

Belly Up to the Bar, Boys (and Girls)

The very first almost-gay bar in Rehoboth was the Pink Pony, housed where Victoria's stands now, in the Boardwalk Plaza Hotel. In its heyday, Rehoboth's gay men often stopped by the Pink Pony at cocktail hour.

Thanks to liquor laws in those days, it was illegal to walk around with a drink in your hand in a bar. Somehow, the men were able to socialize with those sitting on either side of them at the bar.

It wasn't Diego's or Aqua, but it was all they had.

Sadly, the Pink Pony was washed out to sea by the great 1962 storm.

Several miles south along the shore, just over the Indian River Bridge where Matt's Fish Camp is now, the Nomad Village opened. Closed and torn down in the early 2000s, the hotel and bar complex catered mainly to men and women staying at the Nomad Hotel. But word spread that the Nomad backroom was a great meeting spot for closeted folks from DC.

Sussex Countians Randall and Betty Godwin bought the land where the Nomad stood in 1959. Randall built 12 A-frame cottages and a three-story package store and bar, with apartments above. They envisioned a summer resort for families.

Randall described himself as a gay man, although one who also shared his life with his wife Betty and their children. Randall became friends with Jim Short, a Wilmington man who lost his job as a teacher and his teaching license when he was outed as a homosexual.

Years ago, Jim told me he used to go to the Pink Pony on the Boardwalk and another bar, owned by a woman named Juliet, which stood where the original Frogg Pond and now Freddie's Beach Bar stands.

Godwin remembered that it was 1963, when Short told him that a spotter was hired at Julie's bar to point out the increasing number of gay men frequenting the place. "Then, they used to charge a dollar a drink to the gays and

just 65 cents for the straights," Randall said.

With so many gay men in town, Jim suggested that Randall open the "other room" at the Nomad and cater to gays. Randall said "I didn't start out to have a gay bar; it just sort of happened. It just made sense economically."



By the early 1990s, Bonnie and I would drive to Bethany from Maryland for dance parties around the pool at the Nomad.

Many folks who frequented the Nomad back then remember being asked their names and having to sign in. Randall insisted that, rather than harassing people, he was just trying to keep the place a private club so that they *wouldn't* be harassed. The Nomad charged \$5 to join plus a \$3 cover in exchange for three tickets good for three beers or two drinks.

While the "other room" at the Nomad thrived, things were not easy for the Godwins. They faced problems with their liquor license as well as zoning. They were convinced their troubles were the result of their gay clientele. From 1972 through the 1980s, the Godwins fought

the county just to stay open. And more than once they heard tales of lawmakers and county officials "not going to do anything to keep that queer joint open."

But open it stayed.

Local resident Libby Stiff had a trailer at Love Creek in the 1970s and recalls coming down on weekends from Wilmington to go to the Nomad. "It was mostly a men's bar, but my friends and I would go there every Friday and Saturday night. In the late 1970s more women started coming to the Nomad, and it was really hopping on the weekends," Libby recalls.

By the early 1990s, Bonnie and I would drive to Bethany from Maryland for dance parties around the pool at the Nomad. It was wonderful.

I last interviewed the Godwins in late 1999 when they lived part-time in Florida and still ran the Nomad during the summer season here in Delaware. With a self-deprecating sense of humor and pride, Randall Godwin told of holding on at the Nomad through storms, fires, and the incredible gusts of wind from local residents and officials, holding them responsible for "the gay problem."

"It's generally accepted that straights think I caused what was called 'the gay problem' in the area," says Randall, "but it's not true. Gays were already coming from Washington, DC. By the hundreds."

What is true is that several generations of gay men and women, from the 1960s to the turn of the century, found safe haven at the Nomad before there were other gay and gay-friendly bars, restaurants, and dance clubs here in Rehoboth Beach. ▼

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