

seemed like a dream. As one of ONE's founders said in the fifties, to actually someday see people like us marching down Hollywood Boulevard proudly and to have lived to see that day multiplied around the nation is enough.

Billy adds that while Don and Dorr insisted that "we should honor the organization and goals" and not "worship the people doing the work or make them celebrities," it is clear that our lives and work were in fact done better because of the people we met and with whom we worked. Moreover, "we won."

Jim Kepner (1923-1997)

Lewis Gannett
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When Jim Kepner died unexpectedly on November 15, 1997, at the age of seventy-four, he left a legacy to the gay and lesbian cause that stretched from the early 1950s through the entirety of his life. Moreover, he contributed in a remarkable number of ways. Cofounder of many activist initiatives and organizations, he decried the movement's tendency to splinter into ego-driven antagonisms. Journalist, archivist, bibliographer, essayist, and chronicler, he insisted that knowledge of history, both distant and recent, is vital to homosexual self-awareness. Mentor, sage, and, above all, educator, he strove to promote understanding.

With Dorr Legg and others in 1956, Kepner created the first gay studies program in America—indeed, one of the first anywhere worldwide after the Nazis torched Magnus Hirschfeld's institute in Berlin twenty-three years earlier. To complement the program's classes he started the first American reference library for gay and lesbian issues, about which there is much more to be said. In 1958 he launched yet another first, the *ONE Institute Quarterly of Homophile Studies*, the debut in this country of scholarly journalism devoted exclusively to gay and lesbian topics.

At a time when the production or even the possession of frank writing on homosexuality was illegal, Kepner published prolifically in such journals as *ONE Magazine*, *Mattachine Review*, and *ONE Confidential*. Kepner exhibited an intellectual daring quite rare in the 1950s, to which he added an

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equally rare political daring. For a sense of what it was like to live in this repressive climate—an era that young people of today scarcely can imagine—Kepner's *Rough News, Daring Views: 1950s' Pioneer Gay Press Journalism* (The Haworth Press, 1997), a collection of his early articles and essays, is a bracing eye-opener. It's also an excellent testament to the breadth and prescience of Kepner's thinking. Unlike many of his fellow pioneers, however, Kepner did not have a domineering personality. "He just hung in there," Vern Bullough remembers. "When the library opened in Hollywood, he slept in the basement. His needs were not many."

Kepner's greatest achievement was the creation of an open-access library and archive for gay and lesbian history, a project that grew out of the gay studies library already mentioned. For many years he had placed his own substantial library at the disposal of scholars; he encouraged these men and women to peruse the collection at his cramped Hollywood apartment. In 1979 he incorporated his library as the National Gay Archives (after 1984 known as the International Gay and Lesbian Archives, or IGLA). Drawing mostly on his own meager funds, Jim rented a building of 2,500 square feet at 1654 North Hudson Street, just off Hollywood Boulevard. Here the collection grew to more than 25,000 volumes; it also included photographs, sound recordings, a huge clipping file, posters, calendars, banners, and buttons.

The truly remarkable thing about Kepner's archives is that they were directly accessible from the street, where the exhibits in the big plate-glass window invited even the hesitant to drop in. One seasoned gay activist, perhaps jealous of Kepner's accomplishment, sniffed that it was the equivalent of a Christian Science reading room. Be that as it may, Kepner's operation was a joyous beehive of productive energy. As volunteers struggled to cope with the constant inflow of new material, Kepner took time, as much as was needed, to guide researchers and freely share his sage advice. No appointment was needed.

Eventually the landlord raised the rent on the Hudson Street premises, forcing Kepner to move out and place the precious material in storage. Before his death, though, he made sure that the archives, strengthened with the addition of other collections, would have a permanent home on the campus of the University of Southern California.

Kepner's activist career grew out of a struggle he began in his youth. James Lynn Kepner Jr. was born in Galveston, Texas, sometime in early 1923. The exact date is not known because he was abandoned when he was about eight months old under an oleander bush in an empty lot, where a passing nurse found him on September 19. That date thus stands as a kind of birthday, although August 19 was made his legal date of birth, and, years later, an astrologer friend divined that he most likely had been born in the

early hours of February 17. Apparently the abandonment did not leave permanent scars, for Kepner was able to regard it with humor. He wrote in the March 1996 issue of his newsletter, *Jim Kepner's Song and Dance*, "With three possible birthdays, it's no wonder a friend once called me 'the man with a grasshopper mind.' It took years for me to stop apologizing for not having a straight mind."

The rendezvous with the oleander bush may have stemmed from the fact that the foundling had deformed legs and club feet, problems that required the childless couple who adopted him, James and Mary Christian Kepner, to arrange for an operation and years of ongoing therapy. The care that young Kepner received from his new parents came with a downside, however. Mary, raised a Catholic, suffered from the psychological burden of having been prostituted by her own father during her youth, and Kepner père, although a hard worker, was an aggressive, loudmouthed alcoholic. Nonetheless, Kepner recalled that he "remained basically cheery" throughout his childhood. He did quite well at school, devoted himself to Bible study at various churches, planned to become a missionary, and prayed for harmony between his fractious parents.

Despite a growing awareness of his sexual interest in other boys, Kepner's piety stayed with him until his late teens, when realms of a different sort began to capture his imagination. After graduating magna cum laude from Galveston's Ball High School in 1940 (nearly the sum of his formal education) and fulfilling a ROTC commitment, his growing adherence to pacifism inspired him to reject both a lieutenant's commission and religious fundamentalism. Another alternative way of viewing the world also changed his outlook: He found refuge in science fiction; he found idealistic fantasy lands far preferable to the repressive reality of homophobia.

Kepner's father moved from Galveston to San Francisco in 1942 to seek better work opportunities in the booming wartime economy. Shortly thereafter he sent for nineteen-year-old Jim and his daughter, Ella Nora, but not for his wife Mary, from whom he had permanently separated.

Life in the Bay Area afforded young Kepner his first glimpses of gay life. He joined the Golden Gate Futurian Society, a science fiction fan club, through which he met other closeted men, and began visiting used bookstores to collect material on homosexuality, the foundation of his legendary library. His first find was Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*; later, he became renowned for the zeal with which he gathered up every sort of pamphlet or flyer related to lesbian and gay organizing, no matter how obscure.

Sometime in late 1942, Kepner made his first foray to a gay nightclub, the Black Cat, but was steps from the door when a police raid shut the place down. Kepner withdrew into the shadows and watched the proceedings with fascinated horror. For the rest of his life he would recall a startling differ-

ence in the reactions of the bar's patrons: while the butch types shamefacedly acquiesced to being hustled into police vans, the "outrageous queens" resisted, struggling with and savagely cussing out the cops. The experience later prompted Kepner to defend the more flamboyant elements of the queer world whenever conservative gays denounced them for attracting the wrong kind of attention. "Who," he would ask, "first stood up to our oppressors?"

Wartime San Francisco was swarming with horny servicemen, and Kepner quickly learned to pick up men both in bars and on the streets. That thrilled him, of course, but he was dismayed to find that almost all of his tricks exhibited a visceral antipathy to the idea of organizing against mainstream homophobia, or even the homophobia of gays themselves. Thus one can well imagine Kepner's reaction when, in early 1943, a gay sci-fi pen pal named Wally wrote from Wisconsin to disclose the bombshell that a secret group called "The Sons of Hamidy"—led by senators and generals, no less!—was fighting for gay rights. Kepner immediately tried to recruit new members for this organization. Wally, however, did not elaborate on how one could join. Kepner eventually realized that SOH was a figment of Wally's fertile imagination, but not before other pen pals had told him that they'd heard rumors, apparently spread by Wally, that Kepner himself was the formidable group's "national secretary." It is both poignant and telling that Kepner's first stab at organized activism emerged from such wishful fantasy.

The SOH episode raised Kepner's profile as a gay man, with destructive results. Homophobic criticism of him circulated in San Francisco sci-fi circles. Dispirited, Kepner moved to Los Angeles to seek a fresh start.

But Los Angeles proved equally disappointing. The tone of its gay scene (he was told that gays should "act like queens") made Kepner question his place among his sexual peers. Over time he came to realize that he sought a gay community, not one-night stands or even a lover. Adrift and alone, he put his energy into work for the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, first as its secretary and later as president. Although most of the members did not share his interest in activism and social issues, five did, and in 1945 they split off to form the Futurian Society of Los Angeles. For inspiration the group turned to one of the very few ideologies that then seemed capable of charting a politically progressive course: Marxism. In due course Kepner and four co-Futurians decided to join the Communist Party. The move backfired when one of the comrades turned out to be an FBI plant.

Shaken but undeterred, Kepner hitchhiked to New York City, got a job at a cafeteria, and threw himself into Communist Party activities. He supported efforts to have meat packers hire blacks, fought for rent control, and wrote a column for the *Daily Worker*. While making a delivery for that paper

he met the activist Richard Wright, whom he greatly admired and believed to be bisexual. Aware of communist hostility toward homosexuals, however, Kepner remained closeted, to no avail because a fellow Communist party member discovered the truth and informed on him. This led to his expulsion as "an enemy of the people," a devastating setback. Nevertheless, Kepner's party affiliation provided valuable experiences: marching in May Day parades and organizing for causes fanned his desire to work for a similar community of gays. He honed skills that he would later need to pursue that goal.

Kepner moved back to San Francisco with one of his original Futurian comrades, Mel Brown, with whom he opened an avant-garde bookstore on Telegraph Hill. Although stimulating, the venture was a business failure. Close friends but not lovers, Kepner and Brown moved on to Los Angeles, where they settled into a house on Baxter Street in Echo Park. Kepner would live there from 1951 to 1972, and later from 1989 to 1991.

The Baxter Street house soon became the locale of twice-weekly meetings, which Kepner described as "half-parties/half-discussions," of a small group of gay friends that included clergymen and blacks. At the meetings Kepner pushed for starting an organization. Although the others were interested, they didn't want to commit themselves. In mid-1952, however, Kepner started to hear tales of a covert gay group called the Mattachine Society that restricted its members to a select few—an entity reminiscent, perhaps, of the Sons of Hamidy, but which on further investigation proved to be real.

Mattachine's closed nature, and the night job that Kepner was working, prevented him from attending meetings until January of 1953, when a friend, Betty Perdue, took him to a Mattachine gathering at a private Hollywood house. At a subsequent Mattachine meeting Kepner met Dorr Legg. He told Legg he would like to work for *ONE Magazine*, the beginning of Kepner's long, productive, and at times contentious affiliation with the various offshoots of Legg's pathbreaking activist enterprise, ONE, Incorporated. The two men developed rapport at a Mattachine Society conference convened in April of 1953 to write a new constitution for the organization, which quickly degenerated into a fracas. Like Kepner, a number of Mattachine's founders came from working-class, Marxist-oriented backgrounds, whereas newcomers tended to be middle-class and politically much more conservative. The delegates arrived with "bounding optimism, anxious to solve our problems fast," Kepner later recalled, but about "100 of us ripped one another to shreds."

Kepner and Legg repeatedly rose to protest the handling of the same issues, including the parliamentarian's threat "to report us all to the FBI if the idealistic preamble, which [Dorr] and I had worked all night on, wasn't removed." San Francisco delegates charged that one preamble passage, which

called for a commitment to "build a high ethical culture among homosexuals," amounted to "communist propaganda." Harry Hay, presiding, did not handle the dissension well.

Hay was remote, enmeshed in abstract theory, so a counter-revolution was inevitable. . . . [He] regarded any compromise as a sell-out of his dream—forgetting that each gay has had a dream or two, and not all identical.

In the end Hay "astonished and disappointed most members by surrendering Mattachine to the insurgents—in a long, rousing, but impenetrable speech." (All quotations either from Kepner's August 1993 address to the American Historical Association or from the July 1995 issue of *Song and Dance*.)

The turmoil rocked Mattachine's California operations, but solidified Kepner's relationship with Legg. Kepner's first articles for *ONE Magazine*, "The Importance of Being Different" and "England and the Vices of Sodom," grew out of long conversations between the two men in late 1953, often held in Legg's tiny one-room office at the South Hill Street Goodwill building (the first known gay organization office in the United States, Kepner noted).

Kepner and his fellow activists understood that the vast majority of gay men lived in ignorance of their history, both distant and recent, and of their rights as citizens. To address the problem, ONE Institute developed educational strategies: classes at the institute, symposia sponsored by the institute, and *ONE Magazine*. Kepner participated in each, as can be seen from the meticulous records reproduced in Dorr Legg's *Homophile Studies*. He wrote myriad articles for *ONE*, often under several different pseudonyms (Lyn Pederson, Dal McIntyre, Frank Golovitz, and others) as well as under his own byline. In classes and symposia he taught Americans about the homophile movement in Germany, exposed them to the essential writings of Freud on human sexuality, and led discussions of such topics as "Religious Doctrines Down Through the Ages." However familiar these subjects may seem today, a further measure of the pioneering nature of the work done by Kepner and his ONE colleagues was their astonishing ability to focus on issues whose topicality remains undiminished.

At a time when the legal status of homosexuals was just beginning to receive serious consideration, Kepner devoted an entire issue of *ONE Institute Quarterly* (winter, 1960) to the right of association, and to the argument, eventually upheld by the California Supreme Court, that "homosexuals have a civil right to congregate in bars." His writings reveal no less a desire to educate in a way that would uplift, hence his relentless campaign to attack

the misinformation about homosexuality long disseminated by religion and science. As early as the August/September 1957 issue of *ONE Magazine* he composed a pointed rejoinder to the argument, first found in Plato and repeated insistently by Christian authors, that homosexuality is "against nature." Nature, Kepner declared, does not always conform to the storybook conception of family life, "The male as a good provider and protector of the family and the female having all the maternal instinct and blessed fidelity." In truth, "Examples of this idyllic picture are somewhat rare—only a few birds and such disreputable animals as the wolf, the fox, and the weasel."

ONE Institute's symposia routinely involved members of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society. In 1958 the Institute sponsored a discussion of "Homosexuality—A Way of Life." Roundtables were held on such topics as the "The Older Homosexual" and "The Lesbian Partnership." The 1959 sessions included progress reports on "Homophile Movements in the United States Today," given by Del Martin of the Daughters of Bilitis, Rick Hooper of the San Francisco Mattachine Society, and Kepner of ONE. However, when the institute chose "A Homosexual Bill of Rights" as its topic for the 1961 symposium, the Daughters of Bilitis introduced at the very first session a motion to cancel the program. The motion failed, but during the closing banquet the DOB president again denounced the very notion that had been at the heart of the symposium: "It would make us laughable to claim any rights other than those guaranteed in the Bill of Rights" (interview, 1996).

Recurring battles between those activists who saw a need for confrontation to wrest legal protections for homosexuals and others who preferred to seek respectability and establish good relations with the power structure in order to influence it led Kepner to break with Dorr Legg and ONE in December 1960. Later, similar tensions put him at odds with fellow activists in several other gay organizations. But activism always remained at the center of his life. After leaving ONE, for example, he drove a cab and took courses at Los Angeles City College in black studies, which he understood to be analogous to gay studies.

During this time he became very close to Harry Hay. They lunched almost daily with each other in the backseat of Kepner's taxi, theorizing "about every aspect of the homophile movement," Hay recalled in an April 1998 video interview taped at his home (transcript published in *ONE IGLA Bulletin*, #5, summer 1998, pp. 14-16). In 1963, Hay moved in with Kepner "to further cement our loving friendship," Hay stated in the same interview, adding, however, that they were not sexually compatible. In a poem titled "Harry Hay" from Kepner's unpublished manuscript, *Loves of a Long-Time Activist* (the poem appears in the same *ONE IGLA Bulletin*, p. 16), Kepner included the lines:

In 1964 I often parked my cab
An hour where he worked
We shared lunch, held hands
Eyed each other soulfully for a year
Discussing the state of the movement . . .
We never had sex . . .

Interestingly, historians such as John D'Emilio and Neil Miller have had little to say about Kepner. Kay Tobin and Barry Adam make no mention of him at all. Despite this lack of acknowledgment, his dedicated pursuit of an enlightened and enfranchised gay community earned him a place in the gay rights movement second to none. From the movement's earliest days until his death, he indefatigably advanced a radical liberation agenda.

A 1967 episode illustrates Kepner's willingness to confront authority with deeds as well as in print. The Los Angeles police had raided its Black Cat bar (no connection to the San Francisco bar of the same name) on New Year's Eve. Kepner helped organize a rally outside the bar on February 11, 1967, to protest the raid; about 200 supporters showed up, as did an equal number of gun-wielding cops, whose commander ordered the protesters not to utter the word "homosexual." Kepner would have none of that. To the crowd he declared, "The 'nameless love' will never again be silent!" This may well be the first instance in which the famous phrase associated with Oscar Wilde was adapted to the purposes of gay lib rhetoric. In ways both inspiring and amusing, it foreshadowed the oft-heard (to the point of cliché) gripe of conservative 1980s' commentators: "The love that dared not speak its name now won't shut up."

The rally galvanized PRIDE, Los Angeles' nascent street-militant group, and boosted PRIDE's modest Kepner-edited newsletter into *The Advocate*, for which Kepner was a major writer for many years. He went on to participate in countless other rallies, marches, and parades. To give but some examples from a very long list, he marched with Los Angeles' Gay Liberation Front, which he cofounded in 1969; he contributed to the founding of the Los Angeles Gay Pride parade of 1970 and to the Southern California organizing committee for the 1987 March on Washington; and in 1994, along with the Radical Faeries, ACT UP, NAMBLA, and nearly 7,000 others, he protested the commercialization of Stonewall's twenty-fifth anniversary. Kepner, Harry Hay, and John Burnside led a countermarch.

Kepner's belief in the importance of gay history—so graphically evidenced by the archives he created—ran counter to the tendency of many homosexuals to reject the past as part of their break with family and tradition. Kepner characterized their position as follows: "Don't bother me with what

happened 20 or 200 years ago, just you get Tilly Law off my back so I can enjoy myself today." He riposted by comparing the past to memory. In the same way that memory is necessary to guide individuals and protect them from repeating old mistakes, so history can inform and direct groups (*In Touch*, June 1973, p. 22). But Kepner admitted that reconstructing the past is difficult. Moreover, he pointed out:

To many homosexuals the sole value of historic study is the search for heroes. . . . Our job is not to glorify or apologize but to understand homosexuality and make it understood. This demands rigorous honesty. Along with Plato, Alexander, and Caesar we might have to exhume less savory skeletons from the closet. (*Mattachine Review*, September/October 1956, in Kepner, 1997)

As always, understanding remained his chief goal.

Splendid educator though he proved himself to be in so many ways, Kepner wasn't a scholar in the traditional sense, for he lacked the training, a fact he freely acknowledged. His *Becoming a People: A 4,000 Year Chronology of Gay and Lesbian History* (self-published, August 1995), while lively, fun to browse through, and full of fascinating facts, hardly was the work of a professional historian. But then, the readership he wanted to reach—everyday gays and lesbians unaware of homosexuality's significance since ancient times—is an audience that professional historians rarely manage to reach. With *Becoming a People*, Kepner sought to bridge that gap, a wholly admirable goal. There were times, however, when his eagerness to uncover history's hidden homosexual threads took him into shaky territory.

One of this chapter's authors, William Percy, for a time served as chair of the Gay and Lesbian Caucus of the American Historical Association. It was a position I didn't particularly want, but which Charley Shively persuaded me would become extinct if someone didn't take it. A 1990 symposium I convened in New York City, "Gay American Presidents?", promised to be controversial. But my straight friend and colleague, Michael Chesson, a "reputable" historian, agreed to chair it, which imparted some gravity to the proceedings. I read a paper that outed Presidents Buchanan and Garfield (the latter's great-nephew rose from the audience to confirm that Garfield was indeed homosexual), and Shively discussed grounds for believing that two far more hallowed presidents, Washington and Lincoln, also preferred sexual relations with men. Shively's presentation shocked some in the audience—which, of course, we expected. But we didn't expect a contribution from Jim Kepner that elicited general astonishment. To my own embarrassment, and that of Vern Bullough, a longtime Kepner mentor also in atten-

dance, Kepner rose from the front row to announce that he had unearthed proof of the homosexuality of no less than *sixteen* American presidents!

That anecdote notwithstanding, Kepner wasn't the kind of gay activist who clung to doctrinaire views. On the contrary, one of his greatest virtues was his tolerance, for this veteran of so much disagreement over the aims and methods of the homophile movement never wavered in his respect for diversity among homosexuals. We have noted Kepner's defense of queerdom's more flamboyant elements, and his policy, dating from 1953, of disclosing harassment of gay men to readers who demanded other fare. Forty years later, in his 1993 address to the American Historical Association, he was still insisting that failure to understand our legitimate differences regarding goals remains a major obstacle:

The biggest problems in our movement, next to the fact that we've tended to be more reactive than pro-active, is that most activists have been inflexibly single-minded. Whether they were conformist or revolutionary, they usually tried to channel the entire movement into their narrow aims: right to privacy, law reform, social revolution, sexual freedom, assimilation, education, litigation, dancing in the moonlight, focus on identity, or social service—all worthy concerns, but their struggles have jerked our movement from one narrow focus to another.

Kepner also reminded us that, by the same token, as Jews in Hitler's Germany discovered, assimilation and access to the powerful do not guarantee that our struggle is won (Kepner, 1993). The fight must go on, he ceaselessly declared, always with the hope that the process will deepen our appreciation of the communality we share.

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