

HENRY GERBER

U. S. Gay Civil Rights Pioneer (1892 - 1972)



He was born Henry Joseph Dittmar on June 29, 1892 in Bavaria, and changed his name to “Henry Gerber” upon immigrating to the United States, where his family settled in Chicago. In 1917, he was briefly committed to a mental institution because of his homosexuality. When the United States declared war on Germany, Gerber was given a choice: be interned as an enemy alien or enlist in the Army. He served for around three years in Germany and, while there, learned about Magnus Hirschfeld and the work he and his Scientific-Humanitarian Committee were doing to reform anti-homosexual German law. Gerber traveled to Berlin, which supported a thriving gay subculture, and absorbed Hirschfeld’s ideas. Inspired by Hirschfeld’s work, Gerber founded the Society for Human Rights in Chicago in 1924. The organization produced the first American publication for homosexuals, *Friendship and Freedom*. In 1925, a few months after being officially chartered by the State of Illinois, members of the group – including Gerber – were arrested on “obscenity” charges, the result of a tip provided by one of the members’ wives. Though the charges were eventually dropped, the legal fees bankrupted Gerber and the scandal cost him his job with the U.S. Postal Service. As a result, the group was forced to disband before it could fully embark on its mission to promote tolerance and understanding of homosexuality. Despite its brief existence and its small size, the Society for Human Rights is recognized as the first homosexual rights organization in the United States – a precursor to the modern “gay liberation movement” that would not come about until three decades later. Gerber – whose name graces LGBT Chicago’s Gerber/Hart Library and Archives – is widely regarded as a visionary who anticipated strategies others would one day use with great success.

Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate Prior Experience: What did you already know about Henry Gerber and the Society for Human Rights?
2. Read the biographical information: <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/henry-gerber>
3. Group Discussion: Read the founding language for the Society for Human Rights (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Society_for_Human_Rights). How was Gerber able to get government approval for his organization at a time when gays and lesbians were being persecuted under U.S. laws?
4. Extend Knowledge: Learn more about Henry Gerber at the Chicago LGBT Hall of Fame website: <http://chicagolgbthalloffame.org/gerber-henry/>

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Investigate Magnus Hirschfeld and the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, who inspired Gerber: <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/milestone/scientific-humanitarian-committee>
2. Research two other early LGBTQ+ rights organizations—**The Mattachine Society** and **The Daughters of Bilitis**. How were they like the Society for Human Rights? How were they different?
3. Later in life, Gerber wrote about gay rights using a pseudonym. What is a pseudonym, and why do you believe he chose to use one?
4. If you visit the Legacy Walk in Chicago, take a short side-trip to Gerber’s home at 1710 N. Crilly Court. Gerber’s home was declared a National Historic Landmark in 2015. <https://www.nps.gov/places/henry-gerber-house.htm> Why is this designation important?

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders. <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/milestone/american-psychiatry-association-vote> If this had happened decades earlier, how might it have changed the path of Henry Gerber’s early life?
2. Imagine if Gerber had successfully launched the modern LGBTQ+ civil rights movement in the 1920s, 40 years before it launched in the 1960s. Do you think the cause would be further along today? Why or why not?
3. In 2020 the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed employment discrimination against LGBTQ+ Americans, like Gerber suffered. <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2019/17-1618> Identify how the *Bostock v. Clayton County* decision protects Americans today.

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. What laws protect LGBTQ+ citizens from discrimination, or not, in your city and state? Research and write an essay summarizing your findings in your own words.
2. Identify the organization(s) working to secure LGBTQ+ civil rights in your state. What issues are they currently working to resolve?
3. Does that organization(s) currently have a campaign that citizens can join—writing or phoning legislators, or public marches? Would you feel comfortable supporting its efforts? Why or why not?