



The 1950's - ©Tucson LGBTQ Museum - All Rights Reserved (Text Format)

'Sure I got a girlfriend, but I got a boyfriend too ... Why read only one newspaper? ... Bouncer at the Esquire Club In Tucson 1954.

The 1950's in Tucson Arizona opened with a population of 45,454 within its 9.5 square mile city limits to a feeling of peace, new prosperity, and stability both there and across the nation as everyone left World War 2 behind. By 1957 the nation had entered the Space Age (ironically largely due to Nazi technology and rocketry scientists brought back by the military to the United States), and an unprecedented building explosion during the 1950's brought on by millions of returning veterans then in the child rearing stage of their lives who would bring the Baby Boom Generation which would spawn millions of boys and girls who would later become the Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, and Transgendered pushing for their sexual preference rights until the idea was finally right in the faces of everyone in the United States and beyond.

However, at the same time it was also one of the most Socially Repressive Time Periods in the entire history of the United States.



1950's Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual
Government Employees Protest Firings

Any group deemed the all-encompassing term subversive by the US Government and military lead to the United States Congress to require the registration of all members of subversive groups, and they were secretly infiltrated by U.S. Government agents. In 1950, the U.S. State Department identified all homosexuals working for the State Department as security risks. What quickly followed was a rapid expansion of more and more repressive laws and federal government actions that included multiple firings of personnel working for all federal, state, city governments, private businesses, and educational institutions who were merely even suspected or secretly accused of being homosexual.



1952 Senator McCarthy
& Roy Cohn

In 1952, the American Psychiatric Association listed Homosexuality in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) as a Sociopathic Personality Disturbance, with a pathological hidden fear of the opposite sex that was caused by traumatic parent-child relationships. This view was widely influential in the medical profession. In 1956, however, Evelyn Hooker performed a study that compared the happiness and well-adjusted nature of self-identified Homosexual Men with heterosexual men and found no difference. Her study both stunned the medical community and made her a hero to many Gay Men and Lesbians. Politically motivated police raids, recording people's names, addresses, taking mug shots, and keeping secret files on the patrons began occurring at gay bars all over the United States and even up in Canada. In the United States, many laws were passed prohibiting cross-dressing by both men and women.



1959 Secret Prom Tucson

In many communities even dancing with the same sex was illegal and the dancers faced jail terms. Then, across the globe in June of 1950 North Korea attacked South Korea and many of the former World War 2 military troops who had been in the military reserves suddenly found themselves being recalled back into active duty in the branches of service they had so cheerfully left after doing their part not so many years before. The draft began again and both recalled as well as new Gay, Lesbian, Bisexuals were put suddenly back into the military. During this time many Gay's and Lesbian's in the military were often routinely bullied, beaten, baited, found out, put in military psychiatric hospitals, and discharged out of the service.



1955 Actors Sal Mineo
and James Dean - Both Bisexuals

Around Tucson in the 1950's the Town House bar located at 27 S. Scott Avenue (with a mixed crowd and an anything goes atmosphere) continued to bring in increasingly large numbers of Gay's and Lesbian's. Unfortunately, on the Friday afternoon of June 3, 1955 the chief of police contacted the bar's owner due to supposed increasing complaints about the "complexion of the clientele" and that it needed to be "corrected." The next night, a very busy Saturday, most Gays were refused service and told to leave.

Word quickly spread around Tucson and almost immediately the Tap Room bar inside the Hotel Congress located at 311 E. Congress Street which only served beer at the time became the center of the Old Pueblo's growing Gay, Bisexual, and Lesbian population (that scenario had before and would at later times be repeating itself in varying ways over and over again in coming decades).



1956 Gay Actor
Rock Hudson

During other times in Tucson of the 1950's bars like the Zebra Room under ownership of Claytie Lokey located at 167 S. Meyer Avenue an after-hours club across from the police station and the R&B bar inside the Greyhound Station at 2 S. 4th Avenue were for short times Gay Rendezvous until local police applied some pressure on both owners and patrons. The Hotel Congress Tap Room bar became more and more popular with Gays. But, the Club Esquire located at 32 S. 5th Avenue, a sleazy dive bar downtown owned by the very open minded and friendly Hy Lavin was a place where anyone could find about anything and where you always kept both hands on your wallet and the other hand on your drink.



1955 Pioneer Hotel
Downtown Tucson

The bar became Tucson's ultimate cruise and make-out place in town quickly becoming unbelievably popular. With its constant flow of horny military men, Bisexuals, Gays, sometimes Lesbians, missile plant workers, beatniks, alcoholics, transients, prostitutes, pool hustlers, bowling machine freaks (the ones who worked hand setting the pins in bowling alleys), straights, con artists, hustlers, and assorted others as the Club Esquire bar really brought them all in sooner or later.



1955 Around Town

Later in the 1950's the Lil Brown Jug (called LBJ by locals) located at 431 E. Grant Road re-opened as a Gay bar with its Duluth Minnesota owner's Chuck Kohnke and Dennis (Denny) Smith in June of 1956. Located at the time far away from the prying eyes of downtown do-gooder's and police, the Lil Brown Jug instantly became packed every night and finally provided local Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, and others who were allied a safe place to go and be themselves as well as a venue for performances.



1956 Gay Bar

Like the Hotel Congress Tap Bar it was also only allowed to serve beer (the secret in the 1950's was to bring your own small bottle or hip flask of your favorite hard alcohol and then just ask the bartender for a Coke, 7up, Dr. Pepper, or Pepsi and always being sure to leave a very good tip). Soon the Lil Brown Jug was attracting Gays from Phoenix, Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York as the word of a REAL GAY BAR that was located in Tucson spread quickly.



1958 Actors Tab Hunter & Roddy McDowell Roommates

The Lil Brown Jug bars after closing (a.k.a. after hours) parties were even wilder than when it was open and attracted a very intensely loyal following. With it's out of downtown & out of mind location the highly successful bar was never harassed, told to shut down, or bothered by police, state or city authorities.



1958 Home On Leave

As more Gays in the Old Pueblo were able to connect in larger numbers, the spring of 1958 saw the formation of Tucson's first Gay Men's social club which they named Gay Ladies of the Southwest. By the Fall of the same year the group had renamed itself Gay Ladies of the Arizona Desert (G.L.A.D.) and used the initials GLAD as their code word in very cleverly disguised sentences like, I'm GLAD when it rains, which if acknowledged correctly identified both as being Gay or at the least very interested.



1959 Some Like It Hot Movie

Two Gay/Lesbian national level first's occurred in the early 1950's when the Mattachine Society was founded in Los Angeles in 1950 and quickly spread chapters on college campuses including the University of Arizona in Tucson. The second called The Daughters of Bilitis (also called the DOB), a Lesbian social and political club founded in San Francisco originally as an alternative to Lesbian bars in 1955. Membership in both groups was usually not large, but even with the constant harassment, infiltration, and gathering of thousands and thousands of hours of evidence by Police, FBI and CIA, both groups still managed to survive well into later decades.



1956 Gay Student Beaten

Ironically, at the same time in the 1950's the FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, who was a known heavy gambler betting on the horses, was directing his agents to conduct the wiretapping of phones, making sound recordings by secret microphones of their meetings. Hoover himself went home every night and put on a dress and high heels while wrapping his arms around his boyfriend Clyde Tolson who was also the assistant director of the FBI, the heir to his entire estate, his live-in roommate, and constant companion for many years.



1951 FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover with Clyde Tolson (Note the wedding ring on Tolson's Left ring finger - He was not 'Married')

In Tucson of the 1950's many of the national undercurrents had their effects on the city, but others did not. The Gays & Lesbians of the Old Pueblo for the most part at times just did what they had learned to do many years before.



1954 Around Town

That was to keep their lifestyles and sexual preferences behind closed doors in private homes, on one side of friendly bars and restaurants, and visit their private clubs & after hour clubs that were secretly scattered around the city until the opening of the Lil Brown Jug bar as a Gay Establishment on June 12, 1956 provided them more safety and stability.



1959 Actor Clint Eastwood (left)

Gay Marriage Supporter At Old Tucson Studios

As the stroke of midnight December 31, 1959 brought the decade of the 1950's to an end, population shifts around the nation brought many new arrivals as 107,300 people were then living within the 24.5 square mile Tucson city limits. The coming decade of the 1960's would at times shake the country's concepts, ways of thinking, population, and its institutions while at the same time planting the seeds for events that would happen in the decades coming up.

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