



UNHEARD VOICES

Stories of LGBT History



Interview Transcript



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 Ada, about coming of age in an era when sexuality was rarely discussed.

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, and that was Del Martin. And she came to work in the place in Seattle that I was working.

One evening, Del and I and another woman we worked with went off to have an after-work drink. And Del somewhere along the line got on the subject of homosexuality. One of us said, "How come you know so much about this homosexuality?" And she said, "Because I am one!" I was startled.

Interviewer: But you fell in love with each other.

Name: Well, that took about three or four years. 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.

And we also wanted to meet more lesbians. And we didn't have any luck. 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, so...

One time we went to a party where we met another lesbian. So we gave her our phone number. And then very shortly after that we got a phone call asking us if we would be interested in coming to a meeting with six other women to start an organization, and they were going to call it the Daughters of Bilitis because nobody else would know what that name meant.

Interviewer: So DOB started as a secret social club?

Phyllis Lyon: Right. But we discovered also that there were a lot of laws that were anti-gay and there were more things to do than just party. We decided we'd put out a newsletter, *The Ladder*. I was the first editor and I think we got about a hundred copies of it and we mailed it to every lesbian that anybody in the group knew. We'd said in the first issue that if you'd like to continue to get it, send us a dollar. And it began to grow after that.