

# Transvestite Conference Offers New Experience

By Dan Boynton

This week's transvestite convention, the Fantasia TV Fair, provided a unique glimpse into one of the world's most unusual and least understood subcultures.

Provincetown was chosen for the 9-day event because crossdressing here has long been a local fashion. But although young men have paraded down Commercial Street in women's dresses, and women have cut their hair short and worn men's work clothes, the town has never before encountered an organized group of heterosexual transvestites.

Most of the approximately 50 cross-dressers attending the convention were middle-aged, married and fathers. Many were tall, muscular and rugged appearing. Their occupations included a former tugboat captain, an ex-fighter pilot during World War II, a motorcycle racer, several teachers and a corporate executive.

These otherwise virile men shared one overwhelming compulsion—to dress as a woman, and with luck, to pass as a member of the opposite sex.

In extreme cases, efforts to become a woman included taking female hormone injections and having sex change operations, but for most, the transformation was accomplished with a clean shave, a long haired wig, high heels, stockings, elaborately padded undergarments and a cocktail dress.

Week-long classes in makeup, hair styling and deportment were held to help remove evidence of the transvestite's male gender. Two drag balls, a fashion show, and tours of the town provided opportunity to test their acquired femininity.

## Strive For Femininity

For some, the metamorphosis was so complete it was hard to believe they were not women; for others, the disguise only worked at a distance. Many bodies and faces were so masculine, no amount of cover up would suffice, but such persons were willing to strive for a feminine appearance in spite of the practical impossibility they could ever achieve such a goal.

The need to crossdress was so overwhelming the transvestites were willing to risk job security, their own and their family's social acceptance, and potential difficulties with the law. Participants spoke of having been programmed as a child to want to live as a woman, and said the compulsion to dress in woman's clothes was so strong they could not survive without the opportunity to carry this out.

In-depth interviews with five cross-dressers at the convention, and brief conversations with a dozen others indicated many areas of similarity among the group.

All said they felt euphoric when in women's clothes, and many experienced some form of depression or aggressive behavior dressed as a man. Those that had tried psychiatric treatment or had taken tranquilizers reported absolutely no success in changing their gender identifications. All had experienced sexual attraction for women, and only a few also claimed they had participated in sexual relationships with men.

The goal for all was to "pass" in public as a woman.

Transvestites have difficulty deciding what to call themselves, apparently based on confusion over their self-image. Some would like to call themselves "women", ignoring their male bodies. Others prefer "crossdressers." The word "transvestite" is used, but not entirely liked because it implies they are also homosexual. When speaking to a transvestite, you call her "she." Her "brother" (the masculine identity) is referred to as "he."

## Dual Roles

Just what are transvestites? For Wilma June Sharman, at 68 the matriarch of the group, the answer is simple. "I categorize myself as a woman," she said in an interview at J's Port of Call, the restaurant where the group ate during the conference.

As William Joseph Sharman, he served as a former tugboat captain, has two daughters, eight grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. Sharman's children all know of his unusual behavior. "They tell me, we accept Wilma, but we want to see Daddy around the house," Sharman said.

Wilma Sharman has been dressing as a woman since she was five years old. Her wife "tolerates it," although she doesn't accept it fully. "I used to have the fantasy I was a beautiful woman," Sharman said, "but when I looked in the mirror and saw what I really did look like, it was a very different thing." Sharman now thinks of herself as "the average woman walking down the street."

Her only problem is her voice, which in spite of hormone treatments, remains a deep baritone. If she keeps her mouth shut, she says, she can pass for a woman.

In 1910, when Sharman first started cross dressing, little was known about the subject. She was fearful of embarrassing her wife, and for 35 years concealed her interest in crossdressing by buying

women's clothes, wearing them out, and then throwing them away in order to avoid taking them home. In spite of these precautions, accidental discoveries were frequent, and each time, "there was always a hassle."

"If I had known then (47 years ago) what I know now, I would never have gotten married," Sharman said, "a woman wants a whole man. It's not fair for her to marry half a man."

## Pre-Operative Transsexual

Twenty-three-year-old Sandy Mesics found this out in 1974, after two years of marriage, and is now divorced. Mesics and her former wife are still roommates, but no attempts are made to play out a dual role. Hormone treatments have caused Mesics' chest to enlarge into realistic looking breasts, and her appearance, voice and bearing are so feminine, she could pass almost anywhere as an authentic woman.

She intends to undergo a surgical sex change, and to totally drop her masculine identity. But in spite of \$1000 worth of electrolysis treatments, Sandy Mesics still has to shave. "There is no doubt that if I could take care of that problem, I would be much better off psychologically," Mesics said.

Hormones have helped Mesics feel completely like a woman, but her half-woman gender state has created other difficulties as well. "I used to hang around straight bars. Men would buy me a drink and dance with me. I could tell they were getting interested, and I'd have to make an excuse to leave. I couldn't say, 'look, I'm not really a female,'" she said.

For most transvestites, such difficulties never arise. A change in clothing cannot conceal their true sexual identity.

Joan, a middle-aged corporate executive, has no femme last name because until the conference she had never been out in public dressed as a woman. For Joan crossdressing serves to provide an essential psychological relief.

"It's an escape, there's no question about it," she said. Joan has been to three

separate psychologists, five psychiatrists and has tried chemotherapy, but no known form of treatment can change her psychological need to occasionally dress and act as a woman.

A dramatic personality change takes place after Joan has put on women's clothes. An arrogant, domineering attitude gives way to a comparatively gentle, cooperative nature, a phenomenon witnessed by this reporter. Joan admits she "can't go six months without crossdressing. I get too strong, too overpowering. It's just as if I need this break to wind-down."

## Can't Fool Children

Joan's male identity was a former truck driver, now a middle management executive. He has two sons, 19 and 17, and a daughter, 16. The children have never

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been told, but he suspects they know. "Kids aren't dumb. The put things together," she said. At home, he acts in a totally masculine manner.

Denise Reinecke, 27, considers transvestism "mostly a hobby. Some people are hooked on golf, some on collecting stamps. For me it's crossdressing," she says.

Reinecke's other hobbies, when he is acting as a man are photography and motorcycle riding. "I still consider myself a male, even when dressed as woman," he says. Reinecke is an Air Force physics instructor and is engaged to be married. He has not told his future wife about his most unusual hobby.

Reinecke crossdresses once a week "experimentally." She drives to a metropolitan area, takes a motel room and spends the weekend en femme whenever possible. One of her worries is a possible sexual attack from a man. "From a distance, I look desirable enough to be raped," she says. Reinecke has never had any homosexual experiences, and the thought of such an encounter is upsetting.

Ironically, the one person interviewed who would most easily pass as a woman, had no desire to. Brandy Alexander, a female impersonator at the Crown and Anchor, was not officially enrolled in the transvestite conference. But he served as master of ceremonies at Saturday's drag contest, and participated in a makeup demonstration Tuesday.

"I would never choose to pass as a woman," he said in an interview. "I think it's very dull being the girl next door. I

want people to know I'm a boy dressed as a woman and pulling it off." Unlike the other transvestites, Alexander said he "definitely lived within a gay community life," although he added he was "never one to set limitations" with his sexuality.

"I've never felt threatened by society," Alexander said, "I've made people accept me for who I am and what I am." Asked whether he thought he was a girl or a boy, he answered, "I feel like I'm a large sequin."

# Town Takes It All In

Public exposure to members of the transvestite convention came primarily through attendance at the Saturday drag ball at the Crown and Anchor, several days of transvestite films at the Movies, and private excursions into the town.

Practically all of the group attended the drag ball, although only a few entered the competition. "I'm more woman's lib than Miss America," Denise Reinecke said in defense of her refusal to be in a beauty contest. Reinecke added she was attracted to some of the contest's better looking participants, however. "In my different role, I'd say she was a good looking chick," Reinecke blurted out as one of the finalists went out on the stage.

The contest winners were all local boys. Julie (Joseph Webb) won first prize with an orange satin dress, fishnet stockings and white feather boa. Webb's own brown hair is shoulder length. Joey (Joe Porro) was first runner up in an elegant black gown, long black gloves and rhinestone earrings. Norell (Nelson Gardner) won third prize dressed in a white fringe gown and 40's style makeup.

At first, the crossdressers were wary of going out onto the street, expecting public ridicule or attack. But spurred on by constant encouragement from Ariadne Kane, their coordinator, they gradually wandered away from Crown and Anchor

complex and into the town's shops and restaurants.

The group's one trauma occurred at the very beginning, when Joan, a member who had never before been in public as a woman, was hassled by a couple of drunks. But even Joan went on to have a friendly reception at local establishments.

"The people here have been fantastic," she said at a later interview. "I haven't been to one place where I was treated badly."

Townpeople tended to react with varying degrees of private amusement and sympathy at sight of the transvestites, but most of the people questioned said they had gone out of their way to be cooperative. "Those people were trying so hard to be accepted, and were so well behaved, I wanted to help them," one shopkeeper said.

By mid-week, the sight of a six-foot 180-pound burly male dressed in high heels, nylon stockings, a shiny new lavender dress, and matching earrings hardly brought stares from people resting on the park benches in front of Town Hall.

Some of the transvestites had a more difficult time adjusting to Provincetown. "The men here kiss each other on the streets," one of the group said in amazement.

# PROVINCETOWN ADVOCATE

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