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Paul Gordon Schalow

SAN FRANCISCO

It may seem surprising that for the first hundred years after its incorporation in 1850 as a city of the new State of California, San Francisco (population ca. 700,000) was not particularly noted as a homosexual center. Certainly, as in the case of other cosmopolitan port cities such as Boston and New Orleans, gayness was not absent. With the rise of the modern homosexual rights movement in the 1960s, however, San Francisco assumed a paramount status, highlighting the triumphs as well as the setbacks of homosexual affirmation in the United States

Early History. San Francisco began as a Spanish settlement in 1776 as Yerba Buena, passed into Mexican hands in 1821, and was conquered by the United States and renamed in 1846. The Gold Rush days of 1848-49 brought prosperity to the city—and a typically Western disproportion of numbers of men and women. The red-light district was the Barbary Coast, but thus far little information has come to light on specifically homosexual activities there (the catastrophic 1906 earthquake and fire destroyed many records from earlier days). The more genteel atmosphere of the century's later decades, with the presence of gay people in the arts, is subtly evoked in Charles Warren Stoddard's novel *For the Pleasure of His Company: An Affair of the Misty City* (1903).

After the turn of the century, travelers reported the availability of servicemen for sexual purposes (the Presidio was a major army center). Harry Hay,

who later was to start the American homosexual movement, enrolled in Stanford University in 1930. He recalls being helped to come out by his visits to friendly speak-easies in the city. Joe Finocchio's establishment featured drag entertainment; after the repeal of prohibition it moved to new quarters at 506 Broadway, becoming the city's premiere nightclub and gathering place for homosexuals. Such female entertainers as Rae Bourbon, Walter Hart, and Lucian Phelps played an important role as focal points of the gay identity at that time. Finocchio's location in the North Beach area, a Bohemian redoubt, was also important, and the neighborhood later became noted for its beat population.

World War II and After. During the war San Francisco was the chief port of embarkation for the Pacific Theatre of War. While awaiting their orders or returning from battle many American servicemen and -women from less sophisticated regions had their first taste of some sexual freedom. After being mustered out, a certain number of gay men and lesbians decided to settle in the Bay City, where they often became involved in a coupled situation, rather than return to their home towns.

Understandably, then, shortly after the American homosexual rights movement began in Los Angeles it spread to San Francisco. In January 1955, the *Mattachine Review* began to appear, patiently watched over by Hal Call, the guiding spirit of the San Francisco chapter of the Mattachine Society. At the end of the year, eight Bay Area women formed the Daughters of Bilitis, which became the national organization with its own monthly, *The Ladder*. Two of the founders, Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin, remained significant figures in San Francisco into the eighties.

Gay-baiting charges lodged by an unscrupulous candidate in the 1959 mayoral election introduced a phase of unprecedented public discussion of homosexuality. Public talk about a hitherto

taboo subject, including revelation of police payoffs, in turn engendered a backlash in which the police arrested large numbers of gay men and lesbians in sweeps in the bars. Gay organizations, including the Society for Individual Rights (SIR) and the Tavern Guild, found an unexpected source of support in sympathetic members of the clergy, who formed the Council on Religion and the Homosexual in 1964. The gay leaders and church people combined to monitor and eventually stem the homophobic backlash.

Maturity. Although San Francisco's gay community was well advanced in many respects by the late sixties, New York's *Stonewall Rebellion* of 1969, coming in the wake of the Civil Rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement, represented a national watershed which can also be used to divide historical periods in San Francisco. Attention in the mainstream media was reinforced by the brash input of new "underground" *Counterculture* publications such as the *Berkeley Barb*, as well by a series of newspapers written by and for homosexuals. In the late 1970s San Francisco alone boasted four gay newspapers. Under the direction of Winston Leyland the journal *Gay Sunshine* turned into a major gay press, issuing books of all kinds. In the scholarly realm Professor John De Cecco established a center for the study of sexuality at San Francisco State University, where he edited a research tool of great prestige, the *Journal of Homosexuality*.

Three neighborhoods emerged as gay zones. Polk Street gulch was the oldest and most traditional of these. Eventually it was surpassed by the Castro, with its stereotypical clone type. Finally, Folsom Street became the center for those committed to, or dabbling in, the leather and S/M subculture. Backrooms and glory hole establishments for impersonal sex proliferated, and the income generated by tourists soared. Yet old-line politicians continued to deplore San Francisco's reputation as "Sodom by the Bay."

For their part gay men and lesbians had not neglected politics, but this realm was galvanized and transformed by the energies of an outsider from New York, Harvey Milk [1930–1978], who owned a shop on Castro Street. To the dismay of the city's established gay leaders, Milk forged an improbable but solid alliance with the city's blue-collar unions. His methods were often amateurish, sometimes even unethical, but they worked, and he was elected Supervisor on his third try in 1977.

Triumph turned to tragedy when Milk was murdered a year later, together with Mayor George Moscone, by a resentful former colleague and police officer, Dan White. When a jury acquitted White of the most serious charges after an inept prosecution, widespread riots erupted in the vicinity of City Hall, and some gay activists were seen setting fire to police cars. Milk was replaced by Harry Britt, another gay officeholder, and the lesson dawned on the city's straight establishment that gay power had come to stay.

After 1981 the AIDS crisis hit San Francisco particularly hard, but new organizations and coalitions arose to cope with the medical emergency. A prolonged controversy led to the closing of San Francisco's gay bathhouses. Even without these events, some dimming of the exuberance and sheer craziness of the 1970s was probably inevitable. Despite bickering, however, San Francisco's gay infrastructure held firm and seemed destined to remain a major part of the city's life.

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Ward Houser

SANTAYANA, GEORGE (1863–1952)

American poet and philosopher. Born in Madrid, he came to the United States at the age of nine. He graduated from Harvard College *summa cum laude*