender Club was "the place to go to see a dash of lavender and observe the outrageous behavior of Pansies." With low ceilings and sparse decor, the club offered little besides "plenty of bad liquor and an occasionally bad band."9 Similar to other speakeasies or clubs, Fallen Angels and The Lavender Club "offered unlimited opportunities for

7 Grahman, New York Nights, 33.
8 Bodenheim, My Life and Loves, 220.
9 Shaw, Nightlife, 85.
contacts to those who sought to join this type of group.\textsuperscript{10}

Among the hottest nightspots of the Village was a cafe run by a lesbian couple. Located approximately off McDougal Alley, the cafe flourished throughout the twenties. Bare of the niceties of many "tourist" attractions, X cafe offered a comfortable welcome to many homosexuals who took up residence in the former artists' studios around Washington Square. Other haunts in Village for homosexuals included Barney Gallant's, The Black Cat, The Blue Horse, The Greenwich Village Inn, Hot Feet, Romany Marie's and The Open Door.

While laws forbade the wearing of the attire of the opposite gender, men with rouge and eye make-up in heated conversation in low lit cages were a common sight. On the street, individuals often saw the flamboyant behavior and dress of effeminate men in groups walking from one popular bar to another. Oftentimes, a homosexual parading in women's clothes found himself being booked at the Charles Street Police Station. A Park Avenue tycoon might end up arrested for solicitation in an Eighth Street cafe.

Popular with street artists and homosexuals, Washington Square became a chief rendezvous point to meet friends and "dish" gossip. The annual spring art exhibit

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\textsuperscript{10} Ware, \textit{Greenwich Village 1920 - 1930}, 252.
\end{flushright}
allowed "non-Village homosexuals an opportunity to become acquainted with Village inverts." Moreover, "male and female wolves" often "prowled" through the park to find a struggling artist in need of a benefactor. In return for economic security, these individuals expected sexual favors. The Square thus offered a discreet and somewhat safe place for public cruising.

Until the mid-twenties, male prostitution per se remained rare in Washington Square. As the older artistic Village changed into a more libertine playground, male prostitutes became noticeable in both Washington and Sheridan Squares. Due to the availability of free "pick-ups," prostitutes generally found the Village to be less profitable than Harlem or Times Square. Although police harassment and entrapment was rare, homosexuals in Washington Park were often harassed by the women in a nearby precinct station. On hot summer nights, these women made cat calls and shouted obscenities from the windows to the men in the Square.

Another a public rendezvous place was Sheridan Square on West Third Street. Lured by the Village's reputation, the Square sported a number of night clubs hidden in old brownstone houses rarely seen by the tourist crowd. Several all-night cafeteriais frequented by bohemian and

11 Bodenheim, My Life and Loves, 220.
homosexual bordered the perimeter of Sheridan. Hubert's Cafeteria opened in the twenties and, when the building was torn down, was replaced by another, Life Cafeteria. Both became notorious for the large number of homosexuals who could be found at all hours of day loitering at the tables and "made love sub rosa in the rest rooms." Desiring to prevent the "romantic assignations between members of the third or intermediate sex" through the use of off-duty police, Life was forced to close when regular customers found a new hangout, The Waldorf Cafeteria.  

Although the heyday of the literary radicals had passed, Webster Hall continued the tradition of holding yearly "pagan balls" that attracted numerous homosexuals who shied away from the glare of the more riotous "drags" in Harlem. As Charles G. Shaw put it in his book, NightLife, one found

a mixed assortment — college boys, shoe clerks, Villagers, stock-brokers, chorus girls, gangsters...To-day, the Revels...are far more decorous than those of other years. Through, of course, there's still trouble (and plenty) to be had for those who like that sort of thing.  

With the demise of radicalism and serious artistic pursuits, the Village became renowned for a moral decadence that emphasized individual experimentation with all forms of behavior. The pre-occupation of Villagers with

12 Ibid., 229-231.  
13 Shaw, NightLife, 62.
sexuality may have been exaggerated by contemporary observers, yet the issue played an important role in the lives of many inhabitants of that long passed era. Although observers disagreed on the particulars, the common consensus emphasized a tolerance and openness with which sexuality, including homosexuality, was treated and discussed.
CHAPTER XI

GOING TO HARLEM! HOMOSEXUAL NIGHT LIFE IN THE TWENTIES

And there is two things in Harlem I don't understan'
It is a bullyducking woman and a faggotty man.
Oh, baby how are you?
Oh, baby, what are you?¹
"Foolish Man Blues"

Bounded on the east by Madison Avenue and Seventh Avenue on the west, Negro Harlem extended from One Hundred Thirtieth to One Hundred Forty-fifth Streets. The hub was One Hundred Thirty-fifth Street between Fifth and Seventh Avenues. With an easy-going mood and tolerance of personal privacy, Harlem of the twenties became a site for the development of New York's extensive homosexual subculture. Reputedly with more speakeasies than any other area of the city, the "black belt" treated homosexuals good-naturedly and with genuine tolerance.

While many white persons went to haunts currently in vogue, few saw the establishments that catered to the homosexual with their drag shows, sex circuses, female

personators, and other blatantly homosexual entertainments. Both participant and observer of Harlem's nightlife, Willie "the Lion" Smith, popular black musician, remarked on the diverse people that frequented the speakeasies.

History gets made in the night clubs and cafes, anyplace where alcohol is present. It is there one runs into all kinds -- nags, fags, lesbians, pimps, and hustlers.\(^2\)

One foreign visitor also noted with outrage that

The night life there (Harlem) has a great deal of perversity. This is sex perversion. The Whites who go there rather than the Blacks who live there are to blame for it. Above 125th Street and below 140th Street moral standards are erased....The Puritans and the tired business men do not go to Harlem except to see the sights. Its habitues enjoy its perversions. They brag of its colour, its playfulness, its primitiveness, its 'high lights.'\(^3\)

In the Annual Report of 1928, the Committee of Fourteen echoed the views of this visitor by reporting that "Harlem has become a 'slumming' ground for certain classes of whites who are looking for picturesquesness, for 'thrills' and, too frequently, for a convenient place in which to go on a moral vacation."

The report went on to mention that in "several instances (there) were discovered...dives (that) catered exclusively to specialized types of perversion and degeneracy." And in "13 night clubs and


speakeasies, there were...homosexuals of both sexes observed."4

In an autobiographical novel, *Home to Harlem*, Claude McKay created a vivid picture of the ease with which homosexuals and blacks intermixed in the speakeasies of Harlem.

All round the den, luxuriating under the little colored lights, the dark dandiees were loving up their pansies. Feet tickling feet under the tables, tantalizing liquor -- rich giggling, hands busy above.

'Honey, gal! Honey gal! What other sweet boy is loving you now? Don't you know your last night's daddy am waiting for you.5

As a black cabaret singer began to moan a blues tune, "dandies and pansies, chocolate, chestnut, coffee, ebony, cream, yellow, everybody was teased up to the high point of excitement."6

Another bar scene further delineated the thrill-seeking intermingling of blacks and whites, homosexual and heterosexual, tourist and native.

The Congo was thick, dark-colorful, and fascinating. Drum and saxophone were fighting out the wonderful drag "blues" that was the favorite of all the low-down dance halls....The excitement mounted. Couples breated (sic) each other in rhythmical abandon, grinned back at their friends and chanted: 'Oh, baby, how are you? Oh, baby, what are you?'7

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6 Ibid., 32.

7 Ibid., 36-37.
In surveying the Congo for familiar faces, Jake, a main character, sees Billy Biase, a friend,

at a neighboring table with a longshoreman and a straw-colored boy who was a striking advertisement of the ambrozine Palace of Beauty. The boy was made up with high-brown powder, his eye-brows were elongated and blackened up, his lips streaked with the dark rouge so popular in Harlem, and his carefully-straightened hair lay plastered and glossy under Madame Walker's absinthe-colored salve...

'Who's the doll baby at the Wolf's table?' Zeddy asked.

'Tha's mah dancing pardner,' Rose answered.

'Who's the Wolf?' Timidly Zeddy's girl asked.

Zeddy pointed out Billy.

'But why Wolf?'

'Khhhhhh -- Khhhhhh... ' Zeddy laughed.

'Causen he eats his own kind.'

The novel, *Strange Brother*, described in detail the night life in Harlem. The author, Blair Niles, gave a vivid picture of homosexuals slumming at a "low life" dive:

We were greeted at the door by a big black man who glared at us...gave the password and the man smiled and allowed us to enter a narrow, unpainted hallway that lead to the source of some awful catwalling noise. As we shly walked through the entrance to the room, a poignant smell of stale cigarette smoke, body odor, and bad whiskey bowed us over. Gathering my senses, I noticed a long narrow room filled with people best seen at a carnival or freak show.

Finding an empty table at the back, nearest the black

8 Ibid., 91-92.

female pianist and singer, Mark adjusted his eyesight then looked around the room:

I saw shadows talking and carousing to the music. Slowly I saw several tables of men, mostly white, eyeing us as each of us straightened our clothes and fussed with our hair. I felt their stares and noticed if any comments were made among themselves. One young blonde smiled and I returned it.\textsuperscript{10}

One area that thrived on "loose sexual morals" was "Jungle Alley" between 140th and 145th streets. Populated by speakeasies, bars, brothels and marijuana parlors, the Jungle attracted "uptown" homosexuals looking for adventure and sexual partners. On the other hand, the average person needed persistence, contacts, and money to gain entry. For most persons, this remained unknown territory.

The most notorious Jungle speakeasy was The Daisy Chain, located in the West 140s. Owned by a Helen Valentine, former New Orleans madam, The Daisy Chain offered a carnival of erotic delights to a rough and bawdy patronage. With male prostitutes and nightly shows of female impersonators, Valentine's club attracted a large homosexual clientele who readily lost their inhibitions in the dim lights of the club. One individual left written testimony to the typical experiences found at The Daisy Chain.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
We were in a homosexual dive in Harlem, one of those run against the law. It was about three in the morning. I was just tantalizing him, touching his breasts and kissing him on the mouth and cheek. This was not consciously done.11

A notorious aspect of Valentine's club was the staging of sex circuses. The circuses often featured all male sex for the entertainment of the crowd. Participants included the male hustlers of the house and adventuresome youths from the audience. By careful screening of clientele and apparent police protection, Valentine avoided public scandal or police trouble.12 A friend and patron of many struggling black musicians, Valentine and her club inspired two popular songs, Swin' in at the Daisy Chain by Count Basie and Valentine Stomp by Fats Waller. More infamously, daisy chain became a term for homosexual orgies and anal sex.

Located at 146 West One Hundred and Thirty-third Street, The Clam House offered lesbian pianist and singer, Gladys Bentley, who held stage nightly from the mid-twenties into the thirties. One guide to Harlem nightlife stated that The Clam was "a popular house for revelers but not for the innocent young."13 Attired in tuxedo, white shirt, and top hat, Bentley made no bones

11 Henry, Sex Variants, 361.
12 Smith, Music on My Mind, 137.
13 Shaw, NightLife, 76.
as to the type of clientele for whom she performed. The lyrics of her songs were reputedly so blatantly suggestive that "they couldn't be sent through the mails." Due to her open lesbian lifestyle -- she once invited her audience to attend her wedding to another woman -- Bentley proved a popular attraction with homosexuals. The Clam House remained essentially a homosexual club until the mid 1930s. Unlike The Daisy Chain, The House offered no drag shows or sex circuses and therefore attracted a different type of customer.

Next door to The Clam House, Tillie's Inn served food to hungry crowds in the wee hours of morning. Other bars in the Jungle were Bamville, Connor's, and Mexico's, all of which served a rough crowd looking for adventure. More fashionable speakeasies included Ed Smalls' Paradise, Pod's and Jerry's Catagonia Club (which featured Willie the Lion Smith), Texas Guinan's, and the Nest.

A short distance from Jungle Alley, Lenox Avenue also sported speakeasies, sex parlors, and assorted dives. Like the Alley, Lenox attracted only the more daring "white trade" and remained essentially the province of Harlem's inhabitants and Village bohemians. The numerous speakeasies and ballrooms sponsored drag shows with an open tolerance for homosexuals.

One attraction on Lenox Avenue was The Lafayette Theatre, a large renovated cabaret, where Miss Bessie Smith regularly performed. Although The Lafayette advertised well-known black entertainers, The Savoy and The Cotton Club attracted the most attention. With her suggestive lyrics and bawdy delivery, Smith gained a notoriety among homosexuals who regularly attended her performances.

Other popular Harlem nightspots were Ned's Place and Leroy's, with entrance restricted to blacks only. Another Lenox landmark, Connie's Inn near The Lafayette catered almost exclusively to whites, allowing occasional entrance to black homosexuals. Beside The Roseland and The Savoy, The Renaissance Casino at 144 West One Hundred and Thirty-eighth Street was renowned for "its costume balls, which are held spasmodically. But be careful with whom you dance here, for you'll probably discover that the ladies aren't ladies, after all."15 Less renown yet popular, The Smoke Shack (with waiters that sang ribald songs), The Saratoga Club, and The Spider Web flourished into the early 1930s.

Credited with encouraging the Harlem Renaissance, A'Lelia Walker turned her home at 136th Street and her apartment at Edgecombe Avenue into nerve centers for New York's artists. Walker's parties encouraged intense dis-

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15 Shaw, NightLife, 61.
cussion on the role of black art in society as well as wild abandon in pursuit of pleasure. Contemporaries made the common observation that the heiress had a fondness for male homosexuals as friends and companions and those who might otherwise have voiced disapproval of manners and pursuits considered strange or decadent learned to guard their tongues if they desired A'Lelia's good will. The entertainment at "the Dark Tower" included such illuminaries as Fats Walker, Willie "the Lion" Smith, and Bessie Smith whose bawdy songs and risque jokes were often filled with sexual innuendos. The death of Walker in 1929 symbolized the ending of an era in which homosexuals found warm support and friendship in black Harlem.

An intimate of Walker's, Richard Bruce Nugent arrived in Harlem in the winter of 1925. Introduced to the homosexual and bohemian worlds as a regular attender of Georgia Douglas Johnson's social gatherings in Washington, D. C., Nugent readily adopted an extreme bohemian life. He became known for his flamboyant dress—refusing to wear socks and ties! —, his sleeping and living on park benches, and his explicit works portraying homosexual themes. In an interview in 1987, Nugent recalled believing that everyone he met was "in the life"

(homosexual). His attitude in Harlem was "If you can't take me the way I am, it's your problem..." In discussing homosexual life in Harlem in the twenties, Nugent stated that he amused himself by going "to shows, to parties" but not to "gay bars, gay places because I was not fond of the company...." 17

Nugent's most famous and controversial literary work, "Smoke, Lillies and Jade" appeared in the short-lived magazine Fire!. Written to shock the more conservative black middle class, "Smoke" described the love and longing that one man held towards another. Underneath the surface lay a tension of sexual passion that most critics found repulsive and abhorrent. The two characters, Alex (based on Nugent himself) and Beauty, symbolized the physical as well as the emotional components of homosexuality. As Nugent later said, "(I) called a man beautiful and you didn't call a man beautiful. I did it. I even named one Beauty." 18

In describing the life of a typical homosexual, Nugent exposed this underworld with sensitivity and frankness. In one scene, the rite of public cruising was treated as a natural phenomenon:

18 Ibid.
the street was so long and narrow...so long and narrow...and blue...in the distance it reached the stars...Alex walked like music...the click of his heels kept time with a tune in his mind...Alex walked and the click of his heels sounded...and had an echo...sound being tossed back and forth...back and forth...someone was approaching...Alex liked the sound of the approaching man's footsteps...he walked music also...he knew the beauty of the narrow blue.19

"Smoke" closed in a soft pornographic montage of pederasty and androgyny. Attacked for a decadence that critics felt threatened the advancement of the Black race,

Nugent was shunned, but only for a day or two. He still can't see what all the fuss was about. Even today, some people ask him, "How could you write anything so gay in 1926?" His reply is, "I didn't know it was gay when I wrote it."20

A popular institution of the late twenties, the "buffet flats", had roots in the black tradition of the "rent party." Popularized in song by Bessie Smith, a buffet flat was a private party where, for a minimal admission fee, an individual received food, liquor, live music, and easy availability of sexual partners. In an atmosphere where diverse people and liquor mixed easily, a homosexual found a carnival of desires to fulfill and be fulfilled. As noted in the novel Home to Harlem, one could "luxuriate with charmingly painted pansies among


the colored cushions and under the soft, shaded lights.\textsuperscript{21} Strong guards or bouncers prevented any occurrence of trouble especially from undercover police.

\textsuperscript{21} McKay, \textit{Home to Harlem}, 104.
Chapter XII

All Dolled Up: Notoriety of the Masquerade Ball

A doll does not believe in itself he thought it believes only in its dolliness I have the will to doll which is a special way of willing to live....

Julian in *The Young and Evil*.

October 31st, 1907. Crowds at Chicago's Old Armory, on State Street near the Levee, anxiously await the official opening of an already legendary event. At the bewitching hour of midnight, the people instinctively part as an orchestra plays the music for the opening promenade. Through a sea of faces and sweltering costumes, two colorful, corrupt Chicago politicians, Mike "Hinky Dink" Kenna and John "The Bath" Coughlin escorted Minnie and Ada Everleigh, proprietors of the city's most renowned brothel. With opening remarks by Kenna and a poem by "The Bath". Chicago's unique contribution to the development of a homosexual underground begins.

First organized by Kenna and Coughlin in the late 1890s as a fund raiser, Chicago's major social event

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1 Ford and Tyler, *Young and Evil*, 170.

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flourished, not without difficulty, into the 1930s. Officially sanctioned by the city, the masquerade ball sported a libertine atmosphere where liquor, prostitution, gambling, and homosexuality prevailed. While society's elite -- the Palmers and the Fields -- set in regal glory, the poor working stiff and the prostitute hobnobbed with the business man and the professor; the homosexual and the bohemian, with the politician and the judge. This intermingling of people offered the sexual outlaw a sense of recognition and an opportunity to meet like-minded people. For the homosexual, the masquerade also allowed the wearing of "drag" (women's clothes) legally two nights out of a year. This fact alone attracted individuals to the care-free, decadent party where the finale was the promenade of the costumed individuals. Without fear of harassment or arrest, homosexuals gladly partook in the ball's openness.

By the late 1910s, this event became an institution and a legend within the underground in Chicago, New York City and elsewhere. Many customs began in Chicago -- the wearing of drag, the promenade of revelers, the use of police protection, the intermingling of races -- became intricate parts of these social affairs wherever held. The predominance and open presence of homosexuals became such a tradition that many attendees came to watch, applaud, and meet these mythic creatures.
With Prohibition, the 1920s readily adopted the masquerade ball. With crowds of thrill seekers, the existence of easy money, a frank openness in regards to sexual expression and exploration, and, most importantly, the speakeasy, general society developed a new interest in the novelty of the "drag" and in the hidden world of the homosexual. The observations of one contemporary speaks for a whole generation. Noting the prevalence of homosexuals at drag balls, Taylor Gordon stated that the balls consisted mostly of

men from Kansas City to New York who think they can make women look up and take notice, and really some of them would fool many a fly shiek if they were permitted to walk Broadway the way they look at the ball....You should have seen the expressions on fastidious women's (sic) faces, when they learned such charming looking women were men. One beautiful lady said, 'Well, if this keeps up, real women are going to have a battle that will be hard to beat. Look at the privilege these folks have!'

Once the popularity of drag balls and drag shows (staged entertainment by female impersonators) spread, speakeasies and ballrooms in Chicago and New York regularly featured the events. Readily adopted by such Harlem nightspots as The Savoy Ballroom, The Renaissance Casino, and Texas Guinen's, the drag offered an easy way of making money from the white uptown tourist:

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The last big ball I attended where these men got (sic) the most of the prizes for acting and looking more like ladies than the ladies...was at the Savoy. I had to call up everyone I thought hadn't been to one....That night the hall was packed with people from bootblacks to New York's rarest bluebloods....The show that was put on that night for a dollar admission...would make George White's Scandals (a Broadway play) opening look like a side show in a circus.  

The individual newly arrived to the city had little difficulty in learning about these events or where they were held and few problems in meeting new friends, acquaintances, or sexual partners.

Soon after coming to New York I began to dress up as girl. I went to a masquerade ball with another boy who dressed as a girl. At the ball the fellows asked us to dance with them. I like to dance with men if the other fellow leads. I have no trouble following. It comes natural...The balls began shortly before midnight....

The drag featured entertainment by female impersonators, followed by music from a jazz band, and finally a promenade of masqueraders who were judged for best costume by either the audience or a select panel of celebrities. One homosexual by the alias of "Sidney" described a typical evening.

I went to a drag in Harlem in an armory where the were two or three thousand people. They had a hundred policemen there. It was supposed to be colored but one-fourth were white. The police tried to keep the sex in the toilet. I saw only one person outraged...It appealed to me as perverse. Colored people with their families brought their suppers and ate. There were

3 Ibid.

4 Henry, Sex Variants, 433.
Lesbians in the audience but only males dancing. There were two big orchestras at each end and prizes were given.5

Many times an individual spared no expense in buying an outfit for the ball. Individuals saved for months so as to afford the cost of a dress and refinery required. One report stated that individuals paid "as high as $500 for their gowns to wear in the famous Harlem Drag Balls. These men are of all nations, white and black."6 Limited by personal circumstances, others borrowed items from friends, male and female, to create outrageous outfits.

One first-hand account humorously testified to the rich diversity seen at a ball.

There were many young men made-up as girls exposing a large part of their bodies as if in defiance of the supposed fairer sex. What was chiefly against them was that they were mostly too tall. One of the most effective of them was introduced to me as Texas Guinan. She had Texas's blond wig and a mass of pearls and she imitated the tremendous voice of Texas. 'May I leave this horror at your table for a little?' said Mr. Burgess (the manager.)

This false Texas was nothing loath to partake of some gin—we had some with us and mixed it with ginger ale. She was a lively character and attracted a number of other dancers about us. Another male impersonator of woman came and showed us his step-ins which he alleged he had made himself; they were of pink diaphanous crepe de chine and fastened with a tape. Over this fragile garment he had only a burnous (sic) but there was something ludicrous and bizarre in a man of six feet standing exposed for a moment in girl's underwear. He began to carry on a mock flirtation with Texas, encouraged by shouts of mirth from the others.

5 Ibid., 55-56.

6 Gordon, Born To Be, 228.
'Come together, girls,' said the appalling blonde.
'Let me tell you a story. Those who don't think they ought to listen, go away.'

The false Texas reeled off a series of stories which were more indelicate than amusing. I took Claire out to dance and left him. We agreed that there were limits to what one will listen to from a man dressed up as a woman....

Another witness described the colorful variety of participants as well as the costumes chosen for such event.

Among the contestants are slim boyish figures, proportioned like young Dionysus. Others display the symmetrical development of young girls.

Some in a trailing cloud of feathers, rival birds of paradise or peacocks. Great head-dresses nod and undulate from their shapely heads. Many of the paraders wear what would be an emperor's ransom in necklaces, flashing rings, bracelets and ear-rings -- were the jewels only genuine.

Many participants chose to wear other, equally flamboyant costumes. In a description of a show at the Roseland, one witness reported

There were sixty-five professional masqueraders taking part besides the hostesses and the hoofers and the general public.

There were sultans and jinns and caliphs and sorcerers and Aladdins and wicked uncles and Ali Babas, dreadful masks, alluring nakedness and somehow or other everything that was not Arabia as well.

At the magical hour of three a.m. occurred the finale, the promenade of the "fairies."

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7 Graham, New York Nights, 130-131.
9 Graham, New York Nights, 130.
Music for the grand march started and Vincent leapt away and the procession began. He threw his fingers everyway (sic) and went with the music from one to another and they stepped by slowly with their hands on their hips or one hand on one hip or on an arm or both arms and wreathed in smiles and all made up within an inch of their lives. There were screams to them and handclappings (sic) and they waved from their high heels. Fifty or more walked one by one to the platform with a spotlight on it and steps on two sides and there Vincent was. They mounted and turned with Vincent showing them off for the prizes given for the most applause, supposedly, for the most beautiful costumes, but he gave them to those he knew no matter how much they pushed and tore. There were half a dozen running around crying I GOT FIRST PRIZE and others got other prizes and the music went on.10

Part of the revelry of the masquerade later became known as "camp", a self-serving and, on the surface, a self-effacing form of humor in which homosexuals parodied the stereotypical images of homosexuals as effeminate. An excellent example occurs in The Young and Evil.

Tony dear aren't you overdressed Tony answered but I'm not Sheba surrounded by food and Mary what you look like in that outfit he said to Julian. Look at Her!

Vincent had on a white satin blouse and black breeches. Dear I'm master of ceremonies tonight and you should have come in drag you've have gotten a prize. He had large eyes with a sex-life all their own and claimed to be the hardest boiled queen on Broadway.

...bleeding Belle! but the clock doesn't stop when somebody is hit seems to have adopted the habits of a gentleman in every particular which naturally includes the payment of paramours if only in bohemian dinners Becky could you spare it? picked me up on Eighth Street and did me for trade in Christopher Street some books aren't even read things

10 Ford and Parker, Young and Evil, 166.
about the Village because they are bound to be
ninety percent
lies there's a new place called Belle's
Jeans...\textsuperscript{11}

Although a time of revelry, openness, and abandon-
ment, hidden dangers existed for even the most experi-
enced individual. While attendance by undercover agents
appears to have been rare, police entrapment occurred
with some regularity. An individual who solicited sexual
favors from another might find himself arrested. In \textit{Young
and Evil}, Julian comes literally face to face with the
threat of entrapment.

When he went back down the steps the door was
closed into the hall and the one who had given him the
drink of gin was standing in front of it...He came out
fanning himself...

He was being looked in the face by several
policemen one of whom immediately said THAT'S THE ONE.
What one? Julian asked innocently.
No it's not said another and the first one agreed
and Julian walked away.\textsuperscript{12}

Such experience was atypical. Once entrapped, an indi-
vidual found himself in night court facing charges
ranging from disorderly conduct to commitment of
unnatural acts.

Other dangers included the preying of unsavory indi-
viduals on homosexual and heterosexual alike. Many male
hustlers found the atmosphere attractive and the prospect
of easy money lucrative. Due to the great availability of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 153-157.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 167-168.
\end{itemize}
sexual partners, few chose to pay for a hustler's services. However, prostitutes often posed as innocent individuals as to pick-up the unsuspecting person. After commitment of sexual acts, one would be threatened with blackmail. The truly unfortunate found themselves beaten and robbed.

To avoid harassment or an unsuspected raid by police, most sponsors of drag balls paid for protection through underworld connections. At the same time, both New York and Chicago issued a license, for a fee, that allowed these events to occur.

This was a licensed masquerade party with police protection. All violations of the Penal Code of the State of New York scrupulously avoided. Thus it was the officers of the Law cleared the floor for the parade of the 'fairies,' holding back the crowd, while a long elevated platform was set up in the center of the hall. They held back the crowd, too, while the 'fairies' came on in single file....

For the individual new to this underworld of sex, the masquerade ball served as a chance to make contact with a diverse, colorful group of people. Frequenting both heterosexual and homosexual, this community institution attracted the male prostitute and the bar patron, the androgyne and the masculine, the tourist and the participant. Middle class associated with working class, the rich with the poor. Loosening barriers that separated individuals, the drag thus served to bond the diverse

\[13\] Niles, Strange Brother, 213.
elements of the homosexual community together.
CHAPTER XIII

DRAWING DOWN A PRIVATE VEIL:
HOMOSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

"Rat had shown me new visions of beauty. I had shown him fresh fountains of simplicity and peace. Many hours we lay there, saying little, but feeling the steady, warm throb of the body at our side."¹

F.O. Matthiessen.

Especially in terms of relationships, a study of the public aspects of homosexuality does not give a clear picture of the very private lives of homosexuals. Many individuals remained in heterosexual relationships with occasional outings to bars or parks, usually in a different city. Others lived in committed relationships with another homosexual and rarely visited the night scene or had sexual relationships outside the relationship. Some sublimated, for the most part, their sexual desires and chose to invest their time with like-minded friends.

When I was twenty-seven I met a man that I've been seeing off and on ever since. He is very much in love with me. I'm living with him. He is rather ordinary physically but he has a very fine mind and he's well informed and very articulate.²

Given the various individual personalities that made up this underground, one still glimpse the varieties of private behavior that existed.

Scattered reports detail this private arena. An acute observer of the Greenwich scene since the early twenties, Max Bodenheim reported

There is...a penthouse garden atop a skyscraper apartment in lower Fifth Avenue near Washington Square...that would not make it worthy of mention...except for the fact that the man who occupies the penthouse is the bachelor mother of a six-year old girl....

The man is a prominent architect who is 'married' to a handsome young man. Having assumed the role of 'wife' in a marital relationship that is quite common in bohemia, the architect became obsessed with the laudable ambition of becoming a mother. His 'husband,'...was bisexual and became the father of the little dream-girl by one of his female piano students...

After a terrible scene during which the enraged 'wife' threatened to fling his two-timing 'husband' from the penthouse, they finally kissed and made up. The architect agreed to become the 'mother' of the child, which suited the biological mother perfectly.³

The author also commented that homosexuals "were taken for granted in the Village" but homosexual "designs for living...can shock, by their audacity, the most blase bohemian ...!"⁴

² Henry, Sex Variants, 104.
³ Bodenheim, My Life and Loves, 104.
⁴ Ibid., 108.
Bodenheim cited other incidents of homosexual couples who lived or frequented the Village in the twenties and thirties. Despite the author's cynicism and exaggeration, his accounts give a flavor of the diverse arrangements that homosexuals entered when they formed a relationship. "I have known homosexuals who live together with a devotion rarely equaled by so-called 'normal' couples, and can only be paralleled by the passionate inverts described by Plato and other ancients."5

Whether most homosexuals viewed their relationships as a marriage or union remains uncertain. Most humorously camped up the idea but sensitive voices such as F.O. Matthiessen left vivid testimony to the personal struggle of creating, without societal sanction, permanent and enduring relationships.

Marriage is a mere term; only as a dynamic vivid thing does it dominate life. That is: you can visualize marriage or you can live it. Now I am living it.

Marriage! What a strange word to be applied to two men! Can't you hear the hell-hounds of society baying full pursuit behind us? But that's just the point. We are beyond society. We've said thank you very much, and stepped outside and closed the door....In the eyes of the knowing world we would be pariahs, outlaws, degenerates. This is indeed the price we pay for the unforgivable sin of being born different....

And so we have a marriage that was never seen on land or sea...! It is a marriage that demands nothing and gives everything. It does not limit the affections of the two parties, it gives their scope greater radiance and depth. Oh it is strange enough. It has no ring, and no vows, and no (wedding presents...), and no children. Of course it has none of the coldness of

5 Ibid., 111.
ring, and no vows, and no (wedding presents...), and no children. Of course it has none of the coldness of passion, but merely the serene joy of companionship. It has no three hundred and sixty-five breakfasts opposite each other at the same table; and yet it desires frequent companionship, devotion, and laughter.  

Without guidelines or approval, homosexual relationships often followed stereotypical behavior assigned by society in general and the medical community in particular:

In one of the joints I met a fellow who liked me. I didn't think much of him but I've been with him ever since... He is well built, aggressive and domineering. Occasionally I used to be badly beaten by my admirers and this man protected me. At first I regarded him as other men with whom I spent an hour or a night in a rented room.

Later on he provided an apartment in which we both are living now. He works all week, draws his pay, brings it home, allows so much for household expenses and a certain amount for my clothes and recreation... He likes to see me dressed as a woman. In the evening I put on a kimono or a bathrobe. When we go to parties I dress just like any other young girl.

Once in a while I used to go with some other man when I needed more money or when I had an opportunity. Sometimes he didn't object but more often he would be violently jealous and beat me up with his fists. I never liked to be beaten up and I have often left him... I always went back because he liked me.

Commenting on the behavior of an acquaintance, one observer noted that "B.L. keeps a vermillion kitchenette apartment, with a four-poster bed hung with blue curtains and an electric moon over it. When he has his loves he gets violently domestic, tailors, mends, and cooks." 

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6 Hyde, Rat and the Devil, 29-30.
7 Henry, Sex Variants, 432-433.
8 Zorbaugh, The Gold Coast, 100.
In a study conducted in the 1920s and 1930s, numerous personal accounts tell of the struggle to define as well as create such relationships. Individuals told of short relationships with homosexually inclined men who supported a wife and children but kept a separate apartment for their male lovers. Others spoke of having serious, short term affairs with other single homosexuals:

I've had several serious affairs. One was with a very intellectual college graduate. He appealed to me mentally and sexually and it's hard to get both at the same time. I have never lived with anyone I was more crazy about but he was not sincere. He wasn't true to me and I wasn't to him. He hasn't got over the attachment yet.9

Male relationships often last for brief periods due to unforeseen difficulties and an inability to make adjustments. One individual, with the alias of Michael D., gave vivid testimony to the problems faced by male couples.

During the summer when I was in New York I met Daniel, a man six years older, in a subway washroom. He was extremely worldly, a very different person, very emotional, very intense, very tolerant. He took me to his hotel. We saw each other frequently and within a short time I found myself romantically in love with him. For some months, it was most idyllic, a real romantic affair and extremely pleasant. We took walks together on the Palisades, rides on buses and ferry boats, and went to concerts. He practiced sodomy and fellatio on me. I wasn't interested in doing anything to him. He was aggressive and passive sodomy became enjoyable to me. I wasn't faithful to him and I would tell him about my affairs with others. I couldn't imagine why he would be nearly mad with jealousy. I had discovered love but he had discovered jealousy.

9 Henry, Sex Variants, 311.
Our parting was very tender and for a long time we wrote to each other twice a week.\textsuperscript{10}

Another stated that he found that it was "easier to live with a man but after a definite age it becomes economic--with some very quickly after twenty-five, with others if petit and dumb, not until thirty-five." The same man noted that "if you live with anyone the sexual attraction passes very quickly."\textsuperscript{11}

Although the upper-class circle of homosexuals remained for the most part mute, a good example of a homosexual relationship was that of F. O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney. On board the ocean liner Paris bound to Europe in the spring of 1924, Matthiessen, an instructor at Harvard University, felt despondent and alone as he struggled with feelings and desires that he had only recently discovered and admitted. On the same ship, Cheney, an artist with a growing reputation in Boston and New York, also dealt with homoerotic feelings.

I found Rat (Matthiessen's nickname for Cheney) on board the 'Paris.' We fell into an easy intimacy from the start. There was little restraint on the part of either of us; in a day or two I was talking to him of my family and of my religion as freely as I would have to (my closest friends), and he had shown me probably his most sacred possession - a little leather case containing a picture of his mother.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 137.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 199.
\textsuperscript{12} Hyde, Rat and the Devil, 17.
Several days of "laughing and kidding and being serious" followed in which each "had told each other about most of the important events of our lives." However, Matthiessen remained troubled about one private aspect of his life that had not been discussed.

There remained one signal omission: sex. I realized that in order to be on a basis of complete truth and freedom with him I must drag out the skeleton of my twisted psychology that I had (disclosed to a few intimate friends...). All that morning and afternoon I gulped for courage and the right opportunity without success. I steered the conversation to Havelock Ellis, but lost my nerve at the crucial moment. My unsuccessful artfulness was very amusing. That evening while we stood at the rail watching the stars, the formulated words were half a dozen times on my lips, but I put off and put off: Later, I said, Later. You see the crux of the situation was that I did not want to be emotional or alarmist. I wanted to treat of the matter seriously, but calmly. And being a kid I was nervous and excited.13

Desiring a "night cap" and some fruit, Matthiessen and Cheney retired to their cabins. As Matthesseen continued the story:

Now, I said, steeled by desperation, now, now, I'll never get up courage enough if I don't do it now. So I sat Rat down in a chair in my cabin on the pretense of giving him some fruit....And while his mouth was stuffed with a pear, I said in a voice that attempted to maintain its usual pass the bread, please conversational tone, but which sounded queer and remote for all that:

'I know it won't make any difference to our friendship, but there's one thing I've got to tell you: before (my extraordinary senior year at Yale) I was sexually inverted. Of course I've controlled it since ...'

The munching of the pear died away. There followed perhaps half a minute of the most heavily
freighted (sic) silence I have ever felt. Then, in a
far away voice I had never heard came the answer: 'My
God, feller, you've turned me upside down. I'm that way
too.'

For minutes we remained speechless as the truth
sank in upon us that here at last we had each found
someone who could not only understand, but feel our
sexual complexities and difficulties. Then the tension
was broken, and our dammed up experience began to pour
out. They were very similar....By four o'clock we were
exhausted and went to bed. As he left my cabin, Rat
lightly brushed my hair with his hand -- a gesture of
the pure essence of friendly gentleness, and turning
said, 'God, you're a slick feller to have had the nerve
to tell me this. Of course our friendship was all
formed before, but this can't help (but) strengthen
it.'

Inseparable for the remaining few days of the voyage,
the two found themselves falling emotionally as well as
physically in love.

The last two days on the boat passed swiftly. The
last night we sat on the couch in Rat's cabin talking,
his head in my lap. There was tremendous joy in his
nearness, nothing more. After a few hours my back began
to be cramped, and I got up...then lay down beside him.
We were both fully dressed, but the subtle, electric
quality that ran through my whole being as our knees
and shoulders lightly brushed against each other is
indescribable. I had attained complete harmony with
another spirit for the first time in my life...About
dawn Rat turned and with full red lips kissed me fully
on the lips. The very tips of my fingers tingled
with...dynamic electric force as I ran them lightly
through his black hair.

With separate agendas, the two men promised each other
to write as soon as possible. Matthiessen, overwhelmed by
recognition of his desires, "wrote him (Cheney) five times
in the first week and every day after that...." Writing to

14 Ibid., 17-18.
15 Ibid.
his beloved 'Devil' (Matthiessen), Cheney was moved by his feelings and desires, "Well, it's true, isn't it? Our union is complete. Love is stronger than death, stronger than sin - even old habits." However, Cheney proved to be more resistant to his emotions and pleaded on occasion for Matthiessen to be sure of his emotions and not to rush into the relationship.

After tumultuous months of longing and doubt, Matthiessen and Cheney arranged to rendezvous in Italy and returned to Boston together. The return voyage confirmed the feelings of both men. In a letter to a friend in August 1925, Matthiessen described the relationship in glowing terms.

... intimate and all-embracing...the central fact remains that Rat and I are so constituted by nature that our two lives and personalities have blended into a harmony of understanding affection which brings us each closer to the other than we have ever been to anyone else. I did not know that life contained anything so rich and deep.17

Upon arrival, the two lovers shared as much time together as their schedules allowed. Due to health and his painting, Chaney retired to Maine where Matthiessen joined him on holidays, weekends and summers.

Despite Cheney's family who sought an end to the relationship, the two men remained in a committed, intimate

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16 Ibid., 17-18; 24.
17 Ibid., 11.
relationship until Cheney's death on July 12, 1945. Due to separate demands of their professional lives complicated by Cheney's failing health, each spent several months of the year separated and traveling to another part of the country to be with the other. Yet the depth of commitment and emotion that existed was expressed in a letter that Matthiessen wrote to his friend, Louis Hyde.

I can't seem to find my way out of this desperate depression. I'd try to stick it out, if I didn't think it would recur...I have fought it until I'm worn out. I can no longer bear the loneliness with which I am faced.'18

Unable to fight off the nightmares to which he fell prey at Cheney's death, Matthiessen committed suicide on the day this letter was written.

18 Ibid., 3.
You go in to give your girl  
A kiss in the hall  
But instead you find  
You're kissing her brother  
Paul1  
_Masculine Women, Feminine Men_  
(circa 1926)

The popularity of the subject of homosexuality in the twenties was such that one critic noted that "the flood of books drawing on the sensationalism of sexual perversion and the plight of the 'fairie'" increased "tenfold" between the two world wars."2 Easily an exaggeration, this comment has validity in the fact that an openness to discuss sexuality occurred in this decade. This frankness appeared prurient to more conservative elements of society yet the books, plays, and songs of the era treated sexuality implicitly. Even the more explicit treatment used innuendos, current slang, and implication to describe this underworld. A modern reader often has difficulty in drawing a clear picture and meaning. Yet


drawing a clear picture and meaning. Yet there existed a number of popular and underground classics that gave fairly clear, accurate portraits of this sexual underworld.

One popular book of the twenties was *The Blind-Bow Boy* by Carl Van Vechten, a leading New York literati and intellectual. Receiving both accolades and hoot calls on publication in 1923, this novel presents a laissez-faire attitude towards sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. In a tangled plot of festivity and manipulation, Van Vechten follows the experiences of a young man (Harold) living in the heart of decadent society.

In one episode, Campaspe, a leading character of the novel, is approached by her son, Basil, who asked her advice:

A Spanish boy, who shared his bedroom, had made a curious request... Should I, mama? Must I? Do you want to? No, mama. Then you don't have to.  

The novel ends with Harold, around whom the novel evolves, sailing off to England with Ronald, Duke of Middlebottom, a notoriously flamboyant homosexual, whose stationary was engraved with the pronouncement that "A Thing of beauty is a boy forever."  

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4 Ibid., 117.

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As there were a number of homosexuals and sexual dilettantes within his circle of acquaintances, Van Vechten's novel was certainly based upon his own experience. A bohemian by inclination, Van Vechten went to risque parties where sexual perversity was openly displayed. Moreover, he frequented the nightclubs, speakeasies, and cafes popular with homosexuals. On occasion, Van Vechten also served as judge at various drag balls in Harlem.

At the integrated transvestite costume balls at the Rockland Palace Casino, Carl and Avery Hopwood occasionally served as judges while 'the Astors and the Vanderbilts sat regally in boxes' to observe the parades of pretty boys in gilt and feathers and elegant gowns. Once, for a Harlem drag at the Savoy, he joined Bob Chanler and an old enemy, Muriel Drapier, in awarding first prize to a lad almost 'stark naked, save for a decorative cache-sex and silver sandals and he was painted a kind of apple green.'

Although the impact of The Blind-Bow Boy is hard to measure, the novel went through four printings within ten days of publication without any censorship troubles. Due to the book's popularity and availability, homosexuals easily obtained a copy to read and share among friends. Whether one agreed with the picture presented, the book offered a more tolerant attitude toward homosexual behavior than the typical doom and gloom novel then in vogue.

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One such typical "doom and gloom" novel, Strange Brother presented the subject in a melodramatic and morose manner. Set in both Greenwich Village and Harlem, Brother deals with a young man's attempt to come to terms with his sexuality. Mark, the main character, takes the reader through the labyrinths of the homosexual world. Working in Manhattan, he lives in the Village to avoid the scrutiny of friends and family. His friends wore women's attire and paraded nightly on Riverside Drive. Nightly visits to Harlem's bars and dives emphasized sensational aspects of this underground.

Unhappy and depressed with this life, Mark seeks treatment with a Freudian analyst. Failure to find a cure, the author implies, leads to his continued "moral decline" by awakening deep inhibitions and repressions. Soon Mark rejoins his friends at their favorite haunts and eventually turns to prostitution. Meeting another man on a Village street corner, he enters into a tryst that leads to blackmail and ends in his suicide.

Highly dramatic and biased, Strange Brother nevertheless presented a colorful account of the homosexual world. While the author's life remains unknown, the description of the bar scenes, the private parties, the acting out of the rite of public cruising, underlined a thorough knowledge of this world. Frankly sentimental in outlook, the book awkwardly argued for better under-
standing and acceptance of the sexual outcast. At one point, the author has Mark arguing that many geniuses and artists of history had been homosexual and therefore homosexuals had contributions to make to society. Typical of the many works written in this era, Brother attempted to cover a very private, controversial subject with a veneer of delicacy.

Titles of books often underscored the melodramatic and sensational treatment of the subject. Besides The Blind-Bow Boy and Strange Brother, the growing list of novels treating the issue included The Scarlet Pansy (Scully), The Captive (Bourget), Revelation (Birabeau), Gentleman, I Address You Privately (Boyle), Beyond the Street (Calmer), Undue Fulfillment (Coyle), A Strange Love (Eekhoud), and First and Last Love (Hermant). Most capitalized on a growing interest in homosexuality, yet few became commercial successes.


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"illuminating relief 'The Captive' might degenerate into commercial exploitation of a revolting theme." By the time the newly formed play jury ruled, in a split decision, that The Captive was not obscene, several questionable plays including Sex, The Virgin Man, and The Drag, all financed by and starring a Jane Mast, had opened on Broadway. Both Sex and The Virgin Man dealt with the general issue of sexuality. With an open portrayal of homosexuality, The Drag "... put across the message that certain persons are more to be pitied then censored." When Mast's agent, William Morganstern, announced plans to stage The Drag on Broadway, Mayor Jimmy Walker, under pressure of the Society, "called the leading theatrical producers to City Hall...and warned them that censorship would result unless they voluntarily cleaned up the stage." In defiance of Walker and the Society, Morganstern announced that "he had his pick of any one of three theatres...and that he expected to have it (The Drag) on Broadway at an early date." 


Within a week of Morganstern's announcement, New York police raided all three plays, arresting the actors and the producers. Upon release of the actors, Sex, The Captive, and The Virgin Man re-opened to full theatres. Further nightly raids, however, discouraged Morganstern who announced that The Drag would not open in New York.11 After The Captive was ruled immoral by New York Supreme Court Justice Jeremiah A. Mahony on March 9, Virgin Man and Sex closed. With passage of a law prohibiting any obscene play in New York State in April, 1927, the Society felt triumphant over stopping the spread of "sex perversion." It should be noted that Jane Mast was offered a movie contract and so retired to Hollywood where she became better known as Mae West.

With the interest in black culture and music in the twenties, Broadway capitalized on the 'Harlem' craze by producing several high quality musicals with all black casts. One musical, however, that failed miserably was titled, Pansy. The play had many homosexual innuendos. The only saving factor in an otherwise "dismal" show was Bessie Smith, in her first and apparently only Broadway role. Not a dancer by inclination or profession, Smith however did "reasonably good shimmy and shake" which, however, did not prevent "hisses ...to be heard for the

first time in the annals of Broadway premiers" due to the musical's content.\textsuperscript{12} The play lasted a mere three performances.

In terms of music, the lyrics of many "race" records written and recorded by such black singers as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith included frank references to homosexuals. Two songs recorded by Smith in the mid-twenties were titled \textit{Foolish Man Blues} and \textit{Sissy Man Blues}. Both expressed a knowledge and tolerance of homosexuality among the black community. Although these recordings rarely reached a large audience outside the black community, the songs became widely known among the literary and homosexual communities. Due to her personal lifestyle and bawdy lyrics, Smith herself became possibly the most popular black singer among the homosexual community.

Since many jazz musicians started their careers playing in the more "unknown" haunts such as Valentine's The Daisy Chain and even in blind pegs (male brothels), men such as Willie "the Lion" Smith were well acquainted with the slang and behavior of homosexuals. In a jam session in the late twenties, Smith and friends created a

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}
song titled "Strange Fruit" that appears not to have been recorded.\textsuperscript{13}

Recorded by an unknown singer in the late 1920s, "The Lavender Cowboy" became a popular song within the homosexual community. Released on a "race" label, the lyrics were blatant even for the twenties.

He was such a delicate creature
He had eyes of heavenly blue
    And he longed to follow the heroes
And fight as the he-men all do.

Well he rode o'er mountain and prairie
Singing a song light and gay
And he rode his pony side saddle
He said he preferred it that way.\textsuperscript{14}

Although one would err to interpret the word "Gay" in terms of present day usage, the usage of the word suggests that the composer may have been extremely knowledgeable about this underworld. The song ends with the "fairy" cleaning "out an outlaws nest" and dying "with both guns a'smokin'.\textsuperscript{15}

Other lyrists of the twenties made innuendos to homosexuals in songs that listeners often innocently perceived as sentimental and non-sexual. Two of the more famous were Cole Porter and Noel Coward, both homosex-

\textsuperscript{13} Smith, \textit{Music on My Mind}, 237.

\textsuperscript{14} Gillo, \textit{Gay Moments}, 26.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
ually inclined. In songs written for Broadway musicals, Porter and Coward often couched suggestive meanings between the lines. Of the two, Porter was the more playful and candid. Coward, on the other hand, was reserved and ambiguous in his treatment. A careful reading of the lyrics, a knowledge of homosexual slang, and attention to the original unchanged recordings of songs like I'm a Gigolo (Porter), I'm Unlucky at Gambling (Porter), I've Been to a Marvelous Party (Coward), and I Wonder What Happened to Him (Coward) offer a better understanding of attempts to express homosexual themes in a non-threatening manner.16

Written for the rarely performed musical Bittersweet, Coward's Green Carnation became the anthem for homosexuals. Dealing with the life of Oscar Wilde, Carnation spoke of the enchanted and doomed life lived on the edge of society. Moreover, Coward's clever use of supernatural beings that were refined, fanciful, and fey allowed for various interpretations. This use of innuendo in both Porter's and Coward's songs created a sensitivity and ambiguity that made many of their songs popular with homosexuals.

Censored but rarely closed, Porter's Broadway musicals were considered risque by The Society for the Suppression of Vice which criticized his lyrics as offensive due to

16 Ibid., 24-25.
the subject matter. Threat of closure, however, led to lyrics and recordings being changed. Nonetheless, Porter often used the delivery of a song, and not the lyrics, to get a message across to the audience. One favorite technique was the use of all male choruses to reinstate the unlucky fortunes of a lady in love.
CHAPTER XV

AFTER THE PARTY: LIFE
IN THE THIRTIES

By the thirties, a flourishing homosexual subculture had taken a firm root in American society. However the dark clouds of the Depression had a negative effect on the budding culture. With the crash of 1929, the lights of the cabaret and speakeasy, cafe and brothel began to dim. Still, many homosexuals used the little money they earned to pursue their way of having fun. The "gay life," as it began to be known, became a little less visible, a little less extravagant, and more subdued, as with the rest of America. With the passing of the madness of the "roaring twenties", homosexuals once again found themselves faced with the threat of a moral crackdown in the reappearance of a religious and moral fervor.

Throughout the thirties, New York City's homosexual community faced continuing exposes, scandals, investigations, and physical harassment. Bars often were raided, patrons arrested, and valuable jobs lost due to the ensuing publicity. If protected by the mafia, a bar simply re-opened with a different name and higher cover charges. Street life also became more dangerous with blackmail and entrapment on the increase throughout the
decade. Although still popular, Riverside Park became notoriously known by many homosexuals as "fag-bashers" heaven. The glamour and glitter were passing.

In the mid-thirties, New York police, at the order of the mayor, started a major effort to eliminate sexual perverts and perversion on New York streets. The first targeted area was Broadway where "over 100 perverts were arrested within a month". Unlike the more lenient twenties, the judges, aware of the situation, found them all disorderly individuals and, at the recommendation of the mayor, sentenced them to 60 days at Bellevue Hospital for psychiatric treatment followed by a term at Rosebud Prison.¹

A scandal rocked city hall in the late thirties when the United States District Attorney, Thomas E. Dewey, revealed that a blackmail ring had been operating in the city for twenty years. With connections to the mafia, the ring involved several government offices, including the police. Preying upon wealthy homosexuals, individuals were enticed either by policemen or impostors into committing sexual acts in the various "tea rooms" around the city, but especially the one at the Fifty-first Street subway station. Threatened with arrest and public exposure, the

individual procured leniency by paying an agreed amount of money. In written testimony, a member of the ring noted

The amounts secured vary with the financial position of the victims. The top known touch is $35,000 from a Pittsburgh department-store owner, but the losses of a store owner in New York...are considered to be much more than that. The man was shook down by real coppers, by con mobs, parents, anti-vice societies, publishers of periodicals, and what not, until some years ago he moved to Europe.²

The informant went on to note that "the muzzle is one of the few rackets in which a go-back (second attempt) can be successfully staged. In some instances two or three go-backs on the same man are successful."³ Through avoidance of sensationalism and publicity, Dewey persuaded a victim to testify before a Grand Jury. Twenty-three members of the ring were eventually indicted and sent to prison.⁴

Greenwich Village appeared down at the heels. In place of the more successful bohemian artists and writers who moved to Paris or the refinements of middle class culture, the Village became the haunt of individuals more interested in fun and "freedom". Already a tourist attraction by the mid-twenties, this bohemian enclave


³ Ibid.

steadily lost its charm and magic throughout the thirties. Yet the homosexual as well as the struggling artist still sought out the Village due to its lingering reputation.

Still popular, the Pirate's Den drew an almost exclusive homosexual crowd, especially on Friday and Saturdays nights. Many "tourists' easily found the way The Den to "watch the pansies promenade and make eyes at each other and the normal men". Many cafes owned and operated by lesbians appeared and disappeared on a regular basis. These cafes welcomed the homosexual who brought his friends and spent money easily.

The artist studio gave way to the "rent parties" and private clubs where anything went. Influenced by their experiences in Harlem, the homosexual underground brought Harlem back to the Village where free wheeling sex circuses turned into orgies and male prostitution began to be prevalent. The Village became a playground for both the homosexual and heterosexual. The middle class visitor headed to the Village to find a sexual partner or a party, then perhaps went on to Harlem. One homosexual noted that homosexual men are more interested in cocktail parties than other men are. The homosexuals have an exaggerated sense about these parties and about bars and doing the smart thing. They all want to be the dilettante. They're on the go all the time.6

5 Bodenheim, My Life and Loves, 203.
6 Henry, Sex Variants, 227.
Undoubtedly affected by the hard times of the depression, the male brothel catered to a more elite clientele that could still afford the expense. Moreover, the brothel spread to other cities such as Kansas City. A good description of a house in that city serves as an example of what these places looked like:

This 'house' existed in a well-to-do residential section of Kansas City. It consisted mainly of a large, circular room, elegantly furnished with a bar, couches and lounge chairs, tables, etc. The male prostitutes were both masculine and effeminate types, some of the latter dressed as girls. Opening off of this large, circular room were nine or ten small alcoves, containing beds. The alcoves could be cut off from the main room by means of drapes; or exhibitionistic (sic) customers could leave the drapes open, so that other customers could walk around the room and observe what was going on in the alcoves.

Fees in this establishment ranged from $10.00 for a single contact up through $50.00 and even more for an all-night session. Music was provided, and dancing sometimes allowed.7

Gone were the "serious" artist and the bohemian carnival, yet Chicago's Towertown and Levee continued to lure a number of homosexual residents and thrill seekers. Parks such as Washington, Grant, Lincoln, and Oak Street Beach still served as pick-up or cruising areas. While the labyrinthian world of tea rooms remains undocumented in Chicago, several notorious toilets were located throughout the extensive 'L' system and, of greater renown, in the Chicago Public Library and the Chicago Art

Museum. No longer frequented by a large immigrant population, the Turkish baths became known primarily as homosexual haunts. Within the boundaries of Towertown, there were four bath houses that had reputations as homosexual pick-up areas. Jack's Bathhouse at Dearborn and Walton allowed same-sex encounters within the premises.  

In spite of the 1929 stock market crash and the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, a number of nightclubs flourished that catered exclusively to homosexuals. Four of the more renowned, all located within Towertown, were the Casino Club, La Masque, Sally's Shoppe, and the ever popular Bally Hoo Cafe. Located on North Halsted Street, the Bally Hoo gained a reputation for entertainment performed by a lesbian hostess and homosexual host, known respectively as "Mack and Marge." Mack dressed in men's attire and Marge dressed in drag. Other entertainment included the homosexual couple "Frankie and Johnnie" who provided jokes and songs with homosexual lyrics and innuendos. Ever popular, this duo worked at other night clubs as well as at numerous private parties. Frankie and Johnnie are credited with writing the homosexual anthem, "Towertown," whose lyrics were:

Father Spanish, Mother Greek and I'm French.
They call me Del Monte because I'm the sweetest Fruit in town.

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Fairytown, Fairytown, that's where all the boys go down.
Whoops! my dear.
Whoops! my dear, even the Chief of Police is queer.  

Although Hinky Dink and The Bath's patronage had long passed, Chicago still sported annual masquerade balls. Held on Halloween and New Year's Eve at The Coliseum Annex, a public dance hall south of the Loop, these social events continued to receive approval of the city government. One observer recalled his experience at a New Year's Eve ball in the mid-thirties.

Twice a year, with the knowledge and protection of Chicago's officialdom, do the homosexuals of the city gather in great numbers for their semi-annual costume ball, at which conventions and repressions are flung to the winds. New Year's Eve and Hallowe'en mark the occasions for the celebrations of the 'shadow world'... 

The same man recalled the "unusual and colorful sight" of "two handsome young men in street clothes dancing cheek to cheek, holding one another in close embrace ..." At a dance held on October 30, 1932, a thousand men and lesbians are reported to have been in attendance.

While the homosexual community still had friends among the literary set, the radical fringes, excluding Emma Goldman, retreated from the issue in the thirties. This

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9 Ibid., 31.
10 Ibid., 58.
11 Ibid.
was especially true of the American Communist party and its mouthpiece, The Worker. While the official stand of the Soviet Communist Party still embraced homosexual rights, American communists began a shrill attack on "pansies and fairies" in late 1930.

In a review of Thornton Wilder's works for the New Republic, Michael Gold, an American communist, launched a campaign against "genteel bourgeoisie" and homosexuality. Noting that Wilder's novels were "a daydream of homosexual figures in graceful gowns", Gold berated the style, language, and subjects of the novels:

> What gentle theatrical sighs! what lovely, well composed deaths and martyrdoms! what languishings and flutterings of God's sinning doves!...his is the most irritating and pretentious style pattern I have read in years. It has the slick, smug finality of the lesser Latins; that shallow clarity and tight little good taste that remind one of nothing so much as the conversation and practice of a veteran cocotte.\(^{12}\)

The review stated metaphorically that if one pricked the body of Wilder's works "it will bleed violet ink and aperitif." Gold then rhetorically asked if "this is the style with which to express America? Is this the speech of a pioneer continent?\(^{13}\)

Not stopping at berating Wilder's style, Gold personally attacked Wilder. In an aside, Gold noted that


\(^{13}\) Ibid.
Wilder was "a personal friend of Gene Tunney," the implication being that, since Tunney's homosexuality was a well-known subject of gossip, Wilder also was homosexual. Moreover, Gold implied that Wilder's personal tastes and upbringing were suspect.

He has all the virtues...the air of good breeding, the decorum, priestliness, glossy high finish as against intrinsic qualities, conspicuous inutility, caste feeling, love of the archaic.14

In conclusion Gold noted that Wilder's "fundamental silliness and superficiality were "hidden under a Greek chlamys."15

Gold's attack unleashed a tumultuous verbal dispute over the role of art and politics within American literary circles. Avoiding the issue of homosexuality, many American writers and radicals argued for the artist's right to freedom of expression. In response, Gold rejected this argument as a deterrent to the creation of art that realistically portrayed the working class struggle. In 1931, party leadership adopted Gold's viewpoints and abolished their endorsement of the rights of homosexuals. In 1934, the regime of Joseph Stalin repealed the sexual freedom clause of the Soviet constitution.

Despite the American communist retreat, party regulars ignored the lambast and shouting matches that rocked the

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
leadership. Unknowingly recruited to perform at a "unity camp" in upstate New York, Willie Smith recalled his experiences years later.

Everything seemed to be catch as catch can, and everybody slept in a different place each night. It was the most mixed up camp I ever saw or heard about - the races, the sexes, and the religions were all mixed.16

The aftermath of the stock market crash did not deter a second attempt at creating a social organization for homosexuals. Previously associated with the German homosexual rights movement and Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexology, Ernest Klopfleisch attempted—and failed-- to start a resort in the Hartz Mountains of southern Germany in the early 1920s. Saddened but not deterred, Klopfleisch moved to the U.S. in 1924, changing his name to Ernest F. Elmhurst. In 1930, Elmhurst shared his observations and ideas on the American homosexual underground in a letter to Hirschfeld.

As things stand here, the invert who is not altogether blind has a greater opportunity here than perhaps anywhere in the world to satisfy the feelings rooted in him...the invert runs a greater risk of ruining himself from over-association here rather than from withering away for lack of empathy. In smaller towns, the situation is, without question, not quite as ideal as, for example, in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, etc.17

16 Smith, Music on My Mind, 236.

Commenting that the prevalence of "admitted bisexuals...is definitely ten times greater" than one would believe, Elmhurst proposed a social organization where a homosexual could "measure his abilities freely against those of the... bisexual." 18 The German emigre then outlined an elaborate plan for the establishment of such an organization.

I consider it an easily accomplished beginning to own...some central place in the form of a large club building (similar to the YMCA...), with possibly an athletic club close to the large cities. This could serve to give the invert that place in the world which he, with more or less justification, deserves according to his virtue. 19

The question of reaching the "invert" without undue publicity remained a thorny problem. Elmhurst noted that the only opportunity for homosexuals to socialize were "the costume balls, which are enormously successful, and are almost exclusively an enterprise of typical inverts and their supporters." 20 Therefore, the first step involved the distribution of cards

which could be placed on the tables, announcing the idea of an organization. Thus, from among the quests of a dance, an organization could be formed that could be mentioned in the same breath along with all other...clubs. 21

18 Ibid., 130.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
The organization would raise money "by renting a number of rooms in private clubs, some initial members could be attracted who could finance the initial...costs through membership fees. By arranging dances, like those at the Rockland Palace,...one could expect an enormous profit."22 Elmhurst finally proposed that the headquarters be in either New York or Chicago, the latter preferable due to its central location.

Upon receipt of the letter, Hirschfield wrote a Dr. Harry Benjamin, friend and supporter of the Institute, asking him to contact this visionary young man. In a letter to Hirschfield dated June 1930, Benjamin mentioned contacting Elmhurst and advising him to "try starting very small, with a modest group of like-minded (sic) people." However, Benjamin believed that "an honest and open association of inverts is impossible in America." Discouraged by this response, Elmhurst appears not to have proceeded with his plan.23

Throughout the 1930s, the homosexual underground in Chicago and New York showed a resiliency and adaptability to the changing economic circumstances of American society. Attracting a new generation of individuals seeking refuge from hostile environments, homosexuals in

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 133.
Towertown and Greenwich continued, with modification, the traditions and institutions developed over the previous three decades. Thus a rich, colorful legacy would be given to the thousands introduced, through war mobilization, to this world in the early 1940s.
CHAPTER XVI

CONCLUSION

By 1940, a viable, active homosexual underground existed in Chicago and New York. Through three decades of increasing visibility, homosexuals created a rich, colorful subculture with its own language, dress, literature, modes of behavior, institutions, and traditions. The creation of this community allowed a public and private dialogue -- between homosexual and heterosexual, homosexual and homosexual -- to occur. Such communication broke through the veil of silence imposed by society and, more importantly, challenged the psycho-medical conceptions formed in the later part of the nineteenth century.

A growing awareness in society of the persecution and plight of homosexuals led to the beginning of a perceptual change on the part of a minority. Rejecting terminology and ideas that dominated psychology and medicine, individuals worked to develop a more humane approach. Abandonment of the sickness model, furthermore, led to the perception of homosexuality as an unexplainable variation in human sexuality. Founder of

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the Committee on Sexual Research, Dr. George Henry conducted studies of numerous homosexuals that concluded that a homosexual's problems were created by society's intolerance. Henry's work influenced the later studies of Alfred Kinsey who, under the auspices of the Committee, began extensive research on sexuality that eventually superceded Henry's pioneering works.

The sexual underworld between 1910 and 1940 reflected, moreover, the changing mores of American society. Examination of homosexuality in this era, then, mirrors the catalytic changes in an intense, microscopic environment. Faced with isolation, rejection, and persecution, homosexuals chose to create a new community out of diverse people. Drawing upon the tolerance, acceptance, and behavior of other marginal groups, especially the earlier bohemian enclaves of Chicago and New York and Harlem's blacks, homosexuals developed a collective easy-going, defiant attitude. The passing of Towertown in the forties and the eventual absorption of Greenwich into the homosexual subculture marked the passing of an older tradition without a modern equivalent.

More importantly, each individual created a persona or mask to act out one's perceptions of what being homosexual meant. Uncovering the persona to lay bare the real individual remains difficult. However, reclamation of the collective story sheds light upon aspects of private life
long lost to history. Although many records have yet to be discovered, available evidence cited in this paper points to a flourishing culture that became the pivotal point in the later creation of a gay culture. This earlier story remains to be integrated into the tapestry of American social history to contribute to a fuller understanding of American society's diversity.

The arrival of war and the drafting of millions of men greatly aided in introducing thousands to this underground. As with the rest of the country, the homosexual community mobilized in defense of a society more aware, although in general not more tolerant, of sexual differences. This community stood at the edge of the next stage of development, political organization. The coming of war served as a catalyst for a new awareness and consciousness to emerge among men and women who would breakthrough the restraints of the older subculture to find a new freedom to express and create their lives. To understand, then, the issues of today's homosexual community, one must turn to the past and examine the generations that lived from 1910 through 1940.
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