

MATTACHINE: A SERIALIZED STORY IN GAY HISTORY
EPISODE 8: "SILLY LETTERS"



A podcast dedicated to exploring the overlooked, forgotten,
or often-untold stories in gay history.

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Dedicated to Albert Williams

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The original Mattachine Society jester logo is courtesy of ONE Archives at the USC Libraries.

Hal Call: *"December 28, 1941. Dear Mother, I shipped two cardboard cartons of junk to you the day before yesterday. DON'T UNPACK THEM. Just put them away for me, and destroy them if I never get to claim them again. Love, Hal."*

Welcome to *Mattachine*.

1941. Nine years before Mattachine. Hal Call is drafted into the army as a private. He had taken over his college theatre newspaper, "The Theater News," which he used to sell ads to pay his rent and have some extra cash. When Hal is drafted, he reluctantly stacks away his little print shop in the dressing room of a Missouri theater and goes to war.

Hal grew up in Missouri in the 1920s with his Baptist mother. He played croquet on his front lawn. He dressed in drag for his school play. He read poetry. While **Henry Gerber** had begun organizing gay men in Chicago, and **Harry Hay** had just begun to discover his sexuality on the west coast, Hal was a young boy writing his own fictional newspaper he called *The Daily News*. He didn't waste any time dating girls as he grew up, which only hurt his weak bond with his father and stepbrothers. His father's affairs with other women led to his parents' divorce when Hal was 10, causing a permanent rift between the father and son. Hal would run off to the Grand River in the summertime with his friend Clifton. There was nothing to do in particular, but get away from home. Hal and Clifton would sit near the river bottom on a railroad bridge and talk for hours. They would get naked, lay around. It was there on the bridge that Hal had a realization... He remembered finding a pamphlet in his dad's coat about "the horrors of masturbation." Yet his father had no problem carrying on his affairs with other women. It seemed to Hal that many people were talking about things negatively that they were enjoying privately, so perhaps he and Clifton should also enjoy something they desired...

He privately enjoyed what he desired all the way through college. When the war drafted young men out of their homes and into the world, they saw new places and met people they never would have met otherwise. 16 million men go into service, including homosexuals, and suddenly they have a wider worldview. And at first, the military doesn't look into who may or may not be a sexual deviate. And young men at their highest sexual peak have access to explore their interests in new cities with new people.



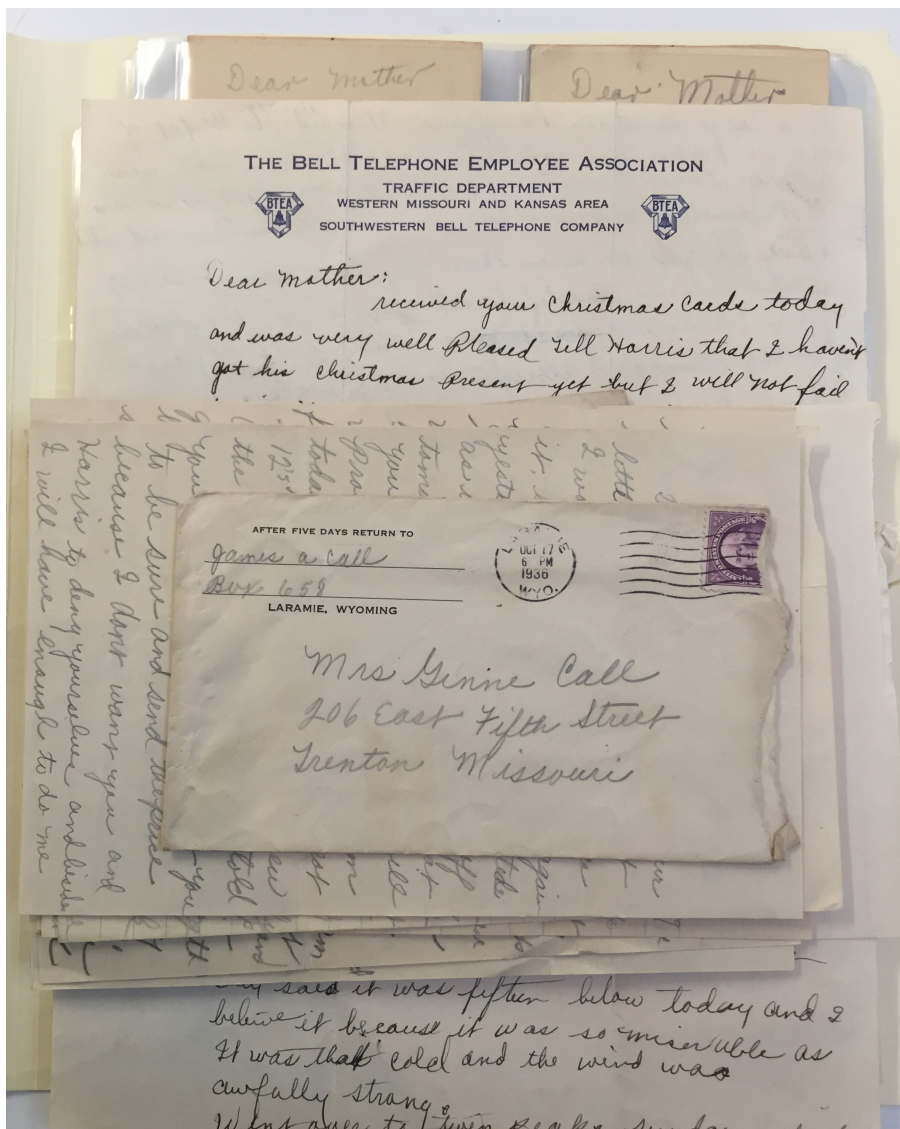
Hal Call

December 6th, 1941.

Hal Call is stationed in **Los Angeles**. He's hanging around the basement bar steps of the Biltmore Hotel, right off **Pershing Square**, when he makes eye contact with a young man. They walk into the densely shaded trees of the square together and hook up. Afterward, they hang around and chat. **Phil** is smart and smooth, and Hal finds he has a strong connection with him. Hal asks for his contact information. And history buffs know what happens next. The next morning, Pearl Harbor is attacked. Hal is sent to war. He writes to Phil, and Phil immediately writes back, starting a very consistent correspondence. Soon Hal has nicknamed Phil "Birdie," and Birdie presses the idea of a postwar partnership.

Hal thrives in the military. He becomes an officer. Of course, he has to suppress his sexual desires out of fear of being discharged. It might be nice to get out of the military, but the disgrace of being discharged for being a homosexual follows a soldier home. So Hal remains closeted, though he grows during his five years of service. But, like other men, he's hardened by it.

Hal Call: "July 6, 1944. Dear Mother, I'm safe. I've seen 14 continuous days of hell! 14 nights of hell, fear and prayer on the battlefield here on Saipan Island. Fourteen front line days without a letup. No man who sees and knows it will ever forget it. Dead everywhere. Shells, snipers, and enemy machine gunners shooting at you; I can smell and feel death every minute... Rain, sun, land crabs, and giant snails all add to the misery of shells, dead Japs, and the stench and destruction of the battlefield to make life dreary, dull and yet keenly exciting..."



In their free time away from the battlegrounds, Hal and his friends go out, of course. They drink, they meet women. Hal pretends. Sometimes the men go off in separate rooms with women, and Hal is unable to perform. When he comes back out, naturally he lies to his buddies and tells them how great the sex was. Back in his bed, Hal writes to Phil. The replies from Phil stack up, and Hal collects them in a package to be saved for him back home. Two cardboard cartons in just a few weeks. *Mother, please destroy them if I never get to claim them.*

The military begins to place regulations on soldiers in order to curb homosexuality. Despite the effort, the military itself is a catalyst for gay life. Hal and Phil aren't the only men experiencing this awakening. There are GI drag shows. There are men assigned to typing pools who go by feminine nicknames, sharing their secret. Gay publications circle, such as "Myrtle Beach Bitch." Soldiers stationed in San Francisco cruise bars the military has designated "off-limits," which essentially lets men know these are gay bars. As soldiers begin to get caught and sent home, groups for homosexual soldiers, such as the Veterans Benevolent Association, bring gay veterans together to fight their blue discharges that deny them their benefits as vets. But it's just as Henry Gerber and his friends had hoped: the war makes way for the movement. **Manuel boyFrank**, Gerber's pen pal friend from our episode 1, continues writing to former Contactors of Gerber's *Contacts* magazine, "The time is ripe for a newsletter." If you've heard our previous 7 episodes, you know he's clearly onto something.

Meanwhile, future Mattachine co-founder 25-year-old **Chuck Rowland** and his boyfriend are in Minnesota trying to enlist to fight for their country. But Chuck is rejected due to his poor vision. Across the country in San Francisco, a teenage **Jim Kepner** opens his draft notice. He's immediately determined "to declare" himself as homosexual and get out of this war. Jim's created a science fantasy magazine, much like the magazines and clubs we discussed in episode 1, the genre serving as a sort of front to attract outsiders. Jim is hoping to grow his subscribers enough to create an entirely gay magazine. The time is ripe, I hear.

Back across the sea, Hal and his troop are under fire, running up a hillside of sugar cane stalks. The sugar cane is burnt and sticking out at angles. The men weave through the stalks, carrying 25 pounds of weaponry on their backs. The Japanese soldiers fire relentlessly. Hal falls to catch his breath before a nearby grenade goes off. He catches a fragment in his hip.

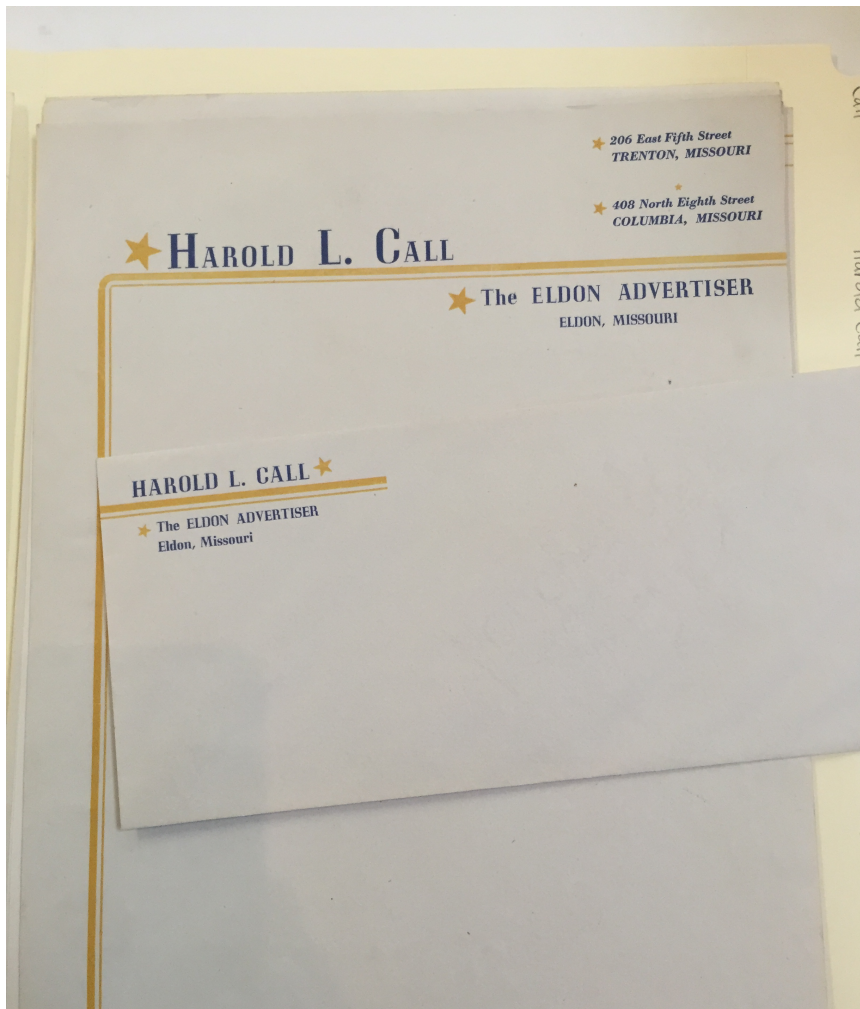


From the ONE Archives at the USC Libraries.

After five years of service, Captain Hal Call receives a purple heart and returns to the US in 1945. Like Hal, most homosexual soldiers don't return to their hometowns and stagnant sex lives. Hal docks in Seattle in October and heads directly for Los Angeles to see Phil. Afterward, he returns briefly to Trenton, Missouri to complete his degree and reclaim what's left of his print shop in the theatre dressing room. Phil comes to visit Hal at school, but gets incredibly sad about the new distance, despite how wonderfully he seems to fit into Hal's life. Hal promises to come to Phil by Christmas.

Phil: *"I have counted the time until summer will shout out in full color, and maybe it won't be too long. As for a place to live next summer, I will have it all fixed up just the way we planned. Maybe not lavishly furnished but good enough to call home in a bachelor sort of way."*

But Hal is taking journalism jobs. A nearby newspaper in Eldon offers him a job setting type. He pushes the move-in date with Phil again. The newspaper offers him a quarter interest in the paper, and he takes it. Hal rents a room in Eldon and drives back and forth from school to the Eldon Advertiser for work.



From the ONE Archives at the USC Libraries.

Four years later. He's a journalist when he comes to visit Phil again. Phil is running his own interior design shop. After the visit, Phil writes to Hal that he had become used to his dull life.

Phil: *"Then you arrived! There were three days of the same old gay life of the not too far removed past. Then you were gone. I again became lost, lonesome, and dissatisfied."*

Hal drops his response in the mailbox, along with his other correspondence. Hal also writes to a friend upstate in Brookfield, code-named "J" in their letters. They discuss their romantic problems, and issues adjusting after the war. Hal is conflicted about work and Birdie. His boss has returned his investment in the newspaper so he

Soon, Hal's running the paper and he's active in the chamber of commerce. He attends events around town and builds up a reputation. With several events to attend, he's expected to arrive with a date. Hal takes Jacky, the daughter of a prominent family. Of course, dating leads to the possibility of marriage, and with Jacky it's really an expectation, and rather than run his reputation and his newspaper into a professional disaster by outing himself, Hal gets engaged to Jacky.



In this small town of likeminded citizens, Hal publishes their paper and needs no pseudonym to do it. He builds a life on his own name while the letters from Phil gather dust. He cruises, when he has time. There's rarely any touching in the public flirtation. There's a sensation in standing close in a public bathroom, but never making a move because police could be anywhere. Arrest would be certain to follow. He just chats sometimes, they feel each other out, give little secrets and admissions to one another. Then one of them might finally, quietly say, *I'm going home*. He has his private groups of friends and lovers, writing letters and analyzing each other, asking each other the same questions Henry and Manuel wrote to each other, the same questions Harry Hay asked Rudi, the same discussions to be spread by the groups run by Mattachine.

But Hal has no idea. In Colorado, though his newspaper is successful, he's suddenly boxing up his letters from friends, never mentioning them to his co-workers, the chamber of commerce, the mayor, his mother, or his fiancé.

Hal: "Then, I met Jack."

One of those cruising spots is the Brown Palace Hotel in Denver, a city whose newspaper declares homosexuality at "an all-time high." Hal meets **Jack Feiertag** in the Brown Palace Hotel. It's more than cruising, though, because they quickly fall in love. On the weekends, Jack visits Hal discreetly in Walsenburg, and on weekdays, Hal is a respectable newspaper publisher publicly dating Jacky. I know, he's torn between Jack and Jacky. But that's the true story.

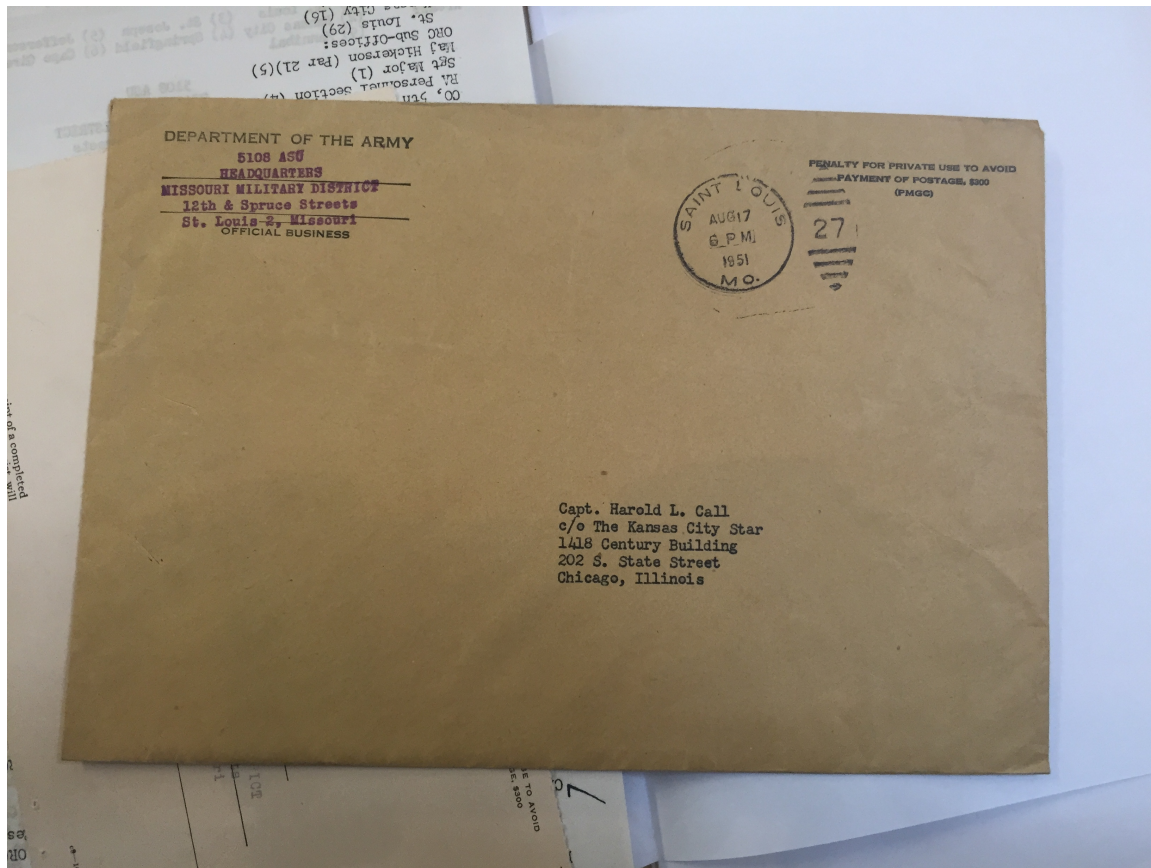
Hal turns the *World-Independent* paper around in just two years. He enhances the local news coverage, cuts expenses, publishes a free Saturday edition, and raises subscription rates 20%.



July 1950. In LA, Harry Hay is presenting his document, “The Call,” his call to action, to Rudi at the Chuckwagon Diner. In Walsenburg, though I’m not sure what pushes him, Hal decides he’s done improving their small town paper. He’s poured himself into his work, and still feels he has no one and nowhere to “come out” to in Walsenburg. So Hal sells his stake in the *World-Independent* and breaks up with Jacky. In his final letter as the publisher, he writes,

Hal: “I must one day make some contribution to the journalistic profession which in turn will square off the generosity you have shown me. As of this hour, I am more convinced than ever that newspaper work is my calling.”

Hal and Jack pack up their things and leave town.



From the ONE Archives at the USC Libraries.

After briefly staying with Hal's parents in Missouri, Hal is soon working for the Kansas City *Star* while Jack works at a hotel. Once they're settled in, Hal's mother phones to check in.

Genne Call: *"Honey, what is this between you and Jack? I saw you give a look at him; I never saw you look that way to anybody before."*

They came to fully embrace their relationship. It must've been noticeable. They've been reading gay novels such as James Barr's *Quatrefoil* and Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Hal receives a letter from his mother, slipped inside is a bookmark that says, "The Wages of Sin is Death."

He reads her letter:

Genne Call: *Now keep this to yourself, but Dad senses something radically wrong with you and your boyfriends. He wanted to talk with you personally, if, he said, you were to give him a chance without some boy hanging around. He didn't like Jack and said he never saw such a boy. Don't tell Dad or Arnold [Hal's young minister brother] a thing, no matter what they think, this will go to the grave with me if I was you. Don't tell anyone else and for goodness sake don't write silly letters to boys and men. No matter what you think of them in anyway, don't put it on paper. I didn't tell Dad a thing and*

he asked me a lot. He says you and he are pals and he'll get it out of you. Well, dear son, if you'll take Mother's advice you won't confess a thing to him."



From the ONE Archives at the USC Libraries.

Hal gets in his car and drives home to Trenton enraged. He sits his mother down and tells her everything. His relationship with Jack, what homosexuality is, and that she's not the only mother experiencing this. He refused to give her the chance to cry.

Hal: "Shut up, straighten up, start reading, and learn something about it."

Then he sits his father down.

Hal: *"I heard you tell jokes about queers and cocksuckers. Well you got one right here looking at you, and he's telling you right now you're going to stop that kind of nonsense! You were running around with Ida. The two of you would fuck in bed if her husband wasn't home. If he was in the bed sound asleep, you'd fuck on the kitchen floor."* He told his father that one time he accidentally caught them. *"You were down there having a piece of ass!"* His father breaks down crying. He listens. And, as far as Hal knows, his father will never tell another homosexual joke again.

Hal's relationships are finally moving forward, and now his career is making progress too: Hal is promoted to the Kansas City *Star's* Chicago office on State and Adams. Jack gets a hotel job in Lincoln Park while Hal looks over 800 nationwide ad accounts for the *Star*. Hal is on the rise. But years later, in Randy Shilts's book *The Mayor of Castro Street*, Shilts will write, "Only when police chased Chicago advertising salesman Hal Call out of the windy city in 1952 did San Francisco get its first permanent gay activist."

Chicago's gay bars are scattered around the north side, near Lincoln Park. Over the next two years, Hal gets to know them. Some of those bars, such as Shoreline Seven, pay off cops to leave them alone. In those bars, Hal will later write, gay men **Hal:** *"...talked in a low voice with other noise and music going on. When we got acquainted with them, we got their names and addresses. They had other friends who they had made out with. We would invite them over and they would invite some of their friends and you'd have eight or twelve people for a Friday or Saturday night drinking session where we had ice and mix, packs of beer, a little booze, and snacks. It would begin around eight o'clock. We would pull the shades and sit around, strip naked, and roll up our clothes and shoes in a bundle. There would be a free-for-all sex party with the radio playing popular music."*

Hal is at a bar around 1 AM on an August night in 1952. A couple guys offer him a ride. He's only about six blocks from home, but he's pretty drunk – and they are too – but he says yes. They get in the car and drive for a couple minutes. The guy pulls over near the Lincoln Park Police Station and turns off his headlights. The two men turn to Hal and begin to touch him, advancing as Hal stumbles for the door handle. He knows – and they should know – it's bad form to hook up in a car, especially near a police station. And, aside from all that, he'll later mention, the two are not his type.

Two flashlights beam through the windows. A couple police officers order the "queers" out of the car. The three men get out, still fully dressed.

The other passenger says Hal and the driver were trying to make a pass at him, but he's innocent. The driver and Hal look at each other, shocked. But it doesn't matter. The officers walk all three of them to the station. Much like Henry Gerber and Dale Jennings, and countless other gay men over the centuries, Hal Call is booked with not much reason. He is taken to jail downtown and processed, and released on bail in the morning. When he appears in court with his attorney, the judge tells Hal that

the arresting officers were within their rights to arrest under the suspicious circumstance, but due to the lack of evidence, the case is dismissed.

He borrows \$800 from his mother to clear the charges, spends \$400 on an attorney, and has to pay \$200 to the judge and \$200 to the arresting officers.

Hal: *"Of course, they didn't have any evidence or anything, but that was corruption in Chicago."*

To borrow the money, Hal has to tell his mother everything. And he tells his boss at the *Star*. He doesn't know that "to be accused is to be guilty." Hal's boss presses him to resign. He doesn't want a homosexual working for the paper.

Hal: *"If you fired all of the homosexuals on the Star, you wouldn't get the newspaper out!"*

But of course, he doesn't keep his job. Hal and Jack load up the Buick once again, and drive away from the life they built for two years. They head to San Francisco to begin again.



