

Globe staff photo/Wendy Maeda

Crowds of pedestrians and cars make their way along Commercial Street in Provincetown, where tension between police and gays increased last week.

Provincetown tensions clash with its reputation

By John Hechinger
Contributing Reporter

PROVINCETOWN — This town has long been a haven for homosexuals, but a confrontation with police last weekend and a series of recent attacks on gays and lesbians are bringing the summer season to a close on a troubling note.

Tensions reached a peak last Sunday in the early morning when the arrests of nine persons outside a pizza parlor popular with the gay community sparked a protest that drew more than 1,000 people.

Such tense relations with police, sometimes in an atmosphere of often violent attacks on gays and lesbians, is not unique to Provincetown, according to Kevin Berrill, director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's violence project.

"There's a longstanding problem about the lack of communication between the police and gay people," Berrill said.

"There is a feeling among gay people that the police don't take their problems as seriously as those of the general population." Berrill cited the findings the Task Force's 1984 survey as indicative of the dimensions of anti-gay violence around the nation:

- More than one in five gay men and nearly one in 10 lesbians reported they had been punched, kicked, hit or beaten.

- More than 40 percent said they had been threatened with physical violence.

- More than 90 percent said they had experienced some kind of harassment, ranging from verbal abuse to assault with a weapon.

Many residents say recent assaults on gays and criticism of police seems out of character for Provincetown, widely known for its tolerance and sensitivity.

"Gay people feel safer here than any other place they live," said Paul Wychules, president of

Confrontations in Provincetown

Tensions between gays and police clash with town's reputation

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the Provincetown Human Rights Coalition. "There's a large part of this community for whom there is no 'us' and 'them', straight and gay."

The town's reputation dates back to the turn of the century, when Boston and New York artists, mostly of the American Impressionist School, came to this fishing and whaling village perched on the tip of Cape Cod, according to Peter Macara, assistant director of the Provincetown Art Association and Museum.

During the next few decades, the town became an artist colony, famous for such visitors as Eugene O'Neil and Tennessee Williams. As sexual and artistic freedom merged and tourism boomed, Provincetown — along with a handful of vacation spots in such places as Key West and New York's Fire Island — became one of the premier gay resorts in the United States.

Now, however, amid this summer's increased tensions, Wychules and other Provincetown leaders fear the situation may change.

Police report 9 assaults against gays by local youths over the last three months. A July letter circulated by the Human Rights Coalition and signed by more than 600 people said the organization had

received 41 complaints of anti-gay harrassment.

Many gay leaders charge the police have not done enough to prevent harrassment. The July letter called for tougher enforcement of complaints, plainclothes patrols at night and protective custody of offenders. Meads, however, says his department has pursued offenders aggressively, going to court in the six case where victims have not dropped charges.

Last weekend, events took an unexpected turn. Responding to residents' complaints about noise and drunken behavior at Spiritus Pizza, a favorite late-night hangout after bars close, the Board of Selectmen, Meads and the pizza parlor owner met 13 days ago and agreed to send in extra officers in the early morning hours of Saturday, August 16.

But the local paper didn't report the decision and the increased police presence caused anger and confusion. Eyewitnesses, including some of those arrested, say the police acted unprofessionally, using excessive force and abusive language. Meads denies the charges, saying police acted with restraint in response to an unruly crowd.

The confrontation led to a larger one and further arrests during the next few days.

It also pitted residents against each other: neighbors who object-

ed to the noise said police were justified; others said the noise and congestion near the pizza shop were no worse than elsewhere and police were unfairly targeting the gays.

Police arrested a male and a female Friday night outside the pizza parlor. One was charged with disorderly conduct, the other with obstructing a public street, according to police.

Meads says his force's record with the gay community is "excellent."

But Meads said he fired a part-time summer traffic officer on Wednesday on charges he allegedly harrassed two gays while off-duty.

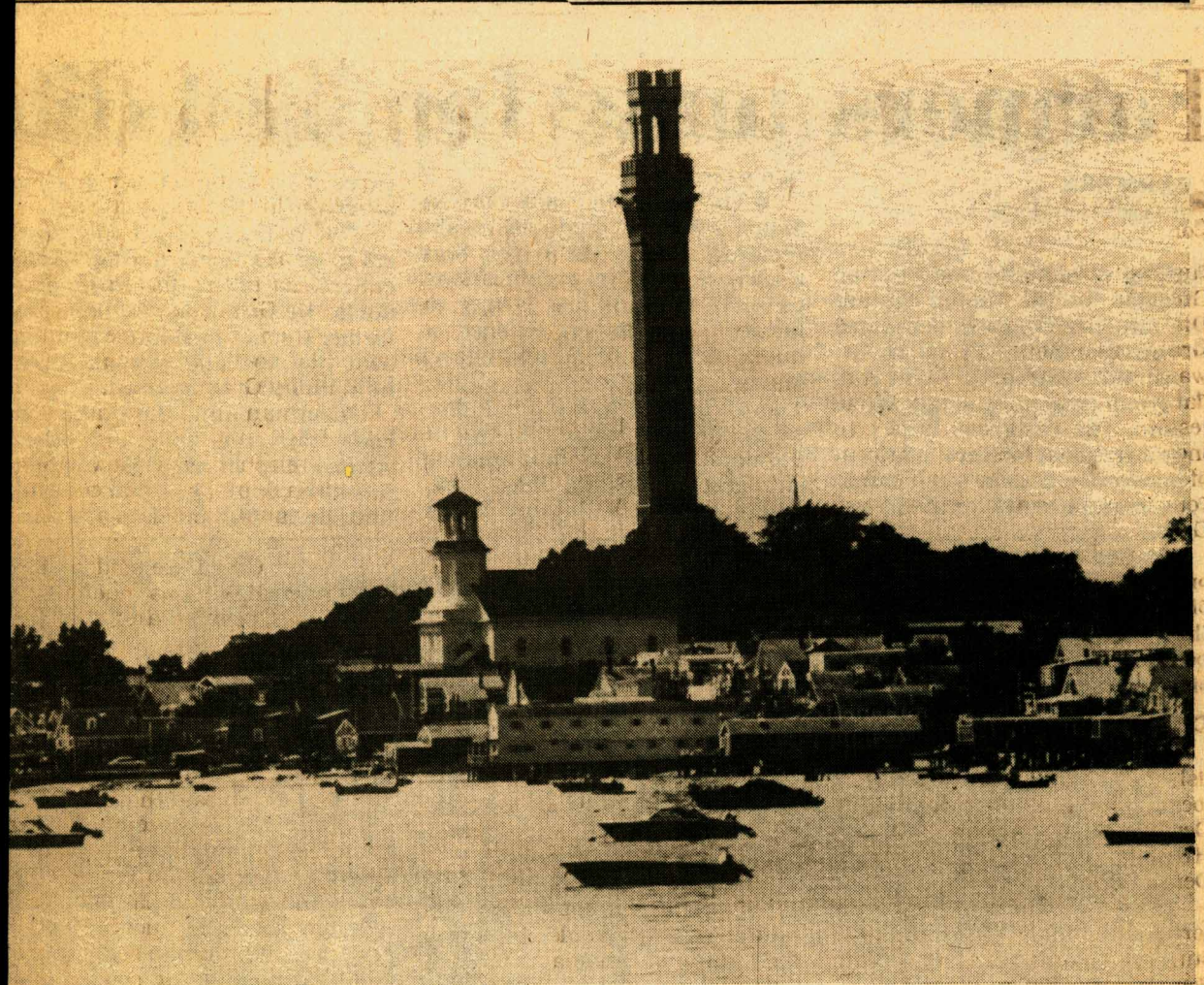
Now, many people are wondering what effects the unrest will have on Provincetown.

"We have a lot of work ahead of us to restore what damage has been done," said Paul A. Christo, a town selectman and president of the Provincetown Business Guild, a predominantly gay group of local business owners.

"This kind of action, whether it is anti-gay motivated or not, is perceived as a blow to the gay community," Wychules said of the weekend arrests. "It emboldens people who have an anti-gay agenda. That's the tragic upshot."

The confrontation also questioned a perception among many

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Globe staff photo/Wendy Maed

A view of Provincetown's waterfront, dominated by the Pilgrim Tower.

residents, including Christo, that the police had been making progress in pursuing those who attack gays.

"They were doing a good job until this year. I don't know what happened," said Wayne Harris, a

free-lance artist who is spending his seventh summer in Provincetown.

Meads, who stands by the actions of his department, says his officers were placed in a "no win

situation," when sources told him the demonstration Friday could turn violent.

The Board of Selectmen will hold a general meeting tomorrow evening to discuss the week's events.