



UNHEARD VOICES

Stories of LGBT History



Phyllis Lyon, the Daughters of Bilitis and the Homophile Movement

Introduction to the Interview (Running Time 1:57)

Phyllis Lyon has been a gay rights activist for over fifty years. She was one of the founding members of the Daughters of Bilitis—a group named for a lesbian character in French poetry. Formed in 1955, it was the first lesbian rights group in the United States.

Here, Phyllis tells her friend, Margie Adam, about coming of age in an era when sexuality was rarely discussed.

Questions to Discuss with Students Following the Interview

- Lyon says, “I didn’t really find out that lesbians existed until I met the woman that I spent the rest of my life with.” What social conditions existed when Lyon was a teenager and young adult – in the 1940s and ’50s – that kept her from knowing that gay and lesbian people even existed? How do you think that invisibility affected both LGBT and straight people? Do you think invisibility is still a problem for LGBT people today? Why or why not?
- Lyon describes how Del Martin “came out” to her, or disclosed that she was gay. What risks did Martin face by admitting that she was a lesbian? In general, what did LGBT people risk by being open about their identity in the 1950s? What are the risks and benefits for LGBT people today who choose to “come out”? How would you feel if someone you knew told you that they were LGBT?
- Lyon says that she and Martin “wanted to meet more lesbians and we didn’t have any luck.” Why do you think it was important for them to meet other lesbians? What were some of the barriers they faced when they tried to meet people like them? How do you connect with people that share similar identities to you? What does “community” mean to you?
- When Lyon and her friends started their new social club, why did they choose the name, “Daughters of Bilitis”? Why was it necessary for them to choose a name that non-lesbians might not recognize? What might have been the consequences if they selected a more identifiable title? What changes had to take place in society for some of today’s groups to adopt their names (e.g., National Gay and Lesbian Task Force)?
- While Daughters of Bilitis began as a social club, Lyon says, “We discovered also that there were a lot of laws that were anti-gay and there were more things to do than just party.” What anti-gay laws existed in the 1950s? How did Daughters of Bilitis set about addressing this discrimination? What anti-LGBT laws still exist today? What groups are currently challenging these laws and how are they doing so?
- Why do you think Daughters of Bilitis decided to create a newsletter as one of their initial strategies for addressing anti-LGBT bias? What were the benefits and drawbacks of this form of communication and networking in the 1950s? How would you compare a newsletter back then to a Facebook group today?

Suggested Activities and Assignments for Extended Learning

- Arguably, the two most influential organizations of the homophile movement were the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society. Assign students to research both and compare and contrast them based on mission, tactics and impact. Then ask students to report their findings to the class.
- Assign students to select one of the key leaders of the homophile movement to research (e.g., Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin, Barbara Gittings, Harry Hay, Frank Kameny). Have students answer the following questions: Who were they? Why were they involved in the movement? What were their major contributions? Have students create a collage or other visual representation of the person they selected that reflects the answers to the assigned questions.
- Assign students to research McCarthyism and the “Red Scare” of the 1950s. Have them answer the following questions: What was happening in the U.S. politically at that time? Which public figures fueled the “Red Scare”? Who was accused of being a communist or subversive, and why? Why were homosexuals targeted? Assign students to compare this era to others in which certain groups were considered dangerous or anti-American (e.g., the Salem Witch Trials, Japanese American Internment, anti-Muslim sentiment post-9/11).
- In 1873 the Comstock Act was created to suppress the circulation of “obscene literature” and “prevent the mails from being used to corrupt the public morals.” In the 1950s the law was used to bar the distribution of LGBT materials, such as Daughters of Bilitis’ *The Ladder* and *ONE, Inc.*, which won a Supreme Court case in 1958 protecting its right to be published. Assign students to find copies of *The Ladder*, *ONE, Inc.* or other LGBT publications from that era (or individual articles from them). Have them write a report summarizing the issues of the day for LGBT people and discussing why these publications were considered “obscene” by some people. Have them research and discuss how current groups are still framing the distribution of information about LGBT people as indecent.
- In the 1950s and ’60s, people like Phyllis Lyon created a distinct movement for LGBT people to fight for their rights, but LGBT people were also members of many other groups fighting for civil rights during that era, including African Americans, women and Native Americans. Assign students to investigate the ways in which these other movements embraced or rejected LGBT people and issues (e.g., exclusion of Bayard Rustin from the black civil rights movement, Betty Friedan’s notion of lesbianism as the “Lavender Menace”). Have students write a poem reflecting on the ways in which their multiple identities find expression within the different communities to which they belong.
- Get your students involved in advocating for LGBT rights. Assign them to research a local or national issue, such as bullying prevention measures, same-sex marriage, same-sex couples at prom, etc. Have students present their findings to the class and brainstorm ways they can make a difference (e.g., writing letters to legislators or a local newspaper, having conversations with friends, standing up for someone who is being bullied, raising money for an organization, starting an awareness campaign, participating in GLSEN’s Ally Week or Day of Silence). Then have small groups of students select one of their ideas to enact.



UNHEARD VOICES

Stories of LGBT History



Student Handout



Phyllis Lyon

“I didn’t really find out that lesbians existed until I met the woman that I spent the rest of my life with,” Phyllis Lyon recalls of the first time she met Del Martin when they worked together in Seattle, WA. Over the next three years, Lyon and Martin’s relationship developed into a romantic one. “We also wanted to meet more lesbians and we didn’t have any luck,” remembers Phyllis. “We went to the lesbian bars, but we were too shy to go talk to them and they didn’t come around and talk to us.”

In the 1950s, following World War II, the U.S. enjoyed an economic boom that brought prosperity to many middle class American families. It also was a time of intense anti-communist sentiment and fear of Soviet spies. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people were targeted during this time because some politicians falsely believed that homosexuals had infiltrated the U.S. government and posed a threat to national security. These leaders considered communists and homosexuals to be both morally weak and mentally disturbed, and argued that homosexuals could be easily blackmailed by communists into revealing state secrets.

As a result of this “Lavender Scare,” LGBT people were routinely fired from their jobs and subjected to police raids on gay bars, parties and even gatherings in private homes. Laws were enacted that prohibited men and women from wearing clothes traditionally associated with another gender, and even dancing with a member of the same gender became a criminal offense. This public harassment forced many LGBT people to lead invisible lives in isolation from one another.

In 1955, finding it hard to develop a social network, Phyllis, Del and six other women founded the first national lesbian rights group in the U.S.—Daughters of Bilitis (DOB). The name, taken from a collection of French poems with lesbian themes, was chosen out of a need for secrecy. “If anyone asked us,” commented Phyllis, “we could always say we belonged to a poetry club.” The group leaders designed a pin to wear so that they could identify with others and chose a motto, “Qui vive”—French for “on alert.” The group’s original charter was written so vaguely that, according to Phyllis, “It could have been a charter for a cat-raising club.”

Though initially a secret club for dancing and socializing, Phyllis quickly discovered “that there were a lot of laws that were anti-gay” and that “there were more things to do than just party.” DOB called themselves “A Woman’s Organization for the purpose of Promoting the Integration of the Homosexual into Society” and focused on educating the public about lesbians, participating in research about lesbians and repealing anti-LGBT laws. Within five years of its origin, DOB had chapters around the country, including Chicago, New

York, New Orleans, San Diego, Los Angeles, Detroit, Denver, Cleveland and Philadelphia.

With Phyllis as editor, DOB began publishing *The Ladder* in 1956, the first nationally distributed lesbian publication in the U.S. Many of the people who wrote for *The Ladder* used fake names to protect themselves and the magazine was issued in a brown paper covering. Even Phyllis edited under the name “Ann Ferguson” for a while, but later dropped it to encourage her readers not to hide. *The Ladder* included news, book reviews, poetry, stories and letters from readers. DOB published 175 copies of the first issue, and by 1957 there were 400 subscribers, including Lorraine Hansberry—the African American playwright and activist—who wrote a letter of thanks to DOB in May 1957 stating she was “glad as heck that you exist.” Historian Marcia Gallo wrote of *The Ladder*, “For women who came across a copy in the early days, *The Ladder* was a lifeline. It was a means of expressing and sharing otherwise private thoughts and feelings, of connecting across miles and disparate daily lives, of breaking through isolation and fear.”

In addition to DOB, other groups were working to address the rights and needs of LGBT people in the 1950s. Often called “homophile” groups—a term preferred over “homosexual” because it emphasized love (“-phile” from Greek) over sex—organizations such as The Mattachine Society, Knights of the Clock and One, Inc. worked on job and housing discrimination, and other issues relevant to the LGBT communities.

Like DOB, these groups faced many challenges working at a time when the law and societal rules deemed LGBT people as subversive and dangerous. For instance *ONE, Inc.*, a publication with LGBT content, was barred in 1954 from being sent through the U.S. Postal Service because it was considered “obscene” and in violation of the Comstock Law of 1873. After four years of legal battles, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously ruled to allow such materials to be sent through the mail.

The 1958 ruling made it easier for LGBT organizations to communicate with their members and increase the impact of their work, but also created backlash for organizations like DOB. During the 1959 mayoral race in San Francisco, one candidate claimed the city was being made safe for “sex deviants,” writing, “You parents of daughters—do not sit back complacently feeling that because you have no boys in your family everything is all right...To enlighten you as to the existence of a Lesbian organization composed of homosexual women, make yourself acquainted with the name Daughters of Bilitis.” The San Francisco police subsequently broke into and searched DOB headquarters, and the FBI even infiltrated DOB meetings, reporting in 1959 that “the purpose of the DOB is to educate the public to accept the Lesbian homosexual into society.”

Phyllis stayed involved with DOB until the late 1960s, and in 1970 the organization dissolved due to the changing nature of the LGBT rights movement and disagreements among the group’s leaders. However, the work of homophile organizations in the 1950s and ’60s, like DOB, formed a base for the LGBT rights movement that continues to this day.

Phyllis has remained engaged in the struggle to ensure social justice for LGBT people in the decades since DOB. In 2008, she and her partner, Del Martin, became the first gay couple to get married in California after the state’s Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage. They had been together for more than 50 years. Phyllis recalls, “We got together in 1953 on Valentine’s day. It was Del’s idea. ‘We’ll never forget our anniversary,’ she said. And we never did.”