

PROTEST! ADD "TRANSGENDER" TO THE TITLE OF STONEWALL 25!

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A WOMAN, CROSSDRESSED IN BLACK LEATHERS, STARTED THE RIOTS AT STONEWALL!

AN FTM STARTED THE STONEWALL RIOT!

The Stonewall Riot of June 1969, considered the birth of the gay rights movement, was prompted by the arrest of a woman dressed in men's clothing. "It has never been covered correctly," said Harry Beard, a former Stonewall bar employee and organizer of the Stonewall veterans contingent in this year's San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade.

When five plainclothes and two uniformed vice squad officers came in to make the usual raid on the gay bar, checking everyone's identification, including their draft cards, Beard said, they found a lone woman dressed in a man's black leather suit. In New York State there is a law requiring that one be wearing at least three pieces of clothing appropriate to his or her biological gender. The officers handcuffed the crossdressed woman and ordered her outside. When yanked by the arm, she turned to the policeman and said, "Don't be so rough!" He responded by hitting her with his billy club. "Hey, you can't do that!" Beard protested, and thus began the Stonewall Riot and the start of the gay rights movement.

"Ridiculous laws, such as the crossdressing law and laws preventing three or more 'undesirables' from meeting on the street, were no longer enforced regularly," Beard said.

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THE STONEWALL RIOTS - NOT JUST A BUNCH OF QUEENS

On the eve of the 20th anniversary of the Christopher Street riots, which started outside of a bar in New York City, we received a fundraising letter from the Human Rights Campaign Fund which began: "Twenty years ago, the sight of a paddy wagon in front of a gay bar was no surprise. So when one pulled up outside the Stonewall Inn just before midnight on June 27th, 1969 most passersby considered it 'business as usual'...but it wasn't business as usual for long...A lot of the drag queens started jeering at the police, drawing a crowd...Then a lesbian was pulled out of the bar, and pushed toward a patrol car...she did something that triggered three nights of rioting, rebellion and ultimately, revolution. She resisted."

Over the years, we've seen innumerable references to the Stonewall Riots. However, this was the first time we saw any mention of this lesbian who sparked the riots. We did a little research with the help of Anne Tracy, who works in Special Collections at Michigan State University Library. Sure enough, the July 3rd, 1969 edition of the Village Voice (which had two journalists on the scene) reported, "The next person to come out was a dyke, and she put up a struggle - from car to door to car again. It was at that moment that the scene became explosive." Only one other source that we could find (SEXUAL POLITICS, SEXUAL COMMUNITIES: THE MAKING OF A HOMOSEXUAL MINORITY IN THE UNITED STATES, 1940-1970 by John D'Emilio, U of Chicago Press) attributed the start of the riots on Christopher Street to that one lesbian who resisted. This bit of information was missing from the Stonewall coverage in all of the other publications we checked, even those from 1969.

On the 10th anniversary of the riots, the Lesbian Tide ran an article about the "omission of lesbians from a focal role in Gay Pride celebrations." The writer didn't mention the lesbian who started the whole thing, instead saying, "Maybe it was the heat, maybe it was that one cop shoved the wrong 'queen,' maybe one gay man had a migraine. Certainly no one premeditated the riot that ignited that night."

Almost every account of Stonewall published on this, the 20th anniversary, could be added to the list of articles which report that no one knows what started the riots. In the Tide article one lesbian remarked (about Stonewall), "It's theirs and it was always theirs, never ours." Twenty years after the fact, we think it is important to reclaim this bit of lesbian herstory. --Cheryl & Marge

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