

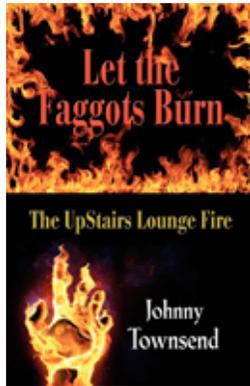


Let the Faggots Burn

The UpStairs Lounge Fire



Johnny
Townsend



On Gay Pride Day in 1973, an arsonist set the entrance to a French Quarter gay bar on fire. In the terrible inferno that followed, 32 people lost their lives, including a third of the local congregation of the Metropolitan Community Church, their pastor burning to death halfway out a second-story window as he tried to claw his way to freedom. This is a riveting account of a forgotten moment in gay history.

Let the Faggots Burn The Upstairs Lounge Fire

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Let the Faggots Burn:

The UpStairs Lounge Fire

Johnny Townsend

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It would have been better for Luther Boggs if he had not gone to the beer bust that afternoon at the UpStairs Lounge. Or perhaps if he had gone only to the beer bust and then gone on home afterwards. After all, *Mannix* was on TV that night back in June of 1973. He could have watched that instead of staying at the bar. *MASH* was also on that evening, as was *Gunsmoke*. If he left now, he could be home in time to watch *Here's Lucy*. But her special guest that week was 15-year-old Donny Osmond. Luther may have been gay, but he was certainly no pedophile.

Luther Thomas Boggs was born on March 1, 1926, to Allen and Agnes Blanchard Boggs, his mother still living in Sulphur, Louisiana. His ex-wife and 16-year-old son had moved to Denver, where the woman continually spoke poorly of Luther to her son, creating in the boy just the opposite effect she desired, making him instead think Luther must have been a good man to leave her fifteen years earlier. In 1973, Luther was 47 years old, a computer programmer who'd recently left Pan American Life Insurance Company, whose pastime was tending his garden. 5'8" and weighing 125 pounds, Luther belonged to the Patio Planters, a group which conducted walking tours through the French Quarter in the Spring, showing off many of the beautiful private patio gardens. Luther had lived on Madison, one street below Jackson Square, so his building had been right in back of the famous Pontalba apartments. He did move around a bit, though. In 1967, he lived at 638 Royal St., apartment 205, and in 1973, he finally bought a house and lived at 6424 1/2 Louisville St.

He enjoyed seeing the other patios in the Quarter and liked the idea of letting people see his patio as well. Just walking down French Quarter streets and seeing the front of the

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buildings was really quite beautiful, but Luther knew that no one could gain a full appreciation for the Vieux Carre' without getting to see the inside of it also.

The late June evening was hot, as summer nights always were in New Orleans, and the sky was clear. Along the Mississippi River or along Lake Ponchartrain, there might be a slight breeze, but on Iberville, just off of Canal Street, there were too many buildings for much of a breeze to get through. It was just hot. At least the UpStairs had air conditioning, though. That meant they had to keep the windows closed, of course, but that was just as well. Because the windows went all the way down to the floor, and there was no balcony, the bar's previous owners had needed to install bars across the windows. They couldn't let someone get drunk and just fall out onto the street, could they? There wasn't much danger of that now, with half the windows covered with plywood, bars, or air conditioners.

The UpStairs had a decidedly friendly atmosphere, with bartender Buddy Rasmussen never hesitating to ask Luther or any of his other customers to do a little something for him. Luther went to the UpStairs almost every day after work, so he was enough of a fixture that Buddy felt free to be casual with him. "Could you go tell that cab driver downstairs that no one sent for him?" "Could you please go tell that guy to stop standing in the doorway and letting all the cold air out?" "Could you help me wash these glasses while I fill the pitchers with beer?" Whatever. And Luther and the other customers felt just as much at ease at Buddy did. "Hey, Buddy, can I put my record of 'Crocodile Rock' in your jukebox?" "My kid's selling Girl Scout cookies. Would you like some?"

This evening, Luther was sitting at the end of the bar near the jukebox, which was next to the door. He and Buddy and a few of the other customers were chatting. The beer bust had been over for a while now, and Buddy could relax a bit. There

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were often a hundred or more people at the UpStairs every Sunday afternoon, but now the crowd had started to thin out. There were probably only sixty-five people in the bar. Enough to keep Buddy occupied, but sixty-five was a number he could handle.

It's hard to say what Luther, Buddy, and the others were talking about. America had declared a cease fire in Viet Nam earlier that year, and some of the POW's had returned home. The Supreme Court made its landmark ruling in January on the Roe vs. Wade case, legalizing abortion. In the Spring, there was major flooding along the Mississippi River, endangering New Orleans. Skylab was currently circling the Earth. Billie Jean King was scoring points in tennis, Stephen Sondheim recently made the cover of *Newsweek*, and Tatum O'Neal just found fame in *Paper Moon*. The book *Sybil* had just been published. Meat prices were soaring. Loretta Lynn, Carly Simon, and Roberta Flack were popular artists of the day. And Secretariat recently won both the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness. But the real news, of course, was Watergate, as it had been the day before, and the day before that, and every day, week after week, for several months.

Most likely, after having a few drinks, Watergate was not exactly the topic Luther wanted to discuss. He probably wasn't talking about his ex-wife, either. Everyone was most likely just gossiping, chatting about what they'd done that day, trying to enjoy the last of their weekend before Monday morning came all too soon. Gay Liberation hadn't really reached New Orleans yet, so probably few people even noticed that this was Gay Pride Day. In New York, people were celebrating the anniversary of the Stonewall riots, which had taken place four years earlier. Instead, for most of the crowd at the UpStairs, this Sunday was much like the previous ones, with friends greeting

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friends and everyone trying to calculate just how much they could drink and still function the next morning at work.

The bar was noisy that evening, what with Dave and Bud both banging away at the piano at the other end of the room, and the jukebox blaring away near the entrance. The sound of sixty voices mingled together in the smoke-filled air, but soon there was another noise which began to intrude. Phil Esteve, the bar's owner, had had a buzzer installed outside. The bar was on the second floor, and there was a stairway leading up to it from the street entrance of the building down on the first floor. When the bar was closed, Phil locked the gate, and anyone making deliveries would have to press the buzzer, which rang upstairs in the bar. Closing the gate kept out transients in this not too respectable part of the Quarter. It also kept out anyone who might try to burglarize the bar. In addition to alerting anyone in the bar of deliveries, though, the buzzer could also be used by cab drivers who had been called to pick up a customer at the bar. And naturally, the buzzer was also used at times by pranksters, by someone just trying to be irritating.

It was ringing now. Not in repeated bursts, but in a long, continuous, aggravating ring. No one had called for a cab, and there were certainly no deliveries going to be made on a Sunday. If it was a customer, all he'd have to do is walk up the stairs and open the door. No need to be such a pest by leaning on that buzzer.

Buddy figured he knew who it was. It was almost surely that asshole he'd had to throw out of the bar earlier that evening for fighting. That guy was weird, always trying to cause trouble. And Buddy would have none of it here at the UpStairs, so he'd thrown the guy out. Now he was back, still trying to be a pest, ringing and ringing and ringing that buzzer.

"Luther," said Buddy wearily, "would you go see who in the hell is ringing that buzzer?"

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Luther stood up and walked the few feet to the door. It would be the second to last favor he would ever do.

Luther put his hand on the doorknob of the fire door at the entrance to the bar, unaware of the 700-degree inferno boiling upwards on the other side. As he pushed open the door, flames shot instantly through the opening, near the ceiling. Luther stumbled backwards into the room, but the door remained open, closing slowly on its automatic hinge, and the flames followed Luther, shooting furiously into the bar.

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Phil Esteve was at the Beverly Dinner Playhouse with his lover, Durel, and another couple, Hollis Wallace and his lover, on the evening of June 24. *Damn Yankees* was about to play. The foursome were eating and laughing, enjoying their night out, when a waiter came to their table.

"Mr. Esteve?"

"Yes?"

"Phone call for you, sir. You can follow me."

As the waiter led Phil to a phone, Phil wondered what the call could be about. Why would anyone bother to call him here? Who could it be, anyway? Buddy knew how to handle the bar. That's why Phil had made him manager. Many of Phil's friends should be at the bar right now, too. What could they need to call him for?

Phil hoped he wouldn't miss the beginning of the performance. Whoever was calling better damn well have a good reason.

"Hello?"

"Phil!"

"Yeah?"

"Phil, there's been a fire."

Phil's mother died in May of 1970. Phil was 39 and began reflecting about life in general and about his in particular. Here he was almost 40 and not getting anywhere. Now he'd inherited \$15,000 from his mother. Maybe he should go into business for himself. It wasn't too late for him to make something of his life if he really tried.

But what should he do? Maybe some kind of shop. Perhaps a novelty shop on Royal Street. Perhaps a bar. Phil knew Alice Brady, who owned the Galley House on the corner of Chartres

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and Toulouse. One evening as he was still contemplating what he should do with his money, Phil stopped by to talk with Alice.

"What kind of shop do you think I should get?" he asked her after presenting his options.

"Well," she replied, "if someone has a dollar, they'll buy a drink before they buy a gift."

So Phil began looking in the ads. He found a bar on the second floor of a building at 604 Iberville. There was a flop house on the third floor with a couple of rooms for rent. The bar was owned by Wanda Long and had been a gay bar before and at another time had been a merchant seaman bar. Nicky Gristina, a bartender who worked at Wanda's when the place was pretty much a hustler bar, said that Wanda was into witchcraft and would sometimes wipe a special ointment onto the bar to get customers.

Wanda had a reputation as a "big crook." but she was always nice to Phil, though she did have a "vulgar mouth." She asked \$15,000 for the bar, but Phil didn't want to spend his entire inheritance. He offered \$7,500, and Wanda accepted, probably because she knew she had lung cancer and wanted to start taking care of her affairs.

The UpStairs had been closed for a year when Phil took over. Of course, he knew nothing about running a bar, so he went to several bars to observe how things were done. He felt pretty confident, though. You sell liquor and people drink it. It couldn't be *that* hard.

One night, Phil stopped at the Caverns and ordered a Manhattan. "I'm going to be opening a gay bar soon," said Phil, a bit proudly.

"You better find a bartender you can trust," replied the bartender on duty, Buddy Rasmussen. They began talking. The UpStairs was well away from most of the other gay bars in the Quarter. No one was going to just stop by. The UpStairs would

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have to be their destination. Well, perhaps anyone who took the Canal Street bus to get to the Quarter might walk by, or people coming from Uptown.

"If everyone from Canal Street to Carrollton stops by for just one drink on their way to Lafitte's," said Buddy, "you'll be successful."

That was a pretty big if, though. The neighborhood was fairly sleazy, with a hustler bar in the next block. Since Phil had no intention of owning a sleazy bar, he'd have to work hard to create a different atmosphere at the UpStairs.

"Ugh," said Buddy as he took his first look at the four-foot wide stairwell leading to the bar. Ugly plumbing jutted out everywhere, creating anything but a good first impression. Something definitely had to be done about that. No one wanted to go someplace that was ugly. They went to bars to escape. "I know," he said. "I'll cover the plumbing with fabric. I'll drape it over the pipes all the way down along the ceiling and walls." It might look a little strange, but better to create an odd first impression than an ugly one. Fortunately, they thought, there was a window at the top of the stairwell. They could leave that open to let the air flow, so it wouldn't get stuffy in the stairwell.

Upstairs in the bar, they looked about. The restroom, just to the left of the entrance, mostly needed cleaning. It was 5'4" wide and 6'11" long, big enough. From the restroom to the edge of the bar was about 8'7", with an 8 foot high window in between, plenty of room to move about without feeling crowded. The bar, 28'4" in length and 2'2" in width, came 6'4" out from the Iberville wall and ran parallel to it, with 22 chrome stools with padded red seats. There were seven windows in that first room, all from the floor almost to the ceiling, and three windows like this in the second room. The three in the second room were covered with plywood, but what about these in the first room? My God, thought Phil, what if someone fell out of

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the windows? Think of the lawsuits. But on closer inspection, he saw that the windows all had bars covering the lower portion. They weren't burglar bars, spaced too far apart for that, but they would alert people that there was a window there and that they'd better not walk out into empty air. Yet the windows wouldn't stay open, anyway, he discovered. The ropes connecting them to the counterweights had rotted, so the windows would slide shut when opened unless propped open with a stick.

As hot as it got here in New Orleans, though, Phil didn't want to rely on windows for cooling the place down. They'd put in lots of air conditioning so the bar would be pleasant. One of these days he'd get around to repairing the ropes, but for now, a stick would do to hold the windows open on the few pleasantly cool days that there were in New Orleans. Something more important was installing an automatic door closer for the fire door which led into the bar, so that no one would come in, leave the door open, and let all the AC rush out down the stairs.

An archway, 15'7" across, connected the first room to the second one. This room was about 21'6" across, and 37' from the Iberville wall to the wall of the storage room and stairway to the third floor. A customer would still have easy access from the second room to the bar, but there was space here to maybe put a dance floor at the Chartres end of the room. They decided to elevate the dance floor by building a platform two feet high and six feet deep, spanning the width of the room. They hoped that by raising the platform that it would absorb the pounding of the feet on top of it. There was a bar below, and Phil didn't want to disturb the people beneath them. They bolted boards on the wall, laid rafters across, and nailed plywood down on top of the beams. There was still room for six tables with four chairs each in the second room, and also for a cigarette machine against the wall to the third room.

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As they looked at their completed platform, they decided to make a smaller, similar platform back in the first room for a piano to rest on, in the corner against the wall connecting the first two rooms, at the Chartres end of the bar, so the two platforms were next to each other, divided by a wall that came out to just past where the platforms ended. They purchased a white baby grand piano for the room and put it on the platform, with stairs leading up to it, and placed two columns with large candles on top of the stairs. The piano's platform blocked the bottom two feet of the window on the far right facing Chartres, but there was still plenty of light from the remaining window space reaching almost to the top of the 12-foot ceilings. Maybe even too much light. Bars were supposed to be a little dim, weren't they? There was more than enough room for the air conditioners they wanted, one in the top of the middle Chartres window, which was supported by plywood and beams that might block off a little more of the light from outside. The Iberville window in the corner seemed a good place for an icemaking machine, giving the bartenders easy access and blocking off yet more of that bright Southern sunlight. They also decided to cover the wall with the three plywood-covered windows in the second room with paneling to make that room hopefully more cozy. Now you couldn't even tell there *were* windows in the second room. Much nicer than plywood.

With a little more work, the bar was looking good. They fortunately had been able to buy some things cheap, getting items from a flop house bar that burned down a couple of months before the UpStairs opened. They bought some oriental-looking hurricane lamps to place here and there. They put indoor-outdoor carpeting on the floors and along the stairs, which they'd keep clean by using muriatic acid regularly. Buddy crawled through the bars on the windows in the front room, hooked his belt to one, and leaned out so he could clean the

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windows. Not too difficult, but Buddy hoped he didn't have to clean them often.

The bar counter was covered with a pink-orange formica, and Phil and Buddy put up a red, flocked wallpaper along the walls. They set up a new wall against the Iberville side of the room behind the bar, covering two more of the windows, leaving four windows out of ten in the two rooms unobstructed. This new wall was brick and had a waterfall in the center. A bit gaudy, perhaps, but still rather nice, especially for this neighborhood. Some plastic lace tablecloths with some plastic roses in vases had been left on the tables by Wanda, but they looked so awful that Phil and Buddy threw them out, putting instead big, teardrop-shaped candles on each table. At least there were no longer phones on the tables. Back when the earlier bar was in business, each table had a phone. Someone would see someone else he liked and phone over to his table to introduce himself. Phil didn't want this to be a cheap pick-up bar, though.

The first two rooms were pretty well set for now, but there was a third room to the bar. The only access to it was through a fire door in the second room, because this room was technically in the next building. The three windows along the Chartres wall in this room were unblocked but painted, so there was no need to get any more plywood. The only problem was that the way the bar was set up made the first two rooms seem like one unit and the third room another. This room just didn't fit in with the rest of the bar. It might be hard to integrate it with the first two. No matter. They'd figure out something.

The UpStairs Lounge opened on Halloween of 1970.

At first, there weren't many customers. Sometimes, hustlers would bring their tricks from Wanda's (not the same Wanda who had previously owned the UpStairs) and have their johns buy them drinks. But no one was allowed to go about asking

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people to buy them drinks. If either Phil or Buddy saw any of that, they threw the guy out of the place.

Phil worked the day shift and Buddy worked at night. The bar was not open twenty-four hours a day, so when Buddy closed up around 4:00 a.m., he made sure the iron gate at the bottom of the stairwell was locked.

With only a handful of customers each night for the first few weeks after opening, Buddy had plenty of time between serving drinks to massage customers' shoulders or dance with them for a few minutes. Phil had bought a jukebox and some records, charging 10 cents a song, but when a customer asked if he could bring a favorite record, Phil and Buddy decided to have customers bring more of their favorites. They'd check on the back of the jukebox to see which songs were being played, and when they found one no one was playing anymore, they'd replace it with one a customer brought. They mostly brought in new songs, but there were also a few oldies and even some opera. Even when a customer brought his own record, however, he still had to pay the 10 cents to hear it play.

"We have to do something more," said Phil. "We still need more customers."

"We had a beer bust when I was in Houston," said Buddy.

"A beer bust?"

They could put a pitcher of beer on each table, Buddy explained, and charge everyone a dollar to get in the bar. They could do it every Sunday afternoon, say from 5:00 to 7:00, refilling each pitcher until the beer bust was over. People would hear about it and soon they would get a crowd coming every Sunday. Then once the customers felt comfortable with the bar and came to know other folks there, they would start coming on other days. They'd lose money at first, but they'd make it up once they had the customers coming regularly.

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There were no other beer busts in New Orleans at that time, so Phil was a bit dubious, but he decided to give it a try. They thought they'd use that third room for the beer bust, so Phil needed some more tables and chairs. He had a friend who worked with cables, so he was able to get fifteen of the huge wooden spools that cables were wrapped around, and Phil used the spools as tables. Because the floor area in the room was 26'9" by 54'8", the tables fit easily, and with four wooden chairs for each table, they could seat sixty people now if they needed. They started the beer bust, trying to be patient with its low attendance, but after a year, Buddy had to admit that the idea just wasn't working too well in this city.

Rather than give up the idea, however, they decided to try moving the beer bust from the third room to the second room. Suddenly, the beer bust flourished. Apparently, everyone had been feeling isolated back in the third room. Attendance swelled from a dozen or so to a hundred, and then at times to a hundred and twenty.

Phil hired Wayne to help out during beer busts. Wayne was jovial and spirited and good for business. Wayne's lover, Lonnie, did outlandish drag for Mardi Gras, the only time Phil would allow drag in the bar. Lonnie once came in on Mardi Gras wearing a 10-foot wide hoop skirt made of Saran Wrap. Together, Wayne and Lonnie befriended many of the customers, helping more people feel comfortable in coming.

After a while, though, Wayne moved to Alaska, and Phil hired Napoleon to help out during beer busts. His lover was Stanley. Napoleon had worked for Clifford Construction previously and also used to hustle before tending bar at the UpStairs but apparently never did any hustling once he started bartending. Certainly, Phil was never aware of it, and Phil made a point of checking up on things he suspected. He'd pop into the bathroom occasionally to make sure nothing was going on that

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shouldn't. A couple of times, Phil did find two guys getting a little too intimate. He kicked them out of the bar.

As attendance at the beer bust continued to grow, more of the customers became regulars. There was Adlai S. "Tad" Turner, who often came with his good friend, Luther Boggs. Tad was in his late 40's and stopped in the bar every day after work. He'd stay for two to three hours, drinking gin and tonic every day, talking when he wasn't drinking. His friend Luther usually drank beer and rarely became drunk.

Tad liked routine. It was fun to have a regular bar to go to. It was comfortable to have a regular drink. He also had a favorite Mardi Gras costume he wore every year. Four heads on a kind of yoke he put over his head so it looked like a man with five heads was walking down the street.

Tad would drink from six to ten gin and tonics every day, and at one point he ran up a \$200 bar tab. When Phil cut off his tab, Tad continued coming every day, only now coming with some money.

Then there was Uncle Al, a retired radioman who had worked at sea for years. Born in 1905, Albert Harold Monroe was in his upper 60's and only had two teeth in front. He'd buy a beer and nurse it for hours. A regular at every beer bust, Uncle Al loved to tell stories. He'd saved his money from his days as a radioman and bought land in the Rigolets. He had a farm there plus a house in the city, at 2265 N. Villere St., where his sister lived with him. Uncle Al grew extra vegetables on the farm so he could bring green onions and okra to his pals at the UpStairs.

And there was Gene, a silver-haired man in his 50's who always wore black, sometimes also wearing a black cloak and carrying a cane. At times, he tried to pick Buddy up. He was single and lived with his mother, and Buddy never went home with him, as he was not trying to get picked up.

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Nila Latrell, who worked for South Central Bell telephone company, came to the bar fairly regularly, and a Sophia Loren lookalike named Diane came occasionally with her friend Frank Dufrene, though women were certainly in the minority as customers. And Max Barnett, who often worked for charities, came regularly, as did a male gossip columnist from the *Times-Picayune*, coming because he was a friend of Phil's.

Another regular was Bob McAnar (or McAnear or McIntyre), a narcotics agent Buddy knew from his time working at the Holiday Inn. Bob wasn't gay, but he thought if a person was gay then he probably did drugs, so he tried to get involved in the gay community to look for drug use. While undoubtedly some of the customers at the UpStairs did do drugs, drug use wasn't permitted on the premises. But Bob liked the crowd and decided to keep going to the bar, anyway. He even began bringing his wife, Betty.

Betty was the impetus behind one of the more successful aspects of the bar's personality. The third room in the bar had remained a problem for Phil. He had let the Metropolitan Community Church meet there for a few months. That had ended up working out okay since now many MCC members were regulars at the bar. At least half the members of the local congregation came to the beer bust every Sunday.

But after the MCC was no longer in the third room, Phil and Buddy wanted to do something else with it. "How about putting on little plays?" Betty suggested. So they built a stage, 18' by 26'9" for the back room and began putting on little melodramas, or "nelly dramas," as they often called them, sometime in 1971. Betty directed the first of these plays. She worked at the Little Theatre and was happy to be able to bring drama to the bar, even if it was just for fun. The "actors" used the storage room and the stairwell to the third floor as the dressing room. There were no real drag shows yet at the bar,

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though the men would dress as women in the plays if portraying a woman. Many of the shows were literally melodramas, with exaggerated acting. Bob and Betty were some of the leading actors and supporters of the plays.

At other times, the group did slapstick comedy, but the melodramas were more common. Buddy put popcorn in bowls on the tables in the audience, and whenever the spectators saw a villain in the performance, rather than boo or hiss, they'd throw popcorn at the bad guy. "Egad, What a Cad," with an all-male cast, was one of the shows that was quite a hit, as was "He Done Everybody Wrong, or The Deviate's Comeuppance," with characters such as Harry Deviate, Nellie Heaven, Miss Queenie, and the Infamous Memphis Queen.

At another time, the Gay Liberation Front Theatre Workshop, with members Philip Schmidt and Charles Selber, who was from Shreveport, wanted to put on a play, but police gave the UpStairs trouble because the play was too political, so that play was never performed.

All in all, things were looking up at the bar. Phil hired David Gary to play ragtime on the piano. Customers would often gather around the piano to sing or dance. When the jukebox was playing, customers would dance to that music instead. The UpStairs was the first gay bar in New Orleans to obtain a dancing license, and people enjoyed the feeling of freedom they could experience by dancing in a public place.

But beer busts and plays and singing and dancing weren't quite enough. Buddy suggested a tricycle race. He'd seen one on the show *Laugh-In* and wanted to give it a try. He found a sturdy tricycle capable of supporting adults. Then he marked off a path on the floor with tape, winding the route among the tables, making sharp turns and going off in unexpected directions.

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Buddy brought a stopwatch the day of the race, and one at a time, the contestants climbed aboard the tricycle. The only way they could reach the pedals was to drape their legs across the handlebars. Most fell over just trying to sit down. They had to keep the rear wheels astraddle the tape the entire distance, being disqualified if they veered too far from the marked path. And Buddy timed each participant so he could declare the winner.

At other times, they would hang a net from the ceiling of the bar, filling the net with balloons. At a certain point during the evening, Buddy would release the balloons, and customers would pop them to see which ones had the half price or free drink coupons inside.

Week by week, the bar developed into an island of relative decency in a sordid neighborhood and into an oasis of friendship in a gay bar scene filled with superficiality. Because the atmosphere at the UpStairs was so informal, many of the customers were not just bar buddies. When Phil had Christmas dinner at his house, for instance, almost all the guests were customers from the bar. Phil Esteve went into the bar business to make money. But he made more than that. He made friends, and he and Buddy helped create an atmosphere where others could make friends as well.

In May of 1973, Phil and Durel went to Europe for a three-week vacation. Planning for it had kept Phil in a good mood. Things that usually bothered him didn't anymore. So what if that guy was being a little obnoxious? Phil was going to Europe. There was one incident, however, that he couldn't overlook.

Phil had hired Donald E. "Mike" Wolf as a bartender not long before to replace Napoleon, who'd moved out of state. Mike was a good bartender, but he had a short temper. When he began an argument with Buddy and then struck Buddy, he still had to be restrained by customers to keep him from continuing to hit Buddy. Buddy fired him on the spot, and Phil stood

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behind Buddy's decision. When things cooled off, though, Phil told Mike that if he apologized to Buddy, and Buddy accepted, that Mike could come back to work. Mike apologized, Buddy accepted, and things were okay for a few days. Then Mike started arguing with a customer and went outside to fight with him. This time, Phil refused to take him back. He fired him on May 17 and then left for three weeks to forget about everything except enjoying Europe.

When Phil returned, there was a new problem. The bartender hired to replace Mike, Joseph Dufrees, simply didn't show up for work one day. Joseph had decided to leave town and did so without giving any notice.

Phil put an ad in the paper but was not terribly impressed with the applicants. After two bad tries in a row, he wanted a bartender he could trust. A few days after the ad came out, on Saturday, June 9, a man named Hugh came in and asked Phil if there were any jobs around. As they talked, Phil became impressed by the man's personality.

Thirty-two-year-old Hubert Dean Cooley had been born on July 9, 1940, to Lawrence and Ruth Loveland Cooley, who lived in Hastings, Michigan by 1957 and still did in 1973. Hugh dropped out of school after the ninth grade, and he joined the Navy in Kalamazoo on July 25, 1957. He was given the rank of AR E-1 and was stationed at the U.S. Naval Training Center at Great Lakes, Illinois, leaving the service immediately afterward on November 4, 1957.

Hugh now lived at 1435 Polymnia Street, Apartment 3, just a few doors down from Mitch and Horace, regulars at the bar. Of medium build, perhaps a little on the thin side, Hugh had tried a heterosexual marriage but was now divorced.

"Stick around," said Phil. "Maybe I can use you."

The UpStairs Lounge Fire

Hugh's eyes lit up. He really needed a job, and knowing Buddy and several of the regulars made this job better than it might otherwise have been. Maybe his luck was changing.

Phil tried him out on an hourly basis for one week, to see if he would fit in, and then, finding that he did, Phil hired him full-time, to take the 8:00 p.m. to 4:00 a.m. shift.

Phil hired Bob Jordan at the same time he hired Hugh, also on a trial basis, but after five days, Jordan came to work drunk and fell behind the bar. Phil was willing to give him another chance, but when he came to work the next day even more drunk and fell again, Phil fired him.

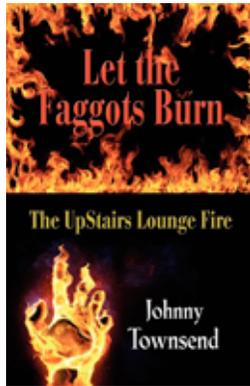
"Give me the keys to the bar," Phil told him.

"No," said Jordan. "You pay me first."

They argued over the keys a few minutes, and finally Phil physically forced the keys from Jordan. Phil shook his head as he watched Jordan leave. At least Hugh was working out. That gave him two good bartenders, anyway. Buddy had sure been right that first time they talked.

Friday, June 15, saw the start of a new play in the third room theatre, "High Spirits," which was a takeoff on a Noel Coward play. It seemed to generate a good response, appropriate laughs and a large crowd that seemed adequately thirsty. The play would probably run a few more months before they'd need to do another one. Someone from the Salt and Pepper Lounge, a straight bar, saw the play and liked it. He asked the UpStairs performers to use it one time at the UpStairs, on June 30, as a fundraiser for the Crippled Children's Hospital. The actors agreed.

Meanwhile, with Buddy and Hugh both scheduled to work on June 24, Phil knew he didn't need to be at the bar to check up on anything. They could both handle whatever came up. Phil and Durel got together with some friends and decided to have a nice, relaxing evening out at the Beverly Dinner Playhouse.



On Gay Pride Day in 1973, an arsonist set the entrance to a French Quarter gay bar on fire. In the terrible inferno that followed, 32 people lost their lives, including a third of the local congregation of the Metropolitan Community Church, their pastor burning to death halfway out a second-story window as he tried to claw his way to freedom. This is a riveting account of a forgotten moment in gay history.

Let the Faggots Burn The Upstairs Lounge Fire

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