

CHRISTOPHER STREET LIBERATION DAY

by two Lesbians

It celebrated a battle.
Sheridan Square looked less than normal. Queens and young street people were conspicuously absent. It was early. A 12-year old walking along with his father nervously laughed "They're all over."

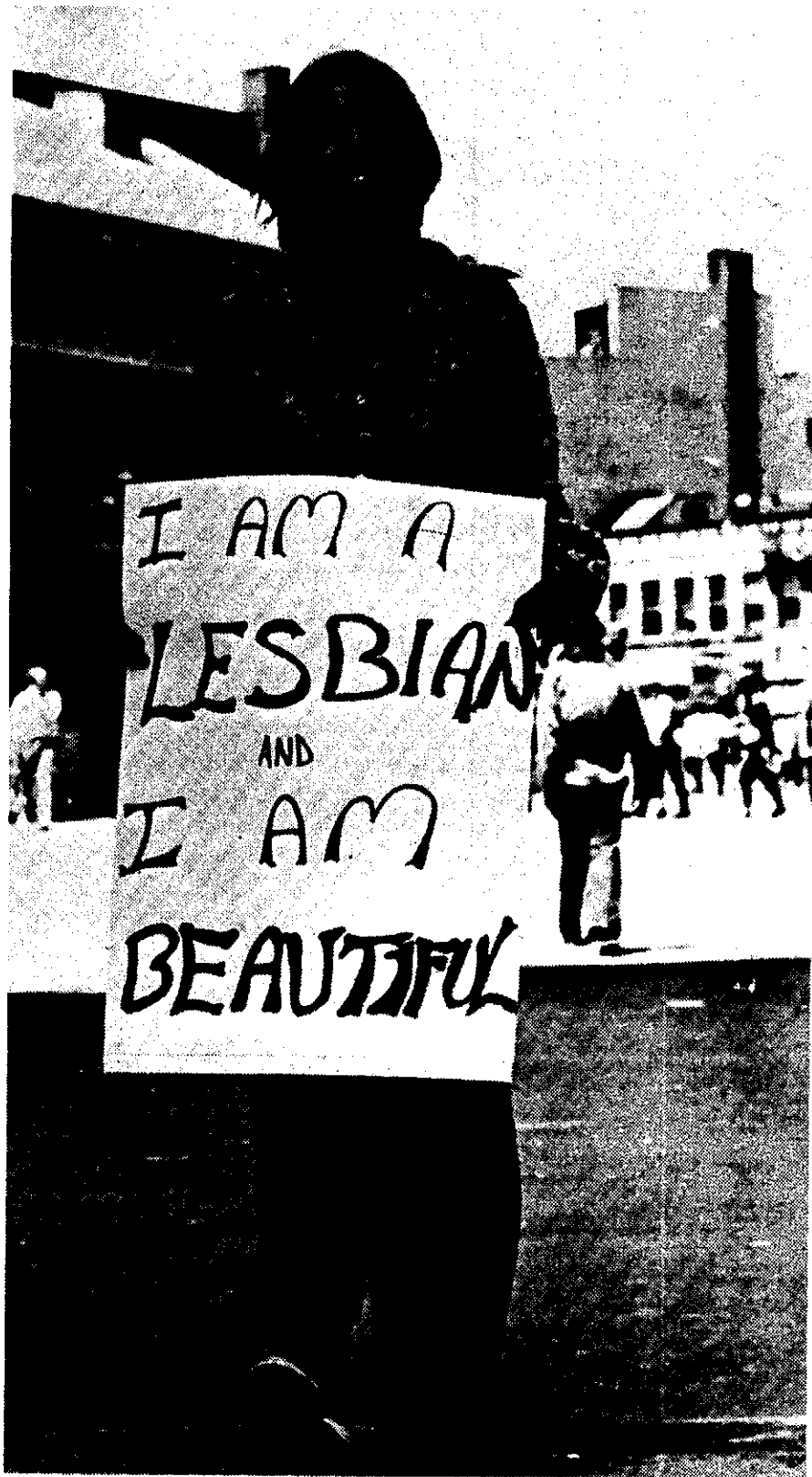
But there weren't many at first, drifting out, massing out at the last moment as if they were watching to see if the others were going to show. A couple of eggs were thrown. Would the queens be busted? The old women saying, "Didja see that sign Sappho-was-a-right-on-woman?" The people were wearing their favorite clothes and two sweatshirts in the crowd — butch and femme. Yes it was a put-on. Getting popsicles and pinning the posters on and there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

Cameras were everywhere . . . "Listen, do you mind if I take your picture". So now it's what does the animal look like and what is its species. Corralled by the sawhorses the parade took shape. We covered 15 blocks! Marching with our arms around each other, yelling to the crowd join us or out of the closets, into the streets and they did join us. The "bright red, green, purple, and yellow silk banners high in the warm afternoon air" were good for our "image" and they made us feel good. Someone called it therapy.

2-4-6-8 Gay is just as good as straight
"No" says a woman "Gay is twice as good as straight."
Approaching Johnny's Desperation Bar women hinted at taking the parade there and liberating the place. But no, we were running a nice parade here . . .
The march kept its definition as did many in the Sheep Meadow.
On the anniversary of a battle we watched a pseudo-hetero couple in a kissing marathon
we watched a "Screw" photographer take pictures of two women lying together on the grass their heads buried together hidden. They are still making money off of us.
And a woman said "I didn't know the men were still using 'she' as a put-down."

In the Sheep Meadow with kite-streamers overhead the smiles of the people were important, the smiles of those unafraid of each other.
And in another part of town a certain neighborhood bar was very busy. Women never came in like that on a Sunday afternoon.
Usually the place was deserted except for the hard-drinking regulars and none of them could be seen in that sort of march even though news photos are hazy. They were friendly and there was no accounting for this phenomenon. Perhaps they had just sensed something.

The women were quiet. Would there be a Lesbian Center? Women filtered in off of the streets and came as far as Sioux City and Oregon.
Upstairs in the church was the Communal Supper which was at first a table with hot water, bread, salami and mustard. Then miraculously all this food appeared — chicken, watermelon, salads and cakes, each person bring what they could. As we began sharing this food together we began talking about our experiences in small spontaneous groups. We talked about the struggle of overthrowing everything they tell us we are. It's time to decide what you want and what you are and not let anyone tell you different.



And downstairs we danced in the hall decorated with our posters; the windows wide open, the breeze, it was the spring, the juke playing the quarter beer and people giving what they could at the door. We realize again that our sisters are incredibly beautiful, and the way they move with the music, dancing close and dancing in circles, together, so beautiful. Now a struggle inside. It celebrated a battle.

You can only do it once. For some people it was the first time they were out on the street and it was the beginning of a revolution for them.

For some it was the chance to show off — in drag, in feathers and flowers. A reporter asked why we considered a gay picnic political. We told him that gay oppression was different from race oppression; that tearing off the mask of anonymity is the first step in our liberation. And we must take the first step. But you can only do it once.

We thought we wore masks to hide from other people; then we found that we ourselves didn't know who we were until we took off the masks. Next year we won't need a parade. We don't know what we will be next year.

Fifth Avenue was filled with fifty thousand women at 5:30 P.M. on August 26, 1970. The newspapers gave conservative estimates of around 6000. Well, what can you expect from the white man's media? If you had been standing on the corner of 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue you would have seen one solid mile of women. That sight alone must have chilled the heart of the hottest chauvinist. Thirty thousand women marched down Fifth Avenue for the vote in 1913. Here we are again, a new and energetic movement on the Avenue once more, this time for equal rights. Here we are again committing the same mistakes our grandmothers did fifty years ago.

The suffrage movement was dominated by wealthy and middle class women and so its goals were understandably the goals of wealthy and middle class women. Revolution was not the issue. The issue was gaining some power in the white man's government. Once we possessed the vote it became painfully clear that for office except for a few states that let us by. The male establishment was busy digging up hoarding blue laws to keep us away from the reins of imperialist government. But our grandmothers had risked a great deal to get us the vote, why couldn't they push one step further and get us equal rights?

Our struggle had been battled in one form or another since Abigail Adams warned her husband concerning women's rights way back during the Constitutional Convention. It had taken generations to get us this far and many women were tired. They had picked up the banner from their mothers and had spent a lifetime fighting for suffrage. Many had focused only on the vote and when it was granted in 1920 they thought the objective reached. The more farsighted wing of the movement regrouped around the National Woman's Party at 144 Constitution Avenue in Washington, D.C. These women pushed for an Equal Rights Amendment and Alice Paul, now in her eighties, is still at 144 Constitution Avenue fighting for the amendment. The suffrage movement was exhausted, fragmented and drenched in class ignorance. The momentum was spent and only a handful of women like Miss Paul were left to carry on. But today the issue of equal rights is a reformist issue rather than radical, and it is a reformist issue to the distinct disadvantage of working class women. If our middle class sisters succeed in getting the amendment passed it will be at the expense of other women.

Perhaps this can be seen more clearly if we view the issue through the eyes of the existing

government. In May of 1969 a group of women from N.O.W. visited Patricia Hitt in her offices at the Health, Education and Welfare Building. After much bombast concerning the unrest of American women with tokenism, Betty Friedan told Mrs. Hitt point blank that the Equal Rights Amendment would be 'a cheap way to buy off American women.' Mrs. Hitt was to transmit this analysis to President Nixon. Apparently she did. Mrs. Friedan was dead center when she assessed the value of the Equal Rights Amendment to the present administration. Being a clever politician, she translated the amendment into terms that spelled benefit to the white male government. Of course, she wants the middle class women as well as what it can do for her hoped-for political career. But the die was cast. The amendment is to defuse the revolutionary wing of the Women's Liberation Movement and to open vistas of establishment opportunity for professional women. It's very simple. When the amendment is passed and ratified, women of the middle class will concentrate on furthering their own status and neglect the 'dangerous' issues the revolutionaries have raised. These women do not begin to question the basic structure of our nation, they are gaining too many benefits from Wall Street and its colonies. Even when child care centers and abortion clinics are established across the land, the country will not be shaken. It will free more women to work for more rich men who can then exploit more poor people here and abroad. More women, especially white heterosexual women, will be siphoned off into the profits and before you know it, women will become as proficient at exploitation as men. Money talks. You dig?

Another aspect of this amendment is that its passage signals the suspension of all protective legislation. At least that's what Attorney General Mitchell has stated. Credibility should be attached to male statements only when those statements refer to punitive actions to be taken against women. In that case, Mitchell is telling the truth. (Washington is full of surprises.) The removal of protective legislation will not affect editors, magazine writers and public relations women, but it will affect factory workers or to put it more clearly, working class women of all races.

Working class women have neither the time nor the resources to fight their exploitation in the white man's courts. Cleanliness laws, lunch hours, safety measures, work hour limitations, minimum wages, premium pay for overtime, weight-lifting regulations will all be wiped off the books. Since only 15% of the women workers are unionized the prospect of quickly

righting these wrongs doesn't look promising. Given the male leadership of most unions it looks impossible.

The middle class women pushing for the Equal Rights Amendment have not addressed themselves to the problem of protective legislation for women workers. Their class privilege makes them blind to even a superficial recognition of the interests of oppressed women. The point is not the protective legislation per se, but the absence of consciousness in middle class women regarding other women's lives and livelihoods.

If this amendment passes, it will succeed in splitting women along class lines. The amendment will probably pass. A few white male leaders will make ridiculous and/or chivalric statements concerning the amendment and sweet femininity but the tide has turned. Even Emmanuel Celler, reigning turd over the House Judiciary Committee is being forced to give ground... Celler has held the amendment up in his committee for decades with the intelligent declaration that it will get out of his committee 'over my dead body.' Perhaps he is giving ground due to an unpublicized terminal disease (such as galloping damage to the brain cells), but more than likely he is giving ground because larger pieces of system excrement than himself are pressuring him. Given these exhalating facts, is there any way out?

An obvious alternative is for middle class women to give up their privileges and join less privileged women so we can fight white male exploitation together. But how many people do you know who have given up their privileges lately? If working class women, Third World women and lesbians organize to educate middle class women some of those women might join the struggle. It should be stressed that most middle class women are working out of an absence of class consciousness not out of malicious class hatred. Saying that middle class women need a consciousness of how they oppress other women is not as easy as helping them gain it. The American middle class is famous for its hostility to any concept of how they might be damaging other people. It took Blacks three hundred years to drum the idea of racial prejudice and its effects into white middle class heads—some still haven't gotten the message.

One hope lies in the fact that all women, regardless of race, class and sexual preference, are treated as less than full blown persons every day in their lives. The forms this takes varies with race, class and sexual preference, but the corroding effects on the psyche are the same:

anger, frustration on one end and despair and hopelessness on the other. Many women attempt to alleviate the damage by throwing themselves into 'acceptable' pursuits. If this recognition can be transmitted to the middle class women some might renounce their privileges over other women.

However, if middle class women continue to exercise their privileges with full knowledge of how this oppresses other women, those middle class women are doomed to share the fate of the existing power structure. When non-white women, lesbians and working class women rise up against oppressors, those oppressors will be swept away.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of the existing problem and its future solution can be seen in the events of August 26th in New York City:

At 11:00 A.M., N.O.W. picketed the Stock Exchange and then went to lunch at White's, a chic male restaurant in the area. At 1:00 P.M. they filed into Battery Park and made speeches thereby insuring that they would miss the working class women of the area, who lunch from 12 to 1.

As the Stock Exchange Stormtroopers sat down to sweet repeat amid male gastronomic reaction a far more significant event was taking place at Willy's, another eatery. The waitresses had heard that August 26th was to be a Women's Strike. Strike to working class women means action. These waitresses on their own initiative sat down on the job at the height of rush hour and refused to serve the fat cats. Since the women were sitting in the same room with the ravenous market rapists it was a highly charged scene. Our sisters demanded higher wages. They received no protection in this action as they have no union, furthermore they didn't ask support from Women's Liberation, nor did they seek publicity. Finally they did serve the men, but their point was made, when the worker on the bottom of the heap refuses to work, the system totters quickly. The worker on the bottom of the heap is a woman. To date no information has been received as to whether the waitresses have been fired for their spirited action.

Working class women turned in to the publicity their middle class sisters so carefully sought after, and the working class women interpreted the strike in their own direct and devastating way to suit their own needs. In New Jersey a grandmother (name withheld by request) was



Photo by Ellen Bedoz

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