

## Women's Lib and the UW-L Woman: 1970-1975

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### ABSTRACT

In my research, I examine the overt representation of women and feminist issues within the *Racquet*, the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse student newspaper, between the years of 1970 and 1975. I accomplish this by qualitatively analyzing the content of editions of the *Racquet* that span this time period, breaking my findings into categories important to the Women's Liberation Movement (and feminism in general). Because qualitative analysis is subjective, some readers may disagree with the interpretation offered; however, I make my judgments to the best of my ability based on evidence within the text.

### BACKGROUND

My choice to research the intersection of the *Racquet* and women's lives arose from several overlapping circumstances in my own life: I worked at the *Racquet* as copyeditor for a year, I volunteer in Special Collections and will be pursuing graduate study in library science, and I have always been particularly interested in women's history. The opportunity to combine these three parts of my life seemed particularly appropriate—not just for my own purposes, but also for UW-L. The *Racquet* has been used in general study of the university's history but has not, to the best of my knowledge, ever been studied in and of itself. It goes without saying that women's unique portrayal and role in the *Racquet*'s history has never been noted, which I set out to change through my research.

In preparing to research the history of women and the *Racquet*, I carefully read 99 years of content within the newspaper (the *Racquet* was not published between the fall of 1931 and 1932, leaving a yearlong gap). I relied heavily on bound copies of the *Racquet* found in Murphy Library's Special Collections, as well as digitized versions that can now be found online. Due to the sheer volume of information I found, in this paper I will summarize my findings from the time that the Women's Liberation Movement and second wave feminism were impacting UW-L (still WSU-L in 1970). Though many of the foundations of the Women's Liberation Movement were set in the 1960s, it was in the early-to-mid 1970s that the WLM really took off, which is why I've chosen to chronicle the years of 1970-1975 in this paper.

#### *Dorm Regulations for WSU-L Women*

A major issue that rocked the Wisconsin State University-La Crosse campus in 1970 was a set of dorm regulations that many students perceived to be outdated. The regulations held separate standards for male and female students by stipulating that women living in the dorms had a curfew of midnight on weeknights and 2 AM on weekends, while WSU-L males in dorms had never had any restrictions and had always enjoyed unlimited hours.<sup>1</sup>

On May 22, 1970, approximately 1,500 students met at 11:30 PM in a campus parking lot to protest these restrictive dorm regulations. According to the *Racquet*, "This erupted into a march to the home of President Samuel Gates, followed by a sit-in demonstration at several downtown intersections." The students then converged between two female-only residence halls and burned the four-page visitation policy that Gates had put forth.

This show of student dissatisfaction was met with equal displeasure from the WSU-L administration. After the May incident, "14 students were suspended, 13 were placed on probation and 33 received letters of reprimand." *Racquet* Editor-in-Chief Donna DeMatteo was one of the students who were suspended, though she appealed the decision and was instead placed on probation.<sup>2</sup> These protests combined with thorough investigations by the Women's Inter-hall Council of how to implement unlimited dorm hours resulted in female students being granted the same regulations as men in spring 1971.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Racquet*, Feb. 11, 1971, 9

<sup>2</sup> *Racquet*, Sept. 24, 1970, 1

<sup>3</sup> *Racquet*, Feb. 11, 1971, 9

Until the regulations changed, however, the issue remained a focal point for many fall 1970 editions of the *Racquet*. The 'Roving Reporter' feature included student quotes on their feelings about housing and visitation. (Unsurprisingly, all featured opinions were in support of changing the more restrictive hours.) In the Issues section, student Sandy Zeig wrote: "Dorm hours are just one example of institutional suppression which perpetuates the idea of 'protection' of women by a male administrative hierarchy. This also perpetuates a dependency on the hierarchy by female students who should be making their own decisions about hours."<sup>4</sup> Just the previous week Zeig had contributed an editorial along with another female student that took a look at women's oppression historically. The editor's note stated that the column was written "in an attempt to give some insight onto the Women's Liberation movement."<sup>5</sup>

In December 1970, the *Racquet* featured a two-page spread in the Issues section that focused specifically on Women's Liberation. The editor's note gave credit to the WSU-L Women's Liberation organization for compiling the articles. This student organization worked with Associated Women Students, another campus organization, to create a "'sisterhood' among women students on issues of common concern." These organizations had goals of reforming dorm hours for women, instituting day care centers for married women, and creating a birth control information center on campus.<sup>6</sup>

The articles in this special Women's Lib section included: "A socialistic attitude toward Women's Lib," "Anti-Women's Liberation rhetoric," "Men are asked views on draft, divorce," "Child care centers offer free service," "Differences in sex roles deemed passé in present society," and "Local birth control counseling is needed."<sup>7</sup> Two sketches by student Lynn Mathison were also included in this section, one depicting a woman with nine separate ball and chains shackled to her legs, each ball labeled differently. Examples of the labels included: job discrimination, beauty image, male chauvinism, and double standard. The other sketch by Mathison was captioned, "Women Exploited??? Never!" and featured a woman in a bra and underwear with arrows pointing to parts of her body that beauty products aimed to perfect.

Naturally, this section received some pushback in the following week's edition of the *Racquet*. Mrs. Pat Moore wrote in and said that while she agreed with some focuses of the movement, such as equal pay for equal work, she ultimately disagreed with the movement "because it tends to polarize and alienate men and women." She wrote: "If the male were meant to participate in the rearing of children as much as the mother does, wouldn't nature have given the male this same mothering instinct that women have?"<sup>8</sup>

#### *Abortion and Contraception-Related Content*

Making contraception and abortion legal and easily accessible to women was a major focus of the Women's Lib movement, and finding articles and opinion pieces regarding these issues in the *Racquet* was common. In January 1971, an article entitled 'Personal Commentary' detailed the exact abortion laws that were currently on the books (abortion was still very much illegal) and closed by writing: "These laws should be read carefully and considered by all. If a person is not allowed a choice he should not be held responsible for his actions because his opinion has not been considered in the passing of the law. If you agree with the present laws or think they should be changed, make your views known to your representative." The author's name was withheld.<sup>9</sup>

The WSU-L Women's Liberation organization was highly active in fighting to make birth control accessible and to make abortion legal. In March 1971, the organization started a clinic "where women can get birth control at minimum cost without having to lie about it."<sup>10</sup> They also arranged a hotline where women could be counseled about reproductive health issues. In May 1971, the organization planned a march, rally, and public meeting to "explain why they consider present Wisconsin abortion laws to be repressive."<sup>11</sup> During the rally the group chanted, "What do we want? FREE ABORTIONS! When do we want them? NOW!" as they walked to the University Health Center. While the group of mostly women marched, an accumulation of males taunted them by yelling, "Use hangers!"<sup>12</sup>

In mid-January 1974, an anonymous student wrote to the *Racquet* chiding anti-abortionists who planned to march in Washington, DC, on January 22 to mark the one-year anniversary of abortion's legalization.<sup>13</sup> The

<sup>4</sup> *Racquet*, Oct. 15, 1970, 6-7

<sup>5</sup> *Racquet*, Oct. 8, 1970, 2

<sup>6</sup> *Racquet*, Feb. 11, 1971, 12

<sup>7</sup> *Racquet*, Dec. 10, 1970, 16-17

<sup>8</sup> *Racquet*, Dec. 17, 1970, 7

<sup>9</sup> *Racquet*, *Ibid.*, 10

<sup>10</sup> *Racquet*, March 11, 1971, 13

<sup>11</sup> *Racquet*, May 13, 1971, 2

<sup>12</sup> *Racquet*, May 20, 1971, 1

<sup>13</sup> *Racquet*, Jan. 17, 1974

marchers planned to carry red roses, to which the student responded: “The marchers would be more accurate if they carried blindfolds to represent their sentiments. Blindfolds would stand for their inability to see that that women, not the state, should have the right to control their bodies.”

Small articles featured in the *Racquet* show that the Women’s Lib organization’s original goal of making contraceptive available and creating an atmosphere of openness about sexuality was slowly but steadily becoming a reality. The counseling services on campus sponsored “sexuality workshops”<sup>14</sup>, professors in the sociology department started an informal service supporting homosexual students<sup>15</sup>, and contraceptive advising was openly advertised at the health center.<sup>16</sup>

Abortion was featured prominently in the December 5, 1974, edition of the *Racquet*. The front page boldly stated, “Abortion: sex revolution on campus” and went on to talk about the fact that contraception is so easily available, yet some students didn’t use it at all. The front page also featured the article “An abortion story” which detailed the experience a UW-L couple had getting an abortion. It talks about the qualms the couple had, specifically in relation to their Catholicism, the specific abortion procedure, cost, and aftermath. The couple claimed that the “abortion was the worst thing they ever had to do in their young lives.” The personal story also gave abortion statistics for UW-L women during the 1973-1974 school year: 49 pregnancies were reported to the health center, and of those, 46 women had abortions while 3 kept their child and married.

### *The Pro-Feminism Racquet*

After reading through each edition of the *Racquet* during the Women’s Lib Movement, it becomes apparent that the *Racquet* was a left-leaning paper very sympathetic to the WLM. This is shown through the inclusion and spotlighting of feminist speakers and the editorial choice to include information about the movement that tended to be positive. The feminists who came to campus were often given front-page spreads. Women’s issues were being paid attention by members of the *Racquet* staff.

WSU-L welcomed several radical feminist speakers to campus in the early seventies, and the *Racquet* chronicled the discussions given by each. In September 1971, Robin Morgan came to campus. She was self-described as a “full-fledged feminist” who was “prepared to kill or die” for Women’s Liberation.<sup>17</sup> The *Racquet* interviewed her and placed the interview, along with a large picture of Morgan, on the cover of the paper. It would have been a challenge for WSU-L students to ignore the large quote next to her smiling face, which stated: “Women form the oldest and largest continually oppressed group in the family of humankind, their subjugation dating from the downfall of primitive communal society and the rise of private property.”

Equally hard to miss was the front page of the *Racquet* in November 1972; “Women—the new nigger” was printed on the top of the page.<sup>18</sup> Black feminist Florence Kennedy visited WSU-L and, according to the article, “exploded with forty-five minutes of wit and rage” during her talk in Graff Main Hall.

In November 1971, Susan Reimer wrote an article in the *Racquet* entitled “Here she is, Miss America!”<sup>19</sup> The article began with a very simple editor’s note, stating some of the comments that Laurel Lea Schaefer made after she was crowned Miss America; namely that “marijuana leads to hard drugs,” that she supports President Nixon and the Vietnam War, and that premarital sex “isn’t for [her].” On the topic of Women’s Liberation, she said: “Women aren’t discriminated against in America.” The editor’s note precedes an article that discloses that Schaefer drank “heavily” as a college student, and had possession of birth control pills the previous fall. While the article remains professional and treats the subject from a distance, the subject matter certainly seems to indicate that the editors of the *Racquet* were intent on disclosing hypocrisy and anyone who held back the women’s movement.

On May 2, 1974, Betty Friedan, author of important feminist book *The Feminine Mystique*, came to the UW-L campus.<sup>20</sup> Her visit was treated with much fanfare and was advertised multiple times within the *Racquet* in the weeks that led up to it. Once on campus, Friedan addressed about 200 male and female students, talking about her ultimate goal of “sex role revolution,” which would overturn sex role stereotypes for both men and women. Of the four feminist speakers who came to the campus during the five-year span, Friedan was considerably more inclusive of males and attentive to the fact that men were important components of the Women’s Liberation Movement.

Prominent women were often featured or invited to UW-L during special holidays. During a celebration of International Women’s Day in 1974, the campus radio station, WLSU, featured an “extensive broadcast of women’s

<sup>14</sup> *Racquet*, March 15, 1973, 5

<sup>15</sup> *Racquet*, Feb. 2, 1973, 2

<sup>16</sup> *Racquet*, Marc 7, 1974, 5

<sup>17</sup> *Racquet*, Sept. 9, 1971, 5

<sup>18</sup> *Racquet*, Nov. 9, 1972, 1

<sup>19</sup> *Racquet*, Nov. 18, 1971, 9

<sup>20</sup> *Racquet*, May 9, 1974, 1

programming” which included “an exclusive interview with singer-performer Bette Midler.”<sup>21</sup> During Women’s Awareness Week in October 1974, two feminists visited UW-L: Jill Johnston and Elizabeth Janeway. Johnston in particular stirred up campus; after a student asked her when she first realized she was a lesbian, Johnston responded: “I assume all women are lesbians, they just haven’t thought of it yet. You don’t have to sleep with another woman to be a lesbian. All women are lesbians because they sleep with themselves.”<sup>22</sup>

Between April 10-12, 1975, UW-L hosted an International Conference on the Status of Women “in observance of the United Nations designation of 1975 as International Women’s Year.”<sup>23</sup> Women from all over the state, country and world flocked to UW-L. Speakers included: Helvi Sipila, assistant secretary-general for Social Affairs of the United Nations; Okgill Kim, president of Ewha Women’s University in Seoul, South Korea; Kathryn Clarenbach, founder of NOW and chairperson of the Wisconsin Governor’s Commission on the Status of Women; Hilda Kuper, professor of anthropology at UCLA; and Anita Senn, president of the Indian Women’s Organization of America.<sup>24</sup>

### *Roving Reporter Gauges Student Opinion*

In December 1971, regular *Racquet* feature the Roving Reporter posed the question “What do you think of the Liberated Woman?” to WSU-L students.<sup>25</sup> The two female answers that were featured both leaned toward a negative view of feminism. Dawn Graff stated, “I don’t really think she’s that liberated, but I don’t really mind in some cases. I think there should become (sic) equilibrium between the sexes in jobs and pay but that’s about it.” Deb French responded: “I think liberated women today are carrying their point too far. They are trying to overtake the role of the man. I think women are becoming masculine and overpowering. She is no longer feminine and attractive to a man. She is right to demand freedom and equal rights in many areas of today’s society but she has gone too far and I don’t like it. I am a WOMAN and I am proud of it. I don’t want to change.” Randy Reeves answered, “Women need to be economically liberated but all this social liberation is bull...earth don’t need another class.” It is impossible to know how many students were asked this question and whether these were simply the most extreme answers, explaining why they made it to print.

In November 1962, Roving Reporter featured six WSU-L males’ responses to the question, “Do you feel threatened by Women’s Liberation?”<sup>26</sup> James Reynolds, a freshman, responded: “I don’t feel [Women’s Lib] is justified because women have it soft already. If you give them a hard time they’ll come off it.” Gary Stigler, sophomore, said, “No. I still think the man will exert his influence in the family.” The other four men included said they did not feel threatened by Women’s Liberation and were generally very supportive.

### *Rape at UW-L*

The first mention of rape in the *Racquet* between 1970-1975 came in May 1973, when an article ran about the Women’s Transit Service in Madison. The headline proclaimed, “Rape prevention aim of transportation service.”<sup>27</sup> It was an eerie bit of foreshadowing; the following fall, the university (which was now called UW-L) was plagued by rumors of “obscene phone calls, window peepers, attacks, and attempted rapes.”<sup>28</sup> In actuality there had been two reported attempted rapes on campus; the description of the attacker fit the same man and the campus was abuzz with worry over this man, deemed “Ronnie Rapist.”

In spring 1974, a student wrote to the *Racquet* expressing that the feeling on campus was one where “a woman is afraid to walk out of her dorm alone at night.” She requested more lighting to be put in around campus buildings, as well as to have a police officer patrolling the grounds at night.<sup>29</sup> Her concerns were far from unfounded. The following week an article was printed that informed the campus that two female UW-L students had been raped within the past six weeks alone. One occurred during finals week of the previous semester, and the other during the semester break. Both rapes happened between 11 PM and 2 AM, and in both instances a woman was walking alone when a man approached, took out a pistol, and demanded that she have sex with him.<sup>30</sup>

With the campus abuzz over rape, there was a flurry of tips and steps to take if you’re in a dangerous situation. One response to the rapes happening on and around campus was a guest opinion piece written by Donna DeMatteo

<sup>21</sup> *Racquet*, Feb. 28, 1974, 3

<sup>22</sup> *Racquet*, Oct. 17, 1974, 3

<sup>23</sup> *Racquet*, Jan. 23, 1975, 1

<sup>24</sup> *Racquet*, April 17, 1975, 1

<sup>25</sup> *Racquet*, Dec. 16, 1971, 3

<sup>26</sup> *Racquet*, Nov. 9, 1972, 3

<sup>27</sup> *Racquet*, May 10, 1973, 12

<sup>28</sup> *Racquet*, Nov. 29, 1973, 1

<sup>29</sup> *Racquet*, Jan. 31, 1974, 4

<sup>30</sup> *Racquet*, Feb. 7, 1974, 1

in late February 1974.<sup>31</sup> DeMatteo's piece "Rape—what to do" primarily relied upon information from women's health book *Our Bodies, Our Selves*. It detailed both what to do if someone is attacking you and steps to take if you have already been raped. Additionally, a guest speaker named Frederic Storaska came to UW-L and gave a speech in at-capacity Mitchell called "To Be Raped or Not to Be Raped," which was "designed to provide women with the psychological and physical tactics for preventing rape, injury or death."<sup>32</sup> Storaska not only talked about the stereotypical rape scene of a strange man in a dark alley, which was what UW-L students were primarily concerned about at the time, but he also mentioned the preponderance of acquaintance rape.

As rape rumors persistently ran through campus, police and other area professionals responded as to the rape rumors. While attending a Residence Hall Association meeting, District Attorney Burleigh Randolph is quoted as having said, "If one-half or one-fourth of these rape stories are true, then it's up to us to put a stop to it."<sup>33</sup> (One wonders if he feels that just *one* rape is worth stopping.) In May 1974, Alderman Sharon Imes introduced a proposal to allow trained volunteers to counsel rape victims in La Crosse,<sup>34</sup> a direct response to the seven reported attacks on women in the city since March 15.

### *UW-L Athletics*

Female athletes have always been an important part of the student populace at UW-L. With nationally-known Exercise and Sport Science and Recreation programs offered on campus, this university has always drawn athletes of both sexes. However, during the early 1970s was apparent that women were not receiving the same treatment as their male counterparts. One woman, who withheld her name, wrote in an editorial to the *Racquet*: "I'm not a strong believer in women's liberation, but I feel I have just as much right to use the facilities of this campus as any member of the opposite sex." She was referring specifically to the various athletic courts on campus, which still operated under a system where "a woman must either find a man to sign her up a court or she must take a chance that there is possibly a court free."<sup>35</sup> Under the antiquated rules, women didn't have the autonomy to sign up for a court themselves.

In February 1974, student Anne Muren expressed her dissatisfaction with the *Racquet's* lack of coverage of female sports teams by writing a letter to the editor.<sup>36</sup> She outlined the many sports events the *Racquet* failed to cover, and concluded by reminding the *Racquet* that a similar letter was written last year (the response by the staff being that men's sports were just more interesting). She then included approximately 250 student signatures and 15 faculty signatures, all of who agreed with her sentiments. It seems the *Racquet* finally took note, and over the next months female coaches and athletes wrote multiple letters to the editor thanking the editors for the improved coverage.<sup>3738</sup>

In spring 1974, articles began cropping up that dealt with the struggle against sex discrimination in athletics. The articles were written by female reporters and their disgust for sex discrimination is evident. While Title IX of the Education Amendment of 1972 banned discrimination based on sex under any federally funded education program, enforcing it was another story entirely. An article by Marybeth Clark spotlighted the solidarity of the 80 female coaches from the state who met with the all-male Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association board of control in March 1974.<sup>39</sup> Mary McLaughlin's piece, "Women rock locker room for equality" was scathing: "Does WIAA stand for Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Aggravation? Is the National Chauvinistic Athletic Association the NCAA? Will the WSUC soon be called the Wisconsin Sexist University Conference?"<sup>40</sup> An article written by Kay Helms features the Director of Women's Intercollegiate Sports at UW-L, Lee Stephenson, who says that women on campus have gotten treatment "as fair as we can hope for in terms of the total picture"<sup>41</sup>—a statement that is somehow less than reassuring. Stephenson cites funding for travel as unequal and the number-one thing she wanted to see changed.

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<sup>31</sup> *Racquet*, Feb. 21, 1974, 4

<sup>32</sup> *Racquet*, March 28, 1974, 1

<sup>33</sup> *Racquet*, Feb. 28, 1974, 3

<sup>34</sup> *Racquet*, May 2, 1974, 4

<sup>35</sup> *Racquet*, April 12, 1973, 8

<sup>36</sup> *Racquet*, Feb. 28, 1974, 4

<sup>37</sup> *Racquet*, April 4, 1974, 4

<sup>38</sup> *Racquet*, Oct. 31, 1974, 12

<sup>39</sup> *Racquet*, April 4, 1974, 8

<sup>40</sup> *Racquet*, April 18, 1974, 11

<sup>41</sup> *Racquet*, May 9, 1974, 9

## CONCLUSION

In December 1975, the creation of a Women's Studies department on campus was finalized, and an intro class was set to begin the following semester<sup>42</sup>, a hopeful step for women on campus. The *Racquet* articles I've included in this paper show only a fraction of the activity that was occurring at UW-L to further women's rights during this time period. Because the *Racquet* frequently featured news about women and the Women's Liberation Movement, it was undoubtedly an incredibly important tool to mobilize and inform the UW-L student body. The fact that the information I've written about was featured in the *Racquet* suggests that the *Racquet* was sympathetic to the feminist/Women's Liberation Movement cause during the first half of the 1970s.

## REFERENCES

(1970-1975). The *Racquet* (Vols. 60-66). La Crosse, WI: University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

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<sup>42</sup> *Racquet*, Dec. 11, 1975