

The OLOHP Insider

#49, Late December 2021

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project

Life-long Couples



Christine & Nancy



Karen & Nelda



Gerri & Alta

Arden's Musings

I recently spent two weeks in the Puget Sound area, visiting friends, and working with Margaret (the Project manager) on various Herstory-related tasks. We email each other almost daily, and talk on the phone occasionally, but it had been over two years since we'd been together in the same place. At first, the restrictions brought about by the pandemic were okay. I could live with it. But as the months wore on, staying home went from "Well, this is kind of nice," to "I've had enough!"

I'm always amazed at how, at 90 years old, I am still frequently doing things I've never done before. Like so many people, I've begun to Zoom. The trouble is that the tech end of it trips me up at times, but I'm getting there. One of the highlights of the trip was that Margaret reached out to all the interviewers for the Project – they are spread across the country – and set up two Zoom sessions. The first was Thanksgiving weekend, and the second, the next weekend. Not only did I get to see many of the interviewers that I hadn't seen in years, I even got to meet a newer interviewer who had recently joined our ranks. I know, to many of you this may all seem like old hat, but for me, it was a bit mind-boggling that I was able to interact with women from Connecticut to Hawaii, and locations in between, all at the same time.

Having had the opportunity to talk with so many of the interviewers and feel how their love of the Project was still strong was reinvigorating. It's made me want to get back out on the road and do more interviewing myself. While I might actually do that, I can see the value of using Zoom to do interviews when we can't actually be in the same place at the same time. That technology lets us record the interview as if we were sitting across from each other, each being able to see the facial expressions and body language. I've missed being able to meet these incredible women and am determined to get back into it!

Unless the pandemic rears its ugly head again and keeps the conference from happening, I'm going to be a presenter at Queer History South 2022: Archives for All, Y'all! in mid-February in Dallas. Queer History South describes itself as "a vehicle for locating and sharing the rich, but often under-documented, history of southern contributions to LGBTQ history and society." It's a relatively new effort to save our history that I knew nothing about until last month. My goal in presenting will be to make sure they know about not just the OLOHP, but about all the other similar efforts that have been quietly gathering our stories. So I'll present early in the conference, sharing what we do and how we do it, and table the next day in hopes of reaching those who didn't happen to hear me earlier.

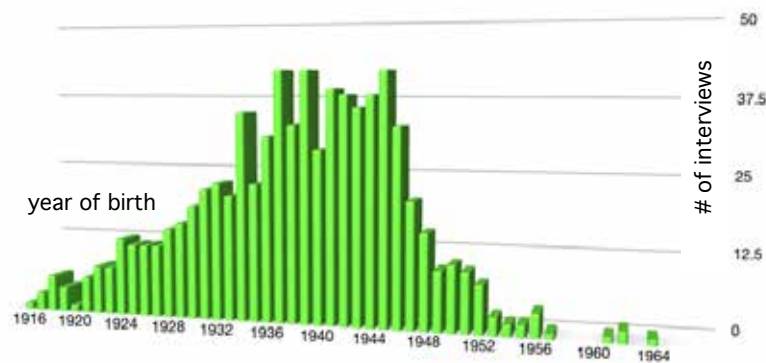
I'm always looking for a chance to share about the Project, and given any encouragement, can talk ad nauseum about it!

Arden

Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians 70 and Older
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Where the Project Stands, By the Numbers

Every so often, we stop to get a snapshot of where we are by the numbers. Overall, we've now conducted just over 775 interviews. Quite an accomplishment, if we say so ourselves!



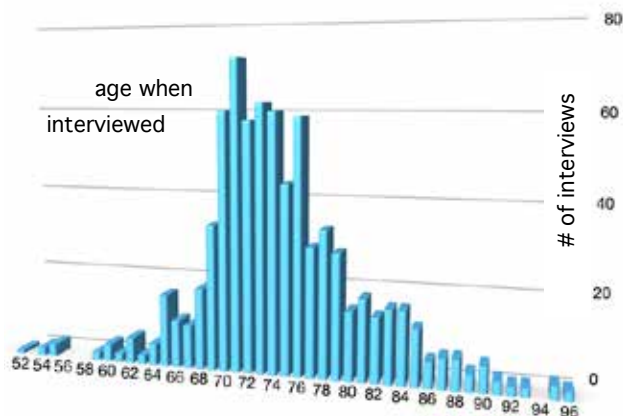
The chart in green represents all the interviews done grouped by the year each woman was born, the earliest being 1916. Helen, born in 1916, was interviewed when she was 84. Most of the younger women on the far right of the chart represent interviewees, a few women whose failing health necessitated interviewing them earlier than the majority.

So where are the 775 now?

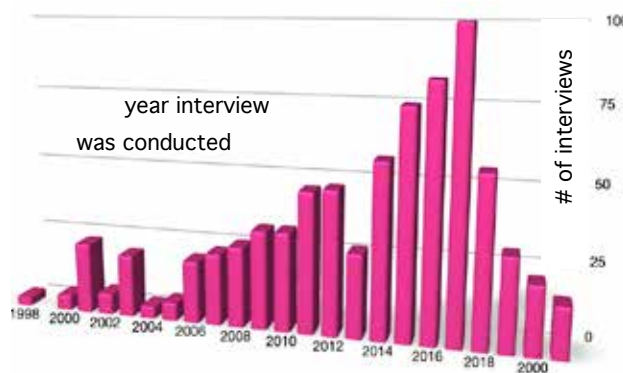
Keeping track of that many women is almost impossible, but we do our best. We know of about 200 women who have passed, and it's likely there are a few that we don't know about. (Periodically, we do what we are able to do to confirm any deaths and update our records.)

Approximately 540 of the 775 Herstories are completed and are either already in our archives at Smith College, or are heading there very soon. The rest of them (~ 235) fall into one of two categories: those still in process and those that will go elsewhere. At least a hundred are still in process. In most of those cases, the woman interviewed is reviewing her transcript, or gathering her photos and other supporting documents. A few Herstories have everything needed completed and are simply waiting on us to get them finalized.

That leaves a significant number of Herstories that won't end up in the collection at Smith – Smith requires a separate deed signed by the interviewee on each Herstory submitted. Unfortunately, there are women we have interviewed with whom we are no longer in contact, or who cannot (or would rather not) sign the paperwork for Smith College, or who never followed through after the initial interview. That last group is an interesting mix – we've come to accept that for some women, simply having their story recorded is all they wanted to do. Those transcripts remain in draft form, and for many of those Herstories, we have no photos or other support materials. We do have OLOHP contracts for them, so they weren't for naught. Those stories will be archived elsewhere, adding to the rich history of lesbians of this era.



The chart in blue represents all the interviews sorted by each woman's age when she shared her story with us. Given that we've always used women 70 and older as our basic guideline, it looks like you'd expect. 72 women were interviewed by the Project at age 71. And 18 women were in their 90s when interviewed.



The magenta chart represents when the Project conducted the interviews. Arden did three that first summer, in 1998, then took 1999 to shepherd them to their completion. The ups and downs in the early 2000s represent Arden's battle with cancer. As the years rolled by, more women volunteered and joined as interviewees and the numbers peaked at 100 interviews conducted in 2017. As you can see, we've slowed since then, but with the help of Zoom, we've kept on going.

We'll Be Playing a Bit of Catch Up

One of the tasks we tackled a few weeks ago was doing what we could to find out if any of the women we'd not heard from, or about, had passed without our knowing it. Unfortunately, with the help of the internet and Google, we found quite a few, more than we could fit into this newsletter. In the next two or three issues, we will do our best to acknowledge each of them.

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



Anna Clementina Vaz, b. 1944

Interviewed in 2011 by Arden — lived in Castro Valley, CA

I was 28. And I was just terribly naive. I had been very protected. I didn't know that there were gay bars. I just was not exposed. And of course all of us were very much closeted in teaching, and of course in physical education. It had been drilled into us that kids were going to get crushes on you, but you handled that accordingly and you were very professional about that.

I finally met a counselor, and we hit it off and suddenly just kind of fell in love. I was still very much into my Catholicism – and so was she– and I had to go to confession. I rehearsed what I was going to say. It was terrifying. At the confessional I said, “I am homosexual.” I had never used the term before. Okay. I said, “I am a homosexual,” and the priest hesitated and he said, “Well, you'll have to avoid the occasion of sin.” And I thought, “What in the ...?” I didn't swear then, but wondered what in the world could that mean. So I thought and decided, “If loving somebody as I do is a sin, I'm going to have to take my chances in hell.”

Harriet Marks-Nelson, b. 1933

Interviewed in 2008 by Arden — lived in Desert Hot Springs, CA

I left the marriage in 1978, and I went back to school and finished. The children were grown, the youngest one in college. I had, by this time, fallen in love with my best girlfriend. I realized that I was lovable, that I was good, and that I was worth something. Loving a woman, and being loved by a woman was an entirely different experience. We used to double-date with our husbands and go to the movies. We'd go out to dinner and do all the suburban nice things and excuse ourselves and go to the powder room to powder our noses. We thought we were the only ones in the world. The only ones that had ever happened to. It was the seventies. The world was understanding gayness, but the gayness that we were seeing (at the gay parade) was outlandish, outrageous. That certainly was not us. We didn't know anybody else like us. But we felt that it was so beautiful that it couldn't be wrong.



(In the photo, that's Harriet on the right with Madge, the love of her life. Madge died recently as well. They'd been together for years, and had married each other several times!)

Kathy Brooks, b. 1939

Interviewed in 2016 by Ann N. — lived in Castro Valley, CA

I started teaching in Women's Studies in Fresno in '73. I helped Lillian [Faderman] the summer she was putting together *Surpassing the Love of Men*. She had been the head of the WS program but stepped down and I was hired to head the program. One summer I was typing some of her things to help her get them to the publisher and I'm reading, and going, “Oh, my god! I didn't know they were lovers.” I had never put two and two together. I had begun to teach in women studies. One day I was teaching class and I realized a set of women that I'd known really well were lesbians! The term lesbian was not part of my life. I was married when I first discovered that I was attracted to a woman. I came to that later in life. Being a lesbian certainly has changed a lot of my friendships and opened a much broader community. It's enriched the way I think.



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Madeline Davis, b. 1940

Interviewed in 2019 by Lamar V. — lived in Williamsville, NY

I remember very well, going into the bathroom, brushing my teeth, washing my face, looking in the mirror and saying, “Oh, my God! You belong here. This is where you live. These people are my people.” I thought that “my people” would turn out to be a group of Jewish people, but they weren’t. They were a group of gay people, and there I was right in the middle of them. I realized, then, that it was women that I was attracted to.



Shirley Ridalls, b. 1931

Interviewed in 2003 by Arden — lived in British Columbia, Canada

I joined the Canadian Forces as a Nursing Sister in 1956 and served for 25 years. It wasn’t safe for lesbians to come out of the closet then. It was safe for me to stay in nursing, and not be adventurous. It had safety written all over it. But when I met my partner, it was pure chemistry. I was fifty years old. It was a revelation.

Pamela Reed, b. 1947

Interviewed in 2017 by Adlai N. — lived in Columbus, Ohio

I came out to my sons and brothers and sisters fairly early in my transition, the first year or so afterwards. I think there was so much shock about me transitioning that they didn’t really think about the fact that it would make me a lesbian.



Jan Secor, b. 1944

Interviewed in 2014 by Gloria S. — lived in Seattle, Washington

Barb and I moved out here partly because we wanted to be more open which meant getting farther away from our families (chuckle). Her family was pretty supportive. My mother chose just not to notice even though I’m sure she knew what was going on – she just refused to believe it was happening.

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.

