Hidden from Historians: Preserving Lesbian Oral History in Canada

Elise Chenier

Abstract

Lesbian history is an important part of Canada's past but some of the most valuable research material we have is in danger of disappearing. Over the past twenty years Canadian activists and researchers have conducted many oral history interviews with lesbians in Canada, yet only a handful have donated their research material to an archive. Drawing on the findings of a research questionnaire distributed to oral historians, this article shows that a lack of training, an absence of financial resources, and a failure to put in place a plan to donate research material to an archive are three of the most important barriers to preserving lesbian oral history in Canada. The article also describes the Archive of Lesbian Oral History, an international digital archive founded by the author.

RÉSUMÉ

L'histoire lesbienne est une partie importante du passé canadien, mais certains documents de recherche les plus utiles sont en danger de disparition. Au cours des vingt dernières années, les activistes canadiens et les chercheurs ont mené des interviews d'histoire orale avec des lesbiennes au Canada. Cependant, seulement quelques-uns ont fait don de leur recherche à un centre d'archives. À partir des résultats obtenus dans un sondage auprès des spécialistes en histoire orale, cet article montre qu'un manque de formation, une pénurie de ressources financières et une incapacité de mettre en place un plan pour faire don des documents de recherche à un centre d'archives sont trois obstacles importants qui empêchent la préservation de l'histoire orale lesbienne. L'article décrit aussi les Archive of Lesbian Oral History, des archives numériques internationales fondées par l'auteure.

Author Biography

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Archivaria, the journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA), is devoted to the scholarly investigation of archives in Canada and internationally. Articles and other submissions are welcomed which explore the history, nature, and theory of archives and the use of archives. The journal aims to be a bridge of communication among archivists, and between archivists and users of archives.

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The oral history research of Liz Kennedy and Madeline Davis has provided a model for others who seek to recuperate the lives of those who left few written documents. The social organization of working class lesbian relationships and the roots of the gay liberation movement are both far better understood now, thanks to their interviews with — —. Allan Berube and Dunbar Moodie have also made creative use of oral histories, while historians of earlier periods have had to rely on more fragmentary material. Robert K. Martin, Martha Vicinus, and Martin Bauml Duberman, for instance, have used unpublished letters and diaries, novels and memoirs, to try to reconstruct the varying understandings and expectations of friendship among nineteenth-century upper-class men and women. Hidden from History book. Read 12 reviews from the world’s largest community for readers. This richly revealing anthology brings together for the first t... “She Even Chewed Tobacco” A Pictorial Narrative of Passing Women In America (San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project) A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Ag A great big anthology of essays by various writers on a wide range of historical time, place, and people (for example the table of contents is divided into main headings - The Ancient. Lesbian history is an important part of Canada’s past but some of the most valuable research material we have is in danger of disappearing. Over the past twenty years Canadian activists and researchers have conducted many oral history interviews with lesbians in Canada, yet only a handful have donated their research material to an archive. The article also describes the Archive of Lesbian Oral History, an international digital archive founded by the author. Do you want to read the rest of this article? Request full-text. He is Professor of History Emeritus at Herbert Lehman College. Martha Vicinus is an LGBT scholar, anti-war activist, and professor of English literature and Women’s Studies. Her books include Lesbian Subjects: A Feminist Studies Reader, Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past, and Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age. She serves as the Eliza M. Mosher Distinguished University Professor of English, Women’s Studies, and History at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. George Chauncey is a scholar of twentieth-century U.S. history and lesbian and gay history. He is co-director As a platform, Clio offers oral historians and oral history repositories a variety of ways to connect their work and collections to broader public audiences. In addition to the critical work of capturing and preserving oral histories for information and perspectives of past events, making oral histories available to the public in some form can significantly enhance a listener’s understanding and connection to history. Unable to access undigitized archives from across the U.S. and in Canada, I needed to reengineer my history senior thesis around a different topic and sources. Upon recognizing the obstacles of conducting remote research, I also recognized the importance of using the spoken word, rather than the written word, to record this unique moment.