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Three Homosexuals In Search of a Drink

By Lucy Komisar

It was a Greek scene in more ways than one. Three heroes in search of justice trudged from place to place. On the other hand, it was a highly contemporary maneuver. It was a challenge to one of the remaining citadels of bias, and a citadel of bias backed up by law, at that.

The actors in the odyssey were three homosexuals, with four reporters and a photographer as supporting players. The three men were determined to force the State Liquor Authority to clarify its regulations concerning the serving of homosexuals in places of public accommodation. Many bars that have served homosexuals have been temporarily closed by the authorities, and some have even lost their licenses.

The place of rendezvous on the day of challenge — April 21 — was the Ukrainian-American Village Bar on St. Mark's Place. The advance guard of reporters peered through the windows of the somewhat tatty place unable to discern why this bar had been chosen for a role in history. Torn red plastic covered the bar stools, a dusty red and white candy-striped awning of some kind of corrugated material hung over the bar, and an old-fashioned bowling machine was in the corner.

A hand-lettered sign atop the bar carried the offending rhyme: "If you are gay, please stay away." It was surrounded by more commonplace signs that read: "No Credit," "No Dancing," "No Spitting on the Floor."

The Voice team arrived first. As the others appeared, we eyed them warily. It wouldn't do to ask the man from the New York Times if he were a member of the Mattachine Society, the organization sponsoring the protest.

The three central characters appeared on schedule. One was Kentucky-born Dick Leitsch, 31, president of the society, who explained that Mattachine referred to the masked Italian court jester of the 16th century who were the only people allowed to speak the truth to the king. He was conservatively dressed in a well cut gray suit with narrow blue stripes and a light blue shirt. With a black attache case in hand, he was the picture of a Madison Avenue executive.

The second man was John Timmons, a 21-year-old coding clerk from Florida, who is a member of the organization's public affairs committee. His vivid red hair and small beard were set off by a bright yellow and baby-blue striped tie.

The chairman of Mattachine's young adult group, the third man, Craig Rodwell, 25, comes from Illinois. A sober, serious young man, Rodwell is a clerical worker.

The Ukrainian American Bar presented a difficulty. It was closed. Across the street, the Dom, which also posts a sign expressing its inhospitality to homosexuals, was also closed. There was one dependable alternative, Howard Johnson's, so everyone bundled into vehicles and made for Sixth Avenue and 8th Street.

As we entered Howard Johnson's, someone referred to the Voice picture of the previous week showing the flag burning at the Bridge Theatre. Timmons, his humor still intact, suggested, "The Daily News would probably like a picture of a fag burning."

Inside, the trio slipped into a corner booth. The press sat discreetly at the next table under one of Howard Johnson's white and gold crystal chandeliers. On the wall, a golden junk sailed across a beige wall. Green fronds in white vases and yellow daffodils were scattered about the room. The young men asked for the manager, and when he appeared delivered this statement: "We, the undersigned, are homosexuals. We believe that a place of public accommodation has an obligation to serve an orderly person, and that we are entitled to service as long as we are orderly. We therefore ask to be served on your premises. Should you refuse to serve us, we will be obligated to file a complaint against you with the State Liquor Authority."

Emil Varela, the relief manager, looked around at all of us as we patiently waited for him to play the part to which he had been assigned in our drama.

He was a gray-haired amiable man of 55 in black horn-rimmed glasses.

“How do I know you are homosexuals?” he suddenly asked. Then he bent over and shook with laughter. “Why shouldn’t they be served a drink?” he asked the abashed reporters. “They look like perfect gentlemen to me,” he chortled. “I drink, who knows if I’m a homosexual or not? I’ve got problems,” he said grinning.

Varela, who owned up to having two children and three grandchildren, declared, “It’s pretty ridiculous that anybody should determine what anybody’s sex life is. I think there’s plenty of lawmakers whose sex life I could challenge — and they drink too.” He laughed.

“I don’t think the government has any right to question any man’s sex life,” he asserted with conviction. “If the government does, I think there ought to be a few marches.” He turned to the waiter: “Bring the boys a drink.”

Challenging the State Liquor Authority was proving to be a tiring and fruitless business.

Things did not improve at the Waikiki, a Polynesian-type bar on Sixth Avenue between 9th and 10th Streets. Its dim, thatched-roof interior dotted with make-believe palm trees hung with coconuts and pineapples bespoke the sybaritic life of the Pacific islands. The three men were served.

“Certainly, I serve anybody as long as he doesn’t annoy anybody,” observed the suave, composed manager. (“Call me Mr. Urban, that’s all.”) “I run a legitimate restaurant,” he stated coolly.

If there was any connection with the now defunct Beachcomber, also Polynesian, a block away, no one at the Waikiki would be likely to say so. The Beachcomber, raided and closed a month or so ago, used to have long lines of men waiting to get in practically every night. It was the kind of rich, big-money operation that causes the knowledgeable to murmur “syndicate.”

Still frustrated by hospitality, we then took off for Julius’s on West 10th Street, long famed for the solidified dust that hangs from the ceiling. “We think we’ll be refused service there,” one of our guides explained, “because there have been several entrapments recently — one of a Peace Corps returnee.”

On Julius’s wall amid the stylized grime was an enigmatic sign: “Patrons Must Face the Bar While Drinking.”

“We are homosexuals and we would like a drink,” said Leitsch.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to prove,” the bartender replied, a fortyish man with black horn-rimmed glasses. (“Just say Jack.”) There was hope in the air.

“You can’t serve us if we are homosexuals?” Leitsch asked.

“No,” the man replied.

There were homosexuals drinking at the bar, and Timmons said he had been served there on about four other occasions. But, he grinned with relief, “another bourbon and water and I would have been under the table.”

A relaxed Leitsch went on to note that the interests of the homosexuals exceeded gaining the right to congregate peaceably in bars. He said that 25 homophile groups had met a few months ago and decided to stage nationwide demonstrations on May 21, Armed Forces Day, to protest their exclusion from the draft. The Mattachine Society has applied for permission to have a minister say a prayer and lay a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Leitsch admitted that he was something less than enthusiastic about this protest. He is a pacifist.

The Mattachine Society has announced that it will file a complaint with the State Liquor Authority against Julius's contending they were unfairly discriminated against. However, they state that they bear no ill-will against the bar or management. On the contrary, Mattachine will offer to pay the bar's legal expense.

<https://www.villagevoice.com/2009/12/02/three-homosexuals-in-search-of-a-drink/>