

Out of the Closet, But Not on the Shelves: *North Carolina Gay and Lesbian Newspapers*

by Thomas Kevin B. Cherry

in collaboration with Plummer Alston Jones, Jr. and Rodney E. Lippard

In 1947, using carbon paper and the office typewriter, a young Los Angeles secretary produced nine issues of *Vice Versa*, the first lesbian publication in American history. Although she could only produce ten copies of each edition, these copies were passed from friend to friend, reaching dozens, perhaps hundreds of women, all eager to read about themselves and others like them. When told by a friend that she shouldn't be "publishing" this work, that it might even get her arrested, the secretary replied, "Why? I don't mention the city it's from. I don't mention anybody's name. And it's not a dirty magazine by any stretch of the imagination." Her friend replied that even though *Vice Versa* had no "cuss words or anything like that in it," the newsletter would still be considered dirty by straight people because it was about the "girls."¹

The friend had good reason to offer this warning. In 1924, Chicago's Society for Human Rights published the journal *Friendship and Freedom*, the first U. S. gay publication. The organizers were summarily arrested on obscenity charges.² Thirty years later, the October 1954 issue of *One*, a Los Angeles gay publication then nearly two years old, was seized by the local postmaster for being "obscene, lewd, lascivious, and filthy." The issue's cover story was on the law of mailable material. The resulting legal case went to the U. S. Supreme Court which cleared the magazine, but offered no written opinion.³ This controversial history is reflected in the holdings of gay and lesbian newspapers in North Carolina libraries.

North Carolina can claim three gay and lesbian newspapers: *Community Connections*, *The Front Page*, and *Q Notes*. A recent phone poll of the ten public libraries in the state serving the largest populations found that not one had a single issue of these publications on its shelves. A similar survey of North Carolina college and university libraries showed almost the same results. Duke began collecting *The Front Page* in 1989 and Wake Forest in 1994. Only the North Carolina Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill maintains full runs of *The Front Page* and *Q Notes*; it just began collecting *Community Connections*.⁴ No other college or university reported holdings of these publications. Like those Los Angeles women in the 1940s, there must be a number of gays and lesbians in North Carolina seeking information about themselves and others like them, but unlike the slim carbon copies of *Vice Versa*

that attempted to meet those women's needs, these three North Carolina publications are professionally produced, widely distributed, and cover a broad spectrum of information: news articles (both from wire services and staff-written), features, commentary, resource directories and announcements, reviews (books, music, theatre), and even cartoons.

One of the more important services offered by these three publications is their listings of gay and lesbian events and resources that are covered by very few, if any, other publications. Here one finds the pertinent information regarding gatherings such as the NC Gay and Lesbian Attorney's Spring meeting, the Charlotte Gay and Lesbian Film Series, a performance by the Common Woman Chorus, meetings of Gay Fathers, and a country western two-step dance. Here musicals, plays, book signings, and other cultural events find column space alongside listings of HIV services and "gay friendly" houses of worship. Resource directories list the telephone numbers to various North Carolina religious bodies, educational associations, and various support groups and twelve-step programs. The numbers, varieties, and locales of groups and associations in these lists might surprise first-time readers (e.g. the Lambda Amateur Radio Club in Fairview and a gay and lesbian political potluck in Kernersville). In a world where few other media sources dare to speak the names of these organizations, these few lines of typescript provide the only real publicity and notice groups such as these get.

Since few readers of these publications subscribe and most pick them up free of charge in clubs, restaurants, and bookstores, a hefty portion of the cost of publication is borne by advertising. All three periodicals carry advertisements ranging from real estate ads to church announcements and from caterers to pet groomers. A large percentage of these ads come from bar and club promotions. Among the notices of drink specials, theme nights, and burlesque shows are photographs of high-haired female impersonators, campy comedians, and other performers. Sometimes a full-page and often a double-page spread, the ads regularly feature photographs of young, muscular men in their underwear, much like the photograph of rap singer Marky Mark that was plastered throughout America's shopping malls a year or two ago. Personal ads and "1-900" phone lines also generate revenue for all three newspapers. These personal ads are slightly more explicit than those that

*La•gniappe (län-yăp', län' yăp') n. An extra or unexpected gift or benefit. [Louisiana French]

The Front Page. Raleigh, NC: Bugle Publishing, Inc., 1979-. Bimonthly.

P.O. Box 27928, Raleigh, NC 27611. E-mail: frntpage@aol.com.

The Front Page is the oldest of the three publications at sixteen (and only three years younger than North Carolina's oldest gay publication, *Lambda*, the newsletter of UNC-CH's gay, lesbian, and bisexual group). It carries the greatest number of news wire pieces of the three. With compilation columns devoted to North Carolina, national, and world news, as well as items originating from the GayNet News Service, this Raleigh-based publication is filled with brief, one- or two-inch pieces with titles such as "Sex Ed Debate Flares in McDowell County," "HIV Protein Discovery," "Idaho Group Planning Another Ballot Measure," and "Australian Gays Win Partner Benefits." In addition to these short squibs, *The Front Page* does publish staff-written news items, primarily concerning North Carolina-based or regional events. "Chapel Hill Recognizes Partnerships" and "Triad Political Group Forms" comprised most of the first page of the April 28, 1995 issue. This same issue contained a two-page interview with Candace Gingrich, half-sister to Newt Gingrich, and a chapter from *School's Out*, a soon-to-be-published work that chronicles the experiences of gay/lesbian/straight alliances in the Chapel Hill and Brookline, Massachusetts public schools. *The All American Boy*, memoirs of Scott Peck, son of Marine Col. Fred Peck, was also reviewed in this issue. *The Front Page* offers commentary, with editorialists in this same issue covering the Oklahoma bombing and Conservative-induced homophobia. It also publishes three cartoons, all with national distribution: "The Chosen Family," "The Mostly Unfabulous Social Life of Ethan Green," and "Dykes to Watch Out For."

Q Notes. Charlotte, NC: Pride Publishing & Typesetting, 1986-. Monthly.

P.O. Box 221841, Charlotte, NC 28222. E-mail: Pridtype@cybernetics.net.

The Charlotte-based publication in the trio, *Q Notes* contains wire service pieces, as well. These articles concentrate on national issues and tend to be fewer, but longer items with headlines such as "White House to Meet with Gay and Lesbian Officials." *Q Notes* also carries the most staff-written material of these three North Carolina newspapers. Its May 1995 issue featured articles written by staff concerning the Clinton military policy, the fire at the White Rabbit Book Store in Charlotte, and the second National Miss Gay Pageant held in Atlanta. Commentary in the issue touched upon subjects including the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, community involvement, and a piece on self image and beauty. It also carries a column prepared by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) that tracks the portrayal of gays and lesbians in the media. In addition, the May issue of *Q Notes* contained a short music review of "Message of Love," a European dance house mix and one cartoon, "Curbside."

Community Connections. Asheville, NC: Community Connections, 1988-.

Monthly. P.O. Box 18088, Asheville, NC 28814.

The smallest of the three newspapers and the only nonprofit publication of the bunch, *Community Connections* has the look of a nonprofit with its wide leading and large type. It carries no wire service reports, and most of its articles are localized to the southern Appalachian region. Coming out of Asheville, this newspaper has a wide range of distribution that extends to most of western North Carolina and parts of Virginia, Tennessee, and South Carolina. It is also distributed in Atlanta. Features comprise a higher percentage of the articles in *Community Connections* as compared to the two other publications. "Springtime in the North Carolina Mountains," "Timberfell Lodge, a Paradise for Men in the Southern Appalachians," and "Lodging In and Around Asheville," were headlines associated with the three most prominent articles found in the April 1995 issue. News articles included "Pat Robertson Announces Antiviolence Stands on Air" and "Asheville Gay Father Makes History." One regular column, "Boots and Saddles," keeps track of the gay and lesbian country western activities in the area. The April issue also contained a review of a recently released jazz disc, Tom Briggs's *Moonlight*, and one comic strip, "Dykes to Watch Out For."

appear in Raleigh's *News and Observer* and the Research Triangle's newsweekly, *The Independent*. *The Front Page*, which runs the greatest number and most explicit of these types of ads, attempts to segregate most of this sort of advertising to one classified "pullout" section, allowing readers not wishing to peruse these items to dispose of them easily. *Community Connections* actively edits such ads to reflect the standards of mainstream publications.

Libraries and librarians do not need to be sold on the importance of newspapers in a community's life; they recognize their cultural importance and the often unique information found upon the tall, flimsy pages. As just one example of this recognition, during the last several years the North Carolina Newspaper Project has gone to great lengths to attempt to preserve Tar Heel newsprint for future generations. In the case of these three alternative newspapers, however, it is apparent that libraries are not providing access to all of the resources that they generally champion.

And, as it was in 1947 Los Angeles, so it is in 1995 North Carolina: most readers of gay and lesbian newspapers get their copy from a friend who borrowed it from an acquaintance who just happened to visit some out-of-town nightspot.

References

¹ Eric Marcus, *Making History: The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Equal Rights, 1945-1990, An Oral History* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993): 6, 10.

² Polly Thistlethwaite and Daniel Tsang, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender" in *Magazines for Libraries*, edited by Bill Katz and Linda Sternberg Katz (New Providence, NJ: R. R. Bowker, 1995): 745-58; and John D'Emilio, "Dreams Deferred" in *Making Trouble: Essays On Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York: Routledge, 1992): 34-35.

³ Marcus, *Making History*, 2.

⁴ The ten public libraries serving the largest populations were determined from the State Library's *Statistics and Directory of North Carolina Public Libraries, July 1, 1992-June 30, 1993*. The ten largest college and university libraries in the state were determined by number of books, as listed on the State Library's North Carolina Information Network (NCIN). Phone calls were made to the local reference desk, except in cases where the call was forwarded to the periodicals unit of the library. Individuals on the staffs of these newspapers did state that their publications were sent to some of the libraries contacted.