

The OLOHP Insider

Inaugural Issue

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project

Issue One



Wow. A Decade and Counting!

A Brief History of the Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project By Arden Eversmeyer

The Oral Herstory Project started ten years ago with the effort to get some stories of Houston women who were in failing health. It started with a personal friend of mine, Marie Mariano. My first interview was nerve-wracking and quite a learning experience and I was glad it was with a friend.

Once I got the hang of it, I began collecting stories outside the Houston area as I traveled for my work with OLOC, Old Lesbians Organizing for Change. They helped get out the word about the

Project and that located some of the women. Most of the women interviewed have come to know about the Project by word-of-mouth referrals from their friends — women who had shared their stories.

About seven years ago, OLOC asked to be involved in the Project. Since that time they have provided about 50% of the direct cost (materials, transcription, travel, etc.) of the Project. They have done this through grants and contributions.

When the Project began, there were no thoughts of a website or a book. We had no concept of how the Project would grow and

that it would take on a life of its own. Almost without exception, the first thing asked by everyone when they learn about the Project is, “Is there a way we can read the stories?” Since I had no idea that

the Project would grow into what it is today, I really didn’t know how to answer that. Up until recently, other than offering a few summarized stories in the OLOC

newsletter, and four stories excerpted (by Pokey Anderson) for a magazine article, there wasn’t a good way to share them.

The goal had always been to gather and preserve the stories

*I had no idea
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Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians Born in the Early 1900s
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for future generations and for research. Today it seems just as important to develop a way to share them *now*, not just in the future.

The book idea was bandied about for several years before it really got started about three years ago. Margaret Purcell made the mistake of saying she thought it might be fun to try her hand at writing a book from the stories and there was no going back. She and her partner had spent many hours in Houston digitizing the collection, and she knew the stories. So the work began.

Once the book was well underway, we realized a website was the natural next step. Mary Henry, Margaret's partner, took on that task. Now we have www.olohp.org and lots of plans on how to expand and make better use of it.

We now have our first book and plans for more. Information on how to order *A Gift of Age: Old Lesbian Life Stories* is available from our website.

Last year we incorporated the Project in order to apply for grants to subsidize the costs associated with the book. We didn't expect OLOC to assume any of those expenses too. They continue to contribute to the ongoing work of collecting and documenting stories for the Project, but we hope to pay for book and website by other means.

At this time there are 165 stories in the collection. About 30 still in the production process (being transcribed, edited and such). Of the 165 stories, some of the women have died since the start of the project.

When I started the Project, I was looking for women born before 1930. They're getting harder and harder to find. We have had to move the date forward, but the focus still remains on women 70 or older.

I have to admit I had to laugh at myself when I was surprised to realize that someone born in 1939 could actually be 70!



This is a traveling display used in the Herstory Project. Examples of two of the completed herstories lay on the table in front of display boards.

Why a Newsletter?
We really just want to share and make you more a part of the Project! Our plan is to publish 6 times a year and distribute it primarily via email. Each issue will contain an update about the Project, an article about a specific aspect of the OLOHP, photos and excerpts from a story or two.



Helen

Helen Cathcart was born in 1916. She was interviewed in Texas in 1998, at age 82. Helen died in 1998 and she is featured in our book.

Dorothy Hoffman was born in 1917. She was interviewed in Arizona at age 90 and died in 2008.



Dorothy

Betty Shoemaker was born in 1918. She was interviewed in California at age 83 in 2001. Betty died in 2002 and she is featured in our book.



Betty S.

Arminta 'Skip' Neal was born in 1921. She was interviewed in Colorado at age 80 in 2001. Skip died in 2003 and she is featured in our book.



Skip

Shevy Healey was born in 1922. She was interviewed in Arizona at age 79 in 2001. Shevy died in 2001.



Shevy

Marie Mariano was born in 1922. She was interviewed in Texas at age 76 in 1998. Marie died in 2008 and she is featured in our book.



Marie

Mattie Tippit was born in 1922. She was interviewed in Texas at age 79 in 2001. Mattie died in 2007 and she is featured in our book.



Mattie

Ricci Cortez, born Ethyl Bronson, was born in 1924. She was interviewed in Texas at age 84 in 2008. Ricci died in 2008 and she is featured in our book.



Ricci

Women Who Have Gone Before Us

Of the 165+ stories in the collection, 15 of the women have since died. Of those 15, nine are featured in our book, A Gift of Age: Old Lesbian Life stories. (Reviewing the list you may notice five of the women were from Texas. This simply reflects that many of the earliest interviews were friends of Arden's.)



Betty R.

Betty Rudnick was born in 1924. She was interviewed in Texas at age 74 in 1998. Betty died in 2002 and she is featured in our book.



Pat

Mickie Clifton was born in 1925. She was interviewed in California at age 84 in 2009. Mickie died in 2009. (Picture not currently available.)



LeClair

Pat Durham was born in 1926. She was interviewed in California at age 75 in 2001. Pat died in xxxx.



Max

LeClair Bissell was born in 1928. She was interviewed in Florida at age 76 in 2006. LeClair died in 2008 and she is featured in our book.



Lois

Maxine Parrish was born in 1932. She was interviewed in Arizona at age 71 in 2003. Max died in 2008.

Lois Heindselman was born in 1936. She was interviewed in Washington at age 70 in 2006. Lois died in 2009 and she is featured in our book.



P.J.

Portia (PJ) Fagan was born in 1938. She was interviewed in Arizona at age 69 in 2006. PJ died in 2009.

Charlotte Avery **Born 1930**

*From her Interview
in September 2000*



1949



2003

C: This man, I guess he was 18 or 19, came into the movie theater where I was working and he was standing at the door. I was looking at him and he was looking at me. We started dating and everything, in fact, we became engaged. But I also, during that same time, started going to [women's] softball games.... They were having the women's fast pitch softball tournament at the park and I wanted to go. So about a week or so before I was supposed to be married, I broke my engagement. I told him I just felt like I was making a mistake. He cried and I cried... and I went to the softball game. So I guess that was when I probably came out to myself.

I: You had no idea?

C: I always had a couple of girlfriends in school. I'd have the best looking girlfriend there would be, even better looking than the football players had. But even at 13, 14, 15, I'd have a special friend at school and we'd walk back and forth to school together. Then they'd come to school the next day and say, "I can't play with you anymore." But there wouldn't be any reason.

Nobody ever said that I was a homosexual or lesbian or anything to my face. It was just real hurtful. Nobody talked about anything at home; they knew what was going on and everybody kept everything a damn secret.

Sharing some excerpts from a few of the Stories

D: One of the things that irritated the daylights out of me [about teaching in college] is that, at this time, my husband was an assistant dean of men. He'd been recruited for that position. When I went to talk to the dean, it was before they had salary scales. The dean offered me... I forget what the amount was, but it was a lot less than I wanted. I tried to get more and he said, "No. Your husband's working."

I thought, "That's not fair." Especially when I found out later that another colleague, a black woman who was at the head of her household, who did not have a master's degree completed, was getting paid more than I just because of her family position.

Fortunately, that dean left. The woman who replaced him sat down and she noticed the women's salaries and she noticed the men's salaries. I got a big chunk, a raise that year.

I was married 21½ years. It got to the point where, when we had moved to California and I knew he was fooling around, I became more and more feminist and more into who I was as a woman. The dance changed. I divorced.

During the fifteen years that I was by myself after my divorce, I did tons of reading. A lot of it had to do with spirituality. And it's interesting... the more that I read, the more women-centered I became.

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Delores Austin **Born 1935**

*From her Interview
in January 2001*

1951



1983

D: There was a point where I said to myself, "I do not want to be alone anymore. And I know I do not want to be with a man.... The only way for me to find a woman I might want to be with is for me to come out."

I called one of the "out" women I knew and had been friends with and asked her if she could come over. "I want to talk to you about something." By the way, I was 60 and already retired! After some chit-chat, I said, "I guess you wonder what I wanted to talk to you about." I could see her sitting there and grinning. She said, "I have an idea, but you have to say it."

And so I said it. And she said, "You know, I knew that's what you wanted to tell me. I've wondered for years when you were ever gonna come out!"

Delores Austin



2000

Fran Eaton Born 1930

From her interview
in May 2000



1948



1998

I: You alluded to the fact that you've known you were gay all your life.

F: Since I was born. I can remember going to the movies with little girls and putting my arm around 'em, you know... trying to neck with them. In the movies! Never even thinking it was unusual! And I was always the doctor and they were always my assistants. I always knew I was gay. It never crossed my mind to be anything else.

I: Did you have any words for it, or you just knew?

F: I just knew that's what I was. There were no words. I knew that I wanted to make out with that little girl. When I was a little kid in grade school, I hated little girls and did not want to play with them. I'd go and play with the little boys.... I never wanted to play hopscotch and dolls. Never had a doll! Broke my mother's heart. What did I want for Christmas? Chaps. Guns. Soldiers. You know, all that neat stuff. And I got it every year. But somebody always threw a doll in. One of my grandmothers, my father's grandmother, was a fantastic seamstress. She'd sew all these frou-frou little dresses and little lace things. I wouldn't wear 'em. I don't know why in the world she sewed 'em.

How can you be involved in the OLOHP?

Lesbians 70 years of age and older can tell their own story. Contact us. If you don't "qualify", encourage older lesbian friends to contact us. Buy a copy of *A Gift of Age: Old Lesbian Life Stories*.* Donate a copy of our book to your local library. Make a tax-deductible donation to support the Project.** Send us a note of encouragement!

* *A Gift of Age: Old Lesbian Life Stories* can be ordered at www.olohp.org

** The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project is a nonprofit but our tax-exempt status is pending. For now, you can make a tax-deductible gift on our behalf by visiting the OLOC website and using the donate button (www.oloc.org) or mailing to OLOC, PO Box 5853, Athens, OH 45701

