

GAY COMMUNITY COALESCES

OF COURSE, GAY PEOPLE HAVE ALWAYS lived in Roanoke. When thousands of men descended upon the railroad boomtown in the 1800s, certainly some percentage of them would have been homosexuals. However, a gay man convicted under Virginia's anti-sodomy laws at the time could have spent up to five years in prison, so for generations, homosexuals kept their lives secret.

A half-century later, Roanoke's gays began to gather privately at restaurants that catered specifically to the gay and lesbian community — even though a 1950 state law forbade restaurants from serving homosexuals, as well as “prostitutes, pimps, panderers” and other perceived degenerates. By the early 1960s, the basement bar of the Trade Winds restaurant (right), a popular steakhouse near the intersection of Franklin Road and Elm Avenue, had become Roanoke's first gay nightspot. In 1974, the bar played host to the first Miss Gay Roanoke pageant and drag show.

The infamous riots at New York's Stonewall Inn in 1969, when a police raid on a gay bar turned violent after the crowd protested the harassment, helped spark the national gay rights movement that eventually made its way to Roanoke. In 1971, the Gay Alliance of the Roanoke Valley formed and began publishing the Big Lick GayZette (below), a newspaper for the local gay and lesbian community. Other gay-friendly establishments opened. Still, many gay people — especially men — were forced to meet acquaintances at out-of-the-way places such as the old Greyhound Bus Station, Elmwood Park and the Elmwood Diner, according to the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project. The police department's vice squad knew where to look for gays, too, as it sent undercover officers to arrest homosexuals soliciting sex. The GayZette alerted its readers to be on the lookout for undercover cops dressed “hippie-type.”

In 1978, downtown Roanoke had six gay-friendly bars, which included the Park dance club, a nightspot still open on Salem Avenue as one of the last gay bars. As people who identify as LGBT have become more accepted, and as gay culture has become more mainstream, most of the gays-only bars have disappeared. An online exhibit organized by Gregory Rosenthal, assistant professor of public history at Roanoke College, contains many artifacts, interviews and reminders of the early days of gay activism in Roanoke. The site is at <http://lgbthistory.pages.roanoke.edu>.

