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3rd “REAR-VIEW MIRROR” ESSAY
INTERNATIONAL LEATHER HISTORY

LEATHER’S FOUNDING DADDIES

by **Jack Fritscher**

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AUTHOR'S HISTORICAL CONTEXT INTRODUCTION



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Oral interviews for this series conducted on videotape by Jack Fritscher, Palm Drive Video, with Ron Johnson, Rainbow Motorcycle Club founder, and a poet. “Everything Ron Johnson has written has surprised and delighted me.” –Thom Gunn, British poet, longtime San Francisco resident, lyricist of leather, familiar with the history of Folsom Street.

The Wild One rode across American drive-in screens in 1953, two years before James Dean’s *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), and 16 years before *Easy Rider* (1969). Brando’s archetypal leather image, via flamboyant underground S&M filmmaker, Kenneth Anger’s blasphemous *Scorpio Rising*, started integrating into street/bar style. By the late 1950’s, the ironically named “Nellie’s” in San Francisco’s Tenderloin was the first bar where leather debuted. The classic poster of the insouciant Brando, black leather jacket and cap,

elbow on motorcycle, hung, like a rushin' icon, over the bar.
That's the truth according to some.

NELLIE'S AND THE BLACK CAT

Others say the Black Cat, on the Embarcadero, was a bar more basically butch than Nellie's, because, informants swear, the Black Cat's butch-style at night was a natural reflection of the butch-style many men lived by day. *Leather* may have debuted at Nellie's otherwise nelly bar, but *butch* had long been a constant at the Black Cat which was, after all, near that greatest seafood/khaki/drifter concession, the Embarcadero YMCA!

The men naming Nellie's as the primordial leather bar claim the Black Cat was acceptable only on Halloween as a camp. (Halloween, that greatest of all Gay Feast Days, all informants agree, was basically pulled together in San Francisco at the Black Cat.) Whatever further research resolves, the Black Cat seems to be the first South-of-Market bar where leather achieved some prominence and longevity. Nellie's, almost immediately after the Advent of Leather, moved out of the Tenderloin to the Mission where it fell, if not from grace, then by location, from leather which preferred the deserted-by-night light-industrial area South of the Market Street Cable Car Slot.)

BUTCH GUYS/SSISSY BOYS

A kind of uncivil civil war broke out among gay men: butch vs queens. This civil war, still as ongoing as any mid-east crisis, hung its ultimate battle insignia, later, when the Tool Box, tired of "Sweaters" trying to break the enforced Leather Dress Code, nailed a pair of tennis shoes to the ceiling to "stamp out sneakers." South of Market, only on Halloween did any flamboyant drag dare rear its slutty head, and then only as a camp. Piss-elegant men were not an often visible species at The Black Cat.

ARE YOU WHAT YOU WEAR?

LA psychotherapist, Guy Baldwin (whose "Ties That Bind" column is a regular *Drummer* trip to bountiful), says in *Drummer* 127: "Social rules say that straight is better than gay. The rules also say that vanilla is better than kinky. So there is hiding. And a part of us is cut off from ourselves." Baldwin's words are ever so true about leathermen's initial history: ambivalence, hiding, and dissembling were the order of the duplicitous 50's when men, with an appetite for leather, were choking on Ivy League fashions and chiffon.

Linn Kiefer, a founding member of the California Motor Club, who resided on Nob Hill admitted to this kind of "Double-Gay" life some men were living deep within the already "Double-Life of Being Gay While Passing in a Straight World."

Two times "Double" can mean trouble.

Early leathermen circumvented duplicitous identity as cleverly as Clark Kent to avoid trouble. The always socially-prominent San Franciscan, Kiefer, said, "After cocktails and dinner at Gordon's, I changed in a phone booth into my jeans and teeshirt and headed South of Market." Levi's and leather were considered very *outré*! Penny loafers and tennis sweaters were the "accepted" gay style. Leather Drag, at the opposite end of Feather Drag, which was mostly relegated to the Sleazedom of the Tenderloin saloons, was judged by the received taste of elegant gay arbiters, as if it were automatically Rough Trade.

WHAT SIMPLE FOLK DO

That, precisely, was leather's appeal. Every class-conscious man, from British lord to NY/SF upwardly mobile type, likes to "Fuck Down." As Sam Steward and Tennessee Williams both, "That's what the lower classes are for: sex." Smell envy there. Envy of the hyper-masculinity the middle and upper-classes imagine that blue-collar workers, drifters, and sailors automatically have because their work, work clothes/uniforms, and seedy lifestyle all signal the roguish romance of sexual emancipation and fuck-you social freedom. (Refer to any drawing by homomasculinist artist Rex.)

Leather, so much a part of working gear—cowboy to lineman to biker, gave men, feeling that their soft ribbon-clerk or corporate-lives made them softer, weaker, more "feminine" than the free-spirited construction worker who rode his bike to his job, a chance to buy into, and act out, the seemingly tougher men they envied with every inch of their hardons.

LEATHER AS PSYCHO-DRAMA

People costume themselves pursuant to their lust. Actor Laurence Harvey, straight as a stick, loved women so much, he was a cross-dresser. [Laurence Harvey figured prominently in the 1960's gaystream developing gay culture on screen. He starred in one of gay director John Schlesinger's masterpieces, *Darling* (1965); in the very lesbian *Walk of the Wild Side* (1962); in Tennessee Williams' *Summer and Smoke* (1962); and in the 1955 film *I Am a Camera* which, based on Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*, became the world's gayest—and probably most perfect—musical *Cabaret* (1972).] On the other hand, homomasculine, but closeted, gay men love naturally-butch straight men so much, they become the *real* male impersonators. That's not politically incorrect, because the aim was to realize the ideal, and not to ape the hurtful macho stereotype. Imitation is not only the sincerest form of flattery, it is also the route to learning how to "up" a man's own true *Butch Quotient*. Many are the gay men of the 50's and 60's who purposely pursued "butch" jobs, from cop to sewer worker to trucker, to enhance their adult perception of themselves and spit in the sissy-boy image they had by-force grown up with.

The history of International Gay Leather is as much a psycho-drama of acting out manliness in one's soul as it is slipping onto one's body a full set of practical leathers for riding.

"OUTLAW" FAGS & HELL'S ANGELS

Post WWII, and on into the 1950's, cars were expensive. Motorcycles were cheap. The Hell's Angels, emerging parallel to bikes during the same post-war time, were basically wild WWII vets who, remembering 200-pound Carol in Keokuk, preferred 2,000 pounds of hot metal between their legs and a blonde Californicating mama riding behind with tits and puss leaning into the biker's shoulders and butt.

At the same parallel time, butch queer—also getting out of the military—likewise preferred the economy and feel of motorcycles. Kicked-up lines of bikes appeared outside the Black Cat. What started as transportation became status symbol. Every weekend, one senior kickstarter reported, more bikes showed up. Guys took notice. Form follows function. What began as *function* became *fashion*. It wasn't long before bikers, standing in the Black Cat, decided, after the Saturday night saturnalias, to run together to a variety of Sunday party-destinations around the Bay Area.

HOW LEATHER GOT THE RUNS

Long before the hey-day hoe-downs of stereotypical Formal Runs sponsored by latter-day saints-and-sinners, who cloned rival new clubs incorporated with legal charters, the prototypical catch-up-if-you-can Satyrs MC was biking casually out to Morrow Bay, Kings Canyon, and down to Valley Floor in Yosemite. The spur-of-the-moment first runs were a way, Linn Kiefer said, to get guys who had never been out of San Francisco to see a bit of California. Almost instantly, riders found runs basically great bar-alternative ways to breathe fresh air and hunt fresh meat. In the early 60's, the runs, dividing the distance between two cities, helped SF men meet LA men by rendezvousing at campsites halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles.

THE “LAYERING” OF LEATHER

The bikes came first as economy.

The leather jackets and gloves came second as warmth and skid-proofing against terminal “road rash.” Only much later, did leather, specifically with the “invention” of the detachable codpiece, lock down into a formal fetish unto itself and a signal for S&M sex.

The clubs came third because the bikes were always breaking down and riding together was more fun in a dozen different ways than being stranded alone along the freeway or a mountain road with a dripping Harley (which is the mechanical equivalent of a dick that starts dripping six hours into an American man’s trans-Atlantic flight to Amsterdam to start his vacation).

OUR LEATHER ADAM

Robert Frost, long before Robert Pirsig’s excellent *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, wrote: “We learn from our hands to our head.” Frost, the “effete” poet could never have written about mending walls if he, as “butch” stonemason had never built one. Manly is what manly does. The mechanics of the motorcycle laid a basic socio-political lesson: men have resources and strength in numbers. [*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* was considered required reading for gay men in the 70's; author Pirsig’s son, who was the center of his father’s motorcycle trip in the book, was unfortunately murdered on lower Haight Street, very near the home of Old Reliable David Hurles, who went out to the disturbance near the San Francisco Zen Center.]

Think of that first day in leather history when the first man, the first gay dad (only a kid himself then), our Leather Adam, repaired his own bike and stood up and got a hardon seeing his formerly pristine fingernails crescented with grease just like the lube-jockeys he’d lusted for in garages throughout his life!

CLOTHES EMPOWER THE MAN

This feeling, born of an acculturated symbolism, has little to do with *straight* or *gay*; it has to do with ability to handle machines stereotyped as “manly.” That is leather’s psychic symbolism, same as any male gear, construction to uniform: it signals to the outside world and affirms to the inner self that, for better or worse—as far as the clothes make/empower the man—here, fuck you! is a man.

You know from your own experience that when you dress “tough,” even straight guys treat you different; when you wear a cop ball cap, clerks smile more. Leather is a heavy symbol in a world that functions on the surface of symbolism.

SEIZE YOUR LEATHER!

The hardest thing to be in America today is a man.

Leather addresses the state-of-being, like a process, head-on.

So, gradually, long before colored hankies coded sex-act preferences, owning a bike became as much an overt signal of butch “sexual inversion” (as homosexuality was politely referred to in those days) as walking a poodle was a sign of queenliness. Leathers divided from Sweaters. The Black Cat, same as the Tool Box and Phoebe’s after it, began to enforce a dress code to keep out the sweater”leather groupies.”

OUR DADS’ FIRST BIKE CLUBS

Here, leather history, which like all history is an agreed upon lie, becomes touchy. Early on, the Warlocks MC existed first on paper as a bike club *with one rule*: a man had to have a bike to belong. At the same time, the Koalas and the Barbary Coasters were aborning as “buddy-clubs”: a man needn’t own a bike, but bikes were the usual mode of inexpensive transportation to bars and runs. As Kiefer remembers, the first bikers were relatively affluent and some were socially highborn, even in the Bay Area. Even so, the high-cost of a bike never prevented the dedicated lower-income leather bachelor from buying his Harley.

CALIFORNIA MOTOR CLUB

The first bike club to be officially incorporated in California was the CMC on April 15, 1963. The California Motor Club (*not* “Motorcycle”) was organized at 111 Gilbert Street, San Francisco, in a warehouse used by Jack Haines’ father to clean used refrigerators and stoves. Its industrial atmosphere made for a perfect clubhouse. The idea of the club was Jack Haines’ and another man, currently unnameable, as he is allegedly still in Mexico waiting for the statute of limitations to run out on whatever he has been accused of doing.

So, there in Jack’s father’s scrub-brush warehouse, like Cinderella from the ash pit, the CMC hoisted its colors and began a tradition, formalizing the leather-bike-club look and affecting community consciousness through cultivating, always, various political types, not the least of whom is the wife of Senator Milton Marks. [Senator Marks on May 12, 1996, sent congratulatory letters on California State Senate stationery to each of us couples who participated in San Francisco’s historic first “domestic partners” ceremony in City Hall, March 25, 1996.]

THE FIRST BIKE RUN

The first bike run was two guys nobody—not even they—remembers fucking their chrome pipes, hot leather seats, and each other in Yosemite.

THE FIRST OFFICIAL BIKE RUN

The first semi-organized CMC bike runs started in the 1961-62 summers as laid-back sex camp-outs, which soon became highly designed encampments, kept aglow by Ray Floyd, the legendary CMC “Fire Fairy,” and which soon staged camp-and-drag shows made festive by the likes of Hollywood’s distinguished British actor and cigar-smoker, Peter Bromilow (who played Sir Sagramore in the movie musical *Camelot*); flaming Flamenco dragster and pioneer politico, Jose Sarria; and dozens of other guys, who, like Mickey and Judy, enjoyed putting on a show where, unlike drag queens, they remained very much men even when costumed in female clothes!

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Until further information emerges, the First Official Bike Run was the CMC 1963 bash at Rainer Creek. Three hundred guys, many on their first trip from the City, got a chance to shit in the woods, eat catered foods, watch an all-electric musical-comedy show, and fuck their brains out. The Park Rangers, at first abashed, came around fast, inviting the CMC back the next year, “because no other weekend camping group had ever left a site cleaner than they found it.”

SEAMEN’S SEMEN: THE CMC CARNIVAL

The CMC, making hardly a nickle on its runs, decided that some kind of fund raiser was needed to line its coffers and raise some charity funds. November was pronounced a dead month in San Francisco: nothing much happening. So, *voila!* “Let’s save November!” One CMC member knew someone who knew someone who could book a blue-collar venue, and the bike club, overwhelmed at the profit from the first party, invented, almost by spontaneous combustion, the Autumn ritual orgiastic extravaganzas still thrown annually at Seaman’s Hall: The CMC Carnival.

Unless you suffer from Reverse Alzheimer’s or just came out *post* the *A-Word*: The CMC Carnival rivals only a papal conclave of cardinals in Rome; so important is it to leather history that its own specific generation will be addressed later.

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