

Now young women choose the
 inspiring young brown-eyed man
 for President
 with no regard
 for the tried and true woman,
 uninspiring and less radical,
 but, a WOMAN for PRESIDENT??
 Women now think for themselves
 And make their own choices.
 They don't know how hard it was.
And that is our success.

DYKES TO THE RESCUE

Merril Mushroom

Prologue

In 1975 the First World Conference on Women was held in Mexico City. Its purpose was to address the needs of women worldwide, and more than a hundred nations participated. The conference participants recommended that 1976 to 1985 be established as the United Nations Decade for Women, and meetings were to be held locally, nationally, and internationally to address issues that strongly affected women in all parts of the world. The intention was that out of these meetings would come recommendations for specific actions and organizing strategies that would be appropriate to each specific region and culture. Topics to be addressed included—but were not limited to—poverty, drug abuse, economics, education and training, health, politics, aging, reproductive rights, child-rearing, and violence against women.

The State of Tennessee conference was scheduled to be held the last weekend in June 1977, and two of the most highly charged issues to be discussed were reproductive rights and passage of the Equal Rights Amendment that was before the U.S. Congress.

June 1977, Clarksville, Tennessee—Dykes to the Rescue

The Tennessee International Women's Decade conference was held the last weekend of the month, and throughout the previous year of planning, lesbian-feminists had secretly been called upon to guarantee the peaceful success of this important gathering.

Throughout most of the 1970s, lesbians were the pariahs of the feminist movement. We were banned from NOW, barred from participating in women's center activities, and hidden from visibility at all costs. We were considered by the "real" feminists

(straight women) to be threats to the credibility of the movement. We were the dirty little secret of the women's movement, and the great fear of the feminist elite was that the people who made up mainstream society, whose approval mattered to straight women, would think that feminists were all just a bunch of dykes.

I had been living in Knoxville since 1973 and was active in the Knoxville Lesbian Feminist Alliance (KLFA). The dykes of our large Knoxville group were involved with running the women's coffeehouse, putting out the newsletter *Mother Jones Gazette*, participating in consciousness-raising groups, doing self-exam workshops with the Iowa City women, infiltrating the local "no lesbians allowed" women's center and NOW meetings, and having our annual prom. When the Knoxville meeting for the International Women's Decade conference was called, we were determined to be involved. We were concerned that the conference would be for and about only the "important" (i.e., straight, white, wealthy, highly educated) women; and this, in fact, was how it seemed to be shaping up. However, we had an important ally—a deeply closeted, wealthy, well-respected political figure, a lesbian who dared not speak her name. And, as it turned out, she and her cohorts also hoped to find allies among us.

A meeting was called, and scores of dykes plus straight feminists who were dyke-friendly showed up. The political figure couldn't take the chance of being seen with us, so her lover—who also was closeted but not as deeply—came to represent her. "We've begun the planning for the IWY conference," she told us, "and we've found out that the John Birchers are planning on disrupting the entire conference." The John Birch Society was an organization of radically conservative right-wing Christian white people who rallied against everyone who was not like themselves, especially feminists, whom they considered to be threats to the American Way of Life, and they were rabidly opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion rights, which they tended to clump into one wad.

"We need to mobilize," continued the closeted lover of the closeted political figure. "We want this conference to be a safe space for women to share ideas and learn from each other. We've worked hard as feminists to learn how to communicate effectively, even through our differences. We need women to work this conference in ways that will defuse any potential situations, to keep confrontations from happening, to mediate when necessary, and to steer discussions so that anyone could feel safe to speak and everyone can be heard. In short, we need the lesbians!"

We all nodded in agreement. "So what's the plan?" asked another woman.

"We already have asked specific women to facilitate the workshops where more sensitive issues might come up—like reproductive rights, the ERA, and violence against women—but we also need to make sure that we are a conscious, active, vocal presence in ALL the workshops. Our goal is to see that no one is silenced, to keep the peace and prevent John Birch infiltrators from dominating so that we can't get our work done."

Over the next few weeks, we were given some training in facilitation and mediation techniques and received our workshop assignments. After much discussion, we agreed that we would not begin as out lesbians in order to maintain credibility in general and not deflect the purpose of the conference into arguing about lesbianism. Some women were less than happy with this decision but agreed to go along with it. "Well, I won't out myself right away," Susie grumbled, "but if anyone should ask me, I won't lie about it." As if anyone would have the nerve to ask—although they might have the nerve to accuse.

The workshop I was to facilitate was on women and ageing, and I planned to focus our discussion on public attitudes toward women as we age and availability of community resources as we care for ageing parents and as we ourselves get old. I also planned on bringing my newly adopted five-month-old daughter for her first women's conference.

The conference coordinators already were busy when we arrived. One of them was tearing yellow fabric into strips. "Here," she called, "everyone who supports passage of the ERA and reproductive rights, tie a ribbon around your upper arm." Soon, many—but not all—of the 1500 conference participants sported yellow armbands. I wore my own rag on my arm and my baby, strapped into a carrier on my chest, had hers, too. Perhaps the presence of the baby made me seem other than what I really was, because the John Birch women initiated easy conversations with me throughout the conference and never seemed to notice our yellow armbands.

I was checking out the room where my workshop was scheduled when I heard our lookout announce, "Here they come!" Several buses pulled up in front of the building, and lines of well-dressed white women and a few white men disembarked, entered the building, and immediately spread out. *Ah, the John Birchers*, I thought. I stepped into the hallway, baby riding on my front. A sweet-looking young woman was coming up the hallway toward me. "Hello," I greeted her, "did you just come on the buses?"

"Yes," she said, somewhat breathlessly. She gave a little skip, looked at the baby. "We're here to cause some dissension!" she announced. She was smiling, seemed excited about the prospect.

"Really?" I responded. "Why would you want to do something like that?"

"Why?" she repeated, "because we have to stop them. They're all pro-abortion perverts, and we can't allow them to take over. We have to stop the ERA and the baby-killers. We have to protect our Christian morals and family values." She leaned forward and chucked the baby under the chin, knowing that of course I understood and agreed with her. I don't think she even noticed that the baby was Black and I was not.

"Who's this 'them'?" I asked her. "Who are you trying to stop?"

"Oh, you know," she replied, "the feminists, the . . . the . . ." she extended her hand, palm level with the floor, and rocked her hand from pinkie to thumb, "thataways!"

Thataways? I thought. *Oy!* I took her by the arm. "Here," I said, "I'll show you where to register. And by the way, let me tell you what this conference is *really* about." Gently, I guided her over to the registration table.

Throughout the weekend I engaged with the John Birchers whenever possible, steering the conversations away from ERA and abortion and to other areas of concern to women worldwide, which these women might be able to relate with. All around the campus, other feminists, lesbian and straight, were doing the same. Evidently, we all did a good job, because there were no crises, no problems, no outbursts. And the local newspapers reported this conference as a great success.