The New-York Historical Society presents Safe/Haven: Gay Life in 1950s Cherry Grove, an intimate look at one of the first gay beach towns in the United States. The outdoor exhibition explores mid-20th-century gay life in Fire Island’s remote hamlet of Cherry Grove, located on the barrier island south of Long Island, through some 70 enlarged photographs and additional ephemera from the holdings of the Cherry Grove Archives Collection—which works to collect and archive the community’s rich and colorful history. At Cherry Grove, gay men and women could socialize out in the open, whether on the beach or on the decks of Grove houses. In the evenings, many gathered at local restaurants or at Duffy’s Hotel bar, where they could enjoy same-sex dancing late at night. Photographs in the exhibition depict scenes of summer events, including theater performances, an annual regatta, art shows, beach baseball, and an end-of-season costume ball.

Images may not be cropped or altered.

**Weekend Guest at Hot House, 1958**
Cherry Grove Archives Collection, Gift of Harold Seeley

During the 1950s, Cherry Grove provided gay individuals a much-needed escape from the homophobia and the legal and social persecution that many experienced in the era of McCarthyism following World War II. Homosexuals faced physical assault, verbal attacks, family rejection, loss of employment, imprisonment, and even involuntary psychiatric hospitalization. In the Grove, they could openly socialize and experience a joyful and rare freedom of sexual expression.
Cocktails, sunbathing, sex, and parties were the norm during summer weekends. Gay men and women found opportunities to socialize out in the open, whether on the beach or on the decks of Grove houses.

Kay Guinness (right) was an iconic Cherry Grove figure. Independently wealthy and closeted, she had affairs with women while also being married three different times to men. She flew small airplanes, had her own motorboat, and loved to be part of fashionable society. In the 1950s, Guinness was arrested in Cherry Grove for nude sunbathing on the beach. Her cottage was named No Man’s Land.

During the 1950s, campy costume parties were held every summer weekend. Attendees, straight and gay, showed off flamboyant outfits that would have otherwise been considered a violation of New York laws prohibiting risqué attire and cross-dressing.

Under the guise of dressing up, many men and women were able to play with gender norms at these fabulous cocktail parties, thereby challenging society’s expectations of “proper” behavior.
**Diaper Party, II, 1951**
Cherry Grove Archives Collection, Gift of Harold Seeley

House members hosting a party would often send out creative invitations with tongue-in-cheek humor.

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**Ed Burke in Ethel Merman’s Mermaid Costume, One Hundred Club Party, 1949**
Cherry Grove Archives Collection, Gift of Harold Seeley

Many Grove house parties were also fundraisers for organizations such as the Cherry Grove Fire Department; the Arts Project of Cherry Grove, which organized theatrical productions; the Dune Fund, which preserved the beach dunes; and the Doctor’s House, which provided community medical services. For the One Hundred Club Party, an early fundraiser for the Arts Project, organizers asked attendees to donate $100 to join the festivities.

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**Men on the Beach, ca. 1950**
Cherry Grove Archives Collection, Gift of Paul Jablonski

Same-sex relationships were openly expressed and nurtured within this supportive and relatively safe Fire Island community. Men and women who came to 1950s Cherry Grove were free to explore their same-sex attractions, to develop positive gay identities, and to enjoy gay social support networks.
Beginning in the late 1940s, community members in late September ended the season by going to “the Ball.” Some spent the entire summer designing and sewing the outfits they would wear. This tradition continues today. In addition to cocktails, food, and a campy costume contest, attendees were able to dance with same-sex partners within the safety of the Community House.

Long summer days on the beach, gay-themed theater productions, weekend house parties, sitting together in local bars and restaurants, community fundraisers—all these were spaces where gay people and their straight neighbors could form social connections and share experiences that were not possible off-island.

Taking photos in Cherry Grove was complicated. People wanted to capture their history but also did not want to be identified, fearing retribution if discovered. The instant Polaroid camera, invented in 1948, produced small-sized photos in a minute but required processing on the spot. Simple cameras models like the 127 Brownie or the Argus C3 were most likely used to take snapshots in 1950s Cherry Grove.
Cherry Grove homeowners and renters have a long-standing tradition of naming their homes. These names, like Hot House, often have a charm that reflects the character of the community.

During the 1980s, the AIDS crisis devastated Cherry Grove. Gay men, women, and trans people of all races, religions, and economic status joined together to care for their male friends who were dying from this disease.

Discrimination existed across race, class, gender, and religion in 1950s Cherry Grove just as it did in society at large. Over the many decades since then, Cherry Grove has become more welcoming to gay people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds.