

WOMEN IN KANSAS CITY'S HERITAGE

by Linda May

The history of Lesbians in the Kansas City Gay and Lesbian community is a story of increasing diversity and increasing resources. Some Lesbians report that is a mixed blessing.

Barbara Greer, 58, a Lesbian activist from the earliest days those two words were used together, says that in the 1950s through the mid 60s there was no organized movement available for most men or women. Greer, at the time the editor of *The Ladder*, the first national Lesbian publication, says the way Lesbians met each other in the 50s and early 60s was radar. "We socialized with private parties, would recognize each other, make friends, get invited to more parties."

There was one bar that Lesbians went to in those days, the Rail Room, a neighborhood bar where Crown Center now sits, frequented by male railway workers during the day. After a certain time of day, a "magic transformation" happened. It was taken over by women and there was a halfway point in the room, unspoken and unmarked, past which no men ventured. Pete's, a women's bar on 47th street in Wyandotte County (Kansas) that became Birds of a Feather in the 80s, was also in existence in the 50s and some Lesbians went to the Saturday afternoon Tea Dances at the Colony on Troost in the early 60s.

Greer reports that she and her friends did not go to the Rail Room or other bars because in those days, whether Lesbian or straight, middle class women just did not go to bars. "(We) would no more have gone to bars than have grown horns on our noses," Greer says. To find out about bars, the national organization for Lesbians-Daughters of Bilitis, *The Ladder*, or a network of friends, Lesbians relied on radar and word of mouth.

The women's movement and Gay rights movement increased resources and opportunities for Lesbians. Some women were involved in a Kansas City meeting of ECHO (East Coast Homophile Organizations) in the mid 60s and a handful of women belonged to the Phoenix Society for Individual Freedom.

Around 1968, the Women's Liberation Union (WLU) moved off the UMKC campus and into the Ecstatic Umbrella, a house on corner of 38th and Gillham that was also home to a child care cooperative and other "radical" efforts. WLU was mostly straight women, but it gave Lesbians a (not always comfortable) place to go.

At a meeting in the late 60s, three women bravely announced their Lesbianism.

"Within six weeks, they were all Lesbians," Greer laughs and exaggerates. WLU, which already had collectives addressing such concerns as the law, therapy, and a newsletter, added the Lesbian Alliance.

Susan B. Anthony House, a women's collective household, was started near UMKC. Some women considered themselves "political Lesbians," meaning they believed a serious commitment to the women's movement meant giving all their support to women only, including their emotional attachments and affections, even if they could not bring themselves to have women lovers.

In the early 70s, New Earth Books, a political book store near 47th and Troost, was taken over by the women in the cooperative and moved to 24 E. 39th and WLU moved into a house on Charlotte in Hyde Park. The Lesbian Alliance ran an information line, monthly dances, a few public speakers but WLU was too separatist for many Lesbians.

Without much conflict over the "lavender menace" (Betty Friedan's label for Lesbians in the women's movement), different factions of the women's movement and Lesbian organizing emerged in the mid 70s.

Greer and others theorize that Kansas City was too small for serious conflict because "There weren't enough of us to afford to alienate anyone."

Jill Johnson came to Kansas City around 1973 and there were at least two NOW chapters by the mid 70s. Margit Lasker, looking for a group more activist than the existing NOW chapters but less separatist than WLU, started the KC Urban NOW chapter in the mid 70s. Margit Lasker was a whirlwind of organizing who had a talent for getting women to do things they never new they wanted or could do.

By the mid 70s, some of the men's bars were letting women in and a few African American women attended NOW and WLU events. Most African American Lesbians still primarily came out through a few churches or social networks in the Black community.

Metropolitan Community Church (MCC/KC) was a part of some Lesbians' lives, while other feminist Lesbians were discovering female centered goddess spirituality to meet their religious needs.

In the middle of the 70s, the Midwest Women's Festival began offering a week each year of "wimmin only" space in the Missouri woods. For one week each year a new culture transformed the hills and the women who participated.

In 1976, Lea Hopkins, a member of Urban NOW, went to hear Troy Perry speak at MCC/KC. She was moved to tears and she began meeting with the group that formed Christopher Street. When Anita Bryant came to Kansas City in 1977, Lea was the spokesperson for the group that protested. A media star was born. A rarity in the visible Lesbian and Gay rights movement, Hopkins was Black and female. Being both beautiful and dynamic, she was a popular leader for several years before she moved on to more national organizing and her writing.

As an African American, Hopkins had first attended a mostly Gay Black church but did not feel comfortable with what she saw as hypocrisy. They preached anti-Gay sermons, she says, and everyone pretended no one there was Gay or Lesbian.

Her explanation for the lack of women in the Gay rights movement is gentler than some. She believes she was one of the few visible women in the Gay rights movement because, unlike most Lesbians, she did not have to worry about a job or losing custody of her son.

Lesbians, along with straight women, spent most of their political energy in the 70s working women's rights rather than Gay and Lesbian rights. Betty Freidan recanted her "lavender menace" stance in a moving speech from the floor at the International Women's Year convention in Houston in the late 70s.

"I, a woman who has loved men, perhaps too much," she began her speech. To the shocked tens of thousands who listened, the women's movement's most vocal opponent to Lesbians explained her change of heart as realizing that, first, no woman should be denied equality and, second, that if any woman can be kept "in her place" by the fear of being called a Lesbian, no woman could truly be free. "This issue has kept us divided too long," she said as she ended her remarks.

When softball leagues were organized, in the mid to late 70s, a whole new resource for Lesbians was opened up. Those Lesbians who were neither politically nor religiously inclined found a way to meet other Lesbians and form social networks. In 1978 Willow Productions was started, offering thirteen women's music events a year, and became a lasting institution for women's culture.

WLU continued to narrow its focus, by 1978 identifying itself as socialist/feminist. WLU soon began to die a slow death as fewer and fewer non-smoking, "chem" free, food conscious, Lesbian, socialist/feminists showed up. Two offshoots continued, however, Actors Sorority and the Women's Chorus.

During the 80s, Lesbian activities diversified nearly to invisibility. Margit Lasker had died of leukemia in 1977 and Urban NOW worked tirelessly to get the ERA passed. Two of the organizers of Willow moved to California to become Holly Near's producers. Barbara Greer had founded Naiad Press and moved to Florida. WLU members moved out of town or became absorbed in their work as therapists and lawyers, in battered women's shelters and rape programs, in theater, and as entrepreneurs.

A social network for Lesbians who were professionals came (and went) and another social network continues to have monthly pot lucks. The latter group is also trying to start a Lesbian neighborhood called Woman Town. Another production company was started, Renegade, and women's dances are occasionally put on

at a VFW hall.

New Earth Books moved into what was called the Foolkiller building on the northwest corner of 39th and Main. When the building was sold in the mid 80s, New Earth moved to Broadway and struggled financially. It was sold in the late 80s to the women who renamed it Phoenix Books and moved it back to its old neighborhood.

Softball, a series of bars, the Women's Chorus, Willow Productions, potluck dinners, and occasional dances continue to provide Lesbians with social outlets. Efforts to provide Lesbians with a center similar to WLU have been tried, in the form of Lavender Umbrella and the Lavendar Community Center, and will probably be tried in the future.

Lesbians have been and are currently active in the political arm of the Gay and Lesbian rights movement, including groups like the Pink Triangle Political Coalition, the Human Rights Project, and last years political



Lea Hopkins rides high at the 1977 Pride Parade.

campaigns. A new political group, Lesbians for Justice, has been formed recently to be a visible presence of Lesbians working for justice in a variety of social and political issues. Lesbians are also instrumental in organizing a new education project, Friends of Justice. Lesbians have continued to be active in Gay and AIDS services—Gaytalk, GLSN, GALA, and Good Samaritan Project, as well as continuing their involvement in women's services.

There is no clear-cut hub or core, no sense of a place or a home, no sense of magic at discovering THE Lesbian community, and no sense of overwhelming belonging when admitted into the circle. Older Lesbians now complain that young Lesbians take too much for granted. "They don't have to struggle," Greer quotes her friends complaining. "We did our job so well they take it for granted," Hopkins observes.

African American Lesbians still have to rely mostly on radar—it provides a tight and safe network. A Black Lesbian tells of being called by a friend's mother. She had not heard from her son for too long and was worried. In less than twenty four hours, Gay African American churches were called in several cities across the country and the friend was located. But such safety and togetherness is at the price of self acceptance and diversity.

With any luck, the 90s will be a time of learning our history and gaining both diversity and togetherness.