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## Seattle

by Ruth M. Pettis

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A northwest commercial and shipping hub, Seattle, Washington, has long attracted people seeking opportunity or personal autonomy. Its allure for gay people can be documented back to the 1930s, but is probably even older.

### Early Seattle

Within decades after the first Americans of European extraction arrived in 1851, the area south of "Skid Road" (Yesler St.) had become a district of saloons and cheap hotels to accommodate the influx of young single men. In this milieu, the first prosecution under the state's new anti-sodomy law was recorded in 1893, in which one man was sentenced to seven years' hard labor for the "intent to know" another "male person."

Politicians and reformers enacted anti-vice ordinances to regulate the district's activities. In response, its entrepreneurs began paying beat patrolmen directly for their "tolerance," a practice that continued through the 1960s and would later become a backdrop for gay visibility.

The earliest venues known to cater to gays appeared in the former saloon district after the repeal of Prohibition. The Casino, nicknamed "Madame Peabody's School of the Dance" or simply "The Dance" in gay code, allowed same-sex dancing and was known all along the West Coast in the 1930s and 1940s. In the 1960s it was a seedy but popular after-hours club attracting gay men and lesbians from all social classes.

The Double Header's nighttime crowd has been predominantly gay since the 1940s, and it is reported to be the oldest continuing gay bar in the United States.

### Post-World War II Seattle

During World War II the region was a major industrial center as well as military transfer point. Gay men and women from the hinterlands who passed through for work or service discovered an existing community and resettled there after the war.

Police payoffs continued and probably accounted for a relative degree of forbearance on the part of local officials. Organized crime was never a factor in ownership of gay bars in Seattle. Many, like the Garden of Allah, a drag cabaret, and the Madison, a lesbian tavern, were gay-owned. As payoff demands increased, however, one owner decided to take his case to the press.

The *Seattle Times* exposed the scandal throughout the late 1960s. A protracted series of investigations resulted in the eventual dismantling of the payoff system, but also brought unanticipated visibility to local gay life.

### Early Activism

Gay college faculty and business owners, as well as the supportive street ministry of a heterosexual pastor, organized the Dorian Society, Seattle's first homophile organization, in 1965. One of Dorian's notable achievements was a 1967 story in *Seattle* magazine, for which one of its members posed confidently for the cover.

Dorian also helped a University of Washington pediatrician sustain the Seattle Counseling Services for Sexual Minorities. A community-based resource serving the entire glbtq spectrum since its inception, the service started in 1969 with a grant from the Erickson Foundation and is one of the oldest organizations of its type.

By 1969 a social network was active that sponsored same-sex dances in outlying rural towns. The former saloon district was still the center of gay bar culture, but this was about to change. Urban planners had become mindful of the district's historical legacy. By the 1970s, its red brick facades and sidewalks restored, a gentrified, tourist-centered "Pioneer Square" went high-rent. Gay venues started migrating to Capitol Hill, a neighborhood east of downtown.

### **1970s and 1980s Gay Liberation**

As in other cities, the 1970s generated scores of organizations infused with liberation fervor, the city's first gay community center and the *Seattle Gay News* among them. The Lesbian Resource Center opened in 1971, a nexus of the new lesbian feminism.

A local branch of Metropolitan Community Church was founded in 1972, and many mainstream congregations have since welcomed glbtq members.

A vigorous women's community, experiments in communal living, and alliances with other progressive movements characterized queer politics in the 1970s and 1980s.

A 1973 overhaul of Washington State's legal code decriminalized sodomy after a complicated legislative process. Seattle added "sexual orientation" to its anti-discrimination ordinances for employment in 1973 and housing in 1975.

In 1978, inspired by the success of Anita Bryant's anti-gay crusades elsewhere, two police officers filed "Initiative 13" to repeal the wording. After a lively and conspicuous campaign, in which moderate and liberationist segments of the queer community canvassed effectively within their respective constituencies, the attempt failed. Voter turnout not only supported the gay and lesbian cause, but also advanced the careers of several pro-actively liberal candidates.

The AIDS crisis compelled a wave of service-oriented organizing in the 1980s and 1990s.

### **Contemporary Seattle**

A conservative legislature has repeatedly defeated attempts to advance gay rights statewide. Ordination and marriage of homosexuals continue to roil local churches. But community building on the part of transsexuals, bisexuals, and queer people of color has resulted in many health, social, and spiritually oriented services. Children of gay parents are coming of age, and a network of queer family resources exists to address their needs.

Seattle voters have elected gay men and lesbians to local and state offices. Approximately 20 years after the demise of the first gay community center, a new one opened in 2002. The seeds of queer enfranchisement planted decades earlier have taken firm root.

In November 2013, Seattle elected its first openly gay mayor, Edward Murray, who had represented the city in the state legislature for many years, and who took office on January 1, 2014.

Given the fact that Seattle may now have the highest per capita number of same-sex households in the country, Murray's sponsorship of marriage equality featured prominently in his campaign.

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### **About the Author**

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