



A photo of this mural at the *Tool Box* was splashed across the opening pages of LIFE magazine's 1964 feature on "Homosexuality in America" and brought national fame to the bar and the neighborhood.

Artist: Chuck Arnett

Location: The Tool Box

Photo Credit: R. Michael Kelley

## RINGOLD ALLEY

### SOUTH OF MARKET'S LEATHER HISTORY

*This is the city's backyard. An early morning walk will take a visitor past dozens of small businesses: metal benders, plastic molders, even casket makers. At five, they set down their tools and return to the suburbs. A few hours later, men in black leather will step out on these same streets to fill the nearly thirty gay bars, restaurants and sex clubs. – Mark Thompson, 1982*

In the 1860s, the South of Market neighborhood was home to most of San Francisco's industry and working-class housing. A century later, as industry and residents left for the suburbs, gay men (and some women) began opening bars, restaurants, bathhouses, and retail shops in the vacant factories, lunch rooms, and tenements. Although the city's first leather bar, the *Why Not*, was open briefly in the Tenderloin in 1962, South of Market quickly became the epicenter of San Francisco's leather scene.

The *Tool Box* was the first leather bar South of Market when it opened later in 1962. In 1966, *Fe-Be's* and the *Stud* opened on Folsom near 11th Street, the leading edge of a wave of leather bars nearby. The area began to acquire affectionate insider nicknames such as "The Miracle Mile" and the "Valley of the Kings." Even the terms "South of Market" and "The Folsom" came to signify a specifically sexual geography. Ringold Alley acquired its own reputation as a late night cruising spot.

Leather bars, shops, bathhouses, and sex clubs continued to proliferate in the area until the early 1980s, when redevelopment pressures and the AIDS epidemic caused the number of leather-oriented businesses to dwindle. But leather has remained a significant presence in the neighborhood, most evident in two annual street fairs: the *Folsom Street Fair*, the world's largest leather festival, and the *Up Your Alley Fair*, which began as an AIDS fundraiser here on Ringold Alley.

Leather found new expressions in groups such as the Bears and Leather Faeries, and the idea of leather has expanded beyond its use among gay men. In 1989, Tony DeBlase designed the Leather Pride flag to represent all people of leather. Its eight black and blue stripes, single white stripe, and red heart now adorn Ringold Alley.

San Francisco commemorates the rich leather history of this neighborhood by honoring some of the people, places, events, and organizations that made South of Market a world capital of leather.



**Leather David**

Artist: Mike Caffee

Location: Fe-Be's

Photo Credit: Rick Gerharter