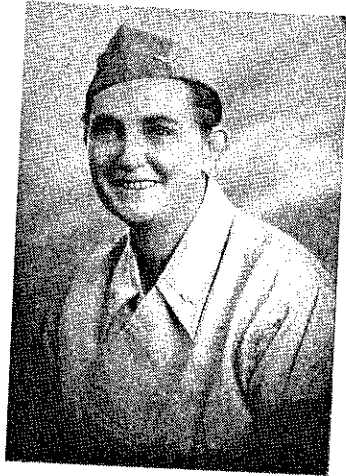


She dated and went out with a number of other women and finally, at age thirty-six, entered into a special relationship with a woman she is unwilling to identify. The two lived together for three years, but their affair was ended by Ben after her partner went to Las Vegas and lost everything gambling, including the rent money. Although she continued to have casual relationships after that, Ben never again was interested in any long-term relationship. She keeps up correspondence with her friends and writes poetry in her spare time. In 1997 she was recognized as a founder of the Los Angeles gay community. She remains proud of what she has accomplished but reluctant to seek publicity. Still, her willingness to come out as she did in the 1940s makes her almost unique among the lesbians of the time.

Berry Berryman (1901-1972)

Vern L. Bullough



Homosexual and lesbian friendships and social groups were long part of the American social scene, although most of these groups avoided public exposure. As historians try to trace down the histories of these groups, some serendipitously come to light and we find they left studies or autobiographies that are important to helping us to understand same-sex life in the past. One such "find" was a study by Berry Berryman who began interviewing her lesbian and gay friends perhaps as early as the 1920s and began writing them up in the early 1940s only to abandon the project, which was eventually completed by Bonnie and Vern Bullough in the 1970s. Her study

was significant even though flawed because it is one of the few studies we have of a rather loosely knit lesbian (and gay) community in an unlikely place, such as Salt Lake City was. She was a pioneer in her study and in her public lifestyle.

Born Mildred J. Berryman in Salt Lake City, Utah, she grew up there. Like many other young women conscious of her same-sex attraction, she had difficulty coming to terms with herself. She married twice, first an elopement at sixteen, which was annulled, and later in her early twenties in a more formal ceremony, which resulted in a quick divorce. After these efforts at conformity, she began to come to terms with her lesbianism and over the years lived with several different women for shorter or longer periods. It is not clear what caused her to begin her studies of the gay and lesbian community in Salt Lake City, but she was undoubtedly influenced by the writing of Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, whose books were in her library.

A short and somewhat overweight woman, she eventually settled down with Ruth Uckerman in 1942 and the two lived together running a small

business making jewelry from semiprecious stones, small carvings, various tourist items, and ribbons for state and county fairs. They later expanded their business to include various injectable plastic items. Similar to Lisa Ben, Berryman began typing up her notes while working in an office—not for a film studio office, but for the American Red Cross in early 1940. She left this job to become a machinist in the defense industry. There she met Ruth Uckerman and the two soon moved to rural Woods Cross in Utah. Berry never completed writing up her research, but fortunately it was preserved by her partner; it eventually came into the hands of the Bulloughs, who published part of it. Her actual interviews have not survived, only her summaries of the case studies.

She objected to much of the scholarship available about lesbianism and homosexuality at the time, but her studies nonetheless were much influenced by them anyway, indicating just how much societal attitudes affect the perspectives of people. Her highest compliment to a woman was that she had a “masculine mind.” The fact that her summaries did survive, however, was enough for interested Utah gays and lesbians to construct a real history of the underground lesbian and gay movement, centered in the Bohemian Club of that city (which dated back to the 1880s). The surviving membership lists have been combed to reconstruct the relevant history, and the study of Berryman’s life and that of her partner have become a small cottage industry. However, neither she nor her partner could be said to be closeted lesbians.

In fact, the home of Berry and Ruth served as a center for many lesbians in Salt Lake City and for many traveling through. They were accepted in their community as eccentrics, and apparently many of their neighbors never even surmised they were lesbians. In fact, one of the complaints that Berry often made was that after Radclyffe Hall’s *Well of Loneliness* came out, it was more difficult for lesbians to hold hands while walking down the street because people were more suspicious of close women. Since Berry’s partner was the mother-in-law of the author of this brief biography, one of her main contributions was also encouraging and supporting my own research into gays and lesbians, and early introducing me into the life and culture of the gay community. Her life emphasizes how rich and varied were the lives of gays and lesbians in a time when it was not polite for many in society to inquire more deeply into unorthodox living relationships. She thought long and often about what it meant to be a lesbian, and one result of her activity as communicated to me was to open up the study of same-sex relationships in the intermountain west and in Mormon country in particular.

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