



## Portland, Oregon

by Tina Gianoulis

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Sam Adams became Portland's first gay mayor on January 1, 2009. Photograph by Bryan Grimes.

Chartered as a city in 1851, Portland, Oregon soon had a wild and woolly reputation as an outpost of the lawless and adventurous spirit of the pioneer West. Often called the "small town big city," Portland has vacillated in its attitude toward its glbtq population, traversing over the course of its history from fearful and repressive to welcoming and accepting.

With a population of almost 600,000 people, Portland is Oregon's largest city. The Portland metropolitan area is the country's 23rd most populous metropolitan area, with more than 2.2 million people. Known for its green spaces and its environmentally-friendly ethos, Portland is also renowned for its lively art and music scenes and its embrace of quirkiness and individuality.

The city is home to a thriving and increasingly visible queer community that has provided leadership for Oregon glbtq activism since the late 1960s. Despite concerted efforts by a determined anti-gay movement that has attempted to suppress gay rights in Oregon, the Portland queer community has become a vital element in the state's complex politics and in the city's rich diversity.

According to Gary Gates's analysis of the 2006 American Community Survey, the City of Portland ranks seventh in the country in terms of glbtq population, with 8.8% of adult residents identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual; the Portland metropolitan area ranks fourth among metropolitan areas, with 6.1% of the population identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

On January 1, 2009, when Sam Adams assumed office, Portland became the largest city in the U.S. with an openly gay or lesbian mayor, a distinction it held until Annise Parker won election as Mayor of Houston later that year and took office on January 2, 2010.

### History

Almost at the end of the trail blazed by white explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark in 1806, Portland was claimed in 1843 by pioneers Asa Lovejoy and Francis Pettygrove, who envisioned a prosperous future for the beautiful area on the banks of the Willamette River that they named after Pettygrove's hometown of Portland, Maine.

The new city, chartered in 1851, soon became a booming frontier town bustling with the legal industries of lumber and shipping and the illegal commerce of prostitution and impressment (the kidnapping of men for forced conscription on trade vessels).

In 1853, the Oregon Territorial Legislature enacted a sodomy law that punished the offense with imprisonment of 1 to 5 years, but no one was convicted under the law until 1886.

Homosexuality came to the forefront of Portland city politics for the first time in the dramatic Portland Vice Clique Scandal of 1912. That year, police arrested nineteen-year-old Benjamin Trout on minor charges.

Frightened by police interrogation, Trout revealed the secrets and meeting places of an underground homosexual community, until then unknown to most of Portland.

Trout's revelations set off a gay witch hunt that spread throughout the Pacific Northwest and southwestern Canada, leading to dozens of arrests and at least one suicide. Some 68 Portlanders were implicated, including a few prominent men. In addition, the Portland YMCA was said to be "a hotbed of homosexual activity" by a muckraking newspaper, the *Portland News*, which broke the story and fanned the flames of the scandal.

Six trials were held in Portland as the result of the scandal and four other men pled guilty to consensual homosexual activity. Three convicted men appealed to the Oregon Supreme Court and were freed.

The fear and suspicion ignited by the Vice Clique Scandal fueled an antagonism to homosexuality that affected politics and social life throughout the twentieth century, though some historians cite the refusal of some juries to convict some of those charged in the scandal as the beginning of Portland's acceptance of the homosexual community.

In 1913, the Oregon legislature strengthened the state's sodomy statute, tripling the term of imprisonment for conviction and vastly expanding the number of acts covered by the law. In the same year, legislators in Oregon and Washington passed laws that authorized the sterilization of sex offenders. In what may be the first referendum on gay rights in the country, Oregon voters soon repealed the law authorizing sterilization of "degenerates" by a 56% to 44% margin. Radical activist Emma Goldman made an appearance in Portland to campaign against the law.

Wounded by the hysteria of the early 1900s, the Portland gay community kept a low profile for the next decades, until World War II brought an influx of new citizens to work in the city's shipyards. Some of these transplants were gays who took advantage of the anonymity of a new city to develop a social subculture, which in turn spawned new police activity to track and control same-sex cruising and socializing.

During the late 1940s, policewomen went undercover at a cabaret frequented by gay men and lesbians, the Music Hall, to entrap lesbians who socialized there, and gay men were routine targets of entrapment in bars and parks.

In spite of this harassment, Portland gays were irrepressible, and, in 1958, a lighthearted drag spoof of the city's annual Rose Festival at the gay-friendly Half Moon Tavern evolved into the Portland Imperial Court, which in 1961 became the first court system on the West Coast, holding twice yearly balls and coronations, and eventually becoming the Imperial Sovereign Rose Court.

Along with reveling in gender-bending pageantry, the courts have always been service organizations that raise money for a variety of local charities.

In the 1960s, several campaigns against "degenerates" were launched in Portland. In 1964, the Portland City Council urged the Oregon Liquor Control Commission to revoke the liquor licenses of all Portland gay and lesbian bars. The request was rejected by the Commission.

## **Gay Liberation**

As gay liberation spread across the United States in the late 1960s, Portland gay activists began to organize, using the alternative newspaper *The Willamette Bridge* and the community radio station KBOO to get the word out.

The Gay Men's Union at Portland State University, the Second Foundation non-profit organization, and the Lesbian Community Project were some of the groups born in the vigorous wave of gay activism in the early 1970s.

Portland's first gay pride event was a dance in the city's Pythian Ballroom on June 27, 1971.

The gay rights movement's first victory was the repeal of Oregon's sodomy law in 1971, which became effective on January 1, 1972. But this victory, real as it was, was due less to gay activism than it was to the state's adoption of a new model criminal code.

Portland's conservative civic tradition made legislative change difficult. However, in 1974 the city became the first in Oregon to promulgate a non-discrimination policy on the basis of sexual orientation for municipal employment.

### **Backlash and Response**

The progressive Portland Town Council formed in 1975 to work for the passage of a state-wide gay rights bill. However, the conservative backlash of the late 1970s and 1980s made gay rights legislation difficult to pass.

In 1977, an Anita Bryant-inspired organization called Citizens to Protect Our Children attempted to recall Mayor Neil Goldschmidt after he declared Gay Pride Day in Portland. They successfully repealed a newly passed non-discrimination ordinance in Eugene, Oregon.

Mayor Goldschmidt survived the attempt to recall him, and when he became Governor of Oregon in 1987 he issued an executive order banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in state employment.

That non-discrimination order did not survive long. A group called Oregon Citizens Alliance, led by anti-gay activist Lon Mabon, succeeded in placing a referendum on the November 1987 state-wide ballot that repealed Goldschmidt's executive order.

Portland gay organizations fought back, but the momentum in the 1980s seemed to be with the conservatives, especially since the larger gay activist community was preoccupied with AIDS. The Portland branch of ACT UP outed Republican Senator Mark Hatfield, who supported several anti-gay measures, but the mainstream media paid little attention.

The Oregon Citizens Alliance proposed a number of anti-gay initiatives that qualified for the 1992 and 1994 ballots. However, thanks largely to Portland's liberal population and its activist queer community, most of OCA's offensive referenda and legislative efforts were defeated.

Still, OCA attracted a great deal of support in rural Oregon and has remained a potent force against state-wide legislative efforts for equality.

A state-wide non-discrimination law covering sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression did not become law until 2008, when the Oregon Equality Act took effect.

### **Efforts on Behalf of Marriage Equality**

In 2004, the attorney for Portland's Multnomah County concluded that the state constitution mandated equal rights to marriage. On March 3, 2004, the chair of the county's Board of Commissioners, citing the county attorney's opinion, ordered the issuance of marriage licenses to same-sex couples.

More than 2,000 gay and lesbian couples were married in Portland between March 3 and April 20, 2004,

when a court ordered the issuance of marriage licenses to cease.

Later that year Oregonians passed an amendment to the state constitution defining marriage as the union of one man and one woman; and in 2005, the Oregon Supreme Court invalidated the same-sex marriages performed in 2004.

Although the constitutional amendment prohibiting same-sex marriage was passed statewide by 57% of the voters, in Portland the amendment was rejected by 60% of the voters.

Following an attempt that failed in 2005, the Oregon legislature adopted a domestic partnership law in 2007. After the OCA was unable to secure sufficient signatures to force a referendum to repeal the law, the Oregon Family Fairness Act went into effect in February 2008; it makes virtually all of the rights and responsibilities of marriage available to same-sex couples.

### **Glbtc Portland Today**

The Portland queer community is remarkably diverse. Not only is Portland said to be a mecca for lesbians, it also includes a large and active population of glbtq Mormons.

Political groups such as Basic Rights Oregon work to fight conservative opposition, while cultural groups, such as the Rosetown Ramblers Square Dance Club, the Portland Lesbian Choir, and the Rose City Gay Freedom Band contribute to community building.

Groups such as Transactive and Getting Bi offer support for transgender and bisexual Portlanders, and the Sexual and Gender Minority Youth Resource Center (SMYRC) provides support for queer youth. Love Makes a Family is an organization that works to support gay and lesbian families in Portland, offering programs for both parents and children.

Other venues for queer networking include the *Just Out* gay community newspaper and the In Other Words feminist bookstore and community center.

Appropriate for a city that prides itself on its athleticism and love of the outdoors, Portland boasts a number of queer teams, groups, and leagues in a variety of sports, from basketball to kayaking and running to softball and volleyball.

The city boasts numerous gay and lesbian bars, coffee shops, restaurants, clubs, and other queer-owned or queer-friendly venues.

Glbtc pride is celebrated in Portland not only with the annual Portland Gay Pride Parade, which attracts tens of thousands of Portlanders and visitors, but also with the Portland Gay Latino Pride Festival and the Portland Gay Pride Waterfront Festival.

Numerous ordinances and regulations protect Portlanders from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.

In 2004, openly gay Oregon politician Sam Adams was elected to the Portland City Council where he served until 2008, when he was elected mayor. He thus became the first gay man elected Mayor of a large American city.

Running against 12 other candidates, Adams won election with 58% of the vote. Soon after becoming Mayor, however, Adams acknowledged that he had had an affair with a young intern in 2007. He apologized for

having lied about the affair during the campaign, but denied that the intern was underage when the affair was consummated.

He was ultimately exonerated of inappropriate behavior, and two attempts to recall him failed to gather sufficient signatures to qualify for the ballot. Although Adams survived the calls for his resignation, there is no doubt that the scandal tarnished his reputation as "the Great Gay Hope" in Oregon politics.

As Mayor, Adams has promoted environmental issues, especially clean technology and sustainable urban development, transportation development, support of the arts, and gun control.

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## **About the Author**

**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.