

The TEXAS

Triangle

July 17, 1997

Vol. V

Issue 38

Before

The Role Of Bars
in Texas Gay And
Lesbian History

& After



Movie houses catered to the avant-garde tastes
of the gay men from the 1920's to the 1940's.

& After

Movie houses catered to the avant-garde tastes of the gay men from the 1920's to the 1940's.

Theaters along Elm Street in downtown Dallas
Photo courtesy of Dallas Public Library

Before & After

The Role of Bars in Texas Gay and Lesbian History

By Thomas Rockman Jr.,
TRIANGLE staff

According to Dallas gay historian Phil Johnson, gays and lesbians often forget that gay and lesbian bars prospered long before any queer organizations, churches, publications, choruses, bands, cheerleading squads, swim teams, and square dance groups appeared on the scene.

If not for the bars "our history would have been decidedly different," said Johnson, "The bars are our roots and our foundation. It was from them that everything else sprang."

Johnson pointed out that any discussion of gay history needs to recognize the underlying elements of American history, elements that have affected the lives of gays and lesbians. One of the most important events was the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, when working men and women moved en masse to urban areas. It was in these urban areas that the seeds of gay and lesbian communities were planted.

As gay people separated from their families, they found that they could lose their identities in large, metropolitan areas like Dallas and Houston, Johnson said.

"The bars were the first things that middle American men from rural areas migrated to when they arrived at the urban centers," said Johnson. "They wanted to be absorbed into the gay culture."

Maggie's Corner (at Commerce and Akard), where Dallas gay men of the 1920s

El Jardin, the oldest gay bar in Texas, was established in 1947 in San Antonio. Leo Harper, a co-owner of El Jardin since 1982, said that the bar has always served as a social club and a place that people come to after work to relax with friends. Being out in 1947 could cause someone to lose his or her job, Harper said, but he believes that today's more tolerant climate has decreased the amount of gay-bashing.

Harper added, though, that certain other old-fashioned attitudes persist: "San Antonio is still in some ways a small town. The vice squad likes to pick on the newer [gay] bars. They like to come in and hold flashlights under the bottles (to check for impurities). They'll have one guy stand at the door like a sentry—we're practically under house arrest until they leave."

Jo Elliott, the matriarch of Dallas bars since the mid-1970s, said that the biggest change she's seen in the bar scene is the integration of lesbian and gay male clientele. Lesbians going to gay bars and gay men frequenting lesbian bars was not common 20 years ago, she said. She recalled that when Garry Monier (owner of the Crews Inn in Dallas) and the late Bob Strange opened a drag show and dance bar called the Landing (at Cedar Springs and Pearl) in the late 1970s

people thought it would fail because it targeted a mixed lesbian/gay male clientele.

"We still have people who want to segregate us," said Elliott. "[But] on the whole, most guys and girls get along. We're all gay no matter what sex we are."

Richard Longstaff, owner of Union Jack since 1971, said that the biggest impact that the bars have had has been political.

As an example, Longstaff points to Ray Hardin, the late owner of Eighth Day bar, who was the first openly gay person to appear on Dallas TV. Hardin also created a coalition of gay and lesbian bar owners who worked on the first 1974 boycott of Coors.

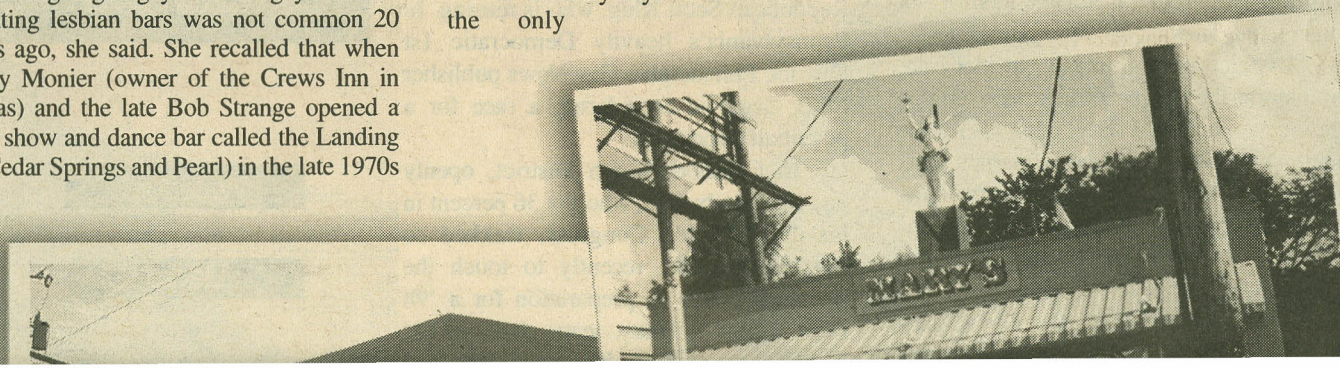
"Because of [Hardin's] efforts," said Longstaff, "[now] most big companies spend more money on [gay] advertising and donate more money to charity in the gay community."

In the early days the bars were the only

outlet for gay and lesbian social and political activity, Longstaff said. The first local gay rights organization, the Dallas Alliance for Individual Rights started in a bar, as well as the Dallas Gay Political Caucus. And the money to pay for attorneys who fought for the repeal of the Texas anti-sodomy statute (the 21.06 penal code) was raised at a bar fundraiser.

The purpose of the bars hasn't changed, Longstaff said, they continue to provide a venue for fundraising and AIDS awareness. But individuals don't have to rely on bars to meet people because a variety of organizations serve that purpose now.

"Back then, we had nothing to guide us in our civil rights history," he said. "Everything was done by trial and error. Right now, everything has to do with image and coming out. The bars are big, clean, and profitable and a colossal amount of money is spent in them."



If not for the bars “our history would have been decidedly different,” said Johnson, “The bars are our roots and our foundation. It was from them that everything else sprang.”

Johnson pointed out that any discussion of gay history needs to recognize the underlying elements of American history, elements that have affected the lives of gays and lesbians. One of the most important events was the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, when working men and women moved en masse to urban areas. It was in these urban areas that the seeds of gay and lesbian communities were planted.

As gay people separated from their families, they found that they could lose their identities in large, metropolitan areas like Dallas and Houston, Johnson said.

“The bars were the first things that middle American men from rural areas migrated to when they arrived at the urban centers,” said Johnson. “They wanted to be absorbed into the gay culture.”

Maggie’s Corner (at Commerce and Akard), where Dallas gay men of the 1920s through the 1940s met and cruised, and the Milar Hotel Bar (at Ervay and Wood) were the first two businesses to attract gay clientele. Along the north side of Elm Street, movie houses—the Majestic, the Palace, the Rialto, and the Queen—popped up to cater to the avant-garde tastes of the “belles” (a 1920s-1940s term for gay men).

is still in some ways a small town. The vice squad likes to pick on the newer [gay] bars. They like to come in and hold flashlights under the bottles (to check for impurities). They’ll have one guy stand at the door like a sentry—we’re practically under house arrest until they leave.”

Jo Elliott, the matriarch of Dallas bars since the mid-1970s, said that the biggest change she’s seen in the bar scene is the integration of lesbian and gay male clientele. Lesbians going to gay bars and gay men frequenting lesbian bars was not common 20 years ago, she said. She recalled that when Garry Monier (owner of the Crews Inn in Dallas) and the late Bob Strange opened a drag show and dance bar called the Landing (at Cedar Springs and Pearl) in the late 1970s

As an example, Longstaff points to Ray Hardin, the late owner of Eighth Day bar, who was the first openly gay person to appear on Dallas TV. Hardin also created a coalition of gay and lesbian bar owners who worked on the first 1974 boycott of Coors.

“Because of [Hardin’s] efforts,” said Longstaff, “[now] most big companies spend more money on [gay] advertising and donate more money to charity in the gay community.”

In the early days the bars were the only

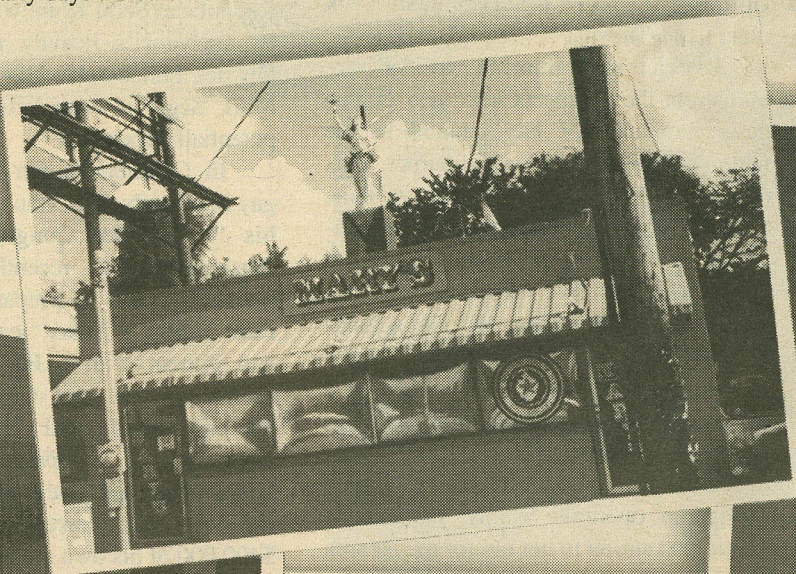
providing a safe space for the LGBTQ+ community. But individuals don’t have to rely on bars to meet people because a variety of organizations serve that purpose now.

“Back then, we had nothing to guide us in our civil rights history,” he said. “Everything was done by trial and error. Right now, everything has to do with image and coming out. The bars are big, clean, and profitable and a colossal amount of money is spent in them.”



JR's on Cedar Springs in Dallas during the 70's. Photo courtesy of the Phil Johnson Historic Archives & Research Library.

Heaven, one of the three Charles Armstrong Investments' clubs in Houston



Another hot spot in Dallas during the 70's was Tex's Ranch. Photo courtesy of the Phil Johnson Historic Archives & Research Library.

Top: Mary's Naturally, in Houston.



How Can We Know Where We're Going If We Don't Know Where We've Been?

By Nancy Ford
TRIANGLE Staff

In the beginning there was The Old Plantation, the Farmhouse, the Galleon, the Red Room, Effie's Pink Elephant, The Off Main, Just Marion and Lynn's, L'amour La Femme. Chances on Westheimer used to be a strip club. The adjacent New Barn once was a silver shop. Trendy Empire Cafe serves latte and dessert where once Chutes, a leather disco, served something completely different. Today the Loading Dock is an antique shop. Numbers, once the progressive dance haven for sweaty gay men is now Numbers, the alternative music venue for sweaty omnisequal Gen X-ers.

As David Bowie so succinctly put it, "Ch-ch-ch-changes."

In the twenty-eight years since the first brick was thrown at Stonewall Inn, the complexion of the nation's gay and lesbian nightclubs have endured a number of facelifts: some purely for reasons of cosmetic enhancement, others to repair the emotional and economic ravages of AIDS. The nightclubs of Montrose, Houston's equivalent to NYC's Village and San Francisco's Castro, are no exception.

In 1972, Ed Moniger opened Inside/Outside, now the site of Rascals, on the Westheimer curve. Moniger can't help but see the change that has occurred in the bar busi-

ness in the last decades. "Things have become a lot more open. When I started in business, two guys dancing was illegal," he said.

In We're under siege!-like fashion, a warning light would flash, signaling that the cops were there. "That's when you grabbed a girl instead of a guy. They used to line people up on the wall; it was all very indiscriminate. They would say, 'Okay, you, you, you, and you—you're all drunk. Come on, we're going downtown.' Whatever they wanted to arrest you for, they did," he said.

"That's when you grabbed a girl instead of a guy. They used to line people up on the wall; it was all very indiscriminate..."

— Ed Moniger, owner of Inside/Outside, 1972

As gay and straight Houstonians alike were enjoying unprecedented economic health, Ed and his partner Jeff closed Inside/Outside and opened E/J's Watering Hole in 1981. The little club on Richmond was formerly Sand Mountain, at that time a coffee-house where a clear-eyed, youthful Janis Joplin performed. "She only sang there briefly, like for a two-week stint. They fired her because they said she'd never be able to draw a crowd," Moniger laughed. "At the time, she probably couldn't. She was only sixteen," he added. Fortunately Sand Mountain had other unknown newcomers, like Willie Nelson and Kenny Rogers, to entertain the coffee-sipping clientele.

Recognizing a good thing when he sees it, Moniger has continued the tradition of providing entertainment for his customers. In fact, E/J's is probably best known for its consistency in providing to local performers a venue and appreciative

doors of Just Marion and Lynn's. Now the site of Cousins, the bar was the founded by Marion Panzer, who met her untimely death defending her business (by then located on Richmond, now the Blue Iguana) in a shootout with a hold-up man.

Two of Houston's leading lesbian musicians, guitarist Kat Drake and drummer Robin Borthwick, recall their first club experience at Just Marion and Lynn's in the early eighties. "I remember walking in for the first time and thinking, 'Wow, look at all these old dykes!'" Borthwick laughed. "Now I'm one of them!"

If you've visited a women's bar in Houston in the last 16 years, chances are you know Vicci Lindsey. Lindsey started her bartending career in 1980 at Houston's Lamppost, formerly located on Times Boulevard in the Village. "Those were the days when you were either butch or femme; no in-between," she remembers. At that time lesbians had the option of socializing there, or at the drug-infested Twins, or at the dank Our Place on Richmond. Or they could try getting served at one of the few estrogen-tolerant men's bars.

Then came Kindred Spirits. Lindsey sites this as turning point for Houston's gay women and their friends. A creation of Houston activist Marion Coleman, KS was the first club in the city where women could go to be with each other that "wasn't dark," Lindsey said. That was at its first location on Buffalo Speedway, which opened in 1981, smack dab in the middle of the Texas' boom years. By this time, there was no necessity for blinking lights to warn same-sex dancers that a raid was imminent. Hundreds of Ralph Lauren-clad professional women, softball players and everyone in between learned to party together, finding possibly for the first time in Houston, a real sense of cross-cultural female community.

A few years later Spirits (as it soon became known, because by the mid-eighties the letters KS stood for something completely different) moved to a new location in the Galleria area. A few years later, Kindred Spirits closed its doors. It now houses an Aztec Party Rental outlet and a Mattress Factory. Ironic: almost a decade

JR's Bar And Grill: They Also Serve Drinks

By Nancy Ford
TRIANGLE Staff

The Old Farmhouse, now the site of the philanthropic Hollyfield Center, offered Randall W. Jobe his first glimpse at the world of gay bars. "And back in 1909, the drinking age was still eighteen!" he joked. "I ordered a Tom Collins, because that was the only drink I knew." Several years and Tom Collinses later, Jobe joined Charles Armstrong Investments, where he has been the social events coordinator off and on (but mostly on,) for nine years.

Two years ago when he returned to CAI, which includes Houston's JR's, Heaven and Montrose Mining Company, Jobe (rhymes with globe) saw "a major change" in the bar scene. "And I have to say, in many respects, the change has been for the better. The causes are not what I would have wanted them to be, but I think the effect has been very beneficial to us all. We saw a change in our clientele, and there was a change, I think, in people's expectations of us as a club."

Jobe remembers the days when "the gay bars were where we could go and be comfortable and be ourselves." But he admits that above all, there was a pervasive sex-quest attitude. "The AIDS epidemic changed that. People wised up," he said.

He envisions the clubs in the late 90s as more of a social crossroads, no longer just a hunting ground for a partner "for life or for the evening," he said. "I think there's a whole new surge of just wanting to have a good time, and it's a more relaxed environment as opposed to the pressure of everybody cruising, everybody looking for sex," he added.

That's part of the reason, Jobe said, that JR's started sponsoring events that

In the twenty-eight years since the first brick was thrown at Stonewall Inn, the complexion of the nation's gay and lesbian nightclubs have endured a number of facelifts: some purely for reasons of cosmetic enhancement, others to repair the emotional and economic ravages of AIDS. The nightclubs of Montrose, Houston's equivalent to NYC's Village and San Francisco's Castro, are no exception.

In 1972, Ed Moniger opened Inside/Outside, now the site of Rascals, on the Westheimer curve. Moniger can't help but see the change that has occurred in the bar busi-

As gay and straight Houstonians alike were enjoying unprecedented economic health, Ed and his partner Jeff closed Inside/Outside and opened E/J's Watering Hole in 1981. The little club on Richmond was formerly Sand Mountain, at that time a coffee-house where a clear-eyed, youthful Janis Joplin performed. "She only sang there briefly, like for a two-week stint. They fired her because they said she'd never be able to draw a crowd," Moniger laughed. "At the time, she probably couldn't. She was only sixteen," he added. Fortunately Sand Mountain had other unknown newcomers, like Willie Nelson and Kenny Rogers, to entertain the coffee-sipping clientele.

Recognizing a good thing when he sees it, Moniger has continued the tradition of providing entertainment for his customers. In fact, E/J's is probably best known for its consistency in providing to local performers a venue and appreciative audience. Moniger's clubs have for more than twenty five years been the place in Montrose to see local performers on their way up, their way down, and at all points in between.

Among the Houston show biz legends who entertained at E/J's were Danny Villa, Brittany Page and John Day, all of whom are gone. "I've lost so many friends. I quit counting at 200," Moniger said. "All the performers—you know so many, you learn to care for people. And then, all of a sudden, they're gone."

Since 1988, E/J's most recent incarnation is on Ralph Street off Westheimer. The former veterinary clinic is now a comfortable, L-shaped space, with the ever-present stage located at the elbow of the building. The large patio in the back is also equipped with a stage. Old habits die hard. What else hasn't changed over the years? You could almost see Moniger flipping pages back through the 25-year history. "I have no idea. Queers is still queers," he laughed.

Most lesbians in Houston, circa late 1970's, entered the world of gay and lesbian bars by walking through the garage

Then came Kindred Spirits. Lindsey sites this as turning point for Houston's gay women and their friends. A creation of Houston activist Marion Coleman, KS was the first club in the city where women could go to be with each other that "wasn't dark," Lindsey said. That was at its first location on Buffalo Speedway, which opened in 1981, smack dab in the middle of the Texas' boom years. By this time, there was no necessity for blinking lights to warn same-sex dancers that a raid was imminent. Hundreds of Ralph Lauren-clad professional women, softball players and everyone in between learned to party together, finding possibly for the first time in Houston, a real sense of cross-cultural female community.

A few years later Spirits (as it soon became known, because by the mid-eighties the letters KS stood for something completely different) moved to a new location in the Galleria area. A few years later, Kindred Spirits closed its doors. It now houses an Aztec Party Rental outlet and a Mattress Factory. Ironical: almost a decade later, people are still walking through those same doors looking for a party and a place to sleep.

Vicci and the customers who love her have since moved to Betsy Worden's Plaza 9200, notably the largest (in terms of square footage) gay and lesbian club complex in the world.

She doesn't know if it's because of the economy, apathy, or the trend toward recovery. But Worden feels the clubs are no longer the social hub for the gay and lesbian community they once were. In the eleven years Worden has been in the bar business, she especially prides herself in being able to provide a clean and safe bar for Plaza 9200's patrons.

Happily, the consensus at Chances and The New Barn is that drugs and fights aren't as big a problem as in past years. Bartender "Boots" attributes that to the recent renovation of lower Westheimer. "The streets are safer," he said, than when he used to frequent The Exile on Bell Street in downtown Houston. He declined to mention the year...

And they rest is history...in the making.

say, in many respects, the change has been for the better. The causes are not what I would have wanted them to be, but I think the effect has been very beneficial to us all. We saw a change in our clientele, and there was a change, I think, in people's expectations of us as a club."

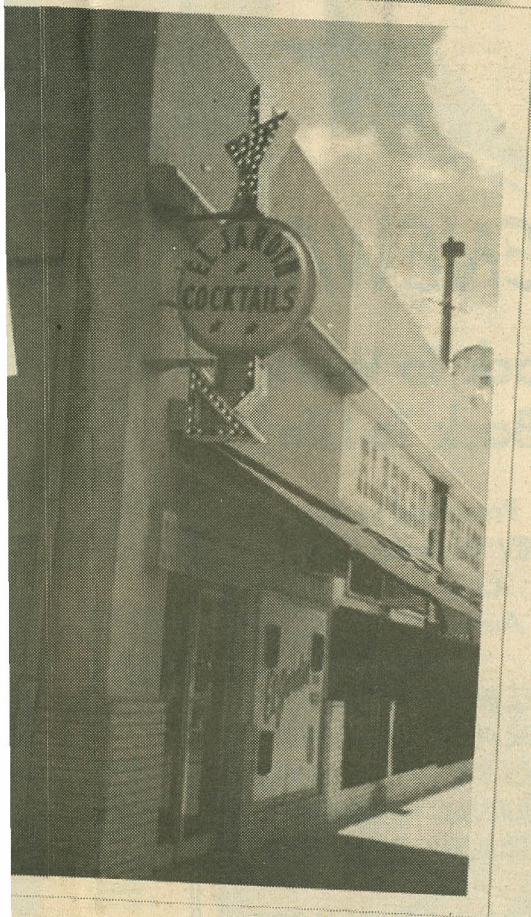
Jobe remembers the days when "the gay bars were where we could go and be comfortable and be ourselves." But he admits that above all, there was a pervasive sex-quest attitude. "The AIDS epidemic changed that. People wised up," he said.

He envisions the clubs in the late 90s as more of a social crossroads, no longer just a hunting ground for a partner "for life or for the evening," he said. "I think there's a whole new surge of just wanting to have a good time, and it's a more relaxed environment as opposed to the pressure of everybody cruising, everybody looking for sex," he added.

That's part of the reason, Jobe said, that JR's started sponsoring excursions that actually take customers out of the bars. "But we always start out at the bar," Jobe laughed. JR's Happy Hour Party Bus began field trips to the casinos in Louisiana and Alabama, "About ten trips over the last couple of years," Jobe said, with another planned for late summer. Jobe feels these outings sends a message to mainstream, traditionally hetero-focused entertainment facilities: "We're going to bring you gays and lesbians, we're going to spend our money like anyone else, be well-behaved, and have a great time," Jobe said.

"Again, the whole idea (is) entertaining people. Our clientele knows that there's life outside the bar. There's the theater, there's sports, there are other things to do," he said.

What does Jobe project to be the future of gay bars? "That we become completely tolerant of ourselves, and consequently, tolerant of the world," he said. "Amid our diversity, we still have our own issues to work on. We've got to accept each other if we expect to be accepted by everyone."



El Jardin on Navarro Street in San Antonio. The oldest gay bar in Texas opened its doors in 1947. Photo: Joe Bean