



An architectural rendering (Gensler, 2005) of Chicago's Center On Halsted. Image courtesy The Center On Halsted.

Chicago

by Tina Gianoulis

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The vigorous Midwestern metropolis of Chicago has been a center of gay and lesbian community and organizing since the early part of the twentieth century. Though the city's politics have been, with some justification, stereotyped as corrupt and ruthless, Chicago has also been the birthplace of many reformers and progressive political movements. The first known gay rights group in the U.S. was the Society for Human Rights, founded in Chicago in 1924, and in 1961 Illinois became the first state to legalize private acts of homosexuality between consenting adults.

More recently, Chicago has emerged as the home of a flourishing and diverse glbtq community.

Early History

In 1781, an explorer from St. Marc, Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti) named Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable founded the first permanent settlement at the strategic trade location where the Chicago River connects the Mississippi River with Lake Michigan. The town of Chicago was officially incorporated in 1833, becoming a city in 1837 as the industrial revolution swelled urban populations throughout the nation.

The famous Great Fire of 1871 destroyed much of the business district of the city, leaving three hundred dead and 90,000 homeless. Chicago administrators hired leading architects to rebuild the city, and the wide boulevards, graceful buildings, and numerous parks they designed earned Chicago the nickname "Paris of the prairie." Over a century later, Chicago's stunning architecture is still admired by visitors from around the world.

Throughout the last half of the nineteenth century, Chicago's position as an industrial and meatpacking center of the Midwest drew tens of thousands of immigrants, from rural areas of the U.S. as well as from other countries, seeking jobs in the city's slaughterhouses and factories.

Rise of a Gay Community

The industrialization and urbanization of the late nineteenth century brought about lifestyle changes as well. Young people began to move away from their families and live alone in boarding houses or tenements. By the early twentieth century this independence, along with the relative anonymity of a growing city, began to allow the rise of a gay community.

The Levee district on the South Side, already home to prostitution and the opium trade, became a center of gay social activity, with saloons and dance halls offering drag shows for gay male customers.

Lesbians in Early Chicago

As frequently happens in societies where women have little power, lesbians were less visible than gay men in early Chicago. Some butch lesbians passed for men in order to obtain better jobs and live in relative

safety with a partner. Newspapers occasionally published accounts of women who had been discovered passing as husbands.

However, other women managed to live in couples, including Jane Addams (1860-1935) and Ellen Starr (1859-1940), two unobtrusively lesbian social workers. Addams and Starr not only helped poor people living in Chicago's slums, but also worked to reform labor laws and improve working conditions for women and children. In 1889, they opened Hull House, one of the first settlement houses to offer services to the poor.

Henry Gerber and the Society for Human Rights

By the 1920s, both gay men and lesbians had become more visible in Chicago society and had expanded out of the "vice" area of the Levee to the bohemian center of Towertown on the Near North Side. It was the era of Prohibition, and the saloons were replaced by tearooms and speakeasies, such as the Bally Hoo Café and the Dill Pickle Club.

It was in this atmosphere that a German immigrant named Henry Gerber (1892-1972), along with six other men, started a homosexual rights group called the Society for Human Rights in 1924. The Society survived only a few months, publishing two issues of its journal, *Friendship and Freedom*, before being shut down by the Chicago police. Gerber was arrested and his name published in newspapers. Although the charges against him were dropped, he lost his job at the Post Office.

However, though the public struggle for gay rights had been temporarily quashed, underground gay culture flourished. An article in a 1930 issue of *Variety* magazine estimated that Towertown was home to thirty-five gay clubs. In addition, gay men and lesbians formed extensive social networks and staged private parties in their homes and apartments.

African Americans

The industrial revolution had also led to a flood of African Americans out of the rural South and into northern urban centers. Queer African Americans gravitated to Chicago's South Side, frequenting clubs like the Pleasure Inn and the Plantation Café and hosting drag balls that became fashionable social events for straights and gays alike.

One famous drag ball was Finnie's Ball, originated by an African-American gay man named Alfred Finnie in 1935. Finnie's Balls, held as Halloween celebrations, continued to attract bohemian Chicagoans into the 1960s.

World War II and Post-War Repression

After the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, a number of bars catering exclusively to gay men and lesbians opened, both on the Near North Side and in the Loop, which also became a cruising area for gay men.

World War II brought another increase in Chicago's gay population, as thousands of men and women passed through the city. After the war, many returned to stay there and become part of the flourishing gay community, which spread to areas such as Old Town, Hyde Park, and Lakeview, and a gay leather scene became visible.

Though conservative elements of society had always condemned homosexuality, and the police had frequently responded with arrests and rough treatment, the 1950s introduced a new level of repression.

Government "red squads" seeking Communists began to investigate homosexuals along with teachers, social

workers, and leftists. Gay and lesbian bars were raided more frequently, and police were not above planting drugs to enable them to make arrests. Chicago newspapers not only printed names of those arrested, but also addresses, phone numbers, and occupations, leading to further harassment of gay men and lesbians, who often lost their jobs after such incidents.

A courageous lesbian lawyer helped victimized gay men and lesbians fight back against police harassment and entrapment. Pearl M. Hart (1890-1978) was a progressive lawyer and law professor who devoted her life to helping queers and other vulnerable people fight police brutality. The first woman lawyer to work as a public defender in Chicago's morals court, she also helped found the Chicago chapter of the Mattachine Society during the 1950s.

The 1960s and 1970s

Inspired by the report of Britain's Wolfenden Commission (1957), the American Law Institute created a Model Penal Code that decriminalized homosexual activity in private. In 1961, Illinois adopted this criminal code and thus became the first state to legalize consensual homosexual acts in private. Despite the significance of this milestone, however, the repression of public queer activity, including socializing in gay bars, continued.

Despite the repression, a gay and lesbian political movement came to the fore in the 1960s. In 1964, a chapter of the Mattachine Society was revitalized as Mattachine Midwest by Robert Basker and Pearl Hart. The new chapter was independent of the national organization and more militant. It protested police abuse and entrapment and aided victims of bar raids and morals arrests.

The movement gathered steam after New York's Stonewall Riots of 1969, which inspired many other gay men and lesbians to begin to organize politically and publicly. Among the first of these new organizations was the Gay Liberation Front at the University of Chicago, followed by other groups, including Chicago Gay Liberation (CGL), which, along with Mattachine Midwest and Women's Caucus, organized the first Chicago Gay Pride in June 1970.

Having been denied a parade permit, some 150 protesters marched along the city's sidewalks, protesting the injustices suffered by glbtq people. The next year the 150-person demonstration had evolved into a 1,200-person parade.

As was the case with other gay groups, it was not long before CGL discovered divisions among its members, and two offshoot groups formed, Chicago Lesbian Liberation and Third World Gay Revolution.

The 1970s saw an explosion of gay and lesbian political organizing and gay and lesbian culture. Gay and lesbian bars, dance clubs, bathhouses, bookstores, theaters, restaurants, newspapers, and other venues proliferated.

Perhaps the most important institution established in the 1970s was Gay Horizons (now Horizons Community Services), which was founded in 1972. At first hardly more than a telephone helpline staffed by volunteers, the organization has grown to become one of the country's largest glbtq social agencies, offering a wide range of services from anti-violence projects to legal aid and psychotherapeutic counseling.

The Mountain Moving Coffeehouse for Womyn and Children opened in 1975 to provide women-only space and a stage for lesbian culture. The coffeehouse remained open for thirty-one years, not closing its doors until December 2005.

The 1980s

In 1981, queer historians opened the Midwest Gay and Lesbian Archive and Library in order to preserve

Chicago's gay heritage. Founded by Gregory Sprague, a Loyola University researcher who died of complications from AIDS in 1987, the archive was later renamed the Gerber/Hart Library after gay and lesbian pioneers Henry Gerber and Pearl M. Hart.

The 1980s were a crucial decade in the development of the glbtq community. Not only were numerous cultural organizations, such as the Chicago Gay Men's Chorus, established, but politicians became more responsive to lesbian and gay concerns. A number of gay men and lesbians were influential participants in the administration of Mayor Harold Washington (1983-1987), the city's first African-American mayor, and their political work helped establish the glbtq community as an important political constituency. In 1987, Washington appointed the first mayoral liaison to the gay and lesbian community.

The campaigns of openly gay physician Ron Sable (1945-1993) for city alderman in 1987 and 1991, though unsuccessful, demonstrated that a significant number of voters cared about glbtq issues. This recognition increased the responsiveness of the political establishment to gay and lesbian concerns.

AIDS ravaged the gay male community in Chicago during the 1980s. In response Sable and Dr. Renslow Scherer established the Sable/Renslow AIDS Clinic. In addition, the Howard Brown Health Center, established in 1974 and named for the pioneering openly gay Public Health Commissioner for New York City, moved to the forefront of AIDS testing and treatment in the 1980s. It became the Midwest's leading provider of medical services to the glbtq community.

Militant AIDS activists formed a series of organizations that ultimately merged in the Chicago chapter of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). Staging demonstrations to protest the neglect of the AIDS crisis by government agencies and to pressure pharmaceutical companies to provide cheaper and more accessible drugs, ACT UP/Chicago brought a sense of urgency to the AIDS pandemic.

In 1988, Chicago gay men and lesbians finally won a fifteen-year battle for human rights when the city council passed the Chicago Human Rights Ordinance banning discrimination against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals in employment, housing, and public accommodations. After this success, the business leaders who had spearheaded the campaign created an organization first known as the Illinois Federation for Human Rights, which soon became Equality Illinois, a statewide advocacy group.

Lesbian and gay activists continued working to extend protections against discrimination, and in 1993 Chicago's ordinance was adopted throughout Cook County. In 1997, transgender activists persuaded the Cook County town of Evanston to include transgendered individuals in its protection ordinance, and in 2003 Chicago did the same.

Despite its size and influence, Chicago has not been on the cutting edge of the national glbtq movement for equality the way San Francisco, New York, and Los Angeles have been, perhaps because politics in the city has traditionally been tightly controlled by the dominant political machine. Nevertheless, the glbtq community has earned an impressive record of political success by working within the local political establishment.

The current mayor, Richard M. Daley, elected to office in 1989, has been a loyal supporter of the glbtq community from the very beginning of his tenure. Not only did he declare his support for same-sex marriage in 2004, but he has frequently directed city resources to projects that benefit the glbtq community.

The 1990s and the 2000s

Beginning in the 1980s but accelerating in the 1990s, the focal point of the glbtq community in Chicago

shifted from the downtown core and the Near North Side a few miles north, spreading to more residential locations. The Lakeview and Andersonville neighborhoods became the hub of gay and lesbian life. The most significant gay center now is popularly known as Boystown, located approximately between Belmont and Addison in the Lakeview neighborhood.

Throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s, the queer community of Chicago continued to develop and grow. In 1991 the Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame was established to honor prominent Chicago glbtq individuals and groups. It is the only U.S. organization of its kind to be city-sponsored.

Latino queers have done important community organizing in the 1990s and 2000s. They formed Amigas Latinas, a support group for Latina lesbians, bisexuals, and questioning women, in 1995, and launched *Homofrecuencia*, the nation's only glbtq radio program for Latino youth, in 2002.

A number of significant cultural groups have emerged in these decades, including Sex Police, an AIDS awareness performance group in 1990, and About Face Theater, a glbtq troupe, in 1995.

Openly gay and lesbian politicians not only began to seek office, but also occasionally to win their races. In 1994, Thomas R. Chiola became Chicago's first openly gay elected official when he was elected to Cook County Circuit Court. In 1996, Larry McKeon, a former mayoral liaison to the community, was elected to represent a legislative district that includes Andersonville, thus becoming Illinois' first openly gay state legislator.

Nancy J. Katz's 1999 appointment and subsequent election to Cook County Circuit Court made her Chicago's first openly lesbian official. Tom Tunney's 2003 election as 44th Ward Alderman (a district that includes Lakeview) made him the city's first openly gay alderman.

In 1996, the Chicago Area Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce was established. By the early 2000s, it would have a membership of more than 600 businesses.

In 1997, the Chicago City Council extended domestic partnership benefits to municipal employees.

In 1998, Boystown received the distinction of being America's first officially recognized gay village. As part of a city-sponsored \$3.2 million restoration project, the North Halsted Street strip was decorated with lighted rainbow pylons. The bronze pylons, more than 10 feet high with rainbow circles, were constructed by the city as an official designation of Chicago's most prominent glbtq neighborhood.

In 2005, the Illinois legislature passed legislation outlawing discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in employment, housing, credit, and public accommodations, in effect extending the protections pioneered in Chicago and Cook County to the entire state.

In July 2006, Chicago's queer community hosted the Gay Games VI Sports and Cultural Festival.

In March 2007, Horizons Community Service's long-awaited Center on Halsted, after some five years of planning, is scheduled to open. Intended to be a focal point for Chicago's glbtq community, the Center aims to meet the diverse social, recreational, cultural, and social service needs of a population that has too often been neglected.

One of America's most storied cities, Chicago is one of the world's leading commercial and industrial centers. It boasts numerous cultural, educational, and social opportunities, from renowned institutions such as the Art Institute, the Chicago Symphony, and the Joffrey Ballet to lively bars and restaurants catering to people of all sexual orientations. A vital part of the city is its diverse and energetic glbtq community. The

annual gay pride celebrations now attract hundreds of thousands of participants, as does the annual Northalsted Market Days celebration, which has become the largest two-day festival in the state.

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