



## Homophile Movement, U. S.

by Ruth M. Pettis

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.  
Entry Copyright © 2008 glbtq, Inc.  
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

The phrase "homophile movement" refers to organizations and political strategies employed by homosexuals prior to the era of confrontational activism of the late 1960s. The term broadly encompasses the period from the end of World War II to 1970 and denotes, in particular, those who endeavored to advance the cause of equal rights through conformance with the heterosexual norms prevalent at the time.

However, there is much overlap between the two phases; some activists in homophile associations were advocating assertive social change tactics well before the Stonewall Riots of 1969 and the term *homophile* continued in use well into the 1970s during the era of the Gay Rights Movement.

The homophile movement's philosophical seeds germinated toward the end of the nineteenth century in Europe, particularly through the writings of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and Magnus Hirschfeld in Germany and Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis in England, whose arguments for the decriminalization of homosexuality anticipated later thinking.

Hirschfeld founded the Scientific Humanitarian Committee, the world's first organization devoted to the promotion of homosexual rights, in 1897. His Institute for Sexual Science, a repository for gay-positive research that he founded in 1919, was destroyed by the Nazis prior to World War II.

In 1924, a postal clerk named Henry Gerber founded the Society for Human Rights in Chicago, the first American homophile organization. Gerber had encountered Hirschfeld's ideas during his military duty in Germany. Back home he attempted to promote them through a newsletter, "Friendship and Freedom." This effort was short-lived. In 1925 Gerber and his associates were arrested, his materials seized, and his postal career terminated.

Early European homophile organizations such as COC (Netherlands) and Forbundet (Denmark) resurfaced soon after the end of World War II. By the 1950s, demographic, cultural, and political developments had converged in a way that enabled the first effective steps toward community organizing among homosexuals in the United States.

The war had relocated thousands of young adult men and women to urban debarkation and industrial centers, where many of them stayed after the war. In these areas, they enjoyed a new-found personal freedom, and those who were gay or lesbian discovered enclaves of kindred spirits.

Alfred Kinsey's studies, published in 1948 and 1953, documented the profound liberalization in sexual mores underway, both driving and driven by publishers' and filmmakers' eagerness to satisfy consumer demand.



**Top:** Barbara Gittings marching in the Independence Day picket in Philadelphia in 1969. Photograph by Nancy Tucker, courtesy Lesbian Herstory Archives.

**Above:** Mattachine Society founder Harry Hay attending a Radical Faeries Campout in Southern California's Anza Borrego Desert in 1996.

Image of Barbara Gittings appears under the GNU Free Documentation License version 1.2 or above, courtesy Lesbian Herstory Archives.

Kinsey's estimate of 20 million men and women in the U.S. who had extensive same-sex sexual experience revealed that homosexuality was much more common than previously assumed.

Finally, the African-American civil rights movement and, later, the anti-war and women's liberation movements, by celebrating *difference* as a positive attribute, broke the stigma of nonconformance and inspired emulation by other disenfranchised groups.

The Kinsey reports exposed a great difference between the actual sexual practices of Americans and their professed beliefs about sexuality. This discrepancy was highlighted by the growth of political extremism in the United States that cast homosexuals as the chief scapegoats of the Cold War.

For gay men and lesbians, the 1950s was a time of police harassment, witch hunts, suspicions of disloyalty, and dismissals from jobs, especially in the public sector. In the United States and Great Britain, throughout the 1950s, thousands of individuals were arrested and imprisoned on homosexual charges.

At the same time, however, at least partially in response to the oppressive political climate, the 1950s also spawned the beginnings of a gay and lesbian political movement that would gradually achieve increased visibility.

### **Mattachine Society**

Three of the men who founded the Mattachine Society in 1951--Harry Hay, Chuck Rowland, and Robert Hull--possessed organizing skills from their previous involvement in the Communist Party. Because public exposure could result in job loss or worse, they emulated the party's secretive top-down structure in which the leadership was not known to its members, a structure also modeled in part on the Freemasons. Mattachine's original governance scheme comprised five tiers, called "orders." Hay envisioned Mattachine as a militant, mass organization controlled by a secret leadership.

That same year Donald Webster Cory (pseudonym of Edward Sagarin), in *The Homosexual in America*, asserted that homosexuals constituted an authentic minority group. This position, previously articulated by German writer Kurt Hiller, reinforced Hay's vision of an emergent "ethical homosexual culture." It provided a theoretical foundation for Mattachine that prefigured the identity politics of later decades.

A contingent led by Hal Call, troubled that the founders' former Communist ties made Mattachine vulnerable to McCarthyite investigations, pressured the original leadership to resign at a pair of membership meetings in the spring of 1953. With these resignations, the organization's focus shifted from political reform to advocating that homosexuals attempt to conform to (or at least accommodate) socially acceptable norms and seek advice from psychiatric experts. Its secretive cell structure changed to a standard open membership.

Mattachine won its first legal action in 1952 when it challenged a police entrapment incident.

The organization also provided subjects for Evelyn Hooker's research, which would ultimately debunk the psychiatric model of homosexuality as mental illness, and fostered a sense of fellowship in a non-sexualized context.

In 1953, its members founded *ONE Magazine*, a publication separate from Mattachine itself, which published until 1972. In 1955, the organization established *Mattachine Review*, a journal that focused on culture and history and took a more moderate position on civil rights issues than *ONE Magazine*.

### **Daughters of Bilitis**

The Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) was founded in San Francisco in 1955 as a discussion and social group for lesbians. Its founders, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon and three other couples, had no knowledge of Mattachine when they began meeting to establish a safe alternative to the bar scene. They soon discovered their male counterpart and the two organizations often worked on joint events but as separate entities.

DOB's leadership recognized that some of Mattachine's concerns, such as fighting police entrapment in cruising areas, did not address the needs of most lesbians. They also realized that the women's fewer numbers, and the men's condescension toward lesbians, could compromise DOB's autonomy. Therefore, DOB's constitution, while allowing collaborative efforts, prohibited structural affiliations with other groups.

Like Mattachine, DOB promoted conformance with mainstream values, a stance alienating to blue-collar and masculine-appearing lesbians. But as a support group DOB aided the personal journeys of individual lesbians, and through its monthly magazine *The Ladder* reached many otherwise isolated women.

### ***ONE Magazine***

Another resource from this period, *ONE Magazine*--largely edited and staffed by Mattachine members but separate from it--continued to challenge the status quo even after Mattachine's retreat into accommodation. Contributing writers examined homosexuality as a socially-cohesive identity. They blasted police harassment, evaluated methods for combating prejudice, and debated topics such as cross-dressing and role-playing.

The most significant victory of the early homophile movement was the result of *ONE Magazine's* legal challenge to the Los Angeles postmaster's 1954 refusal to mail the publication on the grounds that the magazine was "obscene, lewd, lascivious and filthy."

The seizure set the stage for a protracted court battle with significant consequences for the gay and lesbian movement. In 1956, a federal district court upheld the postmaster's action; the next year so did an appeals court, which characterized the magazine as "cheap pornography" simply because it discussed homosexuality.

In January 1958, however, the United States Supreme Court unanimously reversed the findings of the lower courts. This major victory was crucial to the growth of the homophile movement, for it made possible communication and organization on a much larger scale than had previously been possible.

### **New Visibility**

Despite the successes of the homophile organizations, their views reached relatively few people. At the height of its influence, *ONE Magazine* had a subscription list of little more than 5000. By the end of the 1950s, membership in homophile organizations numbered only in the hundreds, well short of the groundswell needed to effect significant legal and social reforms.

Political turmoil in the 1960s, however, provided new models for social change that some homophile activists were ready to embrace. Against the concerns of some that the homophile movement would become associated with fringe or "beatnik" elements, visibility became an important tactic for the new militants.

Frank Kameny and Jack Nichols launched the autonomous Mattachine Society of Washington [D.C.] in 1961

with an activist point of view from the beginning. They allied with the local Civil Liberties Union in a vigorous campaign against anti-gay discrimination in the U.S. Civil Service Commission, in the military, and in the granting of security clearances.

The following year Randy Wicker formed the Homosexual League of New York and actively sought to bring media attention to gay issues.

These individuals represented a new breed of organizers who had no patience with apologetics or with cultivating the endorsement of professional authority figures. Brandishing "Gay Is Good" banners, they actively challenged the prevailing psychiatric illness model of homosexuality.

## **ECHO**

In January 1963 Kameny convened the first meetings of what would become ECHO: East Coast Homophile Organizations. Representatives from Mattachine organizations in Washington, D.C. and New York, the Janus Society of Philadelphia, and the Daughters of Bilitis met monthly to develop strategies. Among the regular participants were Barbara Gittings, Kay Lahusen, and Craig Rodwell.

ECHO activists were responsible for the first gay rights demonstrations. On April 16, 1965 they simultaneously picketed at the United Nations headquarters (to protest the Cuban government's treatment of homosexuals) and the White House (to protest federal hiring policies). On May 29 ECHO demonstrated in front of the Civil Service building, the State Department, the Pentagon, and the White House, and on July 4 in front of Independence Hall in Philadelphia.

These demonstrations generally drew 20 to 40 picketers (but more than 70 at the White House) and were very orderly events, especially when compared to the raucous and rebellious tone of anti-war protests of the time. Because they focused on employment discrimination, demonstrators dressed in office attire, heeding Kameny's rationale that "if we want to be employed by the federal government we have to look employable to the federal government."

These activities yielded modest results, such as meetings with Civil Service personnel and some media attention. The group held yearly demonstrations, called "Annual Reminders," at Independence Hall every Fourth of July through 1969.

New York's Mattachine chapter crusaded against police abuses throughout the late 1960s. In the spring of 1967 the Student Homophile League at Columbia University became the first campus gay and lesbian organization.

## **NACHO**

In 1966 a series of meetings in Kansas City, Missouri resulted in the formation of NACHO, the North American Conference of Homophile Organizations. With more than 80 delegates (about a dozen of them women), the August conference was the largest homophile gathering to that date. NACHO met annually through the rest of the 1960s. It brought suit in discrimination cases, coordinated further demonstrations, and argued against the internalized self-hatred they perceived to be underlying the accommodationist approach.

## **Homophile Activism in San Francisco**

In San Francisco homophile activism evolved against the backdrop of the Beat poets' celebration of nonconformity and in reaction to police crackdowns against gay bars. Several significant organizations were

founded in the early 1960s. The League for Civil Education formed in April 1961; its *LCE News* took an activist tone aimed at the bar scene.

In 1962 gay bar owners formed the Tavern Guild to provide legal help for patrons arrested in police raids.

The Society for Individual Rights (SIR) was founded in September 1963. It recognized the community-organizing potential among bar patrons and sponsored social and political events, including venereal disease education, bowling nights, voter registration, and political endorsements. It grew to 1000 members in its first year, becoming the largest homophile organization in the country.

### **Internal Conflicts**

This outreach was a starkly different tack than that taken by Mattachine and DOB, whose organizational energies were sapped by internal tensions and personality conflicts in the 1960s. In 1965 the militant faction in control of New York Mattachine became embroiled in financial misconduct. In 1966 angry reactions to Gittings' support of the new activism in *The Ladder* resulted in her leaving DOB.

Later on, Barbara Grier's and Rita Laporte's use of *The Ladder* to champion feminist views also proved to be too polemical for the membership and precipitated a schism in DOB. An irreconcilable rift at *ONE, Inc.* required litigation and led to the split-off of *Tangents* magazine in 1965.

National leadership often conflicted with local sovereignty. Mattachine dissolved its national structure in 1961. DOB would do the same in 1970. Some local chapters of the organizations, however, continued to operate into the 1970s and served as entry points for individuals who were coming out.

### **Council on Religion and the Homosexual**

Collaboration with the liberal religious community was another important development in San Francisco. Glide Memorial Methodist Church had long been a presence working with the down-and-out in the Tenderloin district. In 1962, with the consultation of SIR, DOB, and the Tavern Guild, it developed an outreach to young gay street hustlers.

Toward the end of 1964 this collaboration developed into the Council on Religion and the Homosexual (CRH). To launch its fundraising efforts, CRH, with DOB and Mattachine, sponsored a New Year's Eve dance. When police descended on the event, making multiple "inspections" and several arrests, heterosexual supporters and clergy witnessed first-hand the degrading treatment gay men and lesbians had been subjected to for years. With backing from the American Civil Liberties Union, CRH successfully challenged the police in court and generated important media coverage.

CRH continued documenting police abuse cases and helped start Citizens Alert to respond to such incidents, resulting in a significant decrease in harassment of gay bar patrons. It maintained an outreach to the National Council of Churches throughout the 1960s.

### **The Late 1960s and the Dawn of the Gay Liberation Movement**

In San Francisco SIR opened the country's first gay community center in April 1966. 1967 saw a major demonstration against police brutality in Los Angeles and publication of the first issue of *The Advocate*. That December the Western Regional Conference of Homophile Organizations met in Seattle.

By the time of the Stonewall riots in 1969, SIR had pulled back into a more reformist stance and was nearly bankrupt, but there were over 50 other homophile organizations in North America, many of them ready to embrace a new militancy.

Even militant homophile leaders were caught off-guard by Stonewall and its immediate aftermath. The year between the riots and their first commemoration in 1970 saw an explosive proliferation of groups such as the Gay Liberation Front and Gay Activists Alliance, in New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, but also in Midwestern cities such as Chicago and Detroit.

Most of the organizers of these new groups were young. They had not experienced the worst of the McCarthy-era purges and police abuses and had been inculcated into radical politics through other movements. The new activists often showed scant respect for their elders as they transformed the homophile movement into the newly energized gay rights movement.

The 1960s counterculture had dramatically altered perceptions on gender-appropriate behaviors for men. Likewise, the feminist movement celebrated strength and heroism in women. Androgynous archetypes were gaining acceptance. A radical shifting of the zeitgeist had taken place and the torch had passed, often not amicably, to a generation that viewed authority as fallible and corrupt.

But the Stonewall riots and all they inspired did not arise in a vacuum. By 1969 a national network existed that had opened discussion of homosexuality in academia and the media, had begun to challenge police abuses, and had initiated an affiliation with civil libertarians and liberal clergy.

All this had been accomplished under very difficult conditions, including widespread contempt for sexual minorities, draconian criminal penalties for unconventional sexual conduct, and routine F.B.I. surveillance of Mattachine and DOB and other organizations.

Moreover, some homophile activists, including Kameny, Gittings, Rodwell, and others, carried their fervor into the new movement, providing both continuity and inspiration.

The New York Mattachine and DOB chapters fielded contingents in the first Gay Pride march in 1970. Sensing the sea change underway, their leaders had opted into the march at the last minute. It would turn out to be one of their last acts of visibility.

## **Bibliography**

Cory, Donald Webster. *The Homosexual in America: A Subjective Approach*. New York: Greenberg, 1951.

D'Emilio, John. *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the U.S., 1940-1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Duberman, Martin. *Stonewall*. New York: Plume, 1994.

Katz, Jonathan. *Gay American History*. New York: Thomas Crowell, 1976.

Lauritsen, John, and David Thorstad. *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1935)*. New York: Times Change Press, 1974.

Marcus, Eric. *Making History: The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Equal Rights*. New York: HarperCollins, 1992.

Thompson, Mark, ed. *Long Road to Freedom: The Advocate History of the Gay and Lesbian Movement*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994.

## **About the Author**

**Ruth M. Pettis** is the Oral History Project manager for the Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project in Seattle and editor of *Mosaic 1: Life Stories*, a collection of stories from the project's oral history collection. She has contributed articles and fiction to a number of gay and women's publications. She has an A.B. in anthropology from Indiana University and an M.L.S. from Simmons College in Boston.