

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

Research Summary – Installment #6

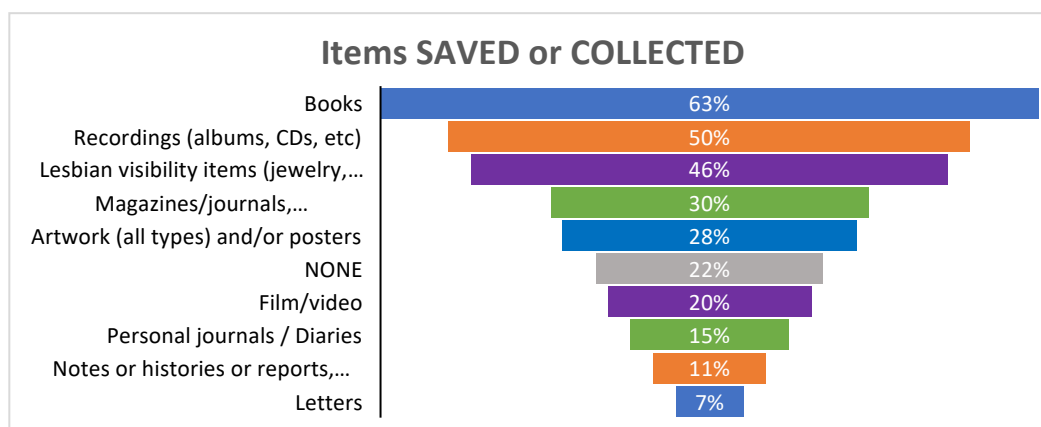
Blog Post – March 11, 2022

Do I Count? How to Collect Your Life in Memorabilia

What can we learn from other Lesbian archives around the country and how to save our own “stuff.”

One might say I’m a pack rat...others might call me too nostalgic. I come by this honestly, I suppose, having spent a full year cleaning out my parent’s house of generations of saved “important” stuff! Whatever the reason, I have in my possession boxes and file cabinets of my own memorabilia reaching back into my childhood. But when I look at what I’ve saved, most of it tells the story of my life as a Lesbian.

In the Wanderground research survey, respondents were asked what Lesbian publications or artifacts they may have save over the years. This chart gives an overview.



However, the comments led me to believe that anyone who saved something doesn’t have much. There were several responses of “might have...” and “maybe saved...” In addition to the materials listed above, a few mentioned photographs, articles written, or other odds and ends.

When asked if they have considered if or how they might preserve those treasures, nearly 75% of respondents hadn’t thought about it. Only 6% gave a definite yes and the rest are sort of looking around for what to do. A few mentioned passing along personal journals and such to family members. Other were skeptical of whether items they have are suitable to save because of how they’ve been stored over time.

Through several conversations, there seemed to be this kind of sentiment ... collecting Lesbian herstory is important but many Lesbians don’t feel individually important or significant enough to contribute their own personal journals, photos, memorabilia to an archive collection. In the words of our last governor, “Knock it off!”

Lesbian lives and experiences are all unique and diverse. Our life collections are invaluable to creating a wholistic picture of the diversity of Lesbian experiences. They may guide each of us and future generations of Lesbians towards understanding both unique and comparable journeys through various historical contexts. These are our stories and making or keeping them visible creates a clear statement:

Your life – your story is VALUABLE!

And here's the real truth of it: No one else can tell your full story. If you don't tell it, who will (or can)?

Q: What kinds of memorabilia will be of interest to a Lesbian archive (Wanderground or otherwise)**?

A: Just about anything relevant to your life as a Lesbian.

- **Personal or organizational documents:** journals, diaries, letters, travelogues, writings, scrapbooks, calendars/datebooks, notebooks, recipes, event flyers, newsletters, meeting notes, postcards/cards, etc.
- **Publications:** books, zines, periodicals, newspapers, pamphlets, articles, etc.
- **Visual Items/art:** original creations, drawings/paintings, posters, photographs, bumper stickers, framed pictures, etc.
- **3-dimensional memorabilia:** jewelry, textiles (including clothing, t-shirts), pottery, sculptures, movement buttons or patches, games, awards, etc.
- **Media:** albums, CDs, cassettes, DVDs, home movies, VHS tapes, and perhaps USB flash drives, etc. (note: out of date electronics such as floppy discs, may not likely be accepted)

*** And before you send anything, always check that the individual archive you chose actually wants or has space for it!*

How you gather and organize your memorabilia is really up to you. However, here are some basic tips for preserving your materials:

- **Gather:** all kinds of memorabilia listed above, especially anything personal if it portrays or honors your life a Lesbian.
- **Categorize:** put items into boxes (Banker's boxes are good) and mark them – especially notify your friends or family – e.g., “KEEP THIS and donate to (xxx archive).”

You can stop here if you like, and archivists can figure out the rest. But if you'd like your story understood more clearly, then do some of the next steps.

- **Separate & Organize:** Go through the boxes and do further sorting...use hanging folders, or large envelopes, or portfolios – even baggies or other containers – to keep similar things together. How you do this is up to you:
 - By type: separate photos, letters, from event flyers, journals, writings, awards, etc.

- By years or sets of years... (high school, at a particular job, living in a certain location, etc.)
- By theme (items related to activities or hobbies, e.g., softball teams, protest marches, favorite picnics, ex-lovers, etc.).
- **LABEL:** In whatever way you decide to collect items, be sure everything (boxes, folders, containers) is clearly labeled, e.g., an envelope with letters from SuzyQ from 19__ - 20__.

And a word about photos: When possible, provide as much information as you can, such as who's in the photo (from left to right), event, geographical location, approximate date, and the name of the photographer. It's best to do this with a #2 pencil or fine point or archival pen on the back of the photo.



The Lesbian Herstory Archives offers some [useful tips for how to prepare your materials](#) for an archive. There are many more things to consider when you actually get ready to donate. [A Guide to Donating Your Personal or Family Papers to a Repository](#) provides a straightforward list of personal and legal information to consider. As Wanderground gets more developed, we will outline our own procedures and forms to provide safeguards and permissions.

What we can learn from other Lesbian Archives

Over the past year, I have visited websites and/or interviewed several Lesbian Archives*:

- [Lesbian Herstory Archives](#) (NYC)
 - I highly recommend the documentary on them: [The Archivettes](#)
- [June Mazer Lesbian Archives](#) (West Hollywood, CA)
- [Black Lesbian Archives](#) (GA)
- [Bay Area Lesbian Archives](#) (Oakland, CA)
- [Purple: Lesbian Legacies in Special Collections at Michigan State University](#) (E. Lansing, MI)

** I've also started to compile a list of Lesbian / feminist/ and or LGBTQ archives from around the country (and world).*

Their collections are rich and diverse. From the founders/curators of those collections, I learned a great deal of information about what to consider when setting up an archive. The obvious things are funding, space, and volunteers/staff. But I also discovered interesting insights on questions like:

- Where do you get archival materials? Where have they come from over the years? What do you take and not take – only Lesbian? Lesbian/feminist? Lesbian/gay? What are your parameters?

- How do you organize and catalog your collection? What specific library guides do you use or have you created your own? Do you use specific software?
- What types of archive boxes or other supplies do you need or use?
- What is your alphabetization order (first name or last name)?
- Do you have a lending library (all said no)? If not, why? What do you do with duplicates, especially books?
- Do you have enough space at your location? Where else do you store items?
- What types of forms have you developed? What forms, permissions, or “deeds” do you require?
- Who does your website? What other media do you use?
- Does your archive (when not in COVID lockdown) offer events or demonstrations?
- Who actually uses your archive? Are they used at all?
- Do you have paid staff? Only volunteers? What do they do?
- What collaborations do you have with other Lesbian Archives or organizations nationally or locally? How do they work?
- How do you deal with current electronic realities – such as digitizing, social media, changing computer software and back-ups, etc.?
- What do you do about climate control?

As you can see, there are many questions and concerns to be addressed. I was able to get a good deal of information related to these questions, and more.

But this was my biggest takeaway...

All of these Lesbian archives are based in community. Most everything in them can be seen and touched. **They are visible.** Deb Edel, co-founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives put it this way...

People (lesbians in particular) need to see and touch their herstory. In order to feel connected with the past, it's important that Lesbians can look and touch and discover riches or information they hadn't known about. Being able to browse allows for uncovering or witnessing pieces of lives or moments you didn't even know existed.

Of all the information I learned, this observation resonated with my own vision of making Wanderground a place for Lesbians. Any Lesbian (or those interested in Lesbians) can enter Wanderground to breathe-in, observe, investigate, and relate to the many Lesbians who have come before her. She can find herself as a crucial stitch in the fabrics of Lesbian communities.

Next Week

Be sure to come back next week for **Installment #7: Collaborations & Information Sharing.** In that blog, I will focus on local libraries and archives at Providence Public Library, Brown Univ., and others....