

THE LADDER

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER, 1972

\$1.25



Interview with

Barbara Love and Sidney Abbott

CO-AUTHORS OF SAPPHO WAS A RIGHT-ON WOMAN. INTERVIEWER FOR THE
LADDER, NANCY TUCKER

(Barbara J. Love born in 1937 in Montclair, New Jersey, attended Purdue University and then Syracuse University where she graduated in 1959. She has had considerable editorial

experience, most recently as an editorial writes for CBS Television Network. Ms. love, President of Foremost Americans Publishing Company, edited and published FOREMOST WOMEN IN COMMUNICATIONS, an important reference work on women in broadcasting, publishing, teaching and allied professions.

Sidney A. Abbott was born in the nation's capital in 1937 and educated first at Smith College, then the University



of New Mexico, and finally Columbia University where she received an M.S. in Urban Planning. She has worked in an editorial capacity for several publishers including McGraw-Hill. Ms. Abbott is presently Production Editor of Foremost Americans Publishing Company in New York City.)

N--How did you get into Gay Liberation? Were either of you in the old homophile movement?

B--I was in the bars--I knew the movement existed and went over to DOB, but it seemed very depressing. Not that the bars weren't depressing but the bars at least had intrigue! DOB was kind of terrifying to me, because you didn't have the covers of the loud music and the

drinks--it was just sterile stark despair! I was in the women's movement very, very heavily from '68 and early '69, was working with Friedan and on employment issues. I got very heavily involved in NOW, then went to Gay Liberation, and eventually went back to NOW to confront them on the Lesbian issue.

S--I worked with black people as an unpaid resource person, then was employed by them in an OEO program. I went into Women's Liberation at Columbia, which Kate Millett and a group of others founded about the spring of '69. Then I lost a lover, and in the profound despair of that became very frightened about my future. I suddenly realized that I was over 30 and had lost a lover of over 7 years, was suddenly terrified of being a homosexual I had always loved being a homosexual Barbara and I were starting our relationship and we were both wondering what the future could hold for us; drifted through a fantastic series of events we were counseled by Father Robert Weeks of the Episcopal Church. Then one night we were sitting in the Hippodrome bar when a little guy walked through. He was sort of chubby, and was just smiling, smiling, smiling! He had a petition, a very serious petition for CLF about an arrest case of something He said, "Would von sign this? The meetings are Sunday night at the Church," That was the most outgoing homosexual I ever met in my life

That, plus Father Weeks, plus Rita Mae Brown, are the three things that eventually got us into gay liberation.

B--When Rita Mae, whom we knew from NOW, had a meeting, a very important meeting, of Lesbians from gay liberation and Lesbians from the women's movement, we went. That was like a coming together of the gay feminists.

S--Out of the meeting that night came three consciousness-raising groups. Out of one of the groups came the idea of presenting the women's movement with a position paper on Lesbianism. That was to become "The Woman-Identified Woman". How do you get it to them? Well . . . they're having this Second Women's Congress, and they screwed us on the first one. So, wham! into the Second Women's Congress as the lavender Menace!

B--From then on we became thoroughly involved in Gay Liberation.

N--Where have you gone since then?

B--We were in Radicalesbians during its founding months, then Sidney had to go to New Mexico because her mother was extremely ill. We had been in a Radicalesbian consciousness-raising group for a year, but found it all terribly mandatory, and also I didn't agree with their attitude toward the press (I want to work with the press and they didn't) and they didn't want to work with men, and I did. So I left. When Sidney came back and I told her I'd left Radicalesbians, well, we thought the world had shattered. But then I went

over to GLF, and worked there for a while. I worked with the first Christopher Street Liberation Day Committee and the Gay Celebration of Love and Life on Christmas Eve. 1970 I began to find people who were willing to work with the press and I did find people eventually who encompassed my beliefs and philosophy as to how we should work. Now we're working all over the place.

N--Do you think that you'll be going back into the Establishment when you finish the book?

S--We have lived for two years a dropout lifestyle, but the time has come when I'm a little tired of buying \$5 jeans. There are things I want to do, books I want to own. I think we're saying that this fall we'd very much like to go back and also continue work in the movement with one organization. We might like to form a new organization which would be entirely a work group, a Lesbian activist group with basically civil rights goals which would use the techniques of zap and confrontation and harassment if necessary.

N--Do you think you'll have a hard time going back into establishment?

B--Yes. I haven't broken through all the barriers. I've said it in the press and I've worked it out with my family. But to go all the way! To go all the way would be not to have any fears confronting the very Establishment people I used to work with. I'll have to have myself very much together, to be very strong, because I'll be alone. If you go above 42nd Street as a Lesbian, you're very much alone in a hostile environment.

N--Do you think you would be able to draw closet professional women into this group you want to form?

S--Yes. And also the women who have been purged from NOW and the women who are tired of working with men in GAA because women's issues cannot be considered because they are in a tiny minority.

B--I'd like to work on something as profound and with the impact as something with the Advertising Council, with free money and free time from advertising agencies to do very "pro" gay public service announcement, like they've done for Blacks and Smokey the Bear and cancer and inflation and the war. The Lesbian issue, the gay issue, fits within the criteria of topics they select for free public service, worth perhaps \$20 million in advertising time, all free! You just need to convince them that this is a valid issue of injustice to people! I'm into thinking that you have to use the big guns to get anybody.

N--What do you want to see happen in the Gay Liberation movement?

B--We, along with other people, have a vision of the future which we must live to make come one regardless of the consequences. We're doing it for our selves *and* for others and for

millions of people behind us and ahead of us. We realize that this movement somehow has got to put effort into projecting 95% of the people who can't join it, because they can't even keep jobs! We must get, at the very minimum, fair employment for homosexuals so they can come out on the streets and still have a job the next day.

S--The Christopher Street parade was billed as going to have 25,000 people. But you're not going to get 25,000 if people are terrified of losing their jobs. But if you work for fair employment - you'll get the 25,000!

B--We don't know if when this book comes out we can get jobs. We have careers in very Establishment industries - myself in a Madison Avenue sort of thing and Sidney as an urban planner. We are typical of millions.

N--What are your family backgrounds?

B--I come from an upper middle class background that, while they consider themselves liberal-minded, they are actually against anything original and creative in human behavior. My background is that they still don't like Jews, Blacks, miniskirts, pantsuits, or Volkswagens! I never expect to be accepted in my hometown and go back to the country club as a Lesbian. I'm breaking all the rules just by living in The Village! All of the children in my family have broken a lot of the rules so I'm not exactly that far out.

S--My father is a retired Army officer. He has a deep psychological understanding of where I am, though various things, like my mother's death and his remarriage, have prevented me from talking to him explicitly. Moving around as an Army child I realized that there were different value situations everywhere I went. In some places girls were allowed to smoke and in some places we were not allowed to smoke. Some places you could have sex as a teenager and some places you couldn't. I realized very early that there were different value structures. I went to Smith and am now finishing up a Masters at Columbia. And I want to grow up to be a Most Ordinary Lesbian, to feel natural and free. That's my goal.

N--How do you feel you broke with early sex role stereotyping?

B--Being an athlete and having held a World's record in swimming was very important in my first breaking out from the role of Woman. It was being an active, independent creature when all my girlfriends in school were ogling the men and watching them play football and basketball as an audience.

S--My way of breaking early with the female sex role was by reading books and being what was considered, for a girl, an intellectual. I had a confrontation with my aunt when I was 15 when she said I absolutely had to give up reading books and using big words because nobody

would want to marry me--I had to be much smarter about catching a man! It made me give up on heterosexual relationships--if that was what my mother and my aunt told me, that wasn't that I wanted--it meant giving up my total self in favor of marriage and children and I couldn't do that! I realize now that young heterosexuals can develop things much better, but at that time-- the 40's and the early 50's--I couldn't do it.

N--What about coming out?

B--I went through the whole thing - attempted suicide, the George Washington Bridge type thing. I was about 23, and it was before I even knew I was gay. I felt so silly when the policeman asked me why I was out there--how could I possibly tell him I was in love with a woman? It sounded so ridiculous! The whole thing was so foreign and so tragic. And it was fuel for Gay Liberation.

N--Barbara, when did you find out you were gay?

B--Well, I guess I was having Lesbian experiences for several years before I even said Lesbian. Then I said "Lesbian" and bated myself. And then eventually liked it when Gay Liberation came around, and now I'm proud of it!

N--Sidney, what about you?

S--At 14 or 15 I thought I had invented Lesbianism, like a lot of young women alone, because I wanted a different kind of relationship with a woman. I didn't have an explicit sexual experience until much later, though.

N--Have either of you had sexual experiences with men?

S--I think we've figured we've slept with as many men as women.

B--But it's a qualitative thing I didn't enjoy it.

N--Your relationship appears to be unusual. How about a rap on it?

S--We will have been together two years in October.

N--How do you date it?

S--I date it from the first night we had a real date, and we began going together fairly heavily about two weeks after that and I moved in about two months after that.

N--How did you meet?

S--Through friends.

B--We met at a very down period in our lives. We both lost our lovers. As a matter of fact, our lovers left us to go with each other.

S--When I met Barbara, and I understood how typical the story of how my lover had left to go with her lover was, Barbara rapped to me about the gay subculture life, and I became terrified. I was very scared of it. I didn't want all my relationships broken up. I didn't want to go near typical gay life. It hadn't been natural for me to go near it before--my lover had two children, we had a dog, and we had straight friends. I said I couldn't live that way. I also knew I couldn't live alone in the world. Barbara had a saying that was a product of her experience--"Always is six months, forever is a year, and eternity is a year and a half. When we just started to get together she said "Do you think we'll be together always?" Then she laughed, and said "Of course we'll be together always!", and told me the saying. This absolutely blew my mind! And I realized that to literally survive, to avoid being on the George Washington Bridge myself. I had to find a new way of living. A big thing in my life is that when you're living alone with a lover essentially in a straight world, you come to cling to that lover far too much. One major value change that I've had is in not feeling that I have to cling so much to Barbara, that if she does see someone else or if I see someone else, that it doesn't have to cause a major upheaval. And I think that the only reason that I did before was that I was just terrified of being alone. I feel a lot of the things from the gay subculture and gay counter-culture have enriched my life, and have made me less afraid.

N--And now that this situation has happened that each of you is seeing someone else--it doesn't affect you as it would have the past?

S--We keep falling in love on different levels. It's like a beautiful slow dive into a pool of water. It seems to me that we've fallen in love on about ten levels.

B--Something unusual happened with me with Sidney, that I think is a tremendous breakthrough in my own personal life. Sidney is the first woman I've ever gone with or become involved with that grew first out of a friendship and an intellectual communication. Everything else had been a bodily attraction and a whole big heavy whether-we-would-even-talk-the-same-language-or-not thing. I thought it was a real breakthrough--we could talk and I got rid of that hangup of a sexual desire. For me that was the beginning of a whole new way of looking at things, a new value system, certainly. Our relationship is very solid. It's not vulnerable because we love each other! It's a very good relationship. So if a sexual attraction or a communication or some desire for someone else develops, our relationship is very whole and encompassing and we don't feel it's threatening. Though we did in the beginning.

S--Having the moment, the C-R group, and each other, we are really very privileged, happy people! People who don't have all this can really be more vulnerable. Like the problem I had when relating to someone else was that she had very deep gut needs which were not being taken care of, whereas my deep gut needs were being taken care of! It was an inequity. We couldn't enjoy the unique aspects; which came out of doing things together because she had needs which were not being fulfilled and I didn't want to subvert my own needs. I would have had to withdraw from Barbara too much in order to meet her needs. So I wound up feeling very guilty, very bad and tooled that relationship. And she had to cool it too because it would have been destructive. Such an interaction with another person may or may not involve going to bed. It has to be important and necessary--it isn't a license for having a good time. It doesn't mean that if I see somebody at a party with a groovy body that I'm going to sleep with her! Although if that need is important and necessary, I will.

B--One of the things we're trying and realizing is that having an attraction to somebody or a good feeling or something that you want to culminate in full expression does not mean that you want to live with them, have a dog, have a house, be together forever. You can have that good feeling and express it without signing a contract on the spot forever with a dog and house. The two don't have to go together like love and marriage and a horse and carriage and all that baloney. I think that separating these elements can be done. There is danger in it--like there is in any experimentation--because you don't always know what the situation is.

N--Would you recommend it for a lot of people?

S--Well, we're doing it within a fantastic context of ideological input and support. When we went through this initially, Barbara started seeing someone, and there was really support - for her, for me, for both of us, without value judgment. The others in the C-R group didn't say you should stay together or you shouldn't stay together. What was so beautiful to me, and this was the first time I really came to trust gay people in a deep sense, was that it was support and care-giving to both of us.

B--I don't recommend anything to anybody! It's a very personal kind of thing that you go through. You have to evaluate constantly the value of honesty versus practicality and danger. You make different decisions at different times, lot us, we felt together enough to perhaps explore without danger. Maybe a few months earlier it would have been more dangerous. So much of this involves where you're at, where the other person's at, and where you want to go. It's also an exploration of how much and what sex means. Does it need to redirect your Whole life?

S--I think it's a realistic position. I don't think we're saying that everyone should do this. I *have* come to a tentative conclusion on sex. The political point of view in the movement is that a sexual relationship should be, can be, or is, an extension of a friendship, that there's a

natural continuum from having coffee and going to the movies to going to bed and talking and rapping and getting to know someone. I don't quite think so, because I think the cultural input against this is too strong. Being unclothed with another person, letting another person touch you, is the most deeply intimate, personal and revealing thing you can do in our society. So that I find that if you take this to the end of the continuum and have sex you do have a responsibility to the other person because they have revealed themselves to you in a way that they reserve for very very few people. At this point in time actually taking a friendship into sex does bring in a whole level of responsibility for that person.

N--Your C-R group is very important in your lives and thinking, isn't it?

S--Our consciousness-raising group was Barbara's idea. The core problem for Lesbians in New York about a year or so ago was that they were terribly fragmented. You had a large number, very hidden, in NOW. You had some in the radical women's movement, DOB, Radicalesbians, and Gay Liberation Front Women. And no one was talking to anyone--each group had The Truth! Initially we called it the Great International Consciousness Raising Group! The idea was to take one or two people from each group or organization. It had to be on an invited basis because they had to be able to talk. We had the President of New York NOW and two other committee chairwomen from NOW, DOB, Radicalesbians, GLF Women, and Gay People at Columbia. In all, about 14 women. After about a year of this, although some people have left and other people have come in, it has become the core of a communications network. A new thing that has happened in the C-R group is that we have admitted a woman who, for lack of anything else, can be called a professional woman. She has introduced us to Lesbians who are really into the Establishment and who don't identify with any of the existing gay groups. They are tremendously interested in Gay Liberation and are looking for support from it even though they don't believe that they could ever walk into a meeting.

B--Our C-R group is really a nucleus for a lot of our thinking and our nourishment and pride, much more than a theoretical group.

S--It's everything! It's a social group, an action group ...

B--A theoretical group, a network. It's so many things! It's all very strong, positive people. All the people in our C-R group are, in some way or other, being counted upon by a lot of unknown people.

N--Who is in the group?

B--Oh, Kate Millett, Tina Mandel, Isabel Miller and a good group of others who are writing books or are otherwise active. One woman is making films on the new Lesbian life styles. All

of this will eventually, hopefully, provide input and direction to millions. This positive input is not only beautiful but it's absolutely necessary to continue on in the front. Every gay activist needs this--I don't think you could find a gay activist who could do it alone.

N--What are your thoughts on Lesbianism and Women's Liberation?

S--We both think the Lesbian has a unique opportunity right now, versus the male homosexual, because of the women's movement. As I see it right now there is no natural way for men to get together as openly heterosexual and openly homosexual. The women's movement deals all the time with issues of independence and autonomy which relate to where gay women are. It can be brought up very naturally. We really have a historical opportunity to communicate with straight people, women particularly, in a natural and open fashion. The two groups can get to know each other in a way that's never before been possible. The women's movement is a laboratory for discovering how to confront the deepest psychological fears that straight people have. This is an opportunity that gay men don't have.

B--The goals of Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation I see as so much the same they parallel each other. When you hear a feminist talk about feminist goals, you can sit there as a Lesbian and identify all the way through in terms of independence, in terms of women loving and valuing each other, in terms of control over your own body. The women's movement won't listen to Lesbian issues, although parts of it have. You almost have to gain a captive audience, like at the Second Women's Congress, and make them listen, because society is afraid of hearing this! If they do allow themselves to understand, they may be changed by this understanding, and then begin to accept gay people, and then they are vulnerable to accepting it within themselves! This is a tremendous threat, just listening to it.

S--Homosexuals into any movement must accept that we are a real threat to heterosexuals. We are a threat to the entire lifestyle on which this country is built, which affects the economic system, and all the rest. We are not just other people who are just like heterosexuals with the same ambitions and all . . .

B--The most important link between Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation is the sex-role stereotyping. That is the issue that has brought accusations of Lesbian-Dyke into the women's movement from the very beginning--the understanding that they are breaking out of the role of "Woman", which "Lesbian" has done in many, many ways. Lesbians realize that they have broken the appropriate behavior patterns for women in many other ways than just going to bed with women.

N--What is the personal result of your involvement in Gay Liberation?

S--What I have gained from all of this is the value of love for my gay brothers and sisters, and to not be afraid of them.

B--For many years before Gay Liberation I was in the gas community and in the bars. I undervalued consistently because I thought gay was bad and non gay was good. I saw all my gay friends, including my self, as inferior to all my straight friends Now that was something that completely changed when Gay Liberation came around I eventually saw all my gay friends as superior Now I see them as very strong, courageous people. I began to value my self more. Through Gay Liberation we haven't found all the answers as to who we are and what we want to do. Rather we've found a whole new perspective and pride that sheds a new light on everything that we've ever done and want to do that demands a re-analysis of everything that we're doing.

S--I was talking to a woman who is not in the movement and I was describing to her our C-R group, which is now overlapping also friendship, intellectual and sexual worlds, and she said, "Well, that sounds like my group of gay friends", and so-and-so had an affair with so-and-so, and so forth. She described this with so much jealousy, fear and pain! As Barbara says, we've been here before but we're in a new place.

B--Our heads are in a different place.

S--It's not that different from what heterosexuals do or what gay people do except that we're thinking about what we're doing and we're trying not to fuck over other people. We're trying not to exploit someone else!

B--Some people reading this in THE LADDER will say this isn't any different from the bar scene. But the bag is having to stay together--the jealousy, the fear, the clinging. In other words, we're trying to get rid of all of the barnacles on these relationships. On the most elementary level the situations seem the saint, but on a more profound level there are incredible changes which do a great deal to free people from the pain that goes with the total dependency thing.

S--What we're trying to do is do this within a value structure, an ethical structure, so that you don't exploit and take advantage of other people and play on their fears and bring your own need into a situation which cannot answer them.

B--As Lesbian activists we have a whole new viewpoint on life. We're exploring new ways of living. Here Lesbianism isn't even accepted yet and we're talking about being in multiple relationships, which other people would say is promiscuous. And they'd say, "Oh, I always knew homosexuals couldn't stay together and couldn't make a life together"! It's hard for us to go beyond the Lesbian thing which has already freaked them out and say, "Yeah, and

we're into new lifestyles, too!" What we've really been doing all along is exploring, unknowingly and unconsciously, with life, with what may be a future lifestyle for heterosexuals. We're way ahead of them in some ways. They think we're back in a primitive age, but we're living in a way that they may want to live and are talking about living. We have this whole new viewpoint! It's most exciting!