

## Gatekeeping in Auckland's Queer Public Spaces from 1975 – 1985

*Have you ever wondered why there are so few mothers at the club?*

*political meetings?*

*playing soccer?*

*on the club committee?*

*in a band?*

- Paula<sup>1</sup>

By the mid-1980s, Auckland's queer public spaces had collectively survived political, legal, and financial obstacles to become visible affirmations of queer identity in the central city. Behind their celebratory façades, however, these spaces had been grappling with one more obstacle. This came in the form of queer people themselves, some of whom had been "pushed out" of queer public spaces.<sup>2</sup> This article brings them back in. It explores how several doubly marginalised groups of queer people challenged and ultimately expanded the boundaries of the establishments which had rejected them. Following the cues of the subject matter, the article also departs from my first, second, and fourth pieces by zooming in on the decade from 1975 to 1985, when these groups became too vocal to ignore.

Exclusion within queer communities did have earlier origins, yet the mid-1970s were a turning point for two reasons. Firstly, the rise of dedicated queer venues as opposed to informal meeting-places systematised exclusion. Younger queer people, for instance, were unable to legally enter spaces like the Aquarius Society, where membership was restricted to those aged twenty-one and over.<sup>3</sup> A more significant factor was the highly charged political atmosphere at this time. Queer Aucklanders were heavily involved in Women's Liberation, the occupation at Bastion Point, and protests against the Treaty of Waitangi and the Springbok tour.<sup>4</sup> Through their involvement in these movements, marginalised members of queer communities gained the skills, connections, and confidence to not only confront exclusion in mainstream society but also in queer spaces.

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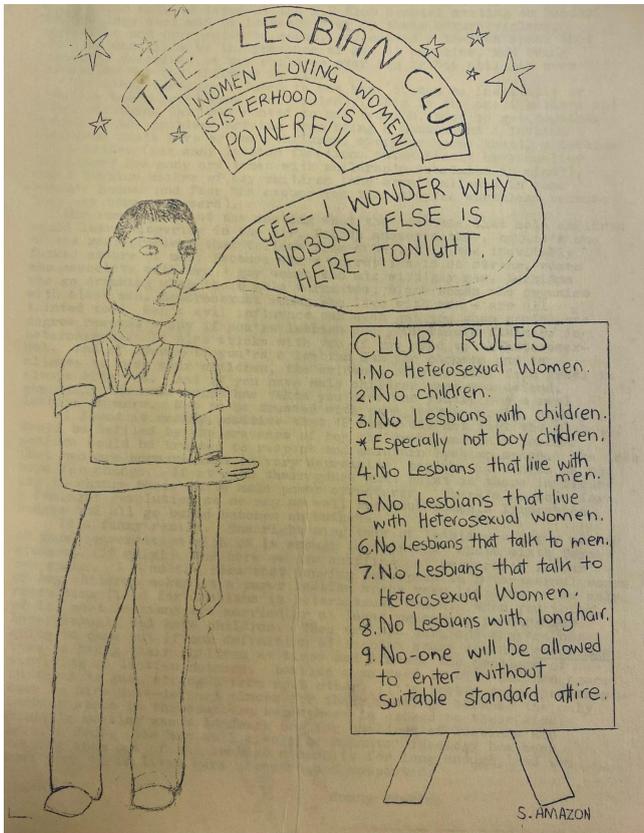
<sup>1</sup> Paula, letter, *Dyke News*, no. 32, July 1983, part 4, series 6.5, Auckland Lesbian Archives NZMS 1184, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

<sup>2</sup> Liz, letter, *Dyke News*, no. 32, July 1983.

<sup>3</sup> "Aquarius Society," *Gay Lib News*, December 1972, folder 1/66, series 1, Socialist Action League Records, MSS-Archives A-209, Special Collections, University of Auckland.

<sup>4</sup> Bobbie, Chris, and Jenny, interview, *Dyke News*, no. 5, June 2, 1982, part 1, series 6.5, Auckland Lesbian Archives NZMS 1184, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

## The people who were excluded from queer public spaces



*A satirical take on the exclusionary culture of the KG Club, produced in 1982.<sup>5</sup>*

Auckland's queer communities were fairly insular during the 1970s, and this was reflected in the city's queer spaces. Anyone new was met with caution or even suspicion. For this reason, younger or newly-out people often found queer venues isolating. One woman named Denise, after being bluntly ignored during her first ventures into the queer Empire Tavern and KG Club, realised that "those of us who are coming out not only have the rejection of 'normal society' but also this rigid separatism to cope with."<sup>6</sup> Those who did not look unambiguously queer were treated even more harshly. "Are you one of us or one of them?" another lesbian was asked, walking into the Empire Tavern with long hair and makeup.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> S. Amazon, illustration, *Dyke News*, no. 11, August 25, 1982, part 2, series 6.5, Auckland Lesbian Archives NZMS 1184, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

<sup>6</sup> Denise, letter, *Dyke News*, no. 6, June 17, 1982, part 1, series 6.5, Auckland Lesbian Archives NZMS 1184, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

<sup>7</sup> Debbie, letter, *Dyke News*, no. 4, May 20, 1982, part 1, series 6.5, Auckland Lesbian Archives NZMS 1184, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

This antagonistic mentality reflects a wider fear of heterosexuality infringing on queer spaces, which also manifested in the exclusion of other minorities who were not 'queer enough'. Bisexual woman Ro Cambridge, for instance, felt that she was "losing a family" after being rejected from lesbian establishments due to her attraction to men.<sup>8</sup> Similar isolation was experienced by 'transvestites' and 'transsexuals' – people who did not dress or identify as their perceived gender respectively. These groups had been instrumental in the creation of early queer spaces in Auckland.<sup>9</sup> Yet some queer people felt that they, along with drag performers, "parodied" the oppression of queer communities while remaining heterosexual.<sup>10</sup> As a result, only certain establishments became known for drag performances, while in others – such as the KG Club – the presence of transvestites could lead to conflict.<sup>11</sup> Despite the fact that many of the identities we now call 'queer' did exist at this time, queer public spaces largely remained restricted to lesbian and gay communities.

Barriers to access were not only ideological, but also practical. Bars and clubs, the predominant form of queer venue, did not complement all lifestyles. These spaces developed a culture of alcohol and drug use and were thus avoided by many queer people who struggled with these substances.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ro Cambridge, letter, *Dyke News*, no. 30, June 7, 1983, part 4, series 6.5, Auckland Lesbian Archives NZMS 1184, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

<sup>9</sup> Sandy, "Gay Liberation ... Alive and Well," *New Zealand Gay News*, January/February 1976, folder 1/62, series 1, Socialist Action League Records, MSS-Archives A-209, Special Collections, University of Auckland.

<sup>10</sup> Steven, "In Memoriam," *New Zealand Gay News*, November/December 1975, folder 1/62, series 1, Socialist Action League Records, MSS-Archives A-209, Special Collections, University of Auckland.

<sup>11</sup> "Comments on the Club," *Dyke News*, no. 25, March 31, 1983, part 3, series 6.5, Auckland Lesbian Archives NZMS 1184, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

<sup>12</sup> Anonymous, letter, *Dyke News*, no. 17, November 18, 1982, part 2, series 6.5, Auckland Lesbian Archives NZMS 1184, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.



*The bar at the KG Club in 1985, well-stocked with alcoholic beverages.<sup>13</sup>*

In addition, some queer spaces charged a membership fee, which created accessibility issues for working-class or unemployed people. This latter issue was particularly contentious at the KG Club where, from 1983, only members were permitted to vote at meetings about the club's operation.<sup>14</sup> Many complained that this was "oppressive," believing that the space was now controlled by those with sufficient funds.<sup>15</sup> Finally, these spaces also tended to be open at night. This was a particular issue for lesbian mothers, whose childcare requirements meant that they were often unable to go out at this time.<sup>16</sup>

The situation of lesbian mothers reveals the ideological underpinning of many of these seemingly practical issues. As one woman recalled, childcare "wasn't all I needed, I needed ongoing support."<sup>17</sup> Such support was not provided by queer establishments. This became glaringly obvious in 1982, when lesbian mothers attempted to organise a family disco at the KG Club. Children would be invited, and the time would be suitably early, but these practical

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<sup>13</sup> Unknown photographer, *Lesbians in Print*, no. 4, September 1985, box 6-014, Lesbian Publications Aotearoa #62\_32\_600, Charlotte Museum.

<sup>14</sup> "The Club," *Dyke News*, no. 37, September 1983, part 4, series 6.5, Auckland Lesbian Archives NZMS 1184, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

<sup>15</sup> "Comments on the Club," *Dyke News*, no. 25, March 31, 1983.

<sup>16</sup> J., notes on interview by Jenny Rankine, 1980s, series 2.8, Auckland Lesbian Archives NZMS 1184, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

<sup>17</sup> J., notes on interview by Jenny Rankine.

solutions did not suffice for the event to go ahead.<sup>18</sup> The underlying problem, it emerged, was anxiety around male and non-queer children. The club committee had implied that sons were “potential women oppressors,” with mothers consequently refusing to enter spaces where their children were unwelcome.<sup>19</sup> Lesbian mothers, like many other groups, were excluded not by oversight but because queer communities felt threatened by the non-queer world entering their spaces.

### **Taking a stand against the Alexandra Tavern**

In 1981, two lesbian women took ownership of the Alexandra Tavern on the corner of Federal St and Kingston St.<sup>20</sup> Hailed initially as a victory for Auckland’s lesbian community, within months, the new ‘Alex’ had become a focal point in conversations about exclusion from queer spaces. The scale of this public outrage reflects the fact that not one, but several groups of marginalised queer people felt uncomfortable here.



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<sup>18</sup> Bernie and Annie, statement, *Dyke News*, no. 9, July 29, 1982, part 1, series 6.5, Auckland Lesbian Archives NZMS 1184, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

<sup>19</sup> “Lesbian mothers,” *Dyke News*, no. 9, July 29, 1982.

<sup>20</sup> Pilar Alba, “The Alex Revisited!”, *Lesbians in Print*, no. 8, July 1986, box 6-014, Lesbian Publications Aotearoa #62\_32\_600, Charlotte Museum.

*The Alexandra Hotel, in which the Alexandra Tavern was located, in the 1980s.*<sup>21</sup>

Racism against 'black' people – a self-identifier used by Māori and Pacific communities at this time – was a particularly prevalent issue. There were several reported incidents of black women being asked to leave the public bar, at least one of which escalated into physical violence.<sup>22</sup> Defences against these allegations were unconvincing. One former employee claimed that, "if white people had've behaved in a similar manner they would've been treated in the same way, but unfortunately it was always the Polynesians."<sup>23</sup> And racism was not the only issue; the Alex was also seen as elitist. Offence was taken at advertisements inviting queer people to "come to the Alex for a touch of class," and this intensified when two working-class customers were sent away because "we don't want your type."<sup>24</sup> Most surprisingly, the Alex was accused of homophobia. Several lesbians claimed that they had been refused entry for no apparent reason.<sup>25</sup> While this last form of exclusion did happen, labelling it as anti-lesbian discrimination was misleading. Other reports reveal that only 'lesbian-feminists', many of whom scorned the company of men, were unwelcome due to the conflicts which they provoked with male customers.<sup>26</sup>

This confluence of issues reached a crisis point in the very last hour of 1981. A group of lesbians staged a mass walk-out at eleven o'clock on New Years' Eve, believing that "withdrawing our business [from the Alex is] the most politically effective thing to do."<sup>27</sup> For a short time, this estimation appeared correct. The Alex closed in early 1982 and reopened several months later with a radically new look. The public bar, which had been the site of numerous problematic incidents, had been removed and the rest of the establishment

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<sup>21</sup> Unknown photographer, reference ID 1052-B2-5A, Auckland Libraries Heritage Images Collection, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

<sup>22</sup> "Alex Pub," *Dyke News*, no. 18, 2 December, 1982, part 2, series 6.5, Auckland Lesbian Archives NZMS 1184, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

<sup>23</sup> Chris Teehan, "Alex Pub," *Dyke News*, no. 20, January 20, 1983, part 3, series 6.5, Auckland Lesbian Archives NZMS 1184, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

<sup>24</sup> Copy of Alex Pub leaflet, *Dyke News*, no. 20, January 20, 1983.

<sup>25</sup> Trish and Paula, letter, *Dyke News*, no. 4, May 20, 1982.

<sup>26</sup> Sharleen, "Pub News," *Dyke News*, no. 10, August 12, 1982, part 1, series 6.5, Auckland Lesbian Archives NZMS 1184, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

<sup>27</sup> Alba, "The Alex Revisited!", *Lesbians in Print*, no. 8, July 1986.

renovated.<sup>28</sup> Conflict between the owners had also caused the more controversial of the two to leave the pub, with the other promising a “clean slate.”<sup>29</sup>

For queer people who had not been directly affected by the exclusion at the Alex, these changes were sufficient. The pub increased in popularity among lesbians, many of whom doubted “that we’ll ever get an opportunity like the Alex again.”<sup>30</sup> Yet black women continued to avoid the place and the original protestors remained unconvinced that any issues had been resolved.<sup>31</sup> The renovations were derided as pandering to middle-class taste, while it was pointed out that the owner who had left remained a financial partner.<sup>32</sup> In an effort to express their concerns, protestors presented patrons of the Alex with a leaflet recounting the issues from 1981.<sup>33</sup> The focus of this leaflet on past events is telling. It demonstrates that change was not, at this time, the protestors’ ultimate goal: the ‘dykecott’ of the Alex had become a matter of principle. With sustained intensity, marginalised queer groups continued to avoid the pub for years to come.

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<sup>28</sup> Alba, “The Alex Revisited!”

<sup>29</sup> Elaine, “Interview at the Alex,” *Dyke News*, no. 19, December 16, 1982, part 2, series 6.5, Auckland Lesbian Archives NZMS 1184, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

<sup>30</sup> Chris Teehan, “Alex Pub,” *Dyke News*, no. 20, January 20, 1983.

<sup>31</sup> “Who’s not at the Alex?” *Dyke News*, no. 48, April 12, 1984, part 5, series 6.5, Auckland Lesbian Archives NZMS 1184, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

<sup>32</sup> Elaine, “Interview at the Alex,” *Dyke News*, no. 19, December 16, 1982.

<sup>33</sup> Alba, “The Alex Revisited!”, *Lesbians in Print*, no. 8, July 1986.

We feel the dykecott of the alex pub which began on Dec 31, 1981 should continue. There were lots of incidents over a few months which led to the dykecott.

Some examples of these are:

1. A black family attacked. There was an attack against a black family which was provoked by pub management. This resulted in the police being called and a charge of assault being laid against one member of the family. We find this to be racist.
2. Two black working class women were asked to leave. When asked for reasons, the management said that they didn't want their type in the pub' and that 'they screwed on the floor'. We find this to be racist and classist.
3. Continual harrasment and then sacking of lesbian staff.
4. Dictatorial attitudes such as banning of lesbians for trivial reasons.
5. Offensive comments to women drinking in the Alex e.g. telling a lesbian to 'wash her hair' before she came to that pub again.
6. Mockery of lesbian involvement in tour (1981) activities.
7. Refusing to display lesbian and feminist posters of meetings/dances etc while on the other hand, gay men were used as 'heavies' by Elaine to chase a lesbian out of the pub because she had removed an offensive sexist poster from the toilet wall.

We know these and other incidents happened in the past but blatant cases that are racist, classist and anti-lesbian should not be easily forgotten if we are serious about fighting these issues. A lot of lesbians have been saying, "But these things happened in the past" or "let's wipe the slate clean." We can't just forget the past like that, besides we feel the changes (?) at the Alex are only superficial. WHY ALL THE SUDDEN CHANGES? ARE LESBIANS BEING USED? AGAIN!! WHY ARE YOU SUPPORTING THIS PUB? WHAT HAPPENS WHEN LESBIAN MONEY ISN'T NEEDED ANYMORE?

1. Despite the fact that one of the management who was actively involved in these incidents has left, she is still a financial partner.
2. We question the motives behind getting rid of the public bar. Mer Is this a way of getting rid of some people the management thinks are 'undesirable'?
3. We find advertisements for the Alex have been offensive, such as "Come to the Alex for a touch of class' and 'come and relax in the Swanky Wanker Bar, with Sharon and Elaine "on hand"....you're never alone." Is this the kind of place lesbians want to be?
4. We find the present management to have little understanding of racism, when, in an interview with Dyke News, the following comment was made, "if you turn around and clobber someone, you get charged with racism if the man happens to be dark.

We know that this pub may be no worse than any others but this argument is like saying that Margaret Thatcher is better than Muldoon because she is a woman. Is having a 'good time' more important than fighting blatant racism, classism, sexism and anti-lesbianism?

*A copy of the leaflet handed out at the Alexandra Tavern in January 1983, which was also published in Dyke News to expand its reach.<sup>34</sup>*

### **New spaces emerging for excluded queer groups**

If not to the Alex, then where did black, working-class, and politically inclined queer people go? Much like organisations who were unable to establish permanent public spaces, the people who were excluded from these permanent venues found transient solutions.

Auckland's lesbian mothers, for instance, organised annual weekend retreats in scenic parts of the city such as Blockhouse Bay or the Waitākere Ranges. In such a supportive environment, one mother, Annabel, marvelled that domestic life was easy: "dishes washed themselves, and kids melted off to bed."<sup>35</sup> The next day, serious matters were discussed.

Workshop topics included custody battles, having male children, and dealing with

<sup>34</sup> Copy of Alex Pub leaflet, *Dyke News*, no. 20, January 20, 1983.

<sup>35</sup> Annabel Fagan, "Lesbian Mothers, Lovers and Children Weekend," *Bitches, Witches, and Dykes*, vol. 2, no. 1, June 1982, box 6-002, Lesbian Publications Aotearoa #62\_32\_600, Charlotte Museum.

teenagers.<sup>36</sup> Yet even these topics seemed more manageable, “away from the tensions of the city” and its exclusionary establishments.<sup>37</sup>



*Lesbian mothers and their children relax at the 1981 Lesbian Mothers, Lovers, and Children Weekend. Photos by Sharon Madgeskind.*<sup>38</sup>

Other queer groups also found refuge on the outskirts of Auckland, their place in the city’s geography curiously mirroring their marginalisation in queer communities. The Seahorse Club, which provided “friendly understanding and companionship” for male transvestites, had a contact address in Howick.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, a hui for black queer people was held on Waiheke Island in 1981.<sup>40</sup> One centrally-located exception was the Women’s Health Centre on Ponsonby Rd. This became a popular location to hold support sessions for a variety of marginalised queer groups. In 1982 alone, a series of meetings on racism in the lesbian community were held here, along with regular meetings of the Lesbian Mothers’ Support Group, the Fat Women’s Group, and several others.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Fagan, “Lesbian Mothers, Lovers and Children Weekend.”

<sup>37</sup> Fagan, “Lesbian Mothers, Lovers and Children Weekend.”

<sup>38</sup> Sharon Madgeskind, in “Lesbian Mothers, Lovers and Children Weekend.”

<sup>39</sup> Advertisement, *New Zealand Gay News*, September/October 1975, folder 1/62, series 1, Socialist Action League Records, MSS-Archives A-209, Special Collections, University of Auckland.

<sup>40</sup> Advertisement, *Bitches, Witches, and Dykes*, vol. 1, no. 3, May 1981, box 6-002, Lesbian Publications Aotearoa #62\_32\_600, Charlotte Museum.

<sup>41</sup> Meeting report, *Dyke News*, no. 15, October 21, 1982, part 2, series 6.5, Auckland Lesbian Archives NZMS 1184, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

“Guy Fawkes Night Barbecue and Fireworks,” advertisement, *Dyke News*, no. 15, October 21, 1982. Barb., letter, *Dyke News*, no. 4, May 20, 1982.

The emergence of such support groups should not be understood as a rejection of queer public spaces. While they had short term significance as spaces for marginalised queer people to voice their experiences, the end goal of these groups was often integration into queer establishments. This was the case, for example, at a meeting on queer alcohol and drug use that was held at Waima Hall in Grey Lynn in March 1986. Attendees suggested that it was “important to develop within our community activities that do not involve alcohol or other drugs,” with a focus on providing non-alcoholic drinks at the gay Staircase Club.<sup>42</sup> This was only one among many attempts by marginalised queer groups to re-enter and improve Auckland’s queer public spaces. Indeed, a few months later, even the steadfast protestors at the Alexandra Tavern began to discuss a return to the pub. “It is time to have a change of tactics,” as Pilar Alba put it, “so that the Alex has a commitment to change.”<sup>43</sup>

### **Established public spaces becoming more inclusive**

Auckland’s queer public spaces did respond to this call for change. Exclusion certainly remained an issue beyond the 1980s, but efforts to combat it began in the 1970s.<sup>44</sup> As early as 1976, the manager of the Backstage Club, Lew Pryme, acknowledged the difficulties faced by queer people entering his establishment for the first time. “We’ll introduce newcomers to groups of people,” he suggested.<sup>45</sup> Other marginalised queer groups slowly gained the same recognition. The KG Club organised a Sunday night ‘Films N’ Fruit Cocktails’ event, where eighty women met over non-alcoholic drinks and documentaries about alcohol in queer communities.<sup>46</sup> In 1983, lesbian mothers also held the disco which they had previously been denied, and their male children were now not only tolerated but explicitly invited.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> “Alcohol and drugs meeting report,” *Lesbians in Print*, no. 7, May 1986, box 6-014, Lesbian Publications Aotearoa #62\_32\_600, Charlotte Museum.

<sup>43</sup> Alba, “The Alex Revisited!”, *Lesbians in Print*, no. 8, July 1986.

<sup>44</sup> Harriet Winn, “Oh my God, I’m Home: Lesbian Nightlife in 1990s Central Auckland,” *Women’s Studies Journal*, no. 34 (December 2020): 55.

<sup>45</sup> “New Gay Club Opens,” *New Zealand Gay News*, January/February 1976.

<sup>46</sup> “Films N’ Fruit Cocktails – Sunday Night at the Club,” *Dyke News*, no. 50, May 17, 1984, part 6, series 6.5, Auckland Lesbian Archives NZMS 1184, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

<sup>47</sup> “Girls, boys, and young women’s disco,” *Dyke News*, no. 33, July 1983, part 4, series 6.5, Auckland Lesbian Archives NZMS 1184, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

For many queer Aucklanders, these shifts symbolised progress and hope for the future. “I want to move forwards and take responsibility [rather than] trivialise differences,” as one woman, Cherry, resolved.<sup>48</sup> Yet for a few, the efforts to make queer public spaces inclusive were mere distractions. One gay man blamed such “charades” for the fact that queer communities “haven’t risen above ... the bars.”<sup>49</sup> His estimation was far from correct. Not only has this article demonstrated that internal reforms were necessary for many marginalised groups to even gain access to bars and other public spaces, but my next one emphasises that queer communities were certainly not restricted to queer spaces. Indeed, in addition to occupying private homes and public venues, many queer people also led parallel lives in Auckland’s non-queer landscape.

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<sup>48</sup> Cherry, statement, *Dyke News*, no. 32, July 1983.

<sup>49</sup> Steven, “In Memoriam,” *New Zealand Gay News*, November/December 1975.

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