

Firebombing Remains a Rubble

Judith Miller

Muriel "Mac" McCann, manager of the recently fire-bombed Mor or Les women's bar in St. Louis, Missouri, was finally cleared of the arson charge thrown at her for allegedly blowing her own tavern up.

Citing lack of evidence, the St. Louis Circuit Attorney's Office on October 16, closed its case on the fire-bombing and refused arson warrants against Ms. McCann, the only suspect in the case.

Assistant Circuit Attorney Michael L. Sullivan said there is no doubt the fire was caused by arson but he noted that police had failed to provide evidence that would connect anyone to the incident.

The fire and explosion that destroyed the bar occurred in the early morning hours of September 11. There was evidence of arson, including two 5-gallon plastic gas containers that were found on the second floor of the building, where Ms. McCann had been living until several weeks before the fire. If she had not moved out, it is quite possible that she would have been killed in the blaze.

The tavern's license was to have expired September 4 in the face of opposition in the neighborhood to its feminist and lesbian patronage. A majority of first floor tenants living near the bar signed a petition opposing license renewal, but a suit was filed on behalf of Bonita Stephens, the bar's owner, challenging the constitutionality of the petition, and the license was extended after a restraining order was secured in behalf of the owner.

"The Concerned Citizens Against Violence," an ad hoc group made up of patrons of the bar and sympathizers, blamed tension and hostility in the conservative neighborhood for the fire-bombing. According to police, there had been a series of phone threats made against continued operation of the bar.

Neighbors reported that a man with the name Ernie on his shirt said he saw three men leave the scene in a pickup. He thought it was strange that they didn't get out of the truck but left a moment after the blaze erupted. One neighbor reported, "I heard the explosion and I saw the man who did it leaving the scene."

So why has the arson case been closed leaving McCann as the only suspect in the case? In the public's mind is McCann still guilty, since she was only cleared due to "lack of evidence"? "I feel like I've been crucified by the press and TV, all of whom have named me as the primary suspect...the police and press have made me out the culprit," stated Ms. McCann.

Although the media had not reported it, Ms. McCann was never booked for arson. She was simply held on suspicion and then released. The press had further charged that McCann had "mysteriously" moved out of her apartment the day before the bombing. She had, in fact, moved out three weeks before, after a bomb threat which she had reported to the police.

Since the opening of the Mor or Les bar in March 1979, there have been repeated harassments of women with increasing incidences of violence. Verbal harassment of women finally mushroomed into threats of bodily harm, destruction of property, sniping at the bar during business hours, and repeated bomb threats, and finally the actual fire-bombing that turned the place to rubble.

For eleven years Mac McCann has fought many battles in the much needed war against injustices toward women. Is it for this reason that the media has "Crucified" her? McCann, however, will keep on fighting. Says McCann, "Through all our history women have been filled with guilt and fear, made to feel helpless in the face of constant injustices. I say no more. We must stand up and fight. I believe with all my heart that if we stand together we cannot be defeated."

Big Mama Rag (Vol 7 No 10 November 1979) page 3. Reprinted with permission of copyright holder.

Available online via <http://voices.revealdigital.com/cgi-bin/independentvoices>

2 letters home to mama

We Would Like To Hear From You

The Trouble With Bars...Anywhere

Dear Chocolate,

I, and I'm sure many others have been seething since your article appeared in BMR. The space, the bold type and the emphasis on your name certainly suggested that BMR agreed with your uninformed, irresponsible, politically un-astute and totally lacking in sisterhood article.

I have run women's bars in St. Louis for almost 10 years; therefore, I must certainly know from whence I speak.

My first bone of contention is with your reference to logistics. Women's bars, owned by gay women, in my experience, (and I've been everywhere, including Denver) are always owned by women who can't afford to be in the bar business. I've heard 100's of women over my many years, women with money, talk about opening a bar. They never do it, they just talk about it. Only caring or financially naive women open women's bars! Bars don't grow on quiet cozy corners. To open a bar, isolated from the Pepsi Colas, the Joes Electric Shops of the world, would cost a fortune. After you hear my story I wonder if you will believe that were someone to have the money would the cost be justified? To be able to afford opening a bar that has not already had the plumbing, the electricity, etc, set up in some way could be a financial disaster. And then there are licensing laws that certainly effect how and where you can open a bar. Let me speak to

the realities.

My first endeavor was above a faggot owned bar. I went there first because it was financially expedient. The "Top of the Bull" a cozy attractive bar in East St. Louis might still be open had I been willing to frequently kiss a faggot's ass. I wasn't--it isn't. I was then offered a place by the straight male owner of a gay club. The "Bottom of the Pot" was in the "rathskellar" or basement of the Potpourri. Politically this place seemed expedient. It was in an area considered the "gay amerika" of St. Louis. Parking was impossible, and the male customers of the Potpourri upstairs hated it that women had taken part of what they considered their's. The fights were constant between myself and the fellows who ran the upstairs. Women didn't know about this. This place was popular, but certainly not without many problems. At last, I was able to graduate to a place I felt would be all ours. For women only! There were no faggots close, in fact no bars or businesses close. No pepsi-colas or joes. But it was in a predominantly Black neighborhood. Many women would not come in at all because this was true, and many of these women were Black. To be able to survive the financial risk of this place I had to live in the basement, and I mean a basement basement, of this place for 5 months. A fact which aided in ending the only long term relationship I sustained in all the years I was in the bar business. Living in this basement also caused the initial infection that eventually killed what was most precious to me, my dog. I say most precious because I certainly suffered more at her passing than from the passing of anyone else. I was on a financial shoestring but I cared--cared that there be someplace for women to get

MORE ON PAGE 18

Big Mama Rag (Vol 8 No 1 January 1980) page 2. Reprinted with permission of copyright holder.

Available online via <http://voices.revealdigital.com/cgi-bin/independentvoices>

Trouble With Bars

From page 2

together. I realized early in the game that I was not in this business to make money. This was my political statement! Yet, here in this isolated spot, women's cars were frequently vandalized and/or burglarized. Two women were beaten up. Our windows were broken, we were robbed twice. I personally prevented a woman being beaten and a 16 year old girl from being raped and got knows what 2078. Many nights I risked a gun or a knife in my gut by threatened angry man who couldn't get in. I was also arrested and spent a couple of hours in jail for working to a locked door. Two and one half years later, only after 2 women had been robbed at gunpoint the "Middle of the Road" closed. I could no longer bear the anxiety I felt for the safety of the women I loved, my customers. When I closed I had \$200 in my name. But I had something much more precious much more valuable. I had the knowledge that I had for many years provided a place for women to get together. May I say without hubbly- that if women who met their present close friends and lovers in a place I ran, decided to give a party for me, they would have to hire the largest hall in St. Louis if they all attended. I deserve a party, by the way. Well, at least I deserve more than I got at the last place I opened. Because I always felt "we deserved something better" and because my credit was good I moved uptown! Working was excellent. The place was large and furnished beautifully. The neighborhood was supposedly excellent. We deserved this place! Opening night was a tremendous success. Over 200 women had been reached by the terrific St. Louis grapevine. Within one month of opening women were coming from everywhere, including many many closets. It was the place to go. But all in within one month a barrage of miseries had befallen us. Our \$100 windows were broken. [We couldn't afford the exorbitant cost of window insurance.] The broken windows were also shot at. We had a very frightening bomb scare. [The police response was laughable, they later in the newspapers denied we ever had a bomb threat, even though it is on tape at police headquarters.] Men flashed at both our front and back doors. Four men frequently harassed women on the streets and in their cars--when I went to the police to complain about their poor surveillance and through such perseverance on my part we discovered that 3 of the 4 men were in the police academy about to graduate and become St. Louis' finest. We were hassled at our front door nightly by men. We had various ways of getting rid of them. And thus the neighborhood circulated a petition to have us closed. The laws of St. Louis allow anyone the right to circulate a petition and if they gain 5% of the neighborhood signatures a bar is closed. They do not have to give a reason for the petition. Justice--hah! They got their \$11 through intimidation, lies, and coercion, and we lost our license. Because our \$1.00 cover charge at the

door had allowed me to put some money away I was able to afford an attorney. We fought and won a restraining order. This order forced the liquor commissioner to issue us a new license. We were never closed. Our next court date would have been October 11, and I am confident we would have won here too. But on September 11 "Mor or Les" was firebombed. Who--who did this? Not the faggots who were unhappy when we invaded their domain, not the Slacks who were unhappy when we invaded their domain. Oh yes, it was the wonderful white middle class, hypocritical, bigotted amerika who burned "Mor or Les" down, and positively the culprits were not women.

I was blamed and arrested. I was jailed for 7 hours before they could decide they had no evidence to keep me jailed, and the backlash of angry caring women must have scared the hell out of the powers that be in St. Louis. The media persecuted me for 3 days. The burned out bar and the suggestion that I was the culprit was front page sensationalism. They tried and convicted me in the media. What pained me more than this adversity was the fact that many in the gay community believed the media. I believe that most of the faggots wanted to believe I did it, and I guess the women that believed (and there were many) are among the many ostriches in this country that believe anything the lying media has to say. I feel very deeply saddened by this. Not because they thought me guilty, but because they are so politically naive they are not aware of the shit that is coming down all over this country. I pray that they wake up before it is too late. Those miserable closets get mighty stuffy. After I was released from jail I was threatened anonymously a number of times. I was threatened that if I didn't shut up I would be jailed again and not come out of jail alive. And I have to say honestly that for the first time in my life I was frightened. I hope you realize that I was in a state of shock. I could not function. I could not cry. I ached. I had lost my best friend and I had been accused of killing her. I was asked to move from my house--I felt I had no place to go. People stared at me on the streets and they whispered, at least I thought all of this happened. I'm sure it did, but somehow I feel not too sure of anything. As time went on I felt more and more isolated--deserted. Where were my friends the day 2 months later that the media said the case was closed and I had theoretically been extorted? I did not receive one phone call in the 48 hours after the media reported this extortionation. I am broke--lawyers took care of that--and I feel very much alone, and still very scared when I realize the power the media wields.

You ask "what's the trouble with women's bars?" Chocolate, since you decided to complain, and now possibly have "the other side of the story" maybe you can answer this question!

Most sincerely,
Mac McCann

Big Mama Rag (Vol 8 No 1 January 1980)
page 18. Reprinted with permission of
copyright holder.

Available online via

<http://voices.revealdigital.com/cgi-bin/independentvoices>