

## Randolfe Wicker (1938- )

Jack Nichols

On July 11, 1984, I penned the following poem describing Randolfe Wicker and mailed it to him in celebration of our friendship, which had begun in 1963:

*Just Like a Woman*, a song of the Sixties,  
floats its tresses in Eighties airwaves,  
and I feel the haunting sweetness of a bold,  
adventuresome time.

Time of Underground Uplift, Mighty blasts of The Word.  
Time of Futurism, Time of Confidence.  
Time of Revolution, through flowers, herbs, and  
through Free Speech, Incorporated, founded by R.W.,  
gay, atheist, john.



I recall a vision. It's R.W.,  
"An arrogant card-carrying swish,"  
riding the subway.  
I follow him through corridors.  
His, a swift gait,  
His, a loud mouth.

An American voter, he, persevering,  
whining, enjoying a good cackle,  
holding tight to skepticism and his purse,  
generous to the undeserving,  
Odd revolutionary,  
praising Calvin Coolidge.

I see, spread from coast to coast, a myriad  
of buttons,  
speaking the unspeakable,  
In keeping with R.W.,  
giving body to anarchism's era.

Illuminating the 1960s, the historian John Loughery (1998, p. 267) noted that "more than anyone else interested in rights for homosexuals," Randolfe Wicker "intuited that the new decade called for a new outlook."

Randy's new outlook, hinted at in my poem, was a hearty mixture of economic conservatism and social radicalism, a paradoxical wedding of characteristics that has provided the quixotic Wicker a persona ever at odds with convention but that has kept, at the same time, an ever-respectful eye on what he calls "The Almighty Dollar." Underground Uplift Unlimited, his mid-1960s' creation, was a counterculture store on New York's hippie superhighway, directly across from The Electric Circus, the city's foremost psychedelic dance hall.

I'd first met Randy Wicker in 1963, in Frank Kameny's home. He'd already begun producing his line of startling slogan buttons and as I entered the room Kameny was arguing with him in a friendly way over his proposed color for a button that would read, "Equality for Homosexuals." Randy remained dead set on his provocative choice of lavender while Kameny insisted the buttons should be black and white.

We were all newly charged pioneers—inspecting each other carefully, tweaking each other hopefully. Kameny, Wicker, and I were encouraged, it was clear, by our meetings with any new activist peers who demonstrated intelligence and ability. Around this same time Randy's friendship with pioneering couple Barbara Gittings and Kay Tobin Lahusen blossomed. He'd thereafter become the only male ever photographed as a house ad in *The Ladder* reading America's first lesbian review.

To me and to a few other crusading admirers, Randy had achieved a kind of minifame. He was a gay media star, one who boldly used his legal name! As a daring and "brash" gay crusader, says John D'Emilio's (1983) history, Randy had rattled New York's gay movement establishment as early as 1958, and in 1962 he did so even more loquaciously when he became the first openly gay male to initiate, on New York City radio, the broadcast voices of eight everyday gay males—including himself—speaking truths about their own lives.

During the summer of 1958, as a university student, he'd volunteered his services to The New York Mattachine Society, Inc. At age twenty, he passed himself off as twenty-one so as not to flout Mattachine admissions rules. Loughery's (1998) history reports how Randy ran up against some of the more timid elements in New York's homophile movement environs: "On his own frolicsome initiative, he had signs printed and displayed throughout Greenwich Village to publicize a talk on 'The Homosexual and the Law'" (p. 250).

Neither the lawyer who would deliver this lecture nor the Mattachine's board members, long accustomed to closeted word-of-mouth approaches,

appreciated Wicker's "helpfulness," although nearly 300 persons showed up to hear their message. Many years later the then Mattachine president, Arthur Maule, affectionately recalled: "We didn't know what to make of Randy Wicker. . . . He was, let's say, a disturbing acquisition for the movement" (Loughery, 1998, p. 250).

Loughery's *Other Side of Silence* (1998) describes Wicker as "impressively energetic and frighteningly vocal" (p. 250), someone who—in 1958—struck a few Mattachine members as just what their organization needed, but to most of the others he was a troublemaker. Putting down permanent roots in Manhattan, Randy later pulled away from what he felt was the too-conservative New York Mattachine Society and founded what he jokingly called the "powerful Homosexual League of New York," a headline-grabbing phenomenon that, oddly, had only one member, namely himself.

Later, however, after he became an increasingly successful businessman, he made generous and regular contributions to sustain the late 1960s' leadership of the New York Mattachine Society, Inc. Randy argued persuasively, humorously, and passionately for his practical American visions, seeming to radiate the values of America's heartland, insisting on human rights and equal rights while promoting—wearing a suit and tie—equality for same-sex love and affection.

When he first spoke on Manhattan's WBAI-FM, a newspaper pundit denounced him as "an arrogant card-carrying swish," charging that by airing the views of openly gay males, radio station WBAI had scraped the very bottom of the proverbial barrel. The pundit's description of Randy was seized upon by his closest friends who tweaked him by pretending to give this description weight. But turn about is fair play, for such tweaking is, surely, Randy Wicker's own much-used talent.

Frank Kameny and Randy Wicker, Peter Ogren, Lige Clarke, Roz Regelson, Barbara Gittings, and Kay Tobin Lahusen, and I became close friends in those early-1960s' years, those prepicketing heydays. But when we later added picketing to our agendas late in 1964, we became bound together even more closely. Picketing remained anathema to movement conservatives who, when our lines emerged in public arenas, lumped us together as rowdy radicals.

Our small but militant grouping was also united by our unsparing opposition to the psychiatric establishment and to its "sickness theory" of homosexuality. Conservatives opposed militants such as Randy for daring to challenge the mental health establishment, whining: "Wait until more research has been done before we decide to take a stand." In public debates Randy Wicker ignored this advice, being adept at making the statures of shrinks shrink noticeably.

His militant East Coast elders hailed Randy's tough-as-nails, pirouetting debating style. He was an interesting person in talk show interviews too, being unexpectedly humorous and uncommonly direct. D'Emilio's *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (1983, p. 159) describes him drumming up media coverage of homosexuality as no one had ever done before. "Wicker used his sudden visibility to induce further media coverage," recalls the historian.

After the WBAI broadcast, being public relations director for his own Homosexual League, Randy was greeted with a welcome blitz of publicity in *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, the *New York Post*, the *Realist*, *Escapade*, and *Harper's* magazine. D'Emilio (1983) writes:

Wicker's achievements had a snowballing effect. Each one of the articles expanded his ability to present himself as a spokesperson for the movement and provided him with added leverage in gaining a hearing for the homophile cause. (p. 159)

Soon afterward, he became the counterculture's national slogan-button king. I was later hired as his company's sales manager. Randy worried at first about hiring me, recalling a Yiddish warning that "business and friendship don't mix," but, with me, he confessed, he'd decided to make an exception.

A lead story in the business section of *The Washington Post* had earlier celebrated the volume of Randy's slogan-button sales. What people feared to say in everyday conversation, Randy knew, could be transformed into pithy satirical comments. Such buttons allowed their wearers the luxury of feeling both hip and humorous. There were buttons that decried censorship, made antiwar jibes, and celebrated the joy of sexual freedom. One said: "F\*CK Censorship!" Another suggested "More Deviation, Less Population." There was a popular psychedelic seller too: "Let's Get Naked and Smoke."

Provided by him with a handsome Volkswagen van, I spread his colorful 1960s' slogan buttons—of which he'd been the nation's premier initiator and supplier—from Virginia to Rhode Island. It was 1967—the period labeled by the media as "The Summer of Love." Beatles' songs blared out of the front door at Underground Uplift Unlimited, especially those from the celebrated album *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

Wicker's two biggest button sellers that were firsts in his collection also championed two causes Randy pioneered. The first button, "Legalize Pot," involved poet Allen Ginsberg with whom Randy Wicker had been a founding member of LEMAR, the League for the Legalization of Marijuana. The poet often dropped into Underground Uplift Unlimited after enjoying a cool

beverage at Gem's Spa only a few doors away in the heart of hippiedom. Although he'd earlier been ticketed on the streets of New York for the "crime" of selling *The Marijuana Newsletter*, Randy still, in 1967, was optimistic that pot would be legalized in most states before the legalization of that other pleasure he championed, the love that dare not speak its name. Later, he backtracked, however, saying he no longer favored marijuana legalization but only its decriminalization.

Randy Wicker quickly became the foremost publisher of radical social ideas that were fueling the revolutionary causes of the 1960s. Although certain books performed the same task, it was his "hip" button business that became by far the most successful vehicle for making counterculture attitudes known to the public. In September 1964, history was made when the first march protesting antigay military policies, was cosponsored by heterosexuals, bisexuals, gays, and lesbians. This small group, marching at a draft board, the Whitehall Induction Center in Manhattan, included Jeff Poland and his Sexual Freedom League and Randy Wicker, Craig Rodwell, Nancy Garden, and Renee Cafiero, gay and lesbian activists.

How did Randolfe Wicker arrive, in the early 1960s, at a mind state wherein he felt comfortable identifying himself in public as a gay activist? His struggle to become himself had not always been an easy one; even when he'd distributed movement literature in New York's gay bars he got flack from apathetic conservatives who ridiculed the liberation struggle for which he stood.

He'd heard worried exclamations from his close relatives as well. His father, whom he'd admired, was particularly unhappy about Randy's activism. Randy's given name was Charles Gervin Hayden Jr. Charles Senior, an assistant comptroller at a company where he'd worked for three decades, had labored all his life to support Randy's mother and to assure that his son became the first member in the family to be college educated. But Charles Senior read Charles Junior's diary, one he'd kept during his first year of college, and discovered that he was gay. "Fortunately," recalls Randy today, "he went to a decent psychiatrist who told him that I would probably be gay all my life." When he confronted his son with his newfound knowledge, Charles Senior said that he just wanted his son to be the best-adjusted homosexual he could be because the concerned father wouldn't always be there to take care of him. Charles Senior had opted, however, not to share the diary discovery with Randy's mother "because" as he put it, "she could never accept it."

"In any case," recalls Randy, "in the summer of 1958, when we went out for lunch one day, I showed him materials put out by the Mattachine Society, the 'public educational research organization seeking to educate the

public about homosexuality.' I thought he took what I showed him pretty well."

"I don't think you're ever going to get very far with this," Charles Senior opined. "But just do me one favor, will you?"

"Of course," offered Randy.

"Just don't involve my good name," cautioned the older man.

"How could I refuse such a 'reasonable' small request from a father who, while not close emotionally, was someone who put the needs of his wife and his child ahead of his own?" wondered Randy. He would adopt a pseudonym, he decided.

Randy was still young and antisocial enough in those days, he says today, that he found the surname he chose, Wicker, to be "charming," partially because it so resembled the word "wicked." Then he saw a movie starring Zachary Scott. "I just remember that he was dressed in a tuxedo, got off a yacht on a pier, and was named Randolph. Ah, there was a first name with real class," Randy recalls. So, as early as 1959, Charles Gervin Hayden Jr. proudly assumed the name *Randolfe Wicker*. He was careful to make sure the spelling would be a unique one. "After all, if my name was ever in lights, who could forget a 'Randolfe' spelled unlike any other in the entire world."

His self-chosen name had become, to Randy, his "real name," expressing how he truly regarded himself. "I named myself," he boasts. A journalist, surprised to find that he was only twenty-one years old, confided to him: "Your name, 'Randolfe Wicker,' does make it seem like you are soon due to inherit a barony." When Randy's business career became lucrative, he changed his name legally to *Randolfe Hayden Wicker*, his middle name a low-key tribute to his hardworking father who had died at the age of forty-nine.

By day Randy was, as his postcollege employment resumé shows, a business machine salesman, a trainee in an advertising agency, and a mass-circulation magazine editor. But by night he transformed himself, in the manner of Gotham's Clark Kent, into the crusading *Randolfe Wicker*. For a time, in fact, he became known affectionately among his East Coast movement friends as "The Gay Crusader" following the publication of an article which had profiled him under that title. "Where is your cape?" they joked.

In 1969, a week after the Stonewall uprising, Randy was asked to speak at a major counterculture gathering being held at Manhattan's Electric Circus. I encouraged him to wear his rare American flag shirt, one which had been blacked out on television screens when Abbie Hoffman had borrowed it to wear on a talk show. The trousers Randy wore were striped bell-bottoms. As he mounted the podium I tweaked him: "Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No! It's Superfag!"

Moving for a time in 1969 to Brooklyn, Randy turned over his spacious Manhattan apartment to Lige Clarke and to me—one located in the very heart of the East Village and kitty-corner from the famous rock theater, the Fillmore East (later to become a gay locale, The Saint). Randy's tribute to his admired mentor, Boston's pioneering activist Prescott Townsend, appeared in 1969's premiere issue of *GAY*. In the second issue of America's first gay weekly, Randy wrote a feature article about the joys of being self-employed, earning him a suspect reputation among Marxist sympathizers in those times. He retaliated against his literary critics by deliberately labeling himself a moderate Republican, even though he'd plainly relished those mushrooming sales in 1968 for his anti-Richard Nixon campaign button advising voters to "Lick Dick."

In the early 1960s Randy had penned a regular column, "The Wicker Basket," appearing in New York Mattachine's monthly magazine. In *GAY*, to which he contributed between 1969 and 1973, the tradition and title of that up-to-date news-nuggetted column were continued. Randy videotaped zaps in this period that were conducted by the spirited post-Stonewall group, the Gay Activists Alliance. In late 1968 Randy had helped secure for me my first job as an editor at Countrywide, a Fifth Avenue leader in the magazine business, a firm where his own quirky talents had earlier been utilized. Countrywide produced at least fifty mass-circulation magazines that focused on television and movie star secrets, true confessions, the occult, true crime stories, and crossword puzzles. Randy, as an editor, had been the Countrywide's best at publishing what is now called cutting-edge material, skating without fear into outrageous, anarchistic realms.

In particular I recall his writing an article about counterfeit coinage titled "Those Terrible Phone Cheats." It was an exposé that provided readers—under the guise of moral outrage—with knowledge of a perfectly sized metal washer, one usable in all machines that required dimes. A pound of such washers could be purchased for only two dollars, he explained, at any hardware store.

In the early 1970s, as the slogan button business slowed, Randy moved away from Underground Uplift's avant-garde perch on St. Mark's Place and, in Greenwich Village, he opened an antique lighting shop. His long-time lover, the late David Combs, had, because of his own interest in antiques, encouraged him. The new business, Uplift, Inc., was destined to support Randy for the next quarter-century.

Around him gathered a bevy of friends and activists, many of whom, like Sylvia Rivera, the feisty founder of Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries, worked daily behind his store's counter. Sylvia's beloved transvestite friend, the late Marsha P. Johnson, lived for twelve years in Randy's Hoboken apartment, running errands and keeping house. Randy himself re-

mained the patriarchal head of a close-knit family of youthful friends whose salaries he paid and for whom he often provided lodging. He particularly liked playing the role of a father.

Thus, in early 1997 when Dolly, a Scottish sheep, was born, he telephoned me when the news broke and exclaimed, "I want to be cloned." That same evening I deliberately recorded his impromptu defense of human cloning, printing it the following morning in *Gay Today*. "Heterosexuality's monopoly on reproduction is now obsolete," he exulted. The following morning Randy registered the world's first pro-human cloning activist group, Clone Rights United Front. Once again he was interviewed on television and radio talk shows, defending cloning from its worried detractors. "Human cloning is going to happen whether people like the idea or not," he explained, "and I'm just trying to lay the groundwork so that babies conceived through cloning will be properly welcomed in the future." After initiating the first pro-human cloning demonstration on Sheridan Square he found himself within the year addressing a special cloning subcommittee called into existence by the U.S. Congress.

Randy once again found himself becoming—for a still conservative gay and lesbian movement—what Mattachine's Arthur Maule had thought of him forty-two years beforehand: "a disturbing acquisition." While child rearing, adoption, and artificial insemination had become acceptable topics in activist circles, cloning had not. The Gay Crusader simply shrugs, convinced he'll one day be properly regarded as far ahead of his times because of his pioneering cloning activism. I tweak him, as usual. "Oh yes, Poppy," I laugh. "You'll be remembered by the cloned babies of the future as the Big Daddy of all clones."

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## Arthur Cyrus Warner (1918- )

John Lauritsen



Photo by John Lauritsen

More than with other leaders of the homophobic movement, there is a disparity between the public fame of Arthur Cyrus Warner and the magnitude of his accomplishments. An important intellectual force in the movement for half a century, he has evaded the glare of publicity so successfully that his name is unknown to the great mass of gay people and indeed to many of the newer "gay leaders."

With an AB degree (*magna cum laude*) from Princeton, an LLB degree from Harvard Law School, and a PhD degree from Harvard University (American and British history), Arthur Warner was well equipped for the roles he would play: mentor, theoretician, and strategist. His most important

contributions have been in the legal sphere, where he and his colleagues intervened in state after state to overthrow sodomy, solicitation, and public lewdness laws.

Warner holds strong opinions and is not hesitant in expressing them. However, he does not mind hearing ideas that are different from his own. On the contrary, he is sometimes delighted; after the speaker has finished, he will pounce, like a cat on a negligent mouse. His speaking style on these occasions is inimitable. Enunciating with vigor, *tempo adagio*, he analyzes the offending argument. Factual errors are exposed, faulty arguments are carried to conclusions of manifest absurdity, and underlying philosophical premises are dissected. The experience is not easily forgotten, and some younger academics have emerged from it shaken and resentful. The present writer has received this treatment on more than one occasion and can say that—even if I still considered Warner to be wrong—I was grateful for the criticism, which at least constituted a safeguard against intellectual sloppiness.