

The OLOHP Insider

#55, Fall 2023

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project



Margaret Checking In

You would think by now I would have learned that time always flies by! But no. Here I am, once again, scrambling to get an *Insider* out in a timely manner. At least, I'm consistent!

It's been an interesting summer with the Project. As we shared in the previous (June/July) issue, despite our declaring the end of last April as the cutoff for seeking out and conducting any additional interviews to add to the Project's collection, we didn't quite manage to do that. Once we put the word out that we were stopping that part of the Project, we were overwhelmed with requests to be interviewed. We spent most of May and June doing additional interviews that we couldn't fit in earlier. We thought that would wrap things up.

Even as we got closer to wrapping up all the interviews we had scheduled, we felt we needed to reach out to anyone else we hadn't been able to fit in earlier. We made one more effort to get back in touch with women with whom we had lost contact, or with whom we'd run into a glitch in getting things set up. This resulted in our setting up another dozen or more interviews as the summer went on. Luckily, we were able to do those at a much more sane pace – of only one or two a week.

So for now, the Project keeps moving forward, consistently making progress. We're not quite taking the pathway we had thought we'd be taking, but we keep moving forward. While we continue to devote a smaller portion of our time to doing a bit more interviewing, we're now making a concerted effort to get all the recent interviews transcribed. We are

simultaneously a bit embarrassed that we're so far behind on that task, relieved that our specific to-do list is now less scary, and pleased that we've been able to add so many stories to our collection.

In addition to focusing on interviewing, and transcribing, we're also back to working toward finalizing more of the earlier Herstories that have been waiting for our attention. It felt good to wrap up and mail out about 20 in August, including two going out of the country. One book went to Japan and another to New Zealand. As far as international mailing goes, we've done that before, but it's one of those things you do so seldom you essentially have to learn now to do it all over again.

We continue to be incredibly grateful for Zoom. While we know interviewing in person is by far the best way to go, we sure do appreciate that Zoom has enabled us to do dozens of interviews that we weren't able to do before. If all things go according to plan, it looks like once we truly say, "No more!" and stick to it, the Project will have conducted more than 900 interviews, a number none of us would ever have imagined.

We know Arden would be thrilled with all the new interviews and the progress we're making. And when we find ourselves fretting about not getting it all done as quickly as we'd like, we draw on something Arden would tell us: *If you don't get everything you wanted to get done today, you know it will be there tomorrow waiting for you. Just do what you can.*

We sure do miss Arden but know she'd be pleased with all that is still happening.

Margaret

OLOHP: Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians 70 and Older

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Never Too Late to Learn

Even 25 years into this Project, hardly a week goes by without something new coming up. For example, this summer we learned a lesson – or, more accurately, we reinforced what we already believed, but wondered if maybe we should reconsider. Whenever we talked about transcribing, people consistently urged the use of a transcription service. We had always had women in our community do the transcribing. On the off-chance that maybe we were just being stubborn, and that use of an outside service might help us catch up, we gave it another try.

The good news is our that the test didn't cost much in dollars to take the time to find out. The bad news is that we got what we paid for! When we got the test transcripts back, we then carefully read along as we listened to the audios ourselves. If we're being generous, we'd say the tests were 90% accurate. That's clearly not accurate enough! We found the occasional typo that was easily fixed, but there were other glaring errors. For instance, one sentence came back to us reading: "Not everyone smothers Tiki quick like that." What was really said was: "Not everyone's mother took it quite like that." And on another test, a three-minute piece of the audio was totally left out.

As you might guess, we quickly abandoned that experiment and went back to our way of transcribing – listening closely, double-checking, and knowing the subject matter. We don't claim to be perfect, but as the old advertising slogan goes, We Try Harder!



Protecting OLOHP Herstories

Have you wondered who is able to find out names of the women who have participated in the OLOHP? Like so many other aspects of the Project, as we grew, and as new avenues for sharing about the Project expanded, the answer to that question changed a bit over the years. At first, only those involved knew who had been interviewed. Arden would occasionally write or be interviewed about the Project and some names would be included, but only women who had given their permission were identified.

We have always had an agreement, a contract, between the Project and the women. They sign either an unconditional or conditional version – whichever one they prefer. Basically, it's either 1) I understand how the Project might use my materials and I trust them to do right by me, or 2) I understand, and I trust the Project, but I'd like to add some restrictions.

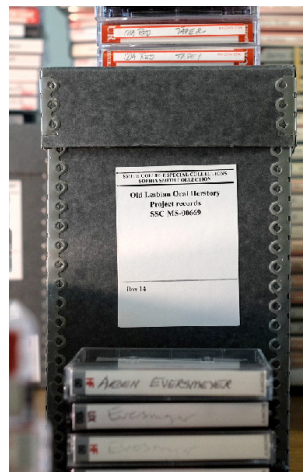
In 2009, we put out our first book, *A Gift of Age*, which included the stories of 23 women. A few years later, we did a second volume, *Without Apology*, with more women's stories. In both cases, we reached out to each woman who was included, and who was still living, provided a draft, and asked for additional permission.

In 2010, when we began archiving the Project's work at Smith College, things changed a bit. After we'd been sending materials there for a few years, Smith asked if we would, in addition to our contract, have an agreement/deed signed for all materials we were adding to the collection. That deed was signed by the interviewee, the interviewer and Smith College,

and it was a lot more formal and detailed than our deed. But even with the legalese, the Smith deed, like our contracts, basically boiled down to the same thing: trust that Smith will handle your Herstory with care, or trust them, but add some restrictions. Since the world was moving more and more towards the internet and digital access of materials, the Smith Deed offered a way to allow, or restrict, that access.

Since we are worriers, we provided everyone with (what we were sure was way too much!) information about the Smith Deed. But even with explanations, some women may not have realized that unless they specifically selected the option to keep their names off the internet, their name would appear on a list of Herstories located in the our collection at Smith. Their full Herstory is not available online, but their name was now listed there. Researchers working at Smith College can ask for access to Herstories for which there is an unconditional contract/deed. And, anyone putting a name in a search engine will find that person's name.

Where does that leave a woman who participated in the OLOHP, signed the Smith Deed, and now feels they'd rather their name not be found by a search engine? Anyone with concerns is urged to contact us. We'll work with Smith to be sure your name is removed from public access and the terms of that specific Herstory are changed according to your wishes. We don't want to cause anyone any worry! We appreciate you all and truly want your participation in the documenting of our lives to be a fulfilling experience for all involved.



A Few Messages from Friends



Thank you, Aganita and Margaret,
The book is beautiful. I can't wait to sit
down and read my story. First I have to get
over my feeling of fame!

So much love goes into these books.
You are making such a difference for older
lesbians. And all who may read or study
our stories in the future.

Grateful to be part of the community,
Kate

I was delighted to see the bound copy of the interview. It's
beautifully done. I feel honored to be included in the project, and
grateful to all of you who've made this project a reality over the
years.

Yours with my thanks!
Ruth

You're amazing. As a former archivist, I have much respect for
your work. A BIG THANK YOU!

Warmly,
Jennie

I enjoyed participating in the project and thank you for your hard work. I will treasure my book and read
occasionally for the rest of my life.

Miyuki

Excerpts from the Herstories of women who have recently passed They were all incredible women, well-loved, and we will miss them.

Joann Thompson, born 1933 interviewed in 2005 by Arden E.

I would hear the other girls
talk about how cute the boys
were when I was about 13 or 14,
how much fun it would be to
marry them, be a housewife. At
the time I was in love with this
girl that I had known all my life.
I kept thinking I had feelings for
her that the other girls had for
boys. So I would go to the library and
read about how I was criminally ill.
I decided if I am, I am. I was
somehow born with a lot of self esteem,
and decided I could live my life the way
I wanted to.



Later, I married. He was very nice. I already knew
I was a lesbian, but relationships hadn't worked out. I
figured I couldn't pick any man worse than the females
I had picked, so I decided to marry him. He was older,
he was a doctor, a very kind man, very funny, and we
got along well. But as soon as I said "I do," I found
out that he had a different expectation for what a wife
is supposed to be. I had been independent and out-
spoken, and he didn't like his wife to act that way.

Twenty-six years later, my children were grown
and gone. My husband had life-long depression, was
medicated, and a bear to live with. He was always
angry about something. I never crossed him until I
decided I wanted a divorce. About that time I met
Johanna at the Women's Group and fell in love with
her. I wanted to live with her and didn't want to
sacrifice one more minute. My children were gone
and now it was my turn. I worried it is selfish to make
ourselves happy. That's not the way we are raised.

Jeanne DeJoseph, born 1943 interviewed in 2016 by Elizabeth Berrey

I wanted five kids. What was I thinking? Five
children! My God! But, in the long run, I realized I
was a Lesbian. It was a while before I could get myself
out of the marriage, because when you're Catholic you
make a promise. If, down the road, you're not happy,
so what? You've made a promise. So I found out I was
a Lesbian. Okay, so what? I'm a Lesbian, but I made
a promise, and I'm sticking
with it. So it took me seven
years from the time I realized
that I was a Lesbian, till I could
actually get myself divorced.
And, if I'd had children, I doubt
very much if I'd ever been able
to do that. I would have just
sucked it up.



Sue Hardesty, born 1933 interviewed in 2015 by Arden and Mary H.

I went off to college when I
was 18 and got involved with a
woman. God, I don't know why.
She was crazy. I probably didn't
know any better at that age. She
decided that she didn't want to
live with a woman, so she talked
me into pretending to be a man.
She cut my hair, got some clothes,
and for two years I lived as a male.
I did not want to be a man. It was
not a comfortable thing to do. I
liked being a woman and that's
the way I wanted it and that's okay.



*Excerpts from the Herstories of women who have recently passed
They were all incredible women, well-loved, and we will miss them.*

Barbara Love, born 1937
Interviewed in 2012 by Chris Pattee

Barbara Giddings said... she said she thought she invented lesbianism. We all thought that way. I didn't know anybody else, so, gee, it must be... that sounds very positive to say I invented it, but I felt like I was stricken with some very bizarre thing.

I didn't have any relationship until after college and when I was in Italy. I was hanging out at the bars at night. I was working hard. It's hard work at a magazine and not having much fun. I wasn't really a butch or a fem so I didn't really fit in at the Sea Colony Bar, which was where I was going at that point in time. I didn't know if I was a butch or a fem. I thought, "Well, I think I'll try to be fem first. I'll try, whatever that means. Get my hair done, I don't know." Then I was dancing with some woman and I let her lead, and it came out that I had a world record in swimming. She said, "You're no fem!" She pushed me away. I thought, "Well, maybe I'm butch!" So I tried being butch. Then I asked somebody to dance and I'd say, "Well, you have to lead," and they'd say, "You're no butch!" and leave! (laughing) Ask a fem to lead! Then they thought I was a policewoman because I wasn't one or the other. I was a fraud. I wasn't a lesbian! This was ridiculous. So I just stood and watched. I had my little place at the juke box. I'd keep my arm up on the juke box and I'd hang out there and I'd get a drink, and I'd just watch, for a long time. Just watching. Crazy.



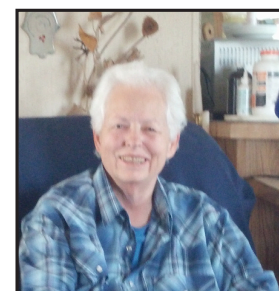
Ellen Dickenson, born 1943
interviewed in 2016 by Edie Daly

In the coming out process, I made myself go to a new place in the city every week. I went to LFL (Lesbian Feminist Liberation), the women's coffee house, and the Duchess and Gay Women's Alternative. Every week I made myself just go, and it was hard because I didn't know anybody in the new world of being a lesbian. I had to do it myself. Finally I did start meeting people.



Martha Jacobs, born 1942
Interviewed in 2019 by Elizabeth Berrey

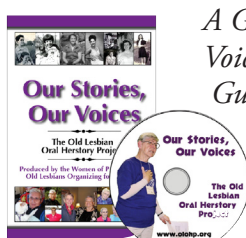
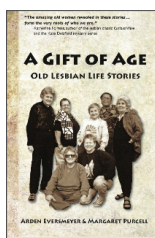
My mother should have had the sense to realize I was gay. I had been living with a woman for years. But how I came out to my mother was one holiday. I don't quite remember if it was Thanksgiving or Christmas. My mother had planned for us to go to another relative's house for that evening meal. My girlfriend and I had never been able to spend one holiday together. I just told my mother that we were going to spend it together. I loved her, and so forth. My mother was kind of broken up over that. I could have done it in a better way, but I was just so fed up with hiding.



Jean Martin, born 1926 *Interviewed in 2015 by Sherry Fulton*



Did others know about our relationship? They knew we were close friends. I don't think there was anything ever – nothing ever – overtly said. There was never any discussion. It was accepted. We did not socialize with any library staff, lesbian or otherwise. Thinking back, we did not live together much for the first ten years – Fran was in Honolulu and I was at Lapakahi, or away at workshops or teaching or doing internships - and so there was little opportunity to socialize as a couple with other lesbians.



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

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

