Chapter 5

Published by

Gay Bar: The Fabulous, True Story of a Daring Woman and Her Boys in the 1950s.
University of Wisconsin Press, 2010.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/1177.

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In an endeavor to keep the bar a cozy place for my regular customers, I am eternally at war with undesirables. That is, undesirable from our viewpoint.

If an owner of a gay bar does not want the harassment and complaints from the neighbors, he tries to choose a location that is not very elite. In my neighborhood, the large apartment house nearby has police cars standing in front of it many times during the month. The rumor is that some of the girls over there are of easy virtue, and they, of course, do not want to throw stones at me. There are many winos who wander by and occasionally try to wander in. I am not only alert to protect my boys from the ones who want to harm them personally; I am always having to ease out or throw out these neighborhood bums.

I often have girls come in. Singly or in pairs. They may not know the type of place it is, and when they see through the half-opened door a group of well-groomed men, they probably think the picking should be good and they try to come in. Many times they look under age, and are in varying types of dress but I have a stock greeting for them. I lean over the bar before they have had time to ask for a beer, and I say, ‘I’m sorry but I do not welcome unattended girls in here.’

Usually they leave without argument. I have had one or two just stand
there, looking over the bar, practically drooling. I get tough and say, ‘You may go—now!’

I can’t think of a better place to avoid a husband, if you want to meet another man, than in a homosexual bar.

There have been several such instances since I have operated the bar. The longest lasting was a nurse.

She used to come in with a sandy-haired man, or he would be there waiting for her, once every week or ten days. Sometimes she would be in nurse’s uniform, other times in street clothes. She wore a wedding ring and when they came in the first time, I thought they were married and just did not know where they were. They were very quiet, drank three bottles of beer and left before 9:30. Once when she was at the bar first, he came rushing in with a profuse apology. This is not too usual for a husband. I heard her say something to him about her husband and that clued me. As long as they left before my gang came in, I was content.

This meeting went on for weeks and weeks, and as time went on they became more and more familiar. He started putting his hand on her knee or she would lean her head on his shoulder.

One of the regulars said ‘You don’t let us do that,’ and I realized that I was showing favoritism. I walked outside the counter and spoke to them quietly.

‘I run this bar for gay fellows. I don’t let them do what you are doing, and you can’t do it either. Please turn around and face the bar and keep your hands to yourself.’

‘Oh I’m sorry,’ she said, turning red. ‘I did not know.’ This was their last time in.

It may seem strange that I would want to run them out since they were not annoying anyone, but their presence put a damper on the conversation. There was never any laughter or wisecracks.

This story will amuse all gay fellows and maybe others as well.

A young fellow came in one night and sat at the front end of the counter. He was in motorcycle clothes. Jeans, leather jacket. All he lacked was the goggles. He was young enough looking to be under age and I checked
his selective service card. This check and the warm glass I gave him was a notice to the rest of the bar customers to keep hands off, so to speak.

He started playing the juke box a nickel at a time, going back to his seat each time, and soon one of my regulars, Lee, was there at the juke box with him, picking out numbers.

I sent Gil Stone over to give him the high sign. Lee ignored him. I went to that end of the bar.

‘Lee, come here,’ I said in a positive voice. He did.

I said, ‘I don’t know that guy, so you leave him alone.’

‘I just want to talk to him, Helen.’

‘You let him alone.’ I was the school teacher speaking.

He went back to his seat at the bar, but in a few minutes he left and as he went toward the front door I heard his voice, not his words, as he said something to the boy in the leather jacket. Soon he left also and I watched them as they talked outside.

I went back to Gil.

‘If you see Lee soon,’ I said, ‘and want to save him some embarrassment, you better tell him to stay out of here. I’ll not only refuse him beer, but I’ll give him a piece of my mind as well.’

Gil worked in a large store and as it happened, Lee went in there the next day. Gil told him what I had said.

‘She couldn’t have seen me,’ Lee protested.

‘Please, she sees everything,’ was Gil’s answer.

The sequel to this came early the next week.

The guy in the leather jacket came in shortly before seven. I was not ready to do business and I sent him to a little cafe next door which also had beer.

Fifteen minutes later he came in wanting credit on beer until his friend could get there, but before I could refuse him, another boy in a leather jacket came in with a girl. He bought them both beers under protest. The girl did not want a soft drink and she was too young for beer. She asked where a phone was and I sent her to a booth a short distance away. After she left I stood in front of the boys.

‘I’m curious,’ I said to the first one. ‘Tell me—why did you tell your friend to meet you here?’
‘This is classier than the place next door,’ he replied.
‘I don’t mean that. I mean why would you ask him to meet you in a homosexual bar? I thought you boys did not like to be seen coming out of a homosexual bar.’

I let him have the word twice so that he could not miss it.
‘I’ve never been here before,’ the new one said very quickly.
‘I was here once before, last week,’ the first one said.
‘I know,’ I answered. ‘You went away with the little guy in the light colored car.’
‘He accosted me outside.’
‘Yes, he accosted you outside, and you followed him on your motorcycle. I got the word back the next day that you were all right.’ I gave the last two words strong emphasis.

His friend gave him a very funny look. They drank their beer in silence and left.

I’ll bet the first one had some tall explaining to do.

My place, before I bought it, was referred to as a bucket of blood. It was a hangout of rowdies who staged fist fights on the parking lot hourly on the hour and then came back in to make up with more drinks.

Most of my business neighbors appreciate the peace and quiet that prevail there now. An incident that took place a few years back brought that out.

There is a bar about two blocks away. The owner, a short, chunky man, dislikes me very much. I can’t understand this dislike for I am sure he would not want my customers if they went there. Although he may not know it, I send him many people who come in, not knowing where they are, and ask for draft beer.

One Fourth of July he came in with four others. Two sailors who came with them stopped outside when they saw a woman behind the bar.

All those who came in were obviously looking for trouble, but since they did not seem too drunk I thought if I served them one drink they might go.

They lisped and made nasty slurs, trying very hard to get an answer from one of my boys.
They ordered another round.

Instead of serving them I went to the phone and called the police. Then I went back to them and told them I could not let them have any more.

The ringleader, my neighbor, demanded more in a loud voice. When I just stood there, he started throwing ashtrays and tore down some holiday decorations.

‘You get out of here right now,’ I said, going around the end of the bar. My stomach had butterflies but my voice was firm.

The ringleader snatched my glasses and threw them on the bar. He pulled back his arm to hit me but one of his buddies grabbed his arm.

‘You can’t hit a woman,’ he said.

They pulled him out, struggling.

This group of seven, including the two sailors who did not come into my place, I found out later had been in two other bars nearby, one of them a gay bar, and one not. They had done damage in each one. The police were late in getting to my place because of calls from these other places. One of the officers, whom I knew, went to the ringleader’s place and talked to him. He has not been back.

My other business neighbors, hearing of this attack, were disgusted with him and for the first time showed tolerance of me and the bar.

He still hates me and incites some of his customers into coming in to start trouble. I give them such dirty looks, they usually stay for only one drink and leave.

Then we have the real tourist.

Sometimes it’s one couple, more often two couples. The men are the ones who want to see the sights. They have the protection of the wife or girl friend. They feel safe. I have news for them. None of my people would think of talking to them. They park themselves in a booth prepared to sit and laugh at us all. I have an answer for that. After they collect their beer from the counter, warm glasses, of course, I walk along the bar and talk to two or three couples and give them the following instructions:

‘One of you turn and look at those in the booth. When you see that
they are looking at you, say something to the other, then you both laugh. Say another bit and laugh again.’

After this treatment is repeated several times, our unwelcome guests drink up real fast and go. A bit of laughter follows them and we have the case of the biter being bitten.

I used to have one drunk who came in just to be thrown out. He was quite amusing.

‘Watch her throw me out,’ he would say, before I could get to the end of the bar.

He was always drunk and I always did throw him out.

He did it for laughs. Once when I went into the little cafe next door, he saw me coming and threw up his arms in an exaggerated gesture of protecting his head. I could not help but be amused at his antics but I maintained my severe school teacher mien.

The worst of these undesirables are the rough characters who get drunk, feel a good fight coming on, and look around for someone to beat up. It is their belief that my customers are sissies and would be easy victims. These ‘courageous’ guys come in, in groups of three or four spoiling for a fight. They could find one too, except for one thing.

I have a standing order, in capital letters, that no one is to get into a fight in the bar unless I am being attacked and if I ask for help. I have had more than one of my boys slide off his stool with fire in his eye, only to have the one next to him grab his arm and say, ‘Let Helen handle it. She can do it.’

There is a sound reason for this order of ‘no fights.’

If a straight fellow starts a fight and one of my boys gets into it and I have to call the police, the aggressor will always say that my boy made a pass at him and his word will be taken regardless of witnesses. If the belligerent picks on me, an owner, he gets short shrift from the law. So—no fights.

I had three characters come in one night. Two I could serve but the third was too drunk. He did not want beer anyway. He wanted a hard drink. The others kept urging him to have a beer.

‘Don’t push him,’ I said. ‘I wouldn’t serve him anyway. He’s too drunk.’
Of course that was the wrong thing to say, as he immediately demanded beer. It looked as if it might be a rough go, but one of my regulars called me from the other end of the bar.

‘Helen,’ he said, ‘there’s a police car in front giving a traffic ticket.’

I rushed out the side door, ran to the street and spoke to the officer who was standing by the car.

‘Will you stick around for a few minutes? I have a drunk who is belligerent because I won’t serve him. I want to see if I can handle him.’

He turned and pointed to the drunk who had just come out the door and was reeling up the street.

‘Is that the one?’

I nodded.

‘We’d rather handle it,’ he said. ‘It’s more fun that way.’ So they wheeled their car and followed him for a block. As I watched they questioned him and then loaded him in the car. When I went back in the bar the other two were quite subdued, finished their drinks and left.

These characters think that since I run a gay bar that I am like an ostrich with my head in the ground and that I think I am fooling everyone. The reverse is true. I am proud of the customers I have.

One more story of these rough ones.

Four of them threw open the front door, leaving it wide open, and swaggered up to the counter. I took the offensive.

‘I don’t serve loud and raucous people.’

They looked a bit non-plussed, turned and left, leaving the door wide open again. They were noisy as they went to the next bar a block away.

This was one of the evenings when one of my customers was giving me a break by tending bar for a few minutes, so I was out on the floor when the same four came in again, this time very quietly.

I approached one.

‘Why do you want to hang around a queer bar?’

We do not use that term for the bar but it is the term they would use.

‘You’re not talking to me lady,’ one of them said.
‘I am talking to you. This is a queer bar. You are not a queer. Why do you insist on being in here?’

‘We just wanted to buy a beer,’ another spoke up. ‘Any law against that?’

‘There is a law against selling to drunks. You are all drunk and I shall not serve any of you.’

They left quietly.

When I get so bellicose, I am reminded of a bantam hen who will attack anything bothering her chickens. Since I am five feet four, the simile might apply.

One evening, one of my regulars sat in a booth instead of sitting at the counter.

‘Why did you sit in the booth?’ I asked later. ‘You always sit at the counter.’

‘When I came in,’ he replied, ‘I could see that your feathers were all ruffled. I wanted to sit back and see if I could spot the trouble.’

Those who are in often know me well enough to know when something is bothering me. I pace. Up and down, up and down. If I am relaxed, I sit on my stool and they know all is calm and they can be relaxed.

One evening I went to the little cafe next door to get a cup of coffee. A customer who was eating his dinner spoke to the owner.

‘Hey, Estelle, ain’t that that old battle ax that owns the place next door?’

I turned and said very sweetly, ‘Yes, I am.’

There are lots of different opinions. Some like me, some don’t.
For Helen, her inconspicuous tavern was a way to make a modest living while improving lives and having fun. “Outrageous they may be to the upholders of morality,” Donald Webster Cory and John LeRoy observed of gay bars, “but kept hidden and semi-secret, they hardly seem harmful; in fact, they may be very helpful to the adjustment of some people to their group and to their society.”

“I have on several occasions used the Gay Bar as a means of introducing supposedly sympathetic non-homosexuals, as well as extremely introverted homosexuals, into a more liberal view of homosexual life,” an editor of ONE magazine stated. “For such purposes one naturally uses Gay Bars with a reputation for discretion and well-regulated conduct.”

Since the repeal of Prohibition, many gay bars of various sorts had come and gone in Los Angeles by the time Helen opened her bar in 1952. Helen’s would be just one tiny twinkle in the city’s extensive and ever-changing constellation of gay gathering places. The influx of homosexuals to Los Angeles during and after World War II created a ready market for proprietors willing to accommodate a queer clientele. Whether they flourished or floundered, their establishments eventually gave way to new ones—a succession of taverns from loose to uptight, nightclubs from edgy to elegant, hole-in-the-wall bars with diverse personalities. Among the most popular places in 1950s Hollywood was the House of Ivy. It featured “a Latin organist with a large collection of feathery chapeaux and a repertoire of camp songs including his two special numbers, ‘Rose of Washington Square’ and ‘Second Hand Rose.’”

In downtown L.A., the Crown Jewel, Harold’s, and the Waldorf were popular gay bars. Discreet businessmen favored the Crown Jewel because its rules of conduct were strict and one had to present a driver’s license to get in, which helped to keep out troublemakers. The popularity of another downtown bar, Maxwell’s, was due in part to its proximity to the department stores on Broadway, where many gays worked, and to Pershing Square and the bus stations, where many cruised. Mattachine member Fred Frisbie said that the Maxwell’s crowd included “hustlers, drunkards, vice cops, and nellie queens” as well as “reserved gay people.” Obviously Maxwell’s offered little protection from run-ins with cops or criminals. But
as Helen acknowledges, not all gay men desired the kind of closely supervised bar environment that she enforced with an “iron hand in a ‘not-so-velvet’ glove.”

Helen’s was a respectable place where her boys could bring “their mothers, landladies and understanding girl friends” without worrying that they would get an unfavorable impression of the gay world. Keeping out obvious queens and boisterous individuals was central to this effort. Nor would Helen tolerate those who tried to use her bar as a cruising ground. Her boys appreciated Helen’s efforts to create a well-regulated gathering place where they were relatively safe from both hostile straights and unabashed gays.

Considering Helen’s attitude in telling her story, it’s likely that she gives an accurate account of her success in dealing with Los Angeles police officers and state Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) officials. Anticipating that *Gay Bar* would be read by some who were unsympathetic to her cause, she would have chosen her words carefully, but it seems unlikely that she would have omitted significant incidents.

By Helen’s account, the police did not raid her bar, the vice squad made no arrests on the premises, she had unremarkable dealings with ABC, and the uniformed officers who patrolled her neighborhood treated her with respect. This was extraordinary. It was attributable in part to the savvy of a mature woman who had lived in Los Angeles for many years, understood gay men quite well, had managed several other gay bars, and was adept in reading people and situations.

In 1951, the year before Helen opened her bar, the California Supreme Court ruled that homosexuals had the right to congregate and be served in any public bar or restaurant. In 1955, a year of major antihomosexual activity throughout the country, the California legislature made it illegal for a bar to serve as a “resort for illegal possessors or users of narcotics, prostitutes, pimps, panderers, or sexual perverts.” Though this legislation was unconstitutional, it emboldened ABC to suspend or revoke the licenses of gay bars simply as a result of seeing persons they deemed homosexual on the premises. While Helen was writing her book, her bar was an illegal resort for perverts. Not until 1959 did a California court case reaffirm “that a
license may not be suspended or revoked simply because homosexuals or sexual perverts patronize the bar in question.”

Los Angeles police chief William Parker saw homosexuals as a grave danger to society, an element to be suppressed in his fast-growing city. With surveillance by the vice squad and the threat of raids by LAPD and ABC officers, gay bars run by organized crime were often more likely to succeed in managing their relations with law enforcement. Helen seems to have handled things quite well on her own. It helped that hers was a small, low-profile gathering place for a select group of men who made efforts to blend in with the general populace. No screaming-queen drama scenes spilling into the parking lot. Certainly no physical intimacy. Helen’s boys understood that their contact with each other in public was limited to handshakes and backslaps, the appropriately masculine mainstays of man-to-man interaction.

“Occasionally, but not frequently, violence breaks out in gay bars,” Cory and LeRoy noted, “sometimes as a result of lovers’ quarrels, other times as a result of some youth going through an episode of homosexual panic, or perhaps because of the jealousies that grip the gay world.” The more gentle nature of many gay males is evident in Helen’s observation that her bar is a peaceful place. Before she and her boys moved in, it had been a staging ground for fistfights.

In 1957 a Hollywood Citizen-News editorial stated, “The police are alarmed over the presence in Los Angeles of an abnormal percentage of the country’s total number of homosexuals. They frequent certain saloon and eating places, parks and streets, creating situations that are obnoxious and alarming to normal people. But legally it is difficult to correct this situation.” The newspaper urged Los Angeles to heed the film industry’s efforts “to screen their employees and attempt to weed out homosexuals and other abnormal characters. Hordes of abnormal people can do great harm to Los Angeles, just as the presence of even a few obnoxious characters in the film industry can damage it.”

Arrests of homosexuals in bars and other public places often escalated just before elections, when incumbent officials wanted to show the public that they were committed to dealing with degenerates. In a letter to ONE,
a San Francisco gentleman observed, “In one city after another, mayors and police chiefs have made a big fuss about getting rid of all homosexuals because they thought it would please the electorate and draw attention away for their own ineffectualness. This is silly, because the electorate couldn’t care less. Even women don’t consider homosexuals any real competition. The really vicious Do-Gooders are those who are afraid of their own homosexual impulses.”

Snaring homosexuals was a major enterprise for the LAPD. What Helen terms her “running battle of wits” with the vice squad was a battle fought much more intimately by her boys. “Vice cops were to be found all over LA,” David Hanna recalled, “in the public lavatories of bus and train stations and department stores, at the YMCA, along Sunset and Hollywood Boulevards in their squad cars, and even along the lovers’ lanes of the Hollywood Hills. Out of uniform they would sometimes patrol the bars undercover, and were not easy to identify. They too were young, dressed in suits, white shirts, and ties. They sounded gay, and many of them probably were. But as slight a suggestion as ‘How about coming to my place?’ was enough for an arrest.”

Helen appreciated the vice squad’s patrol of her parking lot each evening because it kept things safer and discouraged carryings-on in cars. Apparently Helen’s boys escaped the fate of some who parked too near a gay bar, only to learn that vice squad officers had noted their license plate numbers and informed their employers, often leading to job loss. “They were assassinating character at will and causing all kinds of mischief and expense and damage to us as individuals,” said Hal Call.

“Going to gay bars, private parties, or being seen with someone who was ‘obvious’ was much like Russian roulette,” Dorr Legg said. Since you couldn’t go to a gay bar without subjecting yourself to the police, the cat and mouse routine became a mundane reality for many gays. “Will this be the night that I get busted, beaten up, or blackmailed?” Jim Kepner wondered. Another observed blandly of the bar scene, “One is not surprised or dismayed when police swagger in, usually in pairs, glower menacingly at everybody, hurry back to the men’s room to see if anything is going on, glower once more at everybody on their return trip, and swagger out again.
'Vice,' quite likely, in a sharp turtle-neck sweater, is ogling you from your very elbow.”

Big-city law enforcement departments across the country used undercover officers to snare homosexuals, as did the California ABC. In Los Angeles the police department and the ABC were able to recruit from among the many handsome young men who needed jobs while they aspired to movie careers. Their good looks and acting abilities often proved disastrous for men who responded to their attentions. Vice officers were always believed over the accused and were known to give false testimony to bolster their position. “Improper touching.” “Offer to provide sexual services.” “Solicitation of sexual services.” Being convicted of lewd and lascivious conduct, the most common charge against those who were arrested by vice officers, meant being registered as a sex offender for life. Thus did many men disintegrate into depression, alcoholism, and suicide.

Soliciting or engaging in homosexual activity was illegal, but the intensity of antihomosexual sentiment in American culture led many gays to assume mistakenly that just being homosexual was a crime. In addition, gay men were often ignorant of their legal rights and police officers were not required to inform arrested persons of their rights. As a result, many men who had done nothing illegal would plead guilty, pay the fine, and wind up with a record.

In 1952 Los Angeles resident Dale Jennings elected not to go along with this tradition. In jail after being aggressively entrapped by a “big, rough looking character” who was said to have followed him home uninvited and forced his way in, Jennings was visited the next morning by fellow Mattachine member Harry Hay, who posted bail for him. Hay convinced Jennings to go to court and declare that he was indeed homosexual but not guilty as charged. When the jury agreed with Jennings’s attorney—that Jennings acted in a neither “lewd” nor “dissolute” manner and that the arresting officer was “the only pervert in this courtroom”—Dale Jennings became America’s first poster boy for homosexual freedom. As word of this victory spread around the country, contributions “to help eliminate gangster methods by the police” flowed to Mattachine’s anti-entrapment committee.
In Hal Call’s view, “The cops could do any damn thing they wanted. All we could do was run and hide.” Though he was highly sexual and craved variety, Hal was not one to cruise public men’s rooms. It was caution born of experience. Hal’s arrest in Chicago in 1952 had cost him his job, his professional reputation, and a large sum of money. “It was too dangerous,” he said of the tearoom trade. “Cops would stand there with a hard-on and look at you. When you made a move on them, they’d arrest you. They called it ‘enticement;’ we called it ‘entrapment.’ But, the officers were given quotas and they’d rather arrest a queer with a hard-on showing than look down the barrel of a revolver.”

Considering Helen’s remark that “this is a large city and lots of money is needed to run it,” and Hal’s statement that vice officers were given arrest quotas, one might reasonably wonder which group of authorities—psychoanalysts or police officers—extracted more revenue from homosexuals. Also looking for their fee, which often amounted to a year’s pay, were lawyers—the few who were willing to help homosexual clients.

Hal Call was characteristically blunt in explaining why the police played cat and mouse with gay men but not lesbians: “The male homosexual, because he was a cocksucker and because he played with his penis and somebody else’s penis, was a threat to the straight man. That’s where the whole problem was.” A lesbian stated things equally plainly: “The boys are so horny. They just can’t wait.” Mattachine’s major focus on fighting police entrapment did not inspire lesbians to join the organization. One woman recalled “a lot of animosity and resentment over the fact it was the gay guys who were creating such havoc with the police—the raids, the indiscriminate sex, their bathroom habits, and everything else.” Another lesbian left the group, in part because she was unable to reconcile gay men’s sexual practices with the Mattachine idea that homosexuals “are people like other people.”

The Mattachine Society never had more than a few hundred members nationwide. Many potential members were afraid to be associated with a homophile organization. Another impediment to membership growth was expressed by Mr. E.D. in Ohio as he dithered about whether or not to
renew: “As much as I’m ashamed to admit it, I’m afraid my own grand passion is not for social reform (though I ardently desire it) but for homosexuals themselves.” This was a sentiment with which the men of Mattachine were very familiar. “Why should I join your organization or subscribe to your magazine?” a dapper gentleman said brightly to a dismayed Mattachine figure in a cartoon in the Review. “I’m not interested in your suggestions, and besides my landlady might find out my name is on your mailing list.”

It really rankled Hal Call that the organization’s membership was always small. “Homosexuals, as a group, are neurotic—believe us,” he told a fellow Mattachine. “We have met thousands of them over the past several years. By and large they couldn’t care less about our project, our magazine, or anything we are trying to do. . . . But, when they run afoul of the law, the song—and chorus—is changed. Then they want to help. . . . Can you find a better description of a manifestation of neurosis? I think not!”

Hal’s sentiments echoed those of Henry Gerber, whose pioneering efforts on behalf of homosexual rights were squashed by Chicago police in 1925. Some years later, Gerber sniffed at another fellow’s plan to produce an enlightening publication for homophiles: “If a pamphlet for the initiated it would be a commercial failure from the start for the wicked never like to part from their pennies. It all goes for K.Y.”