



Toronto

by John D. Stanley

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The largest city in Canada with 2,481,494 inhabitants and an urban area with a population of 4,366,508 (according to the 2001 census), Toronto is the capital of the province of Ontario, the center of Canada's financial industry, and the home of the largest concentration of Canada's cultural institutions, including three universities.

For diversity, Toronto has no rivals: over 100 languages are spoken and over 200 cultural groups are present, including the largest gay and lesbian community in Canada.

Early History

The city was founded as York in 1793 and settled by Loyalists fleeing the newly independent United States. During the War of 1812, York was raided and pillaged by U. S. forces in 1813, leaving an enduring anti-American attitude. The city name was changed in 1834 to Toronto ("where there are trees in the water" in Mohawk). In the 1870s, the Industrial Revolution began to transform Toronto: between 1871 and 1891, the city's population tripled, and between 1891 and 1911, it doubled.

Toronto's gay history begins soon after its founding, when a successful merchant and justice of the peace, Alexander Wood, was accused of having misused his position to investigate the genitalia of young men. A similar scandal in 1838 involved George Herchmer Markland, the Inspector-General of Upper Canada. (Upper Canada was renamed Ontario upon Confederation in 1867.)

Buggery had been illegal from colonial times, and this prohibition was included in the *Consolidated Statutes of Canada* in 1859. The *Canadian Criminal Code* introduced the crime of "gross indecency" in 1890; and in 1892 a "bawdy house" law was passed to discourage prostitution.

Nevertheless, as Toronto grew, the city acquired more visible signs of gay activity. For example, by the turn of the twentieth century, the glory holes at Union Station, Toronto's main train station, were considered noteworthy in the memoirs of Gordon Hill Graham.

The Growth of a Subculture

The surreptitious nature of the gay subculture endured through the 1950s. However, by World War II, Toronto had a well established network of parks, laneways, bathhouses, and bars where men searched for other men for sex: Queen's Park, Allen Gardens, Sunnyside Beach, the YMCA.

Toronto's police were vigilant, and arrests for gross indecency were made of clerks and barbers, machinists and bookkeepers. During the 1950s, even private parties were not safe from police raids.

Homophobia was given public expression each Halloween, when a mob gathered in front of the St. Charles



Top: A nighttime view of Toronto's downtown core. Photograph by Scott Wilkinson.

Above: A street scene in Toronto's gay village near the intersection of Church and Wellesley streets.

Image of the gay village created by Wikimedia Commons contributor Leslie.

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Tavern on Yonge Street in order to jeer and pellet patrons, especially drag queens. (The police stopped this harassment in 1980.)

Despite this difficult atmosphere, by the 1950s there was not only a full panoply of laws used to restrict homosexuality, but also a growing gay and lesbian community in an increasingly diverse Toronto.

Lesbian History

While there is little evidence for Toronto's lesbian history before World War II, by the 1950s, lesbians gathered at the Continental Bar. As the feminist movement grew in the 1960s, lesbians worked within women's organizations, such as The Women's Place. There were few proponents of lesbian separatism.

The first national lesbian conference was held at the Toronto YWCA in 1973, and The Toronto Women's Bookstore opened soon after. In 1977, the Lesbian Organisation of Toronto (LOOT) was established as an umbrella organization open to all lesbians but ceased its activities in 1981. In 1984, Lesbians of Colour was formed.

New Attitudes

The first attempt to put homosexuality in a positive light was carried out by Jim Egan, who submitted articles and letters to such tabloids as Toronto's *True News Times* in the 1960s. The Maison de Lys, the first club where gay men and lesbians could go for same-sex dancing, opened in 1961; and the first organized, positive discussions of homosexuality occurred in the mid-1960s at the Music Room, a gay club. Such efforts were the beginnings of an attempt to build Toronto's own gay culture.

In 1969, the criminal code was amended to exempt from prosecution private, consensual sexual activities by adults of at least 21 years of age. This change marked a new attitude toward homosexuality.

Gay Political and Cultural Organizations

Gay political life began with the establishment of the University of Toronto Homophile Association (UTHA) in 1969, joined by the Community Homophile Association of Toronto (CHAT) in 1970. (CHAT died in 1977; the university group continues to this day.)

These early homophile groups were replaced by organizations advocating gay liberation, such as the Gay Alliance Toward Equality (GATE) of Toronto. The national voice of gay liberation became *The Body Politic*, established in Toronto in November 1971 and lasting until 1987.

In 1972, Glad Day Bookshop, Toronto's first gay book shop, opened and is still active. Buddies in Bad Times, a gay theater company, was established by Sky Gilbert in 1977. Gay artistic collectives, such as ChromaZone and JAC, arose in the early 1980s.

The community's infrastructure gradually diversified to match Toronto's multicultural nature. For example, in 1977, the Toronto Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf began, followed in 1980 by Gay Asians of Toronto (GAT). Zami, the first Canadian group for Black and West Indian gays and lesbians, was founded in 1984.

In 1981, George Hislop became the first openly gay candidate for city council, although he was defeated. The area in which he ran for office included the intersection of Church and Wellesley streets, which was now the center of Toronto's gay life with bars, baths, restaurants, shops, and numerous high-rise apartment buildings.

Resistance to Gay Activism

Gay activism was met by resistance from the government through police raids. The growing bathhouse culture experienced increasingly more frequent raids, culminating in a simultaneous raid on four bathhouses on February 5, 1981. Over 300 men were arrested as found-ins and twenty more as keepers under the provision of the bawdy house law. It was the largest mass arrest in Canada since the Quebec separatist crisis.

The rage set off by these raids resulted in the first mass demonstration by the gay community on the evening of February 6. In the subsequent trials, most accused were judged to be not guilty. As a result of the unexpected reaction, the municipal government commissioned a report that recognized Toronto's gays and lesbians as a community.

Other community institutions also came under fire: Canada Customs seized shipments of books and periodicals from Glad Day Bookstore, even though many of the titles were sold openly in other book shops. Glad Day survived, but the harassment continues to this day.

Despite these attempts at repression, Toronto's gay community came out of this struggle with a powerful sense of itself, a stronger infrastructure, and recognition by the municipal government.

Toronto's city government has included sexual orientation in its anti-discrimination policies since 1973. The Toronto Public Library Board granted benefits to same-sex spouses in 1989, and the municipal government followed in 1992; the Toronto Board of Education released a gay-positive curriculum guide in 1992. Toronto's mayors have proclaimed Pride Day since 1992. The City of Toronto even gave Buddies in Bad Times Theatre its own building.

The AIDS Crisis

However, a new challenge arose in 1982 with the appearance of the first cases of AIDS in Toronto. Building on the activist infrastructure already in place, a new set of institutions developed to address the needs of people with AIDS.

These institutions were dominated and controlled by the gay community. The AIDS Committee of Toronto was established in June 1983, and it gave a liberationist bent to the struggle for AIDS prevention and research in Toronto.

Again, Toronto's multicultural nature influenced the community's response. The city's Native community was served by Two-Spirited People of the First Nations while the Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention was established to meet the special needs of its community. Toronto took its own distinct road in combating AIDS: The baths were not closed, sex was accepted as a given, emphasis was placed on safer sex.

The Struggle for Equal Rights

Having achieved recognition from government, Toronto gays and lesbians went on to fight for equal rights. The Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Ontario (CLGRO), established in 1975, fought to include sexuality under the protective clauses of the Ontario Human Rights Code.

However, the 1990s "We are Family" campaign implicitly contradicted the liberationist vision that earlier dominated Toronto's gay life. This direction culminated with the first gay marriages at Metropolitan Community Church in 2001 and their sanction by the Ontario Court of Appeals in 2003.

Toronto Today

Toronto's gay and lesbian community is now recognized as an integral part of the city's fabric. An openly gay city councillor represents a heavily gay ward in City Council, and an out member of Ontario's Legislative

Assembly represents the provincial riding.

The 519 Community Centre provides a venue for social and political activities for the community, and the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archive provides the focus for the city's gay and lesbian history. The newspapers *Xtra!* and *fab* serve gay males, *Siren* the lesbian community. Toronto's Pride parade is one of the largest in the world.

Toronto's glbtq community has gone from being a hidden subculture to a power base in politics, the economy, and the arts.

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About the Author

John D. Stanley is an independent scholar who has lived in Toronto since 1971 and specializes in the history of Poland, particularly during the Enlightenment. He received the Ph.D. from the University of Toronto and has published in such journals as *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* and *Canadian Slavonic Papers*. He contributed two articles to *Who's Who in Gay and Lesbian History: From Antiquity to World War II* (2001).