

History Descending a Staircase: The Enchanted Cargo of the Freighter *SS Jack Fritscher*

by Jim Stewart, Department Head, Emeritus,
Social Sciences & History Dept., Chicago Public Library,
and Photographer and Founder,
Keyhole Studios, SoMa, San Francisco

History can be a bitch. It can taunt you. It can seduce you. It can entice you down that dark narrow passage of time with the glimpse of a firm butt framed in open-ass chaps. In San Francisco, South of Market, it suddenly turns the corner and disappears into the midnight fog of a long-forgotten Ringold Alley. You see it again. History's bold building blocks loom large like the shoulders of a Duchamps construction worker in hard-hat and wife-beater shirt who erects scaffolding on Folsom Street. You climb its stairs into the fourth dimension of the time-lapsing past. Your eyes say your heart once yearned for bad-ass boys in leather motorcycle jackets.

In the 1970s, we loved the Eagles' *Hotel California* where "you can check in but you can never leave." We loved Streisand and Redford in *The Way We Were*. We loved Harold Pinter's film, *The Go-Between*, and its author L.P. Hartley announcing: "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."

"We can never sever our links with the past," Ludwik Fleck wrote in his work on the origin of the modern concept of syphilis (*Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, University of Chicago Press, 1979, p. 20). At one time, syphilis was thought to be punishment for sexual sins. Lest we laugh at our ancestors, we must remember that AIDS continues to be viewed by many in a similar light. Gay puritans, for instance, in the 1980s concocted the reactionary myth that the 1970s was a sick decade whose behavior caused disease.

The gay past is a sexual past, and that precise *eros* complicates the telling of the "people's gay history." That past is a country foreign to the institutions that house history. Book publishers and academic journals rightfully fear censorship. Universities and library collections, as well as the National Endowment for the Arts, are protective of their government funding. The next generation of writers and historians is often biased by

politics, gender, race, and the prevailing *zeitgeist*. *Drummer*—the first GLBT magazine to fight the culture war—should not be seen as an erotic embarrassment of pre-historic male-driven sex. Exclusionary puritan history should not pin a huge Scarlet Letter on *Drummer*'s chest.

Fleck suggested that all links to our past “survive in accepted concepts [*accepted* being the operative discriminatory word]...in everyday life as well as in...language and...institutions.” Any concept or way of viewing things and ideas, Fleck argued, does not spring fully grown, like Venus from the sea, but rather is determined by its “ancestors.” The “proto-ideas” (such as found in the gay roots of *Drummer* and its salon) on which contemporary ideas are built, he maintained, must not be “taken out of their chronological context, because they correspond to a different thought collective and a different thought style...one their originators certainly considered [in their day]...to be correct.” (Ibid, p. 25). In precisely this way does Fritscher in *Gay San Francisco* try to resurrect chronological context of *Drummer*'s ancestral and proto-ideas.

Fleck also maintained that each “thought collective” is developed within a discipline by a Vanguard, usually working within a specific situation—such as the first post-Stonewall generation of liberated gay men creating the demotic *Drummer* and living in the SoMa subculture. This first-wave proto-activity by the Vanguard is then followed by the second-wave “official community” that determines the “official canon” of the discipline. Fritscher is in the unique position of being both a Vanguard participant and a surviving analyst of the Vanguard.

Unfortunately for gay history, as the 1970s became the 1980s, AIDS and the gender wars virtually destroyed the first-wave proto-activity of the Vanguard pioneers, and enabled the second-wave to commit that fallacy of logic that because something follows something, the thing it follows caused it.

The main body, Fleck argued, “adjusts its advance according to reports received from the Vanguard, but maintains a certain independence.” In short, *Drummer* existed in a creative reciprocity with its readers and reported actual gay life as lived. Readers independently chose to construct their behavior accordingly. Another stage is reached when the idea becomes “everyday popular knowledge,” and “the fact [for instance, the *Drummer* leather lifestyle] becomes incarnated as an immediately perceptible object of reality.” (Ibid, pp. 124-5). Throughout its life (1975-1999) *Drummer* was a pop-culture perfect circle that, distinct from other magazines, actually created the global leather lifestyle that it reported on. Readers followed its descriptions (not prescriptions) and sent in personal requests and personal ads that shaped the upcoming issues.

The whole process of Vanguard leadership (the *Drummer* creators) and independent critical thinking about that *avant garde* (of *Drummer* creators) is constantly in flux. It is interesting to note how totally *Drummer* was accepted by its readers into their lives for the last quarter of the twentieth century, but that *Drummer* Vanguard and all it represents of male-identified homosexuality has yet to be accepted into the canon of almost-pan-sexual and “official” GLBT history that, ironically, prides itself on every other kind of diversity and inclusion.

The culture war over the right to self-fashion gender identity, which once was *intermural* between heterosexuals and homosexuals, has become *intramural* among gay people. This is precisely when “history can be a bitch,” because some thought collectives operate within specific “thought styles” (*denkstils*), and the “thought styles” tend to “ethnically cleanse” what they don’t like about the thought collectives of the Vanguard.

It appears that correct “thought styles,” which come after the edgy Vanguard, are much slower to change than are the thought collectives of the Vanguard that created the history that must be analyzed.

Group “thought styles” are much broader in reach than is an individual *avant garde* artist or entity, and the “thought style” can encompass whole cultures, such as Euro-cultures, Afro-cultures, Native American cultures, and, one could argue, modern and postmodern gay cultures. The twenty-first-century record of twentieth-century masculine-identified men must not be diminished. Its authentic twentieth-century Vanguard roots must not be excluded from the “thought styles” of GLBT history.

Jack Fritscher and the creative cadre of homomasculine-identified men he brought together under the *Drummer* salon are that Vanguard in twentieth-century gay history. It is a Vanguard whose analysis could help educate the *denkkollektiv* of GLBT history to look beyond what is currently considered politically correct to a broader view of what the “people’s gay history,” in fact, encompasses.

The embarrassing separatist habit—the bad intellectual and academic habit—of excluding masculine-identified gay men or the art and literature of homomascularity from the canon of gay history is analogous to expunging field slaves from a history of slavery, or lesbians from a history of women. Fritscher, not just in *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*, but in his entire oeuvre of books and articles and photographs and videos, invites everyone into the tent even while he tries to tell the hidden history of the homomasculine Vanguard of *Drummer* that was read by thousands of people per month. He writes in *Gay San Francisco* that “the history of leather should be open to all analysts the way the pages of 1970s *Drummer* were open to all.” The *Drummer* Salon, Fritscher continues, was “inclusive” not “exclusive.”

The student of history should be cognizant of the paradigm or construct within which such a study takes place. Like the “thought collective,” the paradigm can shift in an historically short time span.

An examination of the “history” of the “Gay Liberation Movement” in the United States, for example, can be examined within the paradigm of the “birth of a movement,” the “hegemony of a movement,” the “meeting of cultures,” or other constructs. Whatever the paradigm, there is bound to occur a shifting in the thought collective within the paradigm. This flux in the thought collective can often act as a smoke screen to suggest a shift in the paradigm. Although there may be either an emphasis on what Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. in *The Disuniting of America* terms “exculpatory” (i.e., “top-dog”) history, or “compensatory” (i.e., “underdog”) history, this does not necessarily indicate a shift in the paradigm. (NY: Norton, 1992, pp. 48-49).

Jack Fritscher, constructing the *denkkollektiv* memoir of *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*, is a tour guide to the “foreign country” of the past, providing his readers with a look at South of Market, San Francisco, before it was SoMa, before it became prime real estate, even before it was shabby chic, and condo rich. South of Market was once a light-industrial skid row where bad-ass boys in leather motorcycle jackets hung out in clouds of popper, ether, smoke, and sweat. SoMa was the post-Beat bohemian section of the City to which the airlines would not deliver lost luggage after dark. I know. I lived there then. I was the carpenter who customized Robert Opel’s storefront into Fey-Way Gallery. I constructed the inside of the Leatherneck bar. I took photographs. I worked for the publisher of *Drummer*. I took notes for my *Clementina Street Tales*. For years, I was an eyewitness in that strange country, South of Market, when we did things differently.

Jack Fritscher as “eyewitness” in *Gay San Francisco* is kin to Christopher Isherwood as “camera” in his *Berlin Stories*. Climbing the scaffolding of the chapter-and-verse structure of *Drummer*, he unfurls a rainbow flag of narrative about the foreign country of our gay past, and of its citizens and denizens, living, lost, dead, or forgotten.

As editor in chief of *Drummer*, he helped the fledgling Los Angeles publication be born-again in the 1970s freedom of San Francisco. *Drummer* had fled north, followed by its publisher John Embry, to escape trumped-up slavery charges from the Los Angeles Police Department. Under Jack’s tutelage *Drummer* became a voice for homomascuine men, art, and literature. He did not invent them; he encouraged them. This media attention attracted a group of gay, masculine-identified artists, graphic designers, cartoonists, writers, and photographers. The fraternity

grew and began to flex its muscle in what Sam Steward, legendary pioneer of gay leather writing dubbed “The *Drummer* Salon.”

In an instantly symbiotic relationship, *Drummer* under Fritscher publicized the South of Market leather community that by its nature was otherwise evanescent. Mapplethorpe in Manhattan knew the value of the SoMa art scene. Seeking *entre*, he introduced himself to editor Fritscher who connected him to nearly every leather person Mapplethorpe met or photographed in San Francisco, including poet Thom Gunn; serial-killer victim Larry Hunt; Jerry Paderski (face turned away, sitting butt backwards on a toilet bowl in a Tenderloin hotel); and founder of the Janus Society, Cynthia Slater. The SoMa demimonde frequented performance leather bars like Ron Johnson’s No Name, David Delay’s Ambush, and Allan Lowery’s Leatherneck. The crowd surged for two years through Robert Opel’s Fey-Way gallery where he was soon murdered. It included artists Chuck Arnett, Tom Hinde, and A. Jay/Al Shapiro; photographers David Hurles, David Sparrow and Jack Fritscher, and myself and a host of others, who all worked together for mutual support of our art, our creative ideas, ourselves, because it was fun. We were a leather Bloomsbury of masculine-identified male artists. We often lived together at the same addresses. We drove each other’s cars and trucks and motorcycles. We worked with each other and for each other. We exchanged art work. We alerted each other to what hot esoteric foreign films were screening at the Strand, the Lumiere, and the Roxie. We picked up our tools and built playrooms in our homes and in our bars. We exchanged ideas and partied together. And, yes, we sometimes had sex together.

Drummer was our Vanguard collective diary, our traveling art show, our sexual politics, our snapshot album, our unfolding autobiography of the way we were. *Drummer* published Al Shapiro’s graphic novel, *Harry Chess*, and Shapiro painted the murals for the walls of the Leatherneck bar on Folsom Street. Jack wrote about the Leatherneck. I photographed it. *Drummer* published his article with my pictures. Men went to that bar, went home with a buddy, and acted out what they had read in *Drummer*, and the next month they found themselves reflected in *Drummer*. In the Vanguard, Fritscher wrote about cigars as a fetish, and the next month the first cigars appeared in bars. This was our bohemia. It was 1970s San Francisco, South of Market.

Fritscher also allowed his readers to view this world through his friends and fellow travelers. He not only talked the talk; he walked the walk. I know. I was there. The night I got my head shaved at the Slot, that infamous bathhouse on Folsom Street, he was there. I have photos to prove it. He applied dozens of clip-clothes pins to my torso and removed them all in a flash of epiphany. It was a rush I passed along again and

again to other men in that long lost leather community South of Market. “As high as passions, fun, creativity, and sex always surged around *Drummer*, it was not the worst of times,” Fritscher writes in *Gay San Francisco*, “but the best...”

As in the study of Native American culture, there are a couple of obstacles for some historians delving into the study of homomascularity. One is the concept of the cosmos. In the study of both, the historian must not only engage in time travel but must—existentially—also be able to view the order of the universe from a different angle. Back in the day, the order of the cosmos looked far different through a bohemian-homomascularity “SoMa70s” lens than it does through a latter-day feminist lens or a bourgeois hetero lens. *Drummer* itself viewed the universe from a different underground-undersea angle, and Fritscher’s “periscope up” through both *Drummer* and *Gay San Francisco* is the lens whose cross hairs accurately target that angle we, or at least I, saw. Though forgotten, ignored, or denied by some, that angle through that lens is for this Stewart more than *auld lang syne*.

Another obstacle faced by many historians is the method of record keeping. (Fritscher has famously been a diarist and a journalist and an archivist of graphics, letters, and taped interviews for years.) Authenticity of experience is placed on the written primary document which is frequently venerated as an icon. When documentation is something other than written, other steps must be taken to verify its authenticity. Discussing the oral testimony of Native Americans, Daniel Richter argued, “Oral genres,” and here one might include the Old Testament and its campfire tales, “require unfeigned belief in the immutability of the message in the same way that written scholarly genres require implicit confidence in the accuracy of footnotes—as a validation of the historian’s authority to interpret the past.” (“*Who’s Written History?*” *William and Mary Quarterly* 50:2, April 1993: 385.) Hertha Dawn Wong, in *Sending My Heart Back Across the Years: Tradition and Innovation in Native American Autobiography*, proposes that not only oral tradition, but also songs, chants, clothing and other remnants of the past are legitimate fields to be mined for historical information. (NY: Oxford University Press, 1992.)

Fritscher, who earned his academic credentials with his 1968 PhD, long ago earned the authority to mine and interpret the leather past because of his role in editing *Drummer*, and in writing his historical novel-memoir, *Some Dance to Remember*. When I first met him in 1974, he had written four books and had been writing for the *Journal of Popular Culture* since 1968. He knows what he is doing; and, almost as an object lesson to some GLBT historians, it seems that everywhere possible in *Gay San Francisco*, he cites sources to support his text.

Even before the beginning of the 1970s, he was aware that our athletic night-trips in bars and baths and barracks were like the wild treks big-game adventurers once made into uncharted continents from where they would bring back exotic and enchanted cargo. Even in the heat of fuck, he once told me decades ago that someday he expected that all of us in the 70s would be tales told in bedrooms around the world. What no one planned on was the mass death by plague of so many storytellers and photographers who could have kept the true brilliance of the 1970s alive. So with his books of fiction and nonfiction, we can sit on the ground and tell the sad stories of the death of kings, and their enchanted sex lives that were surprisingly artful and personal during a revolution of the species that may never come again.

Jack Fritscher, who taught university film courses in the same city where I was the manager of a commercial movie theater, frequently references Japanese director Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film *Rashomon* in which the viewer sees a rape and murder through the eyes of four different participants. Each account is different.

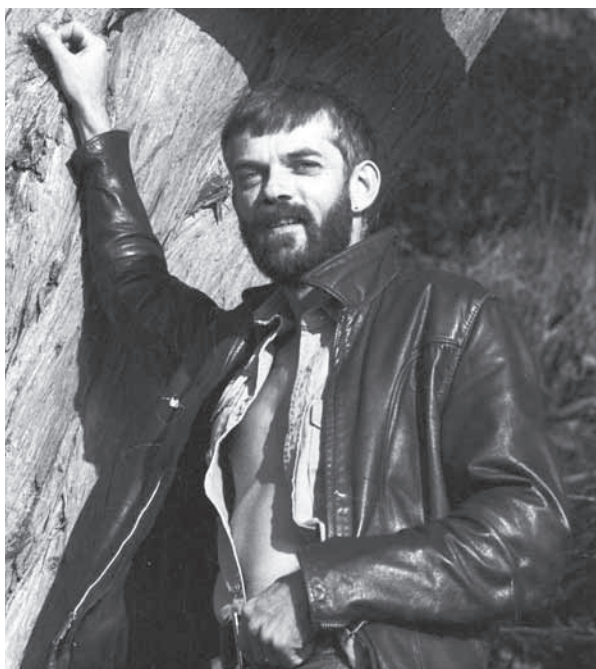
As an eyewitness-analyst, Fritscher is the first to warn that conflicting eyewitness accounts of an incident may prevent its "truth" from being known; that is why he, an eyewitness, has interviewed and cross-examined so many other eyewitnesses to testify before the jury of his readers.

Rashomon has become a catch-word for the difficulty of verifying what "really" happened. Seemingly conflicting accounts only make the event multifaceted. It's much like viewing a cubist painting by Picasso, or an all-angles painting by Duchamps. In *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*, Fritscher writes a multi-faceted "autobiography of us" that could be called *History Descending a Staircase*.

Mystic chords of memory echo through the fog trailing the freighter SS *Jack Fritscher* as it steams in under the Golden Gate Bridge that appears significantly on the cover of *Some Dance to Remember*. That freighter is laden with enchanted cargo from a foreign country: the Past. Brawny seamen appear on deck. When it docks, be there. That's an order.

Jim Stewart (b. 1942) was for many years the department head of the Social Sciences and History Department at the Chicago Public Library. Previously, in 1976 he was one of the first artists in San Francisco to move South of Market to Clementina Street where he was a key force in the creative epiphanies of the SoMa art scene with friends such as Chuck Arnett, Robert Opel, Camille O'Grady, and David Hurles. While managing a commercial movie theater, he had met Jack Fritscher in 1973 and lived in Fritscher's home for six months after moving to San Francisco

in 1975. As a working carpenter in 1977, he built the interior of the legendary Fey-Way Gallery where Opel mainlined formerly closeted gay art in the space where he was murdered in 1979. As a working photographer, Stewart founded Keyhole Studios in 1976, and his strong black-and-white images of Folsom Street sexuality often appeared in SoMa exhibitions and in *Drummer* (beginning as early as *Drummer* 14, May 1977). For several seasons, he worked as a manager for various San Francisco leather venues, such as the Leatherneck bar, and for years he managed the bar and retail store owned by the *Drummer* publisher. He grew up on a farm in Mason County, Michigan, and has lived in the San Francisco Bay Area (including the Russian River), Chicago, and other Third Coast locations. As a photographer, he focused on leather culture, and as a writer, he has concentrated on historical topics and research methods. In addition to poetry, he is currently writing a murder mystery set along Michigan's West Shore, as well as a series of interconnecting stories about 1970s life in SoMa titled *Folsom Street Blues*. He lives in a nineteenth-century farm house that has been in his family for more than a hundred years.



"Jim Stewart," Golden Gate Park, 1976. Auto-photograph by Jim Stewart.
©Jim Stewart. Used with permission.