

The South of Market

Leather History

by Gayle Rubin

A Short History and Walking Tour Guide

One of San Francisco's seasonal rituals occurs each year in late September, when leather-clad men and women from all over the world pour into the City for Leather Week festivities, culminating in the Folsom Street Fair. The fair is the third-largest public event in California, and the largest leather event in the world.

Often thought of as the ultimate manifestation of the leather character of South of Market, one of the world's most legendary leather neighborhoods, the Folsom Street Fair only began in 1984, and not specifically as a leather event. Leathermen had begun to congregate South of Market in the mid-1960s, and the leather presence peaked in the early 1980s. In an odd way, the Folsom Fair recreates a South of Market that is a shadow of its former glory—and in some danger of disappearing altogether.

Geographies of Gay Sex in San Francisco

Prior to the emergence of the South of Market leather scene, homosexual gathering places tended to cluster in neighborhoods that sheltered other activities of urban vice. When San Francisco began to have a visible leather population in the 1950s and early 1960s, these men could be found in North Beach bars such as the famous Black Cat (whose legal battles helped to establish the rights of homosexuals to congregate and drink in public), Tenderloin gay spots like the Old Crow and the Caboose, and the old waterfront, particularly the area near the Ferry Building and the foot of Market Street.

Indeed, a 1954 Mattachine Society convention guide in San Francisco described one such bar, the Sea Cow, as a place for "beer, wine, and seamen," and the Embarcadero YMCA was notorious for sexual assignations. By the late 1950s, Jack's Waterfront Bar had a substantial gay clientele and

was one of the first local bars where leathermen began to visibly congregate.

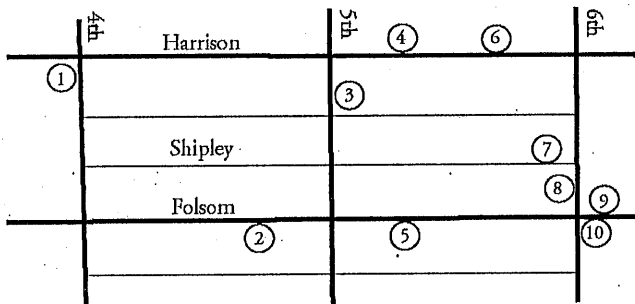
In the early 1960s, two forces closed down most of these bars. Most lost their liquor licenses in a series of police actions called the "gayola" raids. Moreover, during the post-World War II period, city agencies and large private real estate developers began to plan ambitious projects to redevelop several areas of San Francisco. Office towers, high-end retail shops and expensive residential units would eventually occupy the sites of the old produce market, sailors' haunts and shuttered gay bars.

The first bar in San Francisco specifically oriented to the leather crowd was in the Tenderloin—the Why Not, which operated briefly in 1962 at 518 Ellis St. Just as the Why Not was closing, the Tool Box opened at 399 Fourth St. at Harrison. The Tool Box was a sensation—wildly popular—even attracting media notice. In 1964 *Life* magazine did a story on homosexuality in America with a photograph of the Tool Box interior spread across the two opening pages, displaying to all of America the most distinctive feature of the bar: a huge mural painted by local

artist Chuck Arnett, who also worked there as a bartender. The dramatic black and white mural depicted a variety of tough-looking, masculine men. The photograph in *Life* included not only the painting, but also bar patrons standing in front of it, including Arnett.

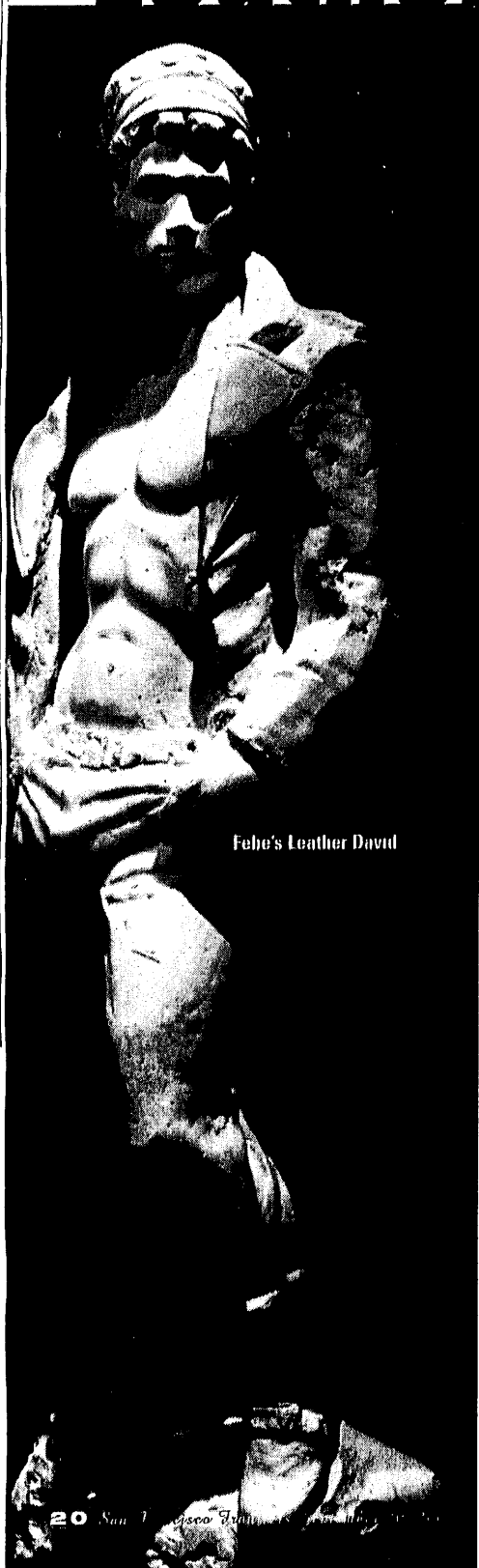
Another man in the Tool Box photograph is Mike Caffee. In 1966 he designed the logo for Febe's and created a statue which came to symbolize the bar. He modified a small plaster reproduction of Michelangelo's "David," making him into a classic 1960s gay biker. Later, this "Leather David" became one of the most well-known symbols of San Francisco leather, reproduced and disseminated around the world. One still remains in a case on the wall of the Paradise Lounge, a mostly straight rock and roll bar which opened on the site occupied by Febe's.

Despite its enormous influence, the popularity of the Tool Box was short lived. By 1965, it had competition from the Detour, in the Western Addition, and On the Levee, on part of The Embarcadero as yet unmolested by redevelopment. When the building was torn down for rede-



1. The Tool Box bar (1962-71) — 399 Fourth St.
2. 800 Folsom (1986-91) — 800 Folsom St.
3. The Hot House bathhouse (1979-83) — 374 Fifth St.
4. BlowBuddies sex club (1992-) — 923 Harrison St.
5. Trading Post Emporium leather shop (1976-83); Long Dong Club bookstore/sex club (1978-78); A Taste of Leather leather shop (1978-84) — 880 Folsom St.
6. The Hotel bathhouse (1976-78); The Handball Express bathhouse (1979-82) — 873 Harrison St.
7. *Drummer* magazine (1987-89); *The Sentinel* newspaper (1992-95) — 285 Shipley St.
8. The Hula Shack lesbian bar (1962-67); Rama, The 678, Lumberyard after-hours (1968-75); The Stol sex club (1976-85) — 879 Folsom St.
9. The Tube (1976-77); Folsom St. Baths (1978-79); Sultro Bath House (1979-83) — 1015 Folsom St.
10. The Gas Station bar (1968-70); Round-Up bar (1970-78); Watering Hole bar and playground (1978-84) — 286 Sixth St.

Map design by M. Czajkowski; historical details courtesy of G. Rubin



Febe's Leather David



Tom Arnett mural on Tool Box wall after demolition

velopment in 1971, old patrons came by to get bricks of the Tool Box as mementos.

The Golden Age of Folsom Street: 1966-1981

The leather scene moved to what would become its Main Street in 1966, when Febe's and the Stud opened on Folsom Street. Several other bars soon opened along a three-block strip, establishing a core area that anchored a burgeoning leather scene. Febe's, at 1501 Folsom, became the main leather bar, and was particularly popular with bikers for almost two decades. The Stud, nearby at 1535 Folsom (currently the Holy Cow) began as a leather bar, but soon evolved into a "hippie" bar and later a dance bar. The Ramrod opened at 1225 Folsom (now My Place) in 1968, and quickly acquired a popularity that rivaled that of Febe's. The In Between, located at 1347 Folsom—in between Febe's and the Ramrod—was short-lived, but was succeeded by several others on the same site, including: a bar with no name, a bar officially called No Name, the Bolt, the Brig, and finally the Powerhouse. Today's reopened Powerhouse is still on the same corner.

Leather bars and sex clubs continued to proliferate in the area in the early 1970s. The Boot Camp opened in 1971 at 1010 Bryant St.; the Folsom Street Barracks (1147 Folsom) and the Red Star

Saloon (1145 Folsom) opened in 1972 and 1973 between Seventh and Eighth, followed by the Ambush at 1351 Harrison St. and Dore Alley, and the Folsom Prison on the corner of Folsom and Fifteenth (now a parking lot).

The late 1970s saw an even more feverish period of growth. In 1977 the Balcony, a favored haunt for the fist-fucking crowd, broke out of the Folsom and opened near the Castro at 2155 Market St. In 1978 the Arena (on the corner of Harrison and Ninth—now the Stud) and the Black and Blue (on the corner of Howard and Eighth, later a paint store and now empty) appeared. The class of 1979 included the Stables, the Watering Hole and the Trench, a piss palace which later ironically became a laundromat. The Leatherneck opened at 280 Eleventh St. at Folsom, soon to be replaced by the Plunge, which had a swimming pool. In 1981 the Drummer organization put the Drummer Key Club in the building, then a bar called Drummaster and another called the Gold Coast. The Compound succeeded the Gold Coast, and then in 1984 a straight dance club called the Oasis took over the site. Leather bars kept opening in the early 1980s, including the Headquarters and the San Francisco Eagle in 1981, the Cave in 1982 and Chaps in 1983.

It is interesting to note that with the

exception of A Taste of Leather, most of the leather shops were still in the Polk Street area until the mid-70s. Most of the South of Market leather businesses had been bars, bathhouses, sex clubs, after-hours haunts and the occasional restaurant. In the '60s, gay life South of Market was mostly a nighttime affair. But during the mid-to-late-70s, the leather economy South of Market diversified.

Vanishing Civilization

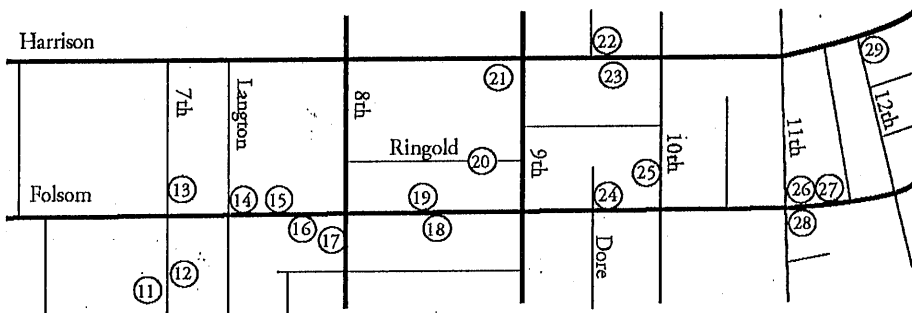
By 1981, leathersmen dominated the visible street life of the Folsom not only at night, but also in daylight. But in ways that were not yet obvious, the foundations of leather South of Market were being undermined by economic and political forces as well as the emerging AIDS epidemic. Tony Tavarossi, who had managed the Why Not, hung out in the Catacombs and had been a central figure in local leather, died suddenly in 1981 of pneumonia; his friends had not yet heard of pneumocystis and thought of pneumonia as the bacterial kind treatable with antibiotics.

In July 1981 the Folsom Street Fire burned out several leathersmen who lived on Brush and Hallam, two tiny alleyways off of Folsom between Seventh and Eighth. Among those dislocated were artists such as Rex and Mark I. Chester, and leathersman-

about-town Alexis Sorrel (a member of the 15, and later the Black Leather Wings, and to whom the book *Leatherfolk* is dedicated). Rex lost many of his original drawings, and photographs of Chester's apartment and whip collection made it onto the front pages of local newspapers with tabloid-style headlines speculating that "slaves" would be found still chained in their quarters in the smoldering ruins. When the burned-out buildings were rebuilt, they were no longer cheap apartments and flats, but instead early examples of a new kind of high-end housing that later became so ubiquitous and associated with the dot-com invasions of the late 1990s.

Large sections of South of Market were approved for redevelopment by the Board of Supervisors in 1953. In 1954 an ambitious plan was unveiled to build a convention center, sports stadium and many high-rise buildings. Forcible relocation of several thousand residents and small businesses began in earnest in 1966, but the big redevelopment projects hit a snag when local owners and residents sued to stop the evictions. Those lawsuits were not settled until the late 1970s, when the construction of what is now the Yerba Buena Center began. The first major completion was the Moscone Center. The years from 1966, when the first leather bars were moving into South of Market, until 1981, when the Moscone Center opened, neatly demarcate the period in which leather life proliferated South of Market.

The early 1980s were hard times for the Folsom, so much so that one local magazine proclaimed "The Death of Leather." The Cave and the Handball Express closed in 1982. In 1983, the Trench was closed for liquor-license violations, and the Hothouse, a bathhouse, shut down. In 1984, the Catacombs, the Cauldron, the Compound and the Suro Baths all ceased operations. Animals, the Arena, the Brig, the Boot Camp, Chaps, the Slot and the South of Market Club were among the casualties of 1985. By 1986, several other venerable institutions disappeared: the Ambush and the Ramrod were suddenly gone, along with Templar



11. Mieler S. leather shop (1960-68)—227 Seventh St.
12. The Cave bar (1981-82); The Rawhide II bar (1982)—280 Seventh St.
13. Mieler S. Leathers (1983)—310 Seventh St.
14. The Stables bar (1979-80)—1123 Folsom St.
15. Folsom St. Barracks bathhouse (1972-76); Watering Hole bar (1984-7)—1145-47 Folsom St.
16. The Walling Arms/Earthquake Ethel's (1974); The Hungry Hole bar (1976-77); Brown's Pub (1980-83); The Bay brick inn lesbian bar (1962-67)—1188-1190 Folsom St.
17. The Hole in the Wall bar (1993)—289 Eighth St.
18. National Leather Association (1993)—1250 Folsom St.
19. The Ramrod bar (1968-86); My Place (1987)—1225 Folsom St.
20. Ringold Alley—cruising area; first Up Your Alley street fair
21. The Arena bar (1979-85); The Stud bar (1987)—399 Ninth St.

22. The Ambush bar, leather shop, restaurant and art gallery (1973-83)—1351 Harrison St.
23. The Lone Star bar (1990)—1351 Harrison St.
24. The In Between bar (1971-72); No Name bar (1973-76); The Bolt bar (1976-78); The Brig bar (1979-85); Power house bar (1985-91; reopened under new management 1997)—1347 Folsom St.
25. A Taste of Leather leather shop; Mack sex club (1990-1999)—317 Tenth St.
26. Febe's bar (1966-86)—1501 Folsom St.
27. The Stud bar (1966-87)—1235 Folsom St.
28. The Plunge bar, pool, afterhours (1976-80); The Gold Coast bar (1981-82); Drummaster/Drummer Key Club bar and private club (1983); The Compound sex club (1983-84)—280 Eleventh St.
29. The San Francisco Eagle bar (1982)—398 Twelfth St.

Hall, a private dungeon on Folsom Street run by the Knights Templar.

AIDS was the popular explanation for the collapse of leather South of Market, but there were other critical factors. 1984 was the year in which a successful crusade was launched to close the gay bathhouses, ostensibly as a tactic to fight the AIDS epidemic. Whether bathhouse closure had any significant impact on reducing HIV transmission is still debated. But since most of the gay commercial sex establishment was located South of Market, the closure of local baths and sex clubs eviscerated the neighborhood gay and leather economy.

In addition, redevelopment surged in the early 1980s, and new zoning guidelines were under review that would have a significant impact on the future shape of South of Market. It was during these battles over city planning policy that two South of Market activists, Kathleen Connell and Michael Valerio, founded the Folsom Street Fair—to help resist the encroaching development. The Fair would demonstrate that South of Market was a vibrant neighborhood that would be destroyed by schemes to build high rises from Market to Harrison. The fair was never an exclusively gay or leather event, but the founders ensured a substantial leather participation which has grown over the years.

As Connell put it in a recent conversation, South of Market was to be “the new gem in the crown of the city establishment and also by the way there was a great deal of money to be made in that process.” The first Folsom Fair, in 1984, did have an impact on the planning process and neighborhood identity, although it was unable to halt the redevelopment juggernaut.

Leather Rising

But pronouncements of the death of leather were premature. Already in 1986 a recovery was underway when new owners of *Drummer* magazine and Mr. S Products brought in new capital and renewed commitment to the neighborhood. The Ramrod became My Place. In 1990 the Lone Star opened on Harrison across from the old Ambush, and Stormy Leather opened a shop on Howard. Blowbuddies opened in 1992 not far from the corner where the Tool Box had been. In 1993, Mr. S moved into larger quarters at 310 Seventh, and recently opened a new women's store across the street at 321 Seventh. In 1994 the Hole in the Wall was in full swing near the corner of Eighth and Folsom. In 1996 the Loading Dock opened as a hardcore leather bar on Mission near Eleventh, and Stompers Boots opened at 323 Tenth. In 2000, A

Taste of Leather moved into new digs at 1339 Folsom, with the Mack sex club reopening in the same building. Despite the accelerating pace of change South of Market, leather has shown a stubborn resilience and a surprising ability to resist displacement altogether, although it no longer dominates even nightlife in the Folsom.

In 1999 and 2000, the changes South of Market escalated even more dramatically during the dot-com bubble. A torrent of Internet capital swamped the market for commercial leasing, and builders rushed in to exploit the city's live-work regulations to put up apartments and condominiums to house those newly enriched by speculative finance and stock options. The ensuing frenzy of construction and displacement has probably wrought more visible change in the last three years than in the previous three decades. The current collapse of the dot-coms now offers renewed opportunities for other uses, and it will be interesting to see who is able to take advantage of it.

As a result of all of this cumulative change, the remaining leather outposts South of Market are interspersed among the new live-work lofts, the straight nightclubs, the upscale restaurants and the complex of superstores such as Costco, OfficeMax, Bed and Bath and Trader Joe's. The increased

intermingling of gay or leather sites with more mainstream undertakings has meant a loss of the very privacy that once drew leathersmen to South of Market, but coexisting has become an adaptive necessity.

The resilience of leather in San Francisco is now most evident during Leather Pride Week, when the community comes out in full force and full dress. While the Folsom Fair is now more leather-identified than it was at its inception, it also recreates a time and place that are no longer what they once were. It is difficult to predict how much leather businesses and residents can continue to withstand the developmental pressures South of Market, and the future of leather in the neighborhood is uncertain. But for now, there is still a present to celebrate and a rich past to explore.

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