

Society of Human Rights and the First Gay Clubs in Seattle

By Avni Rao

In 1924, the Society of Human Rights was formed by Henry Gerber. This society is the first documented gay rights organization. Henry Gerber was part of the army and while he was stationed in Germany, he experienced a more open homosexual community. Gerber connected his experience in Germany to his society while he was creating it. He referenced a person's right to pursue happiness and the importance of law and order. When he started the Society of Human Rights, he submitted an application to organize a non-profit in Illinois “to promote and protect the interests of people who by reasons of mental and physical abnormalities are abused and hindered in the legal pursuit of happiness which is guaranteed them by the Declaration of Independence.”

The Society of Human Rights started the country's first gay-rights publication, *Friendship and Freedom*. The title of the newsletter was directly translated from a German gay magazine, *Freundschaft und Freiheit*. During the 1920s, the United States was far less progressive than Germany, and Gerber's boardinghouse was raided by the police, and everything associated with the organization and newsletter was taken and burned. Unfortunately, no copy of *Friendship and Freedom* exists today. We know of its existence because a photograph published by LGBTQIA-rights advocate Magnus Hirschfeld in 1927 depicts homosexual publications, among them *Friendship and Freedom*.

Gerber didn't find many allies, most people were too afraid to join a society such as his. Of the allies he did manage to acquire, many left because of family/societal strain being in this organization caused. In 1925, a few months after being chartered by the State of Illinois, members of the group, including Gerber, were arrested on charges of 'obscenity.' The consequences that followed forced the group to disband and they never had the opportunity to promote tolerance and understanding of homosexuality. Even though it was small in size and lasted for a short period, it was a precursor to the gay liberation movement, which came about three decades later.

Seattle

The first gay organization in Seattle was called the Dorian Society and sought to serve the **gay community** and educate mainstream Seattleites on homosexuality. The book [Gay Seattle](#) goes into detail about this group. This society was founded by Nick Heer, a professor at the University of Washington. One of the first public acts of the society was to work with

the Seattle Magazine and put Peter Wichern, a gay businessman, on the cover, as shown below. According to the UW, “The society opened a house in 1969 that served as a de facto gay community center on Capitol Hill. The house provided counseling services and employment help for gay Seattleites. The Seattle Counseling Services for Sexual Minorities emerged out of the Dorian House, the first organization of its kind in the United States.” The Dorian Society tried to move away from some forms of gay cultural expression in order to gain respect from heterosexuals.

[Chicago Tribune: First gay rights group in the US \(1924\)](#)

[National Park Service: Series: Finding Our Place: LGBTQ Heritage in the United States: LGBTQ Activism: The Henry Gerber House, Chicago, IL](#)

[University of Washington: LGBT History](#)

[Wikipedia: History of the LGBT Community in Seattle](#)

SEATTLE

THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST MAGAZINE

60 CENTS • NOVEMBER 1967

This is Peter Wichern.
He is a local businessman.
He is a homosexual.

(For his story, see page 35.)



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Image link:

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/images/Friendship-2.jpg?maxwidth=650&autorotate=false>