

# The OLOHP Insider

#39: A Special Double Plus Issue for The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project

## Way Outside the Box! An Anniversary Issue for the OLOHP's 20th



Our advice? Get a cup of coffee or tea and get comfortable... this is a very special issue of *The OLOHP Insider* celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Project. It is way outside the box in terms of what we have done with our newsletter up until now, but reaching a milestone like 20 years feels like a really good reason to stretch our wings. As you page through this issue, you may notice that it lacks as much organization as usual, and wonder why. Like most of the women sharing their stories with the Project, we started out with good intentions! We were going to start at the beginning and tell the story of the OLOHP in an orderly fashion. Then, as happens in almost every single interview, we found it impossible to stay on track. We tried, but to some extent, we've let things happen more organically. Relax. Enjoy!

## Milestones of The OLOHP

**Pre-Project 1990:** Arden does an interview to share her own story with a student and a seed is planted. She sets her transcript aside and doesn't even think to add it to her own project until asked 15 years later if her own story was in the collection.

**1996:** While traveling and wondering how she might go about preserving the stories of her contemporaries, Arden consults with an oral historian for help. Armed with some ideas and resources, Arden returns to Houston and starts making a plan.



Marie, born 1921

**1998:** The first interview is with a friend, Marie Mariano. Arden found it was quite a learning experience. Once transcribed, Arden realized she added so much to the conversation that she found herself wondering just whose story it was, Marie's or her own. Lesson One: Listen first, talk later!

**2002:** Margaret & Mary meet Arden and hear about the Project for the first time. When they learn that Arden's home had been flooded by tropical storm Allison the previous year, they start thinking about how to protect her work.

**2004:** In support of Arden's work, OLOC (Old Lesbians Organizing for Change) officially becomes a sponsor of the Herstory Project. (Arden was part of the leadership of OLOC at that point.)



Scottie, born 1934

**2007:** The 100<sup>th</sup> happens! Arden tracked things closely so that the 100<sup>th</sup> interview would be with a life-long friend, Scottie Scott.

**2008:** With lots of help, we wrap up an effort to create a digital backup of all the interviews.

**2009:** The first issue of *The OLOHP Insider*, the first book, *A Gift of Age*, and OLOHP incorporates!

**2010:** The decision is made to archive the Project at Smith College (Massachusetts), the Project becomes a 501(c)(3), and interview #200 is conducted.

**2012:** The second Project book, *Without Apology*, is completed, as is interview #300.

**2013:** The Project hosts a big event in Houston, *Celebrating Our Lesbian Legacies*.

**2014:** A small group training is held to work with a couple of new interviewers. This set the stage for three more classes held later.

**2016:** A DVD about the Project, *Our Stories, Our Voices*, is completed, the new website is launched, and the 500<sup>th</sup> interview is conducted.

**2017:** An effort to index the interviews and #600!

**2018:** We continue to interview, and begin to build an emphasis on sharing what we have learned from 20 years and hundreds of interviews.

Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians 70 and Older

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### *Queen, Worker Bees and Nectar*

The Project operates much like a bee hive. Arden is the queen. Interviewers, transcribers and other volunteers are the worker bees. And all the women whose stories, memories and experiences the Project is documenting? They are definitely the nectar!

Interviewers are like the worker bees, going out in search of women willing to be interviewed, gathering their stories, and bringing them back to the Project. Like the worker bees, they use some of the nectar (the experience of doing the interviews and working with these amazing women) to feed their own souls — then, what they gathered is tucked away safely for the future.

Throughout this Anniversary Issue, we'll share a bit more about Arden, our queen (having done 305 of the interviews herself), and some of our worker bees, the interviewers and other volunteers.

### *How Margaret Gets Involved*

I wondered that myself. For me, searching old e-mails is a great way to check on something. I knew I'd first met Arden in 2002 when she visited Minnesota where I was then living, but the earliest e-mail I have that shows I was working with the Herstories wasn't until 2004, and it concerned backing up the existing stories and all the associated files. I'd learned that Arden and Charlotte's home had been flooded in 2001, and that they'd had to move everything they could upstairs, including her work with the Herstories. My thinking was that moving it upstairs might be a way to minimize the damage from flooding, but what if it had been a fire?

I was already in awe of what Arden had, almost single-handedly, accomplished, and fascinated by the concept of documenting the lives of these women. I could clearly see two things right away: First, this work was incredibly valuable. Second, Arden had yet to realize the significance of what she was doing. It was important, and it was irreplaceable. I asked if my partner Mary and I could help out by trying to scan everything that had been done so far. Arden said yes, and by the time that goal was achieved, the hook was set and all she had to do was reel me in!

### *Unconventional, in a Good Way!*

Here in the OLOHP, we're used to being thought of as unconventional, out of the ordinary. Some might even say "unusual," pronouncing it as if it were set off with quotation marks! That's okay. We're proud to own such characterizations. In fact, we are pretty darn sure we've earned them!

It's not often you run across an effort that involves such a cadre of women — most who have never even met each other — who devote hundreds of hours each year to what amounts to a very narrowly-focused effort: gathering life stories from a subset (70 years of age and older) of a subset (lesbians) of women.

If you know of another group working on something comparable, we'd love to hear about it. We'll start by giving them the kudos they deserve, but then we'll up the ante a bit, pointing out that the OLOHP has been doing this work since 1998... that we've been able to stretch every nickel we find into at least a full dollar... that none of us are paid a penny... that we don't charge a thing to the women whose stories we are preserving... and that we've done more than 675 interviews! Maybe bragging on ourselves isn't the most acceptable of behaviors, but if we've learned nothing else over this past twenty years, it's that what we are doing is important, and we should be proud of ourselves!



*Arden, Janice and Ellen work on backing up the Project*



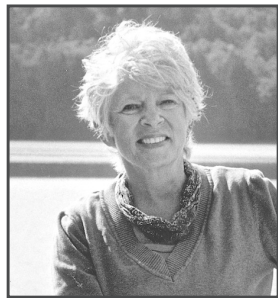
**From Mary H.**

*Being interviewed was a great experience for me. It gave me the opportunity to look at my life as a whole, in a linear fashion, from the beginning to now. I saw things about my life that I had never thought about before – about how my family and friends, and the circumstances of my life, had affected my life view and the way I approached things. It made me much more satisfied with what I have done over my lifetime. And, as a bonus, it's wonderful to have someone sit and hang on your every word, and ask for more.*



**Jean and Elsie in Pennsylvania**

*We are very grateful life's road directed us to the Herstory project. It gave us many rewards – we connected to a lesbian community thru The Insider, relived our many years (65) together via pictures and our interviewer, and best of all, gave us a new, dear friend, our interviewer, Barb.*



**A Note from Llyn D.**

*Thanks for the beautiful book. It really is a treasure and I am honored. The photo reproductions are superior. Very very happy am I. Thanks so much for your work and the work of all the others who clearly consider this to be a labor of love.*

**From Mary M.**

*When I saw my Herstory book, I doubted there were any words to express how I felt. I think after I finished crying, looking at my life unfold with each page, I am still in awe. "Thank you" will have to do for now until I can give you a hug!*



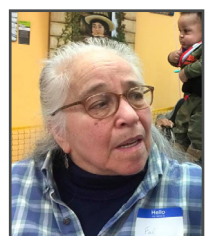
**Thoughts from Ann Bannon Weldy**

*What Arden and the other women have achieved here is nothing less than the creation of an historical treasure that will serve as an invaluable resource for generations to come.*



**A note from Diane R.**

*When I opened the box and saw the cover of my Herstory book, I began to cry. What a beautiful treasure. I had no idea it would look so lovely. Actually, I had no idea how it would look, but I was so touched that I had to call Sherry (my interviewer) immediately to tell her the good news. I want to express my gratitude to the Project for all the work it has done over the years. It is so important. I feel privileged to be part of it. Thank you for all that you do.*



**From Fai C.**

*Telling or hearing readings of our stories reminds us of the fullness of our lives. Reading Herstories nourishes us – they remind us that we are not alone. In that moment of shared stories – we gain strength for the work ahead of us.*

**From Tiska B.**

*It is an honor to share my life with the Herstory Project. Thank you for all your work!*



## More Words from Women Who Have Been Interviewed



### From Gaye A.

*As a performing musician, I have given, literally, hundreds of interviews. There's one rule of thumb: there must be COMFORT between the interviewer and the interviewee. When I met Barbara, the comfort was immediate. There was no need for a "mask" of any kind. I was so comfortable with this person who felt like an old friend, that my heart, my soul, became an open book. I had no need to choose my words, choose my stories. Whatever I would say would be just fine. As the interview got started, she allowed me to ramble and jump from story to story, era to era, until we struck a groove and the intimacy flowed. I knew my words were safe. After two full days, Barbara started to gather items to photograph and items to copy. She was as comfortable with my "babies" as she was with my words. She cradled each piece and delicately held my life's work in her hands. That, too, was ever endearing. I am honored to have been included in the project. I am thankful for a new old friend.*

### From Rand H.

*AMAZING! Received my "book" yesterday. What a stupendous effort by Barbara K (my interviewer), the transcriber, the page layout designer, printer and binder. I just never expected anything like it.*



### Response from Susan W.

*Oh my god! I read the interview completely last night, looked at the pictures, read some of the writings you included. I LOVED looking at all you did with what I sent of documentation, though I was so surprised you used as much as you did. What an amazing project you all are doing. Sending energy to all of you. Thank You!*

### A Note from Polly T.

*Thanks so much for sending along the finished Herstory. My friends and I are enjoying it and I love the idea of having it to leave for my friends and family. Thanks so much for all that goes into the project for the benefit of so many of us.*



### From Diane and Marge

*We were so excited that you were willing to come all this way to see us and we wanted it to be a good experience for you. We very much admire the work you all do and appreciate your efforts to make it here to the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Your visit was the highlight of our year! Even though we didn't know you before the interviews, we consider you part of our lesbian family.*



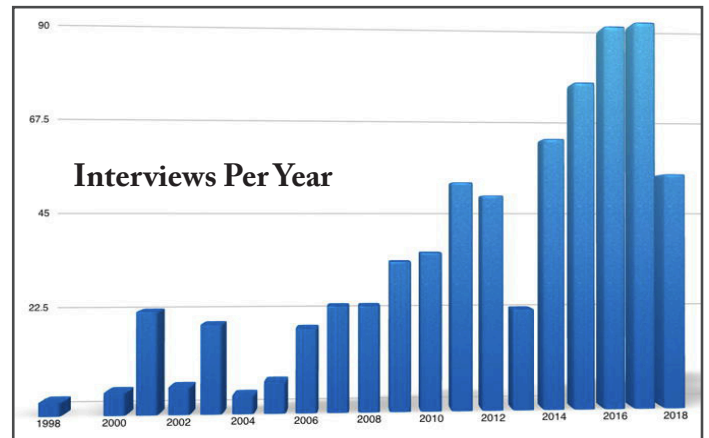
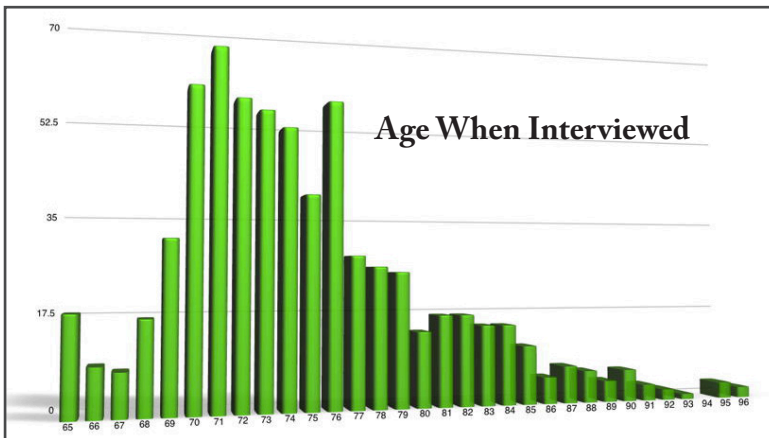
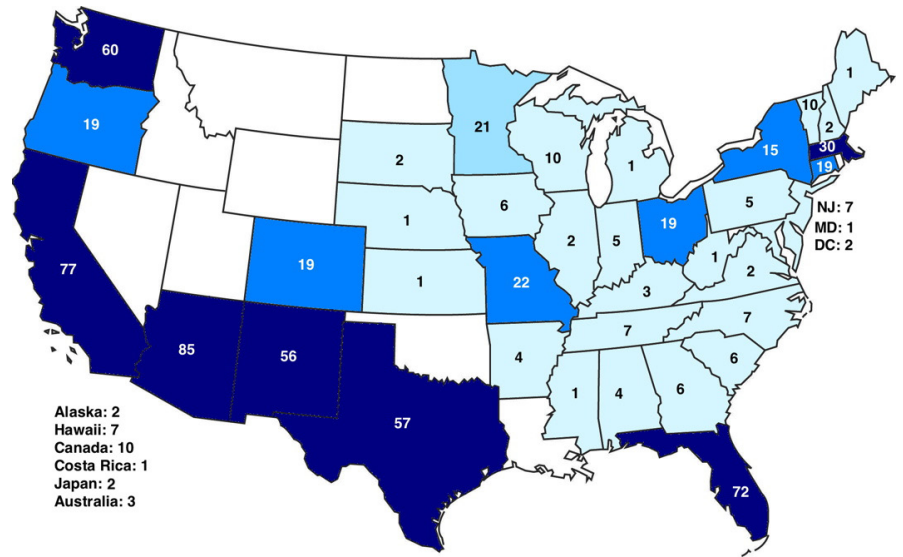
### Note from Betty N.

*I feel so honored to have been interviewed and to have my book. You people are amazing. Thank you!*

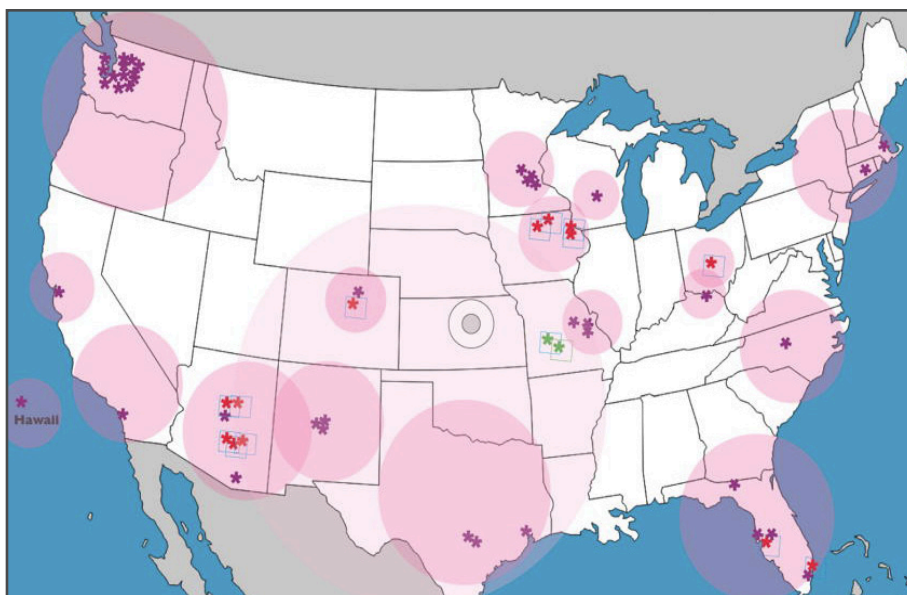


**Where the Women Live**

On the map, we color-coded the states – the darker in color, the more interviews we’ve done there. We’ve added numbers that indicate how many interviews we have done in that state. If you find yourself wondering why certain states seem to have so many interviews, it can be because that’s where so many women have retired, but it’s also because those are places where we have really active interviewers. And the states that are blank? It’s not that there aren’t any old lesbians there... it’s that we have yet to find them!



The green chart illustrates the age of the women when they were interviewed, the most common age being 71 and the oldest being 96. Of those 65 and younger, most of them are our interviewers. We ask that they share their stories as well. The blue graph shows how many interviews were conducted each year. Yes, you read that right... 75 interviews were done in 2015, 88 in 2016 and 89 in 2017. These amazing numbers were largely a result of holding three group trainings of new interviewers and having them jump in with both feet!



**All About Interviewers**

Pink areas in the map show where we have interviewers available. A few travel on a regular basis and are often willing to help cover areas where an interviewer isn’t readily available. Who are they, and how many have they done? Arden has done 300+ interviews! Two others, Chris P and Elizabeth B, have done another 100+ between them. Collectively, there are 35 more active interviewers...they’ve done another 300. That’s a whole lot of women doing a lot of listening and a whole lot of work and we love them all!!!







## Interviewing and Interviewers

From the beginning, Arden had hoped that other women would be interested in conducting interviews for the Project. To that end, Arden worked for years with individual women who had wanted to give it a try, explaining how she wanted it done. Despite her valiant efforts, she ended up doing 93 of the first 100 interviews herself. Fast forward a decade: It turned out that Arden was not wrong in expecting others would join in, she was just a bit ahead of the game. During this past year or so, the numbers have almost flipped with other women doing the majority of the interviewing. Arden is still in the game, but now she's not having to handle that aspect of the Project alone. Who is doing the rest of the interviewing? The Project has 35 women actively interviewing right now. There are also a handful of others available if needed, and several new women getting ready to come on board. Some interviewers do a story every now and then — others tackle a dozen or more each year.

### Notes From a Few of Our Interviewers

#### A Note from Dana R.

*It was my privilege to be interviewed by Arden before my interviewers' class in 2016, and I was impressed by how much information she got out of me with seemingly very little effort. I know that it takes much practice to become a skilled interviewer and that she was, indeed! She also very unobtrusively made herself some notes of areas where the two of us have some commonalities, which she only mentioned to me after the interview process was finished in order to avoid interrupting the flow of my story. That was a tip that I learned from her as a bonus!*



Above: Charlotte, Donna, Carolyn and Arden

#### From Donna and Carolyn

*We met Arden and Charlotte in Madison at the interviewers' training in June of 2016. While traveling through Texas in March of 2017, we thought we might try to catch up with them for lunch or dinner when we got to Houston. Instead of just a lunch, they picked us up from our RV site and took us for a day-long tour of their favorite places in Galveston. They made us feel like we've been life-long friends. We are very proud to know these amazing women.*



Above: Gloria S. on the right, interviewing Eris

#### Gloria's Thoughts

*The stories are wonderful and it is such an honor to be able to hear so many of these stories. Looking at the overall experience of interviewing, what I am left with is the profound trust women are willing to have with me, to tell me about some of the most intimate experiences of their lives. That touches me deeply.*

#### From Marcia P. (Sadly, Marcia died in 2017)

*The OLOHP means the world to me. I have had the opportunity to listen to lesbians older than I who have had challenges and celebrations – lives in and out of the*



*closet – found camaraderie, confidence and validation for being who they are. Through the OLOHP they have been able to emerge from invisibility and have their voices not merely heard but archived for generations to come, generations who otherwise would hardly remember or may not even know how it was.*

## Notes From a Few More of Our Interviewers

### *A few words from Ann N.*

*In thinking about the anniversary issue: I came to the project because, as an oral historian, I had done plenty of interviews in various communities, but never my own. This was an opportunity to interview fellow older lesbians about their lives and see for myself the diversity, hardship and survival skills, as well as the joy many developed to weather life in the mid to late 1900's. I often felt overwhelmed by their stories, and their voices continue to resonate in my brain as I go about my own life and struggles. And I am honored to be part of our work. The intimacy created when one person tells their life story to another, when one woman tells another, when one lesbian tells another is like no other, and in the latter case I feel parts of their story are firmly imprinted on my brain to join my own life stories. Am I a better and stronger person with all these linked experiences? I better be! Certainly a more thoughtful and kind person, I hope.*



### *Thoughts from Mary H.*

*I've been lucky. In addition to interviewing on my own, I was able to be a part of two interviews Arden was doing, help Gloria with another, and do a handful with Margaret. Despite being one of those people who can get up in front of any size audience and not be the least bit anxious, I've tended to be nervous about each interview. However, once I get myself there, chat a bit with the woman, settle in and get the recorder running, I find myself wondering why I worried about it at all! Part of the genius of the OLOHP is that the interviewers are old lesbians as well. Even when you are talking with someone you didn't know before that day, chances are you've had some similar experiences, and even when you haven't, you can relate to what the woman is sharing. As a bonus, for me, working with the Project and interviewing has given me a much deeper understanding of my own life. I love it.*



Mary interviewing Sandra



### *From Joy F.*

*Arden and the women who work with her believe deeply that we can't wait for others to document our lives; we have to do it ourselves, and they act on that belief. I have been inspired by them and the generous women I have interviewed.*



### *Thoughts from Barb K.*

*Though I've known of the Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project since its inception, I've been interviewing only a few years. My interviews are wide-ranging, as I'm sure they are for all interviewers. Among them: a therapist specializing in transgender folk, an award-winning Blues singer/songwriter, a Rabbi, an ex-nun, and a couple celebrating 65 years together in July 2018. How can one be that fortunate!? Arden often says: "We fall a bit in love with each woman we interview." It is true; I have lovely new lifelong friends, and a new partner! Thank you, Arden, for granting me the privilege of meeting wonderful women, and the honor of finding my life mate. I am twice in your debt!*

### *From Judi F.*

*For me, being a part of OLOHP is a continuation of the circle of women that is ever growing and inclusive. The web that we weave is larger and stronger than we could imagine. Aspects of the Project that I really cherish are the personal connection that occurs for the interviewer, and the validation of the interviewee; that all our lives are important to others to whom we may not even know we are an inspiration; and that all of our stories are inspirational. That's just a titch of how I feel about OLOHP, and am forever grateful to women like us who keep fanning the flames.*







***A note from Sharon C.***

*I had been involved in gathering lesbian history in St. Louis for some time and was so excited to find a national organization like OLOHP. In the summer of 2016, I was able to join other OLOHP women from all over the country for an interviewer training in Madison. It was such an honor to be part of that training and to actually meet Arden in person. By then, she had become quite a history superstar in my mind and meeting her was such a privilege. The best part was that I got to do a practice interview of Arden and find out a little more about her. I am so proud to be part of this group and inspired by the work she started and that we can all collectively continue.*

***From Betsy T.***

*I love lesbians who love other lesbians, especially old lesbians. Therefore I love Arden. For at least the last 20 years she has focused with tenderness, acceptance and courage on women who normally are completely invisible, if not reviled. Thanks to her, for the first time in history, our stories are being told. Hundreds of stories. And they are being saved. They are going to help the world of the future know us, appreciate the particular difficulties we faced, see the contributions we made – see us as we really were and are. This is a gift to the future and something to be very proud of. Thank you.*



***From Sherry and Ruth***

*Your gift of the OLOHP to the Lesbian Community is and has been remarkable. Thank you so much for all you do.*

***A Note from Aganita***

*I was, myself, interviewed in the fall of 2011, when I was 71 years old. Sometime, I believe in 2015, I began as a regular transcriber for the Project. I have transcribed more than 200 interviews. I have also helped assemble the books, inserting photos and documents where they fit in the story and binding the books together. Being a part of so many aspects of the Project before I began doing some of the interviews gave me a unique perspective – as a transcriber, I have listened to lots of interviewers and learned from them. I consider it a great privilege to be associated with so many aspects of this great project. I have learned so much from the women whom I have interviewed, those whose stories I have transcribed, and those whose words I have read in presentations. Every story brings new knowledge and perspective. Thank you Arden and everyone else for keeping OLOHP going.*



***Margaret, the Reluctant Interviewer!***

*They say it's important to know your strengths as well as your weaknesses. I work with almost every aspect of the OLOHP, and have come to realize that doing the actual interviews isn't really my forte. That doesn't mean I haven't enjoyed those that I've done – I have. In fact, I consider almost everyone I've interviewed a friend now. At odd times, I find myself wondering what they are up to, concerned about any troubles they might have. Having read hundreds of transcripts done by dozens of interviewers, it was clear most everyone does a better job of it than I do! My problem is keeping my mouth shut. It takes a certain amount of discipline to keep yourself out of the interview. You need to ask questions, listen carefully, realize what hasn't been said and try to gently bring that out, and more. So I interview now and then, but defer to others when possible. That's not to say I haven't loved interviewing... it's essential... it's tricky... it's challenging... it's rewarding... and it's fascinating!*



## Messages from Some of our Transcribers

*Whenever I transcribe an interview, I feel an amazing bond with the person interviewed. By the time I finish Llyn's life story, she will seem like family!*

*Oh wow! Oh wow! Oh wow! I have learned so much from hearing this story. I found myself Googling all kinds of stuff and expanding my knowledge. Her story is so interesting. I felt like I was right there with her, listening to her talk. What a woman!*

*I wanted to share with you how much it means to me to have a part in preserving these women's stories. Transcribing tonight, these lines brought me to tears: "What I didn't realize was, if you aren't authentically able to present yourself – I'm not talking about pride or anything like that – if you're not authentically able to live who you are, what you are, it does something to you deeply."*

*I am totally abashed. I thought when you said you could transcribe 10-12 minutes of recording in an hour that you must be really slow or distracted by cartoons on TV! But I just spent more than two hours actually transcribing and I am only at 00:16:44. Like I said.....abashed.*

*I wanted to share that this interview never stops coming at you. I so enjoyed, learned from, and appreciated hearing Paij tell her rich story. I am ready for another!*

*Attached is the transcription for Ruth. I so enjoyed hearing this interview because so many things she said resonated with me! I'm so happy to be connected to this project.*

*Working on this interview last night, I was reminded about why I love doing this transcribing and how much it means to me. I remember vividly the first interview I transcribed, as if the woman were a friend, and I imagine I'll feel the same way about each. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it.*

**"Alone, we can do so little. Together, we can do so much." Helen Keller**

### ***When it comes to volunteers, "we are grateful" is an understatement!***

Volunteers make the OLOHP so much more than it would be without them. Janice, who created several hundred of the title pages, was probably the first to volunteer her time on an ongoing basis, but she wasn't the last. The Project would never have been able to accomplish all that it has without help from dozens of women. We've featured three, but there are many more. When all is said and done, the only task not done solely by volunteers is transcribing. A few are donated, but even with those who are compensated, they often given us a break on their fees. The OLOHP has been built upon, and thrives on, a love for the women whose stories we are preserving.

#### ***Janice Lee Ives***

*I became involved with OLOHP back in 2000. One day Arden and I were at the same place and since she knew I had a computer, she asked if I had a scanner. I proudly said yes – I had just gotten it, thinking I needed every available electronic machine known to women. She explained a little as to what she needed: A picture to be scanned and put on a page, added to some details about when and where an interview had taken place, thus creating a title page. I agreed. That first one was for Helen Cathcart, a friend from our own community, who was born in 1918! By 2014, I had created at least 245 title pages. (Actually it was more than that, because sometimes I had to make more than one, either a mistake by me or an incorrect date given to me.) It was fun, and I enjoyed doing it, and I feel a sense of pride in helping Arden achieve her goal of producing a printed history with pictures of so many outstanding women in this world.*



***Gloria S. and Nan C., posing with the fruits of their day-long labors. They assembled and bound Herstories that were ready to go, and put together copies of the Guide for OLOHP Interviews, among various other tasks.***



## The Mechanics of a Herstory

In case you're curious, these are some of the steps taken when working on every Herstory... of course, this skips over training interviewers, having recorders available, providing the needed paperwork (contracts, etc.) as well as a few dozen other necessities!



- Outreach:** identify woman willing to participate in the Project
- Arrange the interview:** connect with an interviewer and agree on details (when, where, etc.)
- Interview:** travel to the location and conduct the interview; come back if needed
- Gather support documents/photos:** encourage submission of photos, certificates, articles, etc.
- Scan and/or submit supports:** either scan on-site, or package them to mail for Project to scan/return
- Submit recording and paperwork:** transmit (typically via Dropbox) audio, contract, scans, etc.
- Transcribe audio:** as soon as possible, audio is sent to a transcriber
- Format transcript, send to interviewer:** once transcribed, it is formatted and sent to the interviewer for review
- Review transcript, send to interviewee:** once reviewed, transcript is sent to the women who shared her story
- Edit and return transcript:** woman sharing her story makes any additions or deletions, returns it
- Format support documents/print:** photos and other support docs are formatted, captioned, printed
- Final review of transcript, print:** transcript reviewed, final questions for clarifications, then printed
- Create title page, print:** photos and basic information laid out, creating a title page
- Integrate support docs with transcript:** support docs are inserted where appropriate throughout the transcript
- Assemble two copies of all elements:** two of everything assembled; one set is comb bound
- Package and send out Herstory:** final copy of Herstory mailed (or delivered) to the interviewee  
second copy is prepped to go into the archives

What are some of the other necessities it takes to make the Project work? Keeping track of each story and where it is in the process is a significant undertaking! But we also stay busy with various tasks such as working with transcribers and interviewers to make sure they have their questions answered, and the equipment and forms they need. Then there is the newsletter, brochures, database, presentations, archiving, indexing, filling orders for books/DVD, ..... we're pretty sure you get the picture!

## Money, Money, Money... and Lots of Support

### *How is All This Funded?*

Probably the most amazing part of this whole effort to save our histories is that the Project is done on a shoe-string. Arden has always insisted: "No woman is charged to participate. By sharing her story, she is already making a contribution." At the very beginning, Arden paid for everything out of pocket. As the Project increased in scope, the need to reach out for support increased also. From early on, OLOC has been a significant supporter, raising money on behalf of the Project. Although we have received a few small grants along the way, and a few large donations, the OLOHP has focused on seeking out direct donations of money and lots of donations of time and talent. We've estimated that we incur \$750 in direct costs for each Herstory, and two-to-three times that amount in indirect costs. We are pleased and proud to say that when we've asked, donors have responded.

### *The Other O Organization, OLOC*

First came OLOC, Old Lesbians Organizing for Change...then came the OLOHP, the Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project. Similarity in names and acronyms, and overlap in constituency and interests, has caused endless confusion. Both are important vital organizations – but they are separate non-profit organizations! OLOC has long been a supporter of the OLOHP, helping the OLOHP with outreach and generously raising some of the funds needed to do this Project. Ruth, pictured on the right, serves in the leadership of OLOC and on the Board for the OLOHP.



As Sally Tatnall, a co-director for OLOC, wrote in the most recent newsletter, "The two organizations continue to stand together to advance the visibility and importance of Old Lesbians and to recognize the valuable contributions we have made to the world." Well said.

## The OLOHP Insider: A Series of Lessons Learned

There are things that happen in life that seem to come about with the sole purpose of teaching a lesson, and this was one of them for Margaret. The Project's first book, *A Gift of Age*, had recently been released and we were already fielding questions about when the next volume would be coming out. Giving birth to the initial book had been an arduous, time-demanding process, and for Margaret, the thought of doing it all again felt overwhelming.



When the opportunity presented itself, Margaret floated the idea of starting a newsletter for the Project instead of doing another book. "A newsletter could be designed to share the same information we would put into another book, only do it in a series of smaller bites."

Here is where the lesson came in for Margaret: Make sure you state your case clearly! The key words in the proposal had been "instead of." So when Arden's side of the conversation quickly took a turn towards adding a newsletter to the mix... in addition to another book, not instead of it... Margaret found her head nodding yes. In full disclosure, she has to take some of the responsibility since when it comes to Arden, Margaret seems to lack the ability to say "No."



Within a couple of months, an inaugural issue of *The OLOHP Insider* had made its debut and work was underway on book number two. Nine years and a couple of dozen issues later, Margaret will concede it was the right move to make. *The OLOHP Insider* has been a fun and effective way to keep in touch with supporters of the Project and introduce the Project to newcomers. It's one aspect of our work we hope to continue for years to come.

### Lessons Two and Three

How we managed to go from Issue 18 to Issue 20 without a stop in between for Issue 19 is a mystery, and a bit embarrassing, given that we all made it through first grade math without a problem. Even sadder – we somehow managed to remain oblivious to our goof in numbering for more than two years!

In an effort to better manage various aspects of our work and avoid having several deadlines pile up on us at once, we set target dates (months) for getting each issue out. For years it was February, May, September and December. But even with it clearly marked on our schedules, we struggle to stay on track. More often than not, when we did send out a new issue, we found ourselves adding a note, apologizing

for having it go out at the last minute, or even a bit later than the issue was dated.

What lesson did we learn from our failure to number our issues correctly and get it out on the month it was due to go out? The header no longer says "May 2015 Issue 27." It now says something like, "#37... 3<sup>rd</sup> Issue for 2017." We also learned to cut ourselves some slack! Whether we get an issue out a bit early, or several weeks late, the world will keep on spinning away... so relax.

### One Other Thing The Insider Taught Us

*The Insider* also addressed a need we had not anticipated. When we heard of the death of a woman from the Project, we wanted a way to share that information with others. The newsletter was a way to do just that. By sharing their stories with the Project, each of these women gave us a tremendous gift, a gift we wanted to acknowledge yet again. We don't always hear about a death, but when we do, we'll share that with you in the newsletter, and we are planning to add a section about the losses to our website too.

Example of newsletter feedback:  
*Thank you for continuing to send this. I always pass your newsletters on to other social workers and public health professionals in our state. Thank you so much for all you do. Patric*



## The Story of the OLOHP and its Two Books

Almost before the first handful of interviews had been completed, people who knew what Arden was doing started asking how they could read the stories. Taken aback, Arden starting thinking about how that might be done. Being the one who was conducting almost every interview, Arden felt that, without exception, the stories were fascinating, but that reading a lengthy transcript probably wasn't the ideal way for others to experience the woman's story. Interviews wander, thoughts are often incomplete... a woman might be talking about high school in one breath and retiring in the next, then going back to having her first child. So Arden started to think maybe putting together a book might be the answer. A friend expressed a willingness to explore that idea, but after a year or so allowed that she would pass on that opportunity.

Arden and Margaret e-mail each other almost every day and at one point, Arden mentioned that she still hadn't found anyone who might be willing to tackle a book for the Project... but she didn't ask! After waiting a while, Margaret cautiously, and quietly, typed that maybe she'd be willing to give it a try. She didn't want to pressure Arden and presume upon their friendship or risk their working relationship. To make sure Arden understood it was okay to turn her down, Margaret said she was asking in a tiny voice. The e-mail reply started, "Good morning, tiny voice. I'm so happy you made yourself known."

*In collecting these stories, the OLOHP has shown extraordinary integrity and intellectual honesty. Oral history is intrinsically subjective. It is no small thing to so gracefully honor the narrator's perspective.*

Ann Birnbaum

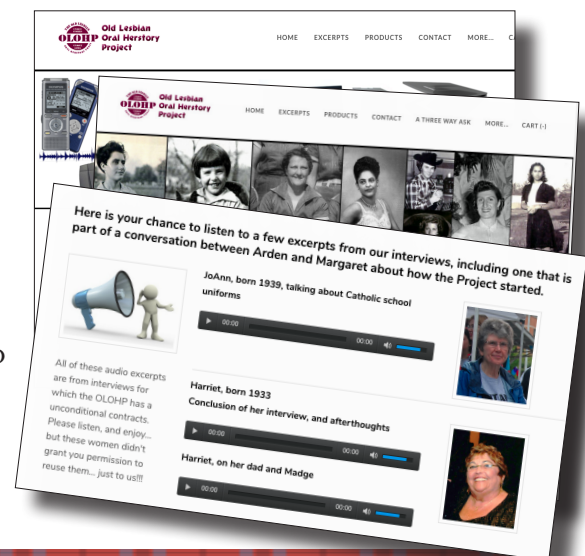
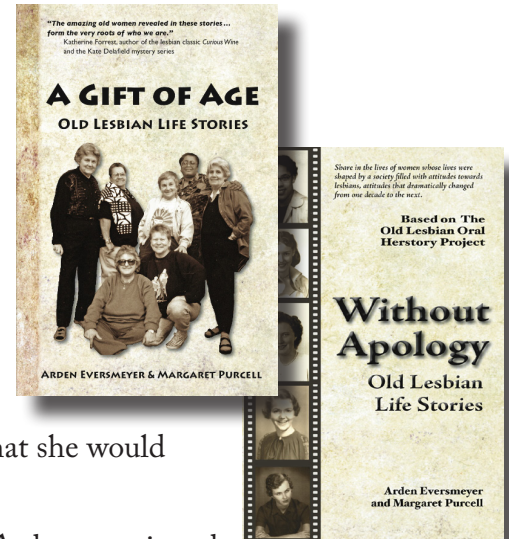
Another two years and a few thousand e-mails later, Arden and Margaret had co-authored their first book, *A Gift of Age*. Before the ink was even dry on it, Arden was repeatedly having to field the question, "When is the next book due out?" Another two years and a few more thousand e-mails and the second book, *Without Apology*,

was released. The most common suggestion we received after the first book was that readers wanted to know even more about each woman, so while both books contain the same number of stories (23), the second is much longer. Both books are available via our website.

Writing the books was a great experience, and there are, without question, plenty of reasons to do another. For now, we had to make a decision. In order to make time, we'd need to slow way down on interviewing and other aspects of the Project, and for now, we feel continuing to gather and preserve the stories takes precedence. That's not to say we won't venture into book-writing once more, but for now, that's on the back burner.

## Please Visit [www.olohp.org](http://www.olohp.org)

Some would say it might behoove us to take advantage of outside resources, but we tend to stick to the "I can do it myself" way of thinking. So when it became clear we needed a much more extensive and snazzy website, we took on the challenge and managed to learn enough to do just that ourselves. If you haven't already done so, take a few minutes to visit the site. We have some ideas on how we'd like to add additional information and create a new area or two – they are on our to-do list, which tends to be a mile long! If you have ideas, send them to us. While on the site, be sure to visit the page where you can listen to a few snippets of actual interviews. You'll also find you can access all the back issues of the *OLOHP Insider* and sign up to have new issues sent directly to you. Of course, there is a place to buy our books and DVD!



## We Love Doing Presentations

The Project has done a host of presentations over the years. In fact, Arden has been heard to say, “Don’t get me started! I can talk about the Project ad nauseam.” Most of us in the OLOHP can do that, too. Up until 2011, presentations followed a typical format – someone telling the listeners about what we do, and how we do it, with a bit of question and answer time at the end. Sometimes a few visual aids or handouts were employed, other times it was a group discussion like the one pictured on the right where Edie and Jackie talked about the Project with students and faculty at Smith College.



In 2011, interviewer Marcia Perlstein flexed her creative muscles by sandwiching bits of information about the Project between excerpts taken from some of the Herstories. That first presentation employing this new format included a dozen old lesbians on stage taking turns reading the excerpts. The impact was amazing. The audience was fully engaged, listening intently, nodding as they recognized the truth in what they were hearing, laughing at times, and wiping away tears at others. Feedback from the women reading the excerpts made one thing very clear – the readers themselves were deeply moved and honored to participate. Taking it one step further, we sometimes personalize the experience even more by inviting a few people (young, old, straight or not) from the audience to join our readers.

Recognizing how effective the new format was, we began tweaking and adapting it to fit a variety of situations, filling it out by adding projected images of the women whose words we are sharing. Presentations range from Arden talking to a handful of interested folk to a troupe of nine women reading excerpts from 40 Herstories for an audience of 180. We view giving the presentations as a way of sharing the incredible stories that have been entrusted to us.

### *On Being a Reader, by Ellen K.*

*I've been interested for what seems like years now in participating in an OLOHP reading event. My schedule never seemed to permit it, but at the 2015 National Women's Music Festival, I got my chance. We received scripts at breakfast, just a few hours before the workshop. Would I be familiar enough with my part to be able to look up and engage with the audience? No worries; parts were small, as was the room (making voice projection easy). The room was filled, and the audience very attentive.*

*It felt so rewarding to be the voice of one of our sisters, and to have that snippet of an experience from the past so fully appreciated, not to mention my own feeling of relating to the part I was reading. I'm eager to participate again, anytime I'm asked.*



### *From Hazel W.*

*We readers – we're being the voices for these women who came up at a time when it was dangerous to live their lives. Because society wanted to erase them, punish them and silence them. So it took courage for them just to be themselves. Now, they're sharing their stories with all of us.*

*I was a transcriptionist, and in their stories, I would recognize so much of my own story, over and over and over again. Now, as a reader, I feel like I'm telling my own story. It gets to me sometimes. I get really emotional, because the stories these women are telling are so personal.*

*It's very uplifting to know that now they can tell their stories, and be open with who they are. We get to be their voices, as it were, and speak for them.*





Here are a few excerpts that have been parts of a recent presentation. These are relatively short pieces – during actual presentations, readings range from 50 words to 850 words. No matter how many we include, and how long they are, the audience always wishes there were more – and we agree!

*We had purges back in those days. Kids would leave campus on weekends. And on Monday morning, people who should be there were not. On the weekend, they would have been packed up, moved out and sent home. Because somebody said...that somebody said. It didn't take proof. All it took was somebody that said somebody had done something. As many as 50 women disappeared in one weekend my freshman year. You had to be so careful.*

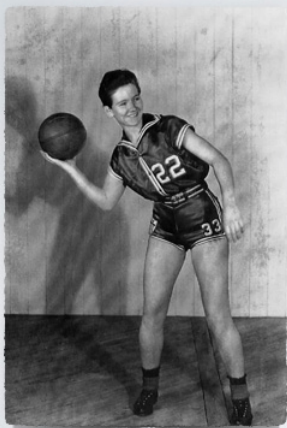


**Arden, born 1931**



**Interviewed at 61 and 75**

*When the party was all over, and everybody was getting ready to go home, she was still at the door, and she's not making any move to go anywhere. Anyway, I finally realized to myself, "She is going to kiss me." I am standing there thinking, "Now what?" I closed my eyes. "Just shut up and close your eyes." That was my coming out.*



**Helen,  
Interviewed  
1998 at age 80  
Born 1918**



**Annalee**

**Interviewed 2006 & 2013  
at age 79 & 86  
born 1927**



*I didn't know the word 'lesbian' until I was fifty! During my adolescence, I fell in love with my best friend, Marilyn. I followed her like a little puppy dog. She and I spent a lot of time together. I followed her everywhere. If Marilyn wanted me to do this or that, that was fine. I knew that I had feelings for her, and I didn't understand what they were at that juncture. I just knew that they were not to be talked about. And I didn't know the words with which to talk about them. I never told her anything about my feelings until we were forty years old.*

**Harriet,  
Interviewed  
2009 at 76,  
born 1933**



**Harriet on right with Madge,  
the love of her life, at one of  
the four times they have  
married each other!**

*I was married to men twice. I could never compare those two to my relationship with Madge. There's just something... I love my life now. I love having been granted the awareness of my lesbianism, of my sexuality. It's a gift... not a curse.*



## Sample of Excerpts Read at Presentations



**Charlotte**



**Interviewed 2000  
at age 70  
born 1930**

*I always had a couple of girlfriends in school. I'd have the best looking girlfriends ... even better looking than the football players had. But even at 14 or 15, I'd have a special friend at school. We'd walk back and forth to school together. Then one day they'd come to school 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 say 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.*

*I went through a whole lot of changes during my life. I went through a whole lot of guilt about my feelings about loving women. I ran from it for a long time. I think the best way I can put this ... is to say it took me a long time to realize that there's nothing wrong with what I feel. There's nothing wrong with loving a woman.*



**Ocie**



**Interviewed 2003  
at age 77  
born 1926**

*By the time I was 13 or 14, I knew there was something seriously wrong with me. I was not like other girls. I knew it was serious. Isn't that strange, how you know not to talk about it? That was instinctive. "I'm not telling anybody about this."*



**Interviewed 2015  
at age 76  
born 1939**



**Betty**



**Interviewed 2016  
at age 76  
born 1939**



**Judy**

*I realized that there was nobody I could really talk to about it. So, I went to the library, and I got lucky. The books weren't negative at all.*

*When I got through about half of the first book I was reading, it was like a light went on inside and outside of my whole body. They talk about spiritual experience – that was one for me. It was such an overpowering gift of freedom. I stood up..... I put the book down..... I walked to the mirror..... and I said, "Now, I know who I am. Now I know." I didn't know where to go with it from there, except my heart was beating. I was so excited. I was happy. I was pulled out of that depression – like I had vomited out all of the crap right there.*



## *The DVD: Our Stories, Our Voices*

Kathy P, who is featured below, deserves the lion's share of the kudos for the OLOHP producing a DVD. We'd been doing live presentations various places when Kathy suggested that if we recorded one, it could be shown in locations we couldn't get to. We gave it a go with home video, but it was clear that wasn't the solution! Undeterred, Kathy reached out to a local university and managed to find the right person, Dr. David Coon at the University of Washington Tacoma. He was not only interested in helping film and video edit, he worked closely with the campus Queer Straight Alliance and got students to help as well.

As with most of the "little" things we get ourselves into, making a DVD became a year-long project involving scripts, graphics, readers, rehearsals, filming, editing, captioning, cover design, development of a Guide to accompany the DVD when it is used in schools, senior centers, and more. The end result made it worth all that time and effort: we now have another useful tool for sharing the amazing information we have gathered and preserved. Copies are available via our website.



## *Archiving Our Work at Smith College*

Doing the work of the Project is one thing – ensuring it will be protected for the future and made available is another. After lots of research and thought, the OLOHP decided Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts was the right fit. The photo above was taken when Arden, Margaret and others visited Smith before making the final decision. About a quarter of our collection has gone there already, and we anticipate sending everything as time allows – we know we need to get with it, but it's hard to carve out time now while we're still actively gathering interviews. It is reassuring to know arrangements are in place and ready when we are.

## *Words from Kathy P...who wears several hats in the Project*

How much of recorded history speaks of WOMEN, our lives, our challenges (linked to misogynistic views of our gender), our achievements, our joys? Not much. Where were the descriptions of the work of women scientists in our biology books? The OLOHP focuses in on a subset of women labeled "sick, disgusting, child-molesters," fired or not hired, threatened into fear and silence – and if we were found out – disowned by family, with our children ripped from our custody. Why? Because we are women-loving-women. We were/are deemed not allowed to live in AWE: authentic, whole, empowered.

Arden and Margaret and the myriad of other OLOHP volunteers who created and continue to grow the OLOHP – for over 20 years now – assure that the Herstories of lesbians born in the first half of the 20th century WILL live on in recorded history. The wisdom and tenacity of OLOHP women made/make it happen: safely and accessibly preserving the stories of lesbian lives in the Smith College archives. And the bonus: the lives of thousands of lesbians (and many others) of all ages are enriched right here and now by the OLOHP books, DVD and Guide, articles, issues of *The Insider* and public readings that allow all of us to sit down in conversation with (so far) 650+ remarkable women: all OLD LESBIANS.

As a coming out group facilitator for 23 years, I speak for the 57-year-old woman who crosses that threshold, taking first steps on her coming out journey: she reads the OLOHP's *Without Apology*, and learns from her courageous foremothers and from other group women, that she is not alone. As an interviewer, transcriber, editor and presenter/reader, I am personally thankful in my own life for the gift, the legacy, of the OLOHP and its amazing women.







1933



1940



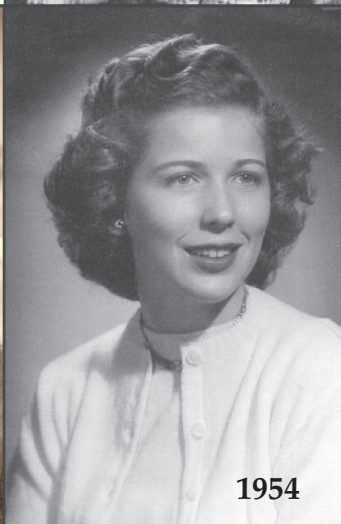
1946



1948



1949



1954



1965



1978

## From Arden...

Twenty years. WOW! Who would have thought then what the Project would become today? It all started because some of the women in a local women's group here in Houston were dealing with life-challenging issues. An unsuccessful effort was made to get "mini" bios to keep a record. Determined these women's stories would not be lost, I learned about oral history work.

In 2004, while visiting Mary and Margaret, they expressed their interest in participating in the Project. That took the Project to a different level.

I loved doing what I was doing – traveling, meeting these wonderful old women and doing interviews. M&M started coming to Houston for a few weeks in the winter, and we would go to Washington to spend time with them in July. Inevitably, at some point in each visit, Margaret would say, "By the way Arden..." That was my signal that something new was going to happen. Margaret is a visionary. We incorporated the Project and applied for a 501(c)(3) status, something I had put off for years. Then came *A Gift of Age*, our first book. It was quickly followed by *The OLOHP Insider* and a second book, *Without Apology*. Along the way, we developed an extensive *Guide for OLOHP Interviewers*, hosted a four-day symposium honoring the Project, held classes to train new interviewers, and began archiving the fast-growing collection. All the while, I continued to travel, sometimes as many as ten trips a year, doing presentations at book stores, conferences, colleges, and organizations – and doing more interviews.

The years have flown by. We have weathered two hurricanes that flooded our home. I have survived two serious health challenges and I lost my Sweet Charlotte this year. But I am doing well, and have recorder - will travel. What a great life I have had.



Charlotte and Arden, 2008



## Friendship and Loss: A Double Edged Sword

Ask any of the Project's interviewers and volunteers what has surprised, and pleased, them the most about being involved in the work that they are doing and they're likely to tell you a version of this: *We not only get to spend time with some incredible women, but we always come away caring about women we may have just met for the first time the day we did the interview. Often, true friendships are formed and nurtured for years to come. And when we interview someone we already know, the interviewing process strengthens the existing relationship as well.*

Early in the Project, Arden became aware of this dynamic, the connection that forms when hearing these women's stories. "After having interviewed several women, I came home and asked Charlotte, 'Is it okay that I fall a bit in love with each of them?' In true form, Charlotte gave me a sly smile and said, 'As long as you don't bring them home with you.' Looking back, I have to laugh. Over the years, many of them became good friends to both Charlotte and myself... and they spent time with us in our home!"



*When Arden travels back to an area where she has done interviews earlier, she always makes an effort to continue to build on the friendships by getting together. Sometimes, as in this photo, it makes quite a group. Of those pictured above, Charlotte, Ocie and Vera have all passed now.*

That dynamic actually plays out even further as the interview moves to a transcriber. You may have already heard Margaret talk about her experience, but we'll share it here again. After reading over a hundred of the transcripts, she decided to try her hand at transcribing. "I was shocked at the difference between reading and listening. I didn't make it through the first recording without laughing along

with the voices, having to pause to take a breath because of something I was hearing, and having to stop and wipe away tears. It felt so personal. I felt as if I knew the woman, as if she were a friend of mine." Part of those feelings come from needing to listen very carefully, playing some parts over and over so the transcription will be as accurate as possible. But it's also hearing the woman's voice, with its strengths and frailties. Listening is so different from reading the words. We add parenthetical phrases that will help the reader feel what is being said beyond the actual words... phrases like (both women laughing) or (said through tears)... while that adds to the experience, it can't possibly convey fully what it's like to listen.

The connections don't end there, either. When we do presentations where we read excerpts from transcripts and project images of those women, both the readers and listeners are deeply affected. After hearing only a few minutes of a story, listeners find themselves caring about that woman, and wishing they knew her, or feeling that – in a way – they already do. When we say everyone involved in the OLOHP is positively impacted by it, we mean it.

Which brings us to the inevitable, loss. We knew going in, that with a constituency made up of women in their 70s, 80s, and even 90s, we should have expected some deaths. What we didn't expect was that the Project would continue for 20 years and that that changed the dynamic. Instead of learning about a death now and then, we're learning of a handful of deaths between each quarterly issue of *The Insider*. While each one hurts, it feels like we don't have time to catch our breath of late, with deaths coming one after another. Since the last issue of *The Insider* where we shared news of ten women who had recently died, and there have been eight more, who will be mentioned in the next *Insider* issue.

Tennyson posited, "it is better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all." We agree, it is *absolutely* better. The richness these women have brought into our lives far outweighs the sadness we feel when they leave their bodies. As long as we remember them, they aren't gone. And, in part due to the work of all those involved in any way with the OLOHP (transcribing, donating, interviewing, etc.), these women's valuable stories will be here, preserved for others to read, for ages to come.

## What's Next? What's Left to Do?

Every year, we stop and talk this one over: What's left to do? And every year we've come to the same conclusion, we're not done yet. There are still unique experiences out there that we have yet to gather up. Our goal has always been to document the life stories of lesbians 70 and older, born early in the 1900s. We've made a good dent on that goal, but we know there is more and while we can, we'll continue our effort to gather their stories and honor their lives.

We know part of what makes our documentation useful is being able to compare it with similar stories of lesbians born 20 or 30 years later. Having now spanned 20 years ourselves, the Project is doing just that. We've now interviewed women born as early as 1916 and on the other end of the spectrum, three of our interviewees (who as part of the process were interviewed themselves) were born in the early 1960s. While finding women born in the 20s and 30s is getting more and more challenging, this fall, Arden interviewed two women born in 1921 and 1922.

We'll continue to interview, but we're also shifting our focus a bit away from only gathering towards putting to use what we've learned. We're doing that several ways including working to disseminate our books, DVD, newsletter and such, of course. But we're also working to create an index and abstract of each Herstory to facilitate use of them for research.

We're also increasing our focus on presentations. Based on responses from audiences, the glimpses we share into the lives of old lesbians are moving, and just as importantly, enlightening. We hear from people who say they had no idea women were arrested in bars simply for wearing pants that zipped up the front instead of on the side. Some listeners are horrified to learn we've spoken to women who were subjected to shock therapy to "cure" them of their lesbianism, to women who lost custody of their children for falling in love with another woman, to women who lived unhappy and depressed for decades because they couldn't live who they truly were inside, all the time worried someone might find out they loved women.

So yes, we're not done yet, and we're about as busy as we can be, still loving what we do, and loving the women for whom we do this rewarding work.

## A Personal Note from Margaret

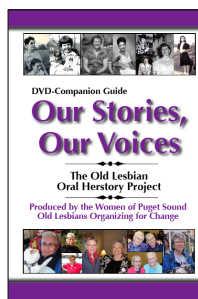
Some things simply bear repeating and this is one of them. As far as experiences go, my life-path intersecting with Arden's is second in significance only to my meeting, falling in love and making my life with Mary. (That's us below, me seated.)



If I had been looking for something new in which to get involved, I wasn't aware of it. Looking or not, it happened. Arden graciously opened the door to the OLOHP and I stepped in. She not only welcomed me in to something unique that she alone had developed, but generously allowed others to be involved as well, nurturing and supporting all of us along the way.

During these years, I've gained a focus that has continued to build. Along with that focus and purpose, I've also gained an unimaginable circle of incredible friends, not the least of which is Arden.

I can't begin to tell you all the things I've learned and experienced while involved in the Project and all the ways it has expanded and enriched my life! Working with Arden and the OLOHP has been, and continues to be, an honor.



## 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!