

Phyllis Lyon

1924 ————— 2020

by Olivia Gagan



Phyllis Ann Lyon was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1924. A lifelong lesbian rights activist, she and her partner Del Martin became the first gay couple to legally wed in California.

Both journalists, Lyon and Martin met in 1950 working at the same magazine, moving into a San Francisco apartment together on Valentine's Day three years later. In 1955, wanting to find other gay women to socialise with, they founded Daughters of Bilitis, an underground network of women. The group was intended to help reduce the isolation and loneliness they felt as gay women. It would grow to become the first lesbian civil and political rights organisation in the United States.

'Bilitis' is the name of a fictional lesbian Greek goddess, from a poetry collection published by French writer Pierre Louÿs in 1894. The literary reference was so obscure even Lyon didn't initially understand it—so they felt confident outsiders would not be able to guess the group's purpose. Even if someone did twig, they could claim it was just a poetry club.

An early goal was simply to be able to safely dance with other gay women, as in the 1950s same-sex dancing in public was illegal. 'Women needed privacy... not only from the watchful eye of the police, but from gaping tourists in the bars and from inquisitive parents and families,' the pair later said. Daughters of Bilitis then applied to become a non-profit organisation, using language vague enough to ensure 'it could have been a charter for a cat-raising club,' Lyon recalled.

Their wish for discretion slowly fell away as the group focused more and more on advocating for their rights and encouraging self-esteem and self-

recognition in fellow gay women. They started a newsletter, *The Ladder*, in 1956. It became the first nationally-distributed lesbian publication, surviving until 1972, with Lyon and Martin hoping it would reach 'the lonely isolated lesbians away from the big cities.'

A reader's letter from 1960—'Niki' from Minnesota—suggests the pair achieved their goal:

'When I first learned that there was such a publication as *The Ladder* I was most eager to be a subscriber. I, like most others, live two lives [...] When *The Ladder* comes to my door once a month I live in that secret world for approximately 20 or 25 minutes while I read each and every word and marvel at the work that is being done to alleviate the pain of falseness that most of us endure just for the sake of not being called queer.'

Daughters of Bilitis grew in stature, organising annual national conferences where pastors, academics and prominent gay activists were invited to talk and debate. Together, Lyon and Martin wrote *Lesbian/Woman* in 1972, now considered a foundational text in lesbian feminism. The book debunked myths and stereotypes and gave advice on the formation and importance of a positive, happy sexual identity within everyday life.

Decades on, Lyon's relationship with Martin continued to test political, social and legal boundaries. They became the first gay couple to marry in San Francisco on 12 February 2004, the same day marriage licenses for gay partnerships were first issued in the city. Lyon was 79, Martin was 83.

In issuing the licences, city mayor Gavin Newsom was defying state and federal bans on gay marriage; six months later, Lyon and Martin's marriage was voided by the California Supreme Court, alongside the unions of thousands of other couples. It took another four years before same-sex marriage was fully legalised across the state and Lyon and Martin could marry again.

Their marriage endured until their deaths. Martin died in 2008, four months after their second wedding, of a complication from a bone fracture. Lyon died in 2020, aged 95. On her death, Newsom, now Governor of California, called the pair 'the manifestation of love and devotion... It was the honour of a lifetime to marry you.'