

The Ladder: A Magazine for Lesbians

Wednesday, August 28, 2024 by Clare Bermingham

Today, on August 28th, we acknowledge the anniversary of the 1971 [We Demand Rally](#), the first large scale gay rights demonstration in Canada. This rally was a key moment in the history of 2SLGBTQ+ rights, as well as the history of feminism, and has had a lasting legacy in the legal reforms to provide rights and protections for all Canadians ever since. But long before We Demand was dreamed possible, queer people across North America started organizing around shared identities. This organizing was helped along by self-published newsletters and magazines that were passed along from person to person.

SCA is pleased to announce that we have acquired several issues of The Ladder, a print publication out of San Francisco, that documents the early rise of lesbian organizing in the 1950s and 60s. We welcome Clare Bermingham to the SCA Blog to tell us a bit more about The Ladder, its founders, and its lasting impact.

I had an opportunity to visit Special Collections and Archives (SCA) at the University of Waterloo Library to view eight original copies of the *Ladder* magazine that they recently acquired. The *Ladder* was a magazine for lesbians that ran from 1956 to 1972, and it was initially published in San Francisco by the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), an organization of lesbians that formed in 1955. The *Ladder* followed closely in the footsteps of *ONE Magazine* and the *Mattachine Review*, which were launched in 1953 and 1955 respectively. It joined these magazines in discussing many issues important to the emerging “homophile” movement, and it specifically focused on adding the voices and perspectives of women.

Community-building Role

The *Ladder* was a critical publication for how individuals began identifying and seeing themselves as lesbians and for building community connection and identity. Women living in and outside large cities, regardless of their access to organizations, bars, and other gathering places, experienced affiliation with other women through the *Ladder*. Many readers wrote letters to magazine, or they submitted essays, poems, and fiction. The *Ladder* helped facilitate the organization of new chapters of the DOB across the

U.S., and it was also a vehicle for links other organizations, including ONE Inc. for men and women, and the Mattachine Society, which admitted only men.

Through the *Ladder*, readers learned about various DOB activities, topics, and issues impacting them and their emerging community, including lesbian history, books, films, political news, and research. It was a channel for recruiting participants for DOB-led research studies and publishing results. Articles regularly discussed matters of self-acceptance, self-respect, social respectability, bar culture and class, being publicly out as a lesbian, masculine and feminine dress and behaviour, and whether the concerns of gay men were of import to women. Respectability politics often won out in the main discourse of the magazine, but there was also some debate and pushback on dominant views. Writers and readers' letters shared perspectives as members of subcommunities: as Black and racialized lesbians; as lesbians married to men and sometimes with children; and as people who might today identify as transgender, representing both male- and female-identifying people who were attracted to women.

Distribution

The *Ladder* was primarily available by monthly mail-order to subscribers over the age of 21, initially for \$1 per year. It was mailed out in discrete brown envelopes, a defining feature that Rita Mae Brown referenced in her 1976 essay collection *A Plain Brown Wrapper* [sic]. Initially hand-mimeographed and later professionally printed, it transitioned from newsletter to magazine over the length of its publication, with its official circulation increasing from less than 200 to more than 3,000. It was mostly distributed across the United States, but it was also sent to subscribers internationally, including in Canada, Europe, and Indonesia. It's worth noting that the *Ladder's* circulation numbers misrepresent the size of its readership as copies were regularly shared between friends and colleagues, and among participants at bars, events, and meetings.

Five Editors and the Evolution of the *Ladder*

In its initial phase, represented by the years 1956 to 1963, the magazine was edited first by Phyllis Lyon and then by Del Martin. Lyon and Martin were partners who co-founded the DOB with a few others, and who became key figures in the early U.S. lesbian movement. Under their leadership, the

Ladder was a sort of “house organ” for the DOB, as Martin describes it in her letter of resignation as editor in the April 1963 issue. The magazine grew alongside the DOB, and it frequently reported on DOB activities, meetings, and conventions during their terms.

From 1963 to 1966, Barbara Gittings, an activist and the president of the New York DOB chapter, served as editor. Gittings professionalized the *Ladder* by increasing the number of pages and having it professionally printed instead of hand mimeographed. She increased its visibility as a lesbian publication by adding the subtitle “A Lesbian Review” to the masthead and distributing it through newsstands and booksellers. With her partner, Kay Tobin Lahusen, who served as art director, she changed the covers of the *Ladder* from ink drawings to photographs of individual lesbians. The featured women volunteered to be on the cover, often with their faces clearly depicted.

Following Gittings, Helen Sandoz (pseudonym: Helen Sanders) took over as editor for two years (1966-68). She backpedalled from its growing political focus and led it in a more whimsical direction, publishing cartoons and lighthearted stories, and even writing editorials as her own cat.

Finally, Barbara Grier assumed the role of editor in 1968. Grier had been a prolific contributor to the magazine nearly since its inception. She wrote opinion pieces, stories, historical and social discussions, and letters under a number of pseudonyms, but she was most well known for her book reviews in her “Lesbiana” column and her annual indexes of lesbian literature. Her vision for the magazine was as a literary publication. She brought in established authors (and with them, a connection to Canada). Jane Rule and Rita Mae Brown wrote numerous stories and essays for the *Ladder*, and Grier credits Rule with helping secure other contributors like Judy Grahn, Helene Rosenthal, and Lorita Whitehead.

Grier had never been an active member of the DOB, and instead moved the *Ladder* into closer association with the early women’s movement. The non-fiction content became increasingly politicized and militant. Writers were critical of the National Organization of Women (NOW), were part of Black Civil Rights activism, and seemed to represent a new type of politically conscious readership.

Issues in the SCA Collection

There are eight issues in the SCA collection, running from June 1961 to December 1963. These issues are representative of the middle period of the magazine and the *Ladder's* close association with the DOB. Three of the issues were published with Del Martin as editor, including the last issue she edited in January 1963. The remaining five issues were edited by Barbara Gittings. However, they were published early in Gittings' tenure before she made major changes to the magazine.

Issue 5.9 – June 1961



This particular copy in the archives has an extra copy of one sheet, so that the first and last inside pages are duplicate.

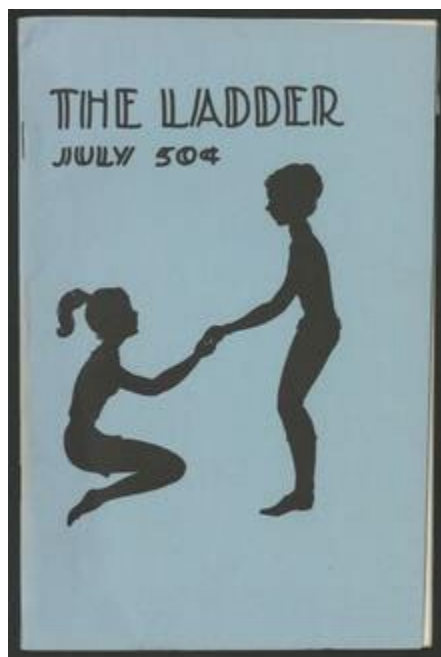
Two articles report on gay and lesbian organizing and other emerging organizations. "There's Been Some Changes Made" reports that the Mattachine Society ended its branch organizations. "Newcomers in the Field" gives details on two organizations: one that supported Christian homosexuals seemingly without aiming to change them; and another that campaigned for more anti-homosexual legislation across the U.S. and promoted access to a clinical "cure" for homosexuals.

Letters from readers cover a range of issues, including the "Homosexual Bill of Rights" proposed by One Inc. in January 1961, which was a contentious

subject during this year. The general perspective from *DOB* and *Ladder* readers was that gay men were seeking special rights to engage in public sex, while lesbians kept their sex lives private and were more courteous of the wider public. This view represents the kind of respectability politics that were typical in the *Ladder*, such as another letter condemning bar lesbian “hustlers” (25). Finally, this issue contains a letter from a Canadian reader in British Columbia, who complains that her friends are too scared to subscribe.

Typical of most issues, this month’s issue includes several poems and a short story, “The Yanks Are Coming,” written by Jay Wallace, who was a frequent fiction contributor to the magazine.

Issue 5.10 – July 1961



Somewhat thin on content, this issue contains a short story by Agatha Mathys called “First Love” which describes a building and short-lived relationship between two college girls, quickly ended by internalized homophobia.

The main feature is a “Masculine Viewpoint” article by Harry Hay arguing against the Homosexual Bill of Rights but advocating for recognition of “homophiles” as a distinct and respected minority group as a starting point for further gains. Hay was a founding member of the Mattachine Society and was known for being a lifelong gay rights activist and advocate.

Issue 7.4 – January 1963

In this issue, Del Martin announces her resignation as editor of the *Ladder* in a longer piece that addresses her feeling that there is some contradiction in the stated goals of the DOB to educate the public and to also help lesbians grow into self-acceptance. The letter offers insights into ways that Martin was navigating how to take responsibility for one's own freedom amidst general societal condemnation.

This issue also contains Barbara Grier's summary and index of lesbian literature published in 1962, a good example of her annual literary surveys.

Issue 7.7 – April 1963

This is the earliest issue in this collection that was edited by Barbara Gittings.

Articles demonstrate the DOB and community's concerns with how lesbianism and homosexuality were discussed in the mainstream press. Two pieces summarize and discuss content from other magazines about homosexuality. The first is a generally favourable review of a feature article from Harper's called "New York's 'Middle-Class' Homosexuals." The second discusses a series of articles on the "sexual deviate" in an L.A. newspaper, "Citizen News," and criticizes it for its sensationalist and exaggerated depictions done to rile up the public and increase its newspaper sales.

Additional snippets about lesbians from various publications are collected in a new column "Cross Currents" that had started in the previous issue (March 1963) and became a staple from then on.

"Variant Poetry" by Terri Cook and Lennox Strang [sic] (Lennox Strong was a pseudonym of Barbara Grier) is a survey of poems written about lesbian love by nine women poets from the 1600s onward.

Finally, this issue contains two readers' letters of interest. The first is typical of the discourse that characterized sex as prurient and sought to distance lesbianism from it. The writer from Ontario, Canada, argues that love is more important and of a higher order than sex, and it should be the focus of discussions in the *Ladder*. The second letter is an unsympathetic and cruel tirade against the type of lesbian depicted as self-pitying, lazy, jobless, and drifting, and it represents the kind of polarizing discourse that pitted so-

called respectable lesbians against a stereotype of disreputable and worthless lesbians.

Issue 7.8 – May 1963

This issue leads with an announcement by Florence Conrad that the DOB is launching a new research study to advance understanding of the lesbian. Conrad had served as DOB's research director since 1957 and had previously led a research study through DOB and published her findings in the September 1959 issue of the *Ladder*. The announcement encourages reader participation and underscores the anonymity and confidentiality of information collected. Signalling the work's credibility and quality, Florence shares that the DOB research committee is working with Dr. Ralph H. Gunlach, Associate Director of Research at New York's Postgraduate Centre for Mental Health.

Several articles summarize or review books, talks, and articles published elsewhere, including a history of Queen Christina of Sweden, a book on Tennessee Williams, a talk by Rev. Robert Wood who authored "Christ and the Homosexual," and an article about Randolfe Wicker who was head of the Homosexual League of New York.

A scholarship is announced that aimed to financially support women choosing to further their professional or trades education. The scholarship was named for Dr. Blanche M. Baker, a psychologist who was a friend to the DOB and One Inc., an advocate for the community, and a contributor to the *Ladder* until her death in 1960.

Finally, in an article called "Main St. – Lesbianville," the author reports on her visit to a notoriously homosexual hotel "beverage room," located in Chinatown in an unnamed city in Canada. She notes that only beer is permitted to be sold and activities such as dancing or pool are not permitted. She describes the place's butch-femme culture disparagingly, and she is critical of the language, drinking, and general behaviour of the patrons.

Issue 7.10 – July 1963

This issue features an essay, "Second Best Society" by Dorothy Lyle (a pseudonym of Barbara Grier), in which she describes three groups or types of lesbians: the stereotypical "bar and ballfield" lesbian, the ungrouped or "older kids" who are typically older (over 35... gasp!) and hold higher social

and professional positions, and a larger unlabelled group of 20- to 30-year-old white collar and professional workers. The latter group is the real focus of the article, and Lyle describes them as a self-absorbed group who do nothing to advance the homosexual community. While clearly not an empirical study, the article is of value for its descriptions of lesbians' activities from this period and its in-group social commentary.

Also notable in this issue are an essay on author Radclyffe Hall ("The Loneliness of Radclyffe Hall") by Donald Webster Cory (pseudonym of Edward Sagarin) who published *The Homosexual in America* in 1951, and a preview of the East Coast Homophile Organizations (ECHO) Conference scheduled for Labour Day weekend ("ECHO News").

Issue 7.11 – August 1963



Significant attention is given in this issue to Jeannace Freeman, convicted of murder in 1961 and the first woman to be sentenced to death in the State of Oregon. At the time of publication, Freeman had lost all her appeals and execution was to be scheduled. Freeman was a butch lesbian who was in a relationship with the mother of two young children murdered by the couple. Her appearance, her dominance in the relationship, and her traumatic childhood featured prominently in both women's court cases and in public opinion. Two articles in this issue discuss the case and how it was received. One calls on readers to write letters to the Governor of Oregon ("Jeannace

Freeman – Eradication of a Misfit??”) to advocate against execution, and the other encourages readers to help homosexuals become socially-adjusted individuals (“An Open Letter to Homosexuals”).



The cover image of this month's issue is similar to some photographs of Freeman like this one, published by the Medford Mail Tribune on December 2, 1962 (p.2).

Also noteworthy in this issue is a short story by Ger van Braam of Indonesia (“A Dope”). Van Braam was the first woman and woman of colour to be openly featured on the cover of the *Ladder*. Her photograph appears on the cover of the November 1964 issue and in a corresponding interview, she describes her life in Indonesia and the difficulties she faces.



The cover of November 1964 issue of the Ladder with the photograph of Ger van Braam.

*(Source: Letters from Ger: A digital exhibition exploring the life of Ger van Braam,
<https://qiarchive.org/en/lettersfromger>)*

Finally, Dorothy Lyle follows up her article from the previous issue with another commentary and a defense of her position in "Why Are They Second Best?"