

# Out of steam

*Some of the history of gay Portland gives way to the future as a onetime bathhouse becomes a parking garage*

by Inga Sorensen

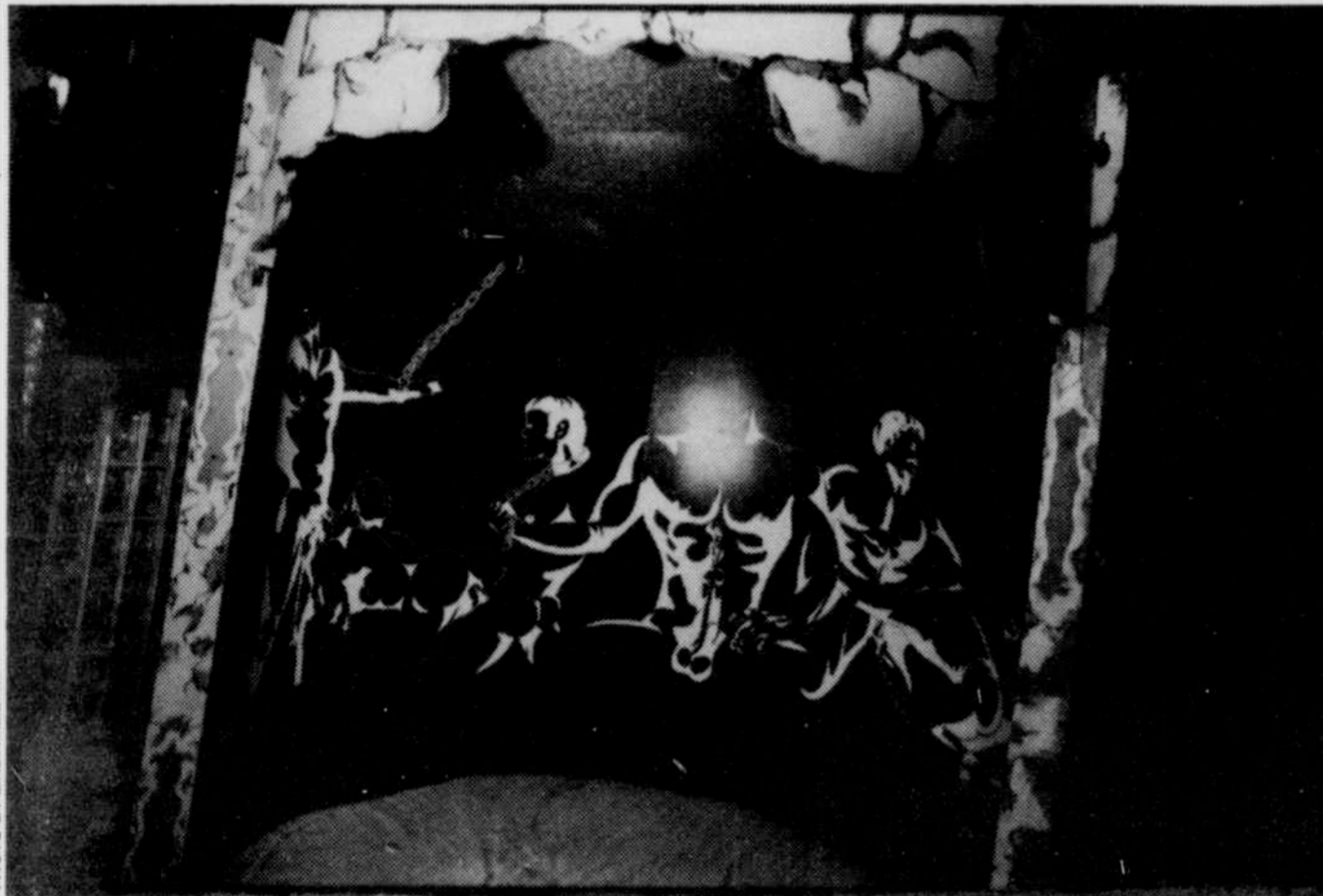


PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

**T**ucked in the basement of the bustling Rich's Cigar Store on Southwest Alder Street in downtown Portland lie the remnants of another era.

"From 1978 to 1985, that was the home of the Club Continental Baths," explains Tom Cook of the Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, which collects and preserves historical information relating to the region's sexual minorities community.

The gay bathhouse was one of a handful functioning in Portland during the dawn of the AIDS era.

"It was one of the nicer ones. It was kept clean. There was a water bed—a round one—a steam bath and a Jacuzzi. There was also a small dance floor," recounts 65-year-old Dick Burdon, a GLAPN member and former bathhouse patron. "It's a part of history, a look at what gay life was like before MCC, the Gay Men's Chorus, the square dance club and all of the other things we now have."

Indeed. Signs of out and proud gay and lesbian life have swelled so phenomenally during the past five years alone, that—at least in queer years—1980 may as well be 1900.

"Fifteen years ago we had the baths and the bars. The baths operated 24 hours, and when the bars closed for the night, the baths really took off," Burdon says. "Men would meet socially and anonymously. Some people met partners, but there was a lot of anonymous sex, and the baths were safer than the parks. And then came AIDS."

He adds, "There's still some bathhouse activity out there, but at a reduced level."

"The bathhouse appears to represent a lifestyle that no longer exists," says Don Vallaster, the Portland architect who will employ his expertise to transform the site—a historic landmark and formerly the Cornelius Hotel—into swanky condominiums for the city's upscale set.

When Vallaster is through, the defunct baths will comfortably harbor the BMWs, Mercedes

Benzes and Jeep Grand Cherokees of condo owners. Translation: the spot will be flattened to make way for parking.

That's where Cook and company come in. "We're interested in preserving the history of our community, and this is part of it," he says. "It reflects the 1970s in that the bathhouse was about declaring there was no shame in gay sex and sexuality. We plan to do a photographic record of much of the debris in the basement."

Cook says he's gotten the OK from the owners to do just that.

"My partner actually used to go there," says Cook. "We went for a walk-through recently."

On the walls, he says, are "primitive outlines of men engaging in various sexual acts."

"If there was a black light shining, the figures would glow," says Cook, adding the bath served as a diner during the 1920s and 1930s.

"I would say the artwork was competently done, but that the subject is somewhat primitive," assesses critic Vallaster.

"We're still trying to make out the artist's signature," Cook says. "Bathhouse art could be found not only here but in baths throughout the country. Before he became famous, Keith Haring used to illustrate on the walls of gay establishments in New York.

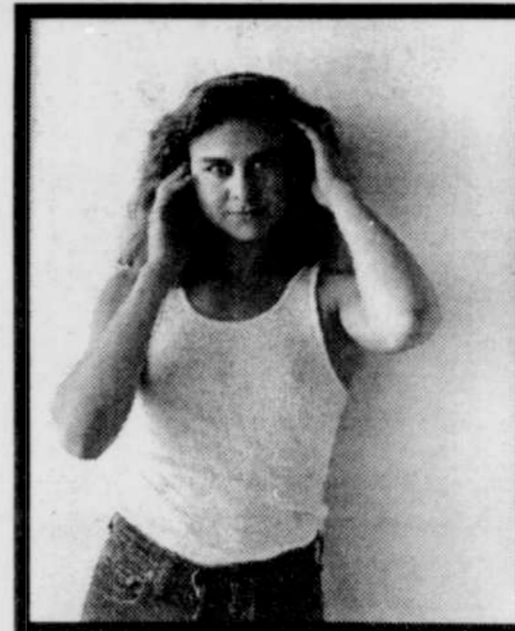
"When he became well known, people went in and actually tried to chisel those works off the walls. I don't think the artist who did the drawings at the Club Continental Bathhouse is going to have to worry about that," he laughs.

Vallaster, meanwhile, says one can still find intact about 40 "private rooms," a semi-open shower area with "four or five heads," and the undoubtedly popular orgy room.

If all goes according to schedule, however, that will all be gone in a year and a half or two.

"Some of the building's corridors will be preserved and some of the detailing," says Vallaster. "But the rooms are not noteworthy. We're talking a major overhaul."

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