

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN AMERICA

Despite the fact that humans have never limited their sexual pleasure to what we now call heterosexual intercourse, the history of homosexuality is relatively short. The genital anatomy of one's partners-or what Freud calls one's "object choice"-did not become the definitive criterion for distinguishing homosexual and heterosexual selves until the last third of the nineteenth century. During the 1860's and 70's European public administrators began noticing that some people were organizing their lives not around family, household, and reproduction but around various forms of sexual pleasure. This was probably a recent phenomenon made possible by the forces of capitalism, which tended to draw people off the land into cities away from their parishes and families and to reduce the importance of arranged marriage. Alarmed, officials began studying these populations, whom they characterized as sexual deviants and grouped according to the particular practices they engaged in. One such class of deviant came to be called "homosexuals".

Homosexuals quickly became the target of medical, psychiatric, and legal intervention, and as early as the 1870, they came together in such places as Bavaria to fight criminalization of sodomy. Until the Nazis destroyed Magnus Hirschfeld's homosexual archives in Berlin and hundreds of thousands of homosexual people were sent to die in concentration camps, the homosexual movement in Germany was widespread and influential.

In the U.S., the history of homosexual culture and politics is even shorter than it is in Europe. The largest and best-known communities are in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, and there are reasons for that. First, because of economic dislocations and farm crises in the first half of the 20th century, people migrated to large cities to find work. Once there, they were often forced to live outside traditional family structures, many in same sex settings such as military and industrial barracks, for prolonged periods. Those with homosexual inclinations found one another at the same time that they found the freedom to express themselves without ever-present familial and religious disapproval. For women in particular this was a new experience.

In addition to economics changes, another extremely significant factor in the development of coastal gay and lesbian enclaves was the ban on gays in the military. **After W.W.11, thousands of gay and lesbian people were dishonorably discharged** from the armed services, and many were simply dumped in port cities. At times, several hundred ex-service people were deposited in San Francisco per day. They could not go home in disgrace, so they stayed.

The first known homosexual political organization in the U.S. was the Mattachine Society, founded in November of 1950 in Los Angeles. This underground emancipation movement was the brainchild of Harry Hay, a young musicologist who had honed his organizing skills in the ranks of one of the most underground political movements in America in this century, the Communist Party. As Hay well knew, persecution of homosexuals was rampant. Police constantly entrapped and brutalized gay people. Public disclosure of homosexuality was enough to get most people fired from their jobs and ostracized from families and communities. By early 1953 under President Eisenhower, homosexuality became by executive order a necessary and sufficient reason in itself to fire any federal employee from his or her job. Most defense industries and others with government contracts followed suit, and the U.S. Postal Service aided these industries by putting tracers on suspected homosexuals' mail in order to gather enough evidence for dismissal and possibly arrest.

The Mattachine Society drew tremendous support after one of its founders, Dale Jennings, was arrested for "lewd and dissolute behavior" in February 1952. Jennings took the unheard course of acknowledging

his homosexuality in court while pleading innocent to the charges against him, thus forcing authorities to draw a distinction between being homosexual and being guilty of illegal activity. The jury was deadlocked and a retrial ordered, but the DA's office dropped all charges. Publicizing this victory was not easy, however. There was a news blackout on all the information regarding homosexuality; no press releases were accepted by any newspapers, magazines, or radio stations. The Mattachine Society was forced to circulate information solely through postings and flyers distributed in areas where homosexuals were believed to congregate. Nevertheless, the event drew tremendous, if quiet, support, and membership in the Mattachine Society grew by several thousand in succeeding weeks.

Fears generated by Joseph McCarthy's campaign to rid America of Communists eventually led to the neutralization of the Mattachine Society. By late 1954 it was the weak, fully public, assimilationist organization whose main purpose was to convince heterosexuals that homosexuals presented no threat whatsoever to any of their values and were in fact exactly like them but for sexual preference. The lesbian organization Daughters of Bilitis, founded in San Francisco in 1955, did not fare much better, although both groups managed to sustain publications with national circulation through the 1950's and 60's. By 1969, there were about fifty "homophile" organizations in the US, all fairly small.

The main reason for the lack of visibility in post-war America was persecution-religious persecution, discrimination in employment, violence, and police brutality. Non-celibate gay people were condemned by and unwelcome in most mainstream religious organizations not only as leaders but even simply as members. This led the Reverend Troy Perry, a Baptist, to found the Metropolitan Community Church in 1968. **Today the MCC is the largest gay and lesbian religious organization in this country** and by far the largest in the South.

Discrimination in employment probably ranked as the most threatening type of persecution gay people faced and still face-second only to physical assault in its violence but affecting far more people. Eisenhower's executive order stood from 1953 until 1993. There has never been any employment protection for gay people as there is now for straight white women, straight men, and women who belong to racial and ethnic minorities. Employers routinely refuse to hire gay people regardless of their qualifications and fire any who manage to be hired while closeted.

Still, the ugliest of all forms of discrimination was and is undoubtedly gay bashing, especially when carried out by public officials. Police harassment and brutality have been constant features of gay and lesbian life for decades. Indefinite detainment's, beatings, and public humiliations are only the tip of the iceberg. Lesbian and male drag queens through the 1950s and 1960s suffered frequent rapes and sexual assaults committed by police officers, sometimes inside police precincts. Moreover, police were certainly no help when beatings, rapes, and lesser indignities were visited upon gay and lesbian people by civilians. It was in this atmosphere of terror and brutality that patrons of the Stonewall Inn in New York's Greenwich Village resisted a police raid in 1969. The Stonewall Inn was a working class gay and lesbian bar frequented by cross-dressers of both sexes. Police raids were common then and ugly. On the night of June 29, 1969, police attempted to raid the bar as usual, but the regulars were fed up. As the officers entered the building, patrons barricaded them inside and held them there. Thus began three days of rioting. At one point, it was estimated that the gays held eight square blocks of the city. Word of the riots spread quickly through homophile organizations around the country. It was at that point that what had been since 1954 a rather quiet assimilationist movement became militant.

In December 1973, this movement achieved a major victory when pressure groups succeeded in forcing the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses. This change eliminated one of the reasons employers so often fire non-heterosexuals and one of the reasons judges so often awarded custody to heterosexual over homosexual parents-but only one.

Through the early 1970s, gay and lesbian communities pushed for anti-discrimination laws, and they were successful in a few cities. **By 1977, California even had its first openly gay elected official;** Harvey Milk was elected San Francisco City Supervisor from District 5. Nevertheless, it was also in 1977 that Anita Bryant began her anti-gay campaign in Dade County, Florida, which was calculated to repeal Miami's legal protections for gay citizens. Throughout 1977, there were successful referenda to repeal gay rights laws across the country—in St. Paul, Wichita, and Eugene.

In 1978, California state senator John Briggs introduced a move to prohibit homosexuals from teaching in California public schools. The initiative was defeated in November after a series of statewide debates between Briggs and Harvey Milk. It looked like gay rights would hold firm in California, but less than three weeks later Harvey Milk and pro-gay San Francisco mayor George Mascone lay dead, assassinated by former city supervisor Dan White. An all straight jury subsequently gave White the lightest possible sentence on a charge of manslaughter. San Francisco's gay population rioted; but the heyday of pro-gay politics was over in that city and anti-gay violence skyrocketed.

Not long after, scientists at the Centers for Disease Control began to notice a number of immune-deficiency-related illnesses in the gay male populations of major cities. Public officials (who did not know what caused the illnesses or exactly how they were spread) began closing down establishments where gay people gathered. Not surprisingly, gay people resisted these moves, seeing them as just another ploy on the part of politicians and police to destroy gay communities and to oppress individuals. Tensions between gay communities and various branches of government increased.

In 1986 in *Bowers v. Hardwick* the U.S. Supreme Court held that states have a right to criminalize even private and consensual sexual behavior. Specifically the court said Georgia had a right to punish Michael Hardwick for sodomy even though his act occurred in private. The police officer who overheard and then witnessed Hardwick's act had entered the house in order to speak to one of Hardwick's housemates about a traffic violation. Officer Bowers placed Hardwick under arrest in his own bedroom.

The following year, **1987, the second March on Washington was held. It was one of the largest civil right demonstrations in this country's history, drawing more than 650,000.** The next day 5,000 demonstrators converged on the Supreme Court steps, and an organization new even to most lesbian and gay Americans, ACT-UP, made its first national appearance. Gay politics, like gay lives, had changed dramatically since Harry Hay founded the Mattachine Society only thirty-seven years before.

Things have changed. However, in many respects life has not gotten any easier. The FBI tells us violence against gay people and destruction of gay property and establishments is on the rise, and the crimes committed against us are getting uglier and deadlier. There are efforts in dozens of states and localities to repeal anti-discrimination laws where they exist and to prohibit them where they do not yet exist so that non-heterosexual people will have no avenue for changing the laws that affect them. More and more people are out of the closet, but while that may relieve and liberate in some ways, it also makes people easy targets for discrimination and hatred.