

Pisces Bathhouse Raid

Forty members of the Edmonton Police service, six RCMP officers, and two crown attorneys stormed the Pisces Health Spa, a bathhouse used by homosexual men, on May 30, 1981, at around 1:30 AM. Fifty-six men were arrested as “found-ins” of a bawdyhouse, a location kept for the purpose of prostitution or acts of indecency. There was never any evidence of prostitution taking place in the spa. Many of those charged had their names plastered across TV screens, radio broadcasts and newspapers. The treatment they received was harsh compared to others found in other types of bawdy houses because the justice system would typically shield the names of men who were found paying for prostitutes. At 4:00 AM, those arrested were rounded up and taken away for their 5:00 AM court hearing. Each man appeared without counsel before two provincial judges. The men claimed that they had asked for counsel and phone calls, but were denied. Eventually, every single man arrested was pronounced guilty. Most had to pay a \$250-\$300 fine or spend thirty days in jail.

One of the men charged during the raid was Michael Phair, who went on to plead not guilty. He was convicted, but then appealed, had his record scrubbed and eventually went on to hold public office. He said the way he and the others were treated in the courts and in the media, being called “animals” and berated by lawyers, led to some of the men leaving the city for good while others lost their jobs. “I was there,” says Phair, who described the raid as “crazy, scary and frightening all at the same time.” “It took me a minute to realize it was police and they had video cameras and lights. One of them came into the TV room where there were three or four of us watching TV and yelled, ‘Don’t move. This is a raid. Stay right where you are.’” He remembers being “herded towards the front and photos were taken of each of us with our names.” Despite the trauma and pain that it caused, Phair said the incident also shone a spotlight on the treatment of the LGBTQ community. He said many people at the time felt sending dozens of police officers into a bathhouse and tying up the courts with charges was a waste of money, especially since those charges did not include any prostitution, drugs or weapon offences.

When news of the raid hit, many were puzzled as to why it took so long to plan a raid against the establishment that had not done anything differently from another ten-year-old bathhouse. Police had been watching the building for months. Undercover officers infiltrated the club and gathered intelligence for police prior to the raid. The Edmonton Police argued that the raid was not targeted at homosexuals but at the Pisces because it was a bawdyhouse. The gay community regarded the raid as a full-scale assault on homosexuals that was part of a crackdown on gay people that had begun a few months earlier in Toronto with “Operation Soap”. About one hundred people rallied at city hall on June 3 to condemn the raid as a violation of civil rights, as well as a waste of money. The gay community had been relatively quiet and quite underground, only emerging into the public sphere after the 1969 passing of Bill C-150, which decriminalized homosexuality. The Pisces Health Spa had only been in operation for two years before it and another gay bathhouse, the Gemini, closed down permanently.

Pisces Bathhouse Raid

Shylo Rosborough (He/Him)
Affirming Ministries Coordinator

