

Wanderground: Archiving Lesbian Legacies, Words, Creativity in Rhode Island

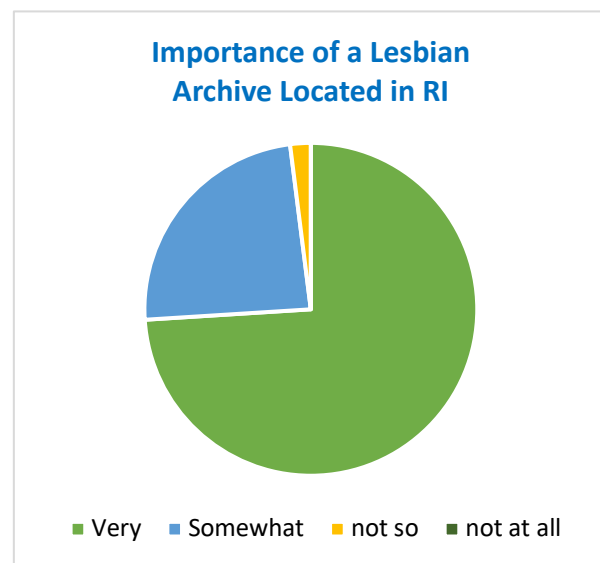
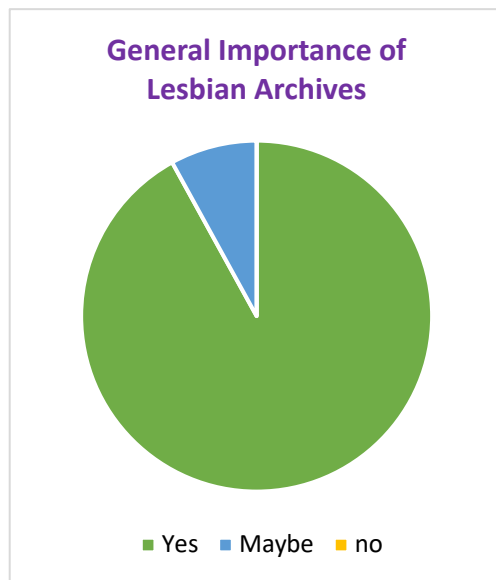
Research Summary – Installment #5

Blog Post – March 4, 2022

Who Needs Archives (and why the name “Wanderground”)?

Are Lesbians in Rhode Island enthusiastic about an archive in RI?

Let’s just start here...overall, those who responded to the Wanderground Research (by survey or interview) were generally quite enthusiastic about having access to a Lesbian archive based in Rhode Island. By the numbers, 92% agreed that the existence of Lesbian archives, in general, are absolutely important (only 8% thought maybe). Whether such an archive should exist in Rhode Island, one person thought extremely important while 74% were very interested and 24% were somewhat interested.



Written comments from the surveys included:

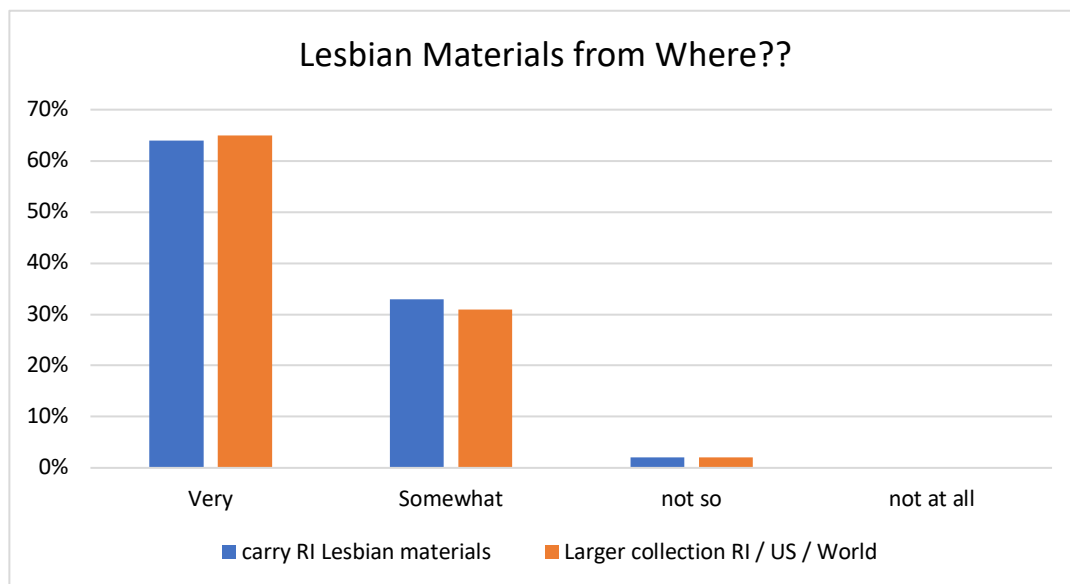
- Desperately needed. The lesbian feminist activists of the second wave of feminism are aging fast. We need to capture this herstory while we still can. And, unbelievably after all these years of work, it seems lesbians are just as invisible now as we were 40 years ago. It is still true that people do not see what they do not want to see.
- The lesbian visibility is so meager in south county. I would love to have even a gay center here. The University (URI) has one but does not seem to be community welcoming.
- It is important to protect the history of marginalized communities - so much is lost over time that could if preserved shape future progress.
- Would love to know of important lesbian contributions here.
- I would want it to be a specifically LESBIAN archive!

And there were some concerns, such as being sure the archive in Rhode Island didn't conflict with other projects in RI (covered in future Summary #7) and include a diversity of experiences and communities. One comment also expressed, "I do feel it may be a swimming-upstream endeavor."

When asked if Lesbians had ever visited Lesbian archives in other areas of the country, only 30% had done so, though a few mentioned checking them out on YouTube videos or websites. The most prevalent visits were to the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) in NYC and the Lesbian Art Museum or the Mazer Archives in Los Angeles. Other mentions included the San Francisco Library, the LGBT Center in San Jose, CA, and the Women's Centre in Glasgow, Scotland. Those visits affected their views of how Lesbian archives can impact our communities:

- I watched [a] documentary about archives in NY. IMPRESSED by dedication of workers, impact on younger lesbians, AND I KNOW as a researcher the value of primary source documents for future researchers, and readers.
- I was impressed by the fact they actually accomplished the establishment of those archives (LHA) and especially impressed and grateful that they opened their doors to visitors so early ... when the collection was still in their home!

In terms of importance about whether an archive located in Rhode Island should primarily feature materials by Rhode Island Lesbians as compared to national and international materials, the percentages were relatively similar.



Again, comments were very positive in expressing a willingness to visit, share, personal items, and curiosity to know specifically more about Lesbians in Rhode Island.

- I would love to know of a place where I can go to read books, and learn and be welcomed.

- It would really be very good to have this material accessible for review and likely important for today's students.

And then there were the interesting contradictory comments:

- I believe that any archive should be 99.999999% Rhode Island focused. There's no need to regurgitate national stuff.
- I think focusing solely on RI might be too small in scope. Perhaps New England...

And my personal favorite comment was this:

- I think what's in a collection has to be connected to the passions and visions of the persons organizing & fun for them!

Well, that's very much what I'm doing!

Finally, in a conversation that I had with two college-bound Lesbians in their early twenties, the hunger for Lesbian herstory, resources, connections, and places was quite palpable. With a combination of anger (*why did all that community go away?*) and sadness (*we want mentors and support – there's nothing here for us*), they were clear about claiming Lesbian and feminist identities while still recognizing the fluidity and spectrums of sexuality. For them, it's less about labels ("stupid, but helpful") and more about coming to identity and self-acceptance.

This is a paraphrase from our very passionate conversation...

We want a space for Lesbian visibility. We want access to Lesbian and feminist history and activism, specifically Lesbian. We want support for our feminism and our Lesbianism. We don't know our Lesbian history and we want to know more. Having a Lesbian archive and library could be a place where we — and everyone — can learn more about Lesbians. We want (need) Lesbian visibility — a place that is unapologetically Lesbian-visible. Lesbians have been in the front of many social change movements — we do a lot for others — we can get sh— done! But Lesbians also need space for themselves, where we can learn about ourselves and spend time with each other — not for any man or society. We want more Lesbian stories and space(s) where we can be in community.

Why the name Wanderground???

In a survey response, one individual commented: "Wanderground seems like an odd name for a collection related to the lesbian experience." For me, this comment identified another important reason to create Lesbian archives.

As I've been pondering for more than 20 years about what to do with my extensive collection of Lesbian publications and memorabilia, I've also played with what to name it. A variety of "obvious" ideas have come to mind: the Labrys Collections, Amazonian Chronicles, Sappho's Sisters Place or Sappho's Salon, The Well of Companionship...you get the idea.

But a few years ago, in conversation with a close friend, we started talking about how Sally Miller Gearhart's Lesbian novel, *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women*, had such a

profound impact on our sense of creating Lesbian communities. First published in 1978 by Persephone Press, Gearhart depicted a world where women came into their full being and power. Men live violently in the cities while women who have fled the violence created peace and security in the hills. As a futuristic Lesbian utopia fiction, *The Wanderground* featured a collection of short, interlocking narratives where women of many ages and diversities live in alone or together in supportive collaboration, communicate telepathically with each other, plants, and animals, and share stories of survival, remembrance, and self-discovery.

From that conversation, I decided to name this venture Wanderground. As grounding place to wander and browse, this community-based archive and resource will affirm Lesbian identity and encourage learning from Lesbian legacies to build positive futures, especially for younger Lesbians yearning for connection. *(More of the longer vision will be outlined in Summary #8 on March 25.)*

Next Week

Be sure to come back next week for **Installment #6: Do I Count?? How to Collect Your Life in Memorabilia**. There I will discuss more about what can we learn from other Lesbian archives around the country and how to save our own “stuff.”