

THE LADDER

The voice of a lesbian generation

by **STUART HINDS**

Friday, Sept. 23, 1955, was a typical evening for San Francisco at that time of year – clear and cool, temperatures in the low 50s. The four couples gathered at Rose Bamberger’s apartment that night would have worn light fall jackets over their dresses to ward off the Bay breeze. Ostensibly meeting for social purposes – they made sure to pull the curtains closed before dancing with each other – the result of their time together that autumn evening would profoundly affect the lesbian community in the United States. This was the first meeting of what would become

known as the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), the first advocacy group created specifically to address the needs of lesbians.

Led by recent transplants and partners Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, the DOB set to work formalizing the structure of the organization. At that first meeting they not only danced, but they designated officers, drew up a schedule of business meetings and created rules and regulations, including an application for membership, which required potential members to be “a Gay girl of good character.” The name of the group was drawn from a fictional paramour of the classical lesbian poet Sappho, and was intentionally

obscure to deflect attention of the heterosexual community.

During their first year the Daughters reached out to the male-oriented Mattachine Society and ONE, Inc., the other California-based homophile groups of the era, for both guidance and strategizing opportunities. They also developed a Statement of Purpose for the DOB, which emphasized education of the membership and the public about the issues of homosexuality and the integration of the homosexual into society. Unlike the other advocacy groups, however, the Daughters emphasized reaching individual lesbians. They recognized that many women felt shame about

their sexual desires, and were afraid to admit them. They needed support to develop the self-confidence to advocate for one’s own rights; otherwise no social change would be possible.

The DOB communicated with its constituents primarily through its publication “The Ladder,” first published in October of 1956. Both Martin and Lyon had professional publishing experience, so Lyon inaugurated the editor’s role, followed several years later by Martin. The publication’s name references Radclyffe Hall’s 1928

novel “The Well of Loneliness,” extremely well-known among the lesbian community. The Daughters of Bilitis provided a ladder out of that well. The magazine’s editorial stance reflected the organization’s conservative nature, and an early topic of regular concern was appearance. During the ’50s the butch/femme dichotomy in the lesbian community had reached a peak, and the DOB firmly believed it was in gay women’s best interests to always assume a feminine appearance. They believed this improved social relationships, and, on a practical level, kept law enforcement at bay.

“The Ladder” also served as a communal sounding board for lesbians, wherein contributors had a variety of ways to express themselves. Regular features included a community forum through which ongoing debates were held from issue to issue. News items and reader-service pieces provided additional information on topics such as legal limits of police entrapment, coming out and lesbians staying married to men. In



THE LADDER

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addition, personal essays, fiction and poetry provided creative outlets for writers and readers alike. Beginning in the Fall of 1957, a Kansas City woman began a regular feature of both book reviews of interest to lesbians and lists of new or overlooked titles. Her name was Barbara Grier, and she would have a significant impact on not only the DOB but the publishing profession as well.

Born in Ohio, Grier came out as a lesbian at the age of 12. She spent the remainder of her life avidly pursuing lesbian literature and producing opportunities for its creation. As a young adult, she lived in Colorado with her partner Helen Bennett while they both completed degrees in library science. They relocated to Kansas City, where Grier landed a job at the Kansas City, Kan., Public Library while Bennett secured a position at the University of Missouri – Kansas City. She eventually became Curator of the Rare Book Collection, a precursor to the cur-

THE LADDER | PAGE 22 >

> FAMILY | PAGE 21

rent Special Collections Department, which is home to the Gay and Lesbian Archive of Mid-America. Her intense passion for lesbian literature made Grier the ideal contributing bibliophile for "The Ladder." Her column of reviews and book news, "Lesbiana," ran from 1957-1962, and she held several additional roles in later years: fiction and poetry editor from 1966-67, editor from 1968-72, and publisher from 1970-72. Like many authors writing for "The Ladder," Grier used a number of pseudonyms, including Gene Damon, Lennox Strong, and Vern Niven.

Another Barbara who had a major role in "The Ladder's" evolution was Barbara Gittings. Gittings was an early and enthusiastic supporter of the DOB, and founded a chapter in New York City in 1958. She became editor of the magazine with the March, 1963 issue. Younger than the original DOB founding membership, Gittings brought a new approach to issues, reflecting a transition within the entire gay rights movement, as it began to echo the general upheaval of the 1960s protest movements. Personally, she was greatly influenced by Frank Kameny, a Mattachine Society member who insisted that gay rights would not progress unless



Barbara Grier

activists became more confrontational and militant. Gittings used "The Ladder" as a platform for this point of view.

Gittings ushered in her new perspectives for "Ladder" readers beginning with the cover of the magazine. Her partner, Kay Lahusen, was a professional photographer, and they introduced the use of photographic portraits of lesbians on the cover, replacing a long-standing tradition of line drawings. In addition, Gittings added the subtitle "A Lesbian Review" to the masthead, further cementing a visual identity for the publication emphasizing the positive qualities of les-

bian life. Editorially she welcomed hearty and sometimes controversial debate within the pages of "The Ladder." She initiated a shift away from articles that underscored approval from authority figures outside the community, and toward pieces that allowed lesbians themselves to proclaim their own worth. Such perceived stridency, coupled with problems in production scheduling, resulted in the removal of Gittings from the editor's chair in the summer of 1966.

For the next two years Helen Sandoz, a longtime friend of Martin and Lyon, edited "The Ladder," and her tenure was marked by a continuation of conventional DOB values and philosophies. Sandoz was regularly harangued by Grier, who was hungry for Sandoz' position at the magazine. In September of 1968, Grier finally published her first issue as editor. Her efforts to shape the magazine to reflect and investigate the political turbulence of the late '60s, and to incorporate the radicalization of the gay movement that occurred after Stonewall, were in direct conflict with DOB leadership. Grier also hoped to integrate into the magazine the separatist tents of the rising feminist movement, believing that they dovetailed with those of the lesbian movement. Other DOB leaders assumed a more assimilationist stance within feminism.

These struggles reached a climax in 1970. The Daughters of Bilitis was dissolved by Martin and Lyon, who subsequently joined the National Organization for Women, encouraging former DOB members to do the same. Rather than watch "The Ladder"

disappear like its parent organization, Grier and ally Rita LaPorte stole the mailing list and contents for the next issue from the offices of the DOB and launched their own, independent version of "The Ladder." Their timing was less than ideal, however. Many sympathetic advertisers were spooked by the growing militancy of the gay and lesbian movement and withdrew their support from publications associated with it. Grier and LaPorte managed to continue producing "The Ladder" for two more years, their final issue appearing in August of 1972.

Grier went on to find success with Kansas City-based Naiad Press, a publishing firm she founded with Donna McBride in 1971 as the first press devoted solely to producing lesbian literature. Lyon and Martin became prominent figures in the feminist movement, and Gittings worked through the American Library Association to promote and ensure access to positive gay literature in libraries throughout the country. Arguably, though, their most effective contributions were the roles they played in producing "The Ladder." As the sole forum for networking, communication and pride for lesbians across the United States, "The Ladder" was essential in moving the struggle for lesbian rights from nascent get-togethers behind closed curtains to a full-fledged civil rights movement taking center stage in the U.S. political arena.

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THE LADDER A LESBIAN REVIEW

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