

Gay Rights Movement in Perspective

by Warren Thompson

I have found that many of us do not know the development of the Gay Rights movement in this country. I did not know myself. I thought perhaps a brief summary would be welcomed. So, briefly here is some of it.

The struggle for human and civil rights of homosexuals gained an impetus from World War II. The labor needs of the war involved such large numbers of young people in the various services that more freedom for gay relationships was possible. In post war years these relationships continued and

many gay men and lesbians settled in the large cities to work and renew their friendships and make new contacts. These were preliminary steps to the formation of the homophile groups in the late forties in Europe and in the early fifties in the United States.

It was in Los Angeles in 1950 when Henry (Harry) Hay met with four other men on a Saturday afternoon to discuss his proposal to form a homosexual organization for the "liberation of one of our country's largest minorities from... social persecution." As a result of the meeting of this group, the Mattachine Society was formed. In the first ten years, this society experienced varying purposes. It started with activism when its members successfully challenged the police use of entrapment in Los Angeles in 1952. This caused a surge in the membership to about 200. During the rest of the decade, the Mattachine Society functioned more as a support group to its members as their concern became involved with the fear of exposure. The approach changed to making efforts to work through professional groups for recognition and understanding.

The next ten years, 1959-1969, were a return to activism under the leadership and activism of Franklin Kameny, a Harvard graduate and astronomer, who had lost his job in the government service because it was discovered he was living with his lover. He was persuasive and gained a following. He founded the Washington Mattachine Society. Yet, despite his leadership, the movement's membership did not expand to any great numbers in the fifties. The strongholds for these homophile organizations were in San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York City, Washington and Detroit. At the end of the fifties the membership was about 2,000 nationally.

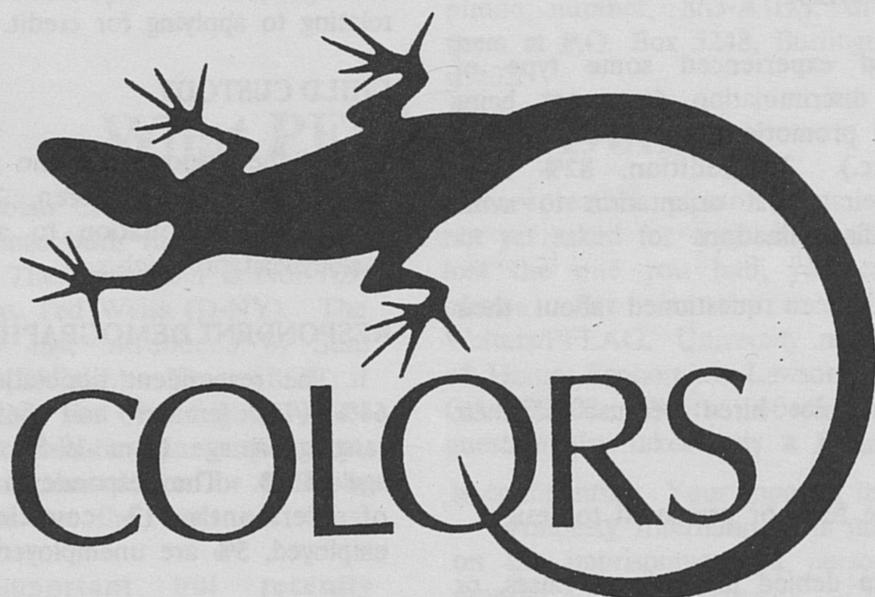
In the fifties Del Martin and Phyllis Lyons were the major figures in establishing the Daughters of Bilitis, a lesbian group. They worked closely with the Mattachine Society but were no more successful in gaining a large membership and were more cautious about the exposure of their sexuality.

There were three publications during these decades. ONE was an independent publication whose purpose was to stir up activism. The Mattachine society had its own publication of information and news about the movement. The Daughters of Bilitis published THE LADDER which supported other women's movements as well as the movement for lesbian rights.

The main event that started the Liberation Movement of the seventies was the STONEWALL INN riot that happened on June 27, 1969 in New York City on Manhattan's Christopher Street in the heart of Greenwich Village. What started as a routine police raid finished as a two day riot

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