

The OLOHP Insider

#51, Fall 2022

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project



Photos of a woman from our Herstories who has barely changed (other than losing the dress and the lipstick) in 80+ years!

Arden's Musings

Before I write anything else, I want to make sure you all understand that the OLOHP is not ending! We announced a few months ago our decision to no longer do any new interviews after April 2023. Ever since, I've been having to say, "No. The Project is not ending!" I'll let Margaret write more about what that means on the next page.

Right now, I want to tell you what I'm up to. We got to looking at all the names in the database and thinking about how many of the interviews, some done 10, 15 and even 20 years ago, were with women who are still around. I had done at least 300 interviews myself. Then the thoughts starting rolling around in my head, and I thought, "Why not reach out to them and see if they'd be willing to do a second interview to fill us in on their lives since the original interview?" I couldn't think of any reasons not to do so, and lots of reasons to do it, and I was off and running!

Believe me, I am having a great time reaching out to these women. In some cases, it was simply a phone conversation, but lots of them agreed to setting up a second interview to update their Herstory. I've loved it. Learning how to connect via Zoom has been key to doing these updates and I have several lined up over the next few months.

Now that COVID has abated, I'm also back to traveling a bit. I had sorely missed going to the National Women's Music Festival in Madison these past two years and loved being back there again. In the past, I'd sometimes interview a couple of women while

I was there, or while I was on my way to or from. That wasn't my intention this time, but I came home with the names of four new woman to interview that I'm arranging for later this fall. I also spent some time with friends on a trip to Nova Scotia. Again, this was a trip we'd planned for 2020, and couldn't take until now. And again, I wasn't planning to do any interviews or seek any out. Guess what happened? I came home with two more interviews to arrange.

One of the other things that has been a part of my life of late has been building a strong connection with my alma mater. I graduated from Texas State College for Women (now Texas Women's University with three campuses!) in Denton back in 1951. I didn't have much interaction with the school again until recently. At this point in my life, I felt I wanted to make a difference in the lives of young women who were starting out, so I set up a scholarship fund. In the process, I met some of the current administrators and saw for myself how much the school had changed. After the archivist learned about the OLOHP, we began an exchange which it appears will end with TWU adding copies of all the Herstories to their collections.

On another subject, we've had some difficulties with our website and the email address info@olohp.org. We're working on fixing things, but chances are any emails you get from that address aren't really from us. We use it for you to mail to us, but rarely mail from that address. And if you cannot order our books or DVD from the website, email Margaret directly and she'll take care of it. (mandm@thewiredcity.net)

Fall is looking as busy as ever for me. I hope it will be a good one for you as well. Stay safe.

Arden

Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians 70 and Older
OLOHP • PO Box 7382 • Houston, TX 77248 • www.olohp.org • info@olohp.org

More About the Next Phase of OLOHP

In the last issue of *The Insider*, we let everyone know that we'll stop doing new interviews as of the 25th anniversary of conducting the first interview, which happens next April. What does that mean for us? It DOES NOT mean the Project is ending!

Figuring conservatively, we have several more years of work ahead of us working with interviews that haven't been totally wrapped up. For those who aren't familiar with what all that entails, here is a quick overview.

- Once we finish recording the interview, the next big step is to have it transcribed. When we aren't overloaded, that's completed in a month or two.
- The transcript is then reviewed. That process is basically watching for typos and checking the format. When there are blanks, where the woman transcribing was unable to understand what was being said, we'll find that part of the audio and see if we can fill in that blank.
- A copy of the interview is then sent to the woman who has shared her story. We ask her to review it, making corrections if needed, and adding anything more she'd like included.
- If the woman has already provided the Project with photos and other support documents, we spend some time setting them up for printing. When we can, we'll do some simple repairs on photos that have faded otherwise damaged.
- Once the reviewed/edited transcript has been returned to us, we assemble the final product, the woman's Herstory, and send it to her. We also print up one or more additional copies to archive.

Our guess is that by the time next April rolls around, we will have conducted approximately 900 interviews. The majority of them will have been totally completed and archived, but not all. We'll have 200 or more that are still being processed. Finishing those up alone will keep us busy for another year or two!

We're also continuing our efforts to make the wealth of information gathered by the Project much more accessible for researchers. More about that in the next column over to the right!

What else? We'd like to put together at least one more book, and we'll continue our efforts to share the OLOHP through various avenues, continuing with the *OLOHP Insider*, and doing presentations. So, "No. The Project is not ending next April!"

Indexing and Abstract Efforts

With the help of some volunteers, we are slowly working our way thru the hundreds of transcripts in the OLOHP collection, doing our best to write an abstract of each Herstory and create our version of an index for each. We knew 1) that this would be a significant undertaking, and 2) that it was likely to take us several years. We were right on both counts, and we're okay with that. As long as we keep moving forward, we're okay with one step at a time. We'll get there eventually!

We were making a dent in these herculean tasks pre COVID, then got off track. But we're back on it now.

When it comes to indexing, our goal is to create a list of keywords that will enable us to easily access specific Herstories more readily. Some examples of the types of things we're looking for in indexing are to identify women who:

- worked as professional Girl Scouts
- never heard the word lesbian until after they became aware of their own sexuality
- ran into trouble in the military because they were (or were thought to be) lesbians
- read the book *The Well of Loneliness*
- were PE teachers
- lost their jobs because of their sexuality

The need for indexing has only grown as the number of Herstories in the collection has grown.

You would think creating an abstract (essentially a summary of each interview) would be simpler and less time-consuming than indexing, but not so. Whereas quite a few women have been helping with the indexing, few seem willing to write the abstract.

Having written some of them myself, I know how it's easy to become immersed in the women's Herstory to the point where a sense of obligation to be sure you get it right is almost paralyzing – there is that fear of leaving out anything important! The good thing is, we can revise or rewrite them later as needed.

Of the hundreds of interviews in the OLOHP, Arden and I are doing the indexing (and abstracts) for those with restricted contracts, but that still leaves plenty. We could still use more help! There are lots more to index (we provide a form to follow) and lots more abstracts to write. It's a great opportunity to be able to read some of the Herstories. Contact us!



Once again, we're playing a bit of catch-up. We have a backlog of names of women who have died. Some died recently, but also quite a few we have learned about only recently. We know we shouldn't be surprised by the number of deaths, given that women needed to be 70 to be interviewed, but that doesn't make it any easier to write about, and to share with you. As we've said before, and will say again, "They were all incredible women, well-loved, and we will miss them."

Jean Scott Westminster, Colorado
Born 1931, interviewed by Arden E. in 2010

After the divorce I moved to Columbia, Missouri, where Stevens College is. And I got a job for one year as the temporary Director of Student Activities. While I was there I met this woman who was an Associate Dean and she and I became friends. I liked her and it was wonderful, and she began taking me to different gatherings, mostly of faculty and staff. It was all women, but it was a women's college, you know. I was just so blind. One evening we were invited to this woman's house for supper. We got there and they were rolling back – literally – rolling back the rugs. They had music on a stereo and everybody was dancing. This friend who had brought me said, "Do you like to dance?" I said, "Love to dance!" So she got me and we started dancing some fast dances. And then we started dancing a slow dance, which means I was pressed up against her. All of a sudden I realized I was turned on. I thought, "What is happening here?" [laughs] I was astounded, astonished and frightened.



I thought, "This is not happening to me. What is going on?" I was so frightened that I backed away from her and thought and read and read for a year. I could not face this. "This isn't who I am," you know. "This isn't who I am." I don't remember how I got steered to this book, whether I just found it or somebody said to me, "You ought to read this book." I read *Rubyfruit Jungle*. I read that, I read some other stuff, and I just began thinking. I started thinking about my life and the friendships I had with women. What did this mean that I got turned on? Maybe this was part of who I am.

So at the end of the year, I went to see this woman whom I had backed away from, that I knew I liked very much. I walked into her office and said, "Hi. Would you have time for a cup of coffee?" We went and she said, "What's this about? You act like you're a little changed." "I think I have, over this last year. I'm not quite sure what it means, but I think I've changed." She kind of laughed a little bit.

I think it was a week or so later she asked me if I would like to come over and have dinner at her house. I had dinner with her, we danced in her living room, and I stayed the night. [laughs] That was my comin' out. I was able to move past being scared to death into thinking, "This feels like the most natural thing in the world."

Jenny Kennedy Apache Junction, Arizona
Born 1950, interviewed by Mary H. in 2016



Jenny and her partner, Dee, became interviewers for the OLOHP in 2016. They both did a great job. We were saddened to hear of Jenny's passing. Part of becoming an interviewer is to be interviewed. Here is Jenny's response when asked when she first realized she was a lesbian:

I think I probably kind of always knew a little bit – or at least when I was single again, the second time – but I think early on. I would hear phrases... my mother would say: "Girls don't sit like that." or "Ladies don't do this, or they don't do that." I was like, "Forget it, Mom. This one does." Back then, you were just a tomboy. It was acceptable. The folks didn't like it, but that's the way it was, and they put up with me.

After meeting in the eighth grade, Jenny and Dee's lives crossed paths for decades before they finally settled in together. They split their time between Arizona and Minneosta. They were together more than 25 years when Jenny died.

Excerpts from the Herstories of women who have recently passed

Beth Sharyer Dallas, Texas
Born 1925, interviewed by Arden E. in 2010

I was twenty-five. Every guy that I ever tried to get interested in turned out to be gay. In Paris [Texas], there was this young man. I'd seen him around. You know, in a little town, if they live there, you're gonna run into 'em some time or other, whether you know 'em or not. Anyway, there was a coffee shop at the back of the drug store that was pretty popular, right across the street from the movie theater. One of the guys in Paris, Gordon, was a notoriously good-lookin' man. When I met Gordon, he was leavin' in the next day or two. He had joined the Air Force and was goin' to be stationed in Sherman, which was about 60 miles north or west of Paris. The next time he came into town, well, he'd get in touch with me and I'd pick him up at the bus station. We became very close. One day he told me, "I'm gonna tell you somethin'. I don't know how you feel about it, but it'll either make our friendship stronger or it will break up a good friendship." He said, "I am gay and I'm in love with a guy here in Paris, but he doesn't love me." And he went on and explained some things. I started crying. I said, "Well, you just opened up a new avenue in my life. I've known ever since I was old enough to walk or talk that I love the attentions of pretty women, women that smell good, and look good, and wear high heels."



Dee Sloan Shoreline, Washington
Born 1932, interviewed by Deirdre K. in 2011

I went to anything that was a lesbian place and was never out in the open, never discussed it with anybody other than other lesbians, and there were few of them I would associate with. It's not that a lot of them weren't nice. It was just that if they looked too butchy. I was embarrassed. People would "know." If they advertised, people would know. I did not advertise and I dressed very feminine. I felt feminine and I still do. My drinking definitely accelerated from there on. I was very unhappy. I was disillusioned by what it was like to be with a woman. It was not the kind of life I wanted, the lifestyle that we had. I'm not the kind of person that likes to go sit all the time in cocktail lounges and run around and psshw! I don't know, I feel it was not who I was, and it was not a happy relationship. There was no meaningful conversation where you talk about your feelings.

I didn't talk about it. I had nobody to confide in about that issue. So when I got with a woman and started associating with other lesbians that would talk about it, I just became more confused. I thought that their relationships were very short-term, a lot of cheating, and a lot of stuff that wasn't me. I just didn't like the lifestyle at all. I just wanted a home with somebody I care about in the home, and to do things like everybody else, to have your families around.

I guess I feel more comfortable around straight people than I do around gays and lesbians. Or I certainly did then, because my entire life had been led around straight people. I did not know anybody else that was gay. I think that was the most scary thing, to feel like you're a freak. You're the Lone Ranger. And to not understand your emotions and your feelings, and not feel safe, not feel that there was anybody that was safe to talk to about them.

But you know, I've experienced a crazy life. I wouldn't go back and change any of it.

Bobbie Knowles Melrose, Florida
Born 1936, interviewed by Arden E. in 2008

Now I know why I was never interested in boys. God, kissing them is like kissing a ball, you know, as far as its effect on me. And now I know why. Not that I went to bed with everybody I was attracted to. But in those days, you didn't know. You know?



Excerpts from the Herstories of women who have recently passed

***Linda McAlister-Lopez Albuquerque, New Mexico
Born 1939, interviewed by Paula F. in 2016***

After two years working in Tallahassee, I had to come back to the main campus of the University of South Florida, but in Women's Studies. I became the third editor of *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, a journal I'd founded. While I was editor, one of the issues that we published was a special issue on lesbian philosophy. I didn't edit that specific special issue, but it was a wonderful issue. One of the articles in it was by a feminist philosopher named Jackie Zita, and it was at a time when, in philosophical circles, there was a lot of deconstructionism going on, and people were saying these categories [such as lesbian] are not really firm categories, they are just created. So, somebody raised the question, "Well, there could be a male lesbian? Because its only a construction." The article had the phrase "male lesbian" in the title. Somebody saw it. I mean a lot of people saw it, but this particular person saw it and reported it to Rush Limbaugh.



So, Rush Limbaugh goes on the air for five days straight screaming and yelling that there is this woman at the University of South Florida in Tampa who publishes this feminist journal that thinks there can be male lesbians, and that's so ridiculous and what have you. I was really worried there for a while, but luckily the university stood behind me. I am even written up in one of Rush Limbaugh's books, where he rants and raves about it. First of all, I didn't write the article. Secondly, he didn't read the article because what the article was about was how ridiculous the concept of a male lesbian is. It made the argument against it. That was my moment in the spotlight – but he went on about it every day for five days!



***Shan Ottey Seattle, Washington
Born 1946, interviewed by Lamar V. in 2017***

I was at Stonewall. I was busted. I was thrown in a paddy wagon, dragged across to Rikers Island, thrown in a little cube with bars around it. I was there for, I don't know ... it was such a fog to me, even now. It was like, "Wow! Is this really happening? Gee, I'm on Rikers Island." The cops were nasty. It really is an island, as many have found when trying to get away. They love that. They just tell you, "We'll throw you out for the fish to eat ya." That was a weird one, getting busted at Stonewall, beat up enough to be spitting teeth out, and not knowing what was going to happen next. You are on an island. You are in a box. You are sick as a dog, your teeth hurt and you are spitting blood out. Finally, somebody who was a lawyer came to see me. I was taken out to this table to sit with this person I had never seen before who was supposed to be helping me. He was telling me I would have to wear this dress to court. I said, "I am not going to put that dress on. No, I am going to go in my dirty jeans, just like this. I fought for these bloody things. You want to take me in front of the judge. I want him to see me like this. Not in a dress!"

Jayne Williams Tucson, Arizona Born 1935, interviewed by Arden E. in 2009

My senior year they wouldn't let me go to school because I was pregnant. They were saying, "Well, she might upset the other kids in the college. They're not used to seeing pregnant women." This was in 1955.

When was my first lesbian relationship? I was, like, 36. It wasn't 1967, it was probably 1968. It wasn't until I retired, in '93, that I came out [as a lesbian]. I was living here in Tucson. I think I came out because my brother was embarrassed because I was a lesbian, my youngest brother. He was in politics. I remember him saying to me, "I thought you'd get over it once you got older, and now you're worse than ever."

Excerpts from the Herstories of women who have recently passed

Vivian and Helen were both interviewed by Arden E. in 2006. They lived in Tucson, Arizona. Their stories were both included in our second book, *Without Apology*. We recently learned that they had both died in 2020, less than six months apart. By then, they'd been together for more than 35 years.

Vivian Larsen, Born 1933

When I was a teenager and confused about my own sexuality, I needed something. A group of girls I was friends with belonged to a Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, so I joined it. I dropped out of Valparaiso University after my second year because my grades were terrible. On my way home to Cleveland by train the Christmas vacation before I dropped out, I met a young man who was also Lutheran, and he was from Swedish descent parents, and he was tall and good-looking. Since I thought I had to get married 'cause that was what all "good" girls did, I married him the summer after I dropped out of school. I was 20 years old by four days, and a virgin, as was he. He was in the Navy and we lived together in San Diego for three months. Then, when he went to Korea, I returned to Cleveland to live with my parents and work. It didn't take long before I was again involved with a woman, so I filed for divorce. The attorney advised I wait for two years and so when he returned safely from Korea the divorce went through. The poor man had terrible luck. His first wife, me, turned out to be a dyke!



Helen and Viv

Helen Kalcsits, Born 1937

Viv always wanted a commitment ceremony. I was not big on commitment ceremonies because in that day, they were having commitment ceremonies in the spring and splitting up and going with someone else in the fall. We actually waited over three years before we could come to a point that we really wanted it. I wanted to make sure we could bargain, that we could come to difficult times and come out on the other side, and neither one of us moves, so that we could process together, and that we could really make a life together. Before that, it didn't make sense to have a commitment ceremony. So we did. When it was all over with, we had dancing and it was... it was wonderful. That's the first time my sisters ever saw me dance with another woman. And men were dancing with men, women were dancing with women and men were dancing with women.

It was an eye-opener for my family because they had never been to an event like ours. They thought the commitment ceremony was nice. They were never big on my being a lesbian, on my being who I was.

Viv always wanted the ceremony and I didn't want it. Then, when somebody asked me afterward how I felt about it, about having them at the ceremony... the way I sensed it was: before the ceremony, it was Viv and I holding hands; it was like us against the world. And after the commitment ceremony, it was like there were a hundred other pairs of hands surrounding ours and over ours, helping to bind us together.

Thank You to the Kellett Foundation for your support of the OLOHP!



How can you be involved in the OLOHP?

- Lesbians 70 years of age and older can tell their own stories.
- If you don't "qualify," encourage older lesbian friends to contact us.
- Buy our books and our DVD.*
- Donate copies of our books and our DVD+Guide to your library.
- Make a tax-deductible donation to support the Project.**
- Send us a note of encouragement!

* *A Gift of Age*, *Without Apology*, and the DVD *Our Stories, Our Voices: The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project* can be ordered at www.olohp.org.

** Tax-deductible donations can be made to the OLOHP either by using the Donate button on our website, or mailing a check.

