



Parades and Marches

by Linda Rapp

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The 2004 Vancouver Dyke March photographed by author and photographer Jane Eaton Hamilton. Courtesy Jane Eaton Hamilton. Copyright © 2004, Jane Eaton Hamilton.

Both parades and marches serve to render a community visible, but the purposes of the two kinds of events are different. Marches typically have the goal of effecting political or social change, whereas parades are celebratory. In practice, the distinction is not always so clear: some contingents in a parade may bear messages of political protest, and marches may have festive elements or be part of a larger program that includes concerts or picnics and similar events.

Pride parades have become significant events in most North American cities and in many European and Asian cities as well. Typically held in conjunction with other gay pride events, and often in June, pride parades offer opportunities for local glbtq communities to celebrate their diversity and to affirm their sense of unity.

While most media attention is directed toward the mammoth celebrations in cities such as New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Toronto, pride parades or festivities are held throughout the world, often in relatively small towns, where celebrations may take the form of parties or picnics rather than parades. One estimate is that as many as 45,000,000 people world-wide participate in pride events each year, from Arcata, California to Zurich, Switzerland.

Sometimes the pride celebrations are purely celebratory, but most often they are also political, the occasion for lobbying for glbtq rights or protesting injustice. Frequently, politicians seize the opportunity of the pride events to express their support for the glbtq community by issuing proclamations or by participating in parades and other activities.

Marches on Washington

Marches and demonstrations on behalf of various causes were fairly common in the 1960s and 1970s, as people took to the streets to show support for the civil rights of African Americans or to protest the war in Vietnam. One of the first demonstrations for the cause of gay and lesbian rights was a "homophile march" on July 4, 1965. About fifty people from the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis picketed the White House in Washington, D. C., to protest discriminatory employment practices by the federal government.

Subsequently, after the growth of the modern gay and lesbian rights movement in the 1970s, several large marches on Washington have taken place. On October 14, 1979, the first National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights drew more than 100,000 people to mark the tenth anniversary of the Stonewall riots, to protest Anita Bryant's anti-gay crusade, and to decry the lenient jail sentence given to Dan White for the assassination of openly gay San Francisco city supervisor Harvey Milk.

Over 500,000 people came to the capital on October 11, 1987 to rally for lesbian and gay rights. Marchers protested the 1986 Supreme Court decision in *Bowers v. Hardwick* upholding sodomy laws. They also criticized the federal government for its dismal lack of action in the fight against AIDS. In conjunction with

the march, the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt was displayed for the first time.

Organizers estimated that nearly 1,000,000 people turned out for the third march on Washington on April 25, 1993. The response to AIDS remained an issue. Participants also protested the ban on gays in the military and laws that failed to protect the civil rights of glbtq people, among other causes.

Over three hundred events were held on the weekend of the march, including a candlelight vigil at the United States Memorial Holocaust Museum, a march at Arlington National Cemetery in honor of gay, lesbian, and bisexual veterans, a mass wedding demonstration to promote the rights of same-sex couples, a "dyke march," and various social events.

The year 2000 saw the Millennium March. Hundreds of thousands thronged to the capital calling for an end to hate crimes, support for the rights of gay and lesbian couples and parents, and passage of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act.

The diverse crowd of marchers included veterans and veterinarians, drag queens and drum corps, gay parents with their children, and gay children with their parents.

Among the prominent figures who spoke in front of the Capitol were Senator Paul Wellstone, Representatives Nancy Pelosi and Jerry Nadler, Executive Director Elizabeth Birch of the Human Rights Campaign, tennis great Martina Navratilova, former baseball player Billy Bean, singer Melissa Etheridge, and actress Ellen DeGeneres.

The parents of Matthew Shepard, the victim of a homophobic murder, were joined by relatives of James Byrd, Jr., the African-American victim of a racially motivated murder, in calling for an end to all hate crimes.

New York's Gay Pride Marches

The march that is generally considered the first pride event took place in New York City on June 28, 1970. Thousands of participants from a score of organizations marched from Greenwich Village to Central Park to commemorate the first anniversary of Stonewall. The protesters, some of whom had traveled from other states to participate in the march, raised many serious issues, including laws that prohibited consensual homosexual acts or permitted discrimination against gays and lesbians in employment and housing.

The march was also, according to Michael Brown, one of the founders of the Gay Liberation Front, "an affirmation and declaration of our new pride."

Stonewall-anniversary marches have been held every subsequent year, and the event has evolved into New York's annual Gay Pride Parade. The mayor and other city leaders now routinely march in the parade, which has featured an extremely wide variety of interest groups, including participants in the Stonewall uprising, the Radical Faeries, S&M advocates, Log Cabin Republicans, drag queens, athletes, theological students, supportive parents and friends of glbtq people, and military veterans.

Police officers from New York's Gay Officers Action League have become regular participants in the parade. In 1999 an active-duty member of the Fire Department marched for the first time. Gay firefighter Tom Ryan was accompanied by Fire Commissioner Thomas Von Essen, who pledged to create a more positive attitude within the department.

In 2002 a group of gay and lesbian police officers, firefighters, and emergency medical personnel were chosen as grand marshals to honor their services in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001.

Stonewall 25

The 1994 march, called Stonewall 25, was the occasion of both visibility and controversy.

Marking the quarter-century anniversary of the Stonewall uprising, it coincided with New York's hosting of the Gay Games, drawing more media attention than usual to the event. Organizers planned a spectacular display. A mile-long rainbow flag was made for the parade and borne along the route by people who had donated to AIDS charities for the privilege.

Various debates about the parade arose. The transgender community protested the official title of Stonewall 25 as a "Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Event."

Some worried that the more flamboyant elements of the parade, such as people in skimpy costumes, outrageous drag queens, and leather fetishists, could present a distorted image of the community and play into the hands of those promoting a homophobic political agenda.

"I can't stop anyone from dressing bizarrely and parading around New York City, but do we have to put them at the head of our parade?" asked Massachusetts Congressman Barney Frank. He went on, however, to sum up the dilemma of the situation, saying, "in the gay community we've been doing two things at once: fighting for our rights and celebrating our cultural freedom."

In addition to the official Stonewall 25 parade, there was also a march organized by ACT UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power), intended primarily as a political demonstration to call for a stronger response to the fight against AIDS. Denied a parade permit, the group marched anyway. The two parades eventually met, and, as *New York Times* reporter Janny Scott put it, "converged in a vast river of humanity" as they continued to their destination, Central Park.

Other North American Pride Parades

Many other North American cities including Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Seattle, Toronto, and Vancouver boast large annual pride parades, generally in June to commemorate the Stonewall rebellion. (A few cities, such as New Orleans, hold annual pride events at other times.)

Many of these parades have been annual events since the early 1970s and their growth has been paradigmatic of the development of the glbtq movement into a mass movement for equality.

For example, the Chicago parade began in June 1970, when an "unofficial" parade culminated a pride week organized by Gay Liberation, Mattachine Midwest, and Women's Caucus. Denied a parade permit, some 150 protesters marched along the city's sidewalks, demonstrating against the injustices suffered by glbtq people. The next year the 150-person demonstration had evolved into a 1,200-person parade. Now the Chicago pride parade routinely attracts more than 200,000 participants.

The West Hollywood parade usually attracts around 400,000 participants. It has become the third largest parade of any kind in Southern California, smaller only than the Tournament of Roses and Christmas parades.

Among the best known summer celebrations is San Francisco's Gay and Lesbian Freedom Day parade, an event that was inaugurated in 1971. The San Francisco parade draws hundreds of thousands of participants. The 2002 procession had 184 official contingents, including groups committed to fighting AIDS, breast cancer, and homophobia, a group of lesbian mothers and their children, and a trailer full of Bears Clubs members.

The parade was led in typical fashion by Dykes on Bikes, a contingent of over a thousand motorcyclists. They were followed by several dozen male bicycle riders who dubbed themselves "Mikes on Bikes" and all

wore tags saying "Hi, my name is Mike."

The San Francisco parade has become one of the largest annual celebrations in the country.

Another important celebration on the North American continent is Toronto's Lesbian and Gay Pride day, which regularly attracts almost 1,000,000 participants.

Other Pride Events

In addition to traditional pride parades there are other events that celebrate various segments of the glbtq community. For example, within the last decade lesbians have begun holding "dyke marches" in such cities as Chicago and Toronto.

Chicago is also home to an African-American gay pride celebration, as are Washington, D. C. and Kansas City.

Boston has instituted a Gay/Straight Youth Pride celebration that includes a march in the city and a festival on the banks of the Charles River.

Non-North American Celebrations

Pride parades are by no means confined to America. A number of European capitals, from London to Stockholm, also hold gay pride parades and festivals. While the history of these is generally not as long as that of their American counterparts, the tradition and participation are growing.

Dublin's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Pride Parade, for example, began in 1992, when only about four hundred people marched. Ten years later six thousand took part in the parade, which is the high point of a two-week pride festival.

The pride parade in London dates back to 1972, when approximately seven hundred gay men and lesbians marched from Trafalgar Square to Hyde Park. In 2002 tens of thousands took part in a parade that was followed by a huge party at Hackney Marshes, with dance tents and entertainment and sports events, as well as recruiting booths for the fire and police departments and the Inland Revenue.

Brighton and Manchester also hold gay pride parades. Manchester's 2003 parade was a highlight of the ten-day EuroPride festival.

Paris's openly gay mayor, Bertrand Delanoë, led the 2002 pride parade in the French capital, which drew a record crowd in excess of 500,000 people.

The 2003 parade in Sao Paolo, Brazil attracted a crowd estimated at 800,000 persons of all sexual orientations.

Gay pride parades have been held in Tel Aviv for some years, but the first one in the more conservative city of Jerusalem took place only in 2002. Some Orthodox Jewish religious and political leaders denounced the march, but approximately 4,000 gay men and lesbians turned out to parade under rainbow flags. A party in a city park followed.

Parades in some other countries such as New Zealand, Japan, South Africa, and Thailand are also of relatively recent origin. They have generally been well received. Bangkok's fourth annual Gay Parade in 2002 drew more than 100,000 people.

Australian Celebrations

Although it is held in February or March rather than June, one of the world's largest gay and lesbian pride events is Sydney's Mardi Gras celebration, which attracts more overseas visitors than any heterosexual event.

The festival traces its origins to a gay pride rally in 1978, staged in solidarity with the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Freedom Day celebrations. At the small 1978 rally, fifty-three persons were arrested.

One measure of the progress of the Australian equal rights movement is that Sydney's Mardi Gras is now a month-long cultural event. The centerpiece of the celebration, the parade, is televised nationally and attracts from 500,000 to 750,000 participants.

All six Australian states also have annual gay and lesbian pride events. The Australian Lesbian Festival, held in a different state each year, has also become an annual event.

Conclusion

Parades serve as vehicles for both political expression and celebration by a diverse group of people. Given the glbtq community's diversity, it is inevitable that certain disagreements over messages and manners of celebrating will arise. Nevertheless, parades have generally been successful in instilling a sense of belonging and pride and in providing a venue for joyous affirmation of identity and community.

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