



Stonewall Riots

by Andrew Matzner

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2004, glbtq, inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

The weekend of June 27-29, 1969 was a turning point in the struggle for glbtq equality. Gay and lesbian activism certainly existed prior to this time, but the confrontations between police and demonstrators at the Stonewall Inn in New York City catalyzed the movement and inspired gay men and lesbians to move their cause to entirely new heights utilizing entirely new tactics.

The birth of the Gay Pride Movement was not without controversy, however, and there continue to be debates about what actually occurred during the riots. Nevertheless, the Stonewall "Rebellion" indisputably holds an honored, if contentious, place in glbtq mythology and history.

Pre-Stonewall

Organizing for gay and lesbian rights in the United States did not begin with Stonewall, but rather with the homophile movement of the 1950s.

The Mattachine Society was founded in 1950 by a group of gay men influenced by leftist politics. The Society engaged in activism and lobbying for law reform, but it aimed to represent homosexuals as non-threatening, upstanding members of society who differed from other white, middle-class men simply by what they did in the bedroom. Although it provided much needed support for gay men, the group was unable to sustain itself over time, and the national chapter finally dissolved in the mid-1960s.

The Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) was a lesbian organization that formed in 1955. Because in part of its publication, *The Ladder*, membership in DOB steadily increased over the next decade. However, internal tensions regarding DOB's involvement in the early women's movement (which generally was anti-lesbian) caused rifts in the organization. *The Ladder* ceased publication in 1972, and as the 1970s progressed DOB's membership sharply declined.

The members of the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis tended to be conservative when it came to social change. Rather than engage in open confrontation with authorities, the goal was to work within the system to lobby for social acceptability. When protests such as picketing did occur, demonstrators acted in an orderly, polite manner; the least of their intentions was to get arrested.

The civil rights, black power, anti-war, and women's movements of the mid to late 1960s, however, greatly inspired younger gay and lesbian activists to move to a more radical, militant stance. The idea of social revolution was part of the late 1960s zeitgeist, and the lesbian and gay collective consciousness was primed and ready for an incident--perhaps any incident--that would allow an aggressive Gay Pride movement to spark, catch fire, and burn brightly.

The Riots

Friday, June 27, 1969 found the world mourning the death of Judy Garland. Some have wondered what



The Stonewall Inn in 2003.
This image, attributed to Wikimedia Commons contributor Montrealais, appears under the GNU Free Documentation License.

effect the gay icon's funeral, which took place in Manhattan, had on the events that would soon transpire.

In the early morning hours of June 28, police officers raided the Stonewall Inn, a small bar located on Christopher Street in New York City's Greenwich Village. Although mafia-run, the Stonewall, like other predominantly gay bars in the city, got raided by the police periodically.

Typically, the more "deviant" patrons (that is, drag queens and butch lesbians, especially if they were "colored") would be arrested and taken away in a paddy wagon, while white, male customers looked on or quietly disappeared. Then, reflecting the system's corruption, the bar owners would be levied an insubstantial fine, allowing them to open for business the following day.

On this night, the charge was the illegal sale of alcohol. The raid began in time-honored fashion, as plainclothes and uniformed police officers entered the bar, arrested the employees, and began ejecting the customers one by one onto the street.

But for some reason, the crowd that had gathered outside the Stonewall, a crowd that had become campy and festive and had cheered each time a patron emerged from the bar, soon changed its mood. Perhaps it was Judy Garland's death, or the summer heat, or the fact that police had been especially busy that summer raiding bars and patrons had become angry and frustrated. Or possibly it was the sight of several drag queens being forced into a paddy wagon.

Whatever it was, the on-lookers lost their patience. As to who threw the first punch, accounts are contradictory. Some say it was a drag queen, while others claim it was a butch lesbian, who initially defied the police.

The crowd, which had grown to several hundred people, erupted. People began pelting the officers with coins, which represented the payoffs gay bars had to make to the police to stay in business. Then they moved to stones and bottles. The police, surprised by and unused to such resistance from patrons of gay bars, beat those they could reach with nightsticks, but eventually were forced to take refuge by locking themselves inside the Stonewall.

The crowd swelled by hundreds more, as word of the riot spread and Greenwich Village residents, many of whom were lesbian and gay, hurried to the scene. Someone squirted lighter fluid inside the bar and attempted to ignite it. Several others grabbed a downed parking meter and used it as a battering ram against the front of the Stonewall. Still others chanted "Gay Power!"

Soon a riot-control police unit arrived to rescue the trapped officers and break up the demonstration. However, it would be more than an hour before the unit was finally able to disperse the crowd, and not before a group of drag queens taunted the police by singing at the top of their lungs, "We are the Stonewall girls / We wear our hair in curls / We wear no underwear / We show our pubic hair / We wear our dungarees / Above our nelly knees!"

The first Stonewall Riot ended the morning of Saturday, June 28. That night the second riot broke out, as thousands of demonstrators--in the name of Gay Pride--flocked to the streets in front of and around the Stonewall Inn. Once again there were confrontations with the police until the early morning hours.

Over the next week, the protests and demonstrations continued in Greenwich Village, but on a smaller scale. The sense of anger that underlay the riots, the discovery that strength in numbers could match and even defeat the police, and the realization that members of the glbtq community did not have to tolerate meekly the customary bullying and harassment at the hands of the authorities, quickly led to politicization. A new era had begun.

Post-Stonewall

A month after the Stonewall Riots, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was formed. Radical and leftist in orientation, the GLF was but one of many politically focused lesbian and gay organizations that formed in the wake of the riots, both in the United States and around the world.

The number of lesbian and gay publications skyrocketed as well, which led to an even greater sense of community. Homosexuals were no longer strictly marginalized in United States society. Rather, out and proud lesbians and gay men were rapidly developing their own communities in cities across the country.

Beginning in 1970, marches have taken place in New York City (as well as in countless places worldwide) every year on the date of the Stonewall Riots. In June 1994 hundreds of thousands of people converged on the city to celebrate Stonewall's 25th anniversary.

In 1999 the United States government proclaimed the Stonewall Inn as a national historic site. The following year, the status of the Stonewall was improved to "historic landmark," a designation held by only a small percentage of historical sites.

Stonewall's Legacy Today

While the political and communal effects of the Stonewall Riots are real enough, what actually occurred in those early morning hours has become the stuff of legend. This has led to controversy, as various segments of the glbtq community (for example, drag queens, butch lesbians, white gay men) have claimed responsibility for instigating what is also known as "The hairpin drop heard round the world."

Stonewall also means different things to different people, whether they identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or queer. Indeed, arguments among organizers during the 25th anniversary celebrations regarding the inclusion of drag queens and transgendered people in the march only highlighted rifts already present within the glbtq community.

In addition, queens of color--who were on the front lines during the riots--have complained of what they feel is the co-opting of Stonewall by gay white men. This sense of separatism and fragmentation should give us pause, for it is important to remember the original communal spirit--and the strength it inspired--of that fateful weekend at the Stonewall in 1969.

Bibliography

D'Emilio, John. *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Deitcher, David, ed. *The Question of Equality: Lesbian and Gay Politics in America since Stonewall*. New York: Scribner, 1995.

Duberman, Martin. *Stonewall*. New York: Dutton/Plume, 1994.

Thompson, Mark, ed. *Long Road to Freedom: The Advocate History of the Gay and Lesbian Movement*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994.

About the Author

Andrew Matzner is a licensed clinical social worker in private practice in Roanoke, Virginia. He is also adjunct faculty in Women's Studies at Hollins University. He is the author of *O Au No Keia: Voices from Hawaii's Mahu and Transgender Communities* (2001) and co-author (with LeeRay Costa) of *Male Bodies, Women's Souls: Personal Narratives of Thailand's Transgendered Youth* (2007).