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Documenting the Gay Rights Movement

Elizabeth Knowlton

Archivists must take an active role in collecting gay records. They cannot depend on traditional, passive techniques to document either the gay rights movement or the lives of homosexuals in America--unless they are so naive as to expect these records to appear miraculously on their shelves. More likely, as with other social reform movements, records will be lost in the daily living of people who have too little time and money to document and observe the immediacy of their lives.

Even when the documents of gays (those who are white, male, or affluent) do arrive at the archives, the semiconscious archivist will studiously avoid looking at them as homosexual papers, will deny that such records are in the archives, or will claim that it is impossible to help researchers looking for either the documents of the gay movement or for clues to illuminate the lives of our gay sisters and brothers. So much worse is the case when the gay person is female, black, poor, and/or uneducated.

This article will consider both areas of collection--gay rights documents and the homosexual's private papers--because, in this one particular, homosexuals differ from the participants of most other social reform movements. In the women's liberation movement, the black civil rights movement, and the movement for handicapped rights, nearly all of the participants visibly belong to the oppressed groups whose cause they espouse.

Homosexuals, on the other hand, are identified by their actions--whether they feel they were born that way or chose their sexual preference. No physical attribute characterizes the lesbian or gay man, hopeful as the heterosexual always is on this issue.

Homosexuals appear in every sex, color, physical and mental type, class, religion, political persuasion, and nationality. Everyone will know a homosexual in some part of his or her life.

Therefore, I state, as one who is both a lesbian and a professional archivist: It is difficult to collect the records of an invisible people, a people who will often not identify themselves, a people whom the rest of society conspires, at best, to ignore or, at worse, to destroy. The leaders in collecting gay records are most likely going to be the gays themselves.

Fortunately, we are already collecting gay records. In the archival profession, however, this is hard to see. Searching The American Archivist index for the last seven years under the headings homosexuality, gay, and lesbian, there is a single reference, in the Fall 1980 issue, and not to an article or report but to a letter from an "outsider," William E. Glover, vice chair of the Homosexual Information Center in Hollywood, California. Glover wrote to the editor to share his point of view as archivist in a small library that sought and preserved homosexual movement materials. He noted the similar problems of dissimilar archives and wished for more communication among them. There was no response to Glover's letter in subsequent issues of The American Archivist; and today, six years later, there is little evidence that anything has changed in the archival profession.

What has been happening to gay rights records? And, how have traditional archivists been responding to the increased visibility of homosexuals since the Stonewall riots of 1969? I wanted, as manuscripts curator at the Georgia Department of Archives and History and as archivist/librarian at the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance, to know what was going on with gay papers in the rest of English-speaking North America. I, therefore, prepared a survey, which only breaks ground in this area. Others must continue the investigation from specialized perspectives after more comprehensive surveys have been made.

On the first page of the survey, there were a few

general questions as to whether the institution collected gay rights movement records, how they got them, and did they know of materials in other area repositories or privately held? Already, this caused a problem. What were the records of the gay rights movement? Was it an organization? A group of organizations? Papers about homosexuality? All papers by homosexuals? A feeling in the air? On a second (optional) page I asked more essay-length questions about collection and funding.

Questionnaires were sent to the forty gay archives in the United States and Canada, listed by the Canadian Gay Archives in December 1985. Five were returned by the post office. Of the remaining thirty-five, fifteen replies or a forty percent return, came back. The results of the survey can be summarized as follows (See the Appendix for complete results). All gay archives collected records of the gay rights movement. The one respondent who said he did not was clearly restricting the term to formal organizations doing political work. The collections had been accessioned from private individuals, gay organizations, or a combination of the two. Two thirds knew of other gay collections or institutions in their areas, and over half knew of papers not in any institution. That figure might be higher if some had not thought papers meant newspapers.

Very few of the respondents left questions blank, even if they had little to say. Only two of the fifteen did not answer page two, and several attached brochures. The majority of the thirteen who answered page two said that their archives was founded by an individual, often themselves. Some reported that they had founded it "out of concern," thus identifying themselves as the founders also. Only twenty-three percent were founded by any organization rather than a person. Most said they actively solicited gay records. Two did not have the staff or space.

An amazing seventy-seven percent claimed to have no problems with homophobia. On one hand, this was positive: the gay archivists were pushing ahead with their work, ignoring public opinion. On the other

hand, it showed their isolation, even from the archival profession. Two said they noticed homophobia somewhat; one said she felt it made gays reluctant to have their names, much less their papers, associated with the archives.

Thirty-eight percent of the archives got private funding from other individuals. Thirty-eight percent funded it themselves. Fifteen percent received grants. Only one was funded at least partly by its organization and that--the Metropolitan Community Church--was more than a library or archives.

Over half of these archives were less than ten years old. Forty percent were founded since 1980; thirty-three percent were founded between 1970 and 1979 (inclusive); and twenty-seven percent were founded in 1969 or earlier. The Baker Memorial Library of One Institute, Los Angeles, California, was founded in 1953; and Barbara Grier's Lesbian and Gay Archives of Naiad Press has its roots in the collection she began in 1946 at the age of sixteen.

After an examination of these questionnaires, traditional archives in the same areas of the country were contacted. Wonderful though it was that gay archivists experienced no homophobia in pursuit of records, I wondered where they were pursuing them and what exactly were their goals outside the doors of the gay archives. Did the traditional archives even know they existed, and what did they think of them?

Using the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) Directory of Archives and Manuscripts Repositories, I selected twelve institutions, usually from the same cities but always from the same states as the previous responses. These included archives in California, Connecticut, Florida, Kentucky, Montana, New York, Tennessee, and Texas. Ten of the twelve, or eighty-three percent, responded, one of them with referrals that did not answer the questions.

Almost to a person the archivists stated that they had no gay rights movement records. The exception was Stanford University, which houses the records of various gay student groups. Sixty percent said that

there were no gay archives in their areas. Twenty percent did not answer; ten percent said possibly; and ten percent said that there were. Seventy percent of the respondents said that there were no gays rights movement papers at large in their areas, although they also seemed to know nothing about the movement. Thirty percent did not answer the question.

One of the most interesting parts of these answers was how the respondents filled out the questionnaires. I wish that I could show the reader the blank spaces, the NO answers in inappropriate places, the form that had capital NO or NONE typed after every question, the ink jabs that looked as though someone had thought the paper might pollute the ink of his pen--a writer's form of AIDS, so to speak. A young woman, one of three female traditional archivists to reply, typed Mrs. in front of her name, an uncommon gesture among my generation.

Anywhere from forty to seventy percent of the traditional archives did not answer the various optional questions on the second sheet. Stanford University archives explained how they happened to be collecting gay records, that they solicited them from campus groups, and that they used the library heading homosexuality where necessary to identify them to researchers. Others had only negative replies to the special questions asked of these traditional archives. None of the archives used a code, even internally, to identify the papers of homosexuals (as opposed to those of open gay rights groups).

All who answered were adamant that they would never destroy evidence of homosexuality in a collection. "Nothing is ever destroyed in our collection except (xeroxed) newsclippings," said one respondent.

Not a single archives had a policy about such papers. When asked how the subject of gay records was discussed at their institutions, giving three options (freely, not mentioned, or negatively), fifty percent did not answer, forty percent said it was not mentioned at all, and ten percent (Stanford again) said it was discussed freely. No one admitted that it was talked about negatively. Obviously, most of the

archivists wished they had never received the questionnaire.

One favorite respondent wrote: "Isn't of much interest here one way or the other. We tend to respect each other's privacy. As a subject one would discuss if it was at all interesting." Of course, in his institution I am sure that heterosexual dating, betrothal, marriage, birth, widowhood, divorce, and remarriage, plus related activities such as buying property together, raising children, or making burial arrangements is never discussed. They respect each other's privacy too much.

A gulf looms between the traditional archivists in their funded institutions and the frail company of individuals doing loving although incomplete work with gay papers in the houses, apartments, and cabins where material has been collected in about seventy-five locations throughout the world. When it is considered that most of these gay archives have no sure income and are less than ten years old, it is clear that their existence is precarious indeed by professional standards. Are archivists ordinarily comfortable with the idea that papers of socially active, distinguished Americans and Canadians are stored in homes without temperature and humidity control, fire or insect protection, legal provisions in case of death or dispute, or publicity as to their whereabouts--just because a family says it loved Uncle Homer and will care for his documents themselves? Nonsense! Although archivists have respect for the owner's wishes and rights, they also have a professional responsibility to offer expertise on care and storage and to recommend appropriate institutions for deposit when that care and storage are not being carried out. Archivists cannot make the existence of "Gay Archives" the excuse to ignore gay records.

Many traditional archivists are homophobic in providing resources to donors and researchers of gay materials, in recognizing gay records in their collections, and in becoming knowledgeable enough in the field to at least know the whereabouts of openly gay archives. But, the gay archivists' cheery

assurance that they have no homophobia to contend with and can successfully carry out their mission of eternal care without knowledge of the "professionals" who hold information and resources widens the gulf even further.

In a sense, gay archivists are right. Like other alternative systems, gay archives have sprung up because we gay archivists feel we can do it better by doing it ourselves. And, we do benefit by having the freedom to collect what we feel is important and to describe it as we wish. The flip side of the separatist archives situation is that each group is cheated of a profitable coalition. For the most part, traditional archivists are academics. Gay archivists tend to be activists. Academics see their active sisters and brothers as blue-collar members of their profession without credentials or positions.

Gay archivists, on the other hand, may fear the power and influence of traditional archives. One lesbian archivist in a large city feels that things have changed so much in her area that now even such places as the Schlesinger are trying to collect papers of lesbian women and lesbian organizations.... [They] have the dollars to compete for materials...what a flip-flop in ten years--not that they should not be doing this. [It] just raises important issues in re: access to researchers, particularly if climates flip-flop again. [Donors] must have some control and spell it all out carefully."

The Georgia Department of Archives and History's interactions with other minority archives illustrate the sort of mutually profitable coalition that traditional and activist archivists can form. The Atlanta Jewish Federation has begun an archives for southeastern Jewish records. They hired an outstanding professional, have an enduring organization, and are supported by a community of prosperous, enthusiastic individuals. The Georgia Archives responded to their request for advice about grants, and donors with Jewish records are now referred to the federation. The archives does not, however, suggest transferring the papers of Rhoda

Kaufman (a prominent early leader in the state's Department of Welfare and a Jewish woman who combated both physical disability and bigotry in state government) to the Atlanta Jewish Federation. The archives does make sure that her collection is cataloged under women, Jews, and the physically handicapped.

Again, when the papers of a prominent black Atlanta politician are offered to the archives, it is recommended to the donor that they join her other papers in the new archives at an established, black university in the city. At the same time, black state records are featured in exhibits, and subject cataloging identifies the Afro-Americans in the archives's collections.

In much the same way can professionals assist researchers, donors, and gay archives: (1) by providing donors with sensitive suggestions as to how best place their collections; (2) by drawing attention to collections already in custody; and (3) by advising private gay archives how best to conserve their records and get needed funding.

Why do some archivists wish to identify gay papers? Many homosexuals will say that they are perfectly ordinary people, that what they do in bed is nobody's business, and that their sexual preference has no effect on their lives or on history. I say that just as a person's race or religion or sex or political persuasion affects his or her life because of society's view of these labels, so does sexual preference affect the directions of lives. For instance, in the Georgia Archives's collections are the papers of two Georgia spinsters who loved each other but were never able to live together. If they had been man and woman, they would have married with society's blessing, and arrangements would have been made to take care of the familial responsibilities each already had. Without knowing about Miss Baldy's affection for Miss Varner, one is left to think that she never felt those emotions that are considered part of the human experience. How many "dried-up old maids" have been misinterpreted by historians when sweethearts may have been close by?

Nowadays, people of the same sex can buy houses (if they have the money), but in some cities ordinances have been introduced to prevent them from renting together. Even without an ordinance, imagine the fear of always having to hide one's homosexuality from a landlord in order to keep the roof over one's head. Without knowing someone's sexual preference, it might be assumed that his actions and concerns are paranoid. Again, these "private" issues affect a person's ideas, decisions, and behavior.

Many donors destroy all personal papers before they reach an archives. "Personal" here includes "life"--love, sex, childbirth, divorce, physical and mental illness, wife abuse, incest, and death, as well as homosexuality. Getting people to save their letters and diaries during their lives is difficult enough, but getting them to deposit those papers in a repository is even harder. Their biggest fear is that something in them will hurt their families. Archivists must respect those fears, and archives do already have in place procedures that will close collections to researchers for twenty or more years. This protection should reassure those who feel they cannot yet be open about their sexuality.

Unfortunately, most archivists cannot separate their attitude toward homosexuality from their care and protection of gay records. Although none of the traditional archivists surveyed admitted to destroying gay papers (deaccessioning being the anathema it is), there are many ways for documents to "disappear" without actually shredding them. Archivists return papers to the family, never get around to processing them, catalog them vaguely and incompletely--archival ingenuity is endless.

If an archivist does not want homosexual records in his institution, he will never see the ones he has. One of the Georgia spinsters mentioned before wrote passionate love letters to the other. They were cataloged by a superior professional as being about "personal matters" and "news of mutual friends." Did she overlook the content? Or, did it make her fearful? Regardless, it now takes a determined researcher to find the microfilmed letters on his own.

How do archivists draw attention to what they have? Collections labeled Gay Students Association name themselves. Memberships in organizations such as the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis have and will identify homosexuals. However, in the past many gays destroyed such clues and rarely left statements as to their sexual preferences. Still, there are other sorts of records and papers that are revealing and can be made available. The traditional archives contacted claimed to have: no love letters between individuals of the same sex; no requests to be buried together; no lifelong, same-sex friendships between people who never married. This is strange considering that rather small, private manuscripts collections in the Southeast contained such examples. They are not, I stress, assurances that people are either gay or straight, but archivists do have a responsibility to describe what is there.

My physician codes her patients' medical folders so that she can give them the best medical care regarding their sexual preference. Although archivists do not have such life and death situations, they, too, could develop an internal code so that researchers seeking gay "ancestors" could be directed toward collections containing the sorts of clues mentioned above. In no way would this be labeling anyone a homosexual without his having done so first. Rather, the finding aids could be saying: she wrote passionate letters to a woman; he never married; she lived her whole adult life with another woman in a large city far from her blood family; he asked that a male companion of thirty years be buried in the family plot. A simple, factual folder description for same-sex correspondence, such as "letters describe the women's continuing affection for each other and desire to live together the rest of their lives" would go a long way to equalize the standards that have been used when cataloging heterosexual and homosexual love letters.

If the will that leaves the papers to the archives also contains burial instructions or gifts to persons who appear in the records, make a copy of that will to

add to the collection in addition to storing it in the collection information or case file. Mention the will in the inventory.

How can archivists become aware of and assist with the collection of gay rights movement records in their areas? The media almost always reports gay rights marches and protests. Through the radio and television stations and the newspapers archivists can get contacts or have their messages passed along to those who are active in the city or state.

Whether or not there is a gay archives, archivists should offer themselves as resource people. Good relations between an activist group and an established archives can result in better record keeping, better conservation, and possibly in a collection for the repository. Groups that are short-lived or constantly changing, that have no safe place for their records, will seriously consider an institution as a depository if it has proved interested, helpful, and trustworthy. At the very least, archivists will have contacts and can refer researchers to original sources.

Since so few of the traditional archives contacted had any idea that there were gay archives in their areas, there is obviously little mutual cooperation between the two. Most gay archives are run by people with a lot of enthusiasm and dedication but very little training or resources. They are not paid for their work. They may collect avidly and still fail to save the most vital records. They may have no conception of the basic conservation or control techniques archives use. They need archivists' support and advice for grant writing and other funding projects.

By acting in a professional manner and inviting gay archivists into archival organizations and community, professional archivists can, in their own ways, further the cause of gay rights as well as preserve valuable historical documents. These ideas should stimulate thinking so that together, archivists--gay, straight, academic, and activist--can further develop ways of preserving and referencing gay records.

Elizabeth Knowlton is the Manuscripts Curator at the Georgia Department of Archives and History. She is a member of several activist groups, including the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance. She would like to thank all of the archives, both traditional and gay, in the United States and Canada, who responded to her questionnaire.

APPENDIX

Documenting the Gay Rights Movement

	GAY ARCHIVES (15)		TRADITIONAL ARCHIVES (10)	
1. Do you have records of the GRM?	yes	14	yes	1
	no	1	no	8
			0	1
2. Where from?	private	5		0
	organization	5		1
	both	4		0
	NA	1		2
	0	0		7
3. Other institutions with gay documents in your area?	yes	10	yes	10
	no	5	no	6
			poss	1
			0	2
4. Know of other papers not in institution?	yes	8	yes	0
	no	5	no	7
	0	2	0	3

GAY ARCHIVES

Origin: individual	7
organization	3
"out of concern"	3
no answer	2

Do you solicit records?	
yes	11
no	2
no answer	2

Have you experienced homophobia?	
don't notice	10
vaguely	2
discourages	
donors	1
no answer	2

Funding:	
self	4

TRADITIONAL ARCHIVES

How did you begin collection?	
Explained	1
None	1
NA	1
no answer	7

Do you solicit gay records?	
yes	1
no	5
no answer	4

How do you identify homosexual records?	
subject heading	1
do not identify	2
no answer	7

Do you have a formal policy about such records?	
yes	0

Appendix (contd.)

private	5	no	6
no funding	1	no answer	4
organization	1		
grants	2	Is the subject discussed?	
no answer	2	freely	1
		not mentioned	4
Age of archives:		negatively	0
1980-present	6	no answer	5
1970-1979	5		
1969 & earlier	4		