

The OLOHP Insider

August 2015

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project

Issue 28



Ruth Silver, 1919 to 2015

All passings are difficult for the Project, but this one, more than most. Ruth, a strong advocate on our behalf, was first interviewed for the OLOHP in 2001 at age 82. In a 2014 conversation with Marcia updating her Herstory, Ruth shared this:

When I think about my 90th birthday party, it was just like yesterday. It was the most remarkable experience, I think, of my whole existence. There were only three people [in my community] at that time who were 90 years old, and the party just went forever. People came from all over – from the east and the north and the south and west – and it was a fantastic experience. People had opportunities to speak about me, and said things about me that I didn't even believe that I did, that it was not possible for one person in one lifetime to do the kinds of things I was doing.

Arden's Musings

What a summer! While much of the country was suffering with drought, we've had serious flooding here in Houston, twice – once in May and again in June. You may have heard on the news that Texas actually had enough rain to cover the whole state five inches deep – think how big Texas is! The flooding made me even more thankful that the OLOHP materials are now all either safely stored up in “the cloud” somewhere, on the upper floor of my home, in an upstairs unit at a storage facility, or at Smith.

We'd had a close call back in 2001 when tropical storm Allison flooded Houston. All the Project's work was at my home, which was temporarily filled with almost waist deep water. The Allison flood was actually what got Margaret to thinking about how she might be able to help the Project out a bit by digitizing all our files, and most of you know how that went: her passing interest, became a dedication, which morphed into a passion... well, some might say an obsession. (There might be a cautionary tale in there somewhere, but don't tell Margaret.)

Once the rains had passed, then the blistering heat set in, something many of you have also enjoyed around the country. Fortunately, we were traveling in cooler climates most of the month of July, one place being Wisconsin and the National Women's

Music Festival. This was their 40th Anniversary Celebration, and several of us, connected with the OLOHP, gave a workshop. We also spent time in the Puget Sound area, took a trip down to the Oregon coast to do some interviewing, and squeezed in another music festival up in Vancouver, BC.

The workshop in Madison yielded a few new women interested in training to become interviewers for the Project. Doing the training in classes has been an interesting development for the Project. In the past nine months I have held two training classes that have produced seven interviewers. The Festival workshop gave us the names of a large group from our heartland - Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa. So I am starting to plan a class for next year.

We have interviewers over much of our country now, and it is wonderful to be able to match one with an interested interviewee. There was a time when Charlotte and I got into the car or motor home and started on a long trip to get the interviews. We have already made five trips this year, mostly for workshops/presentations, and still have Chicago, Shawnee, OK, and McAllen, TX to go. All of these trips involve a presentation, and growth for the project – something Margaret writes about on the next page.

Arden

Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians 70 and Older

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You Know That Old Adage: Be careful what you wish for?

As proverbs do, that one is proving itself right once again. In our case, we've spent over a decade wishing more women would get involved in the OLOHP. We subscribe to that way of thinking that says if we're interested in something, of course everyone else should be too! We're not sure what changed, but after years of trying every which way we knew to make our wish come true, it has. And now that it has, we're dealing with "Be careful what you wish for, lest it come true." Assuming we continue in the direction we're heading, 2015 will set several records for the Project, and face several challenges.



Interviews: At the current pace, we just might set a new high for the number of interviews conducted in a year. In 2014, we did 59 interviews. As of today, we have done 44 interviews in 2015 and we are in conversation with 40 more women about gathering their stories. Even if we only arrange to do half of those this year, it will be a record setter. Whether or not we surpass 59, it has been an incredible year and we've met some truly amazing women.

Interviewers: During 2014-15, a dozen new interviewers have gone to work for the Project, and two more are ready to start as well. These new interviewers join the eight others who also continue to do interviews for us.

Challenges: As excited as we are about the number of interviews being done, our success brings with it some significant new challenges. In the five previous years, we had averaged 38 interviews per year. Interviewing is an essential step, no doubt, and we will be eternally grateful to each of our interviewers. They donate their valuable time to the Project, conducting the actual interviews, often scanning support documents, and following up with the women throughout the rest of the process. That said, we have to look at it honestly: by the time we make the arrangements to do the interview, we've already invested quite a few hours and resources in the form of introductory materials, manuals, forms, recorders, etc. Once we have the audio files, they go into a queue to wait for the next available transcriber. We currently have three women doing transcriptions for hire. We also have a few farmed out to volunteers. Right now, we are working on interviews done in May and early June but we have 27 in the queue! Once transcribed, they go thru a series of steps that take weeks, or months, to complete.



More Challenges: Beyond keeping track of all the moving parts involved in processing each story, and all those extraneous tasks (like ordering and prepping recorders, designing presentations, and such), comes the most daunting challenge of all: Money. Making sure we can do all this at no cost to the woman sharing her story is important to us. Final costs for doing most Herstories falls in the \$750-1000 range, assuming all the interviewer and other labor expenses are donated.

We're proud to say we've managed to work on more than 425 stories to date, scraping together the money to cover all the costs and relying on donations of expenses and hours. However, that's not to say you won't be hearing a fundraising appeal from us some time in the near future since a dollar will only stretch so far!

How Clusters Happen

A quick look at a map of where the 400+ OLOHP interviews came from geographically and one of the things that stands out most is the clusters where there are dozens of interviews. It's been fun to watch the clusters appear, and then grow. We now have several interviewers in the Albuquerque area, and a new cluster is forming that wasn't there a year ago. For years, there were only four interviews done in all of Minnesota. We knew the women were there, but we didn't get it together to make it happen until this summer. Sherry, one of our interviewers, is from that area and we knew she would be traveling thru on her way to Wisconsin. So we asked: Would you stop and do some interviews for us? "Sure." Then we got to talking about someone else we knew there that we thought would be a good interviewer and reached out. "Sure!" In a matter of three months, we went from four to twelve in that area, with at least a dozen more women we'd like to approach...and that's before we even begin asking for referrals from those we interview, which is always a great way to make new connections.

It's been an especially hard summer for the Project...we've lost several women who had generously shared their stories. They will be missed.

Alta Fly, born 1930, was interviewed in 2006 in Tucson, Arizona. Alta devoted much of her life to her art, and always surrounded herself with artists.

I emulated my father for many years. I would wear pants and shirts and even try to get a tie, and I'd watch him shave and I'd try to shave. He loved to wear hats and I'd get me a hat. Through high school, I had teachers take me aside and say, "Well, Alta Marie," they called you by both your names in the south, "Don't you want to try to look like a girl and act like a girl?"



Alta at 22, and at 76 in 2006



Natalie at 23, and at 84 in 2006

Natalie Zarchin, born 1922, led an incredibly full life. An active member of OLOC almost from its inception, Natalie was interviewed for the Project in 2003 in El Cerrito, California.

Dotty Fowler came to me and we became friends. We became buddies, we hung out together. And she invited me to take over the women's network. She knew all the leaders. She was an activist. And so, I met other lesbians. Because of Dotty, I learned to ride a bicycle. I learned a lot from Dotty. I really learned a lot from Dotty.

Morry Baer, born 1917. Ninety-five when interviewed, Morry was the oldest woman to share her story. She was interviewed in Delaware in 2012. Working as a police woman in New York, she had the occasion to guard the door at Eleanor Roosevelt's apartment during a party. Chivalrous to the end, Morry refused to say who she saw coming and going from the party!

I saw this poor person sitting off there in a corner and I moved over. Emily... incidentally, she was very brilliant. Extremely brilliant. We started talking. Her mother was running a rooming house in Brooklyn. I remember going there and staying in one of the rooms overnight with Emily, but most of the time we rented a room. We could get a room for a dollar a night. I found out what to do. We learned the hard way. And 54 years later...



Morry in the 1930s, and on her 95th birthday

Maryline 'Whitey' White, born 1921, was interviewed in 2011 in Ashland, Oregon.

I fell madly in love with a counselor. Ah, first time. And I couldn't understand it, of course, but I just loved her dearly.

Whitey, 25, while serving in Europe with the Red Cross in the 1930s, and on her 95th birthday



Anonymous, born 1935, and interviewed in 2009, recently died. She had a conditional contract with the Project, but we feel we can share these words of hers.

The Dean called quite a few of us in, talking to us. I was one of the people that she called in, and she said, "I understand that you have a relationship with someone at another school." I'm saying "How do you know that? You cannot possibly know anything like that." She said, "Yes, we've seen your letters." Now, I don't know if they truly opened some of my mail in the post office or not, I have no idea, but they said, "Yes, we do know." Now, I was not living with this girlfriend at this time, in fact, my senior year, I was living by myself. My mother paid a little bit more and I lived by myself. But this was the beginning of my senior year, and I was by myself. She said, "You have got to stop this relationship or we're going to kick you out of school." I didn't think for one moment that they would really kick me out of school because I was a good student, and I knew that. But that was the threat, and so I broke off the relationship.

Judith Fine, born 1944, was interviewed in 2010 as part of training to become an OLOHP interviewer. Health concerns made it impossible for her to follow thru. We had lost touch and we recently learned that she died last summer. Judith lived in Leeds, Massachusetts.



Degania Golove, born 1929, died this summer, and while she was not a part of our collection, she was integral to the OLOHP. When Arden began exploring ways to preserve the stories of her own friends and contemporaries, it was Degania who helped her see how it could be done. Degania was a longtime volunteer and coordinator of the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles.

How can you be involved in the OLOHP?

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

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

Buy our books. *

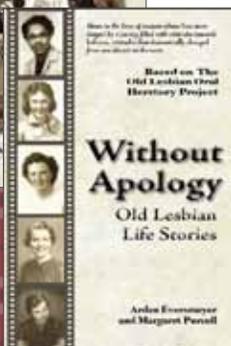
Donate copies of our books to your local library.

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

Send us a note of encouragement!

* *A Gift of Age: Old Lesbian Life Stories* and *Without Apology: Old Lesbian Life Stories* can currently be ordered at www.amazon.com and www.alibris.com

** 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 PayPal/Donate Now button.



A special thanks to OLOC, Old Lesbians Organizing for Change, www.oloc.org, for their ongoing support.