

Give Peace a Dance

A Lesbian New Year's Eve Party 2003

December 31, 2002 • 8pm-1am • Shenanigan's • 4575 N. Channel Ave • Portland OR 97217



a benefit for Portland Lesbian Choir & Lesbian Community Project

A portion of proceeds will support local peace organizing

All lesbians, friends and allies are welcome

Smoke Free • All Ages
Light Buffet • No Host Bar
Silent Auction • Raffle
Dancing to Music by DJ Lauren



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NORTHWEST news

GIVE PEACE A CHANCE

Lesbian pacifist was accused of sedition more than 80 years ago
for Portland protest by Pat Young

During the Burnside Triangle public history tours in September, the story of one outspoken woman contained provocative parallels to the U.S. government's current crackdown on anti-war agitators.

Who was Marie Equi? A doctor, feminist, pacifist, agitator, lesbian?

"She was always in the newspapers surrounded by controversy," community historian Tom Cook says. "She was totally into other women. She didn't have any interest in men at all."

And that was just for starters.

Equi was born April 7, 1872, in Massachusetts. She attended Wellesley College, where she met her good friend Bess Holcomb.

When Holcomb accepted a teaching position in The Dalles, Equi moved out West with her. The town seemed to accept the two women and thought nothing of their Boston marriage.

However, in July 1893, they created quite a stir when Equi threatened to horsewhip the Rev. O.D. Taylor, president of the school's board, concerning a dispute in Holcomb's salary. She almost had her way, but he escaped her wrath, and she was arrested for her efforts.

A few years later, the pair moved to San Francisco, where Holcomb found another teaching job. Their relationship did not last. It's unclear why they broke up, but Holcomb married and remained in California. Equi entered college and later moved to Oregon, where in 1903 she became one of the first women to graduate from University of Oregon Medical School.

In Portland, Equi set up a health clinic in the Lafayette Building located at the corner of Southwest Sixth Avenue and Washington Street. The majority of her patients were women, and most were poor. In addition to regular care, she was one of the few doctors in Portland who performed abortions.

Equi hired Harriet Speckart to be her medical assistant in 1906. They ended up as lovers and remained together for almost 20 years, during which time they adopted a daughter. They lived in several places on the west side of Portland, including Hotel Oregon at Southwest Broadway and Stark Street.

"While she was with Harriet, she was having affairs, too," Cook notes. Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger "made a comment that every time a political woman came to Portland, Marie Equi was there to capture her attention."

Cook points to when she was on trial for her opposition to World War I. The FBI's source was a woman who lived in the hotel room next to Equi's.

"She was telling the FBI the things that she was hearing through the walls, and these were the nights when Harriet was not in Portland," Cook says with a laugh. "But you have to take that with a grain of salt."

In addition to her work as a doctor, Equi was an advocate for the working class and immigrants. She supported the Industrial Workers of the World and women's suffrage and assisted Sanger when she came to Portland.

Equi was often on the streets protesting one cause or another. But it was her opposition to World War I that ultimately landed her in prison.

According to Nancy Krieger's 1983 article "Queen of the Bolsheviks," Equi joined the American Union Against Militarism, an organization that believed the real reason the United States wanted to enter the war was for economic profit. She gave emotionally charged speeches at several gatherings.



Marie Equi was one of the few doctors in Portland who performed abortions

Meanwhile, rallies were held across the nation in support of the war. On June 14, 1916, about 20,000 people flocked downtown for Portland's Preparedness Day Parade.

Krieger notes, "Equi outdid herself by carrying her anti-imperialist politics" when she walked into the crowd and held up a banner reading: "Prepare to Die, Workingmen. J.P. Morgan & Co. Want Preparedness for Profit. 'Thou Shall Not Kill.'"

Needless to say, she almost started a riot as people tore the banner apart and police arrested her. But a few days later, she was at it again. Only this time, she climbed a telephone pole and waved another banner—"Down with the Imperialist War." Police needed the assistance of the fire department to get her down from the telephone pole.

As soon as the United States entered the war, the government passed the Espionage Act, which clamped down on anti-war activities. When the Sedition Law was added in 1918, it became illegal to criticize the government, constitution, military or flag. "It was this new law which finally snared Equi," Krieger writes.

Equi was arrested in June 1918 for a speech she gave in Portland. The Justice Department hired an informant to keep tabs on her until her trial, which didn't start until Nov. 12, 1918, a day after the war ended. The government lined up an assortment of people to speak against Equi. And she responded with just as many supporters.

Krieger describes a confrontation between Equi and the prosecutor as the highlight of the trial. Newspapers reported there seldom had been such a courtroom battle of wits between a man and a woman.

Equi was found guilty and sentenced to three years in jail. She appealed the case but eventually was ordered to San Quentin Prison on Oct. 19, 1920. Her sentence later was commuted to a year and a half.

After prison, Equi lived a quieter life because of the calmer political climate and her failing health. She died July 13, 1952, in Portland. **JY**

PAT YOUNG is a Portland free-lance writer and gay and lesbian historian.

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