



The Lavendar Lens: Lesbianism in the United States 1870-1969 by Audrey Hampshire

On June 27, 1969, police raided the Stonewall Inn, located in Greenwich Village, New York and a riot broke out. Usually the individuals within this establishment simply endured police abuse and harassment. This night was different for reasons still debated among many people today. The gay men and lesbian women in Stonewall Inn fought back against police brutality for hours into the night.¹ Through this event that America as well as the homosexual community began to realize and demonstrate gay acceptance, pride, and resistance.²

In the aftermath of the Stonewall riots, those who had previously found a limited amount of safety within Greenwich Village became enraged. In the days following the Stonewall incident the *New York Times* published only a few brief related articles. A total of thirteen men were arrested that evening and four police officers were injured. The only injury reported in the newspaper was related to the broken wrist of one police officer. Police reported that those surrounding the Stonewall Inn, "threw bricks, bottles, garbage, pennies, and a parking meter at the policemen." The purported reasons the police entered the restaurant were because the Stonewall Inn did not have a license to serve alcohol and the police had a search warrant. When police entered the Stonewall Inn on June 29, 1969 they discovered that only fountain beverages were being served. In the two weeks prior to the June 27 raid, the police had raided the Stonewall Inn two other times. Many of the men who were present at the Stonewall Inn that evening were well aware of the potential police brutality and the fact that many of them were being watched.³

In the days following the Stonewall riot, the *New York Times* continued to cover "near riot" incidents that occurred on Sheridan Square in Greenwich Village. Homosexuals within the area were outraged, fearful, and beginning to realize the potential for change. Three more people were arrested on June 29, 1969 for throwing stones and bottles at the police. Signs were posted outside of Stonewall Inn as well as throughout the 'Village' containing statements such as, "Support Gay Power" and "Legalize Gay Bars".⁴

Following the Stonewall riots many people first began to address the issue of gay rights. In prior generations there had been struggles for equality among many other minority groups within the United States. Charles Kaiser has suggested that the Civil Rights Act of 1964, "provided the blueprints for a much broader national liberation, first for women, then for gays and eventually for practically every other oppressed group in America."⁵

While the Stonewall Inn riots, which many claim sparked the gay rights movement in the 1970s, provide important background, the purpose of this article is to provide a glimpse into the lesbian community within the United States and its organizing efforts prior to 1969. Lesbian women were very involved in fighting for their advancement as well as for their own place within American society long before 1969. Some lesbian women actually paved the way for the advancement not only of the gay rights movement but of the early feminist movement as well. These women organized themselves into nonviolent sisterhoods, which worked towards gaining equality for women as well as the homosexual community. As such,

these movements represent important, though often overlooked examples of nonviolent social change.

It is important to consider several things when discussing lesbianism within the United States. Romantic friendship has been present within American culture since the beginning of the United States. The realm of female activities included sharing time with other females, whether they were family members or friends. Women often supported one another and bonded with one another. These bonding experiences include birth, marriage, death, and institutional experiences which included boarding schools and colleges.⁶

The nature of romantic friendships often varied across a wide spectrum of possibilities. Some were simply sisterly love while others involved love shared between adolescent girls or mature women. Male and female relationships during the early 20th century involved many restrictions and often had physical limitations on intimacy. Women involved in physically intimate relationships during this time period often had more freedom because they were not under the direct control of men. There was also no fear of pregnancy when two women engaged in sexual intercourse.⁷ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg writes in an essay on romantic friendship during the 19th century:

I would like to suggest that the nineteenth century was such a cultural environment. That is, the supposedly repressive and destructive Victorian sexual ethos may have been more flexible and responsive to the needs of particular individuals than those of the mid-twentieth century.⁸

At the beginning of the 20th century women engaged in same sex romantic friendships were not always thought to be homosexual. At the same time men involved in close friendships with other men were often considered homosexual and a stigma was attached to this term for men. Even in the early 1920s two women living in Greenwich Village, New York, were able to raise a child together and live-out what today would be considered a lesbian relationship without raising any curiosity.⁹ In the years following the First World War many American intellectuals became quite interested in gaining further knowledge on the topic of "sexual abnormalities".¹⁰

The 1920s were known as a time of sexual permissiveness within American society. This decade not only allowed for heterosexual experimentation among people but bisexual experimentation as well. What had previously been known as romantic friendship within American society transformed into more physically based genital relationships. Statistical data collected at the time by sociologist Katherine Bement Davis indicates that around fifty percent of women involved in the study were at one time involved in an intense emotional relationship with another woman that involved sexual behavior.¹¹ While bisexuality was more commonly permissible throughout American society during the 1920s, lesbianism was not. By the end of the decade society's view of lesbians was largely negative. Lesbian relationships were considered a major problem within many heterosexual circles. In fact, lesbianism was seen as a threat to heterosexual marriage as well as to maintaining feminine roles for women within society.¹²

During this time in America many people began to question women's behaviors. Lesbian relationships between girls living in reform schools were not limited to girls of the same race. Often African-American girls and Caucasian girls were involved in lesbian relationships.¹³ It was also common for lesbian relationships to exist within other institutional settings. In prison settings women referred to one another as "friends." These "friends" who were engaged in lesbian relationships had several characteristics in common.

There were no limitations on the number of women one could be involved with, no racial limitations, and mutual masturbation was a common practice. Titles such as husband and wife were often adopted by these women, and jealousy was a common problem.¹⁴

As previously noted, many people often associate the Stonewall riots of 1969 with the beginning of the gay rights movement. It is important to understand that Greenwich Village simply did not turn into a gay community overnight, or even in ten years. Greenwich Village slowly developed from a community of unconventional people seeking an open and welcoming community into an area known later to many people as the point of origin for the gay rights movement. Stonewall was simply a turning point in gay rights, it was not the beginning of gay culture within America.

During the 1920s, Greenwich Village became known as a neighborhood, "where value was placed on the unconventional and the breaking of taboos."¹⁵ It was a community of people who were at the time considered abnormal, inverts, or members of the third sex. Outsiders viewed people living within Greenwich Village as openly displaying their sexuality. It was not uncommon to witness two women walking arm and arm around the Village. The neighborhood was also considered a place of open drug use, and the over consumption of alcohol was common among people living there. Some observers thought that these adults living within the Village simply needed to grow up.¹⁶

Greenwich Village was an open community where lesbian relationships existed. It is, however, important to understand that lesbianism was not taken seriously even in Greenwich Village during the 1920s. At that time, Greenwich Village was a predominantly male homosexual culture, where lesbians were welcome and but often considered simply bisexual women. Men within the Village often felt that any lesbian woman could become heterosexual given the right experience with the right man. Sex between women was not forbidden but a long term relationship between two women was not taken seriously.¹⁷

The predominant attitude of men in Greenwich Village regarding lesbianism conformed to the majority of people in American society during this time. During the 1920s many people considered it essential for women to have heterosexual intercourse to remain in good health.¹⁸ Therefore, women involved in sexual relationships with one another were often encouraged both within and outside of Greenwich Village to engage in heterosexual relationships. As Lillian Faderman wrote in her book *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*: Despite the worship of nonconformity in the Village, lesbianism was clearly not accepted as a sexual choice as valid as heterosexuality. Bisexuality was far more easily understood here, as it was in Harlem, particularly if it ended in heterosexuality.¹⁹

Lesbian women became more widely accepted within the Greenwich Village community by the early 1930s in part because of the increasingly large number of lesbians living and visiting there. They began to claim a place within the Village of their own beside an already established gay male community. It is important to remember that although lesbians faced opposition and struggled for recognition within Greenwich Village, they were surrounded with more freedom and acceptance in the Village than anywhere else in the United States at this time.²⁰ The notoriety and status of Greenwich Village began to grow as the decades passed. Many people began to see not only Greenwich Village but also larger urban areas such as New York City and San Francisco as gay metropolises. After the Second World War many lesbian and gay veterans came home from the war and moved to places like Greenwich Village to live a more open lifestyle.²¹

Mabel Dodge decided to settle in Greenwich Village in 1912 in order to organize weekly salons featuring intellectuals. Dodge was bisexual and remains a good example of the changes many lesbians embraced during this time. She was married to three different men during her lifetime and yet continued to be romantically involved with women. Because it was more acceptable for women during the 1920s to engage in bisexual behavior. Many people feel that Dodge helped bring about some early acceptance of female sexuality within society. It is important to note that during the 1930s American society was not focused on the advancement of or further research about societal subcultures. Americans during the 1930s were simply trying to survive and face a future with an uncertain economic situation.

The 1920s, an era often referred to as the "roaring twenties," came to a standstill in 1929 when the Great Depression exploded onto the American scene. The sexual freedoms of the twenties ended and survival instincts of the thirties became dominant. This suspension of societal examination and engagement lasted until the United States entered World War II. Many women who questioned their sexuality during the 1920s and lived bisexual or lesbian lives at that time, found themselves married and leading heterosexual lives during the 1930s. Although these women were married, their bisexual activities did not always come to an end. When medical doctors began speaking out against homosexuality during this decade many homosexual or bisexual women remained silent since they were living heterosexual married lives.²²

Lower class lesbian women who found themselves jobless and homeless during the Great Depression had few choices beyond marriage (mentioned above) or roaming the countryside. Some lesbian women decided not to convert to a heterosexual lifestyle and marry. Instead they wandered throughout the United States with other women. Because they traveled in large groups with other lesbians these women became known as "sisters of the road."²³

Novels depicted lesbians during this decade as very troubled individuals. Often story lines within these fictional accounts describe lesbian women as suicidal, self loathing, and full of hopeless passion. Derogatory terms began to appear during the twenties and thirties such as, *dyke*, *bulldyke*, *bulldagger*, *gay*, *drag*, *queer bird*, and *lavender*.²⁴ Many of these terms were used by lesbians to describe themselves and one another.²⁵

It is important to understand that during the 1930s not all lesbian women considered themselves in hiding or were confused about their sexual orientation. Many middle class women identified themselves during this period as lesbians. The majority of these women were surrounded by other lesbian women and had the frequent support of and contact with other lesbians. These women were often found on college and university campuses, summer camps, and residence halls.²⁶

Major changes occurred within U.S. society during the years of World War II that gave women more significant roles outside of the home. On the home front in the United States during the years of the war women were encouraged to become strong and independent. War propaganda encouraged women to not fear living without men while their husbands, brothers, and fathers were engaged in World War II.²⁷ Women who were not in the military had opportunities to re-establish close and sometimes intimate relationships with other women.²⁸

Some women were directly involved in military service during the Second World War. In fact, approximately 300,000 women served in the military during World War II. Many of these women identified themselves, as well as others within close circles of women, as

lesbians. Lesbian relationships were not impossible within the military environment. Women discovered to have been involved with other women were not always discharged like men involved in homosexual activities. Often these women were simply separated or the relationship was ignored.²⁹

Heterosexual women in the military during the Second World War often took a cavalier attitude toward obvious lesbian relationships. Often heterosexual women worked alongside homosexual women and did not find their lesbian co-workers' sexual preference very important. Male homosexuals who were discharged from the military were frequently loaded onto ships and sent to the nearest U.S. ports, often relocating them individually in large cities. Such relocation experiences, combined with a general sense of having nowhere else to go after being discharged from the military, contributed to the expansion of homosexual populations in New York and San Francisco during World War II.³⁰

Both the United States military as well as American society were strongly critical of homosexuality during World War II. Individuals were more likely to be exposed to same sex relationships and homosexual subculture within the military. This was due, in part to the massive mobilization effort and recruitment of both men and women in large numbers to fight for the common cause. The Women's Army Corps (WAC) screened women interested in military enlistment and often asked them several questions to determine whether they were sexually interested in other women.³¹ There was, however, a generally tolerant attitude toward lesbianism within the military due to the need for women's service.³²

Lesbians as well as gay men discharged from the military due to their homosexuality were dishonorably discharged and labeled "blue discharges." Approximately 10,000 GIs were questioned about their sex lives as well as their love interests during their years in the military. This was the military's way of ensuring safety from any possibly threatening homosexuals. These individuals were denied any GI benefits and often had great difficulty finding jobs.³³

Lisa Ben was a young woman living and working as a secretary in California during the 1940s. She had left home to escape her parents' overwhelming demands. In California Ben began to meet other lesbians and soon decided that she wanted to start a magazine for lesbian women. When she ran out of work at her job she devoted her creative energy to producing the magazine she entitled *Vice Versa*. Overall she published nine issues of the magazine before she lost her full-time job. Ben went on to write gay parodies of popular songs and performed them in local clubs. She never performed her parodies for anyone who wasn't homosexual because she felt that only lesbians could truly understand them.

Vice Versa is a good example of nonviolent social change. Many women during this time period were lesbians but didn't really understand that there were other women living with and openly loving other women. Through her publication Ben was able to further encourage women to acknowledge their homosexuality and enhance their sense of self-worth.

As the Cold War Era further descended upon Americans during the 1950s, the nuclear family was considered an important mechanism to fight communism within the United States.³⁴ Therefore, anyone not living within or seeking to live within the traditional nuclear family was seen to be a possible supporter of communism. Any other nontraditional behavior was considered immoral and unpatriotic.

The McCarthy witch hunts of the 1950s were driven by a desire to flush American society of any possible communist influence. It was also during this time that the United States

government took a harsh stance against the employment of homosexuals within the federal government. Homosexuals at this time were considered by many within the U.S. government to be untrustworthy and, because many believed they homosexuals lacked emotional stability, they were considered possible risks to the overall security of the nation. Homosexuals were considered more likely to commit espionage while holding governmental jobs. Therefore, it was argued, once they were removed from these positions the security of the nation would increase.³⁵

However, the 1950s also produced major progress in America within the realm of homosexuality. Four things contributed to this progress. One was the founding of the *Mattachine Society*, an organization that catered to homosexuals. The second was the book *The Homosexual in America* by Edward Sagarin. A third factor was the work of Evelyn Hooker, who argued that homosexuals were not suffering from any disorder and did not need treatment for their homosexuality. Lastly, a small group of lesbians and gay artists began introducing a gay rights agenda to society.³⁶

The first lesbian organization formed within the United States was known as the *Daughters of Bilitis* (DOB). Barbara Gittings, who is credited with founding the New York chapter of the organization, is considered a leading figure in advancing opportunities for many women. She discovered DOB through her own self-exploration while in college. Like many lesbian woman, she was in search of a lesbian community.

A popular feeling in the 1960s in American society was that organized religion had disappeared and was replaced by complete chaos. The cover of an issue of *Time Magazine* during this time read, "Is God Dead?"³⁷ The deaths of John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert Kennedy shook the structural foundations on which many Americans based their identities. By the end of the decade the Vietnam War left many Americans in complete disillusionment. The overwhelming desire of Americans to come together and survive the perceived madness surrounding them brought an end to the idea of normalcy during this decade.

Changes were occurring throughout the United States on both small and large scales that affected the greater lesbian community. Many people both within and outside of the homosexual community were shocked to discover that Columbia University openly recognized a gay student organization in 1967. There was also a great feeling of sexual freedom during the 1960s present in all American's lives. The stigma of the birth control pill quickly faded among many American women who came to consider it a way to live freely without the worry of unwanted pregnancy.³⁸ Lesbians such as Shirley Willer felt it was important for gay and lesbian people to openly protest in the streets in order to allow the American public to see just how normal gay people are.³⁹ During this era Abigail Van Buren began to address homosexual issues in her "Dear Abby" newspaper column.⁴⁰

Some say the chaos of the 1960s encouraged or promoted the violence that shook the gay community as well as the rest of America on the evening of June 27, 1969 at the Stonewall Inn. It is clear from this review, however, that given the rich past of the gay and lesbian communities in the years proceeding 1969, many social and political changes influenced the events that led to that violent confrontation in Greenwich Village. During the late nineteenth century and for over half of the twentieth century lesbian women were organizing nonviolently in an effort to gain equality and social respect. These leading lesbians provided a nonviolent framework for the gay rights movement that followed in the post-Stonewall era of gay rights.

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