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The Lesbian Herstory Archives

Polly Thistlethwaite

The roots of the Archives lie in the silenced voices, the love letters destroyed, the pronouns changed, the diaries carefully edited, the pictures never taken, the euphemized distortions that patriarchy would let pass.¹

New York City's Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) began in 1973, the brainchild of lesbians in a Gay Academic Union consciousness-raising group.² LHA cofounder Joan Nestle writes:

Several of us had come out before the Stonewall Rebellion and the advent of a formal feminist movement, and we remembered a world of Lesbian culture that was rapidly disappearing. The strongest reason for creating this grassroots project was to end the silence of patriarchal history about us—women who loved women. Furthermore, we wanted our story to be told by us, shared by us and preserved by us. We were tired of being the medical, legal, and religious other.³


The Lesbian Herstory Archives, a grassroots radical alternative to mainstream archives, is dedicated to preserving and nurturing the undocumented diversity of lesbian lives. The founders of LHA recognized the invisibility of lesbians and lesbian culture was a product of lesbian oppression. Public libraries and academic archives, including “women’s” archives, have both blatantly refused and quietly failed to document lesbian lives and culture. In response to pervasive homophobia and sexism, “closeted” lesbian lives are secreted from friends, family, and coworkers, and lesbian culture and sensibilities are defined against and apart from the heterosexual world. To a great extent then, lesbian lives are inherently inaccessible to mainstream archives. Only lesbian archivists, supported and sustained by lesbian communities, can identify, preserve, and protect the richness of our cultures with the knowledge, passion, and integrity required.

In its structure and politics, the LHA represents a radical departure from conventional archiving. The Archives has always been collectively run by a diverse group of volunteers united by the desire to preserve and celebrate lesbian history. Lesbian culture and politics is uniquely reflected in the organization of the Archives, and seen in the governing principles:

All Lesbian women must have access to the Archives; no credentials for usage or inclusion (are required), race and class must be no barrier; the Archives should be housed within the community, not on an academic campus that is by definition closed to many women; the Lesbian (Herstory) Archives must refuse cooption from the patriarchal society around even if it comes in the name of a “women’s college”;

The collection must be kept intact and never be bartered or sold; the Archives should be involved in the political struggles of the Lesbian people;

Archival skills shall be taught; one generation of Lesbians to another, breaking the elitism of traditional archives. The community should share in the work of the Archives. The Archives will collect the prints of all our lives, not just preserve the records of the famous or the published.

Since 1974, the Archives has been housed in Joan Nestle's Upper West Side Manhattan apartment. The collection started with short journal runs in the pantry behind the kitchen; a room which now contains office supplies and the copy machine. Over the past 15 years, the collection has spilled into the rest of the apartment and over into five off-site archival storage lockers. The archives now contains:

- over 200 large special collections (letters, diaries, papers) donated by Lesbians around the world
- thousands of vertical files on individual (the famous, the infamous, and the unfamous), organizations (ACTUP, Daughters of Bilitis, Salsa Soul Sisters), and subjects (butch-femme, festivals, passing women, lesbians in Yugoslavia, and the ever popular “possibilities” file...
• over 6000 books (from lesbian pulp novels to medical texts to radical feminist anthologies)
• 1300 periodical titles (from Aphra Behn’s *Vice Versa* to obscure organizational newsletters)
• 12,000 photographs (donated snapshots, portraits, and erotica as well as “found” images of unknown but likely-looking women)
• hundreds of posters, graphics, and flyers representing lesbian art, culture, and politics around the world
• a substantial collection of oral histories on audio and videotape
• records, buttons, T-shirts, jackets, softballs, postcards, bumper stickers, coffee mugs, pottery, labryrises and other living artifacts of lesbian culture

LHA cofounders Joan Nestle and Deb Edel, along with Judith Schwarz, currently form the nucleus of the LHA collective, with a group of about 10-15 regular volunteers carrying out primary responsibilities. Joan had shared her apartment with octogenarian Mabel Hampton, who died in October, 1989; Mabel had been the guiding spirit for the Archives since its inception. Thursday nights are publicized regular “worknights,” when any lesbian is welcome to come help with filing, sorting, and mailing. Deb, Judith, and other regular volunteers help out at the Archives during the course of the week to give tours, assist researchers or to take care of other chores. The bulk of the hostessing responsibilities, however, falls on Joan (and Mabel until her death). Joan literally lives, eats, and sleeps with Archives.

In 1979, the Archives incorporated as the nonprofit Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation, reflecting the active role the Archives assumes in creating and nourishing lesbian culture. At first, Archives founders carted samples of the collection to places they were invited to speak—bars, churches, synagogues—in an effort to share the Archives with women who might not be inclined to visit such a place.

The first newsletter came out in June 1975 and shortly after that, Joan and Deb created a portable slide show which still serves as a major organizing and educational tool. Later on the Archives began an “At Home with the Archives” series of readings, talks, and presentations for lesbians to share work and ideas. Today the “At Homes” are held in the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center because attendance has outgrown the Archives space.

The Archives itself is as much a sanctuary as it is a resource, “a mixture of a library and a family album,” cofounder Deb Edel writes. Browsing is just as valued as research; the Archives welcomes any lesbian who needs

an image or word to survive the day, Deb says. The Archives has allowed lesbians to own and embrace a culture which then nourishes and strengthens itself.

Lesbians have used the Archives to create poetry, plays, term papers, newspaper articles, films, erotica, drawings, biography, and bibliography. The films Before Stonewall, Silent Pioneers, Neighborhood Voices, and Storme: A Life in the Jewel Box were assisted by the Archives resources. J.R. Roberts' Black Lesbians: A Bibliography, Clare Potter's Lesbian Periodicals Index, Mary Ballou's Women: A Bibliography of Bibliographies as well as Jonathan Katz' and Lillian Faderman's work on gay and lesbian history have all tapped LHA resources as have many other published and unpublished projects too numerous to name here.

The Archives has severely outgrown its space. It does not function like a "regular" archive with a paid staff and holiday hours. If researchers want to use part of the collection that is stored off-site, arrangements for retrieval must be made—a time-consuming task for a volunteer organization. Even on-site it can be a chore to get at the periodicals stacked in acid-free "elephant boxes." Periodical check in and other routine maintenance is strictly dependent on a fluctuating flow of volunteers, so inventory records and filing have been known to fall behind. The file drawers are crammed, and the over-crowding slows upkeep and research. Sadly, the Archives cannot conveniently accommodate all who wish to see the collection. As it is, the Archives received over 1,200 visitors and 3,000 phone calls last year, and demand is growing. One Thursday work night in the fall of 1988 the collective celebrated receipt of the first inter-library loan request! The Archives is looking earnestly now to find its own space—a cultural center with room for readings and performances, a darkroom, film and video equipment. Obviously this calls for funding on a grander scale.

The Archives strives to be as principled in its fund raising as it is in its organization, sustaining itself with individual contributions and grants from radical funding sources. The collective wants to buy a building outright because the strain to make rent could otherwise drain and threaten the organization, as it has others.

With high hopes we've started a "Friends of the Archives" program to build a steadier income, and we've begun to campaign nationally for the building fund by advertising in the gay, lesbian, and feminist press.

The Archives invites any lesbian to send snapshots, letters, diaries, papers and other lesbian artifacts—oral histories, newspaper clippings, organizational flyers and newsletters, and videotapes of dykes on the Phil Donahue Show. The collection is built by unsolicited donations from any woman who has the courage to touch another woman. The Archives is open by appointment. Please call or write: LHEF, Inc., P.O. Box 1258, New York, NY 10116: (212) 874-7232.