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PlanetOut History

Stonewall Riots

by David Bianco

Among gay organizations today, there's everything from the Stonewall Democratic Club to the Stonewall Chorale; there's even a bottled water called Stonewall. The word has taken on mythic proportions in lesbian and gay culture. But its widespread appropriation doesn't dilute the importance of what happened in the summer of 1969 in New York City.

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The event is still a hot topic of debate in gay circles, with much disagreement about what actually precipitated the violence and who took part in it. One legend holds that Judy Garland's funeral, held June 27 in Manhattan, fanned the flames of gay rage. Other versions of the story claim that dozens of sequined drag queens and a mysterious, unidentified butch lesbian were at the forefront of the street rebellion. But a few facts seem certain.

In the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, the police raided the Stonewall Inn, a dingy, Mafia-run "private club" on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village with a predominantly gay clientele. The charge was illegal sale of alcohol. It was the second time that week the bar had been targeted by the police, and other gay bars had also been raided in prior weeks. Police officers lined up the Stonewall's 200 patrons to check identification. Most were free to leave, but the staff, as well as three drag queens and two male-to-female transsexuals, were detained.

Eyewitnesses recalled that the scene outside the bar was at first campy and festive. Patrons were joined by tourists and passers-by, and everyone cheered when a gay person emerged from the bar, dismissed by the police. But when a paddy wagon arrived and the police loaded the bar's staff and the three drag queens inside, the crowd on the street grew surly. One person threw a rock through a window, and eventually garbage cans, bottles, and even a parking meter were used to assault the building. Someone set a fire with lighter fluid. By newspaper accounts, 13 people were arrested and three police officers sustained minor injuries in the confrontation.

Later that night and into Sunday morning, a crowd again gathered in front of the ravaged bar. Many young gay men showed up to protest the flurry of raids, but they did so by handholding, kissing, and forming a chorus line. "We are the Stonewall girls," they sang, kicking their legs in front of the police. "We wear our hair in curls./We have no underwear./We show our pubic hair." Police cleared the street without incident this time, but another street altercation occurred a few days later.

Even more significant, though, was what happened later in the summer. At the end of July, gay activists circulated copies of a flyer calling for a mass "homosexual liberation meeting." The headline of the flyer read, "Do you think homosexuals are revolting? You bet your sweet ass we are!" The alliance that formed from the meeting held on July 24 adopted the name Gay Liberation Front (GLF); among its demands were not only an end to police harassment, but job protection for gay employees, the repeal of sodomy laws, and local and national anti-discrimination laws.

Soon, numerous other organizations and a host of gay liberation publications emerged, first in New York and then across the country. Estimates suggest that, at the time of the riots, there were a few dozen gay organizations in the United States. Within a few years, the number had risen to more than 400.

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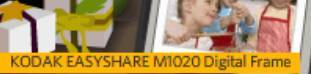
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