The Evolution of Queer Space in Houston
A Testimony from Ray Hill

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, out to McCarron 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 way 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, scrumping 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 let 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 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 seedy. 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 Cokiri's restaurant. The building was 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 Cokiri, 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.

There were sites where these social dance gatherings were enough to hold the building where the couple named A gentleman's club, and Saturday until noon. We needed a bar was closed. So Ruff, and I—beginning Neiman Marcus, in-your-face demand. I suppose you'd have to go to Marcus—went to.

He said, "Now I'd have to hire a cook, and it might lose the cook. It didn't work where he realized the money here. We worked our way over here. The other side of Third Ward, we perform. It was a show bar. I best to perform. It was an old house, and we could dance.

They would have a Roono on McGowen streets. Hazel was here, and women who own era. When the cop was the only one to drink, I would start black bartender, turn the sink where he glasses until the cop came frequently.

After we moved somebody said we needed a private club where a member to get in. We got mixed drinks instead, and we could care Club opened into Westheimer, gyoze place. That was Montrose in a place compared to the one when we came. The group in Montrose, widowed women who were working husbands. Slowly we got to the

Recorded by Raj Mankad
Thursday December 3, 2009, 2 p.m.
Berryhill Baja Grill at Montrose and Hawthorne
He said, "That ain't possible. We've had demonstrations all over...We've had demonstrations with 500 people."

We had 12,000.

It didn't happen overnight. Gay guys with saws and painbrushers, and some lesbians with saws and painbrushers, went out looking for work. And they worked for relatively cheap. Gay folks actually began to buy property over here. Gentrification began.

But until June 16, 1977, the word '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 Convention at the Hyatt Regency. Jane Eli 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's name about Anita. Anita Bryant was a runaway Miss America. After her beauty pageant career, she became a fundamen-\n\n...continues...