

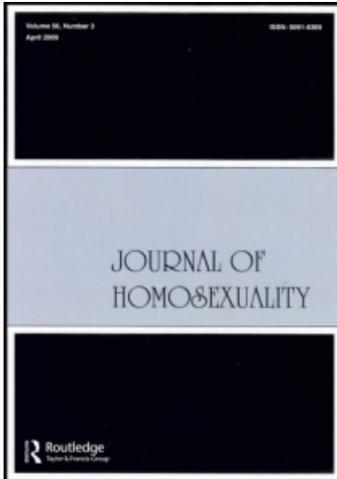
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# The History of Gay Bathhouses

Allan Bérubé

**SUMMARY.** Public policy regarding bathhouses has been criticized as being based on political expediency rather than on medical or social science. To affect that shortcoming, we include here a brief history of gay bathhouses. The history of the baths is rarely told, but whenever it is told it necessarily reflects the times in which it was written. For that reason, we include a history written in 1984, at the time that much of what was known about AIDS, routes of transmission and the role of the bathhouses was very much in flux. This history not only gives a context for the current discussion, but also allows the reader to see the history from that distant point in time. This paper was first published in December 1984 as an article in *Coming Up!*, a lesbian and gay community newspaper published monthly in San Francisco (California). It was later edited and reprinted in a book titled *Policing Public Sex* (1996). The version of the paper presented here is from the original 1984 article (pp. 15-19); several images appeared with the article that are not reproduced here. As with all the reprinted papers in this volume, no editorial changes were made to the paper and only minor typographical errors were corrected.

**KEYWORDS.** Gay bathhouses, history

For centuries, society has stigmatized homosexual men and women as sinners, criminals and diseased because of their sexuality. Baths and bars were the first institutions in the United States that contradicted

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these stigmas and gave Gay Americans a sense of pride in themselves and their sexuality. As such, gay bars and baths are an integral part of gay political history.

Before there were any openly gay or lesbian leaders, political clubs, books, films, newspapers, businesses, neighborhoods, churches or legally recognized gay rights, several generations of pioneers spontaneously created gay bathhouses and lesbian and gay bars. These men and women risked arrest, jail sentences, loss of families, loss of jobs, beatings, murders, and the humiliation that could lead to suicide; in order to transform public bars and bathhouses into safety zones where it was safe to be gay. In a nation which has for generations mobilized its institutions toward making gay people invisible, illegal, isolated, ignorant and silent, gay baths and bars became the first stages of a movement of civil rights for gay people in the United States.

For the gay community, gay bathhouses represent a major success in a century-long political struggle to overcome isolation and develop a sense of community and pride in their sexuality, to gain their right to sexual privacy, to win their right to associate with each other in public, and to create “safety zones” where gay men could be sexual and affectionate with each other with a minimal threat of violence, blackmail, loss of employment, arrest, imprisonment, and humiliation.

### ***EARLY HISTORY OF GAY BATHHOUSES IN THE UNITED STATES***

The transformation of Turkish baths, Russian baths, public baths, health resorts and spas into gay institutions began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States. In California as in other states, all sex acts between men were illegal as “crimes against nature.” Thus, men having sex with each other had no legal right to privacy. Records of California state appeals court cases around the turn of the century contain many cases of men who were arrested after landlords, housekeepers, neighbors, policemen, and YMCA janitors drilled tiny holes in walls, peeped through keyholes, transoms, and windows or broke down doors to discover men having sex with each other. Because *all* sex acts between men were considered public and illegal, gay men were forced to become sexual outlaws [see Figure 1]. They became experts at stealing moments of privacy and at finding the cracks in society where they could meet and not get caught.

FIGURE 1. Sidebar to Original Article (p. 16)

**A 1929, Bathhouse Raid**

As the police, moral reformers and the public became more aware that some Turkish baths were becoming “favorite spots” for homosexuals, police entrapment and raids became more common. In April, 1929, an eyewitness account of a raid in the Lafayette Brothers’ Turkish Baths in New York City was published in a German gay magazine (reprinted in Jonathan Katz’ *Gay/Lesbian Almanac*, 1983). The raid took place during a city-wide politically-motivated crackdown on “suspicious” people. In this raid, the night manager, who had apparently protected the homosexual patrons on his shift, was arrested with the patrons.

The 26-year-old eyewitness, apparently a European, described the baths as “very well known . . . especially as a place where likeminded people meet.” He entered the baths at 9pm, paid \$1 at the door, undressed and entered the steam room, where he had sex with another man. “At about ten-thirty I go up to the dormitory and look for a bed. Chance brings me together with a young, racy Sicilian. Unfortunately, we hadn’t noticed that there were eight detectives among the customers of the baths. . . . Now it’s midnight, and I’m already asleep, my friend at my side.

“All at once there’s a whistle, someone yells ‘Hallo,’ and everyone has to go to the front room. The bath is locked shut. Various people were struck down, kicked, in short, the brutality of these officials was simply indescribable. A Swede standing next to me was struck on the eye with a bunch of keys, and then he got hit in the back so that two of his ribs broke. There was a telephone call, and then policemen, even more detectives, an inspector, and the captain of the detectives arrived. ‘Put on your clothes.’ Everyone, from the night manager to the most recent arrival, was put in the paddy wagon, taken to the station, and jailed. By noon on Sunday we appeared before the magistrate’s court at 2nd Avenue and 2nd Street and were charged with things we hadn’t done. All of the forty-five people who were there were fined ten dollars, or two days in the workhouse, except for four who were sentenced to six months, three weeks, two weeks and one month . . .

“This is the crudest treatment I’ve ever been through,” the young man concluded. “I would place the blame for this on the terrible furtiveness and phony shame which prevails here in America . . .”

These “cracks in society” expanded as the rapidly growing cities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries created more and more public places where men could be anonymous and intimate with each other. These included public parks at night; certain streets and alleys; empty box cars in train yards; remote areas of beaches; YMCA rooms, steam rooms and shower stalls; public rest rooms in department stores, train stations, bus depots, parks, subway stations and public libraries; balconies of silent movie theaters; cheap hotel rooms; parked automobiles; and bathhouses. These locations were attractive because they offered the protection of anonymity, a degree of privacy, and the possibility of meeting men interested in sex. They were dangerous because men who went there could be arrested, blackmailed, beaten, robbed, or killed.

Despite these dangers, a growing number of men risked having sex in these semi-public places. In San Francisco, early popular spots included

the Ferry Building, Union Square, Market Street from the Embarcadero to 5th Street, the corner of Powell and Market, the Embarcadero, YMCA, the men's rooms in Macys and the Emporium, the streets in the Tenderloin, the balconies of the Unique Theater and other movie houses on Market Street, the all-night cafeterias and their toilets on Market Street between 5th and 3rd Streets, the Harman Baths, Sutro Turkish Baths, and the changing booths at Sutro Baths near the Cliff House.

Bathhouses evolved in gay institutions not by themselves, but in the context of the slowly developing sexual landscape in the nation's cities. Men—both heterosexual and homosexual—chose to meet each other in the bathhouses as alternatives to other places, usually for reasons of safety and privacy.

Historical records beginning in the 1890s document the 4 major stages in which bathhouses evolved into homosexual institutions.

1. *Ordinary Bathhouses*: Places where men would occasionally have sex but where it was unusual.

2. *Favorite Spots*: These bathhouses—and YMCAs—developed reputations as “favorite spots” for men to have sex with each other. Word got out that a certain manager, masseur, employee or police officer would look the other way when they were on duty, or that homosexuals were known to gather there at certain hours, usually in the afternoon or late at night. Some private bathhouse owners tried to prevent their places from becoming popular homosexual spots and called in the police or hired thugs and private guards. Others did not discourage their specialized clientele, paid off the cop on the neighborhood beat, told the managers and employees to keep things discreet, and increased their profits.

3. *Early Gay Bathhouses*: Mostly evolved in the 1920s and 1930s. Physically, they were no different than other Turkish or Russian baths, except that sex was permitted in closed and locked cubicles. These places were subject to raids by vice squads, in which the employees, managers and owners could be arrested with their patrons. The owners sometimes tried to protect their patrons from arrest, blackmail and violence if at all possible without hurting their businesses.

4. In the 1950s and 1960s, the first *Modern Gay Bathhouses* began to open. These places were meant to be exclusively gay and catered to the sexual and social needs of gay men. With the beginning of the gay liberation movement in the 1970s, these bathhouses went through dramatic changes. Today there are approximately 200 gay bathhouses in the United States, from Great Falls, Minnesota and Toledo, Ohio to New York City, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Many of the advantages of modern gay bathhouses were already recognized in the newspaper, medical and legal reports describing the earliest “favorite spots”:

1. *Safety*: Patrons felt they were more protected from blackmail at the baths than in other public places; the baths seemed to offer an alternative to sex in the public parks; and there was additional safety in numbers and in their identification as homosexual baths, because those who would be offended by the behavior there would not go there or would leave.

2. *Democracy and Camaraderie*: Some accounts describe “the early gay bathhouses” as refuges from society’s prejudice against homosexuals, as oases of freedom and homosexual camaraderie. The clientele was primarily homosexual and from a variety of occupations and classes, temporarily “democratic” in their nakedness. Members of the staff, too, were sometimes homosexual making these early baths one of the first identifiably gay social and sexual institutions.

3. *Privacy*: Sex took place in an establishment separated from the general citizenry. This created the first urban zone of privacy, as well as safety, for gay men.

4. *Erotic Facilities*: Cabins, steam rooms, dressing rooms, pools and hot air rooms were all available for meeting other patrons. At primarily homosexual establishments, patrons could feel secure that other patrons would not be offended by physical intimacy between men.

5. *A Social Environment*: Old friendships could be renewed, “new intimacies” were “ever in the air.” Patrons socialized with each other in the common areas.

6. *Protection*: The management and employees often tried to protect the patrons from violence and blackmail: the police generally allowed the bathhouses to stay open because they were discreet “outlets for the vast homosexual life of the city” and because some of the “best citizens” went there.

### *THE EARLY HISTORY OF GAY BATHHOUSES IN SAN FRANCISCO*

In San Francisco, the first references to sex between men in the City’s Turkish baths began in the 1890s. By the late 1920s and early ’30s, a few of these “favorite spots” in San Francisco began to turn into predominantly gay bathhouses. These are the earliest gay bathhouses in San Francisco that anyone alive today remembers. One was known as

the Palace Baths near the Palace Hotel; another was known as Jack's Baths on 3rd near Mission Street.

When these gay bathhouses emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, they offered homosexual men a new option: they could meet and have sex in a gay bathhouse, in addition to having sex with heterosexual men in a public bathhouse. Many men who came out before there were any gay baths looked down on having sex with other gay men. They had learned to prefer "servicing" straight men in semipublic places.

It was a later generation of gay men who, partly by using the gay bathhouses, learned to enjoy having sex with and loving other gay men. At a time when no one was saying "gay is good," the creation of an institution in which gay men were encouraged to appreciate each other was a major step toward gay pride. Since then, several generations of gay men—partly because of the opportunities provided them by gay bathhouses and, later, gay bars—have learned to prefer sexual partners who are also gay. The bathhouses, thus, are partly responsible for this major change in the sexual behavior and self-acceptance of gay men.

These first gay baths in San Francisco went through dramatic changes during World War II. Thousands of servicemen went to the baths in San Francisco before shipping overseas.

Many were afraid they would never return from the Pacific, and felt they deserved one last chance to enjoy other men in the freedom of the baths. The baths were an important alternative to picking someone up in Union Square, the main gay cruising park in the city, because they offered a safe and private place at a time when hotel rooms downtown were impossible to find. They were also a useful alternative to the gay bars that began to open in San Francisco during the war, because many of the bars were declared "off-limits to military personnel."

During the 1950s, two major changes took place that affected the baths in San Francisco. For the first time, baths like the Club Turkish Baths in the Tenderloin had opened with the intent of catering to a homosexual clientele. These were the City's first modern gay bathhouses. But this happened at a time when an anti-homosexual panic was sweeping the country, inspired by McCarthyism and bathhouses as well as bars became the primary targets of anti-gay crackdowns and panics. The protective anonymity at the baths helped many gay men survive the crackdowns of the 1950s.

Despite the stepped-up attacks on gay baths and bars during the 1950s, which one local newspaper called a "war on homosexuals," more baths—and bars—slowly opened as explicitly gay institutions. In May of 1954, possibly the first guide to San Francisco's gay bars and baths was printed. It was a mimeographed sheet handed out at a Mattachine Society

meeting—San Francisco’s first Gay organization. Warning that it was “Confidential and Unofficial,” it listed Jack’s Baths, the Club Baths on Turk, the Palace Baths on 3rd Street and the San Francisco Baths on Ellis. In the 1960s, a second generation of modern gay baths opened, including Dave’s Baths on Broadway (which moved from Sansome and Washington and claimed to be the first gay-owned bathhouse in San Francisco), the Baths on 21st Street, and the Ritch Street Baths.

By the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, gay bathhouses went through dramatic changes. They established themselves as a major gay institution that could both shape and respond to the rapid social, sexual and political changes that were taking place. Some of these important changes included:

- San Francisco’s Embarcadero YMCA, along with many YMCAs in other cities, had earned reputations as “favorite spots” for sexual activity at least as early as World War II. By the 1960s, according to men who were early frequenters of the Y, sexual activity there began to decline. Many of these men attribute this decline to the opening of gay baths during the same period.
- In March 1966, as gay bathhouses continued to open in San Francisco, the Assistant Police Chief announced a “‘crackdown’ . . . on public baths . . . suspected of tolerating . . . homosexual problems.” Undercover police arrested a Methodist minister at the 21st Street Baths for “making sexual advances to a policeman,” as well as a clerk who refused to call the police after the arrest of his patron. The crackdown was short-lived and the minister’s trial ended in a hung jury.
- When the “Summer of Love” in 1967 created a new communal ethic among the hippie generation, “orgy rooms” were installed in some bathhouses where group sex became more popular.
- In January 1976, Representative Willie Brown’s “consenting adult sex bill” went into effect in California. As a result, gay bathhouses and the sex that went on in them became legal for the first time.
- In January 1978, to test whether this new law applied to bathhouses, officers from Northern Station raided the Liberty Baths on Post Street and arrested three patrons for “lewd conduct” in a public place. This was the first bathhouse raid since the 1966 crackdown, but Police Chief Charles Gain denied that the police were beginning a new crackdown. The District Attorney’s Office dropped the charges against the three men. “There’s no question this was a private place,” the DA’s office said.
- In the late ’70s, with the new technology that allowed the projection of video tapes onto large screens, bathhouses began installing

video rooms where patrons could masturbate alone or with each other while watching gay sex videos that many could not afford to have at home. In fact, masturbation became a more acceptable practice in the bathhouses partly as a result of these videos.

- In the 1960s, '70s and '80s, several bathhouses, including Dave's, the Barracks, Liberty Baths and the Bulldog Baths, encouraged gay artists who were their employees or patrons to decorate the walls with erotic murals. For some artists, these murals were the first opportunity to create and display their art for an exclusively gay audience.
- In the 1970s, fantasy environments were installed that recreated the erotic situations that still were illegal, public and dangerous outside the walls of the baths. Glory holes recreated the toilets. Mazes recreated park bushes and undergrowth. Steam rooms and gyms recreated the YMCA and Video rooms recreated the balconies and back rows of movie theaters. Cells recreated and transformed the environment of prisons and jails, where generations of gay men have ended up for risking sex in toilets, parks, and the YMCA.
- In the 1970s, some bathhouses featured entertainers that appealed to a gay male audience. The best known was Bette Midler, who began her career performing to gay men at the Continental Baths in New York City. In San Francisco, one bathhouse opened a "Starlite Cabaret," which featured local singers and bands. Country Western bands also began playing on "Western Night" at the baths.
- Several bathhouses began to feature weekly "Movie Nights," when they presented current Hollywood films. At the same time, Hollywood produced two major films situated in gay bathhouses: "The Ritz" and "Saturday Night at the Baths."
- Many gay bathhouses threw parties for their members on major holidays: Lesbian and Gay Pride Day, Halloween, New Year's Eve, Christmas, Valentine's Day. These parties were a tremendous service to the gay men whose families had rejected them and for whom holidays represented a particularly depressing time of year. Holiday parties at the baths, especially for the men who frequented them regularly, could become a social event with familiar people that affirmed their sexuality. They offered a welcome alternative to loneliness and isolation.
- Also in the '70s, the City Clinic began to conduct free VD testing, usually by gay health workers, in many of the baths on a regular basis.

- In the 1970s, as the gay press in San Francisco began to come of age, newspapers like *Kalendar*, *Bay Area Reporter*, the *Sentinel*, *The Crusader*, *Databoy*, *The Voice*, *Coming Up!* and others were distributed for free in the bathhouses as well as the bars.
- Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, gay bathhouses offered their patrons a variety of new services: snack bars and cafes, dance floors for disco and country-western dancing, theme nights such as Buddy Night and Western Night. They also served the gay community by sponsoring benefits for community organizations.

The 1980s witnessed even more dramatic changes at the baths. With the increased popularity of exercise and bodybuilding, gyms and workout rooms were installed. In the last year, safe sex posters, brochures, cards and condoms have been displayed and given out, and safe sex forums have been held on the premises. In the last few months, orgy rooms, mazes and glory holes have been boarded up. Several bathhouses introduced “jack-off” nights, and some made their facilities available to private gay male jack-off clubs.

### ***THE URBAN POLITICS OF GAY BATHHOUSE RAIDS, CLOSURES AND SURVEILLANCE IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE***

Since they were first discovered by city officials in the United States, gay bathhouses and bars have been kept under surveillance by undercover police officers. Yet police departments have also tolerated gay baths and bars as practical solutions to the difficult law enforcement problems of controlling sex in public places. During periodic “anti-vice drives clean-up campaigns,” and “morals drives,” bars and bathhouses have been harassed, raided and shut down by police, state liquor agents, district attorneys, military police and arsonists [see Figure 2]. During these drives, plainclothes police officers have compiled secret reports on the sexual behavior inside bars and baths—“sexual behavior” that has included dancing, caressing, kissing, and invitations to one’s home. Plainclothes officers have used entrapment techniques to entice gay men and women into illegal sexual activities. The city and state used this sexual “evidence” to close gay bars and baths in an attempt to deny homosexuals any legal places to congregate.

Since the 19th century, these campaigns against gay bars and baths have developed in urban politics as a strategy toward attaining specific political goals, new laws, election to office, larger police budgets, moral

FIGURE 2. Matrix of Three Raids on Gay Establishments (p. 17)

	<b>The Baker Street Club San Francisco, 1918</b> To round up all men associated with the Baker Street club and their friends.	<b>World War II Morals Drive San Francisco, 1943</b> To protect servicemen stationed in the Bay Area from homosexuals who were known to gather in public areas.	<b>Toronto Bathhouse Raids Canada, 1981</b> The raids followed a successful anti-gay campaign that drove a pro-gay mayor out of office and ushered in an anti-gay administration. As a secret undercover operation, the goals of the raids were never clearly stated. But it seems likely they were an attempt to test whether the recently politically active gay community could be discredited and destroyed by attacking the bathhouses.  All 6 gay bathhouses in Toronto.
<b>goals</b>			
<b>target</b>	The Baker Street Club, its lessees and patrons, their friends.	Bars frequented by homosexual patrons. Union Square (the city's main "cruising" park for gay men).	
<b>agents</b>	San Francisco Police Department Morals Squad, Army Police, Army Intelligence, the courts.	The San Francisco Police Department Morals Squad, a joint Army and Navy Vice Control Board functioning within the 12th Naval District and the Northern California Sector of the Western Defense Command, District Provost Marshal, District Morale Officer, San Francisco Health Department, State Board of Equalization.	Toronto Municipal Police Officers, Toronto Municipal Police, Intelligence Bureau, Attorney General's Office.
<b>description</b>	In 1918, two men who had met at the YMCA leased two flats at 2525 Baker Street where they held private parties for gay men and offered rooms for gay men to have sex in private. In February, the San Francisco Police Department Morals Squad and U.S. Army Police put the Baker Street Club flats under surveillance. They planted a cook inside as a spy to collect evidence of sexual activity.	In May 1943, a joint Army and Navy Vice Control Board was formed to crack down on vice, venereal disease and liquor license violations in Northern California "to protect servicemen." Targeted bars were placed under surveillance and many had their licenses suspended. During the first wave nearly all of the six or seven gay bars in San Francisco were harassed or had their licenses suspended. Patrons quickly moved	On the evening of February 5, 1981, Toronto Police raided 4 of the 6 gay bathhouses in the city. Undercover police intelligence officers had placed all the bathhouses under surveillance for a 6-month period. Starting at 11:00 pm, undercover police officers entered the bathhouses and arrested 304 men in a 3-hour, city-wide raid. Patrons were rounded up in ways designed to terrify and humiliate them.

<p><b>description</b></p> <p>On February 16, officers entered the premises and began what newspapers called a "siege of the two flats." For a period of 10 days, as men entered the house, they were locked up in rooms as prisoners and questioned until they signed confessions, gave the names of their friends and surrendered personal letters and address books. Eleven men were arrested at the house, including an auditor for the Standard Oil Company, various salesmen and clerks, two singers, a broker, a soldier and a retired merchant. Using the names extracted from the arrested men, the San Francisco Morals Squad began a campaign to round up a second wave of homosexuals who could provide them with even more names. Their goal was to round up all the homosexuals they could identify. They began to hunt down men in other cities and on military bases. Eventually, in this second wave, 20 more men were arrested, including the 2 cops on the beat in the Baker Street neighborhood.</p>	<p>to other bars that would accept their business. Within a week or so, two bars in Chinatown became the new gay spots. When police discovered that the gay bar crowd had relocated to Chinatown, they sent in plainclothesmen to conduct surveillance. During a second wave of the drive they pressured the management of Li Po's to refuse admittance to gay patrons and the bar lost all of its weekend business. Police raided the Rickshaw and arrested 24 patrons. Two lesbians fought back during the raid and a small riot ensued. Police also arrested dozens of men in Union Square. For two weeks the gay bar crowd had nowhere to go. Finally, on a Saturday night, over 50 gay men showed up at the Top of the Mark, and converted it into a gay bar. The Top of the Mark thus earned the reputation as a "favorite spot" for homosexuals for the rest of the war.</p>	<p>At one bathhouse, men clad only in towels were lined up in the snow on the street while they were questioned. In another, patrons were herded into shower rooms and lined up naked against the walls. Several patrons reported that one police officer told his prisoners in the shower room, "Too bad the showers aren't hooked up to gas." A city-commissioned report following the raids revealed that arresting officers scrutinized the genitals and anuses of the arrested men. The day after the raids, a crowd of 3,000 angry demonstrators marched on the police station that had conducted the raid. Then they marched to the Ontario Legislature, where they tried to break down the doors in a riot reminiscent of the rage expressed at San Francisco's City Hall the night of Dan White's sentencing. More arrests followed from the demonstration. On June 16, angered by the massive protests of the original raids, police raided the remaining 2 bathhouses. Two thousand angry demonstrators once again marched on the police station.</p>
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FIGURE 2 (continued)

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>social/financial costs</b></p>	<p><b>The Baker Street Club San Francisco, 1918</b></p> <p><b>The Gay Community:</b> At least 31 men arrested, some of whom lost their jobs, went to jail, or jumped bail to flee the city; 2 attempted suicides.</p> <p><b>The City:</b> Several months of trials in Superior Court; a seven-week grand jury investigation; city and military surveillance of the Club for several weeks; a wave of anti-homosexual hysteria that needed to be controlled.</p>	<p><b>World War II Morals Drive San Francisco, 1943</b></p> <p><b>The Gay Community:</b> At least 50 arrests, several injuries during a street brawl, suspended licenses or loss of business at approximately 10 bars that accepted gay patrons.</p> <p><b>The City:</b> The creation of a floating and growing population of gay bar patrons looking for new places to congregate; the cost of mobilizing state, city and military agents to conduct weeks of surveillance and mass arrests; an undetermined number of trials and Board of Equalization hearings.</p>	<p><b>Toronto Bathhouse Raids Canada, 1981</b></p> <p><b>The Gay Community:</b> A total of 304 men were arrested in the February and June raids. Police called the employers of many of these men to ask if they knew their employees had been arrested. As a result, many of the men lost their jobs. One bathhouse went out of business as a result of the damages to its property.</p> <p><b>The City:</b> Estimates of total cost to taxpayers of the police operations and court proceedings ranged as high as \$10 million. These included over \$35,000 of damages to the premises of the bathhouses when police broke down doors, walls and lockers during the raid. A massive mobilization of police was required to monitor and control three large protest demonstrations. An official investigation was commissioned by the city, in which the police were strongly condemned for their actions, the right of men to engage in consensual sex in private was confirmed, the practice of conducting police surveillance of public parks and rest rooms was attacked, and the city was urged to take emergency steps to rebuild a climate of trust and cooperation between the city and the gay community.</p>
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<p>The round-up had to stop when names of "prominent citizens" were mentioned in court and turned in to the police. The Baker Street Club was closed, but the Taylor Street Club apparently was not investigated. A small number of defendants appealed their convictions to the California Supreme Court and were acquitted several years later. The State Supreme Court ruled that the charges brought against the arrested men—committing acts of "fellation"—were invalid because the word "fellation" could not be found in an English dictionary.</p>	<p>Union Square remained the main homosexual cruising park throughout the war. The gay bathhouses near 3rd Street and Mission were not raided, possibly in the hopes that the Union Square crowd would move its sexual activity to the baths. The gay bar crowd stayed one step ahead of the police, first moving to another set of bars in Chinatown, then moving to the best hotel bars where they were less subject to police harassment.</p>	<p>Of the 304 men arrested, the city was successful in producing only one clear conviction with a criminal record. Most of the raided bathhouses are still open. The raids built support for the gay community that had never existed before. A coalition of groups was formed to defend the arrested men, with much support from non-gay legal groups, churches, labor, minority groups and teachers' organizations. The bathhouse raids are remembered today as the "turning point" in Canadian gay political history, creating a powerful, organized, politically aware gay community. One Toronto city councilman, a gay man, called the raids the gay equivalent of "Crystal Night in Nazi Germany—when the Jews found out where they were really at."</p>
<p><b>results</b></p>		

crusades. Their success at preventing homosexuals from gathering in public or in stopping gay sexual acts have at best been short-lived.

On the surface, the goals of the early anti-bath and anti-bar campaigns in San Francisco were to protect the public morals, health and safety by:

- rounding up all homosexuals and driving them out of the city once and for all;
- eliminating all sex between men in public, semi-public and even private places; and
- preventing homosexual men and women from meeting or socializing in public.

No campaign against San Francisco's gay bars or gay bathhouses has succeeded in attaining these three goals. Bars and baths remained open; homosexuals always stayed one step ahead of the police in finding new places to meet or have sex; gay men and lesbians were forced to become more politically aware and organized. These campaigns have always failed to achieve their stated goals because the social costs became too high, or the real goals were eventually achieved: a new anti-gay law, a larger budget, or election to public office.

While the general public may quickly forget them, the stories of how gay men and women survived or were destroyed in these bathhouse and bar raids have passed down from one generation to another, told and re-told as part of the unique history and culture of the lesbian and gay communities [see Figure 3]. As a result, gay men and women carry with them a lingering mistrust of government and its attempts to intervene in their lives. Any government attempt to once again eliminate all bars or all bathhouses, no matter how well-motivated, cannot help but take its place in the long history of government attacks on homosexuals and their meeting places that has created this mistrust and kept it alive.

In addition, such a drastic measure as the closure of all gay bathhouses cannot avoid the unexpected social costs that have plagued city governments, the gay community and the general public during similar campaigns in the past.

### ***A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE BATHHOUSE CLOSURE, SAN FRANCISCO, 1984***

San Francisco has never attempted to close every gay bathhouse and sex club in San Francisco before. But from 1954 to 1965, the SFPD, the DA's Office, State ABC agents, the *Examiner* and the Grand Jury all

FIGURE 3. Sidebar to Original Article (p. 18)

**Jack's Baths in the 1930s & '40s**

A man who frequented the baths in the 1920s and 1930s remembers that Jack's Baths "may have been intended as a 'real' Turkish (style) Baths," but it quickly developed into a gay bathhouse. "Sometime in the mid-thirties, a Jack G\_\_\_\_\_ opened a Baths on Post St., between Polk and Van Ness. It had as many small cubicles (each with cot, chair, closet, a locking door) as possible; a steam room, warm room, masseurs, showers, T-room, though no pool. . . . By midnight on Friday and Saturday nights, the Baths was filled to beyond capacity. . . . Someone spread the rumor that the U.C. football team came over from Berkeley every Monday evening; the place was mobbed, though it is doubtful if any of these athletes did appear. In those days, however, many 'men' (young, handsome, available, but still MEN), came for servicing."

Jack's Baths is remembered by many servicemen who went there before fighting in the Pacific. Bob Ruffing, who served in the Navy, learned about Jack's by asking a bartender at the Claridge Room, a discreet gay bar on Maiden Lane that was popular with sailors. Trying to be non-committal, the bartender ignored Bob's question, then cautiously said, "Some of the people come in here and tell me about something called Jack's." "I finally found out from him where Jack's was," Bob recalls, "and went there immediately. It's the same Jack's that exists now on Post. That was the best one then."

Bob still fondly remembers what Jack's Baths was like during the war. "It was *good*," he told me. "Very, very busy. They didn't have an orgy room, just regular rooms. There wasn't much general activity; pickups in the hallways and stuff like that, or you'd leave your door open. It was all very quiet, but still very active. I think it was all gay, or at least people who went there knew it was gay. There was never any question about being careful when making passes at certain people."

During one of his visits to Jack's Baths in 1944, Bob met another Navy man whom he was fond of, "it seemed like a good thing," Bob remembers. "We saw each other several times, outside of Jack's Baths. We went back out to the Pacific. It seemed so good to each of us that we decided to get together after the war to give it a whirl. And it turned out to be a 15-year love affair, the major love affair of my life. So nice things can come out of baths."

Bob remembers how the baths changed in San Francisco as a result of the political climate of the 1950s. "I used my real name when I went to Jack's during the war," he told me. "It wasn't raided during the war. I'm sure that the military knew it was there, just as they knew whorehouses were there and they served a purpose. No, there was no question of any raid then. That all came afterward. They raided the baths a few times. When you went to the baths [in the 1950s] you just automatically—at least I did—invented another name, never signed your own name, because when they would raid the bars or the baths, they'd publish the complete list of people who were taken in, in the paper, in the *Examiner*. That was a nasty period, the '50s and early '60s."

joined forces in an attempt to shut down all gay bars. By 1955, these agencies succeeded in pressuring the California Legislature to pass a law allowing the revocation of a bar's liquor license if it had the reputation as a "resort for sexual perverts."

The anti-gay bar drive began in 1954 because, according to Police Chief Michael Gaffey, "a small army of homosexuals had invaded the

city, many of them apparently driven here after other cities had been closed to them by similar raids.” During these years, massive drives against gay and lesbian bars swept most large American cities as the bars developed into the major gay institution in the United States. These national anti-homosexual campaigns created a growing population of gay refugees moving from city to city looking for safe places to live.

During a major crackdown in San Francisco following the passage of the “resorts for sex perverts” law, gay men and women were driven to Oakland, San Mateo and San Jose. Police chiefs in these neighboring communities complained of a “huge influx” of “undesirables” and began conducting surveillance and raids of local bars whose weekend crowds had suddenly swelled with Gay San Franciscans.

By 1958, 15 of San Francisco’s 20 gay bars had had their licenses challenged and hundreds of bar patrons had been arrested. In 1959, one bar owner’s appeal reached the California State Supreme Court, which ruled that homosexuals had a right to gather in public and that gay bars could remain licensed. But arrests and bar raids continued in the early 1960s, with police sending in undercover agents looking for “lewd acts” on the premises. By 1965, after hundreds of bar patrons had been arrested, public opinion began to turn against the police and in support of leaving gay bars alone. While many public officials still wanted to eliminate gay bars, the new pragmatic approach was summed up by the Assistant District Attorney: “It’s better to have homosexuals in one resort rather than spread throughout the city.”

An unexpected consequence of this 10-year attempt to close all gay bars was to transform the gay community into a politically aware minority in local politics. During the gay community’s campaign to defend the bars, the Tavern Guild was formed, a gay press emerged and was distributed through the bars and baths, defense committees were set up, those arrested learned to plead not guilty in court, the Council on Religion and the Homosexual was formed. By 1965, city officials finally realized that gay bars were a permanent part of the city and could not be eliminated without tremendous social, financial and human costs. More than 120 lesbian and gay bars now operate in San Francisco.

It is impossible to predict exactly what social, financial and health costs will result from the current bathhouse closure in San Francisco. However, in the two weeks since the closure of the baths, a pattern is already taking shape, which indicates that, as in past campaigns against the bars, the unexpected social and financial costs to the city threaten to become extremely high:

*Goals:* To stop the spread of AIDS by preventing gay men from engaging in “high risk” sexual contact with each other.

*Targets:* Gay bathhouses, sex clubs and adult bookstores.

*Agents:* San Francisco Health Department, Mayor’s Office, private undercover detectives, San Francisco Police Department, the courts.

### ***Social/Financial Costs***

#### *(1) Dispersion of Gay Bathhouse Patrons:*

*Outside San Francisco:* A bathhouse owner in Oakland reports that the weekend after the bathhouse closure, his business increased 142%, indicating that, as in the 1956 crackdown on gay bars, some bathhouse patrons prefer to relocate their sexual activity to other bathhouses remaining open. This places the burden of changing the sexual behavior of San Francisco residents onto our neighboring city governments.

*To Old Sexual Territories:* Historically the development of gay bathhouses has offered gay men and the police a practical solution to the danger and the law enforcement problems associated with sex in public places. Elimination of gay bathhouses should therefore recreate the pre-bathhouse sexual landscape. Reports have already appeared in the gay press, and stories are spreading through the gay community, that street arrests have stepped up on Polk Street and South of Market, and that mounted police have increased surveillance of Buena Vista Park. This suggests that sexual activity that had occurred in the baths is now occurring with more frequency in the parks and streets, and that the burden of controlling this behavior is now placed on the Police Department. If this is the case, then men who were previously law-abiding in their sexual activity are now being driven to criminal behavior. Bathhouse closure removes the legal alternative to “outlaw” sex and encourages the practice of sex outside the law.

Another “old territory” for sexual activity is the YMCA. Since the degree of sex activity in the YMCAs declined as gay bathhouses opened, it might be expected that sexual activity in the YMCAs would increase as bathhouses are closed. This predictable consequence has already taken place. On November 1, signs went up at the Central YMCA in response to increased sexual activity in the steam room and dry room following the bathhouse closure. “The Central YMCA is not a bathhouse,” the signs read. “We will not function as one.” The next day the steam room and dry

room were closed. On November 3, they were reopened, but with the introduction of continual surveillance of the facilities.

(2) *Financial Costs:*

According to the Health Department's supplemental budget request, the initial expense of hiring detectives to conduct the surveillance that led to closure was \$35,000, and an additional \$25,000 has been requested for continued surveillance. To this must be added the costs of sending undercover San Francisco Police officers into the baths to compile the Mayor's secret bathhouse sex report in March. Additional immediate costs include court costs following sex arrests; filing the city's suit against the bathhouses; processing the bathhouse and sex club closures through the state appeals courts, with the possibility that, as in the past, the bathhouses will ultimately remain open.

(3) *Political Consequences:*

As, might be expected, bathhouse closure has already forced portions of the gay community to organize themselves around defending the baths, as the gay community has done in the past to defend the bars in San Francisco and the baths in Toronto. New gay organizations already include the Northern California Bathhouse Owners' Association, the Adult Entertainment Association, the Community Partnership (a coalition of gay community groups) and the Committee to Preserve Our Sexual and Civil Liberties. In addition, anti-gay organizations, including the Moral Majority, the Cops for Christ and a group in San Antonio, Texas, have begun to use the bathhouse closure to fuel their anti-gay campaigns.

## CONCLUSIONS

As a historian whose research has focused on the social effects of attacks against gay institutions in the past, it is clear to me that the attempted closure of the baths will only relocate the sexual activity that has taken place in the baths. In addition, the unexpected social, financial and health costs to the gay community, the city and the general public will be high. Bathhouse closure will create more problems than it will solve [see Figure 4].

To avoid unexpected social problems and still take strong measures to halt the spread of AIDS, I suggest that:

FIGURE 4. Sidebar to Original Article (p. 19)

**“Pashy Steamrooms Pander to Pansies”**

[*Broadway Brevities*, a 1933 New York tabloid]

“The pansy men of the Nation—New York, Philadelphia and San Francisco—are just nuts about Turkish bathing. Steam joints of the aforementioned cities are the gathering places of perverts . . .

“In most instances the proprietors are not aware of the goings-on in their establishments, but now a few of the places which cater to the public demand for steam baths are glad to enjoy the patronage of pansies provided their actions do not result in police proceedings. . . . Seldom in the vapor-laden interior of a Turkish bath is a contact successfully accomplished without the connivance of a wily manager who gains thereby in fat tips from his degenerate patrons . . .

“In Frisco may be found a bath where queers gather, who boast of this neat hide-and-seek joint, and although the management aims toward eliminating such patronage, the practice is carried on surreptitiously . . . to the accompaniment of warnings by and for queer patrons. . . . [Homosexuals say to each other:] ‘It’s an all right place, but one must be careful of the manager, he’s rough’ . . . and who wouldn’t be! Many a pansy, caught in the act of approach, has been tossed from this place by a gang of wise-money boys who patronize the establishment in hours of relaxation from guiding the destinies of their rackets. A martyr among homos is the lad who died of a fractured skull a few years ago. Cracked on the head with a gin bottle while ‘bathing,’ he was accused posthumously of having attempted unnatural sex acts upon his assailants.”

**“Vapour-Bath Establishments”**

Edward Stevenson, a gay New Yorker living in Europe, included a description of U.S. gay bathhouses in his 1908 book *The Intersexes*. “Resorts in the way of steambaths,” he wrote, “are plentifully known—to the initiated. With many such resorts there is no police-interference, though their proceedings and patronage, night by night, day by day are perfectly plain. A special factor in homosexual uses of vapour-bath establishments (in larger cities) is the fact that in America these are kept open, and much patronized, during all night-hours, and first morning ones; indeed, some are never closed at all; in many examples a double staff of attendants being employed. In most such baths, each client has always a separate dressing-room, usually with a couch. What ‘goes on’ is under the guest’s own lock and key, and without surveillance. New York, Boston, Washington, Chicago, St. Louis, San Francisco, Milwaukee, New Orleans, Philadelphia, are ‘homosexual capitals.’ ”

1. *Bathhouses should be used as a community resource to promote safe sex and safe sex education.* Bathhouses have undergone dramatic changes over the last 100 years, changes that gay men have sometimes risked and lost their lives to bring about. They have become an integral part of the gay community. In the last year they have changed even more dramatically by taking measures to encourage safe sex practices and education. The baths should be allowed to continue these rapid changes in order to serve the community’s needs during the present health crisis. They should entice gay men into them, especially if they

now engage in high-risk sex, so they can be exposed to more safe sex education. They should function as erotic environments where safe sex activity can be encouraged and where men can enjoy sexual intimacy and affection in an environment that is safe, clean and pro-gay.

2. *Bathhouses should be preserved as zones of safety, privacy and peer support as long as gay men are attacked for their sexuality.* Harvey Milk once called our society “fiercely heterosexual,” a dangerous place to be gay. Since his murder six years ago last month, things have not changed. Gay men and lesbians are still assaulted and attacked every day for their sexuality. A national survey recently discovered that over 90% of gay men and lesbians have been physically attacked or otherwise victimized because they were gay. Gay bathhouses still represent one of the very few places where gay men can escape the anti-gay hostility that still is out of control in our city and our nation.

3. *A working relationship of cooperation and trust between the city and the gay community is critical in the fight against AIDS.* Bathhouse closure, together with the sex arrests and political backlash that are likely to follow, will make city agencies and the gay community adversaries once again. This will increase mistrust and lack of compliance with government health programs. Until recently, a remarkable aspect of the fight against AIDS has been the cooperative relationship between the government and the gay community that is unprecedented. The breakdown of that relationship will endanger lives and obstruct the health measures necessary to halt the spread of AIDS.

To defend its case for closure, the Health Department has already begun to stigmatize segments of the gay community. It has called bathhouse owners “merchants of death” and bathhouse patrons “Evel Knievels of medicine.” It has also revived the old rhetoric of crime and disease that was used to attack the bars. Part of the old anti-gay rhetoric was that “sick” people went to the bars to spread the “disease” of homosexuality. In its press statement announcing closure of the baths, the Health Department similarly portrayed the bathhouse as “not fostering gay liberation” but instead “fostering disease and death.” This inflammatory rhetoric and scapegoating only adds to the gay community’s fears that it is once again under attack.

Recently, reports that the Centers for Disease Control considered establishing an HTLV-3 name registry have also increased gay men’s fears of government persecution. As a result of these fears, a UC Berkeley epidemiological study that the gay community desperately needs may now be doomed for lack of volunteers. The bathhouse closure further increases the mistrust of health authorities. Fears have even been

expressed that confidential bathhouse membership lists might be used to discriminate against these men.

My research over the past five years has revealed that the gay community's fears that the government will compile massive lists of names, enforce quarantines and establish detention camps for homosexuals are justified. Both the Army and Navy after World War II compiled lists of over 10,000 men suspected of being homosexual. In 1956, the FBI compiled a 53-page list of homosexuals in San Francisco and their friends. The federal government still has these lists. Several times during World War II, the Navy Department considered a plan to set up detention camps where homosexuals identified by the military would be interned for the duration of the war, not to punish them, but allegedly to protect the nation.

As a historian, it is clear to me that yet another government campaign to dismantle gay institutions, even in the well-motivated attempt to stop the spread of AIDS, will only backfire. Instead, the city should join the gay community in using these institutions creatively. The city's goals should include positive steps toward: (1) dispelling fears that the city is attacking the gay community, (2) rebuilding a working relationship of trust and cooperation with the gay community, and (3) decreasing scapegoating and restoring morale. Bathhouse closure, surveillance of sexual activity, sex arrests, the compiling of lists of names, and scapegoating will only undermine these goals.

Instead of wasting its time defending its bathhouses, its bars and its very right to exist, the gay community must be allowed to devote all of its resources, including the bathhouses, toward promoting the research, health programs and safe sex educational measures that will save lives.