THIS WEEK IN HISTORY:

The Daughters of Bilitis

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One night, on Sept. 21, 1955 in San Francisco, four couples met in secret: Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, Marcia Foster and her partner June, Noni Frey and her partner Mary and Rosalie "Rose" Bamberger and her partner, Rosemary Sliepen. In a world where homosexuality was widely considered a mental illness and police frequently raided gay bars, these women sought community and friendship in a time when society condemned it.

This week in history marks the first meeting of the first lesbian rights group in the U.S. The meeting, which was hosted by Bamberger and her partner, would eventually lead to a nationwide organization with chapters across the country. According to the article "How the Daughters of Bilitis Organized for Lesbian Rights" from the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum, the organization initially began as a place where lesbians could socialize, dance and be themselves without having to worry. The group decided to name themselves The Daughters of Bilitis based on poems written by Pierre Louÿs on the character Bilitis, who was associated with the ancient Greek lesbian poet Sappho.

The organization itself was founded by women of color; Bamberger, a Filipina woman, had the initial idea for the group to meet, and later, in the 1960s, African American activist Ernestine Eckstein served as vice president of the New York City chapter. They picketed publicly in Washington, D.C. and in Philadelphia at a time when it was risky to declare one's sexuality, and many members of the Daughters of Bilitis were being watched by the CIA and FBI.

In the mid 1950s, the group decided to steer towards activism and promote change. They began to publish a magazine called "The Ladder" which would be distributed around the country. As the organization decided to go public, many of the working-class members decided to leave but remained supportive of the group, staying on the mailing list. The first edition was published in October 1956 and continued until the early 1970s.



The Ladder, started by The Daughters of Bilitis Organized for Lesbian Rights, is a lesbian magazine that was distributed nationwide.que nus.

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Throughout their active years the group made large strides for lesbian and gay rights, with many playing an active part in the removal of the classification of homosexuality as a mental illness from the American Psychiatric Association.

The group grew throughout the 1960s until eventually splitting apart in the early '70s due to interorganizational tensions. A main point of contention being whether the group should align itself with male-dominated gay rights groups or as "lesbian separatist feminists," according to the article "Daughters of Bilitis" in Britannica.

Despite the group's disbandment, the Daughters of Bilitis changed the way of life for lesbians in the U.S. providing community, action and a voice to women who previously didn't have one.

One could argue that more groups like the Daughters of Bilitis should exist today; even now, it is difficult to find a lesbian bar, with many having closed down in the past few decades. For my parents, who have been together since the late 90s, they have had a difficult time finding lesbian spaces even in gay friendly towns such as Provincetown, Mass., Rehoboth Beach, Del. and Key West, Fla., which have become more male-dominated. Hopefully there will be more lesbian-owned bars and spaces that can help create a larger sense of community in the future, since right now my parents have resorted to being a part of my hometown's lesbian bowling league.

LOGO BY NAME COLBI LORANGER, ASSOCIATE ARTIST EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

