

An Ex-Nun, A Farm-Boy, and The Only Gay Bar in the World: Memories of Burlington in 1975

Guy Kettelhack

There are many people who could tell this story better. People who've stayed in Burlington and other towns in Vermont - not moved away, like I did, in 1975, with the idea that an exciting gay life could only happen in New York. Surely many of you remember details I have forgotten. Like the name of the ex-nun who bartended at the Hi Hat, Vermont's (and sometimes it seemed the world's) only gay bar. You may remember, too, when the Hi Hat closed, and then re-opened under new management. The biggest change was who welcomed you: a bat-wielding bouncer charged with denying entry to anyone who looked "suspicious." We gay Vermonters might have turned this into Burlington's "Stonewall." But we didn't. Pragmatic and fearful, we went to Plattsburgh (the site of the North Country's only other gay bar) instead.

Nectar's, on Main Street, now inhabits the old Hi Hat space. On a November 1991 trip to Burlington, I popped into it (no bouncer in sight) in search of lingering ghosts of Vermont's 1970s gay population. The actual bar, that '50s free-form wooden swirl of a thing, was still there. And so, for me, were a few memories if not ghosts — some (now that I'm 40) dimmer than others, dimmer for my maddeningly erratic memory. But much lingers.

I lived in Vermont from 1969 through 1975, the last two of those years in Burlington. Before I fled — and that's the right word for it, so convinced was my twenty-four year old self that New York was the only place for a horny, impatient and ambitious gay man — I got to know, live with and love some of an extraordinarily varied lot of gay men and women. If the Hi Hat was our beehive, we were an unusual swarm of bees (few drones; a lot of queens!) We were social workers during the day, pretend-black-leather-demons at night. We taught kids

in elementary, junior and high schools and went home to lonely houses, wondering if we'd ever find someone to love. We were college professors, farm-boys, musicians, some of us old and balding (learning 'line-dances' like the Hustle, didn't matter how silly we looked, we practiced like a bunch of Rockettes, dancing at our late, drunken, high drama private parties), others of us young and tight and confused, stoned on grass, timid about meeting each other, afraid of the world, curious about sex, creeping up to Montreal for some big city fun (regulars at health clinics getting rid of gonorrhoea and crabs and the other unfortunate dividends of big city fun)... Montreal — what a place to sin! Consigned to the "gay" floor of the YMCA by an understanding, smiling YMCA matriarch, we were hyper-alert to the sound of even one shower (a **naked man!**) in the communal bathroom. Oh, the stack heels (just try to walk in those things after ten years of work-boots), chains around the neck, blow-dried hair... It was a long way from the farm, the office, the school-room. Yes, it was a largely gay male world: seventies "public" gay life still seemed largely to involve men. Women seemed to be more private; their lives went on in living rooms more than discos. (Pearl's was a long way off.)

So many images came up for me on this past trip, images like dreams. That bartender at the Hi Hat, for instance. With her greying hair brushed tightly back, her shy, wide, slightly buck-toothed smile, her sensible spectacles and sensible shoes, her back stooped from the onset of osteoporosis, her manners cultivated at a convent and the kindness she was born with, she was a marvel. Her Jesuit discipline and training had prepared her in ways her last Mother Superior could never have anticipated: she was a whiz at making drinks. She had an encyclopedic knowledge of them — Pink Squirrels

came out of her like smiles, their Pepto-Bismol brightness as startling and easy as her welcome every time you walked in. She knew what you wanted before you did. Anything amber, red, green, pastel or fruit-studded — you name it, she could make it. But she was more than a drinks whiz; she was a warrior, too, or at least prepared to be. There were a few nights (not, thank God, many) when some UVM frat or "the faggots," drunkenly storming into the Hi Hat and sending its frightened clientele into dark corners in the back. I wish I could say we stood up to those assholes, but we didn't. However, our ex-nun bartender did. "Get out of my bar and leave my customers alone!" she'd pipe, standing her ground like General Patton. And, after a few shot glasses were thrown across the room, they would. She was stronger than they were, stronger than we were. And all of us knew it.

Her customers were quite a crew. The earringed and (tastefully) made up man with the horde of pet Dobermans — who was the butchest thing going when you talked about raising dogs... My first roommate, one of those social workers I mentioned, the sweetest guy you ever met, and the least likely you'd ever expect to see swathed from head to foot in sinister black leather. A number of college professors, struggling with coming out, earnest about adopted children, Gay Academic Unions, divorced wives... French-Canadians who'd moved south from huge farm families, so terribly terribly eager to fall in love with someone, anyone, everyone, the world... and a man I'll call Joe.

Joe isn't his real name; uncharacteristically, I remember his real name very well, but it doesn't seem right for me to say it, not now, when he can't give his side of the story. You may know who I'm talking about from my

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Rm. 3E
Richardson Place

2 Church St.
Burlington, VT