

THE UNTOUCHABLES

The Burnside Triangle has a long history of controversy

by Pat Young

As part of the ongoing effort to designate the Burnside Triangle as Portland's official gay district, historians are researching the neighborhood's past brushes with local fame. "There are a couple of bars in the triangle that are really important historically, and one of them is Derek's Tavern," notes Tom Cook, Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest co-founder.

Located at 820 S.W. Oak St., the bar had several owners and names through the years. Just before it went out of business, it was the Family Zoo.

Derek's was part of the 1964 tavern controversy in which the Oregon Liquor Control Commission tried to shut down the bars by denying them licenses. "In the mid-1960s there was a feeling that there was a proliferation of gay bars to an extent that people were becoming alarmed about it," Cook says.

The June 29, 1964, edition of the *Oregon Journal* reads, "The unmentionable people are virtually untouchable people and they are growing stronger each week, both in numbers and in the brazenness with which they flaunt their abnormality." The article goes on to state that 10 years earlier the city had only three gathering places but that "today there are eight or 10 taverns and saloons in this city which cater almost exclusively to this crowd."

A businessman called the newspaper and said "that unless the mayor's office took some decisive action soon to curb the public activities of the unmentionables, he and businessmen of his acquaintance were going to take vigilante action of their own. It's getting so we can't take our kids out in public without their seeing these people everywhere."

At the time, Cook explains, a gay or lesbian bar automatically was considered a disorderly premise and an illegal operation. If it was allowed to go on, it was because the police looked the other way.

But during the mid-1960s, homosexuals were beginning to challenge the laws regarding gay bars and their right to congregate in them. "The attorney for Derek's said that you can't deny a businessman a license simply because of the people who frequent his establishment," Cook says.

He was the only attorney in the Portland tavern controversy who defended the constitutional right of homosexuals to gather in a public place. "The other attorneys for the other bars claimed that the owners didn't know homosexuals were hanging out at the bar, or they said the



The *Oregon Journal* published this photograph of cross-dressing entertainers at Portland's Music Hall nightclub March 17, 1950

this club to see some of the acts, completely unaware that they would also be seeing a gay act." The politicians pressured the owner to stop the drag shows. And when they discovered the Music Hall and Back Stage were running under the same liquor license, both places were closed down.

Another story about the Music Hall concerns Mayor Dorothy Lee's 1949 campaign to shut down gambling and prostitution. The Women's Protective Division, which was trying to protect women from going into prostitution, also was trying to protect women from being accosted by men. But somewhere along the line, the officers realized they needed to protect women from being accosted by other women.

"They had heard that there were women picking up other women at the Music Hall," Cook explains. "And how they got onto that we can only guess. Probably some-

body got caught by the police and mentioned the fact that lesbians were hanging out at the Music Hall."

Officers of the Women's Protective Division went to the Music Hall looking to be accosted by lesbians. But they didn't have much luck.

Their Vice Squad report of February 1949 reads: "We observed several women who were, apparently, what we were looking for, but no contacts were made. Sgt. Warren of the detectives said we would probably have to go there several times until we were better known before we would be accosted."

Cook notes: "A lot of the information about those bars is just anecdotal. It just skims the surface. You hear something here and you hear something there and you kind of piece together more of a story, but it is not fully fleshed out. There are a lot more stories associated with those places that we could ever imagine." □

The SEXUAL MINORITIES ROUNDTABLE will discuss the Burnside Triangle proposal during its next meeting from noon to 1:30 p.m. Aug. 14 in the Chief's Conference Room at the Justice Center, 1111 S.W. Second Ave.

PAT YOUNG, a Portland free-lance writer and gay and lesbian historian, is writing a book about 1992's Ballot Measure 9.

VICE SQUAD REPORT

"On this date, Feb. 9, 1949, we visited the Music Hall. The master of ceremonies appeared to be a man, but later in the evening she announced that she was a woman.

"The first performer was a female impersonator. One of the songs she sang was 'Virgin Sturgeon.' There was reference to a lady codfish with codfish balls and the oyster that was pregnant but didn't diddle.

"The next song was about her new house but with no Johnnie, not even a pot. The singer jumped around a lot, crossing his legs, etc. to give the impression that the need to defecate was urgent.

"Next a huge man, dressed as a woman, did a Mae West impersonation and sang 'Come Up and See Me Sometime.' This person had a smutty line of patter. Announcing her next song as 'This Time It's Love.' Next time it will be \$2.

"We checked the Music Hall tonight from 10:45 p.m. to...12:15 a.m. We stayed this late because the crowd did not start coming in until about 11:30 p.m.

"We observed several women who were, apparently, what we were looking for, but no contacts were made. Sgt. Warren of the detectives said we would probably have to go there several times until we were better known before we would be accosted.

"The cover charge was 50 cents apiece. We had three 7-Up and orange drinks apiece @ 20 cents plus 30 cents in tips. Total \$3.10 out of \$5."

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