

The OLOHP Insider

February (or so) 2011

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project

Issue 8



Photos above are all of Ellie Schafer born in 1917. Left to right: with her older sister in 1917; at her high school graduation in 1934; photo from 1938; pictured with Joe Garagiola when she received a 12 Who Care Award in 1987; on horseback in Hawaii as she rode out to visit a leper colony; and at 77 years old in 1994.

Musings from Arden: When I grow up I want to be just like Eleanor "Ellie" Schafer!

Charlotte and I are just back from our almost annual trip to Arizona. Over the 14 years in working the Oral Herstory Project, the number of lesbians in the Tucson/Phoenix area who have shared their life stories with the Project has grown to about 35. We usually hang out with Vera Martin in Apache Junction. Vera, who is now 87, shared her herstory back in 2000 and has always been one of the Project's most enthusiastic cheerleaders. (Vera is one of the founding mother's of OLOC where she and I served as co-directors for years and formed a lasting friendship.)

I have tried over the years to stay in touch with all of the women I have worked with, but I simply don't have time to visit each one. So several years ago I started hosting brunches for the women and their partners as I travel in different parts of the country where there is a large group of participants.

I had not heard from Ellie, so I called her when we arrived at Vera's. I asked if she would be able to come, and she said, "what day is it, Arden"? I responded, "Tuesday morning." "I can't, I work on Tuesday and Thursday." When I asked what she was doing, she said, "What I have always done - drug and alcohol abuse counseling".

Now this would not be particularly unusual but for the fact that Ellie celebrated her 94th birthday in January. She is currently the oldest living participant in the Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project. We had excerpts from her story in Issue 4. (www.olohp.org)

The trip was wonderful. We came home having gathered six new life stories, trained a new interviewer, given a presentation on the Project to about 75 women, held the brunch with 27 women, and visited with several other special people.

Is it any wonder I love doing what I do? We honor you, Ellie Schafer!

Arden, born 1931

Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians Born in the Early 1900s

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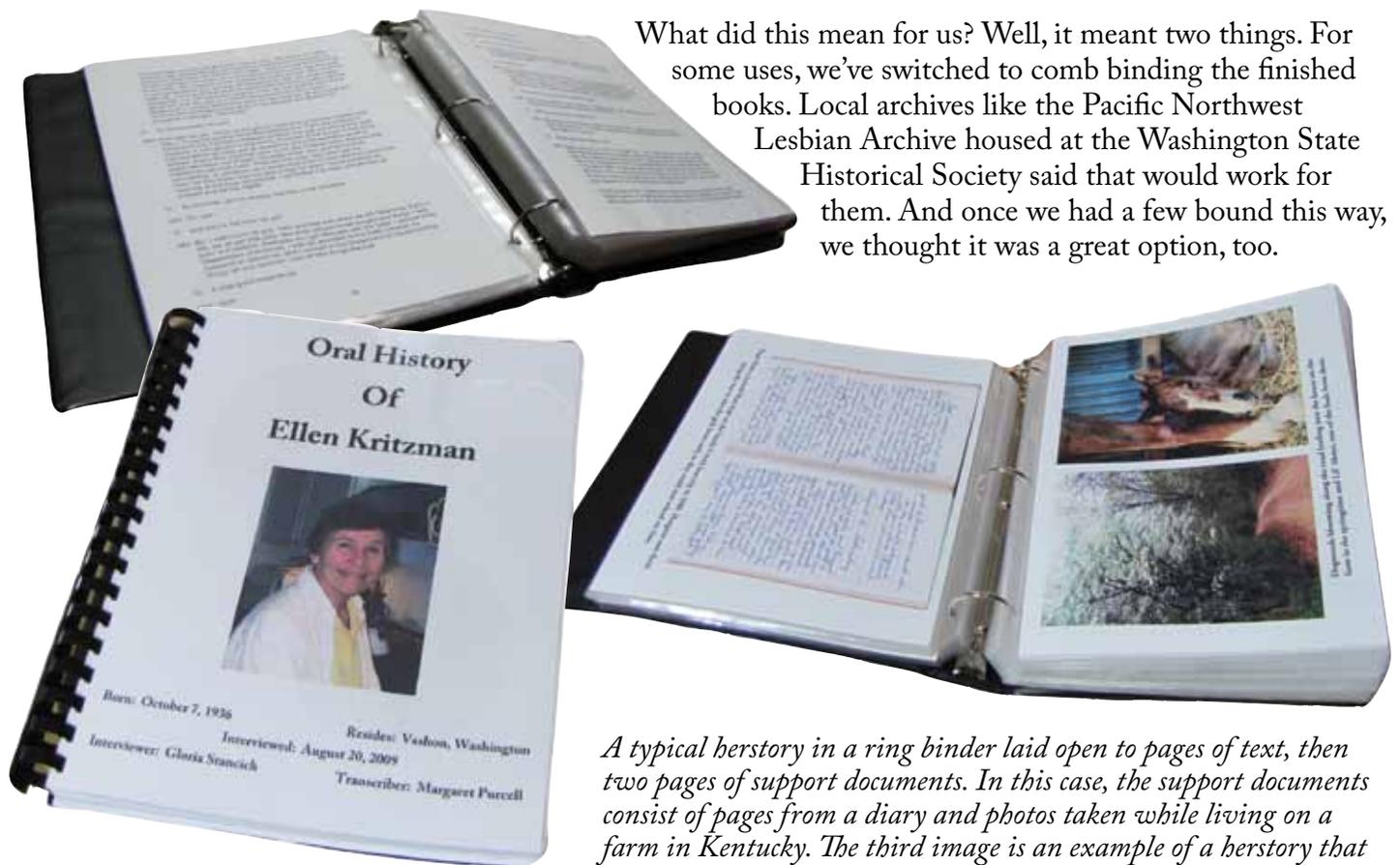
What Does a "Book" Look Like?

When we talk about gathering herstories and processing the materials, we often tell of producing two (or sometimes three) copies of a woman's book. A copy always goes to the women who was interviewed and one stays in the OLOHP archive. Occasionally, a third copy is produced for a local archive or for the Project's own use during presentations. You may wonder what a "book" looks like.

The majority of the books are put together in black, 3- ring binders. Each book begins with a title page, followed by the transcript and a copy of the contract. Transcripts are interspersed with copies of the woman's supporting documents. Most support documents are photographs but we also often have graduation certificates, poetry, copies of articles authored by or written about the woman and such. All the materials are in clear sheet protectors. Binders ranged from half-inch to two-inches and one or two stories have required a part 1 and 2!

In the process of searching for an archive that would be a good home for the books, we learned something that had never occurred to us: in archives, where space is a hot commodity, they don't have room to store materials in ring binders. Plus, it turns out, even if printed pages and the sheet protectors were of archival quality materials, over time, the ink (or toner) on the page can lift from the page to the sheet protector causing damage.

What did this mean for us? Well, it meant two things. For some uses, we've switched to comb binding the finished books. Local archives like the Pacific Northwest Lesbian Archive housed at the Washington State Historical Society said that would work for them. And once we had a few bound this way, we thought it was a great option, too.



A typical herstory in a ring binder laid open to pages of text, then two pages of support documents. In this case, the support documents consist of pages from a diary and photos taken while living on a farm in Kentucky. The third image is an example of a herstory that has been comb bound.

But apparently we weren't done learning new lessons yet, because as we prepped the books to go to Smith College, it became clear that in order for the herstories to be easily stored and accessed by researchers, Smith needed all the materials pulled from any sort of book format altogether and sent to them in folders.

After we spent a respectable amount of time pouting because we really love to see the stories in book format, we regrouped and proceeded to disassemble the 53 books that constituted the first of the shipments going to Smith. Looking on the bright side, the herstories that would have required a dozen or more boxes to ship now neatly fit into two. And we now have a lifetime supply of 3-ring binders and sheet protectors!

Arden and Margaret

Excerpts from a few of the Herstories



With her parents in 1939

Sue Pratt
Born January 1936

From her 2007 Interview



2004

When I was, you know, maybe still in grade school, or first years of high school, I remember feeling an attachment to one of my aunts and to one of mother's friends in the church named Pearl. I would write in my diary about her and she smiled at me today or whatever. And then when they moved to Missouri, had an English teacher, Miss Lyons. And oh, did I ever fall for Miss Lyons – a terrible crush on her. And she kind of reciprocated back to me. She was single. She had a boyfriend that came over and visited her, but she was very affectionate and I was starved for affection.

I couldn't really feel it with my parents, so, sometimes in looking back on this, or maybe at the time I just thought, "I'm searching for a substitute mother." But, oh yes, there were sexual overtones in how I felt about her and her body and how I so much longed for the hugs and so forth that she gave me. And I didn't know what was wrong with me. I never told anybody else about those feelings because I didn't think anybody else would feel that way. At that time I never heard of homosexuality. So there's no way I could have related to that. Nothing. I don't recall seeing anything about it until I got to college.

I learned about it when I got to college. So, you know, this time I just thought, "Well, I guess I'm different from other people." I still wanted to get married and have children. I had always wanted that. And I wanted to date and I did, and as I said I was elected queen and my boyfriend was like the king. But I didn't really enjoy the kissing sessions I had to endure with the boys. [chuckles] And I remember one time, my boyfriend and I, we stopped off at the drugstore after a basketball game, and we happened to run into Miss Lyons. And Miss Lyons was a good friend of Dale's mother, and we had the closeness between her and me and she stopped and talked to us and said how glad she was to see us together out on a date. And the thought occurred to me, "I wish I could go home with Miss Lyons instead of going on this date." But of course I never told anybody.

When Bobbie was in the hospital, the night before the surgery, a young, somewhat snippy nurse came in wanting to know my relationship to Miss Allison. I was fixing the bed and I said, "She is my partner and my companion of twenty-nine years and I have her power of attorney in my purse. Do you need to see it right now?" She said, "No, ma'am."

That was the first time I had ever come out publicly. Business was a breeze from then on. I have come out to the doctor, lawyer, financial advisor, CPA and anybody else that wants, or needs, to know. It's the greatest gift I could have ever given myself.

I have come out, not saying that I am a lesbian, but coming out. I was in physical therapy and a woman needed a ride because her car wouldn't start. I knew she was taking therapy so I told her I would take her home. I was on my way. She was talking about how she wasn't able to get in touch with her husband and asked me, "Do you still have a husband?" It told her that I never had a husband. "Don't feel sorry for me. I have a great life. I shared my home with a dear friend for almost 40 years." Her response was, "Well, that's nice." I consider that coming out.



1945

Jean Lloyd
Born April 1927

From her
Interview
in 2005



2002

It was kind of a varied neighborhood. I had to walk through a field with a bull that was hopefully neutered. (Chuckling) I had to wait for the bus to go into high school later. The high school, Newburgh Free Academy, was again, quite a diverse school. There were a few of us who were academically doing very well and I remember my chief competition was the son of my dentist. (Chuckling) I wasn't quite sure whether he was giving me good care or not.

The question was, "Now where should I go afterwards?" [My parents] consulted people that they knew, friends of my father's. "Where should a girl go to college." Mount Holyoke was a good choice. It was an excellent choice for me. All of a sudden I was on this beautiful campus with people running around in blue jeans and none of the pressures of trying to be an appropriate girl.

I started thinking I'd be a physics major because I had a crush on my high school physics teacher. Then I got interested in psychology because in physics, they already have the answers to everything that we were assigned. And in psychology there were open questions. So my major was psychology.

Well, when I finished college, that was the question because, again, my father was asking other people, "What do your daughters do?" and I said I'd like to go on to school because I really enjoyed going to school. So I said that to one of my professors and he called a friend down at Yale and the man at Yale said, "Is she a blonde?" "Yes, she is" "Well, send 'er on down."

That was the criteria – that was how I got into graduate school. (Laughing) And that was kind of a shock. At Mount Holyoke, the faculty was interested in teaching. There was no sense that you couldn't do whatever you wanted to do. Although, I think there was somebody there (in terms of career counseling) that was a little negative. But anyway, I got to Yale... Why? Why do we even bother having women in the graduate program? 'Cause they're only gonna get married and have babies. And the faculty was interested in writing papers not in teaching. The male students got the best internships. When I finished my masters, again I thought, "Well, I'll just keep going". So I kept going 'til I got my PhD.

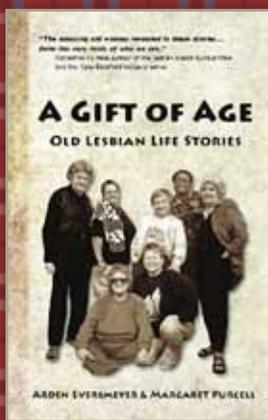


1932

Janet Brown
Born July 1930
Interviewed in 2010



2002



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*

** *Tax-deductible donations can be made to The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project either by mailing a check (address in 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, or write PO Box 5853, Athens, OH 45701.*



As always, nicely done ladies.
Magda

What a lovely way to start the new year!
Thanks once again for all you all do. This is a great project, and I love reading about my peers, formerly unknown to me! Leela