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# Underneath the Rainbow: Queer Identity and Community Building in Panama City and the Florida Panhandle 1950 - 1990

Jerry T. Watkins III

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UNDERNEATH THE RAINBOW: QUEER IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY  
BUILDING IN PANAMA CITY AND THE FLORIDA PANHANDLE 1950 – 1990

by

Jerry T Watkins III

Under the Direction of Dr. Clifford Kuhn

ABSTRACT

The decades after World War II were a time of growth and change for queer people across the country. Many chose to move to major metropolitan centers in order to pursue a life of openness and be part of queer communities. However, those people only account for part of the story of queer history. Other queer people chose to stay in small towns and create their own queer spaces for socializing and community building. The Gulf Coast of Florida is a place where queer people chose to create queer community where they lived through such actions as private house parties and opening bars. The unique place of the Gulf Coast as a tourist destination allowed queer people to build and join communication networks that furthered the growth of a sense of community leading ultimately to the founding of Bay AIDS Services and Information Coalition in 1989.

INDEX WORDS: Queer, Homosexual, Community, Identity, Communication networks,

AIDS, Tourism, Charley Johns, Panama City, Gulf Coast, Florida

Panhandle, BASIC, Bay County, Fort Walton, Pensacola, Emma Jones.

UNDERNEATH THE RAINBOW: QUEER IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY  
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Jerry T Watkins III

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2008

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2008

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by

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December 2008

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the people everywhere who have lived their lives outside of “history,” those who have made it possible for my generation to live openly and honestly.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first and foremost like to thank Mike Krall, Butch Mckay, Mitch Bryan, and Jim Smith for their participation in this project. This project would not have been possible without their support and their willingness to open their memories to me.

Next I would like to thank Dr. Alecia Long who showed me a long time ago that it was not only acceptable but also important to write about the history of sex and sexuality. Also, I would like to thank Dr. Clifford Kuhn who has served as my advisor and mentor guiding me on my path to academic greatness. Thank you to Dr. Michelle Brattain whose advice was invaluable in the completion of this project. I owe a debt of gratitude to Andy Reisinger who talked me out of quitting on more than one occasion and upon whose experience I relied many times.

I would like to thank the scholars before me who have paved the way for this project and whose shoulders I stand upon today. First, and foremost was John Howard, whose work first inspired me. Then through a conversation in London, he helped me to see that Panama City and the Florida Panhandle were important to the larger queer narrative. Then there is Wesley Chenault, who through his work at the Atlanta History Center helped me to find information that was invaluable in the completion of this project. Also, all of this would not have been possible without the pioneering works of John D'Emelio, Martin Meeker and others.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for their moral support and for the freedom to lock myself away from them as I studied, read or typed. I would also like to thank them for their words of encouragement through every step of this process.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Florida has a long history of “running queers out of town.” When discussing this project with a friend, she related a story about her grandfather. According to Sarah, her grandfather was “run out of Florida.” She is unclear on many of the details, since the story was told to her quite a long time ago and already passed through several people. According to Sarah, her grandfather was asked to leave Florida rather abruptly and violently in 1932 because he was gay.<sup>1</sup> Sarah thinks this was the result of a sexual encounter gone wrong, which would not be surprising since there are many cases of such incidents across the country.

This event is more than just homophobia, which is not newsworthy in the Deep South. It also speaks to how queer people everywhere simply want to express that innate desire for connection. People all over the state of Florida and the world have tried to express queer desire either furtively, such as Sarah’s grandfather, or openly. Many people, rather than move to more open areas, chose to stay where they were (unless they were forced out) and to create queer spaces. What follows is a story about how queer people, mostly men, navigated the physical and ideological terrain of Northwest Florida in the years between World War II and the onset of the AIDS crisis.

The Panhandle area of Florida traditionally refers to the area of land between Tallahassee and Pensacola. There is no logic behind this. It is the rest of the state that looks like the handle of a pan. That is simply the way it is, ask any Floridian and they

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah, interview by author, conducted on 10 April 2008, Atlanta, Georgia.

will tell you where the Panhandle is. This area of Florida is more closely tied with the Deep South in culture and history than the rest of the state.<sup>2</sup>

Panama City is an important locus of activity for queer people for most of this time period in large part because of a quiet, non-descript bar that opened in the middle of the 1960s. The Fiesta Room Lounge opened its doors in 1965 and was patronized by an almost exclusively gay clientele. Over the last forty years, the bar has grown in size, visibility and importance. People from all over the world have visited The Fiesta Room Lounge and queer people from all over the South have called Panama City and its bar a second home.

Panama City is not an island, metaphorically or physically. It is part of a greater network of cities and towns collectively known as the Gulf Coast. The Gulf Coast area of Florida physically includes the cities of Panama City, Fort Walton beach and Pensacola as well as every small hamlet and fishing village in between. The term “Gulf Coast” can refer to the entire Panhandle area of Florida, bounded by Tallahassee on the east and Pensacola on the west and including everything north to Dothan, Alabama.

Little has been written about the Southern queer experience. John Howard, Stacy Braukman and Merideth Raimondo are but a few of the writers to explore this vast topic. However, no one has treated the Gulf Coast. When Florida is treated in the scholarly literature, the name “Florida” generally refers to the area east of Tallahassee, with the state capital thrown in simply because it is the state capital. The land seems to be divided.

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<sup>2</sup>Wikipedia article accessed through [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florida\\_Panhandle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florida_Panhandle) on 1 February 2008

This is not necessarily an unwarranted division. The Florida Panhandle is certainly composed differently than the other parts of Florida. The population in the Panhandle is generally more rural, with no urban centers to speak of, unless you count Pensacola. It is a common joke in the area to call that part of Florida “L.A. - Lower Alabama” because the area resembles Alabama more than it does “Florida.”

My story takes place in this Panhandle. It is bounded by two determining events: The Florida Legislative Investigative Committee (FLIC) and the founding of the Bay AIDS Services and Information Coalition (BASIC) in Panama City. The FLIC is often called the Johns Committee because it was formed and led by State Senator Charley Johns. The Committee's mission and its zeal was much like that of the House Un-American Activities Committee of Senator Joseph McCarthy.

I am arguing that the Panhandle is distinctive and yet has much in common with the nation as a whole, at least in the experience of queer people. The Gulf Coast generally and Panama City specifically have contained queer people for as long as anyone can remember. In the 1950s queer men were arrested in a bathroom in Panama City just as men were in Atlanta and Jackson, Mississippi. Queer men needed a place to socialize with each other, so they found bars that would accept them and eventually opened their own space.

Queer men and women moved throughout the Gulf Coast circulating and contacting other queer people from all over the South and the world. The fact that the Gulf Coast is a vacation destination and home to several military installations allowed for a more national consciousness and wider communication networks than other rural areas of similar size. These two factors allowed the people of Panama City and the Gulf Coast

to be more plugged in to a regional and national gay consciousness. It allowed them greater access to queer communication networks.

As a quick introduction, a note on terms is in order. First, the term “queer” will be used a great deal both by myself and other historians. I employ this term for the sake of brevity to denote a host of non-normative sexual identities and practices. Second, the terms “gay” and “straight” will often pop up. This is intentional because those terms are still quite popular and many find it hard to think outside of this dichotomy. For instance, The Fiesta is referred to as “a gay bar” by its patrons and its owners even though the people that patronize the bar are not all gay and mostly not straight.<sup>3</sup>

Before beginning my story of queer people in the Florida Panhandle, an introduction to queer historiography is called for. In the section that follows, I will summarize and bring together the literature I have used in this project. While this is by no means a complete summary of the ideas and practices of queer academia, it is the kind of literature which I seek to join.

The years after World War II, as the world settled into the stalemate known as the Cold War, saw huge strides made toward queer openness. As Allan Bérubé shows in his work *Coming Out Under Fire*, millions of queer people discovered each other and themselves while serving their country in the war. This discovery, partly due to military screening policies and enforcement, led in the post-war years to a growing gay consciousness. As recruits were asked about their homosexual desires and experiences

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<sup>3</sup> Because the bar is generally referred to as “The Fiesta” instead of simply “Fiesta” the word “the” is capitalized in the name.

and as they were put into homo-social environments they were given a language and an opportunity to establish connections with others like themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Other factors contributed to this consciousness raising. New recruits were often far from the home of their upbringing. They were thrust into new environments far from the traditional boundaries and restraints of "home." Out from under the watchful eyes of family and community, people were able to participate in things that simply were not feasible where they came from. The new-found "freedom" of the military experience opened the minds of millions of men and women, queer and non-queer alike, to the possibilities the world held for them, it expanded their world views. The military inadvertently created a queer consciousness in the minds of many where none had existed before.<sup>5</sup>

When the war ended and military personnel were discharged and sent out into the world, they took that consciousness with them. Millions of people who had believed they were completely alone in the world before the war, now knew that there were others out there. They began to reach out, meet each other and create queer networks all over the country, in major cities, small towns and even rural areas.<sup>6</sup>

The already present discourse about homosexuality and other sexual differences was bolstered and "legitimized" by psychiatrists, the government, military personnel and the media. This governmental interest was one factor which led to a more national discussion of sex and sexuality. Alfred Kinsey, Elvis Presley, and the explosion of car

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<sup>4</sup> Bérubé, Allan *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York: The Free Press, 1990)

<sup>5</sup> Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire*, 6

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 255



culture all contributed to a broadening discussion of sex and sexuality in America.<sup>7</sup> Whereas before the war effort, homosexuality was rarely discussed except in rare instances of the “sexual psychopath,” after the war sex discourse increased exponentially. As the country settled into the complacency and conformity of the Cold War, homosexuality and other non-normative sex practices were talked about ad nauseum. Parents worried about their teenagers in cars and the government worried about communist infiltration and sex deviants. A new language of sex phobia and homophobia was born in this time.

The new language of “homophobia” and “homosexual menace” focused attention on queer men and women in the interest of “public safety.” The government “had a duty to root out and eliminate them; and all citizens needed to be ever vigilant in order to identify hidden sex perverts and report them to authorities.” The way that queer people were constructed, as perverts and degenerates, led to national panics and increased harassment.

The red scare and its counterpart, the lavender scare which took place around the country in the 1950s and early 1960s, can be read as flare-ups of the culture of fear, of which homophobia was a part. People in Cold War America were scared, the world as they knew it had changed. As the world settled into an uneasy stalemate in the 1950s conformity was the name of the game, at least on the surface. However, underneath the Ozzy and Harriet veneer, the waves of change were churning as many people found this culture of conformity unbearable. Queer people, African Americans, the government and their fellow Americans were in conflict over ideological space. America preached a

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<sup>7</sup> Braukman, Stacy *Anticommunism and the Politics of Sex and Race in Florida, 1954 – 1965* Ph. D. Dissertation. University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, 1999

doctrine of conformity to truth, justice and the American Way (capitalism).<sup>8</sup> Queer people, as well as other excluded minorities wanted to be a part of this idyllic America.<sup>9</sup>

The dominant queer historiography, at least until recently, has focused on metropolitan communities such as those in San Francisco, New York and Los Angeles. In the last ten years, historians have branched out to explore other areas of the country, including Atlanta, Buffalo and Jackson. However, very few people have explored queer history outside of metropolitan areas in the southern states. The dominant queer narrative has been one of desire, identity, community (or culture), and movement focusing on urban environments and "gay ghettos." In the words of John Howard,

That is, as historian Allen Bérubé scrutinizes it, our history is a ‘coming out’ narrative writ large: Persons of ambiguous sexuality, experiencing inchoate emotions (desire) out there in the hinterlands, move to the city for economic reasons. There they find themselves (identity) and each other (community). They become aware of their collective oppression and act to resist it (movement).<sup>10</sup>

It is the challenge to this paradigm that I seek to join. As people moved through the Florida Panhandle, choosing to remain in non-metropolitan locales for various reasons, they experienced the four areas in distinct ways that do not fit neatly with the traditional queer narrative. Nowhere in the Panhandle can be called “urban” in the usual sense but people still experienced desire and found other queer people with which to form queer communities. The actions of people in the Panhandle cannot be read as “activist” in the Stonewall sense, however as people around the Panhandle quietly lived their lives and socialized with each other they were acting to resist their collective oppression. Both

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<sup>8</sup> Braukman *Anticommunism*

<sup>9</sup> Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 257

<sup>10</sup> Howard, John *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 13

rural and urban people will be given voice as I explore queer places in the Florida Panhandle.

The major inspiration for this work was John Howard's *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*. Howard's work is important for several reasons. First and foremost is his focus on the rural South. While his work is about Mississippi and mine about the Florida Panhandle, his ideas about place, space and movement were essential as I studied, thought about, and researched this project. Howard argues "that notions and experiences of male-male desire are in perpetual dialectical relationship with the spaces in which they occur, mutually shaping one another."<sup>11</sup> In other words, people shape and are shaped by their environment.

One of the main tenets of *Men Like That* is the challenge to the exclusion of non-self-identified queer men from queer history. Not only does Howard include men who identify themselves as queer, but he also includes stories about men who did not take that label, the men "who liked that" but weren't necessarily "like that." The men who could not or would not adopt queer identities are an important part of queer history because of their participation in queer activity without joining a queer world.

Place and space play huge roles in the analytical framework of *Men Like That*. Queer men and women all over Mississippi created their own queer spaces in the physical places around them. "Where you did it mattered. Mississippians were both migratory and place bound, wanderers and homebodies."<sup>12</sup> Those who could, traveled to the nearest gay bar, while still others made queer spaces in hay lofts, homes, public parks, and public bathrooms. People "did it" everywhere they could. In Florida, people traveled to house

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<sup>11</sup> Howard, *Men Like That*, xiv

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 123

parties, gay and gay friendly bars or simply stopped at a highway rest area and momentarily created queer space where none had existed before. My project seeks to add to Howard's ideas that queer desire and expression are not limited to places where major concentrations of queer identified people exist.

The physical place a person lived also had great impact on queer experience. Where people lived dictated the ways they were viewed by society at large and therefore the type of sexuality they could manifest and participate in. Queer men and women living on farms, military bases, slums and mansions, all experienced Queer Mississippi in different ways. However, where a person lived and how that person lived determined their access to queer spaces. For instance, a black man seen "cruising" was far more likely to evoke suspicion and harassment from police than would a white, middle class man participating in the same activity. In this and other ways, race and class (both of which often determined the place one was allowed to live) often determined access to queer spaces both public and private.<sup>13</sup>

Howard deals with another kind of space in *Men Like That*: mental space. The mental space of Mississippians is sometimes equally as important as physical space. Homosexuality was often constructed as something that came from elsewhere, or was brought in by outsiders. This rhetoric was most prominent during the Civil Rights struggle in Mississippi, when the language of the "outside agitator" was being employed against Civil Rights Activists. Attacking the supposed sexual ideas and practices of "outsiders" was an easy way to discredit them in the minds of Mississippians. In this way, Mississippians' personal space and sensibilities were being affronted by outside

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 287

agitators rather than their neighbors and friends. According to the media and politicians, it was outside agitators who brought both the Civil Rights movement and the homosexual menace. The ways that homosexuality and other "unpleasant things", such as Civil Rights, were constructed in Mississippi created what Howard calls "the will not-to-know."<sup>14</sup>

The will not-to-know runs throughout my narrative because it was essential to the existence and increased presence of queer people in the Florida Panhandle. According to Howard, "The heterosexual will to not-know, the pretense of ignorance, proved amazingly resilient. It thrived upon a perpetual reassertion of homosexuality as new." For my own study, incidents such as the Johns Committee and a fire at The Fiesta show just how the larger world mentally and physically dealt with the existence of queer people in its midst. Each time the general public was "forced" to confront the issue of queer people among them, they treated it as a new phenomenon, something that could not have happened there before.

Movement is another piece of the analytical framework important to the book. In writing about queer movement, Howard writes that "hardly an exodus to the cities, queer movement more often consisted of circulation rather than congregation. In their cars, queers drove through complex, multi-directional, avenues of interaction, prompting exchanges of ideas and affections."<sup>15</sup> Howard uses the metaphor as well as the physical space of the automobile to explore ways that Mississippians created their own mobile, queer spaces of expression outside of the fixed gay bars of cosmopolitan cities such as Memphis, New Orleans and Atlanta. Queer movement was not simply from rural to

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<sup>14</sup> Howard, *Men Like That*, 142

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, xiv

urban areas. Queer movement was in every direction as people moved about Mississippi and the Florida Panhandle in their cars and on buses.

The movement of ideas was also important to the redefining of queer in John Howard's Mississippi. "Questioning received wisdom, scrutinizing the taken-for-granted, queer Mississippians reflected on and often rejected discursive conventions, exposing powerful mythologies like the homosexual suicide and homosexual homicide narratives."<sup>16</sup> The free movement of physique magazines, nudist magazines and art guides, which slowly increased throughout the 1960s as the Supreme Court relaxed obscenity restrictions, allowed for more than access to pictures of naked people. It allowed for a discussion of free speech and homosexual rights. The novels of Mississippian Carl Corley, often set on farms and ranches, joined a larger pulp fiction genre that was giving queer readers a paradigm through which to frame their own queer experiences.

John Howard is not the only one to have written about the will to not-know. It is part of the ideology of the South. R. Bruce Brasell explains in the essay "Greetings From Out Here: Southern Lesbians and Gays Bear Witness To The Public Secret," that queer people have been allowed to be a part of society because of the way southerners have historically constructed queer as eccentricity or peculiarity. "Whether as a peculiar appearance one exhibits, a peculiar stare one exchanges, or a peculiar thing one inhabits ... But even the eccentric and the peculiar have to abide by the unspoken cultural rule of

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 297

polite behavior.”<sup>17</sup> As the history of the Fiesta will show, the will to not-know allowed the bar to exist until a fire reminded people of its existence. It is almost as if it's okay, within Southern culture, to perform queer acts; just don't be queer, and whatever you do, don't broadcast it.

This public secret, will to not-know or quiet accommodation (all of these names referring to the same idea) help to explain why southern queer activism and activity looks a bit different from other areas of the country. There was no Stonewall type of in-your-face activism in the South, and especially not in the Florida Panhandle. Even as the Johns Committee was rounding up suspected homosexuals, queer people were gathering in bars, cars and private homes, allowed to continue as long as they were quiet and outwardly conformist.

Quiet accommodation, will to-not-know or public secrets should not be read as weak or assimilationist as some have charged. They instead should be read as activism in a uniquely southern way. As Brasell states, “Out is not confrontational politics, but rather a negotiation of the cultural space, the place one is assigned within southern cultures. For southern lesbians and gays, activism emerges out of their day-to-day existence, where simply to live one's life openly is a kind of activism.”<sup>18</sup> Many people in North Florida did not hide in the closet, yet were not leading gay pride marches. They lived their lives as queer people; they just didn't make a big deal of it.

Another highly important work to my study is Martin Meeker's book *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s - 1970s*. His

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<sup>17</sup> Brasell, R. Bruce “Greetings From Out Here: Southern Lesbians and Gays Bear Witness” in *Out In The South* eds. Carlos L. Dews and Carolyn Leste Law. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001) 159 - 172

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 167

primary focus is the link between identity formation and what he calls communication networks. “Before people who erotically and emotionally preferred the same sex could organize to confront their antagonists, they have had to coalesce around an identity and gather themselves into collectivities, into communities, into specific places, and around certain ideas.”<sup>19</sup> According to Meeker, the communication networks of homosexuals evolved from sometimes dangerous and usually furtive face-to-face meetings (cruising) to ultimately the national media and a national gay identity complete with a geography and a capital city, San Francisco, by the time his study ends in the 1970s.

As homosexuals began to organize in small groups through house parties and social gatherings, for mutual aid and support, they realized the need to reach out to other people; so began the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis, as well as other smaller and more local initiatives. One form of reaching out was through the publication of magazines such as *Mattachine Review* and *Ladder*. From there, the discourse of homosexuality expanded to a national scale as the news media, such as Life magazine, began to allow homosexuals to speak for themselves and censorship of homosexual subjects was relaxed.

Meeker uses the term “communication networks” frequently in his work. He defines the term as the channels through which information is passed. He writes: “The circulation of information happens in the immediate surroundings of everyday life: on the streets, in the church, in the classroom, at the kitchen table, in the lunchroom, on the couch and under the sheets.”<sup>20</sup> Discourse and communication networks were not a

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<sup>19</sup> Meeker, Martin *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s – 1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) 1

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 20



top/down, bottom/up phenomenon; they were instead, a circulation in and around people. As individual people discussed homosexuality whether pejoratively or positively, they were spreading information. For instance, when police published facts about the location of homosexual arrests, they created and named a certain location as a queer space, thereby spreading that information to other queer inclined people. In this way, queer people create and name a space for themselves and the police help in the spreading of that information. The personal was becoming political as queer consciousness was raised.

Meeker does not argue that homosexuals began the discourse about themselves in the years after World War II, nor does he argue that there was no queer community before that time. Certainly homosexuals had been the subject of discourse for nearly a century, from the advent of sexology. Governments, doctors, lawmakers, and law enforcers talked extensively about homosexuals as evidenced by numerous legal prohibitions, police raids, medical and psychological texts. However, before World War II the queer community had not been allowed to speak for itself or about itself. It did not for any practical purposes exist on a large scale in the United States until after WWII. There existed queer people in queer communities around the world, but not until World War II did queer people begin to adopt a more national and global perspective of community. Meeker is referring to the joining of queer identified people into the conversation about queer identified people.

Communication and discourse are key to Meeker's discussion of gay history. According to Meeker, increasing communication and visibility were essential to identity formation and the fight for gay rights. As the discourse became more popularized and people were able to identify their feelings for one another they were able to coalesce into

a community. Meeker includes many stories of people who had been unable to name or explain their same-sex desires before hearing about them in *Life* or picking up a copy of the *Mattachine Review*. The national discourse about homosexuality allowed people to create an ideological map of queer America with San Francisco as its capital.<sup>21</sup>

While out, queer people were coming together for organization and support, others were participating in a more covert and furtive queer world. As people within the walls of The Fiesta used that space for community organization others outside of those walls were creating less permanent queer spaces for their more immediate needs. I refer to a more clandestine type of meeting, known as cruising. The word cruising can have multiple meanings in a queer context. Its first and most obvious is the type of “mating dance” done by gay men in search of a sexual partner. In the bar setting this involves glances, gazes, postures, the proffering of a drink all in the hopes of establishing a connection be it sexual or otherwise.

In other settings the art of cruising looks different and the goal is more short term. For instance, in a public park cruising also involves glances, postures and gazes but they differ in that they are more subtle. In a bar, where queer desire is open and expected the actions are more overt and obvious. In spaces which are more public, the actions must be more covert and furtive.

According to Laud Humphreys in his work *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places* most men who participate in tea rooms are not openly gay. The anonymity of this type of public sex encounter, with very little communication or information shared represents a relatively safe space where non-queer identified men, of all types, can

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 16

engage in homosexual without adopting a queer identity. In fact, for the majority of men who engaged in this kind of encounter, the sex act was the only contact with the gay world.<sup>22</sup>

The idea that men who engage in public sex, such as that described by Humphreys, are not part of the gay world was echoed by my narrators. They all knew of the existence of the cruising spots in Panama City but they never visited them. Very few people chose to adopt an open queer identity and engage in sex where the rules of anonymity forbade openness about identity.

According to Humphreys, “participants bargain to establish a mode of interaction in which each protects himself and the other, and establish roles that both provide them with gratification and serve the needs of others.” A certain percentage of queer identified men enjoy the anonymity of this type of experience, but for the great majority of these men, there is not a need to manage identities the way that non queer identified men need to. The rules of the game in the tea room allow the men to maintain other identities such as husband or father without adopting or accepting a queer identity. The psychological split necessary to maintain this must be extraordinary because, as evidenced by the arrests in tea room raids across the country, suicides can result in the exposure of men who participate in the world of cruising.

Many have argued that in the days before there were recognizable queer spaces such as bars, queer identified men used cruising spots as an entry point to the queer world. Once there, they would make contact with other queer men, as often as not finding long term partners rather than just the furtive “hook-up.” When entry into the

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<sup>22</sup> Humphreys, Laud *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places* (New York: Adline De Gruyter, 1975), xi

larger queer world was established, the “coming out” process was made that much easier. According to Ross Higgins, after queer locations materialized there was less need to participate in cruising.<sup>23</sup> As the queer networks grew and more open spaces such as bars became available, openly queer men no longer needed the anonymity of the tea room and they left that space for those who believed they must maintain anonymity. This process facilitated the divide between tea room sex and open queer lifestyles.

Cruising locations are not built as such. When a city decides to build a public restroom in a park, it is not designed to facilitate homosex; it is sometimes actually designed to curb public homosex. The cruising space must be created by the participants from the built environment. Not every location is ideal for setting up cruising space, however. Factors such as visibility, access to roads and the layout of the actual place are all factors that contribute to this alternate use of public space. For instance, public restrooms are cruising spaces in idea and potential only, and are created and maintained by the participants. When the location is no longer viable, it is no longer a queer space, it then returns to being solely a public place.

The story of cruising is woven into the story about Panama City and The Fiesta because the two worlds at times overlapped. As The Fiesta grew in popularity it can be assumed that the queer community of Panama City moved away from cruising as a way to meet other queer people. The story of cruising can be difficult to get at because of the aforementioned distance between the world of cruising and the world of the gay bar.

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<sup>23</sup> Higgins, Ross “Baths, Bushes, and Belonging: Public Sex and Gay Community in Pre-Stonewall Montreal” in *Public Sex/Gay Space* ed. by William Leap (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) 187. Also see Matt Houlbrook’s *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Metropolis, 1918-1957* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005)

However, I have tried to weave it into my narrative because for some people, including myself, cruising was a precursor to the coming out process in Panama City.

One cannot write a queer history which covers the 1980s and not discuss AIDS. The crisis came later than I had expected to the Florida Panhandle, but the way that North Floridians constructed the disease in their minds and through their discourse is important because it parallels other areas of the country. According to Merideth Raimondo, the ways that AIDS was constructed in the popular media nationally via the Centers for Disease Control shaped the way the public responded to people living with and dying from AIDS. In her words, “The wire service stories began to articulate ‘lifestyle’ as a cause, which ultimately developed into the distinction between the ‘innocent victims’ of AIDS and those who, by implication, were guilty.” Ryan White and Lester Maddox were “innocent victims,” their only fault being exposure through blood transfusion. Ryan White eventually succumbed to AIDS while Lester Maddox never tested HIV positive. Gay men on the other hand, who caught the disease through “lifestyle choices” supposedly, got what they deserved.<sup>24</sup>

Not until I read *Public Sex/Gay Space*, edited by William Leap did I truly understand the difference between the ideas of place and space. This work examines how queer and non queer identified people create, navigate, understand and perpetuate queer spaces.

*place* designates a location that has been naturally formed or constructed, but whose meaning-potential has yet to be fully developed. *Space* emerges when practices are imposed on place, when forms of human activity impose meanings

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<sup>24</sup> Raimondo, Meredith “Dateline Atlanta: Place and the Social Construction of AIDS” in *Carryin’ On In The Lesbian and Gay South*, John Howard, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 347

on a given location, and transform ‘neutral’ terrain into landscape, that is, into a particular ‘way of seeing’ relevant to that particular locale.”<sup>25</sup>

In short, queer people, whether in their cars, public restrooms or queer friendly bars, navigate the built environment to create spaces for the expression of their queer identity.

In using the physical space of the bar as community center and organizing place in the gay community of Panama City, I rely on *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* by Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D.

Davis.<sup>26</sup> This work explores how despite the fact that “lesbians and gays did not live in the same areas, or work at the same places, they formed communities that were primary in shaping lesbian and gay culture and individual lives by socializing together.”<sup>27</sup>

Lesbians and gay men came together and were able to organize around sites designated as queer places.

By socializing together, lesbians and gay men were attempting to end the isolation that so characterized the pre-war queer experience. According to Kennedy and Davis, by bringing queer socializing out of private homes and into a bar setting, people “began the struggle for public recognition and acceptance.” The struggle looked different in every city, but each time same gender dancing occurred or queer people gathered together, those very acts represented resistance to the dominant system.

A large part of this project relies heavily on oral history testimony. The use of oral history is sometimes problematic but also quite beneficial. The stories related by narrators allow us in the present to get a feel for the daily life and daily struggles of

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<sup>25</sup> Leap, William L., ed. *Public Sex/Gay Space* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) 7

<sup>26</sup> Kennedy, Elizabeth Lapovsky and Madeline D. Davis *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1993)

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, 3

people in history; it is a story that is usually outside of the written record.<sup>28</sup> The distance from the event also creates special problems. The intervening years between event and interview can sometimes color the memories and change the meaning in the minds of the narrator. Despite its limitations, oral history has been invaluable in uncovering how people saw the queer communities and identities they were building in the Florida Panhandle.

I begin this project with an analysis of the Johns Committee as its investigations related to the Panhandle. The second part of the project is a look at The Fiesta Room and La Royale Lounge in Panama City.<sup>29</sup> The Fiesta is special for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it has been in operation as a gay bar since the late 1960s. Also, the changes in the physical structure of The Fiesta reflect changes occurring in the larger queer world of the Florida Panhandle.

The Johns Committee is formally known as the Florida Legislative Investigative Committee and it operated between 1956 and 1965. It was created to combat the NAACP after the Brown decision, but when the committee failed at that task, it “launched a relentless crusade against a contrived 'homosexual menace.’”<sup>30</sup> The committee focused on ridding the educational system of homosexual influence because of fears of communist infiltration and influence. In the process of looking for homosexuals in the educational system, the committee uncovered queer networks and queer activity throughout Florida. In the Panhandle, I have been able to document queer activity in all

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<sup>28</sup> Yow, Valerie Raleigh *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*. (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2005), 12

<sup>29</sup> The bar complex is popularly referred to as The Fiesta.

<sup>30</sup> Schnur, James A. “Closet Crusaders: The Johns Committee and Homophobia, 1956 – 1965” in *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South* edited by John Howard (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 133

walks of life and a large party of the Florida Panhandle. Also, I will show how queer people moved in and around the Gulf Coast, with Panama City and Pensacola being popular destinations and nodes of activity for queer people all over the south.

I focus on Panama City and The Fiesta because they represent a nexus of queer activity in the time since World War II. Panama City has been a beach destination since the end of the war. People from all over the world own condos on the beaches and millions have visited the beaches over the years. Bay County is home to Tyndall Air Force Base and the Navy Coastal Systems Station. Between the beaches and the military, Panama City and Bay County have seen a constant flow of people through the area. Part of that stream is made up of queer people. Over the years, the queer community has grown from a few people sitting at a bar to a large and well defined group of people who have accomplished things such as BASIC.

Several themes will run throughout both sections. The first and most important is that of movement, the second being space/place. Queer people moved around the Panhandle either for relocation, vacation or simply passing through and as they did they created ideological spaces for the existence of a queer identity and queer consciousness. Also, as queer people congregated in bars, restaurants, cars and rest stops they began to create spaces that were exclusively queer and not simply queer friendly. This was the case with The Fiesta. It began its life as a straight bar, but by the end of the 1960s it was well known as an exclusively queer space.

When I began the project, it was simply to be an exploration of Panama City and its queer community. However, as I completed more research I realized that people were moving and traveling into and out of Panama City on an almost constant basis. Queer



Panama City residents often traveled to Pensacola, Tallahassee or Atlanta for various reasons. People from Dothan or Atlanta and other nearby cities traveled to Panama City to take vacation and “let their hair down” on the beaches. Tourism and the movement that accompanies it was something that I could not ignore. To write about Panama City and not discuss tourism and movement would be only telling half of the story.

Another type of movement is the movement of ideas. As tourists discovered queer spaces in Panama City, they took that information home. As they talked about their vacations they spread that information. As other queer tourists planned their vacations, they took this knowledge into consideration. When tourists visited Panama City, they brought information about their respective home cities with them. It was this type of movement that informed Panama City’s response to AIDS.

The movement of ideas took other forms as well. The Fiesta advertised in southern gay magazines, and was featured in gay travel articles about the Gulf Coast region. Not only was The Fiesta written about in these magazines, but the owners bought advertising space in them as well. Since advertisements for The Fiesta appeared in various queer publications throughout the South, the owners stocked copies of the magazines in the corner of the bar that houses the community information bulletin board.

The next issue of space and place runs throughout both sections of my narrative. Before viable queer spaces such as bars were generally known, queer and non queer identified men engaged in homosex in a variety of locations, including cars and public restrooms. As queer visibility increased, so to did the number of permanent and viable queer spaces such as The Fiesta. It was in the 1960s that queer identified men had a place

to gather and left the furtive and fleeting spaces of public parks to non queer identified men.

In the pages that follow I will show how queer people created their own spaces in response to universal needs for contact and socialization. I am arguing that in the years between World War II and AIDS many queer men and women, rather than moving to more accepting urban environments, remained in the Florida Panhandle to create the spaces they needed. Through movement and by trial and error, they found each other. Through their lives, they created queer spaces in a sometimes hostile land. Most importantly, I am arguing that the Panhandle is not a historical backwater where queer history breaks down; rather queer people there worked within their environment to create the spaces which they needed, just as queer people all over the country have done.



Figure 1: Map of the Gulf Coast region of Florida

## CHAPTER 2

### THE JOHNS COMMITTEE AND QUEER NETWORKS

#### IN THE FLORIDA PANHANDLE

The Florida Legislative Investigative Committee was created in 1956 by State Senator Charley Johns and was disbanded in 1965. During that time, civil rights activists, supposed communists, homosexuals and others were sought out and questioned before the committee. After the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and the early advancements of the civil rights movement, political elites in Florida became convinced that they must preserve racial segregation in their state. During The Committee's existence, hundreds of people were questioned, often without council, with the stated end of ridding the state of "undesirables," whether activist, communist or queer. Essentially anyone who was not in favor of maintaining the racial status quo was a potential target for the committee.<sup>31</sup>

The collection, housed in the State Archives in Tallahassee, Florida, contains nineteen boxes of material, eleven of which are exclusively devoted to testimony transcript. After the committee was disbanded but before the records went to the archive, committee members and aids shredded files containing the most egregious violations of due process and moral sensibility. Having poured over hundreds of pages of testimony, I shudder to think what was so horrible it had to be shredded and made the surviving records acceptable by comparison.

The documents were originally sealed until 2028 but because of a push in 1993 through the Florida Freedom of Information Act, the records were unsealed early.

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<sup>31</sup> Schnur, James A., "Closet Crusaders," 133

However, all names are blacked out, including some place names and almost all personal names. Whoever redacted the names was not perfect and several times a person's name or a place name would be left in. To counter this problem, one condition of use of the archive is that names associated with the investigations other than committee members cannot be published. The penalty for such is criminal prosecution. Because of this, all personal names are pseudonyms added for ease of reading.

Another limitation to working with the files of the Johns Committee is that of "truth." The committee would often use extralegal, unconstitutional, and sometimes violent threats to convince, cajole and harass witnesses into telling everything they knew. Some people certainly accepted offers of immunity and then sang like canaries. Other individuals invoked the Fifth Amendment protection against self incrimination. However, when an individual invoked the Fifth, there was usually a break in the testimony and it would resume later. There is no way of knowing what sorts of threats were leveled at individuals during the times when the tape recorder was turned off. There were others who seemed to fudge the details of their testimony in order to minimize their involvement or place blame on other individuals. These considerations do not render testimony invalid.

On the contrary, the voracity of the committee and the zeal with which they pursued their goal are telling in and of themselves because it speaks to the distances they were willing to go for their version of "truth." Each person involved in the committee's investigations had their own "truth" and sometimes a lie or a mixing of details speaks volumes about the "truth" that each person was working with.

When writing about sex and sexuality using government documents one must take careful considerations. Writing about reconstructing queer identity and activity from court documents, Matt Houlbrook writes that "this dissonance means we must understand the records of official agencies...as being produced at the point where public and private, pain and pleasure, intersect."<sup>32</sup> It must be remembered that oftentimes, very private lives were for the first time colliding with public lives through the proceedings of the Johns Committee. These considerations do not make the testimony completely unreadable or unreliable; instead the testimony must be read with a discerning eye and a consciousness of the limitations created by the often painful collision of public and private. In utilizing the testimony of the committee, I have tried to bear these factors in mind.

Very few places in the testimony state why the person was brought before the committee. Sometimes it must be pieced together from a particular line of questioning while other testimony gives no indication as to why the committee chose this person. It is not always necessary to have that information when using this type of source. It can be assumed that the committee did not randomly choose people from a phone book, but instead used those testifying before the committee to obtain names of other people. The Committee's methodology has allowed me to reconstruct trans-Panhandle networks and establish connections between various parts of the Panhandle.

There is one final limitation to working with source material such as this. The language used by the committee in its definitions of homosexuality was the language of the "sexual psychopath." The way in which the committee constructed homosexuality is

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<sup>32</sup> Houlbrook, Matt *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5. This particular quote refers to the records of Scotland Yard and the British Government. However, I feel that it is relevant to the analysis of other government documents of a similar nature.

completely in line with the times. The committee members classed homosexuality alongside recognized mental disorders such as Kleptomania and rare complexes such as “Fire-Water Complex.”<sup>33</sup> Also, the committee and some of the informants seem to be operating under the assumption that nobody consciously chooses homosexual activity, it must be at the insistence of one who has already become a homosexual. By keeping this fact in mind, I was able to make sense of the sometimes schizophrenic ways the committee defined homosexuality and the homosexual as well as the ways witnesses defined their own sexuality.

Despite the limitations, I was able to piece together a queer network across the Florida Panhandle. While most of the investigations into homosexual activity were focused in south Florida, the University of Florida in Gainesville and Florida State University in Tallahassee, the investigation could not be confined to just those areas. People from Tallahassee and Pensacola regularly criss-crossed the Florida Panhandle. Because the committee investigated all leads regarding homosexuals their informants included people from such diverse places as Wewahitchka, Marianna, Bonifay and Panama City.

### **Panama City**

Only three files show interviews conducted in Panama City. Two boys from Everett Junior High School were called into the Bay County Sheriff’s office on 21 June 1962.<sup>34</sup> One of their teachers had been accused of molesting male students. The testimony given by the two boys does not accuse the man outright, but they do mention

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<sup>33</sup> Series 1486, box 19, folder 8. “Glossary of Homosexual Terms” This complex is described as: “after lighting a fire, there is a period of exhibitionism followed by a desire to urinate.”

<sup>34</sup> Series 1486, box 10, folder 8

hugging that was borderline inappropriate. “Q: In what way did he do this? A: He put his hand right about there and just pulled up – Q: Around your waist. He'd just pull you up close to him?”

Two girls, interviewed in connection with a junior high school in Wewahitchka, implicated a teacher in a Panama City elementary school. It is unlikely that this is the same man since, contrary to the Johns Committee’s beliefs, pedophiles rarely cross genders. The man was later interviewed in Panama City by the committee and denied all charges and stated that the girls were simply lying.<sup>35</sup>

Even though only three interviews were actually conducted in Panama City or Bay County, Panama City is mentioned many other times in connection with homosexuality in the Florida Panhandle. From the testimony in the sections to follow, it is clear that Panama City occupies an important place on the landscape of homosexuality in Florida at this time because of its central, beach location.

### **Marianna**

A director at the Mariana Boys School, a reformatory type school located in Marianna, was accused of being a homosexual by several students.<sup>36</sup> While none of the testimony is actually from a boy who had sex with the director, there is a great deal of activity that led the committee to believe this man was a homosexual and liked the company of teenage boys.

First, his conduct with the boys caused several of them to complain. “If he comes to the cottage or if he is in the dining hall” stated one witness, “he always puts his arm around the boys and kind of loves them up. I just – I don't want him around my boys and

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<sup>35</sup> Series 1486, box 11, folder 99

<sup>36</sup> Series 1486, box 11, folder 78

the boys don't want it either. This happened quite a few times at the dining hall and on one time during shower time did this happen with me. Q: Have you had the boys to complain to you about this. A: Yes.”<sup>37</sup>

Second, he would sometimes check a boy out of the school for the day and take them to Panama City to spend time at the beach. “Q: Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ do you recall any incident where Reverend \_\_\_\_\_ has checked a boy out and took him to the beach in Panama City. A: Yes. It's been some time back, when the boy was a student here. Reverend \_\_\_\_\_ did take \_\_\_\_\_ to the beach. Q: For a day or a day and a night or a weekend, or how long? A: The best I can remember it was – checked him out, let's see – I believe he kept that boy overnight.” This particular testimony ends with this incident and no mention of what happened at the beach. Earlier in the testimony this witness stated that several boys had asked him not to let Reverend \_\_\_\_\_ check them out any more because of inappropriate touching.

The committee only interviewed one boy who had accompanied the director on a trip to Panama City, but several others were mentioned in other transcripts. According to this youth, nothing happened other than simply spending a day at the beach. However, it is telling that the pair went to Panama City Beach. Panama City is not necessarily the closest spot to Marianna for a person to spend a day at the beach. Why then would the pair have traveled to Panama City Beach?

It is quite possible that Panama City beach was more open, that there was a more relaxed atmosphere or that it was simply farther away from watchful eyes at the Marianna Boys School. This is not to say that Panama City Beach allowed open homosexuals, but

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<sup>37</sup> Series 1486, box 11, folder 78, page 3



for some reason the director chose that location. I must assume that if his purpose was nefarious, he must have felt a bit safer in Panama City. This particular incident points up Panama City beach as a popular destination in the early 1960s for queer and non queer people alike.

Other testimony by employees and students implicate the director and the reverend in other queer activities. The witness was asked whether or not he had seen the director taking youths around in his car outside of school. According to this witness, the director had not been seen with boys from the school, but had been seen with other local boys that were not connected to the school. The witness was unsure as to the nature of the relationship between the director and the other teens but had seen him hugging them and touching them as he had done to boys in the school. It was curious to note that when asked about the nature of the relationship, the witness replied that the other boys would often say in regards to their time with the director; "they were going to make some change (referring to money or pocket change)."<sup>38</sup>

Since there is no mention of local boys performing manual labor for either the school or the director and given that the discussion is in relation to "inappropriate" relationships, I am assuming that the boys were engaged in sex trade. Trade is not necessarily prostitution, but there were many cases documented by the Johns Committee where "straight" men would become a little queer for the right price, be it money, liquor or material items.

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<sup>38</sup> Series 1486, Box 11, Folder 30

## Pensacola

Homosexuals had not only “infiltrated” the public school system, they could also be found in the Air Force, hair salons, and retail stores. One person brought up before the committee, who I shall call Mark, spoke of a man stationed at Tyndall Air Force Base near Panama City who had attended “gay” parties. When asked about other people at the parties, Mark stated that they were from all walks of life. He specifically named hairdressers, students and store owners amongst the attendees. The homosexual community of Pensacola clearly stretched far beyond the limits of the educational system as the Johns Committee came to find out.<sup>39</sup>

The man being accused of homosexuality, according to Mark, would often throw “gay parties.” This was a term used by the committee in reference to parties given by homosexuals, predominantly for homosexuals. These parties would attract men from all over Pensacola and beyond. They were not huge, lavish parties, but there were often from twenty to thirty open homosexuals in attendance. The parties given by this particular man were not the only gay house parties in Pensacola. Mark explained that he had been to other parties “out Tennessee Street, way out.”<sup>40</sup>

It is clear from Mark’s testimony that there was an active queer party scene in Pensacola in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This is in line with the house party scene that was occurring in other parts of the country such as Los Angeles.<sup>41</sup> It is clear that there was enough of a homosexual community in Pensacola and the Gulf Coast that these parties were always popularly attended. According to Mark, the parties were becoming

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<sup>39</sup> Series 1486, box 11, folder 8

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, page 17

<sup>41</sup> Before Meeker, Kennedy and Howard all discuss the house party scene as an early form of queer congregation and then as an alternative to the bar scene.

so well known that they “usually broke up the party pretty fast because the people would just know, it was getting infamous, couldn't have it.”<sup>42</sup>

I broaden the Pensacola scene to include the entire Florida Panhandle because at least two members of the Air Force, who were stationed in Panama City, attended the parties. One of these men would ride a bus from Panama City (a trip that today takes two hours by car) to attend these parties and be with the man who threw the parties. It is unclear whether the other man from Panama City would drive or take the bus or if these two men even knew each other. What is clear is that knowledge of the homosexual community spread across entire Florida Panhandle. Two men traveling from Panama City, as well as other party attendants traveling from other parts of the Panhandle, show that there was a wide network of people and that information about parties and queer spaces circulated across a wide area.

Mark never admitted to engaging in homosexual behavior. According to him, he attended gay parties because of his roommate's connection to the host. The parties that occurred at his house, which seem to have been attended by predominantly queer people, were also because of his roommate. I cannot conclude with any certainty that this man was queer, but the committee did. The interrogator asked Mark why he would stay at a party with homosexuals. “A: You're stuck with them. I didn't have to entertain them. I'm no victim of anything at all.”<sup>43</sup> Mark seems to be asserting that he was not always willingly involved in the party scene, but that he also does not see himself as a victim of homosexual influences either. It seems that Mark was willing to admit to attending the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, pages 16-17

<sup>43</sup> Series 1486, Box 11, Folder 8, page 14

parties, but wanted to assert to the committee that he was not a participant in the homosexual world.

In the discussion of parties thrown at this individual's apartment Mark mentions that people would come from out of town in order to attend. Because of the queer nature of these parties and the attendance by the two Air Force men from Panama City, it is likely that these were "gay parties" even though they are not specifically referred to as such. These parties are further evidence of a wide network of queer people. According to Mark, "the people that I mentioned that came to our place and there were really untold- it seems -- dozens of people that I have never seen before. I imagine most of them were university students. There were some people from out of town. It was really pretty garish."<sup>44</sup>

Mark's testimony makes clear that people traveled great distances to attend queer house parties. This particular informant clues us in to the nature and the strength of cross-Panhandle networks. The fact that people would travel leads one to assume that a queer network was in place and strong enough that queer people would drive in from out of town to attend a house party. Clearly they felt safe and secure enough about the party's host and the location because of already established queer connections that they made the drive or trip by bus.

Another incident brought before the committee involved a Pensacola high school teacher, who I have named Skip. He was brought before the committee after several men complained that he had touched them inappropriately when they were sleeping in the same bed. This testimony is most interesting because none of the men are queer

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<sup>44</sup> Series 1486, Box 11, Folder 8, Page 17.

identified. However, this testimony seems to indicate that Skip was attempting to reach out and create queer space with men he felt safe with. The incidents occurred with four different men over a period of years. Two incidents supposedly took place at out of town motels and the other two took place at Skip's apartment.

The first incident occurred at a roadside motel, late one night in Alabama. The witness and Skip were traveling to Tuscaloosa for a football game at the University of Alabama. When the hour became late, the pair stopped at a roadside motel to get some rest before continuing on to Tuscaloosa. Some time during the night, the witness stated that Skip placed his arm around him several times and the advances were rebuffed each time. Finally, after it became clear that the other man was not simply moving in his sleep, the witness dressed, left the room and hitchhiked back to Pensacola.<sup>45</sup>

Skip attempted to reach out to someone he assumed was of like mind and create a queer space in the motel. However, Skip denied any involvement in queer practices. "Q: Did you ever practice this type of activity? A: No ... Q: Have you ever had any homosexual acts at all Mr. \_\_\_\_\_? A: Well I've been approached if that's what you mean. Q: In what manner? A: Well I've asked, had one or two people to come plain out and ask me and I refused."<sup>46</sup> Skip was most likely not part of the more open queer network of the Panhandle. It would appear from further testimony that he did not adopt a queer identity, but tried several times to participate in queer behavior.

When confronted with the accusations Skip was very evasive. He blames his behavior on a type of sleepwalking:<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Series 1486, Box 11, Folder 127

<sup>46</sup> Series 1486, Box 11, Folder 119, page 3

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, page 6

Q: Did you play with \_\_\_\_\_ penis that night \_\_\_\_\_

A: I know if I did it, it was while I was asleep.

Q: Do you have a habit of doing such things as that in your sleep?

A: Well, I don't know.

Q: Now Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ if you were asleep and this type of act was occurring do you feel like that you could stay asleep and masturbate a person to the point of complete ejaculation [sic] and be asleep all the time?

A: I don't, I don't know anything about it, playing with him. If I did, I didn't know anything about it.

This sort of sleep disturbance is ever so slightly within the realm of possibility. However, it is more likely that Skip knows the accusations are true but is trying to displace blame. He is not queer identified and does not want to lose his livelihood. For Skip, the collision of public and private was too painful. For this reason, I tend to believe that Skip did actually try to establish queer contact with other men. Because he does not admit to queer practices while awake, it is impossible to know for sure what happened. It would be interesting to understand how he came to feel safe enough with these other men to attempt this sort of action.

These incidents are illuminating for other reasons. They speak to the depth of anti-homosexual sentiment and fears. Skip did not admit to homosexual actions, either for professional or personal reasons, but rather blamed it on sleep disturbance as a way of denying the conscious nature of his choices. The other men involved in the incidents were so distressed that they left where they were in the middle of the night. One man even hitchhiked from Thomasville, Alabama after Skip made advances to him. That is a distance of 114 miles walked and hitchhiked because of the distress and fear of the accused man.<sup>48</sup> Rather than discuss the incidents, the men simply fled the scene.

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<sup>48</sup> Google Maps, accessed on 16 June 2008 through <http://maps.google.com> This estimate is for current road conditions. In the early 1960s this would likely have been a different estimate.

## Dothan

Not all men brought before the committee were so evasive about their queer experiences. One of the most interesting and most important testimonies was that of a teenager from Graceville, Florida.<sup>49</sup> Because so much of his story appears here, and for the purpose of clarity I shall use the pseudonym Brent to refer to the youth being interviewed by the committee. Brent was not only involved with a man from Dothan, Alabama area; he also knew of and had experiences with other men from around the Panhandle area.

Graceville lies on State Highway 77 roughly seventy miles Northwest of Panama City and twenty-five miles southwest of Dothan. Graceville is a small country town with strong agricultural connections. These days, it is more like other small former agricultural towns, but in the 1960s it would have had a much closer tie to farming.

Brent, who was eighteen at the time of the testimony, traveled to Dothan quite frequently. For a time, he was employed at Dobb's Barbecue, which is still in operation at the intersection of Highway 231 and Ross Clark Circle, as well as a local manufacturing plant. It was apparently quite common for people from this town and other small towns in the area to travel frequently to Dothan or Panama City and even Tallahassee because Brent speaks frequently of himself and others traveling to those places for entertainment, liaison, or just to get away.

The committee began by asking Brent if he had ever been approached by a homosexual, to which he replied that he had. He then launched into a story about a man

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<sup>49</sup> Series 1486, Box 11, Folder 31.

stationed at “Camp Rooker” who was a “Second Class Lieutenant – helicopter pilot.”<sup>50</sup>, near Dothan. For the purpose of clarity I will use the pseudonym Matt for the helicopter pilot from Fort Rucker.

According to Brent, he met Matt some time in the middle of November 1962<sup>51</sup> at Dobb's Barbecue in Dothan. Matt pulled up near him in a 1963 Ford Galaxy 500 X-L convertible. At the time of the incident the 1963 model year would have just rolled into showrooms. Brent stated that he “was looking at his car – it was a pretty car – and I noticed him kept looking at me.”<sup>52</sup> Matt began the interaction by asking Brent if he knew the way to “the beaches, and I told him approximately 80, 90 miles maybe.” According to the distance Brent gave, he was directing Matt to Panama City.

Impressed by the shiny new car, Brent changed the subject to Matt's car, and eventually, Matt invited him over. “So, me liking cars as much as I do, I did.”<sup>53</sup> During the conversation Brent moved over into Matt's car to get a closer look and continue the conversation. Brent described Matt as acting nervous but not apprehensive. Matt even insisted that Brent drive the car since he loved it so much. Eventually, the pair went for a drive in the Galaxy.

During the drive Brent realized what was beginning to happen. “The first thing I knew that something was happening was he - I don't remember what he - just reached over there and run his hand through my hair or just made out like he did accidentally - that was what he did \_\_\_\_\_ that was when I knew something was coming off, right

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<sup>50</sup> Series 1486, Box 11, Folder 31, tape 1, pages 1-2. The army installation is referred to as Camp Rooker and Fort Rucker interchangeably. The transcript covers two tapes. There is no notation of a second date, so it is safe to assume that the second part is simply a continuation of the first interview.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, tape 1, page 2 The transcript is dated 15 December 1962.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, tape 1, page 2

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, tape 1, page 3



then.” Knowing that something was happening did not stop Brent from continuing the drive with the strange man from Ft. Rucker. The pair continued south toward Graceville, eventually pulling off on a side road.

During the stop by the road, the pair continued casual conversation. It was here that Matt made the first real advances, such as putting his arm around Brent and caressing his leg. Then Matt and Brent hugged and caressed and Matt played with Brent’s penis and caused an erection. Brent was apparently hesitant to speak of the incident on tape because he asked the recorder to be cut off. “Q: During the time that he was playing with you he didn't cause you to have an erection? A: Yes. If you'll cut this off I'll tell you about it.”<sup>54</sup> There is no notation that the committee did so, but the transcript does not continue with any lurid detail. The testimony abruptly switches to the subject of kissing.

The committee members were keenly interested as to whether or not oral sex had occurred. The committee asked Brent at least ten times in as many different ways whether or not Matt had asked to or had actually performed oral sex on Brent. “Q: And in playing with your penis did he tell you that he wanted to suck it? Q: Well did he at any time go down on you? Q: He never did give you a blow job? Q: He didn't give you a blow job that night? Q: Did he ever at any time kiss you on the penis? Q: Never did put his mouth toward it?”<sup>55</sup> The committee was always interested in every lurid detail whenever sexual encounter was admitted. The boy had already admitted to the homosexual encounter, so why continue to probe? The committee seemed to be

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<sup>54</sup> Series 1486, box 11, folder 31, pp 4-5 of tape 1

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. These instances all occurred on page five of tape 1 and page 4 of tape 2. Throughout the entire testimony the committee asked twelve times about oral – genital contact.

incredibly fascinated with sexual detail. It is unclear from the tapes whether or not the committee gave information about violations of sodomy laws to law enforcement officers, but that was within their power and they could have used it as a threat.

According to the testimony, the pair only had one other meeting in the car. This time, Brent knew what he was getting into when he climbed into Matt's car. The pair drove down the road and pulled off again. "We just went just riding back down the highway like we did last time. I think he was driving and he parked again like he did last time and started the same thing."<sup>56</sup>

Brent only spoke of two incidents, but sometimes used language that would indicate a longer pattern of sexual encounters with Matt as well as previous experience of his own. "Well almost every time I was with him he would want to go somewhere."<sup>57</sup> "...and he told me he would get me an apartment in Dothan and pay the rent and get me a job at the bank...That last time I saw him he told me 'I already had it arranged for you to have a job.'"<sup>58</sup> It would seem as though the pair had more than just two encounters or had known each other for longer than one month. Was this intentional or was it just Brent's poor use of the English language?

I tend to believe that Brent was condensing a longer string of encounters with Matt into only two encounters to possibly lessen his chances of bringing the wrath of the committee to bear upon himself or Matt. It is quite possible the Brent believed that because the committee apparently knew that he had engaged in homosexual behavior, if

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, page 2 of tape 2

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, page 5 of tape 2

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, page 12 of tape 2

he minimized the extent of that behavior he could avoid jail or whatever else the committee had threatened him with.

The pair eventually “broke up.” Here I quote Brent at length because this break up story is interesting for several reasons.

I got in his car and told him not to come back, that if he did, I was getting tired of him -- told him I was just getting sick of him and I understood what he was trying to do to me; told him I could see how that could happen and that I wasn't going out with him any more; that it makes me sick to be around him, so he started asking me did I know of anybody else that was gay like that around here and I told him no. He asked me two or three times did I get any pleasure out of it and I told him no, I didn't. I told him I hoped -- he kept telling me that was the only time he ever did that -- he didn't know what it was. I told him I hoped he didn't do it anymore. I remember telling him that I had been with other guys before but it was always for money or something else. I told him if he wanted to go with me again he could but I wasn't doing nothing and it would cost him. I remember telling him that, and so it must have made him mad. I got out of the car ...<sup>59</sup>

First and foremost, Brent seems to be pandering to the Committee's and society's notions that older queer people actively tried to recruit younger, new members into the gay community. Brent says that he knew what Matt was trying to do to him. This leads me to believe that Brent is attempting to show his own innocence or naiveté in the matter because he eventually gave in to Matt's advances. By insinuating that he was recruited, Brent could thereby place the blame onto Matt. It is evident from reading the testimony in its entirety that Brent almost certainly knew exactly what was going on throughout his time with Matt. His language seems to be meant to convey a sudden epiphany as to what had been happening.

There is no way of knowing for certain if Brent was struggling with his own sexual identity or if he was trying to evade the committee by portraying himself as a victim of older, established homosexuals. It would seem to support testimony from other

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, page 10 of tape 2

individuals such as Skip, which portrays homosexuality as something that someone in their right mind would not consciously do unless they were coerced. Brent's language makes clear that he was aware of the language of homosexuality and that he had participated in queer activities with other men. This leads me to believe that he was an active and willing participant in his time with Matt despite what he was trying to convince the committee of.

Next Matt asks Brent if he knows anyone else around that is gay. This leads me to believe that in a place where there were no designated queer spaces, such as a bar, that there was a queer network. At least Matt believed that there was a queer network which he could join. While this particular incident is not proof in and of itself of a broad network of queer people in the area, it is one more piece of the puzzle in reconstructing queer life in the area. The language the pair used leads me to believe that these two people knew that there were other people out there who enjoyed the same kinds of activities. Whether or not Brent actually knew any other queer people is irrelevant, the fact that Matt knew to ask is telling in and of itself. In the post World War II military, Matt would have been given the vocabulary and warned about homosexuals. Whether or not he had already experienced queer activity, is unclear but it is clear that Matt was trying to gain entry into "the community" via a seemingly already established member.

Brent later in the interview denies having sex for money or profit. As he testified, "a buddy of mine, he's probably the best friend I've got, and he told me that he was in the Navy in Diego [probably referring here to San Diego] and he said he talked to a lot of guys and he said they'd go with them for money or booze or something like that but they'd never get in debt to them, I meant I'd never done that before, but I just told him

that to make him think I had.”<sup>60</sup> Brent and his friend discussed men having sex with other men for profit. Even if Brent had not engaged in this behavior, he is clearly more open to homosexual than most of his other contemporaries.

On page five of the testimony Brent established another beach connection. “Q: Go to the beach? A: Yes, go to the beach, that’s right sir. Q: Get a motel? A: Yes.” Brent never mentions which beach the boys are going to, but Panama City is the closest to Graceville and was known for its inexpensive accommodations. Judging by earlier testimony, it is reasonable to assume that Panama City beach was the intended destination.

The fact that Matt wants to take Brent to the beach could mean several things. First, it could mean that Matt has taken others to the beach for similar encounters and feels safe in taking Brent there. It could also just mean that Matt liked the beach. I tend to believe that the beach, for Matt, represents a safe space, a space where he can get away from familiar surroundings, a mental break. Just as the Pensacola high school teacher felt safe out of town, so to did Matt feel safest by going out of town, or to the beach

It is quite possible that Matt did not feel he could take the relationship any farther than petting while still in Dothan because in Dothan he was too close to home, too close to watchful eyes and small town gossips. Perhaps a trip to the beach and the aforementioned mental break was Matt’s way of saying that he wanted to do more, despite the fact that he told Brent he had never done anything like that before.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, page 15 of tape 2

## Lesbians

Queer men were not the only people brought before the committee. There were multiple instances of lesbians and those wishing to expose lesbians coming before The Committee. Only a handful of the interviews deal with lesbianism in the Gulf Coast and only two cases were verifiable enough to be useful in this study. The first instance involved a group of girls at Wewahitchka High School being part of what was known as the “Bongo Club.”<sup>61</sup> The second incident involved the case of a female air force officer stationed at Eglin Air Force Base.

The committee interviewed more than ten girls in connection with lesbian activity taking place at Wewahitchka High School. None of the interviewees admitted to having partaken in homosexual activity, though. The closest the committee ever came to such an admission was one girl who stated that on a sleepover she had kissed another girl.

This case represents more than just adolescent sexual banter. Had it only been idle chatter, the Johns Committee would most likely not have investigated it so thoroughly. The fact that the Committee was investigating meant it believed that the accusations were credible enough and the informants reliable enough to warrant spending resources on a group of high school students. When the committee asked one male student, “Have you seen enough to convince you in your opinion that there is a foundation for some of this talk?” to which the boy replied, “Yes.”<sup>62</sup>

It is reasonable to assume that there was a certain degree of sexual activity among the students at Wewahitchka High. It is clear that there was a group of queer girls expressing their sexuality and exploring lesbianism to the point that it was openly

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<sup>61</sup> Series 1486, Box 11, Folder 104. No date given.

<sup>62</sup> Series 1486, Box 11, Folder 104, Page 2.

discussed around school. Because the witnesses could be playing up to the Committee, it is hard to say whether the level of disgust they expressed toward lesbianism was real.

The informants do not speak of butch/femme roles being utilized in Wewahitchka. According to Kennedy and Davis, the butch/femme dynamic was highly important in the working-class lesbian world of Buffalo, New York.<sup>63</sup> I do not doubt that there was a group of queer girls at Wewahitchka High School. However, the extent of their involvement in the larger queer world of Northwest Florida is hard to gauge. They do not fit neatly with what I have read about lesbian identity in other parts of the country at the time. However, it is quite possible that they were ahead of their time by creating their own queer identities without labels and roles.

It is also possible the girls were simply bohemian or early hippies who experimented with free love. Leaders in Mississippi constructed hippies, civil rights workers and other non-normative individuals as “outside agitators”, homosexuals or perverts.<sup>64</sup> Because this discourse and mode of thinking was a common tool used by segregationists, it is quite possible that the administration at Wewahitchka High School would have been knowledgeable or at least aware of this discourse. Were the girls queer or were they just a little bit non-normative and targeted as queer because of their non-normative behavior?

This particular occurrence of queer girls in Wewahitchka is important for another reason. One of the girls interviewed lived in Panama City as a child and was the same girl accused of lying about a teacher molesting her. This same girl also admitted to kissing other girls and to regularly taking car trips to Panama City and Panama City

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<sup>63</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*.

<sup>64</sup> Howard, *Men Like That*, 142

Beach with other girls she was involved with. There were rumors that the girls would park and make out or two girls riding in the back seat would kiss while two other girls rode in the front of the car. I believe that it is important to note that these girls drove to Panama City when there were other beaches close by.<sup>65</sup> The committee members never ask why Panama City was chosen, but it is most likely that the girls felt far enough away and far removed enough from home to feel safe.

The second lesbian case before the Committee involved two women stationed in Pensacola at the Naval Air Station. Both women, who were in the Air Force, were accused of lesbianism. Neither admitted to actually being a lesbian although they did admit to knowing of and associating with known homosexuals. At this time one could be discharged for associating with known homosexuals as well as actually being a homosexual. However, a discharge for associating with known homosexuals would allow a service member to keep their benefits while a discharge for being a homosexual would not.<sup>66</sup>

The first woman, who I shall call Michelle, was stationed in Pensacola and had previously been stationed at Eglin Air Force Base near Fort Walton Beach. In both locations she suspected that some of her comrades were lesbians. Michelle is most interesting because of her association with softball. She played softball on an all women's league off base. I personally don't believe the lesbian/softball stereotype, but this narrator did. Despite Michelle's statements that she was not a lesbian, she believed

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<sup>65</sup> Series 1486, Box 11, Folder 126, No date given.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Mike Krall, conducted at the La Royale Lounge and Package Store on 28 October 2007



that many of the other women on her team were probably lesbians because they were playing softball and “looked the part.”<sup>67</sup>

The next woman was far more interesting. I have named her Anita. After leaving the Air Force, Anita began a teaching career. Through Anita’s testimony, it is clear that there was a viable lesbian community in Pensacola, Fort Walton Beach and other parts of the Panhandle. Anita admitted to knowing lesbians all throughout the area and even named the lesbian hangouts in Pensacola. Both Buddy’s and The Squire House are mentioned as by Anita as places frequented by lesbians in the Pensacola area. Both bars were located near the entrance to the Air Force Base. Anita even attended house parties during her time in Fort Walton.

In her discussion of the house party scene in Fort Walton, Anita established the trans-Panhandle lesbian community. She speaks of having met women from as far away as Dothan as well as having spent time at a lakeside cabin with other lesbian teachers. Judging by the description of the lake, it was Crystal Lake which is on Highway 77, thirty miles north of Panama City. During the house parties and time spent by the lake, Anita was able to make contact with other lesbians from around the Florida Panhandle. She was in this way taking part in the lesbian network of contacts and communication.

### **Pornography**

As people moved around the Panhandle, they shared information. Meeker and Howard both explore how pornography, physique and homophile magazines circulated throughout the country. Both scholars show how physique magazines were essentially

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<sup>67</sup> Series 1486, Box 11, Folder 123

legal soft-core, homoerotic pornography. At a time when explicit homosexual pornography was illegal, nudist and physique magazines were perfectly legal.

The collection of papers from the Johns Committee contains a collection of queer and homophile publications. *The Ladder, One* and *The Mattachine Review*, all publications from The Mattachine Society and The Daughters of Bilitis were collected by the Johns Committee. In folders labeled “homosexual” are advertisements for physique magazines and photo-essays interspersed with the homophile publications. Both Meeker and Howard make connections between erotic, queer desire and photo-essays and physique magazines. It is clear from the placement of the magazines in the committee’s files that the members were aware of the connection as well.

I had not found evidence of pornography circulating in the Panhandle until I read the testimony of a 17 year old student at Marianna High School.<sup>68</sup> The same boy who earlier confirmed the existence of queer behavior on campus confirmed the circulation of pornography. The boy was asked if he had ever been in possession of pornography, to which he replied yes. According to the boy a friend bought them in Panama City, and then after some time gave them to the boy. The boy stated that they were pictures of naked women, raising the question why the committee would be so interested in his possession of the images. Weren’t young men “supposed” to do and partake in this sort of thing as a right of passage, so to speak?

It was then that I found out why the committee was so interested. “Well, \_\_\_\_\_ most every one of these pictures show a homosexual act taking place, you realize that?” The pictures apparently contained women engaged in acts with each other. Taken

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<sup>68</sup> Series 1486 Box 11 Folder 104

literally, two women engaged in sexual acts with each other is a homosexual act.

However, after having read other treatments of lesbians by the committee and their keen interest in every minute, titillating, detail, I expected the boy to receive a pat on the back for not being a queer. The committee treated these pictures just as they would have any other pornographic image. Not having any basis for comparison with men possessing male pornography or women possessing female pornography, I am left to assume that to the committee, homosexual pornography was homosexual pornography regardless of who possessed it or who was in it.

The time spent with the Johns Committee files was invaluable to my research and my formulation of queer network in the Florida Panhandle. A thorough exploration of all five boxes dealing with the investigation into homosexuality in Florida would fill up a book. It is clear from reading the testimony that people in the Florida Panhandle, whether in Tallahassee, Pensacola or Panama City regularly traveled around the area creating, establishing and taking part in a queer world. People in Tallahassee knew queer people in Pensacola and all points in between. Men and women created queer spaces where they could raise their own consciousness and feel safe. Whether that space was a physical building such as The Fiesta Room or it was a roadside motel, cruising park, or simply a car, queer people in the Florida Panhandle actively sought out places where they could be themselves and express their desires. In this seeking was movement. People did not just stay in their home town, they moved in, out and around the area. People from Dothan went to the beach; men from Panama City took a bus to Pensacola just to attend a gay house party. People were on the move.

## Emma Jones

The committee did not have all encompassing power. As they collected information from homophile organizations around the country, such an organization sprang up within their jurisdiction. The story is included here because it begins right under the nose of Charley Johns, yet the committee never mentions it nor do they seem to know of its existence.

In Pensacola in 1957, a star was born and her name was Emma Jones. However, she was not a real person with a real birth. Emma Jones was a code name for the homophile organization in Pensacola. Since the United States Postal Service banned homosexual materials being sent through the mail, the founders adopted the code name to avoid suspicion when mailing out party invitations and other correspondence.<sup>69</sup>

Much like the Mattachine Society's early mission in other parts of the country, Emma Jones was a queer organization designed to bring people together in a safe environment and to have a good time while doing it. The early years of Emma Jones were characterized by private house parties and gatherings. These parties were much like other house parties being held in the area, but with a bit more organization. Over the years, the parties grew more and more famous. Consequently, the number of attendants swelled to over 2,000 by the early 1970s<sup>70</sup>.

The biggest Emma Jones event was the annual party on the Fourth of July. The invitations to the yearly celebration usually included some reference to the other national holiday taking place. One such invitation addressed to Billy Jones stated, "It's the age of

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<sup>69</sup>Wesley Chenault and Stacy Braukman *Images of America: Gay and Lesbian Atlanta* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 58

<sup>70</sup>Ibid, 58

Aquarius and to all those adventurous, we shall meet again at last in the sands for a blast! George and Abe liked this time, for it gave them reason and rhyme. You will need a car or gondola; so 'Lets get together in Pensacola'.”<sup>71</sup> In order to protect the anonymity of the participants and the secrecy of the club, the parties were invitation only. In order to be admitted to the party and to the club one had to be brought in by someone already in.

Emma Jones was meant to be a love child, something that could be thrown off at any moment and any relation disavowed. She was meant to be a place where gay men could come together without fear because they could easily disavow knowledge of her. Over the years of her existence, the parties grew and her fame increased. Emma was born during Charley Johns' reign, but she out-lived his committee. She was laid to rest in 1975.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Emma cast an ever wider shadow. Invitations to the annual parties were sent all over the country and her fame spread to other party destinations such as Miami. Emma's growth corresponds to the growth of queer visibility. After Stonewall, queer people all over the country began to refuse the closet to which they had been relegated. Emma could no longer hide behind closed doors and invitation only parties. As people refused invisibility, they dragged Emma out of the closet.

However, this new visibility and openness was to be the death of Emma Jones. According to an article in *Tropic*, which was a supplement to the Miami Herald, Emma Jones “became too big, too lavish.”<sup>72</sup> This quote refers to the infamous summer parties.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 58

<sup>72</sup> “The Discreet Lovers of Emma Jones” *Tropic* supplemental section of the Miami Herald. 16 March 1975. The Gay and Lesbian History Thing at The Atlanta History Centre. Billy Jones collection,

By the time Emma Jones was laid to rest in 1975, she had earned Pensacola the nickname of “gay capital of the south.”<sup>73</sup> This designation angered city officials who responded with an increased crackdown on queer establishments and people, according to the writer of the *Tropic* article.

The spark that ignited an already flammable situation came in 1975 when a Pensacola bar known as Robbie’s Yum Yum Tree burned under suspicious circumstances. Police arrested Robert Llewlen, the owner, and put him on trial for burning his own bar. The events and outcome of the trial were reported as far away as Atlanta.<sup>74</sup> This level of exposure was too much for the “discreet lovers of Emma Jones.” The party for that year was cancelled and Emma Jones was “officially” pronounced dead. According to the *Tropic* article, Robert Llewlen was blamed for the death of Emma Jones because he went too far and too public, he brought too much attention to Emma Jones and her parties as well as to the gay community in general.

It is impossible to say for certain whether Emma could have continued had Robert Llewlen not burned his own bar. Emma Jones parties were increasing in size and visibility before Llewlen even visited Pensacola or opened his bar. Llewlen had very little, if any, say in the guest list or in the number of attendants. Invisibility became increasingly impossible as the years went on because of changing attitudes. The burning of the Yum Yum Tree was simply the final act in a long string of actions that signaled the inevitable death of Emma Jones and other secretive organizations like her.

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unprocessed as of 10 April 2008

<sup>73</sup> “The Discreet Lovers of Emma Jones” *Tropic* supplemental section of the Miami Herald. 16 March 1975. The Gay and Lesbian History Thing at The Atlanta History Centre. Billy Jones collection, unprocessed as of 10 April 2008

<sup>74</sup> Billy Jones collected newspaper clippings from the Atlanta Journal and Atlanta Constitution and they can be found in his collection at the Atlanta History Center.

By blaming Emma's death on Robert Llewellyn, Pensacolans participated in the will to not-know. Emma Jones had existed since 1957 and had held parties every Fourth of July since 1960. It is clear that Emma Jones could be tolerated as long as she didn't cause a scene. As long as queer people did not make too much noise and stayed quietly in their places, they could be tolerated. However, by the middle 1970s invisibility and quiet accommodation were nearly impossible. In this way, Emma Jones and Pensacola were existing as remnants of the Old South. The writer of the *Tropic* article states that there is a certain elitism in the death of Emma Jones. "Emma Jones was not about flaunting" so she had to be laid to rest.

There were no riots in Pensacola as there were at the Stonewall Inn in New York City. Emma Jones simply died quietly at the hands of the men who had created her. However, the show did go on. After her death the party was moved to Memorial Day. The next parties were thrown by local bar owners and gay people who were unafraid of notoriety and flaunting. The event was moved to Memorial Day because holding the party on the Fourth of July was too much for local residents, according to *Tropic*. The article cites the connection with nationalism and patriotism that surrounds the Fourth of July as well as the high number of tourists who visited the beaches during the Fourth of July. How true this is, is hard to gauge, but is completely within the realm of possibility. Despite the best efforts of city fathers, the gay party lives on. Every Memorial Day, tens of thousands of queer people descend on Pensacola for one of the largest queer events in the South.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE FIESTA ROOM, THE PANHANDLE, THE WORLD



Figure 2: Original sign hanging in front of The Fiesta Room Lounge<sup>75</sup>

Panama City is not an island, metaphorically or physically. It is part of a greater network of cities and towns collectively known as the Gulf Coast. The Gulf Coast area of Florida physically includes the cities of Panama City, Ft. Walton beach and Pensacola as well as every small hamlet and fishing village in between. The term “Gulf Coast” can

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<sup>75</sup> Photograph by author. Taken 13 September 2008



refer to the entire Panhandle area of Florida, bounded by Tallahassee on the east and Pensacola in the west and including everything north to Dothan, Alabama.

I am arguing that the Panhandle is both distinctive and has much in common with the nation as a whole, at least in the experience of queer people. The Gulf Coast generally and Panama City specifically have contained queer people for as long as anyone can remember. In the 1950s queer men were arrested in a bathroom in Panama City just as men in Atlanta and, Jackson, Mississippi were.<sup>76</sup> Queer men needed a place to socialize with each other, so they first found bars that would accept them and then eventually opened their own spaces.

Queer men and women moved throughout the Gulf Coast circulating and contacting other queer people from all over the South and the world. The fact that the Gulf Coast is a vacation destination and home to several military installations allowed for a more national consciousness and communication networks than other places of similar size and composition. These two factors allowed for a trajectory similar to that of queer communities in Atlanta and other major Southern cities.

In the years since the Fiesta opened its doors several names have been applied to the bar. Hence, a few definitions would be useful to the reader. First, when I use the term “Fiesta” or “The Fiesta” I refer to the bar complex made up of The Fiesta Room and La Royale Lounges after 1975. The complex is made up of two buildings. The structures share a patio which fronts Harrison Avenue and are connected in the rear by store rooms and offices. Before 1975 the two bars were operated separately with one side called “The Fiesta Room” and the other called “The Bayshore Bar.”

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<sup>76</sup> For a discussion of tea room arrests, refer to Howard’s *Men Like That* or “The Library, The Park and the Pervert” in *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South*.



Figure 3: The Fiesta Room Lounge on the left and the La Royale Lounge and Package on the right with a courtyard in the middle.<sup>77</sup>

After an audit by the State Liquor Board and a decline in business at the Bayshore, the two bars became one in 1976. The Bayshore Bar was closed and remodeled. When Bubba Gilbert and Mike Krall reopened it, they named it The La Royale Lounge and Package Store. At this time, the patio was used to provide access for patrons moving between the two areas of the bar. The name Fiesta has stuck through the bars history. In common parlance, “The Fiesta” is used when referring to the bars occupying the corner of Beach Drive and Harrison Avenue. When referring to specific areas of the bar, the proper designation will be used.

### **Introducing people**

In the 1960s, military service was still a viable means of “getting off the farm” and bettering oneself. This is exactly what Mike Krall did. After growing up in Iowa, Mike enlisted in the Air Force. Being a bright young man, Mike specialized in

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<sup>77</sup> Photograph by author on 13 September 2008

computers. After moving around the South training and working in the computer and supply fields, Mike was stationed in Panama City. It was in Panama City that Mike would make decisions that would have a lasting impact on his life including his coming out process.

Mike was discharged from the Air Force in 1968 for association with known homosexuals. Mike not only associated with known homosexuals, they were his closest friends. Of this group of friends, some were in the military and some were not. Somehow, two members of this group were caught “in the act” in a hotel room in Pensacola. The Air Force arrested the two men and in the process, searched the motel room and homes of the two men. Among the items seized was a cache of letters between the couple in which Mike's name was mentioned in friendly and affectionate talk about the group of friends. The letters did not name Mike as a homosexual; however being mentioned in letters between known homosexuals was enough to raise suspicion.

While being interrogated by the Air Force, Mike was asked about the contents of the letters as well as his relationship to the two men. Being that one of the men was from Mississippi, he was affectionately called “The Mississippi Queen” by his friends. When asked about the “Mississippi Queen” Mike recalled, “I told them I thought it was a riverboat.”<sup>78</sup> Mike refused to name others or implicate himself or his lover as homosexuals. Mike’s refusal to implicate anyone else earned him an honorable discharge from the Air Force. The only charge was associating with known homosexuals, not the supposed greater crime of actually being a homosexual.

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<sup>78</sup> Mitch Bryan, interview by author, conversation with notes. Panama City, FL 15 March 2008. The interview conducted with Mitch Bryan was done so at The La Royale Lounge. Mike was tending bar as Mitch and I talked. During the interview, Mitch asked Mike to tell me this story.

This incident is not unique in the grander narrative of homosexuals serving in the military. Countless other men and women have been arrested and discharged in the military's attempt to purge homosexuals from its ranks. The incident not only cost Mike his military career, which he was none too thrilled about anyway, but it also cost him at least one of his friends who was still deep in the closet.

Unwilling to return home and face familial questions about the abrupt and early termination of his military service and unwilling to take a civilian computer job in Kansas City, Missouri, Mike chose to stay in Panama City. This decision was also motivated by the fact that Mike already had a job at a computer center in Panama City. This choice to remain in Panama City positioned Mike to be an important man in the formation and growth of the queer community in Panama City.

Around the time of the discharge, Mike met Bubba<sup>79</sup> and began to tend bar at the Fiesta Room Lounge. According to Mike, he was an introverted person and thought that maybe tending bar would help to alleviate this. Mike eventually gave up on the computer field and devoted his life to The Fiesta and to the queer community of Panama City.

Another important person in the early years of the Fiesta was Jim Smith. Jim Smith is a quiet and mild mannered man. According to Jim, he has changed over the years. He never had an official "coming out." He has lived quietly but openly for most of his life. Until told by a straight friend in 1968, he was unaware of the Fiesta's existence.

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<sup>79</sup> Lesly "Bubba" Gilbert is the owner of the bar and Mike's partner. During the research process for this project, Bubba was not interested in "reliving the past." His participation would have added a depth to this project, but without his participation I have had to rely more heavily on Mike.

After graduating from high school, Jim spent two years in the United States Army. His time in the army was followed by four years of college. Jim's college education prepared him for a job with International Paper Company in Panama City. Jim recalls, "I fell in love with Panama City." When International Paper sold its plant near Panama City, Jim was offered a transfer within the company. However, because he loved the area so much, he chose to leave International Paper in order to stay in Panama City.

"I was a late bloomer." Jim did not set foot into the Fiesta until he was 32 years old in 1968. After that initial visit, Jim did not visit the bar with any frequency until 1969. It was then that he joined the small crowd of regulars and began hosting pool parties at his home on Sunday afternoons.<sup>80</sup> Over the years, the men have remained friends, but the regular pool parties have gone by the wayside.

Mitch Bryan is another important person in the early years of the Fiesta. Mitch did not walk through the doors of the Fiesta until 1970. Before that time, Mitch worked in the medical field at one of the local hospitals. Mitch began his coming out process in the late 1960s. During that process he only had one negative experience, one friend who subsequently ended their friendship.

Walking into a gay bar is a bold step in the coming out process. Some men never actually make that step and never officially come out, choosing rather to stay in the closet and live life in a more traditional, non-queer way. All of my narrators thus far expressed reservations about entering a gay bar for the first time. After Jim's first experience at the Fiesta, he did not return for nearly a year. Mitch too spoke about the nervousness and the apprehension of walking into his first gay bar. Sometimes he would park down the street

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<sup>80</sup> Jim Smith, interview by author, conversation with notes, Panama City, FL 15 March 2008.

for fear that his car would be recognized. But these two men made that step and in doing so, joined the out, queer community of Panama City.

### **Introducing The Fiesta Room Lounge**



Figure 4: Front door of the Fiesta Room.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Photograph by author on 13 September 2008

Quite remarkably, the Fiesta Room Lounge opened its doors as a gay bar in 1965. The bar's openness and the clientele it attracted were spread by word of mouth advertising. Bubba did not hang any rainbow flags on the outside of the building and there were no drag queens until the early 1970s. Only rumor and innuendo guided queer inclined people to an inconspicuous door at the end of Harrison Avenue.<sup>82</sup>

To simply call the Fiesta a “gay bar” would be placing a label on it that does not fit neatly.<sup>83</sup> The Fiesta Room and La Royale Lounge cater to a nearly exclusive gay clientele. However, the owners and staff welcome anyone, of any sexual orientation, who is open minded and accepting. In the 1970s, a local doctor and his wife would frequent the bar (causing a little anxiety among gay medical personnel).<sup>84</sup> The doctor and his wife have not been the only heterosexually-identified people to enter the bar. Over the years, everyone has been welcomed as long as they did not cause trouble.

The Fiesta was not the only gay-friendly bar to exist since World War II in Panama City. Jim Park's Lounge, which was also located in the downtown area of Panama City only three blocks from the Fiesta, was also a gay-friendly establishment. The Escape, which was located inside a Holiday Inn on Panama City Beach was also gay friendly, according to Jim Smith. For a time, there was even a gay owned and operated hotel on Panama City Beach, The Grand Gulf.<sup>85</sup> Unlike the Fiesta, these bars no longer exist in Panama City. Jim Parks Lounge closed some time in the late 1970s due to lack of

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<sup>82</sup> Jim Smith. 15 March 2008

<sup>83</sup> The narrators for this project use the terms “gay” and “straight” and call the Fiesta a gay bar. At times in this project, “gay bar” and “queer space” may seem interchangeable. Because the term “queer” is a predominantly academic/political product of the late 20th century I will most often use the term gay bar because that was the term used in my period of study.

<sup>84</sup> Mitch Bryan, interview by author, conversation with notes, 14 March 2008

<sup>85</sup> Jim Smith and Butch McKay both mentioned the existence of the Grand Gulf in the interviews conducted.

business while The Escape and the Holiday Inn that housed it were badly damaged in a hurricane and torn down.<sup>86</sup> Only the Fiesta has been able to survive the ravages of time and the economy.<sup>87</sup>

As the number of gay men began to grow after 1965, a fledgling gay community began to form. Mike Krall, Bubba Gilbert, Mitch Bryan, Jim Smith and Butch McKay were all part of that group. According to Mitch, there was not a sense of “gay community” like the kind that would be identified in larger cities of the time. There was just a core group of friends who would patronize the same gay bar and lived openly but quietly as gay men. This was not a “community” in the activist sense of the word. These men did not gather together to fight for gay rights, they simply gathered together to have a good time and create a space where they could safely be queer men.

This lack of community sense could be due in part to the dearth of openly queer people who chose to call Panama City home. There were plenty of people that were involved in queer sex, but few who were out. It could also be that Panama City was not ready to have a gay community; there was no need to raise hell and unite for gay rights if the few members of the community did not feel that there was a need. Also, this region of the state has always been more conservative than the rest of the state. I have the sense after talking with the men involved in this project that there was a quiet accommodation that existed in Panama City after World War II.

According to various members of that community, it was quite an introverted community. The gays left the City alone and the City left the bar alone, for the most part.

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<sup>86</sup> Smith, 15 March 2008

<sup>87</sup> Other exclusively gay bars have also come and gone, but not until the 1990s, after my period of study. Of the three bars (Splash, Construction Zone, and Confetti's) only Splash has been open for more than three years.



Unlike other bars in other cities that suffered from police harassment and numerous bar raids from the 1950s onward, the Fiesta was not raided.<sup>88</sup> This is not to say that the bar was without police presence. All of my narrators remember nightly police patrols. Sometimes two officers, but usually only one, would simply walk through the bar checking things out. Both men remembered the officers looked menacing but never harassed anyone. It seems as though the police department simply wanted to send a message that they were watching. Rumors circulated that the police recorded tag numbers of the bar patrons but this was never substantiated by anyone interviewed for this project nor could my narrators remember anyone who complained of repercussions from such an action.

Apparently the police patrols worked to intimidate the bar patrons. In 1970 Jim Smith was enjoying a night out at the bar when two men began dancing together. According to Jim this scared the other bar patrons so much that the bar emptied. The men in attendance that night were so afraid of being seen in an establishment where two men danced together that they abandoned their plans for the night and left the bar. The fear was not unwarranted. It is hard to imagine such a scene happening but at the time being openly gay was very dangerous and two men dancing together certainly crossed that line.

Despite the clearing of the bar and the fear experienced by the patrons that night. This incident represents one way that the members of the queer community in Panama City pushed the boundaries and tested the limits of acceptability. There would be many such incidents over the years of the Fiesta as queer people created spaces for themselves.

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<sup>88</sup> In subsequent years, the Fiesta has been raided twice with the first not occurring until 1998. The final outcome of the raid in 2008 is still pending.

While The Fiesta did not suffer any harm from the Police Department, they also did not have any protection by them either. According to Mike, the attitude of the Police Department in response to harassment from townfolk was “you got what you deserved.” In the late 1960s and into the 1970s a number of incidents occurred. Several windows were shot out, some had rocks thrown through them. Eventually Mike and Bubba stopped replacing windows and simply boarded them up. In one of these cases, Mike was able to copy the tag number of a truck whose occupants had shot through a window. When the police later stopped the truck, there was a shotgun in the gun rack. It is rumored that the two men actually admitted to having shot out the window of the Fiesta Room. However, the two men were never arrested or even ticketed and were told to go on their way.<sup>89</sup>

The early gay community in Panama City did not revolve exclusively around the bar. After Jim Smith began to patronize the bar regularly in 1969 he would host pool parties at his home on Sunday afternoons. According to Jim there were roughly ten people who attended these parties.

In the spring and summer months the number of gay patrons at the Fiesta would swell and there would be an influx of new faces. According to my narrators the sheer numbers of tourists making their way to Panama City over the years has increased. Before the late 1990s, when MTV discovered Panama City Beach, there was not a massive influx of people during the tourist season. There was however, a growing tide of tourists over the years. Consequently the number of men seeking men among those

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<sup>89</sup> Mike Krall 15 April 2008

tourists also increased. Whether this is because the Fiesta or other gay friendly bars were common knowledge is unknown.<sup>90</sup>

Tourists were not the only people to swell the bar's numbers over the years. People also came from other parts of the Gulf Coast. According to Mike, "We are centrally located, so we drew customers from Tallahassee, Columbus, Dothan, and Fort Walton."<sup>91</sup> Not only did Panama City men travel to Pensacola for Emma Jones parties, people from all over the Panhandle would travel to Panama City to enjoy a night out at the bar. Being only a two hour drive from Tallahassee, Pensacola and Dothan, Panama City's central location allowed for ease of movement to and from The Fiesta. People who lived in places where gay bars did not exist, such as Wewahitchka, and Dothan, were able to visit the Fiesta with relative ease. This ease of travel contributed to a Panhandle-wide queer network as people from all parts of the Panhandle met each other and formed friendships and relationships.

Panama City never experienced the kind of gay resistance that New York experienced at the Stonewall Inn. In fact, people in Panama City did not hear about Stonewall until sometime later. According to Mike, "It basically was something that happened in New York. It wasn't really well known 'till later on when the gay movement started going and Stonewall was brought back up."<sup>92</sup> Although isolated in the early years, as time passed and more people became familiar with The Fiesta, communication

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<sup>90</sup> All of the people involved in this project expressed to me that the number of gay men grew steadily throughout the years with a noticeable upsurge in bar attendance in the spring and summer tourist season.

<sup>91</sup> Mike Krall, interview by author, digital recording, 28 October 2007. 12:40

<sup>92</sup> Mike Krall 28 October 2007, 13:30

networks solidified and people in Panama City were more in tune with national, queer events.

The community lived in quiet accommodation with relatively few negative experiences. For instance, Mitch never experienced any employment-related problems, other than being told by his boss that he “shouldn’t hang out with people like that,” referring to Mitch’s boyfriend at the time. He only experienced one negative coming out experience, in which he lost a friend who was unwilling to accept Mitch’s sexual identity. Mitch also told me of others who experienced slight incidents of harassment for their being gay and open.

Because of the climate in which the bar opened, there were go-go girls dancing on raised boxes in the back. Their purpose was simply to maintain the appearance of “morality.” Once per hour a girl would cross the patio from the Bayshore Bar to dance on the box for a room full of gay men, who according to Mike, were not interested. The girls almost never made any tips but their presence was needed to maintain the bar’s image of heteronormativity. The owners and the patrons were not quite ready to say out loud to the world that the Fiesta Room was a gay bar.

This was a time of transition. The bar was caught between public morality/legality and the need for a queer space of freedom. A woman dancing on the box for a crowd of disinterested gay men shows how the bar was trying to move forward within the framework of Panama City in the 1960s. The bar was a gay bar and known as such by some, but Bubba and Mike still felt the need to have go-go girls dancing on boxes. Eventually the go-go girls were phased out and replaced by go-go boys dancing

on the boxes for the patrons as the owners felt more comfortable in their space as a gay bar. As the 1960s drew to a close and the 1970s dawned, there was a growing queer consciousness and openness in Panama City. The first half of the 70s would be marked by several positive events in the queer consciousness of Panama City and the Fiesta.

### **The wedding**

In 1973, Panama City witnessed its first gay wedding. This act, which is another way of living openly, queering space and queering heteronormative institutions, represents another way that simply living life openly is a political act. The wedding was not announced in the Society page or in other ways that heterosexual couples announce such an event and it was only attended by a select group of people.

Butch McKay married his then partner Karon in 1973. The ceremony took place at a cattle ranch located just north of Panama City. The ranch was and still is owned by a prominent Gulf Coast family.<sup>93</sup> The couple was able to hold the ceremony at such a place because two members of the family are gay and were involved in the gay community of Panama City. For this project, the pseudonyms Bill and Tina are used for the two gay members of the family which owned the ranch. “It was like a formal affair. It was a garden wedding. We had a whole aisle of torches. We had a piano player. We had somebody sing. Bill’s lover at the time was a Unitarian minister at the time and he married us.”<sup>94</sup>

The rehearsal dinner occurred at the Harbor House restaurant, formerly located at St. Andrews Marina (a historic area near downtown). According to Mitch Bryan, the staff

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<sup>93</sup> Butch McKay, interview by author, digital recording, Ft. Walton Beach, FL, 17 March 2008  
This narrator asked that names be changed/omitted in our interview.

<sup>94</sup> Butch McKay 37:10.

at the Harbor House was a bit perplexed by a wedding party with two grooms and no brides. Despite this, the rehearsal dinner went off without a hitch.

The wedding went off splendidly despite the best efforts of the police department. “The police were looking for it, they never could find it. They had heard rumors there was a gay wedding. And they wanted to try and crash it.”<sup>95</sup> The police were unable to find it since a large cattle ranch afforded some privacy just because of the sheer distance between the house and the nearest neighbors or the road. It is rumored that the police were tipped off when someone, most likely one of the wedding party, called to ask if the wedding party could have a police escort, to which the police replied “yes, right down town.”<sup>96</sup>

The couple then honeymooned at a Holiday Inn in Destin, Florida and continued the openness of the event. “We rented the honeymoon suite there. The desk clerk looked a little bit puzzled when we checked in.”<sup>97</sup> In 1973 on the Gulf Coast, it would have been odd for two men to check into the honeymoon suite of a hotel. The desk clerk’s puzzled glances were the only negative consequence of the entire event.

This act is very important for several reasons. The first and foremost is that it was an open, gay wedding held in 1973. The second being that it was the first such event held in Panama City. Panama City queers created a queer space where none existed before it through their modification of heteronormative institutions and spaces.

I don’t use the term open in the sense that it was open to the public. The location was semi-secret and was attended by only a few close friends and trusted members of the

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<sup>95</sup> Butch McKay 38:00

<sup>96</sup> Mitch Bryan, 14 March 2008

<sup>97</sup> Butch McKay, interview by author, digital recording, Ft. Walton Beach, FL

community. Mitch, Jim, Mike and Bubba were all there, as well as Bill and Tina. The event was, however, open in one sense because the rehearsal dinner took place at a public restaurant. The attendants made no secret that this was a wedding with no brides and two grooms. This openness surprised me because in 1973, people were just barely dancing together at the Fiesta Room yet and it had not been long since go-go girls were dancing on the boxes.

The participants were actively participating in creating queer spaces and queer events where none had existed before. Both the rehearsal dinner, the ceremony and the honeymoon represent ways in which the participants showed a level of openness not seen in Panama City before. They bravely challenged the established order, even thumbing their noses a bit at the police. In this process, the participants further pushed the limits and boundaries of acceptability in Panama City.

Weddings are also about community. The wedding ceremony is a way to announce to family, friends and community a commitment and a relationship. It is a way to publicly proclaim a relationship. Despite the relative secrecy of the ceremony, the events leading up to and the events after seem to be a way in which the couple affirmed the normativity of their relationship to the surrounding community.

The irony of the fact that the event was held at an active farm and cattle ranch is not lost. In American mythology, the ranch and the farm are idyllic locations of heteronormativity and American-ness. Just think of the Marlboro man, John Wayne and the “cowboy,” all classic symbols of Americana and they all involve cattle farming in

some way. Even in queer erotica the farm, its environs and its people serve as sites of erotic queer expression.<sup>98</sup>

This particular ranch was run by a lesbian, and the event involved queer people. At the time of the wedding, the participants simply wanted a pretty location that was private for their ceremony with no thought given to the implications.<sup>99</sup> However, what occurred is fraught with multiple layers of meaning as we read back over the event with twenty-first century eyes. Two grooms, a lesbian or two and a handful of gay men getting married at a cattle ranch sounds like the beginning of a bad joke, but it was reality. By taking part in this ceremony, the participants redefined the meanings of marriage, manliness and Americana by queering these institutions and making them their own.

### **Representations of The Fiesta**

The 1970s were an important time in the life of the Fiesta and the growth of the fledgling gay community. The first few years of the bar's existence were marked slow growth as more and more queer identified people became aware of it. In just a few short years, Panama City had seen the opening of a queer space as well as a gay wedding. The bar was growing and the queer consciousness of the people who patronized it was growing along with it. The bar's fame was also growing. In 1973 many in the larger queer world of the South would hear of the Fiesta and the gay scene in Panama City.

The queer community of Panama City did not exist in a vacuum. People living in Panama City and the Gulf Coast regularly traveled to other places and tourists came in droves to the beaches. However, before the advent of gay magazines, bars relied heavily

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<sup>98</sup> For a discussion of queer erotica and farm imagery, see John Howard's *Men Like That*.

<sup>99</sup> Butch McKay, 17 March 2008



on word of mouth to advertise their existence. According to Meeker and others, this type of advertising was both dangerous and unreliable in many parts of the country. Even after gay bars began to advertise in queer publications, the listings were not always accurate since the life of a gay bar at this time was relatively short. Following the example of *One* and *The Ladder* other gay organizations and individuals began to self publish their own magazines, travel guides and bar guides.

Other Panhandle cities are listed in early gay guides. The 1969 issue of the *International Gay Guide* lists gay locations in Pensacola, Fort Walton Beach and Tallahassee.<sup>100</sup> Pensacola and Tallahassee each boasted two bars that were gay friendly. The entry for Ft. Walton Beach listed the Flamingo Lounge as having a mixed crowd heavily populated by military personnel and hustlers. Also listed under Ft. Walton Beach is the Wayside State Park. The park is designated as being active on weekends with a military presence.

It is clear from this source that Panama City was not on the national gay radar. However, by this time according to Mike, the Fiesta Room was a gay bar both in name and clientele. The bar was making its transition to more national renown. It would not be until a couple of years later that the bar would be mentioned in print.

The earliest documented mention of a queer place in Panama City occurred in a 1973 magazine for gay men called *David*. Different magazines in various locations throughout the country have called themselves *David*.<sup>101</sup> This particular magazine was published out of Jacksonville from 1970 to 1975. In it, as was common in most gay

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<sup>100</sup> *International Gay Guide* 1969. Billy Jones collection, part of the Gay and Lesbian History Thing located at The Atlanta History Center.

<sup>101</sup> Various magazines have used the title "David." At least three different incarnations reside in the Lesbian and Gay History collection at the Atlanta History Center.

publications of the time, is a listing of gay bars in other areas. For instance, a gay magazine in Atlanta might list bars and cruising locations as far south as Miami or as far west as New Orleans. This particular magazine, dated February 1973, contains a listing for the “Fiesta Room Lounge” in Panama City. The listing states that the bar is “great all year long, dancing is allowed, full bar as well as food available.”<sup>102</sup> The review describes the crowd as mostly young, college age men.

This document raises several issues. The first issue is that of dancing. In interviews conducted for this project, the narrators have shared that men dancing together elicited fear of reprisal by law enforcement. However, this listing states that in 1973 dancing was allowed. It is clear from this review that by that time, the patrons of the Fiesta had pushed the limits enough so that men's dancing together was no longer an issue at the bar.

When I asked Mike about dancing, he stated that at first dancing was frowned upon. Locals knew that dancing was an unacceptable activity, however out of town visitors often did not. Many times, Mike and Bubba would separate couples and tell them to stop dancing because of police patrols. It was a mix and out of town guests and locals that, over time, made dancing an acceptable practice.

One such group of out of town visitors posed a special problem for Mike, Bubba and the other patrons of the Fiesta. In 1972 a boat from Asia docked at Port Panama City. Mike remembers that “a group of about eight Orientals came in and when the music came on they started dancing together. How do you tell people who don’t speak English that

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<sup>102</sup> David Magazine Volume 3 Number 3, February 1973. *Atlanta Gay and Lesbian History Thing* located at the Atlanta History Center. Unprocessed collection, folder number 6620.

they can't dance together?"<sup>103</sup> Because of a language barrier, Mike is unsure what kind of ship they worked on but it was certainly not a cruise ship since cruise ships do not dock in Panama City. It was most likely a cargo freighter. These Asian tourists helped to open the dance floor for same sex dancing and changed the way that people enjoyed their time at the Fiesta.

How did Asian tourists who did not speak English know where to find a gay bar in Panama City? Mike recalls, "I don't know how they got here, I guess they took a taxi." Did they simply ask someone at the port? This is doubtful because of the language difficulties. Was it possible that they found a sympathetic taxi driver? The sympathetic taxi driver hypothesis is the most likely because Butch and Jim both mentioned that if one asked the right person, the location of the Fiesta could be ascertained.

The David review also states that the bar is "great all year." It has been my understanding that there was a small cadre of gay men who supported the bar and were regular members of the queer community. The review does not qualify the word "great" as referring to number of people, or quality of music. The winter months tend to be lean months in Panama City, especially at the Fiesta.<sup>104</sup> It is most likely that since the review was published in November the visit took place in the late summer when the crowd would have been greatest.

There is another possible meaning for "great all year." According to Mike, "Great All Year" was read as "gay" and would signify to readers that the bar was an exclusively gay bar. The fact that the review said "all year," clued people in to the fact that it was an

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<sup>103</sup> Mike Krall, interview by author, conversation with notes, 15 April 2008, Panama City, FL.

<sup>104</sup> All narrators for this project, as well as my own personal experience growing up in Panama City, lead me to believe that the tourist off season is the slowest time of the year. For this reason, many businesses close for the winter months.

exclusively gay bar and not just a bar that was gay on certain nights. It is not known how well known this type of code was, but Mike picked right up on it when asked what was meant by “great all year.”

The final issue is that of age group. The review lists the bar as a mostly young crowd. Mike and Bubba, as well as my other narrators were of course much younger men in the 1970s, but there were almost certainly older gay men at the time. Is this an example of age discrimination whereby the older generations of gay men are phased out of gay consciousness? By describing the crowd as mostly young, was the author consciously or unconsciously erasing the experience and existence of an older generation of gay men? Or was the older generation simply not involved in bar culture in the 1970s when the reviewer visited the bar?

Because The Fiesta Room and the gay bar experience was so new in this time I believe that many people were unwilling or unable to transition from furtive meetings in “tea rooms” to the more open and public space of the gay bar. Because of the separation between the openness of the gay bar and the secretive anonymity of the “tea room,” I believe that the older generation, who was so accustomed to hiding, was unwilling to make that public step of walking into The Fiesta Room. That task was left to the younger generation.

Between 1973 and 1977 seemed to be a time of quiet growth at the Fiesta. In 1977 *Cruise*, a gay magazine based out of Atlanta, set out on a tour of the Gulf Coast. Along the way they visited Tallahassee, Panama City, Pensacola and Biloxi, Mississippi. “The area between Tallahassee, Florida on the east, and New Orleans on the west is always fun, but during the summer the beaches become the place to go for summer

vacations, weekends or just a day off if you live close enough.”<sup>105</sup> It would seem from the article that the Gulf Coast area was a popular tourist destination not just for families and college students, but for gay tourists as well, so much so that the article is titled “It’s Hot! Hot! Hot! This Summer on the Gay Gulf Coast.”

The article devotes three full paragraphs to Panama City and its beaches and even includes a picture of the Fiesta Room Lounge. According to the article, gay tourists can enjoy action (probably in every sense of the word) by day on the “Miracle Strip,” which is what the beach area of Panama City is affectionately known as. This area was home to Miracle Strip Amusement park, as well as shopping, eating and miniature golf. Getting to the main purpose of the article, it stated that “At night the gay action shifts into town to The Fiesta Room Lounge.”

According to the article, the Fiesta Room Lounge served beer, wine and mixed drinks “at reasonable prices” as well as package liquor. The author also includes a mention of a juke box, which still resides at the bar, and the construction of a new dance floor. Clearly by this time, dancing had become a non-issue at the bar.

The article locates Panama City and The Fiesta in a long string of gay establishments and queer spaces along the Gulf Coast. By the mid 1970s the Gulf Coast had acquired enough gay business to earn the name “Gay Gulf Coast.” It is certainly true that by 1969 gay establishments were generating press, albeit in very specific national guide books.<sup>106</sup> However, I believe that as time went on and as the conversation grew, the distance between queer spaces and queer people shrank. No longer were Panama

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<sup>105</sup> *Cruise: The Guide to Entertainment In the South* Vo. 2 No. 8, July 1977. Atlanta History Center, Gay and Lesbian History Thing, Billy Jones collection. Unprocessed material as of 10 April 2008.

<sup>106</sup> Gay Guide book. This article does not mention Panama City but does include cruising locations and gay friendly bars in Tallahassee, Ft. Walton and Pensacola.

City, Pensacola and Fort Walton Beach isolated queer oases in the bleak southern queer landscape. As people began to connect and cross paths, these locations joined with cities such as Atlanta and Miami as queer destinations.

### **Growth over the years**

Over the years, The Fiesta Room itself has grown in size. In the 1960s it was no more than a few hundred square feet. Seeing the bar now, it is hard to imagine the bar without its illuminated dance floor, DJ booth, stage and tables and chairs scattered about. The room originally consisted of a bar, a juke box, stools and a raised box for go-go girls to dance on. Now that box holds the spotlight used for the drag show.



Figure 5: Original go-go box, which now holds a spotlight.





Figure 6: View from the original rear wall of the Fiesta Room.



Figure 7: View of The Fiesta Room as it looked after renovations in the late 1980s.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Photo taken by Mike Krall and donated for the use of this project.

The Fiesta Room's original entrance was on Harrison Avenue. The back wall at that time was made of wood paneling, which Mike knocked down himself. The space of the bar ended at the door to the patio, which according to Mike has been open since the beginnings of the Fiesta. As the crowds swelled, more walls came down. It was 1971 or '72 when the wooden wall came down and the bar space extended from the front of the building all the way to the back.

As the visibility of queer people increased, so did the need for a space for those people. Studying the growth of the bar as it relates to the growth of the queer community in Panama City, one is left with the question "What came first, the bar or the people?" In the case of Panama City, it was a symbiotic relationship. As the people came, the bar grew and as the bar grew in size more people came to visit it. According to Mike, the bar was packed almost every night of the week. Here, the term packed is relative, twenty people would have "packed" the original Fiesta Room Lounge.

When Mike knocked down the wooden wall in 1971 or 1972, the size of the bar doubled. Bubba said "good luck filling this place."<sup>108</sup> In this particular instance, Mike was a visionary. Over the years, people would come to fill up that space. There have been ebbs and flows in the tide of people patronizing the bars, but over the years the size of the usual clientele has increased. The next increase in space came at the insistence of the State Liquor Board and the growing clientele at the Fiesta Room Lounge.

Until the mid 1970s, the Fiesta Room and the Bayshore Bar were operated as two completely separate bars under the same liquor license. In 1975 the State Liquor Board told Bubba that he could only have one bar under one liquor license. He needed to

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<sup>108</sup> Mike Krall, interview by author, conversation with notes, 15 April 2008, Panama City, FL.



either apply for a second license or better join the bars.<sup>109</sup> Bubba's solution to this was the birth of the La Royale. Structurally, both bars are joined at the back by storage rooms and at the front by a brick wall enclosing the patio. There was essentially no public connection between the two bars. The patrons of the Fiesta did not enter the Bayshore and vice versa. The only people who used the back entrance to the Bayshore were Mike, Bubba and the occasional go-go girl sent to the Fiesta room to maintain appearances. The patio was technically in use by the Fiesta but the door to the Bayshore was locked.



Figure 8: Rear wall of The Fiesta Room Lounge as it appears today.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Both Mike and Jim tell the story differently.

<sup>110</sup> Photograph by author, taken on 13 September 2008.

Around this time, the business at the Bayshore was almost non-existent while the Fiesta Room Lounge was packed most nights of the week. To solve their problems, Bubba and Mike remodeled the Bayshore, reopening it as the La Royale Lounge. Now, the back door of the former Bayshore would remain open and patrons could visit either establishment. The bars are now connected by a nicely decorated patio, which allows customers to escape the dance floor atmosphere of the Fiesta and retreat to the quieter, more lounge atmosphere of the La Royale.

That was the story as told by Jim Smith; however, according to Mike the La Royale was opened because of a need for space. Mike remembers that “Sometimes at night, we’d be packed over at the Fiesta and there’d be three people over here [in the La Royale].” Regardless of the reason for the expansion, it represents a way that the people of the Fiesta were pushing physical boundaries of space. The Fiesta Room was exceeding capacity and the people needed a place to go, Mike and Bubba solved this problem by opening the La Royale.

After the remodel and the opening of the La Royale the bar continued to flourish and grow. Disco came and went and the patrons of the bar continued to spend their time and money at The Fiesta. Throughout the 1970s the bar advertised and was written about in various queer publications throughout the South, including most incarnations of *David*. The pull of Panama City beach as a tourist destination also continued to grow. More and more people were choosing to call Panama City home. Some chose to make their homes in Panama City and Panama City Beach permanently. Others, however, chose to make only temporary vacation homes in Panama City.



Figure 9: Interior view of the La Royale Lounge



Figure 10: The patio. The La Royale Lounge is on the left and the Fiesta Room is on the right.

### **Bob and his visits**

Panama City held a special place in the hearts of Atlantans. “All of gay Atlanta went to Panama City when they wanted to go to the beach,” remembers Bob Bost, who was one such gay Atlantan.<sup>111</sup> Atlanta residents supplied a percentage of the condo and vacation home ownership in Panama City and a great many Atlantans, both queer and not, made Panama City their vacation destination of choice. According to one long-time Atlanta resident, queer identified people in Atlanta chose Panama City as a vacation spot over other coastal areas, partly for the ease of travel, partly for the beautiful beaches and of course partly for the gay nightlife. For all of these reasons, the writer of the *Cruise* article wrote that “guys and gals from Georgia and other southeastern states head for the Florida beaches.”<sup>112</sup>

Bob Bost moved from Pittsburgh to Atlanta in the early 1970s because he was asked to leave seminary school. In Atlanta, Bob came out and finally made the final step in that process of self discovery: his first gay bar. Bob’s first gay bar experience was Backstreet, which is described by some as the Studio 54 of Atlanta. He recalled, “It was unbelievable that I opened the door to a room full of people who felt like I did.” Bob was making his own personal transition and pushing his own boundaries in his journey of self discovery. In this process he progressed from Benedictine monk to an out, gay actor.

Bob was unsure whether he went to Panama City in the summer of 1977 or 1978. He and his partner at the time were planning a trip to Panama City in order to get away from the city for a long weekend. Unsure who told him about Panama City or The Fiesta,

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<sup>111</sup> Bob Bost, interview by author, conversation with notes, 3 May 2008, Atlanta, GA.

<sup>112</sup> *Cruise* Volume 1, Number 5, April 1976. Billy Jones collection, Folder 3, Gay and Lesbian History Thing, Atlanta History Center.

Bob remembers that many people talked about the bar whenever he mentioned his travels to Panama City.

On the first visit, Bob traveled with his partner. Most of the memories of that first trip are lost to the haze of alcohol and time. He does remember how “quaint” the bar looked and how mixed the clientele was. This was quite a change from the scene Bob remembers in Atlanta. According to Bob, the 1970s saw an increase in gay bar space in Atlanta with one drawback: as more bars opened in Atlanta which catered to specialized interests such as leather or lesbians, the queer community became increasingly segregated into cliques. Bob was impressed by how “leather queens, twinkies, dykes and good ol’ boys, and older men mixed with ease in the small space.”

Even though the La Royale and the patio were open for business by the time Bob visited, he does not remember either of them. “There was a tiny bar, a tiny dance floor and stage [for drag shows].” This could be a function of memory or it could be that the patio and La Royale were not obvious. According to Bob, he was partnered at the time so therefore not “looking” for a sexual liaison and quite possibly parked himself on a stool in The Fiesta Room for the entire night.

Bob’s second visit occurred in 1981 or 1982 and he was single for this visit. Rather than staying in the city, Bob stayed at a hotel on the west end of the beach. He did not stay at the Grand Gulf Motel, and when asked, he had not heard that a gay motel existed on Panama City Beach. However, he wished he had known of its existence.

On this trip, Bob remembered more of the surrounding downtown area. He commented that because the bar was located in a clean, downtown area he felt safer. As many queer bars are located on the outskirts of town or in rougher neighborhoods, the

fact that the Fiesta was located in the downtown business district is the exception rather than the rule. Had the bar been located in a more marginalized space on the outskirts, or in a rougher area of town, Bob stated that he would not have felt safe entering. After speaking with Bob, I began to wonder how the location of the bar in the idyllic setting of downtown contributed to the “safety” of the bar. How did location influence both the visibility and the anonymity of bar patrons? Certainly being in an already busy business district with plenty of street parking allowed customers to place distance between their cars and the bar’s entrance, thereby allowing patrons not wishing to be seen at the bar the space to deny that their car was parked near the bar.

On this trip, Bob was single and took advantage of this fact. He had a sexual liaison with someone he thinks was a bar tender. The interesting thing about this encounter and the reason for its inclusion is that the encounter took place in the apartment which was to later be the site of the fire in 1987. Bob remembers this space being just a “tacky little room” in which he “could hear roaches and bugs while we had sex.” This memory is so powerful that over twenty five years later, with most of the experience blotted out by alcohol, Bob remembers the roaches and the sounds they made.<sup>113</sup>

Because Bob remembered that “all” of gay Atlanta went to Panama City, it is certain that many gay people from Atlanta vacationed in Panama City. Since Bob did not remember reading about The Fiesta, I can assume that others missed the advertisements and heard about The Fiesta solely by word of mouth. Seeing how information about

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<sup>113</sup> People often mistake Palmetto bugs for roaches. The fact that there were “roaches” does not mean the room or its occupant were dirty in any way. Palmetto bugs are an unavoidable a fact of life for old buildings in this part of Panama City and other areas of the South and have little or nothing to do with cleanliness.

queer locations spread via word of mouth even as far away as Atlanta, shows just how important travel and tourism were to spreading and maintaining queer networks.

Bob's story is simply one example of how gay tourists learned about and advertised for The Fiesta. As queer tourists "discovered" and read about the gay Gulf Coast, they told their friends. Perhaps it was the white, sandy beaches which continue to draw so many visitors to the Gulf Coast, but for gay tourists it is just as often the existence of a gay bar and an established queer community. Even if the community is small, the fact that one exists has been a boon to Panama City's place as a vacation destination for southern, queer tourists.

Also in the 1980s there was a Panhandle wide contest, of sorts. At least every Easter season spanning the late 1970s into the early 1980s, there would be a swell of men from the Dothan area. The Fiesta Room was the host of a contest that Mike called "The Easter Bonnet Contest." The point of the contest was for an individual to create the most extravagant and outlandish bonnet in an effort to lampoon the southern tradition of wearing new, fancy bonnets to church on Easter Sunday. Men from Dothan usually won the contest. Mike stated that sometimes both sides of the entry door would have to be opened to allow the extravagant bonnets a clear entry to the bar.

### **The fire**

Bob visited the Fiesta before the last remodeling project was begun. Consequently he remembers the bar as small and "quaint." All of the other remodeling projects were because the bar needed more space to accommodate the growing crowds. The last expansion came as a result of a devastating fire.

At 1:30 am on 8 April 1987 men sitting around the La Royale lounge noticed smoke in the bar. Mike called the fire department and patrons of the bar checked the back apartment to find James Moss asleep and overcome by smoke. (This is the same apartment that, years earlier, was the site of Bob's tryst with a bar tender.) The Panama City News-Herald named James Moss as the occupant of the apartment at the time and consequently, he was blamed for the fire. According to Mike, "he fell asleep on the couch with a cigarette and caught the couch on fire."<sup>114</sup> Mike remembers that James was a drunk and this was not the first disturbance from the tenant. The apartment James lived in is no longer standing as a result of the fire and the area is now part of a back courtyard.

By the time that the fire department arrived, the apartment was completely engulfed and the fire had spread to the La Royale. Because of the double roof structure, the fire moved easily through the building. "It got into this roof. At one time back there was a real flat roof. And they put another roof on it and it got in between the roofs... And it burnt the back of the building down."<sup>115</sup> As Mike, Bubba, and patrons looked on, the fire department desperately battled the blaze. Mike Cazalas wrote in the article that "Panama City Fire Chief Bobby Richardson said the La Royale Lounge and Package Store was 'pretty much destroyed' and the adjoining Fiesta Room Lounge, suffered heavy smoke, fire and water damage."<sup>116</sup>

Then came the question of what to do with the badly damaged building. The building that houses the Fiesta Room and La Royale Lounge is the oldest brick building in Panama City. It was built in 1903 as a bank. Most other buildings would have simply

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<sup>114</sup> Mike Krall, interview by author, digital recording, 28 October 2007, Panama City, FL.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 44:50

<sup>116</sup> Cazalas, Mike "Historic Building Burns" The News-Herald, Panama City, FL. 10 April, 1987. Page 2A



been torn down and rebuilt, but this building had historical significance. Mike is quoted in the News-Herald as saying that “We’re basically in a state of shock and we don’t have any idea what we’re going to do. We’re just going to wait and see. It’s a beautiful building and I hate to see it town down. We don’t want to lose it without a fight.”<sup>117</sup> So what was a city to do? The La Royale’s wall bordering Beach Drive was now technically unsupported. The article stated that “Richardson said the building was so heavily damaged that it was feared the walls might collapse. ‘This wall is about ready to fall. The city’s standpoint right now is that it needs to be demolished.’”<sup>118</sup>

Several architects and engineers declared the La Royale structurally sound. Mike recalled that “We had an engineer flown in from Mobile [Alabama]. He evaluated the building. And he said that; build the back of it fine. We’d have to brace up the sides. And it should be ok.”<sup>119</sup> However, the City engineers were not convinced of this. The lines were clearly drawn. One side wishing to save the historic building as it was and the other concerned with a brick wall that could possibly fall over onto a busy downtown street. After thirty-six hours of battling the fire, inspecting damage and gauging the options, the two sides called a truce; both putting off any decision making until the next day after a night’s sleep.<sup>120</sup>

However, the city did not honor that agreement. Cazalas wrote that “Late Thursday afternoon a crew of men and a tractor descended on the building. Authorities said they would have to tear down at least half of it.”<sup>121</sup> Mike recollected that, “I was devastated. I came over the ... I used to live in the Cove, still do. I came over the bridge

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<sup>117</sup> Mike Krall quoted in “Historic Building Burns” by Mike Cazalas.

<sup>118</sup> Bobby Richardson quoted in “Historic Building Burns”

<sup>119</sup> Mike Krall 45:20

<sup>120</sup> Mike Krall, 28 October 2007

<sup>121</sup> Cazalas “Historic Building Burns.”

over here. And stupid ‘lil me I had brooms and dust mops. I’ll clean this place up and we’ll be open. Come over the bridge and the building’s gone. I could not believe it. Just a pile of rubble.”<sup>122</sup>

At some time in the night, the city had pushed the unsupported wall away from the street causing it to fall on the nearly undamaged side of the bar. Seeing as how it was unsupported, this would have been easily accomplished. According to Mike, “They just pushed it in. The only thing left standing was this right in here [referring to the wall behind the bar] cause they couldn’t get to it.”<sup>123</sup> The building that the Bay County Historical Society and various engineers had committed to save was now lying in a pile of rubble. According to the News-Herald, “Krall said lounge patrons were upset over the destruction and at different times during the day some gathered in the back parking lot and wept.”<sup>124</sup>

There was a new dilemma. The Historical Society, engineers, Bubba and Mike knew what to do with a building that was still standing. But what was one to do with a pile of old bricks? The couple consulted more architects and engineers and decided to rebuild the structure with as many original bricks as they could save. “After the fire we had a lot of people come down and express sorrow that the building was gone and an interest in helping restore the building back to what it was before the fire. We wanted to build it back with the same material and the same style because it’s a part of history and a part of Panama City.”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Mike Krall 28 October 2007 46:20

<sup>123</sup> Mike Krall, 28 October 2007. 46:50 Here, Mike gestures to the wall opposite Harrison Avenue. The bar, including liquor bottles and the original cash register miraculously were not damaged by the falling wall.

<sup>124</sup> Cazalas, “Historic Building Burns”, 3A

<sup>125</sup> Mike Krall quoted in “Original bricks adorn ‘new’ La Royale” by Mike Cazalas in The Panama City

That is exactly what they set out to do. Members of the queer community, the Historical Society and others pitched in and saved almost all of the original brick. “La Royale manager Mike Krall and friends spent hours picking their way through the rubble searching for bricks.”<sup>126</sup> Some people donated their architectural skills, others donated their construction skills, and others were simply able to volunteer their time. The hardest part of the rebuilding project was the smoke damaged brick. However, most of this was saved. It was hard work, but Bubba and Mike paid people a nickel a brick for cleaning them off.

Because of the fire and the damage caused by knocking down the wall, not all of the original bricks could be saved. So after cleaning and sorting the useable bricks, Mike and Bubba traveled to a brickyard in Dothan, Alabama in an effort to find 100 year old brick. They found exactly the brick they were looking for. “We went back there [referring to an area of the brickyard], and they were all covered with weeds and vines and everything. We pulled the weeds and vines off, they almost matched perfectly. We bought the whole bunch of them and brought them back down here.”<sup>127</sup> After finding the old brick, construction on the bar could begin. When finished, the new walls were reinforced and almost all of the brick was original. The second story of the La Royale had to be sacrificed because of material constraints, but the building can still maintain its title as the first and oldest brick building in Panama City. The process would eventually take over one year to complete before the La Royale was reopened.

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News-Herald. 31 January 1988

<sup>126</sup> Cazalas, Mike “Original bricks adorn ‘new’ La Royale.”

<sup>127</sup> Mike Krall, 28 October 2008

The debate and process of rebuilding the La Royale raises several points. First, the destruction of the wall was more than simply an act of public concern. Second, the fact that the oldest brick building in Panama City housed a gay bar, was able to be transcended by the Historical Society in this largely Baptist, conservative, small town. Third, the rebuilding of the bar by gay community members represents a quasi-political act.

The first issue. According to the Panama City News-Herald, Mike did not anticipate any problems in dealing with the city in the reconstruction of the bar. The article does not expressly name the bar as a queer space, but the bar was well known in the area as just such a space. If the city employees were ignorant of the bar's patrons before the fire, the spectacle of drag queens and gay men standing on the opposite side of the street weeping probably clued them in.

Years after the fire when I interviewed Mike, he stated that the city wanted the bar gone and they thought if they tore it down then the gay community would disappear. This statement is most likely colored by the years after the fire when, according to Mike and Bubba, the city was hostile to the bar's existence. According to the city, the wall was unsound and posed a danger to passing traffic if it were to fall. Without doubt, the truth lies somewhere in between those two opposites. According to engineers the wall was sound, but because the city had final say, it exercised the option of knocking the wall down.

The act by the city represents an attempt to purge the community by eliminating queer space. Just as public restrooms and parks are lighted, patrolled and "cleaned up"<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> For a discussion of this, refer to John Howard's article "The Library, the Park, and the Pervert: Public

in an effort to rid a city of queer space and by extension queer individuals, the City of Panama City attempted to rid the city of queers by eliminating one more queer space. Even if this was not the primary motivation for the destruction of the wall, it was certainly a mitigating factor in the destruction.

The second issue. Members of the Historical Society as well as other community members were able to rise above whatever personal prejudices they may have had in an effort to save the oldest brick building in Panama City.<sup>129</sup> Mike remembers, “We had a lot of help from the Historical Society. They were real pleased that we were going to build the building back with the same brick.”<sup>130</sup> In the process of saving a historic structure, the Panama City Historical Society saved a queer space. For some, it required the will-to-not-know to save a queer space, and for others it was possible that queer people were part of the Historical Society. Regardless of the reasoning, various parts of the community of Panama City assisted in the cleanup, restoration and rebuilding of the La Royale Lounge and Package Store.

The fire and destruction of the bar did not put a damper on gay community spirits. Mike fondly recalled that, “We had the local gay community all got together too. They used to stay in the parking lots at night, and party in the parking lots.”<sup>131</sup> Six weeks after the fire, The Fiesta Room side of the bar complex reopened and the party went on. During the process, the bar space had been expanded and The Fiesta Room expanded to its current size with restrooms in the back and the dressing room finally connected to the

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Space and Homosexual Encounter in Post World War II Atlanta.” In *Carryn’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South*. Ed. John Howard (New York: New York University Press, 1997)

<sup>129</sup> Cazalas, Mike “Original Bricks adorn ‘new’ La Royale” in the Panama City News-Herald, 31 January 1988. Accessed online through <http://66.21.108.67/interconnect/browser/intercon.dll>

<sup>130</sup> Mike Krall, 28 October 2007. 48:30

<sup>131</sup> Mike Krall, 28 October 2007. 47:00

stage. When asked about rebuilding the La Royale, Mike stated that it took “over a year. We didn’t start building this until January of ‘87. And we opened up I think May of ’88.”<sup>132</sup> Almost a year after the fire, the La Royale reopened for business.

In no way should the actions of a few historically minded individuals be construed as an acceptance by all of Panama City. “A lot of people was not happy cause we opened up and started rebuilding”<sup>133</sup> relates Mike. Not long after the fire, a billboard appeared in Panama City that read “God has a cure for AIDS: Fire.”<sup>134</sup> The billboard was part of the sign for Smitty’s Barbeque. The restaurant was and still is located on Highway 231 near the intersection of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard (then Cove Boulevard). Every year, thousands of people pass Smitty’s on their way to the beach, or downtown. It is located on a main thoroughfare in Panama City. It is hard to exactly gauge the public response to the sign, but the fact that Smitty felt certain enough that his stance would not jeopardize his business points to the community’s acceptance of the message.<sup>135</sup>

By the time this billboard was posted in 1987 there were no more than three to four local diagnosed cases of AIDS and the Bay AIDS Services and Information Coalition (BASIC) was two years from its founding. The people in Panama City knew enough about AIDS to understand the message on the sign: AIDS was a gay disease and God did not like gays. The public discourse around AIDS was still very much gay-centered in Panama City even though by this time the national debate was moving away

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<sup>132</sup> Mike Krall, 28 October 2007. 48:00

<sup>133</sup> Mike Krall, 28 October 2007 48:15

<sup>134</sup> Jim Smith, 17 March 2008

<sup>135</sup> During the time immediately after the fire, the rebuilding and the reopening, no editorials or “Letters To The Editor” deal with public opinion about the fire or its aftereffects.

from that. In Panama City and in the minds of many people, AIDS was a gay disease; gay people got it because of their “sinful” lifestyle.

Before the fire, there was very little public acknowledgement of homosexuality from the religious community in Panama City. Just as pastors in Mississippi did not regularly preach against homosexuality until “outside agitators” and the Civil Rights Movement propelled the issue into the public consciousness,<sup>136</sup> the religious community was relatively silent on the issue. This is surprising in a town with over 200 churches.

People knew that the bar was a queer space, but for the most part, left it alone despite the few isolated incidents of vandalism reported over the years. Was this quiet accommodation and a public secret as R. Bruce Brasell claimed? I tend to believe that other than the few incidents of vandalism which occurred over the years, the townspeople left the bar and the queer residents of Panama City alone because they didn’t make waves. The fire was the event that forced the public and the churches to deal with the fact that queer people were in their schools, in their churches and in their cities.

The third issue. The gay community reclaiming and rebuilding its own queer space represents a quasi political act, an act of defiance and an act of community. By coming together and cleaning bricks by hand and contributing to the rebuilding costs associated with the project, the gay community proclaimed its unity and its desire for a space of its own. Other bars have come and gone, but the Fiesta is the only bar that the gay community has rallied around to save. This speaks volumes about the nature of the gay community in Panama City at that time. While they may not have self-identified as a gay “community,” this act certainly qualifies as an act of community.

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<sup>136</sup> Howard, *Men Like That*, 142-166

The rebuilding of the La Royale Lounge can also be read as an act of preserving the history of the gay community. The bar and the gay community were more than just the physical space. By rebuilding the La Royale, the members of the gay community chose to save their own history, almost in a way saying “we have always been here and we will always be here.”



Figure 11: Rear view of the La Royale Lounge as it appears today.<sup>137</sup>

### **Cruising**

The rebuilding of the La Royale Lounge represents another difference between the somewhat stable open queer identity and the more transitory identity of those who participate in the world of cruising. While the locations of The Fiesta and La Royale have not changed, cruising locations have. Such cruising locations exist and have existed for many years in Panama City growing and changing as the queer community has grown and changed.

The most well known cruising spot is Carl Gray Park, near the Hathaway Bridge, which connects Panama City to Panama City Beach. Other lesser known places

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<sup>137</sup> Photograph by author, taken on 13 September 2008.



according to my narrators are McKenzie Park, located downtown only two blocks from The Fiesta, as well as the park in St. Andrews which is roughly one mile from the bar.

At one time in Panama City's history, the public restroom in the main branch of the Post Office was a popular cruising location, but it has long been closed to the public. In speaking with Jim Smith, he told me that when he began coming out to the bar in 1968, people still talked about the time when men were arrested in that bathroom for engaging in queer sex. According to Jim, the incident happened some time before and resulted in several arrests and even a suicide. The men involved were from all walks of life, doctors, ministers and even a teacher.<sup>138</sup> In the time before The Fiesta opened its doors to the public, queer and non-queer-identified men used the restroom at the Post Office and other sites around the city to connect with each other. After the bar opened, some men adopted queer identities and started coming to The Fiesta while others did not.<sup>139</sup>

Others also would partake in both scenes. A local drag performer who lived in Dothan during the 1970s would often stop at a rest area located on Highway 77 on his drive from Dothan to The Fiesta. He would often tell of his adventures at this park with all sorts of people. Because of its location on a major thoroughfare this park would have drawn tourists and truck drivers from all over the country on their way to and from parts of the Gulf Coast. Queer and non-queer identified men on the move created a queer

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<sup>138</sup> This story is based solely on narrator accounts. Police records of the event do not exist according to the Panama City Police Department. Also, according to my narrators, all public record of the event including newspaper accounts have reputedly been destroyed.

<sup>139</sup> Mike Krall mentioned that one of the men arrested during the raid still lived in Panama City. According to Mike, this man sometimes came to the bar, but would almost never talk about his experience with the raid.

space in the park's restrooms. The performer represents the small percentage of queer identified men who participate in both the open and the anonymous queer worlds.

The park on Highway 77 represents how the trans-Panhandle networks of travel come together. Not only did the drag performer and others use the park for sexual encounters on their way to The Fiesta but others also used the park to rest and use the facilities for non erotic purposes during their travels. At this location, people from all walks of life and various areas around the country would come into contact with one another. Here the public space and the private space overlapped. The anonymity of the space and its transient population allowed everyone to get what they came for, whether erotic or not.

In Panama City, Carl Gray Park would seem like an unlikely cruising spot according to Laud Humphreys. Even though it is located just off of a major highway (State Highway 98), access to the park is via a two lane road that also gives access to a Bay County Sheriff's substation. During the day, the park serves as a boat landing, picnic spot, and a hangout for students at Gulf Coast Community College. At night, the park is deserted except for men cruising since the lighting is not suitable to launch boats. Despite the close proximity of law enforcement, the park has been one of the most active and longest running cruising locations in Panama City.

When public restrooms were open at the park, men created a queer space there. When the city closed the restrooms because of the high number of arrests for indecency, men began to cruise in their cars. Despite the best efforts of police, men continue to create a queer space nightly in the park. This particular location defies Humphreys' logic because of the number of arrests and location near a Sheriff's Department substation.

This particular park holds a special place in the lives of men seeking anonymous public sex because they continue to utilize this park for their needs.

The fact that Panama City has so many cruising locations is telling. Because Panama City is a vacation destination and people tend to “let their hair down” when on vacation, it is likely that the number of men who partake in tearoom trade increases as the number of tourists increases in Panama City. I have already shown that the number customers increase at the Fiesta during the tourist season. It is reasonable to assume that non queer identified men wishing to engage in homosex while on vacation would increase as well.

### **BASIC and AIDS**

When first beginning this project, I believed that Bay County was ahead of its time because an AIDS services organization existed in the early to mid 1980s. As my research expanded, I found this to be a mistaken belief. Bay AIDS Information and Services Coalition (BASIC) was not formed until 1989. However, the formation of BASIC is still important to this story because it shows how people coming and going from Panama City and the Gulf Coast were able to share information and ideas.

Butch McKay, who was involved in the infamous gay wedding, was instrumental in setting up BASIC. He moved away from Panama City to Birmingham, Alabama to be with his current partner in 1977. Butch became involved in AIDS work because of a promise made to his best friend who died of the disease in the early 1980s. His first foray into the world of AIDS work was when the AIDS memorial quilt came to Birmingham. After volunteering for that event he took a more active role in AIDS work by volunteering to help AIDS patients through counseling and visits with doctors.

In 1989 Butch traveled to Panama City for a reunion of Fiesta Fellows of the 70s. This was a reunion of the group of friends who spent time at The Fiesta in the 1970s. At this event, he gave a speech about AIDS and its impact on the gay community nationally and in the south. It was this event and this speech that inspired the close knit group of friends to start a local organization. Thus BASIC was born.

This event is significant not simply because it was the birthplace of BASIC. It is clear that the Fiesta held a special place in the hearts of the early members of the gay community. The bar was not just a bar and men like Jim and Mitch were not just people who patronized the bar. They were a close-knit group of friends who came together in a community. The bar and the friendship networks were so important in the lives of these men that they came together for reunions in 1988 and 1989.

BASIC became a 501-C3 organization in 1989 and has slowly over the years grown to cover a six county area. This designation was important in the life of the organization because it meant that BASIC was officially recognized as a non-profit organization and was exempt from many Federal taxes.<sup>140</sup> The Fiesta not only served as the meeting place for BASIC's founders, it has over the years served as fundraiser. The bar hosted an AIDS walk, slave auction, and other fundraisers to help support the organization.<sup>141</sup> These fundraisers combined with generous private donations and the support of the local Health Department has allowed the organization to grow and flourish over the last twenty years.

In this way, the bar is more than simply a queer space for people to freely express their desires and obtain sexual partners. At various times in its history, not simply with

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<sup>140</sup> Wikipedia article accessed through [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/501\(c\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/501(c)) on 24 September 2008.

<sup>141</sup> Butch McKay, 17 March 2008

BASIC, the Fiesta and La Royale have served as community center and community building project. People came together to share ideas because, according to Mike, “I’ve always tried to keep it as more like a clubhouse, a place that people can always call home and as a root that they can...it will always be there, Panama City.”<sup>142</sup> With the help of Mike, Bubba and Mitch, members of the queer community in Panama City used the physical space of the bar and the friendship/communication networks established there to start and maintain a response to AIDS and other issues.

Most if not all AIDS initiatives began from within the gay community since it was primarily gay men who died of the disease in the early years. A great deal has been written about the ways that AIDS brought the gay community together in self-defense like nothing has before or since. Panama City was no different. It was the gay community and the gay bar that facilitated the founding of BASIC. The timing was also serendipitous. By 1989 AIDS could effect everyone. It was no longer being constructed as a gay disease. Perhaps because of this, the organization received institutional support from the health department and local doctors. A place that not even two years earlier had seen fire as God’s divine method for ridding the city of AIDS now had its own AIDS service organization.

Butch would later move from Birmingham in 1992 to become BASIC’s first case manager. In 1996 he would travel back and forth to Fort Walton to assist another AIDS organization OASIS, becoming its executive director in 1998.

AIDS service organizations represent perfectly the queer networks across the Florida Panhandle. What began in Tallahassee with Big Bend Cares spread to Pensacola

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<sup>142</sup> Mike Krall 14:30

and then filled in the middle with BASIC and OASIS. The entire Florida Panhandle is covered under the umbrella of an AIDS service organization. The organizations share funding, ideas and employees. People and information routinely travel through all areas of the Panhandle because of AIDS and AIDS service organizations.

One reason that the Fiesta was so important in the formation of BASIC and in the sharing of information was because of the way Mike ran his bar. Mike stated that “We are not like an island to ourselves; we have a lot of people come in from all over the world here. And we learn things from them. ‘What’s going on in San Francisco? What’s going on in Atlanta? What’s going on in Baltimore?’ They say, ‘we’re doing this, we’re doing that.’ I think that helped a lot, especially when we started BASIC. We went out to different organizations to ask them how they got started. What steps they think we need to go to next.”<sup>143</sup> Panama City and its queer community used the already established communication networks to formulate and implement the response to AIDS. These networks allowed them to learn from other organizations that had come before and set up a viable AIDS service organization in a short amount of time.

### **Conclusion**

The Fiesta began its life as a tiny, bar in an old building in downtown Panama City. Over the years, it has expanded to meet the needs of a growing queer presence. Mike and Bubba have transformed the queer place/space over the years to accommodate the ever increasing needs of queer people.

Many people asked me throughout this project just how a city such as Panama City could support a gay bar for such a great length of time. The answer is twofold.

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<sup>143</sup> Mike Krall 16:38

First, the space was needed and supported. A bar, any bar, queer or not, cannot remain open if it is not patronized. Like the old adage “if you build it, they will come,” people have supported the bar over the years. “This town here, we try to cater to everybody. And basically everybody gets along here...The guy who now owns it, Bubba; he’s very good at running a business and managing money. If it hadn’t been for his financial expertise and wisdom the bar probably would not be here...We’re still small enough, and we try to be real friendly, get to know the customers. We want people to know that they are welcome here and they can be at ease here.”<sup>144</sup> By creating a space where queer people could be open and be themselves, Mike and Bubba have met a need. The central location, the communication networks, and the business model of the Fiesta contributed to a longevity not seen in other parts of the country.

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<sup>144</sup> Mike Krall 11:55 - 15:15

## CHAPTER 4

### THE GRAND FINALE

In the years after World War II, the world for queer men and women has changed. The last seventy years have witnessed a battle over contested terrain as queer men and women fought to end the silence around their identities. They fought for acceptance. They fought for the right to enjoy the American dream. They fought to throw off the label “sexual psychopath.”

This fight looked different and meant different things in various parts of the country. In New York City, drag queens incited a three day riot that forever changed the way queer history was written. In the South, Bayard Rustin quietly left the Civil Rights movement so that his sexuality did not hinder the movement. In California, Harvey Milk, ran for and was elected to the San Francisco city council. Each of these incidents are part of a larger queer narrative but incidents such as these overshadow the daily lived experience of people in all parts of the country.

Not every part of the country had a stonewall-type event, and only big cities have seen the election of queer officials. In the Florida Panhandle, queer men and women fought in their own ways. In Pensacola, they formed the Emma Jones Society, held parties and drew queer people from all over the South to one central location thereby opening the door for greater communication and movement. In Panama City residents and tourists alike supported The Fiesta. In the Panhandle generally, men and women traveled around and connected with each other wherever they were.

I have shown how queer people created the queer landscape of North Florida. Over the years, queer people re-imagined the world around them as something more



positive and more open. Some actively worked for this goal through actions like the rebuilding of the Fiesta while others simply lived their lives, such as Mitch Bryan and Jim Smith.

The larger queer historiography has been largely silent about the rural, Southern experience. Except for a few studies mentioned here, most studies focus on larger cities. John Howard's study of queer Mississippians was revolutionary for its time. Since his work, others have come along to fill up the gaps in queer historiography. Howard showed that queer people, no matter where they are, will express their desire wherever they are, be it bar, hay loft, or automobile.

By exploring the papers of the John's Committee and the life cycle of the Fiesta, I have shown how queer people all over the Panhandle found ways to express and act upon their desires. Whether the bar, the drive in restaurant or the beach, queer people in the Panhandle were queer and were able to find one another. Emma Jones parties and nights spent at the Fiesta were both part of the way queer people found one another.

Martin Meeker put forth valuable ideas in his work *Contacts Desired* and those ideas were vital to my project because he shows how queer people came to see themselves as part of a larger queer world and share information with each other through print and word of mouth. However, his study does not go far below the national level. My study of Panama City and the surrounding areas validates and supports Meeker's thesis because I showed how people far removed from San Francisco were able to establish communication networks where they lived. The networks established facilitated the founding of BASIC and allowed for a greater response to AIDS.

The people in this study used at first word of mouth and cruising locations to establish queer connections and gain entry to the larger queer world. After the opening of the Fiesta, and bars like it as well as the publishing of magazines such as *David*, people in the Florida Panhandle and beyond were able to imagine themselves as part of something bigger. They were able to use the space of the bar and the transient nature of Panama City as a way to connect to the queer world.

The queer networks and the world view of the participants in those networks have changed over the years. When Matt and Brent were cruising in their cars, there were very few options for the couple. However as time went on, and more queer people came into contact with each other and created spaces for queer expression, that all changed. For the most part, gone were the days of cruising public bathrooms; queer people opened bars, had weddings and altered the way they viewed the world.

Far removed but still a part of the queer world is the act of cruising the tea rooms. Various locations throughout the Panhandle were used as tea rooms both before and after the establishment of open queer spaces. These spaces, according to Laud Humphreys and others were vital to the formation of queer identity. For this reason, the papers of the Johns Committee were invaluable in establishing the existence of queer networks before the opening of gay bars.

While Senator Charley Johns set up his committee to rid Florida of homosexuals and civil rights activists, he unwittingly established a queer network. No longer isolated on farms and in small towns, suddenly people were able to see that queer people truly were everywhere. The records left by his committee show us how queer people met one

another and how they traveled in a Panhandle wide network of “men like that and men who liked that.”

No longer can the Florida Panhandle be seen as a historical backwater, which I found out was an opinion held by many people when I began researching this project. The people of the Panhandle and their actions must be seen as important to the larger story because they were the same as what queer people all over the country were doing. Queer people everywhere want the same things; they want to express themselves and to live life openly and honestly. By examining the people and places of the Florida Panhandle, I have contributed to this by introducing the Panhandle and its history to the general public.

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