

Anger Management

By FRED SARGEANT The New York Times Published: June 25, 2009

I WAS 19 years old when I met Craig Rodwell. He was 26. It was just after Thanksgiving in 1967, shortly after he'd opened the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop on Mercer Street near the New York University campus. One day in the shop — considered to be the first literary gay bookstore — the beat cop stopped by to tell us we needed to pay him off each week. Craig told him we wouldn't pay; a few days later we had a break-in and the cash box was taken. For Craig, it was an opportunity to make the connection between police corruption and prejudice, a topic that he would bring up time after time in the shop's newsletter, "The Hymnal."

This was the backdrop to our lives in late June 1969, when we were on our way home from a Friday night dinner with friends in Washington Square Village. We swung by the Oscar Wilde because anti-gay vandalism was a continuing problem. Then we headed home. When we crossed Sixth Avenue we began to see people out on Christopher Street near the Stonewall Inn. As we made our way down the street, I could hear the pings of the coins thrown against the paddy wagon parked outside the bar. Policemen were trapped inside and each time they ventured out the coins would fly. I remember thinking that the crowd was expanding into something I'd never seen before — it quickly grew into the hundreds. Usually in raids on bars, the employees were loaded into the wagon first, then those patrons who had been selected for arrest followed. Other patrons would be sent outside, where they would normally disperse quickly. But this time the customers weren't fleeing. The police had misread the crowd and their ability to handle it.

After things settled down on Friday night, we decided that we had to take action — to bring a larger purpose to the evening's events. And so the next day, we started to leaflet. It sounds primitive today, but in 1969 it was an effective means of communication. People were accustomed to getting leaflets, and they would read them. And Craig knew how to write them. Craig also made calls to the newspapers, letting them know that there would be a lot of people converging in the Village on Saturday night. Getting coverage was a challenge. The press had a bias against gays then, and it perpetuated the view of Stonewall as the time the drag queens fought back. But for Craig and for me, it was the moment the gay-rights movement shifted from what we thought of as a "letterhead" movement of press releases to one of action. Older gays saw the path to equality as going through the power structure. We saw it as going around the power structure. We wanted to exploit the attention this riot received, attention that we had not been able to get before.

That second night turned into a general melee — more police, more protesters — but Craig and I stayed until the end. For us, the end was the beginning. We had witnessed the crowd at work; we had been a part of it. It was not necessarily a crystalline moment and a conscious act of collective gay liberation, but gay liberation was at its heart. The word was out.

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