

## Lisa Ben (1921- )

Florine Fleischman  
with Susan Bullough



Charles Faber Feature

The pseudonymous Lisa Ben broke the barrier of silence within the American gay community by publishing what some regard as the first lesbian newsletter/magazine, *Vice Versa*, beginning in June 1947. Ben said she started the newsletter to keep herself company; she called it *Vice Versa* because when she began publishing it, her kind of life was considered a vice. She distributed it free of charge.

Ben was an unlikely pioneer: although she had enough courage to publish a newsletter (for some twelve issues) and distribute it to friends and bar patrons, she did so anonymously. Later when she began writing for *The Ladder*, she adopted the name Lisa Ben (an anagram of lesbian). As of this writing she still refuses permission to include her real name for fear of discovery by people who would “not understand,” even though her close family has long been deceased, as are most of her former employers and workmates. Since, however, Lisa Ben’s real name, Edythe Eyde, has been publicized online, it seems permissible to note it in this biography.

Lisa, an only child, was born in 1921 in San Francisco. Her father was an insurance agent, her mother a housewife; she was raised for the most part in Los Altos on a thirty-three-acre apricot ranch where she spent a lot of her time playing with animals as there were few children her age in the area. She went to college for two years, then her father insisted she quit and go to secretarial school even though she did not want to. She wanted to be a violinist in a symphony orchestra, but the obedient daughter, discouraged by her parents, did what they wanted as she was never allowed to argue with them. When she began working, she continued to live at home and her parents required her to pay a third of her salary to them as rent. Finally, shortly before

the outbreak of World War II, she got up enough courage to move to Palo Alto where she was then working. Ever mindful of finances, she paid for her rent by watching three children at night. Gathering up her courage, she moved to Los Angeles where she had a friend and she has lived there ever since.

Lisa was not interested in boys and did not date in high school. She knew nothing about homosexuality, although she had a crush on a girl in the high school band which included some hugging and kissing. When the girl broke off the relationship, a devastated Lisa confided to her mother about losing her girlfriend, and when her mother questioned her so intently about the matter, Lisa began to wonder if she had done something wrong. Lisa never brought up the subject again with her parents.

In Los Angeles she fell in with a group of women who did not talk about men all the time, as most of her other friends did. When one of the women asked her if she was gay, Lisa thought she was being asked if she was happy. Her affirmative reply led them to invite her to a club where Lisa noticed that the men and women were in separate areas. That evening it gradually dawned on her what gay meant and that she was not the only woman who found other women attractive. She gradually extended her lesbian contacts.

In 1947, she was working as a secretary in a Hollywood movie studio. She had been told by her boss that there were long periods when she might not have much to do in the office. He said he did not want her to knit or read a book during these periods, but she could do anything else she wanted providing she looked busy. She felt that since there were magazines and newsletters for every type of interest, it would be logical to have a magazine for gay women. She began typing a newsletter and decided to distribute ten copies. This meant she typed each letter twice, producing four carbon copies. Most of what was included in the magazine she wrote herself and distributed to other "gay girls" (her term). Originally she had intended to mail them, but a friend warned her that she could be prosecuted for using the mail to distribute obscene material and so she then depended upon personal contacts to pass them on. She could have cut a stencil and used a mimeograph to make more copies, but this would have exposed her activities to others. She quietly sought a printer to make more copies, but her initial experiences convinced her that this was not a viable alternative. She wrote movie and book reviews, poems, and news. She requested contributions from others, but never received any, although the magazine aroused much interest in the gay community. The publication ceased after nine months and twelve issues because her studio job ended. She went on to other things, among them writing gay parodies of popular songs and singing them at the Flamingo, a club that allowed gay shows and acts on Sunday afternoon.

She dated and went out with a number of other women and finally, at age thirty-six, entered into a special relationship with a woman she is unwilling to identify. The two lived together for three years, but their affair was ended by Ben after her partner went to Las Vegas and lost everything gambling, including the rent money. Although she continued to have casual relationships after that, Ben never again was interested in any long-term relationship. She keeps up correspondence with her friends and writes poetry in her spare time. In 1997 she was recognized as a founder of the Los Angeles gay community. She remains proud of what she has accomplished but reluctant to seek publicity. Still, her willingness to come out as she did in the 1940s makes her almost unique among the lesbians of the time.

## Berry Berryman (1901-1972)

Vern L. Bullough



Homosexual and lesbian friendships and social groups were long part of the American social scene, although most of these groups avoided public exposure. As historians try to trace down the histories of these groups, some serendipitously come to light and we find they left studies or autobiographies that are important to helping us to understand same-sex life in the past. One such "find" was a study by Berry Berryman who began interviewing her lesbian and gay friends perhaps as early as the 1920s and began writing them up in the early 1940s only to abandon the project, which was eventually completed by Bonnie and Vern Bullough in the 1970s. Her study

was significant even though flawed because it is one of the few studies we have of a rather loosely knit lesbian (and gay) community in an unlikely place, such as Salt Lake City was. She was a pioneer in her study and in her public lifestyle.

Born Mildred J. Berryman in Salt Lake City, Utah, she grew up there. Like many other young women conscious of her same-sex attraction, she had difficulty coming to terms with herself. She married twice, first an elopement at sixteen, which was annulled, and later in her early twenties in a more formal ceremony, which resulted in a quick divorce. After these efforts at conformity, she began to come to terms with her lesbianism and over the years lived with several different women for shorter or longer periods. It is not clear what caused her to begin her studies of the gay and lesbian community in Salt Lake City, but she was undoubtedly influenced by the writing of Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, whose books were in her library.

A short and somewhat overweight woman, she eventually settled down with Ruth Uckerman in 1942 and the two lived together running a small