

The OLOHP Insider

#46, Third issue of 2020

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project



Arden's Musings

What a WEIRD year this has been. By this time of the year, for the past ten years or more, I (we) have been on the road at least five times, and as many as ten. This year, I have cancelled arrangements for five trips already, as well as four concerts that our local group had arranged for 2020.

I now live in a large retirement community. We were locked down back on March 20th, with all our meals delivered to our apartments. Residents may go out and they are screened when they return. Employees, about 300, are tested weekly. No visitors are allowed.

Other than quick trips for groceries and medical appointments, most of my time is spent at home, but I have made two exceptions. A group of us old lesbians have been meeting outdoors twice a month for a sack lunch. Think covered wagons: We observe all safety rules, sit in a circle on our camp chairs, wear our masks when we're not eating, and visit. It has really helped with the overwhelming feeling of isolation. It also gives us a chance to share news of other women in our community, and widen our telephone contacts. The one other exception is that I drive up to stay a night or two with a life-long friend each week. She is as careful as I am in regards to limiting her exposure, and having time together telling old stories has kept us both sane through all this.

Having been born during the "Great Depression" (1931), I spent my growing-up years during the Depression and World War II. We learned to do without many things. We had big gardens and canned everything we didn't eat fresh. We walked and rode our bikes because gas and tires were rationed during the war. My father only able to keep his job because his company went to "payless pay days" – work the same number of days and hours, but get a check every other pay day. Our national leaders gave birth to the Works Project Administration (WPA), and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) which put millions of men to work building roads, bridges, etc.

We have had a long period of plenty for our nation, where those doing without became more invisible. So many received instant gratification growing up that their feeling of entitlement rules. Their insistence on large gatherings, parties, and appearing maskless makes it unsafe for the rest of us to appear in public.

Now things have changed. We have a period of unrest already and there will be some violence ahead of us this year. Be sure and exercise your right to vote, but DON'T VOTE TWICE - IT'S A FELONY. Be safe and be well, good people. Be kind to each other.

Arden

Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians 70 and Older
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No Two Are Alike

The Project has now gathered more than 740 interviews, and one of the surprising outcomes to those of us working with the Herstories is that no two are alike. Many of the women share similar experiences, but each is distinct in dozens of ways.

The differences become evident as we process the interviews. Transcripts vary in length, of course, but also in style. We provide some questions and topics to both the interviewer and the interviewee, but we emphasize that they are only suggestions. Other than her name and age, and identifying as a lesbian, nothing is absolutely required. We try to start out with the woman's beginnings, asking about where she was born and about her parents and siblings. From there, the woman may share her story in chronological fashion, or move back and forth between decades. Some women wait to be asked questions, others dive right in unguided. No way it's done is wrong, which makes for some surprising reading.

Every story is a learning experience for us. Recently a woman sharing her Herstory referred to Ohrid. We could simply type Ohrid and move on... or not. Curiosity sure can slow us down! On our end, a reference to something like Ohrid demands we stop and investigate. Okay, Ohrid is in North Macedonia. We could leave it there, or give into that voice that is asking, "I think that's somewhere in the Balkans, but where exactly?"

You're right, we don't actually need to know those details to work with a Herstory, but why pass up such an opportunity?!

That Goes for Support Documents, Too

When we interview a woman for the Project, we always encourage her to also share what we call support documents. Most of those are photos, but they also often include newspaper articles, vitae, certificates, writings and more. As with transcripts, these elements vary. One Herstory might have hundreds of photos, and another only one or two. Photos add so much to a story and we've always said, "the more, the better." Some come to us in excellent condition and it's a simple matter to lay them out, add captions, and print them. Others come showing wear and tear like a crease across a face, or a torn corner. Old black and white photos may have yellowed with age, and old color photos have faded, or the color balance has changed drastically. We know it isn't practical to try to improve every photo, but we try to do as much as we can, especially to photos that feel special. Here is a before and after example from Gaye Adegbolola's documents. The original was both discolored and damaged on the lower third. An hour or so's time, and a smart computer app, and we were able to, for the most part, restore it. We wish we had the time and resources to work with every photo that needs it, and who knows what we'll learn next!

We Learn as We Go

Learning about these women's lives directly from the transcripts and supporting documents that make up the Herstories we gather and process is only one aspect of our education. We've learned about various computer programs we can call upon as needed. Since we work with people with a variety of computers, and levels of expertise, we may need to change formats, use an OCR app on a transcript sent back in a format we cannot use, do what they call "clean and unwrap" or other tasks.

Add our reluctance to spend money if we can avoid it, we exercise our troubleshooting skills before buying anything new, applications or equipment. When a color inkjet recently went rogue on us – with the help of the internet – we were able to identify the cause, a bad printhead, order the part and replace it ourselves. When a laser printer would on occasion leave specks of color where it shouldn't, we started by noting exactly when it would happen and discovered that it was a matter of changing a setting when we used 32# paper instead of our usual 24#.

Over the years, we've been asked a few times if we can handle 35mm slides and we learned a while back how to handle those with a handy-dandy inexpensive scanner. Then we were asked about negatives. That same slide scanner we use also happens to be able to handle common negatives – but these negatives were not only larger format, some were actually printed on 4" x 5" pieces of glass! Thanks to Google and YouTube, within an hour we learned how to tackle digitizing those negatives with things we already had, and converted them to positive images.

Who knows what new challenges wait for us?



*We have learned of the passing of these women who shared their stories with the OLOHP.
They were all incredible women, well-loved, and we'll miss them.*

You may recognize the photos on the right from the Insider a couple of months ago. In that issue, we shared with you that Geri Pries (born 1929) had recently died. We've now learned that Alta has also died. Normally, when the Project interviews two women who are a couple, we insist they share their stories separately. Geri and Alta were an exception – they insisted on doing it together. In honor of their bond and the fact that they died so closely together, we've included photos with them together as well.

Alta Jones, Born 1935
Interviewed at age 80 while living in Arizona

We bought our first house in 1960. They would not loan to 2 women. Mom had to sign for that house. Best investment we ever ever ever ever ever made. We lived in that house for 19 years. When we first got together, we had no friends. Well, Geri had friends at work, but she was very careful... extremely careful who she introduced me to. I tell everybody that when she started introducing me to those work friends, they all thought Geri had a tiger by the tail, because they knew that I wanted so much more than what they had. I had to have ...

I had to be like normal people. And that's how we've lived our lives. We have lived our lives like normal married people. We married each other from the first day forward.

We have not been away from each other for more than a few days, maybe three times, because of funerals in our lives, in our 58 years. When friends talk about being connected at the hip, Geri and I are connected at the hip and we are never apart, that's okay. That's the way we wanted it.



Above: Geri and Alta
Below: Alta and Geri



The piece on the right is about another unusual situation for the Project. She was extremely camera shy, so we don't have a single photo of her and she also died before reviewing and editing her interview transcript. We did have her permission to use her story after she had passed, so we'll share an excerpt here. We'd also like to share this extra side-story that falls into the "there is no way that happened" category. Margaret was interviewed in the Seattle, WA, area in 2016. Years earlier, the interviewer had gathered the story of Joanne, who was living in St. Paul, MN, but Joanne had since died. The interviewer was struck by how much Margaret – her look, her voice, and her mannerisms – were just like Joanne's. It was so remarkable you'd have sworn they were twins. In telling their stories, it turned out they both were born on the same military base in Illinois, within a year or two of each other. While no one knows the full circumstances, we're pretty darn sure the two were at least half-sisters, but didn't know it.

Margaret Moroz
Born 1945, Interviewed at age 68
Interviewed in Kent, Washington

Even in first grade, I started having a crush on this girl in my class. I had a crush on her through high school, but I never talked to her! When I was ten years old, my neighbor died and his wife rented the house out to her niece's friend. It was Betty and Jeanie. Betty was 24, and Jeanie was 30. I was 11 years old, and I really had a crush on Jeanie. I thought she was hot! If they only knew! They wore butch clothes. I was big for 11 years old and they gave me some of their shirts. It was the best stuff I could get. Just my style!

I knew that I couldn't tell everybody that I was attracted to girls and I still struggled with it, believe me. You know how it was back then. I can't remember when I started buying novels with lesbians. It was always the same thing; the butch and fem kind of relationship. The butch would commit suicide, and the fem would go running off with a man. That was the same theme over and over again! Those books were not much help either!

Later, I always had crushes on my girlfriends, where I worked at and people I hung out with. I was dating men and miserable about it, because I hated it. I dated men from the time I was 18 until I was 26. I just really had crushes on all of these girls, but I was afraid to act on any of it, because if I did, I would lose everything. It would put me in a straightjacket, you know?

We have learned of the passings of these three women as well. We'll miss them.

Ida VSW Red

*Born 1933, Interviewed at age 70
Interviewed in San Francisco in 2003*

There were lesbians at Mary Baldwin, of course. I didn't have the vaguest notion. I call it a failure of imagination. But I just never understood it. As I look back I think which professors lived together and which students. I think I myself had lesbian experiences in college, but I just didn't get it. I didn't see it. It was totally hidden to me. So I was not tormented. I would say that, feminism aside, I would have been bi-sexual. In a free world, I would have been bi-sexual. I've loved men; I've loved women.



I wasn't going to marry, but later, when I got what I considered to be a rejection from the only place that I had applied for money to go to graduate school – and I knew I couldn't go without getting money – I said, “yes,” and I was married that same year. What I know about my forebears is that my great-grandmother did not want my grandmother to marry; my grandmother did not want my mother to marry; my mother did not want me to marry; and I did not want my daughters to marry. Yet I married. But when feminism came along, that changed all that.

Shirley Maser

*Born 1926, Interviewed at age 85
in Tucson, Arizona*



I got married when I was 16 and I always wondered about why my mom gave me permission for that. We moved to Seattle for jobs. At Boeing, I started driving a fork truck. They had a lot of women, of course, in those days. I was only 16 and I lied. By then [1942] they were looking for help, so I was able to go to work there when I was 16.

I wore what I wanted to wear. I'd wear jeans and a bandanna. When I was in the shipyard you just wore welders' stuff. You can see where I'm leadin' this up to – all that makes you who you really are. When I was at Pier 91, I met these other gay girls, and then I really learned what the score was. That was really the lesson, and once you know it... that was the time when I had my escape planned out but it didn't work out because that's when I got pregnant. That's when I left that job.

I had met those girls and I was kind of on the road to what I really knew was really my life. I thought, “Well, I guess I'd better go back until I have my baby.” We got along pretty good during my pregnancy. I was with him for a while and then it just finally got to where I just thought it was going to drive me crazy. I left. I took the baby and away we went.

Joyce Wolfe

*Born 1930
Interviewed at
age 88
in Tacoma, WA*



I am sure my family knew, but I was so closed, I couldn't talk to them. Now, I would be able to, but back then, it was just like when I was in the service – they constantly had these CID people come into the barracks to get the queers. It was dangerous. You didn't dare have a relationship.

I think I went to my first bar when I was about 18 or 19. I remember I was with people who were legal, and it was one in Seattle that everybody knew. The cops always came in and checked. So, my friends would hustle me into the ladies room while they were checking everybody's ID. When they were gone, they let me come back out.

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.

