To Tell the Truth: The Lesbian Herstory Archives: Chronicling a People and Fighting Invisibility Since 1974

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At 6:45 p.m. I trudge up out of the 96th Street stop, Walkman affixed, and head down Broadway. I've got my bag full of 1960s scandal sheets I found at a flea market last weekend, all bearing headlines like: "Lez Kidnaps Minister's Wife" and "Lesbian Pickup on 42nd Street—Actual Photos Inside."

"Welcome to the Lesbian Herstory Archives," reads the little framed sampler do-dad hanging on the wall. Yes, Welcome. It's a Thursday "worknight." When I enter this place, home to Joan Nestle, Mabel Hampton and the Lesbian Herstory Archives, I'm usually met with a high-spirited bustle that takes a second to sort out. It's like letting your eyes adjust to the daylight or waiting for the fog to clear from your glasses or something. This house full of dykes is just so stridently non-routine compared to the rest of my work-a-day that it's a bit jolting; it's like entering an anarchistic sanctuary.

Mabel, who is 86, is sitting at the dining room table eating dinner. Tonight she's feeling pretty good and hollers

"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."

—Joan Nestle

Lesbian Herstory Archives Newsletter, Spring 1979
greetings like "There's my girl!" or "Joanie, here's another one!" to each of us as we enter. I get little kisses from girls I haven't seen since last Thursday which is a real nice lesbian custom. They die over the scandal sheets. As I make my way to the kitchen, I find Beth, one of the volunteer coordinators, already giving a tour to four wide-eyed women from New Jersey visiting the archives for the first time. She's starting out in the little back room where the xerox machine resides, the pantry where the archives was first housed before it spilled over into most of the rest of the two-bedroom apartment.

"Depending on who you ask," Beth says in her crackling, animated voice, "the archives was founded in 1974 after the idea grew out of a lesbian-feminist consciousness-raising group. Joan lived here then, and Deb moved in shortly after that, then Judith joined them as a coordinator in 1978, about the time we incorporated as the Lesbian Herstory Education Foundation."

The tour trails off behind the kitchen, and Irare, another archives regular, fixes Mabel some ice water. Irare says she's fine but tired and she's going to work on the subject files tonight—thats means filing flyers, invitations, catalogs, newspaper clippings and the like. I decide to help her after I eat my salad bar dinner I bought across the street.

I first heard about the archives in the early 80s when I was in library school. Some dyke librarian told me about it and I remember being so joyfully astounded then, utterly amazed and inspired sitting there in the middle of Illinois, that there could be a lesbian archive since having an archive means having the power to wield your own vision of yourself in the world. And from my take on lesbian history then, I formed largely from reading the queer books cloistered in the forbidden "cage" in the library's main stacks, lesbians just didn't have much of that. During the 80s we've strengthened, as has our history, but still we don't have enough of that power in the world. That's what makes the Lesbian Herstory Archives so precious.

Now leaning against the kitchen counter as I stuff lettuce in my mouth,
thing done either). Leni's reading a lesboperiodical on the couch; no, it's a Glam-our magazine, hmmm. Amy's working on something-er-other I can't figure out, maybe the button collection. There are a few women in the living room I don't recognize—either new volunteers or visitors. I hear Jo's laughter from the bedroom, she's probably on the phone. I wonder if Judith is here already or will she show up later, and I notice all of a sudden that my eyes and my spirit have adjusted to this place.

"The archives exists as a labor of love by the women who run it." Boy, isn't that the truth. That's a quote from the "Friends" brochure for the archives' fundraising campaign. The Lesbian Herstory Archives is now the largest and oldest lesbian archive in the world with over 200 special collections and hundreds of biographical files from lesbians who have sent or willed their letters, writing, photographs and diaries. These are artifacts from famous, infamous and un famous lesbians, you know, just like you and me, because that's a lot of what the archives is about. We know from being edited out of history that all lesbian lives are important and ever so worthy of remembering, cherishing and researching.

In addition to the personal collections, there are seven drawers of Max's organization files which include papers, flyers and paraphernalia from lesbian, lesbian/gay and gay political and social organizations around the world, e.g. ACT UP, Daughters of Bilitis and Salsa Soul Sisters. Thirty drawers of subject files are chock-full of clippings and whatnot on topics like lesbian mothers, bars, festivals, sports, butch-fem, passing women, s/m, lesbians in Yugoslavia. My favorite being there, for serving as a "stopping-off place" for lesbians searching out their world. Students, scholars, writers, film- and video-makers have used the archives to assemble lesbian history into films like Before Stonewall, Silent Pioneers, and Neighborhood Voices as well as books like Lilian Faderman's Surpassing the Love of Men and J.R. Robert's Black Lesbians: A Bibliography.

Currently, the archives is sponsoring a video project on the Daughters of Bilitis, the first national lesbian organization in the U.S.

Inside, the archives looks like a combination museum-library. Photographs are displayed all over the place along with other dyke artifacts—soft-records, videotapes, audiotapes round out the collection which now spills out of the apartment into five rented climate-controlled storage lockers.

Check it out: The New York Times June 1989 coverage of the Gay Pride March included mention of the "Women's Herstory Archives." Ferchillsakes, how could they miss it? It's the big L-word—the Lesbian Herstory Archives! Get it right, already!

Even with the cooperation of journalists, historians and biographers, so many archives have failed to preserve records of lesbian lives. For example, in the largest research library database...
Lesbian lives and history. The archives welcomes material donations from all lesbians. Organize your writing, photos, videos and other objects of lesbo culture to send to the archives. It's very important to put in your will that you want the archives to receive it, because you never know what's going to happen. You can also provide the archives with newspaper clippings, oral histories and video tapes of things like dykes on The Phil Donahue Show.

Visitors and researchers must remember that the archives has severely outgrown its space. If you want to use things that are stored off-site, you have to make arrangements to have them retrieved, a time-consuming task for a volunteer organization. Even on site it's a major chore to get at the periodicals which are stacked in gray acid-free "elephant boxes" one on top of the other. The file drawers are crammed and the overcrowding slows upkeep and research. Sadly, the archives can't conveniently accommodate all the visitors who want to see or use the place. Visitors are welcomed two regular nights a week and by appointment. Even though several volunteers provide hostessing and reference assistance, it still means a lot of company for Joan and Mabel. As it is, the archives received over 1,200 visitors and 3,000 phone calls last year, and demand is growing!

Especially now, the archives needs money. It is funded entirely by donations from individuals and from lesbian, gay, feminist and radical funding sources. Please contribute generously. The legacy you're providing for is our own.

The Lesbian Herstory Archives has grown for over 15 years in an apartment on NYC's Upper West Side. It has now outgrown its original home, and seeks a new one. About $1,000,000 is needed to buy a building outright, to fund operations and to ensure that the archives continues to shape and reflect lesbian lives. Make contributions to the Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation, Inc. P.O. Box 1258, New York, NY 10116. Call (212) 874-7232 for more information.

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