



Hay, Harry (1912-2002)

by Linda Rapp

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Activist Harry Hay is recognized as one of the principal founders of the gay liberation movement in the United States. An original member of both the Mattachine Society and the Radical Faeries, he devoted his life to the cause of equality and dignity for glbtq people.

Early Life and Education

Hay's parents, both American, met and married in South Africa, where his father Henry Hay, known as Big Harry, was a manager in Cecil Rhodes' mining company. When the birth of their first child was impending, Margaret Neall Hay sailed for England, where their son Henry, Jr., called Little Harry, was born on April 7, 1912 in Worthington, Sussex.

The senior Hay saw little of his family for the next two years, but when World War I broke out, he sent for them to join him in Chile, where he had another mining job. After suffering a serious injury on a work site, Hay resettled the family in California.

"Big Harry" Hay was harsh, opinionated, demanding, and quick to criticize anything that he perceived as less than perfect in his elder son, from insufficient "manliness" to his grades in school. In later years Hay spoke of his determination to live a life completely different from his father's because of his "personal hatred" for the man.

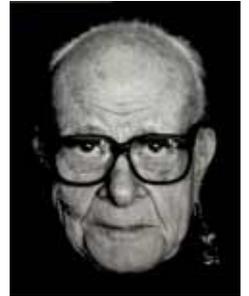
Hay stated that he was aware--however indistinctly at first--of his sexual orientation at a very early age. He recalled a same-sex sexual experience with a playmate at age nine. A couple of years later he devised a scheme to get his hands on the copy of Edward Carpenter's *The Intermediate Sex* (1906) kept locked away at his local library. Although as a young boy Hay could not completely understand what he was reading, he stated in a 1977 speech, "my world was transformed into a whole wonderful, different place" as soon as he learned that there were others like him and that he had the hope of finding love.

Despite his father's negative comments on his academic progress, Hay was a precocious child with a nearly photographic memory, and he excelled at school. After graduating from Los Angeles High School in 1930, he enrolled at Stanford University.

Hay's father wanted him to pursue a course of study such as medicine or engineering that would lead to a lucrative career, but Hay was drawn to drama and music, areas in which his mother had encouraged him to develop his talents.

Hay came out as a gay man in his first year at college. He had affairs with several fellow students.

Career as an Actor



A portrait of Harry Hay by Stathis Orphanos. Courtesy Stathis Orphanos. Image copyright © Stathis Orphanos. All Rights Reserved.

In February 1932 Hay contracted a sinus infection so severe that he had to leave college. Instead of returning, he began working as an actor. His roles were generally minor--extra, bit-player, or stunt rider. He also worked as a shill for drag entertainer Ray Bourbon when the comedian performed at a Sunset Strip nightclub.

While working in Tom Taylor's play *The Ticket of Leave Man--or--Falsely Accused* in 1933, Hay met Will Geer, who would later be best known as the lovable "Grandpa" of *The Waltons* television series.

The two men shared a love of the outdoors, and Geer, whose college degree was in botany, happily accepted Hay's invitations to go hiking in the California mountains. The two quickly became lovers.

Geer and Hay both worked on a 1935 production of Clifford Odets's anti-Nazi play *Till the Day I Die*, in which Hay played a sadistic homosexual soldier who tortured Communists. Although the character was unsavory, Hay accepted the role because there were so few portrayals of openly gay people in the theater at the time.

The Communist Party and Marriage

Geer encouraged Hay's leftist political views and introduced him to the Communist party. Hay became a member. He worked in political theater and also learned organizing strategies.

Since the Communist party condemned homosexuality, Hay distanced himself from his gay friends, attempted to live as a heterosexual man, and eventually married (as did Geer). Anita Platky, whom Hay wed in 1938, was a dedicated worker for the party. The couple adopted two infant girls, in 1943 and 1945.

Unable to deny his true sexuality, Hay resumed socializing with other gay men and began having affairs. In 1951 he and his wife divorced, and he ended his affiliation with the Communist party.

The Mattachine Society

From 1947 until 1952 Hay taught music history courses at the Los Angeles People's Education Center. In his research on the medieval period he learned about secret societies of monks, including one called the Mattachines, who, masked and costumed as jesters, performed songs and dances--often including satire and social parody--on the "Feast of Fools" (April Fool's Day) in defiance of a ban by the Roman Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire. Hay concluded that "the Mattachine troupes conveyed vital information to the oppressed in the countryside of 13th-15th century France," adding that he "hoped that such a society of modern homosexual men, living in disguise in 20th century America, could do similarly for us oppressed Queers."

The modern Mattachine Society had its genesis at a November 1950 meeting of five men--Hay, his lover fashion designer Rudi Gernreich, Robert Hull, who was a student in Hay's classes, and two of Hull's friends, Charles Rowland and Dale Jennings. The men continued to meet, always in secret for fear of a police raid if their organization were discovered.

Membership gradually increased. Hay oversaw the development of the society, taking as his model the Freemasons of the eighteenth century, an underground fraternal organization. The Mattachines attempted to operate by unanimous consensus, which, given the strong personalities involved, including the sometimes volatile Hay, caused occasional difficulties.

McCarthyism

In early 1952 Jennings was arrested for allegedly soliciting a police officer. Hay bailed him out of jail, and the Mattachine Society established the Citizens' Committee to Outlaw Entrapment in Jennings' defense.

At trial Jennings' lawyer was able to prove that the arresting officer had lied. Eleven of the jurors favored acquittal, but one pledged to keep voting guilty "till hell froze over." After forty hours of deliberations by the deadlocked panel, the judge dismissed the case. Although less definitive than an acquittal, the decision was viewed as a victory in the struggle for gay rights.

As a result, membership in the Mattachine Society burgeoned from a few hundred to several thousand. There was, however, also a homophobic backlash. A newspaper columnist called the organization potentially "dangerous," and another identified Hay as "a Marxist teacher."

The scrutiny produced uneasiness within the Mattachine Society. Newer members at the Society's 1953 convention called for a new constitution and new leadership. They were concerned in particular about being perceived as a Communist-influenced organization in the McCarthy era. Whereas the newcomers favored an assimilationist strategy, Hay wanted to celebrate the uniqueness of glbtq people. Hay reluctantly dissociated himself from the pioneering organization that he had founded.

Hay was called to appear at a hearing of the House Un-American Activities Committee in Los Angeles in 1955. He had great difficulty in finding a lawyer willing to represent a gay client, a circumstance that left him "almost catatonic with fear." When he did appear, he was briefly questioned and rather quickly dismissed.

The 1950s proved to be a difficult period for Hay. Soon after his divorce, his relationship with Gernreich also ended. Despite his bold leadership in the gay rights movement he found himself excluded from contemporary organizations.

Shortly after his separation from Gernreich, Hay began a ten-year relationship with Jorn Kamgren, a Danish hat-maker. In order to propitiate the often temperamental and possessive Kamgren, Hay distanced himself from former associates, a privation that eventually led to the couple's break-up in 1962.

The following year Hay moved in with fellow activist Jim Kepner. The two felt affection and respect for each other, but romance failed to blossom. After a few months they parted but remained good friends.

By then past fifty, Hay was pessimistic about ever having an enduring committed relationship. In September 1963, however, at the ONE Institute Dorr Legg introduced him to John Burnside, an engineer who owned a kaleidoscope factory. Burnside was in a "not unhappy" but unfulfilling marriage at the time. Within three months, however, he moved in with Hay, and the two remained "loving companions" for life.

Return to Activism

Hay and Burnside were also committed partners in the struggle for glbtq rights. In 1965 they founded a gay and lesbian collective, the Circle of Loving Companions, based on "the Whitmanesque ideal of the inclusive love of comrades."

The following year they joined the North American Conference of Homophile Organizations (NACHO). As chairman of the Los Angeles committee, Hay organized a "picket line on wheels," in which cars bore placards decrying discriminatory policies in the United States military (although Hay was also active in assisting gay men who resisted the draft during the war in Vietnam).

After the foundation of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in New York in the wake of the Stonewall riots in 1969, regional chapters were also organized. Hay was elected chairperson of the Southern California branch, and he and Burnside became fixtures on picket lines and at demonstrations in late 1969 and early 1970.

The Move to New Mexico

In May 1970, however, the couple left California for New Mexico, where they found new premises for the kaleidoscope factory. In New Mexico, Hay and Burnside not only continued their work for gay rights, but they also became involved in a successful effort to block a federal canal-building project that would have diverted water from the Rio Grande for the benefit of wealthy private developers while local agrarian communities would have suffered a devastating loss of water for irrigation.

The move to New Mexico had been partly motivated by the high cost of living in Los Angeles, but it also provided Hay the opportunity to study Native American cultures, with which he had been fascinated since hearing Quechua and Aymara music in the Chilean mountains as a child. In more recent years he had extensively studied the role of berdaches or two-spirit people in Amerindian cultures.

The Radical Faeries

In addition to these studies, Hay had also been reflecting on gay consciousness, concluding that whereas heterosexual men see themselves as subjects and their female partners as objects, gay men perceive in their lovers fellow subjects--"equals to be respected and cherished."

In a 1976 "Call to Action" Hay envisioned a "gay fairy family of loving-sharing equals." He pursued the idea by founding the Radical Faeries two years later.

Meetings of the Radical Faeries generally occur in rural settings, and their celebrations combine Native American and New Age elements. The first took place in the desert near Tucson, Arizona in September 1979. Since then the Radical Faeries movement has spread across the United States and also to Europe.

Belated Recognition

Over the next decade Hay was somewhat eclipsed by younger members of the glbtq rights movement. He was "rediscovered," however, at the end of the twentieth century, and by the end of his life he was recognized and revered as a founding elder of the movement for equality.

Stuart Timmons published a biography, *The Trouble with Harry Hay*, in 1990, and a collection of Hay's writings, *Radically Gay: Gay Liberation in the Words of Its Founder*, appeared in 1996. When in 1999 the choice of grand marshal for San Francisco's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Pride Parade was put to a public vote for the first time, Hay was the winner. He was also the subject of Eric Slade's PBS documentary *Hope along the Wind: The Life of Harry Hay* (2002), which was nominated for an Emmy and won numerous awards at film festivals.

In 1999 Burnside moved Hay, who was suffering from lung cancer, to San Francisco's Castro district, where he was cared for by hospice nurses and care-taking members of the Radical Faeries. At the same period Hay arranged for his personal papers to be donated to the James C. Hormel Gay and Lesbian Center at the San Francisco Public Library.

Harry Hay died on October 24, 2002. At his side were John Burnside, with whom he had registered as domestic partners only weeks before, and his care givers from the Radical Faeries, who laid Hay out and sprinkled rose petals over him.

Biographer Timmons had visited Hay a few weeks before, at which time Hay had given him a message: "Tell my people I want them to be happy and strong. And free. And contributive. And to fly."

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