

G O C N

STONEWALL NATION 69~79

What Happened, Anyhow?

By Cindy Stein

If you ever decide to do a little checking around about what really happened in the early morning hours of June 28, 1969 when the New York Police Department made its now famous raid on the Stonewall Inn, you might be a bit shocked at what you will find. It seems most logical to first try the local New York City newspapers, since such a historical event would most likely have been recorded minute by minute. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The reports are either sparse or so horribly biased that you'll wonder if they are based at all upon any real facts.

For example, in one account, rioters were described as "the forces of faggotry" and the scene was depicted as one in which the "sudden spectre of gay power erected its brazen head and spat out a fairy tale the likes of which the area has never seen." Such were the rather lurid words and imagery of Lucian Truscott IV, writing for the July 3, 1969 issue of New York City's *Village Voice*. (It should be pointed out that Truscott is not one to be criticized for inconsistency. His latest commentary on gays, the best selling novel *Dress Gray*, is no less homophobic than his earlier effort in the *Voice* ten years ago.)

Surprisingly, it is Truscott who labels the New York *Daily News'* coverage of the Stonewall Riots as "unkind to the gay cause." It seems that even prejudice is relative.

In late June and early July, the press dealt with gays, and particularly with Stonewall, in one of three ways. The first, and this category is inclusive of most publications, was the "maybe-if-we-don't-write-about-them-they'll-quietly-go-away" method. The second, most notably employed by the *New York Times*, was the "if-we-dress-you-up-we-can-take-you-anywhere" method. Thus, the story, buried on page 33, began, "Hundreds of young men went on a rampage . . . after police raided a bar that they said . . . was well known for its homosexual clientele." The third method, chosen by the *Voice*, can best be described if you imagine a reluctantly liberal editor who seizes the chance to pounce on a newly defined "oppressed group" against whom he can still express prejudice.

The two front page *Voice* articles (Truscott's, "Gay Power Comes To Sheridan Square — View from the Outside" and Howard Smith's "Full Moon Over Stonewall — View from the Inside") do have one redeeming feature. If you wade through all the muck of stereotyping and snide remarks (for example, Truscott: "The stars were in their element. Wristes were limp, hair was primed . . .") and the not-so-subtle sexism (Smith, writing of the police officer who led the fight against the raid: ". . . realizing he and his force of eight detectives, two of them women, would easily be overwhelmed if the temper broke . . ." [my emphasis]) what emerges is the most detailed analysis of the event to be recorded in the straight press.

The place to go for the gay perspective on Stonewall is Donn Teal's book, *The Gay Militants*. There again, through the use of personal accounts, excerpts from the straight press, and articles from the newsletter of the New York Mattachine Society (an early homophile group), one can look forward to a lengthy, detailed recitation of one of our finest moments.

What about an objective account? Such a purist goal is hardly obtainable in the chronicling of the traditional history one learns about in school, that is, the history preserved by society's ruling classes. So how can we ever hope to approach such a feat when we are dealing with an event which is both filtered through straight prejudices and trumped up by gay emotions?

However, we must try. Our history, as lesbians and gay men, is precious to us. It serves to summon up courage, as well as give us cause for cautious reflection. It enables us to ascertain how far we have come (or how far back we have regressed). In addition, the knowledge of the history of one's people, particularly when one's people have been traditionally oppressed, is a source of inspiration and a foundation for those who are in the process of coming out.

To aid in this reclamation of our history, a journalist can sift through the printed matter, outline the most agreed upon facts and point out the inconsistencies, noting, where possible, the biases of sources. The following, with respect to Stonewall, is such an endeavor.

The Stonewall Inn was a gay bar (presumably mostly male. Predictably, information concerning lesbians during the riots is almost non-existent) located at 53 Christopher Street, which is about one half block east of Sheridan Square in Greenwich Village. There is much dispute concerning the bar's predominant clientele. Some say mostly professional, "respectable" gay men frequented the inn, others declare the bar was a gathering place for drag queens, gay youth, runaways and street people. The Mattachine newsletter supported the latter opinion, explaining that, ". . . for three dollars admission, one could stay inside, out of the winter's cold or the summer's heat, all night long. . . it saved the kids from spending the night in a doorway or from getting arrested as vagrants."

Others are not so kind. There is a dispute as to whether or not the bar was owned by organized crime. But, regardless of who owned the place, the management was not uniformly looked upon as benevolent. Dick Leitsch, Executive Director of Mattachine New York, during the riots labeled the owners "exploiters" who bought a building "nobody wanted" and opened up a public accommodation full of fire hazards and structural faults. In the New York biweekly, *GAY*, Leitsch made his criticisms known to the community by posing an extremely controversial question: "Were the police harassing homosexuals when they put the Stonewall out of business, or were they doing us a favor?"

In weeks prior to the night of Friday, June 27, 1969, the New York City Police had made raids, "routine" at the time, on a number of gay bars in the Village. On the night of the Stonewall raid, there were about 200 patrons crowded inside the Stonewall Inn. Much has been made of the fact that the bar was operating without a liquor license in an attempt to justify the police action (both Howard Smith and the *Times* are careful to mention this fact).

However, what was left out of their respective subjective and objective accounts was pointed out by Leitsch in a letter to the *Voice* which appeared in its July 10 issue. Leitsch explained that the New York State Liquor Authority would not grant licenses to gay bars. In fact, the license application specifically asked whether or not the applicant intended to use the premises to serve homosexuals! So much for illegality.

Friday night faded into Saturday morning, which brought, between the hours of 2 a.m. and 3 a.m., the famous raid. Leading the police was Deputy Inspector Seymour Pine of the First Division of the New York Police Department and head of the Public Morals section. As he and his cohorts began emptying the Stonewall of its patrons, a crowd of about 400 persons grew outside the bar. At first, according to Truscott, who stood in the crowd observing the activity from atop a trash can, the mood was rather festive. As each patron emerged, his friends would applaud and call out to him. It was not until the paddywagon pulled up that the anger surfaced.

People began to resist. They threw whatever they could lay their hands on: coins, cans, bottles, bricks and garbage. And, in answer to the question as to whether or not there were women present, we are blessed with the fact that both Truscott and Smith both noticed one. One lesbian was observed actively fighting the police as they attempted to force her out of the bar and into a police car. (Both *Voice* writers felt comfortable using the word "dyke" although it was still widely regarded as a slur, and it would be a few years before lesbians reclaimed the word as our own.) Unfortunately, this woman was the exception who proved the rule. Others of her gender were invisible to the eyes of the reporters.

As the paddywagon, loaded with three drag queens, the bartender and the doorman, pulled away, the riot had escalated to the extent that the remaining eight police officers sought refuge inside the Stonewall. The crowd managed to open the door with the help of an uprooted parking meter. Quickly the police shut it. At that point one officer was hit in the head by a flying object. His injury was soon avenged by Deputy Inspector Pine, who rushed into the crowd and grabbed a man whom he thought was the perpetrator. The man, according to Smith, was badly beaten by the police and subsequently arrested. He was Dave Van Ronk, a popular folksinger who, by Truscott's account, had wandered over to the site from the Lion's Head, a straight establishment down the street.

Shortly thereafter, as the crowd began to prepare for its final attack upon the police within the Stonewall and, as a small fire was begun inside the bar, police reinforcements arrived. Smith timed the riot at 45 minutes.

As police cleared the scene, Smith re-entered the Stonewall to find that "all the mirrors, jukeboxes, phones, toilets, and cigarette machines were smashed." Management claimed that this was the work of the police.

The *Voice* reported that two policemen were injured. The *Times* counted four. Saturday night, the Stonewall was open for business almost as usual. A sign on the door read, "Private club, members only" and, according to the *Times*, soft drinks were served. The *Times* reporter, apparently in a rush to meet a deadline, prematurely stated that, on Saturday night, "Throng of young men congregated outside the inn, . . . reading aloud condemnations of the police."

In fact, as the *Times* reported in its Monday morning edition ("Police Again Rout 'Village' Youths," p. 22), the scene was not exactly calm. What began as a rally (Truscott: "Handholding, kissing and posing accented each of the cheers with a homosexual liberation that had appeared only fleetingly on the street before.") ended as Riot Number Two with the arrival of the city's Tactical Patrol Force (TPF), better known as the riot squad.

At this point there is a slight difference of opinion concerning the respective strengths of the opposing forces. Both the *Times* and the *Voice* reported that the TPF overcame the rioters and "swept the area," clearing Christopher Street by 3:30 a.m. Gay sources, however, quoted by Teal, remembered a forceful gay presence. Unfortunately, the press coverage lacked the depth of the reports of the previous night's activities.

The next few nights brought similar confrontations. On Sunday night, Truscott toured the area with poet Allen Ginsburg, who applauded the rioters and cautioned Truscott to "Watch out. The liberation is under way." Teal's account of Monday and Tuesday nights emphasizes police provocation of gays. Officers rode around in cars, taunting gay men and picking fights. After one gay man lit two firecrackers under a policeman's feet, another skirmish began.

On Wednesday night, the rioters were not just gays, but others from outside the area who found the fighting compatible with their needs. This description is reported in the Mattachine newsletter and quoted by Teal. For the first time, stores were looted. The *Times* briefly mentioned this activity in a two paragraph story entitled "Hostile Crowd Dispersed Near Sheridan Square," page 19.

In the next few weeks the *Voice* printed a few letters from readers, most positive and bold in their pronouncements of a new gay liberation movement. A storm of political activity raged throughout the gay community, generating both enthusiasm and conflict (radicals and conservatives met and instantly became enemies). There were no letters in the *New York Times*.

There you have it. Objective? My goodness no. After all, look at who some of my sources were! I did try. I conscientiously combed through *Gay American History* for an historian's account. It was nowhere to be found. Jonathan Katz, the ball is in your court.