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JEANNE BARNEY: LARRY'S "LEATHER WIFE"

Through the years, the stylish petite Jeanne Barney remained the only woman at that French Quarter table of increasingly plump old men whose bumptious nostalgia for their good old salad days had decayed into competition, bragging, and attitude.

On December 29, 2006, six months after Fred's death, Jeanne, whose email address was HollywoodCatLady@, wrote:

The Day After Christmas. Larry actually did go to lunch with me and John Embry and his partner. I rode with John because Larry didn't decide to go until the last minute; I think that he realized he'd have no one to go to dinner with if he didn't go with us to lunch. It was a not unpleasant couple of hours. John and Larry were in truce mode and promised to stop sticking pins in their respective voodoo dolls. John said that you'd sent him a check for \$200 because you wanted to use/reprint something that he didn't remember writing... Not surprisingly, Larry called later in the afternoon to ask what I thought, and whether Embry had said anything bad about him after he left.

That same Christmas, which was four years after the death of Harry Hay, pioneer founder of the Mattachine Society and the Radical Faeries, John Embry gifted Jeanne with the set of pearls the fey Hay frequently wore. She wrote that Embry said about his purchase at auction: "Real estate has been very good to us."

A year later, on December 24, 2007, she wrote me the day after the latest of the traditional Christmas luncheons:

Brunch went well. I realize that now I've accepted the fact that I'll never get my \$ out of him, and [that] if I don't have to spend much time with him, he's bearable. I do wish, though, that ...[he] would not regale me with stories of costly remodeling and brand-new LG appliances for...his apartments.

If a plus-one guest, say, Fred Halsted (1941-1989 suicide) or Oscar Streaker Robert Opel (1939-1979 murder) or me (b. 1939), was present to provide a captive audience for these leather pioneers, the performances were even more serrated. Talk about death by a thousand paper cuts. Were they high on smog? What disconcerting fun they were slicing and dicing and bragging and complaining and agreeing on their addiction to mutual abuse. They were wits halfway between Theater of the Absurd and Theater of Cruelty. And then they'd all go out to lunch. Again. And again. An observer could see they were a chosen family of busy folks, jealous and prideful, and lucky, by age and fate, that they had made their own pioneer reputations in the 1960s and early 1970s before there was fierce competition for gay media power in Los Angeles where it took from 1967 to 1974 for Bill Rau and Richard Mitch's local rag, *The Pride Newsletter*, to grow itself—using the appeal of dozens of Larry's opinion pieces and Jeanne's advice columns—into conservative investment banker David Goodstein's national mag, *The Advocate*. In 1974, for the first time outside *The Advocate*, Jeanne and Larry were billed together as star authors on the cover of the first issue of *ERA: The Magazine of the New Age*.

I fancied them all because to me, born a sucker for bohemian eccentricity, they were like matured versions of the kind of colorful Beatnik-bongo-ish types I had come out expecting to meet in coffee houses in August 1957 when I first hit Greenwich Village. But they weren't artists. They were commercial writers, who, like Larry—who wrote his *Handbook* in six weeks, but only after first signing a contract—weren't exactly artists who were writers the way Mapplethorpe was first an artist who became a photographer—to the distress of other competing photographers who were not artists. Their realization of that esthetic “class distinction”

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may have been one of the many things that fueled their collective emotions in taking their frustrations out on each other in their traveling vivisection show.

They had a special tension. A special anxiety. Even while they were on the inside of gay media, they were always on the outside looking in. They were midcentury hybrid folk straddling history before and after Stonewall. As a writer for the *Journal of Popular Culture*, I saw them as LA provincials forced to change with the incoming international revolutionary 1960s and the new LGBT rising consciousness. In the 1970s, their lucky gay-power boat rose with the rising tide of LA pop culture that Ronald Brownstein documented in *Rock Me On The Water: 1974: The Year Los Angeles Transformed Movies, Music, Television, and Politics*. They were, with their implicit leader Larry, a snapshot of that unique age group who, post-World War II, having come out in the persecuted homosexuality of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, were forced to graduate to the liberated homosexuality of the 1970s if they wanted to be relevant and sell their wares on page and screen.

Maybe it was gay liberation's forcible process of change around their buttoned-down 1950s core values, content, and style that made them nervous and quarrelsome. Perhaps it was their birth years in the Prohibition 1920s and Depression 1930s that made them all so tightfisted with money—the cause of some of their fights—and drove them hard to make a buck out of 1970s gay life, art, and politics. Their generation lived teeter-tottering on both sides of the stone wall of the 1969 gay rebellion which changed gay values and character overnight the way Virginia Woolf wrote in her essay, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”: “On or around December 1910, human character changed.”

They faced for better and worse what Joan Didion played up and laid down in her devastating novel of people coming undone, and being swept away by history, published six months after Stonewall. They were who they were in the pop-culture revolution of the 1970s. The French Quarter was not their Les Deux Magots. They were like a gay Rotary Club of business people making a living by manufacturing gay pop culture they struck off each other for their books, magazines, and films in the way that Fred Halsted spun Didion's 1970 title, *Play It as It Lays*, into

the 1972 title for his S&M leather-and-fisting film *LA Plays Itself* which since 1974 has been in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art. As character actors, they were perfect for both Didion's and Halsted's Hollywood. To me, born a half-generation after Townsend and Embry, and a year after Barney, they had a mystique as tragicomic characters, historic heroes even, caught up in the midcentury war between bigots and faggots like bruised characters suffering in a gay novel writing itself against all odds during those degrading and horrible decades of 1950s homophobia, 1960s politics, 1970s police persecution, and 1980s AIDS that drove some people to all kinds of creation and self-destruction.

Tangent to this core circle, Jeanne Barney and I carried on our own snug relationship by landline phone and email for many years in which she often reported the antics of the latest "lunch... between your friends Larry and John." (She always pretended they were my friends.) When the *Leather Journal* announced her as recipient of its Pantheon of Leather Lifetime Award in spring 2008, I was asked to write her Honorary Biography which—aware of her volatility around Larry and John—I sent her for her approval. She liked it until she didn't until she did until she didn't. Over the years, Mark and I had gifted her with purses and perfumes and, from J. Peterman whose unique clothing she fancied, a silky hand-embroidered Japanese jacket we suggested she wear to walk the Leather Carpet at the Leather Archives & Museum ceremony on July 20 in her hometown of Chicago. Instead she decided to stay in LA because her health at best was always fragile. She was, in fact, that summer of Larry's final act, suffering a rolling grief that her dear friend, Stuart Timmons, the fifty-one-year-old co-author of *Gay L.A.* and author of *The Trouble with Harry Hay*, was confined in a convalescent home after suffering a massive stroke on January 31.

On May 31, 2008, while she and Mark and I were lurching for hours over her vegetarian reuben sandwich and our pastrami reubens at Canter's Deli at 419 N. Fairfax where she, in a kind of Hollyweird Canter-bury tale, told us she had sprinkled her father's ashes inside and outside the restaurant two years before, Mark asked her, "What's with you and Larry? Why do you all

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treat each other like that?” She said he was the second person to ask her that in a week, but she dodged any reason why, leaving the question open to future social historians and literary detectives.