

# BEACH BUZZ

March – April 2001

Volume 2, Number 2

a publication of B.E.A.C.H.E.S. Foundation and its Chapters  
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*“Keeping Our Beaches Bare”*

## A Brief History of the Gay Naturist Movement

By Jim Lewis

I have been asked to write a short history of the gay naturist movement, but when telling a history of anything, it is hard to know where to begin. At the turn of the last century, while the U.S. was banning pictures of naked bathers, such as the oil painting “September Morn” by French artist Paul Chabas, the first nudists of Europe begin stripping themselves of Victorian era prudery and bathing naked in Freilichtpark (Free Light Park) in Lubeck, Germany. Out of this movement was born Nacktkultur, which stressed “health, morality and clean living.” This, of course, included daily exercise, a vegetarian diet, and Spartan outdoor living – all nude, of course.

The movement made its way to this country from Europe in the late 1920s and the American League for Physical Culture was formed. By 1933, it became the International Nudist Conference, which was later to become the American Sunbathing Association and by the mid to late 1930s there were more than eighty nudist camps across America. These camps, like the Nacktkulture movement in Germany, stressed healthful living, but organized nudism was selective of who could become members. A vast majority of the camps did not allow single men or women and many to this day still discriminate against singles. In the very beginning, a few of the clubs did not even allow children.

By the late 1960s, the rebellious youth of America, in what was known as the hippie generation, begin to experience the freedom of being nude at the beach, out in the woods or at home in their back yards. They believed acceptance of the nude body was natural and honest. This philosophy of open nudism sparked the Free Beach Movement, out of which was born The Naturist Society in 1980. The

Naturist Society published a monthly magazine know then as *Clothed with the Sun* and later simply as *N*, which provided information and support for the free beach movement.

Even though The Naturist Society was always all inclusive and accepting of everyone, Lee Baxandall, founder of The Naturist Society, says that from the organization's earliest days, requests were coming in almost on a daily basis from guys wanting to know if there was a gay organization. Mr. Baxandall soon met Murray Kaufman, an openly gay man from New York City, who was hosting monthly nude wine and cheese parties in his NYC apartment. Kaufman agreed to facilitate a gay special interest group (SIG) for The Naturist Society. Thus was born GLN or Gay and Lesbian Naturists about 1983.

In 1985, Kaufman hosted a weekend gathering for GLN members at Summit Lodge, a gay naturist campground in Ohio. Although attendance was sparse that first year, the gathering was deemed a success and another gathering was held at Summit Lodge the following year.

By this time a number of local gay naturist clubs were springing up all across America. Three of the earliest ones were a group in Kansas City, Missouri, which later became known as K.C. Strip; Gay Male Nudists in San Francisco; and Males au Naturel (MAN) in New York City. Now there are well over one hundred gay naturist clubs across America, a half-dozen more in Canada, along with several in Britain, Australia and New Zealand.

By late '85, Kaufman was suffering from burn-out and turned the reigns of GLN over to Steve Johnson, founder and coordinator of a local gay naturist club, Greater Atlanta Naturist Group, in Atlanta, Georgia. Steve facilitated the group for two years before turning it over to Steve Pond of Washington, DC. The

GLN Gathering was hosted the next two years by MAN of New York and held at Hauska House, a farm near the Pocono Mountains of Eastern Pennsylvania. With less than fifty attendees that first year, there were close to 150 attendees at Hauska House in 1988.

In the meantime, I had learned about the Greater Atlanta Naturist Group, which was started in the fall of 1984, and joined in 1985 and have been involved ever since. When Steve Johnson took over GLN, he asked if I would take over coordination of the Atlanta group. In 1988, I attended my first gathering at Hauska House. It was announced that Hauska House was not going to be available for a gathering the following year due to the declining health of one of the owners, and that MAN was ready to turn the gathering over to one of the other local groups.

Later that same summer, I found myself back in Pennsylvania, attending IGLOO, a gathering made up of local chapters of International Gay and Lesbian Outdoors Organizations. The weekend gathering was held at Camp Saginaw, near Oxford, Penn. IGLOO usually had a few female attendees, but none were in attendance in 1988. A majority of activities were off sight. On Saturday I went on a canoeing trip, which several of us soon turned into a “canuding trip,” on the Brandywine River. Upon my return to camp that evening, I was met by an enthusiastic Gerald Crawford, founder of a gay naturist group in Des Moines, Iowa, telling me I had missed everything. Everybody had been playing nude volleyball and skinny-dipping in the camp pool all afternoon.

Knowing that GLN did not have a place for their gathering in 1989, I approached Camp Saginaw's manager the following morning following breakfast. She assured me she had no problem with



hosting a gay naturist group the following summer. Upon my return to Atlanta, I immediately phoned Steve Pond in WDC and told him about the camp and that GANG would be willing to sponsor the event in 1989. In a way, I felt as if I had stepped out of the frying pan into the fire!

As GLN did not have the funds to pay advance deposits on the camp, I talked my fellow officers in GANG into us putting up the advance monies needed. We felt we were taking a big risk, as we had to guarantee the camp a minimum of 150 attendees, and these monies were out of our own pockets. All of our worries were in vain, as we had over 250 attendees our first year. The following two years we extended the length of the weekend gathering by a day and by our third year had maxed out Camp Saginaw with over 400 attendees.

In the meantime, Steve Pond, because of health problems, had passed the reign of GLN to two guys from Philadelphia. These guys “dropped the ball” and GLN ceased to exist for a short time. In 1991, Kaufman managed to resurrect the organization, but by the following year was once again suffering from burn-out. Several GLN members formed an ad hoc steering committee and started a new group, Gay Naturists International. Knowing my history in producing the gatherings the four previous years, I was asked to be administrator of the new independent group which was no longer a SIG of The Naturist Society. In the years that GLN had been in existence, there had only been one woman to join and she never attended any of the gatherings.

In 1992 the gathering, which had been steadily growing each year, moved to Pocono Picnic Company in the Pocono Mountains and was extended to a full week – Sunday ’til Sunday. Also, it was moved from the weekend after Labor Day up to late August.

In any volunteer organization where money is involved, someone always wants to take control. The Greater Atlanta Naturist Group was no exception. A couple of members saw the money the gathering was generating and wanted to take control in 1993. In order to keep this from happening, GANG's steering committee decided it was time for the recently formed GNI to be involved. In

less than two years, GNI had grown from less than 300 members to well over 1,200 members.

In 1993, the gathering was co-sponsored by GANG and GNI and had grown in numbers to 650 attendees. Along about this same time, GNI was to see its share of problems. A new officer convinced the board of directors that neither the president nor the administrator were doing a good job, and that he, himself, would make a better president. He took over the organization and a short

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time later appointed a new administrator to what was now a paid position. The next couple of years were to be very trying for GNI. The GNI board soon found they had no control over the new administrator. Not taking well to criticism, the president resigned six months after taking over the organization. The board and the administrator became embroiled in a bitter legal dispute over the records and monies and GNI came close to folding.

A majority of GNI's members were not happy with this turn of events in the organization and urged me to start a new organization. Knowing that there needed to be more than one national gathering in the future to accommodate the growing number of gay naturists, and fearing the worst for GNI, International Men Enjoying Naturism was born in the fall of 1994. Almost immediately, the new organization had close to 800 members and produced their first gathering at Camp Ramblewood in northern Maryland in 1995.

GNI recovered from those trying times and along with IMEN each organization

boasts of over 1,000 members today. And, in addition to producing a successful summer gathering for their members, both produce a quarterly member's magazine. Many of the guys belong to both organizations and attend both yearly gatherings.

GANG meanwhile invested its earnings from those gatherings it produced and last year was able to buy a small piece of property with a clubhouse, pool and poolhouse, becoming the first truly “landed” gay naturist club in the U.S., if not the world.

With the proliferation of Naturist organizations, nude beaches, and clothing-optional resort destinations, nudity for the purpose of socializing has been enjoying a level of popularity the last ten years it has never experienced before. And to the amazement of many, no where has this been more evident than in the gay community.

Why have we seen this surge in popularity? I think it is due to a combination of many varied reasons, of which there are too many to list. Ever since the Stonewall riots in New York City in 1969, gays as a whole have become more open about their lives and who they are. Although we are and always have been accepted by The Naturist Society, a big percentage of the “landed clubs,” although they themselves have come a long way since the 1930s, still discriminate against singles, no matter their sexual orientation. Also, it seems that men on a whole seem more open to social nudity than do their female counterparts and all people – not just gays – enjoy socializing with like-minded friends. Male-only (and female-only) clubs and societies are as old as humanity itself. They provide bonding and camaraderie. There's nothing wrong with that.

Due to the fact that GNI and IMEN both cater to men only, the membership in both organizations is primarily gay. But both can count a sizable percentage of married men in their respective organizations. Many of the married guys' wives are not into nudity; they, in turn, find that they are not accepted into the majority of landed clubs without their spouses. I personally find it refreshing that they are comfortable enough with



their own sexuality, that they don't feel threatened being in the company of a group of mostly gay men.

As one married member of IMEN recently stated: "No one needs to apologize for finding the company of [other] men uniquely satisfying and stimulating!"

Both GNI and IMEN can proudly boast of their support of the mainstream naturist movement through ongoing donations to organizations such as the Naturist Action Committee, the Naturist Education Foundation and the B.E.A.C.H.E.S. Foundation, and

supporting the work these respective organizations do to ensure naturist freedom for everyone, for without these and other like-organizations, there would be no clothing-optional beaches in this country. We urge our fellow gay beachgoers at Haulover and all other clothing-optional beaches in America to support their national organizations. Even with the proven success of these beaches, they are still under threat of closure every day.

Nakedness in nature satisfies such a fundamental craving of the human organism that, once tasted, it becomes a

habit. This is the chief guarantee that nudism will not be a passing fad.

Editors Note: Facts about the early days of organized nudism in Germany and America have been gleaned from "Nudism Comes to America" by Frances and Mason Merrill, and from "Nudism in Modern Life," by Maurice Parmelee, and from "A Brief History of Nudism" from GNI Informer, Jan. 2001. ✨