

# Be Part Of History

By Ralph Higgins

Nova Scotia has a long and varied history, and that includes a rich queer past. The first permanent European settlement in North America was established here in 1606 and when the Order Of Good Cheer was set up in Port Royal, the law of averages suggests that a goodly percentage of that companionship must have been of the queer variety. In a fort full of men, it is going to take more than roast venison and home made beer to keep the spirits up. And long before the Europeans arrived there were the Mi'kmaq and their two-spirited members.



Oscar Wilde



Halifax Citadel

1882 Oscar Wilde visited the port city but whether he found the local bootblacks to his taste is unknown. Thus far there have been no secret diaries of stable boys detailing what queer life he may have sampled, no inns—or stables—boasting that Oscar slept here.

To ensure that more recent history does not suffer from the same lack of documentation is the raison d'être of the Halifax Gay History Project. In fact, there are several gay history projects, each with its own approach and priorities but sharing the same goal: to preserve, document and record queer life in Halifax. Traditionally gays and lesbians are drawn to larger metropolitan centres where anonymity is possible and where, in the larger population base, they may find others like themselves. What happens in the capital city reflects activity elsewhere in the province.

Robin Metcalfe's book, *Queer Looking, Queer Acting*, mentioned above, is a wonderful source of information on archival materials. A Nova Scotia native, Metcalfe is a well-known artist and curator, as well as an early activist for gay rights in the province. An ardent collector, his written discussion of ephemera: posters for dances, after hours bar invitations, handout sheets for demonstrations, mimeographed news sheets and copies of the first gay newspapers, gives a wonderfully vivid picture of the day to day (and night to night) gay life from the 1970s and 80s.

Chris Aucoin, another prominent member of the queer community, has spent considerable time and effort, gathering and recording items and events of note in Halifax. In 2003, he published a souvenir history magazine in which he placed in context local events and gay rights' progress with the achievements of the international queer community.

An online encyclopedia of queer life is found at <http://gay.hfxns.org>. Based on the work of writers such as Metcalfe and Aucoin, the constantly evolving Gay History Project began in 2001. Dan Mackay, one of the mainstays of the project, explains that it initially was begun as a "bulletin board for the local gay community. I got involved by contributing content and running a backup system so that the content could never get lost." There is already considerable content but more is needed. MacKay's goal is to have a page for "every person, place, thing and event of significance

However, all of this is conjecture and surmise—not documented, verifiable same-sex activity.

We do know, from Robin Metcalfe's book, *Queer Looking, Queer Acting*, that in 1752 some soldiers were arrested in Halifax for "sodomitical practices" and that it was reported in the local newspaper. And, in

to the rainbow community in Halifax, ever. I'd love to include the material documenting Citadel Hill as a cruising area two hundred years ago. And I love the way [that] when something happens in our community it's documented that day. [W]e have a fairly well written page on every drag personality in the city. For example, if there's a contest that ends at 2:00 a.m., by 4:00 a.m. the encyclopedia's been updated with the new title-holders. The level of enthusiastic support from municipal and provincial governments has been very refreshing and we're looking forward to turning some of that enthusiasm into grants for writers."

The wiki format of the Halifax Gay History Project makes it incredibly user friendly and the opening page has a section Tips For Contributors. MacKay explains: "Every page has an 'Edit this page' button at the bottom. We have a small team of people interested in taking care of the content and making sure that all changes are intentional and contribute positively to the work as a whole. [I]t is impossible for a web user to permanently delete content, and if someone messes up an article, they or one of the caretakers can, with a few clicks, restore the original or merge the original and new content."

There are historians who bring their expertise for documenting and verifying fact and events, but one of the most important aspects of the project is the anecdotal contribution of individuals who share their memories and thoughts on the past. Reg Giles' *Peanut Butter And Jelly Sandwich* is a perfect example. Giles describes his initial reluctance to revisit a past that was not always rainbow bright. "Finding myself crying at times for days ... it became a source of healing for me. After I was diagnosed HIV+ I found myself being mad at the world including me but the more I wrote, life became easier. My main focus was going to be about the Turret Club and as time went on the story expanded to include The Heidelberg Lounge, cruising and a whole array of aspects of the Gay Community of the time."



Jane Kansas

MacKay, who often encouraged Giles, describes it as "vignettes of life in the eighties, populated by the queer folk of the community at the time, set in their demesnes—cruising areas, the community-owned bar, and other hangouts—and richly illustrated by photographs that he and friends took."

Getting writers to contribute remains the biggest challenge for the project. "Some people are quite modest and do not want to help with biographical material about themselves; many people who like to write, prefer to write fiction; getting women involved has been a major challenge and finally and most surprisingly to me, some people who were gay rights activists in the 1970s, have gone back into the closet!"

The focus on the past does not preclude interest in the present. MacKay says, "Probably the single biggest use of the encyclopedia is by people "from away" checking out how vibrant the Halifax community is, how much is going on here, and what resources are available."

From the scholarly to the scurrilous, the tourist to the sociologist, the Gay History Project has something to offer everyone. As Giles says, "if you have been around for one day or fifty years, one becomes part of the history."

Henry Ford was wrong: History is not bunk. Both individually and collectively, we need to note our achievements, to celebrate the queer men and women who protested, danced, cruised, married (finally!), lived and died. In recording their thoughts, anger, laughter, love and joy, we are claiming a place for ourselves. ▼

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