

AMERICAN COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS
A Historical Dictionary

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WEST HOLLYWOOD INCORPORATION pages 189-191

by Jim Kepner and Walter L. Williams

The small community of Sherman, California, part of the Mexican Rancho LaBrea land grant, between Hollywood and Beverly Hills, voted in 1924 against annexation to expanding Los Angeles, and began calling itself West Hollywood. Terminus for Los Angeles' first railroad, this unincorporated area of Los Angeles County consisted of car barns, small working-class houses, and truck farms.

The area also drew people wanting to escape the corrupt Los Angeles police. Later, United Artists built a major studio in the area, attracting more movie industry personnel. An initial discussion of incorporation as a separate city failed.

Its night-life strip of Sunset Boulevard flaunted prohibition. Some of this night life catered to homosexuals in the movie industry. Nightclubs like Chateau Marmont, Garden of Allah, and Ciro's were legendary for their party life. About 1935, on Santa Monica Boulevard, ramshackle Barney's Beanery posted a "Fagots Stay Out" [sic] sign, becoming a homophobes' hangout. But many gays lived nearby.

World War II transformed the area, as Los Angeles' Jewish community moved from Brooklyn Avenue to the Fairfax Avenue area of West Hollywood. The other transformation came from an influx of gay ex-servicemen and defense workers. Gay bars dotted Santa Monica Boulevard and gay-run decorator shops dotted Melrose Avenue. More gays came from the Westlake Park area and mixed well with Jews and senior citizens. La Cienega Boulevard, famed as "Restaurant Row" began featuring a Monday-night "Art Walk" which was popular with gay men.

In 1966, police raids of gay bars prompted a militant gay group, *Pride*—inspired by San Francisco's Society for Individual Rights—to form in West Hollywood. Out of this group emerged a gay paper, *The Advocate*, which has become the largest gay newspaper in the United States. *Pride* supported another effort to incorporate the area, which fizzled as county sheriffs tried to expel the hippies from Sunset Strip.

The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) had driven male and female prostitutes from a succession of locations. By 1969, females had occupied Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood, near a former gay male cruising area. The LAPD was working to expel male hustlers from the Selma Avenue turf they had staked out after being driven from Pershing Square downtown. West Hollywood's county sheriffs saw the problem coming their way and wanted a saner approach than the LAPD's. Overtures they made had helped start the Gay Community [p. 190] Services Center—though at first the center was located near downtown in an area which gays were leaving because of police harassment. In 1975, this multipurpose agency moved to the edge of West Hollywood.

In 1983 the county removed Don Eugenio Plummer's century-old adobe home from the West Hollywood park which retains his name. This fueled neighborhood anger among gay residents in particular, who were interested in historical preservation. Ron Stone, a thirty-six-year-old gay man who has become known as the "father of cityhood," dated his effort for a new incorporation movement from the loss of this historical building. Stone was a management consultant and a former aide to U.S. senators Alan Cranston and Mike Mansfield. He had organized a swim team for the 1982 San Francisco Gay Games. He created the West Hollywood Incorporation Committee, guiding its diverse factions with self-effacing skill. A major theme to emerge in this community organization drive was rent control, which was a reaction to rapid rises in living costs. This issue united gays and seniors especially.

Ed Edelman, the area's popular Los Angeles county supervisor, did not encourage cityhood, nor did gay power broker Sheldon Andelson. But Stone and friends learned from the county's Local Agency Formation Commission that cityhood would reap a hefty surplus of revenue over expenses. The Incorporation Committee easily got enough petitions to put two issues on the November 1984 ballot: a vote on cityhood and a choice of five council candidates. Forty-two candidates, twelve of them openly gay or lesbian, competed for the 1.9-square-mile area's 19,000 voters.

Minor homophobic flurries were lost in the campaign's big issue: rent control. Opponents of cityhood were largely against rent control, but 85 percent of the voters were tenants. All five winners in the council election were strong on rent control, and four were backed by the Coalition for Economic Survival (CES), a tenant's advocacy group. Stone sold cityhood better than he sold himself, and his candidacy for city council was not successful.

Valerie Terrigno was the top vote getter and was chosen as mayor. She made history as America's first known lesbian mayor. Previously she had headed Crossroads, a gay job agency, and the gay Stonewall Democratic Club. Deputy Mayor John Heilman was a member of another gay democratic club and an American Civil Liberties Union attorney. Steve Schulte, who started to run for Hollywood's Los Angeles city council seat, was former head of the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center* and the only candidate to win without CES help. The two nongay elected council members were an older woman and a Jewish man.

Despite an estimated \$5 million annual surplus, the new council has a full job, turning the diverse area into a city. It faces hard decisions on development, traffic, parking, beautifying Santa Monica Boulevard's railroad tracks, improving senior citizen services, finding a city hall, and keeping varied interests balanced. The council quickly enacted model gay rights legislation and domestic partnership registration, but it also soothed fears that the area would ignore its nongay population. As the first city government with an openly gay majority, West Hollywood is on trial in the world's media.

REFERENCES: West Hollywood Files, International Gay and Lesbian Archives, Hollywood, Calif.; *Frontiers*, 1983-85; "A Gay City on the Hill?" *Newsweek*, November 1984, p. 46.

By Jim Kepner

Los Angeles' multipurpose Gay Community Services Center (GCSC) was founded in 1971 to provide services identifiable gay men and lesbians were often denied by other social agencies. It became a model for similar groups in scores of cities, many of which it helped to launch. The next year, in a crumbling house on Wilshire Boulevard, scores of GCSC volunteers served 900 persons a week, operated two crisis housing facilities and a thrift shop. GCSC joined in many progressive movement and neighborhood activities.

The catalyst for its founding came in response to the Los Angeles Police Department's brutal efforts to get gay street people to leave Hollywood. Many gays moved into the nearby unincorporated area of the county known as West Hollywood. Professor Martin Field, of the University of California at Los Angeles, began talks with West Hollywood sheriffs to seek a more humane handling of marginal gays. Some gay activists hoped to merge Metropolitan Community Church's gay hotline and services for street people with two committees of the dying Gay Liberation Front (GLF). GLF's apocalyptic survival committee aimed to aid gays in the chaos of the establishment's expected collapse. Two dozen homeless people stayed at GLF's offices until GCSC planners leased two houses for them.

Concerned members of the gay Community met in 1971 to hammer out plans for a Gay Community Services Center. There was a New Left fervor among the leaders, and some of them felt that they were helping to organize gays for the revolution. By 1975, GCSC occupied five adjoining houses near downtown, with a venereal disease clinic, peer counseling, and rap groups. The staff remained mostly volunteer.

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After spending most of his life in “the closet,” Harvey B. Milk was elected as an “open” gay to San Francisco’s board of supervisors and helped create America’s most visible gay neighborhood, before he was assassinated in 1978.

Milk’s early life hardly previewed the kind of symbol he would become. Born in New York on May 22, 1930, he was a Long Island high school athletic hero and later became a teacher and then a sewing machine salesman in Dallas before returning to New York. As a conservative Republican brokerage advisor, he kept his public and sexual lives tightly apart. But his private homosexual life began to have an impact on his attitudes as his second lover, Craig Rodwell, was turning into a gay militant.

Heavy involvement with the cast and producers of the rock musical “Hair” did not change Harvey’s lifestyle. But President Richard M. Nixon’s invasion of Cambodia made him an overnight hippie.

He and a new lover drove to San Francisco, and in time he opened a camera store on Castro Street. The city’s main gay area was Polk Street, but Castro was a blue-collar Irish neighborhood with a few gay bars. Harvey plunged into Castro neighborhood affairs with a concern for other people’s problems that would later win him the support of both his nongay and gay neighbors.

In three unsuccessful tries for public office, the slogan emerged: “Harvey against the machine.” The “machine” was the city’s gay establishment, which saw Harvey as an interloper. In oddball, grassroots-styled campaigns, Harvey enlisted hippies and obvious gays who embarrassed the gay establishment, but he won solid support from nongay senior citizens, rank-and-file unionists, and Asians. His manic enthusiasm, off-the-wall humor and tactlessness brought either unbounded loyalty or bitter enmity. Spurned by the gay Alice Toklas Democratic Club, he founded the Harry Truman Club, later renamed after Milk.

In 1977 Milk was successful in being elected fifth district supervisor. This election also brought into the board the first feminists, the first black woman, and the first Chinese-American. In contrast, a former policeman and fireman named Dan White, from another blue-collar neighborhood, was elected on the pledge of rescuing the city from “radicals, social deviates and incorrigibles.”

As a supervisor, Harvey Milk fought against the “downtown interests” and the developers, who were often allied with Dan White. In 1978 he campaigned statewide against the Briggs Initiative, which was designed to bar gays from becoming teachers. By this time he was onstage as America’s most prominent elected “open” gay. Harvey inspired gay people nationwide, refuting the view that gays must work only through friendly allies. He encouraged other gay and lesbian activists to run for public office. He dramatically called for a National March on Washington for lesbian and gay rights.

This massive march, eleven months after his death, was as much a memorial to Milk as San Francisco’s annual candlelight commemorations.

Mercurial Dan White had resigned as supervisor but later asked Mayor George Moscone to reappoint him. Hearing that Moscone would not cooperate, White sneaked into city hall on November 27, 1978, and shot the mayor. Then he walked down the hall to Supervisor Milk’s office and killed him as well. After a controversial and homophobic trial, White was convicted of manslaughter for these two deaths.

White was paroled in less than seven years. Responding to the gay community's shock, the new mayor, Dianne Feinstein, appointed Milk's gay associate, Harry Britt, to fill the supervisor's seat. Despite election rule changes to make it harder for political mavericks like Milk to be elected, Britt has been reelected twice.

Without exactly planning it, Milk transformed the quaint Irish neighborhood into the prototype for openly gay neighborhoods. Polk Street was supplanted, as a variety of gay businesses moved to Castro. Thousands of young men flocked to the street, displaying a new gay male manner, with masculine but visibly gay style. The gay area spread well beyond the blocks of Castro, and a lesbian area developed nearby. The Castro's glamour later drove up property values, often squeezing out the relaxed small businesses Harvey had defended.

Seeing what had happened in San Francisco, gay and lesbian community organizers soon developed Castro-like areas in many other cities.

REFERENCES: Brigg's Campaign Files, International Gay and Lesbian Archives, Hollywood, Calif.; Dan White Files, International Gay and Lesbian Archives, Hollywood, Calif.; Harvey Milk Files, International Gay and Lesbian Archives, Hollywood, Calif.; Harvey Milk Papers, Harvey Milk Archives, San Francisco, Calif.; Randy Shilts, *The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982); *The Times of Harvey Milk*, Academy Award-nominated film by Robert Epstein and Richard Schmeichen, New York, Teleculture, 1984.

JIM KEPNER AND WALTER L. WILLIAMS