1958: BARBARA GITTING;
Founding the New York Daughters of Bilitis
“It was a long, hard journey”

Barbara Gittings was born in 1932 in Vienna, where her father was a member of the United States diplomatic service; she, a brother, and a sister attended Catholic schools in Montreal, Canada. Her family returned permanently to the United States at the start of World War II. During her first year at Northwestern University, Gittings’s close but nonsexual friendship with another female student caused rumors of Lesbianism. Although untrue of this particular relationship, the charge provoked Gittings’s first serious exploration of her sexual orientation. Turning mainly to books, Gittings began her own intensive investigation, trying to find out about homosexuality—about herself.

In 1956, on vacation, Gitings went to San Francisco and sat in on a meeting of the year-old Lesbian organization the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB). In 1958, Gitings was active in founding the first East Coast chapter of DOB in New York City, and was elected its first president, serving three years until 1961. Gitings edited the Lesbian periodical The Ladder from 1963 until the summer of 1966, then joined Frank Kameny and the Mattachine Society of Washington, D.C., in fighting the United States government’s policy of firing homosexuals in its employ. In the fall of 1971, Gitings appeared on television with six other Lesbians to present a forceful Gay liberation viewpoint on the nationally syndicated David Susskind show. More recently, Gitings has headed the Task Force on Gay Liberation of the American Library Association.\(^{139}\)

In an interview taped on July 19, 1974, Barbara Gitings spoke with the present author about her development as a Lesbian, and about the founding and early history of the New York Daughters of Bilitis.\(^{139}\)

J.K.: Will you tell about the impact of first realizing in college that you were a Lesbian?

B.G.: Putting the label on myself was a big step forward, even though I had a negative attitude about that label. I went to a psychiatrist in Chicago and told her about myself, and she said, “Yes, you are a homosexual.” And then she offered to “cure” me. I didn’t have the money for that, so I didn’t go back to her. Some people say, “She shouldn’t have given you a label.” I disagree. I think she did me an enormous service, because once I said, “Yes, that’s me, that’s what I am.” I was able to work with it. I had been living throughout my high school years and first few months of college with this hazy feeling: “I don’t quite know what’s happening to me.” It was a fog of confusion. Now I had something clear-cut I could come to grips with. So I stopped going to classes. I started going to the library to find out what it meant to be homosexual. I was very aggressive about finding that literature on homosexuality. I went through the stacks. I went through reference books, I went to medical dictionaries, I went to ordinary dictionaries. I went to the stacks. I went to textbooks, the chapters on “abnormal psychology,” sections called “sexual deviations” and “sexual perversions.” That kind of labeling affects your image before you get to the material. But it didn’t bother me too much because I was so anxious to read about myself. The overall impression I got was: I must be the kind of person they’re talking about, because I am homosexual, and they’re describing homosexuals, but I don’t recognize much of myself in this.

At one extreme I remember a scientific study in which a group of male heterosexuals and a group of male homosexuals were compared for micrometric measurements of their bodies—the diameter of the cranium, the circumference of the neck, the length of the nose, the length of the earlobe, the circumference at the hips—to see if there were significant differences between the two groups. The fact that it was about male homosexuals really didn’t bother me that much. Most of the material was on male homosexuals. But I couldn’t see that there were significant body differences, so this kind of study puzzled me. And then at the other extreme there’d be pop-level material which said “the homosexual’s favorite color is green.” That upset me, because my favorite color was blue. I actually thought I ought to change
my color preference, in order to fit in. I did believe for a while that there were group characteristics that applied to all homosexuals. But then I began to say, "Well, no, there must be different kinds of homosexuals. They can’t all be that much alike."

What really changed my image and gave me a much more positive feeling about homosexuality—even though I still thought it was a misfortune that needed to be changed—were the novels. In some of the so-called scientific materials I read, there were references to fiction titles, and I began to seek these out. As I remember, The Well of Loneliness was the first book I latched onto. It was widely mentioned in the documentary literature and was also more available than others. That really hit home, because even though there were differences between myself and the heroine, I still identified with her emotional state, with her feelings. The book has an unhappy ending, of course. It was distressing to me, I suppose, that at the end she deliberately sends away her lover, in order to allow the younger woman the chance of “normal happiness.” It seemed to me that she had sacrificed needlessly.

I was living at home at the time. I had flunked out of college and gone back home in disgrace. I had taken a clerical job, and I was spending my spare time in the public library and going to secondhand bookstores. My father went into my room one day, found my copy of The Well of Loneliness, and wrote me a letter about it. We were living in the same house, and he couldn’t bring himself to talk to me about it. He sent me a letter telling me this was an immoral book, that I had no business owning it, and that I should dispose of it. Not by giving it away, where someone else would be contaminated by it; I had to dispose of it by burning. Well, I simply hid it better and told him that I had disposed of it. This incident reinforced my sense of taboo about the subject matter.

Then I began to find other books. I remember specifically Extraordinary Women by Compton Mackenzie, Dusty Answer by Rosamond Lehmann, and an earlier novel by Radclyffe Hall, which was not explicitly Lesbian but which did have a covert Lesbian theme, and was strongly feminist, although I didn’t see it as such at the time—a book called The Unit Lamp. I searched these out. I made some effort to get them, and they, in turn, led me to other titles. The fiction made a big difference, because here were human beings that were fleshed out in a dimension that simply wasn’t available in the scientific materials, which were always examining us from a clinical point of view in which we were diseased case histories. I appreciated the novels, because even though most of them had unhappy endings, they did picture us as diverse people who had our happinesses.

J.K.: Was there one you could talk to about the subject?
B.G.: No, I didn’t know anyone to talk to. So I went looking in the bars. I didn’t have much success talking to people in the bars, especially about the literature. These were women’s bars in New York City. I had great difficulty in finding women who had read the same books I had. It was important to me to meet other Lesbians as Lesbians, but I still needed more than that. I needed to find Lesbians who shared my interests. Once when I went to a bar in New York City I had with me Colette’s very first novel, from the Philadelphia Free Library, one of the Claudine series, Claudine à l’école, and it hap-
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peded to have illustrations. There was an illustration of Claudine's two
female schoolteachers who were having an affair—one sitting on the lap of
the other, embracing very ardently. I was fascinated by the novel, and fas-
cinated by the picture, a line drawing. It seemed to me very bold to have a
picture like that in a book published early in the twentieth century for the
general public. I was in this bar and trying to talk to somebody—and I
showed her this book, and this drawing, trying to make her understand
why this is such a remarkable illustration, and she says, "Oh, at home I've
got a lot sexier pictures than that." I didn't understand what she meant;
now I do!

There weren't people I could talk to about the kind of literature I was
interested in. A few people had read The Well of Loneliness. Fewer still
read any of the others, novels like those of Gale Wilhelm which I found,
and which, I recall, had happy endings—for a change. The literature was
very important to me. The nonfiction literature gave me a bad picture of
myself, a picture I had to work against. The fiction, despite stereotypes, de-
spite unhappiness, despite bad characters, was much more positive.

J.K.: Would you say that you were looking in those books for a sense of Lesbian
community?

B.G.: Oh, very much so, although I wouldn't have put it in those words. That's
something I think now, but at the time I would have said, "I'm looking for
my people." Then I was so glad to find that my people existed, that there
was literature about them, and a literature that portrayed them as human
beings. There was definitely a sense of community, and of history, conveyed
by the novels; I really appreciated them enormously—and I started collect-
ing. I used to go to the secondhand bookstores and search out the titles, starting with the list in Donald Webster Cory's *The Homosexual in America*, which really was remarkable. I even wrote to the publisher, and found that Cory lived in New York City. I had two or three meetings with him to discuss the literature. I was keenly interested in seeing what more there was. I must admit I hadn't done any analysis of his book. I was simply interested in compiling a large list of literature, finding out what was available, getting to see it for myself. Cory also told me about the existence of ONE, Inc., and the Mattachine Society out in Los Angeles and San Francisco. In the summer of 1956, I made a trip out there—I guess I made it for that reason. I went to the offices of ONE in Los Angeles, and they told me about the Mattachine Society in San Francisco and about a relatively new organization called the Daughters of Bilitis, which was then scarcely a year old. So I contacted the Mattachine Society when I arrived in San Francisco, and they put me in touch with Daughters of Bilitis who, fortuitously, were having a meeting that very evening—and I went. That was my first contact with Daughters of Bilitis.

They had just started putting out *The Ladder*, and they were into their first or second issue. They were discussing it at that meeting. That was the first time I had sat down with a dozen or fifteen Lesbians outside of a bar situation. It was very appealing to me, it was something I had been looking for, the chance to be with people of my own kind in a setting other than the bars.

J.K.: What was it like—that setting?
B.G.: Somebody's living room in San Francisco. It was a pleasant atmosphere; there were refreshments. There were about fifteen women discussing the business of putting out a periodical. I had to do a good deal of listening to try to understand. Even then I was pretty assertive, because I sounded off about the name of the organization. Having just heard about it, and having just been invited by these nice people. I said the name was too complicated, too long, too difficult to pronounce, too difficult to spell, and what the hell, Bilitis was a bisexual fictional character anyway, not even a real person, not even truly a homosexual. What were they doing with a name like that? It wasn't very nice of me, but they seemed to take it with reasonably good spirits. They must have already been accustomed to having upstart Lesbians coming up out of nowhere and coming to their meetings. So I wasn't anything special. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon were very much the leaders. They definitely ran the show. They had strong ideas, and they saw to it that they were carried out.

J.K.: What happened between 1956 and '58?
B.G.: I probably kept in some kind of touch; perhaps I kept in mail contact with Del and Phyllis. I think I may have subscribed to *The Ladder*.

J.K.: According to my information, there was a Mattachine convention in New York City in 1958. On Sunday, September 7, there was a meeting called "for all women in the New York area who are interested in forming a chapter of the DOB." Do you remember that first meeting at all?
B.G.: A vague recollection, yes. It was on Sixth Avenue, a small loft building where the Mattachine had offices. I think only about eight or ten of us met. A no-
The Ladder's publication provoked two anonymous letters from Black writer Lorraine Hansberry, which convey one New York woman's response, in 1957, to a specifically lesbian periodical. Hansberry writes:

I'm glad as heck that you exist. You are obviously serious people and I feel that women, without wishing to foster any strict separatist notions, homo or hetero, indeed have a need for their own publications and organizations. Our problems, our experiences as women are profoundly unique as compared to the other half of the human race. Women, like other oppressed groups of one kind or another, have particularly had to pay a price for the intellectual impoverishment that the second class status imposed on us for centuries created and sustained. Thus, I feel that THE LADDER is a fine, elementary step in a rewarding direction.

Hansberry ends the same letter by asking:

Considering Mattachine. Bilitis, ONE, all seem to be cropping up on the West Coast rather than here where a vigorous and active gay set almost bump one another off the streets—what is it in the air out there? Pioneers still? Or a tougher circumstance which inspires battle?422

In another anonymous letter, Hansberry connects antihomosexuality and antimarxism.

I think it is about time that equipped women began to take on some of the ethical questions which a male-dominated culture has produced and dissect and analyze them quite to pieces in a serious fashion. It is time that 'half the human race' had something to say about the nature of its existence. Otherwise—without revised basic thinking—the woman intellectual is likely to find herself trying to draw conclusions—moral conclusions—based on acceptance of a social moral superstructure which has never admitted to the equality of women and is therefore immoral itself. As per marriage, as per sexual practices, as per the rearing of children, etc. In this kind of work there may be women to emerge who will be able to formulate a new and possible concept that homosexual persecution and condemnation has at its roots not only social ignorance, but a philosophically active anti-feminist dogma. But that is but a kernel of a speculative embryonic idea improperly introduced here.423

tice had been sent out to DOB's mailing list contacts in the New York area, and I suppose to women who were on the Mattachine mailing list.

J.K.: Do you remember anything about the kind of women who did show up? What had brought them there?

B.G.: Our motives were pretty hazy. We didn't have any clear sense of what we were going to do. It just seemed enough that Lesbians were getting together. Just sheer survival of the group was important at first. Even though we had San Francisco DOB's four-part statement of purpose when we started the New York chapter, the discussions were awfully vague and groping. We kept seeking for ways of making the meetings interesting, without having
clearly said to ourselves, "What exactly are we meeting for?" We continued in a rather chaotic condition for a very long time. Most of the time it was just "Well, of course we should continue; when will the next meeting be?" It was taken for granted that it was desirable to continue.

DOB had its four-part statement of purpose printed inside the front cover of The Ladder, and that, supposedly, provided guidelines for us. The Daughters of Bilitis was defined as "A Woman's Organization for the Purpose of Promoting the Integration of the Homosexual into Society..." The word Lesbian was not used once. Four purposes were listed:

1. Education of the variant... to enable her to understand herself and make her adjustment to society... this to be accomplished by establishing... a library... on the sex deviant theme; by sponsoring public discussions... to be conducted by leading members of the legal, psychiatric, religious and other professions; by advocating a mode of behavior and dress acceptable to society.

2. Education of the public... leading to an eventual breakdown of erroneous taboos and prejudices...

3. Participation in research projects by duly authorized and responsible psychologists, sociologists, and other such experts directed towards further knowledge of the homosexual.

4. Investigation of the penal code as it pertains to the homosexual, proposal of changes,... and promotion of these changes through the due process of law in the state legislatures.144

"Education of the variant", not even the word "Lesbian" "Adjustment" became a major controversy phrase later on. The idea of having Gay people speak was totally foreign to us at the time.

It never occurred to us in those early days that we could speak for ourselves, that we had the expert knowledge on ourselves. We were the ones explored, but we thought we needed the intervention of experts to do the exploring. Homosexuality had traditionally been the domain of people in law, religion, and the behavioral sciences.

J.K.: In reviewing The Ladder from the early sixties I was struck by the fact that you even invited "experts" to speak who totally put down Gays.

B.G.: At first we were so grateful just to have people—anybody—pay attention to us that we listened to and accepted everything they said, no matter how bad it was. That is how different the consciousness at the time was. But, I must emphasize, it was essential for us to go through this before we could arrive at what we now consider our much more sensible attitudes. You don't just spring full blown into an advanced consciousness. You do it step by step. Well, this was the important first step. We invited people who were willing to come to our meetings; obviously, it turned out to be those who had a vested interest in having us as penitents, clients, or patients.

J.K.: It was enough that someone was interested in you.
B.G.: You'll hear the same thing from other people who have been around the movement a long time. It's hard for you who came in later to understand. Just to be mentioned, no matter what they said, was important at first. It broke the taboo of silence about homosexuality—anything that helped break the silence, no matter how backward; how silly or foolish it may look to us today, was important. The first publications, the first discussion groups and lectures and panels—these carried a lot of weight with us. When somebody with professional credentials came to address your meetings, that legitimized the existence of your organization. And then when you went out and approached other people, you could say that Dr. So and So or the Rev. So and So had addressed you; that made you less pariahlike to these other people whom you needed.

J.K.: When did that change? Only after the Stonewall resistance in 1969 when Gay people fought back against police harassment?

B.G.: Oh no, the changes, all these consciousness changes were definitely fomenting in the sixties, well before Stonewall. The one thing that Stonewall represents in my view, is a sudden burgeoning of grass-roots activity. It doesn't represent a distinctly changed consciousness in the movement. The militancy—the "we are the experts, not these non-Gays"—all that developed well before Stonewall, thanks largely to Frank Kameny; he was the first one who articulated a complete, coherent philosophy for the Gay movement.

J.K.: When did he begin to have an impact?

B.G.: In 1961, after he lost his case, by a decision of the Supreme Court, to get his federal job back. He said, "All right, I've gone as far as I can go as an individual. I need other people to help me push." And so he founded the Washington, D.C., Mattachine Society in late 1961. It is amazing to us now—but again we have to remember that we are wise in hindsight—when he articulated the idea that homosexuality was not a sickness, and had Washington Mattachine, and later New York Mattachine, adopt this view, that was a controversial thing to do in the movement. When Kameny said that in the absence of scientific evidence to the contrary, we are not sick—homosexuality is not a sickness—many movement people disputed him, saying, "We have to leave that up to the experts." DOB's own research director, Florence Conrad, a woman who lived on the West Coast, opposed Kameny and engaged in a written debate with him which I published in The Ladder. She strongly opposed Kameny's idea; she felt we did not have the credentials or the right to stand up and say this for ourselves. That's how far we've come in ten years. Now we even have the American Psychiatric Association running scared.

Point number one of DOB's purpose was "education" of the Lesbian. I began to chafe at that later on and to feel that this was not a valid purpose. It had too much the ring of "We're going to teach you to be a nice little girl so that you can fit into society." I object to this toward the middle of the sixties. But I didn't think very critically in those very first years. All I had then was a joiner's temperament. This was the group that hit closest to home, so I joined. I also had a feeling that something ought to be done, but our perception of the "problem" was very hazy at that time.

J.K.: What was the "problem" as you perceived it in those early days?

B.G.: My personal problem, mainly, was one of self-image. I have traveled a
long, long way since the days when I thought it was a misfortune to be homosexual, that I should do everything possible to change.

J.K.: So it was to feel better about yourself that you got involved in DOB?

B.G.: I don't know that I did it with that clear an idea. It was more a desire to ameliorate the bad conditions of life for Gay people, to make the inevitable more bearable—certainly not to insist on a full and equal place in society. In the early years of the movement, in the fifties, the purpose of our organizing was to find out more about the nature and cause of homosexuality, to get this information out to the general public, to soften their dislike and hostility, to try to persuade them to grant us some privileges. By the late '60s, we began to see that discussing the cause and the nature of homosexuality would not help us. We began to insist on our rights, to spell them out clearly, to go to court to get them, to demand what was ours. The whole consciousness changed; in the early days, it was much more nebulous.

J.K.: In those days, I've gathered, the idea was that anti-Gay prejudice, the difficult situation Gays were in, was based on some sort of misunderstanding: if straight people would only understand us and see we were just like them, we would be accepted. Education was the answer, because the problems we had were based on miseducation.

B.G.: That's right. We felt that if only we knew more about what kind of people we were, and could get this information out, the public would say, "Oh, well, they're not such bad characters after all."

J.K.: The Ladder, November 1958, says New York DOB is sharing space with Mattachine, Barbara Gittings is president, Jody Shotwell is secretary, Mary Dorn is treasurer; there were two meetings a month. Can you describe those meetings? What was their mood? How many people showed up?

B.G.: Oh, it varied, from ten to twelve, so as many as thirty-five or forty. I realize now that these women were showing up in order to meet others. It was that simple. Up until the mid-sixties, every single one of the Gay organizations flatly denied it acted as any kind of agency for social introductions. The reason for this was simply to avoid flak from the outside society that we might be in the business of "procuring," arranging for "immoral contacts."

J.K.: I think that's important. It seems to me that one of the main impetuses behind the Gay movement is Gay people's desire to meet other Gays, to break out of our isolation.

B.G.: Now, of course, it's easy for us to look back and say how silly we were to deny that. But it wasn't silly at the time. We had some heavy discussions over the possibilities of criticism deriving from any suggestion that we were acting as places for social meetings. While we did have social events, we always called them fund-raisers. Nowadays, with hindsight, we sometimes get a little bit arrogant, because we look back and say, "Oh, how could people have been so silly?" It wasn't silly. In the context of the time.

I remember one letter from a parent—she had gotten hold of a mailing her daughter had received, and she wrote a vile letter of condemnation with the word perverse spelled "prevent." Well, by that time, we were feeling a little bit more graceful about ourselves, and were able to laugh over the word "prevent." Still, there was reason to think we could get into more trouble than we could cope with. That kind of feeling carried over for a very long time. When DOB had its third national convention in 'sixty-four in
New York City, Donald Webster Cory was one of the speakers. That was the time he gave his swan song to the Gay movement. In his speech he chided us for not saying openly that it was a legitimate purpose of our organizations to provide a social place. After all, he said, under what better auspices can homosexuals meet each other? He was prophetic on that issue of socializing. Because only a few years later everyone was saying, “Well, of course, what better place for Gay people to meet each other but in places sponsored and run by Gay people?”

J.K.: You people seem to have been very concerned with what the straight society thought of you.

B.G.: Oh, very much so. Appearance and behavior were very important. We needed the acceptance of society, we thought. So we geared ourselves to getting it. There was an incident at an early Daughters of Bilitis national convention (in Los Angeles, I think), where a woman who had been living pretty much as a transvestite most of her life was persuaded, for the purposes of attending that convention, to don female garb, to deck herself out in as “feminine” a manner as she could, given that female clothes were totally alien to her. Everybody rejoiced over this as though some great victory had been accomplished—the “feminizing” of this woman. Today we would be horrified at anyone who thought this kind of evangelism had a legitimate purpose. Yet at the time, I remember, I joined in the rejoicing. At the same time there was some kind of mental reservation in me; I felt there was something grotesque about this woman’s trying to look “normal” for the purposes of appearances at this convention. The resulting appearance simply wasn’t that persuasive—and what was it really for, since we were essentially among ourselves? We always had the idea we were totally exposed to the world, but when you came right down to it, we were really mostly exposed to ourselves and those few non-Gay speakers whom we invited. During the first years of New York DOB’s existence there was another debate about a woman who lived as a transvestite, who was accepted even at her place of work as a woman who chose to live and dress as a young man. But in DOB there was discussion over her appearance, whether it was acceptable. It was a controversy that probably wouldn’t even arise today, or would arise in a different form.

J.K.: Can you talk about the activities that went on in the early days of New York DOB—coffee sessions, business meetings, lectures, dinners, forums?

B.G.: Practically all took place in New York City; occasionally we went across the river to someone’s living room in New Jersey. We were always rather hard put for places to meet. Especially when the Mattachine Society was out of offices for a while. Both groups were living out of a postal box.

The year after our organization began, in 1959, we started to put out a New York DOB newsletter. I did the newsletter myself. We sent these out to our mailing list of about 150 or so, hoping that women would find something of interest and would come along.

J.K.: What was it like editing that newsletter?

B.G.: There wasn’t much to edit. It was a matter of putting together the words that would announce our events. I was working at an architectural firm, and sometimes I was supposed to stay overtime for company business. Sometimes I would use that time after hours to cut the stencils for the DOB news-
letter, using a stylus and the light tables, and I'd do the drawings and run it off on the company's mimeograph machines, preferably on colored paper, and type up all the envelopes, and stuff all the envelopes, and send the damn things out. It was an awful lot of work.

J.K.: Were you afraid of getting caught?
B.G.: Yes, I was. And I was caught. It might have been around 'fifty-nine or 'sixty. One of my mailings got into the hands of my bosses. Unfortunately, I had used a company envelope with a sticker over the name, with another return address, either mine or DOB's. Somebody received it—I assume someone other than the Gay person who was supposed to receive it—and had gone to the trouble of tearing or soaking off the sticker, had uncovered the company name, and had written a letter to the company complaining about this stuff being sent out. And so I was called in. My immediate boss, a woman, got stuck with dealing with me.

J.K.: Did she ask you what the organization was?
B.G.: I explained it to her with my heart zipping about ten miles away from me in all directions. I was very scared. I didn't know what was going to happen. Was I going to be fired? Was I going to get a severe talking to? I explained the purposes of the organization, and I did not deny I was using company time and company materials. All she said was that she knew something about the subject of Lesbianism because she had been in the armed service. She was not saying that she was Gay, merely that she was acquainted with the existence of Lesbianism.

J.K.: Did she let you get away with it?
B.G.: I don't remember exactly what she said, but I wasn't fired. I was simply told to be more careful about this sort of thing.

J.K.: The New York Mattachine Society existed and was open to women. Why was a separate women's organization started?
B.G.: The reason wasn't the sort of thing you get today, when people say, "Men are male chauvinist pigs: we have to have a separatist organization so women can gain strength from each other." Today we would give you reasons we couldn't give you then. Somehow it was a more comfortable setting to be among ourselves. Yet there were times when we cooperated with the Mattachine Society in jointly sponsoring particular events, like panel discussions. I remember one on religion. Why the need for a separate group? One had been started; women seemed to enjoy being together.

One important motivating principle for the whole movement was overcoming invisibility—not that we spelled it out quite that plainly at the time. For people who are invisible, overcoming invisibility is a major step in improvement of self-image, in coming to grips with who you are. Think of all the isolated Gay people for whom the sheer existence of groups of their own, that they could turn to, was an enormous improvement over the old situation where they felt totally cut off. They might still be isolated, geographically, but as long as they knew that a thousand miles away there was a group, as long as they could occasionally get some kind of publication, it was so much better than simply living in their own little cocoon.

J.K.: Early issues of The Ladder carry letters from all over the United States, from little towns. The women who write say how important it is just to have the knowledge that the DOB exists, that the magazine exists.
In September 1959, there was a Mattachine convention in Denver; Del Martin spoke about DOB and Lesbians in the movement. She said that DOB was "often accused of competing with Mattachine," a charge she denied. Del Martin continued:

At every one of these conventions I attend, year after year, I find I must defend the Daughters of Bilitis as a separate and distinct women's organization. First of all, what do you men know about Lesbians? In all of your programs and your "[Mattachine] Review," you speak of the male homosexual and follow this with—oh, yes, and incidentally there are some female homosexuals, too, and because they are homosexual all this should apply to them as well. ONE [Magazine] has done little better. For years they have relegated the Lesbian interest to the column called "Feminine Viewpoint." So it would appear to me that quite obviously neither organization has recognized the fact that Lesbians are women and that this twentieth century is the era of emancipation of women. Lesbians are not satisfied to be auxiliary members or second-class homosexuals. So if you people do wish to put DOB out of business, you are going to have to learn something about the Lesbian, and today I'd like to give your first lesson.\[45

I was surprised to find such a militant feminist statement in 1959. A short time later, at the first DOB national convention in 1960, Del Martin described DOB as being open to "any woman, heterosexual or homosexual, over 21 who desired . . . the integration of the homosexual into society through education, both of the variant and of the public . . . as to their responsibilities." That also expresses the feeling of the time?

B.G.: Yes, we have to be good boys and girls in order to earn our place in society. Of course, that viewpoint is anathema to us today. We have a right to be here, and we have a right to have our place in society—as long as we don't violate other people's rights. All the early organizations claimed they were open to both Gays and straights, although ninety-nine out of a hundred members were heterosexual. We always insisted that straight people too were members, so you weren't "tainted" necessarily by belonging to the organization.

J.K.: The early Ladders indicate there was tremendous fear of joining, about having one's name associated with DOB.

B.G.: Most people used pseudonyms at the time. It was common in the movement, with few exceptions. Del Martin was one of the exceptions. I always used my own name. I never made a conscious decision to do that, it's just that I never felt sufficient pressure to use a pseudonym.

J.K.: What about your family? Were you afraid they would hear?

B.G.: No, it never occurred to me; it was unlikely. How would they hear about it? There wasn't that much publicity. In fact, we couldn't even get publicity. One of the first problems we had was that the Village Voice wouldn't take ads. DOB and the other organizations were refused ads completely. Eventually, that door was broken down by Randy Wicker, by sheer persistence; and finally the Voice accepted ads for "homophile" meetings.
J.K.: In May 1960, at the first national DOB convention, Dr. Frank Beach was on a panel entitled "Why the Lesbian?"—commenting on statements by four women. One Lesbian's statement reportedly "eluded" Beach "completely." This woman is said to have declared "she didn't believe in any of the standard 'causes' for Lesbianism, ... that she was more inclined to believe that women were just plain sick of being dominated by men and were seeking their own souls!"* Interesting such a statement was made then.

B.G.: I would probably have been annoyed by such a response at the time. I would have felt the person was not treating the question seriously, that indeed there was some kind of cause that we should look for.

J.K.: What about the feminist aspect of the statement?

B.G.: I wouldn't have bought that at the time, and I don't buy it now. Lesbianism has nothing to do with being tired of being dominated by men. I find that theory objectionable. I would have found it objectionable at that time because I thought the respondent was being arrogant, not treating the question seriously, that we had an obligation to supply properly thought-out answers. I would have thought she was thumbing her nose at the speaker. Today I find it objectionable for a different reason. I object to any theory that makes us reactors instead of initiators, that says women become Lesbians as a reaction to being dominated by men. That's why you become Lesbian. If women were in no way dominated by men, they'd still become Lesbians.

J.K.: Did you go to any of those early national DOB conventions?

B.G.: The first I remember going to was the one in Los Angeles in 'sixty-two. It featured Evelyn Hooker. We had the usual line-up of experts.

J.K.: The president of DOB was interviewed by Paul Coates on television in Los Angeles.

B.G.: That was among the first television appearances in the movement. Naturally we were excited. There were very, very few people in our movement who could afford to be seen on camera. The invitations to appear were a breakthrough, a breaking of the silence.

J.K.: Can you describe some of the major differences between the early years of DOB and the Gay liberation movement in 1974? What progress has been made, what needs to be done?

B.G.: Well, we've made enormous progress. One of the most significant changes in the movement has been to stop focusing on ourselves, to realize that the problem is not with us but with them out there, with the outside world. That came about roughly in the mid-sixties. Unfortunately, I see some tendency to reverse this, to devote a lot of energy to consciousness-raising. I really don't understand why this is so necessary for Gay people today—they shouldn't have to go through a whole reeducation trip. Gay people growing up now, with the benefit of positive literature, which I didn't have, and with the benefit of several hundred organizations around the country, which I didn't have, shouldn't need to spend a year raising their consciousness.

J.K.: I'm surprised you say that, because you've emphasized how important it was for you to change your image of yourself.

B.G.: Oh, yes, but I did that by working with other people. The talk was incidental to what we were trying to do. I find it hard to understand people for whom talk is the goal. If a group of people sit down to prepare posters for a
Bank Beach was a small demonstration by four or five men. I find that at that time being the question of the issue of gay rights was not even being discussed. Today I see the question of the question of the issue of gay rights being discussed. But why you become gay in the beginning depends on a number of factors. It can be taken up. The existence of Gay professional organizations is something that we wouldn't have dreamed of ten years ago.

Despite the progress, the vast majority of Gay people are still living in the closet and are not active in the movement. Naturally, movement in the early years of the movement has been significant changes. I realize that Gay people have problems of self-image, and when having to worry about what anyone is going to think about them, and without having special problems of self-image. This is what I look forward to. Those of us who are lucky enough to be able to be out and active in Gay liberation have a special responsibility to those who cannot afford to come out yet. What we're saying to them is: "Hang in there, people, because those of us who are out are oiling the closet hinges just as fast as we can."

Having gone through many years of unhappiness, uncertainty, and negative feelings about myself, I want to see it that younger Gay people don't have to go through the same thing. Those years of worrying and wondering were, in a way, productive for me. I'm assertive and I kept grappling with it until I finally evolved a positive view of my Gayness. But it was a long, hard journey, which might have broken someone else. People shouldn't have to go through that.