

Going Out, Diving In

UNCOVERING QUEER HISTORY in MINNEAPOLIS

Noah Barth

Prologue

The three locations discussed in this article were featured in the exhibit *Going Out, Coming In: LGBTQ+ Spaces in Downtown Minneapolis*, which was on display at Mill City Museum from June 1 to November 5, 2023.

The MNHS exhibit *Going Out, Coming In* was inspired by the LGBTQ+ History Tours, a collaboration between Twin Cities Pride and the Minnesota Historical Society. Both the digital tours and the exhibit focused on important sites of queer and transgender (trans) history. Location-based history can be remarkably powerful. One of the main exhibit goals was for LGBTQ+ people to see themselves reflected in the landscape of the city, even when the building or the business no longer existed. The exhibit did this by portraying the social spaces that architecture facilitated, rather than by focusing on the architecture itself. Thus, the exhibit moved beyond the facade of the buildings that played host to these important spaces to reveal the dynamics of the communities that were forming inside and the personal stories of the people who created those communities.¹

In addition to highlighting past sites of queer and trans gathering for an LGBTQ+ audience, the exhibit had three other main goals and themes. First, it uncovered

Author Noah Barth is a queer historian and was co-developer of the MNHS exhibit *Going Out, Coming In*, part of an ongoing partnership between Twin Cities Pride and the MNHS. The exhibit will be on display again at Mill City Museum April 18–July 7, 2024.

hidden histories of LGBTQ+ people in Minneapolis and brought those stories to the public. Second, it explained through these sites how queer and trans people were interacting among themselves and with the larger world, including activist movements and discrimination. Lastly, it developed a sense of empathy and solidarity with parts of queer and trans life that are often deemed “explicit” among exhibit goers who did not identify as LGBTQ+ by using personal narratives to expand on this history.

The sites that were featured in *Going Out, Coming In* were mainly nightlife sites, because the exhibit focused on the vice districts of Minneapolis. Vice districts offered anonymity that queer and trans people often needed, along with affordable living. “Vice” behaviors were defined by the city or state that regulated them and often included same-sex attraction and gender variance. However, these sites were more than drinking establishments; they offered spaces outside work or biological families where people could forge authentic friendships and find common goals. They fostered a sense of group belonging and identity formation while facilitating the evolution of queer political power, relationships of all kinds (including romantic and sexual), and self-acceptance for queer and trans people.

Like many museum exhibits, *Going Out, Coming In* told complicated stories in a small space. Since each text panel we designed could have no more than 250 words, we left out many of the details we gathered while doing research. This article presents the more detailed stories of three of the sites featured in the exhibit: Onyx Bar, Sutton Place, and the Locker Room Baths. By diving into these three sites from the exhibit in more detail, we can uncover more about the historical characters and settings of queer life in Minneapolis and discover how the community formed and persevered in these times of change, challenge, and joy. We can also better understand the challenges and rewards of researching and exhibiting queer history for public audiences.

The three sites in this article are situated during three pivotal moments of queer history: 1) during and immediately after World War II, when gay men were creating communities within the homosocial environments of the military and soon were forming some of the first gay rights organizations, such as the Mattachine Society; 2) during the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when organizations like Fight Repression of Erotic Expression (FREE) were being founded and the Stonewall Rebellion occurred; and 3) during the sexual liberation of the 1970s and the onset of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s.

LGBTQ+ Timeline of Events

December 1924 Henry Gerber founds the Society for Human Rights in Chicago, widely considered the first gay rights organization in the United States.

Ca. 1938 Onyx Bar opens at 301 Hennepin Avenue in downtown Minneapolis.

December 1941 United States enters World War II.

1945 Onyx Bar closes.

1950 Homophile movement starts with founding of the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles. Chuck Rowland, who previously had frequented the Onyx, is one of the founders.

1958 Urban renewal in the Gateway District of Minneapolis begins. Entire city blocks are razed; residents are displaced.

New Year's Eve 1965 Gordon Locksley opens Sutton Place on North Seventh Street in downtown Minneapolis.

August 1966 San Francisco's Compton Cafeteria Riot; transgender women and drag queens resist police harassment.

May 1969 Koreen Phelps and Stephen Ihrig teach a class titled the Homosexual Revolution, which becomes Minnesota's first gay liberation organization: Fight Repression of Erotic Expression (FREE).

June 1969 Stonewall Rebellion in New York City ignites the modern-day LGBTQ+ rights movement.

July 1969 Locker Room Baths open on Second Avenue North in downtown Minneapolis.

1974 Jean Nickolaus-Tretter and Steve Endean found the Minnesota Committee for Gay Rights.

1975 Locker Room Baths are relocated to 315 First Avenue North.

1976 Sutton Place is relocated to 14 North Fifth Street.

1979 Sutton Place closes and is replaced by the Fox Trap.

1982 Bruce Brockway is the first person diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in Minnesota.

1983 Brian Coyle is the first openly gay person elected to Minneapolis City Council.

1988 315 Club (formerly Locker Room Baths) is the last bathhouse to close in the Twin Cities after city council bans bathhouses.

1993 Minnesota amends its Human Rights Act to prohibit discrimination on the basis of gender and sexuality.

ONYX BAR

Finding and exhibiting queer history can be difficult for a variety of reasons. Sometimes locations, events, or identities were obscured or not documented at all so queer and trans people could protect themselves from being caught and outed. If found out, queer people faced arrest, assault, institutionalization, and discrimination.²

The evidence of queer existence that did survive these decades has often been historically undervalued by those in the profession of collecting, cataloging, and telling history. Those few who explicitly named queer and trans content or materials in the past have been LGBTQ+ historians or institutions (e.g., Jean Nickolaus-Tretter, who started the Tretter Collection for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (GLBT) Studies at the University of Minnesota). Consequently, queer historians have had to devise alternative ways to find citable evidence by reading between the lines of information that is left unsaid or obscured by previous historians and archivists. This sometimes means interpreting close same-sex friendships, rejection of heteronormative expectations like marriage and children, embracing tendencies of other genders, and sex work all as queer even if not specifically labeled as such.³

One of the exhibit sites that emphasized both the need to read between the lines and the excitement of discovery for historians was the Onyx Bar. This was revealed in an interview on March 19, 1984, of Chuck Rowland by well-known gay historian Allan Bérubé for his book *Coming Out Under Fire*. Bérubé's book details the participation of gay men and women in the Second World War. Rowland was drafted into the US Army in 1942 but never faced combat. While stationed briefly at Fort Snelling, he recalled not only many of his peers and superiors being gay, but also going to a gay bar in Minneapolis at the intersection of Third Street and Hennepin Avenue.

Oh, it was a ratty old storefront bar. Dirty, smelly, it had wooden booths on two sides. You dressed up in your finest. . . . But I remember how carefully everyone would dress to go out and cruise the bars. Always a tie, always a handkerchief in the coat pocket. A lot of jewelry if one had jewelry. But they were dress-up affairs, even though [it was] this ratty storefront, it was very much of a dress-up place.

The Onyx Bar was located at 301 Hennepin Avenue, where the Minneapolis Central Library now sits. It was in the heart of the Gateway District, a bustling section of

The Onyx was one of the earliest known gay bars in Minneapolis, which made finding a photograph of it not only important but also unlikely.

downtown Minneapolis where saloons, flophouses, brothels, liquor stores, and theaters operated. The proliferation of the sex industry, liquor sales, and working-class residents inspired the ire of the city's politicians, who identified the area as a vice district. It was these very conditions that allowed for a sense of anonymity and affordability for gay people to frequent the Gateway and, in turn, create Minneapolis's first "gayborhood."⁴

The Onyx was central to the gay scene from around 1938 until 1945. Thereafter, other establishments replaced the bar, until the entire block was demolished to build the Minneapolis Central Library, which opened in 1961. This was part of an urban renewal project started in 1958 to clean up the Gateway and eliminate vice. Razing more than 20 blocks of downtown Minneapolis, including 200 buildings, the effort displaced nearly 3,000 residents. Among the many LGBTQ+ gathering spaces destroyed were the former Onyx Bar, the Dugout, and Persian Palms, and along with them many of the memories and evidence of queer communities.⁵

In the book *Land of 10,000 Loves*, Stewart Van Cleve, an archivist and librarian at Augsburg University in Minneapolis, states, "Were it not for Bérubé, the [Onyx] bar would have vanished from memory entirely." Indeed, had it not been for Rowland's memories and Bérubé's prompts as an oral historian, we may not have ever known that queer people were gathering at the Onyx Bar in the 1930s and 1940s.⁶

Chuck Rowland had lived in Minneapolis in the late 1930s when he transferred from South Dakota State University to the University of Minnesota. Rowland, in a letter dated December 1, 1977, to historian John D'Emilio, recalled going to the Onyx Bar during college.

There were only two [gay bars] that I knew of—one in Minneapolis downtown on the main street. The one in St. Paul was on a side street but also downtown.

Neither was much on decor: The one in Minneapolis was downright scruffy. Both were always jampacked, and everyone dressed up. We all thought of ourselves as young ladies of considerable quality, and everyone wore his most flamboyant outfit. Bright green suits were in vogue, and everyone sported an ascot of some brilliant, contrasting color.

Most people wore makeup—rouge and a little lipstick. A few plucked their eyebrows and wore mascara, but I never saw anyone in actual drag. Without exception everyone took assumed names—quite amusing when one would encounter one of his professors and awkward, later, in the army when one met there a friend from the Onyx.⁷

A keyword search in newspaper databases also tells us queer people of different genders were gathering at the Onyx Bar. Mainly, we find accounts from a courtroom during the trial of liquor salesman Dave Weisman. Weisman was accused of paying off public officials on behalf of Betty Ryan, who ran a “house of ill fame.” Weisman denied these accounts and said the payments Ryan provided him were for liquor only, not hush money. Throughout the trial, Betty Ryan’s affiliations with other women, and their relations to each other, were brought up as an issue of concern.

A searching inquiry by the defense into the relationship between Vera (Moore) Hinman, an inmate of Miss Ryan’s resort and sort of second lieutenant to Miss Ryan, and Miss Bobbie Bannister, boyish-appearing associate of both women, highlighted yesterday afternoon’s testimony in Judge Lars O. Rue’s district court.⁸

The ensuing accounts of the questioning of the women paint a picture of women who were either sex workers or living among sex workers, as well as gender-variant, in same-sex relationships, or generally living outside of heteronormative expectations.

There was no indication that Betty Ryan, Irene Hinman, or Vera Hinman were married. Though Bobbie was married, she had decided to no longer live that life.

Swensen’s questions disclosed [that] Miss Bannister is a divorcee. She said she was married in Port Angeles, Washington in 1937 or 1938, lived with her husband only four months, and has not seen him since they separated. Swensen’s inquiry as to whether she had any children caused Miss Bannister to exclaim, “Gracious, no!”

Furthermore, the discussion in the trial indicated a level of intimacy between Vera Hinman and Bobbie Bannister.



Chuck Rowland, ca. 1952

The nature of the relationship, though not stated plainly, is deemed a taboo subject based on the questioning that followed.

She [Bannister] said she went moose-hunting near the Canadian-Alaskan border and traveled about the country, visiting Mexico and Brazil. She met Miss Ryan between Christmas and New Year’s at the Onyx bar through Vera (Moore) Hinman. Vera, Swensen brought out, gave Bobbie a watch inscribed “To Bobbie from Mickey, December 11, 1939.” . . . She went on to say she met Irene Hinman about two weeks before Christmas at the Onyx. . . . She told of a visit to her hotel by Irene and Probation Officer Brice Barnhill after the raid. While Swensen pressed her for the purpose of the visit, she said Irene wanted to know where Vera was.

Q: Did Barnhill want to know about your personal relations with Vera?

Larson objected the question was improper. The question was permitted. . . .

Q: Didn’t he say anything about your relations with her?

A: Why should he? There is nothing but friendly relations between us.⁹

One of the difficulties in exhibiting queer history is the lack of visual representation to accompany the stories we know about. The photographs of these three women are rare. Photographs of the Onyx Bar where they met are rarer still. The Hosmer Special Collections at the Hennepin County Library has digitized photos accessible online that document Minneapolis’s downtown neighborhoods for



When photographed, Betty Ryan often obscured her face with a newspaper or hat. The one place she could not hide her face entirely was in the courtroom while testifying; instead she wore sunglasses.



This photo of Bobbie Bannister and Vera Moore was initially cut to create two portraits of two women involved in the trial for the purpose of the newspaper story. At the James K. Hosmer Special Collections of the Hennepin County Library, special collections workers reunite spliced photographs back together.

Onyx Bar, 1939



more than a century. Tagging by subject—including streets, businesses, activities, and personal names—enables researchers to more easily locate specific photographs.

The Onyx was one of the earliest known gay bars in Minneapolis, which made finding a photograph of it not only important but also unlikely. The bar existed for approximately seven years, and we didn't know if it even had outdoor signage to indicate its existence. Initially, no keyword searches turned up photographs for it, nor had any photo of it been portrayed in any previous writings about the Onyx, including a blog post from the library that eventually replaced it.¹⁰

Terms that widened the search, including “Third St” and “Hennepin Ave,” proved to be helpful. The latter, for instance, turned up almost 40,000 photograph results. From there, narrowing further based on available information helped winnow the results; 36,100 were in Minneapolis, and 2,166 were in the downtown west neighborhood. Narrowing down the time span proved still more helpful; between 1938 and 1945, 176 digitized photographs matched the criteria. Among those, one from 1939 focused on a campaign parade for US presidential hopeful Thomas E. Dewey. In the background, at the intersection of Third Street and Hennepin Avenue, a blurry but legible sign advertises the Onyx Bar on the corner of the building.

Now this single known photo of the Onyx Bar has its name as a subject tag, so we can easily find it by simply searching for it. Discovering this photograph was thrilling, and we thought it was poetic that we found it at the same library where the Onyx Bar once stood. And though this may not be the *only* photo of Onyx to exist, for now we are able to use this photograph to visually represent and restore queer meaning into the place where three unconventional women met and where Chuck Rowland and Bob Hull went out with their gay friends. First- and secondhand accounts of this place told alongside visual representation restores a memory of one of the very first safe spaces for queer people in the Twin Cities to express themselves and find one another.¹¹

SUTTON PLACE

One of the sites featured in the exhibit, Sutton Place, demonstrates how a vibrant nightlife site can be intertwined with community building and political movements. In 1965, Gordon Locksley bought what was then called Sutton's Lounge in the Produce State Bank Building. Locksley opened up the bar with a New Year's Eve party to ring in the year 1966. An article in the *Minneapolis Tribune* declared it “a new place to camp.” Locksley had decorated



As an art dealer and connoisseur, Gordon Locksley initially met Andy Warhol at his studio, the Factory, between 1966 and 1967. Locksley later welcomed Warhol when he visited in 1975 for a book tour and for their gallery show, which featured works of Warhol, including a two-panel portrait of Shea and Locksley, seen on the back wall here.¹

the bar with movie posters with campy titles and described it as “nothing pretentious. Just a small, gay, side street bar like you find in most of the big cities.”¹²

Locksley and his partner, George Shea, were culture leaders in the Twin Cities. They owned a salon, the Red Carpet, where they routinely sold artwork, antiques, and wigs.

The two, while also business partners, were partners in life. This was so apparent that when, in 1963, an intruder broke into the pair's home on Kenwood Avenue, the newspaper made mention of the fact that both were sleeping in the upstairs bedroom when the burglar rang the doorbell at three in the morning asking to use the phone.¹³

What made Sutton Place unique from the start is that it was an outwardly campy, queer bar that was owned by someone who was at least known to be, if not intentionally out as, a queer man. This comes during a time when the gay liberation movement had not yet fully started. Just a month before Stonewall, in May of 1969, two young people in Minneapolis would start Minnesota's first gay liberation organization.

One of those people was Koreen Phelps. Phelps, who had grown up in South Minneapolis and Robbinsdale, knew she was gay by the time she was 15. She also knew her father was not tolerant of queer people, and her parents put her into conversion therapy at Anoka State Hospital. After this episode, sometime between the ages of 15 and 19, Phelps stole her mother's car and escaped to San Francisco. It was in San Francisco that she encountered the gay rights organizing of the Society for Individual Rights (SIR) and the Committee for Homosexual Freedom (CHF). SIR in particular adopted a view on gay rights that was holistic. SIR not only wanted to gain rights and empathy among society at large, but the organization also

founded a community center in San Francisco to foster a sense of community and dignity among gay people and to promote better physical and mental health.¹⁴

Phelps brought these tenets back with her when she returned to Minnesota and met Stephen Ihrig at the Coffeehouse Extempore. Together they started a course in May 1969 called the Homosexual Revolution, which evolved over the summer and autumn into a student organization called Fight Repression of Erotic Expression (FREE).

Phelps recalled the social spaces that were available to gay people at the time in Minneapolis beyond the coffee shop where they started FREE in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood.

From there we went down to this after-hours place downtown called Sutton's. . . . We went there, it was just this dark doorway with a number on it, I think. They had a disk jockey, records, coffee. It was fun, everybody came there and danced. Sometimes they tried to bust

the place. They had agents come up there, and they were pretty funny because they looked like agents. They wore suit coats or trench coats. We'd pick them out. We did that but, we also felt the need to have something more educational, or something.¹⁵

Stephen Ihrig, cofounder of FREE, was also a regular at Sutton Place. He remembered finding other aspects of his gay identity there beyond just the political.

I somehow knew there were bars downtown in the heart, in the center of the city. . . . And like any young kid, I wanted to meet somebody. I wanted to fall in love; I wanted romance; I wanted sex; and I wanted companionship. And that was the only place you could go and get that or find that was downtown, after hours in the dark . . . where it was safe to go.¹⁶

The first Sutton Place was located in the Produce State Bank Building on North Seventh Street, seen in the background of this photo.



Sutton Place demonstrates how a vibrant nightlife site can be intertwined with community building and political movements.

Ihrig also recalled some of the people at Sutton's not being interested in getting involved in gay liberation. Still, many people he knew from the bar came to the first meeting on the homosexual revolution.

The ones who showed up, the ones who came, I would say one-fourth were students. . . . The others, a lot of them, were from Sutton's downtown. They wanted to know what was going on . . . and they did not sign up, none of them did. And I don't blame them. Most of them didn't come back. But they were absolutely fascinated by it. . . . But one has to understand, they had everything to lose. They had nothing to gain by this and they saw it as a threat. And they wanted to know who were these freaks. Because some of them probably knew who I was. Because I used to go to Sutton's and I didn't dress like a prep to go down there.¹⁷

Phelps and Ihrig both viewed many gay social spaces, including Sutton's, as apolitical. Police raiding the bar and political leaders mobilizing or socializing within the space suggests Sutton's was social and political. Some gay rights organizations, including San Francisco's Society for Individual Rights, believed that liberation for queer people required not only political action but also community building.

We organize for: . . . the elimination of public stigma attached to human self-expression; the accomplishing of effective changes in unjust laws concerning private relationships among consenting adults . . . the establishing of an attractive social atmosphere and constructive outlets for members and their friends.¹⁸

LGBTQ+ social spaces in Minneapolis were consistently under threat and actively politicized by those who wished to shut them down. The Morals Squad was part of the Minneapolis Police Department that tried to regulate the bodies and social interactions of LGBTQ+ people, among other people deemed undesirable. When

the Morals Squad raided the bar in 1966, Sutton Place had its liquor license suspended for 15 days. The head of the Morals Squad, Eugene Wilson, observed men "dancing together, holding hands and kissing but no arrests had been made." When consulted, Assistant City Attorney Dabe Shama determined that holding hands or kissing would hold up in court as "indecent acts." Gordon Locksley and his attorney did well in moments like this to remind Chief Wilson that his wife was a regular at Locksley's Salon.¹⁹

Steve Endean also made Sutton Place a political space. Endean worked in the coatroom at Sutton's, where he "began his career by trying to politicize patrons as he returned their jackets." Endean teamed up with Jean Nickolaus-Tretter to found a lobbying organization, the Minnesota Committee for Gay Rights (MCGR) in 1974. Committed to fair and equal treatment for everyone in society, Endean went on to found the Human Rights Campaign in 1980, the largest LGBT civil rights organization in the United States. Though Endean died in 1993 from AIDS-related illness, his legacy of politically mobilizing for gay rights stands strong today, with its foundation rooted in a long-lost Minneapolis nightclub.²⁰

The political versus social divide of LGBTQ+ existence is not so stark. The lessons from Phelps and Ihrig are that political leaders also require and desire social atmospheres beyond their political activities. They need the respite to find love, find friendship, find sex, and find themselves on the dark dance floors of nightlife spaces. But the story of Morals Squad raids and Steve Endean also tells us that politics is embedded into the nightlife space itself. LGBTQ+ spaces are politicized because they are a site for community formation and mobilization. Those who believe that LGBTQ+ people do not deserve to have equal rights will expose the spaces that foster that sense of dignity and respect as a political space. Conversely, LGBTQ+ people will use their community spaces to politically mobilize for their rights, including fighting for the right to have those said community spaces.

Sutton Place changed ownership and became a disco hotspot in the 1970s. But by the end of the decade, another turnover in owners, clientele, and bar name ended Sutton's legendary reign as an LGBTQ+ hotspot.

LOCKER ROOM BATHS

Just around the corner from Sutton Place, in 1968, renovations were underway at the 600 block of Second Avenue North. The property records for the address indicate a basement remodel in November of 1968. In the months that followed, from December 1968 to May 1969, two vent

systems, two water closets, three urinals, three basins, two showers, two floor drains, and a steam power plant were installed—all necessities for a burgeoning bathhouse. *Guild Guide*, a national gay publication that featured LGBTQ+ businesses, listed the Locker Room Baths.

150 lockers. Rooms available. Color TV. Excellent taste. Station KQRS piped in 7 days a week (24 hours). Very plush and clean; 55 private rooms w/single beds. One block below "Sutton's." Active. Men only. Opened July 1969. Carpeted and paneled rooms, erotic wallpaper. Age limit: 18. 6-hr. limit. \$4 at night; \$3 for locker during the day. Busy Fri. & Sat. nights. 630 2nd Avenue N. 338-5081.

Based on phone number changes, in 1975, a year before Sutton Place moved, the Locker Room Baths moved from its first location to 315 First Avenue North; the baths would later be called the 315 Club.²¹

The Locker Room was an important community site particularly for gay, bisexual, and queer men. On a busy weekend, approximately 700 patrons would come from five different states (North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota). But as a site where sex was a main component to its existence, it could often be misunderstood by those within and particularly outside of the LGBTQ+ community.²²

Police and city officials, whether openly hostile or simply apathetic to commercial sex establishments, failed to recognize the importance of bathhouses for gay male communities. These spaces served as sites for education and testing for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. They provided a safe and warm place to have romantic or sexual encounters with less fear of violence, death, or outing. And for some gay men, bathhouses simply offered a safe place to stay.²³

To counteract the misperceptions and shed light on the important positive roles of bathhouses, the *Going Out, Coming In* exhibit featured personal bathhouse narratives

of both joy and oppression that appealed to basic human empathy, understanding, and solidarity with those who frequented LGBTQ+ establishments. One such narrative came from Chaz (pseudonym), a bathhouse patron who recalled going to the Hennepin Baths after he had been abused at home.

This abusive first boyfriend I had, one night we had a horrible fight, he kicked me out and I picked up an armful of dirty clothes and my platform shoes. I dropped one, and he picked it up and cracked it over my face and fractured my jaw. So I went and lived at the bathhouse



At the second location of the Locker Room Baths, on First Avenue North, patrons entered via a black staircase up to the second floor and the bathhouse spanned up to the fourth floor of the building.



Two employees of the Locker Room, Patrick Schwartz and Doug Victor, protested the 1980 raid by burning their citations in front of the mayor and police chief; they were later acquitted of their charges.²⁵ Right, Locker Room/315 Club room key.



[Hennepin Baths] across from the [Gay] 90s for two or three weeks.

Usually, patrons could not spend the night at a bathhouse; however, Chaz clarified, again, it was who you knew. One of the big drag queens of the early '80s was named Cleo, and Cleo lived at the Locker Room. But the couple of weeks that I spent at the Hennepin Baths, I did have a little fun. . . . But Locker Room was the one of choice . . . the hotter guys went there.²⁴

Historically, the gay community has considered bathhouses to be more democratic social and sexual spaces than most gay bars. Gay African American poet Essex Hemphill wrote in *Brother to Brother*,

At the baths, certain bars, in bookstores and cruising zones, Black men were welcome because these constructions of pleasure allowed the races to mutually explore sexual fantasies. . . . The sites of pleasure were more tolerant of Black men because they enhanced the sexual ambiance, but that same tolerance did not always continue once the sun began to rise.

Locker Room and Hennepin Baths patron Raymond Dolezilek (Fort Peck Dakota) recalled, “at the baths you could do

what you wanted. There wasn’t that stigma, that separation of races.”²⁵

But plenty of stigma for bathhouses existed beyond the dark halls of these sexual spaces. In June 1979, police raided Big Daddy’s bathhouse, a competitor to the Locker Room. Then the Locker Room was raided in December of 1979, with 116 men ticketed for participating in a disorderly house and nine arrested for sodomy. In February of 1980, the Locker Room was raided again, with 102 men being cited, including two employees. The raids on bathhouses and other commercial sex establishments, including adult bookstores and theaters, persisted through the mid-1980s, but they never were as big or as highly publicized as the raids in 1979 and 1980.²⁶

By the mid-1980s, however, a new tribulation for bathhouses and the LGBTQ+ community had arrived: HIV/AIDS. This led to a “volatile political campaign to close the baths and sex clubs” beginning in 1984, according to Gayle Rubin, professor of anthropology, women’s studies, and comparative literature at the University of Michigan. That campaign arrived in Minneapolis (and St. Paul) a few years later.²⁷

St. Paul and Minneapolis banned the operation of establishments that facilitated “high-risk sexual conduct” in 1987 and 1988, respectively. The ordinance that did so defined “high-risk” activities as fellatio, anal intercourse, and vaginal intercourse with persons who engage in sexual acts in exchange for money. Notably, these are not the only behaviors or acts that spread HIV, but they are the ones most associated with queer men and sex workers. These bans meant the closure of bathhouses, viewing booths, and sex-oriented movie theaters.²⁸

What complicates passage of this ordinance is that it was shepherded through the city council by Brian Coyle, who was the first openly gay councilmember in Minneapolis. By this point, Coyle had been diagnosed with HIV

(1986) and was torn between wanting to protect the health of his community and safeguarding their havens and right to sexual relationships. He once scrawled in his notepad, “But this issue, the so-called ‘bathhouse’ issue, is the most frightening because it is so divisive and I risk rejection by many people I respect.” Coyle was not wrong. The Brian J. Coyle collection at the Minnesota Historical Society includes stacks of slips and letters from constituents voicing either their support or their opposition to closing the bathhouses.

How many straight votes have you sold us out for?

Greg and Bob support your stance on the . . . ordinance, and they support the ordinance if it’s truly enforced in straight as well as gay establishments.

Brian Coyle! Had the above [ordinance] been put into place in 82-83-84-85-86, thousands of men’s lives would have been saved—why? The gay community would have gotten a strong message of urgency to change and FAST.²⁹

Patrick Scully, an activist and founder of Patrick’s Cabaret, a performance art incubator, recalled:

I do remember conversations around the bathhouses being closed and a lot of people feeling pissed off, and feeling like Brian had sold us downriver. . . . Ultimately, this was gonna be a disservice to the ability of gay sexuality to manifest itself differently in the world, and they were thinking that gay sex was gonna somehow stop happening in ways that would spread HIV, by passing this horrific law.

This ordinance has been enforced as recently as 2017, with the closure of a North Minneapolis sex club that also offered free HIV testing through the Red Door Clinic.³⁰

The movement to close bathhouses shifted the focus from *what* behaviors happened to *where* behaviors happened. Gayle Rubin wrote in “The Catacombs,” “Rather than promoting changes in sexual behavior . . . the move to close baths emphasized reducing the opportunities for gay men to have sex at all. Closure drove men to the streets and alleys and parks, which were arguably less safe and clean than the clubs they lost.”³¹

Indeed, public cruising in Loring Park became particularly prevalent in the late 1980s and 1990s. With that also came an increase in anti-LGBTQ+ violence. Attackers assaulted and killed queer and trans people in increasing numbers while the Minneapolis Police Department ignored these crimes. This led to the formation of

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the Queer Street Patrol in 1994, a community-organized public safety unit.³²

Rubin appropriately summarizes that “those who pushed for closure appeared to assume that nothing important or good occurred in the sex palaces. They placed little value on the baths and clubs and failed to recognize them as important institutions that served many needs in the gay male community.” Before bathhouses were banned in Minneapolis, the Locker Room was consistently under threat. The gay community fought against zoning, police raids, violence against patrons, and even the eventual discriminatory legislation that closed all bathhouse doors in the Twin Cities—legislation that still exists today.³³

Conclusion

Understanding the past of LGBTQ+ community spaces is important. During times when queer and trans people face discrimination and violence on a local, state, and national level, finding or creating safe havens is vital. Queer and trans spaces do not need justification to exist, but nevertheless we can find some by simply looking to our past.

Uncovering hidden histories of LGBTQ+ people in the landscape of city life in Minnesota is not only empowering for LGBTQ+ people but also enlightening for everyone else to recognize the long presence of queer and trans people here. Inspiration for overcoming adversity can be found in examples set by queer and trans people in 1940s Minneapolis pushing past the isolation and oppression of the outside world and making a society for themselves in the dark rooms of the Onyx Bar.

We can also understand how these spaces are intrinsically tied to LGBTQ+ liberation. Queer and trans people

can find political allies within our queer and trans spaces and amplify our struggles and our successes. But beyond the fight, our respective community spaces offer opportunities to relax and have fun in a world that is often not hospitable for LGBTQ+ people to do so, just as our activist leaders did at Sutton's in the 1960s and 1970s.

And finally, we can recognize how we have lost LGBTQ+ spaces in the past and develop empathy and sol-

idarity for those who are fighting for their right to gather with their communities. If we can understand the societal elements that threaten LGBTQ+ havens, like gentrification and urban development, discriminatory legislation, and police violence, as they occurred at the Locker Room Baths, then we can better equip ourselves and our communities to combat those ever-present dangers to our existence in the present and in the future. □

Notes

1. Twin Cities LGBTQ+ History Tours, Twin Cities Pride and MNHS, 2022, <https://tcpride.org/twin-cities-lgbtq-history-tours>.

2. Stewart Van Cleve, *Land of 10,000 Loves: A History of Queer Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 48–49.

3. Alana Kumbier, *Ephemeral Material: Queering the Archive* (Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2014), 28. Amy L. Stone and Jaime Cantrell, eds., *Out of the Closet, Into the Archives: Researching Sexual Histories* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 5.

4. Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 287; Chuck Rowland, interview by Allan Bérubé, Los Angeles, Mar. 19, 1984, World War II Project Papers, GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA, https://docs.glbthistory.org/oh/Berube-Rowland_1984-03-19.pdf; Samuel Meshbesh, "Gateway District ('Skid Row')," Minneapolis, MNopedia; Van Cleve, *Land of 10,000 Loves*, 48–49.

5. Van Cleve, *Land of 10,000 Loves*, 67–68; Meshbesh, "Gateway District ('Skid Row'), Minneapolis."

6. Van Cleve, *Land of 10,000 Loves*, 67.

7. Chuck Rowland, letter to John D'Emilio, Dec. 1, 1977.

8. "Weisman Will Deny All Counts," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, Apr. 4, 1940, 1, 12. A "house of ill fame" is an archaic term for a brothel.

9. "Weisman Will Deny All Counts."

10. "Onyx Bar," Special Collections (blog), Hennepin County Library, ca. 2013, <https://hclib.tumblr.com/post/35790314958/onyx-bar-301-hennepin-avenue-circa-1938-1945-we>.

11. Hennepin County Library Digital Collections, <https://digitalcollections.hclib.org>.

12. Will Jones, "A New Place to Camp," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Jan. 3, 1966.

13. "Bell Rings, Battle's On! Trapped Intruder Flees," *Minneapolis Star*, Aug. 23, 1963, 1.

14. Society for Individual Rights (San Francisco), *Vector* 3, no. 10 (Sept. 1967): 3.

15. Koreen Phelps, interview by Scott Paulsen, Nov. 5, 1993, Twin Cities Gay and Lesbian Community Oral History Project, MNHS.

16. Stephen Ihrig, interview with author, Brooklyn, NY, Sept. 2018.

17. Ihrig interview.

18. Society for Individual Rights (San Francisco), *Vector* 5, no. 12 (Dec. 1969): 5.

19. Pat McCarty, "City Attorney Asked for Police Guidelines in Homosexual Cases," *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 9, 1966, 21; "Council Unit Asks Bar's Suspension," *Minneapolis Star*, June 8, 1966, 4.

20. Van Cleve, *Land of 10,000 Loves*, 93–95.

21. Property records, Inspector of Buildings, 630-44 2nd Ave. N., 1968–73, Hennepin County Library Special Collections, Minneapolis; Guild Press Ltd., *Guild Guide 1973*, vol. 10 (1972), Archives of Sexuality and Gender; "Green, Two Others Indicted for Bribery," *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, Apr. 1, 1983. Local gay publications such as the *Uptown Voice* listed the Locker Room Baths at 620 Second Avenue North, meaning the baths were likely a very large complex that took up multiple addresses on the block. Eventually, Ronnie Pesis (one-time owner of Y'all Come Back Saloon) assumed ownership of the Locker Room Baths. This may have been about the same time that his father, Ernie Pesis, bought Sutton Place, around 1972.

22. Van Cleve, *Land of 10,000 Loves*, 145.

23. Mark Brunswick, "Manager Says Bathroom Is Misunderstood," *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, June 17, 1987, 1B.

24. Chaz, interview by Myra Billund-Phibbs, Sept. 1 and 23, 2018, 5, Jean Nickolaus-Tretter Collection in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Studies, Archives and Special Collections, University of Minnesota (hereafter Tretter Collection).

25. Essex Hemphill and Joseph Beam, *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (1991; reprint: Washington, DC: RedBone Press 1991, 2007), xli; Raymond Dolezilek, interview by Myra Billund-Phibbs, Nov. 8, 2018, 7, Tretter Collection.

26. Margaret Zack, "City Police again Raid Bathroom," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Feb. 11, 1980; Dan Daniel, "Second Bathroom Raid in 3 Months Nets Over 100," *Gay Community News*, Mar. 1, 1980, 1.

27. Gayle Rubin, "The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole" (1991), in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 238.

28. Noah Barth, "Remembering Pleasure in a Pandemic," *Twin Cities Pride Magazine*, Sept. 18, 2020.

29. Trista Raezer-Stursa, "Coyle, Brian J. (1944–1991)," MNopedia; Brian J. Coyle papers, 1960–2001, box 11, MNHS. Coyle disclosed his diagnosis in 1991 and died the same year.

30. Patrick Scully, interview with Myra Billund-Phibbs, Oct. 12, 2018, 17, Tretter Collection; "Does Minneapolis Have the Will to Bring Gay Bathhouses Back to the City?" *Out Front Minnesota*, Oct. 24, 2017.

31. Rubin, "The Catacombs," 238.

32. "Loring Park: Public Space," Twin Cities LGBTQ+ History Tours, Twin Cities Pride and MNHS, 2022, <https://tcpride.org/twin-cities-lgbtq-history-tours>.

33. Rubin, "The Catacombs," 238; "High Risk Sexual Conduct Ordinance (2023-00991)," Minneapolis City Council, Dec. 15, 2023, <https://lims.minneapolismn.gov/File/2023-00991>. As of December 15, 2023, the Minneapolis City Council removed stigmatizing and discriminatory language from this ordinance, though the changes still disallow the operation of bathhouses in the city.

Notes to Captions

i. *Minneapolis Tribune*, Sept. 18, 1975, 20.

ii. Dan Daniel, "Second Bathroom Raid in 3 Months Nets Over 100," *Gay Community News*, Mar. 1, 1980, 1; "Gay Bathroom Workers Acquitted after Raid," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Apr. 16, 1981, 5D.

Photographs on pp. 24, 26, 28 courtesy Hennepin County Library; photo on p. 23 is from ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California Libraries; photo on p. 25 courtesy John Hustad Papers, Tretter Collection in GLBT Studies, University of Minnesota Libraries and on p. 29 (top right), Tretter Collection in GLBT Studies, Photoshop courtesy of Jared Maire; photo on p. 29 (top left) from the *Minneapolis Tribune*.

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