

Out Magazine

June, 2003

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In the winter and spring of 1920, Harvard University's Perkins Hall—then the largest dormitory on campus, boasting spacious rooms, brick corridors, and iron staircases—was home to some of the brightest, most promising young men in America. As Harvard students, they were expected to continue the tradition of the country's oldest university, leading America with moral and intellectual clarity in a time of tremendous change and uncertainty.

In other circles, though, the boys of Perkins Hall were better known for their "bitch parties." These raucous all-nighters featured drunken sailors, horny Harvard boys, men dressed as women, and what one Harvard student then described as "the most disgusting and disgraceful and revolting acts of degeneracy and depravity" he had ever seen.

The parties were usually held in the second-floor room of Ernest Weeks Roberts, the handsome, brown-haired young son of a conservative Massachusetts congressman. Roberts had a girlfriend in the nearby town of Brookline, but what he really liked was partying and chasing boys. He skipped so many classes, in fact, that he landed on academic probation after receiving several near-failing grades. His father came to the rescue, securing promises from the school that Roberts would be admitted to Harvard's Medical School as long as he showed some improvement.

Roberts put on a serious face for his family, but in reality he was at the center of a wild gay crowd at Harvard: when the boys weren't cavorting in Perkins Hall, they were chasing around Cambridge and Boston, dancing with gay men in bars like the Lighted Lamp and the Golden Rooster. While many "proper Bostonians" perceived their city as a bastion of purity and decency (and took pride in the fact that most theatrical and literary works that dealt even marginally with sexuality were banned from the city), Boston had a vibrant and youthful Bohemian scene dating back to the second half of the 19th Century, one inspired greatly by English writer Oscar Wilde, who came to visit several times in 1882. Boston was no New York—where in 1920, gays opened up 20 restaurants and "personality clubs," many of which were later raided and closed—but it had plenty of its own opportunities for debauchery. In a 1914 letter, an anonymous Bostonian wrote, "And how many homosexuals I've come to know! Boston, this good old Puritan city, has them by the hundreds."

There may have been hundreds at Harvard alone. In May of 1920, Roberts wrote a giddy, gossip-filled letter to his friend Cyril Wilcox, who was taking time off from Harvard to recover from a case of hives brought on by an academic crisis (he had failed to take the April exams his future depended on). In his letter, Roberts recounted his recent sexual escapades and updated Wilcox on all he had missed while recuperating at home. "I haven't made Bradlee yet, but when I do it will last for 2 days and 2 nights without taking

it out," Roberts wrote. But Wilcox never read the letter. He had committed suicide the day after Roberts sent it.

The suicide—and the incriminating letter, which was opened by Wilcox's brother and made clear that homosexuality was rampant at Harvard—sparked a secret investigation at the school: Fearing an "outbreak" of homosexuality, Harvard hastily convened a five-member panel of school officials they referred to as The Court. Over the next two weeks, The Court interrogated dozens of students and handed down guilty verdicts against Roberts, six other students, a philosophy assistant, a dental school student, and an alumnus. The students were expelled—and, remarkably, ordered to leave the city of Cambridge. For many, it was the end of their promising academic careers, as Harvard took further measures to keep them from attending other schools.

For more than 80 years, this remarkable story, recounted in some 500 pages of typed and barely legible handwritten letters and school documents, sat untouched in a locked filing cabinet at University Hall. Then Amit Paley, a Harvard student and an editor of the student-run Harvard Crimson, came upon a strange reference to the Court documents while working on another assignment. Paley was eventually granted access to the files and wrote of their existence in the Crimson. (While Harvard blocked out the names of the students involved, Paley was able to identify them after six months of research).

A further examination of the 500 pages of files, which now reside in the Harvard Archives, along with old yearbooks, freshman-student reports, and 25th- and 50th-anniversary class reports, tell a fascinating, tragic story about gay life at Harvard in 1920 and the administration's ferocious response to the discovery of homosexual "degenerates" on its campus.

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Kenneth Day didn't think of himself as queer, but the blond, athletic Harvard sophomore wasn't opposed to letting guys go down on him. And Harvard's gay boys found Day endlessly appealing: He had a muscular body (Day liked to box and run track), masculine credentials (like Ernest Weeks Roberts, he was a member of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity), and an innocent look about him that invited corruption; one student described Day in a letter as being "young in sin." Roberts liked Day, too, and in his fateful letter to Wilcox, he wrote that he had sex with Day "every once in a while, for diversion," and that soon after he introduced Day to Harvard's gay scene, the sophomore was "being sucked foolish by anyone and everyone he can get his hands on."

Day's sexual adventures were in stark contrast to his attitude the prior year, when he complained about his roommate, Cyril Wilcox, who often invited men from Boston to spend the night in their dorm room. "I am so disgusted with him that I cannot bring myself to talk to him," an aggravated Day wrote in a 1919 letter to his cousin, complaining that their room was turning into a brothel. The roommates soon made up, though, with Day telling his cousin, "Perhaps he can't help being a little queer."

While Day concentrated on his studies, Wilcox struggled academically in 1920, spending much of his free time at the Beacon Hill apartment of his older lover, Harry Dreyfus.

"Wilcox seems to be a bright enough chap, but he doesn't study apparently," his adviser wrote on March 3, 1920. Harvard told him that he would have to do well on his April exams, and when he didn't take them, the school told him that he would not receive credit for much of that academic year.

When Wilcox committed suicide, his family initially thought it was because of Harvard's decision. But then his brother opened Roberts' letter and a second letter from a recent Harvard graduate that referred to Wilcox as "Salome's Child" and made references to recent police raids on gay clubs. Wilcox's brother tracked down Cyril's lover, Harry Dreyfus, and beat him up. He then met with Harvard dean Chester Greenough, informing him about his brother's suicide, the letters, and the names of several students and other men he had extracted from Dreyfus.

Soon after, Greenough received an anonymous letter from someone who identified himself only as a member of the class of 1921. The letter mentioned the names of Roberts and Day, among others, and offered a shocking explanation for Wilcox's suicide: "While in his freshman year he met in college some boys, mostly members of his own class, who committed upon him and introduced him to commit on them 'Unnatural Acts,'" read the letter. "[The] habit so grew on him that realizing he did not have strength of character enough to brake [sic] away from it concluded suicide the only course open to him. . . . Isn't it about time an end was put to this sort of thing in college?"

Harvard hastily convened the secret Court. The initial evidence pointed mostly to Roberts, but The Court wanted more proof before accusing such a politically connected student. The Court called Day as its first witness, and according to handwritten notes taken by members of The Court, he admitted to having sex with Roberts but denied Roberts's claim that he had sex with "everyone who came along." Day told The Court he was drunk the first time he had sex with Roberts, and that he hadn't been with him sexually in more than a month. A member of The Court wrote that Day "admits he is probably a little tainted. Mind poisoned." When asked about his masturbation practices (The Court was obsessed with the subject) Day said he hadn't done that in seven years. Finally, The Court wanted names of other students involved, which Day — disgusted by his involvement in the affair — offered with little resistance.

The next day, Roberts appeared before The Court. After initially denying any homosexual activity, he eventually confessed to sexual relations with five male Harvard students. But Roberts also claimed he had no homosexual activity in three months and that he'd been "led astray" by Wilcox. The Court didn't believe Roberts to be a credible witness, labeling him "certainly the ringleader in the homosexual practices in college."

After interrogating several other students, the investigation quickened when Nathaniel Wolff, a Harvard freshman, casually mentioned to an assistant Harvard dean that he knew something about Wilcox's suicide. The Court immediately summoned Wolff to testify, where he confessed to occasional homosexual activity that began at a prestigious boarding school that was "permeated with homosexuality" and "mutual masturbation." Wolff told The Court that his first homosexual experience at Harvard was with Keith Smerage, a name The Court had not yet heard. Wolff said he met Smerage at the Dramatic Club and realized Smerage was gay at an ensuing dinner. He told The Court he

accompanied Smerage to his dorm room after dinner, where the two "took off all their clothes" and mutually masturbated each other.

It had, until then, been a good year for Smerage, a transfer student from Tufts who loved drama and English. "I have made the Dramatic Club!" he wrote to his mother that spring. "I am fully beyond words. And as is usual with me I wept just a little. It's silly, weak, kiddish and all that, I know; but gee, to have done something real . . . This year I am sure is the most glorious in my college so far. If only I could find a girl, now."

When the Court summoned him, Smerage confessed to having many homosexual experiences, rouging his nails, and having heard of Havelock Ellis, whose 1897 book *Sexual Inversion* examined homosexuality in America. He also told The Court that he had conquered masturbation about nine months prior. Finally, he gave The Court names of other guilty students but stopped short of naming them all. "Said he knows fifty names but won't tell," The Court noted in its files.

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By early June, The Court handed down 14 guilty verdicts. One of the accused, Harvard Dental School student Eugene Cummings, committed suicide on June 11. The story got big play in the *Boston American*. "According to friends of the two in Fall River, Cummings, who was said to have been mentally unbalanced, told a story of an alleged inquisition which he claimed was held in the college office following Wilcox's death," read the article. "He said that he was taken into the office, which was shrouded in gloom, with but one light dimly burning, and there questioned exhaustively. This story, which was denied by the college authorities, was said to have sprung from his disordered mind."

That same month, Dean Chester Greenough, under orders from Harvard president Lawrence Lowell, told Roberts and the other guilty students to withdraw from the school immediately and leave the city of Cambridge. "I am greatly distressed and embarrassed to have to tell you that your son has involved himself in difficulties so extraordinarily grave that the President has instructed me to advise your son to leave the University at once," Greenough wrote to Congressman Roberts. "His offense has nothing to do with low scholarship; it is not gambling, or drink, or ordinary sexual intercourse. If he does not confess to something worse than any of these things, he will not have told you the whole truth. . . . The matter is altogether the most distressing that has occurred since I have been in this office."

On June 8, Congressman Roberts replied to Greenough. "If you are a parent, you will understand how this dreadful news has upset me, far more on the boys' account than my own," he wrote. ". . . I would further like to be informed if this most deplorable affair has been or will be made public." (Greenough assured him it wouldn't.)

Meanwhile, in a letter to his cousin, Day again insisted that he wasn't as guilty as his Harvard classmates. "I have been asked to leave for what I consider an unjust cause," Day wrote. "I could not tell the whole story to the Board. The only thing I can say is I am the least involved of any, and the Board seems to realize that." Indeed, Greenough held out the possibility of readmitting Day in the future and was in favor of doing so a year later,

but he was overruled by Harvard president Lowell. "When I said goodbye to him this morning, I told him that he must not despair, that he must reconstruct his life, and keep up his courage," Greenough wrote to Day's cousin (Day's parents had died when he was young, and he was in the care of his grandmother).

Day's cousin wrote many letters to Greenough asking the board to consider readmitting him. In one, he appealed to Greenough's sense of sympathy. "The loss of a year to a boy in ordinary conditions, with his parents to fall back upon, might not be so serious a matter, but in the present matter it seems a very high price to pay, as it will mean I fear the end of his education." In another letter, he tried, like Day had, to differentiate him from the other Harvard students involved. "He was interested in swimming, track and boxing," he wrote, "which are not sports that interest a degenerate who associates with degenerates."

Of all the dismissed students, Smerage went the least quietly. His mother wrote numerous letters to Greenough, saying "you men could have done much good had you had perhaps a little less sense of justice and a little more of the spirit of Jesus in your hearts." And in a June 15 letter to Greenough, Smerage claimed that the school was responsible for his supposed crime. "Mother says she was warned never to send me to Harvard, but no specific reason was given. Now we know! Harvard has a reputation for this sort of thing that is nationwide. I have heard a more uncomplimentary song Princeton sings of Harvard and along this same theme. Through Roberts I met the leader of a similar act to his at Dartmouth. When I asked an acquaintance of mine there if he knew the lad, he said yes, and added, 'He and his gang should have gone to Harvard.'"

Smerage's rant did little to help him get into Rutgers, as Harvard promised to tell the school the circumstances of his dismissal. Other expelled students—including one who was essentially found guilty for being the roommate of a homosexual—faced similar treatment. "You have given me just the information we needed, and it goes without saying that we shall inform him that we do not care to consider his application for admission," a Brown University official wrote to Greenough. "How frequently we uncover in the undergraduate population messes of this sort, and how disagreeable it is to deal with such matters!"

How *frequently* they uncover such matters? While it's unclear just how many similar purges occurred at other schools, historians suspect that Harvard wasn't alone.

"A case like Harvard's is shocking to some people, but it shouldn't be," says George Chauncey, a history professor at the University of Chicago and the author of *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. "This kind of thing certainly happened more than we realize. I think the Harvard case got so much attention partly because it's Harvard, partly because people have forgotten how virulent anti-homosexual policing was in those days, and partly because people assume that gay life was virtually nonexistent or that gay people were invisible or isolated during that time. But it wasn't."

For Day, Smerage, and Roberts, their expulsion from Harvard was the end of their academic careers. Smerage managed a tea room for three years and soon adopted the

stage name Richard Keith, performing in many New England theater productions. He later moved to New York City and worked as the assistant manager of a restaurant before committing suicide in 1930.

Day, who worked in banking after leaving Harvard, never told his two children why he left college. He married three times and was known as a skirt-chaser. In his Harvard 50th-anniversary class report (Harvard Students remain part of their year's class, even if they are expelled), Day wrote from Florida that he was "very happily married and living on the sun coast."

For Roberts, who married his Brookline girlfriend less than a year after being expelled from Harvard, there was to be no following in his father's footsteps. He worked most of his life as an interior designer. Six years before his death in 1958, Roberts—a loyal Republican—opened an antique shop that he ran with his wife out of their home in Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts. In his class's 25th-anniversary report, Roberts wrote that he was "blessed with the happiest of marriages."