

# “We’re the girls of the pansy parade”: Historicizing Winnipeg’s Queer Subcultures, 1930s-1970

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*As a work of queer history this article historicizes same-sex desire in Winnipeg from the 1930s through the late 1960s. This research asks provocative questions about how the nature of place (a major prairie capital city) and space (commercial venues, public parks, and private homes) permitted, constructed, and constrained queer activities. Beginning with the earliest oral history recollections of Depression-era same-sex activity, this article charts the changes caused by the Second World War, more liberalized liquor laws in the 1950s, and the expanding economy in the 1960s. Ultimately, it illustrates that Winnipeg functioned as a “queer capital” for residents of Manitoba, Northwestern Ontario, and, less frequently, parts of Saskatchewan. Reframing the city of Winnipeg through a queer lens offers a novel addition to our history of this well-known city; it makes an important contribution to the national and international literature of queer urban development; and, finally, it offers a prairie perspective on the formation of social spaces and identities prior to the establishment of dedicated, local gay and lesbian organizations.*

*Œuvre inspirée de l’histoire queer, le présent article historicise le désir pour les personnes du même sexe du Winnipeg des années 1930 jusqu’à celui de la fin des années 1960. Cette recherche pose des questions percutantes, se demandant comment la nature du lieu (une grande capitale des Prairies) et de l’espace (endroits commerciaux, parcs publics et maisons privées) a permis, construit et gêné les activités queer. S’appuyant d’abord sur les premiers récits tirés de l’histoire orale de l’activité homosexuelle au temps de la dépression, cet article retrace les changements qu’ont provoqués la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, l’assouplissement des lois sur les boissons alcoolisées dans les années*

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*1950 et l'essor économique des années 1960. Il en arrive à la conclusion que Winnipeg faisait alors office de « capitale queer » pour les résidents du Manitoba, du Nord-Ouest de l'Ontario et, dans une moindre mesure, de certaines parties de la Saskatchewan. Recadrer la ville de Winnipeg en l'examinant sous la loupe de l'identité queer jette un nouvel éclairage sur l'histoire que nous avons de cette ville bien connue. En effet, non seulement cela enrichit-il grandement la littérature nationale et internationale sur le développement urbain queer, mais permet également d'examiner dans la perspective des Prairies la formation d'espaces sociaux et d'identités sociales avant l'établissement d'organismes locaux voués à la cause des gais et lesbiennes.*

One time these friends of ours, and this other queen, Bobby Turner, well we used to go every week to this place in St. Boniface to play cards – a straight place. We went by streetcar in our drag and we walked in there and they just about fell over. But they enjoyed it. I don't know how wise they were to us, but they thought it was terrific, and many of the men asked me to dance. We did some silly things.<sup>1</sup> (George Smith, Winnipeg, 1990)

We used to gather under that [steel canopy at the Alexander Dock] and do our little routine of ... chorus girl kicking of We Are the Girls of the Pansy Parade. They still sing that, don't they? [At this point Bert sang the interviewer the whole lyric:] "Our sucking will please, our fucking will tease. We're the Girls of the Pansy Parade!" [interviewer laughs]. ... I can remember about 25 gays down there on a warm summer night. Just like up at the Legislative Building.<sup>2</sup> (Bert Sigurdson, Winnipeg, 1990)

THE GEOGRAPHY of queer Winnipeg made possible by Smith's and Sigurdson's oral histories of cruising and drag during the 1930s offers portraits of a vibrant world, largely outside the purview of heterosexual Winnipeggers, where the camaraderie of queer culture and expert knowledge of the city's sexual geographies marked one as a worldly sophisticate in a relatively staid prairie city.<sup>3</sup>

1 Provincial Archives of Manitoba [hereafter PAM], Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Archives Committee, C1861-1903, 1990, copies of 33 cassette tapes (25 hours) – C1869-70, tapes 9 & 10, George M. Smith interviewed by David Theodore, June 25, 1990. Copies of these interviews and transcripts are available in PAM. Originals are in the possession of the Winnipeg Gay and Lesbian Archives Collection. In 2002, I was granted access to these tapes by the archivists at PAM and by the Rainbow Resource Centre [hereafter RCC], 1-222 Osborne Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba, which held the originals. I am grateful to Donna Huen, then manager at RCC, for providing unrestricted access to these materials. According to the PAM finding aid, the "purpose of the project was to record the experiences of gay men and lesbian women in Manitoba to 1970, and to examine public attitudes about homosexuals and interactions with families and social institutions."

2 RCC, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Oral History Project, Bert Sigurdson interview with David Theodore, June 29, 1990. My thanks to Scott de Groot who reminded me of the raunchiness of the Sigurdson lyrics!

3 A queer theoretical approach resists the binary of gay/straight and instead seeks to understand a range of gendered and sexual behaviour. See Nan Alamilla Boyd, "Who is the Subject? Queer Theory Meets Oral History," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 17, no. 2 (May 2008), and *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

Men discovered this world because they were alert to opportunities and difference – a code word, flamboyant clothes, makeup, or teenagers and young men engaged in “swishy” or “fairy-like” gender-transgressive behaviours. Most queer social spaces in Winnipeg were located in the downtown core.<sup>4</sup> Near the train depot, men patronized certain working-class beer parlours (often housed in downtown hotels), Chinese-run cafés, diners, and restaurants, the steam baths, the docks, public and commercial toilets (tearooms in gay parlance), the extensive river trails and paths along the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, and, famously, “the hill” behind the Legislature. On “the hill” they were provocatively watched over by Winnipeg’s Golden Boy, one of Manitoba’s most recognizable symbols and the focal point of the Legislature’s domed roof.<sup>5</sup> By day the classically designed statue of a winged male god with his torch held aloft symbolized western civilization and enterprise. At night, subversively, Golden Boy served as signpost to a nocturnal world of male same-sex experiences.

While Golden Boy and “the hill” remained a constant from 1930 to 1970, other significant changes occurred over this time. First, the subculture became larger and increasingly visible as more men found queer venues and as the lesbian presence became visible in the 1950s. Secondly, this era would witness a transformation as queer subcultural practices receded into the background and gay and lesbian communities emerged. No longer content merely to participate in a range of queer activities, increasing numbers of Winnipeg residents began to identify themselves, personally and to others, as gay men and lesbians. The adoption and use of those labels, as well as the later establishment of organizations and social venues explicitly for gay and lesbian Winnipeggers, politically transformed social and gender relations. Conversely, as the subculture and later the communities became more visible, the dangers posed by the law, the police, and psychiatrists increased as did the risk of alienation from family, friends, and colleagues. To manage those risks, men and women utilized a variety of strategies – evasion, deception, role-playing, compartmentalization of their so-called public and private lives, and sometimes ultra-respectability – to live lives of their own choosing and design. They were also aided by a live-and-let-live ethos shared by mainstream residents of the city, who, provided certain codes were observed, remained wilfully naive and ignored “queer” moments occurring at the margins of urban life. For owners of small businesses such as cafés, bathhouses, or restaurants, this tacit support or tolerance could be financially lucrative.

This research asks provocative questions about how the nature of place (Winnipeg, a major Canadian prairie city) and space (commercial venues, public parks,

4 Although Peter Boag’s work covers the pre-World-War-I era, there are some parallels between Portland and Winnipeg. See Peter Boag, *Same Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

5 “The Golden Boy, a magnificently gilded 5.25M (17.2-foot) figure, is probably Manitoba’s best-known symbol. Embodying the spirit of enterprise and eternal youth, he is poised atop the dome of the building. He faces the north, with its mineral resources, fish, forest, furs, hydroelectric power and seaport, where his province’s future lies” (Province of Manitoba Legislature Tour, <http://www.gov.mb.ca/legtour/golden.html>).

and private homes) permitted, constructed, and constrained queer activity. Recapturing and analysing Winnipeg's queer past complicates and enriches the city's history. It reminds us that the experiences and contributions of queer, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and two-spirited people deserve to be featured in prairie histories. Queer peoples' struggles to take lovers and carve out lives and social spaces are important because they offer insights into active resistance, accommodation, tolerance, and acceptance in the prairies. The stereotype of the region as a bleak, persistently homophobic place scarred by violence and police persecution has some basis in fact, but queer women and men were not merely victims in a region noted for valorizing nuclear families, faith, and farming. Larger prairie cities like Winnipeg provided refuge. This research reveals many similarities with queer urban practices elsewhere in North America. Yet, the timeline of these developments, the city's history, prairie geographies and cultural sensibilities, produced subtle shadings and differences. What to outsiders may appear to be a smallish mid-western city, comparable to other western and mid-western American cities misses the specifics of the Manitoba capital. Winnipeg exerts a disproportionately strong gravitational pull within the province and western region as the political, financial, cultural and educational capital of Manitoba. Not surprisingly, it was the queer capital as well. Equally important, Winnipeggers (similar to many prairie residents) adhered to a set of regional characteristics which could be summarized as comprising a live and let live ethos, resilience and endurance in the face of what was both metaphorically and literally a harsh social and physical climate. Basic geographical, social, demographic and organizational practices which were honed over the course of Euro-Canadian settlement of the prairies enabled spaces for difference, community building (a prairie necessity) and a pragmatic approach to daily possibilities which were shared with heterosexual prairie residents.

As a work of queer history, this study seeks to incorporate same-sex desire into the history of Winnipeg. I use the term same-sex desire advisedly because, as the research on Winnipeg illustrates, not all actors in this world would ultimately choose to identify themselves as gay or lesbian. Prior to the emergence of the political concept of the gay or lesbian individual, many people engaged in homosexual sex but did not define themselves as homosexual. "Queer" is a useful umbrella term to capture those who identified themselves as homosexual and later gay or lesbian, as well as those who were merely sojourners in this world. Winnipeg's queer world had similarities with that depicted in John Howard's monograph *Men Like That*. Howard explores men who identified themselves as gay or ("men like that" in Mississippi parlance), but also those "men who like that," meaning those who liked sex with men. Men who like that may frequently have acted upon their queer desires but did not define themselves by their sexual behaviour.<sup>6</sup> The strengths of Howard's research lie in making visible those men who had sex with men, their homosexual male peers, and the rural and small-town world in which they circulated. In Winnipeg many of the spaces

6 Howard, *Men Like That*, p. xviii.

of this subaltern queer world – the baths, cruising sites, the YMCA, or drag venues – encouraged and respected anonymity, and thus dalliances with married men were commonly reported. Even those individuals who subsequently identified as gay recalled that, during the 1950s and 1960s, they frequently negotiated “double lives” in their attempts to pass as heterosexuals by day while they indulged their queer desires by night.<sup>7</sup>

A number of the men and women whose histories are enumerated here later chose to identify themselves as lesbians and gay men, taking the now familiar journey “from desire to identity to community to political consciousness.”<sup>8</sup> Not all did or could, however. By employing a queer perspective, as opposed to writing a gay history, I resist affixing historical identity labels and attempt “to understand the conceptual categories and ways of knowing actually used by actors in the past.”<sup>9</sup> In so doing, this study captures individuals who would not have fit into present-day categories of sexual orientation and affords a more nuanced, accurate portrait of queer life in Winnipeg. It also permits analysis of how and why a cohort of queer participants resisted identification as gay well into the 1960s. Such resistance reminds us that the emergence of visible communities of lesbians and gays was not a linear, uniform progression. Unless the individuals specifically used the word “gay” in their interviews, I have categorized most activity prior to the mid-sixties as either homosexual or queer. By the late sixties, Winnipeggers were beginning to utilize the terms gay and lesbian, and my terminology changes to reflect this shift.

My research on Winnipeg is part of a transnational historical project to rewrite urban and social histories with queer actors at their core.<sup>10</sup> It has benefited from this extensive historical literature on queer urban histories, most notably George Chauncey’s *Gay New York*, as well as a theoretical framework that includes Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, historical and cultural geography, and queer

7 For an excellent discussion of such matters and a model of how to map queer histories and terrain, see Matt Houlbrook and Chris Waters, “*The Heart in Exile: Detachment and Desire in 1950s London*,” *History Workshop Journal*, no. 62 (2006), pp. 142-165; Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

8 Robert Mills, “History at Large: Queer is Here? Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Histories and Public Culture,” *History Workshop Journal*, no. 62 (2006), p. 255.

9 Steven Maynard, “‘Respect Your Elders, Know Your Past’: History and the Queer Theorists,” *Radical History Review*, vol. 75 (1999), p. 71.

10 For an excellent overview of some of the major work on cities and sexuality, see Matt Houlbrook, “Cities” in H. G. Cocks and Matt Houlbrook, eds. *The Modern History of Sexuality* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). Starting with George Chauncey’s ground-breaking *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), this approach has defined the field. Other notable entries in an ever-expanding literature are Daniel Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles and the Making of Modern Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Houlbrook, *Queer London*; Matt Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality 1885-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Boyd, *Wide Open Town*; Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs*; Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); David Higgs, ed., *Queer Sites: Gay Urban Histories since 1600* (London: Routledge, 1999); Brett Beemyn, ed., *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories* (London: Routledge, 1997).

theory.<sup>11</sup> In American LGBT histories (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered), local studies of queer, lesbian, and gay sexual activity and community formation have dominated the field for the past two decades.<sup>12</sup> British historian Matt Houlbrook observes that North American and European historians and sociologists have focused so particularly on cities and sexuality that “the city and sexuality appear culturally and conceptually inseparable.”<sup>13</sup> A study of Winnipeg’s queer community is, in the first instance, an important contribution to Canadian histories of sexuality as it demonstrates persuasively that queer Canadians were not just residents of Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal.<sup>14</sup> Too often the excellent scholarship within the field of Canadian history of sexuality has focused on Ontario, Quebec, or British Columbia, thereby distorting queer histories by omission.<sup>15</sup>

Gendered and sexual behaviour in Winnipeg shared many commonalities with that in cities beyond Canadian borders, yet key differences also made

11 Chauncey, *Gay New York*; Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume 2* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); David Bell and Gill Valentine, eds., *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995); Kath Weston, *Long, Slow Burn* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Jon Binnie and Gill Valentine, “Geographies of Sexuality: A Review of Progress,” *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 23, no. 2 (June 1999), pp. 175-187; Mark Turner, *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003); Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

12 Marc Stein, “Theoretical Politics, Local Communities: The Making of U.S. LGBT Historiography,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 11, no. 4 (2005), p. 608.

13 Houlbrook, “Cities,” p. 133.

14 The earliest academic work on Canadian homosexuals was Maurice Leznoff’s “The Homosexual in Urban Society” (Master’s thesis, McGill University, May 1954), which focuses on Montreal. Subsequently, there has been sustained academic interest in histories of sexuality in Canada. See Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire: Homo and Hetero Sexualities*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1996); Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Becki L. Ross, *The House that Jill Built: A Lesbian Nation in Formation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995) and *Burlesque West: Showgirls, Sex, and Sin in Postwar Vancouver* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Carolyn Strange, *Toronto’s Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Elise Chenier, “Rethinking Class in Lesbian Bar Culture: Living ‘The Gay Life’ in Toronto, 1955-1965,” *Left History*, vol. 9, no. 2 (spring/summer 2004), pp. 85-117, and *Strangers in our Midst: Sexual Deviancy in Postwar Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); David Churchill, “Mother Goose’s Map: Tabloid Geographies and Gay Male Experience in 1950s Toronto,” *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 30, no. 6 (September 2004), pp. 826-852; Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile, *The Canadian War on Queers: National Security as Sexual Regulation* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010); Cameron Duder, *Awfully Devoted Women: Lesbian Lives in Canada, 1900-1950* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010); and the extensive work of Steven Maynard on Toronto, including “Through a Hole in the Lavatory Wall: Homosexual Subcultures, Police Surveillance, and the Dialectics of Discovery, Toronto, 1890-1930” in Joy Parr and Mark Rosenfeld, eds., *Gender and History in Canada* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1996), and “‘Respect Your Elders, Know Your Past.’”

15 There have been a few publications pertaining to histories of sexuality in western Canada. See Terry L. Chapman, “Sex Crimes in the West, 1890-1920,” *Alberta History*, vol. 35, no. 4 (October 1987), pp. 6-21; Lyle Dick, “The 1942 Same-Sex Trials in Edmonton: On the State’s Repression of Sexual Minorities, Archives, and Human Rights in Canada,” *Archivaria*, no. 68 (2009), pp. 183-217, and “Same-Sex Intersections of the Prairie Settlement Era: The 1895 Case of Regina’s ‘Oscar Wilde,’” *Histoire sociale / Social History*, vol. 42, no. 83 (May 2009), pp. 107-145; Dale Barbour, *Winnipeg Beach: Leisure and Courtship in*

Winnipeg unique. First, in the interwar and war years, Winnipeg’s relative geographic isolation and the general population’s ignorance about queer subculture allowed tremendous freedom for those able to locate queer spaces. Bold young queers like Smith and Sigurdson capitalized on this provincialism. Secondly, in contrast to arguments made about some American cities, the years following World War II witnessed an expansion of opportunities for same-sex activity and increasing visibility.<sup>16</sup> Those interviewed whose experiences spanned the interwar and postwar periods observed that the 1950s and 1960s brought more openness to Winnipeg’s queer subculture as more modern, expanded liquor and commercial entertainment laws increased the possibilities for commercial leisure. At first glance this seems curious because we know that Canada was not immune to Cold War anxieties and purges. However, as the work of Patrizia Gentile and Gary Kinsman has illustrated, queers were creative about fashioning a wide-ranging variety of public and commercial spaces for socializing and sex despite the risks.<sup>17</sup> Canada was far less affluent than much of the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. After World War II there was much “catching up” as average Canadians saw their incomes rise dramatically and the economy flourished. Nowhere was this more evident than in Winnipeg. Winnipeg had endured 30 difficult years after World War I, including postwar unrest and class conflict, the searing, long-term effects of the Great Depression, and, the psychological blow of having its position as the “gateway” western Canadian city usurped by Vancouver. The tremendous economic rebound and renewed growth enabled more single working men and women to afford to rent rooms and apartments. These private spaces, alongside the increase in commercial spaces, were prerequisites for the expansion of the queer subculture. Greater disposable income also enabled many middle-class men and women to travel to cities with larger gay and lesbian commercial and social spaces. Minneapolis and San Francisco were favourite destinations and further stimulated a sense of queer identity, community, and, later in the decade, activism.

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*a Resort Town, 1900-1967* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010); Angus McLaren, “Sex Radicalism in the Canadian Pacific Northwest, 1890-1920,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol 2, no. 4 (April 1992), pp. 527-546; V. J. Korinek, “‘The most openly gay person for at least a thousand miles’: Doug Wilson and the Politicization of a Province, 1975-83,” *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 84, no. 4 (December 2003), pp. 517-550.

- 16 George Chauncey’s and Nan Alamilla Boyd’s research on the gay/lesbian/queer communities in New York City (*Gay New York*) and San Francisco (*Wide Open Town*) conclude that gay and lesbian identities and their social and geographical spaces were well established in both cities prior to World War II. Chauncey argues that “gay life in New York was less tolerated, less visible to outsiders and more rigidly segregated in the second third of the century than in the first” and that “the very severity of the postwar reaction has tended to blind us to the relative tolerance of the pre-war years” (*Gay New York*, p. 9). Such was not the case in Winnipeg. My research on Winnipeg supports the finding of John D’Emilio and Allan Bérubé that World War II was a stimulus to homosocial opportunities and, ultimately, homosexuality. See John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1990).
- 17 Kinsman and Gentile in *The Canadian War on Queers* map queer spaces in Ottawa during the postwar era (pp. 200-209).

Thirdly, as the provincial capital and the largest city within the region, which encompasses Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario, Winnipeg became a destination for queer migrants. Stereotypes suggest that queer people fled Winnipeg; rather queer youth growing up in small towns and rural areas often gravitated to the city, where one could fashion a queer life. It was possible to meet other women and men, to frequent networks of commercial and public spaces where queer socializing or sex might be feasible. Many individuals initially came to the city to study at the University of Manitoba. Others relocated to Winnipeg for work and sometimes, as in the case of dancers with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, that meant securing employment in a queer-defined workplace. While it was neither a “wide-open town” nor internationally recognized for homosexual opportunities or tourism, as were San Francisco, New York, and London, Winnipeg figured as a site of possibility in provincial and regional knowledge networks.<sup>18</sup> Once individuals found social spaces and a cohort of queer friends, the city took on a different hue. At the same time, they were under no illusions about the limited scope of urban queer activities by comparison with other North American queer tourist destinations. A determined cohort made a decision to stay in Winnipeg, and those who stayed were clear about their attachments to the city and the region. The prairies were home. Their families and jobs were there, and Winnipeg struck the right balance – big enough in which to live as a queer person, but still connected to the places and people that were important. This determination to stay reflects ongoing prairie pride, resilience, and endurance. There are far easier places to live, socially, culturally, or geographically, than the prairies. The bonds occasioned by hardship and the sense of community created in surmounting it were routinely cited as forging communities and community-mindedness in small towns and prairie cities. This definably prairie attitude, shared by queer and heterosexual residents alike, was a recurrent refrain articulated in the Winnipeg oral interviews.

Finally, the politics of gay and lesbian activism in Winnipeg adhered to a slightly different trajectory than in other cities. Only during the mid-to-late 1960s did Winnipeg residents become familiar with gay and lesbian identities and politics as articulated in the United States. News of these developments emboldened a small coterie of university students to import gay and lesbian politics into the city in the early 1970s. Formal gay and lesbian organizing in Winnipeg thus lagged behind that of comparable American cities where “some gay men and lesbians were organizing for freedom” decades before the watershed Stonewall Riot of June 1969.<sup>19</sup> Winnipeg was also out of step with Vancouver and Toronto, where gay activist groups began to form in the mid-1960s.<sup>20</sup> While many gays and lesbians were not activists, and there is no simple link between gay/lesbian

18 Boyd, *Wide Open Town*.

19 D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*.

20 This paper emerges from a larger study that chronicles the queer, gay, and lesbian history of the prairies from 1930 to 1985. The resulting monograph (*Prairie Fairies: A History of Gay and Lesbian Communities in Western Canada, 1945-1980*, under contract to the University of Toronto Press, in progress) includes a chapter on Winnipeg’s gay and lesbian organizational phase (1971-1985).



identity and activism (some participants were in fact resistant to such changes), such organizations offer interesting historical opportunities. In particular, Winnipeg’s history provides an intriguing perspective on the evolution from an earlier model of a predominantly queer subculture to the contemporary model of more open and visible gay and lesbian “communities.”

### Methodological Notes and Challenges

One of the primary reasons why queer westerners have not been extensively featured in prairie histories has its roots in methodological challenges and the difficulties of finding sufficient documentation. Recognizing the political importance of knowing their histories, a small group of concerned individuals initiated the Manitoba Gay and Lesbian Oral History Project in 1990. This far-sighted decision has provided an invaluable primary source without which this research would not be possible. The archive, called *Lesbians and Gays in Manitoba: The Development of a Minority*, is preserved at the University of Manitoba Special Collections.<sup>21</sup> Supplemented and enriched by existing print and cultural documents, including Jerry Walsh’s self-published memoir *Backward Glances at a By-Gone Era*, these texts permit the reconstruction of a cultural history of male same-sex desire, in Walsh’s words, before “homosexuals were called gays.”<sup>22</sup> Until now, only a handful of graduate students and scholars have had the privilege of utilizing these documents.<sup>23</sup>

As with all oral histories, these interviews need to be approached with care, as they tell us as much about the early same-sex experiences in Winnipeg as they do about the era in which they were collected. There are obvious silences, omissions, and absences. Nan Alamilla Boyd recently analysed the ramifications of the field’s reliance on oral history sources, questioning their reliability and the precise nature of the “truths” revealed.<sup>24</sup> While the issues of memory, nostalgia, and the narrators’ propensity to self-edit their lives for the official record are well-known challenges with all oral sources, one particular trial is unique

21 RRC, “Lesbians and Gays in Manitoba: The Development of a Minority. Project Summary” (Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Archives Committee, 1990).

22 Jerry Walsh, *Backward Glances: A Compilation of his Remembrances of a By-Gone Era in the Gay Community of Winnipeg*, 27 pages, undated. This source contains much information about Winnipeg’s community prior to the establishment of exclusively gay clubs, from the 1940s to the 1970s, with shorter sections on the post-1972 era (specifically Happenings, and other gay-owned or operated spaces). Written for insiders in a campy, humorous tone, it nevertheless offers much detailed information about venues, locations, activities, and how the community defined itself. Thanks to Mike Giffin for sending me a copy of this invaluable document. Although it is undated, Giffin believes the document dates from the 1990s. Jerry Walsh died in 2000, and regretfully I never got an opportunity to interview him. A “Gerry Walsh” was interviewed by the 1990 oral history project and given similarities between the interviews it was likely the same individual.

23 David Churchill, director of the University of Manitoba Institute for the Humanities, has worked to preserve the community histories in Winnipeg. The University of Manitoba Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Two-Spirited (LGBT) Archival and Oral History Initiative has preserved the original 1990 and 1992 interviews and added a contemporary oral history collection. The value of having these interviews in a secure, easily accessible location for scholars is tremendous.

24 Boyd, “Who is the Subject?” p. 178.

to historians of queer sexualities: the issue of sexual identity and the political importance placed upon it. "Despite the best of intentions and the lightest touch," Boyd observes, "these oral histories are always offered up in relation to the larger gay and lesbian research project" and are "always structured around a certain historical desire for gay and lesbian political visibility."<sup>25</sup> The so-called "coming out narrative" predominates, and those interviewed tend to be identified as gay men and lesbians.

Such was the case in Winnipeg. The Gay/Lesbian Archive Committee's successful application for an oral history grant from Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Citizenship declared that the goal was to "record the experiences of gay men and lesbian women in Manitoba to 1970."<sup>26</sup> The third of 39 questions asked informants to recall "when you realize[d] that you were gay or lesbian?"<sup>27</sup> Not surprisingly, the collective narratives that emerge from the interviews are about self-identification. They chart a progressive chronology from earlier, informal subcultural queer activities and spaces to the contemporary era when a recognizable minority of gays and lesbians emerged in Manitoba. Narrators spoke with evident pride, and their personal histories were usually, but not always, affirmative.

Interviewer David Theodore (a McGill history student) conducted all the tape-recorded interviews in Winnipeg and Selkirk, Manitoba. Telephone interviews proved problematic to record due to their poor sound quality and were quickly abandoned as impractical. Lack of a travel budget meant that, by default, those interviewed were city residents. As Winnipeggers, they were preoccupied with staking a claim to a differentiated Winnipeg identity and experience. Many informants provided their own perspectives about how Winnipeg compared with Toronto, Minneapolis, New York, and London. Some participants were critical of Winnipeg's flaws and its limitations for queer people, while others appeared as civic boosters. In addition to their local, personal recollections, participants were asked questions about major historical events – World War II, second-wave feminism – and issues of importance to the queer, gay, and lesbian communities such as medical, psychiatric, and social perceptions of homosexuality throughout their lifetimes. It was evident that those who created the interview questions were familiar with American gay and lesbian history and the importance placed on key watershed events such as World War II.<sup>28</sup>

Cognizant of the importance of broad representation, the collective carefully noted that "attempts were also made to insure that interviews included individuals from different sub-groups within Manitoba's lesbian and gay community." Initially 200 people volunteered for interviews, and "75 individuals were selected as suitable for actual interviews according to the time frame of their recollections or the singularity of their recollections."<sup>29</sup> Ultimately 22 interviews

25 *Ibid.*, p. 189.

26 PAM, Finding Aid Manitoba Gay Lesbian Archives Committee, Gerry Berkowski, August 1991.

27 PAM, "Potential Oral History Project Questions: Manitoba Gay and Lesbian Archives, Oral History Project 1."

28 They were clearly indebted to the work of John D'Emilio, Allan Bérubé, and other foundational gay historians.

29 RRC, "Lesbians and Gays in Manitoba: The Development of a Minority. Project Summary" (Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Archives Committee, 1990).

were completed: 17 men and five women. Ethnically, the vast majority were Euro-Canadians. Only four self-declared First Nations individuals were interviewed. With respect to race and ethnicity, the organizers offered a sample that mirrored (broadly) the contours of Winnipeg’s ethnic and racial composition in the postwar era. However, they were keenly aware that the small sample of lesbian interviews would be rightly criticized as unrepresentative. The organizers speculated that women’s participation had been limited by the fact that there were “fewer social opportunities . . . for lesbians prior to the 1960” and because “the suicide rate for lesbians was phenomenally high prior to 1970.”<sup>30</sup> How they drew these conclusions is unclear.<sup>31</sup> It is overly simplistic to blame the relative absence of women’s voices on fewer social opportunities. As Cameron Duder’s research illustrates, middle-class lesbians in this era purposefully chose discretion and limited visibility to minimize their economic and social risks.<sup>32</sup> Those habits and defences are not easily abandoned. The reticence of middle-class lesbians more likely combined with the collective’s lack of commitment to locating more women produced the small response rate. Ultimately, the nature of the original project and its failure to recruit a more representative sampling of narrators shape the histories that can be produced. My research is sensitive to silences and strives to offer complex analytical assessments of the narrators’ histories, but there are hurdles that cannot be cleared. Male voices predominate because of the source limitations, not because I intended to exclude women or because lesbians were necessarily rare in Winnipeg.<sup>33</sup> Future work needs to be done to recapture these missing voices.<sup>34</sup>

### Setting the Scene: Winnipeg

As Canadian cities go, Winnipeg has received considerable historical attention.<sup>35</sup> Famously located in the “heart” of the country at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, Winnipeg has a lengthy history of settlement, conflict, and commerce. Incorporated in 1873, Winnipeg had its heyday in the late

30 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

31 Contemporary studies illustrate an important link between the relatively high rate of youth suicide, homophobia, and GLBT orientation, but sources pointing to a historic link with lesbianism are, to my knowledge, not available.

32 Duder, *Awfully Devoted Women*.

33 The 1992 collection of oral interviews with Winnipeg lesbian and gay activists has a much better representation of women’s voices. Similarly, in the interviews I conducted in each prairie city, I made a point of collecting equal numbers of women’s and men’s histories. In virtually all cases, the women were more challenging to locate.

34 In the larger study from which this paper emerges, significant coverage is given to the gay and lesbian organizational phase of Winnipeg (1971-1985) and the prevalence of lesbian voices and activism is stressed.

35 Among the many key books on Winnipeg, see Elylt W. Jones and Gerald Friesen, eds., *Prairie Metropolis: New Essays on Winnipeg Social History* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2009); Alan Artibise, *Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth 1874-1914* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s Press, 1975) and *Winnipeg: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Co and The National Museum of Man, 1977); David Amason and Mhari Mackintosh, eds., *The Imagined City: A Literary History of Winnipeg* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2005); David Jay Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial*

nineteenth and early twentieth century as railroad construction and then the massive transportation infrastructure within the city laid the groundwork for waves of European and Euro-Canadian settlers and investors. Winnipeg became the primary “gateway city” to the western region as people and goods funnelled west into and beyond the city.<sup>36</sup> Winnipeg’s growth was meteoric, surging from a mere 241 residents in 1871 to 136,035 in 1911.<sup>37</sup> Initially, most of these newcomers were single men. By 1911 the city’s sex ratio was still 120 males to 100 females.

Given Winnipeg’s rapid growth and disproportionate population of young, single, working men, issues of morality were sources of civic debate prior to World War I. Winnipeg had two segregated red-light districts. Prostitution was regarded by many, including the city’s police force, as a necessary by-product of the large numbers of single male workers and travellers.<sup>38</sup> Winnipeg was “infamous for its saloons and houses of prostitution, which served the tens-of-thousands of single men who passed through the city on their way to work or settle further west. It is doubtless the case, therefore, that same sex sexual experiences occurred.”<sup>39</sup> Civic reformers and first-wave feminist activists opposed this utilitarian view of prostitution and initiated repeated campaigns to eradicate the brothels. Despite such efforts, brothels remained fixtures in the city until World War II. Like many western North American cities, Winnipeg has a lengthy history of heterosexual licentiousness that has often been regarded as a colourful remnant of the city’s boomtown, western ethos. This history provides an important context for sexual activities in the city. Not only queer men sought sex in particular geographical locations and spaces in Winnipeg. Evidently, there existed a plethora of urban opportunities for individuals to act upon both heterosexual and queer desires. Prior to sexual activity becoming a marker of identity, men could and did seek opportunities for sex in the city, whether it was with female prostitutes or effeminate, young queer men.

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*Relations, and the General Strike*, rev. ed. (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990); Christopher Dafoe, *Winnipeg: Heart of a Continent* (Winnipeg: Great Plains Publishing, 1998); Royden Loewen and Gerald Friesen, *Immigrants in Prairie Cities: Ethnic Diversity in Twentieth Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009). Helpful are works on Manitoba or “the West” more generally, including Ken Coates and Fred McGuiness, *Manitoba: The Province and the People* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1987); Gerald Friesen, *River Road: Essays on Manitoba and Prairie History* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1996); Robert Collins, *Prairie People: A Celebration of My Homeland* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2003); W. Peter Ward, “Population Growth in Western Canada, 1901-71” in John E. Foster, ed., *The Developing West: Essays on Canadian History in Honour of Lewis H. Thomas* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1983).

36 Carl Abbott, *How Cities Won the West: Four Centuries of Urban Change in Western North America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), p. 42.

37 Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931, Volume II: Population by Areas* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 1933), p. 9.

38 Artibise, *Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth*; Ronda Hinthner, “The Oldest Profession in Winnipeg: The Culture of Prostitution in the Point Douglas Segregated District, 1909-1912,” *Manitoba History*, no. 41 (March 2001), <http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mhistory/41/oldestprofession.shtml>; Mariana Valverde, *Age of Light, Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991).

39 RCC, “History of the Gay Lesbian Community,” p. 1.

Much of this sexual activity occurred near the railways in the Point Douglas red-light district or in the railway hotels, cafés, and public spaces near these venues. Railways shaped the spatial and geographical layout of Winnipeg, determining social, commercial, and financial activities within the city. The Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) yards in Winnipeg were said to be the largest in the British Empire.<sup>40</sup> The CPR lines bisected the city’s east and west, cutting off the north part of the city from the downtown core. The “north end” was the working-class part of the city and the destination for most of the working-class Eastern European, Jewish, and British immigrants who flooded into Winnipeg prior to World War I.<sup>41</sup> Not surprisingly, the key commercial, financial, retail, and service industries that supported or depended upon the railways were all clustered in the city’s core. Importantly, the city was also rich in cultural and educational facilities. It was home to the University of Manitoba (founded in 1877) and a disproportionately large number of theatres and cultural venues. Such infrastructure meant that Winnipeg was a destination for an international who’s who of visiting literati, musicians, and politicians.<sup>42</sup>

While the city’s geographic location continued to be advantageous well into the twentieth century, Winnipeg could not retain its title as the pre-eminent western Canadian city. In 1913 Winnipeg was Canada’s third largest city, but by the 1920s it had been eclipsed by Vancouver, as eastern manufacturers opted for commercial shipping (via the newly opened Panama Canal) rather than railways.<sup>43</sup> Equally significantly, the dislocation after World War I, the influenza outbreak of 1918, and the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 were a series of sharp shocks to the city. The Great Depression further exacerbated its hardships. From 1931 to 1951, the population of Winnipeg had increased only marginally from 218,785 to 235,710 residents. The relatively static population figures hide significant demographic changes. In 1931, 56.5 per cent of Winnipeg residents were Canadian-born; by 1971 this proportion had grown to 75 per cent. In 1931, 60 per cent of Winnipeggers chose British as their ethnic identification while 38 per cent indicated a “European” heritage.<sup>44</sup> While the prairies received a significant stream of immigration from Central and Eastern Europe, Winnipeg’s ethnic composition differentiated it from other prairie cities. In particular, the consistently large number of Jewish residents has been a hallmark of Winnipeg cultural and commercial life (in 1931, 17,236 Winnipeggers were Jewish).<sup>45</sup> In the early 1930s, Aboriginal residents were not yet a presence in the city. In 1971, 42.9 per cent of Winnipeg residents listed British as their ethnicity, while the European ethnic population of Winnipeg

40 Abbott, *How Cities Won the West*, p. 48.

41 Russ Gourluck, *The Mosaic Village: An Illustrated History of Winnipeg’s North End* (Winnipeg: Great Plains Publications, 2010).

42 See Arnason and Mackintosh, eds., *The Imagined City*.

43 Artibise, *Winnipeg: An Illustrated History* p. 109.

44 *Census of Canada*, 1931, Table 34, “Population of Cities and Towns 10,000 and over, classified according to racial origin,” p. 499.

45 *Ibid.* Jewish citizens were the largest European “racial” origin in Winnipeg’s 1931 Census statistics.

had increased. Ukrainians were then the largest ethnic sub-group (64,305 people, 12 per cent of the population); the Jewish community had grown to 19,380 individuals;<sup>46</sup> and the number of Aboriginal residents had increased significantly to 4,945 women and men.

The conclusion of World War II restored prosperity and optimism in Winnipeg as “factories hummed, new industries and head offices located in the city, business was generally good, and housing construction exploded.”<sup>47</sup> Not surprisingly, queer informants corroborated this in their recollections, observing that the rebounding economy launched more social and commercial venues. Culturally, there were additional important developments. Prior to the war, the Winnipeg Ballet Club, the precursor to the acclaimed Royal Winnipeg Ballet, was formed. The Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra was founded in 1948, and a decade later the Manitoba Theatre Centre was launched under the direction of John Hirsch.<sup>48</sup> Arts and cultural organizations were and remain important to Winnipeg’s identity, but they were also critical to fostering social and economic spaces for queer men and lesbians. In 1967, the provincial government created a new institute of higher education in the city, granting university status to the former United College (affiliated with the University of Manitoba) as the University of Winnipeg.

Population growth and changing ethnic and racial demographics do not capture the entire story of the postwar changes in the city and province. Increasingly, Canadians were choosing to live in urban areas. By 1951, 57 per cent of Manitoba residents lived in cities or towns.<sup>49</sup> Their city of choice was Winnipeg. Unlike Saskatchewan and Alberta, which each have two major cities, Manitoba has one city that predominates. In 1970, 54 per cent of all Manitoba residents lived in metropolitan Winnipeg, and by 1971 the city’s population stood at 540,262.<sup>50</sup> Although Winnipeg’s heyday as a “gateway” city was over, it continued to have a significant position as a major provincial and regional metropolis within Manitoba, Northwestern Ontario, and Saskatchewan. The gravitational pull toward the provincial capital after World War II was doubly true for Winnipeg’s queer migrants.

### **The Interwar and War Era: Pansies, Fruits, and Dirt**

In the late 1930s, according to Bert Sigurdson and others, Winnipeg had a covert circuit of queer spaces in “Chinese cafés on and near Main St, such as the New Moon on Henry Avenue, and a cruising area that stretched along the west bank of the Red River from Union Station north to the Alexander Dock.”<sup>51</sup> (See Figure 1.) Bert’s experiences allow us a glimpse into the lives of Winnipeg homosexuals. Born in 1922, Bert was raised by his Icelandic-Canadian parents in a house

46 1971 *Census of Canada*, “Ethnic Group by Census Metropolitan Areas.”

47 *Ibid.*, p. 176.

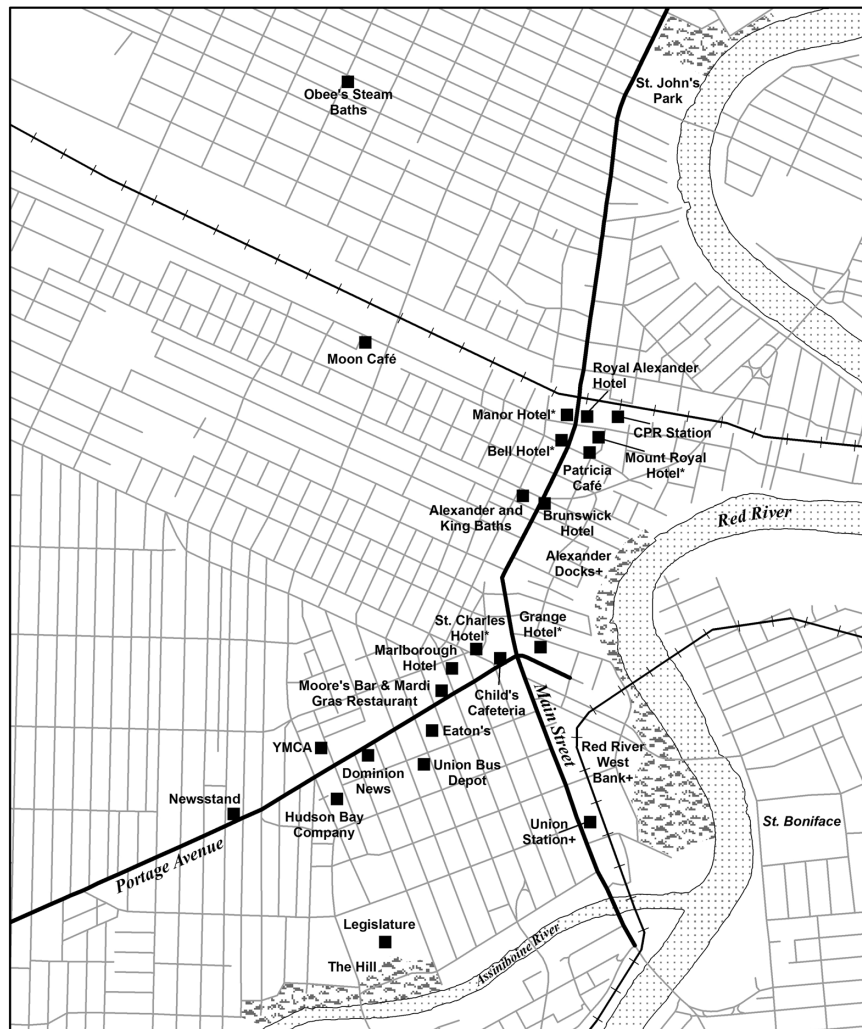
48 Dafoc, *Winnipeg: Heart of a Continent*, pp. 144-146.

49 Abbott, *How Cities Won the West*, p. 177.

50 1971 *Census of Canada*, Population, Volume I (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, August 1974), p. 8-4.

51 *Ibid.*

## Winnipeg Queer Spaces, 1930-1970



Map created by Geoff Cunfer  
Historical GIS Laboratory  
University of Saskatchewan

- Buildings and commercial spaces    + Active before 1945
- ▨ Cruising areas and parks            \* Primarily lesbian

Information about places used for queer cruising and socializing comes from an undated document entitled "History of the G/L Community" created by the Winnipeg Gay/Lesbian Resource Centre in the University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections. Please refer to the text for more details.

FIGURE 1: Map of Winnipeg Queer Spaces. © Geoff Cunfer, 2012.

on Olivia Street in the west end of Winnipeg.<sup>52</sup> The youngest of six children, Bert characterized his household as one where “women had the power,” both economically and practically, since his mother was the family breadwinner. His father, a former Icelandic newspaper editor, was employed sporadically. Bert attended Principal Sparling elementary school and Daniel McIntyre United College, played sports, and was interested in music and dancing. Bert’s first memories of homosexuality and sexual and gender difference dated from 1933, when he met a “precocious homosexual” by the name of Ginger with whom he “experimented” sexually. Ultimately, Ginger decided that he wanted to find “real men” since, as Bert recalled, it was atypical for two “gays” to have sex together in light of the then common practice that effeminate queer men had sex with masculine or straight-appearing men. Naturally, we cannot ultimately know how many times this “rule” was broken by Bert, Ginger, and others! Such structural practices were similar to contemporary homosexual experiences in New York and London, England.<sup>53</sup> This search for “real men” took Ginger and Bert down to Main Street, where they met Myrtle, Colin, and Walter at the restaurant of the Brunswick Hotel. Another group of queer men, Percy, Jack, and Mitzi (nicknamed the “society belles”) hung out on Portage Avenue. Employing women’s names, or camp names as they were known, and gender-transgressive behaviour, particularly ultra-femininity, were popular practices for younger men. They featured repeatedly in the interviews collected and were well-known queer signs that denoted homosexuality.<sup>54</sup> In fact, in some of the sources, camp names were the only ones utilized, and men’s actual names were unknown or forgotten. Because they were pre-teens and teenagers, they were too young to enter beer parlours lawfully. Instead, they hung out in a cluster of Chinese cafés on or near Main Street – the Modern Café, the New Main Café, and the Moon Café – where, as long as they behaved and did not “camp it up too much,” the management tolerated their adolescent behaviour. As he grew older, Bert no longer participated in such gender-transgressive activities; while the interviews are largely silent about how age differences or life stage affected sexual and gender roles, it seems clear that age, and likely permanent employment, caused some men to alter their behaviour.

Bert reported that, although his group wore a bit of makeup (mascara and a little Max Factor foundation), their clothes and gaits were what really identified them as homosexuals. Myrtle’s mother would create fancy shirts in eye-catching colour combinations with green fronts and salmon backs. To afford such clothes during the Depression, he recalled, they “boosted” (stole) the material from The Bay and Eaton’s. While they never wore such attire to school, they routinely sported these outfits on Main Street, often attracting verbal harassment. Bert recalled that later they cruised an area along the riverbank at the foot of Alexander Street and on the

52 RCC, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Oral History Project, Bert Sigurdson interview with David Theodore, June 29, 1990.

53 See Chauncey, *Gay New York*, pp. 65-97; Houlbrook, *Queer London*.

54 Chauncey, *Gay New York*, pp. 54-55.



docks. Because the practice of cruising can be misunderstood, I employ Mark W. Turner’s expansive definition of cruising as “a process of walking, gazing, and engaging another (or others), and it is not necessarily about sexual contact.”<sup>55</sup>

Not all of Bert’s recollections were so rose-hued. Verbal and violent assault was not unknown in Depression-era Winnipeg, and Bert vividly remembered harassment on the streets. “We used to be so bloody scared of the dirt. And, thinking back, that could be realistic. There were a lot of transients looking for money,” Bert recalled. These attacks were also motivated by gender and sexual difference. “‘Dirt’ was what we called the gay bashers,” he said. “They would be looking out to bash you, trying to take your money. We also called dirt anybody who chased us. When we walked home after our night on the beach . . . they would call out ‘tutti fruitti’ and we’d have to take off.” Drawing parallels with a later era (by employing the term gay-bashers), Bert was unequivocal that some identifiable queer youth and men drew negative attention on the streets of Winnipeg. Another category of persecution came from those men Bert called “dirt bitches,” whom he described as other homosexuals, though not “noticeably so,” who “would pick on other gays and beat the shit out of them, to prove their masculinity.” Those beaten were the more effeminate younger males, like Bert, who were derogatorily classified as “wimps, swishy, fairies.”<sup>56</sup>

In addition to these challenges of the street, Bert also spoke forthrightly about commercialized sexual transactions, observing that he was “passive bait for chicken hawks who would pay him for sex.”<sup>57</sup> Chicken hawks were adult men, frequently older, who had a predilection for younger men and newcomers to the queer world. Bert also mentioned the actions of an elementary school teacher whose reputation for assaulting his students in class or in the gym was so widely known that boys who took his gym classes were labelled “Neil’s pansies.” Over 20 years later, Bert heard that this teacher had been formally charged and “jailed in Calgary for having sex with his students,” an outcome Bert applauded.<sup>58</sup> The by then middle-aged teacher, Sidney Neil, was arrested by the Calgary police on charges of indecent assault of a teenage male and contributing to juvenile delinquency. At his trial in May 1956 he was convicted of gross indecency and sentenced as a “criminal sexual psychopath.”<sup>59</sup> He successfully appealed his case to the Supreme Court of Canada in 1957.<sup>60</sup>

Oral historians have written extensively about the challenges and opportunities presented by these sources, in particular about the care with which one needs

55 Turner, *Backward Glances*, p. 60.

56 RCC, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Oral History Project, Bert Sigurdson interview, June 29, 1990.

57 *Ibid.*

58 University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections [hereafter UMASC], “History of the G/L Community,” Winnipeg Gay/Lesbian Resource Centre, 1-222 Osborne Street. The “Events/Law” page lists a series of criminal cases, human rights events, landmarks (such as first Pride events), and this one line, presumably referring to this incident: “Sidney Neil (arrested and tried in Calgary) 1956.”

59 “Criminal Sexual Psychopath: Teacher Given Unique Sentence,” *Calgary Herald*, May 25, 1956, pp. 21, 33.

60 Supreme Court of Canada, *The Queen vs. Sidney Keith Neil*, June 10 and 11, October 1, 1957.

to address silences, omissions, and people's selective agency in recounting their histories.<sup>61</sup> While I believe it is important to convey the tenor of the recollections provided by Bert and the others, which acknowledges their agency, his recollections are sometimes disturbing, and they do raise innumerable, mostly unanswerable questions. Specifically, this interview is largely silent about the ages of the other youth and men with whom he experimented, the power and class relations inherent in those exchanges, and the possibilities for exploitation. Bert clearly believed that Neil's classroom conduct was criminal, but this contrasts sharply with his more benign and reciprocal view of the streets and his relationship with older males. Without a doubt, those exchanges provided Bert with access to a queer world in which he sought to participate. George Chauncey, Steven Maynard, Jeffrey Weeks, and others have grappled to describe the conflicting "dangers and possibilities" presented by these relationships, concluding that "early twentieth century understandings of sexual relations between boys and men were markedly different than our own."<sup>62</sup> Ultimately, it is seldom possible to know the motivations of the adult actors.

George M. Smith's recollections of the interwar and war years offer a slightly different perspective on those times. George was born in Scotland, and his parents immigrated to Winnipeg when he was a young child.<sup>63</sup> In 1933, George quit school after grade 11 to take an accounting programme at Angus Business College. A few years older than Bert, George also reported that he was sexually active in the queer subculture and had two buddies with whom he "hung out." Jack Early (one of the Portage Avenue belles mentioned in Bert's interview), Jack Manson, and George frequented a downtown restaurant on Fort Street and routinely strolled along in front of Liggett's drugstore across from the Post Office building. He and his friends used a bit of mascara to "imitate the look of movie stars" but dressed in an ordinary fashion. After dark, they also headed to the Alexander Docks that, conversely, he remembered as generally safe from violence. Indeed, the entire "west bank of the Red River from Union Station north to the Alexander Dock" (now Juba Park) was a popular cruising area.<sup>64</sup>

61 Methodological and theoretical observations about the value and challenges of utilizing oral history abound. A useful and accessible guide to the key issues is provided by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998). See also Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Culture* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003).

62 Steven Maynard, "'Horrible Temptations': Sex, Men, and Working-Class Male Youth in Urban Ontario, 1890-1935," *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 78, no. 2 (June 1997), p. 235; Jeffrey Weeks, "Inverts, Perverts, and Mary-Annes: Male Prostitution and the Regulation of Homosexuality in England in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries" in Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr., eds., *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Meridian, 1990); Chauncey, *Gay New York*. For a similar argument about the uses working-class young women made of sexual favours and exchanges, see Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

63 RCC, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Oral History Project, George M. Smith interview with David Theodore, June 25, 1990.

64 UMASC, "History of the G/L Community," undated, author unknown, Winnipeg Gay/Lesbian Resource Centre.

Another interviewee, Gordon C., also noted the popularity of the Alexander Docks area (or the “Hobo Jungle” as it was colloquially known in classist, racially tinged language) and remembered his surprise that there was such a “great mix of people [there] – Natives, Poles, Ukrainians and Hobos.”<sup>65</sup> Gordon, who was born in 1926 and raised in the Fort Rouge area of Winnipeg, recalled sexual experimentation from a young age. He reminisced about one friend in particular with whom he engaged in sexual activity from the age of 10 through 20. Asked what terms they used, he indicated that “fruit” was commonly employed.

Bruce M.’s interview effectively bridged the pre-war and war years and offers a more ambivalent recollection about this world. Born and raised in Winnipeg, he spent a portion of the summer of 1933 at the farm of a family friend. There, at the age of 12, he was initiated into having queer sex with an individual he referred to as “Old Uncle John.” Nearly 60 years later Bruce recollected that he felt “guilty about the experience” and that his friends back in the city ostracized him when he told them what had transpired.<sup>66</sup> Recollections of inter-generational sexual experiences with older family friends, cousins, or siblings were routinely reported in the interviews from this era.<sup>67</sup> However, there were few explicit expressions of anger or victimization in either the transcripts or the recorded interviews. In this case, Bruce’s guilt and the reported ostracism by his friends are the only clues to indicate these events were not representative of the average experiences of teenage males in Winnipeg.

By coincidence, while swimming near the Norwood Bridge later that summer, Bruce met “some gay guys” and then “didn’t feel like the only one.”<sup>68</sup> He left school and signed up for the Canadian Army, but this did not prove to be a positive experience. While stationed in Kingston, Ontario, he was involved in a fight after another soldier called him “queer.” After this incident, he was determined to pass as heterosexual and married while overseas. Despite this attempt at conventionality, marriage was not enough to provide him with the respectability he sought. While in the army, he was called a “fairy” and a “pansy” despite his capabilities as a soldier. With anger he recalled that he “may have been passed over for promotion in the army and later at work because he was ‘rumored’ to be queer.”<sup>69</sup>

Most of the male informants who were old enough to have served in World War II did so. Interestingly, though, their recollection of the war’s impact on

65 RRC, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Oral History Project, “Gordon Clark” [pseudonym, original name may not be used] interview with David Theodore, Winnipeg, June 4, 1990.

66 RCC, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Oral History Project, Bruce Mitchell interview with David Theodore, Winnipeg, May 28, 1990.

67 My own collection of oral interviews with gay men from Saskatoon, Regina, and Moose Jaw also reported such activity, offering important contextual information for the Winnipeg interviews. These were clearly not isolated incidents.

68 RCC, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Oral History Project, Bruce Mitchell interview with David Theodore, Winnipeg, May 28, 1990.

69 Bruce Mitchell’s recollections are similar to those reported in Paul Jackson’s work, which explores the range of experiences of queer servicemen in the Canadian forces during World War II. See Paul Jackson, *One of the Boys: Homosexuality in the Military during World War II* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004).

Winnipeg's queer activity was not a focal point of their interviews. The information they chose to share points to much continuity with queer social and sexual practices of the interwar period. War meant being shipped out of Winnipeg, initially east to central Canada for military training, and then usually being deployed overseas into the theatre of war. Interviewees who shared their memories of those years often identified their experiences in Toronto, Montreal, New York City, and London as highlights of their lives. What transpired in Winnipeg receded into the background until the war's conclusion. For example, the recollections of David B., who was born in 1920 and grew up in the north end of Winnipeg, were typical. David recalled that, prior to the war, he "learnt about sex from friends [but] had no words to express my feelings" and generally described himself as "naive."<sup>70</sup> In the Canadian Air Force, David discovered how to pick up other men. Acutely attuned to the educational value of queer gossip, David recalled that, after he was transferred overseas, he "heard another airman make a joke that . . . Piccadilly Circus was the place for homosexuals."<sup>71</sup> He laughingly reported heading there at his first opportunity. When he returned to Winnipeg after the war, he was a different person, more mature and emboldened about how to locate queer activity. Within short order, he found the city's cruising areas along the Red River, the beer parlour at the Marlborough Hotel, and the local steam baths, which provided him with much-needed "private" space since he continued to live with his parents.

By comparison with the bright lights of international queer metropolises, Winnipeg was portrayed as more conservative and furtive. Equally, heterosexual Winnipeggers were depicted as provincial and considerably naive about the homosexual activity that existed within their city. While most of the interviewees focused on international comparisons, many western Canadian service personnel were stationed in southern Ontario and Quebec, which enabled them to compare Winnipeg with Toronto and Montreal. For example, George Smith, who was an entertainer in the Canadian Army's variety show, observed that Toronto during the war years was "the deadest place in the world" compared to Winnipeg. In this context, it is worth noting that western Canadian animosity toward Toronto is a beloved facet of prairie culture.<sup>72</sup> In contrast, George "loved New York . . . we had a ball. We'd go to Harlem and all these places." Still he recalled that, though the city was much smaller, "fortunately in those days there was still a lot of fun in Winnipeg. Not like it is now. We had so many places to go then – the beer parlours, etc. It was so fun."<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, he noted, "I

70 PAM, C1864 and C 1865, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Archives Committee, David B. [pseudonym] interview with David Theodore, June 7, 1990.

71 *Ibid.*

72 By coincidence, the *Globe and Mail* recently published a gallop poll indicating that Toronto was the least beloved Canadian city. See Matt Demers, "Toronto the Least Liked City in Canada, Especially by Westerners," *Globe and Mail*, November 9, 2011. The poll conducted by Léger Marketing found that 30 per cent of Albertans hate Toronto.

73 PAM C 1870, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Archives Committee, George M. Smith interview with David Theodore, June 25, 1990, Tape 2.

could get as much trade [straight-presenting/acting men] here as I could in New York, in those days. So it wasn’t like coming back to a dead place. I was quite happy to come back.”<sup>74</sup> George’s recollections offer important perspective on Winnipeg’s enduring queer charms.

David S., who turned 20 in 1945, recalled the war as a formative moment for familial reasons. His older brother Bobby returned from his naval service and declared that he was a homosexual.<sup>75</sup> This shift from covert queer participant to declared homosexual caused shock waves within the family. So did his revelations that he was an active participant in an elite homosexual subculture within the medical school at the University of Manitoba. Winnipeg’s gay and lesbian community archives hold a series of biographical files and records about local people, institutions, and activists. A slim file is devoted to Lennox Gordon “Buzz” Bell (1904-1973), the son of a prominent Winnipeg doctor. In 1949 Bell became “the first full-time Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Physician in Chief at the Winnipeg General Hospital” and was remembered as a “gifted teacher, popular with students and colleagues.” The file concludes with the statement that “the medical college gained a national reputation under his guidance.”<sup>76</sup> Privately, he was also well known to have discreet affairs with select male students.<sup>77</sup> Bobby S. had been one of those students, and Dr. Bell was frequently invited for dinner in his parents’ household. Dean Bell’s circle of students, professionals, and wealthy homosexual men was one of the elite queer subcultures within the city. Bell’s discretion and the privileges accorded a prominent professional from a well-established Manitoba family meant that his friendship network largely escaped scrutiny or censure. It helped that Bell was widely respected for his excellent leadership of the college and his community service.<sup>78</sup> How much Winnipeggers suspended disbelief about the never-married Bell’s activities is uncertain, but in this particular case Bobby’s family was clearly blindsided by revelations of their son’s involvement with him.

The final shock came in 1946 when Bobby was charged with gross indecency. Convicted for having sex with two 12-year-old boys, he served six months in Headingley Prison (just outside Winnipeg). The family was reportedly in a “state of

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> PAM C 1867, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Archives Committee, David Swan interview with David Theodore, June 12, 1990.

<sup>76</sup> RCC, “History of the Gay and Lesbian Community Appendix.” This multi-page document offers a list of social and political organizations (and their locations), special events, and a number of prominent gay and lesbian individuals in the city. The Bell entry (which corresponds to a very thin file in the biographical vertical file) restates the information provided in the oral interviews. A graduate student researcher was unable to locate any official archival materials from Dr. Bell’s tenure at the University of Manitoba that links his public, professional career to his private interests. Still, the multiple references to Bell in oral interviews (the 1990 and 1992 collections, along with my own interviews in Winnipeg) corroborate the story of Bell’s private queer life.

<sup>77</sup> PAM C 1867, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Archives Committee, David Swan interview with David Theodore, June 12, 1990.

<sup>78</sup> Author interview with “Florence McGregor” [pseudonym], Winnipeg, November 2002. McGregor mentioned Dean Bell in her interview, stating that he “was always very careful but we knew he had lots of parties. The intern’s residence was named for him. There were all kinds of rumours about Dr. Bell but he had such a good record. . . . He was one of the better people. Very sensitive. Very kind.”

shock” over the trial, the publicity, and their son’s conviction. For David, Bobby’s visibility, combined with the stress of the conviction and the negative attention it brought his family, offered a chilling lesson about the limits to Winnipeggers’ tolerance. After his release from jail, Bobby had his medical licence reinstated and he returned to London, England, where he lived in an “openly gay community.” By contrast with his brother, David remembered being very cautious about acting on his homosexual desires, let alone publicizing them. Despite his awareness of the liberating possibilities of moving away from Winnipeg, David purposefully chose to stay. Other Winnipeg queers actively made the same choice, despite their knowledge that an openly homosexual existence was possible elsewhere. City residents might travel widely and correspond with friends, family, and former lovers who moved away; still, many remained. Such evidence suggests we need to be cautious about our preconceptions about how individuals make such choices. Sexuality is but one part of a complicated puzzle involving economic and educational opportunities, families and friends, and regional or urban preferences.

David and Bert were the only interviewees to mention criminal charges. Criminal court records were not excavated for this research, but other historians have profitably utilized those sources.<sup>79</sup> Scott de Groot’s research into Winnipeg’s gross indecency charges in the postwar era illustrates a spike in newspaper coverage and convictions.<sup>80</sup> Lyle Dick’s case study of the 1942 same-sex trials in Edmonton illustrates the coercive powers of the state to police homosexual or suspected homosexual activities in that city.<sup>81</sup> These two western Canadian case studies support other Canadian research that demonstrates greater media coverage attended an increasing number of gross indecency charges in the 1940s and 1950s. During this time period, Cold War anxieties about social, sexual, and political “abnormality” and worries about how best to reconvert from the total war effort to civilian life preoccupied educators, doctors, governments, and the criminal courts.<sup>82</sup> The relative silence on these topics within the Winnipeg interviews could be due to a number of factors. Informants might not have wanted to dwell on difficult matters or disclose such incriminating evidence about themselves or friends in interviews intended to form the basis of a community history.

79 See Dick, “The 1942 Same-sex Trials in Edmonton” and “Same-sex Intersections of the Prairie Settlement Era”; Scott F. de Groot, “The Accused Have Not Indicated that They Intend to Fight off this Disease: Moral Panic, the Imperiled Child, and the Regulation of Sexuality in Postwar Winnipeg” (MA Cognate paper, Queen’s University, 2008); Terry Chapman, “‘An Oscar Wilde type’: ‘The Abominable Crime of Buggery’ in Western Canada, 1890-1920,” *Criminal Justice History*, vol. 4 (1983), pp. 97-118; “Male Homosexuality: Legal Restraints and Social Attitudes in Western Canada, 1890-1920” in Louis A. Knafla, ed., *Law and Justice in a New Land: Essays in Western Canadian Legal History* (Calgary: Carswell, 1986), pp. 267-292; “Sex Crimes in the West, 1890-1920,” *Alberta History*, vol. 35, no. 4 (1987), pp. 6-21; and “Sex crimes in Western Canada, 1890-1920” (PhD dissertation, University of Alberta, 1984).

80 De Groot, “The Accused Have Not Indicated that They Intend to Fight off this Disease,” p. 27.

81 Dick, “The 1942 Same-sex Trials in Edmonton.”

82 Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble with Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Kinsman and Gentile, *The Canadian War on Queers*; Richard Cavell, ed., *Love, Hate and Fear in Canada’s Cold War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

### **Remembering North Main Street in the late Forties and Fifties**

After World War II, Jerry Walsh settled in Winnipeg. He immersed himself in queer life in the downtown core and, in the excerpt below, recalled those days evocatively:

Unlike today, back then Main St. was a safe place to cruise day or night. The street’s crowning jewel was the Royal Alexander Hotel at the corner of Higgins and Main. It was elegance at its greatest and attracted many queens who hoped that some of its glitter would rub off on them. . . . East of the hotel was the CP Station. . . . It was a bustling place both day and night as train travel was at its peak. . . . Across Higgins was and still is the Mount Royal Hotel, which was where the gay girls hung out, but it also had its share of sleazy drag queens. No other males went there unless in the company of the girls. It was a lively and noisy place with frequent bouts of dikes duking it out. . . . It was the first place that I ever saw two guys dancing together; no one seemed to mind, so next time I brought my patent leather pumps. Between Henry and Higgins on the east side was the Moon Café, a lot of young guys hung out there and were ready to welcome you after the pubs closed. Myrtle an older queen appointed herself den mother and kept all the chicks in check. She demanded respect and if you didn’t give it to her, you were told to leave and never come back. It wasn’t sex she wanted just control. For a quarter you could get a piece of pie, a coke and a ten-cent package of cigarettes, and spend as much time as it took to make contact. The Chinese owners never bugged you.<sup>83</sup>

Bert Sigurdson also remembered that the Chinese owners were very protective of their cafés. “Chinese fellows were not bad about protecting, they didn’t want anything to happen, and they’d shoo everybody out,” he said. “You felt more trust with the Chinese fellows that ran the restaurant – they never said anything negative.”<sup>84</sup> Whether this was because the owners were averse to trouble, which might bring an unwanted police presence, or a calculated business decision to protect their loyal customers is unknown. The preponderance of queer socializing in Chinese-run cafés in Winnipeg demonstrates an important symbiotic relationship that worked for owners and patrons alike.<sup>85</sup>

Peter, who was born in 1935 and raised in the upscale Crescentwood area, remembered “playing around with the other guys” in grade school and “that it was natural . . . we didn’t put any connotation or names to it.”<sup>86</sup> As a teenager he discovered “the hill” behind the Legislature, and he would ride his bike there in the evenings for sex and then return home. Asked about violence or a police presence during the 1940s, he noted that the “police raids came much later, when

83 Walsh, *Backward Glances*, pp. 17-18.

84 PAM C 1874, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Archives Committee, Bert Sigurdson interview with David Theodore, June 29, 1990, Tape 1, Side B.

85 Elise Chenier has also noted the use of Chinese-run restaurants in postwar Toronto in “Rethinking Class in Lesbian Bar Culture.”

86 PAM C 1879, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Archives Committee, “Peter” interview with David Theodore, July 24, 1990, Tape 1, Side A.

they were cracking down.” Given the examples set by Dr. Bell, whom Peter remembered as always taking a female escort to public events, he emulated the strategic upper-middle-class public/private duality. “When I was in my twenties,” Peter reported, “I remember my lover wanted to go to a movie but I was adamant that we wouldn’t be seen together in public going to a movie.” Asked if being gay affected his job prospects, he replied “No.” Pressed by the interviewer to clarify this statement, Peter shrewdly replied, “well it certainly was possible to work, to become Prime Minister, to do anything you wanted to do you just didn’t make your sex life public.” Despite the oral history project’s goals of chronicling the emergence of a clearly defined gay and lesbian minority, Peter was resistant to this narrative arc. He was critical of “political activists [who] are doing great harm to other homosexuals by publicizing gay activities” because it was his belief that you “can’t advance in society if you wear a label.”<sup>87</sup> Publicizing the queer world had, in his opinion, brought increased violence to the cruising areas and unwelcome speculation about people’s private activities. Corroborating evidence is found in the interview of George Smith, whose youthful memories of drag socializing in St. Boniface served as an introductory anecdote. He employed similar strategies to Peter, explaining, “I always had two lives. A private life and a public life.” He confided to the interviewer, “I had to keep my hair pinned up at work, we’re all scared of somebody.”<sup>88</sup>

While differences of opinion were expressed in the interviews about the degree to which one could be increasingly overt about queer activities as the city shed its economically depressed pre-war malaise, the opportunities for queer socializing increased significantly. Gordon Clark noted that, in the postwar era, Winnipeg bars such as the Marlborough Hotel were wide open, and on any given night you could find a mixed crowd of “army men and screaming queens.” Amendments to the liquor laws, not the war, were frequently cited as an important lever of change in Winnipeg. In 1957, the law was revised to include mixed-gender public drinking establishments, ushering in the era of the cocktail lounge.<sup>89</sup>

Interestingly, all of those interviewed from this postwar cohort reported a loosening of social mores, an observation that contradicts the dominant characterization of the late forties and fifties in North America as an era of conformity and family values. In part, this was clearly tied to better economic times in Winnipeg generally, resulting in more restaurants and bars and expanded opportunities for commercial leisure. It also reflected the pre-war teenagers’ transition into adulthood, with its commensurate economic and social freedoms. All informants noted increased opportunities for queer male sexual activity and socializing after the war, but stressed that particular codes of behaviour were observed. Newcomers were taught the “rules” by those in the know, including where to sit, what bars to frequent, and how to conduct oneself in the baths or on

87 *Ibid.*

88 PAM C 1869, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Archives Committee, George Smith interview with David Theodore, June 25, 1990, Tape 1, Side B.

89 See Dale Barbour, “Drinking Together: The Role of Gender in Changing Manitoba’s Liquor Laws in the 1950s” in Jones and Friesen, eds., *Prairie Metropolis*, pp. 187-199.



the trails. The paramount rule was never to identify or disclose the men whom one had met in queer cruising areas if one spotted them elsewhere in the city. Unlike their younger selves who had challenged gender norms with transgendered clothes and makeup, in the forties and fifties these interviewees largely followed middle-class conventions: they dressed appropriately to go out for the evening in suits, ties, and often hats; they obeyed the drinking rules of the day (patrons had to sit at tables, drinking their beer, instead of circulating around the room); and they avoided “camping it up” too much in public establishments. Ironically, the strict nature of the liquor laws encouraged much cruising of the men’s tearooms.

In addition to cafés and hotel beverage rooms, the Grenadiers Club and the YMCA were also popular for queer socializing.<sup>90</sup> The Grenadiers Club, located at the barracks of the Winnipeg Grenadiers, was an unlikely queer haunt, but, because the Steward’s son was queer, his friends had access to this space and took full advantage. According to Jerry Walsh, “the Grenadiers was great, plus being a military building the drinks were cheap. Never a night went by that we didn’t outnumber the members.”<sup>91</sup> By comparison with the 1990s, the cruising spots in the forties and fifties were remembered as being relatively safe. Walsh recalled that the cafés and parks were safe during both day and night and bashing was seldom heard of, even on Main Street and “the hill,” two spots that would become increasingly more dangerous in the seventies. Walsh was particularly proud of the savvy use queer men made of city parks, which “weren’t as manicured as they are today” and provided ample “underbrush, tall grass and clumps of bush” for trysts. “Banana Park” was the campy, queer nickname for St. John’s Park. “It was a family park but all the people had to leave by 10pm. The park officers would clear the park and then leave. There were no gates in the fences so at 10:30 the park would start filling up again with those looking for brotherly love.”<sup>92</sup> This mixed use of a public park, in which park staff were unwittingly complicit, is one example of how multiple communities used the same spaces at varying hours for completely different purposes. The park’s landscaping and the nightly clearance of people from the grounds enabled queer residents to pursue their activities without harassment or detection.

Similar outcomes but different strategies governed other mixed usage of steam baths in the city. Walsh’s testimony offered detailed recollections of the Alexander and King Bath (the city’s oldest), which had a primarily queer clientele.<sup>93</sup> Obees, the other bathhouse, was a north end institution. Located at Mountain and McGregor Streets, Obees first opened in 1914, initially providing access to baths and showers for the local immigrant population. By the early 1940s, its mission had changed from a purely utilitarian and functional space to a social one. In a recent popular history, writer Russ Gourluck suggests that “Obees remained

90 Walsh, *Backward Glances*, p. 2.

91 *Ibid.*

92 *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

93 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

a popular destination for men to socialize and play cards, conduct business, perhaps have a few drinks, and enjoy a relaxing steam bath.”<sup>94</sup> By contrast, Walsh remembered how this “family” bathhouse attracted a mixed group of older men as well as a newer crowd of queer men who managed to co-exist:

The elderly straight men came mainly for the steam, they spent hours steaming and hitting themselves with the oak leaf switches. They also brought food, beer or wine and made a night of it. The gays at first tried to out stay them, but it was a losing battle, so they didn’t flaunt it, but went about doing what they had come for. The old timers went about their thing and didn’t seem to notice or care what else went on. There were never any problems, mainly because the owner was an ex boxer and no-one wanted to spar with him. ...

In the end, the queer men “took a tip from the straights and brought food” and “for three bucks you could buy a mickey of rye to sip on between sessions.”<sup>95</sup> Such descriptions show how the traditions and businesses originally intended to serve Winnipeg’s immigrant populations were co-opted into homosocial spaces by other men for their own purposes. For the owners of the baths, like the Chinese café owners, such queer activity was financially advantageous as it provided an essential new source of revenue. This exemplifies the live-and-let-live ethos in action. It is doubtful that the older immigrant men were unaware of the presence of so many younger, queer men in their midst, but the accommodation between the two groups (one wilfully pretending not to see while the other group did not “flaunt” their business) worked to everyone’s advantage. The infusion of new customers allowed the steam bath to stay open, which provided both straight and queer men a private, male-only space away from the prying eyes of wives and families.

Men who initially arrived in Winnipeg in the mid-1950s, bringing with them a fresh perspective on the city, observed that lesbians were increasingly included in some queer male socializing. Ted Patterson provided one particularly detailed narrative about class and gender differences. Raised in Edmonton in what he described as a “square, unsophisticated, working-class family,” Ted arrived in Winnipeg in 1954 on a scholarship with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet Corps (RWB). Because homosexuality was well known among the RWB dancers and administrators, Ted quickly learned the geography of queer socializing in Winnipeg. He recalled that “gays held court” in the basement beer parlour of the Marlborough Hotel, a primarily working-class venue where discretion prevailed.<sup>96</sup> Ted noted that some Winnipeg bars tried to evict their queer clientele at various junctures in blatant attempts to attract more respectable and thereby affluent patrons. These strategies often backfired; after queers were

94 Gourluck, *The Mosaic Village*, p. 168.

95 Walsh, *Backward Glances*, p. 9.

96 RRC, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Oral History Project, Ted Patterson interview with David Theodore, Winnipeg, June 27, 1990.

barred from the Marlborough Hotel, for example, they decamped to the St. Regis, where the staff welcomed them.<sup>97</sup>

Ted observed that, from 1955 to 1970, house parties played a crucial role in middle-class socializing in Winnipeg. A variety of party circuits included those of the theatre and ballet crowd and others involving more prominent wealthier circles, corroborating earlier comments about the elite queer networks and the class and gender stratifications within the city.<sup>98</sup> Socializing after the theatre, queer patrons tended to head to either Child’s or Moore’s. Asked to compare Winnipeg’s queer offerings with those of other cities with which he was familiar, Ted honestly observed that “any weekend in Minneapolis seemed like a holiday” and that Winnipeg was provincial by comparison. What kept him in Winnipeg was the Royal Winnipeg Ballet because he was able to live in a “gay world” as a dancer with the company. During the 1960s Ted taught dance classes in Brandon, Manitoba, a smaller city he characterized as “a dead end” for gay people.<sup>99</sup> Other interviewees also noted how advantageous the city’s strong roster of arts, cultural, and musical venues was to attracting queer migrants and to offering all city residents economic and social opportunities. Peter explicitly praised the particularities of arts and cultural activities in the city, noting that “gays [were] attracted to the arts in Winnipeg” and that the “vitality of the arts in Winnipeg [was] due to the work of the Jewish community.”<sup>100</sup>

House parties were popular for a variety of reasons. First, the 10:00 p.m. (later 10:30 p.m.) closing time for licensed drinking establishments meant that people eagerly sought after-hours social spots. Immediately after the war, a housing shortage also meant many young adults were still living at home. In both instances, then, house parties provided much-needed spaces for people to congregate. Jerry Walsh recalled eventually being able to afford to rent a bed-sitting room equipped with a kitchen consisting of a coin-fed gas cook stove and an icebox. Though far from opulent, this working-class apartment was the scene of many parties. Initially these parties were basic affairs. The host “would buy the beer and we’d pay a quarter for every bottle we drank.”<sup>101</sup> As people began to make more money, living spaces were upgraded to larger self-contained apartments and later houses. More space meant larger parties, now featuring music and dancing. In the late sixties and early seventies, Alan Miller observed that house parties were still quite an attractive and enjoyable way for “gay men and

97 I am indebted to Matt Houlbrook’s sections on the “pink shilling,” in which he astutely assesses how commercial opportunities, and consumer power, were critical facets of homosexual life in London for both middle-class and working-class men (*Queer London*). Specifics regarding the Marlborough Hotel’s Cocktail Bar and its changing policy concerning gay patrons is taken from Walsh, *Backward Glances*, p. 2.

98 The 1992 community interviews, as well as the author’s research on the period from 1970 to 1985, indicate more class and gender tensions, particularly the creation of a number of women-only social and political organizations.

99 RCC, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Oral History Project, Ted Patterson interview with David Theodore, Winnipeg, June 27, 1990.

100 RCC, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Oral History Project, “Peter” interview with David Theodore, July 24, 1990.

101 Walsh, *Backward Glances*, pp. 11-12.

lesbians [in Winnipeg] who were in relationships and/or for those who did not visit the bars” to socialize.<sup>102</sup> Ted Patterson noted that he regularly attended lesbian parties and that some of the lesbian couples he met in those years became close friends. He fondly remembered “Pearl and Jean who worked for the Red Cross” because of their great parties in the city and at their summer cottage in Kenora, further indicating that both Winnipeg Beach and Grand Beach were also the sites of queer summer parties.<sup>103</sup>

For middle-class lesbians in Winnipeg, the house parties were important social venues.<sup>104</sup> One informant, Ruth B. Sells, who was born in 1927 in northwestern Ontario and moved to Winnipeg at age five, remembered a profound sense of isolation during her youth. A tomboy as a child and later a rather solitary teen, she vividly recalled reading Radclyffe Hall’s melodramatic lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness*. Sells worked as a teacher for five years and subsequently chose to work in a variety of piano and retail music stores in Winnipeg. In those stores she met queer customers and slowly began to build a circle of homosexual male friends. In 1950, a male friend who lived in the same rooming house as Sells introduced her to an older lesbian couple. Sells and 40-year-old Joy Boyd clicked instantaneously, resulting in Boyd leaving her girlfriend and moving in with Sells. With the exception of one brief hiatus apart, Sells and Boyd were together until Joy’s death in 1984 at the age of 74. A frequent traveller to American cities – Minneapolis, San Francisco, and Chicago – Sells remembered that, even though all of them were more vibrant than Winnipeg, Winnipeg was home. Sells and Boyd owned a cottage in the Whiteshell area and, looking back on their lives together, Sells reflected that they had been happy to lead quiet, discreet lives.<sup>105</sup> Sells and her partner were the embodiment of respectable middle-class lesbians and homosexuals.<sup>106</sup> Her personal good fortune did not translate into complacency about the challenges of living as a lesbian during this era. She was forthright about the hardships of compartmentalization and living “a lie to survive.”

102 Alan Miller, “Alan Miller’s Winnipeg Years, 1969-1972,” email to the author, April 30, 2007.

103 For an excellent analysis of the creation of heterosexual social spaces at Winnipeg Beach, see Dale Barbour, “If Heterosexuality is the Norm, Why Do We Need to Go to Winnipeg Beach? Making and Unmaking Safe Social Space, 1900-1965” (MA thesis, University of Manitoba, Department of History, 2009) and *Winnipeg Beach: Leisure and Courtship in a Resort Town, 1900-1967* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2011).

104 American historians, most notably Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis in *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Rutledge, 1993), have offered considerable evidence of the importance of house parties within lesbian social networks in the city of Buffalo, New York. Cameron Duder provides similarly compelling evidence for middle-class Canadian lesbians in *Awfully Devoted Women*. The evidence presented here is partial and incomplete owing to the lack of female informants interviewed for the pre-1970 queer and lesbian history of Winnipeg; nevertheless, it seems logical that such venues were equally important in the city of Winnipeg.

105 Duder, *Awfully Devoted Women*.

106 Duder (*Awfully Devoted Women*) focuses specifically on the strategies employed by middle-class women to be “discreet” and thus protect their lesbian relationships. For the United States, see Liz Kennedy, “‘But we would never talk about it’: The Structures of Lesbian Discretion in South Dakota, 1928-1933” in Ellen Lewin, ed., *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pp. 15-39.

This discrimination motivated her participation in two American homophile organizations, the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society.<sup>107</sup>

If it was challenging to grow up with lesbian or homosexual inclinations in Winnipeg, it was often more arduous for those raised in rural areas or small towns. Informants frequently commented upon the impossibility of finding any information about homosexuality, and none mentioned parallel queer spaces in those smaller venues. It was seldom openly discussed, and resources were non-existent. Dr. A. M. Watts, whose work as a Chaplain at the University of Manitoba served as a springboard for gay advocacy on campus, remarked that “homosexuality was never seriously discussed” in the forties and fifties, although negative pejoratives like “pervert” could be heard in some circles.<sup>108</sup> Jim H., who grew up in Portage La Prairie, a small bedroom community west of Winnipeg, recollected that he first heard the word “homosexual” in 1959 when he was 23 years old. Curious but cautious, he went to great lengths to research this subject, driving all the way to Minneapolis (approximately eight hours by car) to consult its public library. In Winnipeg he feared that someone might question his research.<sup>109</sup>

While the 1950s witnessed changes in queer socializing and an increase in venues and opportunities, there were also important continuities. Chief among them was cruising “the hill” and the city’s tearooms. Informants provided an extensive list of tearooms that included some of Winnipeg’s commercial and public landmarks. Naturally, this use of commercial space was never noted in the commemorative books about Winnipeg. For instance, informants recalled popular tearooms on the third floor of Eaton’s and the fifth floor of The Bay, as well as the second floor of the Rialto Theatre, the Hargrave Bus Depot and the attached Salisbury House restaurant, and the William Street Library. Such use of public space was not unique to Winnipeg: “many men, gay identified or not, engaged in public sexual encounters in parks, sauna baths, cheap movie houses, locker rooms, public toilets, highway rest stops and other such places in and around major cities.”<sup>110</sup> For some men this activity was merely a sexual outlet, but for others “it could and did lead to self-identification as part of a community bonded by queer male desires.”<sup>111</sup> Despite the evident bravado expressed in the

107 RRC, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Oral History Project, Ruth B. Sells interview with David Theodore, Winnipeg, August 16, 1990. For a discussion of the differences between respectable, middle-class homosexuals and working-class queers, see Houlbrook and Waters, “*The Heart in Exile*,” p. 162. For a history of the Daughters of Bilitis, see Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of Lesbian Rights Movement* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006).

108 Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Oral History Project II, Dr. A. M. Watts interview, Winnipeg, June 25, 1992. Although not gay himself, Watts contributed to gay and lesbian advocacy in the city and region during the 1980s through his influential work within the United Church. In explaining how he came to be an advocate for such issues, he reflected on his youth and experiences at the University of Manitoba.

109 RCC, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Oral History Project, Jim H. interview with David Theodore, Winnipeg, July 12, 1990.

110 Ross Higgins, “Baths, Bushes, and Belonging: Public Sex and Gay Community in Pre-Stonewall Montreal” in William L. Leap, ed., *Public Sex/Gay Space* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 9.

111 *Ibid.*

interviews about these multiple sites, many men also voiced their apprehensions. Jerry declared that he was always afraid of public ridicule, the risk of losing his job, and police harassment or being arrested, particularly at “the hill.” Ultimately, he said, “I lived two lives; I did not want my straight friends to spot me with my gay friends at gay spots.”<sup>112</sup>

While many gay men stated that they feared public ridicule and the police, the lesbians interviewed from this time indicated that what women feared most was psychiatric intervention. Pat, who was born in 1931 and raised in the north end of Winnipeg, reported that in 1946 she “slept away the summer, afraid that if she told someone she was a homosexual she would be sent to the Mental Hospital in Selkirk.”<sup>113</sup> As an adult Pat feared being fired if her work colleagues discovered her lesbianism, so she habitually hid her private life. While Pat’s middle-class instincts to remain silent about her lesbianism left her isolated and apprehensive as a teen, as an adult she fared better than working-class or Aboriginal lesbians. One Aboriginal woman interviewed (‘Kate’) disclosed that she had spent considerable time in her teens incarcerated in unnamed institutions (one can infer that these were psychiatric institutions or reform schools) where she discovered her lesbianism.<sup>114</sup> She recalled particularly difficult memories of former girlfriends who had committed suicide and her own suicide attempt, which earned her an admission to the psychiatric hospital. In 1965, at the age of 18, Kate participated in the Selkirk Mental Hospital Aversion Therapy programme.<sup>115</sup> Such programmes to “cure” deviant sexual expressions were part of a roster of psychiatric treatments meted out to homosexuals in the era before the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses in 1973.<sup>116</sup>

### “The Torch of Golden Boy Burns Bright”: The Sixties

By the 1960s, Winnipeg’s queer culture had entered a transitional phase. Initially the shifts were subtle, as the postwar expansion of mixed social spaces in cocktail lounges continued to benefit women and men who sought commercial establishments for socialization. By the end of the decade, queer and increasingly “gay” culture was no longer invisible to the mainstream of Winnipeg residents. Equally important were the numbers of Winnipeggers now openly referring to themselves as gay or lesbian. The queer subcultural model was beginning to recede into the background (if never entirely disappearing) as an openly gay or lesbian community model began to emerge.

112 PAM 1990-233 C 1883, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Archives Committee, Gerry interview, 2/2 [26 July 1990].

113 RRC, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Oral History Project, “Joe” and “Pat” [both names are pseudonyms; Joe is male, Pat female] interviews with David Theodore, Winnipeg, July 25, 1990.

114 RCC, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Oral History Project, “KC and Audrey” interviews with David Theodore, Winnipeg, August 15, 1990.

115 RCC, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Oral History Project, “Kate” [this individual requested anonymity, so “Kate” is a pseudonym] interview with David Theodore, August 9, 1990.

116 Chenier, *Strangers in our Midst*.

One of those popular cocktail lounges in the sixties was Moore’s Bar on Portage Avenue. This “elegant” lounge was located above a main-floor family-style restaurant and coffee shop. Teenagers and those under the legal drinking age of 21 who wanted to cruise the traffic in the lounge sat in the fountain area of the coffee shop where they could observe the stairs.<sup>117</sup> Moore’s queer clientele was so critical to the commercial viability of the lounge that, when it closed, the owners held a party for their gay customers. After the demise of Moore’s, the Mardi Gras, located next door, began to attract a queer crowd. The Mardi Gras was profiled in journalist Peter Carlyle-Gordge’s melodramatic, two-part magazine article in the *Winnipeg World* entitled “The Hill is Favorite Spot.”<sup>118</sup> This voyeuristic article provided a glimpse into Winnipeg’s homosexual men and their haunts (the hill, private parties, and the bar). Although Carlyle-Gordge clearly identified himself as married, he eschewed the common approach of speaking primarily with psychiatrists and other “experts” but “decided to talk exclusively with homosexuals themselves and let them explain why they are as they are.”<sup>119</sup> Part of his investigation included socializing at “the Madras” (his nickname for the Mardi Gras).

According to Carlyle-Gordge, the Madras was the “main centre to meet and socialize,” although reportedly “some homosexuals abhor it because such a large proportion of its clientele is made up of exhibitionistic, ‘nelly’ pretty boy homosexuals.”<sup>120</sup> On the night he visited, Carlyle-Gordge found “forty men sitting around the lounge and perhaps four women” in a room that was “brightly painted with dancing scenes.”<sup>121</sup> The patrons were “resplendent in silk shirts, sunglasses, bright bell-bottom trousers and whatever else is the latest fashion. Some look like ordinary sober-suited businessmen and probably are. They are the ‘respectable’ homosexuals, either there with a friend or to eye the younger talent. . . .” In his article, Carlyle-Gordge utilized the terms gay and homosexual interchangeably, evidence that by now they were in common usage in Winnipeg. “The police know the Madras is gay and make periodic checks, though there is usually no trouble,” he wrote.<sup>122</sup> Similar to Moore’s, it had a coffee shop at street level, with the lounge upstairs. Young men waited in the coffee shop until the bar closed, when “a drag line forms outside” composed of those from upstairs and downstairs, and “within ten minutes the line has disappeared, everyone having found a suitable partner. Sometimes a whole group will troop off to a party if someone suggests one.”<sup>123</sup> The unsuccessful often left for “the hill.”

117 PAM C 1868, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Archives Committee, T. Frost interview with David Theodore, June 19, 1990.

118 Peter Carlyle-Gordge, “The Hill is a Favorite Spot: Part I,” *Winnipeg World*, Summer 1969, pp. 36-41, and “The Hill is a Favorite Spot: Part II,” *Winnipeg World*, Winter 1969/Spring 1970, pp. 36-41. Carlyle-Gordge is a Winnipeg-based freelance journalist who has written for a wide-ranging number of local and national newspapers and periodicals, including *Outwords*, a GLBT periodical produced in Winnipeg for members of the community and their allies. For more information about his career, see his website: <http://www.gordge.com/>.

119 Carlyle-Gordge, “The Hill is a Favorite Spot: Part I,” p. 37.

120 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

121 *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

122 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

123 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

The second part of Carlyle-Gordge's series offered a detailed guide to cruising the hill. Beautifully rendered (if dramatic), it is worth excerpting here because it captures the lived reality of this nightly activity and offers a rare observation of how disparate groups of young and old, working-class and elite queers met and negotiated sex and sociability at this famous local cruising spot:

The Hill is a strange place. Walking there at night – the whole area around the Legislative Buildings in general and in particular that area that slopes down to the river from Assiniboine Avenue – is an odd, unsettling experience. It is even odder if you are a stranger and don't know why the Hill is so famous. Or is it infamous?

The torch of Golden Boy burns brightly in the night, attracting not moths as some lights do, but another kind of night creature, the homosexual. Single men go there. Lonely men. Men looking for other men. . . . They wait patiently and walk endlessly up and down Assiniboine Avenue, through the grounds of the Legislature, down the slope, down to the river, down to the bridge. That's a very favorite spot. . . . On Fridays business on the Hill begins at about 10:30pm and goes on till 4 am or even later, there being a noticeable increase in business soon after the bars close. . . . A man may go there, walk around for a while ("cruise" is the correct term) and see someone he likes. . . . Two men may pass each other on Assiniboine Ave or in the grounds of the Legislature and be interested in each other. At a reasonable distance, one will turn around and start walking in the other man's direction, slowly pursuing him at a short distance. After a while, the pursued, if he's interested may walk across to the slope and go down to the riverbank to wait. There the two will meet, talk and arrange whatever they want to arrange. . . .

For every man on foot there are perhaps two or three in cars, cars that cruise round and round, picking up the pedestrians in their headlights. The Hill wouldn't be the Hill without cars. . . . If a headlight blinks and a car slows down to a snail's pace as it passes someone, the driver is very much interested in that someone. . . . This may seem a strange form of "courting," but to hundreds it's quite normal and it goes on every night. . . .

As a rule, those driving cars tend to be older, in their 30's or 40's. Youth almost always walks. Occasionally another kind of car creeps around the grounds by the Hill. It contains not a homosexual in search of a mate, but a policeman or two policemen. The police may scare off a few people, temporarily at least, but they don't interfere too much with the homosexuals, their concern being more with hippies and other "undesirables."<sup>124</sup>

It is intriguing that, in assessing the risks to Winnipeg residents, Carlyle-Gordge observed that the city's police force considered hippies and unspecified "undesirables" (we can infer drug users, transients, and the indigent) as posing

124 Carlyle-Gordge, "The Hill is a Favorite Spot: Part II," p. 38.



more of a risk to citizens than homosexuals.<sup>125</sup> The men themselves remained apprehensive of the police and their powers because homosexuality was still illegal, and “the police could pick you up just for being,” as Jerry Walsh recalled.<sup>126</sup> After the 1969 Criminal Code amendments, private homosexual acts were no longer criminalized, but “public” sex, whether on “the hill” or in bathhouses, remained a criminal activity. Murray W., a self-declared working-class male and infrequent hill hustler, reported “many straight, married men cruised the Hill” in the evenings.<sup>127</sup> For queer men cruising who were married or living “double” lives, police harassment or criminal charges of gross indecency had the potential to shatter lives. The increased police presence was also a response to a rash of violence in the 1960s. Gay men who cruised the hill in the late sixties commented on the risks posed by gay bashers who targeted them for sport, or possibly as compensation for their own conflicted sexuality. Murray reported that he was “beaten in the washroom of the Mardi Gras” and that “sometimes men would wait outside the MG to beat up patrons.” On the hill he was “harassed by the police” while socializing with his group of friends and later “chased around the city in his car by attackers.”

Press coverage of cruising spots and gay practices made them far more visible than previously, and this development brought an attendant increase in anti-gay violence and police surveillance. Queer men recalled that, whenever possible, they exercised agency in resisting these attacks. Walsh cited the heroic actions of Corina, a man known only by her camp name, who fought back against such attacks: “One night a few of us were at the hill, all of a sudden we heard a great yell, and four guys came a running, being chased by Corina. She chased them all the way across the bridge [Osborne Street], then calmly came back and said ‘That will teach those bastards they can’t fuck around with us.’”<sup>128</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, anti-gay violence became so widespread that the activist group Gays For Equality created a public education campaign to warn men about the dangers and strongly encouraged them to refrain from cruising on the hill. For the middle-class activists, this was logical and valuable work, much like anti-smoking campaigns appear logical to non-smokers. However, reversing decades of queer geographical imprinting that marked the hill as a social and sexual space for a varied group of working- and middle-class youth and adults, some of whom identified as gay and others who were there just for the sex, was virtually impossible.

Ironically, one of the safer locations proposed was the baths. The wave of police raids of Canadian bathhouses (Winnipeg’s included) was yet to come. For

125 In this respect, Winnipeg police officers were following similar policies and procedures as their counterparts in Toronto. See Marcel Martel “‘They smell bad, have diseases, and are lazy’: RCMP Officers Reporting on Hippies in the Late Sixties,” *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 90, no. 2 (June 2009), pp. 215-245; Stuart Henderson, *Making the Scene: Yorkville and Hip Toronto in the 1960s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

126 Walsh, *Backward Glances*, p. 22.

127 PAM C 1892, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Archives Committee, Murray W. interview with David Theodore, August 22, 1990, Tape 1 Side B.

128 Walsh, *Backward Glances*, p. 25.

many participants these commercial spaces provided the illusion of safety and privacy. Men spoke fondly of the tough owner/operators, whose gatekeeper function offered them more protection than in public, outdoor venues. Many frequent bath patrons in Winnipeg continued to be married, middle-class, professional males. In his interview Terry observed, "the married ones undergo a transformation once they get inside a steam bath; they look ten years younger when they start having 'fun.' It's sad to see them leave because they seem to age as they get dressed. They probably wouldn't speak to you on the street."<sup>129</sup> Perhaps not, but some of them had reportedly worked out flexible accommodations with their wives. Bruce M., the former soldier, told the interviewer that his wife knew that he was "fooling around but considered it a safety valve" to preserve their marriage. Bruce met men through work (at the post office and also while he worked for the railroad) despite keeping his homosexuality "undercover at work."<sup>130</sup> These valuable recollections provide glimpses of men whose participation in the queer subculture remained masked by their public heterosexuality.

The *Winnipeg World* articles, like the oral history collection, provided little commentary about the city's lesbians, citing space limitations as the rationale. Readers were thus left with only the most fleeting of impressions of lesbian existence. Yet Winnipeg lesbians were staking claims to social spaces, though these were differentiated from those of gay men. The Mount Royal remained the venue of choice for working-class lesbians. This Main Street bar was derided for both its clientele and its location on Winnipeg's "skid row." Kate, a regular patron of the Mount Royal, recalled that, despite its reputation as "grubby and sleazy," there was a sense of protectiveness among gays in the bar.<sup>131</sup> Possibly this was due to the fact that police routinely surveilled and arrested patrons of the Mount Royal. During such raids it was not uncommon for gay people to flee out the back door, cross the parking lot, and enter the Patricia Café, another popular working-class lesbian and gay hangout. Kate recalled that the Mount Royal attracted gay factory workers, hairdressers, cooks, and a number of lesbians, some of whom initially attended the Mount Royal with their husbands. First Nations lesbians were regarded as "rougher and tougher" according to Kate, and she remembered that they socialized most often at the Patricia, the Bell, and the Manor hotels. According to the abbreviated informal community history, "it was only in the 1960's that lesbians first began to appear at some of the taverns and restaurants that had become popular with gay men. The Grange Hotel and the St. Charles Hotel became two of the choicer meeting places at this time. Women also met through less visible friendship networks, softball teams, and acquaintances at work."<sup>132</sup>

Kate's interview corroborates the class divide among Winnipeg homosexuals that mirrored the spatial divides in the city between "north enders"

129 Carlyle-Gordge, "The Hill is a Favorite Spot: Part I," p. 38.

130 PAM C 1861, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Archives Committee, Bruce Mitchell interview with David Theodore, May 28, 1990, Tape 1 Side A.

131 RCC, Manitoba Gay/Lesbian Oral History Project, "Kate" Interview with David Theodore, August 9, 1990.

132 "History of the G/L Community," Winnipeg Gay/Lesbian Resource Centre, author unknown, undated, p. 2.

and “downtowners.” She reported that the downtown crowd, who patronized Moore’s and the Mardi Gras, were more affluent than the Main Street, north end crowd. Not surprisingly, Main Streeters were often mistrustful of the more affluent lesbians and gays. When community or citywide festivities, balls, or socials occurred, those special events managed to transcend class and geographical boundaries, drawing people from across the city. Race differences were not so easily shed, and few oral informants recalled Aboriginal people at such events. These histories either confirm the marginalization of First Nations people within the queer subcultures or indicate Euro-Canadian ethno-centric views that ignored First Nations participants. These conclusions are very tentative, and additional research needs to be done to analyse more fully First Nations’ participation in queer, gay, and lesbian activities in Winnipeg. A more inclusive history that included their experiences would better document demographic changes in both the queer communities and Winnipeg during the 1970s, when large numbers of Aboriginal people moved into the city.<sup>133</sup>

The late 1960s saw the emergence of a new series of drag events, called the Beaux Art Balls, which became popular outlets for Winnipeg’s gay and lesbian residents. One such event held in 1969 attracted 250 people for the dinner, dance, and drag fashion show.<sup>134</sup> Paul, a journalist, reminisced, “the queens look forward to this event all year long. ... Sometimes the finished product is a riot. Sometimes it’s stunning and you would never guess they’re really men dressed in women’s clothes.”<sup>135</sup> It was common to see both men and women cross-dressed at this event intermingling with those who came attired in more conventional clothing. In the same era, the first gay boat trips were organized and held on the city’s Paddlewheel boats. These boats were tremendously popular in the city during the summer. Memorably, drag queens were the featured entertainment that differentiated these cruises from their straight counterparts.

## Conclusion

While the history sketched here may appear linear and progressive, this was not in fact the case. During the interwar and war years, Winnipeg’s queer subculture was relatively small and comprised largely of working-class and middle class men. These men discovered and forged the queer geography of the city’s core – the public and commercial cruising sites as well as the cafés, beer parlours, hotels, and transportation infrastructure where men who sought other men congregated. They marvelled at how wonderful it was to see 25 men on the docks or on “the hill” behind the legislature in the evening. Prior to discovering these spaces, they had believed that their experiences were singular. Finding a cohort of other men was a profound experience that ended their isolation. Yet, if their

133 Evelyn Peters, *Native Households in Winnipeg: Strategies of Co-Residence and Financial Support* (Winnipeg: Institute of Urban Studies, University of Winnipeg, 1994) and “‘Our city Indians’: Negotiating the Meaning of First Nations Urbanization in Canada, 1945-1975,” *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol. 30 (1992), pp. 75-92.

134 Carlyle-Gordge, “The Hill is a Favorite Spot: Part II,” p. 40.

135 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

recollections were accurate, the queer subculture was both vibrant and quite small until after World War II. Mainstream Winnipeggers were largely oblivious to this secretive world. However, Winnipeg's urban design, the importance of railways, and the constant ebb and flow of settlers, workers, transients, and travellers in and through the city meant that well-known modes of queer sociability were recognizable and available. The absence of lesbians from the extant sources utilized here does not, in all likelihood, mean that they were absent from Winnipeg. Winnipeg's pre-World-War-II lesbian enclaves, friendships, and social spaces still await their historian.

If the queer sociability of male cruising was an international phenomenon, what was particular and specific to Winnipeg was the city's prominent role in the western region, first as the "gateway" city and later as a regional metropolis. The development of a queer subculture in Winnipeg deserves to be understood as part and parcel of the settling of the west as well as the growth, rapid development, and then stagnation of the city during the first half of the twentieth century. Sexual opportunities abounded in this youthful city, and men took advantage of those opportunities whether under the literal signpost of "Golden Boy" or in the city's red-light district. The queer subcultural world had important parallels with heterosexual men's conceptualization of the city's sexual opportunities. Many of those interviewed had been young, effeminate, gender-transgressing "pansies" during the thirties, but their interviews point to the presence of "real men" (or trade), whose participation in the queer world might have been one of opportunity (an available male sexual partner) but might also have been one of choice.

During the interwar and war years and stretching into the postwar era, immigrant small business owners were important in providing spaces for queer socialization in Winnipeg: Chinese-run cafés, European bathhouses, restaurants, and beer parlours. These relationships were mutually advantageous socially and financially. While it would be conjecture to claim that owners recognized and accepted queer diversity, it is not speculation to contend that the region's live-and-let-live ethos enabled diverse activities and mixed uses of commercial spaces. Queer tables in bars and restaurants, queer areas of bathhouses, and queer uses of public spaces were tolerated as long as "they did not camp it up too much." In the fifties and sixties those establishments that attempted to bar queer clients learned harsh economic lessons. Others, like Moore's, recognized their core audience and the importance of such patronage.

After World War II, Winnipeg changed, and so did the queer subculture. Winnipeg's economic fortunes finally improved, and the city became a major regional metropolis serving Northwestern Ontario, Manitoba, and parts of Saskatchewan. As the province's largest city, Winnipeg was an attractive destination for its mix of economic, cultural, educational, and social opportunities. A disproportionately strong arts community differentiated the city from others in the prairies and drew migrants from elsewhere. Queer opportunities expanded in postwar Winnipeg, but, perhaps more significantly, in the fifties and sixties Winnipeg became a destination city for queer people. Alongside a demographic shift that

saw the city grow to include over half of the province’s population, our sources indicate that queer, lesbian, and gay men from small towns and rural and northern areas increasingly chose to migrate to Winnipeg. The reason, quite simply, was because it was possible to be queer and live in Winnipeg. Otherwise, service men returning from World War II (with extensive experiences in London, New York, and central Canada) would not have permanently returned to the city. Nor would the next generation of younger men and women, like Ted Patterson, Ruth Sells, or Jim H., have purposefully moved to Winnipeg. These individuals could have chosen other Canadian locations but did not because ties to the region or community and proximity to family and employment, combined with their ability to live a queer existence in the city, made Winnipeg a pragmatic choice. The number of commercial spaces, including restaurants, lounges, and steam baths, as well as cultural spaces like the ballet and theatre, expanded. Postwar affluence meant that private social spaces in houses and apartments were increasingly available for house parties.

House parties might not seem like a huge innovation, but the creation of house party networks led to the increased visibility of lesbians as they entered mixed private social settings with gay males. Later, women’s divergent interests (politically and culturally) would drive a wedge between lesbians and gays in Winnipeg. Continuity with the past was evident in the enduring attraction of public male cruising sites along the rivers and on “the hill,” but the queer subculture was no longer solely determined by such spaces. People could and did enter it at parties, through workplace friends, or while socializing at the theatre or ballet. This indicates that people were not merely discovering same-sex enclaves but beginning to talk more explicitly about previously closely guarded matters. In the fifties and sixties, this “subculture” began to be far more visible, making it easier for queer men and lesbians to locate such spaces. They were aided by the city’s relatively compact size and the prairie sense of “community” and mutuality that facilitated connections and friendships.

Visibility is not tolerance, though, and one must be appropriately cautious about making overly positive conclusions about how this emerging gay and lesbian minority was viewed by the majority of Winnipeg residents in the late sixties. In 1969 and 1970 Carlyle-Gordge reported that there was still “a vast chasm of ignorance, prejudice and irrationality [in Winnipeg] which divides gay society from straight society.” Further, he believed “that there is a pressing need for more education, research, understanding and tolerance. Until straight society takes a more open-minded attitude to the continuing fact, rather than problem, of homosexuality, a large . . . group of the population will remain unhappy, frustrated, third-class citizens, having to hide their true identity and inclinations or, if admitting them, being treated as social pariahs.”<sup>136</sup> Both lesbians and gay men in Winnipeg increasingly recognized that the decades of queer subcultural practice combined with the postwar expansion had gradually led to the emergence of “gay and lesbian communities.” The language of sexual identities came late

136 Carlyle-Gordge, “The Hill is a Favorite Spot: Part I,” p. 37.

to Winnipeg, but by the end of the sixties people were openly referring to themselves as gays and lesbians. These identities would propel a small minority of often young, university-educated men and women to embrace political activity. Such younger individuals would establish gay and lesbian activist and cultural organizations in the 1970s and 1980s.

For the older cohort involved in this study, those active from the 1930s though to the 1960s, the daily resistance of living openly gay and lesbian lives in a prairie city would be sufficiently political. Their narratives of coming out and staking claims to a sexual and political identity in late adulthood were points of empowerment and obvious pride. Not all embraced this shift from participant in the subculture to declared sexual identity. Peter, an elite, upper-middle-class male, was most critical of the dangers involved in this transition, the loss of freedom associated with openness and visibility, and the potential demotion in status for those now wilfully choosing a minority "label." Men such as Peter (and Dean Bell) had been well served by the older model that allowed them to lead double lives of professional success and "private" queer desires, and one cannot argue that the new model advantaged all queers. It might have become easier to find others, or to find organizations and spaces for gay and lesbian activities, but such "openness" had its price.

Examining Winnipeg's queer subculture from the 1930s to the late 1960s illustrates how western men and women re-made commercial and public spaces to suit their needs. Beginning in the 1930s, they creatively fashioned a queer circuit within Winnipeg's downtown. These spaces evolved and expanded considerably throughout the twentieth century, although the clearest acceleration was after World War II. Western Canadian sensibilities governed how people made sense of such activities. The live-and-let-live ethos that enabled a range of businesses to profit from their queer clients while providing urban queers and lesbians with much-needed space and services was not unique to Winnipeg, and others have claimed a similar ethos in American western and midwestern cities. Unique to mid-twentieth-century Winnipeg were the city's economic and ethnic demographics and the regional characteristics that emphasized resilience, endurance, and community-mindedness at the expense, often, of individual gain or a so-called "softer" life available elsewhere. Not only did people purposefully "choose" to stay in Winnipeg over other more congenial cities; they also migrated there from elsewhere in Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario so that they could lead queer lives. Contrary to our impressions that queers fled Winnipeg, it was, for many rural, small, and north residents, a regional queer destination city.

Ultimately, the sense of community created within various social networks within the queer subculture during the postwar era led to the emergence of a visible gay and lesbian community by 1970. Not all members of the "pansy parade" joined the gay activist parade four decades later. Geographically, the journey from cruising "the hill" to lobbying for rights in front of the Legislature was a short one. Conceptually, however, to step over that line meant rupturing the tacit tolerance and wilful ignorance of mainstream residents. Politically, conceptually,

and practically, the change was profound, both within gay and lesbian circles and outside them. Some residents would, over time, accept Carlyle-Gordge’s argument that gays and lesbians in the city required acceptance and equitable treatment. Gay politics came to Winnipeg in the seventies but was not uniformly embraced by all. Others residents completely disagreed with such notions. The history sketched here resists closure and, in contrast to the goals of the oral history project, it avoids a linear narrative of emancipation and emergence. Instead, it offers a unique perspective on a “bygone era” when queer social spaces, camaraderie, and expert, insider knowledge of the city provided queer men and lesbians with remarkable latitude in remaking the city’s landmarks, commercial, and social spaces to suit their own purposes.