



Legg, W. Dorr (1904-1994)

by Linda Rapp

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A portrait of Dorr Legg by Stathis Orphanos. Courtesy Stathis Orphanos. Copyright © Stathis Orphanos. All Rights Reserved.

William Dorr Legg was a pioneer in the American gay rights movement and in glbtq studies. A leader in the homophile movement of the 1950s and a founder of the magazine *ONE*, he won an important Supreme Court decision after a Los Angeles postmaster challenged his right to send a publication with homosexual content through the United States mail.

Legg set out to be a landscape architect. He earned a master's degree in landscape design from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, the city in which he was born on December 15, 1904.

After his graduation Legg worked for several years in New York City before becoming a professor of landscape architecture at Oregon State College in 1935.

Legg went back to Michigan in the early 1940s to care for his elderly parents. While there he fell in love with Merton Bird, an accountant.

Hoping to find a social environment more accepting of their interracial relationship, Legg, who was white, and Bird, an African American, moved to Los Angeles in 1949. Shortly thereafter the couple founded an interracial social organization for gay men, the Knights of the Clocks, a name that Legg called "deliberately ambiguous." The society flourished for several years in the early 1950s.

Legg played an active part in the post-World War II gay community in Los Angeles. He joined the fledgling Mattachine Society, which Harry Hay founded in 1950 as a forum for discussion of the civil rights of gays. In 1952 Legg also became a member of *ONE*, Incorporated, an organization to which he would devote his efforts for the rest of his life.

Legg and Bird were among the six original members of *ONE*, which took its name from a line by Thomas Carlyle, "A mystic bond of brotherhood makes all men one." The founders established their group as a non-profit corporation in the state of California.

Legg gave up his career as a landscape architect to become the business manager of the organization's monthly publication, also called *ONE*, the first issue of which appeared in 1953. It became the first widely distributed gay publication in the United States.

The magazine was a slim volume at first, typically running from twenty to thirty pages in length. The content initially consisted mainly of essays on topics of interest to the gay community but also included stories, poems, and book reviews. As time went on, the magazine grew, featuring articles on gay studies in the humanities, social and natural sciences, and medicine. By the end of the 1950s, the magazine had attained a distribution of five thousand copies.

The United States Post Office confiscated the October 1954 issue of *ONE* on the grounds that it was "lewd, obscene, lascivious and filthy" and could therefore not be sent through the mails.

ONE sued Los Angeles Postmaster Otto K. Olesen, who prevailed in the first round when in March 1956 U. S. District Judge Thurmond Clark agreed that the publication was obscene. He also stated that "the suggestion that homosexuals should be recognized as a segment of the populace is rejected."

ONE appealed the decision in the Ninth Circuit, which upheld the lower court's ruling in March 1957. The case next went to the United States Supreme Court.

The justices ruled in favor of *ONE* in January 1958. Their decision in *ONE, Incorporated v. Olesen* (355 U.S. 371; 78 S. Ct. 364; 2 L. Ed. 2d 352; 1958) was *per curiam*, meaning that they held the issue to be so obvious that no lengthy written opinion was needed.

The news media gave the Supreme Court decision scant attention. The coverage of it in the *New York Times* read in full, "Reversed unanimously and apparently on the same ground [as in a previously mentioned case involving nudist magazines] a Post Office order excluding from the mails a magazine dealing with homosexuality." Nevertheless, the case was a landmark, establishing the right to send gay and lesbian material through the mail. It had enormous consequence for the fledgling rights movement.

ONE was involved in another lawsuit in the mid 1960s, when Don Slater, its editor and one of the co-founders, split from the organization to publish his own magazine, which he also called *ONE*. Legg and *ONE, Incorporated* won the case, and Slater changed the name of his magazine to *Tangents*.

ONE remained in publication until 1969. Financing it had long been a problem. Donors had helped keep the magazine afloat, but the loss of their monetary support combined with a loss of readership to magazines of a more radical viewpoint made the enterprise no longer viable.

The magazine was only a part of *ONE, Incorporated*'s most important mission, education. Legg considered educating the public key to gaining acceptance for lesbians and gays, or, to use the term that he preferred, homophiles.

To promote scholarship the leadership of *ONE, Incorporated* decided to offer college-level courses and also to compile a library of research materials.

Legg was tireless in organizing and teaching classes at the *ONE Institute of Homophile Studies*. This pioneering institution in glbtq studies opened in 1956. In the same year, Legg, using the pen name Marvin Cutler, published a book on the nascent gay rights movement, *Homosexuals Today: A Handbook of Organizations and Publications*.

Under Legg's leadership *ONE*'s course offerings were expanded and the prestige of the Institute gradually grew. In 1981 the state of California gave the *ONE Institute* a charter to grant master's and doctoral degrees. Legg, who had previously served as the Institute's director, was named its dean.

In addition to its regular classes, the *ONE Institute* offered various special programs, including public lectures. Among the speakers at *ONE*'s Extension Lectures were activist Harry Hay, psychiatrist Evelyn Hooker, the Reverend Troy Perry, and novelist Ann Bannon.

Legg also organized and led the Institute's Overseas Tours, which, between 1966 and 1981, took *ONE* members to some two dozen countries in Europe, Asia, and South America to learn about gay and lesbian history and contemporary culture.

Legg also founded *ONE Institute*'s *Quarterly of Homophile Studies* and co-edited the *Annotated Bibliography of Homosexuality* (1976), a pioneering interdisciplinary survey of gay and lesbian studies.

The establishment of a rich and varied library was a high priority for Legg. He constantly insisted on the need for interdisciplinary research, saying, "Homophile studies calls for nothing less than a field theory which will cut across the whole range of scholarly investigations, revealing their mutual actions and interactions." Legg oversaw the development of ONE's impressive collection.

Legg remained a vigorous activist and scholar until the very end of his life. In 1994 he published *Homophile Studies in Theory and Practice*, an exhaustive history of ONE, especially its educational endeavors.

Legg died shortly after the book's publication, on July 26. He was survived by his life partner of thirty years, John Najima.

Later that year the directors of the ONE Institute decided to focus on their mission as a research center. The Institute stopped offering classes and merged with the International Gay and Lesbian Archives. The new organization, ONE/IGLA, found a home for its collection at the University of Southern California.

ONE/IGLA's library, the largest glbtq archive in the world, holds books, periodicals, personal papers, films, photographs, sound recordings, items of memorabilia, and an art collection. Their Special Collections include the AIDS History Project and the Lesbian Legacy Collection.

This vibrant archive stands as an enduring monument to the vision of Dorr Legg.

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