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PHYLLIS LYON, DEL MARTIN AND THE DAUGHTERS OF BILITIS



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Detailed Description:

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Not only were they founders in 1955 of the first lesbian rights organization in U.S. history, the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), but they also were instrumental in the formation and growth of other related social movements, including the contemporary women's rights movement. They helped bring hidden issues of violence against women and within families into public view; insured the open involvement of LGBT peoples (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender and transsexual) in electoral politics; and challenged censorship at local, state, and national levels.

Their devoted partnership drew its strength from their shared love of all things political, so much so that when Martin died in August, 2008, a grieving Lyon encouraged activists to use

Martin's lifelong dedication to equality to motivate them in the fight against Proposition 8 (a California ballot measure denying marriage rights to lesbian and gay couples). Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin were the first couple to be married by San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom in 2004 in a challenge to California law prohibiting same-sex marriage; they repeated the ceremony in June 2008, after the California Supreme Court overturned the ban.¹

Born in San Francisco on May 5, 1921, Dorothy L. Corn Taliaferro, or Del as she would become known, was salutatorian of the first graduating class of George Washington High School and went on to study at the University of California at Berkeley. At 19, after transferring to San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University), she married James Martin and two years later gave birth to their daughter Kendra. The marriage ended in divorce a few years later after her husband discovered love letters Del had written to a female neighbor.

Phyllis Lyon was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma on November 10, 1925, but moved often with her family; she attended schools throughout California, graduating from Sacramento High School in 1943. She too attended the University of California after finishing high school and graduated with a degree in journalism. By 1949, bored with writing for what were then known as "the women's pages" in the local newspaper in Chico, California—the high point of which was interviewing one of her idols, Eleanor Roosevelt—Lyon decided that a job offer in Seattle with a building construction journal would be worth the move. It was there, in 1950, that she met Martin; soon, they fell in love.

They moved to San Francisco in 1953 and established themselves as a couple, buying a car together and taking out a mortgage on a small but spectacularly-situated home in Eureka Valley. However, frustrated in their efforts to meet other lesbians, which were limited to a handful of bars that welcomed gay people—and which could be raided at any time by police—Lyon and Martin co-founded the Daughters of Bilitis with three other female couples in San Francisco in 1955 as a secret sorority. They did so at a time when "gay rights" was a contradiction in terms: gay men and lesbians risked personal safety as well as their families and jobs if they dared to live openly. As Lyon and Martin would do repeatedly over the next half-century, they used their personal experiences to help others accept and value themselves as well as demand rights and respect from society at large.²

"We were fighting the church, the couch, and the courts," Martin often remembered years later, concisely detailing the array of social and cultural forces confronted by early gay activists, who called themselves homophiles ("love of same"). As DOB was the only group dealing specifically with the issues confronting gay women, she and Lyon helped guide its development over the next twenty years and kept careful records of its growth. Daughters of Bilitis changed from a small social club into a national network with local chapters that provided practical organizational skills for individual women as well as a foundation for the lesbian/gay and women's liberation movements that flowered in the late 1960s and early 1970s.³

From the mid-'50s on, Lyon and Martin both used their writing and speaking talents to explode misconceptions about gender and sexuality. As the first President of DOB, Martin

penned stirring calls to arms. "Nothing was ever accomplished by hiding in a dark corner. Why not discard the hermitage for the heritage that awaits any red-blooded American woman who dares to claim it?"⁴ Both she and Lyon served as editors of DOB's groundbreaking monthly magazine, *The Ladder*, launched as a way to recruit new members to DOB, and ushered in a new decade of political engagement and media visibility for the tiny gay rights movement. *The Ladder* grew from a mimeographed newsletter in 1956 to an internationally recognized magazine with thousands of subscribers by 1972; each month, readers copied its contents or circulated the little magazine among friends and coworkers. Letters from women—and some men—poured in from across America and around the world.

Martin's many contributions to *The Ladder* over the next 14 years range from short stories to editorials to missives: one of the most famous is "If That's All There Is," a searing condemnation of sexism in the gay rights movement written in 1970. Increasingly devoted to the women's liberation movement, and frustrated from years of experiencing both private garden-variety sexism and public examples of female invisibility, Martin exploded on paper after gay events at which the contributions of lesbian activists were either minimized or ignored. She angrily bid "goodbye" to her gay brothers for their failure to understand or incorporate women's issues; her denunciations of the "male chauvinists of the homophile movement" ranged from their "co-ed organizations" where "women are invisible" to the "defense of washroom sex and pornographic movies" and the "gay bars that discriminate against women."⁵

Due to the influence of Martin and Lyon, and the creativity of women like Barbara Gittings, Helen Sandoz, and Barbara Grier—all three of whom they recruited as editors—*The Ladder* provided one of the few media outlets produced by lesbians, for lesbians, that also challenged misogyny as well as homophobia in the decades before and after the rebirth of women's liberation.⁶

Their innate political savvy also showed itself in their early efforts at outreach and coalition building. From their earliest efforts at activism, Lyon and Martin strategically appealed to established groups and individuals who would become important allies—from the American Civil Liberties Union to the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research—as well as helping to create new groups that furthered social justice. They played a crucial role in establishing the groundbreaking Council on Religion and the Homosexual in 1964, for example, which helped breach seemingly impenetrable barriers between gay people and mainstream religious groups.

As early members of the National Organization for Women (NOW)—Lyon and Martin joined shortly after its founding in 1966, the first lesbian pair to take advantage of the organization's "couples' membership"—they effectively promoted feminist ideas during a time referred to by some historians as "the doldrums" for the mass women's movement. In the 1950s and '60s, Lyon and Martin insisted that lesbians understand and confront the dual oppressions of gender and sexuality, and they worked within NOW in the early 1970s to counter fears of the so-called lesbian "lavender menace." Together, they challenged homophobia in the women's movement and insured the inclusion of lesbian rights on NOW's agenda.

Their keen political instincts and interests extended further, into the world of Democratic Party activism. Lyon and Martin were co-founders of the Alice B. Toklas Democratic Club, the first gay political club in the United States, in 1972 and remained active in local, statewide, and national political campaigns for more than 35 years.⁷

Martin and Lyon also made history in publishing. They co-authored *Lesbian/Woman* in 1972 and *Lesbian Love and Liberation* in 1973; in 1976, Martin published *Battered Wives*. All were pioneering works that broke through the silence surrounding women's daily experiences. Martin was one of the first to link domestic violence in America to sexist social structures; she became a co-founder of one of the first women's shelters in the United States, La Casa de las Madres in San Francisco, and is credited by activists with helping to change attitudes and policies on family violence.⁸

Their lifelong dedication to equality and justice has been recognized locally and nationally. To name but a few of their honors, in 1979, local health care activists and providers established Lyon-Martin Health Services to give lesbians in the San Francisco Bay area access to nonjudgmental, affordable health care. In 1990, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Northern California presented them with its highest honor, the Earl Warren Civil Liberties Award, in recognition not only of their efforts to advance the rights of sexual minorities but also to acknowledge their efforts against censorship at both local and state levels. In 1995, Senator Dianne Feinstein named Martin, and Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi named Lyon, as delegates to the White House Conference on Aging, where they made headlines by using their moment at the podium to remind the 125,000 attendees that lesbians, gay men, bisexual and transgender people grow old just as straight people do and must be included explicitly in aging policies.

The worlds of material from the Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Papers are presented here in two segments, each one a treasure trove for researchers, activists, and all those interested in contemporary social movement history. Part I—*Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin, and the Daughters of Bilitis*—provides extensive information on the founding and growth of the homophile movement, especially the Daughters of Bilitis and *The Ladder*, including early meeting minutes, correspondence, chapter records, membership data, and manuscripts unavailable elsewhere. Part II—*Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin: Beyond the Daughters of Bilitis*—provides valuable sources on a range of other issues and groups. In particular, the files detailing the impact of Martin's book *Battered Wives*—and the heart-wrenching correspondence it evoked from women in small towns and big cities, all of whom were grateful that their personal "problem" had been exposed as a social ill—are particularly strong and have yet to be thoroughly explored by researchers. In all, the availability of this collection can only further interest in two remarkable 20th century women leaders and the pioneering people and organizations they inspired.

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¹William Grimes, "Del Martin, Lesbian Activist, Dies at 87," *The New York Times*, August 27, 2008; Rachel Gordon, "Lesbian Rights Pioneer Del Martin Dies at 87," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 28, 2008.

²For additional background on Lyon, Martin, and the time period in which the Daughters of Bilitis was founded, see Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement* (Carroll & Graf, 2006; Seal Press, 2007).

³In-house accounts of DOB's founding and development, including annual organizational histories published in *The Ladder*, presentations to homophile conferences throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, chapter correspondence and newsletters, and pamphlets published by the organization itself are available in *Part I: Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin and the Daughters of Bilitis*, particularly series 1 through 4. They are from the Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin Papers collection housed at the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco.

⁴Del Martin, "President's Message," *The Ladder*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (November 1956).

⁵Del Martin, "If That's All There Is," *The Ladder*, December/January 1970-71 (Vol. 15 No. 3 & 4): 4-6.

⁶A complete run of *The Ladder* is available in *Part I: Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin, and the Daughters of Bilitis*. Original copies can be found in the Periodicals Section of the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco; nearly complete copies (missing back covers) were published by Arno Press (A New York Times Company) in 1975 in eight volumes as part of their "Homosexuality: Lesbians and Gay Men in Society, History and Literature" series.

⁷In *Part I*, series 6, and *Part II: Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin: Beyond the Daughters of Bilitis*, series 8, researchers will find extensive materials on Lyon and Martin's involvement in numerous organizations, ranging from the ACLU and NOW to their individual leadership of the San Francisco Commission on the Status of Women (Martin) and the San Francisco Human Rights Commission (Lyon).

⁸Series 5 and 10 in *Part I* contain valuable information on issues relating to lesbian mothers, an early concern of Lyon and Martin as well as DOB. Also included in Series 5 is a subsection of correspondence dealing with "Battered Women." In *Part II*, especially series 11, Martin's growing leadership in the nascent domestic violence movement is well documented.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE ON PRIVACY

The publication *Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin, and the Daughters of Bilitis* documents the joint and individual work lives of life-partners Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin, from the Homophile movement of the 1950s to the 1980s. The collection is strongest in materials connected to Lyon and Martin's involvement with several major organizations, particularly material from the 1960s and 1970s. The collection contains significant documentation relating to

the administration and activities of the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB). The collection includes: correspondence, manuscript drafts, organizational papers including minutes, constitutions, flyers; and financial documents.

This digital publication under the guidance of author and scholar Dr. Marcia Gallo (author of the 2006 publication *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement*) will provide students, faculty, and researchers with an increased understanding of the roots of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) activism via primary source documents. The goal of this collection is to create an experience for the researcher that is as close as possible to an encounter with the breadth and comprehensiveness of the collection located at the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Historical Society in San Francisco. At the same time the Publisher recognizes that the digital format, destined by its very nature to be more widely used than any other medium, poses special privacy issues.

Many of the key players in the Daughters of Bilitis story have long been public figures, while others have not and remain committed to their privacy. Therefore, in cooperation with the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Historical Society we have maintained the access restrictions requested by the Historical Society.

Pseudonyms were used by most DOB activists, but often minutes, notes, and letters contain an informal mixture of given names and pseudonyms. It was decided that to respect fully the original restrictions, not only would the digital publication end at the year 1984, but all last names on internal documents of early homophile organizations would be masked.

The following provides a more detailed description of the Publisher's masking and/or document withdrawal policies.

When it was not clear when (or if) a particular newsletter or publication moved from internal distribution to newsstands, the Publisher assumed it was an internal document and masked last names. In some instances, this may mean that an activist's pseudonym was redacted. In other cases, researchers very familiar with the history of the gay rights movement may notice that the names of activists they know to have been "out" have been truncated on a particular document. This was an unavoidable consequence of adhering strictly to the collection restrictions. Mentions of the nom de plume of well-known lesbian or gay authors of fiction and non-fiction books, on the other hand, were left intact. When dealing with internal conference proceedings, the Publisher assumed that scholars or professionals speaking in their official capacity on educational panels should be treated as public figures. When a member or officer of an early homophile organization was listed as speaking or facilitating, we attempted to discover if they were mentioned in press releases and were, in fact, known to the public. If this could not be determined, we erred on the side of caution and treated them according to the restrictions placed on the collection.

Home addresses and phone numbers were masked when they appeared in minutes, newsletters, or correspondence. Letters from fans of books by Lyon and Martin can be quite full of intimate detail about the life of closeted and victimized women. In a few cases,

letters judged simply too personal were de-selected and this de-selection noted in a Notice of Withdrawal found at the beginning of a folder. Slightly more frequently, the full names of correspondents and those mentioned in their narratives were masked to preserve their confidentiality. Last names and street addresses were redacted. In a few cases, the names of extremely small rural towns were taken out as well. Exceptions to the rule were applied to activists who were clearly celebrities due to media attention to their defense cases. Researchers who wish to pursue specific letters with redactions are urged to contact the Historical Society.

Items removed for privacy included tax forms, personal bank records, insurance forms, and medical records.

Previously-published materials were, in general, withdrawn due to copyright issues. The research files of Lyon and Martin, which are composed almost entirely of previously published materials, were not scanned due to a plethora of copyright and privacy issues.

In conclusion, the Publisher is confident that respect for privacy has been maintained. Researchers who need more detail will be able to pursue, in consultation with the Historical Society, documents that have been redacted or withdrawn.