



## Mattachine Society

by Craig Kaczorowski

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One of the earliest American gay movement (or homophile) organizations, the Mattachine Society began in Los Angeles in the winter of 1950. It was formed by Harry Hay, a leading gay activist and former Communist Party member, along with seven other gay men.

The name refers to the Société Mattachine, a French medieval masque group that allegedly traveled from village to village, using ballads and dramas to point out social injustice. The name was meant to symbolize the fact that "gays were a masked people, unknown and anonymous."

By sharing their personal experiences as gay men and analyzing homosexuals in the context of an oppressed cultural minority, the Mattachine founders attempted to redefine the meaning of being gay in the United States. They devised a comprehensive program for cultural and political liberation.

In 1951, the Mattachine Society adopted a Statement of Missions and Purpose. This Statement stands out in the history of the gay liberation movement because it identified and incorporated two important themes. First, Mattachine called for a grassroots movement of gay people to challenge anti-gay discrimination; and second, the organization recognized the importance of building a gay community.

The Mattachine Society also began sponsoring discussion groups in 1951, providing lesbians and gay men an opportunity to share openly, often for the first time, their feelings and experiences. The meetings were frequently emotional and cathartic.

Over the next few years attendance at Mattachine meetings increased tremendously. Soon discussion groups were meeting throughout the United States. Mattachine groups also began to sponsor social events, fundraisers, newsletters, and publications.

From 1953 to 1968, a group within the Mattachine Society, ONE, Incorporated, produced the monthly periodical *ONE Magazine*, which at its peak achieved a circulation of 5,000 copies. Although formally independent of the society, its first editor, Dale Jennings, and most of its editorial board were members.

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 the United States Supreme Court unanimously ruled that the mere discussion of homosexuality was not obscene. *ONE* continued publication until 1972.

In 1955, the San Francisco branch of the Society began a more scholarly, less confrontational journal, *Mattachine Review*, which they published until 1965. These periodicals reached previously isolated individuals and helped the Mattachine Society become better known nationally.

The Society also became active in protesting police entrapment of gay men and other oppressive tactics

and policies.

Some of Mattachine's more political actions, as well as the Communist leanings of several of its founders, put the organization under considerable pressure and public scrutiny during the country's anti-Communist era of McCarthyism in the early 1950s. For example, a columnist for a local Los Angeles newspaper wrote about the Society in March 1953, calling it a "strange new pressure group" of "sexual deviants" and "security risks" who were banding together to wield "tremendous political power."

The article set off a panic among Mattachine members. In the controversy that followed, two conventions were held. Unprecedented public meetings of gay people, these conventions were attended by delegates representing hundreds of discussion group participants.

A strong coalition of conservative delegates emerged, questioning the organization's goals and challenging the idea that gay people were a legitimate minority group. They claimed such an approach would only encourage hostility.

Although in disagreement with the conservative delegates, the Mattachine board members feared the consequences of a government investigation of society activities. Consequently, in May 1953, the original founders resigned, and the organization was turned over to the conservatives who began to restructure it.

The new leadership drastically revised the goals of the organization. Instead of social change, they advocated accommodation; instead of mobilizing gay people, they sought the support of psychiatrists and psychiatric professionals, who they believed held the key to reform.

Unfortunately, such changes had a devastating effect, and the society declined. Discussion group attendance fell and chapters folded. At its 1954 convention, only 42 members attended.

The society dissolved its national structure in 1961. The New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco chapters remained active for several more years, but the society's influence waned.

It should be noted that not every organization using the name Mattachine was formally affiliated with the original Mattachine Society or its national structure. For example, Chicago's Mattachine Midwest was established in 1965 as a completely independent organization.

As the Mattachine Society declined, other organizations such as the San Francisco Society for Individual Rights, the Gay Liberation Front, and the Gay Activists Alliance became more dominant in the nascent gay liberation movement.

Mattachine failed to adapt to the increased militancy of gay men and lesbians after the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969 and faded away.

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**Craig Kaczorowski** writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.