

CROW'S



C A W S

BY CROW COHEN

Without Maps: Reflections on Lesbian Feminist Journeys Out

For the last couple of years, I've been interviewing lesbians in the local area who were activists in the '70s and early '80s. These were the women who created the Gay Pride March, the Women's Health Center, the Rape Crisis Center, feminist academic courses at the local colleges, and all forms of visibility so that the words 'gay' and 'lesbian' are now familiar to mainstream culture.

This month, I thought I'd give you an idea of what some of these women were up against as they forged the pioneering concept known as lesbian feminism during their coming-out journeys. (All names have been changed to protect their privacy.)

Without Definitions

In the '50s and early '60s, a few of the women sensed their attraction for other women but never heard the word "lesbian." Sometimes the only way they were introduced to the concept was through pornography:

"When I was a teenager, I was starved to be sexual with women. I really wanted to be a boy. I found myself in this little slimy downtown theatre and they used to show all these foreign hush-hush type movies. [One that fascinated me] was about this woman who dressed up as a man and had relationships with all these women. It was very exciting. Occasionally the word 'faggot' was heard, but not the 'l' word. I got married, had kids. I was a good wife, did that whole heterosexual thing. All the while, there was something eating at me. What was this wonderful differentness about me that I don't have a name for? In our community the word 'faggot' was bandied about, but not so much 'lesbian.' Nobody used that word where I grew up that I know of."

One woman discovered her attraction by accident - literally:

"My first attraction to women was when I was 14 and was in a car accident and hospitalized for three months. I fell in love with this nurse named Mary. I didn't even know what the word 'lesbian' meant. I thought I had a mother complex."

One student at UVM was also in the dark about lesbianism as a way of life. Her roommate came back from a trip to NYC and told her about this intriguing woman she met:

"She reminded her of me. I said, 'Oh, I would love to meet her, but why does she remind you of me?' 'Well, she's a lesbian.' I said, 'A what?' and I sat up. I really didn't know what that meant in terms of culture and a life. I was playing *The Grateful Dead* and reading Shakespeare. Meanwhile, I'm surrounded by lesbian teachers and coaches at the University, all of whom are in

the closet."

Without Guides

Even if we heard the word 'lesbian,' certainly there were no positive associations around it. There was no such thing as gay positive therapy back in the early '60s:

"I had no role models, no books. I was in a vacuum in terms of positive thoughts about [my attraction to women]. I had lots of fear and anxiety. I went to a psychiatrist at college because I was so troubled. He allowed me to have the goal to change so I wouldn't have such feelings anymore — which was the worst goal I could have had, because it made it even harder to accept. In those days, it was probably in the psychological diagnostic manual as some sort of emotional illness."

Religion never helped much either. These days there are a handful of clergy who speak out against homophobia, but back then?

"In college in 1969, I was lovers with my roommate. We were both 'born again,' and we got thrown out of our prayer group, not because our sin was more heinous than anyone else's, but because we were unrepentant."

Another late teen also suffered tremendous guilt in those early days:

"I had to hide. If you have to hide, you've got to lie, to cover it up and be ashamed. I would have nightmares, sweating, that I was going to burn in hell for [making love with women], which lasted probably into my 30s. So that took a long time to work out of my psychic system, my soul spirit."

Reactions from our parents were also devastating. One woman was publicly humiliated when her irate father suspected she had a woman lover:

"My mother was upset with me for staying out all night and not calling. She said, 'Your father's really angry with you. You'd better go talk to him.' So I went down to talk with him at the bar, and there were these men sitting around. He asked me where I was, and I told him I was staying over at a friend's house. He asked if it was a girl, and I said yes. So he turned around and slapped me in the face right in front of everybody."

Without Shame

Many of our parents might have reacted this way, but the tragedy is that this woman had nowhere to turn in society to receive affirmation back in the '50s, aside from forbidden bars in bigger cities. No wonder our energy was explosive once we found others of our kind to help liberate us.

"By the late '60s, liberation movements were in full swing. I came to lesbianism because I was in a place in my life where I was

playing around with different sexual venues — part of the 'sexual revolution.' I remember the first time I was passionately kissing a woman. It was like, I don't know about this. (I was about 33.) I'm kissing a woman?! I dunno. But I got over it pretty quick. All I needed to know was that there were others doing the same thing."

Many lesbians in the '70s came from the political left, trying to cope with the sexism in mixed groups at that time. One woman was eyeing dykes from a distance at first:

"Between '76 and '78 I was working on social justice issues: apartheid, Nestle's boycott. I didn't really hook up with these wild women. They were running around in skirts with pants underneath."

The power of the written word also infiltrated our lives. Here's an account from a woman involved in the "back to the land" movement:

"In '75, I was reading a book up in [rural Vermont] in the house I had built. I saw *Flying* in the store and bought it. I got halfway through and said, 'My god! That's me!' So I called up a friend of mine who lived in Boston and who I had heard through the grapevine was gay; and I said, 'You'd better come up here and visit me and tell me about this.' She did. (She was working for *Gay Community News* at the time.) She came up

north and told me all about being a lesbian, whatever she knew at the time, which was very little. She left, and I wrote [my boyfriend] a letter that I'm either bisexual or a lesbian, and then moved to Burlington."

One woman didn't notify her boyfriend. Her boyfriend notified her. He was a political activist and started noticing the rise in energy among us dykes.

"He said, 'I think you're a lesbian,' and I said, 'Why?' 'Because I watch you come alive with those women. You're just so happy, and when you're around [lesbians]. I think you want to be with them.' And it was true."

Without Looking Back

Once we began finding each other, it didn't take long for that revolutionary fervor which was fomenting in the larger cities to catch on in our small town. Here's one woman's impression of those early years:

"I arrived in Burlington, not as a feminist, but wanting to be a lesbian. My friend invited me to a softball game down in Smalley Park. I hadn't seen anyone yet. I was this 25-year-old very dykey-looking woman because I had short hair and was living in the country with no water or electricity. I was really a little butch, and I had my softball mitt — one of the things I took with me to Burlington. [The dykes who came to the game] were tough. They had leather jackets on, were

riding motorcycles, and I was wet behind the ears. I was very serious about playing softball. They were very serious about hugging on first base, which was really scary. In between innings one would sing 'Amazon Grace.' Every action was steeped in finding this new identity."

Later on, this same woman got invited to one of our rather stimulating parties.

"They invited me to a party at Handy Court, which was a hotbed of emerging dykes. I just kind of walked in as though I was a lesbian feminist. Really, I think that's what everybody was doing. We were the embodiment of 'fake it til you make it.' Everybody was a neophyte, but we didn't act like it."

Ah yes. Bravado. No question about it. So many of us have had to spend years differentiating between courage and bravado. Nevertheless, lesbian feminists were in the forefront of a pioneering movement that shook up American society for good.

"People were telling me how bored they were - how spiritually depressed. We were fuckin' not depressed! We couldn't sleep because there was so much to do. We were creating a women's center, a newspaper, and having discussions about every -ism possible, investigating our own lives and everybody else's. It was this incredible stir." ▼

Bi

continued from page eight

inside, there was no way I was going to be able to come clean with others. While I can say I've been a lot better about this recently, I'm still not entirely there. I still hide myself away.

I don't suppose it's easy for anyone. I'd guess that those who struggle with this process go through their own individual pain. I'm reluctant to share a lot of this simply because of that — my issues and problems are so terribly insignificant. The problem is that this whole thing drives me further and further into a black hole. The depression doesn't really stop — it just gets displaced. The number of times I have thought that I am making progress is small in comparison with the number of times I felt a cold steel barrel was a better answer. But that's so messy, really. I keep plugging away, hoping to find some resolution, some relief. I haven't gotten much closer to resolution, but I seem to have moved away from the cold steel barrel theme.

Odd, but so many venues seem to be carefully maintained cliques. Even those spaces where I would have expected something, where I had, on one or two occasions, even dared to hope for more than just simple conversa-

tion have left me empty. I'm surely not that unattractive, am I? Yes, this is about physical feeling: it has taken a very long time to recognize that this drive is not immured solely within the boundaries of a loving relationship. It's there, period, and it's manifest as a physical interest. Should I be so strong as to deny it, or is that a fool's religion? I like how I can feel there. Can it really be true that no one else feels the same?

Oh yes, the self-pity. I nearly forgot. The many who have struggled, who have persevered, who are ensconced within 'their' community like a caterpillar in a cocoon, have little use for — much less interest in — an interloper, especially an AC/DC like me. To be bi is not even to be marginalized — it is simply to not be.

Are there answers? I no longer know. I no longer hope for much. It doesn't seem so much a matter of resignation, but that I can feel okay about having this inside of me, and having only me know about 'that' side of me. It's likely, I'm sure, that the depression will ebb and flow. It's not inconceivable that somehow, somewhere, I'll consummate this urge. With good fortune, it might be a thor-

oughly enjoyable experience. Most likely, along the way, I'll get the same stones thrown from all sides when those pitchers realize that I'm not their image of what they believe I should be. I can — I must — accept all of this.

I suppose, though, that if it all becomes too much, that I can always go sky-diving. And with no parachute, well then, what a clean, thrilling finish. And no one the wiser. ▼

p.30

nada.

zippo.

zilch.

nicho.

nothin' baby!

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classified in OITM
doesn't cost
one red cent.