

AGA

AUSTRALIAN GAY ARCHIVES

PO Box 124 Parkville 3052
An Initiative of the Fourth National Homosexual Conference, 1978

Tel (03)328 1238 (any Thurs eve)

NEWSLETTER

No 1 April 1983

EDITORIAL

This is the first of what will be an occasional newsletter of the Australian Gay Archives. Further issues will be produced when there is sufficient news to convey to Archives supporters.

There is no formal basis for subscribing to the newsletter. It will be sent to all those who have supported the Archives in some tangible way, either by donation of their time, materials, services or money.

Up till now we have relied on national homosexual conferences for sharing information and ideas about the Archives. Whilst conferences will continue to provide rare opportunities for personal contact between interested people from different states, there is a clear need for medium to communicate in between conferences: whether it be on routine business, reports on progress, policy formation or review, news from overseas archives, and so on. There is also no reason why the newsletter need be a one way medium and invite letters and other contributions on matters of general interest to the readership.

Update

Since the Archives' workshop at the last national homosexual conference in Canberra, four important initiatives have come to fruition. (Minutes of the workshop are available on request.) First, the inaugural national committee has formed, after a general invitation was extended to people who attended the Archives workshop. The duties of this body are not yet defined, but a working interest in the Archives is the roughly understood basis of membership. The committee's first task was its involvement in the approving of a letter and the development of a contact list for a very successful direct mail fundraising drive, which was also mooted at the workshop.

Work has begun on two other foreshadowed projects: the oral history project and the subject classification of the collection. This early work clearly holds major implications for the future writing of gay history in Australia, and will be fully reported at the next national conference in Melbourne. In the meantime, we invite readers of this newsletter, especially those with relevant expertise, to read the progress reports in this issue, and let us know of any practical suggestions for improvement.

In addition, the unglamorous maintenance work goes on - the mounting and indexing of press clippings, the 'please send us' and 'thank you' letter writing, the listing and filing of material which is now contributed from people in WA, SA NSW, Queensland and Victoria.

In September the Archives will be five years old. Born at the national homosexual conference in Sydney 1978 - the same weekend of the mass arrests of peacefully marching conference-goers - the Archives has emerged from 'infancy'

to 'childhood'. Long past being 'just a good idea', and now outgrowing the parochialism and sheer distance problems that have traditionally limited projects calling for interstate cooperation, the Archives is beginning to reap the rewards of the slow but steady growth of gay archival consciousness in Australia.

This consciousness is reflected in the growing usage of the Archives, no less than in the increasing volume of contributed material. Indeed it is the users' needs - requests coming from overseas as well as locally, and an increasing number from research students from tertiary institutions - which has impressed upon us the urgency of the need to improve the retrieval system.

We hope you will find the newsletter of interest, and if you would like to visit the Archives, you are cordially invited to drop in at our regular Thursday night meetings at The Hub (144 Adderley Street, West Melbourne). Interstate visitors are urged to phone us a week in advance (03-328 1238 any Thursday night) to confirm an appointment.

GAY DAY

This year's festivities were bigger and better than last year's. The colourful surroundings, friendly atmosphere and entertainment ensured that the large crowd had a good time.

The Archives again had a display which drew a lot of attention. During the day, we made contact with four older gay men who agreed to be interviewed as part of our oral history project.

WORK ON CATALOGUE

Work has begun on subject cataloguing our collection (currently it is only filed by group of publication). This will be a long and difficult task, but one which is essential if the collection is to be accessible, and not merely to the extent of our all too imperfect memories.

The system is designed to provide users with a practical means of retrieving material related to a particular subject, whilst not being so complicated as to take up all our time to maintain. As we progress, we may have to modify the system, but at least work has begun. The essentials of the system are outlined on page 3.

FUNDRAISING

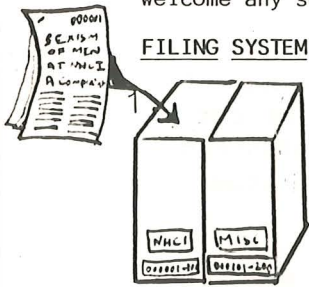
As at 31 March, we had received donations totalling \$950 in response to our recent fundraising drive. This includes \$300 from the Sydney Gay Mardi Gras Committee and \$75 from the 8th National Conference of Lesbians and Homosexual Men (Canberra 1982), plus donations from 33 individuals. Part of this money has already been spent on purchasing much needed shelving, a 100 leaf visible index, and stationery. In addition, we have sent a large number of periodicals off to be bound.

Our sincere thanks to all those who responded so generously to our call for money, and to those, unable to give money, who have offered their time and services to the Archives.

MAKING THE ARCHIVES ACCESSIBLE

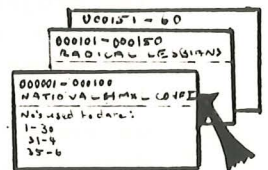
The following system is being set up as a retrieval system for information in the archives. We would welcome any suggestions before the project is fully underway.

FILING SYSTEM



- All material is filed in storage boxes (see picture, left).
- Where the group writing/issuing the material is an ongoing group, a whole box is allocated for the group. Where there is little material and/or the group is defunct, a number of groups are included in the same box.
- Each item is marked with a unique number, and boxes are allocated a sequence of unique numbers for articles in them, allowing for expansion in those boxes where the group is an ongoing one. Where they contain material from a single group, this is noted on the outside of the box. The boxes are filed according to numerical order.

- The unique numbers on the boxes and the name of the group of publication are noted on cards, and filed numerically. A record is kept on these cards of which numbers have already been used. Where the group's material outgrows the numbers (and box) allocated to it, a reference is made on the card to the subsequent numbers for this group.



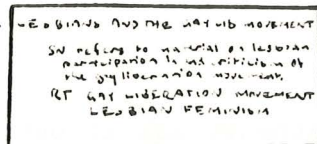
- Two sets of keyword cards are kept:

a) Keyword reference cards

Unique number card

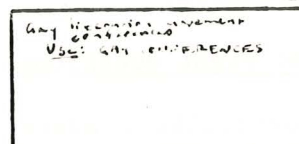
Keywords are kept on cards, filed in alphabetical order. Keywords are written in capital letters, with explanations of scope, related terms, narrower terms and broader terms. (These serve as a guide to the person doing the keywording as to what other entries may be necessary. They also serve as a reference to the user.) Years and the names of groups will also be entered on keyword cards. Cross reference cards are interfiled with keyword cards, the cross references being written in lower case. The purpose of cross reference cards is to cover all those subjects the user might think of, which are not keywords.

eg. i)



Keyword reference card

ii)

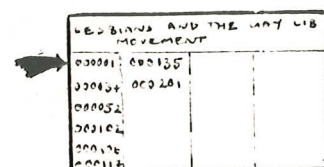


Cross reference card

KEY
SN = Scope Note
RT = Related Term
NT = Narrower Term
BT = Broader Term
JF = Use For

b) Keyword entry cards

Unique numbers of items are entered on keyword entry cards, under all the appropriate keywords.



- The ultimate aim of the archives at a later date, when there is more time and labour available, is to type, in addition, individual catalogue cards, with author and title, for each item.

HOW TO FIND AN ITEM ON A CERTAIN TOPIC

If for example you wished to find an item on debates on sexism at homosexual conferences, which had resulted in splits in the gay movement, you could look up the following keyword entry cards:

- CONFLICT WITHIN GAY ORGANISATIONS
- GAY CONFERENCES
- GAY LIBERATION MOVEMENT
- LESBIANS AND THE GAY LIB MOVEMENT
- SEXISM

The numbers which appeared on all these cards would indicate those items on the original topic. The unique number reference cards would indicate which box was to be sought, and it could be taken from the shelves and the item(s) quickly found.

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Following discussion at the 8th national homosexual conference at Canberra last year, this project has begun.

While not possessing any special skills in conducting interviews of this type, and while recognising that such interviews need to be conducted with great care, we feel that the six interviews so far conducted have enabled us to gather much valuable information which would otherwise have been lost.

We are eager to hear from people who know of older lesbians or gay men who would be willing to talk about their experiences and recollections. As there is practically no written material on gay lifestyles before the early 1970s, these interviews are of tremendous importance. So give it some thought and talk to your friends.

The project is limited at present by the small number of people involved and yet we see the project as being something that a lot of people, including interested interstate people, could undertake. If you would like to join the Archives team in conducting interviews, please let us know. The reason we would like to talk with you beforehand is to discuss matters such as:

- . the manner of the initial approach (including letters of introduction from any person acting on the Archives' behalf),
- . confidentiality,
- . co-ordination of efforts to verify facts and dates provided by other interviewees with experience of the same or related events),
- . sensitivity of interviews, eg, language, personal questions.

The project is also limited by our lack of expertise, and we hope to enlist the support of gay people with experience of working on oral history projects.

Asking the right questions

We are particularly aware that the questions we ask in our interviews will play a large part in determining the sort of information we get back. The implications for the writing of gay history in the future are clearly great. We would therefore welcome any feedback from readers of this newsletter on the appropriateness of the questions we ask: suggestions for better wording, obvious omissions, different ordering.

It should be stressed that our limited experience has already taught us that check lists of questions can only serve as a guide. There is sometimes no point in pressing certain questions, and much valuable information and insight can be lost in stopping interviewees from going off at what may appear to be a tangent. Nevertheless, it is important that we as interviewers be made aware of the range of concerns that may strike future historians as pertinent. We invite your constructive comment.

Graham Carbery

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Suggested format for conducting an interview - your comment is invited

Preamble:

- . point out to interviewee that if you raise a subject that s/he would prefer not to discuss, to just say so.
- . explain what the Archives is about (give person a brochure and letter of introduction) and then outline the purpose of the oral history. Emphasise that there is practically no recorded Australian gay history prior to 1970, and what snippets there are lack a social/political context.

Opening:

- . Could you tell us a bit about your early life?

Prompting questions:

- where did you grow up? (town, suburb, country)
 - when did you leave school?
 - who were your friends then? Any contact now? Are any of them gay?
 - what did/do you work at?
 - were you interested in politics?
 - were you or any members of your family religious?
 - did you have any brothers or sisters?
 - do you know of anyone else in your family who was gay?
 - have you ever been married?
- . When did you first realise you were attracted to men/women?
 - . How did you meet people?
 - bars
 - beats
 - dinner parties
 - through friends?
 - . When did you leave home?

Later questions

- . What was the vocabulary used in a) the social scene in which you mixed (eg homosexual, camp, queen) and b) the wider community (invert, homosexual, fairy, queer).
- . How open were you able to be about being gay with:
 - your family
 - friends
 - workmates
 - church (if relevant)
 - doctor.
- . What were the scandals of the time?
- . Who were the notorious gays?
- . How did you and your friends react to these people?
- . Where were the beats, bars, coffee shops, restaurants, gyms, shops, churches, etc...
- . Did you or any of your friends ever come into contact with the police?
- . Were you aware of the illegality of gay male sex?
- . Did you know any lesbians/camp men? (for male/female interviewees)
- . Did lesbians/camp men go to the parties that you went to?
- . Were lesbians/camp men well received a) in your scene, b) generally among camp men/women?
- . Were there any signs/gestures/dress fashions used to identify a person as being gay?
- . How did you view the gay liberation movement in the 1970s? Did it
 - make you feel better or worse?
 - increase your confidence in being gay?
 - make you more inclined to venture out to gay venues?

NEW YORK'S LESBIAN HERSTORY ARCHIVES

The Lesbian Herstory Archives, housed in New York, has been described by two of its founding members, Joan Nestle and Deborah Eden as a 'mixture of a library and a family album', containing both formal and informal history of lesbians.

It was formed in 1973 after some women in the Gay Academic Union, who had been in a consciousness raising group together, felt the need to stop the loss of lesbian history, and to start collecting. In 1974 they put their personal libraries together and the archives were formally opened in 1976.

The Lesbian Herstory Archives is financed by members tithing themselves, fundraising events and donations, particularly from women who come to view the archives. A lesbian slide show was produced and when the women show this or give talks, they accept donations. A newsletter with a circulation of 5000 is sent out free, also requesting donations. Joan Nestle comments that they have not applied for a grant: 'One of our principles is not to ask for money from the society that ruled us out in the first place.'

The collection includes donations of records of much of the 'nitty gritty pieces of people's lives' - diaries, letters and hand-made post-cards. There are collections of buttons, posters, t-shirts, clothing and tapes of lesbian music. There is a 'lesbian snapshot collection', including photos dating back as far as 1915, showing 'lesbians at play or work', and including photos of lesbians from all different backgrounds, cultures and racial groups to break down myths about lesbians. The archives also include materials in all languages from many different countries.

The archives do not question any woman who defines herself as a lesbian and who offers material to the archives, whether or not she relates sexually to women. They feel that as there are changing definitions of 'lesbians', they need only offer biographical details on the woman involved, thus allowing future generations using the material to make their own decisions. Material on 'borderline case' women is included, where the grapevine has suggested she is a lesbian.

Other material has been 'found', rather than solicited or donated. Lesbian Herstory Archives News 7 carries a story about someone finding a stack of papers thrown outside a Greenwich Village apartment. On taking it home, it was discovered they were the love letters and general correspondence of Elanor Coit, a labor activist who had recently died.

Oral history also features prominently as a part of the archives - both the histories of older lesbians, relating their past, and tapes of 'current' lesbian lives for future archival material. Those interviewed are asked about details of their lives - slang, dress and facts about their sex lives.

There is a large collection of paperbacks, written by lesbians, that women survived on in the 50s, including works by Valerie Taylor who has commented that her Whispers of Love was banned in South Africa where it was published because it was 'revolutionary' but is dismissed in the United States as 'trash'. Lesbian writers at the time had little control over the titles, or covers of their books, which were often cashing in on sensationalism. Publishers would often do a 'trade off' with authors who wished a lesbian couple to be together at the end, by requiring the death of a lesbian, the loss of a job or the loss of a child. There are taped talks by the authors of these novels.

LESBIAN HERSTORY ARCHIVES (cont)

Joan Nestle comments that when lesbians who lived through the 50s come into the archives, 'their eyes light up'. The butch-femme image, she feels, is very much misunderstood these days: 'They have a sense of their lives not being worth much.' When they see the collections of books and photos, 'it gives them a sense of part of their history being given back to them.'

To contact the archives, write:

Lesbian Herstory Archives,
PO Box 1258
New York, NY, 10116, USA

Compiled from an interview with Joan Nestle and Deborah Eden, two of the Co-ordinating Committee of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, by Nora Neumark for GayWaves, Sydney; and from Lesbian Herstory Archives News 7, December 1981.

Helen Pausacker

VENUES OF THE PAST

One of many inspiring pieces in the New York Lesbian Herstory Archives newsletter no 7 - at 48 close-typed pages it's more like a journal - is a 120-item listing of lesbian bars from the past in various cities of the US. The list was a result, in summary form, of a previous call put out for historical information about lesbian bars.

Already in the course of the AGA's oral history project, it has become apparent just how many places that once served as gay meeting places have vanished without a trace, at least to those of us who came out from the late 60s onwards.

And if bars have the significance which they clearly still do in the lives of many gay women and men, it's hard to overestimate their importance in the times when other social alternatives were entirely absent.

We would therefore like to repeat the LHA's call, but to extend it a little: as well as bars, we'd like to know about the coffee shops, clubs, beats, and any other spots which were known as gay meeting places for men or women.

Such information as addresses, years of operation, physical description (photos would of course be a bonus), the names of staff or proprietors, nick names (there's a wonderful story about why one beat in Melbourne was called The Reading Room), description of patrons (age, class, sex, sexual style), attitudes of the management, memories of the music, hours open, how well known to the surrounding community (especially police) - all of this would add greatly to our understanding of the roles played by social venues in gay life.

If you would prefer to talk over, rather than write down your recollections, that's fine too. Call any Thursday on (03)328 1238.

Graham Carbery

APPLICATION FOR CHARITABLE STATUS

In February we wrote to the Deputy Commissioner of Taxation (Gift Assessor) to commence discussions which we hope will lead eventually to the Archives being granted status as a benevolent institution. At the time of preparing this newsletter, we have not had any reply - which is apparently par for the course for such a request - and it is not expected that a decision would be made in much under 12 months. Although these things take time, it will be worth the wait, as the benefits of charitable status are considerable. It would mean that donors of money or equipment would be able to claim the value of their donation as tax deductions.

MAJOR ACQUISITIONS

In recent months the Archives has received the following substantial donations of material:

- . Lesbian Teachers' Group (Sydney) - records of the group
- . AngGays (Sydney) - bulletins and minutes of meetings
- . records of the 1982 Gay Mardi Gras Committee (Sydney)
- . 3 bound volumes of newspaper clippings from Alan Smith (Melbourne).

DO YOU HAVE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING?

We are keen to fill in gaps in our collection of periodicals. We would be grateful if you could send us copies of the following:

GAY Nos 1-5, 7-20, 24-2, 28-32, 34-36, 38, 42, 59-63, 65, 78 onwards.

THE LIBERTINE 2-3, 6-11, 13, 36.

CAMP NSW NEWSLETTER 1-33, 40-41, 45.

SYDNEY GAY LIBERATION NEWSLETTER 1, 3-5, 16.

WOULD YOU SEND MATERIAL TO US?

Rather than throw away your old copies of gay magazines and articles, we ask that you keep them for us. Likewise, if you come across newspaper items of indeed, anything which deals with issues that you think might be of interest to us, we would be grateful if you would put them aside and send to us from time to time. It is from people like you that we acquire a lot of very valuable material. We urge you to ask your friends.

WE'RE BUSTING OUT ALL OVER

Evidence of the rapid growth of the collection is our need for extra storage and working space. Fortunately for us, John Willis, Pastor of Christ's Community Church, has generously given the Archives the use of an additional room at The Hub. We now have one room to store the bulk of the collection and another to use as a workroom. Further good fortune for the Archives is that ALSO (the organising committee of Gay Day) has donated a desk, office chair and two ordinary chairs - enabling the extra room to be put to immediate use. We'd like to thank John and the ALSO people for their support.