

The Pink Elephant: A Houston institution.

**H**ISTORY HAS NOT been kind to the bar, as illustrated by the following excerpt from a 19th Century publication—"The Public House-keeper's Monitor":

*"Public Houses, though very useful when no more in Number than necessary and well managed, yet when made subservient to Idleness, Drunkenness, Profanation, may in such case be called poisonous Sinks of Iniquity, and fatal Consequence to the great Annoyance of the Neighborhood, the Corruption of Morals, the Waste of Substance, the Destruction of the Body, and the eternal Ruin of the Soul."*

Even today, the bar, particularly the gay bar, endures a negative reputation. Florence King, in *HE: An Irreverent Look at the American Male*, compares that uniquely seventyish institution, the singles bar, to the gay bar. Her words sting: "Both are gin mills with a primarily sexual function. Their atmospheres are identical: anonymity, false happiness, frantic conviviality or a studied blase pose adopted to mask desperation, a concentration on physical attractiveness and youth, mockery or harsh pity toward anyone 'over the hill,' and an underlying sense of stealth and guilt."

Is this all they are? In cities where gay bars proliferate, they offer many purposes to their clientele. Some men use gay bars solely for the function of finding a sexual partner. Others enjoy the relaxed atmosphere and friendliness of the bar and do not actively seek sexual partners. Intellectuals may do their profound thinking while sitting alone in a bar, nursing a can of beer.

"I come here to relax, have a drink after work," an anonymous customer at Houston's *Mary's* told us. "Occasionally I cruise."

"I stop off here after work for a couple of drinks," Billy Joe Shelton informed us while we sat in *The Lazy Joe*, an obscure unadvertised Houston gay bar. "I do this for relaxation. Plus, I know the bartender—an old friend—and a few of the regulars. Purely a social activity for me." Billy Joe, an ole' timer, gay bartender in Houston for 30 years, then went on to tell us of his farm, his financial independence and of his opinions of the contemporary gay scene.

Gay bar history might have begun in Babylon or Rome; documentation is not readily accessible. In America, New Orleans and New York undoubtedly began gay bar history, followed of course by San Francisco. In modern, booming futuristic Houston, I discovered three estab-

lished gay bars—*The Pink Elephant*, *The Exile*, and *Mary's*. These "historic sites" were pursued with another interest in mind. How was it in the old days when being gay wasn't necessarily "Proud to Be," let alone safe?

"Gays weren't into the drug scene," Billy Joe continued. "We drank beer or brown-bagged it." He added, "I'm not a typical citified gay. Still country, like Houston's gay bars used to be, when Houston was a town, not a city."

How do "city gay bars" differ from "country gay bars?" Billy Joe described, "The country gay bar, like the small town gay bars of today, wasn't free and cruisy like most of the modern day gay bars. If a stranger walked in, no one spoke to him, unless he sent over a beer to someone. Then, he was welcomed as a friend."

Bill Smith, owner/manager of Houston's *Pink Elephant*, "The Oldest and Friendliest Bar in Texas," provided us with additional gay bar folklore. In existence since 1936, the *Pink Elephant* served only beer until 1979.

"We used to be located two blocks down the street, next to a fancy, and once successful Italian restaurant," Bill began. "Often, the *Pink Elephant* caught the overflow of customers from the restaurant. There, for a while, the clientele was mixed. One way to tell if the clientele was chiefly gay was to wait until the restaurant closed for the night."

The *Pink Elephant* achieved a degree of fame (or infamy) under the 20-30 year management of Miss Effie, a post-Depression Era version of Annie Oakley, who was bound and determined to keep her gay bar respectable and orderly.

"She would sit over at a corner table every night, a pistol hidden in the folds of her skirt," Bill told us. "If the queens got too rowdy, she'd fire that pistol into the air. That usually settled people down. No one doubted that she'd aim the

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By Charles Casey

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Earl Clark

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The Exile: An oasis in downtown Houston—live entertainment featuring good country music.



# The Bars:

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Gay bars, like small businesses, come and go. Nothing glamorous, exciting, or inviting stirs one as he approaches the shabby facade of the **Pink Elephant**. How has this "seedy looking dive" that bespeaks "trash" maintained popularity and durability?

"Regular crowd mainly," Bill explained. "We're rather respectable. It's quiet, friendly here. We have long-term bartenders and we (the management) mingle with our customers. No hustlers are allowed. And, we're rumored to have a hot tearoom. Most of our advertising is by word-of-mouth."

Former bar owner/manager and long-time gay activist in Houston, Rita Wanstrom, reminisced about "the gay ole' days" in Houston over coffee at the **Brasserie** restaurant. Years ago, she opened up **The Roaring Twenties**, the first bar in Houston where gays could come together. Shortly after that bar went defunct, she opened up **Hazel's**, ostensibly a straight bar.

"We had a red light by the front door," Rita told us, an animated almost mischievous glint in her gray eyes. "Gay couples danced together. If the cops were coming down the road, the light began flashing and everyone switched partners so that it appeared heterosexuals were dancing."

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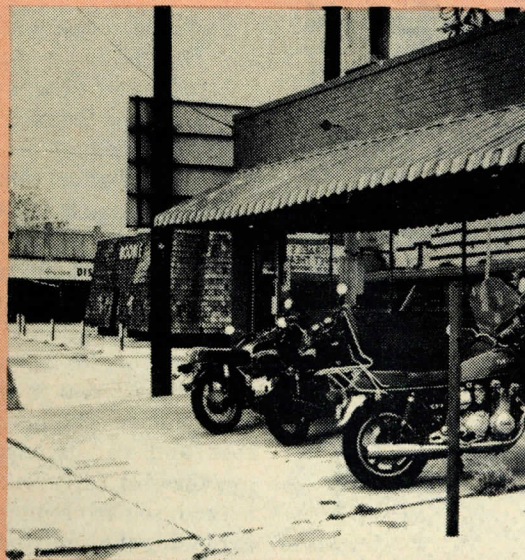
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**MARY'S:**  
A Houston  
legend at the  
heart of  
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Years ago, in Houston, she informed us, we couldn't have sat here in ease like we were. Out of the blue, the police might have come in and yelled "All queers get out and line up!"

"Fear of harassment, exposure and blackmail were part of our daily lives," added a friend of Rita's sitting with us, a long standing engineer with Brown & Root, who wishes to remain anonymous. "Gays today do not appreciate the freedom they do have. They take it for granted."

"We've gained a lot through our permissive society," Rita continued. "Years ago, we learned to blend in, seek progress furtively, discretely. We should be grateful for the progress toward gay rights and gay freedom that's been made."

In the old days when being gay was illegal, when gay bars were illegal and when the local police department frequently went on "queer" hunts (reminiscent of Salem witch hunts two centuries earlier) gays looked to the public meeting place (the bar) for survival of a struggling lifestyle, a place to meet others, maybe find a companion, a place to discuss gay problems or needs, to bullshit and share dreams of a better day.

"Discrimination within the gay community puzzles me," Rita concluded, referring to black vs. white or lesbian vs. gay male that's obvious in Houston and New Orleans gay bars of today. "At one time, there was not room for it. We came together for survival."

For whatever reasons, gay bars remain the focal point of the gay lifestyle, socially, politically and to a certain degree monetarily. From survival to fund raising to easy cruising, they remain vital.



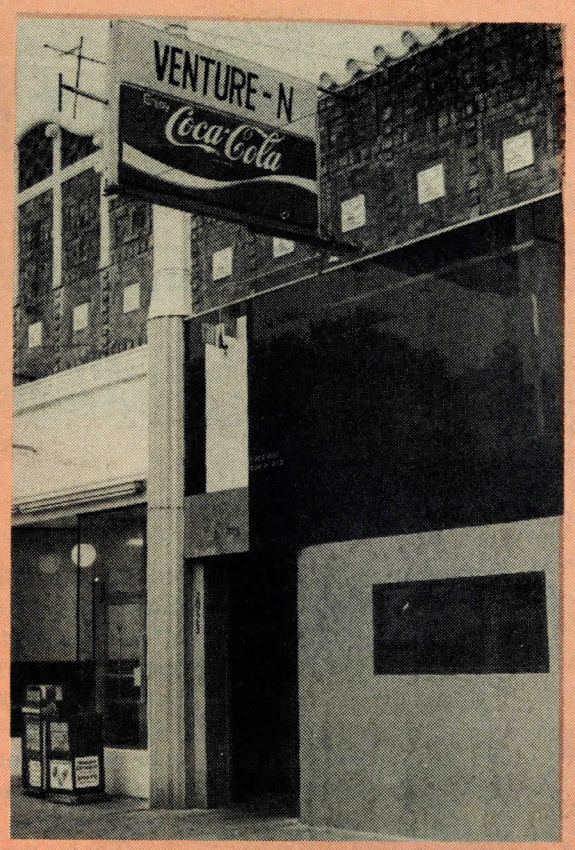
**Brazos River B**  
Good vibes, countr  
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**Ratshole: Grand Opening—Soon**



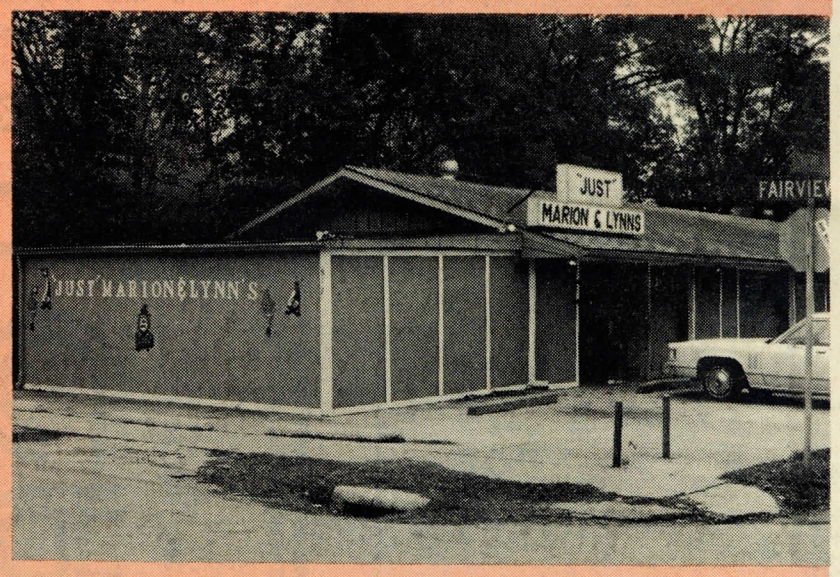
**MARY'S:  
A Houston  
legend at the  
heart of  
Montrose.**



**Venture-N: San Francisco ambience  
and Houston hospitality.**



**Brazos River Bottom:  
Good vibes, country music  
and lotsa stompin'.**



**Just Marlon & Lynns: Friendly,  
hospitable—where the girls are.**

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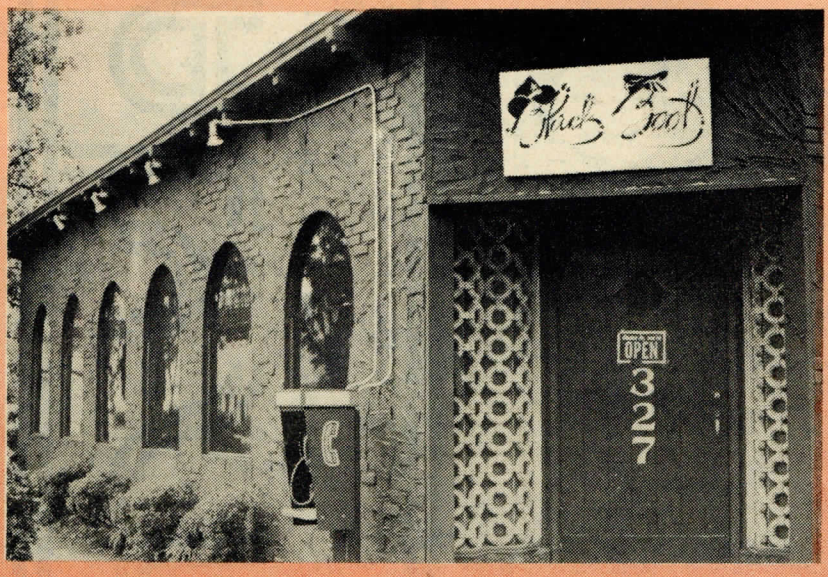
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**The Black Boot: The latest addition to  
Houston's leather scene.**

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