



Spectators watch the 1982 Pride Parade in front of and from the roof of Mary's, the historic gay bar located at the intersection of Westheimer Road and Waugh Drive. Mary's, the oldest gay bar in Houston, closed in 2009.

All photos courtesy of J. D. Doyle, www.houstonlgbthistory.org, unless otherwise noted.

Marching for Pride: The History of the Houston Pride Parade

By Hannah DeRousselle

Perhaps a parade seems rather insignificant, but that is not the case and never was for the Houston Pride Parade. It represents a beacon of hope—a light in a dark place. It is a visual representation of the Houston LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) community's existence and a reminder that no member of the LGBT community stands alone in the fight for recognition. The parade is acceptance and support in active form. It signifies a unique part of our city and its history. The Houston Pride Parade is important, and this is its story.

Although the 1950s marked the rise and evolution of the homophile movement, which included national LGBT organizations such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, the repressive political and social at-

I think the Pride Parade proves that we [the LGBT community] have a part in the city, that we're part of the diversity of the city. We are like any other parade except we're probably more fun. We see it with the people that come out. Now that it is a big thing, people [learn] about it and see it and understand what kind of community we are.

—Jack Valinski

mosphere in the United States led to such things as police raids on gay bars, which were regularly shut down. Plain-clothes officers, posing as regular bar patrons, often entrapped the actual customers.¹ It seemed that the LGBT community could not escape the oppression. Then in late June of 1969 in New York

City at the Stonewall Inn, a group of the bar's patrons, tired of harassment, fought back.

The Stonewall Inn was one of the establishments that served the LGBT community in New York's Greenwich Village. Clientele paid \$3 and signed a register to enter the bar. Management, often tipped off about impending bar raids, warned their patrons as a service. When the lights flicked off, customers knew that the police were on their way. However, on the morning of June 28, 1969,

when police raided the Stonewall Inn, the gay patrons fought back. Led by transgenders, the bar's customers began to riot, throwing trashcans, coins, and, as legend has it, high heels, and more.²

The police called for reinforcements who attempted to beat down the crowd, offering a temporary solution. The next night the crowd returned—this time in numbers rising above 1,000. After hours of rioting outside the Stonewall Inn, police called in a riot-control squad, which dispersed the crowd but could not stop the momentum. Citywide demonstrations of varying types and intensity followed. In the end, the Stonewall Riots lasted six days.³ From this event grew the gay rights movement that society knows today.

After Stonewall, new activist groups began appearing across America. The first step in joining the new gay liberation movement was “a proud (and often public) declaration of one’s homosexuality.”⁴ Houston was no exception, and over the next decade the local LGBT community began to find its voice.



A marching unit makes its way down the street as spectators watch during the 1982 Pride Parade. Marchers carry a banner proclaiming the year's theme, "A part of... Not Apart From."

The year 1975 marked the founding of the first civil rights organization for the LGBT community in the South, the Gay Political Caucus, better known today as the Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Political Caucus. In 1976, the Houston Pride Parade, sponsored by the University of Houston's Gay Activist Alliance, took its first infant steps. It had little resemblance to the modern-day parade. Spectators saw no floats or bands; they saw only people. During the prior year, gay activists, including one of Houston's earliest, Ray Hill, recruited marchers. Hill targeted “the most ‘obviously gay persons’” for recruitment, believing that these were the people that “had the most to lose—and the most to gain.” The participants numbered sixty men and women.⁵

On Sunday, June 20, 1976, the marchers took to the street to commemorate the Stonewall Riots. They traveled down Main Street, chanting, “Off of the sidewalk! Into the street!” Few people filled the sidewalks that Sunday afternoon, but the march still drew attention. As it continued, people began stepping off the curb and joining the crowd in the street. Soon enough, the crowd

swelled to numbers somewhere between 300 and 400.⁶ The march was brief, but it birthed a tradition.

The cancellation of the 1977 parade due to a lack of funding nearly brought the tradition to an early end, but anti-gay Florida orange juice spokesperson, Anita Bryant, with her “Save Our Children” campaign, ironically saved the parade. Bryant came to Houston to perform at the State Bar of Texas meeting on June 16, 1977. To say the LGBT community was angry over the visit might be an understatement. Quickly, activists Gary Van Ooteghem, Ray Hill, and Reverend Jeri Harvey organized a candlelight vigil and protest. Before heading to a rally at City Hall, between 4,000 and 6,000 protestors filled Houston's sidewalks, many wearing black armbands with inverted pink triangles as they encircled the Hyatt Regency Hotel, where Bryant was to sing. Police, some in riot gear, stood by to prevent any outbreak of violence, but they need not have worried. Though protestors encountered a group of Bryant's supporters during the march, no violent incidents took place.⁷

On July 1, 1979, a decade after Stonewall, the Houston Pride Parade was officially born. Coordinated by the Parade Committee and supported by Houston's GLBT Political Caucus, the parade began evolving to its present incarnation. Under the direction of New Orleans native Larry Bagneris, the organization held an open community meeting to plan the parade. This meeting resulted in decisions to have grand marshals, themes, and merchandise for the parade. Bagneris ultimately became the “driving force behind the parade's form and structure.” This also likely represented the starting point of the parade's Mardi Gras-like atmosphere, for Bagneris, a participant in the 1976 march, had seen “how the parades of Mardi Gras forged a community identity in his hometown.” For the first time, the parade featured floats, many made from flatbed trucks and pickups, with several of them sponsored by gay bars. Thelma “Disco Grandma” Hansel became the very first grand marshal. While the *Houston Chronicle* described the event as a “plea for understanding,” the parade was anything but pleading. Under the theme “United We Stand,” the parade celebrated “the emerging solidarity within the gay community.”⁸

As the Pride Parade entered the 1980s, it continued to evolve. Still fairly new, it required some tweaking. In

1984, the parade moved to an earlier starting time, 2:30 p.m., which *This Week in Texas* reported was “at the request of our city fathers.” A bigger change came the next year. Usually, the parade traveled down Westheimer Road from Shepherd to Bagby Street. The 1985 parade saw its forty-eight entries reverse their direction, traveling east to west, up Westheimer.⁹ These were changes made by the Parade Committee and the community; however, others attempted to make additional changes.

At the June 5, 1985, City Council meeting, Dr. Stephen



Hotze presented a petition with 10,000 signatures in an attempt to prevent Mayor Kathy Whitmire and council members from attending that year's Pride Parade. According to Dr. Hotze, "lewd and obscene behavior was rampant during the parade." He went on to say that by attending, the mayor and council members were "endorsing the homosexual lifestyle and pornography." In response, the city officials swiftly shot down the petition, saying that they never observed any such behavior at previous parades and that they would not allow a petition to dictate whether they attended or not. The police "said the gay parade was 'one of the most peaceful and lawful parades around.'" The victory clearly scored a point in the LGBT community's favor. Nevertheless, LGBT community leaders urged spectators and participants to behave with dignity, telling them not to wear tank tops or take off their shirts. Also, leather or skimpy swimsuits were not allowed on the floats that year.¹⁰ The police proved right, and the Houston Pride Parade was peaceful.

Interestingly, very few protests against the parade took place. Pride Parade cofounder Jack Valinski, who found himself steadily more involved with Houston's LGBT community after moving to the city in 1981, explained that occasionally protestors attended the parade, but the groups were small. For example, he noted, the parade might have five people protesting in a crowd of thousands cheering it on.¹¹

The parade committee, Valinski included, generally worked closely with the community on several levels to alleviate as many of the parade's negative side effects as possible. Since the parade began in a residential area, organizers made sure they used only one side of the street and did not block any driveways. The parade virtually shut down Westheimer Road, causing the businesses there to suffer. To minimize this disruption, organizers kept businesses informed on the time and date of the parade. They assisted them in finding ways to work around the parade, such as allowing customers to enter the establishments through a secondary entrance or back door. Very aware that crowds invariably leave messes, organizers woke bright and early the day after the parade and cleaned the street. Their goal: To return the street to the same condition it was in, if not better, before the parade.¹²



Former and current grand marshals celebrate the 2013 Pride Parade.

Despite efforts by its organizers to minimize negative reaction to the parade, *This Week in Texas* reported "several dangerous threats" were made "regarding the safety of gays" in 1985. As Gay Pride Week approached, they increased in number and included threats against prominent members of the LGBT community, Mayor Whitmire, and several council members. Extra police officers, both plain-clothes and uniformed, were on duty at the parade. Fortunately, and perhaps because of the increased police presence, nothing came of the threats.¹³



These participants in the 1984 parade, all wearing matching orange t-shirts and some wearing hardhats, ride down the road on a Lull forklift. Participants cover a wide range of entries from commercial to community organizations and more.

Generally, the Pride Parade and the Houston police shared a good relationship, although bar raids occurred around the time of the parade. In 1987, police raided Michael's, Chutes, and Joe Club on successive nights in June rather than Mary's, their usual target. Police traditionally raided bars around election times as well. Paradoxically, the bar raids resulted in publicity for the LGBT community and Pride.¹⁴

Even as the LGBT community made strides, AIDS swept destructively across the country in the 1980s. AIDS devastated Houston's LGBT community, and the effects were palpable. Toned down in comparison to past years, the 1985 and 1986 parades had smaller crowds and shorter durations. Tension in the city hung thick in the air. Intolerance grew and often the bull's eye landed upon the LGBT community. Some people called for a quarantine of gay men. Those with, or thought to have, AIDS lost "jobs, [were] turned away from housing, refused health care, [and] denied medical insurance." In 1987, parade organizers urged par-

ticipants to donate money to local AIDS organizations rather than spend it on floats.¹⁵ Hard times fell on the community during that decade, yet the parade marched on.

The 1990s represented a decade of change for the parade. Previously, the parade committee of the GLBT Caucus popped into existence around March or April, raised money for the parade, organized it, put it on, and disappeared again after June. Then came Jack Valinski. In 1992, Valinski, together with Carol Clark and Brian Keever, co-founded Pride Houston, a non-profit organization dedicated year round to the Pride Parade and Pride Week.¹⁶

Pride Houston kept many of the policies of the Parade Committee. Meetings remained open to anyone wishing to attend, and organizers still worked closely with the community. Volunteers and parade entries met with much gratitude. While InterPride, an international organization dedicated to LGBT Pride events across the globe, voted on a worldwide theme every year, the Pride Houston Committee and the community decided whether or not to use it. Generally speaking, Pride Houston did everything in its power to make the parade a fun and memorable community event.¹⁷

By 1994, the Pride Parade had steadily evolved into a neighborhood event in Montrose, its place of origin. Families and children often watched from their yards as participants built their floats during the day. When the parade started, they had a good time as they watched it assemble.¹⁸ Then, perhaps, they joined the crowd of spectators and cheered it on.

The parade had one problem, though. It took place

in June to commemorate the Stonewall Riots, but that in and of itself was not the problem. If you have spent a summer in Houston, you know the problem—the heat. Something needed to be done. Starting in 1995, Pride Houston conducted a survey amongst the LGBT community, speaking to as many people as possible, to decide on the best course of action. They presented four options: Move the parade to the spring, move it to the fall, keep it the same, or turn it into a night parade. Ultimately, the night parade won. It took some time to work out all the kinks and make the transition; but in 1997, the Houston Pride Parade, drawing inspiration from Sydney, Australia’s evening parade, lit up the night. Its centerpiece was a huge 8½ foot disco ball financed, in part, by “Mattress Mac,” Jim McIngvale of Houston’s Gallery Furniture.¹⁹ Finally, the Pride Parade took the form Houstonians know today.

As the parade moved into the 2000s and 2010s, one thing appeared certain—the parade would continue to grow. Each year seems to bring new participants. In 2001, Houston Police Department officers marched in the parade for the first time. The next year marked another first as the Houston Fire Department began participating. In 2011, the University of Houston joined in the parade. By 2014, the parade was drawing 425,000 participants, making it Houston’s second largest parade. And in 2015, it moved back to downtown Houston.²⁰

The Pride Parade has long been a deeply personal symbol for members of Houston’s LGBT community. Stories are told of homosexual men who were dying of AIDS at the height of the crisis in the 1980s that held on just long enough to make it through the Pride Parade before passing away in July. The parade was of great importance to them.²¹

The Pride Parade allows members of the LGBT community to see each other’s strength. It shows them that they never stand alone and demonstrates to others that they are not ashamed or afraid. At the Pride Parade, a person “can look up and down the street and see 100,000-plus people who support [them] and [their] lifestyle.” It calls to the world, “this is who we are, and this is what we look like.” Most of all, it states to every LGBT member, “[B]e yourself, accept yourself — it’s who you are,” and there is nothing wrong with that.²² These effects cannot be discounted. The Pride Parade represents an important part of Houston’s diverse history.

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In 1997, the parade became an evening event to reduce the effects of the Houston heat. Here revelers (l-r) Albert Gamboa, Adam Rivera, and John Chakalis celebrate with the Gay Men’s Chorus of Houston float during Pride in 2009.

Photo courtesy of Pride Houston, Inc.

