Three Questions for Archivist Marjorie Bryer: Documenting Stories of Pain, Courage and Love

Marjorie Bryer at work in the archives of the GLBT Historical Society.

Marjorie Bryer brings exceptional experience to her post as managing archivist at the GLBT Historical Society. She has been involved with the institution for more than a decade in such positions as volunteer, board cochair and project archivist. Marjorie holds a Ph.D. in U.S. History and a master's in library and information science. She has previously worked for the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, the National Park Service and the National Archives and Records Administration. Both her academic pursuits and her work as an archivist reflect her commitment to preserving the history of marginalized groups.

Why is it important to preserve GLBT archives?

Historically, archives have been the domain of the privileged, and archiving practices in the United States have often documented just the lives of heterosexual white men. But GLBT people have long recognized that knowing our history is both emotionally validating and practically important; it's instrumental in creating identity and pride and in building movements to fight for the rights we have been denied.

The founders of the Historical Society were highly aware that GLBT people have too often been erased from history. For nearly three decades, we've carried on their work by gathering the records of Bay Area GLBT communities so scholars, filmmakers and others can show how GLBT history is integral to U.S. history. Our collections attempt to document the diversity of GLBT experience, telling deeply human stories of pain, courage and love.
Researchers come in to do all sorts of projects, including exhibitions, films, articles, college papers, dissertations and books. In the past few weeks, we’ve had researchers working on masculinity in the forties and fifties, gay liberation, AIDS activism and immigrant communities, and faith and the transgender community. And an artists collective recently had some films digitized for their upcoming projects.

Nearly 200 patrons from across the United States and several other countries visited the archives last year. Obviously, the archives are essential for people doing research on queer history. But anyone interested in San Francisco history, local and statewide politics, family history, gentrification and urban renewal, labor history, the history of medicine, diversity issues and a wide variety of other subjects also will find important material in our archives.

What have been the top priorities for the archivists in the past year?

Our archivists are both historians and advocates for social justice. Our primary role is to make historical documents accessible to the public. When we get boxes of materials, we have to process the contents -- describing them, putting them in an order that makes sense, transferring them to containers that will help preserve them, creating a catalog record and writing a guide to help researchers. One challenge we share with all archives is processing backlogs. Few institutions have enough space, staff and funding to keep up with all the material coming in.

Luckily, we have been completing a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission that enabled us to survey all our manuscript materials and update our catalog. We have processed over 415 linear feet of records -- or about half of our previously unprocessed material. And we’re about to start work on a grant from the Council on Library and Information Resources that will enable us to process more than 20 additional collections. As a result, researchers using the archives soon will be making further discoveries about GLBT history -- and visitors to The GLBT History Museum soon will be seeing previously hidden treasures.

Marriage Equality, Cell Phones and the Internet: Supreme Court Justice Flunks Queer History Test

The United States Supreme Court heard oral arguments on the constitutionality of the Defense of Marriage Act on March 27. Among the statements that caught the attention of GLBT historians was a remark from Justice Samuel Alito that same-sex marriage is “newer than cell phones or the Internet.” Although the first nation to recognize such unions was the Netherlands in 2000, and the first U.S. state was Massachusetts in 2003, the debate over marriage equality has a much longer history.

The periodicals collection in the archives of the GLBT Historical Society includes evidence from the pioneering homosexual-rights publication One Magazine: early articles that argue in favor of stable gay couples versus what was seen as an inevitable life of one-night stands. An August 1953 cover story raises the question “Homosexual Marriage?” The author argues that legally recognizing same-sex marriage would protect heterosexual marriage by making “adultery” and “promiscuity” unacceptable for both groups. The
The magazine put the issue on the cover again in June 1963: “Let Push for Homophile Marriage.” The writer notes that “there are many homophiles who, like me, find the married homophile life so much more preferable” than hook-ups.


Spring Talks at Museum to Feature Queer Biography, History, Memoirs

History Talk
The Life & Times of Tede Matthews, Poet & Revolutionary
Thursday, April 4
7:00 - 9:00 p.m.

Historian Greg Youmans presents the life and times of Tede Mathews, a poet and activist who lived in San Francisco from the mid-1970s until his death from AIDS in 1993. A star of the groundbreaking 1977 documentary Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives, Mathews was a performer with the gender-bending theatrical troupe Angels of Light. He also was a member of the Modern Times Bookstore Collective; a founder of the queer antiwar group LAGAI; and an activist who worked in solidarity with national liberation struggles in Vietnam, Chile and Nicaragua. Illustrated with video clips, the talk will explore how Mathews's biography complicates standard accounts of recent queer history. Admission: $5.00; free for members.

History Talk
Plane Queer: The History of Male Flight Attendants
Thursday, April 11
7:00 - 9:00 p.m.

Historian Phil Tiemeyer discusses his new book, Plane Queer: Labor, Sexuality and AIDS in the History of Male Flight Attendants. Tiemeyer examines how this heavily gay-identified group of workers created a place for gay men to come out, fight homophobia and AIDS-phobia, and advocate for LGBT civil rights and gender equality. Joining the author will be Bill Wright, a Pan Am flight attendant from the 1950s through the 1980s. Together, they’ll reveal the neglected queer history of a gay-identified career that emerged with the dawn of commercial passenger flight in the late 1920s and that continues today. The program will highlight the ways that gay men at times thrived in this workplace, and at other times encountered sexism and homophobia that threatened their foothold in the profession.

Author Reading
Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore: The End of San Francisco
Thursday, May 9
7:00 - 9:00 p.m.

Author, activist, queer social critic and former San Franciscan Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore read from her new book, The End of San Francisco. Shown is a home movie of gay friends on an outing to the shore of San Francisco Bay in 1947. (To watch the film, click on the photo.)
Sycamore recounts how it all will come to an end with her new book, *The End of San Francisco*. Sycamore conjures the untidy push and pull of memory, exposing the tensions between idealism and engagement, trauma and self-actualization, inspiration and loss. Part memoir, part social history, part elegy, *The End of San Francisco* explores and explodes the dream of radical queer community and the mythical city that was supposed to nurture it. Described by the *Austin Chronicle* as “a cross between Tinkerbell and a honky Malcolm X with a queer agenda,” Sycamore edited the award-winning anthology *Why Are Faggots So Afraid of Faggots?* on *Wikipedia*.

For an array of videos from our archives and programs, see our *YouTube channel*.

For a look at what we're discovering in our archival collections, read our archives blog: *Hidden From History*. 

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EXHIBITIONS & PROGRAMS

**The GLBT History Museum**

**Location:** 4127 18th St., San Francisco, CA 94114  
**Phone:** 415-621-1107  
**Website:** www.glbthistorymuseum.org

**Admission:** $5.00 general; $3.00 with California student ID. Free for members. Free for all visitors on the first Wednesday of each month (courtesy of the Bob Ross Foundation).

**Hours**

Mondays & Wednesdays - Saturdays: 11:00 a.m. - 7:00 p.m.  
Tuesdays: Closed  
Sundays: Noon - 5:00 p.m.

ARCHIVES & READING ROOM

**GLBT Historical Society**

**Location:** 657 Mission St., Suite 300, San Francisco, CA 94105  
**Phone:** 415-777-5455, ext. 3#  
**Website:** www.glbthistory.org

**Research Hours (by appointment)**

Members: Wednesdays - Fridays: 11:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.  
Nonmembers: Fridays: 11:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.  
First & Third Saturdays: 1:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.