

Dale Jennings (1917-2000): ONE's Outspoken Advocate

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Dale Jennings is frequently mentioned in the annals of gay American history, but the references are often pointed and brief. He is listed as one of the founders of the Mattachine Society, a cohort of Harry Hay. At his death he was lauded as the “Rosa Parks of the gay rights movement” for having prevailed in the first court case in the United States in which a man admitted in court to being a homosexual yet successfully fought charges of lewd conduct in a public space. He helped found *ONE*, the first successful magazine in the United States dedicated to equal rights for homosexuals, and was briefly senior editor as

well as a significant contributor under his own name and various pseudonyms.

Not much has been written of Jennings' personal life, but it is hard to encapsulate the history of a man who never really settled down. He was born in El Paso, Texas, October 21, 1917, grew up in Denver, Colorado, and traveled extensively as a child as a violin prodigy (Legg, 1994). He moved to Los Angeles in his late teens where he developed a passion for sailing. He rented an old stable and launched a traveling theater company, Theatre Caravan, for which he reportedly wrote and produced an estimated sixty plays. Unfortunately, he earned very little money in the process. During World War II, Jennings was stationed at Guadalcanal, but after the famous battle that had been fought there. When he was discharged, he returned to Califor-

I would like to thank Walter L. Williams, Vern L. Bullough, Stephen O. Murray, Jim Schneider, Joseph Hansen, and George Mortenson (Fred Frisbie) for their comments on prior drafts of this article.

nia and studied cinema for two years at the University of Southern California. Not about to be "tagged as a fag," he played it straight and pursued relationships with women. He tried the married life—three times. Each was brief and annulled. He began to explore sex with men and learned that a lot of "straight" guys enjoyed sexual play with other guys from time to time. He began to visualize sexuality as a spectrum of possibilities and thought that rigid labels such as "homosexual" or "heterosexual," "gay" or "straight," were illusory—and dangerous.

Although often referred to as among the great queer pioneers of the gay or homophile movement, Jennings frequently stood counter to the culture-forming "minoritizing" tendencies emerging within the early days of Mattachine. He was a steadfast libertarian who stood up for the right for same-sex love and eroticism, but he refused to the end of his days to don the "gay" mantle. He repeatedly wrote in later essays that to do so would be like tattooing a target on one's chest; it would be the equivalent of suicide. Jennings perceived the homophile movement to be caught in a paradox: although the rights of those who practiced homosexuality needed to be protected, to stand fervently in favor of something was the surest way to incite those most adamantly against it.

Nevertheless, Jennings stepped into the gay movement one November night in 1950 when he met Harry Hay and Rudi Gernreich, two active members of the Communist Party in Los Angeles. Hay was a teacher for the California Labor School. With Gernreich's blessing, they had given Bob Hull, a student in his music history class, a prospectus he had written that called on the "androgynes of the world" to unite (Hay, 1996). Hull was thrilled with the document, so he asked Hay if he could bring two friends over to discuss the matter. These were his lover-turned-roommate, fellow communist Chuck Rowland, and Hull's current boyfriend, Dale Jennings.

According to Hay, "These five 'sexual outlaws'" had "gravitated to the Left because . . . they found themselves in total empathy with the programs and goals of our Hetero outlaw friends in labor and politics" (Hay, 1996, pp. 315-316). Hay recalled that Jennings had not been active within the party, but he referred to him as "one hell of a fellow traveler" (Timmons, 1990, p. 144). However, in an undated (c. 1984) Christmas card Jennings sent to his friend Don Slater, he had written, "When I was a loud-mouthed commie, people fled the Mattachine in the thousands; now that the prevailing shade this season is red, my conservatism is worse than damned: it's ignored." A letter to Don Slater dated July 16, 1990, also indicated that he had once been in "the local red cell." Indeed, Jennings was eventually cast out of ONE in 1954 by a zealous Dorr Legg, due to Jennings' communist activities and associations.

Gay journalist/historian Jim Kepner (1994) explained that the communist background "gave them a starting philosophy with strategic applications . . . analyses which suggested specific courses of action, the experience and chutzpah to tackle what seemed hopeless, and the idea of a minority community, which must learn to respect itself, to build its own institutions, resources and sense of fraternity/sorority." It was these five comrades who met to discuss the prospectus on November 11, 1950, and again two days later. A larger, semipublic "discussion group" convened the following month, on December 11. By early 1951, Mattachine had recruited another five members, including their first woman, Ruth Bernhard, although other women had attended the public meetings. That summer, they adopted official missions and purposes, which proclaimed homosexuals to be one of the largest minorities in America. Hay designed an elaborate initiation ceremony reminiscent of the Masons. Jennings seems to have appreciated the importance of this ritual, for he later wrote, "To many a homosexual, who may have lived out years of loneliness or bitterness, believing that his lot in society was a miserable one and without hope, the whole proceedings, the sense of group fellowship, the joining of hands in solemn oath, bespoke something so new, and of such dazzling implication as to be well-nigh unbelievable" (Timmons, 1990, p. 155).

This does not mean, however, that Jennings agreed with the "cultural minority" impetus that was driving Mattachine. As the others sifted and sorted through names trying to find one that aptly described them, Jennings grew frustrated, wanting simply to work toward freedom of choice in sexual preferences and behaviors. As Joseph Hansen, another early member of Mattachine, wrote, "You can't start a society of people with nothing in common but what they do in bed" (Hansen, 1998, p. 19). While other members droned on about "the pain and sorrow, the desperate loneliness of being homosexual and afraid, always having to lie and hide," Jennings stood aloof and "struggled not to laugh aloud" (Hansen, 1998, pp. 19-20). Writing under his pseudonym Jeff Winters, he commented that when Hay proposed that the group call itself Mattachine, after a troupe of masked bachelors who led the festivities in the medieval French Feast of Fools, Hay hadn't noticed "the sniggers of the rest of us." Yet it was also Jennings who wrote, as Hieronymus K., "It would be the Mattachine Foundation commemorating the fools and jesters of legend who spoke the truth in the face of stern authority" (1953, p. 19).

It is somewhat ironic that, through the course of events, it was Jennings who galvanized the Mattachine. The precipitating event was his arrest in the spring of 1952 for allegedly soliciting a police officer in a toilet in Westlake Park (now MacArthur Park). Jennings left his Echo Park apartment in search for a good movie. After passing on the first two shows, about 9:00 p.m.

he stepped into a public restroom on his way to a third theater. He soon left, "[h]aving done nothing that the city architect didn't have in mind when he designed the place," only now he was followed by a "big, rough looking character who appeared out of nowhere." Jennings proceeded to the theater to find that the show there was one he'd already seen. So he headed for home, still followed by the burly stranger (letters, not yet catalogued).¹

Jennings now became afraid that the man had set out to rob him, so he "walked fast, took detours and said goodbye at each street corner." Upon arriving home, however, the man persisted and, before a witness, he pushed past Jennings and into the apartment. Jennings describes what happened then:

What followed would have been a nightmare even if he hadn't turned out to be vice squad. Sure now that this big character was a thug, I—as the prosecutor described it—"flitted wildly" from room to room wondering how to get rid of this person sprawled on the divan making sexual gestures and proposals. I was almost relieved when he strolled into the back bedroom because now I could call the police . . . Then he called twice, "Come in here!" His voice was loud and commanding. He'd taken his jacket off, was sprawled on the bed and his shirt was unbuttoned half way down. . . . [H]e insisted that I was homosexual and urged me to "let down my hair." He'd been in the navy and "all us guys played around." I told him repeatedly that he had the wrong guy; he got angrier each time I said it. At last he grabbed my hand and tried to force it down the front of his trousers. I jumped up and away. Then there was the badge and he was snapping the handcuffs on with the remark, "Maybe you'll talk better with my partner outside." (Jennings, 1953d, p. 12)

The partner, Jennings wrote, was nowhere to be found when they left the apartment. Cuffed, he was paraded all the way back to the park, where he was ushered into the waiting patrol car. The arresting officer sat in the back seat beside him, and he and two other officers in the front seat asked baited questions, such as "How long have you been this way?" The officers "repeatedly made jokes about police brutality, laughingly asked . . . if they'd been brutal and each of the three instructed me to plead guilty and everything would be alright" (1953, p. 12). Jennings feared that he was in for "the usual beating," probably out in the country somewhere, but they eventually made it to the station, where Jennings was booked at 11:30 p.m., although he was not allowed to make his phone call until after 2:00 in the morning. That call was to Harry Hay, to ask for fifty dollars bail. Hay posted the bail by 6:30 a.m., and the two went for breakfast at the Brown Derby. It was

there decided that Mattachine would help contest the charge. That night Hay called a meeting, and Mattachine convened, back in Jennings' apartment.

Hay hired Long Beach lawyer George Sibley to take the case and, under his advisement, Mattachine organized the Citizens Committee to Outlaw Entrapment, which raised funds and promoted Jennings' case through use of leaflets and flyers. The trial began on June 23, 1952, and lasted for ten days. Jennings admitted to being a homosexual, but he adamantly denied any wrongdoing. The jury deadlocked eleven to one for acquittal, and the charges were dismissed by the judge.

Hay's later recollection of the arrest somewhat contradicts Jennings' story. This account by Hay was related to journalist Stuart Timmons:

Dale had just broken off with Bob Hull and was not, I know, feeling very great. He told me that he had met someone in the can at Westlake Park. The man had his hand on his crotch, but Dale wasn't interested. He said the man insisted on following him home, and almost pushed his way through the door. He asked for coffee, and when Dale went to get it, he saw the man moving the window blind, as if signaling to someone else. He got scared and started to say something, when there was a sudden pounding on the door, and Dale was arrested. (quoted in Timmons, 1990, p. 164)

As to what really happened that night, none can know save Jennings and the arresting officer. Jennings knew that even some of his supporters did not believe the story, and he wrote in the first issue of *ONE Magazine*: "To be innocent and yet not be able to convince even your own firm constituents, carries a peculiar agony" (Jennings, 1953d, p. 11).

The controversial case drew national attention to Mattachine, and through the summer following the trial, membership in the organization ballooned. Mattachine-like discussion groups immediately sprang up in Long Beach, Laguna, and Fresno. By early 1953, groups had formed as far away as San Diego, San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, and Chicago.

As for the original founders, Hay was becoming disturbed by what he felt to be the increasing belligerence of Jennings, and Jennings grew disdainful of Hay's visionary theatrics. Like a Judas, Jennings was continually in vocal opposition to anything Hay favored (Timmons, 1990, p. 178). Hay believed that gays were a unique and specially talented folk who had been an integral part of tribal societies and needed to unify to reclaim those sacred and traditional roles. Jennings thus compared Harry Hay to a surly Moses bearing "that dratted Decalogue" (Hansen, 1998, p. 23). Jennings and others maintained that there was no essential difference between males who preferred sex with women and those who preferred other men. Hay wanted visibility;

Jennings wanted privacy. Hay wanted publicity; Jennings wanted the right to be left alone. "Homosexuality is today's great irrelevancy," he wrote in one of his first articles of the nation's first successful homosexual magazine, "Homosexuals Are Not a People" (Jennings, 1953b, pp. 2-6, as Jeff Winters). He was not alone in his discomfort. Even before the entrapment incident, several other members, such as latecomer Don Slater, had complained that Hay's secret organization was not doing a satisfactory job of reaching the general public and of taking legal/political action to protect and defend the rights of homosexuals. "We wanted more action than weekly symposia," wrote Mattachine member George Mortenson (2000).

No one seems to recall who came up with the idea of publishing a monthly magazine at a meeting in the home of George Mortensen, but the idea immediately sparked interest. In October of 1952, a small cadre met in Martin Block's bookshop on Hollywood Boulevard and decided to separate from Mattachine and form ONE, Incorporated. Block was elected president, with Dale Jennings as vice president, and Don Slater as secretary. These three formed the editorial board of *ONE Magazine*, with W. Dorr Legg as their business manager, Bailey Whitaker, a.k.a. Guy Rousseau, in charge of circulation, and Joan Corbin as "Eve Elloree" as the primary artist. George Mortenson and Ann Carll Reid also assisted as needed (Legg, 1994).

By the second meeting, much had been accomplished. Jennings and Slater had secured an office at 232 South Hill, Suite 302, and somehow managed to pay the first and last months' rent. They had also contacted over a dozen attorneys, which they then narrowed down to two. With the blessings of Legg and others, Jennings and Slater appeared the next day in the law office of Eric Julber. The Articles of Incorporation were signed on November 15, 1952, by Tony Reyes, Martin Block, and Dale Jennings.

Never before had Jennings been so animated to the homosexual cause. A seasoned playwright and budding author, he had at last found his niche in the movement as editor in chief and writer. George Mortenson, an early president of ONE, Inc., recalled:

Dale Jennings was the only one who had been exposed to the process of pamphleteering in the process of helping his sister issue broadsides and advertising matter in her sewing business. So Dale Jennings was busy from morning till night coaching we novices, in this and that nicety from scribbled notes to properly formed "Dummies" ready for the printer—to be set in type, how to indicate the position of artwork relative to text, etc. Don Slater designed the cover. (Mortenson, 2000)

The first issue of *ONE* was odd looking: nearly square, with a gray cover and logo reminiscent of a cross, in purple ink. Hansen (1998) recalls that it

was printed by Jennings' sister and brother-in-law in their basement, and distributed by hand in the streets and bars of Los Angeles.

Jennings' narratives were pointed and angry, and the personas he wrote under invited controversy. For example, in the second issue of *ONE*, as Jeff Winters, he scathingly chastised Christine Jorgensen, equating her much-discussed sex change operation with eunuchism: "You're not a woman you know . . . those expensive scalpels only gave you the legal right to transvestitism" (Jennings, 1953a, p. 13, as Jeff Winters). Winters assured his audience:

[H]omosexuals are not a third sex, personalities in the body of the wrong sex, biological confusions of nature. Most neurotic symptoms they display—and there are plenty—can just as easily have been caused by society refusing to adjust to them as the reverse. Their vast number in both history and present makes it impossible to label them freaks and so unusual as to be called abnormal. (Jennings, 1953a, p. 13)

With Jennings at the helm, *ONE Magazine* launched against the winds of culture. Through its thought-provoking essays, daring social commentary, and sharp, consistent design, *ONE* tacked its way into history, serving "as one of the unofficial voices of the homosexual rights movement" until 1972—covering forty years of queer history (Licata, 1981, p. 172). But Jennings did not get to stay editor in chief for very long. Early in 1954, their business manager, Dorr Legg, pressured him to leave. Jennings later admitted in a July 16, 1990, letter to Don Slater that his bullying tactics and maverick manners were to compensate for his own low self-esteem. He confessed to having been overly divisive, and he felt that his bullying approach had backfired on him. He did not contest Bill Lambert's (i.e., Dorr Legg) decision to cast him from the editorial board of *ONE* and found it ironic that he had been evicted from *ONE* and the "red cell" simultaneously:

Bill Lambert got rid of me at almost the precise time that the local red cell took my [communist party] membership card away from me for being a carnivore and hence a security risk. Naturally both organizations were quite correct and should have been more circumspect about letting me come near them in the very beginning. (letter to Slater, July 16, 1990)

In the years after he had left *ONE*, Jennings wrote and published his first novel, *The Ronin* (1968). Jennings had once studied tai chi in China and Zen in Japan, and this book is a homage to Japanese culture. In *The Ronin*, he re-

cast an old Buddhist myth into his own poetic encomium on manhood. He was proud that the story had been published in Japan, but he lamented that it did not sell as well as he'd hoped: "I'm afraid my erotic passages were a little too much for them," he wrote to a fan in June 7, 1983. In this letter, Jennings' described his Ronin as a man of mythic stature, "with three balls . . . and a permanent erection," whose "pretty damned big" manhood/sword gets him into all sorts of trouble. Tuttle Books of Japan secured the copyright for *The Ronin* in 1968, and the book has been reprinted several times since. *The Ronin* was Jennings' first and most successful novel.

Jennings' second book was based on a film treatment he had sold to Warner Brothers, called *The Cowboys* (1971). Warners had purchased the motion picture rights to *The Cowboys* in 1970, for \$150,000. At that time, *The Cowboys* was a three-page plot summary in which an aging rancher named Anse, an old cook, and nine boys drive a herd of cattle across Montana, replacing Anse's original crew who had gone to fight in the Civil War. Through the drive, each boy would become a heroic man: "The fat boy outshines everyone in calming the cattle at night with his soft singing—and the one they started out calling sissy turns out to have the coolest head in a crisis" (letter to Slater, July 16, 1990). The group encounters rustlers, pure "prairie scum" who "grab-ass" with the boys and beat Anse to a pulp, nearly killing him. The boys reap revenge by tricking and exterminating the prairie-vermin rustlers, and Anse recovers in the end to berate the boys lovingly. In the movie itself, however, Anse is shot and killed.

Jennings worked with Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank Jr. to create the screenplay for the film. Jennings received a separate credit, "Based on a novel by," though plans for publication were still being drawn. Mark Rydell produced and directed the movie, with John Wayne starring as the rancher, who was renamed Wil. The movie was a great success. It is one of John Wayne's last movies, and one of the few in which his character dies.

Besides the aging rancher, *The Cowboys* featured another wave-tossed hero, a boy named Cimarron, a Mexican word for "an animal that runs alone or a man who is wanted; in combining the sense of being both wild and solitary, it is one of the beautiful words in the language" (Jennings, 1971, p. 227). In the introduction to the novel, Jennings advises readers to read the glossary before delving in to the text, in order to "bone up on the West a bit." Be wary of double entendre and euphemisms, he winks. How, then, is one to interpret the description of Anse as he coyly eyes young Slim and slaps his leg with "that long, stiff riata of his" (Jennings, 1971, p. 65)? The sight of the boys scrambling under their blankets to get dressed in the cold, early morning suggests to one of the boys an orgy, an idea elaborated on "until many of the boys stumbled off into the darkness too stimulated to irrigate the plain" (p. 83).

Jennings defended such passages as portraying a historic reality. The publishers, however, would have none of it. According to a September 25, 1970, memo, one editor at Bantam demanded that all glimmers of homoeroticism be deleted if the book was to be published:

Sure there was sex in "them days," and for all I know this story may depict it accurately. It gets in the way, however, and it weakens the story unnecessarily. Judicious cutting would make a big difference, and I think the real taboos have to do with masturbation and the way in which the author has suggested adolescent homosexuality without really describing it. Such stuff is out of place in a book for adults.

This same editor advised that Jennings turn up the intensity, so to speak, on the heteroerotic: "I rather like the scene of the floozy walking naked through the town with a gun in each hand." Let's kill the circle jerks, but bring on the femme fatale!

In a formal letter from editor Bob Silverstein of Bantam Books, Jennings was formally entreated to make substantial changes to *The Cowboys*: "The intimations of adolescent homosexuality are distracting. Either they should be more clearly spelled out or considerably toned down. And frankly I urge the latter." Jennings submitted a revision in January 1971, but it was clearly not enough; Silverstein replied in March that Bantam had submitted *The Cowboys* to Putnam. "No word yet," he wrote, "but very high hopes all around." The book was again rejected, however, and finally published by Stein and Day in 1971, but Jennings never let go of the copyright.

With the financial success of *The Cowboys*, Jennings was able to purchase a ranch outside of Los Angeles, where he lived for a time. According to his friend Jim Schneider, he moved for a time to northern California, after he lost his home and most of his possessions in a lawsuit brought on by an ex-lover. When he returned to Los Angeles, he found he had been forgotten by both Hollywood and the gay movement. He eventually reconnected with the gay movement in February 1985, when he wrote to his old friend Don Slater to ask for a job. Slater had separated from ONE and founded HIC, the Homosexual Information Center, in 1965. Jennings came to Slater hoping that the HIC would accept and protect his scripts and books, and perhaps even hire him: "The time has come to send out signals. Those in need of the services of a life-guard must advertise."

Thus began a correspondence with Slater that would last until Slater's death in 1997. Jennings greatly admired Don Slater, and he believed wholeheartedly in the goals of the HIC. They agreed, as Slater wrote in a letter to Jennings dated July 5, 1991, that

the protection of privacy in sexual relations is the key to sexual freedom. It is the only centralized control necessary or acceptable in a democratic society. . . . It is the individual not the state that should make decisions that touch so directly on the freedom and dignity of people. . . . The sexual act and all its variations belongs to everyone.

The 1990s were not great years for Jennings. He remained isolated and alone, a surly and reclusive old man who drank too much, who felt befuddled by technology and haunted by regret. He grudgingly allowed others to care for him, but he hated having live-in guests and feared that someone might throw away or destroy his archived pictures and writings. He worked diligently on his writing every day, but more than a few times he lost a day's efforts by turning his word processor off before saving his work. By 1996, he realized that his memory was slipping. He wrote vexedly of losing his scissors and not being able to remember names of objects or recent events. Concerned, he made final arrangements that his works and property would go to the HIC, which would be housed within ONE Institute and Archives in Los Angeles. He wrote of his relief that his words would be preserved—but swore to haunt from the grave anyone who should dare to edit him.

To the end of his days, Jennings never stopped writing, and his legacy to the HIC consists of hundreds of articles, including unpublished books, plays, film treatments, and stories, which he called "invaluable treasures of the heart." He has also left to the HIC a collection of thousands of pictures of men that he had cut out of magazines, a "pictorial record of America's most beautiful men" from the 1950s through the 1980s that had brought him great joy in his solitude. He hoped that HIC could preserve his writings and his collections, and perhaps it might even profit from them.

William Dale Jennings died on May 11, 2000. He was eighty-two years old. His friend Jim Schneider had taken care of him and was with Jennings at his death. His memorial service, held June 25, 2000, was the first public event held in HIC's new home in the ONE Institute and Archives, near the campus of the University of Southern California at Los Angeles.

In method and manner, Jennings was indeed, as Timmons wrote, "[o]pinionated, intelligent and aggressively virile" (1990, p. 144). In a way, Jennings lived a life similar to that of Cimarron, whom he had so admired—his had indeed been the way of the maverick. But solitude did not seem so heroic to Jennings as an old man, when he had to pay penance for the crimes of his youth. So, like his Ronin, he tunneled through a mountain to secure the safety of others only to find, after years of effort, that he had miscalculated from the start and had created a path to a ledge he judged more lethal than the one he had sought to avoid.

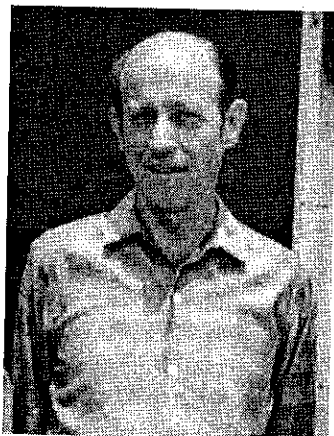
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The personal papers of Dale Jennings are housed in the Homosexual Information Center within ONE Institute and Archives in Los Angeles.

W. Dorr Legg (1904-1994)

Wayne R. Dynes



One of the founders of the modern American gay movement, W. Dorr Legg served the cause until his death. Legg's experience had an extraordinary span, for he lived in every decade of the twentieth century. He witnessed World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, and the profound social changes that began in the 1950s, including the civil rights movement. From his base in Los Angeles, he tenaciously fostered the rise of the American gay movement, guiding its most durable organization, ONE, Inc., through many unanticipated storms and discouraging setbacks.

Once he got started no one could challenge Dorr for dedication and stamina. Yet he was a late starter. Only in his forties did Dorr Legg take his place as a leading pioneer in what he preferred to term "homophile" activism and scholarship. At the height of his career in the 1970s he was a lanky, balding man who, apart from his height, would scarcely attract attention in a crowd. He refused to "send up flares," as he termed the extravagance some displayed to announce their homosexual identity. Yet he remained clear and forthright about who he was and what he was doing. For the shy and retiring, his stalwart and unsterotypical persona tacitly attested that participation in the movement was open to everyone.

Beneath the veneer of blandness lay a core of steel. In the little world of homophile activism Dorr Legg's life recalls the career of the founder of a small nation-state. One might think of Syngman Rhee (1875-1965), for example, first president of Korea, or Hastings Banda (1905-1997), who exercised the same office in Malawi. They began with a tiny band of followers, sticking to their task through thick and thin. For long years their endeavor seemed quixotic. More conventional personalities would have given up. Yet when the time came they were ready to play a major role, but the sequel was