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You Make Me Feel: A Study of the Gay Rights Movement in New Orleans

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The University of Southern Mississippi

You Make Me Feel: A Study of the Gay Rights Movement in New Orleans

by

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A Thesis

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Introduction

Across the country, New Orleans has a reputation of being one of the most sexually open cities in the country, yet it also is home to one of the largest Catholic populations as well. With such a diverse population racially, economically, and culturally, one would think that New Orleans has always accepted people from all different walks of life. When one sets foot in modern day New Orleans they experience a multitude of different aspects of the Cajun country's culture from the voodoo culture, to the jazz culture, to the party and alcohol culture of Mardi Gras. However, one thing that seems to permeate all three of these things in New Orleans is the willingness to accept and even participate in new and unusual things. Pieces of society that have a history of going against status quo and causing a number of people from the "straight-laced" realm of society to question it seemed to have always been welcome in New Orleans.

An example of this is the city's well-known gay community. With their own night-life district in the French Quarter and a strong presence in Mardi Gras celebrations, the gay community in New Orleans is well accepted and has successfully created its own space in New Orleans. However, this was not always the case. The New Orleans's gay community was often targeted by the New Orleans Police and by members of the New Orleans heterosexual community. As in many cities throughout the country during the 1950s, members of the homosexual community in New Orleans were often victims of violence and were often arrested because of their sexuality. As a result, as in many cities

in the South, the city's gay community opted to try and stay hidden; only taking the chance to socialize at night when a majority of the bars would be open.

Similar to many cities throughout the country, the New Orleans gay community emerged in its own way. Over the course of nineteen years, following three random events that were completely independent of one another, traditions that still continue in the city's gay community today were created and most importantly, the community established itself socially and culturally. Between the years 1958-1977, the city's gay community experienced a number of tragedies and subsequent triumphs. Each of these events allowed them to acknowledge, in one way or another, themselves as a growing community and most importantly in some way allow the rest of the city to acknowledge them as well.

One of the most publicized, and the last response that I will look at, was the public demonstration against Anita Bryant's presence in New Orleans. By organizing one of the largest civil rights demonstrations in the city's history, the gay community showed the New Orleans authority figures, city officials, and heterosexual community that continuously discriminated against them that they were no longer going to remain hidden and be treated poorly. While the first two events delivered much smaller responses and were more of a build up to the final event. The gay community in New Orleans still, in one way or another, delivered an important response that allowed them to find their voice as a community.

This document will examine each of these events and explain how they helped the gay community in the Crescent city establish itself and unite; creating the city's modern

gay and lesbian community: one of the most well-known LGBT communities in the country. The first incident was the murder of the young Mexican native, Fernando Rios, who in 1958 was in New Orleans on business as a tour guide. The second was the 1973 tragic fire in the gay district that resulted in the deaths of over thirty men and women, both straight and homosexual. The third and final event that united the New Orleans gay and lesbian community was the 1977 arrival of Christian Right spokeswoman and national gay opponent, Anita Bryant. Each of these events was completely independent of one another and random incidents. Each of these occurrences spawned a reaction from the gay community because they felt that their community was being attacked directly. As a result, the city's version of the Gay Rights Movement was sparked.

Not to be confused with the National Gay Rights Movement, New Orleans' nineteen-year long Gay Rights Movement involved the city's gay community in developing both public and private responses that will be explained in detail in the chapters to come. However, one very important note to make of these events is that, although, they were completely separate from one another, each allowed the city's gay community to respond as a collected front. It is also important to note that each response was relative to the time period in which it occurred. For example, the more closeted response of the 1950s, reflected aspects of the national homosexual community in that it was very secretive and participants felt that it was more important to protect one's identity and the identities of friends than to publicly demonstrate and call attention to sexuality. Furthermore, the way that the gay community responded while opting to remain hidden from the heterosexual community, was completely New Orleans. They

focused on developing a social and cultural response, such as the formation of the Mardi Gras Krewes, which echoes traditions that are fundamentally practiced in New Orleans.

It is very important to note that New Orleans during the 1950s and well into the 1970s was very different than the very open modern New Orleans. During this period, the atmosphere of the Crescent City was much more religious. With such a strong Catholic and Christian community, it was more common to see the city natives attend church and focus on developing an uncorrupted society than frequent Bourbon Street. They focused on continuing many of the social practices that one would equate with the American South, for example, proper social etiquette for young men and women rather than encouraging sexual freedom.

This document is an examination of all the elements that made the social and cultural emergence of the gay community in New Orleans that I am going to term as the Gay Rights Movement. In addition to these I will examine the three events listed above and explain how each of these events and the subsequent responses from the gay community all constitute the city's Gay Rights Movement. Furthermore I will examine how the gay community in New Orleans successfully and unsuccessfully established itself as a modern gay community in the wake of the Gay Rights Movement. In doing each of these, I intend to illustrate that the New Orleans gay community's response was completely unique to both the South and the National gay communities. As opposed to focusing on developing a political voice, the New Orleans gay community focused on creating social spaces for itself that eventually grew into important traditions and events that are still practiced and celebrated in New Orleans today.

Literature Review

There has been quite a bit of literature written on the National Gay Rights Movement. Many historians agree that the Modern Gay Rights Movement started in 1969 in Greenwich Village New York; however, many individual gay communities developed their own community base that allowed them to organize locally and to grow stronger, as well. For example, prior to the Stonewall Riots, Los Angeles created a number of grass roots organizations and had protests that demanded an end to the police discrimination carried out against the homosexual community. In addition a number of works focus on the American South and how the gay identity emerged throughout a number of cities. These works demonstrate that gay communities did exist in the South and were aware of themselves, and they argue that this is not a modern phenomenon, but has existed for centuries.¹

There are also books that focus on New Orleans and its gay community. Although these books are much rarer, they tend to emphasize the emergence of the Gay Mardi Gras Krewes and the traditions that they produced; for example, how the emergence of these Krewes affected the larger Mardi Gras celebration and the extravagance of the balls and costumes. In fact, I only encountered one publication that addressed each of the events that I credit to be the beginning of the New Orleans' Gay Rights Movement and that is, James T. Sears' *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall*

¹ A few books that were very important in my research and the formation of my argument were: James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001). John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988). Edited by John Howard, *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, (New York: New York University Press, 1997). John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001). Jim Kepner, *Rough News, Daring Views: 1950s' Pioneer Gay Press Journalism*, (Binghamton, New York: The Haworth Press, 1998).

South. Sears' publication was one of the most helpful secondary sources that I encountered because he was able to provide me with a historical account of the gay community in New Orleans. However, as his title suggests, Sears' examination involves a number of other Southern gay communities, and unfortunately, because it is such a large project and there are a number of significant gay communities in the South, New Orleans tends to get lost in his examination. Thus, this thesis is unique because it is the only document that focuses completely on the gay community in New Orleans and examines the three key events that created the gay New Orleans community. In addition this thesis aims to show how New Orleans' gay community is unlike any other gay community in the country. When one analyzes subcultures throughout the country it is very easy to find similarities amongst them. For example, the activism shown in California and New York during the Gay Rights Movement tends to mirror one another in a number of ways. Yet, the gay community in New Orleans' actions during the modern Gay Rights Movement and the years leading up to it are very different from what we see on the coasts. The differences will be illustrated in the following chapters and, in highlighting these differences; I aim to show how the gay community in New Orleans is unique in relation to the rest of the nation.

I also looked at books that focused on the national Gay Rights Movement; these books helped me understand the context in which the New Orleans gay community emerged.² These books also explained the political and social environment in which the Gay Rights Movement emerged. Faderman's *Gay LA*, explains the political environment

² A few of these books included Craig A. Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements: Assimilation or Liberation?* (Philadelphia: Westview Press, 2008). Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay LA: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 2006). David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Rights Movement*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2004).

that the Los Angeles gay and lesbian community began to organize and demonstrate for political change. Though Faderman's focus centers on cities in California, a lot of the examples she gives are similar in other cities around the country. For example Faderman credits the Watts Riots and the Chicano Movement as inspiration to the Los Angeles gay community in becoming more visible and vocal. In one of her chapters she explains that if it were not for these minority groups organizing and demanding political and social equality. Though these movements only happened in Los Angeles, similar movements were going on at this time across the country. These movements acted as blue prints for the national gay community and showed them how to organize and demonstrate successfully.

David Carter's examination of the Stonewall Riots sheds new light on the event that many credit as the beginning of the national Gay Rights Movement. He explains in detail how the Stonewall Riots began and what happened during the riots. This book is important because it explains in detail the Stonewall Riots and explains the next chapter and the more political chapter in the Gay Rights Movement. As more homosexuals joined the political movement, the national gay community was brought to the forefront of national politics, where they remain today. The Stonewall Rebellion and the subsequent actions in other gay communities allowed more homosexuals to accept their sexuality and focus on changing the national political and social environments so that people of differing sexualities, like different ethnic and racial backgrounds, would all be protected.

Methodology

In order to obtain a more general understanding of the social, cultural, and political environment that existed in a number of the gay communities in the American South, I obtained oral histories from people that lived in Hattiesburg, MS during this time. This is essential because Hattiesburg, MS, is about an hour and forty-five minutes away from New Orleans and has a relatively close relationship with the city. This is also important because there is next to no oral histories from the New Orleans gay community in existence, thus Hattiesburg's oral histories (which did note some association with New Orleans) were essential to my study. I also examined the growth of the Atlanta's gay community whose growth mirrored a number of cities throughout the country and also showed me that what occurred in New Orleans was unique to the Big Easy.

I also used some of the local publications, such as the *Times Picayune*, *The New Orleans States-Item*, and *The Vieux-Carré Courier*; these newspapers covered each of the three case studies in great detail. The *Times Picayune* and *The New Orleans States-Item* were similar publications. They are national publications and were owned by the same people. The *Times Picayune* was very helpful because it gave an enormous amount of detail for each of the three events that I examined. For example, in the case of the murder trial involving the three Tulane University students, the *Times Picayune* covered the entire trial giving details on the defendants' testimonies and the arguments made by the prosecution. The *Vieux Carré-Courier*, which was a publication that emerged in New Orleans in 1961, provided information on the fire in the French Quarter and Anita Bryant's presence in New Orleans. This publication was very important in my research because it was a community-based publication and provided a great contrast to the *Times*

Picayune, which was a national publication. While the *Vieux Carré-Courier* focused on the social issues in the French Quarter, the *Times Picayune* and *The New Orleans States-Item* focused on all of the issues in the city.

I also looked at some newspapers from other cities, in order to understand how people outside of Louisiana felt about what was going on in New Orleans. I did not use a lot of these publications because I did not want to take my attention away from New Orleans, but the differing opinions did prove to be useful because they showed that New Orleans did get some, although very little, national attention. This proved useful in showing that although the gay community in New Orleans did not seem as important as the larger gay communities in California and New York; they still did get some attention which shows how impactful the modern Gay Rights Movement proved to be nationally.

In addition to the written publications, I also watched some of the televised news broadcasts that covered each of these events. Because they happened such a long time ago, it was a bit difficult to gain access to them. However, I was able to find a couple of televised news broadcasts that also covered one of the tragic events that sparked the gay community's decision to gather; unfortunately they did not cover the actual activism. For this reason, the newspapers proved to be very helpful because they covered both the events and the gay community's reaction to those events.

Two very important films proved to be very helpful in my research. The documentary *The Sons of Tennessee Williams*, chronicled the emergence and the customs of the gay Mardi Gras Krewes, what I argue to be the first case of the New Orleans gay community organizing, Tim Wolff's examination of the gay Mardi Gras Krewes and their

rich history helped me understand what they did for the gay community. Although they did not march publicly until years after their formation, they still created an important space for the gay community to be themselves. The film *Easy Rider* helped me achieve a better understanding of the social and political environment of late 1960s early 1970s New Orleans. This is necessary because part of my argument is that New Orleans' gay community did not quickly become public because of the city's social and political atmosphere.

The autobiographies of Reverend Troy Perry, a gay minister that helped organized the gay community in New Orleans, and Anita Bryant, who achieved national popularity because of her campaign against homosexual's obtaining civil rights and as result urged a number of gay communities to organize including New Orleans, proved helpful because they allowed me to understand how they influenced, both directly and indirectly, the New Orleans gay community to organize.

Chapter One

During the 1950s and 1960s the political and social environment in the United States was experiencing major changes. African Americans all throughout the country were protesting and demonstrating in hopes of achieving their civil rights. With significant gains like their victory in the Supreme Court case *Brown v. The Board of Education*,³ African Americans in the United States were making significant political and social gains. This period is known as the Civil Rights Movement. However, African Americans were not the only minority group in the United States that were beginning to mobilize themselves and demand the civil rights that they felt deprived of for the last two centuries in the United States. Like African Americans, homosexual Americans, began to call for their civil rights. In hopes of achieving these rights, headed by Harry Hay, a small group of gay men in California founded the Mattachine Society in 1950.

The Mattachine Society was the first gay political organization founded in the United States.⁴ Created in response to the systematic firings of homosexual employees of the State Department during the Red Scare, the Mattachine Society intended to organize homosexuals politically and end the injustices that homosexual Americans faced at the hands of American government. Following the founding of the first chapter of the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles, California, many other chapters of this organization

³In 1954, the Supreme Court Case *Oliver Brown et al. v. The Board of Education of Topeka et al.* ruled that the separation of African Americans and White Americans in the American education system was unconstitutional and went against the Fourteenth Amendment. This resulted in a very gradual integration of all schools in the United States.

⁴David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 169.

soon emerged. By 1956, Mattachine Society chapters opened in New York, Chicago, and Washington D.C., which essentially lit the spark for the modern American Gay Rights Movement. Gay men and women were beginning to see that it was possible for them to organize in order to initiate change in the United States.

However, although there were some major strides being made on the Eastern and Western coasts of the United States, very little progress was made in the cities and towns of the southern United States. Of course there were homosexuals all throughout the American South; however, they did not mobilize like their counterparts in the West and East Coasts. According to oral histories gathered by the University of Southern Mississippi's Mississippi Oral History Program, many homosexuals developed relationships with members of their community and opted to keep their sexual preferences hidden from the larger society.⁵ Many homosexuals met in predominantly gay clubs or bars to socialize. One of the oldest and still popular areas in the cities in the American South is the French Quarters in New Orleans, Louisiana.⁶

The French Quarter in New Orleans is known for many things. In addition to Mardi Gras, sexual freedom and indulgence, the French Quarters also caters to its gay population. With a number of coffee shops and bars that accommodated to a gay clientele, the French Quarter was a haven for many homosexuals in the New Orleans area.⁷ The bars and clubs were where people came to socialize and develop relationships with other homosexuals in the area. Like many homosexuals, John Doe, a student at Tulane University during the end of the 1950s, developed his network of friends within

⁵ John Doe, interview by Karen Cox, Hattiesburg, MS, July 1, 1993.

⁶ Ibid,

⁷ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 2001), 15.

the gay community in New Orleans at gay bars.⁸ Unfortunately, although these places were often sources of building relationships and having a good time, gay bars were also places where homosexual were harassed by the police or passing homophobic men.⁹

One of the most publicized hate crimes against a homosexual occurred in New Orleans in 1958. Although justice did not prevail in this crime, it did lead to the gay community in New Orleans uniting and reacting to this injustice in a unique way that is still practiced in New Orleans during Mardi Gras today. Therefore this reaction marks the first acknowledged and recorded formation of the gay community in the city.¹⁰ As stated above, however, this unique response was provoked by a terrible crime committed by a group of Tulane University students on the streets of the French Quarters.

On an early September morning, a young unidentified man was found beaten, bleeding, and unconscious on Orleans Alley between the St. Louis Cathedral and the Cabildo, the famed Louisiana State Museum.¹¹ It was not until he was taken to Charity Hospital that the identification was made since his wallet was stolen from the scene of the crime. The young man's name was Fernando Rios, a 26- year old homosexual; Rios was an employee of a Mexico City-based tour guide travel service called Geneva Travel.¹² Though there were no cuts or lacerations on Rios' body, it was evident that he was beaten on his face. Later that day, he succumbed to his wounds and what was once considered a robbery, quickly became a case of murder.¹³

⁸ John Doe, interview by Karen Cox, Hattiesburg, MS, July 1, 1993.

⁹ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 2001), 15-16.

¹⁰ Tim Wolff, *The Sons of Tennessee Williams*, Online Film, (New Orleans, LA: 2010).

¹¹ "Officers Look for Clues—Last Movements of Dead Tour Guide Probed," *Times Picayune*, September 30, 1958, 3.

¹² *Ibid*, 3.

¹³ *Ibid*, 3.

The police canvassed between fifty and sixty people and two days after Rios died three suspects emerged.¹⁴ On October 14, 1958, three Tulane University students were indicted for the murder of Fernando Rios. According to the news article, “Jury Completed for Trial of Three in Guide Slaying,” the three suspects were accused of murder because their crimes resulted in Rios’ death. Although they only intended to physically assault and rob Rios, his death was still a consequence of their crime, which under Louisiana State Law is defined as murder.¹⁵ The District Attorney, Richard A. Dowling, sought the death penalty for all three of the young men. Dowling told the *Times Picayune* in an October article: “The youths may be tried in November. Each of the students could be given the maximum penalty of death in the electric chair. A 12 man jury will hear the case.”¹⁶ Interestingly, it seems that District Attorney Dowling was intent on serving justice, no matter what the sexuality of the deceased was.

This crime occurred at a time when a vast majority of Southerners considered homosexuality a taboo, and various sexual acts, including, physical contact between members of the same sex; was criminal offenses. It was not rare for homosexuals to be targeted by the police or by a group of young men and beaten very badly and even sometimes killed. According to Albert Carrey, a homosexual man who went to Tulane during the 1950s, it was not rare for the police to go to gay bars in the French Quarter and try to bait the men to go out of the bar and have a sexual encounter with them. Once the men were out of the bars, the police would usually beat, arrest, and charge the men with attempted crimes against nature. Carrey writes, “The following day, the city’s principal newspaper, the *Times Picayune*, would publish (their) name and address...under the

¹⁴ “Students to Face Trial in Slaying,” *Times Picayune*, October 15, 1958, 5.

¹⁵ “Jury Completed for Trial of Three in Guide Slaying,” *Times Picayune*, January 21, 1959 1.

¹⁶ “Students to Face Trial in Slaying,” *Times Picayune*, October 15, 1958, 5.

heading, ‘Crimes Against Nature.’”¹⁷ This must read column in New Orleans, destroyed families and careers.

Another wrong committed by heterosexual men against many homosexuals during the 1950s was the “time honored tradition, for fraternities” called “rolling a queer.”¹⁸ As stated in filmmaker Tim Wolff’s documentary, *The Sons of Tennessee Williams*, “rolling a queer” was a tradition that many fraternity students at Tulane University participated in. According to Officer Superintendent Joseph L. Scheuring a “roll job or rolling a queer” “is a sneak thief who seeks to relieve another person of his property by taking advantage of the person. Usually no violence is used...but I have seen a number of ‘roll jobs’ where violence was used.”¹⁹ Unfortunately, on the night of September 29, 1958, three fraternity brothers, John S. Farrell, age 20, Alberto A. Calvo, age 20, and James P. Drennan, age 19, decided to go find a gay man and beat him up.²⁰

The day of the murder, Farrell, Calvo, and Drennan were walking from Tulane University when Farrell got the idea to go to the French Quarter and go “roll a queer.”²¹ Although he quickly agreed to participate with his friends, Drennan testified that he did not know exactly what “rolling a queer” entailed, only that it involved some type of petty theft.²² Thus, the three friends went to the predominantly gay area in the French Quarter and chose to enter the Café Lafitte in Exile, a very popular gay bar, in order to find their victim. Farrell instructed his friends to go wait outside in the alley next to the bar, while

¹⁷ Albert Carrey, “New Orleans Mardi Gras Krewes,” http://www.glbtc.com/social-sciences/new_orleans_mgk.2.html. (Accessed March 10, 2010).

¹⁸ Tim Wolff, *The Sons of Tennessee Williams*, Online Film, (New Orleans, LA: 2010).

¹⁹ “Students on Trial For Lives Testify – Tell Their Stories of Slaying in Quarter” *Times Picayune*, January 23, 1959, 3.

²⁰ Tim Wolff, *The Sons of Tennessee Williams*, Online Film, (New Orleans, LA: 2010).

²¹ Jim Kepner, *Rough News, Daring Views: 1950s Pioneer Gay Press Journalism*, (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, Inc., 1998), 299.

²² “JURY ACQUITS 3 STUDENTS TRIED IN SLAYING OF GUIDE – Freed Students, Kin Jubilant over Verdict,” *Times Picayune*, January 24, 1959, 1.

he waited inside for their potential target.²³ While Farrell sat at the bar, Fernando Rios walked in and had a seat next to him. Although stories conflict as to what happened next, the two men had a conversation with one another, they seemed to be friendly with one another, and enjoyed each other's company. Farrell never revealed to Rios whether he was homosexual or heterosexual; he allowed Rios to assume that he was gay, in a sense entrapping the young tour guide.²⁴ However, it was reported that Rios did invite Farrell home with him.

Outside Drennan and Calvo, Farrell's accomplices saw their schoolmate, Nicholas Silvey, walking by. According to Silvey's testimony, given during the January court proceedings, one of the boys called to Silvey and told him that, "Johnny Farrell was in Café Lafitte in Exile, 901 Bourbon, 'to get a queer to roll.'²⁵ However, Silvey disregarded this statement and continued to enjoy his outing with his two friends that he went to the French Quarter with.

After they left the bar, Rios tried to hail a cab for the two young men to go to his home. However, because he was in the gay area of New Orleans and because he had another man with him while leaving the well-known gay bar, Café Lafitte, the taxi drivers passed them up, refusing to give the couple a ride.

So the two men walked down the street and Farrell guided Rios to Orleans Alley, where, according to eye witness testimony, his friends Drennan and Calvo were

²³ "Students on Trial For Lives Testify – Tell their Stories of Slaying in Quarter," *Times Picayune*, January 23, 1959, 1.

²⁴ This statement again is contested. At the trial Farrell stated that he told Rios that he was not homosexual and had no intention of going home with him; however, many authors, including Jim Kepner of *Rough News, Daring Views: 1950s Gay Press Journalism*, and the DA Dowling believed that Farrell did not tell Rios that he was straight in order to get him out of the gay bar and into the alley, where he would be beaten by he and his friends.

²⁵ "Boast in Fatal Beating is Told—Student Says Trio on Trial Bragged of Act" *Times Picayune*, January 22, 1959, 1.

waiting.²⁶ While Drennan kept watch, Farrell and Calvo beat Rios badly. According to the doctors that examined him, “both of his eyes were badly blackened, there were severe lacerations, bruises, and fractures on his skull, nose, and mouth. He’d apparently received a severe blow in the liver.”²⁷ What seemed to be a harmless prank was clearly a very violent crime. Before leaving Rios’ body in the alley, Calvo got the wallet and the boys ran back to their dorm room.

It was not until the next morning that the night custodian for the Cabildo, Ernest Hutchins, and the newsstand operator outside of the Cabildo, Matthew Lillard, found Rios unconscious and called the police. The two described Rios as beaten and bloody. Lillard stated “The man’s face was so mutilated I could not get a good look at it... The beaten man’s face was out of shape, his jaw was swollen on the left side and his mouth was twisted.”²⁸ As stated above, Rios died in the hospital without regaining consciousness. Based on the witnesses’ comments, it is evident that Rios was the victim of an extremely brutal attack. This was not a harmless prank that happened to go too far as Drennan and Calvo claimed it was; nor was it a case of self defense in response to an “indecent advantage” gone awry, as claimed by Farrell’s defense attorney, Baldwin.²⁹ Rios was the unlucky victim to a completely random crime.

When the three students made it back to their dorm, they told their dorm mates of the evening they just had. Calvo showed off Rios’ wallet proclaiming to Silvey, “Johnny

²⁶ “Students’ Trial Recessed” *Times Picayune*, January 22, 1959, 3.

²⁷ Jim Kepner, *Rough News, Daring Views: 1950s Pioneer Gay Press Journalism*, (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, Inc., 1998), 299.

²⁸ “Students’ Trial Recessed” *Times Picayune*, January 22, 1959, 3.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 3.

just rolled a queer.”³⁰ He then showed Silvey the wallet and its contents which consisted of some American, Mexican, and Canadian money totaling \$40 and some cards that had Spanish written on them. The next morning another student named George Meyer, overheard Calvo and Farrell discussing what happened the previous night. Meyer stated that he watched the two go through, what he heard them identify as Rios’ wallet and burn its contents. Meyer then stated,

That when the three boys heard that Rios had died they discussed the matter. Rather than feeling remorseful, they were kidding about the incident. Three alternatives were discussed (1) going to the police, (2) going to a priest; (3) consult a lawyer.³¹

Eventually the boys decided to go to the Dean of Students and explain to him what happened that September night. Eventually, the Dean called the boys a defense attorney and the police to get their statements.

This resulted in the boys being indicted for the murder of Fernando Rios. Thirty-nine witnesses and experts were called to testify on behalf of the state, while twenty-one were called by the defense. However, no testimony seemed to be more convincing to the jurors than the testimonies given by the three students on trial. John Farrell was first put on the stand and according to his testimony he was the victim of “improper advances.”³² He stated that Rios tried to come on to him sexually and after Farrell yelled “No!” Rios tried to grab Farrell, who responded by punching his assailant in the stomach and the face. It was not until later that he found out his accomplice had stolen the wallet.³³

³⁰ Ibid, 3.

³¹ “Students on Trial For Lives Testify – Tell Their Stories of Slaying in Quarter” *Times Picayune*, January 23, 1959, 3.

³² Farrell’s testimony, Ibid, 3.

³³ Ibid, 3.

When confronted by District Attorney Dowling with the fact he had initially planned to roll a queer, Farrell vehemently denied it, stating that when he told his friends about it they said they would not participate in it, and thus he changed his mind. It was not until after eating that he changed his mind and decided to go into Café Lafitte with the intention of “rolling a queer.”³⁴ It was there, he stated that he met Rios, who suggested that the two go hail a cab and go to a hotel together.³⁵ However, unable to hail a cab, the two go into the alley where Rios tried to come on to Farrell. Farrell denied him and punched Rios twice, once in the stomach and once in the face, and ran. “Hearing my cries for help, Calvo ran into the alley we went through the man’s pockets but I did not take anything.”³⁶ According to Farrell’s testimony, the robbery was Calvo’s idea. When Calvo showed Farrell the wallet, Farrell quickly told Calvo that he should not have stolen it.³⁷ During his testimony, Farrell also stated that when they encountered their dorm mates, it was Calvo who bragged to their friends about their encounter with Rios. Farrell quickly denied the encounter, stating his friend was only kidding around.³⁸

Alberto Calvo was the second out of the trio to be called to the stand. Nevertheless, Calvo’s testimony contradicted his friend’s at some very important points. For example, he stated that the idea of rolling a queer was completely Farrell’s idea and when confronted with it Calvo and Drennan said that they did not want to participate; but they agreed to wait outside of the Café Lafitte while Farrell went in to find “a queer to

³⁴ Ibid, 3.

³⁵ Ibid, 3.

³⁶ Ibid, 3.

³⁷ Ibid, 3.

³⁸ Ibid, 3.

roll.”³⁹ Farrell also instructed them to wait until he came out with someone, and that they follow at a distance, making sure they stay hidden. “After a few moments, I heard Johnny yell for help, and ran into the alley. There I saw the man on the ground and Johnny over him.”⁴⁰

According to Calvo, Farrell told his friends that the man had grabbed him “and he got mad and hit the man.” Calvo continues, “Johnny said we ought to take something from the...then he leaned over and took the man’s wallet from the rear pants pocket.”⁴¹ Calvo testified that he did not see any marks or indication of harm done to Rios’ face or body, and he insisted that he did not hit him, but he admitted to bragging to his fellow students about participating in the crime.⁴² He added that the American money that they stole from the tour guide’s wallet was given to the church, and the Mexican and Canadian money was burned because they had no use of it. Like Farrell, Calvo insisted upon his innocence.

The next accomplice and final person to take the stand in the five day trial was David Drennan. Drennan’s lawyer tried to paint his client as the innocent party; he restated that Drennan had no idea what “rolling a queer” actually meant and claimed that when Drennan found out his friends robbed Rios, he told them they should not have done that.⁴³ Drennan then told the jury that he only had a very vague understanding of what it meant to “roll a queer,” “I thought it meant taking money, but I still told Farrell it would

³⁹ Calvo’s testimony, *Ibid*, 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 3.

⁴² *Ibid*, 3.

⁴³ “JURY ACQUITS 3 STUDENTS TRIED IN SLAYING OF GUIDE – Freed Students, Kin Jubilant over Verdict,” *Times Picayune*, January 24, 1959, 1.

not be right to do.”⁴⁴ He then corroborated Farrell’s and Calvo’s testimonies about where he was after Rios and Farrell came from the bar and where he was once the two got to the alley.

However, he claimed that he did not mean to block the alley. He also added, another inconsistency in the testimony when he admitted that Rios would have had to gotten past him in order to leave the alley.⁴⁵ He then admitted that he did participate in the destruction of the wallet, did conspire as to what to do with the money, and helped concoct a story to tell when asked what happened.⁴⁶ When asked what they did with the wallet, he told the court that “the wallet was ripped up and thrown over the railing of the Claiborne overpass.”⁴⁷

This concluded the testimony for the state. When it was time for the defense to put their witnesses on the stand, there were sixteen people (four for Farrell, six for Drennan, and six for Calvo) who all testified to the great character of these three men. However, none of these people had any insight on the crime that was committed in September 1958. The next day, the three students were found not guilty by all twelve members of the jury. According to the *Times Picayune* article “JURY ACQUITS 3 STUDENTS TRIED IN SLAYING OF GUIDE – Freed Students, Kin Jubilant over Verdict— Spectators applaud verdict almost en masse,” there was a possibility of four different verdicts that could have been given. “1) Guilty as charged, which carries a mandatory sentence of death by electrocution. 2) Guilty without capital punishment,

⁴⁴ Drennan’s testimony, Ibid, 1.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 1.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 1.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 1.

which carries a mandatory life imprisonment sentence at hard labor. 3) Guilty of manslaughter, which carries a sentence of not more than 21 years at hard labor in the state penitentiary. 4) Not guilty, which means freedom.”⁴⁸ As indicated in the title, the spectators all applauded the verdict, and the boys’ family members rushed over to hug and kiss their sons and brothers and congratulate them on their innocent verdict. Due to a Dr. Muelling Jr.’s testimony that Rios’ skull was “unusually thin” the jurors did not believe that Farrell, or his accomplices could have known that hitting him “one time” would result in the man’s death.

The prosecution placed witnesses and doctors on the stand that contradicted the defendants’ testimonies. The testimony showed that the three University students intentionally beat and robbed Rios and confessed to their friends of doing so. However, the jurors did not agree with the evidence placed in front of them and allowed their feelings against homosexuals and in favor of the well liked and hard-working students who “had the advantage of position, wealth, and education” to override their judgment.⁴⁹ Although during his closing statements, Dowling did call for the jurors to look at the crime that took place, he also showed his distaste for the victim. Dowling “accused them of not only killing the man but of trying to ruin his reputation after his death by calling him a homosexual.”⁵⁰

This statement depicts how deep homophobia penetrated that court room. Not only were the defendants obviously harboring homophobic feelings based on the crime they committed, but so did the District Attorney. When he made this statement he was

⁴⁸ Ibid, 1.

⁴⁹ Dowling’s Closing Arguments Ibid, 3.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 3.

really saying that if the victim were homosexual he deserved to be punished. In fact, what is more chilling was that he condoned the gruesome murder of the victim. This statement is significant because throughout the trial, the sexual orientation of the victim and the setting of the crime (which as previously stated was in a known gay bar) were very major parts of the trial. In fact, it seemed that the jury and the trial's spectators overlooked the brutality of the crime and focused on the victim's sexuality. However, when Dowling made this comment, he implied that he could understand the defendants' actions if they were motivated against a homosexual. The District Attorney essentially said that being beaten to death was a sentence befitting a homosexual.

When one hears about the horrific crime committed in North Orleans Alley, one forgets that the evil criminals were in fact very young men. Both Calvo and Drennan affectionately referred to their "ring leader" as "Johnny," the eldest of the three at 19 years old. Being so young it could easily be argued that they simply did not use their best judgment. However, there was also a victim in this situation-Fernando Rios, who as District Attorney Dowling stated in his closing arguments, "...had a right to live, not to be murdered, not to be robbed; and, he had a greater right to his reputation after his death."⁵¹ Like many injustices carried out in trials against murdered African Americans in the south, Rios' death was unjust and no one paid for the crime, not even the robbery that happened after the fact.

While many people in New Orleans' heterosexual community celebrated the innocent verdicts, gay men and women were agitated with the unjust decision. This "innocent" verdict was part of a very long list of injustices that gay and lesbian

⁵¹ Ibid, 3.

communities in New Orleans experienced. However, this time the communities decided to react and the way they reacted was purely “New Orleans”.⁵² When one looks at the history of New Orleans, one sees a city that is extremely unconventional. New Orleans has always played by its own rules, never completely following the status quo created by many of the major cities of the United States. Although there are many good examples of this, one extremely important example of this is the gay community’s response to the vicious hate crime carried out against Fernando Rios. While cities on the Eastern and Western coasts of the United States founded chapters of the Mattachine Society to combat the political and social opposition that homosexual men and women encountered, in New Orleans gay men gathered together and formed krewes.

A century’s old tradition, Mardi Gras krewes were formed in order to celebrate Mardi Gras with parades, floats, or in the case of the gay krewes, balls. According to Albert Carrey, a founder of one of the first gay krewes in New Orleans, members of the krewes are usually bound by ties of family or neighborhood or ethnicity or other shared interest.⁵³ Men and women would gather together in their respective krewes and put on large scale productions complete with costumes and balls. Although the idea of the krewes did not originate in New Orleans, the New Orleans krewes that one encounters during Mardi Gras are completely unique to American culture. Thus, with the creation of the Krewe of Yuga in 1959, the New Orleans gay community created a unique institution and established a New Orleans tradition.⁵⁴

⁵² Tim Wolff, *The Sons of Tennessee Williams*, Online Film, (New Orleans, LA: 2010).

⁵³ Albert Carrey, “New Orleans Mardi Gras Krewes,” http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/new_orleans_mgk.2.html.

⁵⁴ Tim Wolff, *The Sons of Tennessee Williams*, Online Film, (New Orleans, LA: 2010).

Though this krewe originally met in private homes, they were created by its gay members to “secure themselves” and their community.⁵⁵ In the early stages of the krewes, some of the members would host private parties for their friends and krewe members to attend. Given the innocent verdicts in the Rios’ Case, many gay men felt that their lives were in danger.⁵⁶ As shown above, despite overwhelming evidence, the three students who murdered the young gay tour guide did not serve any jail time because the members of the jury allowed the victim’s sexuality to cloud their better judgment.

Unfortunately, harassment from the New Orleans Police Department also plagued the gay community in the French Quarter. Like many states in the country, it was illegal for members of the same sex to dance with one another.⁵⁷ Oftentimes gay men would be arrested and if convicted they could serve a maximum of five years at the Angola State Prison.⁵⁸ Even if they were exonerated, their pictures and names might be published in the city paper.⁵⁹ This often affected their personal and professional lives. Due to their sexuality many young men were disowned by their family members and many lost their jobs.⁶⁰ Thus many men in New Orleans gay community felt it necessary to create spaces for themselves where they could remain secure and continue to grow as a community.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Albert Carrey, “New Orleans Mardi Gras Krewes,” http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/new_orleans_mgk.2.html.

⁵⁷ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 16. And Lillian Faderman and Stuar Timmons, *Gay LA: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians*, (New York: Perseus Books Group, 2006), 175.

⁵⁸ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 68.

⁵⁹ John Doe, 1993, Interview by Karen Cox and the USM Oral History Center, Hattiesburg, MS. July 1.

⁶⁰ Albert Carrey, “New Orleans Mardi Gras Krewes,” http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/new_orleans_mgk.2.html.

In 1959, after the Krewe of Yuga first formed, it was decided that it was very important for them to emulate all of the traditions of a Mardi Gras Krewe. During the first few years of the Krewes existence, they often gathered at one another's homes to celebrate Mardi Gras together. However, in 1962 it was decided that the ball would be moved to a private school's cafeteria due to ball's growing popularity.⁶¹ Dressed in their most extravagant costumes, covered in rhinestones, their faces covered with beautiful masks with beautiful high wigs atop their heads, gay men from all over New Orleans came to the ball in Jefferson Parish.⁶²

It is very important at this time to note how significant these balls were. These balls did more than function as a place for gay men to meet and network with one another. These krewes acted as a private response to the constant harassment the gay community experienced in New Orleans. Though Rios was the most highly publicized case of gay bashing that occurred in New Orleans during the 1950s and possibly the only one that resulted in murder, it was not an isolated incident.⁶³ As stated above, many male university students participated in "rolling a queer." However, Rios' murder sparked something in the New Orleans gay community. His murder acted as their Stonewall. It was the catalyst that encouraged them to take the future of their community in their hands and try to better it, even if only for a moment.

Although they did not act as a political group, the gay Mardi Gras Krewes allowed the New Orleans gay community to organize; something that rarely happened.

⁶¹ Tim Wolff, *The Sons of Tennessee Williams*, Online Film, (New Orleans, LA: 2010).

⁶² Albert Carrey, "New Orleans Mardi Gras Krewes," http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/new_orleans_mgk.2.html.

⁶³ Through my research I found that a number of differing publications pointed to Rios' murder as **the** point that sparked the emergence of the krewes and encouraged the city's gay community to unite.

When these men gathered at the balls in their beautiful costumes, they were doing more than mocking the straight community's balls. They were celebrating the city's homosexual community. As time progressed, more gay krewes emerged. In 1961, the newly formed Krewe of Petronius was the first gay krewe to be legally registered as a Mardi Gras krewe and obtained a state charter to hold their ball. In 1962, the Krewe of Petronius also became the first gay krewe to obtain a police detail to prevent harassment.⁶⁴ However, not all of the balls went smoothly. While the Krewe of Petronius enjoyed their celebration free of harassment from outsiders; the Krewe of Yuga's ball was subjected to a police raid and resulted in a number of men being arrested and placed in jail.⁶⁵

These differing experiences show that although the gay community in New Orleans was growing more socially aware, they were still subject to discrimination by those in authority and members of the heterosexual community. Although these balls only occurred annually, every time they were held they guaranteed a secure space for its attendants. Men could dance with one another and be themselves without worrying about being arrested or targeted by strange men and subsequently being beaten. The emergence of the gay krewes were more than just a wonderful tradition, they were a grass roots organization that acted like the more political Mattachine Society. They provided a space for gay men to be gay men and feel secure with expressing their sexuality, even for a moment.

⁶⁴ Albert Carrey, "New Orleans Mardi Gras Krewes," http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/new_orleans_mgk.2.html.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

As time progressed more krewes continued to emerge. Today, according to a gay Mardi Gras Krewe website, there are about eight gay Mardi Gras Krewes that hold balls every Mardi Gras in New Orleans.⁶⁶ The tradition of the gay krewes has continued in New Orleans for over fifty years. Although when they first emerged they were not a public, the legacy that these krewes have created for the gay community in New Orleans is one of social response. The pattern started by the gay krewes will be seen in the subsequent chapters. Rather than focus on changing the politics in the city, the New Orleans gay community establish social and cultural customs and spaces for them to gather and be themselves.

Years after the murder of Rios, more spaces for gay men and women appear throughout the French Quarter. There are more clubs and bars targeted to gay men and women to socialize and network as a community. Unfortunately, as more of these spaces developed, the city's gay community was not free from tragedy. Fifteen years after Fernando Rios was found unconscious in the French Quarter, another tragedy claimed the lives of thirty-three men and women in a fire at a popular gay bar.

⁶⁶“The Krewe of Armenius History,” <http://www.kreweofarmenius.org/history.htm>

Chapter Two

As the gay krewes continued their growth in New Orleans, a number of gay and lesbian groups persisted with organizing and asserting themselves as important political and social voices. During the 1950s and well into the 1960s homophile organizations were forming throughout the United States.⁶⁷ The formation of these organizations, such as, the Daughters of Bilitis, the Mattachine Society, and ONE, Inc, allowed a number of gay men and women to unite and recognize themselves as a community in their local areas.⁶⁸ Through these organizations, they were able to not only develop relationships with other homosexuals in their communities, but also expand and reach out to homosexuals throughout the country. This resulted in the emergence of a national gay and lesbian community.⁶⁹

Though the homosexual communities on both the East and West coasts were forming political organizations, gay communities in the American south were finding unique ways that allowed them to organize and create a larger community in their areas. As shown in the previous chapter, gay Mardi Gras krewes were created in New Orleans in order to provide a safe haven for gay men in the area. However, there was still the prevailing worry that gays and lesbians were being targeted by the New Orleans Police

⁶⁷ Homophile organizations decided to use this word instead of homosexual because they did not want to be associated with the negative connotations, i.e. mental illness, sexual deviance, etc. that were associated with the term. Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay LA: A History of Sexual, Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians*, (New York, New York, 2006), 111.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 111.

⁶⁹ Craig M. Loftin, "Unacceptable Mannerism: Gender Anxieties, Homosexual Activism, and Swish in the United States, 1945-1965," *Journal of Social History* 40.4 (2007), 578.

Department. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the New Orleans Police Department's Vice Squad would often send undercover officers into gay bars and clubs in order to entrap gay men by arranging sexual encounters with them. Like many states in the country, Louisiana had anti-sodomy laws that prohibited men from having any type of sexual encounter with one another that involved entry into an anal or oral cavity. Thus, undercover officers would enter the gay bars and clubs and solicit these men; if they agreed to the sexual encounter they were jailed for attempting to commit sodomy, a sentence that carried a maximum of five years in the state penitentiary.⁷⁰

Although there was always a worry that they would be arrested by the New Orleans Police Department's Vice Squad or targeted by homophobic men within the city while participating in events thrown by the krewes, they knew that the chances of them being targeted by others were lessened.⁷¹ The formation of these krewes shows the uniqueness of New Orleans' gay community. New Orleans is known for its century's long celebration of Mardi Gras, and the extravagant balls that are associated with both heterosexual and homosexual krewes.⁷² Thus, by associating with Mardi Gras' openness with sexuality and use of extravagance, they were able to successfully use the traditions of Mardi Gras to develop their unique strategy to unite and recognize themselves as a community.

⁷⁰ James T. Sear, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001) 68.

⁷¹ Albert Carrey, "New Orleans Mardi Gras Krewes," http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/new_orleans_mgk.2.html.

⁷² The idea of homosexual balls is not new. According to George Chauncey in his book *Gay New York* and Chad Heap in his book *Slumming*, during the Harlem Renaissance black gay men would gather and put on extravagant balls as a way for them to socialize.

1950s New Orleans was a far cry from today's sexually liberated and socially open-minded city. Like many cities in America's post World War II era, traditional values were cherished and anything or anyone that challenged this ideal was met with disdain. In New Orleans the idea of homosexuality was met with such hostility. Many times men would go out at night, determined to find and assault a gay man.⁷³ In 1958, when an unidentified gay man was found unconscious and badly beaten in the French Quarter, a number of gay men were not surprised. However, when the assailants were caught, put on trial, and acquitted, this solidified in a number of gay men's minds that they were not protected by anyone. The police targeted them and aimed to incarcerate them. Straight men targeted them and aimed to beat, if not kill, them. As a result, it became more important for them to create a safe space that remained hidden from those that targeted them.⁷⁴ Members of the New Orleans' gay community felt that, in order to save themselves from harm, they needed to stay hidden from their attackers.

New Orleans' gay and lesbian communities were not the only southern homosexual communities that aimed to create their own space in the south; this is best showcased in the emergence of shows featuring female impersonators in Atlanta. Though female impersonation had been staples in cities on the West and East coasts, in the early twentieth century, during the 1950s and into the 1960s they became popular in many large southern cities. In fact, drag shows were so popular that they took place in straight venues.⁷⁵

⁷³ Tim Wolff, *The Sons of Tennessee Williams*, Online Film, (New Orleans, LA: 2010).

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Wesley Chenault & Stacy Braukman, *Gay and Lesbian Atlanta: Images of America: Georgia*, (Atlanta: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 43.

Similar to the secret parties thrown by the krewes in their early stages, Atlanta gay men and women held private parties to minimize scrutiny directed towards them from the heterosexual community. These private parties, however, did more than create a social outlet free from inquisitive heterosexuals. They also allowed gay men and women to develop social networks within their community, creating a larger community amongst homosexuals in Atlanta.⁷⁶ It is important to note that there were growing gay communities throughout the South. So often in a number of historical works the gay and lesbians communities in the South are overlooked or ignored because many assume that these homosexual communities were either completely stifled or non-existent. The social scenes that emerged in Atlanta and continued to grow in New Orleans illustrate that many gay communities in the South, like their bicoastal counterparts, were becoming aware of their selves and felt it important to build a tighter community.

These private parties and quiet organizations like the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis were essential to the development of the national gay community because it was one of the rare moments that gays and lesbians could acknowledge their sexuality. Many gay men and women during the 1950s felt differently about their sexuality than today's homosexual community. While it is now considered an important political and personal move to come out publicly, during the 1950s many homosexuals did not assert their sexuality publicly. This act was more often done in small groups with others that shared same sex desires.⁷⁷ Thus, as the 1950s drew to a close, private organizations and private parties were essential for the growth of many local gay

⁷⁶ Ibid, 44.

⁷⁷ Donna Jo Smith, "Queering the South: Constructions of Southern/Queer Identity," in *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, ed. John Howard (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 375.

communities. New Orleans is unique in this sense because the krewes combined the ideas of gay organizations and holding private parties in order to create a refuge for the New Orleans' gay community.⁷⁸ While homophile organizations were becoming more political as the 1950s came to an end, the Mardi Gras Krewes remained focused on building a social network for the Crescent City's gay community and creating a space for homosexual to express their sexuality openly.⁷⁹

New Orleans was becoming increasingly dangerous for gay men, because of their sexuality, police continued to target them. Fear kept many gay men in New Orleans, including those participating in the gay Mardi Gras krewes, hidden. Yet it is very important to note that although the gay krewes did not parade in the streets during Mardi Gras, the fact that they held balls and were gay was made public.⁸⁰ This may seem to contradict the motives behind the formation of the krewes; however, it is important to remember that these men were required to be in costume and they only gained entry through invitation. Thus, though the balls were known to the public, the balls ensured the attendees protection.

As the country entered the 1960s, the path towards social and political change for many groups who felt overlooked or mistreated by the American government and the majority of American society was being laid. Many American citizens were becoming disillusioned with a number of the policies in the United States and called for a change. These disenchantments emerged in a number of social and political movements. The

⁷⁸ Although they started in 1959, by the end of 1959 and the beginning of 1960 there were two different krewes in New Orleans, the Krewe of Yuga and the Krewe of Petronius. Within a few years, the number grew to four.

⁷⁹ Tim Wolff, *The Sons of Tennessee Williams*, Online Film, (New Orleans, LA: 2010).

⁸⁰ Ibid.

emergence of the second wave of the Women's Liberation Movement, which began in 1961, and gained momentum within a few years, led to women throughout the nation calling for their civil liberties.⁸¹ A very important step for American women, organizations like National Organization of Women (NOW) called for change for one of America's most overlooked groups.⁸²

The emergence of the Antiwar Movement motivated a number of college-aged American youths demonstrated against America's involvement in Vietnam during the Vietnam War. They called for a peaceful end to America's involvement in Vietnam.⁸³ Though, these demonstrations grew increasingly more violent, it laid a new groundwork for groups that wanted political and social change in America. It became evident to a number of groups that sometimes violent visibility was more effective than peaceful assembly.

However, no movement was more influential in the development of the Gay Rights Movement than the African American Civil Rights Movement. As the 1960s approached African Americans achieved a number of important advances, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964.⁸⁴ With the formation of the more militant Black Panther Party, African Americans showed the homosexual community the importance of taking ownership of what a majority of society believed to be a negative quality. By stating that

⁸¹ Jo Freeman, *The Women's Liberation Movement: Its Origins, Structures And Ideas*, Liberation Movement- Documents from the Women's Liberation Movement, <http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/wlm/womlib/>

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ *The Pacifica Radio/UC Berkeley Social Activism Sound Recording Project: Anti-Vietnam War Protests in the San Francisco Bay Area & Beyond*, in the University of California, Berkeley, Library webpage, <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificaviet.html>.

⁸⁴ The Civil Rights Act called for the end of discrimination against one's race or gender in "employment, voting, and education. *Events*, on the Civil Rights Digital Library, <http://crdl.usg.edu/events/>.

black was beautiful, the Black Panthers showed the gay community how to “invert the negative values of society” that had been associated with their community.⁸⁵ This act was very important for both the Black Panther Party and the growing homosexual community. For instance, during the Stonewall Riots, many young gay women and men shouted “Gay Power” and “Gay Pride” as they marched through the streets of the Greenwich Village.⁸⁶ Based on this it is safe to ascertain that gay men and women no longer viewed their sexuality as a weakness and a necessary secret, but empowering and necessary to express. Thus, with the emergence of so many important movements, a “period of tremendous political, social, and cultural upheaval” surfaced.⁸⁷ As these movements progressed, they began to set the tone for the “protest culture” that materialized during the Gay Liberation.⁸⁸

As these movements gained momentum and achieved significant strides, the national homosexual community began to ready themselves for a monumental act that would start their advancement socially and politically. As the 1960s continued many gay men and women grew away from the accommodation ideologies of the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis and adopted a more radical and much more visible tactic.⁸⁹ Since many gay men and women participated in the previously mentioned movements, a number of them felt more energized and opted for a more “confrontational...approach that embraced the unconventional politics associated with

⁸⁵ John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 320.

⁸⁶ David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press: 2004), 147 & 289.

⁸⁷ John D’Emilio “Gay Communities in the South,” in *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, ed. John Howard (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 172.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 320.

⁸⁹ Craig A. Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements: Assimilation or Liberation?*, (Philadelphia: Westview Press, 2008), 18.

the antiwar (movement), women's liberation, and civil rights movements."⁹⁰ As a result, on the night of June 28, 1969 at a small gay bar in Greenwich Village, New York called the Stonewall Inn, the modern Gay Rights Movement began.

On that night, the New York Vice Squad raided the bar on the grounds that the Stonewall was operating without a liquor license, one of the most common reasons vice squads throughout the country raided known gay bars.⁹¹ The police forced the patrons to exit the bar; however, rather than peaceably disassemble the patrons of the bar and a number of gay people from around the area began to gather and called for the mistreatment of gays and lesbians to end. Fights ensued, but the gay community refused to back down. Although many were injured and faced the prospect of going to jail, years of frustration and discrimination seemed to fuel their anger. As a result this Saturday night sparked the six day long riots known as the Stonewall Riots.

This event, along with the environment created in the United States by the proceeding movements, helped create modern Gay Rights Movement. Gay organizations like the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) formed and attacked America's homophobic attitudes and allowed the gay and lesbian community to find strength and empowerment in acknowledging their sexuality.⁹² Coming out of the closet was no longer a secretive occasion; it became a political act. Many homosexuals began to reject society's negative view of homosexuality and began to associate their homosexuality with pride and self-

⁹⁰ Ibid., 19.

⁹¹ David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2004) 142-146.

⁹² Craig A. Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements: Assimilation or Liberation?*, (Philadelphia: Westview Press, 2008), 21.

acceptance.⁹³ According to Freedman and D’Emilio, the gay community’s public coming out was an act of resistance against the oppressive mainstream society.⁹⁴ In allowing their sexuality to be used as an act of resistance, the newly formed GLF did something very unique for the time: they adapted the feminist idea of “redefining the personal as political” to the needs of their movement.⁹⁵

However, during this great mobilization in the national gay community, New Orleans moved much slower. Although the gay Mardi Gras Krewes, the Krewe of Yuga and the Krewe of Petronius, had been in existence for over ten years, members of New Orleans’ gay community were still under persecution from the heterosexual community. One of the notable instances was when the city’s District Attorney, Jim Garrison, arrested the openly gay prominent businessman and civic leader, Clay Shaw, and charged him with conspiring to assassinate President John F. Kennedy in 1967.⁹⁶

Although it was years after Kennedy’s assassination, Shaw was the only person to be brought to trial for the President’s murder.⁹⁷ In the spring of 1969, during Mardi Gras, Shaw’s trial began and at the end of what Sears called a trial with a “carnival atmosphere,” he was found not guilty.⁹⁸ Though this was a true victory for the Crescent City’s gay community, given the results of the previously discussed court case that involved a gay man many homosexuals in New Orleans were intimidated by Shaw’s

⁹³ John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 321.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 321.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 322.

⁹⁶ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), 14.

⁹⁷ “New Orleans Businessman Clay Shaw Interview, 1967,”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=alwGiET07G0&feature=related>.

⁹⁸ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), 17.

arrest. They saw the attempted persecution of an important city figure and were “riddled with self-doubt, chilled by official intimidation, and silenced by innuendo.”⁹⁹ So while the pilots of the Stonewall Riots stated that it was the beginning of being out and proud, the gay community New Orleans opted to remain in the closet.

As the 1970s approached, many more homosexuals made the political decision to express their sexuality and they displayed a unified sense of pride as a community. As the movement gained more and more momentum, gay and lesbian organizations surfaced throughout the country. This environment seemed to comfort some members of the gay community in New Orleans. In 1972, the gay community in New Orleans decided to open their first chapter of the GLF. Formed by a disillusioned ex-member of NOW, Lynn Miller, the New Orleans GLF held workshops on lesbianism at the YWCA. They also attempted to repeal the state’s sodomy law. GLF was one of the very first and very few political homosexual organizations in New Orleans.

Yet they proved to be too radical for the southern tastes of the New Orleans’ gay community and were often referred to as “radicals” and “antagonists.”¹⁰⁰ A majority of the gay community in New Orleans felt uncomfortable with the GLF’s urgency to incite conflicts with the New Orleans Police Department and the city’s officials. As shown previously, the New Orleans gay community wanted to remain out-of-the-way of the city’s authority figures and the New Orleans GLF, in their eyes, made that very difficult.¹⁰¹ A few months after they formed, the GLF split due to a lack of community support. The emergence of the GLF did, however, motivate a small group of Tulane

⁹⁹ Ibid, 19.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 72.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, They were referred to by a gay man in New Orleans as “shit stirrers.” 72.

University students to form the university's first Gay Student Union¹⁰² The student organization only remained open when school was in session, and proved not to be especially effective in the larger community. Yet as the 1960s came to a close and the country entered into the 1970s, Gay Rights Movement continued to grow and by 1973 almost 800 lesbian and gay organizations had opened around the country.¹⁰³

The gay nightlife was still very popular in the New Orleans' French Quarter. People frequented the bars that catered to both a high-class clientele and people that wanted to drink and dance. The Up Stairs Lounge, with its red wallpaper was a relatively new club. It catered to people who enjoyed quiet conversations and piano playing.¹⁰⁴ Although the gay community in New Orleans remained relatively inactive politically, they were enjoying their growth as a community socially. They continued to go out and hold parties binding them closer as a community. Sadly a tragic fire would momentarily silence the gay community socially, but motivate them to come together politically.

Located on the second floor of a three room complex on Decatur Street, the Up Stairs Lounge had a number of regulars that built family like relationships with the owners of the bar.¹⁰⁵ More than just the usual gay bar, many couples came to the Up Stairs Lounge to celebrate their anniversaries, regulars would bring their favorite records for the jukebox, and people from all walks of life, such as-- actors, street people, or

¹⁰² Wesley Chenault & Stacy Braukman, *Gay and Lesbian Atlanta: Images of America: Georgia*, (Atlanta: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 64.

¹⁰³ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 322.

¹⁰⁴ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), 97.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 101.

prostitutes, came to indulge in conversations.¹⁰⁶ On the night of June 24, 1973 the Up Stairs Lounge was full of about sixty patrons. While some were participating in the regular pastime of drinking and having a few laughs, some of the members of the Metropolitan Community Church were there to thank a bar patron for donating an air conditioner to their church.¹⁰⁷ The Metropolitan Community Church was relatively new. Head minister Father William P. Richardson, affectionately referred to as Father Bill brought the Metropolitan Community Church to New Orleans because he wanted to create a religious institution in New Orleans that openly welcomed homosexuals. An expansion of the Los Angeles based Metropolitan Community Church; the church was established by Father Bill who was sent by the church's founder, Rev. Troy Perry, to New Orleans to open up another chapter. Both Father Bill and Rev. Troy felt compelled to help homosexuals accept themselves.¹⁰⁸

The Metropolitan Community Church was first formed in Los Angeles by Reverend Troy Perry in 1968. Expelled from his church in Tennessee because of his sexuality, Rev. Perry moved to Los Angeles. He always dreamt of creating an interfaith church that did not discriminate against any of their members' sexuality.¹⁰⁹ However, given the religious environment in Tennessee, he understood that it would have been impossible to do so and placed his ambitions on the backburner. Following a large scale police raid on a popular gay club called The Patch, Perry witnessed his date and a number

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Troy Perry, *Don't be Afraid Anymore: The Story of Reverend Troy Perry and the Metropolitan Community Churches*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 34.

of the other patrons get arrested, for being “gay at a gay bar.”¹¹⁰ A few months later Perry opened the first chapter of the Metropolitan Community Church, welcoming all, including lesbians and gays; the Los Angeles chapter of the Metropolitan Community Church soon grew to over 1,000.¹¹¹ When Perry sent Father Bill to New Orleans, he hoped that the gay and lesbian communities would flock to the church the same way the Los Angeles homosexual community did.

A number of patrons entered the small bar to enjoy their Sunday night with their friends and loved ones. After dropping off his two children at a Disney film earlier that night, the temporary assistant pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church, George Mitchell, pulled up to the bar with his lover, Louis Broussard.¹¹² Meanwhile Jimmy Warren and his little brother Eddie were enjoying a conversation with their mother Inez, who was in town visiting her gay sons.¹¹³ In the back of the bar, members of the Up Stairs Players were planning next Saturday’s show which would benefit the crippled children in the city.¹¹⁴ A little after seven that evening a twenty-six year old hustler and petty thief named Rodger Dale Nunez started bothering one of the bar’s regulars, Mike Scarborough. A fight broke out between the two and Nunez was thrown out of the bar, but not before he called out his threat and promised he was going to burn the crowd out.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay LA: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians*, (New York: Basic Books, 2006). 163 and 159.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 165.

¹¹² Reverend Troy Perry, *Don’t Be Afraid Anymore The Story of Reverend Troy Perry and the Metropolitan Community Churches*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 79.

¹¹³ B. Rushton, “After the Fire Up Stairs,” *Vieux Carré Courier*, June 29, 1973.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Statement of Michael Wayne Scarborough, July 16, 1973, Department of State Fire Marshal, New Orleans, 1-2.

Almost forty-five minutes later the bar began to close with the traditional singing of the bar's anthem, "United We Stand." While the group was singing one of the bartenders, Luther Boggs, went down the stairs and opened the steel front door. Suddenly, an orange fireball went up the stairwell knocking him down. Pretty soon, "Fire!" was exclaimed and the room began to fill with black smoke.¹¹⁶ Flames began to cover the doorways and, as a result, seemed to eliminate the patrons' hope for escape. As the flames crawled up the walls, the electricity failed and panic ensued. Patrons ran across the room and attempted to slip through the barred windows. Two men, clothes ablaze, jumped from the bar's second-story window. While some escaped the fire with just a small number of bruises and cuts, many "lay lifeless on the pavement; blood ran into the gutter."¹¹⁷ The piano player, Buddy safely led twenty of the patrons including George Mitchell through the bar to a fire escape on the roof. Though he had made it to safety, Mitchell could not find his lover Louis Broussard; "pushing aside firemen," he went back into the burning lounge to find his lover.¹¹⁸

From the street people could see Pastor Bill Larson reaching out of the window attempting to escape the inferno. From the street Buddy watched in horror as his home away from home burned; he watched as liquor bottles exploded, the famous red wallpaper that characterized the lounge turn into ash, and as people trying to escape the mayhem in panic, threw barstools across the room.¹¹⁹ It took eighty-seven fire fighters, thirteen engines, and sixteen minutes to contain the blaze. "Expecting to find five or six

¹¹⁶ J. LaPlace and E. Anderson, "29 Killed in Quarter Blaze," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, June 25, 1973.

¹¹⁷ W. Philbin, "First the Horror, Then the Leap," *New Orleans States-Item*, June 25, 1973.

¹¹⁸ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), 102.

¹¹⁹ A. Lind, "Fire Bares the Grisly Face of Death," *New Orleans States-Item*, June 25, 1973.

persons, he was ‘flabbergasted.’ The veteran chief found bodies fused together or burnt to the bone.”¹²⁰ Mitchell was found with his arm over Broussard, the two perished together in the fire. On the small stage where the piano was, Inez was found covered by one of her sons. Larson’s body remained out of the window; his body visibly charred.

Twenty-eight men and women, gay and straight, died that night in the fire, a third of these people were members of the Metropolitan Community Church.¹²¹ Fifteen were later hospitalized and within weeks three more died, including a teacher, Luther Boggs, who was fired while he was in the hospital fighting for his life. Minister Larson’s family refused to claim his body. They told the Metropolitan Community Church to cremate him and keep his ashes.¹²² After hearing that a tragic fire broke out in the French Quarter, NBC News cameras and a number of New Orleans newspaper journalists rushed out to interview the witnesses to the fire. While NBC News respected the feelings of those that were interviewed and did not show their faces, they did not seem sympathetic in their newscast. They were less focused on the damage done by the fire or the number of victims that perished in the fire, and more focused on the sexual orientation of those that frequented the club.¹²³

¹²⁰ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), 103.

¹²¹ “Up Stairs Fire Death Toll 31,” *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, July 12, 1973. It is important to note that this number has changed throughout my research, what I have deduced is that thirty-one of the people that died as a result of the fire were identified by someone. While four were never identified, and were buried in a community cemetery.

¹²² James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), 104.

¹²³ NBC Coverage, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvvRJNqo1YM>

NBC was not alone; a number of the publications printed the names and identities of the survivors of the fire and deemed the bar a “homosexual hangout.”¹²⁴ This was a very dangerous thing to do in the intolerant and homophobic atmosphere of New Orleans, where many still referred to minority groups, and most specifically homosexuals, negatively. As previously stated, getting one’s name printed in the newspaper in association with a gay bar or homosexual hangout damaged one’s reputation. People could be fired from their jobs or disowned by their families because of society’s attitudes towards their sexuality.

The lack of remorse towards the victims of the fire was displayed in a number of publications the following day. Newspapers’ gruesome accounts of “bodies stacked like pancakes” and “charred, cooked-out pile of human flesh” display less pity for the victims of the fire and more interest in recounting a true-life horror story for profit.¹²⁵ Radio DJs were no better making jokes like, “what will we bury the ashes of queers in? Answer: Fruit Jars.”¹²⁶ In light of these attitudes, Rev. Troy Perry, the founder of the Metropolitan Community Church spoke at a press conference the Monday after the fire on behalf of the members of his church and the gay community. He chastised the media for the abhorrent behavior towards the victims of this fire. He also called for the closeted members of the gay community in New Orleans to stop attacking their fellow brothers

¹²⁴ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), 104.

¹²⁵ J. LaPlace, “Scene of French Quarter Fire Is Called Dante’s Inferno,’ Hitler’s Incinerators,” *New Orleans States-Item*, June 25, 1973.

¹²⁶ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), 100.

and sisters "...even if you aren't ready to come out of the closet. Too many people are now being hurt and suffering for your complacency!"¹²⁷

After hearing this statement, a number of the members of New Orleans' gay community became empowered, while the other number grew nervous. They understood that their sexuality was a cause for trouble for them and wanted to accommodate the heterosexual community by remaining closeted and out of their way. This is evident in a conversation had at a meeting with a few gay bar owners and Rev. Perry. According to Perry during this meeting someone called out "'Why are you carpetbaggers making trouble for us queers here?'" Drawing from his experiences in Los Angeles and the political and social successes achieved by the city's gay community, Perry responded, "Somebody has to speak up and speak out! We can't be frightened of this or it will only be worse next time."¹²⁸ Like GLF two years prior, Perry and the members of the New Orleans chapter of the Metropolitan Community Church were met with opposition when they asked members of the New Orleans gay community to organize and demonstrate publicly. As stated above, the New Orleans gay community's main concern was to remain out of the NOPD's and other city officials' sight.

With images of Rios' killers escaping prison and the NOPD continuing to target gay men and try to put them in one of the most dangerous prisons in the country, the New Orleans gay community was still in terror of what may happen to them once they publicly acknowledge their sexuality. In addition to this, they witnessed Nunez set the fire and despite an overwhelming amount of evidence, he got away with a mass killing because a

¹²⁷ Reverend Troy, Perry, *Don't Be Afraid Anymore The Story of Reverend Troy Perry and the Metropolitan Community Churches*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 88.

¹²⁸ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), 104.

majority of his victims happened to be gay. The city's gay community did not believe that there was power in their numbers. They still looked at themselves as individual beings that were separated by class, money, and location.¹²⁹ Thus when an outsider like Perry, entered the city and told the gay community they needed to become more visible and demand social change, the New Orleans gay community did not appreciate this. They understood that they were already under the city's authority figures microscopes and the idea of bringing more attention to their community only frightened them. They felt that like GLF, Rev. Perry was just trying to cause trouble for them.

At the same time, Father William Richardson quietly made the arrangements for the memorial service. About fifty people were invited to the memorial through word of mouth and it was held that Monday evening at St. George's Episcopal Church. Perry led the ceremony and asked those that attended the memorial to remember their brothers and sisters.¹³⁰ However, because of the religious ties of the church, a number of Christians were upset and wrote Father Richardson asking him "What kind of Christian are you to allow a thing like this to go on in our church?"¹³¹ Due to this negative response, another memorial service was planned that sought to not offend any of the surrounding churches. Perry called a number of churches who all turned him down for a number of reasons; for example, a Catholic Church said no because only Catholics could use their church. A Baptist church hung up on him. Eventually St. Mark's Methodist Church volunteered its space. The memorial date was set for Sunday, July 1, 1973 at two o'clock.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 275.

¹³⁰ B. Nolton and C. Segura, "Memorial for Fired Dead Has Forgiveness Theme," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, June 26, 1973.

¹³¹ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), 105.

Instead of allowing the second memorial service to travel by word of mouth, 3,000 flyers were passed out announcing the service's time and day.¹³² Two hundred and fifty people attended this memorial service. They heard Perry's call during his press conference a few weeks prior and understood that it was important for New Orleans' gay community to come out of the closet if they wanted to achieve any real victories. It was evident to the city's gay community that the NOPD were not going to make it a priority to charge Nunez with arson or murder. Though he was placed at the scene of the crime by a number of witnesses and arrested, he was never charged with anything.¹³³ Many members of the Crescent City's gay community understood that unless they forced the larger community to acknowledge them, murderers like Nunez, Drennan, Calvo, and Farrell would never have to answer for their crimes. Meanwhile, innocent people continued to suffer.

While the service was in progress, Perry received a note telling him that news cameras were set up outside across the street from where the service was held. Perry then told the 250 guests, "I cannot control what is happening across the street. I just want to tell you that you can go out of the side door... [and] leave through the alley."¹³⁴ Perry understood that this was a time when people were really afraid of the possibility of being hurt or disowned or mistreated once they came out of the closet. However, no one

¹³² Ibid, 105.

¹³³ In addition to this, the New Orleans Fire Department did an arson investigation that they claimed showed there was no possibility that what happened at the Up Stairs Lounge was arson. However, the National Fire Protection Association, stated after conducting their investigation that the fire was set deliberately by some person or persons. Over twenty years later, the NOFD apologized to the gay community for their lack of action, and did agree that what happened that night at the Up Stairs Lounge was arson. This is shown in the fire investigation table in A. Elwood Willey and the National Fire Protection Association, *Fire Investigations: Night Club Fire* (the Upstairs Lounge), New Orleans, LA, June 24, 1973, National Fire Protection Association, 1974.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 106.

decided to remain invisible and leave St. Mark's through the side door. Instead they left singing and holding hands. Perry states that at this very moment, while these gay men and women exited St. Mark's singing and their heads held high, the gay community in New Orleans really began standing up. He continues, "it gave courage to the larger gay rights movement. It so galvanized us... that we said we can *never* let anything like this happen again!"¹³⁵

The act of leaving the memorial service so publicly was an important moment for the city's gay community. Though there is no record that all of the attendees were homosexual, there were a large number of gay men and women that went to the memorial service. Thus, when they left the service in the presence of media personnel, it was an important moment for the gay and lesbian community. When they left the service together they were publicly acknowledging their sexuality. Though they did not yell out their sexuality in unison, their presence at the memorial service led many to believe correctly that they were gay. This was a correct assumption because it was common that gays and lesbians befriended one another and rarely associated with heterosexuals, especially if it had anything to do with expressing their sexuality.¹³⁶ So when the gay and lesbian attendees left the memorial service and photographers and newspaper journalists were there to capture their faces, the mere presence of the gays and lesbians outside of the service meant that they were openly proclaiming their sexuality.

This was the first political response that the gay community ever had. As shown above, two years prior, the New Orleans GLF chapter tried, although unsuccessfully, to

¹³⁵ Ibid, 106.

¹³⁶ John Doe, 1993, Interview by Karen Cox and the USM Oral History Center, Hattiesburg, MS, July 1 and Gary Barlowe, 1993, Interview by Karen Cox and the USM Oral History Center, Hattiesburg, MS, July 23.

organize the gay community for a politically driven protest. But that Sunday afternoon the city's gay community finally took the next big step into the political realm for their Gay Rights Movement. As previously stated, after the Stonewall Riots, coming out of the closet, or publicly stating your sexuality was a political act. Thus, the fact that they allowed their faces to be photographed and recorded showed that they were finally willing to risk their private relationships with their families and their professional life. They were no longer concerned with being comfortable and safe. This moment shows that the city's gay community was finally willing to risk exposure in order to achieve change. They finally understood that the only way they were going to save their community was by taking a stand and showing that despite two terrible tragedies they were no longer going to hide. However, this moment was just that, a moment.

After the public departure from the memorial service, the majority of the gay community no longer focused on public demonstrations and or creating political organizations. Though the lesbian community did participate in political organizations, like the New Orleans chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis, the gay community focused on continuing their social culture. The next year, following the Krewes of Armenius and Bacchus which formed in 1969 and 1970, the Krewe of Endymion became the fifth gay Mardi Gras Krewe in New Orleans.¹³⁷ Also the large party-like celebration, called Southern Decadence, entered its second year. As both of these social and cultural events continued to grow, the New Orleans gay community becomes less focused on the political realm. It was not until 1977, when Anita Bryant came to New Orleans, that the city's gay community became political once again. The public demonstration carried out

¹³⁷ "Gay Mardi Gras History," Brief History of Gay Mardi Gras, Rip Naquin-Delain, Sonny Cleveland, and George Patterson, <http://www.gaymardigras.com/historyx.html>.

against Bryant was the first organized, large scale, political demonstration planned by the members of the city's gay community and the largest civil rights protest in the history of the city.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press), 275.

Chapter Three

The tragedy at the Up Stairs Lounge in the summer of 1973 rocked the New Orleans gay community. Though the fire resulted in a loss of the gay community's friends and family members, the tragedy also became a rallying point and led to the New Orleans gay community's first public and politically based demonstration. When the gay community left the service publicly, they allowed their faces to be photographed. This in turn, was a form of them claiming their sexuality; which, during the 1970s was a political act. Yet, as the memorial service ended so did the gay community's focus on changing the city's politics. After the fire at the Up Stairs Lounge, gay men in New Orleans returned their focus to expanding their social endeavors. It was not until the promised visit of a famous singer and activist in 1977 that the city's gay community became political, once again.

Despite the local devastation experienced by the city's gay community in 1973, national gay community experienced a great triumph. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) made the ground-breaking decision to no longer list homosexuality as a mental disease or defect in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV).¹³⁹ A major political achievement for the homosexual community, the medical community no longer regarded homosexuality as a sexual perversion. By 1973 the

¹³⁹ Craig A. Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements: Assimilation or Liberation*, (Westview Press: Philadelphia, 2008), 25.

national gay community made significant strides politically and in creating a stronger and more visible community, they slowly but surely liberated themselves from the closet.¹⁴⁰

Despite the increasing visibility of the national gay movement, the gay communities in some cities chose to remain hidden. As shown in the previous chapter the tragedy at the Up Stairs Lounge resulted in thirty-two deaths and is recorded as the deadliest fire in the city's history.¹⁴¹ This tragedy and the organizational efforts of Reverend Troy Perry and members of the Metropolitan Community Church became the necessary catalyst for a number of people from the New Orleans gay community to demonstrate and become more vocal. Prior to this event, the gay community in New Orleans enjoyed its anonymity opting not to draw attention to them in hopes of escaping persecution by the city's police and citizens. However, this fire awoke a new consciousness within a small number of citizens from the city's gay community. They began to understand that it was no longer acceptable to remain hidden when their community was subject to such discrimination and intolerance. However, they still did not know the proper steps to take.

By the 1970s the New Orleans gay community had created a pattern for itself. While many gay and lesbian communities across the country participated in organizations that focused on increasing gay rights, such as GLF and the Daughters of Bilitis, and changing legislation that hindered gays and lesbians, the gay community in New Orleans chose to focus on increasing the number of their social spaces.¹⁴² As the national Gay

¹⁴⁰ Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay LA: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians*, (New York: Basic Books Publishing, 2006), 177.

¹⁴¹ This includes the Great City Fires of 1788 and 1794 which resulted in the city being virtually destroyed.

¹⁴² Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay La: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians*, (New York: Basic Books Publishing, 2006), 175 and 185.

Rights Movement continued to gain momentum, the New Orleans gay community continued to distance itself from trying to change the state's politics and attitudes towards gay men and women. They did not want to attract more negative attention from the heterosexual community.

As stated in the previous chapters, members of the city's gay community were often targeted by men from the heterosexual community. The number of physical attacks against gay men did not decrease. Straight men would often target gay men and assault them. This included the 1977 stabbings by a young man named Warren Harris, who for a six-week period, stalked gay men and killed them.¹⁴³ In addition to the murders committed by Harris, the city's gay community was still targeted by the New Orleans Police Department who continued to carry out entrapment operations that targeted the city's gay men. Police officers would go to gay clubs and bars in the French Quarter and invite some of the men to participate in a sexual act that was deemed illegal by state law, such as sodomy. As a result, these men were arrested for sexual misconduct and faced five years in the state prison or a fine.¹⁴⁴ However, the most damaging prospect was the fact that their family and coworkers would find out that they faced sexual misconduct charges. At this time the term sexual misconduct was often synonymous with homosexuality. Thus, if someone was arrested under this charge their reputation, their personal relationships, and their professional relationships might suffer as well.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ "Youth Guilty of Stabbings," *Denton-Record Chronicle*, October 30, 1977, and "Homosexual Hater Accused of Slayings," *Daily Review*, April 15, 1977.

¹⁴⁴ "The When and Now of It," *Impact*, November 1980.

¹⁴⁵ Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy & Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, (New York: Routledge Press, 1993), 87.

The city's gay community did not choose to focus on changing the political environment in New Orleans because they wanted to remain out of the line of fire of the city officials and the city's police. In addition to the continuous arrests of gay men by the city's police department, the gay community did not forget the fire set by Michael Nunez in 1973 at the Up Stairs Lounge. Despite many eye witnesses and the fact that Nunez drunkenly confessed his crime, the city's police department never charged him for the murders of the people at the club or for, arson. Instead the gay community watched as another aggressor was rewarded for his criminal act against homosexuals, while the victims (who remained non-violent) were singled out by the city's police and arrested. The New Orleans' gay community did not trust city's authority figures because in an almost twenty-year period they watched people target their community without punishment. Meanwhile, men who participated in homosexual activity faced years in prison.¹⁴⁶

Thus, the city's gay community found new ways for them to meet and expand its influence while still remaining hidden from the public eye. The idea of participating in social activities allowed members of the city's gay community to develop a broader network. Though they opted to refrain from focusing on changing the politics that chose to hinder homosexuals and their personal relationships, they did create social spaces which allowed them to organize in a different sense. They focused on creating social spaces and developing larger social institutions like the gay Mardi Gras Krewes. The gay community believed that if it called for political change, then it was asking for

¹⁴⁶ "Police Crackdown on Lewd Acts," *Times Picayune*, August 14, 1977.

unnecessary and risky attention from the heterosexual community and the city's authority figures.

The city's lesbian community, however, contrasted with the New Orleans gay community. During the 1960s and 1970s, the city's lesbian community chose to concentrate on changing the political atmosphere for the homosexual community.¹⁴⁷ An example of this is the New Orleans chapter of the Gay Liberation Front, headed by Lynn Miller who was a lesbian feminist. However, her focus on altering the political environment in New Orleans was not endorsed by the majority of the city's gay community and after a few months the city's chapter of GLF dissolved.¹⁴⁸ There was also a chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis in New Orleans, which was established by former members of the city's GLF after it disbanded.¹⁴⁹

The city's lesbian community and members of the Daughters of Bilitis, which focused on changing legislation that affected lesbians, were not as wary of attempting political change as their gay male counterparts. This fearlessness was due to the lack of arrests by the city's police department. Throughout lesbian and gay history, it was less likely for lesbians to be targeted by the police or assailants from the heterosexual community because of their gender and, more importantly, because it was much harder to determine the sexuality of two females. It was much more common for two women to spend a lot of time together; as a result, lesbian relationships were not looked upon with

¹⁴⁷ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America (Between Men – Between Women)*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 300.

¹⁴⁸ Dudley Cleniden and Adam Nagourney, *Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 219.

¹⁴⁹“Gay New Orleans: A Rich Gay Heritage,” The Official Tourism Site of the City of New Orleans, <http://www.neworleansonline.com/neworleans/glb/glb-heritage.html>. It is important to note that there is a limited amount of scholarly work done on the New Orleans chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis.

as much scrutiny as gay relationships.¹⁵⁰ Thus, women in the New Orleans lesbian community opted to focus on the political realm and participated in socially and politically aware organizations while the New Orleans gay community focused on creating social spaces for their community.

Meanwhile, members of the city's gay community formed the Gay People's Coalition which operated a gay switchboard and published a tabloid newspaper called the *Causeway*. This piece of journalism included brief news, bars and bathhouse ads, and recipes.¹⁵¹ By 1974, a number of the men in the gay community in the south continued to participate in more social endeavors than focus on establishing a political voice. An example of this is the growing disco scene in Atlanta, where a number of gay men met up and danced with one another in "glitter discos."¹⁵² The same idea appeared in New Orleans where social groups like the gay motorcycle club, Knights D'Orleans, created a network for gay men to get together and go on bike runs. Often times, these bike runs also included gay motorcycle clubs from other southern states, such as, the Thebans of Florida.¹⁵³ In addition to these social groups, gay men continued to meet at local gay bars and cruised public rest stops and parks.

They also continued the now fifteen year long tradition of the Mardi Gras Krewes' ball. This grew to include a number of clubs, which increased the number of

¹⁵⁰ Allan Berube and Foreword by John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010) 282.

¹⁵¹ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 273.

¹⁵² Wesley Chenault, Stacy Braukman, and Atlanta History Center. *Images of America: Gay and Lesbian Atlanta*. (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 63.

¹⁵³ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 173-174.

social outlets for the gay community in the city. Yet, while these institutions did unite the gay community in New Orleans, they were still noticeably hidden and acted more as secret societies than organizations that made public statements. Thus, when the then two-year old tradition of a small costume party called Southern Decadence was founded in 1974, homosexuals in the city were breaking ground by no longer focused on meeting privately and, instead, embracing a public celebration of their sexuality.¹⁵⁴

Though it was not originally created as a traditional event, Southern Decadence is one of the most important social events to the New Orleans gay community.¹⁵⁵ In August of 1972, a group of friends and housemates decided to throw a going away party for one of their friends. They called the party Southern Decadence and told the guests to come as their favorite “southern decadent.”¹⁵⁶ The party was held the Sunday before Labor Day “under a big fig tree” by their home.¹⁵⁷ The party was a relative success. Thus, the group of friends decided they would throw another one Labor Day weekend in 1973. However, this time they decided to add a parade. The parade was relatively short and occurred in the French Quarter. It was not labeled as a public demonstration.

The participants of this parade only stopped at gay bars in the French Quarter, even as Southern Decadence became more and more popular in the gay community, it was not publicized in the straight community. Southern Decadence was a celebration that became well-known in the gay community. The participants would parade through the

¹⁵⁴ “New Orleans,” *GLBTQ Social Sciences*, (3) http://www.glbtc.com/social-sciences/new_orleans.html .

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 97.

¹⁵⁷ “New Orleans,” *GLBTQ Social Sciences*, (3) http://www.glbtc.com/social-sciences/new_orleans.html .

French Quarter interacting with strangers, but they did not disclose their sexuality.¹⁵⁸

Like the gay organizations before them, Southern Decadence, was another social outlet for the city's gay community. As the years progressed, it became a Labor Day celebration for the gay community that grew each year.

As the 1970s progressed and the national gay identity continued to grow, a number of people from the Christian community began to worry about the emerging challenge to all that they believed to be important, such as, the importance of family structure and religious values. This increased, more so, after the removal of homosexuality from the DSM-IV by the APA. Prior to this controversial change, many members of the Christian community referred to homosexuality as moral degenerates.¹⁵⁹ The inclusion of homosexuality as a mental disorder by the medical community gave the Christian community's claims about homosexuality a lot of credibility. Their claim was not just an erroneous statement made by a religious group, but was also a fact that was backed by the medical community. Thus, when the Christian community received word that homosexuality was no longer a mental disorder and that many of the gay and lesbian communities throughout the nation were making significant social and political strides, conservative members of the Christian community made it their mission to try and stop their progress.¹⁶⁰

With the removal of homosexuality from the list of mental disorders, many members of the homosexual community began to call for local laws that would protect

¹⁵⁸ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 98.

¹⁵⁹ Craig A. Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements: Assimilation or Liberation*, (Westview Press: Philadelphia, 2008), 26.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

lesbians and gays from discrimination in housing, public accommodations, and employment.¹⁶¹ By 1976 twenty-nine cities and counties enacted policies that protected members of the gay community from such discriminations, these cities included Ann Arbor, Michigan; Washington D. C., and Los Angeles.¹⁶² Although these laws did protect homosexuals in certain parts of their professional lives, these ordinances were only limited to city practices, and like the civil rights laws for African Americans before them, the amount of help these ordinances provided for the gay community was limited. No federal laws were passed to protect members of the gay and lesbian communities leaving a number of homosexual communities to be subjected to discrimination in their cities of residence.

While these ordinances did show that a gay political voice was emerging and growing as the 1970s progressed, a majority of these ordinances existed in cities in the North and on both coasts. Only two ordinances protecting gay rights passed in the South, in Austin and Chapel Hill.¹⁶³ A majority of the cities in the South still promoted conservative Christian values, despite a growing gay identity. As the gay voice increased so did the anti-gay voice which encouraged a halt to the homosexual community's progress. However, no city in the country sparked as much debate and demonstration as Miami and the Dade County ordinances. Backed by the Dade County Coalition for the Humanistic Rights of Gays, a county-wide nondiscrimination ordinance was proposed and pushed by the organization to protect the civil rights of gay men and women.¹⁶⁴ Jack

¹⁶¹ Fred Frejes, *Gay Rights and Moral Panic: The Origins of America's debate on Homosexuality*, (Palgrave MacMillan : New York, 2008), 53.

¹⁶² Ibid, 54.

¹⁶³ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 230.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 232.

Campbell, Bob Kunst, and Lisa Berry all were elected as co-chairs and encouraged the gay community in Miami-Dade County to organize. They stated, “Only by presenting a united front, will the gay community... accomplish its goals of legislative reform and liberation.”¹⁶⁵

After holding a number of weekly meetings, an ordinance was finally proposed to the Miami-Dade County Commission and in a very narrow vote in January of 1977, the ordinance was passed. It prohibited discrimination against anyone based on their sexual orientation.¹⁶⁶ This was a major political triumph for the Miami’s gay and lesbian community. However, members of the Christian community felt that this was an attack on their religious values and, more importantly, their families and their children. One person that felt the strongest about this was Anita Bryant.

Anita Bryant, an Oklahoma native, was very religious. In 1958 she gained celebrity when she won the title of Miss Oklahoma. In the subsequent year, at the age of 19, she won runner-up in the Miss America Pageant.¹⁶⁷ Following her success in the Miss America Pageant, Bryant signed a recording contract with Carlton and later Columbia Records.¹⁶⁸ As a singer she was relatively popular, however, her popularity increased when she appeared in television homes across the country singing “Come to the Florida Sunshine Tree” as the spokesperson for Florida’s Natural Orange Juice.¹⁶⁹ Her beauty

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 345.

¹⁶⁷ Craig A. Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements: Assimilation or Liberation*, (Westview Press: Philadelphia, 2008), 26.

¹⁶⁸ Anita Bryant, *A New Day*, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1992), 45.

¹⁶⁹ “2 Anita Bryant Florida Orange Juice Commercials, 1969,”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TaQabiB7Gg>,

and engaging all-American motherly qualities won the hearts of many middle-class families across the country.

In 1976, the Dade County Commission passed a city ordinance that prohibited discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations based on one's sexual orientation.¹⁷⁰ Outraged, Bryant vowed to get the ordinance repealed. She felt that the city legislators endorsed the homosexuals, "whom she described as 'human garbage,'" and their lifestyle.¹⁷¹ Encouraged to bring an end to the homosexual community's significant gains, Bryant organized a meeting that and created the Save Our Children Campaign.¹⁷² Their focus was to get the ordinance that was passed in January repealed. They began a petition that required ten thousand signatures to put the ordinance on the ballot and allow the public to decide whether or not the law should be repealed.¹⁷³ Members of the Save Our Children Campaign decided that it was important to show that the homosexual community was a very large threat, not only to American family values, but to America's children.

Months after the ordinance was passed, Bryant succeeded in placing the repeal of the anti-discrimination initiative on the ballot.¹⁷⁴ She encouraged the citizens of Miami to vote against anti-discrimination ordinance appealing to them after services at the Northwest Baptist Church, she stated,

¹⁷⁰ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 345.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 346.

¹⁷² Fred Frejes, *Gay Rights and Moral Panic: The Origins of America's debate on Homosexuality*, (Palgrave MacMillan : New York, 2008), 94.

¹⁷³ *Ibid*.

¹⁷⁴ Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney, *Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 92.

What these people really want, hidden behind obscure legal phrases, is the legal right to propose to our children that there is an acceptable alternate way of life...No one has the right to corrupt our children... homosexuals, have civil rights too, but they do not have right to influence our children to choose their way of life. Before I yield to this insidious attack on God and his laws...I will lead such a crusade to stop it as this country has not seen before.¹⁷⁵

This quote spearheaded Bryant from being a household name that smiled at American citizens and encouraged them to buy Florida Orange Juice, to becoming a political and religious crusader who was determined to keep the homosexual menace from her children and all American children. Bryant used her nationwide fame, her beauty queen charm, and her classic looks to fuel passion for ending the progress of what she, and many conservative American Christians, perceived as a threat to her children and to traditional American values. In June of 1977 the anti-discrimination law was overturned in a public vote.¹⁷⁶ With this major victory, Bryant became a crusader for the Christian Right, who unleashed a nationwide campaign against a number of gay and lesbian communities in the country.¹⁷⁷

Anita Bryant's Save Our Children campaign struck a chord with a number of people in the country. Her campaign focused on maintaining traditional gender roles and American family values, which at the time were challenged by more women entering the workforce and choosing to have children later. The campaign also played on people's worry for their children. In the spring of 1977, local New Orleans news station WVUE reported that three men were arrested in an East New Orleans homosexual ring that

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Fred Frejes, *Gay Rights and Moral Panic: The Origins of America's debate on Homosexuality*, (Palgrave MacMillan : New York, 2008), 102.

¹⁷⁷ Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay LA: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians*, (New York: Perseus Books Group, 2006), 223.

involved a boy's scout troop.¹⁷⁸ According to the news story, the troop leaders organized the local chapter of the boy's scouts with the intention to molest the young boys. Though it was never confirmed whether or not the boy's scout leaders were homosexual, the conclusion made by the WVUE reporters played to a popular sentiment of the times. Many believed, including Anita Bryant and members of the Save Our Children Campaign, that homosexuals were by definition pedophiles. They thought that people from the homosexual community targeted children to spread their homosexual influence, or recruit more people to join the homosexual lifestyle. Bryant once stated that gay men and women pursued children because they could not give birth to more homosexual children, thus they turned to other people's children to convert them to a homosexual lifestyle.¹⁷⁹ So the Save Our Children Campaign gained success as it played off the negative publicity and stereotypes that plagued the homosexual community.

While the repeal of this ordinance stirred the members of the Christian Right community, members of the nationwide gay and lesbian community became outraged with the outright declaration of political and religious war waged against them by Bryant and her collaborators.¹⁸⁰ Members of the gay and lesbian communities throughout the country watched uneasily as Bryant and the Christian Right successfully eliminated a major civil right achievement for the Miami-Dade gay community. This opposition is shown in many demonstrations throughout the country; one example is San Francisco's

¹⁷⁸ WVUE, March 11, 1977, UNO Library Historical Archives. This was not the first time a homosexual ring was discussed on the New Orleans news program, the previous year, WVUE stated that there was a "homosexual ring" in New Orleans that had international connections, September 10, 1976, UNO Library Historical Archives.

¹⁷⁹ Actual Anita Bryant footage from the film *Milk*. Sean Penn, Josh Brolin, and Emile Hirsch. 2008. *Milk*. DVD. Directed by Gus Van Sant, Los Angeles, CA: Focus Features Films.

¹⁸⁰ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 142.

growing gay community nestled in the Castro District. A large public demonstration of gays and lesbians from the community organized and shouted, carrying signs that read “No More Miamis!” and “Fight Back!”¹⁸¹

The Castro was not unique; public protests were also held in Atlanta, Los Angeles, and New Orleans. Through a number of orange juice boycotts and fundraisers, major cities like New Orleans, which held a fundraiser called “Squeeze Anita Weekend”, were able to show their displeasure with Anita and the growing Christian Right community. However, one of the most important displays of anger towards Anita Bryant and her Save Our Children Campaign came in the form of a unified demonstration of New Orleans’ gay community in the summer of 1977.

Anita Bryant’s crusade against the homosexual community spawned an increase in both verbal and physical attacks of gays and lesbians throughout the country.¹⁸² Spawned by a growing social and cultural presence and the irrational fear and hatred that the Christian Right had for the gay community, a number of American citizens became enraged with the gay community and began to lash out against them. The gay community in New Orleans was definitely not overlooked. In April of 1977 during a six-week period a young man named Warren Harris targeted men from the gay community and murdered them.¹⁸³ Harris’ crime spree was not unique, there were a number of gay men who were targeted and either beaten or killed due to the long-term, and newly re-awakened, demonization of the homosexual community. As shown in the previous chapters, gay activism in the Crescent City was sporadic, at best; other than the gay social scene, some

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 145.

¹⁸² Craig A. Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements: Assimilation or Liberation*, (Westview Press: Philadelphia, 2008), 27.

¹⁸³ K. Cocke, “The Stabber,” *The Courier*, April 1977.

lesbian organizations, and the Tulane Gay Student Union, there were not any long-term political gay organizations in existence. However, there was a growing group of homosexuals in the New Orleans community that saw that the city's gay community was not using its size and influence to its fullest potential. Ed Martinez, a writer for the gay newspaper the *Vieux Carré-Star*, summed it up perfectly when he wrote: “

Where are the gay activists in New Orleans....? Where are all the organized groups that give gay communities in other cities their sense of community and sharing? After the fire at the Upstairs Lounge everything has returned to normal. Nothing to raise gay consciousness in this city has happened, and nothing very much is very likely to happen...nothing could have given a gay community more reason to band together than that horrible tragedy...¹⁸⁴

However, when the city's gay community found out that Anita Bryant planned on performing at the city's Summer Pops music festival on June 17 and 18, a short-term gay rights group was formed.¹⁸⁵ Human Equal Rights for Everyone (HERE) convinced a number of the city's radio stations to stop playing Bryant's records.¹⁸⁶ HERE was one of the first gay organizations that received some support from the gay male community. Unlike the New Orleans GLF, a few years prior, HERE was met with a lot less opposition and was supported in their boycott against Bryant. It was the first institution in New Orleans that focused on developing a political voice for the gay men in the community. However, no politically and socially conscious gay organization was as successful in New Orleans as the Gertrude Stein Society. As Bryant's visit to New Orleans neared, the Gertrude Stein Society successfully organized a large-scale public demonstration against the famous singer.

¹⁸⁴ E. Martinez, "Where Are the Gay Activists in New Orleans?" *New Orleans Vieux Carré-Star*, April 7, 1977.

¹⁸⁵ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 273.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 273.

The Gertrude Stein Society was formed by Alan Robinson, a University of Illinois graduate and gay activist who settled in New Orleans in 1975. After participating in the gay night life, Robinson found that the gay community was broken and that rather than having a uniformed social life, that members of the community were sectioned off based on their social class. For example, the participants of the Mardi Gras Krewes remained sectioned off by themselves, while the gay men from Uptown New Orleans went to private parties and refused to participate in the “dirty” bar scene or the clubs and bars in the French Quarter (the usual hang out for the gay men in the lower and middle classes). After seeing this Robinson, believed that it was necessary to form an organization that focused on social aspects of the city’s gay community, as opposed to political issues like its predecessors.¹⁸⁷ Thus, Robinson formed the Gertrude Stein Society, which played up social gatherings for the gay community, such as Salons and cocktail receptions and a newsletter that was published and issued throughout the city.

Robinson and members of the Gertrude Stein Society understood that it was very difficult for a political organization in New Orleans to be accepted and gain members. As seen with the New Orleans chapter of the Gay Liberation Front, members of the city’s gay community did not welcome organizations that focused on changing legislation that negatively affected homosexuals. Thus, the members of the Gertrude Stein Society felt that if they began as a social organization they could gain larger membership, and eventually progress into a political organization. As they promoted themselves in the

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 274.

community, Robinson and the Gertrude Stein Society were readying themselves and the city's gay community to venture into the political realm.¹⁸⁸

After reading in the city's newspaper that Bryant was going to appear at the city's music festival, the leaders of the Gertrude Stein Society sought to call the other gay institutions in the city and organize a protest against Anita Bryant.¹⁸⁹ In order to ensure a large turnout for the gay community, this meeting included eight gay organizations including the Metropolitan Community Church and the Daughters of Bilitis. The members of the Gertrude Stein Society understood that Bryant's presence in New Orleans and her threat to the city's gay community warranted an organization that would end her successful anti-gay crusade.¹⁹⁰ They resolved to create a new organization to confront Bryant during her concert because the Gertrude Stein Society was a social group. Thus the gay organizations listed above and fifteen other organizations, including the gay Krewes and feminist organizations created a group called Human Rights for Everyone.¹⁹¹ They made the decision to pass out flyers throughout the French Quarter and encouraged the gay community to come out and demonstrate against the singer's presence in the city. News of the protest traveled across the country. Other local newspapers also notified the public of New Orleans gay community's planned protest against Bryant.¹⁹²

During Bryant's tour of major cities throughout the South, she stopped in New Orleans and was welcomed by the city's assistant mayor as well as about seven police

¹⁸⁸ Reid Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,) 144.

¹⁸⁹ Times Picayune, "Blacklist Anita Bryant?" June 17, 1977.

¹⁹⁰ James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruits, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 275.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Kenneth R. Clark, "Lines Drawn on Gay Issue," Frederick Daily Leader, June 9, 1977.

officers provided for her protection. Bryant claimed that her life had been threatened a number of times by members of the city's gay community.¹⁹³ As Bryant began her concert, three thousand gay and lesbian protestors gathered in the heart of French Quarter. The crowd joined hands and sang "We Shall Overcome" and shouted "We will not continue to live in closets."¹⁹⁴

The protestors then began to march through the French Quarters, shouting for members of their unified community to come "Out of the closets and into the streets!" As they made their way towards the North Rampart Street Municipal Auditorium where music festival Summer Pops was held, they listened to speeches, sang, marched, and partied.¹⁹⁵ Separated by the NOPD, thirty-five members of the group, the "Christians Behind Anita" chanted for Jesus. Although the numbers were very large, the demonstration was very peaceful. Members of the city's gay community and other organizations, like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the New Orleans Chapter of NOW, chose to show Bryant that they were not going to allow her to demonize homosexuals and take away their civil rights. In his article that covered the demonstration, Gabor remarked on how peaceful the demonstration really was.

(The police were) looking for either blood-shed or a gang bang, and the police quietly encircled the area, casting paranoid glances in every direction for the rumored knots of bat-wielding pro-Anita Christians...when a singer started We Shall Overcome, there was no hesitation, everyone joined in and knew that it was true – here was a party and a movement that couldn't be stopped.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ Times Picayune, "Blacklist Anita Bryant?" June 17, 1977.

¹⁹⁴ WVUE, Protests in Jackson Square, June 17, 1977.

¹⁹⁵ Jim Gabor, "The Gay Life in Baton Rouge" *Gris-Gris*, (1977), 12-15.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

Sparked by an outsider coming to condemn their existence, the gay community in New Orleans found itself organizing and demonstrating against the outsider that attacked its community. Though the gay men only ventured into the political realm temporarily in response to Anita Bryant, their activism showed that there was a real community for homosexuals in the city and that they were able and willing to make important changes. However, most of the changes that followed Bryant's unpopular visit to New Orleans were part of the social realm. Traditions like the gay krewes' balls increased to include more gay krewes and continued on today.¹⁹⁷ There were also traditions like Southern Decadence and Gay Mardi Gras which allowed the gay community to grow.

The New Orleans gay community response to Bryant's presence was the final chapter in the city's nineteen-year long Gay Rights Movement. From the social response of the gay Mardi Gras Krewes, to the political response created by the Gertrude Stein Society, the city's gay community evolved at a somewhat slower pace than its bicoastal counterparts. However, its response was quite different than its bicoastal counterparts as well. While the gay communities in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Washington D.C. focused on changing the political atmosphere for their local gay communities, the New Orleans gay community chose to create social spaces for itself. Until 1977, despite a moment of political demonstration in 1973, the city's gay community focused its attention on developing social spaces and uniting its community by participating in events like Mardi Gras and Southern Decadence. However, Robinson and the Gertrude Stein Society understood like the city's lesbian community that the New

¹⁹⁷ Tim Wolff, *The Sons of Tennessee Williams*, Online Film (New Orleans, LA: 2010).

Orleans gay community was going to have to react publicly and politically if they wanted to change society's perception and treatment of them.

The Gertrude Stein Society understood that the only way the city's gay community was going to transform the way the local police and the city's authority figures treated them was by becoming visible. It was important for the gay community to illustrate to the city officials that there were large numbers of them and that they were no longer going to support legislators that sought to deprive them of their political rights. Thus the 1977 protest against Anita Bryant led the city's gay community into a new political arena. According to the city's tourism website a few years after the demonstration, groups like the Louisiana Gay Political Action Caucus and New Orleans AIDS Task Force emerged.¹⁹⁸ However, these political organizations were not as important to the city's gay community as its social institutions. Events like Southern Decadence, groups like the gay Mardi Gras Krewes, and the social clubs and bars in the French Quarter allowed the New Orleans gay community with the opportunity to come together and celebrate their sexuality.

¹⁹⁸ "Gay New Orleans: A Rich Gay Heritage," The Official Tourism Site of the City of New Orleans, <http://www.neworleansonline.com/neworleans/glb/glb-heritage.html>.

Conclusion

The gay community in New Orleans, like many sub-communities in the United States, wanted to make a place for itself. Although it is in a modest section of the French Quarter, the city's gay community had its sanctuary for over fifty years. Despite a number of difficulties, it was able to establish a number of festivals that not only celebrate who New Orleans gay men and lesbians are, but allow them to come together and remember how far they have come. Celebrations like Southern Decadence and Gay Mardi Gras are public occasions that not only bring out a number of gay men and women from New Orleans, but that include gays and lesbians from across the country and encourage the straight community to join in as well.

After a difficult period in which the gay community left the "closet" and became recognized by the straight communities in New Orleans and around the country, the gay community in New Orleans has become an important part of the national gay community. It is considered a relatively significant community and continues to grow. In fact, the gay Mardi Gras which includes the gay Carnival Krewe's parade is considered one of the largest sources of tourist revenue and one of the largest tourist attractions for the city of New Orleans.¹⁹⁹ This event allowed the gay community to obtain an important place in the city's political and social arena, which is a far cry from the community described in the previous three chapters. Although it took over fifty years, the city's gay community

¹⁹⁹ Official New Orleans Tourism Website. Things To Do: Mardi Gras. New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation. <http://www.neworleansonline.com/> (accessed February 1, 2010).

openly flaunts their sexuality and is free of the harassment that they once experienced at the hands of the police, the politicians, and a number of the citizens.

As was shown in the first chapter, during the 1950s the gay community was often targeted by young male college students and gay men were targeted and beaten in order to prove the aggressor's masculinity and power and their target's frailty and defenselessness. Groups of young men would often target and deceive young homosexual men who were often isolated. Like the hate crimes that targeted African Americans, once they gained their trust, the straight men would beat homosexuals; not because they differed racially, but because he differed sexually. Many of the city's gay men understood this and tried to evade their aggressors by keeping their sexuality a secret and attempting to pass as straight men, while others opted to travel in larger groups hoping to intimidate their assailants.

Unfortunately, because Fernando Rios did not spend a lot of time in New Orleans he did not know of this tradition and readily and unknowingly befriended Johnny Farrell. Since Rios was not a native of the city he did not know who was involved in the city's gay night life and who was a potential attacker. Sadly, his naivety cost the young tour guide his life and despite the overwhelming amount of evidence, the city's gay community watched in horror as the three Tulane students got away with murder. This tragedy momentarily paralyzed the gay community. They were not sure if they would ever be able to live their lives openly and without fear in the Crescent City.

Since they were so afraid of becoming then next Rios, the importance of creating an underground refuge out of the sight of the violent straight community increased. Thus,

a year after Rios was found unconscious in the French Quarter and later died; the gay Mardi Gras Krewes were established. This tradition has had longevity of well over fifty years. When the Krewes were first created, they originally aimed to create a space for a New Orleans gay community that wanted to remain out of the reach of the city's police and straight community. It is important to note that many of the members of the city's gay community were still in the closet and chose to remain hidden because they did not want to risk losing their jobs, and more importantly, their families. Thus they wanted a place where they could be themselves without the threat of being "outed" publicly. As a result they often met in the homes of friends or secluded areas on the outskirts of the city to develop their Mardi Gras Krewes. Although they started as a spoof of the straight Mardi Gras Krewes, they later became a permanent and distinctive mark of the New Orleans gay community.

Like the homophile organizations -- the Mattachine Society and the Daughters' of Bilitis-- that emerged in California, D.C., Chicago, and New York. The gay Krewes gave the city's community a space to be themselves. However, unlike many of the chapters of the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, the gay Krewes did not focus on advancing the city's gay community politically, but rather opted to provide a social outlet. The Krewes allowed the men to socialize and eventually, although hidden behind masks, announce themselves as a part of the city. What is even more significant about the Krewes is that they followed the city's time honored tradition of the Mardi Gras Krewes. In doing so, they were able to create a tradition that was both uniquely gay and uniquely New Orleans.

As the 1960s emerged, the city's gay community continued to expand, as more clubs and bars opened, and coffee shops and bookstores that were targeted to gay men and women opened throughout the French Quarter. The city's gay community slowly, but surely, continued to expand their social network and they created beloved hangouts that remained popular well into the 1970s. During the 1960s a number of disenfranchised groups in the large cities throughout the United States called for an end of race and gender-oriented discrimination. They began to demonstrate publicly and called for political and social change. This is evident in Los Angeles, where the Chicano Movement and the African American Watts Riots began to produce major changes for ignored demographics. In addition to this, in cities like Berkeley, San Francisco, and New York, the counter culture, or hippies, and women publicly demanded more political rights for women and the social change for the youth who were growing more and more disillusioned with society.

As these cultures began to make their mark socially and politically in these cities, the gay communities in each of these cities began to do the same. The most recognized event was the Stonewall Riots which started in New York City in the summer of 1969. The New York gay community demonstrated publicly and called for "Gay Power;" this resulted in the Gay Liberation Front, one of the most influential and political gay organizations in American history. This organization made coming out of the closet a political act and encouraged more gay and lesbian Americans to accept their sexuality and to wear it proudly. A similar thing occurred in early 1960s Los Angeles, and although it was not on as large a scale, the LA gay community began to publicly demonstrate and, like Stonewall would later do, demand that gay men and women were

no longer targeted by the police. As a result, more people's awareness of these different communities expanded and many gay communities in the country began to assert their presence and demand that they receive the same recognition as all American citizens.

However, because of its location in the South, New Orleans did not gain the public awareness that emerged on the East and West Coasts. While many of the movements that emerged in the coasts were met with a lot less police hostility, African American's public demonstrations and marches during the Civil Rights Movement led to a number of them being arrested, beaten, and at times murdered. The same hatred was shown for members of the counter culture, as shown in Dennis Hopper's classic film *Easy Rider*, featuring Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, and Jack Nicholson. In an iconic scene, the three men entered a diner on the outskirts of New Orleans and flaunted their social rebelliousness in the presence of five other men who represented the southern "good ole boys" and were disgusted by the social revolution that the actions of Hopper, Nicholson, and Fonda represented. Later the three young men were beaten by the "good ole boy" characters and, as a result, Nicholson died. This is a perfect representation of how many of the members of "heterosexual, white community" in many of the cities in the South, including New Orleans, felt against any challenges to the status quo.²⁰⁰

Because they were exposed to this environment, and not the more open and progressive environments that existed in the East and West Coasts, the New Orleans gay community remained in the closet where it was safer. They felt that if the straight African American community didn't experience major change, despite the major advances they

²⁰⁰ Dennis Hopper, Peter Fonda, and Jack Nicholson. 1969. *Easy Rider*. DVD. Directed by Dennis Hopper. Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures Corporation.

made nationally, then there was no way that the gay community, in the huge Christian and Catholic community that is New Orleans and the South, would experience any positive response or change from the members of the status quo.

Thus, as New Orleans exited the 1960s and entered the 1970s, the city's gay community opted for secrecy and chose to remain out of the public eye. This, however, as stated above did not stop them from creating private social spaces in the French Quarter. In addition to the growing number of coffee shops, bars, and clubs, the gay Carnival Krewes continued to grow. In addition to the then fourteen-year old tradition, in 1972 a group of gay men started the Labor Day celebration for the city's gay male community, Southern Decadence. Another secretive affair, Southern Decadence was a chance for the city's gay community to connect and socialize, creating an even stronger social community.

Thus the gay community, when the Up Stairs Lounge caught fire and resulted in the deaths of over thirty gay and straight men and women in 1973, seemed to be focused on coming together but remaining hidden. This is supported by the establishment and very quick failure of politically conscious gay organizations like the Gay Liberation Front, which came to New Orleans in 1971 and left a few months later. In the 1970s, while the gay communities on the East and West Coasts developed their own subculture and even spreading out into other subcultures like the Disco movement, the Biker culture, and the Punk movement, and in doing so, became more visible, the New Orleans gay community still focused on creating a unified, but private population, a focus that many of the communities in East and West Coasts had had ten years prior.

Hence, when the public memorial service was held for the victims of the fire at the Lounge, in June 1973, the then hidden gay community was asked to make itself visible like its bicoastal counterparts. Although it was only for a very short time, it created the necessary blueprint that would later be used by the protests organized by the Gertrude Stein Society four years later. First in 1973, and then later in 1977, it was very important for the New Orleans gay community to assert itself and force the city's straight community to acknowledge them. This momentary demonstration also started a socially conscious dialogue within the city's gay community, which up until then often seemed to be met with hostility within the gay community. As the members of the Up Stairs Lounge Memorial service exited the funeral as a united front, a small number of the city's gay community, led by Los Angeles minister Reverend Troy Perry, initiated the people into the visual stage of the Gay Rights Movement.

Unfortunately, this version of public activism was short lived and did not resurface until four years later. As the massacre at the Up Stairs Lounge seemed to fade in the background, the city's gay community followed the rest of the nation and focused on themselves in the "Me Decade." As a growing number of the gay community participated in the growing party and drug culture, the memories of the thirty two that perished in the fire seemed to vanish. However, as a small number of people in the New Orleans homosexual community began to develop a more political social consciousness, they called for their counterparts to demonstrate. They understood that gay communities in the nation were becoming safer and developing better relations with their local straight communities. This smaller core of city's gay community wanted their brothers and sisters

to publicly demand protection and social change in New Orleans. They wanted to ensure that massacres like the Up Stairs Lounge Fire could not happen again.

It was not until Anita Bryant's arrival to the Crescent City that the gay community became galvanized. When the University of Illinois alum, Alan Robinson arrived in New Orleans and later established the Gertrude Stein Society, he created a more socially and politically aware gay community in New Orleans. Eight years after the Gay Liberation Front first emerged in New York City and spread to other gay communities throughout the nation leading to more politically active and aware gay communities, the Gertrude Stein Society incited one of the largest civil rights, and more importantly, gay rights demonstrations in New Orleans. This protest not only showed Bryant that the gay community in New Orleans did not support her, but more importantly, it made the Christian population in New Orleans and the rest of the nation take notice. On the eve of the Stonewall Riots' eight year anniversary, the New Orleans gay community collectively "outed" themselves. They began a period of becoming more aware of themselves and making the rest of the city more aware as well.

From 1958 until 1977, a nineteen-year period, the gay community in New Orleans went through a number of stages. By opting to grow, but remaining secret, and then finally choosing to expose themselves from the safety of the closet, they became a major part of New Orleans' culture. These three random events that were flashes in the pan and could have very easily been forgotten were, but they in one way or another seized by the city's gay community and outsiders from Illinois and LA became an opportunity for the New Orleans' gay community to assert itself and become one of most recognized gay communities in the country. No longer did they opt to remain hidden, instead they created

a space for themselves that is so uniquely New Orleans that it is even promoted on the city's website.²⁰¹

The New Orleans' gay community seems to be one that is content with being a social and culturally based community. During the lulls in between Rios' murder and the formation of the Mardi Gras Krewes, the tragedy at the Up Stairs Lounge and their public departure from the memorial service, and the public demonstration against Anita Bryant's presence in New Orleans, the city's gay community focused on building spaces for them to socialize. Although fear was a major factor in their not demonstrating publicly like the communities on the East and West Coasts, it seems that changing the politics in the city was not a priority. The New Orleans' gay community, instead, chose to create spaces where they could network with one another. Like the culture in New Orleans, which is so centered in celebrations and festivities, the gay community mirrored their surroundings and focused on creating a larger social scene. Only when they were threatened by an outsider and, at times, motivated by an outsider, did the city's gay community feel the need to organize and demonstrate in one way or another. Incredibly their versions of demonstration changed with the times. In 1959, when it was much more important for a gay man's sexuality to be hidden, the gay community created the krewes, which acted like a secret society. In 1973 and 1977, when it was much more important for a gay man and woman to publicly claim their sexuality, their demonstrations became more public.

What occurred over that nineteen-year period in the city's gay community and emerged as a result is completely New Orleans. New Orleans is a city that is saturated in

²⁰¹ Official New Orleans Tourism Website. Things To Do: Gay and Lesbian. New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation. <http://www.neworleansonline.com/> (accessed February 1, 2010).

culture, history, and tradition. It is a city that is synonymous with extravagant events like Mardi Gras, the signature Cajun cuisine, and the home of Jazz, traditions that continue to separate New Orleans from the rest of the American metropolises. The city's and the citizens' emphasis on these traditions and the importance of maintaining these social constructs has been the city's identifiable characteristic. Each of these things--from the food, to the music, to the culturally drenched Mardi Gras parades and balls--is evidence that New Orleans is ultimately a city that focuses and prides itself on culture and social traditions.

Following these completely one of a kind aspects, the gay community in New Orleans continued the same traditions. Unlike any other gay community in the country, the gay community in New Orleans focused on developing social and cultural outlets and environment. For example, the clearest association with the unique New Orleans culture is the establishment of the gay Mardi Gras Krewes. These Krewes, like so many krewes before them, celebrate during Mardi Gras and participate in balls, requiring the members to wear specific types of costumes and masks. Gay Mardi Gras is, like regular Mardi Gras, a tradition that focuses on expanding the gay community socially and culturally. It also has a number of gay and straight men and women come from all over the country to participate in an event that only happens in the Big Easy. Unlike their bicoastal counterparts, their grass roots organization was not one that focused on political change; but one that mirrored a cultural custom. The gay Krewe is something that you can only find in New Orleans.

Events like this and Southern Decadence are important parts of the history of the city's gay community because New Orleans is a city that prides itself on its culture and

social traditions. Thus, while many gay communities in the country focused on political changes during the 1970s, the gay community in New Orleans created Southern Decadence. Thirty years later they still focus energy on this event because it is their Gay Liberation Front, their Mattachine Society. Though the gay community in New Orleans did not focus on political changes during the 1970s, they did focus creating a tradition that they hoped would not only unite the community, but that would become a tradition celebrated for years to come. To the gay community in New Orleans, Southern Decadence is more than a party. It is a social gathering that cemented the historical place of the city's gay community.

In 1980 and 1984 events like Gay Pride Weekend and Gay Halloween, events that are echoed in many major cities throughout the country, followed. However, if it were not for Southern Decadence and Gay Mardi Gras, as well as, the Gay Rights Movement in New Orleans, Gay Pride Weekend and Gay Halloween would not have been possible in New Orleans. The nineteen-year struggle that stemmed from three completely separate events that could have easily faded away-- the murder of Fernando Rios, the tragedy at the Up Stairs Lounge, and the march against Anita Bryant-- allowed the city's gay community to become more aware of itself and force the rest of the country to become more aware as well.

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