

Sherman - Set the Waybac Machine for 1882!

by: Kathleen

Fri May 01, 2009 at 22:45:18 PM EDT

I recently read a [story in the Inky](#) (Philadelphia Inquirer) about a two day community workshop to begin the process of developing an “[Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia](#), a print and online resource that is expected to be completed by 2014.” The event included many academics and representatives of 150 community organizations. After checking with some lgbt community leaders and historians it seemed that the lgbt community hadn’t been included in the process. I suggested on the project site that our history was an important part of the fabric of our region and that it might enrich the project to hold a session at the William Way Community Center and include our contributions to the many communities which lgbt Philadelphians are part of and our own history.



The Project Coordinator, **Dr. Charlene Mires** of Villanova University acknowledged the oversight and was enthused at the opportunity to include lgbt persons and history in the project – an event focused on our community will hopefully be scheduled in the near future. It promises to be an exciting project and I hope many from our community will share in preserving our heritage.

It reminded me of that this week is the 44th anniversary of the **Dewey’s demonstration**, the first known organized demonstration for lgbt rights; and one that was initiated over a denial of service to transgender people – who then refused to leave.



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These unknown persons (they were apparently minors and their names were not noted in any source I can find, and are reported to be African American) were supported by members of the Janus Society – whose President **Clark Polack** was arrested along with the minors after

offering to provide assistance in finding legal counsel. Janus organized the protest that extended over about two weeks, was covered on a local TV station and where they distributed 1500 pieces of literature. The coordinator of the action was **Robert Sitko**. Dewey's changed it's policy of refusing to serve lgbt persons at that location (Dewey's had several locations, they would serve us only in their 13th Street location. Both of these locations still operate as diner type restaurants to this day, the 13th Street location in the gayborhood – just a few steps from many clubs. **Mark Stein** (now at York University in Toronto) has documented much of this in his excellent [City Of Sisterly And Brotherly Loves: Lesbian And Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972](#). If you click the thumbnail below, you'll open a copy of the leaflet Janus members handed out that day.



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Dewey's is far from the beginning of transgender history in the region. There are many events, organizations and people who've been under reported or forgotten. In 1882 Y.C. Victor of Hanover, PA wrote a letter to the editor advocating support for the Dress Reform Movement (which had several national conventions in Philadelphia advocating for increased freedom for woman from restrictive dress codes). Mr. Victor had what we would recognize as a support group of transpeople who would meet at his home and he used what we might consider the blogs of his day advocating to change laws unfairly targeting gender variant people.

"**Mr. Y. C. Victor**, of Hanover, Pennsylvania, writes to this same Eastern paper to say that he believes in "Equal Rights for Both Sexes." There are plenty of women who wear men's clothes and are allowed to be on the public streets without being arrested; and I say it is perfectly right. But let the men wear what is most comfortable to them; and I can tell by my own experience, I am a man retired from business; I live alone—except my housekeeper. Well, I have been wearing women's clothes for the last few years, most of my time..... But I dare not go out in my dress for fear of being looked upon as a lunatic and arrested: and I dare not receive any company when I dressed in petticoats, except a few intimate male friends who wear the same dress, and my housekeeper." (reprinted in the Fort Wayne Daily Gazette, April 9, 1882)

This may be the earliest yet known instance in the US of an lgbt group that engaged in political advocacy. I haven't seen it reported elsewhere. I think it's important that this group is from a small town of about 3,000 in rural Pennsylvania. Most of the research into our history focuses not just on larger cities, but on a very few Cities. How much are we overlooking? I find it interesting that this type of group, running out of someone's home, was seen often in the transgender community.

I've run across many instances of transgender people from the time of Victor's group who were arrested, sentenced to lengthy terms, or placed in the workhouse or mental institution until they agreed to live as their sex assigned at birth. But – there were also instances where people were accepted. Most of these are wealthy individuals, entertainers or members of groups where gender variant behavior was supported by society – like the Mummies or Molly Maguires.

Mrs. Henry Lewis (Bertha Harvey) was famous for playing male parts. She played Richard III at the Walnut Street Theater in Philadelphia in 1837. Her other notable roles included Othello and Virginius.



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Charlotte Cushman was a world renowned actress noted for playing male leads. The Charlotte Cushman Club in Philadelphia was a boarding house that served traveling stage actresses. [The Charlotte Cushman Foundation](#) in Philadelphia honors her legacy. The engraving below shows Ms. Cushman playing Romeo to her sisters Juliet.



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Harry Lehr (the husband of **Elizabeth Wharton Drexel**) was well known for "playing the soubrette" during entertainment among the elite of the gilded age, "the 400". This was reported in the society pages of the major newspapers from DC, to NY to Newport. The Drexel's are one of the most prominent families in Philadelphia history, of **Drexel University** and **Saint Katherine Drexel** fame.



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Reed Erickson, one of the most important figures in transgender history lived in Philadelphia at 1726 Roselyn Street, 421 South 8th St. and 2039 Walnut St. He was quite wealthy and funded much of the important trans research in his time through his Erickson Educational Foundation. He was one of the major funders of the One Center in California, the course in miracles and the Kripner dream research. (addresses courtesy of Prof. Aaron Devore who has written extensively on Mr. Erickson).

[Reed Erickson and the Erickson Educational Foundation](#)

"Reed Erickson (1912-1992): How One Transsexed Man Supported ONE."



Thom Nickles, in his book [Gay and Lesbian Philadelphia](#) notes how in the 50's & 60's the Mummers had large drag contingents and these (and other) "crews" were organized by gender variant entertainers. It was often said that Philadelphia was the only city that awarded a prize to the prettiest drag queen as was the tradition for the Mummers for many years, but I've seen newspaper stories from several other PA towns doing the same. The Mumming tradition goes back to 1642 in Philadelphia – though the modern City sponsored event dates to 1901. Below I've included some pictures from 1925.

Transgender and gender variant people found ways in these organizations to express their identities in a socially acceptable manner and were often leaders of these groups. Even though a gender variant identity wasn't seen as the focus of the organizations, trans people found ways to be included, to shape them and to express their identities within the confines of their times. The connections to community organizations and providers of goods and services where people had to know of the gender variants persons activities is another area I think should be studied. Even as far back as 1878, the Scribners Magazine article "He Playing She" (about performers) noted the need for supportive clothing, make up and wig stores for the entertainers. Invisibility was a collaborative affair. (The person they note as the best performer of that time – Robert Craig – was seen often on the Philadelphia Stage at the Arch Street Theater).



Many had lived quiet lives in their affirmed genders – we only know of some when they were outed and were punished for their identities.

1905 Masquerades as Woman.

Pittsburgh. Pa., Jan. 4.—For years William Henry Mackintosh, Carson Street, a stenographer, has been masquerading as a woman. When he was attending a dance his identity was discovered and he was arrested. He was sentenced to thirty days in the workhouse.

March 12, 1890 - Indiana, PA

A FELLOW has been arrested in the eastern part of the State for masquerading as a woman selling corsets and female underclothing. He is effeminate in appearance and of very slender build. He says he has in the business, in female costume, for several years and has visited nearly every town in the State. This is undoubtedly the chap who visited this place some weeks ago and supplied numerous of our ladies with corsets and underclothing. His identity was suspected by one of the ladies, but he denied it and the same day left town, with several orders unfilled.

HIGH COURT WON'T NIX BANISHING OF MAN

Philadelphia Daily News (PA) - **November 17, 1998 (Lebanon, PA)**

The Supreme Court turned down an appeal by a transsexual who says a Pennsylvania judge banished him for life from his hometown after he tested positive for the AIDS virus. **Raul Valentin** argued yesterday that he should be allowed to pursue a federal civil rights lawsuit against the judge who he says ``unlawfully sentenced him to life away from his home and family."

Some were accepted, though they were considered marginal; as this 1905 obituary indicates.

“For years Felbuff (first name Valentine) has been one of the best-known characters along the river. With his wife, who is just as eccentric as he was, he lived in an odd little house of his own making. On the (Schuylkill) river bank, just above the Roseglen tunnel on the Reading Railway. In the summer he fished and ferried passengers across the river in his crazy old rowboat, and in the winter he did odd jobs along the railroad and for the neighboring- farmers. He eked out a precarious living, but neither he nor his wife was ever known to complain of hardship. Felbuff's oddest habit, which, earned him the name of "**Rosy Glen**" was the wearing of women's clothes. These were his wife's usually.” The ferry would have connected the then working class Manyunck section of the City to Rosglen – a section of the rather tony town of Gladwyne just outside of Philadelphia.

If one follows the river just slightly further down along **Kelly Drive** from where Rosy Glen would have docked in Manyunck one comes to the statue of **Jack Kelly, Sr.** in his scull, commemorating his three Olympic Gold Medal wins. His son, **Jack “Kell” Kelly**

was a member of City Council, brother of **Princess Grace** and leading candidate for Mayor of Philadelphia. He was also the partner of one of the most famous and successful transwomen of her day, **Rachel Harlow**. Who opened the first discothèque in the City, had one of the most famous restaurants in the City and owned other clubs. She appeared often on television.

"His mother warned the local democratic chairman that she would stop contributing to the party," Lewis said, "she would also support the opposition candidate, and threaten to erect a huge billboard with the sign: 'Do you want Harlow to be Philadelphia's First Lady?' Junior was not nominated."

Publicity Photo for the 1968 movie "The Queen" featuring Harlow prior to transition below. The film was a documentary of a pageant organized by drag legend **Flawless Sabrina (Jack Doroshow)**. Also appearing were **Terry Southern, George Plimpton, Edie Sedgwick and Andy Warhol**.



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And moving into the early 1970's, the political group the **Radical Queens** was co-founded by **Cei Bell** and **Tommi Avicolti Mecca**. Ms. Bell has a chapter on the Radical Queens in Mr. Avicolti Mecca's book "**Smash the Church, Smash the State**" which will be released on June 1st.



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This article is running a bit long for a blog post. So let me end with some fun. For those of

you wondering about the picture heading this article, it's from a cartoon from the 50's & 60's – *Peabody's Improbable History* starring Mr. Peabody and his boy, Sherman. Here's the first episode, enjoy.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YunO4Wc8E28>

-Kathy Padilla

Tags: (All Tags)



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Great History Lesson (0.00 / 0)

There were many small protests at that time -- before Stonewall ripped the doors off the hinges.

They're all important to remember.

by: *David Ehrenstein @ Sat May 02, 2009 at 14:40:22 PM CDT*

Nice article,...thanks. (0.00 / 0)

It is good to be reminded of historical precedent. Again note, how money and celebrity status was/is insulating.

LOVE Conquers H8

by: *Orion45 @ Sat May 02, 2009 at 15:22:10 PM CDT*

PS. I remember that show well. Knew exactly who it was!.... oops dates me I know. (0.00 / 0)

LOVE Conquers H8

by: *Orion45 @ Sat May 02, 2009 at 15:23:03 PM CDT*

[Parent]

I try to camouflage (0.00 / 0)

I try to camouflage it by saying I have an interest in history.

Not that that works.....

by: *Kathleen @ Sat May 02, 2009 at 15:34:58 PM CDT*

[Parent]

hee hee hee (0.00 / 0)

never does...

Directing a house of transfolk is a challenge. Doing it well is a mission.

by: *dyssonance @ Sat May 02, 2009 at 15:39:58 PM CDT*

[Parent]

1882? (0.00 / 0)

That's what year the Christiban thinks it is today, isn't it?

by: *Jon Michaels @ Sat May 02, 2009 at 15:27:40 PM CDT*

It's difficult for them..... (0.00 / 0)

mourning the loss of something that never existed. Are flowers appropriate?

While we're at it, should we open the smelling salts for Aravosis? He seems prone to the vapors; bless his heart.

by: *Kathleen @ Sat May 02, 2009 at 15:55:55 PM CDT*

[Parent]

as a near fanatic about transhistory... (0.00 / 0)

thank you :D

Directing a house of transfolk is a challenge. Doing it well is a mission.

by: *dyssonance @ Sat May 02, 2009 at 15:31:31 PM CDT*

Just a minor quibble (0.00 / 0)

but I have met Dr. Mires, and I believe that her name is Charlene Mires, not Charlotte Miers.

by: *Teleprompter @ Sat May 02, 2009 at 17:00:14 PM CDT*

Thanks for catching that - fixed! (0.00 / 0)

And I had her emails right in front of me. So much for writing uncaffeinated. She read this too - now that's embarrassing.....

by: *Kathleen @ Sat May 02, 2009 at 18:39:26 PM CDT*

[Parent]

Thank you!! (0.00 / 0)

I'm a transhistorian, and I have an extensive timeline of events crucial in our history, and these items will do a lot to help in the early entries.

Another protest which lots of transfolk forget is the riot at Compton's Cafeteria, which happened in San Francisco a couple of years before Stonewall. Just like what happened in NYC, a gathering of queens were being harassed by the SFPD and the girls retaliated. Susan Stryker put together a great documentary on the event called *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria*, and here's more info on the film: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt04...>

But many, MANY thanks to Kathleen for the history lesson. Be assured all of your info's now in my timeline. Want a copy? Email me.

by: *Marlene @ Sun May 03, 2009 at 06:09:47 AM CDT*

Roots... (0.00 / 0)

Thanks Kathleen for sharing this fantastic survey of trans history in Philadelphia. The Dewey's protest is particularly interesting. Many in town are familiar with the role the 13th street corridor has played in transactivism over the past 20 years, but I never realized how far back that history extended.

by: *marcusian @ Sun May 03, 2009 at 11:55:16 AM CDT*

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<http://www.pamshouseblend.com/diary/10750/sherman-set-the-waybac-machine-for-1882> [accessed 5.15.2009]
