Bears, Bikers and Mayhem. It all began in 1849...
- Gay men by the hundreds (and then thousands) move to California following the Gold Rush. Some come for gold, but many come to escape the rigid rules of Victorian east coast and European society. California, desperate to attract enough people to become a state, opens its doors to all (and the 60 male to 1 female ratio is also attractive to guys that have no intention of ever wanting to marry).

1920s
- Gay lifestyles are firmly implanted in European and American culture, particularly in Paris, London and New York. A new term, “beard,” begins to be used as a woman who marries a gay man so that he can “keep up appearances.”

1960s
- Encouraged by their straight friends of the hippy movement in the Haight-Ashbury of San Francisco, many gays participate openly in the free love atmosphere of the period. San Francisco tries to legitimize itself to the east coast establishment, and makes a last effort to rid the city of its gay residents. Soon, however, the city realizes that part of the city’s character is its openness and tolerance – and to lose that would be to lose everything. Instead of trying to hide the gayness to the east coast, San Francisco begins to flaunt it.
- In 1967, police raid the gay bars in Greenwich Village New York City and carry patrons to jail and publish their names in the New York Times, a standard practice. But this time, gays fight back and the Stonewall Riots ensue. The first Gay Pride occurs after this in The Village.

1970s
- While the 1970s push the free love of the 60s to excess, gays empowered by that movement, jump from The Haight over the hill to the immigrant neighborhood of Eureka Valley. As gay residents begin to outnumber immigrants, the name of the neighborhood is changed to The Castro, after the large theatre near the corner of Castro and Market.
- The Castro promotes and image of gay men as being neat, clean cut, very pretty guys. Men that don’t want to conform are often asked for three types of ID and treated poorly in the Castro. The leather community is the first to leave the Castro, and makes SOMA their home. Many ex-hippies, who happen to look rather bear-ish, find that all of the gay liberation in the Castro is not for them to participate in. Early bear notions begin to form as a protection against the slim, trimmed look and behavior of the Castro.

1980s
- AIDS strikes the gay community, causing a huge public backlash in mainstream America. The freedom and acceptance gays had in the 70s is gone.
- By the end of the decade, the leather community has taken a hard hit from AIDS. The number of leather bars in SOMA goes from over thirty to about a dozen.
- Bear identity has formed, somewhat based on safer sex (big bears hugs and teddy bear cuddles, but not much more) and the first bear bar, the Lone Star Saloon, opens in San Francisco’s leather neighborhood of SOMA. The leathermen are also somewhat anti-bear, but they are more tolerant than the Castro twinks. The Lone Star moves to its current location on Harrison after the 1989 earthquake. The Lone Star Saloon becomes an unexpected and immediate hit, and suddenly guys are showing up from all over the country. The bar’s subtitle, Bears, Bikers and Mayhem, sets it apart as a truly unique gay space. The bar becomes (and still is) the premier bear space in the world. The term “woof” enters gay lingo as something bears say to each other when they see someone hot.

1990s
- Bear goes big. The bear scene becomes the fastest growing gay sub-culture ever. Guys are tired of shaving their back hair, prancing around saying “oooo girl,” and counting calories just to “look gay.” Guys want to be guys, and the Lone Star serves beer (not pretty drinks with umbrellas), and shows the NFL games on Sundays for beer bust. Walking in the door guys
are greeted with the sounds of Led Zeppelin, the Kinks, the Rolling Stones, AC/DC and loads of classic rock. This ain’t no disco, it’s not for “girly men.”

- The early 90s find bears flaunting their bellies – it’s partially a reaction to AIDS. Being able to gain weight is a sign of being healthy in the gay community. This further popularizes the movement. (Although bears are commonly thought of as chubby, in the mid and late 80s, bear was more about being just a regular guy with a beard. The AIDS epidemic really pushed the chub factor onto the bear scene.)

- The big bear events are established by the early 90s. Bear Pride/Chicago, International Bear Rendezvous/San Francisco, Bear Bust/Orlando. (As if to prove the above point, the Chicago event was originally called “Big and Bear Pride” – indicating that the two were not necessarily the same. Many younger bears don’t realize that the chub identity wasn’t actually the original bear look. It has, however, become the most noted feature – providing loads of positive self-esteem for larger men everywhere.)

- New animals start to arise. Wolves, silver foxes, pigs, rhinos, otters, polar bears, cubs, bulls – all with certain characteristics. The term “Goldilocks” is used to describe a straight female that likes the company of bears.

- Anti-bear backlash happens as bears are accused of “trying to pass for straight.” A rift grows between the Castro and the Lone Star. In the Castro, bears are treated rudely and not served at bars, and find that the only place they are welcomed is Pasqua’s Coffee at the corner of 18th and Castro (now Starbucks). Mainstream gay media constantly makes fun of bears. Bears retaliate, and the open, friendly attitude of the Lone Star (and other bear bars), becomes open and friendly to anyone – unless you look like you’re from the Castro or West Hollywood.

- The scene begins to spread to Europe. Europeans are confused at first. Americans tend to be larger in belly size, and because women in America are encouraged to remove any excess body hair, the fascination with hair being a male-only attribute tends to be more of an American phenomenon. European men don’t quite get it at first, but by decade’s end, European men have embraced bear-ness.

- The International Bear Brotherhood Flag is invented in 1996. The stripes imitate the stripes of the Rainbow Flag, but the colors are said to represent all colors of bears, from white to yellow to tan to brown to black. The paw is a bear paw. Duh.

- The scene is now growing so quickly that attempts to document it are failing. The Bear Book is published by Ivy League professor, Les Wright (who is also a bear), and becomes a novelty read among sociologists all over the country.

- The new animals that were created at the beginning of the decade have all been eclipsed by the fun-loving bears. Everyone wants to be a bear. Winnie the Pooh is the most photographed character by gay men at Disney parks. Smokey Bear pops up on guys’ websites everywhere as “code” for bear. Santa Clause is (playfully) accused of converting kids to become bear chasers at an early age. Chubby actor, John Goodman, is made an “honorary bear” by Bears LA. (A debate quickly follows – can straight men be bears?)

- A short-lived lesbian movement (for chubby women), called “Mama Bears” launches and dies in just a couple of years.

- By the end of the 1990s, nearly every weekend from March to November has a bear event somewhere. The season “opens” with Spring Thaw in Seattle, and “closes” with HiBearNation in St. Louis. All bear events are fundraisers for various charities – usually giving money to AIDS research or to charities that support childhood diseases.

- More controversy surrounds the hair/beard issue with bear men as many Asian and Black Americans find that they cannot often be considered “bears” because genetically they are often not as hairy as their White American/European friends. They often site feeling excluded from the bear community – and they are certainly never represented in bear media. Chinese/Pilipino writer and activist, Joel Tan, finds frustration in being a chubby man that is routinely excluded from Castro-like environments, but also from Lone Star type environments. His talks bring the subject to light and bears respond by trying (not entirely successfully) to promote a more unified image. Keith Gordon begins (the now defunct) Ursa Noir for bears of color to promote more diversity in the bear community. Still, by the mid-2000s, the number of Black bears will have dropped. Latino bears, however will find the
scene very accommodating, and Osos del Sol is eventually formed in Los Angeles as the first Latino/Hispanic Bear Social Club. Gay Asian artists take a fascination towards the bears, finding that the chubby bear reminds them of a well-known Japanese icon – the sumo wrestler. They begin to push the sumo image as an alternate bear image for Asian men. While Asian bears themselves are rare, their images (often very stylized as to appear AmerAsian) are extremely popular in bear art. A large percentage of mainstream bear art is also done by Asian artists. (The image at left, for a very mainstream bear social club, is by Japanese bear artist, Go Fujimoto.)

2000s

- New bears are beginning to show up on the scene, and suddenly the warm, fuzzy “any guy” attitude of the bear bar becomes all about beautiful beards and lots and lots of body hair. The lookism of the Castro and West Hollywood has taken over the bear community and those guys that don’t look “perfect” find it harder and harder to socialize in bear spaces. Lone Star regulars are thrilled that the scene has hit a new group of men, but also concerned that the attraction has now become physical. Instead of the counter-culture of the early bear scene that said be proud of your non-Castro twink body, the “superbear” has arrived to make everyone feel inadequate.

- To make things worse, the next few years decade find a new challenge to the bear community as a new animal, the musclebear, emerges on the scene. Musclebears reinterpret the bear identity with a strong, hyper-masculine body build. Bears are torn over the new image as the mainstream gay media immediately promotes the musclebear instead of the bear. Some bears feel it is a good way to show that bears can also be accepted and be attractive in mainstream eyes. Many bears, however, feel the new image is a sell-out – an imitation of the mainstream male ideal. Musclebears don’t help the situation by often invading bear spaces and only associating with other musclebears.

- By mid-decade, two bar deaths on the east coast cause fire alarms to go off nation-wide. Bars are not fire safe. The Lone Star is raided by the fire marshal, and because of the building’s odd design and no rear exit, the limit is set at 49 people. The place earns the nickname of the “49er Bar,” and while the joke is good, many see it as the death-nail to the confused bear scene.

- Just in time, Harry Lit, founder and organizer (along with the Sacramento Valley Bears) of Lazy Bear Weekend in Guerneville, creates a new event on Harrison called the Hairrison Street Fair. The name and general attitude are taken from the Folsom Street Fair, which is the world’s largest leather street fair. Hairrison is the world’s first bear street fair, and suddenly SOMA is alive again with bear energy. Bearapalooza Music Festival continues to be successful.

- The bear scene appears to be back in San Francisco in (almost) full swing, and new bear events world-wide are popping up every year. The GenX bears are now older and seeing the Millennial bears come in, and as generations will, they complain that the “new kids” just don’t get it. But they will. They always do. The musclebears still cause heads to turn, but it’s generally for praise – any insecurity about the new variety of bear seems to have worn off, and chubby bears and muscle bears share spaces fairly evenly.

- Bear Pride’s 2008 theme is “Woofstock” with the Grateful Dead’s dancing bear the obvious logo choice.

To the 2010s…?

- The late 2000s have set in place several actions that will affect the Lone Star and the bear community. San Francisco’s SOMA has become hip and trendy with the heterosexual set, with many of the old leather bars having turned into dance clubs and hang outs for young urbanites. So far, the general attitude is accepting on both ends, but the decline of the leather scene has changed the presumed gay flavor of the neighborhood into a mix of gay men and younger straight couples.

- The heterosexual influence seems inevitable as in recent years, the term “bear” has found its way to mainstream TV shows from David Letterman to Top Chef to the Simpsons.