AN INTERVIEW WITH JOAN AND DEBORAH OF THE LESBIAN HERSTORY ARCHIVES

by Beth Hodges

Photographs by JEB

In 1974 there was a pantry, dark, and empty except for a single file cabinet. I knelt on the floor to examine the contents of the cabinet, a complete set of THE LADDER. *This was the embryo of the Lesbian Herstory Archives.*

Five years later the Archives has outgrown the pantry, spills into the kitchen, the dining room, the front hall, the bedrooms of the upper West Side apartment that houses it. In the pantry where I first held THE LADDER, *shelves of our serial publications line an entire wall. And all over the apartment I see walls of books, of file cabinets, flyers, posters, collages, framed photographs, and a bulletin board whose announcements include notice of lesbian raft trips, a black bibliography, a southeastern lesbian writers' conference, a Jewish lesbian anthology.*

Today there are over three thousand volumes in the Archives collection. How many unpublished papers and letters and articles, clippings, taped interviews, radio shows, videotapes, photographs and manuscripts there are, no one knows exactly.

The Archives collective has lost members and gained members, but three have been constant from the beginning. Valerie Itnyre, Deborah Edel and Joan Nestle together have done the day-to-day work of the Archives these five years.

In April I spoke with Deborah and Joan, the two who share their home with the Archives collection and with the hundreds of women who visit each year. Since much of our conversation concerns beginnings, visions and quests, Joan starts out with the story of a woman who chose to begin her journey at the Archives

Joan: The Archives reaches out in ways that we didn't plan for. One day we were sitting around and there was a knock on the door. I went to answer it and it was a woman, probably in her mid- to late forties, and she had a huge backpack on.

Deborah: A little lady.

J: She said her name, she said she was from Hawaii and she'd tried to call us but the line was busy so she just took the risk of coming. Her story was that she had been married for many years. She had raised, I think, five children—the oldest was in his twenties. She had gotten a divorce, gone to law school, and come out as a lesbian woman. She'd just finished law school, and "before she got married to another institution," is how she put it, she wanted to make a pilgrimage through, or to, the lesbian community as she had understood it to be from Hawaii; and she had certain places on her journey that she was going to stop. She'd made no previous arrangements.

The place she wanted to begin her journey was the Archives. So we welcomed her, and I went to take her backpack from her, and it must have weighed at least sixty pounds. She stayed here for three days. What she would do, she would get up in the morning, have her healthy breakfast, and she would sit—she didn't even sit on a chair, she sat on the floor in a corner of the Archives—and she would just reach out and pull out things.

We would have dinner together and she would tell us her itinerary. She would say she was going to Buffalo and we would say, "but"—I don't want to use her name—"but woman," we'd say, "it's terrible snow storms up there now, you know: you're from Hawaii." "No, no, that's o.k., that's where my spirit tells me I have to go," and then when she left she said she knew she was right to begin here, that it was like sitting under a waterfall, in the Archives room.

We said good-bye to her and we told her to keep in touch with us. And around two months later two women came to the Archives from the Actors' Sorority, a lesbian theater group in Kansas City, and they said Jackie says hello. So she was making her trek. It's this image of an older woman launching herself into the lesbian world, and finding it, that symbolizes the Archives.

D: She did something that I thought was very brave also. She had written a series of coming-out letters to old friends, and if their responses weren't fully real, she wanted to go deal with them directly.

J: Her courage and her spiritual vision and her faith that we'd all be there is symbolic of the Archives. Her courage to journey at this point in her life.

Something we found from the Archives is that many, many of our women are on journeys. The Archives gives them a stopping-off place, a renourishing place. We are a very brave people.

Beth: Will you tell about Mabel, a brave woman who has been important to you on your journey?

J: Mabel was the first lesbian woman I knew. I was around ten years old when I met Mabel. She was sort of a buddy of my mother and also was hired by my mother to take care of me—my mother was a working woman. Mabel used to read old lesbian paperbacks and she would keep them in her raincoat pocket with the book cover turned outward so I couldn't see the covers. And one day I took it out of her pocket—it was an invasion of privacy—and I read, devoured this lesbian novel. And Mabel just watched me grow.

D: How did you link back up with Mabel?

J: Mabel always stayed friends with my mother because they went to the race track together all the time, and they helped each other through hard times. So I knew Mabel, and Lillian, the woman she lived with for forty years who died this June.

Mabel was the witness to my coming-out, and to my mother's upsetness. Mabel told me something the last time she was here, that when I was coming out, my mother called her in the middle of the night and said, "If my daughter is a lesbian, I'm going to kill myself"; and Mabel said to her, "There's nothing you can do, she chooses, that's her life, you have to let her do it." Mabel was sort of the bridge between me and my mother.

I remember the first woman I was involved with, Susan. Mabel was at the house and my mother came home drunk and was in a very bad way. Susan got very scared and ran out of the apartment. I was holding on to my mother, trying to get her to calm down, and Mabel turned to me and said, "Now you leave your mother alone and go after your woman." And I ran out the door after Susan. This was the first recognition and support for my relationship.

But how we got together again was, when I was out, I guess around 1960, I was with Carol, and I'd been off and on in touch with Mabel. And Mabel told me there was going to be this big dance up in the South Bronx. It was going to be drag dance, for male and female homosexuals. I wanted Mabel to meet Carol so we went to their home and spent the night there; and we went to this dance at this ballroom. It was just incredible, hundreds of people, women in suits and men in dresses.

D: What did you wear?

J: I wore a dress, Carol wore a suit, and I remember to this day coming down the steps and a woman saying to Carol, "Can I borrow your woman? She's really saying something."

D: And you love it, you love it!

J: I love it to this day, being an old femme.

B: You said once that the Archives really began with Mabel. That she was an example for you of strength and self-cherishing.

J: Yes. Mabel was raised in the south by her grandmother and then came to New York when she was about seven. She stayed for a short time with an uncle who molested her. She ran away and worked in white people's houses from the age of nine. She said she was a lesbian from when she was a little girl playing in Winston-Salem.

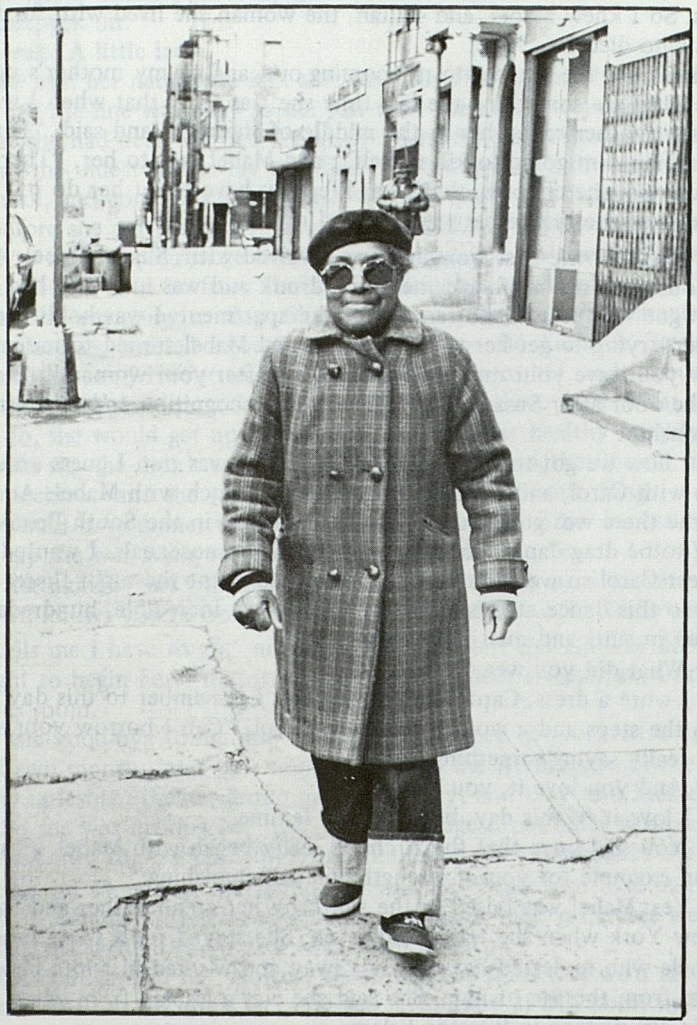
Years ago she was doing the things that we as a community are doing now. In her own way she was an archivist. Her whole life she was always looking for lesbian images. She taught herself to read; and she'd save the Wonder Woman comics because they were images of strong women.

D: She saved the old paperbacks.

J: She had a lot of the fifties paperbacks, which she prized.

She was political in her own way. She was cherishing of her own history, and knew there were other women like her. She tried to find the hidden images. And she was also seeking another way of knowledge; she joined the Rosicrucians in a search for a spiritual vision which she preserves today in

the Eastern Star. Because she had a strong sense that things were wrong, that men were keeping women from their full power.



B: What is Mabel's relationship to the Lesbian Herstory Archives today?

J: She has become very important to the Archives. In fact, she uses it more than any other woman. Even though reading for her is very hard because she's had cataract operations, she spends hours in that room, reading through what she's missed. It's like a hunger. She's just finished reading *Patience and Sarah.* And she just read Ethel Waters . . .

D: And Ann Shockley.

J: Yes, if Ann Shockley could hear this, Mabel wants so much to thank her for *Loving Her* which she read three times and made sure we gave copies to every one of her friends. She felt it was such an important work for her.

We sent her the newsletter. And Mabel, who is living on social security, sent us a donation—when she's donated her whole life. And she tells all her friends about the Archives.

D: Also she gave us her thirties, forties, fifties paperback collection. Our collection has grown since then, but it's what she had saved all these years that started the Archives' collection.

J: We've been doing an oral history with Mabel. And finally around a month ago she said, "All I want to do is be remembered."

B: I don't think she needs to worry.

J: It's beautiful to see the kind of recognition she's getting now. One day there was a woman working here in the Archives and she just kept seeing we had all these pictures of Mabel, Mabel working at her desk, and the woman said, "Is this woman a writer? Why do you have so many of her pictures?" And we said, "No, she's Mabel Hampton. She's a lesbian woman." And really it's about her that the Archives is. And all the other women like her.

B: Judith Schwarz has been a member of the collective for about two months now, hasn't she? How did you get together with her?

J: One of the very exciting things about the Archives is that so many women are beginning things, particularly research in lesbian history. They're working without support, those that aren't academically based. It's exciting that we share beginning moments, and one was when Judith Schwarz, whom we did not know at all, who has now become a member of the Archives and also a member of our family—she wrote us a letter about how she'd been doing grass roots research in the Library of Congress, hours and hours, after her ACLU typist job, and women told her she was crazy, all she was interested in was dirty linen, why did she want to know about women's private lives, that was gossip.

She wrote us a letter saying, "Am I crazy?" It was a very finely typed and finely worded letter. I read it and I got so excited, I sat down and typed one of my emotional outpourings about how it was just the opposite, that what she was doing was putting the center back into things, that she could not listen to those who questioned the importance of what she was doing because they were the ones who created the emptiness in the first place. And I was so afraid that my letter was going to be too crazy . . .

D: . . . for this proper woman, who typed so neatly.

J: She wrote back and she was so grateful we just exchanged letters almost weekly after that.

D: Also, both of you had discovered the connection of your mothers' deaths which was very present for both of you at the time, and it was another bond between you.

B: Does this happen often, that you bond with women who write you or who come to use the Archives?

J: That's another thing that makes the Archives so special. Since the Archives is in our home, when women use it, they do share in what is going on in our lives. One of the principles of the Archives is that it be an integral part of lesbian reality, not an isolated collection. We try not to let what's

going on here personally get in the way of a woman who has something concrete and special to do. But what we found—we've had hard times here—is an incredible caring on the part of women who we have never met before and may never meet again but who come here and, either through a conversation or through something they overhear us say, become involved.

I have gotten incredible caring and support for my own difficulties. It is a world of caring that grows out of that room, a center that radiates. A caring for the collectiveness of all of us also deepens the caring for us individually. So whenever I hear women saying they don't know where the lesbian community is, it's very hard for me, because we always feel that . . .

B: . . . you live there . . .

J: . . . we live there, that the Archives is at the heart of things.

D: It's also been incredible because it's never stopped; no matter what was going on in our lives, it's always managed to keep on flowing. The week Joan was in the hospital two women were staying here . . .

J: . . . working on their anarchist record of lesbian music . . .

D: . . . taking telephone calls and occasionally letting women in for us.

B: Will you talk about what the Archives has meant to you?

J: It has meant life to me.

It started as a political and philosophical and personal issue, but I never imagined it would be as personal as it has become. It's, I would use the word magic—how can I say it?—it's almost as if it has an understanding of things, almost as a living person. During the time I've been ill, whatever I *can* do, the Archives has something for me to do. It has never made me feel useless or valueless or completely dependent. There is always something to create with it, even if it's just clipping articles, which is what I do sometimes.

B: You once said that you would remember these early years of the Archives as its golden age. Why?

J: I just see it as very gentle and very personal, the way it is now. There's a glory to it, in its simplicity, in the smallness of the room, and in its coherency. We don't have large amounts of money to worry about now and it's all very manageable. Now every woman who comes, helps create it, and it's still small enough that every woman can see her own impact, can touch everything that's there. Women sit shoulder to shoulder, as if the voices could all hear each other still. As we grow as a culture, or as we accumulate more as a culture, some of that immediacy won't be there. But now there's a quiet strength to it that I wish all lesbian women could share in.

B: Fran Winant is an example of a woman seeing her impact on the Archives.

J: Yes. I had known Fran superficially for years and years but never have I been able to tell her how really important she is. To me she is one of our women who has kept her own voice and her own imagination and is constantly growing with it. There's a wonderful integrity to her. And she finally came the other night to the Archives. Way before we knew she was coming, we had made a blow-up of one of her paintings of her dog who's very dear to her.

B: She wrote a whole volume of dog poems.

D: Yes, and did a whole series of paintings. . .

J: . . . with her special language. And we had posted it. Someday we'd like to have the originals, but we do what we can, so we made a slide and we

blew it up. She walked into the Archives room, this woman who I thought would know for sure how at the center of things she was, and she wept.

What she wrote in the book, we read afterwards, was, "This has brought tears to my eyes. You understand." And for us it was such a gift to be able to say to her, "You have to understand too, you have to know how it's voices like yours who've kept our spirits intact." So it was a beautiful moment of being able to say thank you to someone I wanted to thank for many years.

B: Do you dread the future, that the Archives will change so much and your relationship with it will change?

D: We realize that the Archives has to grow . . .

J: . . . into its own entity. We have a future vision of it, of its having a house with various rooms for all aspects of lesbian culture. So our visual artists would have space, our performing artists would have space, our sculptors would have space, and there would be room for women to sleep in and to eat together in. There would be a living creating of culture at the same time it is being documented. The Archives house would be a living symbol of our cherishing of generations. And it would have its own kind of excitement and its own kind of spirit.

D: I hope that it will always have a sense of caring that so many larger spaces lose in the process of becoming larger and dealing with more money and more objects and more things. There can be a hollowness to a building. I'm sure that won't happen, because in the shaping of the Archives, we will have already created a nurturing space, and so it can't grow into a hollow.

B: How are you shaping the Archives?

J: We thought that the first, say, ten years of our life with the Archives would be spent building an atmosphere as much as building a collection. We would be creating a world of confidence in us who are working with the Archives, an attitude of acceptance, and getting our community used to the idea that there would be an on-going intergenerational place that would be for *all* lesbian women. Not for a specific school of thought or a specific age group or specific class or specific cultural group, but for *all* of us.

How the Archives does things is as much a part of the culture it has created as what it collects. For instance, it wouldn't be our Archives—it wouldn't be a lesbian archives—if it ever was some place where lesbian women didn't have access to it. It wouldn't be our Archives if you ever needed a letter of referral to be able to use it or if there wasn't a place for women to rest when they were tired or to eat when they were hungry.

B: Or if there was a fee to use it.

D: Or if we got swallowed up into someone else's collection. Even if it was a feminist library.

J: We drew up some principles that we hope will be picked up by the next generation. One principle we hope will always stay loud and clear is that the word *lesbian* will never be diluted, will never be lost. And our Archives will never be turned into a woman's archives or a gay archives. But will be the one place that the word, the noun, *lesbian* will echo through the generations.

Though we know that women each time may choose a different word to call themselves—I mean, when I first came out, *dyke* was a very hard word

and now it's a wonderful word. Each generation will take the glory of naming itself. That's the spirit of the Archives, that we take what has been abused and turn it into cherishing.

B: Are you training another generation to come along and take over for you?

D: We see that as part of what we have to do.

J: The first thing that we have done—we hope when this interview is published we'll be incorporated—is set up a legal identity that gives us a way to hand down what we've created and keep it safe from the patriarchal society. We have created a foundation, and we hope that the Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation will become an umbrella group to encourage and provide sustenance for lesbian cultural workers in all different fields, and that out of these women working will come those who take on the Archives as their generational commitment.

But we've realized that in any time there'll be only a small group of women who can say, or will want to say, "Yes, this is my way of being political; this is how I want to live, giving all my time and energies to the Archives." So we're working out other ways. For instance, having what we call Daughters of the Archives, women who undertake a project for a short period of time and don't have to say, "I'm giving all my life, I will become a vestal virgin of the Archives," but instead can say, "I will work," for instance, "on documenting lesbian photography from 1970 to 1980."

Once we build up a sense of our endurance and our integrity and our commitment, and we do as much of the shit work as possible, like getting the incorporation out of the way, getting our cataloging, setting up the procedures so that when women come into it they don't have to do the paperwork but can be more imaginative—once we do this, we think that we really won't have any problems in getting women to commit themselves to working on the Archives.

Also, there's a whole generation now of lesbian archivists. We've got in touch with several who've been trained in patriarchal archival schools who are now saying, "How can I contribute my skills to the Archives?"

And we hope eventually the Archives will be able to pay us a salary, will be able to reimburse women who are giving their skills.

B: Do you have a lifetime commitment to the Archives? Do you see yourself working in the Archives, in the middle of the Archives, until you die?

J: We do have a lifelong commitment. We've also learned that lifelong can be as long as tomorrow or ten years or fifty years.

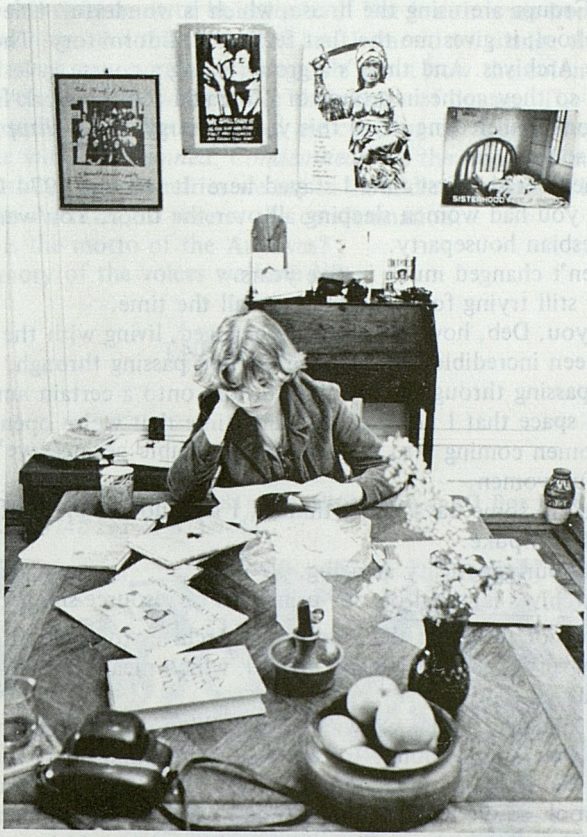
B: Deb, do you have any reservations about a lifetime commitment to the Archives?

D: As long as I can see myself in a fluid relationship to it, no. But I would, if I thought we would be so involved and so tied to it that we would end up creating an atmosphere that would exclude other women. I have a strong sense of commitment to the Archives, but it doesn't mean that thirty years from now I'm going to be living with the collection, either literally or figuratively, on such a day-to-day basis. That I have no way of knowing. Ten

years ago I had no vision of the Archives, so it would be wrong of me to try to be literal and say, "Yes, in ten years I still will be cataloging." But I *have* committed myself to the Archives, to helping it grow.

B: Can you talk about how your life has changed, living with this collection?

J: Our days are in layers; we never know what's going to happen. The telephone rings all the time. The other night it began with a woman here using the Archives. She was going to hear Kate Millett speak the same place we were and since she lived in Westchester and didn't want to go all the way



back, we said, "OK, why don't you stay for dinner?" Then another friend came, and then a woman from Boston, Monica, called and we ended up having ten for potluck dinner.

B: Are you kidding!

J: No, it just grew. And then we all traipsed over to Gay Women's Alternative. But very much, that's what happens, depending on the women's needs and what's going on in the house. A visit to the Archives seldom stops with using the material. It becomes women sitting down at the table and talking about "why are you interested in this?" or about an issue in the community; it's women sharing food.

B: Do you find there are greater numbers of women coming here?

J: Yes. Sometimes there are so many women working here that nobody knows who lives in the house–just the final statement that we've changed the nature of the apartment. Tee Corinne was one of the women working here and never knew who the women of the Archives collective were until she saw us much later. If women have been here several times, they'll give the tour of the Archives. Whoever is in the house with the most knowledge about things sort of takes over.

B: Do women ever come as groups?

J: Yes. Groups are using the house, which is wonderful. I never went to a private school; it gives me the first feeling of a dormitory. There are field trips to the Archives. And there's a group taking a course in lesbian literature at Barnard, so they come in groups of three and four to work here; and there's a wonderful feeling of all this young energy. I can *shtup* them with coffee and soup.

B: I remember the first time I stayed here. It was the 1974 Gay Academic Union, and you had women sleeping all over the floor. You were so happy to have a lesbian houseparty.

J: I haven't changed much in five years.

D: She's still trying for pajama parties all the time.

B: And you, Deb, how has your life changed, living with the collection?

D: It's been incredible, the sense of women passing through, and they are always passing through. It's trying to hold onto a certain amount of privacy and space that I need, at the same time that we've opened up our house to women coming into it. It's been incredible because we've met wonderful wonderful women.

But there are some days that I think if I see another piece of paper or an index card I will puke.

B: I find your generosity amazing.

J: The Archives is based on our principles of resource-sharing. We have a whole history of resources that allows the Archives to come into being. If we didn't have the size apartment we had, which means, if we didn't have the jobs that we have . . .

We say, "What is it that we want to do? What do we have that we can share?" We didn't have money to rent a separate building, so we used our apartment. We didn't have the money or the knowledge–we hadn't gone to archival school–so we went to libraries and we spoke to women who did. We learned about archiving and we found places we could buy things cheaper.

Every time a woman comes to the Archives there's another sharing. Women will say to us, "Oh, you need stationery? OK, I'll rip it off from my office" or "You need xeroxing? I'll do that."

The Archives is an act of empowering. We have taken a power or we have *created* a power. We must not stop at the limits imposed upon us but must think imaginatively, "How far can we take what we have?" And I think one of the givens of being a lesbian is that we have huge amounts of imagination and strength.

This is a message to the whole community: I see us as a colonized people,

and one thing a colonized people know is that the society who thinks you shouldn't exist in the first place isn't going to make it easy for you to create or to survive. And so, rather than talk about what we don't have, we use what we *do* have.

B: How did you come to see us as an oppressed people?

J: It was reading a passage in a book. This was around five years ago. I had been teaching a third world studies program for six years. I had been reading the literature of colonized peoples and part of me knew that being a lesbian in this country is to be colonized. But it didn't hit home until I read *The Colonizer and the Colonized* and I started to change the pronouns to *she.* There was one incredible paragraph about how the colonized are ruled out of time, and how they lose their sense of lineage. The last sentence in the paragraph was, "The colonized are condemned to lose their memory."

It was the word *condemned. Condemned.* It's the image of imprisonment to death. Without our memories we are in an endless prison. It became the banner of the Archives, to reverse the condemnation.

B: What is the motto of the Archives?

J: In memory of the voices we have lost.

END OF PART ONE

You may reach the LESBIAN HERSTORY ARCHIVES at PO Box 1258, New York, N.Y. 10001, 212-874-7232 or 873-9443.