

The Onyx: A Welcoming Bar for Queer People

IN JUNE 2023, the Twin Cities Pride March started at this intersection of Third Street and Hennepin Avenue in Minneapolis. Though the parade depicted heading north on Third Street at this intersection is very different from the Pride march, a piece of Minneapolis queer history is preserved in this 1939 photograph.

The parade that took place on December 9, 1939, was for Thomas E. Dewey, seated on the right side of the back seat of the rear car next to Minneapolis mayor George E. Leach. At the time of this photo, Dewey was campaigning to win the nomination at the upcoming Republican National Convention in 1940. Dewey gained national attention for successfully curbing organized crime and toppling infamous mafiosi. Dewey secured the Republican nomination for president in 1944 and in 1948. He lost both times, to Franklin D. Roosevelt and to Harry S. Truman, respectively.

The buildings behind Dewey's parade along Hennepin Avenue have since been torn down and replaced. The Hennepin County Library's Central Branch has been standing on the southeast corner of the intersection since 1961. In 1939, however, a number of businesses operated on the block pictured on the right side of the photograph: Crystal Theater (half out of frame), Lankis Cafe, B & B Hotel, and the Onyx Bar.

The Onyx Bar (301 Hennepin Avenue) comes up in an oral history conducted with Chuck Rowland by Allan Bérubé and in a letter from Chuck Rowland to John D'Emilio. In both, Rowland remembered the Onyx as a gay bar: "The [gay bar] in Minneapolis was downright scruffy. . . . [It was] dirty, smelly; it had wooden booths on both sides."

But it was "always jampacked. . . . We all thought of ourselves as young ladies of considerable quality. Bright green suits were in vogue, and everyone sported an ascot of some brilliant contrasting color."

"It was quite amusing when one would encounter one of his professors," Rowland recalled, and awkward serving "in the Army, when one met there a friend from the Onyx."

Rowland often went to the Onyx with his lover, Bob Hull, while Rowland was attending the University of Minnesota and later when he was stationed in the US Army at Fort Snelling. Rowland and Hull went on to cofound the Mattachine Society in 1950 with five other homosexual men, including Harry Hay. This "homophile" organization



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was one of the first to politically mobilize gay men toward securing rights for homosexuals.

Stewart Van Cleve, author of *Land of 10,000 Loves*, states, "Were it not for Bérubé, the bar would have vanished from memory entirely." Without Rowland's memories, we may not have ever known that queer people were gathering at the Onyx Bar in the 1930s and 1940s. The James K. Hosmer Special Collections that preserved and digitized this photo of the Onyx Bar now sits on the very site the bar once stood, inside the Central Library. And 83 years after that 1939 parade, LGBTQ+ people started their Pride march right next to where one of their first safe spaces once stood.

—Noah Barth

Sources

"Thomas Edmund Dewey," Governors, National Governors Association, <https://www.nga.org/governor/thomas-edmund-dewey>; "Thomas Dewey," Notable Names, The Mob Museum, https://themobmuseum.org/notable_names/thomas-dewey; Charles Dennison Rowland, interview by Allan Bérubé, March 19, 1984, transcript, and Chuck Rowland to John D'Emilio, December 1, 1977—both GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco, CA; Stewart Van Cleve, *Land of 10,000 Loves: A History of Queer Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

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