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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

less glorious. Clinging imperiously to power, Rhee and Banda wore out their welcome through their rigidity and arrogance.

Although it came to occupy a four-acre estate in west-central Los Angeles, the ONE, Inc., of Dorr Legg was never an independent country. Still, Dorr maintained his position at the helm through policies not unlike those of Rhee and Banda. Rarely venturing beyond his office, where he received visitors with an almost imperial assurance, Legg was without question a "control freak." As a leader he showed exemplary courage and dedication; he was incorruptible and unswerving, but ultimately he failed to change with the times.

A serious intellectual, Legg crafted an original strategy of homophile activism and scholarship. Repeatedly he found himself obliged to defend his approach, which he did with steadiness and application. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, though, steadfastness modulated into rigidity. ONE seemed to many to be an anachronism in the post-Stonewall world despite continuing accomplishments.

At ONE, Inc., Dorr Legg encountered not one but two challenges that tested his mettle. The first began in 1965 when a group of dissidents attempted to take over the organization. The second crisis stretches through the 1980s until 1993, as the adventurism of a former benefactor threatened to deprive ONE of its headquarters.

A founder of what was to become the Log Cabin Club, the gay Republican group, Dorr Legg sometimes seemed intent on polishing his retro image. Yet in some respects he was ahead of his time, for he anticipated the rise in the 1990s of the nonleft gays such as Bruce Bawer and Andrew Sullivan.

At the core of Legg's Republicanism was a libertarian distrust of government. This distrust led him to throw two FBI agents out of the ONE office when they sought to intimidate him. He also reversed the efforts of the United States Post Office to keep ONE from the mails. Unfortunately, however, toward the end of his life, his antigovernment instincts led him to refuse to fill out forms needed to secure the continuation of the status of ONE Institute. In following this principle of resistance, and in other ways, he sometimes went too far.

Dorr Legg also ranks as a pioneer of interracial understanding. The Knights of the Clocks, his first organization, was biracial, black and white. As a rule his partners were either African American or Asian. He established his credentials in this realm long before it became fashionable, and long before militancy and infighting took their toll.

Fulfilling his duties at ONE, Inc., Dorr demonstrated fidelity for forty years, six days a week. Running ONE was like riding a bicycle; you had to keep going so as not to fall off. At the price of a certain rigidity, he resisted

volatility in the movement, a problem which has, if anything, increased in recent years.

The future homophile leader came into the world as William Lambert Dorr Legg in Ann Arbor, Michigan, on December 15, 1904, the second son of Frances C. Dorr and Frank E. Legg. His father had settled in the university town as a manufacturer of pianos. From the lively family circle the boy learned to take pride in his forebears, for his family roots in North America stretched back to pre-Revolutionary times. One of Dorr's ancestors was reputedly involved in Shays' Rebellion (1786-1787), an antigovernment rising in western Massachusetts.

In Ann Arbor the family circle kept up with national issues, including the tragedies of lynching in the South. From these discussions Dorr developed a concern with discrimination against Americans of color. His commitment gradually converged with his sexual interests which included, although were not limited to, African Americans.

When he was ten or eleven his father began to take him on his rounds to collect rents from the small properties he owned. This experience prepared him for his later role as financial monitor of ONE, which he proudly asserted had never been accused of fiscal irregularity—a common problem with many gay and lesbian organizations.

In those years Michigan glowed in a general sense of prosperity and accomplishment. The state's farmers, generally of northwestern European stock, struggled with the difficult climate to produce bumper crops. Alongside agriculture, industry flourished, famously in the manufacture of automobiles, with Henry Ford as its standard bearer. Michiganders took pride in their universities, arguably the finest of the state-supported institutions in the Midwest. At the age of sixteen Dorr enrolled in the University of Michigan where he took a double major in landscape architecture and music. The music studies involved memorization of intricate compositions of Johann Sebastian Bach. To this training Dorr attributed his remarkable power of memory, which proved crucial in reconstructing the membership lists of ONE, Inc., after a dissident group made off with the organization's records in 1965.

Like many other young people in quest for self-knowledge, he recalled cautiously straying from the beaten path—in his case it was reading in the library. Before it was translated into English he read Marcel Proust's novel *Remembrance of Things Past* in the original French so as to learn something of homosexual life in Europe.

Taking several years off to participate in the real estate boom in Florida as a landscaper, Dorr was graduated from the University of Michigan in 1928. He settled at once in New York City, where he worked for an architectural firm. He found the manners of the "queens" circles to be fussy and preten-

tious: in his mind they were still trying to keep alive the manners of Oscar Wilde's set without adjusting to the times. He did take the opportunity to read Radclyffe Hall's then notorious lesbian novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, shortly after its American publication, and to frequent the Broadway theater, where productions then could be quite daring. There were speakeasies and, above all, drag balls in Harlem. It was at such places and events that Dorr began to explore the link between gay social life and the almost equally taboo world of black-white friendships.

In 1935 he was appointed an assistant professor of landscape architecture at the State University of Oregon in Eugene. The following seven years saw a quiet but satisfying round of teaching and small social gatherings. During World War II, though, the college shrank as the draft siphoned off many if not most of its students, and the program he was in more or less collapsed.

Rather than hanging on in Oregon, he chose to return to Michigan, settling for a time in Detroit to be close to his aging parents. There he developed a relationship with a young black man and, to his dismay, he found that the pair, even though they appeared reasonably "straight," could not walk down the street together without eliciting hostile questioning by the police, who regarded any kind of black-and-white friendships as an anomaly, suspecting such relationships as having criminal overtones. Perhaps the fact that Dorr's lover, Marvin E., was strikingly handsome further piqued the officers' attention.

Such reactions precipitated Dorr's resolve to find another place to live. But where? After extensive research, he concluded that Southern California would be best, not only for the racial aspect and its climate, but he also believed that the postwar boom would fuel the economy and jobs in his field would be plentiful. Accordingly, he and Marvin set out for Los Angeles by car in 1948 and, following instructions of friends who had been there before, they drove straight down Wilshire Boulevard to the gay beach at Santa Monica which was thronged with happy bathers. Repeatedly over the years Dorr recalled his astonished pleasure at the joyfulness and camaraderie of the scene. For him this was indeed "the place."

While conditions in black-white relationships and socialization in Los Angeles surpassed those in most parts of the United States, they were still far from ideal. To be sure, a bar, the Piccadilly on Pico Boulevard near Western Avenue, fostered contacts between black and white gay men. Other bars flourished at the beach itself, where the special atmosphere of the Tropical Village (or "TV" as insiders called it) still enjoys a fond place in recollections of many older gays. There was always a diverse crowd gathered to be entertained by jazz pianists, drag entertainers, and comedians. Dorr and Marvin also visited predominantly black nightclubs on Central Avenue in East Los Angeles, the Los Angeles counterpart to Harlem.

As Dorr began to put down roots in his new city, he developed a number of gay black friends. One of them, a young accountant named Merton Bird, suggested that they form a social organization. Meeting for the first time, apparently in early 1950, they took the name Knights of the Clocks, attracting blacks and whites. Attendance, however, rarely surpassed ten members and the aims of the group were not political.

Later in the same year Dorr learned of a gay group that was decidedly political, the Mattachine Society, which had been founded by Harry Hay and four colleagues. In keeping with the Masonic principle of organization favored by the group, Dorr soon garnered an invitation to join the Fifth Order. Two years later, on October 15, 1952, a group of mostly Mattachine members attended a private party where the participants decided to start a monthly magazine, *ONE*. Although he did not realize it then, this event was to determine the rest of his life. In April 1953 he quit his job to become a full-time business manager of the newly organized *ONE, Inc.*, at a salary, when it was paid, of twenty-five dollars a month.

A number of talented people joined in editing the magazine including Eve Ellore, Jim Kepner, Ann Carl Reid, Sten Russell (Stella Rush), Dale Jennings, and Don Slater. They worked in offices on the third floor of a rickety old building on Hill Street in the decaying downtown area of Los Angeles. The door always stood open for people to drop in and, after overcoming their initial trepidation, many did.

ONE Magazine had to surmount an early challenge when the postmaster of Los Angeles declared it unmailable. After considerable legal maneuvering, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *ONE's* favor in 1958. The case ranks as the first gay success before that august body, and the opening wedge for the distribution of much more sexually explicit material.

Similar to many contributors to the magazine, Dorr sometimes published work under pseudonyms, giving the impression that more writers participated than was actually the case. Dorr's monikers included Hollister Barnes, Richard Congar, Marvin Cutler, W. G. Hamilton, William Lambert (an abbreviation of his full name), Wendy Lane, Valentine Richardson, and Sidney Rothman. Under the name of Marvin Cutler, Legg edited a landmark survey of the international gay movement titled *Homosexuals Today: A Handbook of Organizations and Publications* (1956). When the American gay movement began in Los Angeles in 1950 its founders knew little of their European counterparts, but six years later *Homosexuals Today* demonstrated that *ONE* was up to speed. In due course the group organized a series of European and Asian trips for gays and lesbians, allowing direct contact with movement figures and groups in other countries.

ONE, Inc., was also conceived by Dorr as an educational institution, and he and others began offering classes on homosexuality. These were given

wide publicity but the overall response was disappointing and few students actually came. Legg preferred the term "homophile studies" and emphasized an interdisciplinary methodology. He believed that the approach prevailing at universities, in which homosexuality was often included as part of a course, only fragmented the subject by dividing it along conventional departmental lines. Moreover, universities, he believed, could not be relied upon to study homosexual behavior and culture both fairly and comprehensively and institutions such as ONE, maintained by homosexuals themselves, were essential.

Finances remained a chronic, often urgent problem, and appeals were made for private donors. Most of the donations were small in scale. In the summer of 1964, however, Dorr received an urgent request that ONE, Inc., send a representative to Louisiana to discuss funding. Finding that no one else would go, Dorr borrowed a suit and flew to New Orleans at the donor's expense. At the airport he was met by a young man who introduced himself as Reed Erickson, who took him to his home near Baton Rouge and told him that he must first meet Henry before any real discussion could ensue. Assuming that Henry was Erickson's lover, Dorr blanched when he found that instead Henry was a leopard. After wrestling for a bit with his animal companion, Erickson invited Dorr to touch the beast's head, which he did with some trepidation. Later, after some informal conversation with his host, Dorr was told that ONE would get some money. Erickson said he made a fortune in the oil business and had set up the Reed Erickson Educational Foundation to give out money to gay and other causes. This foundation became the main financial support of ONE.

Only in the course of time did Dorr learn that Reed Erickson had been formerly Rita Alma Erickson and had been one of the first to undergo surgery to change from female to male. Later Erickson moved to Mexico and finally to Ojai, north of Los Angeles, from which post he sought to exercise a more direct influence over the organization he had benefited.

For several years during the early 1960s ONE, after moving to new and commodious headquarters on Venice Boulevard, had a fairly placid existence, only disturbed from time to time by the need to oppose police raids and other hostile acts from the straight world. Trouble, however, was brewing from within. Some members of the staff had come to resent what they regarded as Dorr's authoritarian style and feared that he might use the ONE elections scheduled for 1965 to extend his power over the organization. Although most members were prepared to tolerate Dorr's attitude because of his unflinching dedication to the cause, Don Slater, one of the most active editors, was not. On Easter Sunday of 1965 the dissidents, headed by Slater, who had a key to the premises, hired a truck and removed every file and the entire library from the Venice Boulevard headquarters to a new location in

Hollywood. When Dorr appeared for work on Monday morning, he found almost everything gone, including the full membership list with its addresses. Dorr turned his ability to memorize great chunks of information to his advantage and reconstructed many of the names and addresses, informing members through mail and phone calls that a palace revolution had taken place, and that ONE was still in business. The ensuing legal proceedings were protracted. Dorr proved tenacious and unyielding, so much so that his tactics alienated the judge who might have been expected to rule in his favor. Instead, the judge ordered that the material be divided. Dorr's group could keep the name ONE, while the dissidents who had been publishing ONE during the trial changed their publication's name to *Tangents*, and adopted the official name of the Homosexual Information Center. Los Angeles now had two competing groups and magazines, and animosities only gradually died down. In a petty act of spite, one of the things not returned to ONE was Dorr's draft of his master's thesis on the sociology of homosexuality, and he never did get his degree.

To return to the comparison with leaders of emerging countries, Dorr found that although he had turned back the invaders, his domain was not what it had been. It proved impossible to keep publishing *ONE Magazine*, which sputtered out and disappeared in 1972, along with its scholarly twin, *ONE Institute Quarterly of Homophile Studies*. One of the landmark studies the group did complete and publish in 1976 was a project several years in the works, the two-volume *Annotated Bibliography of Homosexuality*. The 13,000 items included constituted a landmark in the gathering of information on the subject.

Drawing conclusions from his experiences, Dorr resolved never again to be dislodged from control of ONE. Each year he obtained from the board of directors a signed statement of wages due him—which he declined to collect. As these IOUs piled up, his position became more and more secure, as no one could raise the money to redeem them. His defense might have been that having been labeled an autocrat, he might as well behave as one. But the tactic exposed an enduring character trait, a kind of *libido dominandi*, whereby he sought to control his surroundings, not always with the proper sensitivity to changing circumstances. Gradually, the membership became older and more rigid, mirroring the leader himself.

For many years ONE functioned out of its second floor office in an increasingly shabby building on Venice Boulevard in central Los Angeles. The depressed neighborhood undoubtedly discouraged some visitors, but ONE was open during business hours for consultation with staff and visitors to make use of the large but uneven Blanche M. Baker Memorial Library. This availability also characterized the rival *Tangents* group, which for some years maintained an office on Cahuenga Boulevard in Hollywood, and

later on Hollywood Boulevard itself. In the latter place, however, the office hours were more irregular.

Some events continued to take place: regularly monthly meetings with lectures, occasional conferences, and classes. These last, some observers felt, had a certain Potemkin village aspect. The classes tended to attract only two or three persons, but figures given out to the public suggested considerably more. In public relations, Dorr sought to put the best face on things, hoping that better times would eventually come. In the 1970s and 1980s such an advance seemed unlikely, as Dorr and his associates did little to assimilate themselves to the headier currents of gay liberation. In his speech and writing Dorr continued to prefer the term "homophile" rather than "homosexual" or "gay." It goes without saying that he shunned the 1990s fashion for "queer studies."

It was the continuing connection with Reed Erickson, the wealthy transsexual philanthropist, that opened the possibility of breaking the log jam. Concerned that the Venice Boulevard premises were increasingly shabby and inadequate and in a neighborhood perceived as unsafe, Erickson encouraged Dorr to seek a better location. The result was the purchase of a turn-of-the-twentieth-century estate in Los Angeles on Country Club Drive. Erickson bought the property outright with bags of South African gold coins and announced his attention to give it to ONE. The staff moved the library in, made plans for a museum, and considered creating quarters for resident research scholars. Attendance at the monthly lectures increased. Even before the move, Legg and his associates had obtained authorization from the state of California to award the PhD degree, and Dorr himself had assumed the post of Dean of the ONE Graduate School. Several dissertations were written and degrees granted, but again disaster struck.

A falling out with Reed Erickson, in part because of Dorr's intransigence about sharing part of the property with transsexuals, caused the benefactor to withdraw his de facto donation of the Country Club Drive property. Because there was no written agreement, legal proceedings became unavoidable. It was in retrospect a vicious battle; at one point Dorr was locked in at the premises for a week because Erickson had the gates welded shut. In 1993 the courts ruled that the estate be divided. ONE received two of the four acres and the smaller of the two houses. It was something of a Pyrrhic victory, for of necessity the school and research facilities had been neglected during the years of legal wrangling.

But the neglect was scarcely total. During those hectic years, Dorr Legg and his associates—David G. Cameron, Walter L. Williams, and Donald C. Paul—found time to compile and publish a major volume, *Homophile Studies in Theory and Practice*, which Dorr fortunately lived to see published. This book is both a detailed record of the academic achievement of

ONE Institute of Homophiles Studies and a statement of the underlying philosophy. It is one of the rare comprehensive documents of a gay and lesbian organization that has been produced by its creators and sustainers themselves.

Dorr died peacefully in his sleep in his Los Angeles home on July 26, 1994. He was survived by his partner, Japanese-American John Nojima, who had faithfully supported him financially and morally for thirty years. Appropriately, the Los Angeles City Council observed a moment of silence.

Shortly after Dorr's death ONE merged with the International Archives that had long been valiantly conducted by Jim Kepner, who had originally deposited much of his material with ONE and later withdrawn it after a falling out with Legg. The new group, termed ONE/IGLA for short, enjoys the support of the University of Southern California.

As Dorr might have predicted, the experiences of the enlarged group have been neither easy nor smooth. But with dedicated workers the enterprise is under way, continuing and expanding Dorr's legacy. His motto, and that of his beloved ONE, would fittingly be Latin, *Per ardua ad astra*—through difficulties to the stars.

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