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Women Picket Men's Clubs To Gain Full Membership

By SANDRA SALMANS
N.Y. Times News Service

BIRMINGHAM, England — For Sheila Capstick, a Yorkshire miner's wife, the last straw was the "men only" sign in the clubroom where she liked to play snooker, a form of pocket billiards. For Alexandra McPake, a Birmingham transport worker, it happened when her father died and, as a single woman, she had to ask men friends to invite her to the neighborhood club that her family had used for years.

Now Mrs. Capstick, Miss McPake, Mrs. Capstick's sister and her 60-year-old mother have joined with other English women in a group called Equal Rights in Clubs, Campaign for Action, to campaign for women's admission as members, with equal rights, to working men's clubs, Britain's traditional male preserve.

In mid-April more than 100 women picketed the annual conference of delegates to the Club and Institute Union, with which most of the clubs are affiliated, in Blackpool, and they expect to argue a court case in the fall in which they intend to challenge the clubs' nonmembership policy for women. They are also planning another 100-strong picketing demonstration against a Birmingham club in the fall.

Britain's Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 "may have given greater freedom to middle-class women, but it hasn't done a thing for working-class women," said Miss McPake's sister, Caroline Bradford, a Birmingham housewife. "If we're successful, we could do more to affect the lives of women."

Founded in the mid-1800s as a way of improving the life and education of the working class, Britain's so-called working men's clubs have become a linchpin of working-class life. The 4,000 clubs, with a total of more than four million members, provide the only social life in many towns, especially in the Midlands and the North of England.

"When we were kids, the highlight of every year was the Christmas party at the club," recalled Mrs. Bradford who, like her mother and sister, lives only a few blocks from the club.

But at the same time the clubs, more than Parliament or El Vino's, the Fleet Street wine bar in London that won't serve women at the bar, are essentially male preserves. At most of the clubs, only men can be full members. Women, as the wives, widows, sisters or daughters of male members, may receive a "lady's card," but that does not permit them to vote, hold club office or invite guests. "The lady's card just lets you buy a drink without your husband being there," explained Mrs. Bradford.

Some clubs do extend full membership to women. But the Club and Institute Union, the parent organization, does not issue women associate cards, which entitle the holder to visit other clubs, a privilege accorded to male members. One reason, suggested a Birmingham man, was that "the women would want to go gallivanting." And a few clubs refuse to let women even set foot inside, while others make the barroom portion of their buildings off-limits to women.

While insisting that the decision on membership is up to a club's members, the general secretary of the institute, Frank Morris, maintained: "The atmosphere would be entirely different in a club if women members were admitted. The way they conduct themselves might not be acceptable to the men." Women might, he suggested, carry on as though they were at a ladies' meeting, "playing bridge, singing, things like that."

"These ladies forget that we were founded as working men's clubs," Morris added. "It is an inherent trait in British men to enjoy the company of their fellow men. We do like the companionship of women, but in the right place. Men go out to dinner with their wives, for example."

Attitudes have hardened on both sides since the campaign was begun last summer in Yorkshire and Birmingham. At her husband's club, Mrs. Capstick distributed "Snooker for Women" T-shirts and collected signatures of some members for a petition calling for women's membership in that club, which the club management destroyed. She now plays snooker at another club in the area. The McPakes — Alexandra, Caroline, another sister, who is 16, and their 60-year-old mother — joined some members of a local women's liberation group and members of the Communist Party in picketing their club last August.

A female bartender at the club, who telephoned a local radio station to declare her support for the women, promptly lost her job. (The club maintains that she left voluntarily.) Soon after, women's annual dues rose from 16 cents to $2.35, an increase for which some members blame the McPake women. Men pay dues of $9 annually.

The Blackpool demonstration, where women picketed club delegates to the Club and Institute Union's conference, took the quarrel nationwide. "It was a corrupted flag," said Morris. "They were protesting against something that was not on the agenda." The clubs in previous years had voted against women members by "a colossal margin," he said.

The campaign will shift into high gear in the fall, when a Birmingham widow, Mrs. Joyce Bonner is expected to get a court date on her suit against a club that refused to give her membership. Her lawsuit charges that the club refused to give her an associate card that would allow her access to other clubs affiliated with the Club and Institute Union throughout England. Her case is being financed by the government-funded Equal Opportunities Commission. In addition, a member of Parliament from Birmingham, Jeffery Rooker, is proposing a bill that would make private clubs subject to the Sex Discrimination Act.

Truth-Seeking Songster On North Country Tour

WEST LEBANON — A former seeker of women, Cadillacs, whiskey and money, singer-songwriter Townes Van Zandt at age 35 says he is searching for truth, preferably on painless variety.

Currently on tour from Nashville and scheduled to perform three concerts in the Upper Valley, the tall, gaunt musician in an interview this week spoke of his quest for "lay-down-and-die truth."

"There's gotta be some kinda truth that's painless," he says, suggesting that he might be looking for an ultimate truth, such as could be found in the poetic finality of an exploding gun that claims "all's well that ends."

Describing himself as "an Indian from Oklahoma who likes good whiskey," Van Zandt says that he has retired from gambling and now spends 50 percent of his time on the road.

Being a gambler, Van Zandt says, is a humbling experience "because there's always a loser." There is also, he adds, "a big body of law floatin' around out there."

Claiming that he now stays "straight as an arrow," Van Zandt says he considers himself a "pretty normal guy in a weird lifestyle."

His traveling life, he says, is in tune with the kind of old-fashioned, Spanish-sounding rhymes that are similar to Edgar Allen Poe's poem "El Dorado."

But he refutes the idea his songs and music are patterned after other musicians. "I'm just a good mountain man who likes road music," he claims.

Local Appearances

In addition to road songs, his music also explores such themes as love, gambling, fast living and goodbyes, themes that he will be presenting in concert Saturday at the Lebanon Opera House, Sunday at the Ritz Cafe in White River Junction and Tuesday at Our Place in Bradford.

Of his desire to deal with truth in spite of believing "somebody always gets hurt," Van Zandt says he has been influenced by several folk musicians as well as the lives of people like Albert Schweitzer, Vincent Van Gogh and St. Francis of Assisi.

VanGogh's life, particularly exhemplied the "lay-down-and-die truth" that appeals to Van Zandt.

Of the famous artist's first acknowledged attempt at self-expression — preaching in a Belgium coal mining town — Van Zandt related that after a mine caved-in, Van Gogh donated all his clothing and food to the victims' families, becoming so enfeebled by cold and hunger that he "preached laying sideways."

Stating that Van Gogh knew nothing about violence, Van Zandt said that after the artist committed suicide by shooting himself "in the worst possible place, it took him 72 hours to die."

Although Van Zandt was characterized by one reviewer as a "singer-songwriter of the most woebegone variety," he avoids cynicism and plans to continue performing, traveling around and searching for truth as painlessly as possible.

"I feel real privileged to be doin' this. I see a lot of nice people and sometimes I'm in a position to help somebody," he said.

ON CONCERT TOUR — Nashville singer-songwriter Townes Van Zandt is currently on a North Country concert tour and will be performing with John Lincoln Wright and the Sour Mash Revue at the Lebanon Opera House, Saturday at 8:30 p.m.

AVA Gallery Names Jury

HANOVER — A jury of professionals will select the membership for the new AVA Gallery of Hanover July 30.

George Tooker, painter, Beverly Zager, director of Fischbach Gallery in New York City, and Arthur Blumenthal, curator of Dartmouth College Museum and Galleries, will comprise the jury.

All artists living or working in New Hampshire, Vermont or Maine are invited to enter Painting, printmaking, sculpture, photography, and mixed media will be accepted for jurying.

Work should be delivered to the Hanover High School July 28 or 29 and should be picked up Aug. 4. Other arrangements for delivery or pickup may be made through the gallery.

In 1971, what was then called the Community Gallery began as a cooperative effort of artists and friends to provide an outlet for the work of area artists.

In 1975, the gallery moved to its present location on Allen Street in Hanover and changed its name to Alliance for the Visual Arts at the request of the members.

The next few years were ones of steady growth and in 1979 a professional staff was hired.

The phasing out of the cooperative system and the incorporation of a board of trustees occurred this year.

For more information, persons may call or write David Messier, director, AVA Gallery, 3 Allen St., Hanover 643-2841.

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