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# *Chicago Whispers: A History of LGBT Chicago Before Stonewall* by St. Sukie de la Croix

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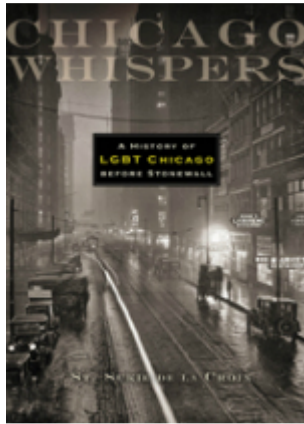
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# ***Chicago Whispers: A History of LGBT Chicago Before Stonewall* by St. Sukie de la Croix**

by Rachel Wexelbaum

Posted on 24. Jun, 2012



**Chicago Whispers:**  
**A History of LGBT Chicago Before Stonewall**  
by St. Sukie de la Croix  
University of Wisconsin Press  
Paperback, 978029928694, 332 pp.  
June 2012

Based on 2010 Census numbers, Chicago has the third largest urban LGBT population in the United States, after New York and Los Angeles respectively. The land that we know today as Chicago has had an LGBT presence since the seventeenth century. In spite of that, no one has published a history of LGBT life in Chicago until today. Chicago gay press writer St. Sukie de la Croix wrote *Chicago Whispers: A History of LGBT Chicago Before Stonewall* (University of Wisconsin Press) to fill that empty space on the shelf.

An internationally published journalist, de la Croix moved to the United States from Great Britain in 1991 to become a columnist, editor, and reporter for gay Chicago publications such as *Windy City Times*, *Outlines*, *Clout*, *Blacklines*, *En La Vida*, *Nightlines*, *Nightspots*, *Chicago Free Press* and *Gay Chicago*. The title of his book *Chicago Whispers* comes from the LGBT history column that he wrote for six years in *Outlines* and continued in the *Windy City Times*. De la Croix's column about Chicago's gay history landed him a job as a tour guide on the Chicago Neighborhood Tours gay history bus. He also had the honor of writing a 10-week series on Chicago's LGBT history for the *Chicago Tribune*. Many people identify de la Croix as a historian, but he firmly insists on his journalist identity due to the nature of LGBT history research. According to an interview with de la Croix,

Historians have a set way of doing things, an academic clarity. There are rules to follow, whereas a journalist will sell his own grandmother to get to the bottom of a story...Gay history is

so hidden and buried, that it sometimes requires intensive detective work...However, in the end, if the book is to be of any use to students, all the information has to be sourced, and I'm very proud of my bibliography.

While de la Croix may be proud of his bibliography, he could not have written *Chicago Whispers* without interviewing hundreds of LGBT Chicagoans for primary source material. While many of the subjects have had their names changed, or remain anonymous, de la Croix includes their personal stories to support the historical narrative.

In addition to de la Croix's well-researched chapters, *Chicago Whispers* includes a foreword by University of Illinois at Chicago LGBT history professor John D'Emilio. D'Emilio honors *Chicago Whispers* by comparing it to Jonathan Ned Katz's groundbreaking American LGBT history classic *Gay American History*. He states that de la Croix "chooses to stay very close to his sources...[and] also displays great respect for the documents. As much as his materials permit, he has them speak to us directly."

De la Croix addresses the wide spectrum of pre-Stonewall lesbian, gay, and transgender cultures in Chicago. He follows Katz's tradition of writing thematic chapters instead of chronological ones. This strategy allows a reader to pick up wherever they wish. At the same time, a reader who takes a concrete sequential approach to history may get a shock when time fast forwards two hundred and fifty years, without transition, between the first and second chapters. In spite of the bumps, it is extremely difficult to put this book down. De la Croix breathes life into a history that deserves national recognition. Take heed, New Yorkers and Angelenos, of some surprising facts about LGBT Chicago:

- Male on male prostitution in Chicago began in 1861, when thousands of single men moved to the city for work.
- Chicago was the home of many Union soldiers who were later discovered to be female.
- Between 1870 and 1910, Chicago burlesque theaters were famous for their drag performers.
- A gay subculture was noted in Chicago as early as 1889 by the medical profession and the law.
- The "Chicago Renaissance," spanning from 1912 to 1924, brought many gay and lesbian writers, poets, and playwrights to the forefront. Chicagoan lesbian Margaret Anderson, editor of *The Little Review*, first introduced the writings of Ernest Hemingway, Djuna Barnes, Hart Crane, Amy Lowell, and others to the world.
- Chicago was also the home of Henry Blake Fuller, author of the first American gay play and gay novel, and author and photographer Carl Van Vechten, supporter of African American writers.
- The Chicago jazz and blues scene of the 1920s birthed lesbian performers Ma Rainey, Alberta Hunter, and Ethel Williams, as well as scores of songs that addressed lesbians and "sissy men."
- The Society for Human Rights, the first recognized gay rights organization in the United States, was established in Chicago in 1924 by German immigrant Henry Gerber. It produced *Friendship and Freedom*, the first American publication for homosexuals.

- By the 1930s, fairies, queers, and “pansies” were known by the mainstream. The majority of “pansy parlors” in Chicago existed in the African-American neighborhoods.
- During World War Two, gay bars and nightclubs in Chicago attracted many patrons, in spite of being “off limits” to military personnel.
- Alfred Kinsey began his male sexuality studies in Chicago; gay writer Samuel M. Steward helped Kinsey find participants, and served as a model for S&M films produced by the Kinsey Institute.
- Chicago became the home of lesbian pulp publishing in the 1950s, with Newstand Library Books becoming the leading lesbian pulp publishers in the nation.
- Langston Hughes called Chicago home for a while, as did Lorraine Hansberry.
- The first Mattachine Society outside of Los Angeles was in Chicago. In 1955 three chapters existed in Chicago. Chicago Mattachine lasted until 1962. After that, Chicagoans Pearl Hart, Ira Jones, and Robert Sloane Basker founded Mattachine Midwest in 1965. A chapter of Daughters of Bilitis, as well as One of Chicago, also existed.
- In spite of the existence of gay and lesbian activist organizations in Chicago, local media gave almost no coverage to the Stonewall Riots in New York. Police harassment of gays and lesbians in Chicago continued.

De la Croix ends *Chicago Whispers* with the establishment of Gay Liberation Front in 1969...”But that’s another story,” he writes in closing. To be continued, armchair LGBT historians...de la Croix has a sequel to *Chicago Whispers* being reviewed by his publisher as we speak.

#### **Works Cited:**

Shapiro, G. (2012, June 1). “From a ‘[Whisper](#)’ to a [Scream: An Interview with St. Sukie de la Croix.](#)” *Baltimore Outloud*.