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The University of North Carolina at Charlotte



LIVES OF LESBIAN ELDERS

Looking Back, Looking Forward

D. Merilee Clunis, PhD

Karen I. Fredriksen-Goldsen, PhD

Pat A. Freeman, PhD • Nancy Nystrom, PhD

Lives of Lesbian Elders
Looking Back,
Looking Forward

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To all those who came before us

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This book emerged from conversations with lesbian elders. Although we were from different academic backgrounds, namely history, psychology, and social work, the six of us shared the view that these women's stories and history were—and are—being lost, and that loss means our link to our understanding of our past and future is jeopardized. We decided to embark on a project we called “Looking Back, Looking Forward,” which we hoped would help bring our lesbian elders out of the shadows, restore our history, and provide at least some of the information necessary to meet the future needs of aging lesbians.

In those early meetings we shared our visions, clarified our goals, honed our focus, and made decisions. We determined the goal of the project would be to provide accounts of the experiences of lesbian elders against the backdrop of the historical context of their times. Thus, what they did and why they did it (for example, avoiding the term “lesbian”) becomes clearer with an understanding of how homosexuality was perceived and treated during the early 1900s through the 1960s.

All six of us were involved in setting the initial purpose and scope of the project. We decided to limit our sample to women age fifty-five and older, to include those living in Washington, Oregon, and California, and to gather information through in-person interviews. We developed a semistructured interview based on a set of open-ended questions that could be completed in one to one and a half hours. Participants were gathered primarily through snowball sampling, and the taped interviews were conducted in their homes during 1997 and 1998. To analyze the material, we first transcribed the interviews and then at least two of us coded each one to identify themes.

All of the initial members of the team remained with the project into the data-gathering phase until one member, Pat Terry, needed to leave due to other commitments. Another member, Teresa Jones, stayed with the project through the data-analysis phase when, as anticipated, her professional obligations necessitated her pulling back.

The four remaining members of the project—Merilee Clunis, Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen, Pat Freeman, and Nancy Nystrom—are responsible for creating this book from the interviews. We have tried to understand what these lesbian elders were saying about themselves, their lives, and their social and historical context. And we have tried to convey that understanding, as much as possible, in their own words. We feel privileged that these women were willing to share their stories with us. We sincerely hope that we have reflected them accurately and that their response to the book will be, “Yes. They heard us.”

We have many people to thank for their help in creating this book. First and foremost, we want to thank the lesbian elders whose words and lives appear in this book. We have profound respect for their trials and tribulations and the deepest gratitude for their willingness to open their lives to us.

We are also indebted to the Pride Foundation of Seattle for the grant that allowed us to have the interviews transcribed; to Jennie Goode, who provided invaluable editing and advice on earlier versions of most of the chapters; to our families for their support throughout this project; and to one another for persevering during the time it took to complete this book.

Introduction

My strength comes from my desire. . . . I have a desire to grow in grace.

Ernestine, age seventy-five

GETTING STARTED

The lives of elder lesbians have simply been overlooked. As women, as lesbians, and as elders they have been stigmatized and marginalized by U.S. society. Their lives have largely remained invisible in a society that, through much of the twentieth century, criminalized homosexuality in order to enforce heterosexuality. Despite this, the sixty-two lesbians, ranging in age from fifty-five to ninety-five, interviewed for this book have lived dynamic lives, drawing upon their resourcefulness, amazing resilience, and independence. Unfortunately, their stories are being lost to time; without them our link to the past as well as our understanding of the future is in jeopardy. With professional backgrounds in psychology, social work, and history, the authors began the “Looking Back, Looking Forward” project as a means to bring our lesbian elders out of the shadows and restore their history, one piece of the collective history of lesbians in the United States.

In the early stages of this project, we developed a semistructured interview based on a set of open-ended questions, designed to take approximately an hour to an hour and a half. We searched for older lesbians to interview, but it was difficult finding willing participants. Notices in gay/lesbian publications produced few responses. We have little doubt that older lesbians’ reluctance to be interviewed reflected the impact of the stigma of being gay during the era in which these women were coming of age. The fear and distrust that was so much a part of being lesbian remained strong, especially for those over sixty-

five years of age. As a result, confidentiality was of particular concern. From the few older lesbians willing to be interviewed, we gathered other names. We contacted these women to explain the project and solicit referrals to others who might be interested in participating.

Many women granted interviews only after we had established credibility, trust, and fellowship through the process of direct contact. However, as we built trust with each referral and interview, more referrals followed. Although this approach to obtaining participants was successful, it also had drawbacks. The major risk was that this “snowball sampling” might skew the demographics because of the tendency for people to associate with those of similar age, socioeconomic class, and ethnicity. Despite this potential drawback, the sample was, in fact, quite diverse in income, education, and age. Many of these referrals also added to the geographic diversity of the group, providing contacts throughout California, Oregon, and Washington.

Personal referrals did open doors, but they did not open all doors. The project team was diverse in terms of class background and race, yet only about 5 percent of those interviewed were lesbians of color. Life expectancies are generally lower for populations of color, so there may be proportionately fewer of these elders. More important reasons, however, included fear of discovery as well as outright distrust of researchers. One woman of color stated that she had been interviewed for one of the very first lesbian studies, had been misquoted, and felt used. She did not trust researchers—lesbian or otherwise.

Aside from being lesbian, the women who participated in this study differed in other ways from the stereotypical woman of the time. For example, women generally were not encouraged to attend college; they were, however, expected to get married. Even after World War II’s GI Bill opened college campuses in greater numbers to women, society decreed that women should attend for no longer than two years—the time expected to find a suitable husband. Although the women interviewed were diverse in terms of class background and income, a surprising number had attended college. Twenty-nine percent of the women interviewed had some college; 21 percent had an undergraduate college degree; 43 percent had a graduate degree; and 7 percent had a high school diploma or less.

More than 50 percent of the women had been married and 42 percent had children. Of these, some had acknowledged their lesbianism but had given in to social pressures and married. Others had repressed their lesbianism, especially to themselves, and had married. A few had admitted their lesbianism, at least to themselves, but stayed married until after their children were grown, and then divorced.

Fifty-three percent of the women were retired from a job or career. However, they continued to do volunteer work, hold full- and/or part-time positions, and pursue education, hobbies, travel, and a variety of interests. For these women, retirement has not led to stasis. Their household incomes ranged from \$10,000 to over \$100,000. Of the 47 percent who had not yet retired, a number continued to work well into their sixties. One woman had no immediate intention to retire even though she was in her early eighties. Ninety-four percent of the women described their health as good or excellent, although 17 percent acknowledged serious health problems or a major disability. Sixty-five percent of the women had partners; 35 percent were single or their partners had died. Geographically, 37 percent lived in California, 36 percent in Washington, and 27 percent in Oregon.

In putting this book together, we recognized that what the women had to say was the most important aspect of it. To that end we have quoted them extensively; however, we have not quoted equally from all sixty-two interviews. Rather, we selected quotes that were representative of a particular experience. As promised, we have changed the women's names and identifying information for reasons of confidentiality. Generally the women told us that being interviewed was a rewarding experience, even a freeing one. We, too, benefited tremendously from this process. Meeting these women, all of whom were, intentionally or not, pioneers in the gay movement, was exciting and memorable. We thank them for the privilege of being allowed to share their lives, for even a short time.

The life experiences of these lesbian elders provide the basic material for this book. How these women lived—the choices they made and their reasons for making them—can be understood only within the context of the changing perception of homosexuality throughout the twentieth century. Thus, historical background is central to this project.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Early History

If we are to understand the importance of these elder voices and the significance of their message in today's world, we must listen to them within the context of their time, not from the perspective of the twenty-first century. We must understand the culture, the politics, and the social mores of the eras in which these women came of age. Each of us is the product of history, and the women here are no different.

If coming of age is defined as the years leading up to and including the generally defined legal age of twenty-one—the years that shape and establish a person's identity—then familiarity with the history of the years spanning 1900 through 1969 is necessary in order to comprehend the lives of the women in this book. If we are to understand the fear, rebellion, compromise, loss, resiliency, courage, and tenacity it required to be lesbian prior to the late 1980s, we must not lose sight of the fact that to be homosexual was to be considered a pariah, a criminal, and/or a sick individual subject to voluntary or involuntary medical cures, including lobotomy. Above all, if we are to understand the events and forces that shaped these women, we must approach their chronicle from the social history of lesbians in the twentieth century.

Up until the early 1900s, lesbianism was viewed as a relatively innocuous occurrence that prepared women for “real sex,” that is, sex with a man. A woman who maintained a long-term relationship with another woman was said to be in a Boston marriage. This term conferred respectability to the relationship between two women—generally educated and of the financially secure middle or upper classes—who lived together in what was considered a marriage and thus helped to keep them from becoming a social and/or economic burden to their families.

Often one woman assumed a more assertive, masculine role and dressed in a masculine fashion while the other assumed a more feminine role, dressed accordingly, and ran the household. The Ladies of Llangollen—Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby (who had a more-than-fifty-year relationship)—are an example of such an arrangement, as are Willa Cather and Edith Lewis (together for forty years). Novelist Sarah Orne Jewett and Annie Fields; Irish writer Edith

Somerville and Violet Martin; Rosa Bonheur (painter) and Nathalie Micas; and Mary Woolley (president of Mount Holyoke College) and Jeanette Marks provide additional illustrations of these committed relationships.

Women during this period had few rights outside the control of a male family member or husband. However, those in Boston marriages achieved more independence and control over their lives. In addition, a growing number of young upper- and middle-class women were attending women's colleges, and articles in popular magazines and newspapers endorsed and promoted the many benefits of education and special friendships.

The early 1900s saw an increasing prosperity in the United States, which led to a growing middle class with a strong sense of social and political responsibility and a mounting sense of optimism. In spite of their prominent involvement in such progressive movement reforms as child labor, banking regulation, and food standards, people in the middle classes found time to indulge in their increasing interest in the medically "deviant" and "grotesque." For instance, Magnus Hirschfeld, Sigmund Freud, and Havelock Ellis were publishing studies about flagellation, sadomasochism, homosexuality, and the like.

After 1910, as a result of the medicalization of lesbianism and the growing public knowledge of the "dangers" of lesbianism to young women, the popular media no longer looked favorably on women's education and independence. College-bound young women and their parents were now warned of the temptations and corruption awaiting them: depravities that von Krafft-Ebing, Ellis, and Freud had added to the psychological/medical lexicon and the vocabulary of the knowledgeable public, along with the terms "homosexual" and "lesbian."

The public heeded the warnings. Increased newspaper coverage and very visible police raids of bars, balls, and clubs catering to gays and lesbians became almost indispensable in keeping the majority heterosexual society aware of the homosexual threat to the country's morals. Such stories and incidents likely increased the sale of newspapers—and in the process reinforced the message that deviance would not be allowed. Now that homosexuality was linked to mental illness and the criminal world, visibility, however limited, was no longer tolerated.

In the glare of such public knowledge and scrutiny of the perverse, any single, independent, professional woman was often assumed to

be a lesbian. For lesbians seeking protection in Queen Victoria's apocryphal dictate that lesbians did not exist, invisibility neither ensured safety nor provided peace of mind. In fact, public suspicions about the relationships of women educators, such as Mary Woolley and Jeannette Marks of Mount Holyoke College, and M. Carey Thomas and Mary Garrett of Bryn Mawr College, led to their discomfort, fear, and change of living arrangements.

Young men, also, did not escape examination. They were admonished to be manly and to avoid the "sink" of pansyism that had been personified earlier by Oscar Wilde and had so shocked society on both continents. No longer was it acceptable for men to engage in sex with an effeminate male, or "pansy," as a substitute for sex with a woman. What before had been passed off simply as a means to satisfy the natural drives of men when women were not available was now viewed as evidence of perversion.

World War I

The forming and reforming of political and military alliances such as the Franco-Russian Alliance and the Triple Entente, as well as the escalating crisis in Morocco in 1911, set in motion ominous rumbles in Europe. When war broke out, the developing war technology quickly killed the men and the horses they rode. It killed the French soldiers in their bright blue tunics, who marched into battle in disciplined formation. It killed Englishmen, Germans, and, when the United States entered the war in 1918, it killed the doughboys. The war changed the world. Europe was devastated and struggled to rebuild. Germany was burdened by enormous debt. The United States became a creditor nation with loans and investments in Europe.

America was changed. Like it or not, the country was now part of the international scene—no more isolation. The growing public sophistication that came from greater involvement in other parts of the world led to an increasing awareness of same-sex love. The troops had spent time in Paris. Gays and lesbians met others like themselves; they frequented homosexual clubs, and many experienced Parisian society, which was more tolerant and accepting of homosexuality. After the war the question for Americans (gay, lesbian, and straight) was now, "How do you keep 'em down on the farm after they've seen Paree?"

The answer was: You did not. Straights and gays returning from the war migrated to the larger cities in search of opportunities or simply as an antidote to the sameness and predictability of farm and small-town life. Gays and lesbians, in particular, sought the more tolerant climate of the larger cities where they were more likely to meet others like themselves. Automobiles and trains provided mobility for all classes of society and changed the way people lived and played.

New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, all with reputations of “anything goes,” became meccas for the avant-garde, bohemians, and gays and lesbians, as did Greenwich Village and Harlem in New York, South Side Chicago, and the Tenderloin in San Francisco. Jazz, blues, bathtub gin, speakeasies, drag balls, sin, sex, masculine women, and effeminate men proliferated. Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey defied convention and shouted out that they may “say I do it, ain’t nobody caught me, sure got to prove it on me . . .” And Gladys Bentley—all 300 pounds of her, in white tuxedo and top hat—attracted long lines of whites, blacks, straights, and gays to her shows. Nobody played the piano and sang like Gladys. She was the queen of the dirty ditty, double entendre, and low-down blues.

Reform in the Air

Although it is the bobbed-hair and bathtub gin set that seems to have left its mark on the postwar years, these people were not, in fact, representative of the majority of society. The older middle-class majority found such fast-living antics deplorable at best. Certainly the hobnobbing and sexual experimenting going on in the big cities was evidence to the majority that society was in decline. Legal means and social pressures were used to counteract what many feared to be an increase in homosexuality. Such lowering of morals was directly due, many believed, to homosexuals being allowed to serve in the military and to the corrupting influences of foreign lands.

The morally righteous found confirmation of America’s decline in the events of the Newport Naval Station scandal of 1919. The business community and moral reformers, concerned about the large number of effeminate sailors who cruised the Cliff Walk and congregated at the local YMCA brazenly soliciting homosexual sex, supported the U.S. Navy in a homosexual witch-hunt. The navy sent out “decoys,” entrapped the sailors, and charged them with criminal acts

of sodomy, drug use, and the like. In keeping with the mores of the times, the “decoys,” who openly testified to having had sexual relations (which some said they enjoyed) with the sailors in question, experienced no repercussions, no stigma, no questions of ethics. Not one of these more masculine men who the sailors serviced faced arrest or prosecution. This fact speaks volumes about the period regarding homosexuality and the attribution of specific sexual acts to gender roles; that is, the “manly” man was considered manly as long as he was serviced by an effeminate man; it was the effeminate man who went against nature. The message of the entrapment and prosecution of the sailors by the Department of the Navy was not lost to lesbians: It was another reason to move further into invisibility even though women were rarely if ever arrested and prosecuted.

The reformers also targeted the tolerant atmosphere of the big cities, which they believed encouraged sin. It was in this atmosphere that Henry Gerber and six of his friends founded the Society for Human Rights in Chicago in 1924 (the earliest documented homosexual emancipation organization in the United States) with the goals of educating the public and bringing about legal reform. They also published a journal, *Friendship and Freedom*, which reported on the society’s activities. In 1925 police raided Gerber’s house and confiscated his papers. He and other members of the society were arrested and jailed for three days without charges. Gerber lost his job and the society was disbanded.

Not surprisingly, during this period so-called patriotic societies flourished. These right-wing conservative groups used intimidation to promote white power through the control of education, business, and the public at large. The Ku Klux Klan experienced rapid growth and held picnics and massive hooded parades. Less civilized activities included cross burnings, beatings, and lynchings. They focused their hate on blacks, Catholics, Jews, immigrants, and homosexuals.

While the market, despite some warning signs, continued to gain, the moral reformers did not. The high living, speakeasy hopping, drag ball attending, drug and sex experimenting of the young and the Gatsby set appeared to be on the rise. Even *The Well of Loneliness*, banned in England and declared by the conservative *Sunday Express* to be nothing but an “unutterable putrefaction” (Omrod, 1985, p. 177) was published in the United States—and worse yet was being widely read. The reformers need not have worried, however. Its author,

Radclyffe Hall, believed in the theories of Ellis (namely that “inverts” were born that way and destined to be miserable) and von Krafft-Ebing (1969, pp. 222-225) (who believed inversion resulted in “antipathic sexual instinct,” even though he did support efforts to repeal Paragraph 175 of the German law that made sexual relations between adult males a crime). In melodramatic style, Hall espoused Ellis’s theories in particular. Her novel’s turgid prose and depressing plot portrays a lonely, mannish lesbian doomed to a life of seeking “the love that dare not speak its name” (Wilde, 1960, p. 41). Shunned and enduring social condemnation, she learns that nature, i.e., heterosexuality, will triumph.

The extent of *The Well of Loneliness*’s influence on lesbians of the 1920s through the 1960s is difficult to assess. Although the book presented a negative portrayal of lesbian life, it was still a representation of lesbians. Even if many lesbians found the novel to be depressing at best, its depiction of Parisian lesbian enclaves showed that all lesbians were not living lives of anguish. Just how many lesbians who read Hall’s book recognized that Valerie Seymour was based on the American expatriate Natalie Barney, or that the descriptions of the gay bars were exceedingly accurate, is obviously unknown—and in the long run does not matter. What is important is that, for better or worse, *The Well of Loneliness* showed that resistance to heterosexual conformity was a real possibility. This resistance was manifested in a number of ways, especially in finding and meeting others, in spite of the very real dangers of discovery.

Another significant message conveyed by the book was this: The U.S. public received confirmation that lesbians were predatory and perverse and, worse yet, mannish. With much hue and cry, the defenders of public morals announced that the publication of Hall’s novel was but further proof that the decline and fall of the United States was but one perverse act away. Government passed and enforced laws that criminalized homosexuals and drove them underground. Even worse, some lesbians accepted lesbian life as described by Hall; they embraced it, took it as their truth, and were frightened by what it portrayed.

Crash and Reform: The End of Gatsby

By 1919 Berlin had replaced Paris as the “open city” of Europe. The city’s temptations and vices appeared in guidebooks such as *What’s Not in the Baedeker Guide*, 1927. Magnus Hirschfeld’s Institute of Sexology provided scientific public lectures, research, medical care for sexual dysfunction, and a very popular museum of sexual aides, which was a major attraction for tourists—homosexual and heterosexual. Homosexuality flourished in this atmosphere. But in 1933, in an economy wracked by a worldwide depression, unemployment at devastatingly high levels, and merciless inflation, Hitler came to power.

FDR won the 1932 presidential election and Hitler seized power in January 1933. The Great Depression was, of course, a world depression that saw the rise of fascism in the United States as well as in Europe. Black Shirts marched in Italy, Brown Shirts marched in Germany, and Silver Shirts marched in the United States. In Germany, Hitler denounced Jews, homosexuals, and international bankers. In 1935, under the guise of reining in unfettered hedonism and restoring family values, Hitler acted on the authority of the newly amended paragraph 175 of the criminal code and began the Nazi roundup and imprisonment of homosexuals.

In the United States, Father Charles Coughlin denounced Jews and international bankers, and—along with other moral reformers—condemned homosexuals. Banks failed, unemployment grew exponentially as did lines at soup kitchens, and men abandoned families to hop the rails or build Hoovervilles. Fascism in the form of Father Coughlin and his radio broadcasts gained huge audiences. The American fascist Silver Shirt movement increased its membership nationwide. Moral reformers and politicians, cognizant of the power to be gained by warning of the ever-present dangers of nonconforming groups including homosexuals, busily investigated these groups looking to reform anything they designated as morally lax or corrupt. Vilification by the press and public guaranteed that homosexuals (male and female) were viewed as criminals unable to escape their own perversities. In the meantime, the masses sought relief from business failures, unemployment, bank failures, family breakups, and overwhelming poverty.

In Europe, World War II broke out in 1939 with the Nazi invasion of Poland. History tends to repeat itself in many ways. The war years were no exception, and many social and economic changes occurred as a result of World War II. During the war, women joined the factory workforce in great numbers. Rosie the Riveter became the symbol of the new woman. She was independent and could do a man's job. The military, too, offered women the opportunity to join, which they did—including lesbians in large numbers. But just as after World War I, when the war ended, women were turned out of their jobs and told to become housewives. The government actively promoted policies and advertising campaigns encouraging women to return to the home.

After the War: Conformity

The congressional elections of 1946 brought in a Republican-controlled Congress that sought to control the unions and prevent an apparent spread of communism. Such distrust of Russia's intentions and politics following the Russian expansion into Berlin led to ever-growing suspicions and fears in the United States. Reacting, in part, to fear of impending destruction and the potential impotency of American might, society displayed less and less tolerance for those seen as different, and homosexuals were at the top of the list. In magazines geared to the general public, the psychiatric and mental health communities published articles extolling the benefits of normalcy and the destructiveness of being abnormal, that is, homosexual—a condition that could be cured, of course, by the compassionate psychiatrist or mental health worker.

Unfortunately, some of the cures offered, for example, shock treatment and lobotomy, often had destructive side effects; others were simply time-consuming, ineffectual, and very expensive. Some homosexuals were involuntarily treated, sanctioned by criminal and mental health laws. With homosexuals treated as criminals and social deviants, at risk of losing their jobs, credit, social standing, friends, and subject to blackmail and involuntary commitment, it is not surprising that gays and lesbians moved ever further into what is now referred to as the "closet." They formed a rapidly growing and vast underground subculture and stayed there out of fear.

Although the majority of the medical community supported the current beliefs of the times, some sought change. The 1948 and 1953 publications of Alfred Kinsey's studies of sexual behavior in men and women, which reported that 8 percent of men were homosexual and 28 percent of women had erotic responses to women, shocked America. Unfortunately, they failed to enlighten the public, most of whom had not actually read the books. The studies had a limited impact within the medical profession as well. The fear of difference, whether in sexuality or politics, ran rampant in American society.

As fear of communism—which, with the help of the media and right-wing politicians was becoming linked in the public mind with homosexuality, blackmail, un-Americanism, and perversity—increased, so did loyalty oath requirements for government and public educational institutions. Many states formed committees to investigate the nefarious activities of myriad communists, and by association homosexuals, in such places as government, Hollywood, universities, and the military. In the early 1950s, Joseph McCarthy, a Republican senator from Wisconsin, was appointed chairman of an investigative arm of the Senate Committee on Government Operations. With Roy Cohn as chief counsel, McCarthy charged that the State Department was riddled with communists and perverts (homosexuals), and that there was, in fact, a list of 205 names. McCarthy then proceeded to intimidate politicians, the military, and the public at large.

Few stood up to McCarthy. Most joined in the paranoia and, if called to testify before his committee, named names. Considered to be security risks, gays and lesbians were fired from government service jobs; gay and lesbian teachers were fired as corrupters of children; gays and lesbians were also fired from civilian jobs and evicted from apartments. The military stepped up its search for homosexuals in the ranks and dishonorably discharged them. McCarthy reportedly died of cirrhosis of the liver, likely a result of alcoholism, in 1957. Unfortunately, however, homophobia did not die with McCarthy. Cohn was disbarred shortly before his death in 1986 of AIDS-related cancer. He'd lived a deeply closeted life, denying his homosexuality in spite of being notorious for picking up hustlers.

There was opposition to the homophobic hysteria. Psychologist Evelyn Hooker conducted a series of studies of gay men in 1956 that challenged the accepted dogma of homosexuality as a mental disorder. In 1957 in England, the Wolfenden Report stated, "homosexual

behavior between consenting adults in private should no longer be a criminal offense” (Miller, 1995, p. 283). Homophile organizations such as the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society, which published the magazine *ONE*, did exist. However, most gays and lesbians were not tempted to move out of the closet by such reports or organizations.

As is true about so much of life, economic and social status had much to do with how one lived—in this case, in or out of the closet. The famous and the rich led amazingly open lives as, indeed, they had always done. For example, Dorothy Arzner, a film director from the 1920s to the 1940s, was recognized as a lesbian by the movie industry. Marlene Dietrich’s affairs and her relationship with Mercedes de Acosta were well inferred among those “in the know.” The movie-viewing public was meanwhile subjected to massive publicity campaigns showing Dietrich smiling happily in heterosexual romantic situations. The wealthy and upper middle class also managed, for the most part, to maintain their way of life. They held private parties and went to San Francisco, the Village, and Cherry Grove, the oldest town on Fire Island. If life began to be marked by galloping ennui, they simply went to Europe.

Working-class gays and lesbians did not have such options and led more restricted lives, many finding their social life in “the bars.” The Volstead Act (prohibition), originally passed in 1919 and generally ignored until the 1930s, actually opened the door nationwide for a more entrenched police payoff system that allowed speakeasies to flourish and furthered East Coast expansion by the Mafia who began running bars catering to homosexuals. A similar non-Mafia payoff system on the West Coast also allowed such bars to operate. Women who frequented the bars were subjected to the “butch/femme” dogmatism that dominated bar culture. For many women, however, bars and the gay scene were not an option for either meeting other lesbians or simply socializing in a gay/lesbian atmosphere. The women in this study often discovered lesbianism (their own or someone else’s) at college or on the job.

Whether they were working, middle, or upper class, lesbians and gays often lived with guilt, denial, and fear. The parties and bars provided a semblance of safety and a place to mingle. There was, indeed, an atmosphere of camaraderie, acceptance, and solidarity, but it came at a price. Alcohol flowed freely. Its consumption allowed one to for-

get the everyday pain of living a lie, of constantly hiding the truth from society and from oneself. It filled the glasses of the lonely solitary drinkers as well. In the end, class did not protect gays and lesbians from alcoholism or loneliness, which flourished in their communities. And the closet door remained as tightly shut as ever.

Denial, social pressure, and fear of discovery led many gays and lesbians to voluntarily seek instantaneous heterosexuality at the hands of therapists and psychiatrists who practiced a variety of techniques to cure homosexuality. Others were forced into medical treatment by spouses, parents, friends, “concerned” citizens (e.g., doctors or educators), or the criminal justice system. Others found avoidance of the mental health professionals to be safer, easier, cheaper, and less traumatic: They just got married. As previously noted, more than half of the lesbians in this study married. The reasons included not recognizing their lesbianism, doing what was expected, suppressing lesbian desires, and marrying because of pregnancy or the desire to have children.

The Movements

After the Kennedy assassination, when the women’s movement, the Vietnam War, the Stonewall riots, and the start of the gay liberation movement turned American society upside down, younger gays and lesbians began to emerge from the closet. However, for the majority of older gays and lesbians these changes were not enough and they remained silenced.

Younger gays and lesbians, in particular, had learned from the civil rights movement and were no longer willing to accept denigration or invisibility. In Seattle, Washington, in 1967, several owners of gay bars rebelled against the police payoff system and testified against the police department. The chief of police was forced to resign and several policemen received jail sentences. This activism ended the payoff system as well as the policy of harassment of gay bars in Seattle.

Two years later at the Stonewall Inn—a seedy bar in Greenwich Village, New York, noted primarily for its “nothing left to lose” patrons including hustlers, queens, and the down-and-out—a few queens and dykes stood up to the police and refused to load themselves passively into the waiting paddy wagons. They threw pennies, chanted,

sang, and set the bar on fire. The Stonewall riots, which lasted five days in varying incarnations, marked the start of what has come to be known as the gay liberation movement.

The removal of homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1973 reflected a shift in social opinion and simultaneously contributed to further change. In this more supportive atmosphere mental health service providers did not necessarily become gay and lesbian affirmative, but many formerly closeted therapists and members of the medical professions began coming out professionally.

Gay and lesbian activists began sponsoring gay/lesbian dances and events, and university students joined in support. Laws allowing involuntary commitment were changed. “Out” gays and lesbians entered politics in surprisingly large numbers and were elected, also in surprisingly large numbers. Today gay and lesbian liberation is still evolving. Visibility continues to grow as more are stepping forward and coming out. More gays and lesbians have moved into the mainstream, some with children and homes in the suburbs. Even though a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender presence is gaining public support, a very real and growing form of virulent homophobia and heterosexism remains and must not be ignored. As history reveals, complacency can be dangerous.

In this book the importance of the historical context of the women’s lives cannot be overstated. Understanding the periods during which the women came of age and first recognized their lesbianism is essential because their history continues to shape their lives today. As highlighted throughout this introduction, the women came of age at a time when homosexuality was severely stigmatized and lesbian invisibility reigned. Few public portrayals of lesbian life were in existence, and those few depicted a life of despair, shame, and loneliness. Understanding history is the key to where we’ve been, knowing who we are and what challenges the future may bring. Only through listening to the voices of the lesbian elders themselves can we learn about their experiences—and our collective history—and come to appreciate their strengths and needs as they age.

These women are the forerunners to the gay liberation movement. Without their sacrifices and resolve, we would not be where we are today. Through looking back and looking forward, the women shared their lives—the dreams, the compromises, and the simple truths.

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