


The Very Gay and Interesting History of the Almost Lost Tradition of the Sunday Tea Dance

 Will Kohler • December 13, 2020



This is one of Back2Stonewall.com's most popular Gay History posts. We hope that you enjoy revisiting it or reading it for the first time.

^

The Very Gay History of the Almost Lost Tradition of the Sunday Tea Dance

Many gay men under the age of 30 today are totally clueless of the almost lost tradition of the Sunday Tea Dance. (*A tradition that really must be brought back.*) So here's a little history primer on the "Sunday T-dance" and how and why it was embraced it in the gay culture.

Historically, tea was served in the afternoon, either with snacks ("low tea") or with a full meal ("high tea" or "meat tea"). High Tea eventually moved earlier in the day, sometimes replacing the midday "luncheon" and settled around 11 o'clock, becoming the forerunner of what we know as "brunch".

From the late 1800's to well into the pre-WWI era in both America and England, late afternoon (low) tea service became the highlight of society life. As dance crazes swept both countries, tea dances became increasingly popular as places where single women and their gentlemen friends could meet – the singles scene of the age.

While tea dances enjoyed a revival in America after the Great War, The Great Depression of the 30's wiped them out. Tea consumption was in steady decline in America anyways and by the 50's, tea was largely thought of as something "your grandmother drinks". Also, nightlife was moving later and younger. Working men and women were too busy building the American Dream to socialize so it was left to their teenaged

children in the age of sockhops and the jukebox diner. Rock and roll was dark and dangerous — something you sneaked out for after dinner, not took part in before dinner.

Gay people, of course, were still largely underground in the 50s, but it was in these discreet speakeasies that social (nonpartnered) dancing was evolving. It was illegal for men to dance with men, or for women to dance with women. In the event of a raid, gay men and lesbian women would quickly change partners to mixed-couples. Eventually, this led to everyone sort of dancing on their own.

By the late 60s, gay men had established the Fire Island Cherry Grove and also the more subdued and “closeted” Pines (off of Long Island, in New York) as a summer resort of sorts. It was illegal at that time for bars to ‘knowingly sell alcohol to homosexuals’ and besides many of the venues there were not licensed as ‘night clubs’ or to sell alcohol. To avoid attracting attention, afternoon tea dances were promoted. Holding them in the afternoon also allowed those who needed to catch the last ferry back to the mainland to attend.

The proscription against same-sex dancing was still in effect and gay men were not allowed to dance together by law, so organizers were forced to institute ‘no touching’ rules. The only way it could happen was in a group. The line dance was born. Dances like the “Hully Gully” and “The Madison” allowed men to dance together as long as there was at least one woman involved. It became the rage in the Pines. The dancing

was monitored by someone up on a ladder with a flashlight and megaphone to observe, if the men got too close the light would be shined on them. The dance would be featured in the 1970 film “Boys in the Band.”

In 1967 Tea Dance went to 7 days a week during season.

During this time raids by the Suffolk Police Department were a common occurrence on Fire Island. The men of the Pines were often rounded up like cattle and chained to poles in order for them to get their quota. Their identities were sometimes revealed in the local press.

By the 1970’s after the Stonewall riots disco music arrived and again the Tea Dance would evolve. It would now grow into a phenomenon that all of Fire Island would find their way to.

Post-Stonewall, the tea dance moved to Greenwich Village. A newly-energized gay community around Christopher Street embraced the social dancing craze. While the Fire Island gays tended to be rich upper-class preppies, the downtown gays of Christopher Street and the Village were working-class and they tended to party at night. As in the straight community, tea dances gradually moved later until they became subsumed into the night club scene.

Through the 70’s, gay men championed the uniform of the working class — t-shirts and denim — as fashion aesthetic. In part because they were affordable, and in part because it projected an appealing

hypermasculinity associated with the working class. Gays in the post-Stonewall era were consciously rebelling against the effete stereotypes associated with the manicured, sweater-wearing, *tea-drinking* gays of the Fire Island set. Real men wore t-shirts and drank *beer*. Gay men still had afternoon/early evening dances – usually on Sundays, in order to make the most of one’s weekend while still being able to get up for Monday morning’s work.

The downtown gays rejected the term “tea dance” as being too effete and opted for the supposedly butcher “t-dance”, and promoted “t-shirts and denim” as the costume of choice. By the mid 70’s, the “Christopher Street Clone” look (*short cropped hair, mustache, plaid shirt over a tight white t-shirt, faded denim jeans that showed off your ass*) had made the trans-continental trip from New York City to Los Angeles (*gays in Hollywood*) and, of course, to San Francisco (*follow the Yellow Brick Road and it leads to Castro*). It brought with it the tea dance phenomenon

Through the decades the popularity of the tea dance has waned. And while it still survives in Fire Island and a few gay bastions like *Provincetown* it is all but gone and those few remaining are shadows of their former selves.

Lets not let the Tea Dance become a piece of our forgotten gay history.

*TRIVIA:

Back in the day a no gay man worth his weight in

poppers ever went to Sunday Brunch before 2 p.m. and timed it that way as to hit the Tea Dance at 4 p.m. part of this was because they were out at after-hours clubs, the Baths, or the Meat Rack the night before till 6 or 7 a.m. in the morning.

Pines Joins the Act; 25 Arrested at Beach

Cherry Grove — At least once each summer Suffolk police conduct a Saturday night raid on this Fire Island community in the hope of putting an end to some of the more flagrant law violations among members of the homosexual colony.

Almost always the raid nets a bagful of suspected deviates charged with "outraging public decency" for their activities under the stars in the eastern reaches of Cherry Grove where the last boardwalk meets sandy stretches which separate the community from its next door neighbor, Fire Island Pines.

Saturday night the first major raid of the 1963 summer season was carried out in two sections by plainclothes detectives and patrolmen who dressed casually, and some hardly at all, in order to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible. This time they bagged 20 males at Cherry Grove and an additional five at Fire Island Pines in simultaneous raids carried out with split-second precision.

The accused men were herd-

ed aboard beach vehicles and driven to Davis Park, a few miles east of the Pines, where they were arraigned in the Davis Park Fire House before Justice of the Peace William Underwood Jr. Guilty pleas were entered and the men were fined \$50 each and given 30-day suspended jail sentences.

A Fire Island Pines resident, saying that the raid was the first in its history, said that five of the men were seized by police on Tuna Walk, near Shore Walk, hard by the site of the old Lorse Hill Coast Guard Station. The others were arrested about a half-mile west of the area, in the easternmost part of Cherry Grove. This observer said that the Pines raid was carried out in spite of the fact the arrested men had posted lookouts along the boardwalks.

All but one of the arrested were from New York City or elsewhere off Long Island, including one male who said he was an employee of the Argentine government and claimed

Continued on page 6





Tea Dance [<http://www.back2stonewall.com/tag/the-very-gay-and-interesting-history-of-the-almost-lost-tradition-of-the-sunday-tea-dance>]



Will Kohler

Will Kohler is one of America's best known LGBT historians, He is also a a accredited journalist and the owner of Back2Stonewall.com. A longtime gay activist Will fought on the front lines of the AIDS epidemic with ACT-UP and continues fighting today for LGBT acceptance and full equality. Will's work has been referenced on such notable media venues as BBC News, CNN, MSNBC, The Washington Post, The Daily Wall Street Journal, Hollywood Reporter, and Raw Story. Back2Stonewall has been recently added to the Library of Congress' LGBTQ+ Studies Web Archive. Mr. Kohler is available for comment, interviews and lectures on LGBT History. Contact: Will@Back2Stonewall.com