

Confessions of a non-bra-burner

"I'm not about to burn my 34A cup Vanity Fair for women's lib. I need it to keep up the world," writes columnist Jane Trahey in *Chicago Today*.

"I don't intend to die on a burning bra hill, but I do have some definite opinions about the women's liberation movement!" a *Daily News* article quotes the national executive director of the YWCA.

"Derby and Harilyn and most other women graduates haven't thrown their bras into the Chicago River in support of Women's Liberation," reports a *Chicago Daily News* article about college seniors.

This is all very cute and catchy, and maybe it's the only way to attract a reader's attention. (Would you be reading this article if the first three paragraphs weren't all about bras?) The only trouble is, it ain't true. The women's liberation movement and bra destruction have nothing to do with each other: No one in the women's liberation movement has ever burned or otherwise mutilated a bra. At least not in public.

If you find this hard to believe, that's not surprising. The myth has been repeated constantly by the media over the past three years, building on itself in the classic pattern of the Big Lie: Every time women's liberation is mentioned, bras are mentioned too, and vice versa. (Ad copy submitted to one bra manufacturer suggested, "If you must burn a bra, burn ours.") This sort of publicity is puzzling and upsetting to those of us who joined the movement because of our concern about serious problems of sex discrimination. But what editor wants a story about employment, child care or abortion reform when he can write about bra-burnings—especially when the bra nonsense conforms to his stereotyped notions of women as silly, trivial and sexy?

Obviously, I can't swear that no woman ever burned a bra in public. I'm sure that none of the 10,000 members of the National Organization for Women ever burned a bra, and I'm fairly sure that no member of any other women's liberation organization has done so either. Nor have the media ever documented a specific case in which a women's liberation group was involved in a bra destruction, despite their constant repetition of the myth.

Nevertheless, every time one of the nation's 110 million women does something frivolous, she's lumped in with our movement by the media—just as the media for years linked individual acts of black violence with the civil rights movement.

The bra-burning myth originated in a symbolic action at the Miss America pageant in 1968. At that time a "freedom trash can" was set up on the boardwalk in Atlantic City so that women's movement activists could symbolically discard uncomfortable items of feminine artifice that reinforce the cultural definition of women as sex objects. Tossed into the can were high-heeled shoes, girdles, false eyelashes and, yes, padded bras. Newsmen on the scene somehow managed to report only the bras, which is more of a reflection on them than on us.

This incident occurred at the same time that a lot of people were burning draft cards in public places. The two images—bras and burning—apparently became muddled in the public mind, and a Great American Myth was off and running.



'A Great American Myth was off and running'

The myth got its next boost in 1969 when Jane Andre, an aero-space engineer in California, was fired for organizing a "bra-less Friday." Cutesy wire service stories brought the news to the panting nation, and Chicago newspapers asked the local chapter of the National Organization for Women to comment.

Our official response focused on the serious implications of firing a woman from an \$18,000-a-year job for a very minor cause and went on to discuss the widespread role conflict in the lives of American women between their former roles as sex objects, domestic servants and their emerging roles as serious workers. The front page story in the *Chicago Daily News* distorted this analysis to a simpleminded quote that women can't do a good job at work if they wear bras.

The myth was reinforced by two sepa-

rate incidents in September 1969 that were organized not by NOW members or even by women, but by men. Disk jockey Clark Weber, then with Chicago radio station WCFL, promoted a stunt at which women were invited to toss their bras into a barrel. The same day, a young Chicago architect named William Baldwin tried to organize a "media event" at which women would toss their bras into the Chicago River (Baldwin said he wanted to encourage women to go bra-less because he liked the bra-less look). But the only women who showed up were three models Baldwin had hired for the occasion; all four of them were cited for polluting the river.

The linking of stunts with the women's liberation movement has been so thorough that even the most well-meaning and astute of people have unconsciously accepted it. A television talk-show host readily acceded to my request that he invite movement leaders on his show, but he cautioned, "Let's have a serious discussion, not any of this bras-in-the-river nonsense." Even Alderman Leon Despres, one of the earliest and most consistent supporters of the

movement, confused the models' stunt with our movement. He wrote in the *Hyde Park Herald* last August, "Last year several Women's Lib sympathizers tossed their brassieres into the Chicago River."

The bra business is one example of trivial news coverage linked to women's liberation. Another common practice of the Chicago press is to report minor actions of the movement—such as integrating men's grills—as though they were the major thrust. Although NOW has always viewed public accommodations as a somewhat secondary issue, a couple of forays into illegally segregated men's grills in the Loop rated a number of oh-so-cute stories about "broads crash men's bar."

NOW had not sought any news coverage on this relatively minor issue but reporters swarmed to the scene, alerted by tipsters,

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and the coverage was all local color and no substance. Never mentioned was the fact that the grills were operating in violation of a city ordinance prohibiting sex discrimination in public accommodations; also ignored was the fact that a woman was assaulted and injured in one of these attempts to enforce women's legal rights.

And how does one cope with the irrelevant treatment we invariably get on radio and TV talk shows? Mary Jean Collins Robson, former president of the Chicago NOW chapter, was a guest on a WIND radio talk show when the host, Dave Baum, challenged her, "So you think you're entitled to equal rights, eh? I suppose you think you can do my job," and walked out of the studio, leaving her alone at the microphone. Robson had made no claim to professional training or experience in hosting a talk show, yet Baum proposed to resolve the question of women's equal abilities with a personal contest between a trained and an untrained individual. Would Baum have dared to respond so simplistically to a spokesperson for black liberation?

On another occasion, after a NOW member had appeared on a talk show on WGN radio, I asked host Dan Price to evaluate her performance. "I think she's a dyke," he replied. When I suggested that I had asked him only for an evaluation of her communications skills, he said, "Oh, she was excellent—very convincing, articulate, full of statistics to back up her beliefs." Then he concluded, "But I still think she's a dyke."

I would like to think that sooner or later the news media will grow weary of wasting their space and air time on bad coverage of the women's liberation movement.

Since the men who make the decisions in the media are all readers of CJR, I hope the bra-burning or bra-dunking myths have now been laid to rest once and for all.

I'll believe it when media reporters stop behaving as they did at a recent press conference we called to discuss an important government policy that we felt discriminates against women. When we had finished reading our statement, we asked if there were any questions.

"Yes," came the prompt reply from one male reporter. "Why are all feminists ugly?"

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