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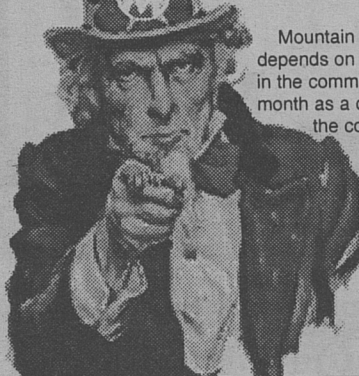
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## Out In The Mountains Wants YOU!



Mountain Pride Media, publisher of Out In The Mountains, depends on community members to help keep our paper out in the community by asking you to volunteer about an hour a month as a distribution volunteer. It's easy and helps to keep the cost of producing and distributing our paper down.

Right now we need help with the following distribution routes:

Bennington, VT - 155 copies - 11 drop off points  
Keene, NH - 70 copies - 5 drop off points  
Springfield, VT - 50 copies - 3 drop off points

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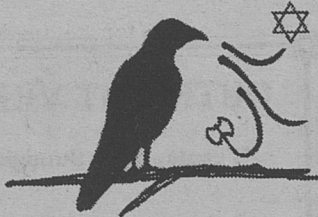
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"Out" and Serving our  
Community since 1989



# Crow's Caws: Lesbian News



**crow  
cohen**

The first "gay"-positive newspaper published in Vermont debuted in 1978 - *Commonwoman*. I put the word "gay" in quotes because the lesbians in the feminist collective who ran the paper reserved the word gay for male homosexuals.

*Commonwoman* was a newspaper written exclusively by women in the days when "sisterhood was powerful" and combating sexism was our primary focus. The paper lasted six years and reported the beginnings of the Vermont Women's Health Center, the first battered women's shelter, the rape crisis hotline, gay pride parades and the mayor's council on women. We also documented our cultural events, dances, music festivals and legal and not-so-legal political actions. We were a wild bunch. We prided ourselves on being on the front lines of radical journalism. I will try to depict what it was like to keep *Commonwoman* going, using the words of some of the women who were on the scene fervently creating a vibrant communication to foment revolution.

Our concept was to create a paper for lesbian, bisexual and straight women although in the collective that formed, lesbians were in the majority. "I went to the first organizational meeting for creating a local woman's newspaper which happened in Winooski. It was a funny mix of people. There were us lesbian feminists and these softball jocks as well as this straight woman involved in Montpelier politics. Here we were coming up with all these ideas we needed to communicate. We were trying to figure out if there could be a 'common woman.' Could there be a common medium we could use to communicate? There was already tension about whether we would use the word 'feminist' in the *Commonwoman* subtitle. And there there was the debate about how to spell 'woman' - womyn? wimmin?"

Many of the radical lesbians wanted to separate themselves as conceptually as possible from men. Therefore, we played around deleting the word "man" from the word used to describe our species. We settled on leaving the "man" in the word, *Commonwoman*, because we planned to distribute the paper statewide and didn't want to alienate the common folk right off the bat. "*Commonwoman* was really about sweating the small shit. The most contentious meetings were about things that really didn't matter. We spent maybe two whole meetings talking about what color and design we were going to have on these promotional buttons that we were going to make, and we spent maybe five minutes discussing whether we were going to put lesbians kissing on the front cover." We went with the kissing dykes so obviously we weren't

into being supersensitive around not offending the masses.

Our paper was a creative outlet for the sizeable, vibrant women's community roaming about in the 70's and early 80's. Burlington had a national reputation for being politically progressive (still does), so we had fertile ground for planting seeds of radicalism. "I had zero political consciousness when I came to Burlington and started working on *Commonwoman*. That was my first experience with consensus decision-making, of reading articles that had a political consciousness and radical viewpoint. *Commonwoman* was the outlet for anyone who had anything they wanted to get published. There really wasn't anywhere else."

But sometimes we even scared ourselves. "I went to the jury selection for the Kristina Berster trial, [she was] an East German woman who was caught trying to come across the Vermont border illegally and accused of being a spy.

## **Commonwoman was a newspaper written exclusively by women in the days when "sisterhood was powerful" and combating sexism was our primary focus.**

Having come out of a very radical political environment and having been anti-war in high school, I wanted to write about this possible frame-up. The system was so stacked against this woman. I thought it was important that everyone knew what the government was doing. I wrote the article for *Commonwoman* which was just getting off the ground. I made no pretense about my article being objective reporting. They published it with a disclaimer saying that the article did not reflect the opinions of the editorial board. I thought basically it betrayed their lack of political commitment. It was a chickenshit thing to do. The fact that they hadn't told me that they were going to print the disclaimer made it a personal affront. Frankly, I expected more support than that. So I went to an editorial meeting irate. I'm told by reliable sources I came in like a dragon. I have no idea what I said but it must have been really cathartic." As I recall, the following month we printed a disclaimer of our disclaimer.

Lest radical feminists be accused of not having a sense of humor, we printed some pretty funny stuff. "One woman wrote this article called 'The Politics of Penile Penetration' about how bad vibrators were. It was kind of a technophobic article. Having gone to engineering school, I thought technology was pretty nifty, so [as] 'Priscilla Mum'

[I] wrote a response. It was fairly sexually explicit. I said that vibrators were fine, and you didn't have to have a penis-shaped one. There were nice little round ones made by Hitachi."

And picture this: "Phyllis Shafley [a rabidly homophobic anti-feminist, anti-choice activist] and Sarah Weddington [the lawyer who took *Roe v. Wade* to the Supreme Court] were having a public debate in Burlington. After the debate I went backstage and introduced myself to Phyllis. I had my picture taken shaking hands with her." We printed the picture with the caption, "Phyllis meets a lesbian."

*Commonwoman* pulled us together as a community not only through the writing, but through its production and distribution as well. "We'd put the layout boards all over the table - and five, 10, 12 people came to glue the words down on paper. This couldn't happen anymore. Now we have computers so you don't have that collective energy. There's nothing that could replace that. What a loss! One dyke laying out her article argued about having her words crooked, claiming it was a political statement. It really wasn't. She just didn't want to straighten them out." Not all those "layout weekends" were pleasant affairs. Tempers flared past midnight when those conscientious women cut and pasted for hours to meet the deadline.

"I also did a lot of layout which was pretty educational. People would show up at layout to make sure you didn't fuck with their article. It you had to cut it to fit or touch a hair of it, you got shit for it at the next meeting."

Distribution could be a little on the flaky side. "We tried to charge 50 cents for the newspaper, but we had no way of really collecting the money. Mostly we wanted our work out there. So we gave people a choice - 50 cents or free - we didn't care. We built all these collection boxes, but they were always empty. Someone always took the money because we didn't have the money to buy locks for them. I remember bringing them to field hockey meetings to a closeted group of field hockey referees. I would bring a bunch of the papers and look clandestinely around the room for those who were the more obvious-looking dykes, and I'd pass the newspaper to them."

Stay tuned next month for the story of one distribution trip where we attempted to plant the seeds of revolution in "mom and pop" stores in the heartland of Vermont. I think I'll call it "Johnnie Appleseed Was Actually a Dyke." ▼

*Crow Cohen is a lesbian feminist living in Burlington.*