



San Francisco

by Susan Stryker

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San Francisco has enjoyed an undisputed reputation as a "gay mecca" since at least 1964, when *Life* magazine published a path-breaking feature article, "Homosexuality in America," that declared the city by the bay to be the "gay capital" of the United States. That characterization stemmed in part from the fact that both of the two leading national organizations for homosexuals--the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis--had been headquartered in San Francisco since the 1950s.

The presence of these organizations in San Francisco in turn reflected a significant upsurge in homosexual visibility in the San Francisco Bay Area during and immediately after World War II. Prior to World War II, San Francisco seems to have been not significantly different from other major American port cities in terms of its homosexual and transgender subcultures; that is, they were present, but not a defining feature of the city in the broader cultural imagination. Before the mid-twentieth century, San Francisco's sexual minority subcultures came nowhere near rivaling the levels of complexity to be found in older, longer-established East Coast cities, particularly New York.

Early History

Little documentation remains of homosexuality during the Native American, Spanish, and Mexican periods of San Francisco's history, though the early Spanish Mission fathers noted the existence of the so-called "berdache" or "two-spirit" tradition among the indigenous Ohlone tribe.

The initial period of Anglo rule, inaugurated by the conquest of California during the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848 and consolidated by the rapid influx of U. S. citizens during the Gold Rush of 1849, also provides scant evidence of homosexuality, though its undocumented existence can be inferred.

Immigration to California well into the 1850s was almost exclusively male, and a high proportion of the few female immigrants were prostitutes. In such sex-segregated and relatively closed environments (mining camps, prisons, ships), particularly where male-female sexuality is conducted largely on a commercial basis, there tends to be a high incidence of "situational" homosexual activity among men. There was also in San Francisco a well-documented presence of female individuals who lived and worked as men. In 1876, for example, Jeanne Bonet, who lived in male attire, led a gang of former prostitutes who, according to sensational journalist Herbert Asbury, "had nothing to do with men."

The atypical gender distribution of San Francisco's mid-nineteenth-century population contributed to the development of a large "vice" district, the fabled "Barbary Coast," which quickly earned San Francisco its reputation as a "wide-open town." The relative openness of a bawdy, semi-public sexual culture in San Francisco no doubt contributed to the development of rich homosexual and transgender subcultures before the twentieth century, as did the city's maritime economy and its burgeoning, bohemian literary and art scenes. Asbury notes that the brothels along Commercial Street in particular "were much frequented by degenerates," such as men who wore women's clothing, and that popular erotic sex cabarets included both



A publicity portrait of comedian and San Francisco Supervisor Tom Ammiano provided by Outright Speakers and Talent Bureau. Courtesy Outright Speakers and Talent Bureau.

male and female entertainers "who were encouraged to do whatever their erotic fantasies might dictate."

It has been more difficult to recover the history of lesbians than the history of gay men and transgender people during this period, in large part because of the general exclusion of women from employment and public life, except as prostitutes, which made it more difficult for women to create independent sexual lives for themselves apart from the demands of family, child-rearing, and domesticity. It seems likely, however, that "passionate friendships" between women in this period sometimes included sexual expression, but this aspect of women's lives has rarely become part of the public record.

The Precursors of Modern Subcultures

The precursors of modern homosexual and transgender subcultures in San Francisco date from near the turn of the twentieth century. Edward Irenaeus Prime-Stevenson, writing under the pseudonym Xavier Mayne in *The Intersexes: A History of Similisexuality as a Problem in Social Life* (1908), described rampant male homosexual prostitution among soldiers mustering at San Francisco's Presidio during the Spanish-American War of 1898.

Charles Warren Stoddard, a member of San Francisco's literary elite, published the frankly homoerotic and autobiographically based novel, *For the Pleasure of His Company: An Affair of the Misty City*, in 1903.

A San Francisco correspondent of the eminent German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, writing in 1905, described her life as a transgendered person who sometimes ran a boarding house for dance hall girls.

Shortly after the great earthquake and fire of 1906, a young San Franciscan named Alice B. Toklas traveled with a friend to Paris, where she was introduced to Oakland native Gertrude Stein, whereupon Toklas and Stein launched one of the most public, celebrated, and long-lasting lesbian relationships on record.

In 1908, The Dash, a saloon and dance hall in the Barbary Coast district, was closed by the police for reportedly allowing cross-dressed male entertainers to dance on tabletops and permit customers to perform oral sex on them beneath their upraised skirts.

World War I and the Emergence of Modern Subcultures

World War I brought drastic changes to the sexual culture of San Francisco. In coordination with military authorities concerned over the spread of venereal disease among troops and social purity reformers involved in alcohol prohibition and anti-prostitution crusades, city officials shut down the Barbary Coast in 1917. Much of the "vice" trade went underground and relocated to the Tenderloin district, immediately north of Market Street, the city's main commercial thoroughfare, where it was controlled and regulated by corrupt members of the San Francisco Police Department.

It was in the Tenderloin's speakeasies and gin joints during the era of Prohibition that San Francisco's modern gay subculture began to take shape. When Prohibition was lifted in 1933, a number of gay bars quickly opened in the Tenderloin, which remained the epicenter of gay bar culture into the 1960s. One former Tenderloin establishment, Finocchio's, a female-impersonation nightclub, relocated to the new bohemian entertainment district, North Beach, which emerged in the former Barbary Coast. Finocchio's survived there until 1999.

The North Beach entertainment district was also home to San Francisco's first known lesbian establishment, Mona's, which featured cross-dressed female performers and staff. Between the 1930s and 1950s, homosexual and transgender subcultures existed in close association with nightclubs like Mona's and Finocchio's, which simultaneously catered to tourists seeking risqué experiences, as well as to members of sexual subcultures seeking social space.

Gay and lesbian people also lived in the North Beach neighborhood, especially those with artistic and literary sensibilities. Elsa Gidlow, who made her home there between 1926 and 1954 (when she moved to nearby Marin County), had authored the first volume of explicitly lesbian poetry to be published in North America, *On a Grey Thread*, in 1923. Her immediate circle included the writers Kenneth Rexroth and Lincoln and Una Jeffers, and she was a correspondent of Radclyffe Hall and Una Trowbridge, whom she had met during a year abroad in Paris.

World War II

World War II brought further drastic changes to San Francisco's sexual ecology. As historian Allan Bérubé has demonstrated, the war itself played a pivotal role in the formation of new sexual identity communities by throwing together vast numbers of gay men who formed associative networks based on their shared sexualities, and also created significant new employment opportunities in wartime industries for single women, including lesbians.

As one of the principal administrative centers of the war's Pacific theater of operations, San Francisco became something of a dumping ground for homosexuals dishonorably discharged from military service. At the Treasure Island Naval Hospital in San Francisco Bay, medical and psychological experts conducted nonconsensual tests on many of these men in an effort to discover the "causes and cures" of homosexuality.

Faced with the prospect of returning home in disgrace or remaining in arguably the most scenic city in the United States, many gay World War II veterans opted for the latter. In the late 1940s, a tabloid paper in San Francisco described this demographic trend with the shocking headline, "Homos Invade S. F.!"

The Homophile Movement and the 1950s Counterculture

In the 1950s, San Francisco was home to the first national organizations for homosexual rights, as well as to an emerging counterculture that celebrated sexual diversity. The Mattachine Society, a men's organization founded by gay communist Harry Hay in Los Angeles in 1950, relocated its national headquarters to San Francisco between 1954 and 1957, after politically moderate and conservative elements in the organization broke with its radical founders.

At the same time, in 1955, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon founded the Daughters of Bilitis, a national organization for lesbians. The founding of other so-called "homophile" groups, such as the Society for Individual Rights (SIR) and the Council on Religion and the Homosexual (CRH) in the 1960s made San Francisco the center of organized gay political life in the United States. A police raid of a 1965 fundraising ball for the CRH, which enjoyed the support of San Francisco's liberal clergy, resulted in a great deal of negative publicity for the police and helped place homophile rights on San Francisco's progressive political agenda.

In tandem with this unprecedented organizational growth, San Francisco's long-established reputation as a haven for radicals, eccentrics, and dreamers helped sustain a new "beatnik" counterculture in the 1950s, popularized by pansexual literary figures such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac.

The Beginnings of Political Activism

The bohemian milieu of the Black Cat Café produced one of the most influential meldings of countercultural style with political activism in the person of José Sarria, a Mexican-American drag entertainer who waited tables there and performed wildly popular Sunday afternoon "operas" laced with political and social satire.

When Black Cat owner Sol Stoumen became embroiled in controversy in the early 1960s because of his support of gay bar owners who had recently banded together to protest the police practice of demanding

payoffs as a condition for remaining in business, Sarria rallied to his defense. In 1961, Sarria ran as an openly gay candidate for San Francisco's Board of Supervisors in order to call attention to police harassment of gay-friendly establishments. He did not win the election, but he received 5,600 votes and demonstrated that a gay vote could be tapped for electoral politics.

The "gayola" scandal that prompted Sarria to run for public office also helped launch the first gay newspapers in the United States--Guy Strait's *League for Civil Education* and *Citizen's News*--as well as the first gay business owner's association, the Tavern Guild. Sarria later founded the Imperial Court System, now the oldest gay philanthropic organization in the world, which stages gala drag balls to raise money for various causes.

Transgender people also began to organize and find a political voice in San Francisco in the 1960s. Since the 1950s, transgendered individuals seeking access to hormones and genital surgery had been drawn to the city by the presence of Dr. Harry Benjamin, the world's leading medical expert on transsexuality, who maintained a practice on posh Union Square.

In August 1966, three years before the more famous rebellion at New York's Stonewall Inn, transgender residents of the Tenderloin rioted against police oppression at a popular all-night restaurant, Compton's Cafeteria. Many of the militant hustlers and street queens involved in the riot were members of Vanguard, the first known gay youth organization in the United States, which had been organized earlier that year with the help of radical ministers working with Glide Memorial Methodist Church, a center for progressive social activism in the Tenderloin for many years.

In the aftermath of the riot at Compton's, a network of transgender social, psychological, and medical support services was established, which culminated in 1968 with the creation of the National Transsexual Counseling Unit, the first such peer-run support and advocacy organization in the world.

The new style of gay liberation politics, which began in San Francisco with the formation of Vanguard and the riot at Compton's Cafeteria, gained further momentum with the formation of the Committee for Homosexual Freedom (CHF) in the spring of 1969, a few months before the Stonewall riots, which initially received scant coverage in the San Francisco media. The CHF was established in response to the firing of an openly gay man by a steamship company, and helped popularize the new strategy of "coming out" as a means of agitating for gay rights.

The new style of gay liberation drew heavily on the youth-oriented, rock-music-infused counterculture that took root in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury neighborhood, where the prevailing ethos of sexual revolution and "letting it all hang out" created a welcoming environment for many baby boomer gay men and lesbians.

"Gay Power" Politics

By the fall of 1969, New Left and student movement activists had imported "gay power" politics to the Bay Area, but these Stonewall-inspired groups did not thrive. A tumultuous protest against the homophobic editorial policies of the *San Francisco Examiner* on Halloween 1969 (dubbed "The Night of the Purple Hand" by local activists, who slapped purple handprints throughout downtown San Francisco after *Examiner* employees dumped a barrel of printers' ink on the crowd from the roof of the newspaper building) was one of the most visible demonstrations of gay power.

Two other high points were the appearance of the Gay Liberation Front's "Homosexuals Against the War" contingent in a massive 1969 protest against the war in Vietnam, and a 1970 "Gay-In" held in Golden Gate Park.

By 1971, the mantle of gay power politics had fallen on Raymond Broshears, a contentious yet energetic activist whose Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) focused its efforts on providing social services in the Tenderloin

and Polk Street neighborhoods. Under Broshers' stormy leadership, San Francisco's GAA found itself well outside the mainstream of local gay politics in the 1970s and disbanded within a few years.

Gay Pride

As sociologist Elizabeth Armstrong has argued, the early 1970s witnessed a shift away from both the homophile activism of the 1950s and early 1960s and the more militant liberation movement that began in San Francisco in 1966. By 1973, a new emphasis on "gay pride" rather than "gay power" emerged, as well as a new emphasis on cultural identity rather than political alliance in broader-based social movements.

The result was the somewhat paradoxical emergence of major new gay cultural institutions such as pride parades and film festivals, and the simultaneous proliferation of narrower-interest groups addressing the concerns of an increasingly fragmented population of sexual minorities. Separate organizations and institutions developed for lesbian feminists, bisexuals, transgender people, sadomasochists, people of color, and an ever-lengthening list of increasingly complex and specialized communities of identity. There were about 50 organizations serving the Bay Area's gay and lesbian community in 1970 and nearly 300 by 1980.

San Francisco's gay pride parade began in 1972, and is now the largest glbtq public event in the world, drawing an annual attendance of half a million people. The San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, now the oldest and largest such event in the world, began in 1977.

Other such cultural institutions or symbols to emerge in San Francisco in these years include a chapter of the Metropolitan Community Church, the Gay Men's Chorus, the Gay and Lesbian Marching Band, the *Bay Area Reporter* newspaper, and the rainbow flag, now recognized around the world as a symbol of gay cultural identity. Just a few of the many specialized organizations founded in San Francisco in the 1970s include the S/M advocacy group Society of Janus (1974), the Bisexual Center (1976), and the Gay Latino Alliance (1977).

Lesbian feminist organizations and publications did not flourish in San Francisco in the 1970s, in part because of the high cost of living and working in the city, coupled with the effects of sexist employment discrimination against women; most significant lesbian feminist organizations and publications in the Bay Area were located in nearby Berkeley, Oakland, San Jose, and Santa Cruz.

A notable exception to this trend was the emergence of a women's community enclave along Valencia Street in the city's Mission District. Anchored by pioneering institutions such as Old Wives' Tales bookstore (1976), the Artemis Café (1977), and the San Francisco Women's Building (1979), a thriving women-oriented neighborhood took shape that by the 1980s included the sex shop Good Vibrations, Osento Bath House, the offices of *On Our Backs* magazine and the lesbian events calendar *Coming Up!*, and Amelia's, one of the city's most popular and longest-running lesbian bars.

Harvey Milk and Gay Neighborhoods

Gay politics achieved a new benchmark of success with the election of an openly gay man, Harvey Milk, to San Francisco's Board of Supervisors in 1977. Milk's electoral success was due in large part to a shift from citywide to district elections, which enabled him to exploit the dense concentration of gay votes in the Castro neighborhood.

The Castro emerged as a predominantly gay neighborhood in the early 1970s, fueled by the migration of thousands of baby boomer gays to San Francisco in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but it was by no means the only gay enclave.

The South of Market neighborhood had been home to numerous leather and motorcycle bars since the early 1960s, and Polk Street near the downtown Civic Center had been a locus of gay hustling for almost as long.

Middle class lesbian residential neighborhoods had also taken shape on the Castro's periphery in Noe Valley and Bernal Heights.

Milk was able to mobilize the significant number of gay and lesbian voters in his district to catapult him into City Hall. His tenure as an elected official was tragically short-lived. After only eleven months in office, Milk and San Francisco Mayor George Moscone were assassinated on November 27, 1978, by former city supervisor Dan White.

When White was convicted of manslaughter rather than murder and given a light sentence, rioting erupted at City Hall on the night of May 21, 1979. In response to the "White Night Riot," San Francisco police officers staged a retaliatory raid on the Castro, where they vandalized property and beat passersby on the street.

Backlash

The violence perpetrated against Harvey Milk was part of a larger pattern of backlash against the gay civil rights gains of the 1970s. In the later 1970s, there were numerous arson attacks on gay community institutions, as well as at least one politically motivated murder. Four assailants attacked and beat to death Robert Hillborough, a gay man, in front of his home in the Mission District, while yelling "This one's for Anita!," in reference to born-again Christian former beauty queen Anita Bryant's then current campaign against a gay rights ordinance in Florida.

San Franciscans played a leading role in the successful effort to boycott Florida orange juice that resulted in Bryant's losing her job as spokesperson for the Florida Citrus Growers' Association. They also played an important role in the successful campaign against Proposition 6, the so-called Briggs Initiative, which would have banned gays and lesbians from teaching in California public schools.

AIDS and the Realignment of Political Sensibilities

A July 4, 1981 article in the Center for Disease Control's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* that noted unusual clusters of Kaposi's sarcoma and pneumocystis pneumonia among gay men in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York marked official awareness of an epidemic first labeled GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency), and later renamed AIDS (Auto-Immune Deficiency Syndrome). San Francisco's gay community was among the hardest hit in the early stages of the epidemic, and also played a leading role in developing a response to it.

The so-called "San Francisco Model," which consisted of education and prevention efforts coupled with a grassroots mobilization to found community-based organizations designed to meet public health needs unaddressed by the government, was quickly adopted by communities throughout the United States and around the world. San Francisco has remained at the forefront of AIDS research, and is home to both the San Francisco AIDS Foundation and the Center for AIDS Prevention Studies at the University of California-San Francisco medical school.

Dealing with the AIDS epidemic transformed sexual identity politics in San Francisco, and to a limited degree bridged some of the identity based differences that had proliferated in the 1970s. The epidemic bred new forms of activism, represented most notably by ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), and later Queer Nation and the Lesbian Avengers, by requiring a re-examination of the relationship between identity and broader social conditions such as racism and poverty.

The realignment of political sensibilities, coupled with a more complex sense of identity, inspired a new wave of activism among post-baby boomers in the 1990s, which helped reconfigure the community in ways that were more inclusive of bisexual and transgender people. The Bay Area Bisexual Network, Transgender Nation, and the Intersex Society of North America all date from this period. By the mid-1990s, it had become *de rigueur* to speak not of a gay and lesbian community, but rather of a GLBT community, or even a

community of people who were "gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, questioning, and allies."

Cultural and Political Power

By the early 1990s, San Francisco's glbtq community, which by some estimates encompasses from 10 to 15% of the city's total population, was a constituency with unprecedented political, economic, and cultural influence. One indication of how well integrated the glbtq community had become in the social fabric of the city was the opening in 1996 of the Hormel Gay and Lesbian Center in San Francisco's New Main Public Library, the first such center in a public library in the United States.

Named for philanthropist (and, later, first openly gay United States Ambassador) James C. Hormel, the center provides access to an impressive collection of books and manuscripts on glbtq history and culture. Roughly one-third of the Hormel collection is on deposit from the GLBT Historical Society, whose vastly larger collection includes runs of more than 3,000 periodical publications, several thousand rare books, 450 collections of personal papers and organizational records, hundreds of oral histories, approximately 80,000 historic photographs, hundreds of thousands of printed ephemera items such as posters, fliers, leaflets, and matchbook covers, and a growing collection of artifacts, original artwork, and textiles. The collections of the GLBT Historical Society, which has ambitious plans to open the world's first museum of GLBT History and Culture, are second in size only to those of the ONE Institute in Los Angeles.

The "lavender sweep" in San Francisco's 1990 city elections brought lesbians Carole Migden and Roberta Achtenberg to the Board of Supervisors, and gay man Tom Ammiano to the Board of Education. Achtenberg went on to Washington to work in the Clinton administration, while Migden became an influential state legislator, and Ammiano later became President of the Board of Supervisors; in 1999 he finished second in the mayoral run-off election.

Other lesbian and gay city supervisors in the 1990s include Leslie Katz, Bevan Dufty, and Mark Leno, who has since risen to prominence both statewide and nationally as a progressive member of the California legislature. The presence of openly gay and lesbian politicians at city hall and in the state house enabled San Francisco to pass landmark legislation such as domestic partner benefits, and civil rights protection and medical benefits for transgender people.

The Twenty-First Century: Success and New Challenges

In 2002, after nearly 10 years of planning, the San Francisco LGBT Community Center opened the doors of a 40,000 square foot facility, the first LGBT center in the country built from the ground up.

Like other nonprofit organizations serving the glbtq community in San Francisco, the Center has faced a difficult financial reality. The unprecedented technology-driven economic boom of the late 1990s, followed by the burst of the "dot.com bubble" in 2001, has played havoc with the entire Bay Area's nonprofit sector--first driving up rents by 200 to 300%, then drying up public, foundation, and corporate support.

Moreover, skyrocketing housing costs are pricing many glbtq people out of the San Francisco market, resulting in their migration to cities with a lower cost of living, such as Oakland, or out of the region entirely. It is not possible to say at this time what effect these economic conditions ultimately will have on San Francisco's long and inspiring glbtq history.

That inspiring history reached yet another milestone on February 12, 2004, when, at the directive of Mayor Gavin Newsom, San Francisco became the first government entity in the United States to grant marriage licenses to same-sex couples. After a week in which almost 3,000 same-sex couples were wed, the City of San Francisco filed suit against the State of California, challenging its prohibition of same-sex marriage on constitutional grounds.

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