

Mattachine Society

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The May 1959 issue of the <i>Mattachine Review</i> , an American homophile magazine	
Formation	1950
Purpose	Civil and political rights for homosexual men
Headquarters	Los Angeles, California
Official language	English
Key people	Harry Hay

The **Mattachine Society**, founded in 1950, was one of the earliest homophile/homosexual organizations in the United States, probably second only to Chicago's Society for Human Rights (1924). Harry Hay and a group of Los Angeles male friends formed the group to protect and improve the rights of homosexuals. Because of concerns for secrecy and the founders' leftist ideology, they adopted the cell organization being used by the Communist Party of the United States. In the anti-Communist atmosphere of the 1950s, the Society's growing membership replaced the group's early Communist model with a more traditional ameliorative civil-rights leadership style and agenda. Then, as branches formed in other cities, the Society splintered in regional groups by 1961.

Founding

Harry Hay conceived of the idea of a homosexual activist group in 1948. After signing a petition for Progressive Party presidential candidate Henry A. Wallace, Hay spoke with other gay men at a party about forming a gay support organization for him called "Bachelors for Wallace". Encouraged by the response he received, Hay wrote the organizing principles that night, a document he referred to as "The Call".^[1] However, the men who had been interested at the party were less than enthusiastic the following morning.^[1] Over the next two years, Hay refined his idea, finally conceiving of an "international...fraternal order" to serve as "a service and welfare organization devoted to the protection and improvement of Society's Androgynous Minority".^[2] He planned to call this organization "Bachelors Anonymous" and envisioned it serving a similar function and purpose as Alcoholics Anonymous.^[3] Hay met Rudi Gernreich in July 1950. The two became lovers,^[4] and Hay showed Gernreich The Call. Gernreich, declaring the document "the most dangerous thing [he had] ever read", became an enthusiastic financial supporter of the venture, although he did not lend his name to it^[5] (going instead by the initial "R"^[6]). Finally on November 11, 1950, Hay, along with Gernreich and friends Dale Jennings and lovers Bob Hull and Chuck Rowland, held the first meeting of the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles, under the name **Society of Fools**.^[7] James Gruber and Konrad Stevens joined the Society in April 1951 and they are generally considered to be original members. Also that month the group changed its name to *Mattachine Society*, a name suggested by Gruber and chosen by Hay, after Medieval French secret societies of masked men who, through their anonymity, were empowered to criticize ruling monarchs with impunity.

As Hay became more involved in his Mattachine work, he correspondingly became more concerned that his homosexuality would negatively affect the Communist Party, which did not allow gays to be members. Hay himself approached Party leaders and recommended his own expulsion. The Party refused to expel Hay as a homosexual, instead expelling him under the more convenient ruse of "security risk", while ostentatiously announcing him to be a "Lifelong Friend of the People".

Mattachine was originally organized in similar structure to the Communist Party, with cells, oaths of secrecy and five different levels of membership, each of which required greater levels of involvement and commitment. As the

organization grew, the levels were expected to subdivide into new cells, creating both the potential for horizontal and vertical growth.^[8] The founding members constituted the so-called "Fifth Order" and from the outset remained anonymous. Mattachine's membership grew slowly at first but received a major boost in February 1952 when founder Jennings was arrested in a Los Angeles park and charged with lewd behavior. Often, men in Jennings' situation would simply plead guilty to the charge and hope to quietly rebuild their lives. Jennings and the rest of the Fifth Order saw the charges as a means to address the issue of police entrapment of homosexual men. The group began publicizing the case (under the name "Citizens Committee to Outlaw Entrapment") and the publicity it generated brought in financial support and volunteers. Jennings admitted during his trial to being a homosexual but insisted he was not guilty of the specific charge. The jury deadlocked and Mattachine declared victory.^[9]

Naming

The Mattachine Society was named by Harry Hay at the suggestion of James Gruber, inspired by a French medieval and renaissance masque group he had studied while preparing a course on the history of popular music for a workers' education project. In a 1976 interview with Jonathan Ned Katz, Hay was asked the origin of the name Mattachine. He mentioned the medieval-Renaissance French *Sociétés Joyeuses*:

One masque group was known as the "Société Mattachine." These societies, lifelong secret fraternities of unmarried townsmen who never performed in public unmasked, were dedicated to going out into the countryside and conducting dances and rituals during the Feast of Fools, at the Vernal Equinox. Sometimes these dance rituals, or masques, were peasant protests against oppression—with the maskers, in the people's name, receiving the brunt of a given lord's vicious retaliation. So we took the name Mattachine because we felt that we 1950s Gays were also a masked people, unknown and anonymous, who might become engaged in morale building and helping ourselves and others, through struggle, to move toward total redress and change.

—Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History*. Crowell Publishers, 1974.^[10]

This French group was named in turn after Mattaccino (or the Anglicized Mattachino), a character in Italian theater. Mattaccino was a kind of court jester, who would speak the truth to the king when nobody else would. The "mattachin" (from Arabic *mutawajjihin*—"mask-wearers") were originally Moorish (Hispano-Arab) sword-dancers who wore elaborate, colorful costumes and masks.^[11]

The Mattachine Society used so-called harlequin diamonds as their emblem. The design consisted of four diamonds arranged in a pattern to form a larger diamond.

Affiliations

Most of the Mattachine founders were affiliated with Communism. As the Red Scare progressed, the association with communism concerned some members as well as supporters and Hay, a dedicated member of the Communist Party for 15 years, stepped down as the society's leader. Others were similarly ousted, and the leadership structure became influenced less by Communism, more by a moderate ideology similar to that espoused by the liberal reformist civil rights organizations that existed for African Americans. Although Hay claimed "never to have even heard" of the earlier gay liberation struggle in Germany—by the people around Adolf Brand, Magnus Hirschfeld and Leontine Sagan—he is known to have talked about it with German émigrés in America, including Rudi Gernreich.

The Mattachine Society existed as a single national organization headquartered first in Los Angeles and then, beginning around 1956, in San Francisco. Outside of Los Angeles and San Francisco, chapters were established in New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago, and other locales. Due to internal disagreements, the national organization disbanded in 1961. The San Francisco national chapter retained the name "Mattachine Society", while the New York chapter became "Mattachine Society of New York, Inc." Other independent groups using the name Mattachine were formed in Washington, D.C. (Mattachine Society of Washington, 1961), and in Chicago (Mattachine Midwest, 1965). In 1963 Congressman John Dowdy introduced a bill which resulted in congressional hearings to revoke the

license for solicitation of funds of the Mattachine Society of Washington; the license was not revoked.

A largely amicable split within the national Society in 1952 resulted in a new organization called ONE, Inc. ONE admitted women and, together with Mattachine, provided vital help to the Daughters of Bilitis in the launching of that group's magazine, *The Ladder*, in 1956. The Daughters of Bilitis was the counterpart lesbian organization to the Mattachine Society, and the two organizations worked together on some campaigns, although their approaches to visibility in the mass media differed considerably. Under a different leadership, however, the Daughters of Bilitis came under attack in the early 1970s for "siding" with Mattachine groups rather than with the new separatist feminist organizations. Also in the 1960s, the Mattachine Society of New York was associated with other groups (including the Mattachine Society of Washington) in ECHO (East Coast Homophile Organizations) and, from 1966 (along with Mattachine Midwest), in NACHO (North American Conference of Homophile Organizations).

Goals

The primary goals of the society were to

1. Unify homosexuals isolated from their own kind;
2. Educate homosexuals and heterosexuals toward an ethical homosexual culture paralleling the cultures of the Negro, Mexican and Jewish peoples;
3. Lead the more socially conscious homosexual to provide leadership to the whole mass of social variants; and
4. Assist gays who are victimized daily as a result of oppression.

Decline

Following the Jennings trial, the group expanded rapidly, with founders estimating membership in California by May 1953 at over 2,000 with as many as 100 people joining a typical discussion group. Membership diversified, with more women and people from a broader political spectrum becoming involved. With that growth came concern about the radical left slant of the organization. In particular, Hal Call and others out of San Francisco along with Ken Burns from Los Angeles wanted Mattachine to amend its constitution to clarify its opposition to so-called "subversive elements" and to affirm that members were loyal to the United States and its laws (which declared homosexuality illegal). In an effort to preserve their vision of the organization, the Fifth Order members revealed their identities and resigned their leadership positions at Mattachine's May 1953 convention. With the founders gone, Call, Burns and other like-minded individuals stepped into the leadership void,^[12] and Mattachine officially adopted non-confrontation as an organizational policy. Some historians argue that these changes reduced the effectiveness of this newly organized Mattachine and led to a precipitous drop in membership and participation.^[13] Other historians contend that the Mattachine Society between 1953 and 1966 was enormously effective as it published a magazine, developed relationships with allies in the fight for homosexual equality, and influenced public opinion on the topic too.^[14]

During the 1960s, the various unaffiliated Mattachine Societies, especially the Mattachine Society in San Francisco and the Mattachine Society of New York, were among the foremost gay rights groups in the United States, but beginning in the middle 1960s and, especially, following the Stonewall riots of 1969, they began increasingly to be seen as too traditional, and not willing enough to be confrontational. Like the divide that occurred within the black civil rights movement, the late 1960s and the 1970s brought a new generation of activists, many of whom felt that the gay rights movement needed to endorse a larger and more radical agenda to address other forms of oppression, the Vietnam War, and the sexual revolution. Several unaffiliated entities that went under the name Mattachine eventually lost support or fell prey to internal division.

Depictions in fiction

The 1995 film *Stonewall* includes members of the New York City chapter of Mattachine among its characters. Mattachine members are seen leafleting, attending meetings and participating in the Annual Reminder picket in Philadelphia.

In 2009 The Mattachine Society and its founders became the subjects of the play *The Temperamentals* by Jon Maran. After workshop performances in 2009, the play opened Off-Broadway at New World Stages in early 2010. *The Temperamentals* received a Drama Desk Award for Best Ensemble Cast. Michael Urie, who originated the role of Rudi Gernreich, received a Lucille Lortel Award for Outstanding Lead Actor.

The Playboy Club, a 2011 television series on NBC, includes a lesbian Playboy Bunny in a lavender marriage with a gay man. The two are members of the Chicago Mattachine chapter.

Notes

- [1] Hay/Roscoe, p. 61
- [2] Hay, quoted in Hay/Roscoe, p. 63
- [3] Hay, quoted in Hay/Roscoe, p. 65
- [4] Hay and Gernreich were together until 1952, when Gernreich ended the relationship (Hay/Roscoe, pp. 359).
- [5] Ehrenstein, p. 47
- [6] D'Emilio, p. 62
- [7] Hogan, et al., pp. 382–3
- [8] D'Emilio, p. 64
- [9] D'Emilio, pp. 69–70
- [10] Katz, Jonathan. *Gay American History*. Crowell Publishers; 1974.
- [11] Johansson, p. 92.
- [12] Loughery, pp. 228–29
- [13] Hogan, et al., p. 383
- [14] Meeker, pp. 37–76

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Further reading

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External links

- Mattachine Society, Encyclopedia of Homosexuality (<http://williamapercy.com/wiki/images/Mattachine.pdf>)
 - The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society (<http://www.glbthistory.org>)
 - Mattachine Society, Shreveport, Louisiana (<http://www.xanga.com/themattachinesociety>)
 - FBI file on the Mattachine Society (<http://vault.fbi.gov/mattachine-society>)
 - Documents from the Mattachine Society's archives (<http://www.rainbowhistory.org/msw.htm>)
 - Mattachine-related correspondence of Franklin Kameny (<http://www.kamenypapers.org/correspondence.htm>)
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