

The Swinging City By The Bay

BY KEVIN McATEER

The front cover of the Friday, February 13, 2004 issue of the *San Francisco Chronicle* featured the headline "180 Exchange Vows On Historic Day" with a color photograph of Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin, lesbian activists, founders of the Daughters of Bilitis, and a couple for 51 years. In the weeks following this historic move by the city of San Francisco, there continue to be pages of news analysis offering reasons as to why the newly elected Democratic mayor of San Francisco would initiate such a historic act of civil disobedience. Yet just as those outside of Vermont during the Civil Union debate may have asked why it is that Vermont was the first in the nation to legally recognize same-sex couples, now we want to know why San Francisco.

While the short answer may be in the newspapers, the longer and more interesting answer is in *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* by Nan Alamilla Boyd. Boyd's work does not directly speak to the case for same-sex marriage. Instead Boyd's research addresses the question "Why San Francisco?" The answer can be found in Boyd's insightful and thought-provoking study of the social, economic, cultural, sexual, gender and geographic factors that created San Francisco as the gay capital of the U.S.

Wide Open Town dissects the layers of social, economic, and political forces taking place in this urban center under the influence of competing interests of business, military, and artistic communities. Boyd could have easily chosen to solely focus on homophile groups like the Daughters of Bilitis or the Mattachine Society, but instead she dedicates the bulk of her research to the role of working-class bar culture in San Francisco in creating the free spirit that San Franciscans and tourists asso-

**Wide Open Town:
A History of Queer San
Francisco to 1965
Nan Alamilla Boyd
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ciate with the city. As Boyd writes in her introduction: Communities forged inside bars and taverns functioned politically and, ultimately, offered practical and ideological response to policing that were distinct from those of San Francisco's homophile (or lesbian gay civil rights) organizations.

Boyd could have simply described bar culture, focusing on the social interactions of the lesbians and gay men who gathered there, but instead she offers an interesting examination of liquor laws and regulations in California in the post-Depression era. Her insight into the importance of liquor regulations proves to be a useful tool of reference for points she argues throughout the book.

During Prohibition (1920-1933), Boyd writes, San Francisco openly defied both federal and state efforts to enforce the prohibition of alcohol. With the repeal of Prohibition, the state of California placed the regulation of alcohol under the jurisdiction of the tax board, as opposed to the local municipalities. As a result, a whole new liquor-industry opened up smaller nightclubs and cabarets — many of them started by people associated with organized crime — tapping into some of the business previously monopolized by the taverns and bars. Boyd points out, the intimate nature of the nightclubs also made the surveillance of activities inside the bar difficult, allowing gay bars to survive.

Boyd leads the reader through a geographic history of San Francisco, with a particular focus on the North Beach area. During the early to mid-20th century, North Beach — not the Castro or the edgier South of Market areas now identified as the

city's gay ghettos — was the center of the less-public but still popularized gay community. The vaudeville culture of nightclub acts in the 1930s and 1940s, including female-impersonator shows, developed what Boyd describes as a public culture for homosexuals in San Francisco in the North Beach section. The exotic nature of the clubs fit nicely into other cultural and economic events — including the completion of the Golden Gate Bridge and the 1937 World's Fair in San Francisco.

Where Boyd's research and writing begin to intersect with the current front-page civil rights issue of same-sex marriage is her careful examination of how a compromised but more coherent community developed between the previously unheralded (before Stonewall, that is) working-class activists of San Francisco's bar and drag culture and the assimilationist-based homophile movements made up of primarily middle-class lesbians and gay men. Here Boyd suggests a combination of political movements including the 1961 bid by openly gay Jos Sarría for city supervisor, the 1959 California Supreme Court decision *Vallerga v. Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control*, and the 1961 repeal of California's vagrancy law, which had been exploited by police to entrap the unwary.

Just as non-Vermonters looked to David Moats' recently published *Civil Wars* to offer a more substantive explanation of why Civil Unions were created in a small rural state like Vermont and not in a place like New Jersey or even California, *Wide Open Town* offers a valuable resource to readers interested in the queer history of San Francisco. Boyd's work not only helps to constitute the reasons why San Francisco is known as such a gay Mecca but it also pieces together the earlier movements influencing the creation of a political, cultural, and social environment that has led to the public marriage of Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin, two icons of queer history — along with some 4,000 other gay and lesbian couples — fifty years later. ▼

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essays are short — two-to-four pages apiece — and they're best enjoyed a few at a time. But keep this book by your bedside, and you'll go to sleep every night with a smile on your face. And a little wiser, too. ▼

Scott Sherman smiles before sleep in Richmond.

speaks to our community as well as the dominant culture: "We're here, we're queer, how about we explore this together?" Which is exactly what Perry does in these essays — explores his big gay life and those around him.

You probably won't want to read this book at one sitting. The

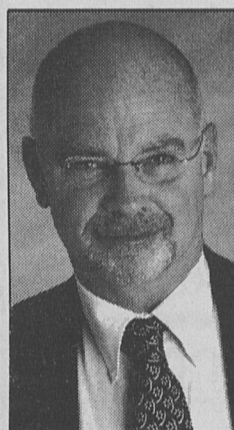
Funny Guy

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bursting through these walls, its dynamic, powerful stuff.

Perry concludes: "I propose a new slogan, not meant to be funny but to be investigated. It's one that

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