

America's Dairyland:

A Brie Bit Gay

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The dogmatic, authoritarian 1950's triggered a massive emergence of movements and sub-cultures that sought to counter repressive McCarthy-era persecutions and reject mainstream American society. Frustrated with American complacency, marginalized Americans united to challenge societal conformity and interest in the Black power movement, women's liberation movement, student-led anti war efforts, and the counterculture of the Sixties spiked. Openly gay and lesbian communities felt empowered by these movements and began advocating for their own equal rights, consolidated self-esteem, and group consciousness. Although these communities developed after World War II, it wasn't until the 1969 Stonewall riots that the sexual revolution blossomed and politicized itself as the gay liberation movement. Out of these existing gay and lesbian communities, the Gay Peoples Union, a student-led organization at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, emerged and championed gay activism. While many queer organizations claimed the mantle of revolutionary sexual struggle, none embodied the gay liberation movement like the Gay Peoples Union as they utilized both mainstream and alternative media outlets to combat systemic oppression, promote political engagement, and destigmatize homosexuality.

The two world wars and tensions with Soviet Russia birthed a culture of fear surrounding social deviance, and America doubled down on a restored belief in the superiority of capitalism, cultural conservatism, and religion. The federal government weaponized heightened concerns about communism to invoke a moral panic, known as the Lavender Scare, in the 1950's that targeted gays and lesbians working for the United States government and military. Claiming homosexuals could be easily manipulated through blackmail into working for the Soviet Espionage, this McCarthy-era persecution resulted in the firing, harrasing, and outing of thousands of queer Americans labeled as security risks. While this conspiracy might have been

true for a small percentage of those singled out, the federal government's true motivations had little to do with communist concerns - as the most obvious solution would have been to decriminalize homosexuality, thus eliminating the risk of Russian blackmail - and more to do with creating a nationally held, negative narrative surrounding queer people. Despite these efforts to alienate gay and lesbian Americans, McCarthyism unintentionally helped to stimulate self-awareness and a collective identity among them.

While the United States government used social deviance to justify their decades-long witch-hunt against queer people, the Gay Peoples Union expanded on the definition of deviancy to shed light on the legal discrimination they experienced. In their article "Police vs. Gays: Crisis in Understanding", the *GPU news* explored institutional repression and the widespread misuse of police power during the mid-twentieth century. It examined the function of policing in society and explained that "each citizen must be treated with equal respect, with no more force or interference than the individual situation warrants" and "any deviation from that policy is a perversion of police power".¹ In this context, the concern of deviancy was focused on perversion of justice by corrupt police officers - not private, consensual homosexual acts. The *GPU news* advocated the importance of open communication between gay communities and law enforcement agencies, hosting their own interview with the Captain of the Milwaukee vice squad. Despite the local police department's denial of unnecessary harassment, sexual assault in prisons, and entrapment, the Gay Peoples Union was making waves for the gay liberation movement as they empowered the broader community to stand up against police brutality.

While the Gay Peoples Union recognized that not all law enforcement agencies were abusive, the existence of harsh sex laws in the United States enabled police corruption and was

¹ T. P. Q., "Police vs. Gays: Crisis in Understanding," *GPU News*, September 1972. Archives Division.

both a political and social hindrance to the gay liberation movement. Gays and lesbians were subject to a host of laws, ranging from “Lewd and Lascivious Conduct” and “Disorderly Conduct” to the much harsher charge of sodomy.² The Gay Peoples Union used their radio broadcast program *Gay Perspective* and newspaper publication to examine the ramifications of these sex laws on queer Americans. Eldon Murray, one of the G.P.U.’s founding members and radio personality, explained that these state laws derived from King Henry VIII’s Buggery Act 1533, which prohibited sodomy and forced homosexuals to choose between abstinence or criminality.³ Murray emphasized that while enforcement of these sex laws usually failed due to the impracticality of monitoring private sexual acts, they succeeded in demoralizing homosexuals’ individual self image and the true harm of these laws was internal rather than legal. In their article, “Sex Laws: The Need For Reform Part II”, the *GPU news* reported the varying stages of progress states were at in their repeal of these laws and the organization’s plans to testify Wisconsin’s proposed bill.⁴ They also advocated for the abolition of outdated sex laws in all countries and stressed that the post-WWII sexual revolution was as much a local struggle as a global one. The Gay Peoples Union recognised the importance of education, employing informational forums about systemic oppression to inspire a knowledgeable and solidly supported movement and invoke political action.

A developed awareness of both individual and collective identity was central to the gay liberation movement’s political process to unionize and transform American politics. The Gay Peoples Union acknowledged both local and national affairs influencing the movement and

² Meeker, Martin, “Behind the Mask of Respectability: Reconsidering the Mattachine Society and Male Homophile Practice, 1950s and 1960s.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10, no. 1 (2001): 78–116

³ Murray, Eldon, “Sex Laws.” (Gay People’s Union Radio Program.) Milwaukee, Wisconsin: WZMF, March 14, 1971. University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Division.

⁴ “Sex Laws: The Need For Reform Part II,” *GPU News*, March 1972. Archives Division.

encouraged gays and lesbians to challenge discriminatory laws by involving themselves in the political scene. The Gay Peoples Union invited Dr. Franklin E. Kameny, the first publicly declared homosexual to run for a national political office, to be a keynote speaker at their Midwest Homophile Conference and publish an article in *GPU News* to motivate gay activists to undertake extensive lobbying efforts, run for public office, and shape American politics.⁵ Kameny discussed the importance of the upcoming presidential election (as Democratic candidates began vocalizing their support of gay rights), proposed bills to expand civil protections to homosexuals, and the increasing visibility of gays in politics. This was the beginning of an ongoing culture war that would place homosexuality at the center of American political debates for decades to come.⁶ The Gay Peoples Union also formed ties with the Wisconsin Civil Liberties Union to create opportunities for homosexuals seeking an active role in legal aid work as the WCLU committed to establishing “better channels of communications” with gay rights organizations and formed a legal defense committee to financially support homosexuals in need of legal representation.⁷ These efforts to politically mobilize homosexuals proved successful in the following decades as legislation later passed to prohibit employment discrimination based on sexuality and legalized same-sex marriage nationwide.

Though politically moderate, the new-wave queer activism the Gay People’s Union blossomed out of focused on inspiring gays and lesbians to come out. Originally named the Gay Liberation Organization, the Gay Peoples Union’s first manifesto expanded on the importance of coming out, urging all people to surrender the security of ignorance and instead open themselves

⁵ Dr. Franklin E. Kameny, “Gays and Politics,” *GPU News*, October 1972. Archives Division.

⁶ Escoffier, Jeffrey, “Fabulous Politics: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Movements, 1969-1999.” In *The World the Sixties Made: Politics and Culture in Recent America*, edited by Van Gosse and Richard R. Moser, 191–218. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003.

⁷ “McManus Attacks Courts,” *GPU News*, October 1972. Archives Division.

to the “wild diversity of human life”.⁸ Most importantly, the manifesto confronted the most dangerous inhibitor for the queer movement: the archetype of the primarily white, college educated, able-bodied, and often middle-class gay. Despite the role of black, transgender women in the Stonewall uprising, the exclusion of queer people of color accompanied the emergence of the gay liberation movement and the development of gay neighborhoods presented challenges for gay men and lesbians of color as they faced racial discrimination in housing, meanwhile white homosexuals found new opportunities and safe spaces.⁹ The inclusiveness of the Gay Peoples Union strengthened the queer community in Milwaukee as a whole and separated the group from many other gay organizations that ignored racism and misogyny. The manifesto also confronted homophobic stereotypes that labeled queer people as pedophiles, degenerates, and “destroyers of human dignity” and attempted to deconstruct these stigmas by compiling insightful articles from young, Milwaukee activists in the gay liberation movement. These essays explored the impact of sexism, religion, and the patriarchy on homosexuals and straights in the United States.

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee became an unexpected hub for cultural change as the Gay Peoples Union focused on destigmatizing homosexuality through education and group awareness. The *GPU news* reported a successful experience speaking in a professor’s class about sexual psychology and its connection to the homosexual sub-culture.¹⁰ The Gay Peoples Union Speakers Committee found that with just one conversation, university students began to reflect on their own assumptions about queer people and became more open-minded. Outside of these informational assemblies, the Gay Peoples Union also hosted open meetings on campus for all to come. In the same December issue, the Milwaukee Council on Religion and the Homosexual

⁸ “Gay Liberation Organization Manifesto.” Milwaukee, 1970. Eldon Murray Papers. Milwaukee Area Research Center. University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries.

⁹ Escoffier, “Fabulous Politics,” In *The World the Sixties Made: Politics and Culture in Recent America* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003.

¹⁰ “GPU Speaks to UWM Class,” *GPU News*, December 1972. Archives Division.

shared the story of Brother Grant Fitzgerald, a frequent attendant of GPU meetings, and his relationship with God as a Black, Catholic gay man.¹¹ Though forced to resign from his teaching position at a Milwaukee high school, Fitzgerald kept in touch with the Gay Peoples Union and later formed the Gay Ministry Task Force, which worked to build a better relationship between the Church and gay community. While organized religion had previously justified and enabled the Lavender Scare, upheld harsh sex laws, and promoted a culture of fear and disgust surrounding homosexuality, the Gay Peoples Union was convinced the church could be an useful ally in aiding the cause.

As several gay rights efforts advocated for the “eradication of gays' oppressive attachments to religion”, the Gay Peoples Union recognized the importance of religious support for the gay liberation movement and labored to bridge the gap.¹² The Gay Peoples Union sought to dismantle the restraints placed on queer people that developed from the rigid, religious framework America had attached itself to. The two largest problems were internalized homophobia and the paranoid political style of the religious Right - which popularized in response to the counterculture movements of the Sixties. Teamed with local parishes and the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, the *GPU news* marked in their printed calendars upcoming worship services and weekly meetings for any queer reader interested or already faithful. The Gay Peoples Union also used their radio program to examine liberal interpretations of the biblical verses and how homosexuals nationally were forming gay churches or working within established churches for change.¹³ In the aforementioned December issue of *GPU news*,

¹¹ Council on Religion and the Homosexual, “No Room in the Inn?” *GPU News*, December 1972. Archives Division.

¹² White, Heather Rachele, “Born Again at Stonewall.” In *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights*, 138–70. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

¹³ “Religion and the Gay.” (Gay People’s Union Radio Program.) Milwaukee, Wisconsin: WUWM, December 9, 1971. University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries. Archives Division.

another article was published by Donna Martin studying the relationship between female homosexuality and the church. Donna Martin presented the issue to the ministers of the United Methodist Church of Milwaukee and elaborated that “the church should stimulate the conscience” of all people concerning its “repressive treatment of homosexuals”.¹⁴ With this attitude, the church was not viewed as an inhibitor but as a vehicle for a cultural, sexual, and political revolution.

The post World War II sexual revolution transformed American culture and politics, shaping equal rights laws, developing explicitly gay spaces, and confronting ignorant, outdated beliefs. Although the gay liberation movement was an often subtle, contradictory process that lasted the life span of two generations, the Gay Peoples Union championed gay activism, using both mainstream and alternative media outlets to combat systemic oppression, promote political engagement, and destigmatize homosexuality. While the Gay Peoples Union began on the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee’s campus, they rapidly transformed into a community-wide organization, establishing the first gay and lesbian community center and gay health center. Despite their decline in the Eighties, the Gay Peoples Union served as the most informative, resourceful organization within the gay liberation movement and played a significant role in the social and political achievements that followed their decades-long efforts.

¹⁴ Donna Martin, “Female Homosexuality and the Church,” *GPU News*, December 1972. Archives Division

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