THE HOMOPHILE MOVEMENT

1951 – 1968

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE MODERN LGBTQ RIGHTS MOVEMENT
ACTIVISM GAINS MOMENTUM
IMPACT AND INFLUENCE
PERSONAL STORY
Psychology books taught that gays were afflicted with a self-destructive sickness for which there was no known cure...

"The gay persecution and police raids of World War II and its Cold War aftermath were powerful warnings against "coming out" as gay or lesbian. There were almost no positive resources to help one figure out one’s sexual orientation. I didn’t know anyone who was gay. For most of us, it was "go-it-alone."

There was no relevant discussion in schools,
churches, or colleges. Psychology books taught that gays were afflicted with a self-destructive sickness for which there was no known cure, except perhaps psychotherapy designed to turn gays straight. This mental disorder carried with it a social stigma that would bar us from jobs. It was inconceivable that we could ever lead a “normal” life, much less settle down with a permanent same-sex partner. Many of us just forcibly shut down that side of our lives.

In college I enrolled in ROTC, whose stipends in the final two years I needed for tuition. I was acceptable enough to become a “Distinguished
Military Graduate” with a lieutenant’s commission in addition to my bachelor’s degree, summa cum laude. I ranked fourth in my Officer’s Basic course (out of 80), and served out my term in New York, undetected, with increasing responsibilities and top security clearance.

After I had landed a job teaching, one of my promising freshman students didn’t return for a second semester. He had been arrested in a police raid on a gay bar. The police notified his parents and also the college’s president, who had told him not to return to school.

– William Koelsch
DEFINITION OF TERMS

Although the terms gay, lesbian, transgender, and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) have been used throughout the text, these were not terms people predominantly used in 1950s and 1960s. Homosexual was the term most often used for lesbian and gay people in the era. Many gay and lesbian activists of the 1950s and 1960s preferred the term homophile to homosexual and referred to their fight for equal rights as the homophile movement. Queer was considered a derogatory term, unlike the positive all-inclusive meaning it has today. In the 1950s and 1960s, transsexual became the most widely used term for transgender. Today the term transsexual is used more as a subset of transgender if it is used at all.

Donald Webster Cory’s The Homosexual in America: A Subjective Approach published in 1950 was the first non-fiction book in the United States to identify gay and lesbian people as an oppressed minority group. Unlike most psychological accounts of the day, it criticized the idea that homosexuality could be cured and encouraged gay and lesbian people to shed their guilt and shame. The book’s argument for the rights of homosexuals inspired activists of the era and set the stage for the gay rights movement to follow.
The Homophile Movement

The Post World War II Era saw the formation of some of the nation’s first LGBTQ organizations, including the Veterans’ Benevolent Association in New York and Knights of the Clock in Los Angeles. Although these early organizations had no real impact on LGBTQ rights and mobilization. The first LGBTQ activist organization of note came together in 1951 when Harry Hay helped organize the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles. The Mattachine Society blamed an intolerant society, not gay and lesbian people, for the discrimination they faced. Hay argued that gay and lesbian people were a minority group oppressed by a prejudicial society, and they needed to organize to challenge their unjust persecution.

At first, membership in the organization grew slowly. Most gay and lesbian people feared they would be arrested or fired from their jobs if anyone knew they were a part of an LGBTQ organization. But

In an era that labeled LGBT people as mentally ill and legally criminal, Latino gay activist José Julio Sarria provided a public symbol of pride, determination, and revolt. Sarria’s theatrical drag performances at the Black Cat bar in San Francisco were a popular theatrical attraction in the 1950s and 1960s. When he was arrested on a morals charge, he decided “to be the most notorious impersonator or homosexual or fairy or whatever you want to call me—and you would pay for it.” His lyrics taunted the police who harassed him. He took to the streets in makeup and drag in an open challenge to local morals statues. He led the bar’s patrons in renditions of “God Save Us Nelly Queens,” enlisting them in the war against quiet shame and solitude.

Sarria ran for a city supervisor’s seat in 1961, the first openly LGBTQ person to run for government office in the United States. Later as founder and head of the drag-based Imperial Court System, Sarria created an oasis for LGBTQ pride and celebration, as well as a fundraising force for LGBTQ rights causes across the United States. “You do good work, your work will fight your battles.” Jose Sarria’s work cast him as one of the most caring, devoted, and fearless leaders in the early fight for LGBTQ rights.

José Julio Sarria
C. 1922 – 2013
in 1952, when the Mattachine Society successfully defended a police entrapment case against one of its members, excitement spread about the organization. Mattachine Society chapters formed across the United States and membership expanded rapidly. The success was short-lived. At the Mattachine Society’s national convention in 1953, members forced Hay and the other original founders out because of their past communist ties. Although the following years saw membership dwindle and the national coalition crumble, local Mattachine Societies in Washington D.C., New York City, Chicago, San Francisco, Boston, and Detroit among others continued to work effectively for gay and lesbian rights into the 1970s.

HARRY HAY JOINED THE COMMUNIST PARTY in the 1930s, but soon grew weary of the party’s anti-homosexual stance. In 1948, he proposed a group founded on the idea that homosexuals were an oppressed minority who must mobilize for civil rights. Two years later, Hay and four others founded the Mattachine Society.

Hay ended his marriage, resigned from the Communist Party, and dedicated himself to the Mattachine Society. Unfortunately, Hay’s hope of leading a national movement ended when he and his fellow co-founders were ousted due to their past communist ties. After being called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee in Los Angeles in 1955, Hay retreated from public activism.

In the 1970s, Hay and his partner John Burnside became active in the gay and Native American civil rights movements. By the end of the decade, they had helped found the Radical Faeries, a tribal spiritual movement for building gay consciousness. Hay’s reintroduction into LGBTQ activism revived interest in his past and early organizing efforts and led to his standing among many as the founder of the gay rights movement.
In 1953, a group of Mattachine Society members in Los Angeles came together to publish the LGBT periodical, *ONE Magazine*. Henry Gerber in 1924, and Lisa Ben in 1947, had each published short-lived gay and lesbian periodicals, but *ONE Magazine* was the first to sustain production and reach a national audience. *ONE Magazine* challenged the status quo with cover stories on same-sex marriage and federal anti-LGBTQ persecution. The magazine quickly drew the attention of the FBI and the United States Post Office. In 1953 and again in 1954, the local postmaster confiscated the magazine, claiming its positive portrayal of homosexuality violated federal obscenity laws. But in the 1958

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**CHRISTINE JORGENSEN**

CHRISTINE JORGENSEN WAS NOT THE FIRST PERSON to have gender reassignment surgery, but she was certainly the most famous American to do so. A World War II veteran, George William Jorgensen always felt he was a woman trapped in a man’s body. Because the United States had no facility for sex reassignment surgery, Jorgensen had the procedure in Denmark in 1951. Now known as Christine, Jorgensen became a media sensation upon her return to the United States in the early 1950s. In an era where the mainstream media did not discuss non-cisgender identity or sexual orientation, Jorgensen broke the silence by speaking to media outlets, touring as an entertainer and lecturer, writing a book, and having a movie made about her life. Her publicity raised the consciousness and visibility of transgender people to themselves and to the nation at large.

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(left to right) Don Slater, W. Dorr Legg, and Jim Kepner helped make ONE Incorporated a leading LGBTQ equal rights organization in the 1950s. Besides publishing *ONE Magazine*, the organization was the first to establish a public LGBTQ research library (1953), provide social services to the LGBTQ community (1953), host conferences on LGBTQ rights (1955), teach classes in LGBTQ studies (1956), and publish an LGBTQ scholarly journal (1958).
The Homophile Movement

FOUNDING MEMBERS OF THE DAUGHTERS OF BILITIS, Phyllis Lyon (left) and Del Martin were as committed to activism as they were to each other. Aside from running the Daughters of Bilitis and its flagship publication, *The Ladder*, they were active in the Council on Religion and the Homosexual and helped launch the anti-police brutality Citizens Alert. They were the first lesbians to join the National Organization for Women as a couple, despite the anti-lesbian rhetoric prevalent at the time. Their book *Lesbian/Woman*, winner of the American Library Association’s LGBT book of the year in 1972, was a formative text for the burgeoning lesbian rights movement. Later, Martin and Lyon developed into leading educators regarding domestic violence and human sexuality. Together for over fifty years, they were the first same-sex couple legally married in California.

decision *ONE, Inc. v. Olesen*, the United States Supreme Court overturned the ruling, delivering the first Supreme Court decision in favor of LGBTQ rights.

In 1955 San Francisco, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon helped found the Daughters of Bilitis, the first lesbian organization in the United States. Their publication, *The Ladder*, would be the only lesbian periodical in the United States over the next fourteen years. The Daughters of Bilitis expanded to several chapters across the United States and, in 1960, convened the first of a series of national lesbian conferences.
IN SAN FRANCISCO IN 1962, gay bar owners and bartenders organized the Tavern Guild to combat police harassment of their bars and patrons. The Society for Individual Rights (SIR) formed two years later to push for broader LGBTQ rights. SIR combined social functions with political activities to become the largest LGBTQ organization in the United States. In 1966, it opened the nation’s first LGBTQ community center.

A coalition of San Francisco gay and lesbian activists and religious leaders formed the Council on Religion and the Homosexual (CRH) in 1964. When police raided a CRH sponsored New Year’s Eve event in 1964, religious leaders stood side-by-side with gay and lesbian activists to condemn the police’s targeting of LGBTQ people. The protest brought about a temporary halt to police raids on LGBTQ establishments and demonstrated the untapped power of coalition politics.

In Los Angeles, the first reported LGBTQ clash with police occurred in 1959 at Cooper’s Donuts, where a mostly black and Latino LGBTQ clientele responded to the harassment of drag queen patrons by chasing officers from the establishment. Eight years later, PRIDE (Personal Rights in Defense and Education) led hundreds in protest when police raided the Black Cat bar in Los Angeles and brutally beat patrons and the bartender. The next year, bar owner Lee Glaze led a crowd of flower-carrying protesters into a Los Angeles police station to protest the arrests in his bar.
In Washington, D.C. in 1961, Frank Kameny and Jack Nichols revived the Mattachine Society of Washington and fought to reform the federal government’s anti-gay and lesbian policies. The group initiated a massive letter writing campaign aimed at federal staff and politicians, and in 1965, helped organize some of the first gay and lesbian pickets. They enlisted the help of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which had previously ignored LGBTQ discrimination claims. The Mattachine Society of Washington provided support to *Scott v. Macy* (1965) and later *Norton v. Macy* (1969), both successful legal challenges to the federal government’s discriminatory policies.

In New York in the early 1960s, Randy Wicker, the one-man member of the Homosexual League of America, provoked mainstream newspapers and magazines to cover homosexuality and homosexual issues. Wicker, and members of the New York Mattachine and the League for Sexual Freedom, organized the first LGBTQ picket in 1964 when they protested military security lapses in regards to the confidentiality of gay and lesbian records. The New York Mattachine Society staged “sip-ins” the next year at New York City bars to protest the state’s ban on serving alcohol to LGBTQ patrons.

In Philadelphia in 1965, the Janus Society, a homophile activist group founded in 1962, led a sit-in at Dewey’s restaurant in response to a decision by the owner to refuse service to those in “nonconformist

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**Frank Kameny** 1925 – 2011

IN THE 1950S, FRANK KAMENY WAS FIRED as an astronomer for the federal government when his homosexuality became known. Blacklisted from working in his profession, Kameny turned his frustration into political activism. Although he lost a four-year court battle for reinstatement as a government astronomer, he helped revive the Mattachine Society of Washington to agitate for reform of the federal government’s discriminatory policies. He helped to organize some of the first gay and lesbian protests, enlisted the support of the American Civil Liberties Union for gay discrimination claims, and inspired LGBTQ activists with his fiery speeches and tireless activism.

Kameny’s early battles with the federal government convinced him that the fight for gay and lesbian rights would be forever hindered until the American Psychiatric Association (APA) removed its listing of homosexuality as an illness. Although others had broached the issue, his inspiring speech before the New York Mattachine Society in 1964 ignited a heightened activism around the cause. Kameny remained actively involved in the issue for the next nine years, even speaking at the 1971 APA annual meeting, and helping end the APA listing in 1973.
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Reed Erickson was born Rita Alma Erickson in El Paso, Texas. Independently wealthy, Erickson began his transgender transition under the care of sex realignment surgery pioneer Dr. Harry Benjamin in 1963 and changed his name to Reed. In 1964, Erickson founded the Erickson Educational Foundation, a charitable foundation primarily created to support research and services in transgenderism, gender identity, and sexual diversity. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Erickson supported conferences, publications, educational services, and media outreach on transgender topics. Erickson donated over two million dollars to various organizations including the Harry Benjamin Foundation, Johns Hopkins Gender Identity Clinic, National Transgender Counseling Unit, and ONE Incorporated. Through his generous philanthropy, Erickson advanced transgender medical and support services more than any individual or organization in the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1967, Charlie Brydon organized Seattle LGBTQ activists into ASK/US (Association for Social Knowledge of the United States), which later became the Dorian Society. This organization raised the visibility of the LGBTQ community in the Pacific Northwest and provided services to the community through its Dorian House. Bob Basker founded the Mattachine Midwest in 1964 in Chicago to combat a heightening of local harassment and discrimination against LGBTQ people. In 1966, the Mattachine Midwest led a picket at the Chicago Tribune and Chicago Sun-Times to protest the exclusion of LGBTQ news and advertising.

In 1963, Frank Kameny helped bring together the Janus Society in Philadelphia and Mattachine Society chapters in New York and Washington, D.C. to form East Coast Homophile Organizations (ECHO). In 1965, ECHO led small protests at the White House, Pentagon, State Department, and Civil Service Commission, and initiated the first in a series of Annual Reminder pickets outside of Independence Hall in Philadelphia. In 1966, gay and lesbian activist organizations came together in Kansas City, Missouri, for the first North American Conference of Homophile Organizations (NACHO). By 1967, the coalition claimed a membership of 6,000 individuals and organizations. By 1968, they had formalized a national campaign behind Kameny’s “Gay is Good” slogan.
When the owners of Compton’s Cafeteria in San Francisco asked the police to run off their transgender patrons, LGBTQ activists set up a picket to protest the treatment. When Compton’s owners continued calling the police, the patrons turned against the police and chased them from the building. The ensuing riot in August 1966 spilled into the streets, smashing windows, vandalizing a police car, and burning down a newspaper stand.

Regardless, this era saw a change in the mentality of the LGBTQ movement and set the stage for the successes to come. Before the 1950s, there were no activist-oriented LGBTQ organizations, no LGBTQ periodicals, and a worsening persecution of LGBTQ people. By the end of 1969, there were activist organizations throughout the American Northeast, Midwest, and West; open rebellion on the streets; and an increasingly visible and strident LGBTQ print media. Those courageous activists that came out of the closet to lead this charge risked their homes, jobs, families, and lives so that future generations would not be excluded from their civil rights.

LGBTQ ACTIVISM of this era had limited impact on broader civil rights law. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 covered all Americans except those with disabilities, LGBTQ people, and undocumented immigrants. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 removed a discriminatory quota system, but it strengthened the exclusion of gay and lesbian immigrants. By 1969, only Illinois had decriminalized sodomy (1961), while guilty sentences for sodomy in many jurisdictions could result in life in prison. LGBTQ people still suffered from vague charges relating to morals, lewd conduct, and disorderly contact that sent them to jails and mental institutions because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.
In 1960, Virginia Prince launched Transvestia, the first transgender publication in the United States. Although a breakthrough for the time, Prince aimed the periodical for a narrow audience of heterosexually married cross-dressers. The first broad-based transgender support group did not emerge until 1966 in San Francisco with Vanguard, the nation's first organization for LGBTQ kids (journals pictured). Conversion Our Goal, the nation's first transgender peer support group, and the National Transsexual Counseling Unit formed in San Francisco in 1967 and 1968 respectively. New York City saw the formation of Labyrinth Foundation Counseling Service in 1968, the nation's first organization devoted to transgender men.

Although the LGBTQ movement was inspired by the tactics of the Civil Rights and Women's movements, LGBTQ activists' involvement in the struggles of other civil rights causes was often fraught by homophobic biases. Bayard Rustin, a leading strategist of the black civil rights movement and organizer of the historic 1963 March on Washington, was pushed into the background when his homosexuality became public. Ivy Bottini, a founder and president of the New York chapter of the National Organization for Women in the late 1960s, was driven out of the organization amid a purge of lesbian members. Not until the 1970s would such biases soften as black leaders such as Huey Newton spoke out in support of LGBTQ rights and lesbian-feminism became an influential force in the women's movement.