

Lesbian/Women's Studies/LGBT History

A Collection of Stories
Based on Interviews in the
Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project

Praise For
Without Apology

Individually fascinating, the stories featured in Without Apology: Old Lesbian Life Stories collectively enrich, expand, and complicate our understanding of lesbian life in twentieth century America. Carefully collected and thoughtfully edited, this invaluable collection sheds light on the formation of lesbian identity and community during decades punctuated by conflict and change. Told with honesty, wit, and poignancy, the stories are to be savored and shared.

Joanne E. Passet, Ph.D.
Professor of Women's History, Indiana University East
and author of Sex Variant Women: The Life of
Jeanette Howard Foster

Praise For
Without Apology

We came out together in 1974. Both of us were married with children and we knew nothing about lesbian lives. We read political books, fiction and lesbian magazines and newsletters, but still knew little of our Herstory until Arden presented her project to us. Then, in 2009, A Gift of Age: Old Lesbian Life Stories was published, sharing our stories, our legacy, and our heroes. We felt pride reading about the lives of our sisters. Books like these helped give us a place in the world and they pass our legacy on to future generations. They are a must read.

Ruth Berman and Connie Kurtz, featured in an award winning documentary that premiered on HBO/Cinemax,
Ruthie and Connie: Every Room in the House

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Without Apology: Old Lesbian Life Stories

Arden Eversmeyer
and Margaret Purcell



Share in the lives of women whose lives were shaped by a society filled with attitudes towards lesbians, attitudes that dramatically changed from one decade to the next.

Based on The
Old Lesbian Oral
Herstory Project

Without Apology

Old Lesbian Life Stories

Arden Eversmeyer and
Margaret Purcell

Charlotte Avery

Born February 1930 in Texas
Interviewed in 2000, at age 70, in Texas

*He cried, and I cried, and then
I went to the softball game.*

My father and mother married when they were real young, on my mother's seventeenth birthday. They followed the crops. My daddy would do carpenter work and work in the fields, and my mother would pick cotton, cook for the field hands, and stuff like that. They traveled in a covered wagon from north Texas to south Texas. This was probably in about 1914 or 1915.

Charlotte's family ended up staying in south Texas when her father got a job at the Sinclair Refinery, but he was a drinker and quickly got fired, ending up back doing carpenter work. His drinking was an ongoing problem that affected the whole family.

I don't have any memory of my life from the time I was born until I was about six years old. I guess it was just too

traumatic, so I just blocked it out. But I remember having a little wagon when I was young, and I'd pull it up to the store, about five blocks away, to get a block of ice. I'd cover it with tow sacks to keep it from melting. Sometimes Momma would send me to the store to get a loaf of bread, and I'd eat two or three slices before I got back home.

We lived right behind the grammar school where I went to school. It was a two-story building. All the grades went to that school. At the end of the sidewalk there was this little old shell and sand place, and I used to play there with the doodle bugs. I'd stay down there, or go over to the school and shoot marbles, just anything to be out of the house. There was always a bunch of chaos, anger, and stuff when my daddy was home. That's all I remember of weekends: he was drunk, raising Cain, and cussin' Momma.

I remember him having an old Model T, and he came home drunk and ran into the side of the house. Our house had those clapboards that ran up and down. He knocked those boards off, and we'd get out there the next day and nail them on, or stuff the cracks with newspaper.

We had screen windows, and a wood stove. We didn't have indoor plumbing until we moved. There were two adults and seven children living in a two room house.

When I was twelve years



Charlotte at 3 years old

old, we moved about five blocks from where we were living, into a four-room house. Then we had indoor plumbing. I used to saw logs with a cross-cut saw, and then split the logs for firewood. I had to dig holes in the back yard to bury garbage. That's how I cut the big toe off my left foot, with a "sharpshooter."

Growing up during the 1930s, with an alcoholic father who kept the family stirred up all the time, was difficult. Charlotte's mother offered some balance, and stability, for a while. However, that wouldn't last.

My mother was beautiful. She used to iron for the neighbors to make money, because Daddy never gave her any. He'd buy all the groceries. If there was any money left on Friday when he got paid, he'd buy the groceries and bring them home. But a lot of times he drank all the money up, and there'd be no groceries. So she started taking in ironing. She'd make up pastry, and bread and stuff, and take it to our neighbors.

I remember during World War II, when my oldest brother was in the Navy, Momma kept our nephew, my brother's boy, and they paid her a few bucks for doing that. She never did have any money of her own until my daddy started getting Social Security, and the social worker told her that half of that money was hers. So she made Daddy give her her half, and she'd spend it on all the things she wanted to eat, like fruits and vegetables. Daddy only liked potatoes and beans, and things like that. Momma could buy anything she wanted then.

If it was around Christmas time, she'd get a washcloth, or something, and wrap it up and give it to her kids for Christmas. She was always buying something for somebody else, and never did spend any money on herself. She had a hard life.

The hardships of life took their toll on Charlotte's mother, and after a while she sank into depression and tried to commit suicide. Charlotte and her sister, Mary, began taking turns going to school when their mother was depressed, afraid of what might happen if no one was there. That began to take a toll on Charlotte's education.

I was supposed to graduate in 1948, but I was going to school every other day. I failed my typing. It wasn't that I couldn't have done the typing, it was just that I didn't like it to begin with, and didn't see the point in it. So I went back to summer school in 1950 and got my diploma. I addressed a thousand envelopes for the school district tax election to get my typing credit! The teachers all knew what our situation was at home, and took a lot into consideration.

Church played an interesting role in Charlotte's tumultuous upbringing, too. While it offered a refuge for her and her siblings in some respects, it also added to her inner turmoil.

Me and my momma and the kids, Mary and Bob, went to the Methodist church when we were living in that little two room house. We'd walk down the lane. There was a pasture to the south of us, and there was a barbed wire fence. We'd walk along that barbed wire fence down to First Street, where the church was. But the women made fun of my momma because she didn't have real pretty clothes to go to church in. We always had homemade clothes, or second hand clothes. You know how people are: if you don't have a lot of money, or look right, what they considered "look right," they made fun of you.

In Charlotte's memories, her father didn't really participate with the family very much, and when he did, everyone wished he hadn't.

He didn't do anything but go to work, get paid, and get drunk. Once or twice I remember him splitting some logs in the back yard for the stove, but I split a helluva lot more logs than he did. When he wasn't drinking, he was just sitting in the rocker reading. When he was drinking, he'd always want us kids to come sit on his lap, and he'd tell us how much he loved us. Then he'd get mad about something, and you never knew whether he loved you or whether he hated you.

Getting out of the home and working while she was in high school gave Charlotte a break from the demands and stresses of home life.

When I was in high school in Houston, there was a little confectionery store across the street that sold candy, gum, fruit pies and soda water. I'd go there and work before school, during the lunch hour, and after school. I was probably 14 or 15 years old then.

The last three years of high school I worked at the theater as a cashier. My sister, Mary, worked behind the candy and popcorn counter. Sometimes I'd work behind the candy counter, too. I remember in 1948, when I was working behind the candy counter one night popping popcorn, a man, probably about 18 or 19, came in to the movie theater. He was all wet 'cause it was raining outside, and stood at the door, looking at me, and I was looking at him.

We started dating and, in fact, became engaged. During that time, I also started going to softball games. Joan played softball, and we played on the team together. I didn't play very long as I wasn't too good. They were having a women's fast pitch softball tournament at Memorial Park, and I wanted to go. So about a week before I was supposed to be married, I broke the engagement.

I told him I just felt like I was making a mistake. He cried, and I cried, and then I went to the softball game. So

I guess that's when I probably came out to myself. I realized that if I got married to him, I would be making a mistake.

Looking back at her years in high school, Charlotte wondered why she hadn't figured it out earlier. "I always had a couple of girlfriends in school. I'd have the best looking girlfriends, even better looking than the football players had. Even at 13 to 15 years old, I'd have a special friend at school, and we'd walk back and forth to school together." When a friend would come back to school and say she wasn't allowed to spend time with Charlotte any longer, she was hurt and confused.

Nobody ever said that I was a homosexual, or a lesbian, or said anything to my face. It was just real hurtful. Nobody talked about anything at home. They knew what was going on, and everybody kept everything a damn secret.

Finishing high school, and realizing there weren't many decent jobs available to women, Charlotte and a friend, Joyce, both decided to join the Air Force.



Just out of high school, 1949

We went to join the Air Force, and they gave us papers to have my parents sign, since I was under 21. We were supposed to go back up the next day get our physical exams. Joyce came over the next morning and said, "Well, are you ready to go?" And I said, "No, I can't go." "Why not?" she asked. "Well, Momma won't sign my paper," I said. "You son of a bitch!" she replied. So she went off to the Air Force, and I stayed home.

Charlotte did find a good job, and went to work for Western Electric, where she stayed for the next 33 years. Western Electric was the service center for Southwestern Bell, and Charlotte started out working in the shop. That solved her job problem but she still needed a social life. One of the few places you could go to find other lesbians in the 1950s and 1960s was the gay bars.

I would go to the bar and have a couple of beers, just to be with people. A friend of mine nicknamed me 'Bump,' because I just never had too much to say. You could talk to me and I'd say something, but I never would strike up a conversation on my own. I'd go to the bar just to be with people.

The other place Charlotte was able to find other women like herself was at the softball games. Texas was the focus of a very active women's softball system.

There were a lot of women there. Lorreta, my girlfriend, played softball and lived way up in Dallas. I went with her for awhile. We would run up a million dollar phone bill. She was a nurse, and worked nights. Sometimes she'd call me two or three times a night. Long distance relationships just don't work well, though.

Then in the early 1950s, there was this girl at the ball game, and I asked somebody who it was. "Oh, that's Arden. That's Tommie's girlfriend."

Charlotte knew of, and respected, Tommie, so she didn't approach Arden. She certainly didn't know that her life and Arden's would become entwined decades later. Throughout her 20s, Charlotte's social life continued to revolve around going to softball games, and spending time with a few of her running buddies. Just that and work.

I went to Western Electric in August of 1950, and I stayed there 33 years. I worked in the shop. Western Electric

was the service center for Southwestern Bell, before the Bell companies split up in 1983. We repaired all kinds of telephone equipment. Then I worked in the Teletype Department for about ten years. I really liked that. I like to take things apart, put new parts in machines, put them back together, and then test them. I really enjoyed that. Then they invented the transistor, and everything changed. When I retired in 1983, I was working on circuit boards, repairing and checking them.

About 1980, after all that affirmative action stuff, they were supposed to offer supervisor jobs to the women. So, naturally, they offered me one. I was a smart aleck. I'd seen all these supervisors that didn't know their butt from a hole in the ground, and you knew how they got to be supervisor. You'd go ask them a question, and they'd just give you a book and say, "Here, read this and it'll tell you what to do." So they asked me if I wanted to be a supervisor, and I told them, "No, my morals are too high."



At work in 1961, dressed for the annual "Go Texan Day" celebration

I never went to college. All the training I had with work was on-the-job training. One time, they sent me to Columbus, Ohio, for an electronics course. I used to feel kind of inferior to people who had been to college and had lots of degrees and stuff. But I've discovered that some of those people didn't have any common sense, so I don't think I did too badly with my high school education.

Back in 1950, I started off making 92¢ an hour, and when I retired I was making \$13.85 an hour. I was paid the same as the men because we were all in a union.

During her working years, Charlotte identified as a gay woman, since she had yet to hear the word 'lesbian.' Even though she knew she was different, Charlotte didn't have any word for it. "I just knew that I enjoyed being with women." Eventually, she thought of herself as 'gay.' "Homosexual doesn't sound good, but if you're gay, that sounded okay."

During that time, Charlotte was, for the most part, a loner. She did have a few relationships, including one long, significant one. Charlotte and Sharon got together in 1971, and stayed together for the next nine years.

All during that time, Sharon drank on a daily basis. She had a problem with alcohol, and just like any other kind of relationship, I guess I was attracted to what I was familiar with. I had been raised in an alcoholic household. I always had the feeling that if I was good to her, if I bought her nice clothes, if we had nice vacations, or whatever, there was always something I could do to make her quit drinking. Well, that didn't work.

In 1980, her employer told Sharon she could either go into treatment, and get help for her alcoholism, or she would lose her job. She was in the hospital for 28 days, and they had what they called a 'family week.' Sharon's parents lived in California, and she didn't want them to know anything

about it anyway. I got involved in Al-Anon's 12-Step program, and that 'family week' really changed my life.

I finally discovered that I wasn't responsible for her drinking, nor could I do anything about it. The only thing I had control over was myself and my behavior. I discovered that my behavior was just like the behavior of my dad, who was an alcoholic. I wasn't alcoholic myself, but I had all the characteristics.

I was a rescuer. I was the one in the family that they always brought all their problems to, because they knew that I'd fix it. The only way I ever got a feeling of self-worth was by doing stuff like that.

I was devastated when Sharon left. I stayed alone for about eight years. Sometimes I'd go to two or three Al-Anon meetings a day. I worked at the Al-Anon Intergroup Office for two years after I retired, answering the phone and talking to people wanting to know where a meeting was.

I had my older sister go to Al-Anon for one of her boys who was having a problem with alcohol. She went for awhile, but then she decided it wasn't for her. Everything was always a big secret in her family, and they never talked about anything. It got to be too painful for her, so she just quit going. But it helped me a lot to learn about the disease, and how it affected the family. It answered a lot of questions about why my father was the way he was. Both of my brothers, my dad, and one sister were alcoholic, and my mother was manic-depressive. When I got involved in Al-Anon, I quit rescuing my family.

Having lost Sharon, and not wanting to put herself out there again, Charlotte spent much of her time alone for the next few years. But in 1987, several years after she retired, Charlotte's life as a loner changed. That's when she crossed paths once again with Arden, the woman she'd noticed at a softball game

decades earlier. Arden's first partner, Tommie, had died several years before, and once she began to recover from her loss, Arden started a social organization for older lesbians in Houston called LOAF, Lesbians Over Age Fifty.

Charlotte went on a camping trip with some of the women from LOAF, and fell head over heels. Neither Charlotte nor Arden were looking to start a new relationship, but they didn't seem to have much choice in the matter. Before long, they were inseparable. Together, they learned about the larger lesbian community, not just in Houston, but across the United States.

Life changed drastically for Charlotte when she came out. A famous Texas football coach, Bum Phillips, was often quoted as saying his team wasn't going to knock on the door, they were "gonna kick the door in." According to Charlotte, she didn't just come out, she kicked the door off the closet. She and Arden dove head first into community activism, and never looked back.

Twice, I've marched on the state capitol in Austin, Texas. I got involved in PFLAG, because Arden came out to her mother, and we started taking her mother to PFLAG. Then we both started going, and Arden went to Al-Anon with me, too. Then we got involved in OLOC, Old Lesbians Organizing for Change. You have to be 60 to belong. We were both on the steering committee for that, and that's been real interesting.

We went to the National Lesbian Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, as a part of OLOC. On the marquee at the civic center was, "Welcome Old Lesbians." Boy, that was a thrill. I can't remember how many were there, something like 5,000. Everywhere you'd go, all you'd see was lesbians. If you walked down the street, all you'd see would be lesbians. Everybody treated us well. That was empowering.

In Washington, D.C., we were in the front of the parade at the March on Washington. We had special seating down

by the stage, and that was really a sight. There were a million people there. Of course, they discounted it, and said there was only about 400,000, but they always do that. There's no way they're going to acknowledge that there could be a million gays or lesbians in Washington, D.C.

Her family probably always knew, on some level, that Charlotte was a lesbian, but it was never spoken about, never named. When Charlotte was in her late 60s, she decided ignoring the truth had gone on too long, and on National Coming Out Day, she sent them all a letter. (letter on page 194)

I sent letters to all of my family, and came out to them. I told them I wasn't doing this for them, I was doing this for myself. I was just tired of keeping everything a secret. I have a feeling they were ashamed of me. I told them that I had always been a lesbian, and that I was a child of God and I would not discuss the Bible with anybody. I had one response from my sister's son, who is probably a gay man, but who has never been allowed to be who he is. I hand-delivered the letter to my niece, Judy, and she just wadded it up and threw it in the garbage. A couple of them accepted it, and don't have a problem with me being a lesbian. But one sister is so homophobic it makes my blood boil sometimes.

Life never did slow down for Charlotte. She knows she has to have met at least 400 or 500 lesbians through LOAF. They've been going long enough that she's now lost several good friends over the years. "Betty Rudnick was one of my favorites. She was my fishing buddy," Charlotte recalled.

I'm 70 years old, and the thing that makes me the most uncomfortable about being 70 is that my little pride gets hurt when I can't do the things I used to do. I can't work out in the yard and dig, get up on ladders and do a lot of stuff.

Another of the many interests that keep Charlotte busy is her involvement in a group for young gay and lesbian kids in their area.

Arden and I, mostly Arden, are going to mentor these two young lesbians. They're really neat. One of them has some medical problems that she is going to have surgery for, and she's not able to work. I can imagine how she must feel, having to depend on her partner for financial stuff right now. I have always had problems asking for anything I needed. I wouldn't ask anybody for anything. I'm so independent.

Charlotte lives on her pension from Western Electric, but she worries about how she could have been better about planning for her future.

I would probably be in real good shape, but after my daddy got sick with cancer in the late 1950s (he died in '63), when he got so he couldn't work any more, I helped my mother and daddy financially a lot. And I've always taken vacations



Arden and Charlotte's commitment ceremony in the hills of West Texas.

every year. I spent a lot of money on mother and daddy, buying things for them, especially Momma, things that she never did have. So, I'm saving money now, for the first time.

I wish I'd met Miss Arden in 1950, but I didn't. I went to the Methodist Church, the First Methodist Church in downtown Houston, for over 30 years. After Sharon left, I stopped going to church. I began to be aware of how the church felt about homosexuals, so I quit going altogether. But when Arden and I got together, she was going to Unity Church, and I started going, too. I felt like I'd come home. I never could understand all the hate that comes out of the fundamentalists as far as homosexuals are concerned. That's not what Jesus teaches. It's just like when I was a little kid, and we lived in this little town, Galena Park. Probably wasn't 200 people there, but everybody knew my father was an alcoholic, and they made fun of us kids, and my momma. I don't much care for hypocrites.

Well, I tell you what: since I retired, back in 1983, and got involved in activist work, they've been the happiest years of my life.

Charlotte's continues to live in Houston, with her 'Sugar,' Arden. Together, they have crisscrossed the United States over and over, gathering the stories of lesbians 70 and older.

Interviewer: Arden Eversmeyer

