



YMCA

by Caryn E. Neumann

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A typical mid-twentieth century room in the YMCA at 180 West One-hundred-thirty-fifth Street in New York City.

The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), founded in London in 1844 and brought to the United States in 1851, began as an effort to protect vulnerable men from the dangers of the city. By the early twentieth century, YMCAs had become popular havens for men who sought sex with other men.

The middle-class Protestant founders of the YMCA sought to provide a buffer between young men away from home for the first time and the dangers of the city. Emphasizing the triangle of mind, body, and spirit, they aimed to build a Christian superman who would be sober, morally clean, and physically fit to face the perils of the modern age.

Accordingly, the YMCA built dormitories where men could find sanctuary. By the 1880s, the YMCA had embarked on an ambitious physical education program to accompany its lectures on health and Christianity. It built gyms, locker rooms, and swimming pools (where men swam nude in the custom of the era) to be located in the same building as the rooms for rent.

Men who did not realize that a gay subculture existed discovered one at the YMCA when they stopped to take rooms upon their arrival in the city. Other men discovered the YMCA through friends or through scandals that received heavy newspaper coverage.

In 1912, the Portland, Oregon YMCA, with the ninth largest membership in North America, became the center of a sex scandal. This first public account of a homosexual underworld in the Northwest appeared when a Portland newspaper charged many of the city's most prominent men with sodomy and contributing to the delinquency of minors. A few of the implicated men lived at the YMCA and others used the sports facilities.

The Portland scandal, as well as a subsequent one in 1919 at the Newport, Rhode Island Naval Training Station, prompted the leaders of the YMCA to enact strict rules against homosexuals. Suspicion of homosexuality or the solicitation of homosexual activity became grounds for immediate eviction. However, many of the desk clerks charged with enforcement were gay men who worked at the YMCA because they liked the gay-friendly environment. These men looked the other way as homosexual behavior abounded.

Cruising at the YMCA offered men a number of denial strategies. The physical facilities offered evidence that a man desired self-improvement but not proof that he accepted a homosexual identity. Yet it remained easy for a man to place himself in a situation where sex might occur. Many who participated in the thriving cruising scene in the YMCA remained closeted or self-identified as heterosexual outside of the building.

The 1940s through the 1960s witnessed the heyday of cruising at the YMCA. As the YMCA became associated in the public mind with virility, it attracted muscle men and lovers of muscle men. Members of the armed services and the working class were pulled into the YMCA by outreach programs that unintentionally also brought men who desired soldiers, sailors, and construction workers. It is this image of the YMCA as a

sexual paradise that became immortalized in song by the gay-themed disco group The Village People in 1978. The double entendre-filled "YMCA" featured a chorus of "They have everything for you men to enjoy, you can hang out with all the boys."

The emergence of a public, militant gay rights movement in the 1960s spelled the end of the YMCA as a gay playground. Participation in gay community centers, such as bars, became more attractive to men than heading over to the YMCA. The rise of AIDS in the 1980s dampened the public cruising scene and further reduced the popularity of the organization among gay men. Now known chiefly as a family athletic center, the YMCA has moved away from its sole focus upon young men.

In the decades when homosexuality remained underground, the YMCA provided a safe meeting place for gay men. It helped men to discover that they were not the only ones in the world with same-sex desires, and it gave them the opportunity to act upon these feelings without fear of arrest or public humiliation.

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