



Daughters of Bilitis

by Teresa Theophano

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Founded in 1955 in San Francisco, the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) was the first national lesbian political and social organization in the United States. As part of the "homophile movement"--as the pre-Stonewall gay rights movement was termed--DOB set a precedent for countless other organizations for lesbians and bisexual women.

The Daughters of Bilitis began when lesbian couple Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin started meeting with several other female couples to discuss lesbian issues. Their group's name came from "Songs of Bilitis," a lesbian-themed song cycle by French poet Pierre Louÿs, which described Bilitis as a resident of the Isle of Lesbos alongside Sappho.

The founders believed that the name Daughters of Bilitis was both subtle and communicative. Knowledgeable lesbians would glean its meaning, but the general public would not.

At first a social club, the Daughters of Bilitis, influenced by the Mattachine Society, a gay men's group, soon adopted more political goals. The Mattachine Society had formed in Los Angeles in 1951, and DOB allied with both it and *ONE, Inc.*, an independent gay-themed magazine, whose editors were members of the Mattachine Society.

DOB's activities included hosting public forums on homosexuality, offering support to isolated, married, and mothering lesbians, and participating in research activities.

Lyon and Martin poured their energies and resources into the organization. Martin became DOB's first president, and Lyon became the editor of the organization's monthly magazine, *The Ladder*, which was launched in October 1956. The women used their personal funds to keep DOB afloat; and they often spent more time working on DOB than at their paid jobs.

Under their leadership, the group had a relatively conservative focus. For instance, under their direction the *Ladder* shied away from overtly political or militant material, publishing instead fiction, poetry, personal essays, research reports, and psychologists' writings on homosexuality. To an extent, it advised conformity to the straight mainstream. It discouraged women from cross-dressing or embracing butch-femme identities--or any other activity that would make them too visibly different.

Additional chapters of the organization began cropping up. By 1958 there were branches in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Rhode Island. However, DOB did not attract the numbers that gay male organizations of the 1950s and 1960s did.

Possible reasons for DOB's small membership include classism and assimilationism. The organization reached out primarily to white, middle-class women, the very people who had most to lose should they be identified as lesbian at a time when police harassment and loss of jobs were common fates for open lesbians. At the same time, however, its assimilationist message failed to appeal to women of different

backgrounds who may have embraced a more radical perspective.

The *Ladder's* monthly circulation in the early 1960s peaked at about 500 copies, and in 1960 DOB maintained a membership base of just over 100.

While DOB presented itself as an exclusively lesbian organization from the beginning and stressed the need for attention to women's specific needs, it was not until the women's movement of the mid-1960s that the group's focus began to change dramatically. The leadership of Rita Laporte and Barbara Grier in DOB brought a considerably more radical lesbian-feminist flavor to the organization. Under the editorship of Barbara Gittings, *The Ladder* became more militant.

The shift from lesbian rights to *women's* rights conflicted with Martin's and Lyon's tactics. After extensive disagreements and a disastrous conference in 1970, ultimately Laporte and Grier usurped the *Ladder's* subscription list to begin publishing the magazine independently.

The debate over whether to become a part of the mainstream feminist movement--many of whose members were openly anti-lesbian--or to continue concentrating on homophile issues proved devastating for the Daughters of Bilitis.

The organization fell apart shortly after Laporte and Grier's coup. Individual chapters struggled on as autonomous organizations, but the national DOB folded, and the *Ladder*, now an independent women's liberation magazine, could not maintain sufficient financial support to continue. It ceased publication in 1972, having reached print runs of almost 3,800 copies.

The inability of the Daughters of Bilitis to survive the tumultuous 1960s does not diminish its importance in glbtq history. For many lesbians DOB provided a crucial space in which they could meet outside of the traditional bar scene. Its members fought for legal reform and gay civil rights, along with more research into lesbian life, and helped to foster understanding about lesbian lives both within and outside of their community.

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