

## Author's Preface

### Arden:

I gave an interview more than fifteen years ago to a student. It was about my life as a lesbian, more specifically, as an old lesbian. At that time, I was 60 and I said I thought my life could be neatly divided into three parts. The first part included my childhood, teenage years and coming out to myself in college as I gained an understanding of why I felt I was different. Next, I spent 33 years living in a long-term relationship with Tommie. That part ended when she died and I was given the chance and the challenge to start again. The third part of my life began with a five-year process of taking my power and healing. I also developed my social consciousness and became an activist during this time.

It all seemed nice and neat. I knew my life wasn't over, but I didn't have any great expectations of what was yet to come. And I certainly didn't think I would fall in love again, but I did. And I never expected to find a new direction for my life—collecting the life stories of old lesbians. So, when I wasn't even looking, both my sugar, Charlotte, and this project found me, and I began a fourth part in my life.

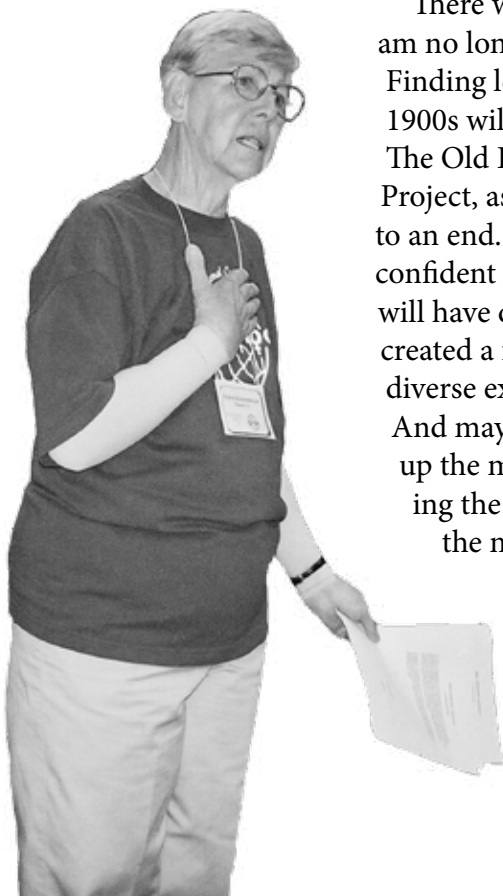
Those few years I spent transitioning from the third to the fourth part, I often thought about how old lesbians are in many ways an invisible population. It was easy to see how that came about, given how we lived. I had never been out to anyone other than close friends and that was how they lived too. Then a woman I knew died. She had some great tales she loved to tell, and I found it disturbing that her story would only live on with a few friends. And that's when it began.

Something began to nudge me. I kept thinking about all the old lesbians I knew and the stories they had to tell. As scary as it was, the idea that I could be the one to document their stories just wouldn't let me go.

It started out as something simple, me talking with a few friends to make sure their stories were saved. But the project quickly took on a life of its own. Most of the women I talked with

connected me with other women they knew, and before I had a chance to think it through, I was traveling all over the country interviewing women.

I'm still not sure I ever had much say in whether or not I wanted to take on such a huge project. Feels more like it took me on. But I do know one thing for sure—I have never regretted it. It's been incredibly rewarding and humbling. I've often said that I fall just a little bit in love with each old lesbian I meet. I'm always honored that they will share their stories with me. I stay in touch with all of them and some have gone on to become good friends. Some have died and that's been hard. Others have gone on and continue to live such rich lives that I wish I had time to go back and interview them again.



There will come a time when I am no longer able to gather stories. Finding lesbians born in the early 1900s will become harder and harder. The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project, as I know it, may even come to an end. I'm okay with that. I'm confident the stories in the collection will have done what I want; they've created a first-hand record of the diverse experiences of these women. And maybe someone else will take up the mantle and focus on collecting the stories of lesbians born in the mid 1900s. They have their own unique stories to tell.

Now, there is this book. And a website ([www.olohp.org](http://www.olohp.org)). And we're working on ways to share more of the collection. It makes my head spin. And at the same time, it pleases me no end

to see these stories being shared—shared with other old lesbians, with younger lesbians, and with society at large.

The stories deserve to be told. I am truly humbled by the thought that I actually played a pivotal role in making this happen.

What a ride! And, best of all, it's not over.

*Arden Eversmeyer*

**Margaret:**

The longer I live, the more conflicted I am about destiny. I've never believed that individual events are meant to happen, that the details of our daily lives have been laid out in a huge planning book. But when something happens to me, like meeting Arden Eversmeyer, I do have to wonder.

My partner, Mary, became involved with Old Lesbians Organizing for Change, a non-profit that works to improve the lives of old lesbians. Even though I wasn't officially old enough, (you have to be 60 to belong to OLOC), I began tagging along when Mary went to meetings. That's where I met Arden and became aware of her collection of interviews.

There had already been tentative plans to put together a book based on what had become known as the Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project. A woman had already expressed an interest in writing the book, and preliminary work was underway.

Mary and I traveled to Texas several times over the next few years, getting to know Arden and her sweetie, Charlotte, and learning more and more about the OLOHP. Fascinated by the Project, and looking for a way we could help, Mary and I took on the task of creating an electronic backup copy of all the work Arden had done. It was a time-consuming task that required two additional visits to scan the printed copies of all of the interviews and all of the supporting materials.

Two years later, I heard that the woman who had done the preliminary work for a book based on these stories could not continue, and I e-mailed Arden. Since my writing experience was limited to magazine articles, training materials, newsletters and

similar materials, I wasn't sure that my skills were what Arden and the book project needed. In a really little voice, I broached the possibility of my giving the book a try. I didn't want her to feel obligated by our growing friendship. I was thrilled when I opened my e-mail the next day to find a reply from Arden that started, "Good morning tiny voice."

I had ready access to most of the Herstories, since we had scanned them, and I found myself reading one after another, being pulled into each woman's story. My office was soon overrun with printed transcripts, notes and lists. I love to read in bed, and it became a family joke that I'd go to bed with a different woman each night as I read and reread their interviews. I was soon conferring with Arden about the myriad of details and drafts it has taken to make a book happen.

Sometimes I find myself looking back and shaking my head. Could all of the little events that had to happen precisely when they did to get me here have been just luck? If it was, I'll have to say I'm one of the luckiest people alive.

*Margaret Purcell*



### **A note about the graphics in *A Gift of Age*:**

Is a picture really worth a thousand words? We think so, and we hope you'll agree. The pictures we had access to for use in this book were all photocopies, and some of them were actually copies of copies! The age and condition of many of the documents were other limiting factors. Thus, making sure we had adequate quality in this book became quite a task.

We hope you'll agree that though the quality of some of the graphics we've included may leave something to be desired, even the fuzziest among them add to the story, and often tells their own tales.