

Shirley Willer (1922-1999)

Del Martin
Phyllis Lyon



Shirley Willer was a heavysset woman who wore mannish attire and a short haircut. The clothes, she claimed, fit her ample figure better than standard women's clothing. She had a deep voice and the commanding demeanor of a leader. As a nurse she exhibited the caring and nurturing manner of her profession. She objected to being called "butch," which to her was stereotypical role-playing. She was fated to take on the role of Robin Hood during her stint as national president of the Daughters of Bilitis—a role that led to her downfall and the downfall of the organization and its magazine, *The Ladder*.

Shirley was born in Chicago in 1922. Her father was a judge, a heavy drinker, and a wife beater. In 1931 her mother packed Shirley and her younger sister into the family car and fled. In order to make ends meet her mother had to work split shifts and strange hours, leaving Shirley to run the household.

Eventually Shirley managed to get into nursing school where she learned that some women, called lesbians, were attracted to other women. When she told her mother she might be one, her mother got a copy of *The Well of Loneliness* for her to read. She was grateful for her mother's understanding. All hell broke loose in the family, however, when Shirley's first love turned out to be her cousin. Her aunt took her daughter home and told her never to see Shirley again.

In 1962 Shirley moved to New York because she had learned that the Daughters of Bilitis had a chapter there. At her first event she met Marion Glass (Meredith Grey), a founding member, and they soon became a couple. Marion was a reserved, intellectual type who found her voice through Shir-

ley. With Marion as mentor Shirley soon became president of the chapter and by 1966 the national president of DOB.

Shirley had become a friend, confidante, and therapist to a wealthy, closeted lesbian who wished to contribute to DOB anonymously. The two devised a plan whereby Shirley, acting as a conduit, named individual members to receive checks for \$3,000. Initially the donations were used to make *The Ladder* a slick paper magazine, professionally typeset, with a distributor to get it on newsstands. Shirley planned also to increase the membership of DOB and to improve the structure of the organization. To this end Shirley and Marion began to travel the country organizing more chapters for DOB, but they failed to provide anyone with their itinerary and did not keep in contact with the national office in San Francisco. The vice president, who was supposed to be in charge of the national office, was unfortunately not functioning. Efforts to communicate with other national officers also proved elusive. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, who had come to the rescue in previous DOB crises, felt they had enough and both resigned in 1968.

The August 1968 issue of *The Ladder* ran an article titled "Changing Times" by Meredith Grey introducing a plan to decentralize DOB in which there would be no need to elect a national president or hold national assemblies anymore. No mention was made of where or when the DOB Convention of 1968 would be held.

When Shirley finally surfaced she announced she had made arrangements for the convention to be held in Aurora, Colorado. On such short notice only fifteen members showed up. It was here that Shirley and Marion formally introduced their plan to decentralize DOB, giving autonomy to chapters to establish their own policies. The new United Daughters of Bilitis, Inc., a separate corporation, would undertake publication of *The Ladder*. They also urged DOB to become a member organization of the recently organized North American Conference of Homophile Organizations. The DOB members present felt the drastic new plans needed more consideration and deferred action until the next scheduled convention in New York City in 1970.

Upset at the refusal of DOB members to follow through on their recommendations, Shirley and Marion quit both the DOB and the national homophile movement. Rita Laporte succeeded Shirley as national president. She and Gene Damon (Barbara Grier), editor of *The Ladder*, felt that drastic action was necessary to save the magazine. Rita then took the mailing list as well as some of the properties and records of DOB to Reno, Nevada. The move was perceived as a theft. DOB members in San Francisco consulted attorneys who advised that any suit to recover the magazine would end up in federal courts and would take years (and large quantities of money and en-

ergy) to settle. The August/September 1970 issue of *The Ladder* did not mention DOB. With this fait accompli, Shirley, even after her resignation, had achieved her goal to decentralize DOB. At the 1970 convention in New York the national board, whose principal responsibility had been *The Ladder*, dissolved itself. The chapters were set free. Only one chapter still exists, in Boston. *The Ladder*, without the backing of the organization or the "anonymous donor," ceased publication in 1972.

Shirley and Marion spent the last years of their lives in Key West, Florida, where they opened and ran a rather profitable "rock shop" and became involved with the growing lesbian and gay community there. On reflection it was realized that Shirley, as the first non-California president of DOB, was caught in the middle of East-West conflicts and power struggles in the homophile movement at that time. She and Marion had their roots and loyalties in New York and the East Coast way of operating. What had started out as a grandiose plan to reorganize DOB, with Shirley's guaranteed source of financing, ended up destroying it.

Shirley died on New Years Eve 1999. Shortly before, Manuela Soares had interviewed her on videotape for the New York Lesbian Herstory DOB Project. By then Shirley had come to terms with her anger and feelings of betrayal. She realized that all the participants in the struggle had probably done what they thought was best. She did not want to put anyone down. Shirley's good deeds and intentions and her deep disappointment reflect the feelings and ideals of the pre-Stonewall movement.

