The gay archival impulse: the founding of the Gerber/Hart library and archives in Chicago

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of community archives, offering a critique of the community archives discourse through a historical case study focused on the origins of the Gerber/Hart LGBTQ library and archives in Chicago.

Design/methodology/approach – This study explores the archival collections of the founders of the Gerber/Hart library and archives and the librarians that have worked there as a means for understanding the origins of the archival impulse, the rationale for building the collections and the practices that shaped the collections during the first decade of the organization’s history.

Findings – The historical analysis of the Gerber/Hart library and archives situates community archives and LGBTQ collections within the broader historical context that lead to the founding of the organization and reveals deep connections to the information professions not previously considered by those studying community archives.

Originality/value – The paper offers a reconceptualization of community archives as archival projects initiated, controlled and maintained by the members of a self-defined community. The authors emphasize the role of the archival impulse or the historical origins of the collection and the necessity for full-community control, setting clear boundaries between community archives and other participatory archival models that engage the community.

Keywords Libraries, Community archives, Archival history, Archival impulse, Autonomous collections, LGBTQ+collections

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

All over the place, folks were looking for ways to preserve a record of our past, of our history as a people and as a community. We were driven in part by the conviction that knowing our history would contribute to making us a people and a community [...] All of this was happening on the margins of the academic world, outside the walls of the great libraries and archives in the United States. – John D’Emilio, In A New Century.

Community archives have quickly become a new subject of study for archival scholars. The literature abounds with case studies of collections housed within community spaces and built in partnership with community members as participatory projects in institutional archives. Many of these case studies are focused on LGBTQ collections. The Lesbian Herstory Archives (Thistlethwaite, 2000), Canadian Gay Archives (Barriault, 2009), ruckus! archive project (Campbell and Stevens, 2009) and the Lavender Library, Archives and Cultural Exchange (Wakimoto et al., 2013b), serve as the exemplary case studies of LGBTQ
A complementary body of work focused on affect and the archives explores community-based, institutional and personal LGBTQ collections (Sheffield, 2014; Cifor, 2016; Lee, 2016). Few of these studies dig deeply into the archival collections of these organizations to provide a historical perspective on the development of the archives and place the cases in historical context. Kelland’s (2018) Clio’s Foot Soldiers situates the efforts of LGBTQ archives, libraries and historians within the context of the larger social movements impacting the study and collection of LGBTQ materials, but offers a macro view of the larger movements, only nodding to the development of organizations like those listed above. We offer a new historical perspective on the development of LGBTQ collections both nationally and internationally through the history of the Gerber/Hart Library and Archives located in Chicago, IL.

Through a close reading of the archives of the founders, librarians and board members that shaped the Gerber/Hart over its four decades of operation, this historical case study situates Gerber/Hart within the Gay Rights Movement and development of professional organizations for academics and librarians. This work resulted in the acceptance of gender and sexuality studies in the academy and built a global network of organizations that afforded the study of a history erased or silenced in mainstream institutions and offered access to information resources to LGBTQ communities. This article also begins to offer a reconceptualization of community archives. Where the archival community has been reluctant to bound the concept in an effort to remain inclusive, we argue that by placing boundaries around these practices and clearly defining what constitutes a community archives, we can better differentiate between participatory community archiving efforts and those initiated, led and controlled by the community for the community. Our critique offers the opportunity for opening dialog between community archivists and the archival profession, acknowledging where the boundaries of community and profession begin to overlap.

Reframing community archives

While community archives have become a subject of study for archival scholars, there has been a reluctance to concisely define the term. The archival discourse uses a variety of modifiers to describe community collections – independent, informal, ethnic, identity-based, community-based, community-led, grassroots and radical – but fails to clearly articulate the difference between the terms. UK scholars Flinn, Stevens and Shepherd’s 2009 “Whose Memories, Whose Archives,” is the most often cited conceptualization of the term, although the authors acknowledge the ambiguity of the terms “community” and “archives,” for which “there are no absolute agreed-upon definitions or positions.” The terms are left to the broadest possible interpretation to support inclusivity and to resist setting boundaries that would exclude one group’s efforts over another’s. This has left the archival field with a conceptualization of the term that has allowed for exploration of case studies, without clear boundaries for interaction or engagement. Flinn (2015, p. 145) observes, “for some, it is not sufficient that the collections are about the community, the community must also be fully involved,” describing a variety of projects that include community-led and community-engaged efforts to preserve archival heritage. Archival case studies range from autonomous collections defined, built and controlled by community members to community-engaged and participatory projects initiated by institutional archives. We offer a definition of community archives that set clear boundaries between these practices without enforcing a definition of community. Community, as Flinn and others have suggested, must remain self-defined by community members (Flinn et al., 2009; Caswell, 2014). While the concept of community remains open, we argue that by setting clear boundaries between community archives and
mainstream archives the archival field can better contextualize the practices emerging within these community-spaces.

Community archives are imagined as spaces where the community members and archivists can collaborate as equals, sharing and exchanging knowledge. However, many of the case studies presented in the literature uphold traditional relationships between archives and community, preserving the role of the institutional archive as the collector and preserver of community histories. We posit community archives as archival projects initiated, controlled and maintained by the members of a self-defined community. In this re-articulation of the concept, the archival impulse originates within the community and the community retains full control and ownership of the archive regarding the preservation, access and maintenance of the collection. It is this impulse that differentiates community archives from other community-oriented efforts. The desire to build an archive is not generated from an archivist or institution external to the community, but from the community itself.

Control is also central to our definition, emphasizing the desire of the community to not only frame their historical narrative through archival materials but also to control the access and use of those materials. Through the concept of the archival impulse, we also aim to engage the history of community archives. The majority of the available case studies focus on the contemporary practices of community archives; few engage deeply with the history of the archives and the historical conditions under which the archives were founded. We offer a historical case study that centers on the archival impulse, the desire to build an archives and to preserve a community’s history, claiming a space for building community.

Gerber/hart library and archives

The work [researching and writing gay history] brought the satisfying pleasures of intellectual discovery. It also brought the thrill of watching my work and the work of others become a tool for community building.” – John D’Emilio, In A New Century.

As many of the archival case studies of community archives have, we could easily start with a study of the current activities of Gerber/Hart Library and Archives. Gerber/Hart is currently located in the Rogers Park neighborhood sharing a building with the Howard Brown Health clinic, an LGBTQ focused medical center. The organization was founded in 1981 first and foremost as a repository for the records of LGBTQ individuals and organizations. Named for Henry Gerber, founder of one of the first gay rights organizations in the USA and Pearl Hart, a Chicago attorney and advocate described as “Guardian Angel of Chicago’s Gay Community,” the Gerber/Hart is the Midwest’s largest LGBTQ library. The circulating collections include 14,000 volumes and 800 periodical titles. Similar to the outreach activities of public libraries Gerber/Hart holds book clubs and game nights and hosts talks, exhibits and class visits. The archives and special collections preserve 100 archival collections documenting LGBTQ people, organizations and causes from across the Midwest.

Surveys of the librarians, volunteers, members and patrons would no doubt reveal the significance of this community archive and library to the contemporary LGBTQ community in Chicago and across the Midwest. A study of the contemporary practices would reveal the symbolic significance of the space as a site for the preservation of community history, as a welcoming and safe space for community members to access information not collected elsewhere, and perhaps even standing in opposition to the current threats to the community (Caswell et al., 2018). We offer a novel approach to studying community archives, focusing on the past rather than the activities of the present.
Along with the papers of community members, Gerber/Hart’s archives hold the organization’s history and origins though the papers of former board members, directors, librarians and archivists. These records reveal a much deeper history connecting Gerber/Hart to the history of the Gay Rights Movement both nationally and internationally and to the history of independent LGBTQ archives and libraries across the globe. The archival records of the founding members and the librarians who have worked at Gerber/Hart over the past three decades, afford opportunities to engage the archival impulse, the conditions under which the archives was justified, imagined and realized. By tracing this impulse, we seek to further contextualize community archives and the development of practices and standards that shape these spaces.

The archival impulse

There was a hunger then for words and images from the past. History was our confirmation that the worlds we were constructing in the present were not our momentary hallucinations but had roots and connections; our lives had strong ties to something that stretched way back in time. – John D’Emilio, In A New Century.

During the height of the Gay Rights Movement of the 1970s arose a gay archival impulse: the desire to know, collect, preserve, celebrate and share gay history. Springing from lesbian and gay academics, librarians and community members alike, this impulse led to a wave of LGBTQ history projects and the founding of community archives around the globe well into the 1980s. Founded in 1981, Gerber/Hart was established alongside the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York (1972), the Canadian Gay Archives in Toronto (1973) and the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco (1985). The archival impulse was not strictly about documenting the activism of the contemporary moment; it was driven by a desire to record and acknowledge a visibly gay past. In the very first Gay Archivist newsletter published by the Canadian Gay Archives (1977) in an article with the title, “Problems with Research in Gay History,” articulated the desire of lesbian and gay archivists to look anywhere and everywhere for gay history:

Where does one begin to search out such history? The answer is simply everywhere. Gay people have always existed, and wherever there is recorded history, we may expect to find glimpses of them. It has often been the case that even where gay history has been uncovered by either non-gay or gay historians, it has been suppressed or ignored (p. 1).

The ability to tangibly preserve a lesbian and gay past is what drove community members and professionals to build archives such as Gerber/Hart and actively collect history.

Emblematic of Gerber/Hart’s role in the academy and the community is the work of its founding members. The beginnings of Gerber/Hart sprang from the creation of the Chicago Gay and Lesbian History Project by Greg Sprague, a Chicago-based historian of lesbian and gay life, in 1978. The history project included an active researching and publishing agenda by Sprague, the collection of oral histories, and a commitment to presentations and course offerings for the LGBTQ community in Chicago throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s. Sprague’s community history efforts mirror the work of community archivist Willie Walker and the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project of the late 1970s that led to the formation of the GLBT Historical Society in 1985. Through the work of academic and community historians such as Greg Sprague, John D’Emilio, Willie Walker, Allan Bérubé and Jonathan Ned Katz history projects grew into community archives.

As an academic historian, Sprague was a member of the Chicago chapter of the Gay Academic Union (GAU), formed in April of 1978. Sprague also had commitments to the larger historical profession and was the co-founder of the Committee on Lesbian and Gay
History of the American Historical Association in 1979, an organization that still exists today now named the Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History. His role in both the GAU and the Committee on Lesbian and Gay History, demonstrate Sprague’s commitment to changing the historical profession to be more inclusive and accepting of LGBTQ history while remaining firm in his commitment to the community. Sprague and the Chicago chapter of the GAU played an integral role in the founding of Gerber/Hart. In a 1980 press release, the purpose of the GAU was:

[... ] to promote the gathering and dissemination of scholarly information regarding lesbians and gay men, to increase protections for job security and advancement in academic and professional settings, to provide opportunities for members to get together and share ideas and experiences, and to encourage and support students within the organization and in their campus activities.

To this end, the GAU in Chicago started a lending library the year it formed, and this collection is the basis of the Gerber/Hart’s library today. The GAU was the academic half of the two Chicago organizations that co-founded Gerber/Hart, and the other organization was Gay Horizons, Inc. a community service organization (The Center on Halsted, present day). Established first as the Midwest Gay and Lesbian Archive and Library in 1981, the Gerber/Hart has always hovered within the academy and the community.

Greg Sprague was only one of the principal founders of the Gerber/Hart and was accompanied by fellow historian James Monahan in the endeavor to open a gay community archive in the late 1970s. While Sprague focused on local gay history in Chicago, Monahan was concerned with issues of preserving gay history at a national level and paying close attention to gay archiving at an international scale. In a 1979 unpublished draft of an article penned by Monahan to appear in the first issue of the Gay Insurgent journal regarding gay archives titled, “Considerations in the Organization of Gay Archives,” Monahan articulates the need for three distinct regional gay archives, one being in the Midwest, with linkages that allow for sharing of resources through interlibrary-loan and research aids. His call for an archives reads:

Archives must be established, as many people are coming to realize, and they must be established in such a way that (1) collecting and maintenance problems are not compounded and (2) research in gay history becomes viable within general history rather than promoted as another effort to further fractionalize a field already saturated with specialties (p. 1).

In Monahan’s vision, Gerber/Hart was developed as the Midwestern cornerstone to the cultivation of a national gay archive system. Hence, the Gerber/Hart reflected the regional scope of the archive project in its early naming as the Midwest Gay and Lesbian Archive and Library. Although Monahan’s vision of a national gay archive has yet to come to fruition, his efforts in establishing Geber/Hart as the primary independent gay archive in the Midwest was a success.

Monahan was skeptical of creating a stand-alone unaffiliated archive outside of an academic institution because he was aware of the national and international political and safety risk in archiving gay history in the late 1970s. This was most evident in Monahan’s discussion of the police raid on the Body Politic in Canada on December 30th, 1977 the gay political journal that started the Canadian Gay Archives. Monahan discusses the raid in his Gay Insurgent article writing:

The police raid on The Body Politic, and thus an incursion into the Canadian Gay Archives, reinforces the point that an archive which is independent of a recognized repository is not likely to be respected for what it is; an archive consisting solely of gay collections and managed solely through gay efforts cannot guarantee the security of its holdings as well as an archive which is part of an academic institution (p. 9).
Monahan’s concerns evidence how Gerber/Hart’s beginnings were not in isolation. Lesbian and gay historians, archivists and librarians in the 1970s and 1980s working in community settings were learning from one another and watching as archives were established and faced controversy.

The gay archival impulse inspired by Jim Monahan, Greg Sprague, the Gay Academic Union and other community historians and organizations in Chicago is evident in the early documents connected to Gerber/Hart’s founding. In a revised version of the Articles of Establishment dated November 5th, 1980 the purpose of the Midwest Gay and Lesbian Archive and Library was stated as follows:

The Midwest Gay and Lesbian Archive and Library shall be the depository for the records and papers of lesbian and gay organizations and individuals, and other resources bearing upon homosexuality in American society, but concentrating upon the Midwest region. A lending library of published materials shall constitute a part of the collection. The Archive and Library shall also serve as a support agency for the research activities of the Chicago Gay and Lesbian History Project (p. 1).

Here, the desire to preserve, protect, control, celebrate and share gay history, the gay archival impulse, shines through. In this statement of purpose both Sprague and Monahan’s visions of a gay archive merge and result in the opening of the Gerber/Hart library in 1981. Sprague received support for the Chicago Gay and Lesbian History Project, while Monahan played an integral role in regional gay archive building. Regardless of geographic scope or intention, both Sprague and Monahan were committed to preserving and legitimizing a visibly gay past.

Defining new standards

But this work was not being prepared for academic conferences, and it was not being published in academic journals. It was rooted in our communities; it was presented to community audiences; and it was published in queer newspapers and magazines. We relied on members of the community to provide us with the raw materials for our history. – John D’Emilio, In A New Century.

Joe Gregg introduced himself to Gerber/Hart members in the July 1982 newsletter, describing his faculty role with Northeastern Illinois University Libraries and experience with collection development, cataloging, serials services and reference at Northeastern and at the University of Chicago Libraries. Gregg joined Gerber/Hart following the Library’s first major move to 3,245 North Sheffield working alongside Ruth Ketchum as co-librarian until his death in November of 1987. Such as Sprague and Monahan, Gregg’s work crosses the boundaries between professional worlds. The archival discourse continues to uphold the divide between community and professional, frequently describing the role of the professional archivist in building community-based collections in institutional archives but failing to explore the connections that community archivist may have to the profession. Andrew Flinn has raised questions regarding the potential “threat” of community archives to the archival profession, describing community archives as a means for democratizing archival heritage. His research focuses on the ways in which the professional community can support the efforts of community archives, acknowledging that many community archives “face long-term challenges relating to resources and in some cases technical expertise to ensure their sustainability and long-term preservation” (Flinn, 2010, p. 4). This narrative is mirrored across the archival discourse, as scholars focus on the instability of community-led initiatives (Welland, 2015; Gilliland and Flinn, 2013). While archival practices and the broader landscape of archival infrastructure should be assessed for inequities that may further marginalize community efforts, this narrative assumes that
community knowledge and professional knowledge are two separate and distinct spheres. The professional engagement of community archivists is erased.

The community archives discourse is sensitive to the limitations of community identities and boundaries when it comes to the identity terms selected by archivists to describe community-based efforts. Archival Scholar and South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) co-founder Michelle Caswell has reflected on the danger of imposed identities, noting that the construction of the identity-term “South Asian American” for SAADA is an intentional move that aims to recognize the shared colonial history of South Asian countries and the experience of immigrants from these regions to the United States. This terminology, she notes, acknowledges that “identity-based community archives can be built on complexly layered theoretical foundations and acknowledge fluidity, multiplicity and tension within heterogeneous communities” (Caswell, 2014, p. 44). Our conceptualization of community archives also purposefully refuses to define the concept of community. From our perspective, the impulse for the community archive originates within the community, and thus, the boundaries of the community and archive are self-defined. However, community identity should not erase the other identities that community members embody, including their professional identities. Caswell, like others studying community archives, recognizes that community-based projects are “flourishing regardless of the involvement of professionally trained archivists.” Our definition stresses the importance of community control of these archival efforts, but this does not mean that the influence of the information professions is not present. The archival discourse has perhaps focused too closely on the shared identity of the community members building these collections and has not fully interrogated the roles that community members play in community archives and their professional identities outside of these spaces.

Gregg’s work with Gerber/Hart demonstrates the overlap between these roles. Gregg’s knowledge of professional practices allowed him to critique the best practices established by the library and archival fields and to enact change from within as a member of the American Library Association. His work with the ALA’s Gay and Lesbian Task Force exposes a global network of LGBTQ libraries and archives illustrating the interconnectedness between these community collections and the development of standards for community libraries and archives. The discourse focuses on the building of collections as acts that embody the community’s power to document itself and to fill gaps in histories where their stories have been marginalized. Joe Gregg’s work continues this narrative, demonstrating the power of professionals to work alongside their communities to build space within the history of librarianship and archival practice.

An undated draft of a letter to new members of Gerber/Hart touts the professional connections of co-librarians Joe Gregg and Ruth Ketchum as one of the benefits for library members: “Gerber-Hart also offers services that few gay and lesbian libraries can match – unique access to the collection, assistance from a staff of professional librarians and special membership benefits.” In addition to listing the ability to check out materials, copies of the newsletter, and discounts at community bookstores and organizations, the letter positions members of the library as active change agents within the community supporting the mission of the library and archives:

- You help document, preserve and protect lesbian and gay history that might otherwise be distorted or lost.
- You insure that accurate and complete information is available to combat the prejudice, misinformation and ignorance that exists about gay and lesbian people.
You help students, professionals, scholars and concerned individuals find resources available nowhere else to assist in research, recreation and complex issues of personal and collective identity.

You keep alive a vital link between the past, present – and future – of the gay and lesbian community.

Gregg’s work with Gerber/Hart served the Midwestern LGBTQ community, but he also carried this work into his professional activities outside of the organization as an active member of the Gay and Lesbian Task Force of the American Library Association.

The Gay and Lesbian Task Force was formed in 1970 as part of the ALA’s Social Responsibilities Round Table (now the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Round Table or GLBTRT). Gregg’s papers reflect his work building local standards and practices at the Gerber/Hart while simultaneously advocating for change to best practices through the professional networks afforded by the ALA Task Force. The first evidence of Gregg’s work with the task force comes in the form of a letter from male co-chair Michel (1985) in June. Michel’s letter, addressed to his gay and lesbian librarian colleagues, serves as a call to become more active with the group. He outlines a list of potential ideas of focus for the task force, including: addressing homophobia in print, advocating against censorship of gay and lesbian records, speaking out against libraries and archives refusing gifts of gay and lesbian focused literature, supporting collection development efforts by identifying “good” books and materials, highlighting the role of gay and lesbian librarians and professionals in the field, building a professional network and building cataloging standards and tools such as union catalogs and thesauri to support the access and use of library and archival materials. Gregg (1985) replied to Michel and his colleagues stating that the establishment of a subject thesaurus, “which can be used to organize materials dealing with Lesbians and Gay men in a logical, comprehensive and sensitive manner,” was his top priority, citing his experience with archival collections at Gerber/Hart. He reflected on the shortcomings of professional standards such as Dewey and Library of Congress classification systems, citing a lack of depth and scope of the standards and the issues that arise with subject terms that do not reflect the community and colocation of resources. Further citing the work of Walter Williams of the International Gay and Lesbian History Archive (California) to build their own classification scheme, Gregg argues that the Task Force should work together to build a standard appropriate for Lesbian and Gay materials.

The working group on a subject thesaurus of terms describing the Lesbian/Gay experience was established as an arm of the Gay and Lesbian task force during the annual conference in July of 1985. Working with Robert B. Marks Ridinger, librarian at Northern Illinois University, the working group began surveying the membership of the International Association of Lesbian and Gay Archives and Libraries (IALGAL), also formed in 1985. The subject thesaurus was based on the subject indexes from a number of institutions across the globe. Phil Parkinson, serials librarian at the Alexander Turnbull Library at the National Library of New Zealand and librarian at the Lesbian and Gay Rights Resource Centre New Zealand, shared his Gay Decimal Classification (GDC)[1] developed after the Resource Centre received a large donation. Parkinson cited the shifts in identity terminology and new areas of concern for the community as his rationale for modifying the Dewey decimal system to suit the organization’s needs. In a September 1986 letter to Gregg, Parkinson describes recent changes to the GCD, “I scrapped a big chunk of my old gay studies classification to make room for an expansion dealing with the gay community response to AIDS.” His statement reflected the necessity for a flexible classification schema that could shift with the needs of the community, rather than institutional collections.
The Canadian Gay Archives (CGA) similarly worked from Dewey decimal classification. The professional librarians working with the CGA collections were already familiar with the standard and the use of the classification scheme aligned with practices in other academic libraries. However, the CGA acknowledged the limitations of the standard:

When we chose and began to work with the Dewey system we acknowledge that because the focus of our collection was specific – homosexuality and gay/lesbian studies - the code was limited and allocated an inadequate selection of classification numbers. If we used only established classifications in the code there would be an inconvenient clustering of materials under the broad numbers provided. We therefore decided to expand the system to meet special requirements (Fraser and Averill, 1983, p. 33).

Using the customization available within Dewey, the CGA modified their classification schema following exemplars from women’s studies and black studies that had already been widely shared in the academic community. CGA also consulted their membership as they adapted the professional best-practice.

Others, such as Leslie Colfax of the Homosexual Information Center in Los Angeles shared their struggle to assign community appropriate subject headings to their holdings, “[...] A few years ago the staff prepared a preliminary list of subject headings on the topic of sex, in general, in an attempt to replace some of the misleading, narrow and often derogatory headings developed by the LC” (Colfax, 1986). The Task Force compiled these localized interventions of from around the globe, including The Pink Thesaurus published by the Hall-Carpenter Archives in London, Ridinger’s work with the index of the Advocate, the Canadian Gay Archives’ Alternative Press Index, The Lesbian Periodical Index from the Lesbian Herstory Archive and Parkinson’s work with the Gay Decimal Classification (Gregg, 1986). The Gay and Lesbian task force published The International Thesaurus of Gay and Lesbian Index Terms in 1988, reflecting Gregg and Ridinger’s years of work with the Thesaurus Working Group and input from gay and lesbian libraries and archives from across the globe. Gregg’s correspondence and records from the Gerber/Hart express a desire to build on the momentum of the Thesaurus to establish microfilming projects, comprehensive periodical indexes, and union catalogs for archival holdings. Sadly, Gregg would not live to see the publication of the Thesaurus or realize these other projects, succumbing to AIDS-related illness in November of 1987. Though Gregg’s impact on the Gay and Lesbian archival community would continue.

The thesaurus working group was one of many professional outlets for lesbian and gay archives and libraries. Gerber/Hart’s October of 1985 Newsletter announced the formation of the International Association of Lesbian and Gay Archives and Libraries (IALGAL) formed at the International Gay and Lesbian History Conference at the University of Toronto earlier that year. Gregg excitedly describes the publications plan for the IALGAL Newsletter to follow with the Canadian Gay Archives publishing the first issue, the San Francisco Bay Area Gay and Lesbian Historical Society the second, and Gerber/Hart following with a Chicago focused issue for the third. The IALGAL Newsletter would not launch officially until August of 1990, published by the San Francisco Bay Area Gay and Lesbian Historical Society. This issue suggests continued activity among the members of the organization following the formation in 1985, including a meeting in Arlington Virginia in 1987 following the March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. In this time, Alan Miller of the Canadian Gay Archives compiled and published the Directory of the International Association of Lesbian and Gay Archives and Libraries, a survey of over 100 libraries and archives holding Lesbian and Gay materials from around the globe. Many of those listed also contributed their ideas and best practices to the thesaurus working group. dedicated to Gregg, “in recognition of his encouragement,” the publication includes the full survey...
responses from 34 archives and libraries and the contact information for the remaining organizations surveyed. The map below represents the mailing list included in the Directory (Figure 1).

Most of the organizations surveyed appear to be independent community archives and libraries based on the statistics provided. However, of the 34 responding organizations 27 indicated that they had professional librarians or archivists involved in their collections or on staff. Survey respondents also listed the professional organizations that their repositories were affiliated with. Outside of the IALGAL a wide range of national and regional organizations were named: Canadian Lesbian and Gay History Network, Association of Canadian Archivists, Ontario Association of Archivists, Toronto Area Archivists Group, British Records Association, CA Library Association, Archives and Records Association of New Zealand, Church and Synagogue Library Association, American Library Association, American Association of State and Local History and California Coalition of Historical Societies. In 2010, Robert Ridinger describes the IALGAL as short-lived, suggesting that the ALA task force and SAA Lesbian and Gay Archives Round Table (formed in 1989) were more successful in organizing the community of practice. However, projects such as the Lavender Legacies Guide first published by the SAA Round Table in 1998 listing Gay and Lesbian holdings across archives in North America, build on the legacy of IALGAL and the earlier efforts from the community.

Joe Gregg’s tenure at the Gerber/Hart and involvement with the ALA task force demonstrate the entanglement of professional and community identities. Gregg and the librarians and archivists in his network were both information professionals and part of their communities. They worked to build practices that would better represent their collections and communities while also acting as change agents from within the profession. Organizing an Archives: The Canadian Gay Archives Experience illustrates the need for autonomous community archives and libraries, such as the Canadian Gay Archives and Gerber/Hart:

While the libraries were very accessible to the public they were simply not collecting the material that was available. Their book selection was limited, gay and lesbian periodicals almost non-

![Figure 1. International Association of Lesbian and Gay Archives and Libraries Mailing List 1987](image-url)
existent, and their newspaper clippings were restricted largely to local newspapers. They had no interest in collecting the records of organizations or papers of individuals unless they had distinguished themselves in some field. [. . .] From its inception the Archives has collected printed material, personal papers, and records of organizations. Because there was no other such collection in the country there was no thought given to limiting the scope of the collection (Fraser and Averill, 1983, p. 6).

If in studying these organizations we only focus on the collections as gap-filling measures reflecting the inequities of archival history, we miss opportunities to understand how these organizations and the professional community were and are closely networked together. *Organizing Archives*, such as the *Thesaurus* and other tools developed by the membership of the IALGAL highlighted in this history, blended professional best practices and localized community practices that suited the specialized needs of these organizations – many of which were still in their first decade of existence in the 1980s (Knowlton, 1987; Miller, 1987). The guide not only stresses the need to establish practices and share knowledge but also to join archival and professional organizations at both the regional and national level to facilitate knowledge exchange and legitimize the work of the archivists and librarians within these organizations without professional credentials:

> [Professional library and archives associations] will all have publications that will provide useful information. Their newsletters can be used to reach professional gay and lesbian archivists who may want to get involved as well as the general archival community. Membership in these organizations is a kind of official recognition by the profession (Fraser and Averill, 1983, pp. 57-58).

Archives and Libraries such as the Canadian Gay Archives, Lesbian Herstory Archives, and others have been included among the growing number of case studies of community archives, but none have explored the role of the community archivists as archival professionals in the dual roles that they played in establishing a network of community archives that stretches across the globe. This historical reframing of the Gerber/Hart demonstrates how closely aligned professional and community-identities are for those dedicating themselves to the preservation of their community’s history.

*Sustaining autonomy*

I worry about relinquishing control of our history to any institution that is not ours. I pray that the community will remember the value of these grassroots efforts to save our history. Gerber/Hart and the institutions like it around the country are treasures. They are gems that need protections and polishing and all our appreciation. - John D’Emilio, In A New Century.

The words of John D’Emilio, LGBTQ historian and current President of the Gerber/Hart Board of Directors, have framed this exploration of Gerber/Hart’s history, illustrating the concerns that LGBTQ libraries and archives share with many community archives – the desire to preserve, share and claim a history that is not represented elsewhere. The quote above, articulates one of the repeated concerns of community archives, the loss of control. Our reconceptualization of community archives respects the autonomy of community archives; such as D’Emilio we argue that community control over all aspects of archival management is part of what makes these organizations valuable to their communities and to archival theory.

All too often, community archives are described as fragile, requiring the support of institutional archives. Flinn and Stevens (2009, p. 15) observe, “Questions of independence, sustaining resources, keeping archives open, achieving organizational aspirations and navigating the possible compromises required in partnership with formal heritage organizations are common to many independent archives all over the world,” and suggest...
that complete independence and autonomy from mainstream institutions “is not and was never universal” among community archives. Partnership and absorption by mainstream heritage institutions is described as an inevitability for many community archives that lack resources in terms of funding, budget and community support. While the contemporary discourse stresses the need for equitable partnerships and carefully negotiated terms of acquisition when community collections are absorbed into archival institutions, the Gerber/Hart demonstrates a case where professional support was already internal to the community and has allowed the organization to maintain its autonomy throughout its history.

LGBTQ community archives have always been aware of the fragility of autonomy, as Elizabeth Knowlton observed in her 1987 survey of LGBTQ collections:

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 (p. 22).

The history of the Gerber/Hart demonstrates that these community archives were not working in isolation; the librarians and archivists working in these organizations networked together, using community and professional networks to share best-practices and support collecting efforts across institutions. While organizations such as the International Association of Lesbian and Gay Archives and Libraries did not share a long history, the ALA Task Force, SAA Round Table and AHA Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History have continued to serve as professional hubs for LGBTQ archivists, librarians and historians dedicated to preserving collections in institutional and community archives alike. The contemporary acknowledgment of the lack in which many community archives operate is a rhetorical move to emphasize the necessity of a support network for community archives, but this marginalization narrative continues to shape an image of community archives as organizations that need to be saved instead of acknowledging the expertise embodied within the staff and community members.

The papers of the founders, board members and librarians of the Gerber/Hart – Greg Sprague, Jim Monahan, Joe Gregg, Ruth Ketchum, Barry Aldridge, Donald Landers, Hugh Mathis, Joyce Bolinger, Kevin Boyer, Randy Grisham, Rosemary Mulryan, Veronica Drake and William Haddad – preserved within the Gerber/Hart archives illustrate the complexity of these spaces and the rich history of community archives that has yet to be fully interrogated by historians and archival scholars. This historical analysis of key figures in Gerber/Hart’s history situate the organization within the broader historical context of the Gay Rights Movement and its impact on the academy, the information professions and society at large. While the Gerber/Hart stands alone as a singular case study in this article, our methodology demonstrates that a close historical reading can aid in developing more robust case studies that do not isolate community archives within the context of their locality and explore the intersectionality of the identities embodied by community members. This case study flips the narrative most commonly articulated in the archival discourse, demonstrating that community archives can and should maintain their autonomy. Further, we argue that any study of these sites must include an interrogation into the archival impulse, the reasons that communities seek to build collections, to claim ownership of their history, preserve materials, celebrate their history, pass on knowledge to future generations and seek to shift archival practices that have excluded or marginalized their pasts. These are collections that do not exist to fill gaps in archives but stand in powerful contrast to the archival institutions that are designed, built and maintained for other audiences.
Notes

1. The GDC is still in use at the Resource Centre now operating as the Lesbian and Gay Archives of New Zealand (LAGANZ)

2. For a contemporary critique of the biases in library organizational systems see Adler’s (2017) Cruising the Library: Perversities in Organizational Biases.

References


Further reading


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