

DRUMMER FEATURE ARTICLE

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1st “REAR-VIEW MIRROR” ESSAY
FOLSOM, SOUTH OF MARKETead Line...

HOW SOMA BEGAN: HOME IS THE SAILOR! HOME FROM THE SEA!

by **Jack Fritscher**

- This entire feature article "How SOMA Began" is also available in Acrobat pdf.
- Author's [historical introduction](#)
- Actual [feature article](#) as published
- [Illustrations](#)

AUTHOR'S HISTORICAL CONTEXT INTRODUCTION



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IN THE BEGINNING, THE LEATHER GODS SAID, “Let there be Eden.” And there was. And they found San Francisco good. World War II, manning the Pacific Front, crammed the City (1941-1945) with horny young soldiers whose last view of America, as their embarking warships slipped west under the Golden Gate, was the low-slung skyline of white buildings that receded into the gray fog.

The tender young seafood fought the war and won.

The battle ships returned to San Francisco.

Wide open, the City was a Party.

“How ya gonna keep ‘em down on the farm after they’ve seen Paree?”

“You can’t, Blanche,” as Miss Davis and Miss Crawford might have said. “You can’t.

War turns teenagers into warriors, especially when the war is distinctly between bad guys and good guys. The phallic romance of battle, uniforms, guns, and machinery changes a man who has spent years tightly billeted with other men.

Not every swabbie and Marine went back to sweet Carol in Keokuk.

OPEN CITY FOR A BALL-BEARING POPULATION

Shore leave is taking leave of your senses.

The open seaport of San Francisco, as it had been wide-open for the tall-ship sailors, ‘49-er miners, and cowpokes from the earliest days of the Barbary Coast, rewarded the WWII victors, who hot-gunned their not-very-pacific Pacific battle stations for years at the risk of sudden death, with the one and only thing as intense as war: *sex!*

Mark Henry’s fascinating history of early San Francisco, written at San Francisco State University, unearthed positive evidence, in personal diaries kept from the period, that not every Barbary Brothel was straight. A silent tradition of men’s unspoken bonding, was already in place: so sure of itself, it didn’t talk much, because the language of gay sex is mostly sign language.

Men, even before the original Gold Rush, always outnumbered females in the City by the Bay. *Necessity* may be the “Mother of Invention,” but *Dick* is the “Father of Perversatility.”

Any port in a storm. And while, famously, everyone who’s missing may turn up in San Francisco, most people who come to San Francisco, come by choice and on purpose. San Francisco has always been the open city where Americans who are immigrants escaping from the rest of the lickety-lickety United States come for sanctuary and freedom.

A Buddy/Buddy Attitude, grounded in the crowded anonymity of a port city, where ships—like men—passed darkly through the night, was embraced. From the start, “Frisco” men [Never call San Francisco, “Frisco”] traditionally have lived by the ancient male/male code of the sea, the cowboy-miner buddy code of the West, and the *Semper Fi* of the military: quietly, and nobody scared the horses.

WHO PUT THE PENIS IN THE SF PENINSULA?

A man does what a man has to, wants to, do. Penis celebrated penis in the peninsular City that has always been a free-spirited Sodom-Oz oh-so-loosely attached to the rest of the US. More than once San Francisco—Thank you, Jesus!—has tried to shake itself loose from the tight-assed American continent.

HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE THIS MATERIAL

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Male encounters have always had a proud, but “politely” censored history in San Francisco—that history whispered *sotto voce* at first and then louder, growing with intensity as the ball-bearing population, especially after World War II, grew in numbers, until finally, in the 1970's, the love that once dared not speak its name, having been stone-walled once too often, began to scream!

HI, SAILOR! NEW IN TOWN?

The many young WWII vets who set their khaki butts down in San Francisco bars merged with the already-settled “bachelors” who populated the Bay Area port cities for the abundance of blue-collar jobs. Effeminate men and drag queens were, informants attest, virtually unseen, closeted, probably still at home, experimenting with Max Factor. The postwar-style was *Butch*.

Many a homomasculine San Francisco resident, having a home or apartment, from office worker to merchant marine, was more than patriotically happy to host the footloose-and fancy-free young vets.

“Hi, sailor? New in town?”

That line, a joke today, had real meaning back then to a lonely soldier, lonely and blue, all alone, with nothing to do. Seafood connoisseurs had a fast-food feast roaming the bars and streets. A bed, a meal, a blowjob were tools of the “trade.”

WHY'S THE “Y” DENY THE “WHY” OF ITS SUCCESS?

Both YMCA's, the Golden Gate and, especially, the SOMA Embarcadero Y, were WWII smorgiastic smorgasbords. With more than 2 million served, the YMCA, long before The Village People celebrated its indiscreet charms, should have won its Golden Arches for its one-million served and changed its name to Y-MacDonald's. What happened in those YMCA rooms, halls, stairs, gyms, and shower-room toilets is legendary. The “Y Culture” was host to generations of men who came out in the halls, rooms, toilets, gym, pools, stairwells, and roofs of Y's all around the world.

To connect ancient history to recent history, that WWII YMCA sex-scene evolved and continued up through the digging of BART not-so-straight down Market Street. For 30 fucking years, the mid-40's to the 70's, the Y's were the embryo that eventually gave birth to the SOMA baths and late-night fuck dives. As the decades changed, man-to-man YMCA sex switched uniforms: from veterans of the military to construction workers building BART and elevating the post-modern high-rise skyline of old, low-slung San Francisco.

The truth about single guys and husbands? A straight man is as smart as a fag when he wants his cock sucked hard and fast with no strings attached. And the Y's were the happy hunting grounds of homosexuality no matter what the current goody-2-shoes management protests too loudly today. (Who the fuck do they think kept them in business all these years anyway? Nuns?)

MEANWHILE BACK AT POST-WWII

“Hey, swabbie! Tired of the cramped rooms at the Y? Wanna get more comfortable?” Miss Rosemary Clooney sang on the jukebox, “Come on a' my house....I give you peach an' a pear, an' I love your hair.”

Every cocksucker worthy of his Seafood Fishing License ran his San

Francisco/Oakland digs as a private man-to-man USO.

The War was over. The Fleet was in. Sailors, jitter-bugging together in an age when straight men still danced together, danced sub-textually to the strains of “When I’m Not Near the Girl That I Love, I Love the Girl I’m Near.”

Insatiable SF bachelors, living in homes and apartments, installed discreetly revolving doors while the horny young warriors, homesick and home-at-last, waited their discharge papers. They were triumphant victors. Under fire, the boy recruits had become men. They could fucking well do what they wanted. And they did. They fucked and got sucked like there was no tomorrow, and when tomorrow’s morning came, all they had to say was the classic line, “Boy! Was I drunk last night.”

The Atomic War itself, as much as the exploding male population, caused the grand old Victorians to be cut up into rooming houses and divided into small studios. Rent was paid, then as now, as often in “trade” as it was in cash.

SOUTH OF MARKET WORKINGMEN’S HOTELS

Closet doors banged quietly open. Not every soldier wanted to leave his Baghdad Daddy quite so fast to climb back on his Iowa daddy’s dull tractor. After living tight with close buddies all during the war, men had grown accustomed to homo-sociability. The urge to merge man-to-man—far easier than all the claptrap a man has to put up with when he gets pressured into breeding—spread from the Y to the multitude of workingmen’s single-room hotels located in the industrial area South of Market that serviced the docks and ships of the Port of San Francisco. “Sexual preference” widened from farm-boy preference-for-gender to a more urban quest for anonymous pleasure devoid of obligations. “Whatever, as long as *my* cock feels good. I’m not ready to settle down.”

Later, by the time these 50-year-old blue-collar SOMA hotels, dating from the rebuilding after the 1906 earthquake and fire, were fairy-dusted into gay baths, they were already stewed in cum.

FAIR TRADE

Funny how Ten Inches of Hard Cock captures more hearts than Ten Stone Commandments. Outmoded morals turned to outrageous orals. In an anonymous crowd in a Party City, men began to come out to fraternize for love and money. (“After all, a Marine ain’t a queer as long as he only fucks with other Marines.” This jarhead oral tradition, a retired Leatherneck said, is not found in USMC manuals!) But once a man fucks with men, there’s no turning back to fundamentals—without turning, often, kind of nasty and mean-spirited.

Everyone hears of hets turning queer. When was the last time anyone ever heard of a faggot going for-god’s-sake 2.3 kids straight? Besides, “like seeks like,” one maxim says, and “mixed marriages”—like, maybe, between opposite sexes—“rarely work,” another maxim says. Queers at the time offered a high-quality of lifestyle far different from back home, down on the farm in Indiana. They seduced the vets with that peach, that pear, plus a little booze, free head, handy cash, and that new little kick: smoking reefer.

Enter the Pleasure Zone, boys! Even today, San Francisco is known all across America as a party city. A survey showed that the first destination preferred throughout the US prison population was San Francisco’s Tenderloin District just north of Market Street.

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“Candy is dandy,” straight guys jaw about girls, “but liquor is quicker.” What works on the goose works on the horny young gander. Amazing slick grace! How fast a shot of Jack Daniel’s and a hit on a joint make a young soldier, without much cash, want sex, free sex, so bad he’ll let a cocksucker go down on him while he shuts his eyes and half-pretends those hot lips belong to sweet Carol from Keokuk who starts fading into the blue.

SO LONG, CAROL! HELLO, CARL!

Along with the queer-sanctuaries of the Y, imagine those nights in those 50-year-old seedy SOMA hotels, with their 45 single rooms with one bath down the hall, and all their doors left slightly ajar. Historically, the drawings of Rex—friend of J. Alfred Prufrock—illustrate this blue-collar culture of cheap hotels that in the 70’s became the Barracks, the Slot, the Handball Express, The Waiting Arms, and The Hot House—which was almost directly across the street from *The Bar That Put SOMA on the US Sex Map*, Chuck Arnett’s infamous formal invitation to San Francisco masculine-identified gay life, THE TOOL BOX.

What was taboo in Keokuk became totem in San Francisco!

(Tune in next issue for “Tales of the Black Cat Bar and The Tool Box...”)

(*Drummer* Editor’s Note: Next *Drummer* issue, check out this “Rear View Column” to pick up our S&M SOMA “International Leather History” with the founding of the Bike Clubs and tales of the legendary Tool Box. As *Drummer* collects the “One-and-Only Official History of International Leather,” *WE NEED YOU* for factual accuracy, dates, anecdotes, and photos! Fritscher and Johnson are collecting our Oral History from men who lived it.

If you have a story to tell, a fact to add (or correct), photos to share about bars, early bike runs, bike clubs, S&M scenes, the first leather, whatever, send a note to Fritscher/Johnson, c/o Palm Drive, PO Box 193653, San Francisco 94119. We’ll contact you, and your story can become part of *Drummer*’s International Leather History!)

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