

HENRY GERBER

IS THE FOUNDER OF THE SOCIETY FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, THE FIRST KNOWN HOMOSEXUAL ORGANIZATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Jeremy Sorese

// October 2020 //

Governors Island, NYC



Conclusive biographical information on Gerber is scarce and often contradictory. What little we do have comes from municipal records, his personal correspondence and a handful of published editorials written during his lifetime.

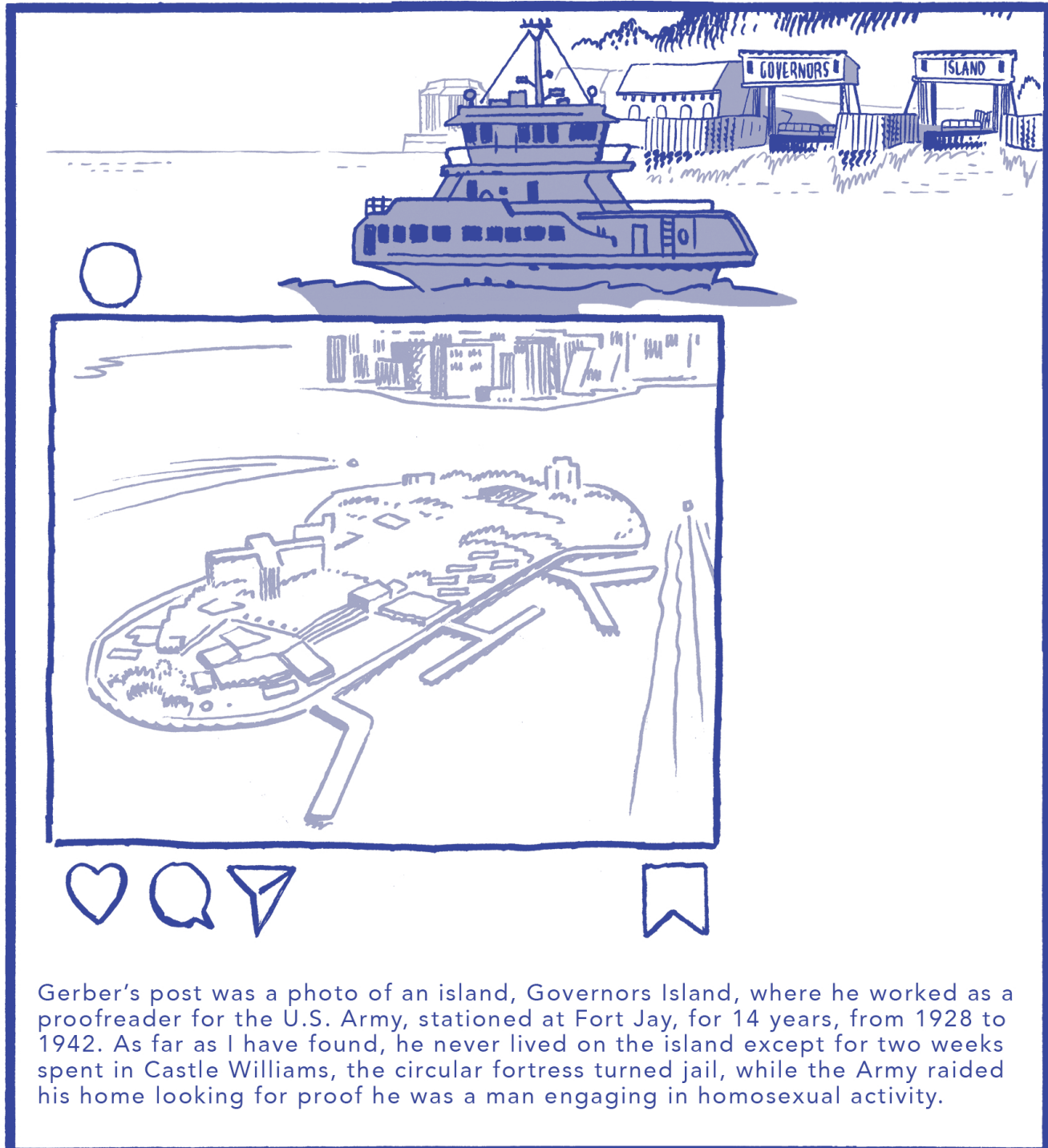
Born: Heinrich Josef Ditmars, June 29th, 1892, Passau, Bavaria.

Emigrated to the United States: October 27th, 1913, age 21, last name changed to Gerber.

Settles in Chicago, Illinois. First enlists in the Army: January 26th, 1914.

I first learned about Henry Gerber on Instagram.

I follow an account called NYCLGBTSTATES, which pairs historical queer figures with photos of where they once lived here in NYC.

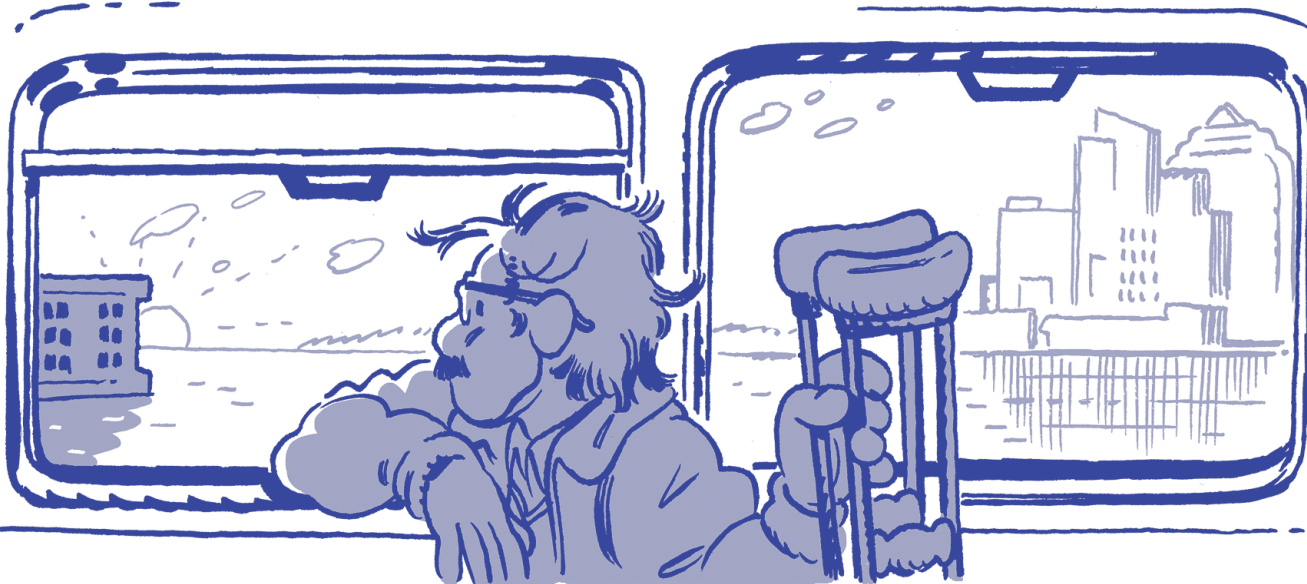


Gerber's post was a photo of an island, Governors Island, where he worked as a proofreader for the U.S. Army, stationed at Fort Jay, for 14 years, from 1928 to 1942. As far as I have found, he never lived on the island except for two weeks spent in Castle Williams, the circular fortress turned jail, while the Army raided his home looking for proof he was a man engaging in homosexual activity.

As a resident of Shandaken: Governors Island, I've found there's something impenetrable about the island itself. It's obviously a place of history, but unlike the rest of the city—which endlessly repurposes the old into something new—Governors Island has stayed partially frozen as the military base it once was. Through Gerber, the island began to thaw, and my time there felt charged with purpose. He became both a spectral figure but also a personification of the island itself. Waiting for the ferry back to the city, the winter sun leaving behind an eerie calm in its hurry to set, I thought of Gerber going home just as I was and how, in my departing, he was staying behind.

Seeing Gerber represented by an isolated collection of pebbles and dirt on Instagram felt a touch obvious, but the comparison stayed with me. After all, he had been a German immigrant arrested and imprisoned twice, in two separate American cities, for his homosexuality and his activism, and is still largely unrecognized in this country for those sacrifices. From the very beginning, my research into the life of Henry Gerber has felt like an act of justice, an effort to amend history and to hold tight to a story that, like so many, are all too easily buried beneath the new.

The story of Henry Gerber is a short one. Despite living to be 80 years old, his list of accomplishments is small. Outside of a single box of letters preserved at the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archive, there is little of him left behind physically, and what has been written is well trodden, the same points retraced by multiple historians. In telling the story of early gay activism, his name is often paired with the lives of other, more monumental figures, such as Magnus Hirschfeld and Harry Hay, and I find myself succumbing to the same temptation.



As what I learn about Gerber's story intersects with those whose stories run adjacent to his, I find myself drifting away from the singular thread of his life. Like all of us, his life is a part of so many, and when there isn't more to learn about Gerber, there is a temptation to fill in that space with someone else. The gaps in his story feel like knots to untangle, as if my teasing could loosen something lost. In reality, that information may just be gone.

In Chicago, there is a library named after him, The Gerber/Hart Library and Archive at 6500 N. Clark Street (Pearl M. Hart was an attorney notable for defending oppressed minority groups and the first woman in Chicago to be appointed Public Defender in the Morals Court—she was also a lesbian). Early on in this project, I emailed them in the hope of learning everything I could, believing that a library archive named after someone should surely contain something from their life. There was nothing. A building to honor Gerber's attempt to form a group of likeminded homophiles had nothing of him inside of it.



1710 North Crilly Court, his place of residence where he started the Society for Human Rights, was listed as a National Historic Landmark in June 2015. I found a series of blog entries titled "My Old House" about Gerber's life on ChicagoNow.com by a woman named Shirley Baugher, who now lives at the address. She had no contact information listed, which left me with no way of corroborating her sources. I reached out to her via Twitter and received no reply. The archivist I spoke to at the Gerber/Hart library was quick to remind me that when Gerber lived there it was a boarding house, and it has since been remodeled. If there had ever been evidence of his time there, it would be long gone.

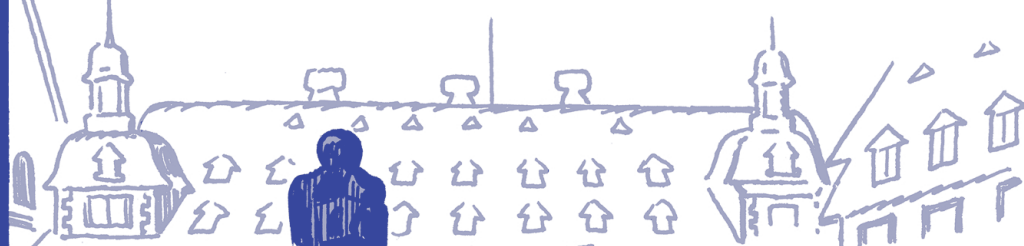


April 2nd, 1917: U.S. Declares War on Germany

- Gerber, along with 50,000 other nonnaturalized aliens of German birth, are listed as enemies of the state.
- He is granted conscientious objector status during the war and stays at Fort Oglethorpe in Georgia. During this time he is briefly institutionalized for his homosexuality.

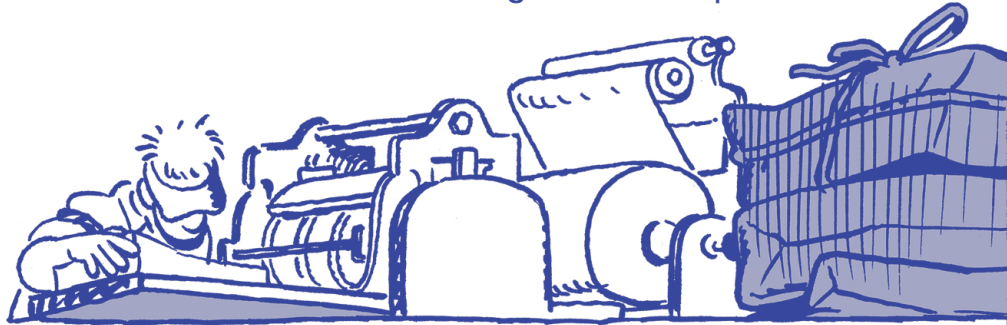
November 11th, 1918: World War I Is Over

- Gerber reenlists on October 2nd, 1919 and joins the Illinois American Forces in Germany (AFG). He gets a job working at *The AMAROC* (American Army of Occupation) News which is the daily newspaper of the U.S. Army of Occupation.



December 1919: Arrives in Koblenz, Germany to work as a proofreader

- Typesetting an American newspaper on a German printing press proves difficult for many on the staff, but as a fluent German speaker, Gerber is indispensable.
- Through local reporting, Gerber learns of a political movement to reform anti-homosexual laws and a thriving local homophile movement.



- The AMAROC News ends production in January 1923 but Gerber stays behind.
- He frequently visits Berlin and partakes in all it offers a young gay man. He meets Magnus Hirschfeld and other members of the Scientific Humanitarian Committee. He visits their institute of Sexual Research.



1924: Returns to Chicago

- He gets a job working for the U.S. Postal Service.
- He moves to 1710 North Crilly Court.
- Inspired by the politically-minded nature of sex law reform in Germany, Gerber develops the idea of a similarly focused homosexual organization. He dreams of attracting reputable homosexuals to his cause in a bid for legitimacy; doctors, lawyers, politicians, scientists.



- On December 10th, 1924, with the help of a lawyer, Gerber applies for a charter for an organization he calls the Society for Human Rights. The charter is granted two weeks later.

- Charter members include:

- Reverend John T. Graves: President
- Al W/Meininger: Vice President
- Ralph Ellsworth Booker: Treasurer
- Henry Gerber: Secretary



The information that I do have often feels more substantial than it actually is. Gerber was my age (31, going on 32) when he created the Society for Human Rights, a coincidence I can't ignore but doesn't explain more about who he was. Part of his creating the SHR included a publication called *Friendship and Freedom*, written out on his personal typewriter and paid for out of his own pocket. The name was borrowed from a German publication, *Freundschaft und Freiheit*, by Adolf Brand in 1921. *F+F* was short lived before being folded into a larger publication simply called *Die Freundschaft* in 1922.

Brand oversaw several publications (*Der Eigene* [1896-1931], *Eros* [1927-1931], *Extrapost der Eigenen* [1911-1912], *Gemeinschaft die Eigenen* [1904-1926] and we know Gerber subscribed to at least two (*Freundschaft und Freiheit* and *Der Eigene*). There are no surviving copies of Gerber's newsletter, but there is photographic proof it existed. Discovored by James Steakly, a German photograph taken at the time of various 1920s gay publications show, at its center, a copy of *Friendship and Freedom*. The photo was printed in Steakly's 1975 publication, *Lesbians and Gay Men in Society, History, and Literature*.

Any further connection between Gerber and Brand is tenuous. On the surface, they appear to have lived similiar lives, but I know this is a fact similiar to knowing that Gerber had once been my age. Brand gave up homosexual activism in early 1933 when his home was raided and all papers needed to produce his magazines were seized and given to Ernest Röhm, a close friend of Hitler's and a co-founder of the Sturmabteilung (SA, or "Storm Battalion"). Röhm was also an out homosexual and would be executed by Hitler a year later, in 1934. Adolf Brand died in an Allied bombing on February 2nd, 1945 at the age of 70.



Where does this pressure to do Gerber's story justice come from then? Telling the story of anyone else's life is full of decisions made on educated assumptions, and yet everything I learn feels equally precious.

July 12th, 1925: Gerber Is Arrested

- A detective and a reporter from the *Chicago Examiner* arrive at Gerber's door in the middle of the night claiming to be "looking for a boy." When no boy is found in his apartment, they seize his personal papers and arrest him.
- Earlier that night, Vice President W/Meininger is arrested after his wife (from whom he is separated) finds a copy of *Friendship and Freedom* and reports the finding to her case worker.
- *F+F* doesn't openly support homosexuality, but it does discuss reforming laws pertaining to sodomy that made it a felony punishable with the death penalty.



One of Gerber's fellow SHR members, the Vice President, was someone by the name of Al. Al's last name, depending on which source you look to, is either Meininger or Weininger. The difference between a W and an M may seem like a small detail but after all, it was Al who caused the demise of SHR. Unbeknownst to Gerber (who didn't want bisexuals or lesbians in his organization), Al was married to a woman and a father of four. It was Al whose organization was founded first, who at the time of arrest was in bed with another man. Back at the precinct, Al quickly coughed up the names of his fellow members.



Headline Reads "Girl Reveals Strange Cult Run By Dad" in *Chicago American*

- Claims SHR members performed sex acts in front of family and urged men to leave their wife and children.
- SHR members spend three days in jail. Their bail is set for a thousand dollars each.
- In one month, the members of SHR endure three appearances in court.



- During the first trial, a detective produces a powder puff he claims to have been found in Gerber's apartment.
- Selections from Gerber's personal diaries are read out loud, including a part that says "I love Karl" (which is now thought to be Karl Marx, the German philosopher and socialist, who was straight and died in 1883).
- Two of Gerber's superiors from the Post Office testify, claiming Gerber violated the Comstock Act, which criminalized usage of the U.S. Postal Service to send obscenity of any kind through the mail.



Gerber himself told a skewed version of the events from the summer of 1925. In an article he wrote for *ONE* magazine in 1962 titled "The Society For Human Rights - 1925" Gerber recounts details that have since been debunked. According to Gerber's story, he was living at 34 Oak Street at the time of the arrest. The scandalous newspaper headline he remembered running in the *Chicago Examiner* was "Strange Sex Cult Exposed" and it had been Al's wife who had found the copy of *F+F*. Writing in *Chicago Whispers; A History of LGBT Chicago Before Stonewall*, St. Sukie de la Croix discovered that not only did the *Chicago Examiner* not exist in 1925 (it became the *Chicago Herald-Examiner* in 1918), but the headline read "Girl Reveals Strange Cult Run By Dad," and listed his home address as Crilly Court.

If 70-year-old Henry Gerber can't get the details of his 33-year-old self getting arrested right, then why am I trying to?



The Third Trial, Judge Dismisses

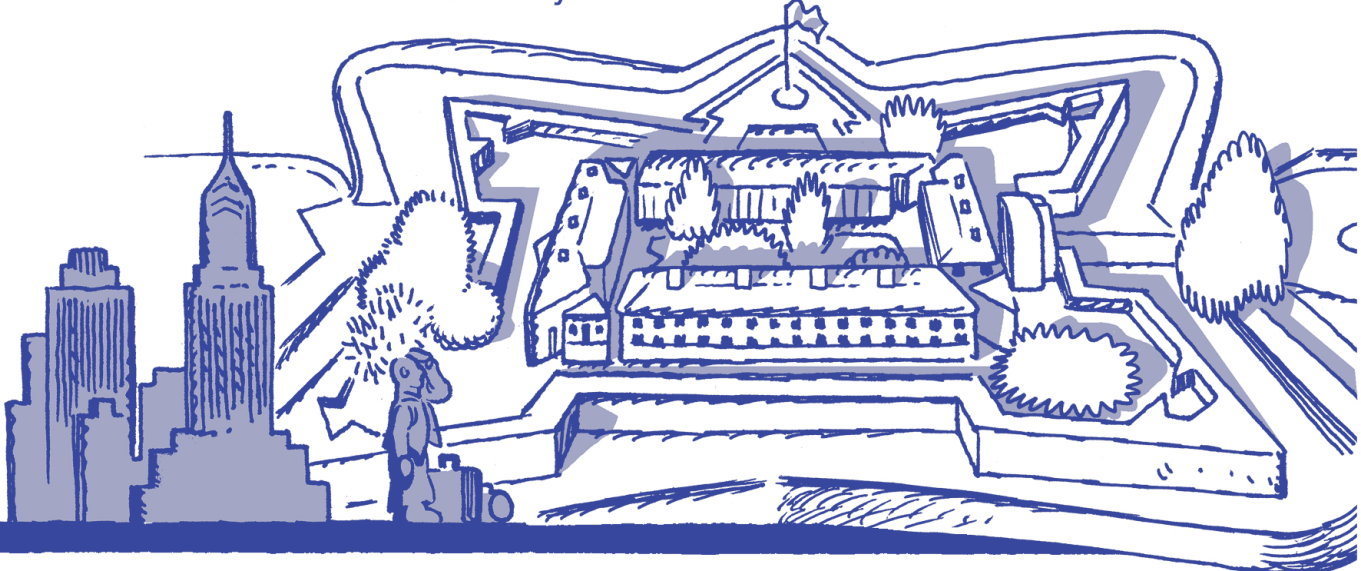
- Judge reprimands the prosecution for lack of a warrant and any evidence.
- Gerber's confiscated materials are set to be returned but aren't.
- His journals, personal writings, every copy of *Friendship and Freedom*, and the minutes for SHR meetings are gone. His typewriter is returned.
- The three trials destroy Gerber financially. He loses his job at the Post Office in August of 1925.
- The Society for Human Rights disbands after only seven months.





1928: Leaves Chicago for New York

- Visits a friend from his AMAROC days who encourages him to reenlist for a third time.
- Gets a job as a proofreader for the Army at Fort Jay where he will work for 17 years.



1930: Gerber Starts Contacts

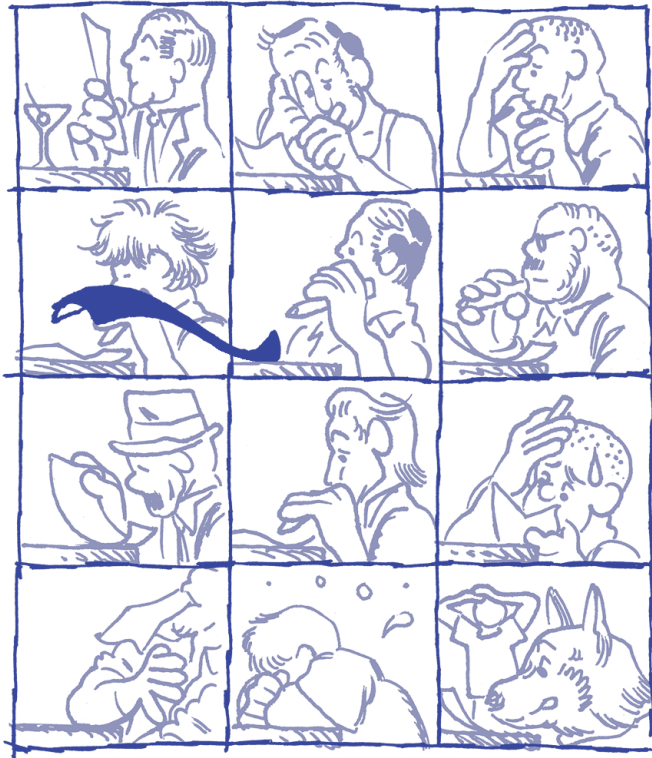
- Gerber takes over a 200-member pen pal club started by someone named "Merlin Wand."

Tagline: The Only Correspondence Club for the Mentally Marooned

- Prospective pen pals submit a personal ad, which then got printed in a mimeographed newsletter. Gerber receives letters he then forwards to numbered recipients for a small fee.
- It was a safe way to cruise for men if you could astutely read between the lines. Gerber's personal ad read as follows...

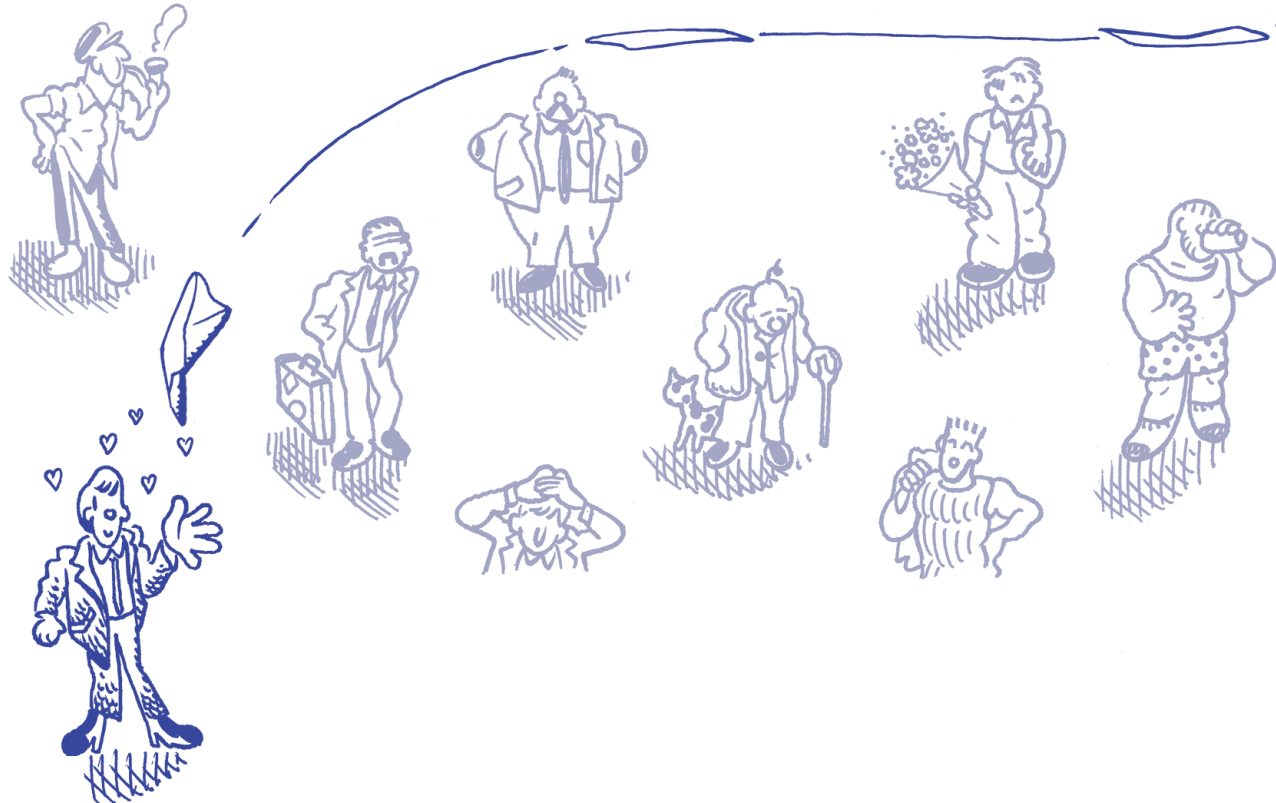
"NYC Male, 44, proofreader, single. Favored by nature with immunity to female 'charms,' but does not hate women... Not interested in the gossip mongering of the average Contacts female nor inclined to waste time on brainless male 'old wives' who are too lazy or cowardly to solve their own problems."

- He also began *Chanticleer* magazine using the Army's office supplies. He wrote under the pen name Parisex, disparaging priests and politicians for their conservatism.



In a letter to Manuel BoyFrank, January 17th, 1940;

I was surprised to find you a homosexual, too, but let me tell you from experience it does not pay to do anything for them. I once lost a good job in trying to bring them together. Most men of that type are too scared to give their names or to join any association trying to help them; the other half are only interested in physical contacts and have not the slightest interest to help their cause. I found that out to my own sorrow.



Most of what we know of Gerber's life has been learned from his correspondence. Through his letter writing, we know Gerber was rarely a generous person, but after his disappointing experiences in Chicago, his writing only becomes more judgemental. He is fiercely opinionated about nearly everyone; gay and straight, male and female, no one quite measures up in his eyes. I would go as far as to say he's cruel, especially in his attitudes towards women. In one letter to Manuel BoyFrank, Gerber goes on at length...

If the average yokel would realize that he can enjoy the sex act without paying the penalty of marriage and bringing up kids, no one would frequent women and they would have to work instead of being coddled into silly baby dolls by cunt-struck men. The very fact that it takes so many laws to enforce heterosexuality shows that homosexuality is natural.

Cattiness is often attributed to gay men and, though we are quick to dismiss this as a demeaning stereotype, there is a certain basis in reality. I admit, I am particularly malicious about other gay men and how I feel some spend their time. I can't speak for Gerber, but it doesn't take much to infer from my own moral superiority that I'm jealous. I think there is a certain amount of historical preservation and intellectual work that needs to be done, and feel frustrated that others may not see its importance as I do. I have internalized the importance of filling in the vast gaps in history I feel exist for queer people and hope, and through the work I make, to come one step closer to doing so.

If I succeeded in freeing the homosexual, I, too, would benefit. —Henry Gerber

I have found it difficult to remain impartial while researching Gerber. In talking about him with others, I immediately leap into recounting the numerous tiny details I've uncovered. I see myself overwhelming those around me but can't stop — as if I am, then and there, justifying his importance. I am not only defending Gerber, but also my own efforts, not just my research but the totality of all that I do. I empathize with his strong convictions while worrying that I too will become embittered through years of being unrecognized for my efforts.

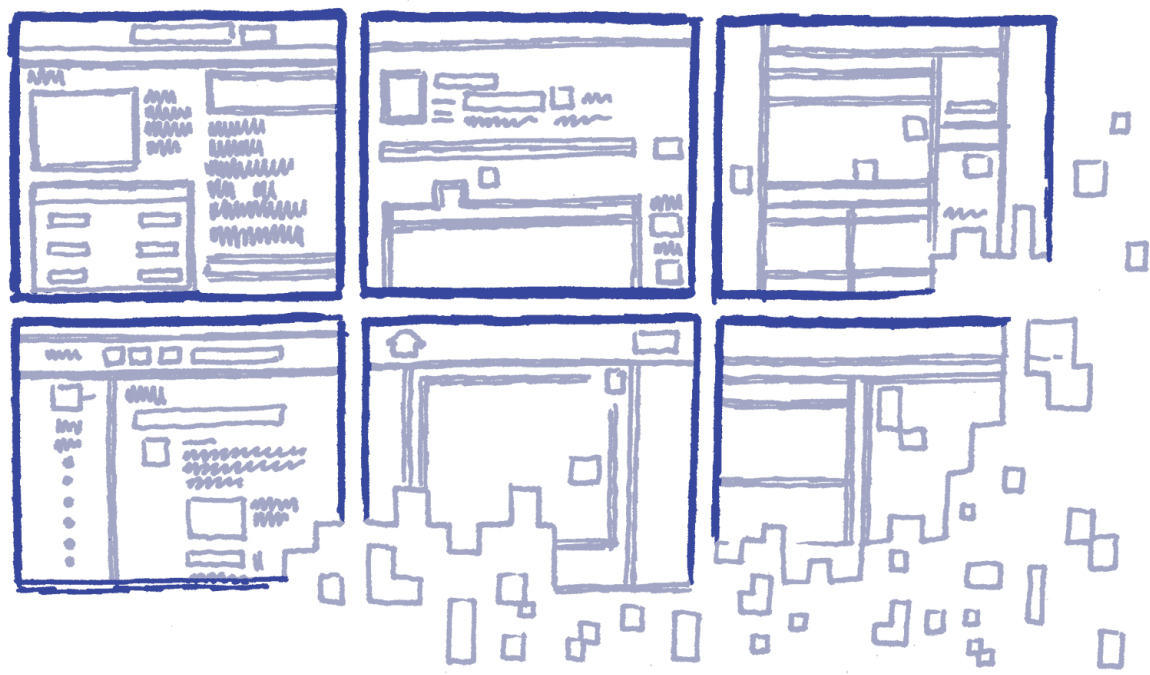
It was my boyfriend who first connected the dots for me. While describing all of the work Gerber lost, my boyfriend looked at me and said,

"You worry this'll happen to you too."

I think we are becoming more comfortable with loss.

In the short time we've occupied digital spaces, we have seen whole online communities disappear with very little effort to save them. In 2018, MySpace lost all uploaded music from the years 2003 to 2015—estimated to be around 50 million songs—in a failed server migration. (500,000 MP3s from 2008 to 2010 were saved by The Internet Archive.) Livejournal was purchased by the Russian search engine company Rambler in 2005 and is now subject to Russian law. Google+, Vine, and Friendster are all gone. Image sites such as Photobucket have shrunk their hosting capacities, and in the case of Flickr, purged excess from all user accounts.

Our digital selves have shorter lifespans than the printed word but we don't approach them any differently. We record our lives for years on end knowing Instagram accounts get deleted, phones get smashed, computers crash. Unlike the loss of paper materials which take up a physical space even when destroyed, digital information disintegrates beyond recognition, back into its original 1s and 0s.



1939: Gerber Ends Contacts

- Worried about the paperwork falling into the wrong hands, Gerber destroys all evidence of *Contacts*, including home addresses and correspondence.
- Despite being less reputable than a nonprofit organization would have been, *Contacts* is essentially the second version of the Society for Human Rights.
- In total, *Contacts* was a viable place for gay men to meet, organize, and have sex for 9 years—15 times longer than the Society for Human Rights.
- A few members of *Contacts* reach out, asking to continue writing to one another on a smaller scale. One of these people is Manuel BoyFrank (Contactor 1366), future president of ONE Inc. Another is Frank McCourt (Contactor 1744), an amateur photographer. Much of the writing we have from Gerber survives due to their correspondence.



The books burned by Nazis are often the only books thought of when book burning during World War II is mentioned. In some ways, this is due to the strength of the narrative—the atrocities committed later feel like an escalation of these earlier efforts. Unfortunately, the truth is that the volumes lost as collateral damage during the bombings of major European cities is as equally devastating as the pointed destruction by the Nazis. In her book *The Library Book*, Susan Orlean explains...

Twenty major libraries containing 2,000,000 books were destroyed in Italy. France lost millions more, including 300,000 in Strasbourg, 42,000 in Beauvais, 23,000 in Chartres, and 110,000 in Douai. The Library of the National Assembly in Paris burned down, taking with it countless historic arts and science books... During the Blitz, 20,000,000 books in Great Britain burned or were wrecked by the water used to extinguish the fires. The Central Lending Library in Liverpool was completely ruined... Theodore Welch, who studies libraries in Japan, has written that by the time the American Army arrived in 1945, three quarters of all books in [Japan's] libraries had been burned or damaged. The losses in Germany were astonishing. Most of the library books in cities including Bremen, Aachen, Stuttgart, Leipzig, Dresden, Munich, Hanover, Münster, and Hamburg were incinerated. Three quarters of a million were destroyed in Darmstadt; more than 1,000,000 in Frankfurt; 2,000,000 in Berlin. By the end of the war, more than one third of all books in Germany were gone.

Burning books from a place of fear and judgement is not a foreign concept here in the United States. The Comstock Act of 1873, used against Henry Gerber during his trial in 1925, was created by Anthony Comstock, founder of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice (NYSSV) and chief architect of this eponymous law that made it illegal to send "obscene, lewd and/or lascivious" material through the U.S. mail. During his crusade to uphold Victorian morals, Comstock burned books by the thousands and was given authority to search printing houses for anything he considered inappropriate. Even the logo for NYSSV depicts a man burning books.

As far as my research has found, Gerber experienced three major losses of his written work. The first, after his arrest in Chicago. The second, when he destroyed all evidence of his involvement with *Contacts*. And the last being when the manuscript of his autobiography *Moral Delusions* was lost near the end of his life. It's hard to believe anything survives long enough for someone to remember it had ever existed in the first place. We use the term "body of work" so easily without really hearing what we're describing. In the case of Gerber, a loss so great as to leave nothing substantial of the physical person behind at all.





- November 1930: Anxious about the future of people like himself in his home country, Magnus Hirschfeld leaves Germany for a world tour starting in New York.
- May 6th, 1933: With Hitler newly appointed Chancellor, the growing animosity towards all things deemed immoral reaches a boiling point. A group of Nazi-affiliated university students who belong to the Nationalist Socialist Student League ransack The Institute for Sexual Research shouting "Brenne Hirschfeld" ("Burn Hirschfeld"), beating up staff and destroying the premises. Later that day, the Sturmabteilung arrive to strip every bookshelf of their volumes in preparation for the book burning in four days.
- May 10th, 1933: The stolen volumes collected in recent days (including the 20,000 books from the Institute of Sexual Research, along with an estimated 5,000 to 70,000 other books) are burned in Opera Square at an event called a Feuersprüche or "Fire Incantation."
- May 14th, 1935: Hirschfeld dies in Nice, France. His body is never returned to Germany.



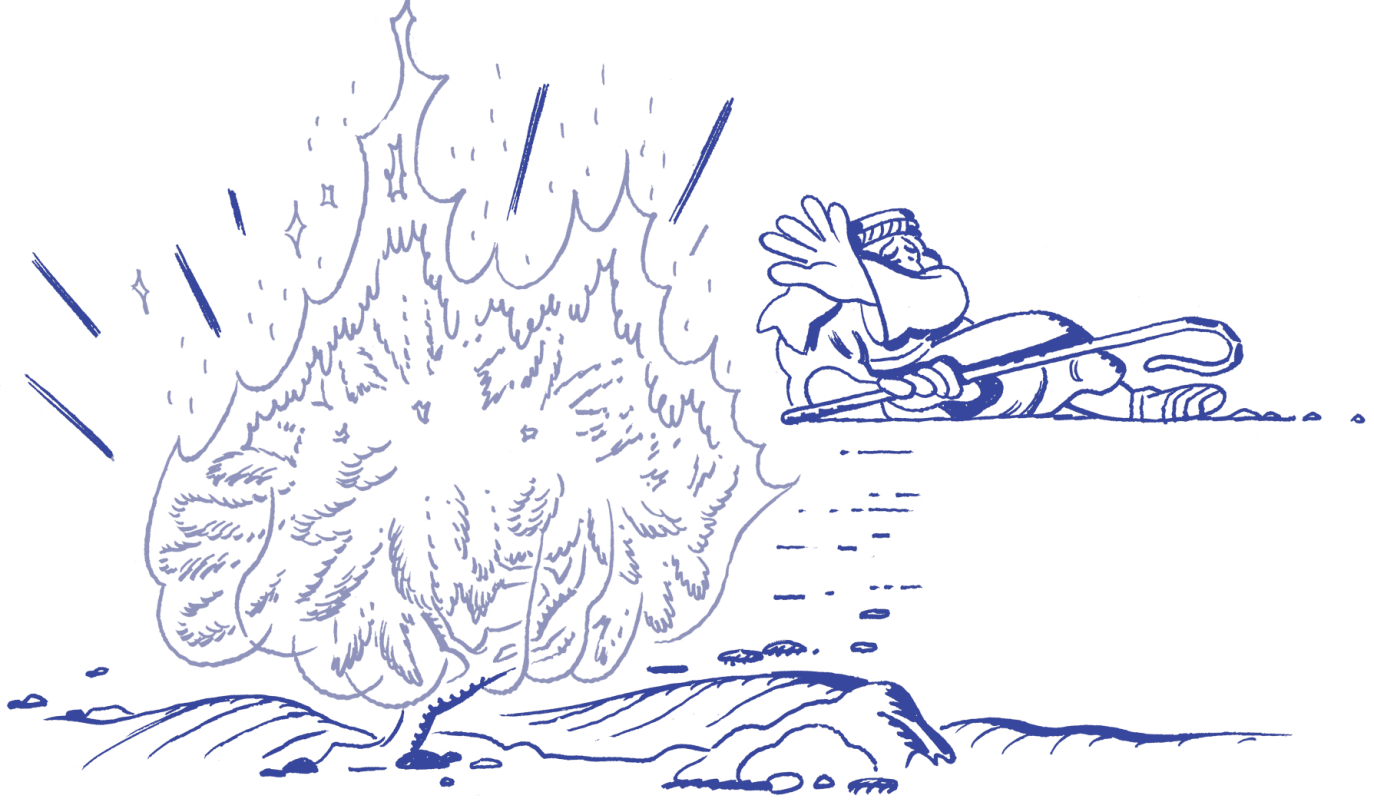
It's hard to tell from the black-and-white photographs taken on that night, but the book burning in Opera Square was a joyous event. There was live music, singing, dancing, a rousing speech delivered by Joseph Goebbels at midnight. The burning of books was a deliberate act to signal the end of what the Nazis saw as amoral decadence. A symbol for a new beginning and a hope for a better future. We can look back with the clarity of history but, in the moment, many in the crowd must have been reassured knowing their lives had a clear direction to follow.

In *Behind the Mask of the Mattachine*, James T. Sears makes a snide comparison between Gerber and the biblical figure of Moses;

"Although never gaining the stature of the homosexuals' Moses, Gerber was well ahead of his time—although the ideas and even the name for the society had been borrowed from his European comrades."

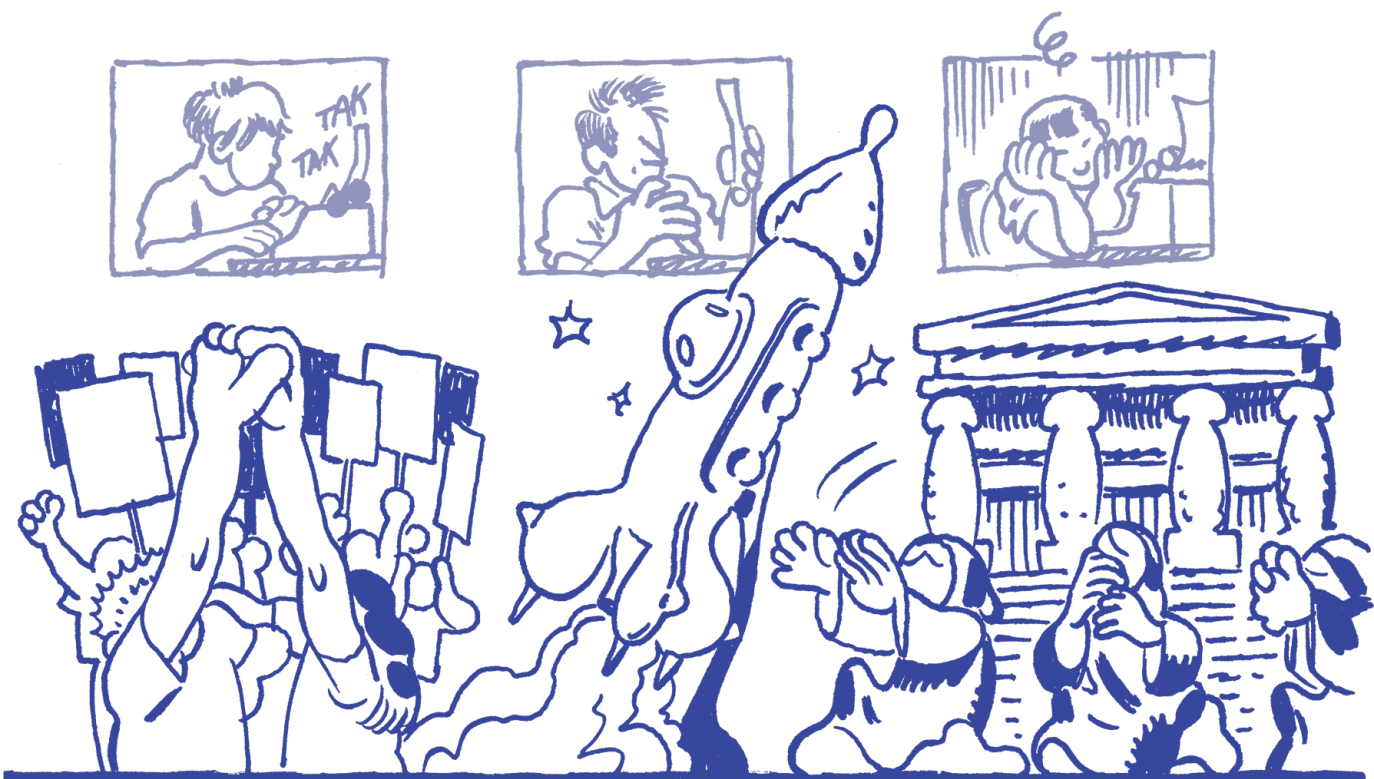
So rarely are we given a sign as clear as a burning bush as to what the purpose of our lives should be. Both the flaming shrub appearing to a young shepherd and a bonfire of stolen paperbacks before a horde of disenfranchised German citizens speak of a certain zealous fanaticism. A moment of singular elucidated truth to push out the doubts as to what we're supposed to be doing.

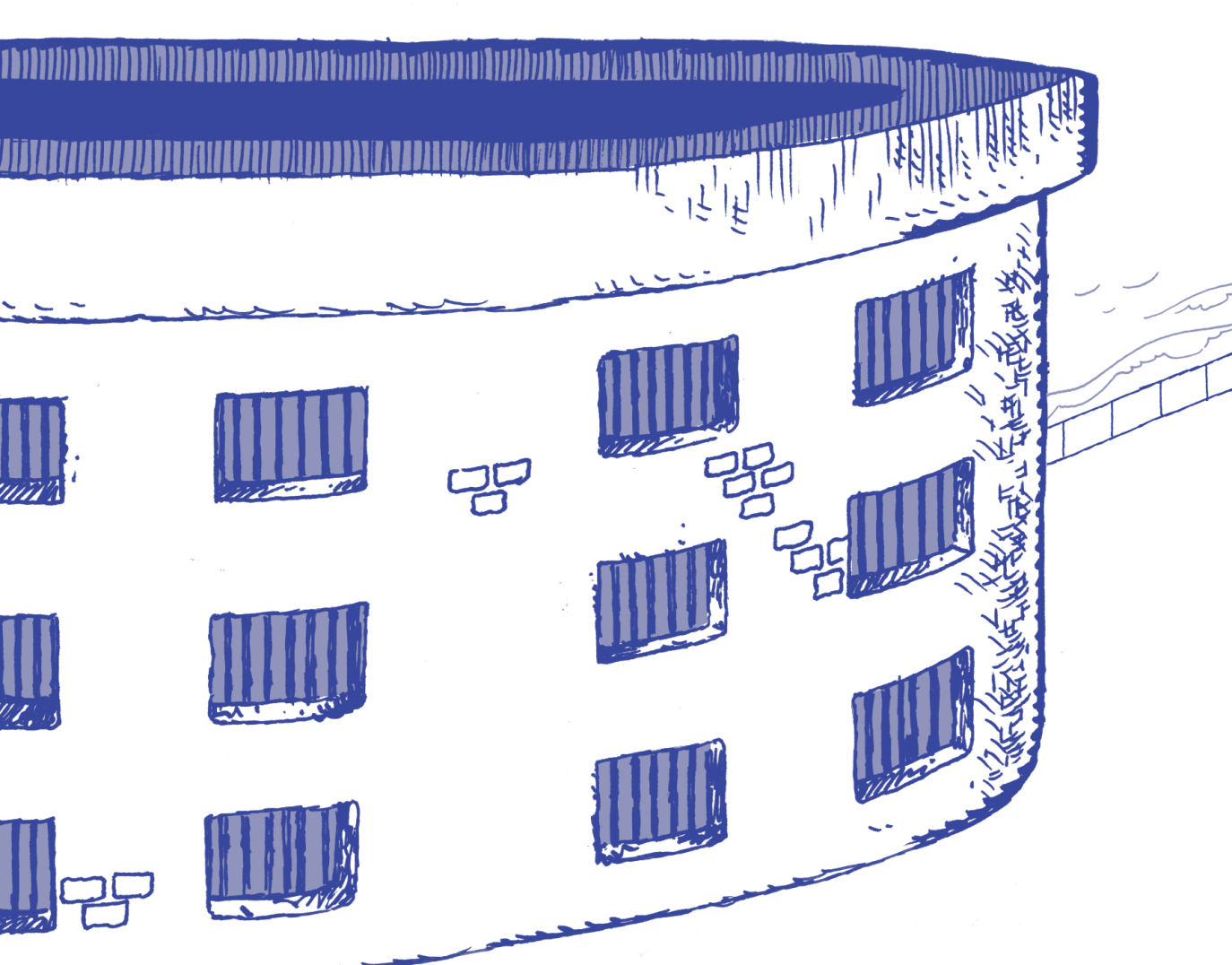
What must the Israelites have thought as Moses led them away, unprepared, from the lands of Canaan and told them that, after everything they had been through (imprisonment by the Pharaoh, surviving the ten plagues, crossing the Red Sea), the Promised Land would not be enjoyed by them but by their descendants in forty years?



1939 to 1948: Correspondence with Manuel BoyFrank and Frank McCourt

- The topic of starting a gay rights organization comes up frequently, but the three acquaintances differ from one another in how this should be accomplished.
- BoyFrank, inspired by the Women's Rights movement, wants to expand beyond gay men. Gerber, who claims to not hate women, "considering them necessary in the scheme of nature," doesn't see much value in a feminist approach.
- McCourt proposed the ideas of male fraternities but most of his passion is in his growing collection of erotic photographs. As far as McCourt is concerned, any organization should be sex-focused.
- In 1942, McCourt starts the Manhattan chapter of the U.S. Rocket Society, a science fiction club which functions as a front for homosexual men to safely meet and have sex at his home on a regular basis. Much like *Chanticleer*, McCourt publishes *Equinox Errant* for his Rocket Society members. McCourt talks of forming a "Hedonic Church" which would emphasize "physical beauty" and the "worship of the phallus."

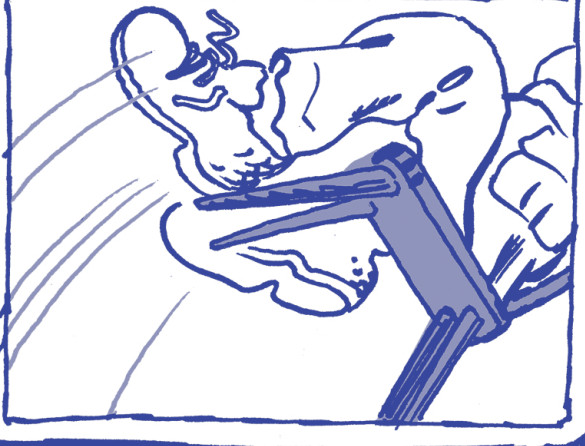
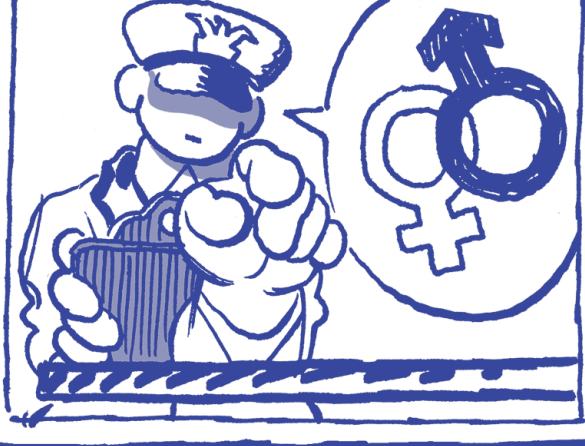




February 1942: Gerber Is Arrested Again

- Despite destroying all evidence of Contacts, the Army is suspicious of Gerber's activities.
- His home is raided by the Army and despite their not finding anything substantial, he spends two weeks in Castle Williams while they investigate.
- Gerber is brought before a disciplinary committee to see if he's unfit for the Army.
- Gerber is given an honorable discharge and leaves his post on Governors Island.
- According to his record, Gerber retired from the U.S. Army as a staff sergeant after serving 21 years and 8 months in WWI and WWII. His army serial number was 6423386.

"They put me before a Section VIII board and tried to get me out of the army on that. When I told the president of the board I only practiced mutual masturbation with men over 21, the psychiatrist told me 'You are not homosexual.' I nearly fell out of my chair! Imagine me fighting all my life for our cause and then be told I was not a homosexual!"—Henry Gerber



1942: Gerber leaves NYC for Washington D.C.

- Moves to an apartment in the U.S. Soldier's and Airman's Home, earning a pension of \$25 a month without worries of rent, food, or health care.
- Gerber's days consist of working on his never-to-be-published book Moral Delusion and frequenting an X-rated movie house.
- Gerber makes his last effort to form an organization, creating the Society Scouting Sex Superstition; An International Underground Movement Fighting Fascism in Sex, which would combat religious zealots, political fascists, and extortionists. He is adamant that the word homosexual will never appear and the organization would fight all "sex superstition." There are to be no meetings, no dues, and no membership cards, only educational publications produced in the hope of educating the masses.
- BoyFrank struggles to keep the relationship between all three men stable but once again fails. In one letter, Gerber writes how this failure to see eye to eye "saved me from the last remnant of my delusion that homosexuals are worth saving."

I want to work from top-down and you want to work from the bottom up. I can never agree to that. In other words, you want to enlighten the people as to sex, while I want to enlighten the authorities that persecution of homosexuals is anti-social and unjust and hypocritical as long as the perversions of the heterosexuals are not punished. The only difference is that my plan can bring results, while your plan can only put you in jail.—Henry Gerber



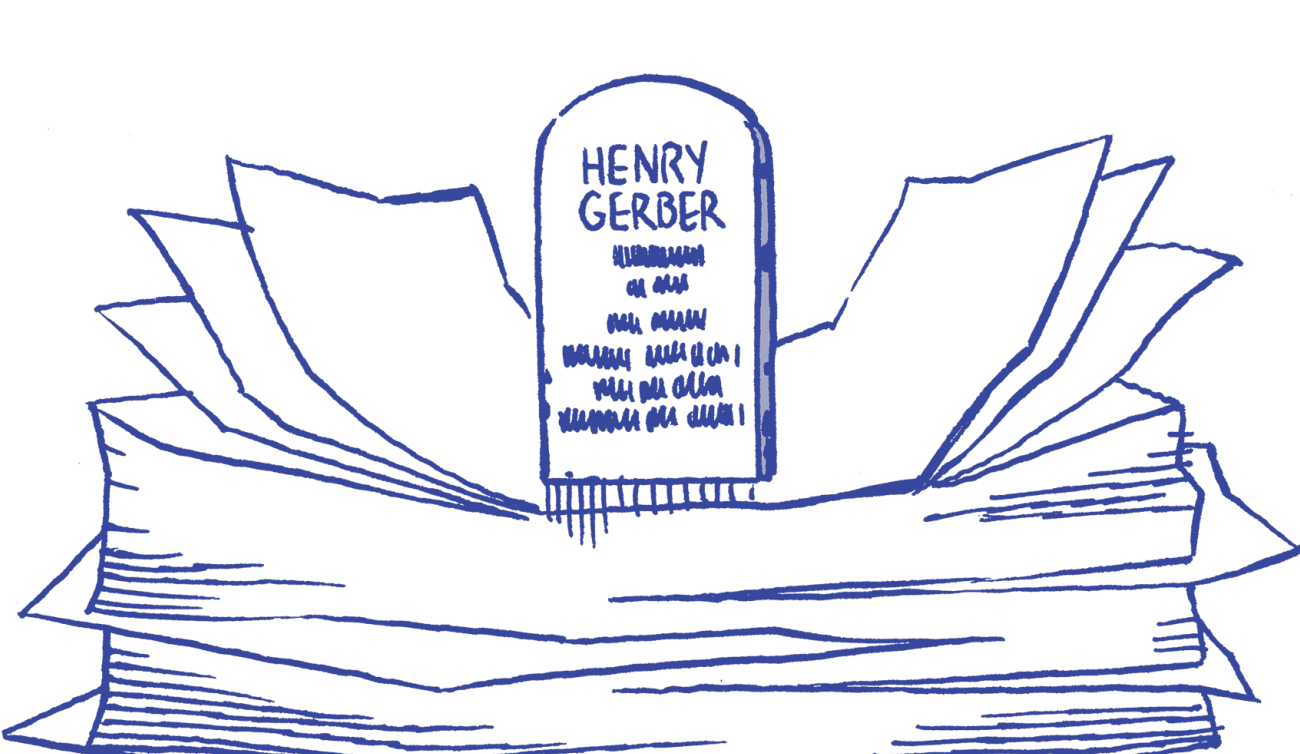
Harry Hay is often credited as having created the first sustained gay rights organization in the United States, the Mattachine Society. Hay, a former member of the communist party, used his first-hand experience being a member of a radical leftist group in creating a more stable gay rights organization; instead of a singular group, Mattachine utilized decentralized cells, oaths of secrecy, and five different levels of membership, each requiring greater levels of involvement. As the organization grew, the groups subdivided further, keeping the threat of discovery and arrest low.

Hay was a firm believer that his idea to create an organization like Mattachine was entirely his own—though there is a distinct possibility this idea had been planted in Hay by his first boyfriend, Champ Simmons, who once dated a member of Gerber's original homophile organization. In 1929, four years after the Society for Human Rights imploded, then 17-year-old Hay picked up 30-something Simmons in Pershing Square, a cruising area in LA. Hay spoke openly about Simmons and it is possible he opened up for him socially, but not the connection to Gerber, so it is impossible to prove or deny that Hay knew of Gerber when forming Mattachine.



1949 to 1972: Later Years

- In 1949, Gerber translates several chapters of Magnus Hirschfeld's *Die Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes (Homosexuality in Man and Woman)* into English. The text is later published in *ONE Institute Quarterly*, the journal of ONE Inc.
- Gerber, nearing the end of his life, continues to write for various publications. In 1962, he writes an article about the rise and fall of the Society for Human Rights in his own words. It is unknown if his efforts had been widely known before the publication of this article.
- Henry Gerber dies from pneumonia on December 31st, 1972 at the age 80.
- He is buried in section Q, grave 833 in the cemetery next to the Soldier's Home.



Where shall I begin? For everything is connected with everything else...Try to use your imagination responsibly—think precisely what our conditions were and what the most practical expedients had to be. Then, many of things I tell you should cause you little surprise.—Manuel BoyFrank

On a scorched Monday in March, I took a long walk on Governors Island. It was one of those days we have in increasing number; gorgeous but unseasonably so, in a way you can't enjoy without feeling guilty. Walking south from my studio, down along Nolan Park and on through the Liggett Arch, I made my way to Outlook Hill. As I drew closer, I realized I was also walking towards Ellis Island, with its minarets and orange and white brickwork, where it sat long before this man-made hill was even a thought.

It's safe to say Gerber knew of the close proximity between these two islands he had history with.

When I look at the shape of Gerber's life, it's easy to see him passively shuffled back and forth between the same places over and over because of inane bureaucratic decisions.

To leave Germany as an immigrant only to go back with *The AMAROC News*.

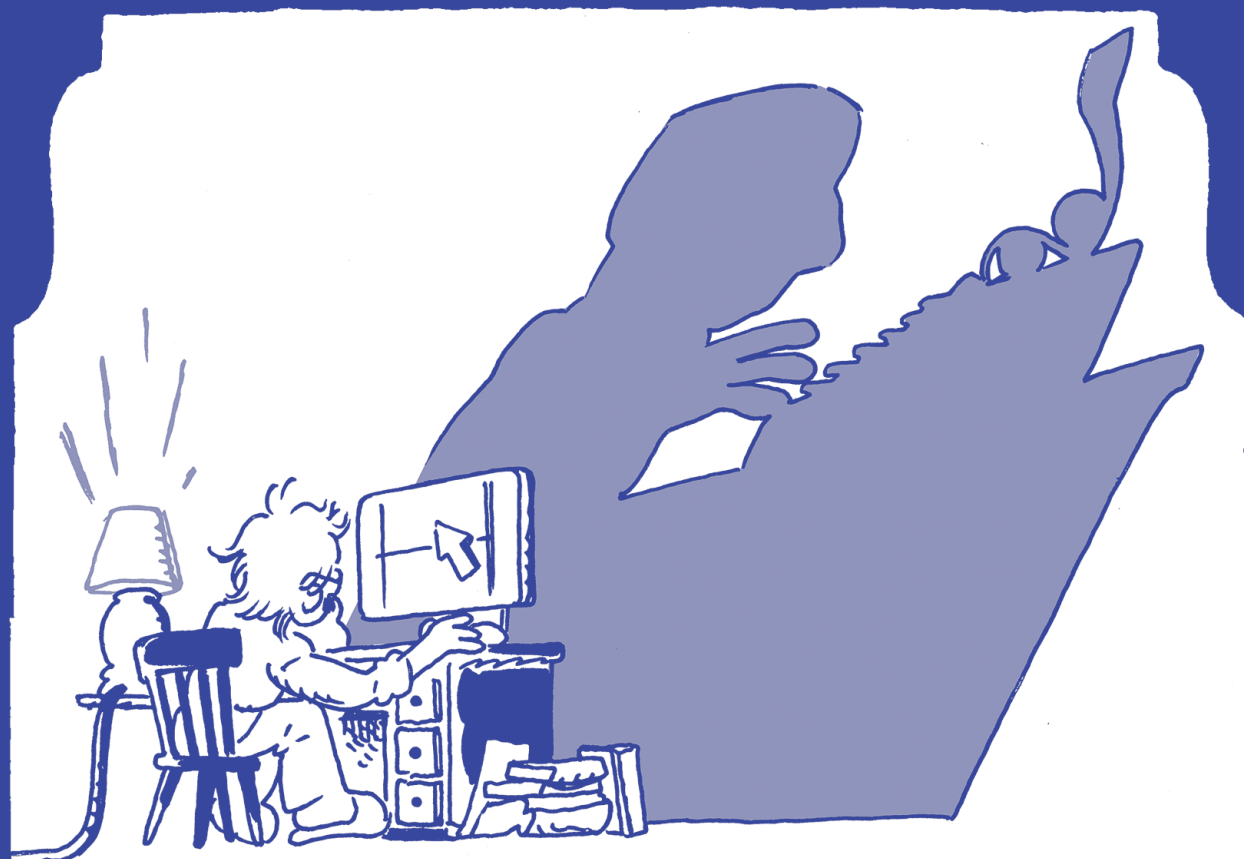
To leave Chicago as an enemy of the state only to return as a postal employee.

To enter the New World through Ellis Island only to come back 20 years later working as a proofreader next door. Gerber's life was an attempt to work within the confines of a system that didn't see him as a full human being. But that's the easy narrative to follow.

The trickier one, the one I've come to appreciate, is that Gerber's story isn't particularly unique in this sense. Our lives are all defined by forces larger than ourselves, which often work against us. Climate change, government ineptitude, global pandemics, forces we won't be able to see the full breadth of until our lives are nearly over. Gerber's legacy, no matter how fragmented, is still solid substrate beneath all that has come since. The pieces are still recognizable as achievements, no matter how small they've been worn down to. Yes, I wish I knew more, but I'm grateful for what I do know.

The base layer of Outlook Hill is the debris left over from the demolition of the structures on the lower half of the island. Below the planting soil and fill and pumice that make up the 70-foot-tall mound is what remains of the old Army barracks, including a grocery store, a bowling alley, even a Burger King. We may think of a legacy as a monument which stands against the churn of time, not unlike a mountain. The reality is, we all get chewed up and broken down and paved over. Some details are always lost, but the sense that those things were once real never dissipates.

What's important is to stay conscious of the individual layers of earth beneath your feet, and to hope that those ahead of you, whom you'll never have the chance to meet, do the same.



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Shandaken Projects supports cultural advancement through public programs and artist services. These opportunities are focused on process, experimentation, and dialogue, and are aimed particularly at important but under-served individuals. Through free residency programs, educational opportunities, and commissions and exhibitions, Shandaken creates possibilities for cultural practitioners to forge new pathways in their work and in the world.