

The OLOHP Insider

November 2011

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project

Issue 12



Musings

Believe it or not, 2012 is right around the corner, and Charlotte and I have completed another year of travel. Our third, and last, trip of 2011 was in our motor home to North Carolina and Tennessee. Leaving behind the dreadful heat, fires, and drought in Texas for the lush mountains and cool weather was such a blessing.

In addition to enjoying the weather and incredible scenery along the way, we had interviews and visits in Greensboro and Asheville, North Carolina, and Knoxville, Dowlletown, and Memphis, Tennessee. Parking berths for our motor home and wonderful hospitality was extended to us all along the way. And, as usual, we met some wonderful old lesbians.

Our 2011 trips, and some work closer to home in Houston, have been productive. We've added about 40 new stories and four new trained interviewers. The Puget Sound OLOC group has been busy adding more stories from their area, also, and several stories have come in from northeast interviewers. Our continued search for lesbians born before 1930 has resulted in two who are 90, and several well into their 80s, so we are pleased.

Although we won't be traveling, much of November will be devoted to the OLOHP. Margaret and Mary will be here so we can make the decisions and do the prep work for sending 80+ more herstories off to Smith College for archiving.

When we started the *Insider* in 2009, Margaret and I made a commitment to produce it for two years, 12 issues, before re-evaluating. This issue marks that goal. We hope we have accomplished what we set out to do. We wanted to give you a better idea of the nuts and bolts behind the Project as well as let you read some excerpts and photos from the womens' stories.

The *Insider* has been great fun and we still have more to share. The only immediate change is we will be going to a quarterly instead of six per year. We'll do our best to have the 2012 issues out in February, May, August and November. There is still lots more work to be done, and we want to keep all of you informed on what we are doing **and** have enough time to keep up with interviews, processing, archiving and such.

It has been quite the year and we're looking forward to much more to come in 2012!

Arden, born 1931

Gathering the Unique Life Stories of Lesbians Born in the Early 1900s
OLOHP • PO Box 980422 • Houston, TX 77098 • www.olohp.org • info@olohp.org

Tracing the Trajectory of Bonita Flagg's Herstory

We asked Marcia Perlstein, one of the OLOHP interviewers, to share her experiences interviewing a friend in her area who was nearing the end of a long struggle with cancer. Here are Marcia's thoughts.

I counted Bonita Flagg among my closest friends, almost from the moment we moved to Port Townsend, Washington. Even before meeting Bonita, I became a card carrying fan of Arden and OLOHP. Several years ago, I trained to be an interviewer for OLOHP and had a bumpy start, since I was unfamiliar with digital technology. In fact, I proudly called myself a techno-nitwit!

On Thanksgiving of 2010, we had several invitations to dinner, but I intuitively knew that it would be Bonita's last Thanksgiving, and that I wanted to be wherever she was. Ironically, I got too sick to go, but the next morning, I perked up, and we had our own private "after party." That was the first time we talked openly about the possibility of her impending death. She had struggled valiantly for more than six years, and although she continued to fight, Bonita began to feel that she was out of options.

I approached the possibility of interviewing Bonita and she perked up. She wanted to leave some legacy for her family. They were far flung, from Portland, Oregon, to Plano, Texas. I made arrangements to bring her a completed herstory so she could see what we were up to.

In March, we finally connected for her interview. By that time, she was pretty much totally at home. With the help of Margaret and Mary, we put her interview on the fast track. After the initial interview, Bonita began the process of going through photographs of family, friends and her theatrical experiences as a drama teacher, actress and director. She was beginning to lose energy, but was excited about the project and devoted what she called her "spurts" to pouring through photos and press releases from productions in which she'd had central roles.

I picked up her original material, had it copied and shipped off to Margaret. Several weeks later, I got the

transcript of her interview, which she and I edited together. The only change she felt strongly about was the correct naming of all the dogs in her life! She was a devoted animal advocate and her final career had been as the owner of Bonita's 4 Legged Friends.

Less than two weeks after getting the final transcript and labeled ancillary material and photographs to them, Margaret and Mary came to Port Townsend, and hand delivered Bonita's completed herstory. The next day, I brought it to Bonita, and sat while she leafed through it, truly appreciative and mesmerized. She commented that her nephew in Plano, and niece in Portland, would really treasure this.

One week later, hospice arrived, and Bonita was bedridden. Being the community treasure, a care team came together from the LGBT, theatre and pet communities, arranging to support

her medical team. Members of those communities were also invited to drop in to say their good-byes. If she was sleeping, people waited in the living room until she briefly woke up. At her request, her herstory book was put on the coffee table in the living room for family and friends to see while they waited.

Bonita died in June. Her niece invited me, as her historian, to write her obituary. I accepted, but in Bonita's true spirit, wanted to assemble a representative group to work on it together. The next day her niece, main caregivers, dear friends, pet store comrades, and a theatre buddy, all assembled to write her obituary under a two-hour deadline. We snatched several direct quotes right out of her herstory. As we all know, group efforts aren't always easy. However, this one was magical.

Finally, at her memorial, her book was exhibited along with other memorabilia and photographs organized by her niece, Patricia Flagg. I am still in touch with her niece Patricia, and nephew, Steve. The silver lining for me was that although we lost Bonita, we found her family. They feel a very special connection to our project and the way in which we have preserved an unusual legacy.

Marcia Perlstein



Recent Passings

Losing women who have shared their story with the Project is inevitable, of course. Losing three in a short period of time is especially difficult, and thought provoking. These three women have recently died, leaving behind friends, families and their Herstories. They will be missed.

Joanna Russ **Born 1937** **Died 2011**

*From her Interview
in November 2009*



- I: When did you finally come to terms with being a lesbian? How old were you?
- J: It was late. I was about 29. When I was in Binghamton, two of my science fiction friends, two women whom I knew best of all the people there, told me they were lovers. I was like, "Wow. They're just people. They're just like other people." Then I began to think about that and wonder why that delighted me so much. I said, "That's what I am." I remember walking back and forth in my apartment, saying over and over to myself, "I'm not. I'm not that. I'm not like *that*." It took a while to realize that *that* was just me. I really thought I'd have to change somehow.
- I: Did you think you'd outgrow it or something?
- J: No. In order to be a lesbian, I would have to change. And I didn't want to change then. I didn't know how to change. Then, finally, I realized I don't have to. I'm just me. Just stay me and I'm a lesbian. That's not all that uncommon, the feeling that you must become a different sort of person, in order to be worthy of this or something.

I was born in Brooklyn, New York. I grew up a wild child like a boy child. I had no restrictions placed on me. My mother would have preferred to have a girly-girl, and I fought that tooth and nail. She wanted the curls and the white stockings and I hated that. She said to me, because I would always get my white stuff dirty, "You'll never wear white." So now today I wear white gardening and I still go "Pththth."

I went through the public school system in New York and loved every minute of it. I enjoyed school. I enjoyed learning. I loved playing in the streets after school. I loved the nice little girls' club. We'd save up and we would buy ourselves Dodger jackets, name blazing down the back, and we'd save up some more money and go see the Dodgers play baseball. We'd sit in the bleachers there. That, and I spent my whole life piled up, listening to The Shadow on Sunday nights, with my little dog curled up on me. My dog, The Shadow, and the Brooklyn Dodgers, that was my whole existence outside of school.

Miriam Carroll **Born 1930, Died 2011**

*From her Interview
in August 2006*

1943





1928

***Doreen Brand
Born 1928 Died 2011***

*From her Interview
in April 2003*



1991

And then I met Beverly. We clicked immediately. After meeting she said to me, "We haven't had a chance to talk yet." And so we walked and we talked, and we walked and we talked, and we've been doing that ever since. We feel very lucky to have found each other.

What I've come to discover is that if you have to work too hard at it, it probably isn't for you. In my present relationship, we don't have to work. We both are happy together. We are happy just to be together. We don't agree on every single thing. For instance, she doesn't put sugar into coffee. And I do notice that in the early years we did seem to agree on every single thing, and I knew that that's not healthy because I don't want anybody to be subverting their feelings, and I certainly can't subvert my feelings. And so we sometimes move into separate rooms for television.

She has a love of certain programs that I don't like at all, and vice versa. But other than that we seem to enjoy the same movies and shows, and we like the same people, and we just don't have to work hard at it. We just get along. It's what I dreamed I would have in a man, which never came to pass.

I just wish everybody could find someone. And, of course, we both have pensions from our jobs. We have enough money to do the things we want mostly, and we're not greedy, so we're content with what we have. And, life is great. Beverly is eight and a half years older than I am, but is in very good health. In fact, I think, better health than I. And I hope that she lives like her mother to be a hundred.*

**Note: Doreen's partner, Beverly Hickock, was featured in A Gift of Age and continues to live in California.*



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 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, or write PO Box 5853, Athens, OH 45701.*