

# The OLOHP Insider

June 2011

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project

Issue 10



*Skip Neal spent much of her life involved in various forms of art and music. Here she is at 18, with her mother in 1945 while she was in the WACs, working as a scientific illustrator, and working on an art piece while at a elder hostel in 1989.*

## *Musings*

The interviewing process has changed considerably for me over the years. There was a time when I felt like I needed to know a great deal about a woman I had never met in order to guide an interview. And because I had no way to get that information, I would be somewhat insecure starting an interview.

Then I met Armintha "Skip" Neal in Denver ten years ago. I was there doing some work with another woman and my hostesses said to me, "Oh Arden, there is someone you need to meet. She has a wonderful story and she is willing to talk to you." That was my first truly impromptu interview – no preparation for either of us. And what a joy it was. Skip was an amazing woman with incredible stories to share, but just as importantly, she was willing to share a great amount about her everyday life – about those common aspects of life that bind us all together.

*The sense of urgency stays with me - our time is fast running out.*

I have always worked from a basic outline to try and get the "meat" of what a woman's life has been. After all, that's what the Oral Herstory Project is all about. But the experience with Skip allowed me to let an interview flow in whatever direction it might go – with some amazing stories as a result.

With some of the women I have known for many years, when I had the privilege of interviewing them, I discovered that I had not really known them at all. Their lives are so much fuller than I had known and often, much fuller than the woman sharing her story had believed before the experience.

I continue to look forward to each interview with excitement. Hearing about the life of another wonderful woman, and perhaps being rewarded with another lasting friendship. And the sense of urgency stays with me - that our time is fast running out.

*Arden, born 1931*

*Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians Born in the Early 1900s*  
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## *Another Perspective on Interviewing*

Being new to the interviewing process, I know I have a somewhat different perspective than Arden's. What seems to come naturally to her is still a bit intimidating to me and requires a bit more homework on my part.

To date, my interviews have all been women I know, so that changes the dynamic somewhat – at least, it does for me. Knowing her personality and knowing we have some shared experiences makes it easier to get started. Once we are sitting together with the recorder going, and I've stated the who, what, when and where for the record, I usually ask the woman to tell me about her parents. By the time she is talking about where she was born and her siblings, both of us have relaxed.

If you wanted to be gracious, you'd call me naturally curious. If you'd rather be accurate, you'd be more likely to say I was nosey. I can't remember a time I didn't wonder about people I meet. I want to know what makes them who they are and having a legitimate reason to ask all my questions suits me fine! If a woman is talking about going to elementary school, I want to know if she had to change into play clothes when she came home each day. Did she live in house or an apartment? Was the area rural or urban? Did she take the bus or walk? When she talks about high school, I want to know if she belonged to the band. Did she work after school? Did she date boys? I do have the set of questions with me that we use to guide us when doing OLOHP interviews, and, occasionally, I do resort to glancing at them. But, so far (knock on wood), the information we'd love to know about each woman for the Project seems to come out naturally in the conversation.

The more the woman shares, the more I want to know. As you can imagine, this makes for a long interview and carpal tunnel problems for the transcriber! I know when I take that next step and interview a woman that I don't already know, I may sing a whole new tune. But for now, I'm loving the process.



Listening is an essential skill for interviewing. That sounds easy but I've found it takes more skill than I'd anticipated. The interviewer has to let the woman tell her story at her own pace and in her own way, but she also needs to be very present herself. It's easy for a conversation thread to stray so far that it needs to be rescued – memories spark other memories. The interviewer also needs to keep track of the overall picture, respectfully bringing the conversation back on topic when needed. If she doesn't, sometimes a thread of the story will be started, but not finished.

As someone who has both interviewed and transcribed, it's easy to tell when the interviewer is thinking ahead to what she wants to ask next instead of staying in the moment, and reacting to what is being shared. Along with listening, when you are interviewing, there is a part of you that needs to keep track of which suggested questions have been covered. You also need to stay aware of the woman's comfort level – comfort with the subject matter being discussed, but also mindful about whether or not a break is needed. And, at the same time, checking to make sure the audio recorder is doing its job without letting it make you lose contact with your subject.

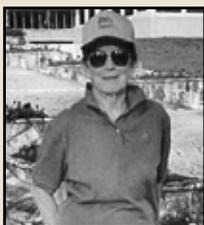
Then there is that side of many of us that wants to interject ourselves into each interview. Offering a few details about a similar situation or experience can help further the story and let the woman know you understand what she went through. Then again, once you start, it's hard not to make it too much about yourself.

Reassuring is part of the job, too. Sometimes the conversation gets into an emotional place. When it does, the interviewer needs to be able to handle it sensitively.

Quite the balancing act – one for which I can't thank Arden enough. Interviewing has been an amazing experience, one where I can exercise that nosey side of my nature and say, "Arden made me do it!"

*Margaret, 1951*

## Recent Passings



*Jennie Gates, born 1927 and interviewed in 2000 in Houston, Texas  
Jennie died in February, 2011.*



*Bonita Flagg, born 1937 and interviewed in March 2011 in Port Townsend, Washington.  
Bonita died June 2011.*

## Excerpts from a few of the Herstories

**Lois Heindselman**  
Born 1936  
died 2008

*From her 2006 Interview*



2006

When I first went on that gay cruise, I thought, "You know what? It's the first time in my life I feel like what it's like to be normal." Do you know what I mean; I feel like everybody else gets to feel every day of their life. And I've never really felt like that because I always felt like something was wrong when I was somewhere.

You know, I don't care if you're walking down the street or whatever... I don't seem to feel like I fit in. I mean, I act like it sometimes but I don't really, in many many cases. But on the cruise, it was like everybody was just like me. I can just not worry about a thing and live every day like everybody else gets to live.

If they [straight people] realized the difference in how we have to feel because we happened to be this way, they'd do some second thoughts on it. But too many of them still believe and think that we... well, that it's our option, our choice to be gay. Well I got news for them.

I went, again, to see a psychiatrist. A Quaker man, he was part of our Quaker medical group. So I started going to see him, Dr. Boardman. And out of that came that I needed to do something for myself and not just my family. I needed to think about myself. So I determined... I have a book, I still have it, by Mary McCarthy. It has to do with Florence. It's a big beautiful book. I said to myself, "Very well... I'm going to make something of myself. I'm going to be something. I'll look up every word I don't understand. That's what I'm going to do."

I used to get on my bike and ride two or three miles over the dirt road. There was a another road, but I rode up the back road. The reason I went on my bike was that there was a big hill and I loved to go tearing down that hill on my bike. I would end up in the town of Groton where the library was open on Monday mornings. I went around to the library with this book and began to do it, to look up every word that I didn't know.

Pretty soon, the two librarians got kind of interested in this person. "What are you doing?" So I explained and one morning they said, "Would you like to help with the over due books?" And I said, "Yeah, sure." So I subsequently became a librarian and was opening and closing on Wednesday nights, that little library, and loved it. I truly loved it.

**Jess McVey**  
Born 1918  
died 2010

*From her 2003 Interview*



I lived a very double life. I dated Jewish men - professional Jewish men. And when they would drop me off at an appropriate time like 12:30, I would go out to the bars and I had a girlfriend. And, you know, that's basically what I was interested in. I was lost. And so I would move back to Miami. My mother wanted me to get a Masters, do something so that I would be back on track. Nothing interested me. I had no interests, really. When I was in between my junior and senior year of college, I took a summer, because it wasn't appropriate for me to just hang out, and my mother sent me off to the Sorbonne in Paris. So I was in Paris as a young woman and tried to come out there.

I never went to school [while in Paris]. I never went to classes. Occasionally if they went to a museum, I'd go along, but I wasn't really interested.

I was only interested in finding myself. So I went back to Florida, and in 1966, the woman who had served me my first drink in a gay bar (it wasn't a lesbian bar, it was a gay bar) was invited to work on Fire Island in the Grove as a bartender. She said to me, "If you would like to come along, they'll put you in a job." And I said, "Well, that sounded good, because I knew that my life was not on in any direction. So I went up to Fire Island. Women weren't working the Island in those days. They had had one woman working and then they had two, and now they'd invited a crew of us. They put me to work as the shrimp girl. The dyke in the kitchen said, "Can't have this little fem doing the shrimps." [Laughter] They had to find another job for me, and they did. They made me a cocktail waitress in the nightclub. It was the first time I had done physical work and it was an honest day's work. I worked hard, and I loved it.

That was a wonderful beginning for me, to enter into a new life. We made excellent money, and we saved throughout that summer and drove west. When I told my mother that I was going to Fire Island to work, my mother, who was very liberal except when it came to her daughter, said to me, "I know what Fire Island is, and I think it's disgusting." So those were her parting words to me then. We really never... we never had the closeness again. That was really the parting of our ways. In later years she was diagnosed two years before she would have total dementia. She never accepted my lifestyle, but she did come to visit. And that was her way of making amends.



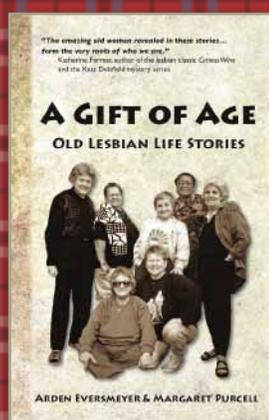
1948

**Katie Ulman**  
**Born 1938**

*Interviewed in 2008*



1998



### ***How can you be involved in the OLOHP?***

***Lesbians 70 years of age and older can tell their own story. Contact us.***

***If you don't "qualify", encourage older lesbian friends to contact us.***

***Buy a copy of A Gift of Age: Old Lesbian Life Stories.\****

***Donate a copy of our book to your local library.***

***Make a tax-deductible donation to support the Project.\*\****

***Send us a note of encouragement!***

***\*A Gift of Age: Old Lesbian Life Stories can be ordered at [www.olohp.org](http://www.olohp.org)***

***\*\*Tax-deductible donations can be made to The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project either by mailing a check (address on page 1) or going to our website and using the Donate Now button. You can also support the OLOHP by making a donation to OLOC, one of our sponsors, telling them it is on our behalf. Visit their website at [www.oloc.org](http://www.oloc.org), or write PO Box 5853, Athens, OH 45701.***