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point of view

Pre-Stonewall Activism in Chicago

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Bulldykes, Drag Queens, and Gangsters: Pre-Stonewall Activism in the City of Big Shouldersby [Victoria Shannon](#)

In 1970, one year after the Stonewall Riots in New York City, three U.S. cities commemorated Stonewall with marches: New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Chicago newspapers had not even covered Stonewall, but nevertheless activists recognized the significance of the New York rebellion and wanted to express solidarity with the defiance of their brothers and sisters.

Indeed, Stonewall inspired Chicago gay men and lesbians to organize such groups as the Gay Liberation Front at the University of Chicago. Chicago Gay Liberation, along with Mattachine Midwest and Women's Caucus, organized the first Chicago Gay Pride in June 1970. The small parade, in which about 150 people participated, eventually morphed into one of the largest celebrations of gay pride in the United States.

Until recently, Chicago's role in the gay rights movement has not been as discussed or documented nearly as thoroughly as that of New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, cities which, for various reasons, have been accorded a much more prominent place in the history of glbtq activism than Chicago.

It may be that Chicago's location in the conservative Midwest is one of the reasons its activist history has not generated as much interest as the glbtq movements in the coastal cities. It is also possible that Chicago's movement has been overshadowed because the public manifestations of glbtq life in the city were long connected to organized crime. Or perhaps it has been neglected because in Chicago political activism of all kinds has traditionally been controlled, or at least circumscribed, by the city's dominant political machine.

Nevertheless, Chicago has a rich history of progressive social movements, including the movement for equal rights for glbtq people. After all, the first known gay rights group in the United States, the short-lived Society for Human Rights, was founded in Chicago in 1924.

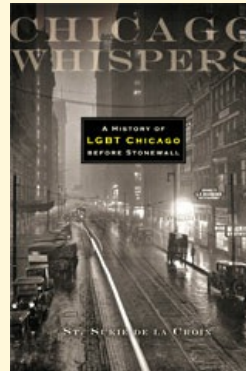
In his fascinating new book, *Chicago Whispers: A History of LGBT Chicago before Stonewall*, St. Sukie de la Croix, a British-born journalist, has helped redress the neglect of Chicago's LGBT history, including its many contributions to the gay rights movement.

De la Croix's most important points are that Chicago had an identifiable gay culture as early as 1899 and that that culture helped nurture the plucky glbtq community that emerged in the years before Stonewall. This continuity is part of Chicago's significance for the history of the American gay rights movement.

De la Croix also emphasizes the role of those gay and lesbian people who, in spite of vehement opposition from politicians and police, staked their claim to be who they were and to claim certain areas of Chicago as their own. In these areas, they opened clubs and frequented cruising areas. Prominent among these pioneers were sexual outlaws of various stripes, including drag queens and "mannish" women.

The history of pre-Stonewall glbtq Chicago is by no means exclusively the story of bulldykes, drag queens, and gangsters, but they feature prominently in it.

At Columbia College Chicago, I teach a course I created called "Gay & Lesbian Studies." In preparation for that course, I have read well-documented histories of pre-Stonewall New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Until 2008, however, it was difficult to find histories



Chicago Whispers: A History of LGBT Chicago before Stonewall (2012) by Sukie de la Croix.

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of Chicago's pre-Stonewall years, even though the Chicago movement has self-consciously made significant efforts to preserve its history and the history of glbtq people generally, as witnessed by the Legacy Walk—a veritable outdoor museum located on one-half mile of North Halsted Street in Lakeview—which will be dedicated on October 11, 2012.

In 1981, Gregory Sprague, a Loyola University researcher, founded the Midwest Gay and Lesbian Archive and Library. The archive was later renamed the Gerber/Hart Library to honor gay and lesbian pioneers Henry Gerber and Pearl M. Hart. The Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame and the Leather Archives and Museum were both founded in 1991.

Although these organizations play crucial roles in documenting Chicago's pre-Stonewall history, de la Croix's book fulfills the need for a comprehensive and accessible source that explores all areas of Chicago's remarkably diverse activist history.

De la Croix's exploration of Chicago's gay and lesbian history begins with a short chapter about Native American tribes in and around Chicago in the 1600s. The first accounts of these "feminine men" were written by Father Marquette and Louis Joliet who explored the area in their quest to discover a Western trade route to China.

Marquette wrote extensively about these men the Native Americans called "twin spirits." Marquette expressed his disdain for their behavior, but they were often held in high regard by their tribes. De la Croix notes that in 1702 fur trader Pierre de Lietta described the "feminine men" of the Illiniwek tribe as "berdache," men who performed the duties of women.

Chicago Whispers is especially interesting for its discussions of organized crime's involvement in the Chicago glbtq community from the Civil War until the first decade of the twentieth century.

During the Civil War, Chicago was a major manufacturing center for the Union Army. Job opportunities attracted thousands of single men to the city. As a result, there was a proliferation of taverns, gambling houses, and opium dens.

The most infamous of these establishments was Roger Plant's "resort," Under the Willows, which opened in 1861. When it opened, Under the Willows was a two-story building; however, as the war went on, it expanded to over 60 rooms with a saloon, private cubicles, and at least three brothels, covering half a block.

Although the subject of frequent public outcry, no serious attempts were made to close the establishment. Under the Willows remained open until 1868 when Plant, having amassed a fortune, retired to a large country house to provide a "decent" life for his family.

Among the colorful characters brought to life in *Chicago Whispers* are Alderman "Bathhouse" John Coughlin and his crony, Michael "Hinky Dink" Kenna.

Although heterosexual, Coughlin quickly learned how to profit from Chicago's "umderworld," opening a bathhouse at 169 West Washington in 1882 and another at the Brevoort Hotel at 143 East Madison Street in 1887.

When he was elected alderman of the First Ward (which included the famous Levee "Red Light District") in 1896, Coughlin created the "First Ward Ball," or "The Derby." Thousands showed up for this annual event, paying large amounts of money for blocks of tickets. The profits from "The Derby" funded Coughlin's political campaigns.

The annual ball was a "colorful and outrageous" event, hosting owners of every gambling den, saloon, and brothel in the city. It was attended by madams, prostitutes, drug dealers, gangsters, female impersonators, drag queens, pimps, and even notable locals clad in various costumes meant to conceal their identities.

The ball ran from 1896 to 1908, when the city's first vice commission cracked down on "pervert practices." Coughlin's exploitation of Chicago's underground glbtq culture for graft and corruption is among the first to be documented in the United States, but it was certainly not the last.

Women feature prominently in *Chicago Whispers*. For example, de la Croix explains how Amelia Bloomer's "trousers" for women helped facilitate the cross dressing that gained momentum during the bicycling "fad" at the end of the nineteenth century. Although male reaction to this new attire was derisive, women viewed the new style as comfortable and liberating.

Not surprisingly, the eventual acceptance of the new women's clothing made cross dressing for females much easier. Although many women cross dressed during the Civil War to serve with their husbands, others found that passing as men enabled them to assert independence from patriarchal constraints and also helped them earn a living by taking jobs reserved for men.

One famous example of a Civil War female soldier passing as a man

is Jennie Rodgers, an Irish immigrant, who dressed as a man and served in Company G of the 95th Illinois Infantry Volunteers under the name Albert Cashier. Cashier fought in forty battles and military encounters; at Vicksburg, after being captured by a Confederate outpost, she stole a gun and escaped.

After the war, Cashier moved to Saunemin, Illinois, where she continued to live as man. In 1899, Cashier applied for a military pension, which she received after being examined by three doctors.

In 1922, Cashier was hit by a car driven by State Senator Ira M. Lish. She was examined by her physician, Dr. C. F. Ross, and it was discovered that she was a woman. For unknown reasons, Lish and Ross decided not to disclose Cashier's biological sex.

It was not until she became ill and was sent to the soldiers' and sailors' home in Quincy, Illinois (at age 68) that Cashier's real sex was revealed. She was lodged in the women's ward and forced to wear dresses.

In 1915, the "Little Soldier," as Cashier was known to her comrades, died; she was given a full military funeral.

In 1977, the town of Saunemin erected a monument at Cashier's grave that reads: "Albert D. J. Cashier Co. G 95 Inf. Civil War. Born Jennie Rodgers, in Clogher Head, Ireland, 1843-1915." Although an estimated 750 women served as soldiers in the American Civil War, Cashier was the only one to serve a full term undetected and to collect a pension.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during the Chicago literary renaissance, the city was a lively literary center. One of its most famous periodicals, *The Little Review*, was founded in 1914, by Margaret Anderson and her lover Harriet "Deansie" Dean. The publication's first office was in room 917 of the Fine Arts Building at 410 South Michigan Avenue.

Anderson's mission was to publish experimental writing and publicize international art. She espoused "isms" (Futurism, Imagism, Dadaism, Anarchism). *The Little Review* published works by many homosexual writers, including members of the Bloomsbury Group.

In 1916, Anderson was joined by Jane Heap, who became co-editor and, later, Anderson's lover. Together, Anderson and Heap established *The Little Review* as a publication that espoused feminism and anarchism. In 1917, Ezra Pound joined the magazine as foreign editor.

In 1918, *The Little Review* began to serialize James Joyce's *Ulysses*; chapters were published until 1920 when the Society for the Suppression of Vice charged the magazine with obscenity. Anderson and Heap lost the court case and they were forced to discontinue publishing the novel.

In the meantime, Anderson and Heap drifted apart, and Anderson moved to Paris where she became lovers with Georgette LeBlanc, a singer who had been married to Belgian dramatist Maurice Maeterlinck. Heap continued to publish *The Little Review* until 1929.

One of the most interesting chapters in *Chicago Whispers* focuses on Henry Gerber, a native of Bavaria who emigrated to the United States in 1913. He served in World War I and moved to Chicago in 1919 after his honorable discharge from the U.S. Army.

Influenced by the German homophile movement, especially by the writings of Magnus Hirschfeld, in 1924 Gerber, joined by six other men, founded the first gay rights organization in the United States, the Society for Human Rights.

According to its charter, the purpose of the group was to "promote and protect the interests of people who by reasons of mental and physical abnormalities are abused and hindered in the legal pursuit of happiness which is guaranteed them by the Declaration of Independence and to combat the public prejudices against them by dissemination of facts according to modern science among intellectuals of mature age."

The Society for Human Rights was short-lived. The organization's publication, *Friendship and Freedom*, which may be described as the first homophile newsletter in the United States, was confiscated by the U.S. Post Office after two issues. Gerber was arrested on July 13, 1925. He appeared in court three times before he was finally cleared of criminal charges. He exhausted his savings defending himself, and he lost his job in the Post Office.

Embittered by his experience in Chicago, Gerber moved to New York City in 1927. There, he re-enlisted in the army. He served until 1945 when he retired with an honorable discharge and a pension. While serving as a proofreader on Governor's Island, Gerber continued writing, sending numerous letters to newspapers in support of homosexuality.

In 1930, Gerber established a pen-pal club that published a monthly newsletter; although not exclusively homosexual, the newsletter

facilitated meetings between homosexuals. He also published *Chanticleer*, a literary magazine in which he wrote about his views on politicians and priests and, occasionally, homosexuality. He also became involved with the homophile movement that emerged after WWII, contributing to the Mattachine Society's publication *ONE Magazine*.

Fittingly, the Chicago glbtq community has honored Gerber by naming its library, established in 1981, the Henry Gerber-Pearl Hart Library. The honor recognizes the fact that Gerber's activism began in the city of Chicago during a time when homosexuality was not only a taboo subject, but a crime punishable by prison sentences and almost-guaranteed dismissal from employment.

The Library's other honoree is Pearl M. Hart (1890-1975), a Chicago attorney sometimes called the "Guardian Angel of Chicago's Gay Community" for her work as an ardent defender of gay rights. Hart, who helped found the Chicago chapter of the Mattachine Society, often represented victims of police entrapment and harassment.

Chicago Whispers traces the evolving attitudes toward homosexuality as well as the growth of a subculture in the city of big shoulders. It documents the changes that took place in Chicago from the establishment of the city when homosexuality was regarded as a medical and legal condition to a more complex and pregnant moment on the eve of Stonewall when homosexuality could be conceived as the basis for a political and social movement.

De la Croix has written a social history rich in character and color, one that includes both the enriching experience of the great migration of African Americans and the distorting paranoia of the Cold War. In its pages, high and low culture jostle side by side. Mannish women and powder puffs, the blues and burlesque, experimental literature and jazz, lesbian pulps and male physique culture, all contribute to the creation of glbtq culture in the great Midwestern metropolis.

I look forward to de la Croix's promised sequel, which will continue the story into the exciting events after Stonewall.

As a teacher whose mission is to give students a solid base in glbtq history, I am grateful for de la Croix's book, which is both thorough and readable.

St. Sukie de la Croix is an internationally published journalist, columnist, fiction author, playwright, and photographer. In Chicago, he has written for *Outlines*, *Windy City Times*, *Nightlines*, *Nightspots*, *Chicago Free Press*, and *Gay Chicago*. As a historian, de la Croix has published dozens of articles about Chicago's gay history, scripted and acted as tour guide on the Chicago Neighborhood Tours' gay history bus, and written a ten-week series on Chicago's LGBT history for the *Chicago Tribune*.

Chicago Whispers: A History of LGBT Chicago before Stonewall. Foreword by John D'Emilio. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012. Learn more about *Chicago Whispers* by visiting this [site](#). The book may be ordered from the University of Wisconsin Press [here](#).

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