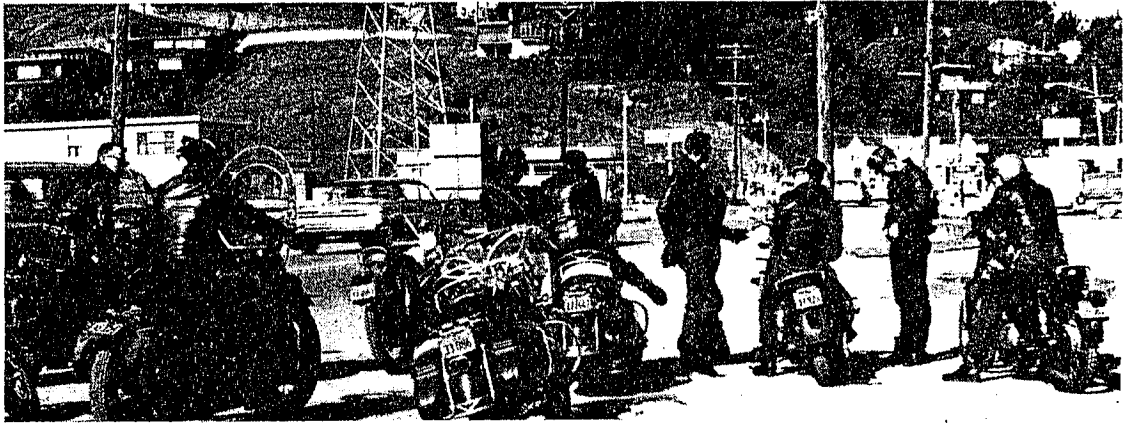


VALLEY OF THE KINGS

by Gayle Rubin

The history of gay people in the South of Market area is largely the history of the emergence of the male leather community in San Francisco. Leather means many things. Since the 1950s, it has been a central symbol for a complex gay male sexual and cultural experience focused around masculine imagery and institutions. Leather has never been about mainstream, corporate or white-collar masculinity. The imagery of leather comes primarily from the motorcycle gear worn by the biker gangs of the '50s and by the urban "juvenile delinquents" and street gangs who emulated them. Other major sources are the police, the military and blue-collar men generally. Leather bars are egalitarian, in the sense that the ordinary markers of social status are replaced by distinctions of sexual role and fantasy. Leathermen may be accountants (or anything else) by day. But by night, their bars are filled with outlaw bikers, spit and polish officers, and an assortment of Marlboro men — cowboys, construction workers and the like.



Boys on Bikes: The Warlocks on an early run

The attitudes and sexualities that came to be expressed through the idiom of leather were present in a more diffuse way before the leather subculture crystallized. Older men can recall cruising sailors and truckers, and hanging out in rough bars and neighborhoods for sex, long before there was anything like a leather bar. When Alfred Kinsey was collecting data on S/M sex in the late '40s, he was in contact with a loose underground of men who liked it rough. In the mid-'50s, such networks began to coalesce into a subculture. In 1953, Marlon Brando swaggered across the movie screens of America in *The Wild One* wearing a black leather motorcycle jacket, Harley cap, jeans, T-shirt, aviator glasses and engineer boots. Soon men dressed like "Johnny" and his "Black Rebels" began to percolate regularly through the gay bars of the period. In San Francisco, these men were found at Jack's Waterfront, an eclectic bar in the old Embarcadero area (since redeveloped). They are also said to have patronized a place called the Castaways near the Rincon Annex.

The first leather bar in the United States appeared in New York around 1958. In San Francisco, the first leather bar appeared in the Tenderloin, on Ellis between Hyde and Leavenworth, in 1960. The Why Not, whose poster featured a leather-jacketed stud standing with the words WHY NOT between his spread legs, was short-lived. It was soon followed by the Tool Box, located at 399 Fourth Street (at Harrison). The Tool Box was the most famous of the early San Francisco leather bars and was the first to be located South of Market. Local artist Chuck Arnett covered several walls with a massive black and white mural, copies of which have hung in the Bootcamp, the Catacombs and the Stables. When the building was torn down for redevelopment in 1971, old patrons came and got bricks to save. Relics of the Tool Box are still venerated in the community.

When Life magazine did a feature on homosexuality in America in 1964, a photograph of the mural and of men in leather inside the Tool Box spread across the opening pages. One of the men in the picture is Chuck Arnett, whose art has graced the walls, posters and matchbooks of many South of Market institutions. Standing next to him is another artist, Bill Tellman, whose work also has been very influential in the local leather iconography. Nearby is Jack H., who is reported to have instigated several South of Market projects, including the Slot, the first bathhouse to cater to the leather crowd. He also was responsible for the Detour, a short-lived bar on McAllister to which the leather crowd resorted briefly when the popularity of the Tool Box began to fade. From the Detour, the crowd moved to On the Levee, at 987 Em-

barcadero. The owner later opened another bar and restaurant at 527 Bryant, known both as the 527 and Off the Levee. The place currently is called Chez Mollet.

Leather bars migrated to the western end of Folsom Street and inaugurated the era of the "Miracle Mile" when Febe's and the Stud both opened in 1966. There is said to have been a beer bar called the Dead End on the site of the present Hamburger Mary's. The Ramrod opened at 1225 Folsom in 1968. At 1347 Folsom, a succession of bars replaced an old neighborhood place. First there was the In Between, the address being in between Febe's and the Ramrod. The In Between was succeeded by the Cow Palace Saloon, and then by a place that had no name. It was followed by the Phoenix and then by another bar, this one officially called the No Name. Then came the Bolt, and finally, around 1977, the Brig opened and has remained successful ever since.

The Bootcamp, on Bryant Street, opened in August 1971. The famous Barracks bathhouse opened at 1147 Folsom in the early 1970s. Shortly thereafter the Red Star Saloon opened next door at 1145 Folsom. Technically, bars and baths cannot occupy the same premises and sex cannot legally occur anywhere that alcohol is served. But there was a door between the Barracks and the Red Star and men passed back and forth. The red Star is reputed to have been one of the hottest and sleaziest bars in the history of Folsom Street, and did not last long. The Barracks survived longer, and the building was being remodeled when it was destroyed by the 1981 Folsom Street Fire. The Watering Hole has recently moved into a new building on the site of the old Red Star.

Although the mass media treated the Folsom Fire as if it were a gay sex event, the area affected by the fire was home to a wide variety of people, by no means all of them gay. Nevertheless, there were many leathermen living on Hallam Alley and Brush Place whose homes were among those destroyed by the fire. Gay men had been trickling into the South of Market to live since the time of the Tool Box. Most were attracted by proximity to the bars and the ambiance of the area. Others were drawn by housing made temporarily cheap and available as older residents began to be displaced by the impending redevelopment. Housing had become scarce and expensive by the late 1970s, but by then gay men had become a significant element in the residential population in the area. Today, South of Market is an important gay residential neighborhood as well as a center for gay recreation.

The Ambush, on Harrison and Dore, held its grand opening on Thanksgiving Day 1973. A gay guide from

1974 lists the Red Star, the Barracks, the Ramrod, the No Name and Febe's, all along Folsom between Seventh and Twelfth; the Ambush on Harrison near Tenth; and the Folsom Prison farther out on Folsom near Fifteenth. In 1977, the Balcony opened on the north side of Market near Sanchez. Although it was physically closer to the Castro, the Balcony initially catered to a leather crowd, especially the fisting community. The Black and Blue, at Eight and Howard, opened on New Year's Eve, 1978, and the Arena, on Harrison and Ninth, opened on February 5, 1978. The Trench on Eighth above Howard, opened in 1979 or 1980 and was closed by 1983. The Eagle opened at the far end of Harrison in 1981 and Chaps followed nearby on Eleventh in 1983.

In California, as in most states, the sale of alcohol is tightly regulated and bars are expected to maintain rigid standards of conduct. The Alcoholic Beverage Commission (ABC) is the agency that enforces the regulations through its power to grant and revoke liquor licenses. Consequently, the ABC exercises a great deal of control over the life of those communities for which bars are central social institutions. During the '50s and early '60s, the powers of the ABC were used regularly to harass and close gay bars in San Francisco. This practice was curtailed by several court decisions and by changes in the local political climate. However, periodic crackdowns still occur, and the leather bars have frequently been the recipients of the unwanted attentions of the ABC.

One of the most sustained periods of ABC activity South of Market began a few weeks before the 1978 election in which the anti-homosexual Briggs initiative was on the ballot. San Francisco police raided the Bootcamp and charged eight men with 78 separate counts of sexual conduct. The Bootcamp lost its license and became a private club. Also in 1978, the Arena had been holding popular "slave auctions." One man who was frequently "sold" reported that the ABC first demanded that all participants wear jockstraps. Then they insisted that there be no bare buttocks. Then they objected to the use of restraints. Finally, "they cleaned it up so much it just wasn't fun anymore and the auctions just stopped." The ABC also objected to the nude paintings and photographs that decorated the bar's walls. Eventually, the ABC charged the Arena with sexual conduct on premises and suspended its license for 90 days.

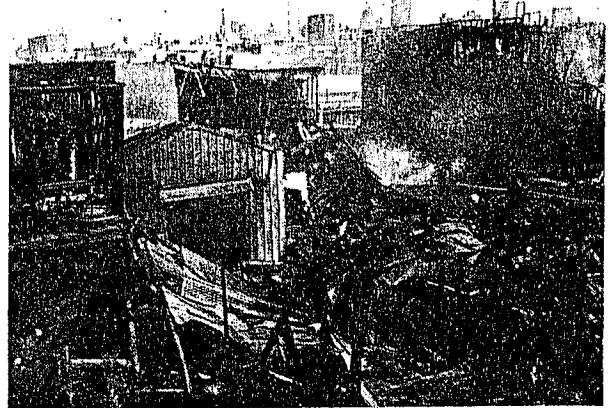
The Ambush was also charged and hit with a 90-day suspension. The Ambush elected to stay open, selling only non-alcoholic drinks. Many of the regulars came in to drink fruit juice and Callistoga in a show of support for the bar. Both the Ambush and the Arena survived their



Chuck Arnett's mural in the rubble of the Tool Box

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Henry Lelou & Associates



Smoking aftermath of the Folsom Street Fire

Henry Lelou & Associates

Mick Hicks

suspensions. Another bar, the Black and Blue, also was suspended. It reopened briefly after the 90 days, but soon closed for good.

Over the next two years, almost all of the remaining leather bars got at least a "talking to" from the ABC. The Trench was raided and ultimately lost its license. As a consequence of all the ABC activity, behavior in the bars has become more restrained, their backrooms virtually disappeared and raunch has become more privatized. Activities such as the slave auctions moved into the baths and private clubs.

Small business has been one of the most potent forces in the development of the gay community as a whole and of its more specialized subcultures. As new groups emerge, small businesses can respond quickly to cater to their particular wants and needs. The bars and baths are the most obvious examples of this process, but there are also shops that sell everything from sexual paraphernalia to specialized greeting cards. A kind of "tertiary sector" provides auxiliary services such as food, temporary shelter, etc. Since the time of the Tool Box, small businesses catering to the gay crowd South of Market have proliferated.

In 1981, one of the custom leather shops produced a guide map of businesses in the area that were thought to be of interest to the store's customers. There are 17 bars listed: the Eighth Day, the Ambush, the Arena, the Brig, the Cave, Febe's, the Eagle, the End-up, Headquarters, the Cock Ring, the Ramrod, the Rivet, the Stud, the Trench, the Watering Hole, the Drummer Key Club and the Stables. Eleven baths and sex clubs are listed: the Bootcamp, the Club Bath of San Francisco, the Caldron, the Folsom Street Club, the Glory Hole, the Handball Express, the Hothouse, the Sutro, the Slot, the Warehouse and the Folsom Street Hotel. There are 11 specialty shops. These are mostly leather shops, but there is also a bakery, a used clothing store, a tattoo parlor and a place selling motorcycle gear. Eleven restaurants are listed as serving the area. The number of establishments is indicative of the growth and elaboration of gay community life in the neighborhood.

Motorcycle clubs are another organizational form that has played an important role in the development of the leather community. The bike clubs first emerged in the 1950s. They provided a social life outside the bars, and would sponsor "runs" — weekend camping trips to rural areas where gay men could relax and socialize with more freedom than was then possible in the bars. Generally, each club sponsors a major weekend run, one or more one day events in town and a big public social event each year. Proceeds from these

events are donated to various charities.

The first gay motorcycle club in the United States was the Satyrs, founded in Los Angeles in 1954. The Oedipus, also of Los Angeles, formed soon after. Two clubs vie for the honor of having been first in San Francisco. The Warlocks appear to be the oldest club and the California Motorcycle Club (CMC) appears to have been the first to incorporate. Other past and present San Francisco Clubs include the Barbary Coasters, the Cheaters, the Constantines, the SFGDI, the San Franciscans, the San Francisco Serpents, the Recons, the Rainbow, the Golden Gate MC, the Koalas, the Cycle Runners, the Centurions, the Knights of Malta, the Aquilas and the newest club, the San Francisco Eagles. It is not always necessary to own or even ride a bike to belong to the clubs. Among local clubs, only the Warlocks currently require that members have a motorcycle.

The bike clubs provide an extensive social network by having reciprocal relations with clubs in other cities and countries. Local clubs are all represented in an umbrella organization called the Forum. Most also belong to the Interclub Fund, an organization founded initially to raise money for club members injured in motorcycle accidents. The fund's charitable activities have been extended to cover a wide range of health and financial emergencies.

Each club has its own distinctive dress, insignia and events. Febe's and the Eagle are the two bars most favorable to the club scene and each displays an extensive collection of club insignia. The CMC hosts a giant carnival extravaganza each year in the fall. The Barbary Coasters produce an annual awards night for all the clubs. The GDIs hold a yearly cabaret, and the Warlocks used to put on an all-night party that has been discontinued for the duration of the AIDS crisis. In addition to the bike clubs, there are two local uniform clubs, the Phoenix and the Golden Gate Troopers. There are also two S/M clubs, the Fifteen and the Knights Templar.

South of Market also has been home to some avant-garde gay art galleries. The first was Robert Opel's Fey-Way, at 1287 Howard St. Fey-Way was the first gallery in San Francisco to showcase the rather extensive art that has come out of the leather scene. The gallery held shows for Chuck Arnett, Rex, Etienne, Tom of Finland, A Jay, Olaf, the Hun, Domino and Thomas Hinde, among others. It was also a center for leather-oriented performance art, including a piercing party, an evening of erotic dance, and a night of artful and complex bondage. Fey-Way closed abruptly when Robert Opel was shot in July 1979.

544 Natoma opened in April, 1981 and closed October, 1983. Natoma showed the work of visual artists, but was generally more oriented toward performance than Fey-Way. 544 Natoma hosted poetry readings, theater, music and live art. Among the memorable events were a leather version of Genet's play *The Maids*, Lou Rudolph painting a portrait of Esmeralda while she sang and a performance during which owner Peter Hartman played improvisational piano while bondage artist Mark Chester tied up both player and piano.

There are several businesses such as the Club Baths on Ritch Street and the Trocadero Transfer that primarily serve the non-leather gay community. There is beginning to be more of a lesbian presence in the neighborhood. According to Kerry Bowman, owner of the Ambushi, there was a women's bar called the Hula Shack which existed at the time of the Tool Box and which held drag shows every Sunday. When the Hula Shack closed, it was replaced first by a coffee house, then by an afterhours establishment called the Lumber Yard and, finally, by the Slot.

Over the last few years, some of the braver leather dykes have hung out in those men's bars that would tolerate them. Lesbians have also been well represented in the mixed crowds that patronize Hamburger Mary's and the Stud. Many more lesbians have been drawn to the area since the opening of the Bay Brick Inn, on Folsom at Eighth, in August 1982. Increasing numbers of gay women are moving into the neighborhood, following the migratory trails blazed by leather men 20 years ago.

This brief article cannot do justice to the complexity of the gay community South of Market, past or present. Even the history of the leather institutions presented here is part of a longer work in progress and is not complete.

Credit for the story's title is due Mr. Marcus, who in his newspaper column often has referred to the Folsom Street area as the "Valley of the Kings," in contrast to Polk Street (the "Valley of the Queens") and the Castro ("Valley of the Dolls"). I am indebted to Marcus, Sam, Louis, Chuck, Bill, Kerry, Hank, Steve, Jason, Eileen, Don, Bob, Tad, Danny, Fred, Geoff, Ron, Alan, and numerous other individuals who were kind enough to take the time to share their recollections with me. I am, of course, responsible for all inaccuracies.

Gayle Rubin is a member of the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project. She currently is working on a study of the gay male leather community in San Francisco. Individuals who are willing to be interviewed, who would like to share memories or who have collections of memorabilia (posters, buttons, photos, etc.) are invited to get in touch with her at P.O. Box 31452, San Francisco, CA 94131-0452.