



Milwaukee LGBT History Project, Inc.

Gov. Dreyfus signs Assembly Bill 70 into law, flanked by Leon Rouse (left) and Rep. David Clarenbach (right), Feb. 25, 1982. Photo provided by David Clarenbach.

Passing Gay Rights in Wisconsin, 1967-1983

In 1982, Wisconsin became the first U.S. state to protect lesbians and gay men from discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations. One year later, the Wisconsin Legislature legalized all sexual relations between

consenting adults, including between those of the same sex. These landmark achievements were the result of a fifteen-year struggle carried out by progressive lawmakers and LGBT activists.

In 1967, state legislator and civil rights activist Lloyd Barbee introduced in the Wisconsin State Assembly the first bill to decriminalize homosexuality and all sexual practices between consenting adults. In 1971, two years after the Stonewall Riots in New York, he followed up with a bill to protect gays and lesbians from job discrimination. When Barbee left the Assembly in 1976, Representative David Clarenbach steadily continued to build support for both bills.

During the same period, Milwaukee college student Leon Rouse started his own campaign for gay and lesbian rights, organizing clergy from Christian and Jewish denominations to join him on the board of the Committee for Fundamental Judeo-Christian Human Rights. Members of the committee lobbied their superiors as well as their political representatives, and traveled to Madison to testify in support of the gay rights bill. Rouse also recruited Catholic Archbishop Rembert Weakland to his cause. Weakland voiced his support in a letter distributed among legislators, and he publicly asked Catholics to respect gay people and back their struggle for rights in a column for Milwaukee's weekly Catholic newspaper.

While Rouse and the Committee assembled religious support, David Clarenbach and other progressive legislators organized the necessary votes. Clarenbach framed the bill as a question of civil rights rather than gay rights. He brought to bear his ties with labor and liberal interest groups, and reached out to Republican allies. In the end, Assembly Bill 70 passed both houses with bipartisan support. Republican Governor Lee Dreyfus signed it into law on February 25, 1982, adding another "Wisconsin First" to the state's history of pioneering progressive legislation.

A Chronology of Wisconsin's Pioneering Gay Rights Law



1967 Rep. Lloyd Barbee introduces in the Wisconsin State Assembly the first bill to decriminalize homosexuality and all other sex between consenting adults. At this time, Wisconsin law prohibits oral and anal sex for everyone, including married couples.

1969 In June, LGBT patrons of a New York bar, the Stonewall Inn, stand up against a police raid, kick-starting the modern gay liberation movement. Soon after, Wisconsin queers found their first organizations.

1971 Rep. Barbee introduces the first non-discrimination bill for homosexuals.

1975 David Clarenbach is elected to his first term in the Wisconsin Assembly. He follows Rep. Barbee as the most vocal gay rights advocate in the legislature.



The Madison City Council includes gays and lesbians in the city's Equal Opportunity Ordinance.

1977 Anita Bryant leads a successful campaign to repeal a gay rights ordinance in Dade County, Florida. Her campaign begins an organized opposition to gay rights that spreads across the nation.

1978 An effort to repeal Madison's gay rights ordinance fails.

1979 Milwaukee college student Leon Rouse founds the Committee for Fundamental Judeo-Christian Human Rights to organize religious support for gay rights. Members include clergy from the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, United Methodist, Episcopal, United Church of Christ, and United Presbyterian denominations, as well as a rabbi.

1980 The Milwaukee Common Council passes an ordinance prohibiting job discrimination on the basis of sexual preference.



Roman Catholic Archbishop Rembert Weakland publishes a column in support of gay rights in the *Catholic Herald Citizen*.

The Dane County Board of Supervisors adopts an ordinance prohibiting discrimination against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals.

1981 The Wisconsin Assembly passes the non-discrimination bill for lesbians and gay men with bipartisan votes.

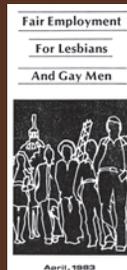
Dreyfus signs sex preference bill



1982 The Wisconsin Senate passes the bill with bipartisan votes.

Fundamentalist Christian radio stations mount a last-minute campaign to pressure the governor to veto the bill. Madison's LGBT community and progressive radio WORT counter with a campaign in support of the bill.

On February 25, Republican Governor Lee Dreyfus signs the bill into law. He cites the broad religious support, the bipartisan votes, the existing local ordinances and the "fundamental Republican principle that government should have a very restricted involvement in people's private and personal lives."



1983 Wisconsin legalizes sex between consenting adults.