

Interview Transcript

OLOC-Rhode Island Chapter - Discussion

Details

- 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)
- Date & How Recorded: July 21, 2024 via Digital Recorder
- Interviewed by: Mev Miller (facilitated the conversation)
- Transcript edited by: Dana Schneider with edits by Mev Miller using Otter.ai
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TRANSCRIPT

Mev: So, part of the conversation that Dee and I have been having is “Why should we have an archive? What should be in an archive? As Lesbians, what’s important for us to have in a Lesbian archive?”

Wanderground has defined itself as 1950 to 2000 for a couple of reasons. One is because we felt like that was kind’ve the heyday of Lesbian stuff happening in terms of publishing, music, culture, and bookstores and all the rest of that. That’s 85% or 90% of the collection that I had. Since that’s the starting collection.

(whispering and laughter)

Speaker 1 (identified as D): Keep the conversation going or I’m in deep trouble.

Mev: Um, but the other thing was—now I’ve lost my train of thought because there was ice cream being passed around.

(laughter, speaker 1 apologizes)

Speaker 2: We went, Mev and I and Nancy and Sally, down to Bloodroot—Thea, were you there?---

Mev: No, not to Bloodroot.

Speaker 2 (Dee): Down to Bloodroot in Connecticut, which is soon to close, I think in due course because it does not have a succession plan. And it’s got walls with things that are just family portraits, they’re bits and pieces of the lives of the women who ran Bloodroot, this restaurant in Connecticut. And when I look at it, I think “Oh, those are just family pictures.” But when Mev

looks at it, it becomes archival material. It was really difficult for me at first to think that this is worth keeping.

But as one looked at the lives of two women, who've just this last month been in the *New York Times* with their restaurant, you realize they are significant persons. And this stuff on the wall, who are not collectors, would put in the rubbish bin, is actually archival. It needs somebody with Mev's eye, I think, and also an understanding of the herstory of that person to recognize that the piece should be saved and not jettisoned. Because I would jettison everything.

Mev: I think that's part of, "Why look at the stuff that I've saved over the last forty-five or fifty years?" And I'm like, "Why did I save this?" But then I say, "Well, here's the story behind why I saved this."

Okay so I need to tell that story because other people are not gonna understand why that particular piece of fence—I'm talking about a piece of green wire fence, that's about this big, that's obviously been cut off of a chain link fence—why is that piece of fence important? Well, it's a piece of fence from Greenham Common, from when the women were doing the peace encampment at Greenham Common, and somebody cut that and brought it home to me as a souvenir. So, there are things like that, you know, that you might think "rubbish bin," but have a really interesting story that hangs with other bits and pieces from that time.

So I think part of the conversation that Dee and I were just saying, is what makes it archival? And what, as Lesbians, is important for us to save and why would we save it? And what would you want to see if you were coming into an archive?

And I think there's also a difference between—we call ourselves an archive library and part of it is—the library part is because we have a lot of books and periodicals and publications...and CDs, stuff like that. The archival piece comes from our personal photographs, our letters, our diaries, our file cabinets of things that we saved from events that we've been to, posters, ephemera, pottery, art, you know, all those things are why we say we are trying to collect that stuff from Lesbians in the New England region, just because quantifiably, you can't carry everything. There's a lot of other archives collecting other things around the country. My opinion is, when somebody says "There's all these other Lesbian archives, why don't you send it there?" First of all, some of it they already have. But the other part of it, I feel like, is that we need outposts.

Given the current terrain of the world, we need outposts, so anything that we can save from where we are, in my opinion, is pretty important. Coming from these boundaries, why would we save this stuff? What should we save, why should we save it, and I'm interested in your thoughts on that. Then hopefully at some point we could have specific conversations about things that we have individually, or other things from our local communities that we've lived in, that we've been a part of, that we'd like to see cherished. That's kinda my open invitation and if you don't want to talk about this topic, that's perfectly fine too.

Unknown speaker: How are you envisioning the stories and objects being saved?

Mev: Well, there's a good database program that we just found that allows you to put stories in context to the item. So, you can collect the item and then there's a place to write all that story stuff. So you could go into the catalog and get all that detail. Or, we put little plaques next to things. Or, actually I was talking about this with the archivist at RISD because we'll be doing a little show that'll go up in September, putting a little number next to it. Number 1 and then you go over here and see number 1, oh that's what that is. So that you have some sort of a map or a chart, something.

Hopefully, maybe not in this space because it's still relatively small, but in a larger space you have docents to walk around and say "Here's what this is... This is the story behind this... Did you know?..."

Speaker 2: *interjects* Oral history, somehow? Could you have recordings? I don't know if it's built into that yet.

Mev: Oral histories, yeah. Somehow. I think there's a lot of archives that are doing oral histories, like "Tell me everything about your life as a Lesbian." We're not quite there yet, but I think because we have the stuff, I think it's the stories behind the stuff.

Speaker 2: Well that's what I was thinking, to clear it up, I was thinking the oral history of that object.

Mev: Yes, yes. When we were down at Bloodroot, I actually collected stories from some of the Lesbians who were there to ask them "What was your memory of Bloodroot? Why was it important for you to come here, and to continue to come here? Do you remember the first time you came here?"

So I do have those kinds of stories and those are the kinds of stories that maybe we all have a meeting at Wanderground sometime and say "*Rubyfruit Jungle!* I named my car after Rubyfruit Jungle." (laughter)

Unknown speaker: I named one of my cheese spreads when I had a catering business, I named it Rubyfruit.

Mev: (laughs) So, I don't know if anybody has any thoughts or Dee if you wanted to say anything more.

Dee: I think I've said more or less—I don't know people in this world and I don't know where things are in this world. What struck me most when I was talking to Mev is how interesting everybody's story could be. You think of our most elderly person right here—hello, Marge—who has presumably got all sorts of stories. All of us have stories but I don't know if any of us are going to be in the New York Times. Nobody's gonna write about us in the New York Times.

Unknown speaker: Mm, I don't know...

Dee: So if those stories become anything worth recording and retaining.

Mev: I have an answer for that but I wonder if anyone else has an answer for it.

Speaker 3: 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.

Unknown speaker: They're already doing it.

Speaker 3: 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. By the way, I found some of the books that I'm gonna get to you.

Speaker 4: I've been listening to a podcast called *Cruising: A Queer Documentary* and it is three women, three queer women, Lesbian mostly, who are going to every existing Lesbian bar in the US and interviewing people. The next season, they're adding some because some have opened since they started this series three years ago. But it's been great—

(the title is repeated for Mev to take note of)

Speaker 4: So they go and they interview the owners, the patrons, find out the history but then they will have an episode that goes into one particular person's life, maybe the person that has been sitting at the bar the longest (laughter). And there's so many, what you would think of as mundane details, but they're not. They're all precious. To find out how this community worked in that place, how did it started how did it end, or if it's still going on, how did that happen? So I support archiving things that you might have thought, "Oh, I have this whole box of stuff, I haven't dragged it down since the '80s." No, let's go look at it.

Mev: Yeah. 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.

Mev: Something like that. 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.

Speaker 5: I'm thinking as you're talking about our experiences and how valuable that is because there are so many things that are lost. I think about things that I've had that have somehow ended up in the back of the closet, and tapes that deteriorated and things like that. If there's not really an effort to preserve those things, otherwise it's just gone.

Dee: One of the things that I think happens to us, and others of us who don't have children, and won't have grandchildren, possibly not even got nieces and nephews and certainly none that could necessarily care about our stuff—nothing that can have a descending role in the world. If you have children and grandchildren, they can come and say "oh look what granny had!" And there's some sort of interest in it. I've said this often to Sally. Chris doesn't want ANYTHING! The only person we've got is Sally's nephew Chris. He doesn't want anything we got—the whole bloody lot will go in the rubbish. I think that disappearance of anything we ever owned, was ever of any importance, written or whatever—it's gonna be gone. And that is magnified by how many thousands of single women, Lesbians, activists, whatever we all were, just disappear into the nothingness of the world. Nobody will ever have any interest in saving anything.

Speaker 6: I think that's a good reason to archive it.

Dee: Yes, it is.

Speaker 6: Because even yet, even people with children and grandchildren are not finding collectors among the young people, but it also gives a chance to think, well where does this go? Where should it go? Or if we want to be visible, how are we gonna make it visible?

Dee: You think of people who, during wars for example, are just ordinary soldiers in the mud, in the trenches, and they're writing letters of poetry or whatever and somebody finds that and

they're shoved in their pockets after they've been blasted with bullets and it becomes something of some significance. It's obviously not what's gonna happen to us, I hope. But it's just a little letter that was gonna go home to mom, nothing of any significance at all but it becomes sort of a museum collection piece.

Speaker 6: I think you're reminding me, I think of what becomes of the story of [inaudible] and her roommate. You know what I mean?

(laughter and affirmation)

Dee: If these walls could talk, you know? It makes you so sad that one poor woman, she didn't exist after the partner had died and they covered and they swept her out. Have you all seen this?

Speaker 1: Yes. Not only have we seen it, we know people who have experienced it.

Dee: Dreadful thing.

Speaker 1: The car, the house, the will taken out of, stolen from a desk drawer. Changed at the last minute.

Mev: And along with that, there are so many Lesbians who are like "I don't want anyone reading those letters or those journals. They're too private—I don't want anyone to know about that." "I have burned all my journals because I don't want people to know," whatever. That's what some have said. And you know, I get it. It's sort of like a different type of privacy issue than folks on Facebook blasting what they had for dinner last night. But some of those writings are so potentially painful or revealing or embarrassing or sexy or whatever they are... that there's some reluctance to share them. If you think about what those writings look like to someone thirty to forty years from now, long after you're dead, what meaning could that bring to what Lesbians were experiencing in a particular time period and what that was like and what the context of it was. The context of what happened in 1980 is really different than the context of what's happening now.

And what's happening now is being superimposed onto 1980 without a deep understanding of "This is why this was happening." We're taking this layer and shoving it on top of that layer, but it doesn't fit. But they want it to fit. Taking things out of context has a really big meaning to me right now, it means something to me.

Speaker 7: I was thinking, maybe people who don't want to share like documentation, maybe they would share their story and describe some of the contents without—

Speaker 8: Be anonymous?

Speaker 7: Yeah. Or even not be anonymous, just talk about the love letters or whatever it is that they wouldn't want to hand over.

Mev: Or, say "You know what, these are these love letters, I don't want them made available to anyone until fifty years from now." Which would be totally fine too. There are a lot of archives that do that, you can sign a waiver that says "okay, but not to be public until such and such a date."

Speaker 9: Elda Dawber had a book called *Wait Until I Die*.

Speaker 3: 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.

Dee: Particularly Mev, how does it work?

Mev: How does what work?

Dee: What we're talking about.

Mev: I'm not sure I understand.

Dee: Well, we're sort of waxing quite lyrical about the need to collect stuff and that all people's stuff could have a story. How do you, the archivist, the lesbrarian, do something with it? How do you get it? Where is it? You know when you go to Bloodroot, you say "I want dibs on that stuff, don't you dare let that stuff get lost." But if there's other stuff out there that people have, how do you begin to get a handle on getting that and storing it?

Mev: We are Wanderground Lesbian Archive Library, we are collecting materials from Lesbians who lived in the New England region between 1950 and 2000 and we would love to have your stuff. We are collecting memorabilia, calendars, photos, letters, posters, books,. Anything that you have and if you're interested, put it in a box. Here's a piece of paper that you can put it on. If you're not ready to give it to us yet—my mom would say, "Don't get rid of that, I'm not done looking at it yet." (laughter)

So, when you are ready to stop looking at it, you have it in a box so that when somebody comes to clean out your house, they say "Oh look, here's this box. There's a letter on top that says 'Give this to Wanderground Lesbian Archive Library, they'll know what to do with it.'"

Dee: That's interesting.

Mev: Then the box comes to us and it has your signature on it that says “Yes, I would like this to go into the archive. So, what I was gonna say, all of you go into the back of your closets and see what kind of cool and interesting stuff you have. As curators, it’s not just me but the collection enhancement team, would look at that stuff and say “Yes, we can keep this and this and this” and “Oh, that book has coffee stains and crap on it, we’re not gonna keep that.” Those of us who are herstorians or archivists will know what the value of it is, and the value will not be monetary. It will be—oh, this clock at Bloodroot was handmade by Kathy Lewis who was a woodworker and she did a lot of really cool stuff and that’s why this clock is important to have.

So, [I’m] encouraging all of you, if you have a story behind the thing to tell us what the story is because we may not know. “Oh, what is this piece of wire?” You know, it’s actually a piece of fence from Greenham Common.

Dee: What are the ethics around photos with people in them, who maybe still exist somewhere else?

Mev: Yeah, there’s a lot of conversation around that. I think that if you can identify who is in them and say “It was taken on this occasion and these are the people in the photo.” I have a lot of photos where I don’t remember. I don’t even know if I knew all the people when the photo was taken in the first place. In which case, we would probably put that in the archive but not make it visible like on a public display. We might exhibit it or let people look at it but it wouldn’t be reproduced, put on a website or put in any kind of media. I think the goal is to try and have as many permissions as you can. What do you know about release forms? Especially photos, “oh my god, that’s Aunt Trudy! I didn’t know...” (laughter)

Mev: So maybe, you know, the time limit. After maybe 30 or 40 years, all those people are dead and who cares... I think as much as we can, try to identify people. If we can get permissions; if not, it just stays in the archive. I know that Providence Public Library has a lot of photos from—what was the bar up in Woonsocket?

(murmurs about the bar name): Kings & Queens?

Mev: Right. They have a lot that they don’t digitize publicly, but they do have them in an archive so you can, sort of, go through and see. I have a lot of photos that—what’s her name, Priscilla Skerry—Priscilla gave me a lot of photos from Orioles and RIWA and OLE. And it’s like who knows who. Most of them are not identified but I have them in a binder. People can look at them. If I use one, I usually try to use one with the back of somebody’s head. “Oh, I recognize that haircut!” Or things that are fuzzy, you can’t really tell who it is, that kind of thing. Because they were somebody’s personal photos.

Nancy: And we have forms, too, that will tell you how to do this, how to write. We’ve got all those on the website.

Mev: In the book *Wanderground*, there's this whole discussion about the memory vessel, so we've been calling these boxes memory vessels. So, this is just—put all of this stuff in a box, and this is your memory vessel. Label it, save it, bring it to us.

Conversation concludes with the difficulty remembering the story behind certain belongings. Mev mentions the possibility of having a show and tell among the group and meeting at Wanderground in the future.