



## Jennings, William Dale (1917-2000)

by Linda Rapp

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2006 glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Editor and author Dale Jennings was a pioneer of the American gay rights movement, one of the co-founders of both the Mattachine Society and ONE, Inc.

William Dale Jennings was born in Amarillo, Texas on October 21, 1917, but while he was just an infant his family moved to Denver, Colorado, where he resided until graduating from high school. He then settled in southern California to pursue a career in theater.

Jennings established a company, Theatre Caravan, for which he wrote and produced about sixty plays. The enterprise did not earn him much money, but he was gaining a reputation as a rising star in the theater.

World War II intervened to halt his budding career. Jennings joined the United States Army in 1942 and served in the Pacific theater of operations. He was honorably discharged in 1946, having earned several medals and a bronze star.

Jennings subsequently spent two years at the University of Southern California, studying film and theater. Wary of the homophobic tenor of the times, he attempted to conform to heterosexual norms. He married three times, but all these unions were of short duration and quickly annulled.

In late 1950 Jennings became part of the nascent homophile movement when his lover at the time, Robert Hull, brought him to a meeting with Harry Hay, Rudi Gernreich, and Charles Rowland. Their discussion group gradually grew and was organized as the Mattachine Foundation the following year. The name was changed to the Mattachine Society in 1953.

Mattachine members were ritually inducted into what was of necessity essentially a secret society in that era. An already hostile climate had been exacerbated by a December 1950 report by a United States Senate subcommittee declaring homosexuals a threat to national security. Given these circumstances, wrote Dudley Clendinen in the *New York Times*, Jennings's "courage made him a permanent icon and the infant movement's first hero . . . when he was arrested in Los Angeles on a sexual solicitation charge [in 1952] and decided to publicly contest it in court."

Jennings had stopped at a public restroom and been followed home by a "big rough-looking character" who Jennings thought might be intent on robbing him. When he finally reached his apartment, the pursuer forced his way inside.

Jennings reported that he refused to comply when the man, an undercover vice squad officer, suggested a sexual encounter; nevertheless, he was arrested for solicitation.

From jail, Jennings called Hay, who bailed him out and encouraged him to take the unprecedented step of going to court rather than pleading guilty at once so that the charge would escape public attention. The Mattachine Foundation established the Citizens Committee to Outlaw Entrapment to raise funds for

Jennings's defense.

At trial, Jennings acknowledged his homosexuality but forcefully declared that he was not guilty of the alleged offense. After nearly forty hours of deliberation, the jury reported that it was hopelessly deadlocked, with eleven members in favor of acquittal while one hold-out announced his intention to continue voting for conviction "until hell froze over."

The district attorney's office decided against a retrial and dropped the charges several days later.

The outcome of the case had no apparent effect on the policies and tactics of the vice squad, but it gave hope to gay men. Membership in Mattachine increased, and similar groups were formed, mostly in California.

Although Jennings owed much to Mattachine, he disagreed with its leader, Hay, on various points of philosophy and strategy, and so he left the organization in late 1952 to become--along with Donald Slater, W. Dorr Legg, Martin Block, and Tony Reyes--one of the founders of ONE, Incorporated, which took its name from a line by British writer Thomas Carlyle: "a mystic bond of brotherhood that makes all men one."

Jennings served as editor-in-chief of the society's fledgling journal, *ONE Magazine*, and also penned articles. Like several others, he used pseudonyms for some of his writings to foster the impression that the number of contributors was higher than was actually the case.

Todd White describes Jennings's articles in *ONE* as "pointed and angry" and tending to invite controversy. This approach did not sit well with *ONE*'s business manager, Legg, who forced him off the editorial board in 1954.

Also in 1954, the Los Angeles postmaster seized and refused to mail copies of *ONE* on the grounds that the magazine was "obscene, lewd, lascivious and filthy." The seizure led to a lengthy court battle with significant consequences for the gay and lesbian movement, when in 1958, long after Jennings had been forced out as editor, the United States Supreme Court unanimously ruled that the mere discussion of homosexuality was not obscene.

Jennings pursued his writing career. At his death, he left over 120 books, plays, and short stories. Only three of his novels were published. The first, *The Ronin* (1968), was the adaptation of a Zen myth about a virile and brutal samurai warrior who eventually eschewed violence for a life of asceticism. White calls the novel Jennings's "own poetic encomium on manhood." Although the book would prove Jennings's most successful in reprints, he was discouraged by its lack of early acceptance. "I'm afraid my erotic passages were a little too much for [readers at the time]," he wrote.

Jennings published his next novel, *The Cowboys*, in 1971. The previous year, director Mark Rydell, who had read a plot summary, persuaded Warner Brothers to buy the movie rights to the story. As well as writing the novel, Jennings contributed to the film script. The project was not without controversy.

*The Cowboys* tells the tale of a rancher, played in the movie (1972) by John Wayne, who enlists a group of teenaged boys as cattle-drivers after his original crew decamps to join a gold rush. The situation is clearly at least homosocial, but editors at Bantam called for the elimination of any trace of homoeroticism.

Jennings resisted, arguing that his work reflected the reality of frontier life. One editor conceded that "for all I know, this story may depict [sexual practices] accurately" but nevertheless urged the "judicious cutting" of passages on subjects he viewed as "taboo." Another wrote to Jennings, "The intimations of adolescent homosexuality are distracting. Either they should be more clearly spelled out or considerably

toned down. And frankly I urge the latter."

Although Jennings made some revisions, Bantam finally rejected *The Cowboys*, as did Putnam. Stein and Day eventually accepted and published the novel, to which Jennings retained the copyright.

The last of Jennings's novels to make it into print was *The Sinking of the Sarah Diamond* (1974), an adventure story about a singularly ill-starred cargo vessel that floats from one disaster to another. Reviewer Martin Levin of the *New York Times* praised the "slick . . . storytelling" that made "a buoyant novel out of a sinking ship." Despite favorable reviews, the book was not a great success.

*The Cowboys*, on the other hand, had given Jennings the resources to buy a ranch near Los Angeles and later to move to northern California. A lawsuit by a former lover cost him his home and most of his assets, however, and he returned to Los Angeles.

Hat in hand, in 1985 Jennings turned to an old friend from ONE, Slater, who had since left the organization and founded the Homosexual Information Center (HIC) in 1965. Jennings had served on the HIC board and contributed articles to its journal, *Tangents*. His purpose in reconnecting with Slater was twofold: to request that the HIC preserve his writings and also to seek a job.

Slater was unable to offer Jennings employment, but the HIC accepted his collection, which was a great relief to him. He continued adding to his writings until his last days, although the process became increasingly difficult for him in the mid-1990s when his memory began to fail. At that point he bequeathed all he had to the HIC.

Toward the end of his life Jennings was reclusive and suspicious of care-givers, fearful that they might destroy his cherished archives. One person whom he trusted was Jim Schneider, a veteran activist and member of both ONE and the HIC, who cared for him in his final years and was present when he died of respiratory failure on May 11, 2000.

A memorial service was held for Jennings the next month at the ONE Institute and Archives, into which the HIC had moved and where Jennings's writings are now housed.

## **Bibliography**

Clendinen, Dudley. "William Dale Jennings, 82, Writer and Gay Rights Pioneer." *New York Times* (May 22, 2000): B7.

Katz, Jonathan. *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976.

Levin, Martin. "New & Novel." *New York Times* (April 7, 1974).

White, C. Todd. "Dale Jennings (1917-2000): ONE's Outspoken Advocate." *Before Stonewall: Activists for Gay and Lesbian Rights in Historical Context*. Vern L. Bullough, ed. New York: Harrington Park Press, 2002. 82-93.

## **About the Author**

**Linda Rapp** teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of [www.glbtc.com](http://www.glbtc.com).