

# The OLOHP Insider

#57, April 2024

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project



## *Margaret Checking In*

Once again, we're running a bit later than we had hoped for this new issue of the *OLOHP Insider*. It isn't that we lack for anything to say, or that we haven't been thinking about it -- we've been concentrating on getting closer to being caught up on finalizing Herstories and getting them out to women who have participated in the Project. Time simply seems to get away from us. (In case you have wondered what all is involved in getting a Herstory ready to go, we're including an article about that on the next page.)

It is now almost a year after the date when we said we were going to stop doing new interviews, but as you all know, if you've been reading our newsletters all along, that didn't quite go as planned. We were literally overwhelmed with last minute requests to be a part of the Project. So instead of sticking to our decision to no longer gather new stories so we could concentrate on the ones we were already working with, we morphed into a new decision: We'd go ahead and schedule interviews out into the summer for anyone who had contacted us by that first deadline, even though we couldn't fit them in by then. Working around everyone's availability resulted in our continuing to interview on a regular basis all the way through the rest of the year.

In some ways, we'd like to brag that we did finally reach that milestone. Interviews have slowed way down, but we are still working with a few that we couldn't arrange earlier. Now factor in that we have quite a hard time saying "No," when someone new reaches out to us. The result is that, a year after we thought we were stopping, we are still interviewing several times a month, and expect that's the way it will go for a while yet.

The bottom line is that from our experience, every woman we interview adds a richness and fullness to our collective herstory. You'd think that we might have heard most everything after 900 interviews, but that's not so. There are similarities, of course, and sometimes we even hear a recounting of the exact same happening that another has shared, but when it's told from a new perspective, not only do details often differ, but so do the interpretations and the impact.

So we keep on, tired, and worried about getting it all done, but extremely grateful that these amazing women continue to trust us with their stories.

When a woman being interviewed told Arden she didn't think she had much of a story to tell, Arden replied: *We do. Every single one of us. We are strong, we are independent, we have flourished where others would not have us flourish. So yeah, we all have a good story. We all have a story to tell.*

## *If Only*

It doesn't happen every day, but we do sometimes end up saying "No." Rarely is that ever to a woman willing to share her story. We do occasionally have to turn down other requests that we cannot fulfil. If only we had more time, more energy, more expertise, more assistance, more funding, etc. Then maybe we could help more with a research project, spread the word about someone's new book, participate in a panel, or something else. We do our best and help where we can, but each time, before we answer, we try to remember to ask ourselves this: "If we do this, will it keep us from doing our best in working with the Herstories that are in still in process?"

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

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### *Margaret Says: Please... Help Me Figure This Out!*

I'm hoping that one of you can help me solve a mystery. I took time to do a deep cleaning of my work area last week and found this photo (on the left) hidden under the stand for my computer monitor. It must have gotten separated from a batch of photos someone sent me for their Herstory that I was scanning. I'd like to say it was sometime in the last few months, but given where it was found, it could have gone astray long before that. It is about 2" x 3" and, as it appears here on the left, is a yellowed black and white print. The only markings are on the back of the photo. There are no names, but it does say it was processed on September 30, 1941 in Wilke, Saskatchewan. I'd hoped I could determine who it belonged to by searching my computer files for the keyword Wilke or Saskatchewan, but that didn't work. If you happen to recognize the photo, I'd love to get it back to where it belongs with our apologies.

### *What It Takes to Wrap One Up*

Shepherding each Herstory from beginning to end involves quite a few steps, the last of which comes after we've gotten back any edits from the woman sharing her story as well as any supporting documents, an OLOHP contract, and a signed Smith deed. With those elements in hand, it's our turn. Depending on how busy we are with transcriptions and such, it may be a matter of weeks, or months before we get a chance to put the final book together.

To finalize a Herstory, we do a very quick review of the transcript, looking for typos or layout errors, before printing two copies. Then we go through each of their support documents, looking closely to see if we might be able to do a bit of correction on faded photos, add a bit of sharpness, decrease shadows, fix scratches or a fold mark, and such. Once we've done what we can, we lay the photos and other support materials out, adding any captions supplied to us before printing two sets. Once we've created a title page, we assemble all the pieces in the order needed, comb bind a copy for the woman, package it and get it in the mail.

It sounds rather straight-forward – it's anything but! There are a few that may take only a couple of hours, and there are a few that take several days.

Here is an example of two recent herstories that presented us with a unique challenge. We were working with Barb and Sue, who, over the years, also performed together as The Derivative Duo. We interviewed each of them separately, then the two of them together about the Duo. They were very easy to work with. They scanned and submitted the bulk of their photos and other supports digitally, and also sent us a batch to scan. When it came to finalizing their books, we ended up with three stacks on the table that we referred to as "Yours," "mine" and "ours," doing our best to make sure keep it all straight. We did make one goof, which we were able to fix after the fact, but all in all, it was an interesting and enjoyable undertaking!

### *Sharing A Bit of Feedback*

Right now, lesbians are in position to celebrate our women-loving perspective as never before by being visible - by taking up space in the cultural and political arenas. The Herstories you have gathered through OLOHP are part of a shared determination that the accomplishments and uniqueness of our precious lesbian community will not be disappeared once again as our collective revolutionary impact is being absorbed into and appropriated by mainstream culture and politics.

I am so grateful to be a part of your project, Sisters. Thank you for including me.

Onward and Outward! *Margie*

Doing the transcribing has been a gift in the midst of all of the Covid mess. For a stretch of time I couldn't do it, but when I was able to get back to a little of it, I was happy to remotely revel in the herstory of our amazing lesbian world. I use the internet when I need to go check names, places, etc., to be sure I have the right spelling on things and all. It's led me down some paths I wouldn't have necessarily traveled. Makes me all the more excited that OLOHP exists. What a brilliant endeavor!

With much respect and awe, *Moire*

Thank you so much for the copy of my Herstory Book! I can only imagine how much work it was to assemble this one book among so many. I am honored to be a part of this wonderful project. I was surprised and pleased to see the many pages taken from my website, as well as the links to my papers and materials at the Tretter collection.

All the best to you and all the other women at OLOPH! *Chris*

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

***Bear Dyson , born 1945***

*Interviewed in 2017 by Lamar Van Dyke*

There was an alternative newspaper back then... I can't remember what it was called... but I started picking up copies of it, and there were things in there about lesbians. Parties and where the bars were and that kind of stuff. I started hanging out there, meeting people. Then I heard there was going to be a lesbian event at one of the colleges that was in the LA area, and I went to it, and it changed my life. All these dykes. It was on a university campus... I think it was UCLA, but I can't remember for sure... Some of the big names in the lesbian world at that time were there. I remember there were women that were as butch as me, and beautiful women there. Femme girls that I was interested in because I came out butch. Jesus, my dad. It's his fault, because I know how to drive a nail!



One day I read an article some place about this dyke who had had her kids taken away from her by her husband. He threatened to kill her. These kinds of stories would be coming to us. We all hung out on Capitol Hill. There was a queer community center that some people put together, and I was there frequently. I met all kinds of really interesting, smart, good people. When I heard about this thing where a couple of men had threatened to kill their wives and all that, there were a couple of dykes in Seattle that I was buddies with, who said, "We've got to get out of here." I was so angry about it, just so angry. I went upstairs and I was sitting around thinking about it. I came down the stairs and I said, "We need a Lesbian Mothers Defense Fund, a national defense fund." I talked about what was happening, and I started it. (What I learned about myself is that while I have good ideas and can start things, I am not real good at hanging in there because I move on.)



***Nelda Majors, born 1938***

*Interviewed in 2007 by Arden E.*

I went to Sam Houston when I got out of high school, or graduated high school. I went my freshman year and sophomore year, and my sophomore year I met Karen. She had just started there as a freshman. I met Karen and, actually we were just friends for a long time. In fact, I didn't tell her about me, and you know, she had never been in a relationship. But it was just something that -- it happened. And we've been together ever since. It will be 50 years next March. *Editor's note: Nelda and Karen's 50 year mark was in 2007 - when Nelda died, they had been together more than 65 years.*

***Diane Germain, born 1942***

*Interviewed in 2016 by Elizabeth Berrey*

In those days, on the basketball team, we had little bloomer things you had to wear, really horrible, but after the first year, we were able to wear like real shorts. You know how you have those A shirts with a letter on them or something and we had to wear little blouses underneath. Eventually, we were allowed to wear a tee shirt, instead, so we got a little more masculine, as we went along and more freedom for doing things like that. I loved my jacket, and I loved my letters. It helped me out because, like my mother, I was very depressed with all the things that were going on.



Then I thought I was crazy. I didn't think I was a lesbian. I thought I was crazy. I didn't know lesbians. Crazy, I knew. [Laughs] I thought, "Poor little girls, what they go through. It's sad."

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

**Shaba Barnes, born 1935**  
*Interviewed in 2003 by Arden E.*

We began talking about school when he said, "I know that you have a little boy in you." I was shocked and relieved. I had tried to bury my feelings for women so deep that it was burdensome. When he said that, even before I replied, I felt a relief. I did not deny it. Then he came up with an idea. Folks were after him to marry also, teasing and saying that it is better to marry than to burn. Since he knew my secret, we could marry each other and folks would leave us alone. We worked together, we got along well, he liked my son and he would be a good husband to me.

I surprised myself because I did not deny that what he was saying had some validity to it. I said that I would think about it. I was at the stage where I wanted another baby, I wanted a girl child. He was very popular. I thought that it would be good for the both of us. I later said yes.

He went to fight with Castro in Cuba. When he came back to the States about a week before I had the baby, the love I thought I had for him was gone, but I was determined to make the most of this marriage. Muslims did not believe in separation or divorce. I did not want to disappoint my family anymore. So here I was, taking care of the house and children by day, working at night. He began to mistreat me.

I was constantly tired. I began to stand up for myself. We started arguing and once he slapped me. That was the last straw. I hit him back. I pushed him down the stairs. He wasn't badly hurt. I knew what I had to do. He left the house one morning. When he returned, I was gone.

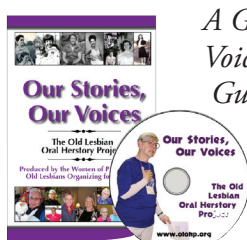
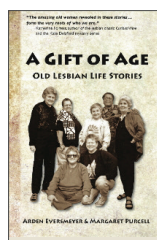
By then, my father had died and my mother was worried about me. One day my butch cousin called and said she was coming by to visit. I remember being afraid of her when I was a child. She did not look like the women I knew. She smoked, drank, talked loud, said bad words, wore tee shirts like men and pants. I had not seen her for many years, except at my father's funeral so I thought it was odd. She bought a bottle of Mogen David wine, the kind we drank at Passover. She spent the entire weekend with me. At first we talked about my dad, then other



members of the family. I fixed a nice dinner, she played with the children. I was enjoying her company. I began to lighten up.

The next day she told me the purpose of her visit. My mother had called and told her that she thought it was time for her to have that talk with me. My father had asked her to be there for me when I needed her. My mother and father both knew that I was a Lesbian long before I could even grasp at such a concept. All of these years, I had suppressed my feelings and covered it up with situations that victimized me. My cousin also shared with me the other members of my family who had Lesbian relationships. I could not believe it. As I looked back in retrospect, I remembered them and their special friends.

She did introduce me to one of her friends. She was the same age as my cousin so she was much older than I was. My entire persona changed. No longer was I the Muslim housewife and mommy. There was no mistaking me now for the life I was leading. I was free. Of course, it pained my mother to witness this metamorphous but she stuck by me.



*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](http://www.olohp.org)*

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

