



Libraries and Archives

by Ruth M. Pettis

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A group of materials held at the archives of the GLBT Historical Society of Northern California in 2010.

For many queer and questioning people in the process of coming out, the public library has often been the first source for information. Likewise, university holdings and glbtq archives have been crucial repositories for the restoration and reconstruction of hidden queer history. Both kinds of institutions remain vital sources for accurate information and for facilitating research into the history and culture of sexual minorities.

Libraries

Pre-Stonewall era coming out stories often describe furtive searches through indexes and card catalogs under the heading "homosexuality" only to find one's intuitive sense of self distorted through vocabularies of perversion and criminality. Despite this, many found comfort in the knowledge that they were not alone.

Those fortunate enough to discover literary reflections of their experience through writers such as William Shakespeare or Sappho or James Baldwin or Radclyffe Hall or who could sift through problematic terminology toward an objective viewpoint could begin the difficult process of identity formation.

Early on, gay activists recognized the importance of reliable information access. Librarians were the first American profession to establish a gay interest group. In 1970 a group within the American Library Association founded the Task Force on Gay Liberation. Eventually, it became the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Round Table (GLBTRT), chaired by lesbian activist Barbara Gittings from 1971 to 1986.

GLBTRT worked to expand the Library of Congress's subject headings to non-judgmental terms more reflective of glbtq experience. Pertinent headings, including "same-sex marriage," now number in the hundreds.

In Library of Congress cataloging "H" comprises the social sciences; "HQ" (9-471) designates topics concerning sexual life. Thus, general glbtq materials fall between HQ74 and HQ78. (In her speeches Gittings would joke that "HQ" wasn't a deliberate reference to "homosexual queer," although that provides a useful mnemonic.)

The Dewey Decimal System, still used by many public libraries, designates gay and transgender topics in numbers beginning 306.76 (between prostitution and cross-dressing).

However, researchers must always look beyond these categories. Even neutral cataloging schemes cannot adequately reflect the interdisciplinary and multicultural nature of gay experience or identify veiled intimations of sexuality in biographical sources. Thus, Charles Morris urges librarians and archivists to be watchful for queer subtexts in all forms of literature and to cultivate awareness of them.

GLBTRT established the Gay Book Award to recognize gay-positive literature. The first recipient was Isabel Miller in 1971 for her novel *Patience and Sarah*. These honors are now known as the Stonewall Barbara

Gittings Literature and Israel Fishman Non-fiction Book Awards. These and other awards, such as the Lambda Literary Award, Publishing Triangle Awards, and Gaylactic Network Spectrum Awards can serve as acquisition tools for expanding glbtq collections.

Trade publications periodically list core titles and review new offerings for glbtq youth and, more recently, for gay parents, a relatively new non-fiction category. E-book providers like *NetLibrary.com* and full-text databases like *LGBT Life* and other online resources that can supplement shelf offerings are also regularly reviewed for libraries.

Information access for glbtq teens remains one of the most critical issues in public library service. This at-risk but underserved group requires unbiased information on HIV/AIDS and other STDs as well as positive and realistic role models in biography and fiction. Direct and easily-navigated links to unbiased sexual health information from a library's teen-oriented web pages can literally save lives. Advocates for Youth, Planned Parenthood, and Nemours Foundation offer good sexual health information sites. The Internet Public Library also maintains a list of online resources for teens on health and sexuality.

Many public libraries compile reading lists for glbtq teens, and their prominent placement helps make the library a welcoming place for glbtq youth. The Oakland, California Public Library, for example, identifies glbtq materials in its circulating collection with rainbow stickers on the book spines.

Reference service for questioning teens requires particular sensitivity to privacy and safety, especially since the local library is often the first source a youth consults. Yet a Canadian study in 2005 revealed an alarming degree of discomfort on the part of librarians when faced with such situations, and a concurrent lack of knowledge of available resources, prompting Ann Curry to recommend better professional training on glbtq youth needs.

Outreach to glbtq patrons--such as Pride Week displays, event posters, or free gay literature in high-circulation areas--sometimes draws the ire of conservative patrons and involves the library system in legal actions and threats of budget cuts. While the legal challenges are seldom successful, an insidious result is to cause librarians to self-censor to avoid future conflict.

In happy contrast, the James C. Hormel Gay & Lesbian Center at the San Francisco Public Library is the first public library reading room dedicated to a core glbtq collection.

Archives

The Nazis' destruction of Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science in 1933 is an oft-cited event underlying the resolve of contemporary activists to fully document and preserve the record of queer experience. To this end there are now well over a hundred glbtq document repositories throughout the western world.

Typically, archivists collect personal papers, organizational records, early movement periodicals and newsletters, photographs, audiovisual materials, political literature, and ephemera such as buttons and event flyers. Some include oral histories, posters, artworks, diaries, and memorabilia such as T-shirts and matchbook covers.

Archival material does not circulate and must be examined on-site. Access is sometimes limited to credentialed scholars. However, many archives have digitized parts of their collections and made these files available on the Internet.

ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, an outgrowth of ONE Institute, is the largest research library devoted to glbtq materials. In facilities donated by the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, ONE houses

the records of organizations such as the Mattachine Society and Metropolitan Community Church, the personal papers of early gay and lesbian figures such as Harry Hay and Laud Humphreys, the Lesbian Legacy Collection, the Twice Blessed collection of Jewish GLBT records, and seminal homophile periodicals.

The Lesbian Herstory Archives began in 1975 and for the first fifteen years was housed in its founders' (Joan Nestle and Deborah Edel) Manhattan apartment. It now has its own facility in Brooklyn and shelters the records of over 1500 organizations, the personal papers of Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde, and even love letters, among other one-of-a-kind materials.

The Gerber/Hart Library, established in 1981, is the Midwest's largest glbtq library. Its holdings are particularly strong in Chicago's glbtq political history.

The June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives in West Hollywood houses rare books, women's music recordings, and even 1940s baseball uniforms. The collection includes the papers of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon; they also actively seek the everyday stories and mementos of all lesbians.

San Francisco's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society (GLBTHS), founded in 1985, creates exhibits from its collection of José Sarria's gowns, Harvey Milk campaign memorabilia, a lesbian WAC's scrapbook, 1950s muscle magazines, and AIDS diaries.

In the Netherlands the International Homodok and Lesbisch Informatiecentrum have operated since 1978 and 1982, respectively. The facilities, in Amsterdam and Leeuwarden, are major repositories for European glbtq history.

Another significant archive of European glbtq material is maintained by Berlin's Schwules Museum, a private institution dedicated to preserving, exhibiting, and discovering homosexual history, art, and culture.

Serving as a repository for diverse collections--including records of self-help groups, public institutions, and churches, as well as memoirs, oral histories, and literary and artistic works--the Schwules Museum attempts to build from such diverse sources a continually expanding chronicle of gay social history and to document the history and development of gay liberation movements around the world. However, it has a particular concern with the persecution of gay men and lesbians during the Third Reich.

Britain's Hall-Carpenter Archives were founded in 1982. Collections of activist and organization papers, oral histories, and news clippings reside at the London School of Economics, the National Sound Archive, and Middlesex University, respectively.

The Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives in Toronto has operated since 1973 with *The Body Politic's* records as its core. It houses artworks, a gay/lesbian portrait collection, and extensive sets of periodicals, vertical files, graphics, and AV materials.

There are many regional GLBT archives. Specialized collections range from the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Religious Archives Network (Berkeley), to the AIDS Library of Philadelphia, to the Leather Archives and Museum (Chicago).

The Society of American Archivists' Lesbian and Gay Archives Roundtable (LAGAR) maintains an online list, entitled "Lavender Legacies," of North American glbtq-focused collections. The Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project provides links to many international and U.S. regional facilities.

Many activists argue that gay-related materials should remain in glbtq-owned facilities. Citing cycles of

political repression and indigenous peoples' struggles to reclaim their artifacts, spokespeople are understandably wary of mainstream institutions' priorities. They make a strong case for retaining proprietary control over access, display, and interpretation of glbtq culture.

However, stand-alone facilities must continually seek funding and usually rely on volunteer staff. Aging documents and audiovisual materials require appropriate preservation and storage conditions that are costly to sustain. For these and other reasons, some activists and organizations have opted to deposit their memorabilia in mainstream institutions that provide full technical support.

For example, Yale University Manuscripts and Archives house the papers of David Mixner and Harvey Fierstein; the New York Public Library's Manuscripts and Archives Division is the repository for Barbara Gittings' and Kay Lahusen's papers; and the University of Oregon has acquired the estate of lesbian artist Tee Corinne.

Some archives, like ONE, find an intermediate solution by having their collections housed within university facilities while staffed and processed by community members. Others, like the Lesbian Herstory Archives, deliberately preserve their autonomy.

Because of special considerations affecting film preservation, the film festival Outfest has partnered with the UCLA Film and Television Archive to house and preserve its Legacy Collection. Lynne Kirste discusses the specific issues regarding film archiving.

Some mainstream institutions, such as the Human Sexuality Collection at Cornell University and the Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan, actively collect gay materials. The Tretter Collection in GLBT Studies at the University of Minnesota Libraries has a worldwide scope, even housing some of Hirschfeld's materials that escaped his library's destruction.

Collection of glbtq materials is an ongoing process. Personal diaries will be valuable to future historians, along with organizations' minutes and financial records. Posters of marches, fundraisers, and cultural events provide a visual narrative of history, while photographs and home movies of private gatherings put human faces on the collected stories. Erotica, especially when a broad span of years is represented, documents society's evolving attitudes toward sexual imagery.

All too often, relatives of a deceased person discard memorabilia with glbtq interest. To prevent this from happening, individuals--before becoming incapacitated--should contact archivists in order to create clear instructions about transfer of their records. This also provides institutional staff with appropriate context for the donated materials.

In the absence of such arrangements, discovery of significant collections is left to serendipity. Having conservators who themselves are knowledgeable about glbtq culture is also helpful.

For example, when lesbian archivist Linda Long began a new job at the University of Oregon she came across 30 unprocessed boxes marked "Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove" that turned out to be, in the words of Carolyn Gage, a "mother lode of lesbian culture."

These writings, images, and videotapes documented the Oregon rural lesbian communities of the 1970s, including material gathered by the Southern Oregon Country Lesbian Archival Project (SO CLAP!) spearheaded by Tee Corinne. Without the attention of a knowledgeable conservator, this history might have remained inaccessible for decades.

Conclusion

Probably the best assurance against future loss of glbtq records is their proliferation and duplication in different formats among multiple collections. Modern preservation methods, secure storage in brick-and-mortar facilities, and digitization are necessary, while the Internet also provides creative possibilities for exhibition and dissemination.

Most importantly, all segments of the queer population must recognize that their stories and images will continue to provide vital affirmations for future generations.

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