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Betty Leonard, Longtime Manager Of Flint's State Bar, Dies At Age 90

By Tim Retzloff

Printed 9/4/2014 in issue 2236

Photo caption: Betty Leonard (right) with Melva Earhart in a 1981 photo from Metra magazine.

Mary E. "Betty" Leonard, known to many by her maiden name Betty Underwood, died Aug. 19 at age 90. She was the longtime manager of the State Bar in Flint and a sort of surrogate parent to an untold number of "gay kids" in the Flint area over three decades. Leonard had been in hospice following a stroke earlier this summer.

Leonard was born March 23, 1924 in Detroit to Arthur and Fannie Underwood. Her father worked as a machinist for Ford Motor Company and in 1925 moved the family to Inkster where Mary, who preferred to be called Betty, attended high school.

She knew she was different at an early age, but it was only after she turned 21 at the close of World War II that she ventured to the working-class gay bars in downtown Detroit: LaRosa's, the Silver Dollar and, after it opened in 1949, the Palais.

Although she loved women, Leonard wanted children and so married a man and had two daughters in the early 1950s. She also wanted to work and found a job at a small auto supply factory making circuit breakers.

From the late 1950s to the mid-1980s, Leonard managed the iconic State Bar under its original owner, Melva Earhart. Leonard took a shining to Earhart the first time they met, Memorial Day 1957. Leonard and a friend had decided to visit Flint.

"I just liked her when I first saw her. She was behind the bar," Leonard recalled in a 1995 oral history interview. "We had on black slacks and white sport coats with a pink carnation in there. We were all dressed up." Earhart invited the women to sit at the bar. "I was just talking to her, and I really liked her. And she got off at six. And she said she'd meet me after," Leonard said. "And everybody goes, 'She'll never show up. She never comes back.' Well she came back with a black skirt on, white sport coat and a pink carnation in her lapel."

The two began dating, meeting in Pontiac as a halfway point between Flint and Inkster. Then Earhart invited Leonard to come work at the State as a barmaid. Within a month, Leonard was managing the place and stayed on through three different locations on Union Street, West Kearley and South Dort Highway. She eventually moved in with Earhart, and for a time the two shared a trailer on Lake Fenton.

Their romantic relationship ended in the mid-1960s, at which point Leonard moved back to Inkster and operated a butcher shop at Telegraph and Nine Mile. Then, in 1968, Earhart moved the State to its Dort address and asked Leonard to come back and run the bar. Leonard continued on for another eighteen years.

From Leonard's perspective, the State provided a safe haven for people coming out at a time when many felt rejected at home. In the 1995 interview, Leonard recounted also appearing on a local call-in radio program about gays, one of the first times the topic of homosexuality was addressed on local media.

After Earhart died in 1985, Earhart's straight cousin - Orla "Smitty" Smithson - took over the bar. Leonard continued on as manager for another year. "Came back from vacation and he told me I was fired. No warning, no nothing," Leonard said. "Oh, I was pissed." In recent years, Leonard lived in retirement in Canton with her daughter.

Jack Horton of Mount Morris became "fast friends" with Leonard beginning in the 1970s. Horton recalls drinking many Budweisers with Leonard and joining her and other bar patrons on trips to Cedar Point. He helped her celebrate her 89th birthday at the State Bar in March 2013, only a few months before the bar closed its doors for good.

"She was a very brave and strong person," remembered Horton. For him and countless others, Leonard and Earhart worked as a team to make their bar a center of gay life in Flint. "They're heroes in our community, and they should never be forgotten," Horton said.

Leonard is survived by her daughter Linda Meldrum, her brother Arthur Underwood, seven grandchildren and three great grandchildren. She was preceded in death by her daughter Rose Riley, her parents, her sisters Phyllis Disney and Winifred Johnson and her many friends.