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“Jorgensen Enjoys Being Christine”: Christine Jorgensen’s Public Image and How It Shaped a Movement



By: Giovanni Esparza

Mentors: Joan Clinefelter and Chris Talbot

Historical Questions

1. In what ways did Jorgensen both positively progress and negatively complicate the transsexual movement?
2. How did Jorgensen articulate her understanding of gender?
3. And in so doing, how did she become a key figure of social movements concerned with issues of sexuality and gender?

Key Terms

- Transvestite: By their terms, was a person who dressed in clothes of the opposite gender.
- Transsexual: Someone who changes their body in order to match the gender they identify with.
- Transgender: An umbrella term that means having a gender identity or gender expression that differs from the sex that they were assigned at birth.

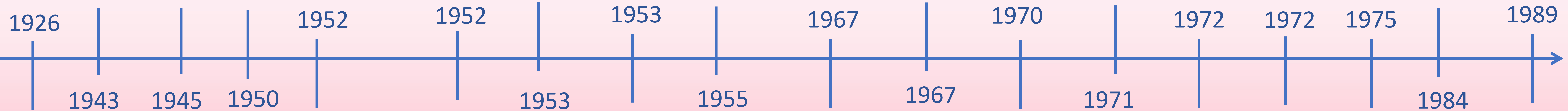
Humble Beginnings

- Jorgensen joined the military in 1945, but never saw war.
- Jorgensen, still a male, tried to get a career in Hollywood but never managed to do so, eventually moving back to New York to attend college where she read *The Male Hormone* by Paul de Kruif.
- In 1950, she decided to travel to Copenhagen, Denmark where she would officially change her gender.
- Jorgensen decided to write a letter home to her parents in 1952 and a reporter from the *New York Daily News* wrote an article on her transformation based on the letter.
- There is evidence that Jorgensen leaked the letter herself.



Book, Movie, and Lectures

- Jorgensen decided to write an autobiography about her life and publish it in 1967.
- Jorgensen then decided to produce a movie on her life based on the book.
- The book sold thousands of copies around the United States and the world and the movie was also widely successful.
- In the early 1970s, Jorgensen went on college tours talking about her experience and spreading the idea of transsexuality to college students.



Shows and Interviews

- Many newspapers published articles on Jorgensen, some of them positive and some of them negative. Most just curious about her.
- With the public asking questions, Jorgensen decided to set the record straight with a 5-issue story of her life
- Jorgensen performed in drag style shows where the public would come to watch her sing and she would answer their questions.
- Jorgensen really “performed” her gender on and off the stage because she had an idea of what the ideal woman should look and act like.



Social movements

- Jorgensen did not originally agree with the Women’s Liberation Movement.
- This caused the general public to denounce her for her old-age views on gender.
- In 1972, influenced by lesbian authors, Jorgensen switched her views on Women’s Liberation in support.
- The sexual movement also denounced her because people were getting homosexuals confused with transsexuals.
- Jorgensen campaigned for AIDS in the 1980s which won back her support of the homosexual community.
- Jorgensen had her first interview on television in 1984.

Significance

This research is significant because it shines a light on the important contributions of this forgotten figure in history. As the first of her kind, Jorgensen laid the foundation for the conversations surrounding transgender people we are having today. She spent a lot of her life in the public eye and every moment she spent in the spotlight, she used to educate the public on the transsexual community. Even when different social movements pushed her out of the spotlight, she never gave up on advocating for her community. My research takes a different approach and brings Jorgensen to the forefront surrounding the narrative of transgender history.

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References

