

OLOC-Rhode Island Chapter - Discussion

Overview

Members of the OLOC-Rhode Island Chapter (Old Lesbians Organizing for Change) discuss what makes certain items worth preserving in an archive, emphasizing the importance of stories about the everyday lives and communities of New England Lesbians. They discuss the difficulty of preserving their herstory, especially within an increasingly hostile political climate for Lesbians. The group also discusses the importance of contextualizing certain artifacts through personal stories, whether written or oral. Information was shared about details and suggestions for the best ways to preserve Lesbian memorabilia for later archival acquisition.

Summary

The discussion begins with some skepticism by one of the participants about why archives should exist or why they are important. Why should we save all this stuff, who could possibly want it? If we have no heirs, it will all be rubbish – and even our heirs may not want it, so, again, rubbish. What, as Lesbians, is important for us to save and why would we save it? It was pointed out that while the objects themselves may seem irrelevant or insignificant, it's actually the stories behind them that have meaning and importance.

Mev Miller (Instigator/Lesbrarian) provided detailed information about Wanderground and gave some examples of types of things in the collection and why they are important – the stories behind them. Additionally, there was a question of duplication – why should there be another archive? Why not send our stuff to other archives? The response was two-fold; those archives may already have a lot of what's in Wanderground AND, given the current state of the world, there is a need for "outposts" so not everything is all in one place. The group also discussed how the archive would catalog and preserve items (in-depth cataloging system) and well as tell the stories behind them (recorded oral herstories).

The group also discussed how we as individuals feel about the importance of our stuff or our experiences. It's a misperception that one has to be famous or to have done something great to

be in an archive; in fact, all our lives and stories are worth preserving. An example was given of WWII soldiers whose letters have been saved. Those letters provide opportunities for families and future generations to understand the firsthand experiences.

An additional concern for many Lesbians was that of privacy and being outed. Many Lesbians have burned or destroyed their letters or journals out of fear or concern for themselves and others – because they are private or potentially embarrassing. But keeping those items in the context of history provides valuable information. But concern was also expressed of misunderstanding past experiences when placing current perspectives on them – thus taking stories out of context.

Mev Miller (Instigator/Lesbrarian) discussed the process for individuals to leave certain belongings to Wanderground, through the donation of “memory vessels,” or curated boxes of personal belongings left to Wanderground when the time comes for the objects to be donated. In the hopes that some women in the room would collect their items for future archiving, details and suggestions were shared about the best ways to preserve items later acquisition. For example, put items in a box with a note about the story or significance of the item. Also mark photos with place, names, dates. As for the ethics of photos with people in them, it was suggested that photos could be archived but not made public until some designated time in the future.

Audio Quotes from Interview

🔊 — indicates audio clip available

We Have a Past – Remember It (:44)

🔊 I just think it's so important that as life goes on, we should not be a mystery to ourselves. If you don't have a past, you likely don't have a present or a future. Especially if people want to wipe you out. If we exist at least in some way, you have some sort of power. There is someone who is gonna say “I'm part of that. I've got a history.” So, I think it's extremely important to collect all that we can.



We Need to Tell Our Stories (1:28)

🔊 I think in these times, there are people actually trying to wipe out our story. As they were trying to keep us from having a story. I think because of that, outside of what we know, we don't know our herstory. We don't know what everybody was doing, except if something hit the news, except the newspaper that came out in Kansas City, the newsletter, The Ladder. Except for some of the music and poetry that we could share with one another. But I would love to see, just like they did with slavery, I would love to see an oral history of us. Because there's gonna be a time, and it's coming soon—where they're gonna try to change history and we're not gonna exist. [Another speaker: They're already doing it.] Except, what we preserve. And I think there's a lot that we don't know about ourselves, that we can tell a pretty powerful story, and I think it's just important that individuals, everybody sitting in this room, everyone who represents an ancestor to us—I just think it's extremely important.

**You ARE Somebody Important – and Part of the Fabric (2:00)**

🔊 I think one of the things that I have found in having these conversations with other Lesbians is like “Well, I’m nobody, I didn’t do anything, I wasn’t active, I didn’t do this, I didn’t do that...” But I’m like, that’s the point. You were, you are somebody, you are a lesbian who has a whole life and you have a story to tell. You don’t have to be famous. I think there’s this misperception that the only people who live in archives are people who are famous and who published something or did something magnanimous. What we really want to do is have a fabric that’s holistic, that really includes as many stories and incidents – I mean, even if they’re really short. “I remember the time I went to this party... and this is what happened and this is why it was important.”



And I actually do have a story about a party that is pretty funny. The woman was leaving town, she was moving out of town, she invited everybody who she knew in this city. There [were] easily 50, 60 Lesbians there. Someone had this great idea, they put up this pin, with the person’s name, and asked “How are you connected to her?” You know it was this massive web of relationships, finding out who was related to who and why, it was just the most—I wish I had a picture of it—it was just the most fascinating story and how people were linked together and they didn’t know they were linked together. It’s like the seven steps of—what was that—Kevin Bacon or whatever thing. [Unknown speaker: Six degrees of separation.] Something like that. It was fascinating. And those are the kinds of stories that are really fun but they get lost. And give a sense of community and people, our herstory.

Related Items in Wanderground Collection

- Minutes from meetings
- Notes about chapter activities written for the national OLOC Reporter
- OLOC-RI Chapter banner
- Proud to Be an Old Lesbian – business sized cards
- Photos

Details (single space ok)

- Interview with: OLOC-Rhode Island Chapter (Sally H., Dee B., Nancy H., Berry-Jean M., Thea E., Cathy G., Marge M., and a few others)
- Topic(s): Archiving (importance and how to), Wanderground collection
- Date & How Recorded: July 21, 2024 via Digital Recorder
- Interviewed by: Mev Miller (facilitated the conversation)
- Summary Prepared by: Mev Miller