



## Lyon, Phyllis, (b. 1924) and Del Martin (1921-2008)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Two courageous women who became lovers during one of the most socially conservative eras in American history, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon were among the founders of a lesbian liberation movement that developed and enlarged the very definition of lesbianism.

In their early influential book, *Lesbian/Woman* (1972), Lyon and Martin challenged any view of lesbians that focused only on sexuality by defining a lesbian as "as a woman whose primary erotic, psychological, emotional and social interest is in a member of her own sex, even though that interest might not be overtly expressed." This concept not only opened the door for women who had never been sexual with women to see themselves as lesbians, but it also laid the foundation for a woman-identified subculture that became the basis for the lesbian movement of the 1970s. Martin and Lyon also became role models for lesbian couples by staying in a committed relationship for over fifty years.

### Early Lives

Martin was born in San Francisco on May 5, 1921; Lyon in Tulsa, Oklahoma on November 10, 1924, but raised and educated in San Francisco. They both pursued journalism majors in college, Martin at San Francisco State College, Lyon at University of California, Berkeley.

When Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon met in Seattle in 1949, where they worked for a publishing company, Martin, who had been briefly married, was a 29-year-old lesbian mother, and Lyon was 25 and straight. In 1952, they became lovers, and in 1953, they moved to San Francisco, where they remained in the same house for the next fifty years.

### Daughters of Bilitis

In 1955, seeking a social life with other lesbians, they and a group of friends formed an organization called the Daughters of Bilitis, named after a book of lesbian love poetry: *Songs of Bilitis* by Pierre Louÿs. The name was deliberately chosen to be recognizable by the cognoscenti, but obscure to others.

In 1956, DOB issued a twelve-page, mimeographed newsletter called *The Ladder*, edited by Lyon. An accommodationist organization, soon to be closely associated with the Mattachine Society, a predominantly male homophile group, DOB became the first national lesbian society; and *The Ladder*, the first overtly lesbian journal, achieved national circulation. Because of the conservative climate of the 1950s, membership in DOB was secret, and Lyons used a pseudonym for her work on the first few issues of *The Ladder*.

By the early 1960s, DOB had spawned chapters throughout the country, in such cities as Chicago, New York,



**Top:** Del Martin (left) and Phyllis Lyon at their wedding celebration in 2008. San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom stands behind them.  
**Above:** A tribute to Del Martin posted on San Francisco's City Hall following Martin's death in 2008.

This video still appears with the permission of [www.current.com](http://www.current.com).

New Orleans, San Diego, Los Angeles, Detroit, Denver, Cleveland, and Philadelphia. In the early 1960s, subscriptions to *The Ladder* reached about 500 copies, though it was read by considerably more women, as copies were passed along to people who were too frightened to subscribe.

Although Lyon and Martin devoted a great deal of their resources to the organization, younger, more radical feminists came to the fore and, in a bitter power struggle, attempted to make DOB more militant. By 1970, Lyon and Martin had been displaced as the leaders of the organization, which soon disbanded.

### **Lesbian Activists**

Lyon and Martin, meanwhile, had become very active in San Francisco politics and in the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, which had been formed in the mid-1960s to help end police harassment of gay bars. A particularly egregious raid of a New Year's Ball on January 1, 1965, led religious leaders in San Francisco to condemn the police action. Subsequently, the CRH endorsed homosexual law reform and other measures designed to improve the lives of homosexuals in San Francisco.

In 1970, Martin wrote a widely distributed article in the *Advocate* entitled "Goodbye, My Alienated Brothers," in which she rebuked the male chauvinism of the homophile movement. Although at the time Lyon and Martin flirted with lesbian separatism, they subsequently became leaders in helping improve the relations between the sexes in the glbtq movement.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Lyon and Martin also worked to address the lesbophobia of the women's movement. Although there were prominent lesbians in the National Organization for Women, many leaders, including especially Betty Friedan, one of the organization's founding mothers, were perceived as homophobic. In 1971, at the NOW's national conference in Los Angeles, the organization finally passed a resolution affirming that the oppression of lesbians is a feminist concern.

In 1972, Lyon and Martin helped form the Alice B. Toklas Memorial Democratic Club to help lesbians get elected to public office. Both women subsequently served in a number of capacities on city commissions and task forces.

### **Writing and Other Activities**

In 1972, Lyon and Martin published their most significant book, *Lesbian/Woman*, which remains a crucial account of American lesbian life in the twentieth century, ranging in its concerns from questions of sexuality to questions of psychological health. For the 1991, twentieth-anniversary edition, Lyon and Martin added an update that gives a sense of the growth of lesbian influence in American life during the twentieth century.

Their 1973 book, *Lesbian Love and Liberation*, defends individual choice and freedom in sexual matters.

Along with writing and speaking about lesbian and gay issues, Martin also became a pioneer in the campaign to publicize and stop domestic violence. In 1976, she published one of the earliest books on the subject, *Battered Wives*, which blamed battering on the inequalities in the institution of marriage and a pervasive cultural misogyny.

Lyon, who in 1976 earned a doctorate in education, with a specialty in human sexuality, at the University of California, Berkeley, became director of the National Sex Forum and a nationally known expert on sexuality.

In 1979, Lyon-Martin Health Services, an affordable women's health clinic, named in honor of the two women, opened in San Francisco.

In the years since the gay and lesbian movement began, Lyon and Martin became significant figures both as

educators and as politically-savvy advocates. In 1995, they helped form Old Lesbians Organizing for Change, and both served as delegates to the 1995 White House Conference on Aging.

In 2002, the year of the couple's fiftieth anniversary, filmmaker Joan E. Biren released a documentary about their lives titled *No Secret Anymore: The Times of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon*.

### **Marriage Equality**

On February 12, 2004, Lyon and Martin were married by San Francisco City Assessor Mabel Teng, following Mayor Gavin Newsom's directive to grant marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Following the ceremony, Martin remarked, "Phyllis and I demonstrated our commitment to one another more than half a century ago. Today San Francisco has demonstrated its commitment to us through equality and fairness."

That marriage was soon nullified by the Supreme Court of California, on the grounds that Mayor Newsom lacked the authority to issue marriage licenses. Lyon and Martin then joined in a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the California laws that limited marriage to opposite-sex couples. After a victory at the district court level and a loss at the appellate level, the lawsuit was finally considered by the Supreme Court of California.

In a historic 4-3 decision authored by Chief Justice Ronald George, on May 15, 2008, the Supreme Court of California ruled in favor of marriage equality, declaring it unconstitutional to deny same-sex couples the freedom to marry.

In a tribute to Lyon and Martin, Mayor Newsom arranged for the couple to receive the first marriage license to be issued to a same-sex couple after the Court's decision became final. He then married them in a private ceremony at City Hall soon after 5:00 p.m. on June 16, 2008, followed by a reception for family, friends, and members of the news media.

### **Conclusion**

The couple's selection to be the first same-sex couple to be married in California as a result of the state Supreme Court's decision was altogether appropriate. As Kate Kendell, executive director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights, remarked, Lyon and Martin have played a pivotal role in the struggle for glbtq equality.

"At a time when being openly gay cost you everything you cared about, they were [openly gay]. And they took risks and spoke out from the 1950s on in a way that I certainly do not believe I would have nor would most of us."

Allowing the couple to be the first to marry, Kendell said, "is the absolute least we can do to acknowledge how critical their legacy is to the lives of all of us."

Martin and Lyon occupy a particularly important position as founding mothers of the modern glbtq movement, having participated in the movement's evolution from the timid first steps of the homophile organizations to the heady days of the gay and lesbian liberation to the achievement of more mainstream political clout.

Sadly, only three months following her wedding, Del Martin died on August 27, 2008 in San Francisco. She was survived by Lyon, a daughter, a granddaughter, and a grandson, as well as by legions of admirers.

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"World Film Premiere Celebrates Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon: 50th Anniversary of Lesbian Civil Rights Movement Founders." [gaytoday.com/events/021103ev.asp](http://gaytoday.com/events/021103ev.asp)

### **About the Author**

**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.