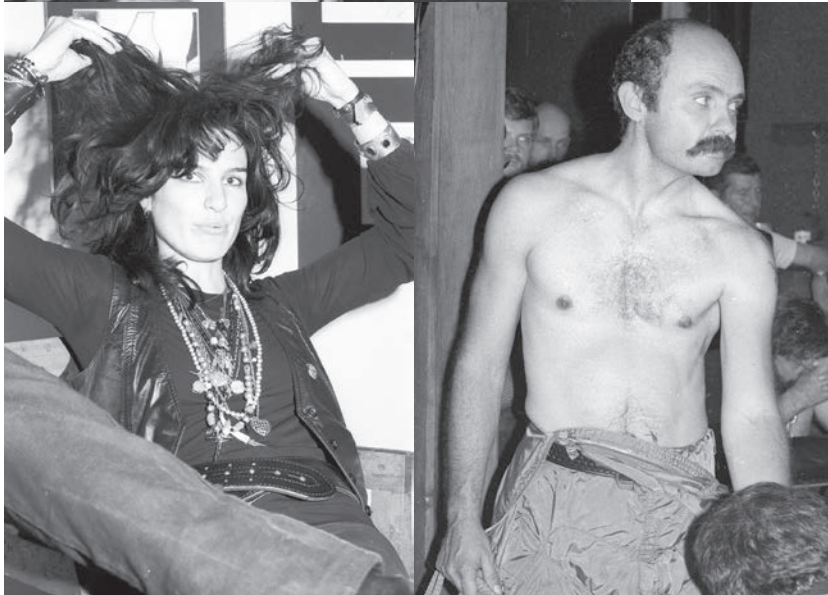




New Year's Eve, 1982. Mineshaft manager Wally Wallace with Mineshaft artist Rex exhibit Rex's 1983 Mineshaft calendar. Publicity photo attributed to George Dudley for Wally Wallace. Courtesy Wally Wallace.



Mineshaft member Camille O'Grady (left), muse/poet/artist/singer, Fey-Way Gallery, 1287 Howard Street, San Francisco, April 17, 1979. Photo by Jack Fritscher. Mineshaft member Jack Fritscher (right) wrote the first national feature on the Mineshaft in June 1977 for *Drummer* 19, December 1977, and the second in *Drummer* 20, January 1978. Photo by Mark Henry.

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THE MINESHAFT

October 8, 1976-November 7, 1985
 Legendary Twentieth-Century Sex Club

If You Don't Know Jack Shit About The Mineshaft, Pull Up A Chair

“The first rule of Fight Club is: you don’t talk about Fight Club.” But the legendary Mineshaft wasn’t Fight Club. Macho men who survived Mineshaft nights bragged every morning after about the night before. Wally Wallace managed that Roman orgy pit that ran 9 years and 9 days from October 8, 1976 to November 7, 1984, at 835 Washington Street in the Meatpacking District in Greenwich Village. Located, without irony, next door to an all-night loading dock with burly butchers in white coats shouldering bloody cow carcasses from trucks into florescent abattoirs after midnight, the Mineshaft was one of the great performance spaces in New York. Freddie Mercury came for the sex and bought the T-shirt designed by Rex. It was at the Mineshaft that music producer Jacques Morali zeroed in on the four fetish archetypes that became the pop stereotypes of the Village People. Glenn Hughes, the leatherman biker in the Village People, was a sex-player at the Mineshaft as well as part of the leather salon around *Drummer* in San Francisco.

“MACHO, MACHO MAN”

The Mineshaft changed the character of sex and ritual in the 1970s when homomale men came out to try everything to make up for time lost in the closet, and to create erotic interaction, no matter how existentially extreme, to achieve fully human male pleasure. Wally encouraged negotiation and consent. “I made our music tapes ranging from country-western to standards and Ella and jazz. No ‘Let’s Dance.’ My policy was the music was never so loud you couldn’t hear the person next to you.” He helped men turn sex fantasies into floor-show performances in his theatrical set designed to keep hundreds of stoned players moving up, down, and through scaffolds of stairs, slings, and bondage rigs while circling the drain of the sacred watersports bath tub. “A regular Saturday

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night,” Wally said, “would be 500 to 600 guys. Special events, a 1000.” Like the Stonewall Inn, the Mineshaft was owned by the Mafia who told Wally to do his thing as long as he sold lots of beer. On March 28, 1990, I shot a two-hour video interview of this iconic New Yorker who lived 1938-1999.

100 NIGHTS x 20 MEN A NIGHT

Wally said, “I always felt the Mineshaft was everybody’s bedroom. New Yorkers often live in single rooms or small apartments with nosey door-men. Guys went to the baths for fun they had no room for at home. It was safer than taking strangers home. We had some pickpocket problems we controlled rather well. We weren’t like the club called the Toilet that hired its own pickpockets to work its crowd. When we caught pickpockets, we’d throw them out on the street without their clothes.”

Through the years, I played at the Mineshaft more than 100 nights with armies of men uniformed in jockstraps and combat boots. We tucked brown bottles of popper into the necks of our gray wool socks while searching for any scene and any kink with any freak from anywhere around the globe. “The Mineshaft,” Wally said, “attracted very hot men who got into S&M action that turned everybody on: fisting, bondage, whipping, worship, tit play, water sports, humiliation, dirty stuff. But it wasn’t just handsome hot men. All kinds of faces and bodies made for great scenes. It’s not always muscle and looks. It’s a sensuality some people have.”

IMPROVISATIONAL EDGE PLAY

Mineshaft sex was not about wham-bam as much as it was about sustained edge play in a gladiator arena where leathermen could turn the magical thinking of masturbation into reality. Every night Wally’s stage set encouraged improvisational actors to arrive from closets around the world to produce their performance art with a new cast of thousands. Fetish scenes escalated from one intensity to the next, from the mud to the stars, while players changed identity within a scene, so that a man could enter any intimate scene upstairs, or leave any orgy scene downstairs, or go up on the roof where a shirtless blacksmith tended a fire to heat branding irons. The erotic dynamic was pitched so far beyond the boundaries of civilization that a man had to have self-discipline not to get swept away in action or voyeurism too extreme for himself, but not for the other guy.

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SEX TOURISTS & THE MACHO DRESS CODE

“Air fares were low,” Wally said. “We had lots of Europeans. I had a doorman keep tabs for ten-days over two weekends. It was something like 33 states and over 40 countries. The only countries missing were behind the Iron Curtain. I had fun with the Germans and the Dutch. New York is supposed to be this cold city, but we did everything not to be that way.”

The Mineshaft’s “Dress Code” came about by popular demand. “It was basically leather and Levi’s,” Wally said. “At an open meeting, the one rule people wanted was no cologne or deodorant. Everybody wanted sweat. Then some people wanted to go totally leather. I pointed out that the business could not exist if it was just leather because a lot of young guys couldn’t afford leather. We agreed on jock straps, raunch wear, fetish gear, but no suits, ties, dress shirts, or sweaters. Because of fire codes, people always had to have their shoes on. Rudolf Nureyev played at the Mineshaft many times, but was refused admission once by a doorman for wearing a fur coat. So he took off his coat and was in full leather, but the doorman wouldn’t let him in because he still had the fur coat—and this arrogant employee refused to check the coat! Nureyev vowed never to come back, and he never did—and neither did the doorman.”

Wally made a point about leather fraternity: “The Mineshaft employees were a working fraternity. On Saturday night, I’d have one doorman and maybe fifteen guys on duty. We had three bars, with three or four guys in coat check. We had one assistant manager to make the money pulls from the various bars. We didn’t have cash registers and couldn’t keep money in the house due to the Mafia owner’s policy. So our three floor men were constantly collecting money from our three bars.” Wally hosted hundreds of community fund-raisers at the Mineshaft, including the Metropolitan Community Church benefit for the survivors of the fire at the Everard Baths, 28 West 28th Street, where nine patrons died May 25, 1977. “Whatever money I made for the benefits went directly to the causes we supported. The owners, the Genovese crime family, were not generous, but I sure was.”

CAMERAS, VIDEOS, & THE MOVIE, *CRUISING*

Wally said the most basic sex was cocksucking and rimming with most fierceness going to bondage, fisting, and hazing “torture” not unlike Navy SEAL SERE training. He rarely allowed photography except for the Mr. Mineshaft Contest portraits shot by Robert Mapplethorpe who used the Mineshaft as a casting couch for models and ideas. In the early 1980s,

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Wally allowed the Skulls of Akron biker club to shoot several S&M videos, like *Fisting Ballet*, which can be viewed online as a documentary of the Mineshaft space with its hoists, slings, crosses, and whipping posts.

Wally told me that, contrary to urban legend, the “interior leather bar” scenes in William Friedkin’s film *Cruising*, so hated by the politically correct, were “not shot at the Mineshaft although to this day a lot of people think they were. I didn’t want the exploitation. The bar scenes were shot at an after-hours place now called the Cell Block which was in the basement of the Little Triangle Building at 14th Street and Ninth Avenue. They decorated the interior to look like the Mineshaft.” Friedkin’s casting director did, however, hire Mineshaft leathermen as atmosphere extras so a viewer can freeze-frame old friends streaming on Netflix who are authentic Mineshaft faces now all gone with the wind.

AIDS & THE MAFIA

The Mineshaft, which did not cause AIDS, is a textbook example of how some first-class party people cruised on full speed toward the iceberg of HIV that no one knew lay dead ahead. When AIDS and the Mafia killed the Mineshaft, it was the end of an era. While it lasted, the Titanic 1970s was a perfect moment in time when we men liberated “our bodies ourselves” at the same time that women like Susie Bright empowered their sexual identities in 1970 with their movement and book *Our Bodies Ourselves*. It remains a veteran’s badge of honor for a man, alive or dead, to have been one of the men who dared play at the Mineshaft.

It’s important to gay male history to note that the first guys to die were not necessarily into the Mineshaft, S&M, or fisting despite the calumnies spread by puritanical haters. Needles were more dangerous than sex. A person was more likely to contract AIDS shooting up inside Studio 54 than fucking inside the Mineshaft. Wally said, “I was rather naïve about drugs unless somebody was falling over. The FFA [Fist Fuckers of America] was a very heavy drug scene—as I finally realized when their orgies at the Mineshaft went on for days. It took me awhile to realize some of my staff were addicts.”

Always rolling with the punches, Wally kept the Mineshaft safe from being either a firetrap or the Black Hole of Calcutta. He opened exits and hosed down the concrete interior with bleach and distributed condoms and safe-sex pamphlets. As a community service, he permitted the Gay Men’s Health Crisis to shoot a video inside the Mineshaft. When AIDS caused beer sales to drop off sharply, the Mafia accused Wally of

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embezzling the profits. He quickly schooled the straight hoods that there was a fucking plague killing the patrons.

When the Mineshaft was raided and closed in 1984, the excuse was AIDS, but the reason was taxes. Wally explained how a former NYPD cop, known as the “main man” behind the Mineshaft, was arrested on charges that the Mineshaft ownership had no liquor license and had failed to pay sales tax and income tax. It was the same reason the NYPD in 1969 had raided the Stonewall bar controlled by mobster, Matty the Horse Ianniello.

GOODBYE TO ALL THAT

The Mineshaft existed in the wonderful window between penicillin and HIV. If any talent was required at the Mineshaft, it was “perversatility.” Thinking of what gay saint Yukio Mishima wrote in 1968 about ecstatic gay male pleasure and pain in *Sun and Steel*, I feel the Mineshaft was a graduate school of sex education, physical discipline, and existential identity. As we survivors raise our heads above the fallen field of our beloved AIDS dead, we eyewitnesses recall that at the Mineshaft, in the Dionysian fuckerie of all we were doing, we were simply evolving away from a fundamentalist society towards being fully human.



Publicity photo attributed to George Dudley for Wally Wallace, 1978.
Courtesy Wally Wallace.

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