

Hal Call (1917-2000): Mr. Mattachine

James T. Sears

Only when police chased Chicago advertising salesman, Hal Call, out of the windy city in 1952, did San Francisco get its first permanent gay activist.

Randy Shiels, *The Mayor of Castro Street*

"If the priests controlled sex," the lanky man with cobalt eyes bellowed to me, "they knew they could control man." Sitting on his worn gold casting couch and surrounded by 7,000 gay erotic videos, eighty-three-year-old Harold Leland Call has devoted a half-century to the gay movement. Applauded by some and disparaged by others, all would agree that the Missouri-born Call was a prominent figure during the pre-Stonewall era. From the *Mattachine Review* to Bob Damron's *Address Book*, from physique magazines to hard-core erotica, from the Black Cat to the California Hall, from *Life* magazine to *CBS Reports*—Hal Call furthered homosexual rights at a time when there were few activists and even fewer willing to lend their real names.

Harold Leland Call was born in September 1917 to a fervent Baptist mother, Genne, and her freewheeling twenty-four-year-old husband, Hal's father, Fred. In Grundy County, the sharp-eyed Call quickly became aware of the contradictions between religious belief and everyday life. His father's extramarital exploits eventually led to a divorce when Hal was ten. As Call entered puberty, "I knew I had a fascination and attraction for male genitals. I was hungry for information about sex, anxious for sexual experiences. I was fascinated by other men's penises" (Kepner interview).

Hal also developed a love for writing in addition to an interest in sports. At age eleven, he printed "The Daily News" with



a rubber lettering set and writing skills acquired in a one-room schoolhouse. Later, his eighth-grade schoolteacher at Smith School wrote for his graduation: "Congratulations and best wishes to the best student I ever had in school. The future is yours." And, for Hal Call, it was.

Receiving a scholarship to the University of Missouri in 1935, Hal studied journalism while supplementing his income by publishing a weekly flyer, "Theater News," with local movie listings and advertisements. He also worked at the *Columbia Missourian*.

As war neared and the draft began, Call enlisted as an Army private in June 1941; within a year he had been promoted to sergeant. Originally expecting to serve only one year, Pearl Harbor changed that and the realities of war and Army life altered the *Missourian's* worldview: "I am being taught to kill in battle," he wrote his mother. "I do not like that part, although I am not a conscientious objector, nor am I a coward" (letter to his mother, March 15, 1941). Call became a lieutenant after completing officer candidate school in the summer of 1942, before seeing combat in the Pacific theater. Call saw the worst of the war two years later. Writing his family after the intense fighting where much of his battalion was cut to ribbons:

I'm safe. I've seen 14 continuous days of hell! 14 nights of hell, fear and prayer on the battlefield here on Saipan Island. Fourteen front line days without a letup. No man who sees and knows it will ever forget it. Dead everywhere. Shells, snipers, and enemy machine gunners shooting at you; I can smell and feel death every minute. . . . Rain, sun, land crabs, and giant snails all add to the misery of shells, dead Japs, and the stench and destruction of the battlefield to make life dreary, dull and yet keenly exciting. (letter to mother, July 6, 1944)

Earning a purple heart from taking a shell fragment and later appointed regimental battalion commander, Captain Call returned to the United States in the fall of 1945. And, at the beginning of the New Year, he returned to the University of Missouri to complete his degree. One of his courses was country newspaper production. One week the entire class helped assemble the edition of the *Eldon Advertiser*. Call worked in the shop casting stereotype plates for advertisements. "When the owner saw me back there using the printer's tools, sawing and cutting plates, and setting type, he went gaga! He offered me one-quarter of interest in the newspaper." Call traveled the sixty miles three days a week from Columbia working as a printer, editor, and advertising salesman. Graduating a year later, Call continued to work at the paper until the owner retired. When the paper was sold, Call's modest investment had yielded him a handsome financial return.

Postwar gay life in Missouri—except in Kansas City—was far from liberating. J, a friend from Brookfield, wrote Hal about problems in his former college town: “Naturally you know about all the nastiness in Columbia. Neither I, fortunately, nor Jack, were involved—that to me is typically amazing! But the scare of the witch hunt was a little too much for us” (letter from J, September 23, 1948). In another letter, addressed to the “Scarlet Whore of Babylon,” J described the aftermath:

There was a “clean up” on here and all sorts of grotesque rumors, fantastic terrors, etc., are floating from pillow to nameless post. . . . There was a small article in one of the St. Louis papers several days ago saying that EK had been let off scot-free after his last week’s trial but was on probation for a period of time. (letter from J, 1949, no date)

Call received this letter in Walensburg, Colorado, a once-affluent mining community where he had purchased the *World Independent* in 1948, after a brief stint editing a daily newspaper in Brookfield, Missouri. As one of the emerging community leaders, Hal engaged in a relationship with a daughter of a prominent family. And, like most closeted homosexual sons, he fended off letters from his mother, who fretted:

You said in your letter you could never afford being married with all your expenses you have, well, there are thousands of married men not making what you are and have lovely families and nice homes. You come in contact with them each day and so do I. Harold, it isn’t our prestige that gets us along in this world—I know from experience. Just simply be what you are and live it. You remarked in your letter you’d be in a mess if you had a family to care for. Well, dear son, that is a mistake. You’re missing the dearest thing in your life by not having a dear wife and little ones to care for. (letter from mother, November 13, 1949)

Similar to other small-town homosexuals during this lonely hunters’ era, Hal experienced problems living the dual life. His friend J philosophized at the time: “You mentioned something about ‘us who have such a difficult time finding happiness’ well, my view on that one is that any life has its share, rather evenly distributed, of happiness and its contrary” (letter from J, March 28, 1950). Hal found solace with gay men who were generally his junior with respect to Hal’s war and work experience: Bill, an archaeology student in Alamosa; Terry from Durango; Jack, another student who would eventually follow Hal to Chicago.

Following a declining financial base for his paper and realizing the importance of being earnest with the woman he was dating, Hal placed the *World Independent* on the market. As he awaited the July sale, he wrote Bill in the spring of 1950:

The way is still cleared for my own getting out of here on schedule. . . . Oklahoma City and St. Louis, I see, have just finished local vice clean-up campaigns, although the word is they only scratched the surface. . . . I find it [Denver] matches the worst I saw in Kansas City—and I thought that the limit. I've met many persons there one way or another in the past few weeks, and I am more convinced than ever that the axe is about to fall.

After working for the *Kansas City Star* for a year, Call secured a transfer to the newspaper's Chicago office where he joined several of his Missouri gay friends, including J. Then, on a hot night in August of 1952, Hal and three companions were arrested for "lewd conduct" in a parked car at Lincoln Park. He paid an \$800 "fee" to get the charges dismissed. "I had to borrow the money from my mother and told her what it was all about. I told my boss at the *Star*; I was one of those people that didn't know that to be accused was to be guilty—as all of us have learned since" (Kepner interview). Hal resigned from his job, packed everything in his 1945 Buick super sedan, and departed for San Francisco—accompanied by his lover, Jack.

When Hal and Jack drove across the Golden Gate Bridge in the mid-October 1952, there was no inkling that the City by the Bay would become America's gay Mecca or that Harold L. Call would play a major role in its transformation. Although the city had long enjoyed a tradition of "mixed bars" filled with returning soldiers, police harassment was common and much of the homosexual scene remained underground. Hal and Jack frequented the Black Cat on Montgomery Street, where on Sundays José Sarria sung operas while Jim McGinnis (known as Hazel) played the open-front piano. They also spent time at a few bars on Post or Taylor Streets. "We were always weary and on the lookout. With hands, arms, and elbows on the bar at all times. We were always afraid a cop would come in and sweep the place out as they did on some occasions."

Working for an insurance trade magazine, Hal's thinking was profoundly influenced by two odd groups that had taken root in the area. The Prosperous Society, whose cornerstone was the "only thing in any individual is his consciousness," challenged Call's intellect. His gay political consciousness was activated by the Mattachine Foundation.

Founded a year earlier by a handful of Angelinos, the Mattachine Foundation sponsored clandestine ongoing discussion groups mostly in Califor-

nia metropolitan areas. At the beginning of 1953, Hal attended a discussion group held in a Berkeley student's room. About fifteen men were in attendance. Recognizing the importance of this effort but dismayed by its lack of organization, he formed another group across the bay. In the spring of that year, the former Army captain helped lead the charge against Mattachine's secretive Fifth Order. "They all had communist backgrounds," remembers Call, "every damn one of them!" (interview by Paul Cain, July 27, 1994). Two years later, he observed

the original founders of the movement had built better than they knew. . . . Gone were the "secret" orders, the questions of who was behind it all, and the possibility of alternate motives. Established was an association of persons who knew and trusted the others within the group and shared the zealous desire to alleviate a pressing social problem. (*Mattachine Review*, March-April, 1955, p. 39)

Mattachine chapters soon expanded to New York, Chicago, Denver, and Boston, among other cities. As secretary of the San Francisco Area Council, Call began publishing the region's newsletter in the fall of 1953. Two years later, Call was director of publications for the Mattachine Society. The Society entered an agreement with the newly formed Pan Graphic Press (partly owned by Call) to produce *The Mattachine Review*. This monthly magazine informed the heterosexual as well as the homosexual with questions posed on its cover such as: "How would you face the problem if a member of your family is found to be a homosexual?" Nevertheless, the magazine was hardly a bastion of reactionary political thought as alleged by some contemporary commentators (e.g. Streitmatter, 1995, p. 89). *The Review* advocated disclosing one's homosexuality to others, published excerpts from England's *Wolfenden Report* and articles from the liberal *Der Kreis*, a European gay journal. There also were cover stories such as "Police Roundup Jails 69" and "Intolerance, Hate, Prejudice, Fear, Ignorance," as well as thoughtful essays on bisexuality and pornography. Further, Call's Dorian Book Service offered readers—many living in towns lacking progressive bookstores—the opportunity to order books such as André Gide's *Corydon* and Jeannette Foster's *Sex Variant Women in Literature*.

Politically, the *Review* argued against the ghettoization of homosexuals or their elevation as a "special people" and generally veered away from the more political and separatist stance adopted by *ONE Magazine*—although activists such as Jim Kepner wrote for both and Dorr Legg, *ONE*'s founder, was treasurer of the Mattachine Society. "I wanted to live in the general society," stresses Call, "not create a homosexual subculture."

As a journalist from the Midwest, Call was sensitive to the role the media (and society's professionals) could play in advancing homosexual rights. His public appearances stressed reason and common sense as he sought to educate a sexual illiterate citizenry. In a 1958 radio show, for example, he explained:

Homosexuality is just one of the things that exists in nature. It always has been with us, as far as we know, and always will be as far as we expect. It seems that no laws, no attitudes of any culture that we have looked into in the past have ever been able to stamp it out or even essentially curb it. (KPFA program, November 24, 1958)

Later in the show, when confronted with the "problem" of the nelly homosexual, he again offered a radical response—couched in common sense:

We hear so many homosexuals who urge us to please preach that the flamboyant individual should not show off and shouldn't be obvious so that he receives the ridicule and scorn of his fellow man. . . . However, we feel that there is a more basic problem to get at, that will in the long run—if it can be solved—take care of this. That is to educate the public so that its attitude toward these people who are displaying these mannerisms will be changed. Then, the mannerism will no longer be of any significance and whether they are recognized or not, it won't amount to anything.

In private, however, Call's blustery outbursts and bawdy style coupled with his political conservatism and business acumen annoyed some homosexual activists who generally were less able to translate ideas into the "nitty-gritty." Throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, Pan Graphic Press was the Alyson Publications of its time, publishing booklets on transvestism, West Coast bars, and the sexual continuum. Other services included *Dorian Book Quarterly* with reviews of books on "sexual variance and related themes." The Press also printed the lesbian periodical, *The Ladder*, edited by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, for most of its first year, as well as legal briefs for the bohemian Black Cat club, which was constantly under siege by state officials.

During one visit back to Grundy County, Hal sat his mother down and explained "the facts of life." Putting her on the Mattachine mailing list, he said: "If I come back home and find that little magazine hidden and not read, you'll never see me again. Mom, you're gonna learn something!" And she did—as did others.

Ground zero for sexual liberation during the 1960s was San Francisco. It had begun, however, a year earlier during the city's mayoral election when Russ Wolden sought to unseat Mayor George Christopher. Although ahead in the polls, Wolden sought to link Christopher to a city becoming a "national headquarters" for perverts based on information released from the Mattachine Convention that was hosted by the chapter in Denver. The gambit, however, backfired as the city's newspapers roundly condemned Wolden's tactics and Christopher won handily. Meanwhile, local homophile groups benefited from the publicity and soon after the election, Call recalls, "our first real meeting with top police officials came to pass after that."

Call was influential in moving city government—particularly the mayor's office and the police—away from its antihomosexual stance. He was also active in many of the city's gay milestones, providing financial support and printing services to José Sarria's 1961 campaign for city supervisor (the first openly gay man to run for public office in the United States), lending a hand (and designing its logo) for the Tavern Guild (the first gay business association in the country), assisting ministers in forming the influential Council on Religion and the Homosexual, identifying subjects for Alfred Kinsey's further sexuality studies, facilitating *Life* magazine's 1964 cover story of "The Homosexual," bailing out customers arrested at the Tay-Bush Inn and helping to organize the California Hall New Year's Eve Party, at which a police raid resulted in a public relations disaster for the city.

Cliff Anchor, an activist who had been introduced to the gay movement when he saw a newspaper article that featured Mattachine and Call, observes:

Call was a great strategist. Sarria got away with it since he was in the entertainment business. But Hal was out in front and conservative. He attracted people and money into the gay community who wouldn't have been involved otherwise. (interview by author)

By the summer of love, there had been a dramatic change in the San Francisco homosexual scene thanks to the efforts of groups such as Mattachine, the Tavern Guild, and the Society for Individual Rights, a new group that merged the social with the political. Although conservative politically, as a fierce defender of free speech Call found himself at odds with both federal authorities and some homosexual leaders. He asked: "What's the use in battling for sexual freedom without having any?" Hal Call's most pivotal role was in an obscenity case that forever altered the American homosexual landscape.

From his early sexual experiences as a Missouri teen paging "one-handed readers," Call recognized that to be human was to be sexual. But a

seismic cultural and legal shift was occurring during the mid-1960s as evidenced in the popularity of *Playboy* and the use of "the pill." For the homosexual, however, the legal climate had changed little even though images of men in athletic poses, wearing G-strings, often appeared, and homosexual acts were illegal in every state except Illinois. In Minnesota, during the summer of 1967, a trial was held with defendants Conrad Germain and Lloyd Spinar facing a twenty-nine-count federal indictment for producing and distributing "obscene materials." Their company, Directory Services, produced full-frontal-nude men's magazines. Interspersed among the thirty- to fifty-page nude spreads in publications such as *Rugged* (butcher-than-thou men wearing little more than leather motorcycle jackets and boots) and *Tiger* (muscled or thin twenty-somethings) were essays espousing gay liberation as well as comic strips with gay political sensibility.

Call "was instrumental" in connecting the defendants with key expert witnesses such as Wardell Pomeroy, who had been associated with Kinsey's Institute for Sex Research and in developing their legal strategy. In July 1967, the court ruled these materials did "not exceed the limits of candor" and "the right of minorities expressed individually in sexual groups or otherwise must be respected" (p. 11). The homosexual revolution moved into high gear as the landmark decision thwarted the federal government, who smugly had assumed a quick guilty verdict (*Butch*, 1967).

"We opened Pandora's box," confesses Call, who soon opened Adonis Bookstore with partners Robert Trollop, Jack Tennyson, and Bob Damron. The city's first gay venue sold bold magazines such as *Golden Boys* (from Calafran Enterprises owned by Damron/Trollop) and homosexual literature. The storefront also was a good recruiting ground for male models as well as Mattachine activists. In 1967, Call also began Grand Prix PhotoArts Films which produced slides of male stars such as Tony Rivers and Peter Decker. Hal worked with many of the leading erotic photographers of the day such as J. Brian, Toby Ross, and David Hurles (*The Old Reliable*), and he knew or filmed male models, including John Holmes, Joe and Sam Gage, Casey Donovan, Scott O'Hara, Jack Wrangler, Gordon Grant, Kip Knoll, and Ray Fuller. He also collaborated with major West Coast adult filmmakers such as Chuck Holmes at Falcon, Bill Higgins of Catalina Video, and Manco videomaker Bill Wyman.

During this "golden era of gay sexuality," Call perfected video techniques beginning with his first fifteen-minute loop film, "Let's Beat Off," in his Adonis, Halcyon, Zante, and Cockpit film series. "I had the capability of talking to these people and putting them at ease so they didn't feel embarrassed about jacking off. I had the knack." As the new decade of the 1970s dawned, Call opened CineMattachine on Ellis Street, the first live jack-off stage show in the city.

With the new decade, another generation of leaders arose and a different homosexual agenda emerged. Polk Street and the Tenderloin area fell on hard times as the gay population and businesses migrated to the Castro area. As gay power segued into gay rights and "Silence = Death" aborted "Free Love," tales of the homosexual city seldom included Mr. Mattachine, except for his efforts in promoting safe-sex practices as city health officials threatened closure of the movies houses and sex clubs.

In July 1999, six months before his death, Call sat in front of ten video screens in a cramped office above the Circle J Theater. There he entertained a dwindling number of friends and lectured to a drying stream of admirers or writers. From cybersex to queer nation, Hal admitted, "I'm not in step with them; they're not in step with me." A spectator to the movement he helped engineer, he was at ease with himself and his accomplishments: "I'm off center stage now. It's another generation."

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Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are taken from interviews with Hal Call by James Sears, May 1998-July 1999. Copies of this are in the Call papers, International Gay and Lesbian Archives, in Los Angeles. Additional sources used in Call's direct quotations are from an interview with Jim Kepner and another from Paul Cain, both located in the Call papers. His correspondence is also located there.

The article on the history of the Mattachine Foundation is in *Mattachine Review* (March-April 1955). For other details see my *Calling Shots: The Life and Times of Hal Call, the Homophile Movement, and Male Erotica*, New York: The Haworth Press, forthcoming.

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Del Martin (1921-)

Phyllis Lyon



Del Martin is determined, positive, combative, loving and caring, a stubborn Taurus, always right but also ready to admit if she is wrong. An activist and lifelong Democrat, first energized by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, she is passionate about human rights and politics and a rabid champion who insists that the lesbian's place in history be written as it happened, not as some men have assumed it happened. Growing old has not changed her. She has continued to fight for new causes, not sitting back and waiting for others to act. She's Del Martin, and she has been the love of my life for the almost-fifty years we have been together.

Del Martin is a writer. Her piece, "If That's All There Is," written in 1970 after particularly egregious actions by a group of gay men, was published and widely reprinted, and made quite a stir. Male historians uniformly attribute the piece to her—and that is all! But she has written much more than that—articles and essays and editorials which have had a definite impact on the lesbian and gay movements from the 1950s to today. Her reporting tells what actually happened. Her more reflective pieces often wonder what would have happened if, or when, or if not.

Born in San Francisco on May 5, 1921, she was raised by her mother, Mary, and her stepfather, Jones Taliaferro. Mrs. Jones Taliaferro, who had only a grade school education and had worked as a waitress, spent her life trying to keep up with the Joneses, an ambition her daughter did not share.

Early on, Del discovered her attraction to other girls but had no words for what she felt. Somehow she knew enough not to say anything about it to anyone. Eventually, like so many others, she discovered Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. It gave her some sense of who she was although she never could relate herself to the main character in the novel, Stephen Gordon. (Many years later Del realized she was a "sissy butch.")