

Robert “Bob” Booth Hull, Gay Rights Pioneer

by M. David Hughes, HFA Member #1444

Veterans Day 2010 marks the 60th anniversary of the founding in Los Angeles of the Mattachine Society, the pioneering gay civil rights organization that set the stage for later movements. Robert “Bob” Booth Hull (1918–1962) was one of the group’s five co-founders, but because of his suicide twelve years later, he is not well remembered. Nevertheless, Hull was portrayed last spring Off-Broadway in Jon Marans’s critically acclaimed play about the Mattachine founders, *The Temperamentals*.

Bob Hull, born May 31, 1918, descends from the Richard Hull (1599–1662), immigrant, line. His Hull line can be traced back ten generations in this country [see lineage, page 9]. Bob’s grandfather was Charles Edgar Hull (1850–1937), born in Jefferson County, New York. Bob’s father, George Elliott Hull, a construction engineer born in Beadle County, South Dakota (1886–1937), outlived his own father by only four months.

Bob’s mother was Elsie Mae Booth (1888–1985), born in Minnesota. Bob’s sister, the author Elizabeth “Betty” Hull Froman (1920–1975), contributed to *Saturday Review* and *Atlantic Monthly*. She married the writer Robert Winslow Froman. Betty wrote two children’s books, *Eba, the Absent-Minded Witch* (1965), and *Mr. Drackle and His Dragons* (1971).

Bob Hull grew up in St. Louis Park, Hennepin County, Minnesota (the setting of Joel and Ethan Coen’s 2009 film *A Serious Man*). His classmates’ memories of him vary. Hull was different from other boys, engaging with girls without pursuing them. He had a sensitive side, but also a fun, even “wild” side, like painting the title of their school oratorio on the water tower, a local landmark, with his sister, their friend David Jenkins, and others. He avoided sports in high school, but played tennis with Jenkins in college. Memories also vary regarding the reason for their teacher’s suicide—in the school lunchroom—the first weekend after the start of school in 1931.

Hull may have taken part in a student strike, precipitated by the resignation of a favored principal, two months before high school graduation in 1936. He was third in his class of 67 and was a talented pianist and organist, performing a challenging Chopin *Ballade* at commencement. Following the death of his father, Hull’s education was bankrolled by another prominent Park resident, Maurice H. Graham, an inventor for Toastmaster.

While Graham had hoped Hull would major in

science, Hull’s friend David Jenkins, who as David *Lloyd* had a career as an operatic tenor, urged Hull towards music. Hull began college in June 1937, but after three terms at the Minneapolis College of Music, 1938–39, and a spurned offer of marriage to a coed (provoking an attempted suicide by Hull, according to Jenkins), Hull abruptly transferred in January 1940 to the University of Minnesota’s chemistry program.¹ Before long, a friend of Hull’s who taught music in Gary, South Dakota, visited Minneapolis with a fellow teacher, Charles “Chuck” Rowland (1917–1990), who four decades later founded L.A.’s gay-oriented Celebration Theatre.

Rowland was born and raised in Gary, Deuel County, South Dakota. By 1941 he was a boarder in Hull’s house; they had a brief romantic relationship, remaining friends until Hull’s death. While Hull was exempted from military service by admitting his homosexuality, Rowland eagerly entered the army. Upon discharge, Rowland organized full-time from his parents’ home in South Dakota for the American Veterans Committee, and later for the Communist Party in Minneapolis. Hull also joined the CP, contributing his musicianship to party functions.

After his CP job was defunded, Rowland left the party, and moved to Los Angeles in early 1949. Hull followed that summer, retaining his membership, and performing in July at a CP front group’s concert of the work of George Antheil, accompanying soprano Betty Jaynes, the actress who at 15 had been known as the youngest opera singer in the world.² Hull also taught at the Neighborhood Music School, a Boyle Heights settlement house. Early on he met and bonded with Stan Witt, himself a brilliant, Julliard-trained pianist (and later music editor of Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*). As early as that fall Hull began taking music history classes taught by Harry Hay at the CP’s California Labor School. The next summer saw Hull being appointed organizational secretary of his party club in June, only to be expelled by August for his homosexuality.

¹ He received a Bachelor of Chemistry with Distinction in 1943.

² The concert was sponsored by the Arts, Sciences and Professions Council. In 1939, Jaynes appeared with actor Henry Hull in the film *Babes in Arms* along with her husband, Douglas McPhail, who committed suicide in 1944, following their 1941 divorce, and his eight months in hospital for a 1943 fall during Army basic training. Chuck Rowland also was hospitalized for a broken leg while in the Army Specialized Training Program.

On July 8 Hay met future fashion icon Rudi Gernreich,³ and after comparing notes about the need for a gay civil rights organization the two canvassed gay beaches to test the waters under the guise of collecting signatures for the Stockholm Peace Appeal, which called for a nuclear weapons ban. That appeal, begun in March, took on new meaning with the June 25 start of the Korean War, causing Hull and Rowland to relocate to Mexico in July to avoid any wartime roundup of subversives. They quickly returned to Los Angeles, however, and were approached by Hay, who had crafted a prospectus for a “service and welfare organization

Hay’s prospectus called for self-help discussion groups, some of which were led by Hull, who Hay remembered as being able to distill heady political talk into practical language, for which Hull was dubbed “Viceroy of the Mattachine.” Archivist Jim Kepner recalled Hull coming to his discussion group “from upstairs,” but having a conversational style. “[H]e was liked by most of the people, even though nearly everyone in our Guild was suspicious with the kind of total paranoia about the Foundation” (the leaders’ elite organizational arm, which was separate from the Society and rumored to be Red.) “They sort of made an exception with Bob.”



1936 Yearbook

Informant advised in Nov. 1950 that subject is a homo-sexual.

Informant advised in June, 1952 that it was his opinion, along with a number of individuals residing in the area where subject resides, that HULL was "sexually queer".

Subject in Aug. 1950 was a member of one of three squads that were formed as a breakdown of the South Tashjian Club, Midtown Division, LACCP. Informant further stated that subject was one of 5 Communist Party members who comprised Squad #2.

BOB HULL was expelled from the LACCP sometime during the summer of 1950 on charges of being a homo-sexual.

Excerpts from Hull’s 1952 FBI file

The only surviving photograph of the Mattachine founders (asterisked), Christmas 1951. Left to right: Konrad Stevens, Dale Jennings*, Harry Hay*, Rudi Gernreich*, Stan Witt, Bob Hull*, Chuck Rowland*, Paul Benard. The photographer, James Gruber, with Stevens, became the sixth and seventh to be admitted. Considered for, but denied membership, Benard is said to have drowned in 1954 after moving to Mexico. Hull’s friend Witt sometimes socialized with members, as on this occasion. (Photo courtesy James Gruber)

devoted to the protection and improvement of Society’s Androgynous Minority.” It was well received. Hull, Rowland, and Hull’s current beau and future novelist Dale Jennings, met with Hay and Gernreich on Saturday, November 11, 1950, Armistice Day. The Mattachine Society was formed.

³ Bob Hull’s cousin, Richard Booth Lang (1927–1999), taught his high school classmate William Claxton “all the technical ins and outs of the chemistry of photography and the physics of lenses.” Claxton became Gernreich’s photographer in the 1960s after marrying Peggy Moffitt, who became Gernreich’s muse.

Hay’s prospectus also characterized homosexuals as a minority along the lines of African Americans and Jews. Jennings, and others who followed, including the actor Paul Benard with whom Hull lived for a time, questioned the minority model because it assumed that people from disparate backgrounds would be united by their private proclivity. Nevertheless, Jennings accepted the organization’s support for his (successful) acquittal on a vice squad arrest. (Hull, like many gay men of his time and place, was himself a registered sex offender due to “vagrant lewd” charges.)

The acquittal campaign and victory caused growth in the organization. Members began to question the need for the cell-like structure that had kept the ranks protected, yet isolated. Alert to such rumblings, in the spring of 1953 the founders held two constitutional conventions, where transparency was advocated, the minority model debated, and the founders Red-baited. At the second convention, the founders abdicated—at Hull's suggestion—and the Mattachine elected new, right-leaning leadership that led the group into the 1960s as a force for change, the merits of which remain the subject of study.

After the conventions, Hull occupied himself with allied, low-key pursuits. He was organist at the First Universalist Church, whose pastor (and future anti-censorship crusader) Wallace de Ortega Maxey, remained a Mattachine member. Jim Kepner recalled that "Chuck, Bob and I tried to start a gay group in Mexico City" in 1954. In 1956, Hull and Stan Witt assisted Rowland in the establishment of his gay-friendly Church of One Brotherhood, which he saw as a First Amendment refuge, mindful of J. Edgar Hoover's 1951 threat that 14,000 Reds could be rounded up "on a moment's notice." But pivotal for Hull, post-Mattachine (in late 1954), was meeting his romantic partner of the next seven years, who has requested anonymity. Hull and his lover enjoyed outdoor camping, performing chamber music, and spending holidays with Hull's relatives and with his mother, Elsie, who was accepting and, in fact, considered Hull's partner to be a second son.

Bob Hull is described by this lover, who is a psychologist, as being a depressed type. During years in therapy, Hull's psychiatrist actually used an amphetamine-type stimulant in their sessions to overcome Hull's reluctance to open up. After these sessions, Hull drank alcohol to come down—an

emotional and psychological seesawing routine that, undertaken on a regular basis, surely took a toll. When his partner separated from Hull for personal reasons in early 1962, Hull faced either living alone, which he couldn't abide, or seeking out a new mate, which he found daunting as he approached middle age. Although his friend Stan Witt stood by him, Hull allowed a crippling introversion, and an aversion to confrontation—nurtured in childhood by his excessively pacific mother—to prevail. Not long after finding himself single, Bob Hull killed himself. It was May 1, 1962—International Workers' Day.

No memorial was held, nor obituary published. Elsie's "second son" assisted her with cremation arrangements, and Bob's remains were placed at the historic Chapel of the Pines columbarium, in Los Angeles (next to Angelus-Rosedale Cemetery), in a crypt from which the public and even family members are barred. Harry Hay wrote the only known tribute to Bob Hull in *ONE Magazine*.

To The Memory Of Robert Hull

Skilled organic chemist, indefatigable musician and musicologist, a charter organizer and executive committee member of the original Mattachine Society.

DEAD BY HIS OWN HAND

Here was a man whose inspired response to the initial "Mattachine-idea Prospectus" brought together the dedicated Five who, expanded to Seven, pioneered and carried through the original Mattachine Society.

Bob, it was your stubborn search for logical function a decade ago, coupled with the passion and intensity of your belief in the first Mattachine Idea, that helped create within the living and working relationship of the pioneers a bond even closer and more precious than brotherhood. Somewhere, in the years that followed, we—who now so sadly scribble these pedestrian sentiments—failed you. Forgive us!

Some of this material has appeared in a different form on OutHistory.org, "The Pre-Gay Era in the USA: 1950–1969, Movement Pioneers," curated by C. Todd White. Hughes is in the last few months of research for a book-length biography of Hull and Rowland and welcomes any information or feedback. Please contact him at david@qualityofmercy.com.

Sources: I am particularly grateful to Stan Witt and Anonymous for their contributions to this profile of their friend. 1936 *Echowan*, Senior Class of St. Louis Park High School, St. Louis Park, MN, p. 11, by kind gift of Jacquelyn Waleen. 1941 *Suburban Directory and Map, St. Louis Park [MN]*, p. 71. I am grateful to Jeanne Anderson for this, and to the St. Louis Park Historical Society and many St. Louis Park residents, named and unnamed, for their many kindnesses. Anonymous. Telephone interviews by M. David Hughes, five occasions, October 2008 through August 2009. Arts, Sciences and Professions Council, Music Division. George Antheil Program, Assistance League Playhouse, Hollywood, CA, July 17, 1949. Antheil Papers, New York Public Library. I am grateful to my mother, Phyllis J. Hughes, for this. Bryant, Kimberly, Administrator, Chapel of the Pines, Los Angeles. Interview by M. David Hughes, November 20, 2007. *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 10, 1937, p. W6, "Betty Jaynes, Opera Baby, To Make Radio Bow." Claxton, William. Interview (n.d.) transcribed on *The Digital Journalist*, <http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0103/wc04.htm>, accessed September 23, 2010. I am grateful to Anne Lang for bringing this to my attention. Commire, Anne. *Something About the Author*, Vol. 10: Elizabeth Hull Froman. Detroit: Gale Research, 1976, p. 49.

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Lineage of Robert “Bob” Booth Hull

Robert “Bob” Booth Hull, b. 31 May 1918, Minneapolis, Hennepin Co., MN; d. 02 May 1962, Los Angeles, Los Angeles Co., CA; bur. Chapel of the Pines, Los Angeles, Los Angeles Co., CA (cremation)

George Eliot Hull, b. 25 Jul 1886, Beadle Co., SD; d. 11 Aug 1937, Hennepin Co., MN; m. ca. 1917, Elsie Booth

Charles Edgar Hull, b. 31 Jul 1850, Jefferson Co., NY; d. 12 Apr 1937, Cass Co., ND; m. 20 Jan 1880, Whiteside Co., IL, Elizabeth “Lizzie” Paddock

George E. Hull, b. ca. 1818, Cheshire, Berkshire Co., MA; d. 16 May 1854; bur. Brewster Cemetery, Ellisburgh, Jefferson Co., NY; m. Jane A. Parker

Nathaniel Hull, b. ca. 1795, CT; d. between 1835 & 1847; m. 09 Feb 1815, Cheshire, Berkshire Co., MA (1) Prudence Fish (Served in War of 1812)

George Hull, b. 08 Apr 1764, Wallingford, New Haven Co, CT; m. 31 Jul 1785, Wallingford, CT, Elizabeth Foster

Dr. Nathaniel Hull, b. 07 Mar 1743, New Haven Co, CT; d. 25 Feb 1771, Wallingford, New Haven Co., CT; m. 13 Apr 1763, Mehitable Beadles

Dr. John Hull, b. 13 Mar 1712, Wallingford, New Haven Co, CT; d. 15 Aug 1755, Wallingford, CT; m. 28 Oct 1735, Wallingford, CT, Mary Andrews

Dr. Jeremiah “Jery” Hull, b. 28 Sep 1679, Derby, New Haven Co., CT; d. 11 May 1736; m. 24 Mar 1711, Wallingford, New Haven Co., CT, Hannah Cook, b. 28 May 1693; d. 22 Nov 1735

Dr. John Hull, bap. 24 May 1640, New Haven, New Haven Co, CT; d. 06 Dec 1711, Wallingford, New Haven Co., CT; m. #1 Mary (?Beach)

Richard Hull, b., prob. ENG, will: 21 Aug 1662, pro.: 06 Jan 1662/3, New Haven, New Haven Co., CT; m. ?

Tombstones of Ancestors of Robert "Bob" Booth Hull

Brewster Cemetery, Ellisburgh, Jefferson County, New York

Photographed by Phyllis J. Hughes, HFA Genealogist



Tombstone for George E. Hull
Died May 16, 1854, Aged 37 Years.
Great Grandfather of Robert Booth Hull



Footstone for Wife Jane A. (Parker) Hull
Great Grandmother of Robert Booth Hull



Footstone for Son George E. Hull



Tombstone for son George E. Hull, 1852-1930
and his Mother Jane A. (Parker) Hull, 1828-1918