

Requiem for the Valley of the Kings

GAYLE RUBIN

"Once the rough threatening preserve of welders, wholesalers, butcher supply houses, winos, struggling artists and gay men who dressed in black leather motorcycle outfits and metal studs, SOMA has suddenly become fashionable. Now the streets are lined with shiny BMW's and Mercedes..."

—New York Times, September 15, 1988

"When gay people take over a neighborhood, they call it gentrification. When straight people take over a neighborhood, they call it a renaissance."

—Tom Ammiano

The South of Market has undergone so much rapid change in recent years that many of its current habitues are unaware of, or uneasy about, its recent past. The newspapers endlessly repeat a mantra of how brave pioneers—usually restaurateurs catering to a so-called upscale crowd—have wrested the area away from the elements that once made the area "undesirable." This point of view rests on the assumption that it is good when "disreputable" populations such as gay people, the poor, or people of color are displaced by straighter, wealthier, whiter, more "respectable" folk.

Gay leathermen are one of the most visible and least understood of the allegedly vanishing groups of SOMA aboriginals. Reading about the world of leather in the straight press is a bit like reading the reports about indigenous peoples written by dumbfounded colonial missionaries. When I see the disappear-

ance of its gay population used as an indicator of the South of Market "renaissance," I am reminded of the ways white settlers in North America spoke of the Native Americans they displaced.

The gay male leather presence South of Market has diminished substantially in recent years. But leathermen are still an important population in the area, coexisting uneasily with the new arrivistes. On September 24, the occasion of the sixth Folsom Street Fair, they will be out in force. It is appropriate to recall who they are and how they got here, and that they have a legitimate stake in the neighborhood and its future.

What is Leather? Leather means many things, but since the mid-1950s it has been a central symbol for a complex gay male sexual subculture. The imagery of leather comes primarily from the gear worn by motorcycle gangs in the '50s, and by urban street gangs whose style of dress similarly included boots, jeans, and motorcycle jackets. Motorcycles and leather jackets came to symbolize power for the powerless. These styles and meanings were popularized in the '50s by movies like *Rebel Without a Cause* and *The Wild One*. Gay men who rode bikes or wore leather did so for the same reasons as straight youth: to express toughness, masculinity, independence, and personal (as opposed to institutional) power.

In addition, leather has specifically sexual connotations whose cultural roots are not entirely clear. By the early 1950s, associations of leather with fetishism and sadomasochism were well established in both gay and straight erotica. Some of

the gay men who adopted leather garb did so for reasons shared by straight women and men who wanted to express an interest in kinky sex.

A gay male subculture organized around



leather imagery coalesced after World War II. By the mid-50s, the first bars catering to the leather crowd had appeared in major cities. In San Francisco, the first leather bar opened in 1960. This was the Why Not, located in the Tenderloin. Leather bars did not migrate South of Market until the early '60s, when the Tool Box opened at Fourth and Harrison.

The Tool Box inspired a wave of bars that

established Folsom Street as the symbolic center of the local leather community. Febe's and the Stud opened in 1966, the Ramrod in 1968. A succession of bars came and went for the next two decades at 1347 Folsom, now the site of the

Powerhouse. Another wave in the early '70s expanded leather territory south to Harrison and Bryant with bars like the Bootcamp and the Ambush. A third major wave crested between 1978 and 1983, and included the Black and Blue, the Arena, the Stables, Headquarters, the Trench, the Eagle, and Chaps.

Like many other urban populations, the leather community used bars as central meeting places. However, as the community grew it diversified. By the late '70s a number of other establishments were serving the leather crowd. These included bathhouses and sex clubs, shops, art galleries, and restaurants.

As this commercial and social world expanded, some leathermen moved into the South of Market as residents. Gay men attracted by the ambience of the bars had begun moving into the area after the Tool Box opened. Housing in the neighborhood was relatively cheap and available, as older residents became displaced by the early stages of redevelopment. By the late 1970s gay men represented a significant portion of SOMA's population.

The South of Market served gay men well

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as the headquarters of the leather community. It was centrally located, rents were low and buildings cheap, and nighttime parking was plentiful. The economy of the area was based on low-rent commercial and light industrial use. Since images of working class masculinity are central to leather iconography, the area's blue collar labor force was the stuff of fantasy. At night when the local businesses closed the streets were fairly deserted. The empty streets gave privacy and safety to men whose sexual activities drew hostility and sometimes physical attacks in more populated areas.

As more gay and leather businesses located along the Folsom corridor, the Miracle Mile (as it was known) became a recognizably specialized zone of gay nightlife. Local columnist Mister Marcus coined nicknames for each of the major gay neighborhoods. Polk Street was "The Valley of the Queens," Castro Street "The Valley of the Dolls." Folsom he called "The Valley of the Kings." By the late '70s, the Valley of the Kings was a world capital of gay male leather. It even attracted heterosexual and lesbian sadomasochists and fetishists, who began to occupy the margins of the more established gay male leather world. They felt safe there.

By 1978 the Folsom's days as a gay and leather Mecca were already numbered. Redevelopment was accelerating. After George Moscone was assassinated in 1978, Mayor Feinstein made rapid development a major goal of her administration. The Moscone Center was quickly built and soon surrounded by expensive skyscrapers, office buildings, housing complexes, and glitzy shopping centers. The massive redevelopment began to drive up rents and land prices. Low-rent leather bars could not compete easily with higher rent yupppitoria.

As development began to transform the area, city officials, the police department, and the Alcoholic Beverage Commission (ABC) threatened the leather bars more directly. In 1978, the police and the ABC came down on the bars with a series of raids and visits that drove several out of business. New parking regulations made it difficult to park cars and bikes at night without getting ticketed.

By the time the impact of AIDS began to hit in 1982 and 1983, the economy and stability of the leather bars had already been undermined. From 1983 to 1986, when leather bars began to close in waves and were replaced by straight-oriented businesses, it appeared as though AIDS was responsible. But AIDS only deepened an already existing crisis.

Whatever the cause, the changes were breathtaking. The block of Folsom between Seventh and Eighth Streets epitomizes this drama of urban succession. A large space at the end of Rodgers Street, once used for both gay and straight S&M gatherings, is now gone, and Cafe Milano sits on the corner. Across Folsom, the Southside occupies the former site of a lesbian bar, The Bay Brick Inn, which in turn replaced a leather bar called Headquarters. Across from the Southside is the corner of Hallam Alley. In 1981, the dozens of leathermen who used to live on Hallam Alley and Brush Place lost their homes in the Folsom Street Fire. New buildings are only now being built on lots razed by the fire.

At the corner of Folsom and Hallam, the Watering Hole—the only remaining gay bar on the block—occupies the site of the old Red Star Saloon and the Barracks. Next door is Eddie Jacks. The Stables and Templar Hall (former clubhouse of a now defunct gay leather organization) used to be located between Hallam and

Langton. These have been succeeded by Rings, Buster's News, and Julie's Supper Club. Along this block, the Miracle Mile has become Restaurant Row.

The intersection of Folsom and 11th Streets, once the heart of the Miracle Mile, is another vivid indicator of profound change. The Oasis has replaced the Drummer Club. Febe's has become the Paradise Lounge. Chaps is now the DNA. On weekend nights hordes of straight youths hang around the rock clubs and affluent adults eat at posh restaurants nearby. To get from the Eagle to the Powerhouse or My Place, a leatherman has to navigate through often hostile and sometimes violent crowds, or simply avoid the corner altogether.

While gay leather no longer dominates the Folsom nightlife, it is not true that leather is dead. There is still a large and viable gay male leather community, and much of it is still centered South of Market. A few of the bars have hung on. There are new businesses catering to the community, including an art gallery, a publishing company, and a number of private social spaces. The leather community has become more privatized, and its ability to occupy public space in the Folsom has become more limited and occasional.

However, the Folsom is still a magnet, a piece of sacred ground, and a powerful symbol. Leathermen are no longer the major population on the streets at night, but they are always present. They come out in great numbers for special events such as the Dora Alley Fair, held every August, and the Folsom Street Fair. San Francisco now (unofficially) hosts a yearly leather pride week, scheduled to culminate with the Folsom Fair. Lots of leathermen—and women—will be celebrating on the street on September 24.

Communities that are small, stigmatized, and relatively underpowered economically and politically are always subject to being badly misunderstood by outsiders. A certain amount of hostility and fear is directed at the leather population by some of the owners and patrons of the newer, straighter, South of Market businesses. But if some of the big developers have their way, the palaces of rock and new wave cuisine will vanish along with the leather bars. At the moment, the leather bars, rock and roll clubs, galleries, immigrants, street people, and restaurants still share a vibrant neighborhood. And although the South of Market has undergone drastic change, its future is still up for grabs. It still could end up looking like the financial district.

We all tend to forget how fragile the present is, how quickly things change, and how suddenly the things we take for granted no longer exist. The South of Market is still a neighborhood, and one worth fighting to preserve. The wildly diverse populations who use it need to understand and respect one another. The Folsom Street Fair is a wonderful opportunity to see, appreciate, and celebrate the wondrous vitality and diversity that continues to flourish south of the slot.

Gayle Rubin is an anthropologist and member of the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian History Project. She has been working on a historical study of the gay male leather community for several years and would like to interview individuals who have knowledge of the community and its past. Those interested in being interviewed or who possess memorabilia (posters, pins, insignia, buttons, patches, flyers, photos, etc.) are invited to get in touch with her at P.O. Box 31452, San Francisco, CA 94131.

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