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Question of coexistence



—Journal-Bulletin Photos by KRIS CRAIG

GATHERING PLACE: Spiritus Pizza on Provincetown's Commercial Street, where many gays congregate after the clubs and discos close.

In Provincetown, historic tolerance now being tested

By LINDA BORG
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PROVINCETOWN, Mass. — It began as a typical summer night in Provincetown.

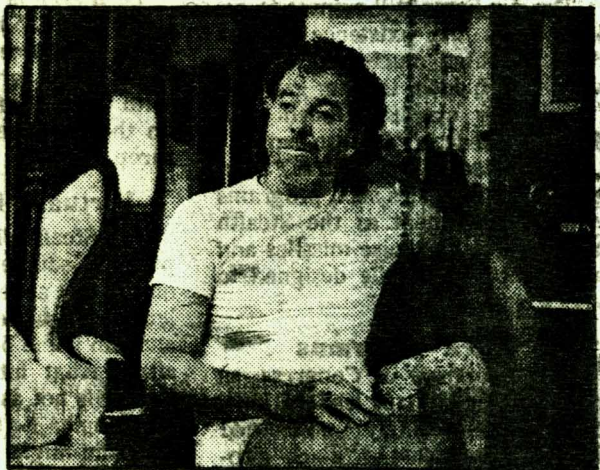
The clubs and discos had closed at 1 a.m., emptying thousands of revelers onto Commercial Street, the town's main thoroughfare. The usual crowd was gathered in front of Spiritus Pizza, a gay hangout in the West End. The men talked and sipped coffee, relaxing after an evening of drinking and dancing at one of Provincetown's gay bars and clubs.

Usually, there are only a few policemen, scattered along the edge of the crowd, looking sheepish and out-of-place. Last Friday, that changed.

In a move that some members of the gay community believe was motivated by bias against gays, police first ordered the crowd to disperse, then arrested five people for rude and disorderly conduct or failing to move.

The police say they were just trying to keep the peace.

The clash between police and gays has stunned a



*PRESTON BABBIT Jr. calls the clash
"an unfortunate misunderstanding."*

town that prides itself on its tolerance of all lifestyles.

A sense of outrage has percolated through the gay community. In the coffee shops and art galleries on Saturday, people talked of police harassment. A local entertainer called for a demonstration in front of Spiritus at 1 a.m. Sunday.

Warned by an out-of-town reporter that the gathering might become violent, Police Chief James Meads called in a dozen state troopers. By 1 a.m., 26 police-

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men were sandwiched among 1,500 angry people, many of them gay.

"Ho, Ho, Chief Meads must go" and "Tonight, we have the sidewalks. Tomorrow we take the streets" were chanted.

Despite the taunts and catcalls, both sides remained nonviolent. Two people were arrested and the crowd dissolved at 2:30 a.m., singing protest songs from the 1960s.

"It was creepy," said Bob Moran, a 29-year-old waiter from Seattle who witnessed Sunday's demonstration. "We didn't know what the cops were reacting to. You wonder what the motivation was; you wonder if it's anti-gay." The weekend's events threaten to spoil the live-and-let-live philosophy that has made Provincetown such a mecca for gay men and women.

"When you're dealing with a minority group and something like this happens, the doubts start to happen," said a gay man at the Boatslip restaurant on Commercial Street earlier this week. He declined to be identified. "There are a thousand rumors around town."

"There was no reason in the world for a show of force with the state police," said another man

at the Boatslip. He described Sunday's confrontation as a "Mexican standoff."

One prominent gay businessman, however, said that the weekend's events were simply a combination of bad timing and poor judgment.

"It was all an unfortunate misunderstanding," said Preston Babbitt Jr., owner of the Rose and Crown guest house and a board member of the Provincetown Business Guild. "Everyone is very upset that this will make a schism between the gay and straight communities."

Expects people to behave

Police Chief Meads grew up in Provincetown and has spent 26 years with the department, the last three as chief. He, too, feels misunderstood.

"This was not an anti-gay issue," the exhausted-looking chief said this week. "I would have reacted the same had there been a thousand kids."

"I expect people to behave here as they would at home. We don't have to get uptight, but that doesn't mean you can spoil the quality of life in this town."

Meads said he was responding to several neighbors' complaints about noise, garbage, throwing up on tables and urinating in public — all supposedly stemming from the large gatherings outside Spiritus.

At the chief's request, the Board

of Selectmen held a public hearing on Aug. 11 to discuss the complaints with the owners of Spiritus. The pizza shop owners agreed to pay for extra police coverage to keep the crowd out of the street.

Gays 'got hit cold'

Meads said he inaugurated the extra coverage last Friday because weekends draw the biggest crowds.

"Unfortunately, both sides agree, word never reached the gay community, so the Spiritus regulars had no inkling as to why the police were moving in on their nightspot.

To make matters worse, several gays said, police arrived in the middle of Carnival, a weeklong gay festival sponsored by the Provincetown Business Guild. Some gays said that the timing of the police action was a deliberate attempt to harass and intimidate the gay population.

"I'll admit the gay community got hit cold," Meads said, adding that he assumed the local newspaper would publish the board's decision. "Some advance publicity would have helped."

But the chief still believes Sunday's demonstration was uncalled for.

Babbitt agreed. "I thought it was an irresponsible response to an irresponsible action."

But Thomas Wilson Weinberg, 41, the local entertainer who circu-

lated the flyers, felt the demonstration kept gays from feeling demoralized by Friday's "show of force."

"I don't think (the police action) was deliberately malicious," he said. "But I think there is anti-gay sentiment here just like everywhere else, so when a place where gay people gather is besieged, I can understand why so many people felt it was an anti-gay gesture."

Weinberg sympathizes with the neighbors' frustrations. But he says everyone has to put up with the seasonal discomforts of living in a summer resort.

But that attitude doesn't sit well with one longtime resident of Carver Street, who has barricaded her home against the crowds, the broken bottles and the booming disco music for five years.

Joan Snow, who has lived in Provincetown for 32 years, said she frequently can't drive down her street because of the overflow crowd from the Back Street disco.

"The noise was terrible, horrendous," she said. "I have nothing against the gays but I do disapprove of a public display. Where are the local people's rights?"

"It's not a gay issue whatsoever," she said. "I lay the blame on the selectmen. They rubber stamp license after license. It's dumped an impossible task on a small-town police force."