

Remembering Wilma Sharman, the “Queen Mother”

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In 1975, I made the acquaintance of Wilma Sharman, a 68-year-old transwoman who knew more about the trans community at that time than most of us. She was a whirlwind, a “yenta” who seemed to know everyone and everybody, and she became my friend and mentor, despite our 40+ year age difference. In fact, Wilma boasted at the time that most of her friends were younger than her. We spent a couple of years traveling to events, talking about our paths, sharing our thoughts and concerns, and generally having a great time.

Wilma was an upbeat character: a diminutive presence at 5 foot 4 inches, with a booming baritone voice. The fact that she was so upbeat was amazing, since her upbringing was like something out of a Charles Dickens novel. Wilma was born as Bill Sharman on January 31, 1907, in Jersey City, New Jersey, to Thomas Sharman and Lillian Boettcher Sharman.

Wilma wrote about her upbringing: “I was the first born of a poor family, had a sister who died in infancy, and a brother who died at age 7, hit by a railroad train, killed instantly. My father was seldom at home, whoremaster and alcoholic, machinist by trade and a very good one but on account of drinking, never held a job for long, was with a whore when my mother died, he died at a young age [37], probable suicide. My mother, typical of women of her era, good housewife, good mother, tried to keep her family together under adverse conditions, died very young [28] of pneumonia when I was 9 years old.”¹

Wilma recalled that she wanted to be a girl from age five, and going to sleep at night wishing to wake up as a girl. She began crossdressing at age 12, and had some erotic satisfaction from it, though she would go through episodes of purging her feminine clothing. She dropped out of school in the 7th grade and went to work as a deckhand at the age of 14.

Sharman married Gertrude Gimberlain on December 29, 1928, when he was 22 and Gertrude was 19. The couple would go on to have two daughters, Lillian, born in 1929, and Diana, born in 1931. Wilma hoped to stop crossdressing but resumed about a year after their marriage. While Gertrude tolerated Wilma’s occasional dressing, she would not allow it in front of their daughters.

By 1959, Sharman was now captain of a tugboat in New York. On one occasion, while captaining the tug, “James F. Murphy,” which was towing two barges in the East River, one of the tow lines snapped and the barge rammed the tug and sank it. Sharman swam 150 feet to the Manhattan shore. One crewman was drowned.²



Lee Brewster, (l), with Wilma Sharman, (r) at Mardi Gras 1974. Photo by author.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Wilma became aware of Virginia Prince and *Transvestia* magazine and started to subscribe. I believe she also participated in some of the “sorority” meetings sponsored by that group.

When Wilma retired in the early 1970s, she took a job as superintendent of the apartment building where the couple lived in the Bronx. Also, Wilma started on HRT and was thrilled with the loss of libido and breast development. She began crossdressing more frequently, she estimated about “80 percent of the time.” When interviewed in 1975, Wilma remarked, “I’m living like a 40-year-old, and I don’t have any older friends.”³ At about that time, Wilma started exploring her sexuality and came to consider herself a “male lesbian.”

In 1973 she attended “Dream 73,” in Oregon. It was sponsored by the Seattle FPE chapter. There were about 50

attendees, and in those pre-TSA security days, Wilma flew there as her female self. Also in 1973, Wilma came to know Lee Brewster, and in 1974, she attended Mardi Gras with Lee’s tour. That’s where Wilma and I met.

We roomed together at the first Fantasia Fair in 1975. We were interviewed by the *Provincetown Advocate*. Dan Boynton, the author of the article, wrote: “Sharman now thinks of herself as ‘the average woman walking down the street.’ Her only problem is her voice, which in spite of hormone treatments, remains a deep baritone. If she keeps her mouth shut, she says, she can pass for a woman. In 1910, when Sharman first started cross dressing, little was known about the subject. She was fearful of embarrassing her wife, and for 35 years concealed her interest in crossdressing by buying women’s clothing, wearing them once, and then throwing them away in order to avoid taking them home. In spite of these precautions, accidental discoveries were frequent, and each

time, [as Wilma said], ‘there was always a hassle. If I had known then (47 years ago) what I know now, I would never have gotten married. A woman wants a whole man. It’s not fair for her to marry half a man.’⁴

Wilma took me to meetings of the Albany TVIC club in 1975 and 1976, which was a well-run and well-attended club that had monthly get-togethers. Interestingly, by the time I finished my medical transition in the summer of 1976, Wilma detransitioned, and went back to being Bill. As I recall, he met a transsexual named Joan or JoAnn, ended his marriage, and tried going “straight” for a while. The pair did continue to attend TVIC meetings in Albany, though, at least for a little while.⁵

About this time, I lost touch with Bill, and I often wonder how things turned out for him. Did he stay with JoAnn? Did he remain in his male role? Did he have happiness in his last years? Unfortunately, that will remain a mystery to me, as the trail ran cold, and I will probably never know. I did notice that when Bill’s wife, Gertrude, died in August 1986, there was no mention of Bill in her obituary.

Bill/Wilma died on May 7, 1996, in Worcester, Massachusetts, at the age of 89, and was reportedly survived by two daughters, eight grandchildren, and three great grandchildren.

Wilma/Bill, wherever you are, thank you for being my personal “Queen Mother” when I needed you most. I hope you found happiness.



Wilma sailing on Long Island Sound, 1975. Photo by author.

¹ “Wilma: Queen Mother,” *The Crossdresser*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1975, p. 4.

² “Tug is Rammed by own Barges, Sinks, 1 Missing,” *Binghamton NY Press and Sun-Bulletin*, June 14, 1959, p. 1.

³ Peter Warren, “Crossdressers meeting in Provincetown talk about their desire to pass as women,” *The Boston Globe*, November 2, 1975, p. 36.

⁴ Dan Boynton, “Transvestite Conference Offers New Experience,” *Provincetown Advocate*, Oct. 30, 1975, p. 1.

⁵ *TVIC Journal*, Sept. 18, 1976, p. 1.