

Stella Rush a.k.a. Sten Russell (1925-)

Judith M. Saunders



The formation of the Mattachine and of ONE was not an all-male affair. Women from the first played important roles and among these Stella Rush stands out. Interestingly, the contribution of these women is sometimes overlooked because several women writers also used male pseudonyms.

Stella Rush published her first article in *ONE Magazine* under the pseudonym Sten Russell in 1954, at the height of the witch hunts and government purges that were backed by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the executive order of President Eisenhower.

Rush continued to publish in *ONE* until 1961 and in *The Ladder* until it ceased publication. Her writings and those of other brave pioneers provided isolated gay men and women throughout the United States with a community to which they could belong. In these early publications, gay men and women read accounts of conferences (held by ONE, the Mattachine Society, and Daughters of Bilitis), scientific studies, police oppression activities, fiction, poems, and more. Always lively were the letters to the editor, which provided a forum of dialogue otherwise unavailable to these readers.

Stella, an only child, was born in Los Angeles on April 30, 1925. She spent her childhood and school years migrating between Los Angeles and Kentucky. Not only was Stella's childhood marked by unending geographic upheaval but also by family disruptions and losses. Stella lacked the stability so important to the developmental years of childhood: Stella's beloved father died before she was two years old, and when she was five her mother developed a serious illness that recurred throughout her life. The illness

I would like to thank Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon for their assistance.

bar. Wham, all of a sudden the police were there and made all of us go outside. The raid seemed to be aiming mainly at the guys, although if a woman gave them lip she could also go to jail. The police were very democratic about that. I had been warned ahead of time, probably because I belonged to a church where we were in political hot water over the communist thing—loyalty oath thing. And so we had some counseling [by the minister] to give only name and address when asked, but don't tell them where you work. Let them think you are unemployed or whatever. So you don't end up on the front page. I was scared to death, standing there shaking. This cop asked me to identify myself, so I hauled out my driver's license, and said that's me. "Where do you work?" I don't have a job. You don't know. You don't want to argue with a policeman or anyone who has a gun and a billy stick. I didn't give them any reason to take me down to the station. At the same time, I wasn't going to help them. The whole thing with me was not to argue with them about anything if I could help it. . . . The police officer told me, "You should cooperate with us." And I answered, "I would, sir, if I knew what you wanted." Actually there were about four times I had to talk with cops, and most of the time there was a good cop/bad cop scene. The most difficult ones were not the gay bar raids, but were being stopped by the police about race, like the time my partner, Bea, and I were taking a black man home from choir practice. I was ready, if I had to, to go to jail for the right of free association with others and to take a stand against race discrimination. I was a member of ACLU and could see what the ACLU could do about it—that is, for the racial discrimination. I wasn't prepared to go to jail about the homosexuality issue, because, as far as I could see, gays didn't have any civil rights and ACLU didn't have anything to offer. It took a lot of work and education before the ACLU took us on—they had to get to know us and to read a lot of our stuff.

After a few years of reading, and going to gay bars to meet women and men, Stella entered a four-year relationship with a lesbian who was twenty years her senior. This relationship had many points of strain, but it was through this relationship that Stella met women who were involved with *ONE Magazine*.

After Stella learned about *ONE Magazine*, she didn't rush to them to offer her services. Stella explained, "At first, I hung out around the edges of the organization and gave it gifts of what money I could afford anonymously. I had a civil service job as a civil engineering assistant. I didn't want to lose it." She had differentiated knowing she was gay from the lifestyle associated at that time with being gay. She believed of herself and of the gay

community, "We are just people. Not any better or any worse than other people." Stella believed strongly in a vision of normalcy for gay men and women, and this included being able to live within a context of human and civil rights. ONE brought together men and women in order "to publish and disseminate a magazine dealing primarily with homosexuality from the scientific, historical and critical point of view, and to aid in the social integration and rehabilitation of the sexual variant." ONE battled with the U.S. Post Office for the right to mail the magazine to their subscribers. The U.S. Post Office declared the magazine to be obscene literature. ONE responded with a lawsuit that found its way to the U.S. Supreme Court before being vindicated.

The values reflected in ONE's purpose drew Stella to their work, but crossing the line from anonymous supporter to active participant was not an easy transition. "It took going through waves of fear before working on this stuff." Like so many others in the early 1950s, Stella had a lot to lose.

One of the first things Stella wrote for ONE was "Letter to a Newcomer" in 1954. Stella explained, "I wrote this because it had finally gotten to me in my heart and mind, that people, including me, shouldn't have to live like this. Shouldn't have to be using pseudonyms (e.g., Sten Russell), or lying all the time just to make a living or just to get along in society." Stella calls this a simple article, but admits that "some people got a great deal out of it and seemed galvanized to activity by it." The staff at ONE heard often from many people about how much this magazine meant to people throughout the country. People subscribed to the magazine, but often one individual's magazine would circulate to dozens of friends.

Stella was a reporter, later also an assistant editor and a corporate member for ONE. As a reporter she was assigned to report on conferences held by organizations such as the Mattachine Foundation (later the Mattachine Society) and ONE, Incorporated. Her reporting of the papers presented at conferences was so thorough, so complete, that it prompted Don Slater, editor, to remark, "You wrote more than I remember hearing."

She also was assigned to explore the "butch/femme phenomenon" among gay bar lesbians. Stella found that opinions were strong and expectations firmly held that role distinctions needed to be sharply drawn. Not being distinctly butch or femme was courting disapproval as strong as that usually reserved for the practicing bisexual individual.

Although Stella participated in ONE's corporation and publications from 1953 to 1961, she also became active in the Daughters of Bilitis and their publication, *The Ladder*, in 1957. Stella believed that she had found a very good fit between her beliefs and the values reflected in the Daughters of Bilitis's purpose: A women's organization with the purpose of promoting the integration of the homosexual into society by education of homosexuals

and the public at large, participation in research projects, and investigations of the penal code as it pertains to the homosexual.

Stella resigned from the *ONE Magazine* editorial board in 1961 and explained her resignation in an article in *The Ladder*: "I resigned from ONE seven months ago, mainly due to great policy difference between myself and the rest of the editors of *ONE Magazine*. It is dismally depressing to be a minority of one person most of the time" (Russell, 1962). As her explanation continued, she affirmed her continuing support of *ONE Magazine* because its importance as a publication was greater than the ideological differences that existed.

Stella attended One's Midwinter Institute in 1957 so she could report the proceedings and discussions in *ONE Magazine*, and there she met the love of her life, Helen Sandoz, whom everyone called Sandy. Sandy was the president of Daughters of Bilitis, a group in San Francisco that had been founded in 1955 by Del Martin, Phyllis Lyon, and other women. Stella believed Sandy to be one of the most noble, courageous women she had ever met. Not only was Sandy one of the original signers of the Daughters of Bilitis Charter, she also was a good executive and had published her own newspaper in Oregon. Soon Sandy and Stella had overcome all obstacles to their relationship and began a life partnership that ended only when Sandy died June 7, 1987.

Stella made her debut as a reporter for *The Ladder* in March 1957, and she continued to use the protective, necessary pseudonym, Sten Russell. In 1958, Stella also assumed the responsibility of publications director for the Daughters of Bilitis. Her first assignment was to report for *The Ladder* at ONE's Midwinter Institute at which had been assembled a lively panel of psychologists, psychiatrists, clergy, attorneys, and members of ONE to debate the issue of whether homosexuals should be coerced into heterosexual practices. The panel concluded that (1) if homosexuals are neurotic, it is due more to negative attitudes toward society and their position in society, and (2) no one believed homosexuals could or should be coerced into heterosexual practices.

As the Los Angeles reporter, Stella was kept busy throughout 1957 reporting on conferences and attending a specialized course (thirty-six hours over an eighteen-week period) that surveyed the social and biological sciences and the humanities as they pertained to the homophile. Stella, as Sten Russell, reported discussions in depth, so that readers learned who spoke and what they said. Some of her reports were up to seventeen pages long because the discussions required that much space for accurate reporting and audience understanding. The dialogue was rich at the conferences and seminars that brought together scientists, gay activities, police officers, medical staff, and clergy. The topics that focused the dialogue were the social and

philosophical concerns of the gay men and women in the 1950s, and in many instances, concerns that continue to live today.

Sten Russell reported on the Fourth Annual Mattachine Society's Convention, and its broad range of topics. A prominent panel addressed the topic, "Must the Individual Homosexual Be Rejected in Our Times?" Dr. Harry Benjamin, endocrinologist and sexologist, began by saying he was ashamed that the question had to be asked. In his opinion, no one knows what is "normal," only what is "customary." Leo Zeff, clinical psychologist, rephrased the question to, "Can the individual homosexual be accepted in our time?" "No," he said, "this is not an antihomosexual society; it is an anti-sex society." With this reshaping of the discussion, he brought the problem to heterosexuals as well. Julia Coleman, social worker, spoke of "the price of rejection" to society, and that society must ground its actions in facts, not myths. William Beher, social worker, suggested that the homosexual must first accept himself or herself, thereby paving the way to being accepted by others. Alfred Auerback, clinical professor of psychiatry at University of California, San Francisco, believed that change could not be brought about in present attitudes by force or pressure, only by evolution. Sam Morford, moderator, wrapped up the panel discussion by saying, "It didn't seem to him that anyone could be rejected unless he (or she) accepted the rejection."

Although Stella's reports of conferences, seminars, and research were welcomed by both *ONE Magazine* and *The Ladder*, she struggled as other writers had before her to have her poems published. A common response was, "They aren't gay enough." Stella wondered: if the poem was good, and if it was written by a gay woman (or man), why wasn't it gay enough? Her poems were good enough that her stance eventually prevailed. Consequently, readers were able to discover and enjoy yet another dimension of Sten Russell, reporter. Although her poems spoke of passion and love, she combined humor and love in, perhaps, her best known poem, published in *ONE*, in 1961:

PYEWACKET

Love poem to a Lady Cat
 "Cherchez la femme."
 Oh, tiny Siamese lady cat
 —beautiful kitten—
 The wisdom of a thousand
 Years shines from your
 Bright, mischievous eyes.
 Oh, loving little soul—

Such feminine grace
—and only eight weeks old:
How I love you!
We are betrothed.
You have snored on my sleeve.
Arched your back
And crossed your paws (all four).
My heart is gone
As I contemplate the
Mysterious infinitude of
Womanhood!

Sten Russell

In addition to conferences and seminars, Sten Russell also reported results of scientific studies that examined homosexuality in a variety of dimensions. The controversial Kinsey statistics were reported from a review of three programs that had been taped when presented by WRCA-TV in New York City. This same taped series in 1957 included the report of a study by the noted anthropologist, Margaret Mead, "Male and Female in American Culture." Mead, so Russell reported, discussed cultural institutionalization of an ordinary variation of sex drives, and that the problem arose with attempts to define sexual identity in terms of occupation and temperament. Mead believed that this was the basic mistake any society could make and it led to curbing and warping of the great human potential for variety and adjustment to changing conditions.

Russell also reported the results of a study by Virginia Armon, PhD. The study found no significant difference between homosexual and heterosexual women when their Rorschach tests were compared. Although Armon indicated that it had been a tremendous amount of work for a relatively meaningless result, Russell reported she was not sure . . . "the significance of insignificance is quite meaningful."

From ONE's tenth anniversary annual meeting, Russell reported the taped presentations that featured two prominent clinician/researchers of the time: Blanche Baker, MD, psychiatrist, and Evelyn Hooker, PhD, psychologist. Baker said that homosexuality was a product of many factors. She believed every human being was a mixture of femaleness and maleness. Baker was convinced that the neurotic conflict of most homosexuals existed because they did not accept themselves. Hooker said that she did not believe that homosexuality and pathology are necessarily connected. This position is hallmark of her pioneering research. Hooker continued to assert that homosexuals, even with the most compelling motivation, would find change

(to heterosexual) well nigh impossible in the vast majority of cases. From this same conference, Russell also reported on Suzanne Prosin's observation, as a result of her independent research on lesbian couples, "The homosexual minority is the reverse of most minorities, since those comprising it come from the majority to the minority. Therefore, its values started with those of the majority, and its values may still be the same."

Stella continued her reporting and working conscientiously at her other, varied positions with both *The Ladder* and Daughters of Bilitis through 1968. Her life-partner, Helen Sandoz, a.k.a. Helen Sanders a.k.a. Sandy, was even more involved in the activities of Daughters of Bilitis and *The Ladder*. Sandy designed many of the covers of *The Ladder*, reported on conventions, organized the Los Angeles chapter of Daughters of Bilitis, and typically was an officer of either one of the chapters (San Francisco or Los Angeles) or the national group. Their combined contributions in building gay organizations and publications were significant in establishing the groundwork for a major gay rights movement. Perhaps people who build major movements, such as gay rights, are known in the same manner that major architectural structures are known—by the visible structure that emerges, not by the foundation that provides the structure with its strength and shape. Stella and Sandy were two pivotal people who helped to shape the sound foundation of the gay civil rights movement that we know and enjoy today.

During the foundation years (1950 to 1970) for the gay civil rights movement, a lot had been accomplished. By the end of the 1960s other organizations had appeared and provided gay men and women with more choices about how to direct their energies. Many lesbians struggled with these choices of directing their energies toward integrating lesbians into society through the feminist movement or to continue with organizations devoted exclusively to the welfare of the homosexual. Many leaders of the Daughters of Bilitis and publishers of *The Ladder* believed they could accomplish the purpose of "promoting the integration of the homosexual into society" by joining forces with the emerging feminist organization, National Organization for Women founded in 1966.

Stella and Sandy found the rhetoric of the early feminist movement too strident. They were particularly concerned that fighting for rights of women, which they strongly supported, was being waged against men. Both Stella and Sandy believed fervently in rights of all women *and* men, and were reluctant to give their efforts to groups that aimed to elevate one group at the expense of another group. They had relegated their private and personal interests to the background for many years, and they decided the time had come to place their private and personal goals and activities more centrally in their lives.

Stella and Sandy lived a quiet life together until Sandy died in 1987. They had been together thirty years. Stella continued to work and remained in touch with old and new friends. She retired in 1997 and lives in Southern California.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Much of the information in this biography is based on interviews with Stella Rush conducted between June and December 2000.

- LeVay, S., and Nonas, E. *City of Friends: A Portrait of the Gay and Lesbian Community in America*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995.
- Russell, Sten, "Letter to a Newcomer," *ONE*, 1954, pp. 18-19.
- Russell, Sten, "Mattachine Looks at Life—Life Talks Back," *The Ladder*, September 1957.
- Russell, Sten, "The Open Mind," *The Ladder*, November 1957.
- Russell, Sten, "The Personality Variables of Homosexual Women," *The Ladder*, May 1959.
- Russell, Sten, "PYEWACKET: Love Poem to a Lady Cat," *ONE*, 1961.
- Russell, Sten, "The Searchers Probe the Homosexual Neurosis," *The Ladder*, March 1957.
- Russell, Sten, "Ten Years of History," *The Ladder*, March 1962.

drained her mother's energy, leaving her irritable, unstable, and emotionally inaccessible to her daughter. Stella feared her mother's fragility. This fear placed constraints on the closeness that she and her mother shared, causing the relationship to be defeated by an inherent estrangement.

Stella took refuge in her studies, and developed a reputation as a "brain." Having begun her education in California, she had to start first grade over in Kentucky when she and her mother moved back to live with Stella's maternal grandmother. When she returned to California, she was advanced early from the second to the third grade. She was back in Kentucky for her fifth year at school, but halfway through the fifth grade, Stella's grandmother, fearing Stella was ill, told Stella's mother to take her back to California for medical treatment. Stella explained, "Grandmother thought I had tuberculosis, but really, I had just curled up inside myself dying of depression from the impossibility of my situation." This ebb and flow between Kentucky and Los Angeles continued throughout Stella's grade school and junior high school education. She graduated from high school in Los Angeles shortly after the United States entered World War II, after having had the luxury of going to one school three years in a row. She was fortunate to get a trainee aircraft draftsman job at North American Aviation for two years where she worked and saved money for college. She completed three years of college at the Universities of California at Berkeley and Los Angeles, with majors in math and public speaking.

Stella explains that although reserved, she always felt free in her schooling. Contrary to popular belief, her schooling in Kentucky was more advanced than California, such that teachers in her second grade in Los Angeles promoted her early to the third grade. Stella was fortunate in having several teachers along the way who were very special and helpful to her. Stella remembers, "I fell in love with almost all my teachers."

From her relatives in Kentucky, Stella learned to value family, religion, and duty; whereas Los Angeles, for Stella, was the land of liberty. Exposure to such differing values and lifestyles was as broadening as it was confusing. Stella credits being raised in a family with a strong tradition of a fundamentalist religion as contributing to her difficulty in working through her denial about being gay and in reaching an acceptance of herself. Los Angeles contributed to Stella's sense of a right to fairness, regardless of skin color—what Stella calls "the race thing." This core belief has remained a steadfast value guiding Stella's actions in life.

Responding to the question, "How did you get into gay life?" Stella answered, "That makes me smile. It took a lifetime, it seems—seventeen years to see it (being gay) standing there in front of me—another six-plus years to accept it on a beginning basis, another five years of going to gay bars in order to meet gay women and men, and to find out about a small magazine