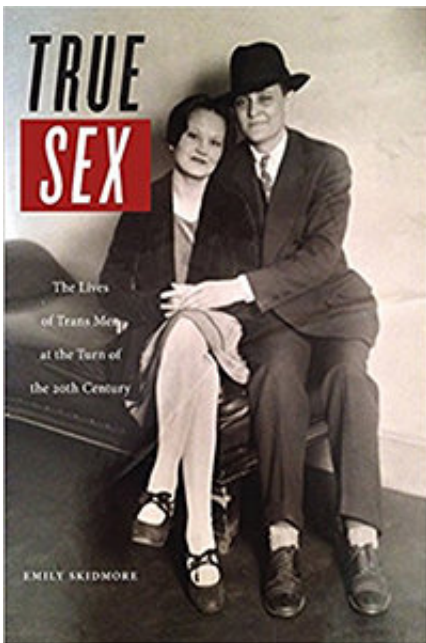


# New book shows existence of transgender people isn't a recent phenomenon

November 21 2017, by Glenys Young

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True Sex: The Lives of Trans Men at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Thanks to recent highly politicized, highly publicized pushes to ban transgender people from serving in the military and using the public restroom that matches their gender identity, it may seem like transgender issues have suddenly sprung up out of nowhere.

But they didn't, and that's important to know, says Emily Skidmore, an assistant professor of history at Texas Tech University and the author of "True Sex: The Lives of Trans Men at the Turn of the Twentieth

Century."

"I have always been interested in gender and particularly interested in thinking about how definitions of proper femininity and masculinity have been defined," Skidmore said. "When I began this project in 2007, transgender issues were just beginning to attain a great deal of visibility within the mainstream media, and this coverage often presented trans issues as new. As a historian, I was suspicious of this and was curious in researching to see if there was a history of gender transgression in the United States."

It turned out, there was.

"'True Sex' is about 18 individuals who were assigned female at birth but who lived as male in the decades around the turn of the 20th century," Skidmore said. "I look particularly at the moment of revelation when the individual's 'true sex' was revealed and investigate what happened next: How did the local community respond? Were charges pressed? If the 'true sex' was discovered upon an individual's death, how was the funeral handled? Were they buried in male or female clothes? Who conducted the service?"

During her research, Skidmore was surprised by the number of cases she found.

"In the 60-year period of my study, I was able to find 65 cases reported in newspapers of individuals who were assigned female at birth but who lived as male between 1876 and 1936," she said. "So, the fact that, on average, newspapers were reporting one case of gender transgression a year was very surprising to me.

"I think readers will be most surprised by the locations the trans men chose to live. Many of them chose to live in small towns or rural spaces

and, surprisingly, were able to find support – or at least tolerance – in those spaces."

Skidmore believes the topic is especially important to address in the current political and social climate.

"We are living through a period when trans issues are increasingly politicized, with so-called 'bathroom bills' being debated and the president himself proposing a ban of [transgender people](#) from the military," she said. "Understanding that trans [people](#) have always been a part of the fabric of our nation has never been more important.

"One of the results of the current framing of trans issues as 'new' is that they are easy to delegitimize. Legislatures can argue that we need new laws on the books to protect us from the new 'threat' trans people present, when in reality, trans people have always existed, and there actually is a long history of communities – even rural ones – tolerating their trans neighbors. Uncovering this history can allow us to think critically about the present anti-trans political discourse."

While the book addresses conversations happening within scholarly communities, it is written for a wider audience. Skidmore believes it can give more context for readers to consider the topic.

"It can provide perspective to our current moment," she said. "For example, trans men have served in the U.S. military since at least the Civil War. There is a famous example of a trans man named Albert Cashier who fought for the Union in the Illinois 95th Infantry. His 'true sex' was not discovered until 1913 while he was living at a home for veterans in Quincy, Illinois. This long history of service should, I think, motivate us to push back against the suggestion that trans people cannot serve in the military.

"I hope my book encourages readers to think about trans people as part of the fabric of our nation's history; they are not ancillary to that history, but rather, trans men have a long [history](#) of contributing positively to communities large and small across the country."

Provided by Texas Tech University

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