



Archives and Research

Finding Aid

Collection No.: 072
Collection Name Older Lesbian Energy (OLE) Collection

COLLECTION SUMMARY

Creator: Older Lesbian Energy
Title: Older Lesbian Energy (OLE) Collection
Extent: 2 record cartons, 2 linear ft.
Date Span: 1979-2012

Administrative Information:

Provenance: This collection was donated by (Name, Date)

Processing Note: Finding aid prepared for The History Project, by Laura Kiritsy, April 2015.

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Digital Repository: Not Applicable.

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SUBJECT TERMS

Subject Names:

Blueberry Cove Camp, Tenants Harbor, ME
Fast, Anita
Jones, Jane (d. 2009)
Krebs, Maggy
Lacasse, Ruth
Older Lesbian Energy (OLE)
Riso, Carol (d. 2009)
Rockport Lodge, Rockport, MA
Schiff, Toni

Subject Topics:

Feminism--Massachusetts
Lesbianism--Massachusetts
Lesbian culture--Massachusetts
Lesbian community--Massachusetts
Older lesbians

Document Types:

DVDs
Ephemera
Flyers
Handwritten materials
Illustrations
Newsletters
Newspaper clippings
Magazine
Photographs
Print materials
VHS tape
Surveys

RELATED COLLECTIONS

Coll. 73: the Joyce Crowder Collection

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

OLE (an acronym for Older Lesbian Energy) is a social organization for lesbian women over age 40. Founded in 1980 by Toni Schiff and Anita Fast, OLE grew out of Schiff's 1979 master's thesis for Goddard-Cambridge School of Social Change, "The Development of a Radical Lifestyle in Mid-Life." Schiff interviewed a number of middle-aged lesbians who told her they felt isolated and alone. In October 1979, with her thesis completed, Schiff invited these women and their over-40 friends to her home for a dinner party. Forty women

showed up. In 1980, Schiff and Fast organized more social events, including a Labor Day Weekend retreat at Blueberry Cove campground in Tenants Harbor, ME. It was during this retreat that the group took the name OLE, which was conceived by member Ruth Lacasse in a contest. This inaugural Blueberry Cove retreat is considered to be the birth of the organization, which soon grew to include nearly 200 members.

OLE was founded to offer mutual support, social activities, networking, and resource sharing, rather than advocacy or political activism. At early gatherings, women often sat in small groups to discuss spirituality and share other personal issues.

OLE was strongly invested in preserving the privacy and anonymity of its membership in its earliest years, most likely, in part, out of concern for the fact that there was little societal acceptance, and no statewide legal protections, for LGBT people at that time; they often risked losing their jobs, homes, and custody of their children if they came out publicly. The organization adopted a confidentiality policy that required member lists to be kept confidential; prohibited the sharing of other members' phone numbers; advised members to phrase telephone voice messages to other members in "general or innocuous terms;" required members to describe OLE only as "a women's group" to non-members; and prohibited discussing OLE business in public or in the presence of strangers.

In the 1990s, the organization focused more strictly on social programming, as members at that time had less need for personal sharing and exploration. This gave rise in the mid-1990s to a split between long-time members who wanted to preserve OLE's "sharing group" character and newer members who wanted to socialize and hold more gatherings out in public. In 1994, this division resulted in newer members of OLE's Catalyst Coordinating Committee (CCC), the organization's main administrative body, resigning from their positions.

As the group's original members aged, OLE had difficulty attracting new, younger women in their 40s and 50s. This may be attributable to the growing mainstream acceptance of LGBT people in the 1990s and 2000s, as well as the ease with which the internet allowed LGBT people to meet each other. By the mid-2000s, the organization was unable to find enough members to fill all of the seats on the CCC, and, due to dwindling interest, the group held its last annual June weekend in Provincetown in 2006. The annual OLE winter weekend in Provincetown, which had begun in 1980, continued.

Despite waning interest, longtime member Carol Riso, along with Jane Jones, continued to organize monthly OLE events until their respective deaths in 2009. In November 2009, 15 longtime OLE members met to determine the organization's fate. They decided there was no longer enough desire or people willing to organize OLE events on a regular basis. Rather than dissolve the organization, the group decided OLE would evolve into an informal email group of remaining members who would come together should anyone decide to organize a gathering.

In the aftermath of that decision, a group of OLE members regularly gathered for poker games, while another gathered on a monthly basis to sing folk songs and share a potluck

dinner. Additionally, from 2010 until at least 2013, OLE organized a March retreat in Provincetown.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

OLE Records document the creation, operation, and business and social activities of OLE from roughly 1979 through 2012. Contained in two Paige boxes, the bulk of the collection consists of print and handwritten materials, newsletters, photographs, and audio-visual recordings, along with some OLE memorabilia. Most of the material dates to the 1980s and 1990s, offering a unique glimpse at the joys and stresses of creating and maintaining a space where older lesbians could meet and socialize during a time when coming out was still considered risky to one's safety and livelihood, particularly among older LGBT people. The collection also includes general feminist and/or lesbian-themed print and audio-visual material, and LGBT memorabilia and ephemera.

The original order of the collection is substantially unchanged. It is arranged in eight series: Organizational Records, 1980-2012; OLE Activities; Correspondence; OLE Membership; OLE Publications, 1980-2004; OLE Photographs; Miscellaneous Feminist Material; Memorabilia and Ephemera.

DESCRIPTION OF SERIES

Series I: Organizational Records, 1980-2012

Organizational Records, the most substantive of which date to the 1980s, include operational documents like bylaws, confidentiality statements, two historical overviews, annual meeting minutes and financial reports; and meeting minutes and notes from OLE committees, the bulk of which derive from the Catalyst Coordinating Committee (CCC), OLE's main administrative body. Logo designs, organizational graphics, and OLE print advertisements are also included.

Additionally there are DVD and VHS copies of OLE's 10th anniversary video and materials related to the production and editing of the video. The video features OLE co-founders Anita Fast and Toni Schiff discussing the organization's founding and early years, and interviews with OLE members discussing the organization's importance in their lives absent other confidential social spaces for older lesbians in the 1970s and 1980s. Also included is a DVD copy of a short video called "OLE," recorded during a 2009 gathering in Provincetown, MA. The DVD is unplayable, but an operable "rough cut" version, also on DVD, is included. The rough cut features longtime OLE leader Carol Riso and five other OLE members reflecting on their coming out experiences and lives as older lesbians.

There are also records of OLE's response to an installment of "The Pink Mafia," a fictional series about a group of lesbians that ran for several months in *Bay Windows* newspaper in 2007. OLE members wrote letters to the newspaper responding to what they perceived as negative portrayals of OLE and its members in an installment about the annual Boston Pride parade.

Also included are records pertaining to OLE's donations to other organizations, its final organizational meeting, and its involvement with the Senior Pride Coalition, a collective of local LGBT elder organizations.

Series II: OLE Activities

Materials related to OLE social activities chiefly in the 1980s, including the Rockport Lodge Weekend, an annual retreat held at a women's vacation lodge in Rockport, MA. Also included are materials related to the OLE Book Club and the annual OLE Seder dinners.

Series III: Correspondence

This series contains correspondence to and from OLE, spanning the years 1981-2010, with some undated material, although the bulk of it dates to the 1980s. Correspondence chiefly relates to OLE events, committee work, newsletter content, women seeking information about OLE, requests to join the mailing list, and other organizational issues, including disagreements and commentary about OLE's prohibition on members bringing lovers under age 40 to OLE events and the organization's strict confidentiality policy. Several letters written by prospective members in the late 1980s are of historical interest as they reflect the isolation and loneliness that many older lesbians felt during a time when there were few social/support outlets for older lesbians and the LGBT community as a whole still struggled for societal acceptance and protection under the law.

Series IV: OLE Membership

This series consists of materials created by OLE members, and those related to being a participating member of the organization. Materials span the years 1979-2010, with some undated documents. Included are poems and essays written by members, some of which reflect on their experiences at OLE events or on lesbian life and relationships. Also included is the master's thesis, "The Development of a Radical Lifestyle in Mid-Life" by OLE co-founder Toni Schiff, the 1979 research project that became the catalyst for organization's formation. Additionally, there is material written by or about founding member Carol Riso, including news of her death in 2009. Also included is material related to the OLE Friends in Need Program, a pool of members who were available on an alternating basis to do errands and other tasks for fellow members who were in need of assistance.

The series also includes a variety of member surveys that were conducted periodically from 1983-2004 in order to create policies such as OLE's membership fee; assess member satisfaction after OLE retreats and other events; gauge interest in potential social activities, and determine the organization's future direction. The completed surveys give insight into the concerns, priorities, and interests of the respondents both as OLE members and more broadly as older lesbians trying to live fulfilling lives in a society still not fully accepting of the LGBT community or older people in general. There are undated comments written by OLE members, two of which express strong dissatisfaction with what the writers believed to be negative changes in OLE, particularly the loss of the "sisterly spirit" and enthusiasm that characterized the group's early years.

Series V: OLE Publications, 1980-2004

This series consists of copies of OLE's newsletters, which varied in title, format, content, and publication schedule over the course of its existence. Although some editions of the newsletter are missing from the collection, the organization created an inventory denoting which issues are included in this series. Early iterations were alternately titled "OLE network news," "OLE," "OLE Octopus," and the "OLE Newsletter." A handful of early newsletters were published in pamphlet form but the publication most often took the form of one or more photocopied 8"x10" pages stapled together. Also included are pre-publication layouts of the Spring/Summer 1982 and Summer 1983 issues of OLE Network News.

Early newsletter content documents organizational history and policy; OLE social activities and events; member grievances and feedback; other organizational news, and notices of community events of interest to OLE members. Newsletters also include members' commentary, poetry, and reviews. Issues raised in early newsletters include alternating concerns that publicizing the group would cause it to grow too large to accommodate member gatherings, but that not publicizing it meant that women in need of the support OLE offered would not learn about the organization. The February 1985 issue of the OLE Octopus included a confidentiality policy created by the Catalyst Coordinating Committee requiring member lists to be kept confidential; prohibiting the sharing of other members' phone numbers; advising members to phrase telephone voice messages to other members in "general or innocuous terms;" requiring members to describe OLE only as "a women's group" to non-members; and prohibiting the discussion of OLE business in public or in the presence of strangers. The May 1986 OLE Newsletter detailed concerns about dwindling attendance at recent events and called for an emergency meeting to discuss the organization's future.

In later years, the newsletter became a more perfunctory publication primarily concerned with notifying members of upcoming OLE events and business items such as payment of dues and open committee seats. Newsletters from 1991 reference OLE's "Celebrity Series," featuring talks by Evelyn Murphy, Massachusetts' first female lieutenant governor; Shelby Scott, WBZ-TV's first female news anchor; Jeanne Rowlands, Northeastern University's first women's athletics director and the first woman to manage a USA Olympic basketball team; and renowned women's health advocate and out lesbian Dr. Susan Love.

Series VI: OLE Photographs

Materials include photographs, photocopies of photographs, and one archival quality DVD of photos, all taken at OLE events. Materials date from the late 1970s-2012, with some undated items. Photos spanning the years 1996-1997 to 2012 are contained in a blue photo album included with the collection.

Preservation note: None of the photos are currently contained in archival-quality sleeves. They will eventually need to be rehoused in such sleeves for long-term preservation.

Photocopied photographs span circa 1980-2000, with some undated copies. They appear to depict a 1980 OLE retreat in Maine, as well as OLE's participation in Boston Pride and related Pride events in the 2000s. There are also photocopies of photos taken at Golden Threads 2006, an annual celebration in Provincetown for older lesbians.

The photographs, some in black and white and some in color, span the years circa the late 1970s-2012. They are mostly candid shots documenting a host of OLE events, gatherings, and celebrations. Most of the women in the photos are not identified, although the backs of some photos include names and dates.

Series VII: Miscellaneous Feminist Material

Materials span 1979-2009, with some undated material, and include news clippings, fliers, newsletters, and other publications related to feminist issues and events and/or the lesbian community. Among the materials are a lengthy 1981 *Boston Globe* profile of OLE member Buffy Dunker, who came out at age 73; a 1987 *Gay Community News* obituary for OLE member and feminist artist Maggy Krebs; and a 1993 issue of *Newsweek* featuring a cover story on lesbians.

Series VIII: Memorabilia and Ephemera

The series contains undated OLE and general LGBT-related memorabilia and ephemera. Materials include LGBT- and rainbow-themed stickers, buttons, lanyards, and pins and jewelry; a Pride flag, a ceramic plate depicting a Pride flag, a rainbow patterned winter scarf and glove set, OLE business cards, an OLE-branded t-shirt, an OLE banner, and a canvas tote bag bearing a silk-screened group photo of OLE members.

Also included is a DVD featuring the short films "Peach" and "A Bitter Song," both starring Australian actress Lucy Lawless. In the latter film, released in 1991, Lawless portrays a kind nurse who helps a troubled young girl; in the former, released in 1995, she portrays a tow truck driver attracted to a young Maori woman. Also included on the DVD is the 1998 documentary "Lavender Limelight: Lesbians in Film," featuring interviews with lesbian directors Cheryl Dunye, Su Friedrich, Jennie Livingston, Heather MacDonald Maria Maggenti, Monika Treut, and Rose Troche.

BOX AND FOLDER LIST

Box 1

Series I: Organizational Records

- Folder 1: OLE Operating Documents
- Folder 2: OLE Committees - Meeting Minutes and Notes, 1981-1988
- Folder 3: OLE Committees - Meeting Minutes and Notes, 1994-2004
- Folder 4: Annual Meeting Minutes and Financial Reports, 1980-2008
- Folder 5: OLE History
- Folder 6: OLE Graphics and Logos, circa 1981, circa 1994, circa 2008
- Folder 7: Advertisements, 1997-2008
- Folder 8: OLE Donations to Other Organizations
- Folder 9: OLE Final Meeting and Archives Donation
- Folder 10: Response to "Pink Mafia" Column
- Folder 11: OLE 10th Anniversary Video, 1988-1990
- Folder 12: OLE 10th Anniversary Video-Oversized Materials, 1988-1990

Folder 13: OLE Videos, 1991, 2009
Folder 14: Event Flyers and Related Material
Folder 15: Deed of Gift & Event Fliers
Folder 16: Senior Pride Coalition

Series II: OLE Activities

Folder 17: Rockport Lodge Weekend, 1985-1988
Folder 18: OLE Book Group, 1990
Folder 19: OLE Seders, 1981-1988, undated

Series III: Correspondence

Folder 20: Correspondence, 1981-1989
Folder 21: Correspondence, 1990-2010
Folder 22: Undated Correspondence

Series IV: OLE Membership

Folder 23: Carol Riso, 2007-2010
Folder 24: OLE Member Surveys, 1983-2004
Folder 25: Member Comments, circa 1989
Folder 26: OLE Friends in Need Program
Folder 27: Writing By OLE Members, 1979-1984

Series V: OLE Publications

Folder 28: OLE Publications, 1980-1985
Folder 29: OLE Publications, 1986-1989, undated
Folder 30: OLE Publications, 1990-1992
Folder 31: OLE Publications, 1993-1999
Folder 32: OLE Publications, 2000-2004
Folder 33: OLE Publications, 2005-2009

Series VI: OLE Photographs

Folder 34: Photocopies of OLE Photographs, circa 1980-2000, undated
Folder 35: OLE Photographs, circa 1970s-1980s, 1988, 2000-2012
Folder 36: OLE Photo Album, 1996-2012

Series VII: Miscellaneous Feminist Material, 1979-2009

Folder 37: Miscellaneous Feminist Material

Box 2

Series VIII: Memorabilia and Ephemera

Folder 38: Miscellaneous LGBT Stickers
Folder 39: Peach / A Bitter Song / Lavender Limelight DVD
Folder 40: OLE Business Cards
Folder 41: Miscellaneous LGBT Pride Gear
Purple OLE T-shirt

LGBT Pride flag
Rainbow winter scarf and glove Set
OLE canvas tote bag with silkscreen photo
Ceramic LGBT Pride flag plate
Purple vinyl OLE banner