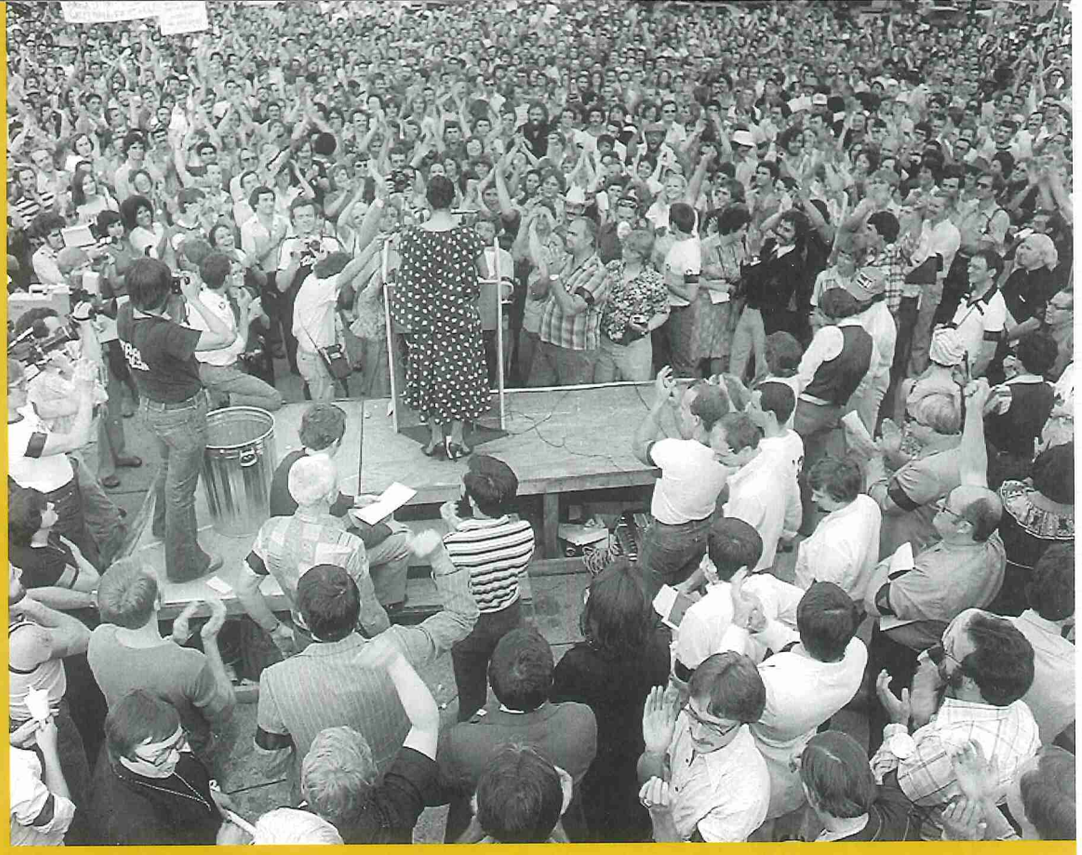

Liz Torres, an actress in the hit TV show *All in the Family*, addresses a June 16, 1977, rally.

The Evolution of Queer Space in Houston

A Testimony from Ray Hill

Testing one two three. My voice does carry. Been the blessing of my life.

I was in high school when I came out, and I was a football player. The cheerleaders were interested in me, but I just wasn't interested in the cheerleaders, at least not the female ones. Nobody knew what I was talking about because I didn't match the stereotype. Anyway, we beat Pasadena that year. That's the school's number one rival. If you go to Galena Park and your team beats Pasadena, you are a hero, if you are the quarterback, and I was the quarterback.

I started coming into town because I heard there were other gay people in town. I thought I had a budding career of being a street hustler, but that didn't work out. I gave too much product away.

Pretty quickly I fell in love. But I didn't do that right either. This was 1959 and '60, and I fell in love with a black guy who was also a high school athlete. We had a great time, but we didn't have anywhere to bump. We couldn't go to his grandmother's house with whom he lived over in Third Ward. She lived in one of those shotgun houses, and we tended to get carried away. We'd knock that house off its foundation. We could go to my house, but from Downtown to where I lived in Northshore, we had to catch a bus, go out to McCarty drive. There was a trolley out that way that ran between Houston and Baytown. They didn't have a stop, but they'd let you off and you'd have to walk a mile to the house. By the time we got there, it's time to start back because he had to work at the Texaco station Downtown at eight o'clock in the morning. We couldn't go to the hotel because the world was segregated. We couldn't go to the YMCA because they had a YMCA for me and my kind, and a YMCA for him and his kind.

So the only place we could bump was on the front porch of [a church Downtown]. They've got this brick fence across the front of the porch behind which is a lot of space [...]

In those days, screwing was a felony. You could go to prison for that. It wasn't until 1973 that the law changed, and it became a Class D misdemeanor where you would get a citation, and presumably left to what you were doing before you got the ticket. I met five old men, who because of multiple convictions—if you got convicted for sodomy three times then another law kicked in called the habitual criminal act, and you could get life—with a life sentence in Texas prisons.

Going to prison was a very real fear. Gay bars in that era were not like South Beach, J.R.'s, and "The Mine." There was the Pine Lounge at the corner of Holman and Almeda. Basically it was a garage apartment where the house had either burned or they had torn it down. So they turned that it into a parking lot, made a bar out of the garage without much improvement. The guy who owned it lived upstairs.

There were no nice bars. Every place was sleazy. Ken Ray's Red Devil at Southmore and Almeda was down in a strip shopping center. There were people who wouldn't go there because you could see the front door from the street. The China Gate and the Lounge Royal were very popular places because the door was around in back, and nobody could see you going in if they were passing by. And nothing had been purpose-built as a gay bar. Drinks were more expensive than they were in anybody else's bar. They were taking profits, and you were pretty much a captive audience.

But in the mid-60s, the real gathering place was not in the bars because bars were dark and the music was loud. After the bar closed, everybody would go to a restaurant where you would actually meet and talk to people, carry on conversations about issues of the day and where you worked and what you did. And the restaurant that was most convenient in that era was Cokin's restaurant. The building is still there on Main Street near where Wendy's is under the freeway. It's now a beauty parlor or something. It was owned by a guy named Bernard Cokin, who had actually inherited the restaurant from his ancestor. He never married, and he didn't want anybody to think he was queer. He would intermittently decide he didn't want us there. We'd be ready to go meet our friends, we'd go running to the restaurant, and they wouldn't let us in the door. So we organized a committee to find a new restaurant.

Recorded by Raj Mankad

Thursday December 3, 2009, 2 p.m.
Berryhill Baja Grill at Montrose and Hawthorne

COURTESY HOUSTON METROPOLITAN RESEARCH CENTER. PHOTO THIS PAGE FROM RGD 06N 6-17-77, HOUSTON POST COLLECTION

THE ONE-LEGGED, QUEER, EX-CONVICT RADIO HOST OF *THE PRISON SHOW*, RAY HILL, IS AN INEXHAUSTIBLY PROVACATIVE RACONTEUR

There was Simpson's Diner, which was one of those railcar diners at Main and Bell. But it wasn't big enough to hold us. We looked around and found the building where Katz's is now. It was owned by a fellow named Art Wren who was also a single gentleman up in years. It only operated weekdays and Saturday until about three o'clock in the afternoon. We needed a place that was open when the bar was closed. So Paul Stewart, Joey Bosh, Carl Huff, and I—Joey and Carl were drag queens, and Paul Stewart was an advertising genius for Neiman Marcus, a design man but very out and in-your-face rambunctious big loud guy, which I suppose you'd have to be to work for Stanley Marcus—went to talk to Art Wren.

He said, "Naw, I don't want to do that. First, I'd have to hire a short-order cook, and that costs money, and it might not work." So finally, we hired the cook. It didn't take about a couple of months where he realized he was going to make a lot of money here. We went about spreading the word. On our way over here, gay people, most of which lived on the other side of Main Street on the northern end of Third Ward, began to notice there were garage apartments, inexpensive duplexes, and boarding houses to live in over here.

Montrose dead-ended into Westheimer. Just went to Westheimer and stopped. Right there was what apparently had been at one time a very grand house. The first really nice bar was in that house, rearranged so that there was an entertainment space, a lounge, and relaxing bar or two. It was called May Britt's. It was a show bar. Drag queens could come in there and perform. It was a nice place. It was a well-done place.

In the old days [before the transition to Montrose] we would go dancing only on Sunday afternoon. They would have a "Tea Dance" at Hazel's Dessert Room on McGowen between Austin and Caroline streets. Hazel was one of these straight women who owned the gay bars of the era. When the cops would come, since I was the only one not old enough to drink, I would run back and Matt, the black bartender, would hide me under the sink where he washed the beer glasses until the cops left. And the cops came frequently in those days.

After we moved to Montrose, somebody said we really needed to have a private club where you had to be a member to get in. And they could serve mixed drinks instead of just beer and wine, and we could dance. So the Encore Club opened where California runs into Westheimer, now the location of a gyros place. That was the dancing bar.

Montrose is in pretty good shape compared to the condition it was in when we came. The largest population group in Montrose in the '50s and '60s seemed to be widowed women living in the houses their hard-working husband executives had built or bought for them. Slowly we began to occupy the space in Montrose, and Montrose took the place of Almeda Street. It didn't happen overnight. Gay guys with saws and paintbrushes, and some lesbians with saws and paintbrushes, went out looking for work. And they work for relatively cheap. Gay folks actually began to buy property over here. Gentrification began.

But until June 16, 1977, the words "gay community" meant the part of town where the bars were. It was a geographical reference.

Anita Bryant was to come to Houston to perform at the Bar Association State Convention at the Hyatt Regency. Jane Ely of the *Houston Post*, a large everybody-knows-she's-a-lesbian-closeted-dyke, was a columnist for the *Post*. She wrote a column called "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner."

I forget some people don't understand about Anita. Anita Bryant was a runner up Miss America. After her beauty pageant career, she became a fundamentalist Christian singer. She settled in South Florida. Broward County passed a non-discrimination ordinance against gay people. Anita started a crusade, which she named Save Our Children, to overturn that ordinance. It was picked up by the wires and carried all over the country so everyone knew what was going on in Miami. By the time she comes to Houston, she is a national icon.

We had over a month to organize. Given the proper tools—I had a radio show, we had a newspaper that came out every week, there was a bar rag called *This Week in Texas* came out every week—you can organize anything in a month.

Since I was the only ex-convict there, I dealt with the cops. B.G. "Pappy" Bond was captain of special ops. He says, "Well, how many people do you expect at this demonstration?"

I said, "Well, about 500."

He said, "That ain't possible. We've had demonstrations all over. Civil rights. Anti-war. All kinds of things. We've never had a demonstration with 500 people."

I said, "You better plan on it anyways."

We had 12,000. We marched from a gay bar called Depository II at the corner of Bagby and McGowen.

The plan we had agreed on expecting 500 people was that if we actually got that many, we would use the sidewalks on both sides of the street on Smith and Louisiana. That would put us going around the hotel where Anita was performing. We could have our rally between the library buildings next to City Hall. All that was agreed and planned. We worked it out. We couldn't close the street because there was no ordinance that allowed you to close the street at night.

When the crowd [got] to be 12,000, of course they had already started their journey, gone three or four blocks. This attractive young officer's radio went crackle crackle mumble mumble. "Mister Hill, Captain wants to talk to you."

I said, "OK." I took the radio. I said, "what can I do for you, captain?"

He said, "Take the goddamn street."

I said, "Well, captain, we've got two streets, which one?"

"Take both the mother***s."

The young officer heard that and said he would radio the other police.

I said the crowd is not going to do what your officers tell them to do. They're going to do what my marshals tell them to do. For marshals, I had these fairy-like gay guys and these little butch dykes. Why? Because they are instantly identifiable. You know they mean business because they look like they're queer. I called some of them, "You run down this row, you run down that row, you tell them to take the streets." And so here we've gone four blocks and we own turf that we did not have. You have any idea what that does to a crowd?

An early gay pride parade.

And then we get down to the hotel. Everybody's got to go around the hotel a couple of times. Chanting. We raise such a ruckus, Anita is just performing and they can't hear her sing. How much screaming do you have to do to kill the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" inside the hotel?

On our way back to our cars, because we had to come back from there after the demonstration, I realized that the words "gay community" no longer meant what part of town where the bars were. It meant a group of people with common goals and aspirations. We had literally become a community that night.

I then realized we didn't have any institutions to sustain a community. So I called Houston Town Meeting I. It was a Roman numeral, meaning there were going to be future town meetings. The Montrose Counseling Center, Montrose Clinic now Legacy Health Services, Gay Community Center, Gay Activities, and Montrose Sports Association were all formed in 1978. All of that grew out of Community Meeting I. Those institutions are still serving us. So if you've got a community suddenly out of nothing, you need to create institutions.

He said, "That ain't possible. We've had demonstrations all over...We've never had a demonstration with 500 people." We had 12,000.

OVER 60 YEARS OF HOUSTON'S UNDERGROUND HISTORY. (HE HAS HIS NAME ON A SUPREME COURT CASE TOO BUT THAT'S ANOTHER STORY.)