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 gang culture 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. Leather men 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 idiomy of leathers were present in a more diffusely way before the leather subculture crystallized. Older men can recall cruising sailors and truckers, and hanging out in rough bars and neighborhood sex, long before there was anything like a leather bar. When Altered Kinky was collecting data on S/M sex in the late 40s, he was in contact with a loose underground of men who liked rough sex. In the mid-50s, such networks began to coalesce into a subculture. In 1953, Marlen 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 Rebel” 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 developed). They are also said to have pioneered 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 Animor collected several walls with a massive black and white mural, copies of which have hung in the Tool Box, the Catacombs and the Stable. When the building was torn down for redevelopment in 1971, old patrons came and got bricks to save. Refills 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 page. One of the men in the picture is Chuck Animor, 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 run illegal several South of Market projects, including the Stot, the first bathhouse to cater to the leather crowd. He was responsible for the Deceiver, a short-lived bar on McAllister to which the leather crowd reacted brieﬂy when the popularity of the Tool Box began to fade. From the Deceiver, the crowd moved to On the Level, at 987 Embarcadero. The owner later opened another bar and restaurant at 527 Bryant, known both as the 527 and Off the Level. The place currently is called Chiot Mollot.

Leather bars migrated to the western end of Polkton Street and inaugurated the era of the “Miracle Mile” when Pepe’s and the Stud both opened in 1966. It 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 Polk in 1968. At 1347 Polk, a succession of bars replaced an old neighborhood place. First there was the In Between, the address being in between Pepe’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 Bull, and finally, around 1977, the Bigg opened and has remained successful ever since.

The Bootcamp, on Bryant Street, opened in August 1971. The famous barracks bathhouse opened at 1447 Polk in the early 1970s. Shortly thereafter the Red Star Saloon opened next door at 1445 Polk. 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 Bootcamp 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 Polk Street, and did not last long. The Bootcamp survived longer, and the building was being remodeled when it was destroyed by the 1981 Polk 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 Polkton 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 male, a number of whom were many leather boys 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. But there were four noticeable factors that made the area 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 guide from 1974 lists the Red Star, the Bootcamp, the Ramrod, the No Name and Pepe’s, all along Polk from Seventh and Twelfth; the Ambush on Harrison near Tetuch; and the Polkton Prison farther out on Polkton near Fifteenth. In 1977, the Histon opened on the north side of Market near Sanchez. Although it was physically closer to the Castro, the Polkton Prison initially catered to a leather crowd, especially the ﬁshing community. The Black and Blue, at Eight and Howard, opened on New Year’s Eve, 1979, 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 these 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 national 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-homosexuals 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 to operate as 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 to drink fruit juice and Callicanga in a show of support for the bar. Both the Ambush and the Arena survived their
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.

Smoking aftermath of the Folsom Street Fair

1984 National opened in April, 1981 and closed October, 1987. National showed the work of visual artists, but what generally more oriented toward performance than Fess 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, Los Rodulfo pulling a portrait of Emerick while she sang and a performance during which owner Peter Hartman played impromptu piano while bondage artist Mark Clutter tied up both player and piano.

There are several businesses such as the Club Bahia on Ritch Street and the Troubadour that primarily serve the nonleather gay community. There is beginning to be more of a lesbian presence in the neighborhood. According to Terry Bowman, owner of the Ambush, 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 after-hours establishment called the Lumber Yard and, finally, by the Shot.

Over the last few years, some of the newer 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 refers to the Folsom Street area as the "Valley of the Kings," in contrast to Polk Street (the "Valley of the Queen") and the Castro ("Valley of the Delos"). I am indebted to Marcus, Son, Lamb, Chast, Sam, Kenny, Hands, Dave, Eusebio, Bob, Tony, Brendan, Fred, Geoff, Bob, Alun, and numerous others who have been kind enough to take the time to share their reminiscences with me, all of course, responsible for all inaccuracies.

According to M. A. Piers, a member of the San Francisco Leather and Gay History Project, she currently is working on a study of the gay, male leather community in San Francisco. Her book will be a three monographs or who have collections of monographs (narrative, literature, photos, etc.) are invited to get in touch with her at P.O. Box 31432, San Francisco, CA 94131-4432.

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