

Rebels &

The life stories from four of

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Once upon a time, we had not surfed the Internet, or sent people up in space. We had not flown on an airplane, we had not dropped atomic bombs, we had never heard of the ERA. We hadn't been through the Great Depression, or fought Hitler. We didn't know what an interstate highway was, or a Xerox copy. We hadn't seen *Ellen* or *Will & Grace* on TV, because we had never seen a television. We had never marched for gay rights.

And yet, women born in the early part of the 20th century managed to

somehow get educations, support themselves, and live their lives intimately connected to other women. Gay or lesbian organizations or communities were basically nonexistent in the U.S. until after about 1948. But, that didn't stop these women.

Through the efforts of Arden Eversmeyer and Old Lesbians Organizing for Change (O.L.O.C.), a number of oral histories have been taken of these women who are now in their 70s and 80s. (Favorite cheer of O.L.O.C. gals marching at pride parades: "Two, four, six, eight! How do you know your grandma's straight!")



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About the Old Lesbian

The Old Lesbian Oral Herstory Project has been in process about four years. Just in the last year, it has become a major project for the national organization O.L.O.C. (Old Lesbians Organizing for Change), a political, anti-oppression organization.

The priority is to collect the herstories of lesbians 70 years and older before their stories are lost forever. They are an invisible population who were strong enough to live their lives and love whom they wanted in a hostile society. The project will include les-

biens with backgrounds ranging from blue-collar women to those with visible high-profile careers.

Lesbians are being trained in different parts of the country to take these herstories. The herstories are being tran-

Survivors

our lesbian "ancestors"

Pokey Anderson and O.L.O.C., Inc.

Having these histories and the wonderful pictures that go with them is like looking through a collective lesbian family album. Since most of our biological ancestors were not gay or lesbian (or we never got to hear about it), we can turn to stories like these to begin to answer the question, "What was it like, a generation or two or three ago, to be queer?"

Arden conducted these interviews in the last few years, and several of the subjects are no longer living. She started in Houston with her oral history project, and is now touring the country gathering stories of our lesbian forebears.

Each story is unique, but a few similarities shine through. Most of these women have courageously stood up for something when it would have been a lot easier to remain silent. Many of them have been incredible anchors and caretakers in their families when no one else would do it, bringing new meaning to the term "family values." In addition, in listening to their stories, one gets a sense of tremendous resilience, accompanied by a finely developed sense of humor.

Here, then, are a few highlights of their stories.

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Oral Herstory Project

scribed, supplemented with pictures and documents, compiled into books, and archived here in Houston. This is not a means of "outing" old women. Binding contracts and confidentiality are part of the process.

The project has three needs: The need for transcribers is critical. Information about old lesbians in the Gulf Coast area who might be willing to tell their stories would certainly be welcomed. And, of course, contributions

(tax-deductible) to help fund the project would be gratefully accepted. For any of the above, contact: P.O. Box 980422, Houston 77098, fax 713/802-2989, or e-mail chardenea@worldnet.att.net.

—Arden Eversmeyer



Helen Cathcart

1916–1999



*H*elen Cathcart tells of her first “incident,” as she calls it: “I guess I was probably 15 or 16, and we had this slumber party. And this girl, she was about three years older than I was, she said, ‘Well, I just think I’m gonna kiss you,’ and I says, ‘I just don’t think you are.’ Of

course, we ended up kissing, but I resisted, at least once.”

That was certainly not the last woman Helen Cathcart kissed. She grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, one of 10 children, including a twin brother. She stood nearly 6 feet tall and was a gifted athlete. As a young woman,

she heard about a semi-pro basketball team in Galveston, and determined to go join it. She left Arkansas around 1937 and arrived in Galveston with 50 cents. The team, sponsored by American National Insurance Company, won two national championships and was termed “one of the greatest girls’ basket-

ball teams in history” when Helen finally retired from it in 1941. They played other teams all over the country, sometimes traveling in a private Pullman rail car. The company also fielded a softball team, so she played on that too. One of the women’s teams of the time actually played the minor league Houston men’s baseball team in an exhibition at the old Buff Stadium in the East End, where Finger’s Furniture is now. She recalls this as one of the best periods of her life: “I didn’t know from shinola, so I just didn’t have any worries, no problems. Just had a good time, and enjoyed the playing.”

Helen did resent that if you went to a gay bar in those days, you’d never know if you were going to be raided. She even remembered a police raid on a private home in Houston, with people jumping out of the second story window to avoid arrest.

friends when they needed an escort, the women dressing the part of a straight woman out on the town, “even though so many people would know.

“You behaved yourself and never gave them an opportunity to challenge you,” D. said. “The big fear in those days was somebody calling your job.”

Helen was in charge of security clearances for a company during World War II. A young girl was working there part-time; she borrowed Helen’s typewriter, and at one point, Helen needed it back.

“She says, ‘Okay, I’ll bring it to you,’” Helen recounts. “Here she is, about five foot two and was gonna bring my typewriter to me. But at that time, I was wearing earrings and false boobs, and all that good stuff. I said, ‘Man, I’ve had it. A little butch horse to carry my typewriter.’”

of crap like that. I never did join the Army, because I wouldn’t have been in but one day, and they’d have booted me right out the door!”

Later in life, Helen and D. traveled all over, to Canada, Mexico, Hawaii, Luxembourg, Spain, England. Their frequent traveling companions were a gay male couple who had been together for 42 years. That couple also got them invited to a “gorgeous party” where Rock Hudson was in attendance.

After age 50, Helen learned to do painting, remodeling, and even roofing. She never advertised, but did a lot of work for gay people. Later, she happened to be helping out the woman who ran the corner store when a female customer whom Helen vaguely recognized came in with a little boy in tow.

“The woman said, ‘Do you mind if I ask you a question?’” Helen remembers.



“The tea dances, men and women both went. Somebody at the door would ring a buzzer when the police came, and [the women] would quit dancing with the women, start dancing with the men.”

“The tea dances, men and women both went,” Helen said. “Somebody at the door would ring a buzzer when the police came, and [the women] would quit dancing with the women, start dancing with the men. That was the Desert Room.”

D., Helen’s partner of 18-years-plus, picks up the story of those times.

“Around Houston, 40 years ago, a woman did not go in a nice restaurant by herself. You almost had to have a [male] date to go to any function of society—operas, plays,” she said. They would often call up their gay men

The “little butch horse” had no idea that Helen was also a lesbian. Helen decided to get rid of some of the excess femme gear. Even with helpful advice from Helen on how to avoid arousing suspicion, the young woman, who was living with her lover, was subsequently questioned for six months.

“She ended up going to a psychiatrist,” Helen said, “having to take treatments because of the trauma that she went through, them trying to find out from her who was and who wasn’t. . . . I imagine a lot of those women went through a bunch

“I thought, ‘Holy shit, here we come again.’ ‘Cause that’s always the way they start out that business, with this, ‘Oh, you remind me of somebody in *The Well of Loneliness*,’ some bunch of stuff, and I know exactly what they’re getting to. So I said, ‘Oh, no, go right ahead.’”

“She says, ‘Well, are you a man-she?’”

“I said, ‘A what?’ ‘Cause I knew what she was talking about.”

“She said, ‘A man-she?’”

“And I says, ‘Is that some kind of an Indian?’ →



"And she said, 'Oh, no, that's women that like women.'

"I said, 'Oh, really?'"

"And she said, 'Yes.'

"I said, 'Nope, that's not my cup of tea.'" (Bear in mind that Helen had been a lesbian for about 50 years at this point.)

"And so she said, 'Well, I hope I didn't embarrass or hurt your feelings.'

"I said, 'No, it makes no difference to me. I just didn't know what you were talking about.'

"And she said then that she had had a dream about me and that we had gone to a drive-in theater and had a wonderful time.

"And I said, 'Well, I tell you what, I'm glad you were there, but I'm glad I wasn't.'

"So then she went on, 'Oh, you know that they get married?'"

"I said, 'Really?'"

"She said, 'Yes, they really do get married like a man and woman.'

"I said, 'I can't believe that.'

"She says, 'I've always told my husband that if I ever had the opportunity of participating in something like that, that I intended to try it.'

"I said, 'Well, I hope you have a lot of luck.' I thought, 'Honey, you may be going to, but it ain't gonna be with me!'"

"So that was about the end of that conversation," Helen concluded. "Where are they coming from? Isn't that something, though? A 'man-she'! Maybe she made that up."

Helen had three major relationships in her life: first with a woman who eventually got married to a man, then with Doris for 22 or 23 years, and finally, her 18 years with D.

"Fortunately, or unfortunately," Helen said, "I don't know which way you want to put it, I haven't had too many lovers."

"It changes," D. said, "whether or not she's in her bragging stage or her secret stage."

Helen started having symptoms of emphysema in her late 60s, and that slowed her down significantly in later life. But she and D. got caught up in the excitement of watching the Comets on TV, she kept playing poker with her gang twice a week, and, according to D., "Her attitude is the same—obstinate."

Although their relationship had been over for years, D. moved Helen into her house, seeing that she had her meals and that she wasn't left alone for more than a few hours. As with some of the other lesbians interviewed, Helen and D. had been caretakers for other family members, especially D.'s mother and father. Helen and D. were both in amazement that D.'s brother and sister had become scarce when their parents needed care, although they had been plenty in evidence when it came to the inheritance.

At 82, Helen said if she were able to, she'd buy an RV and "just get in that thing and go wherever, whenever it stops, and do whatever." A year later, she passed away. In her obituary, her friends speculated that she was now playing one-on-one with Kim Perrot. ■

Rebels & Survivors



Marie Mariano

Age 79



Marie: "The first thing I remember about anything was getting a doll for Christmas. I think I must have been about four. But I remember piling the boxes up behind the fence to trade my doll to the next-door neighbor for a gun and holster. And then my Daddy took me down and bought me overalls and a little shirt and gun and holster. And then I went from there. I was my father's girl."

Marie Mariano was born in Idaho in 1921. Her grandparents were political refugees who came to the U.S. from Italy. She found herself defending her ethnic background at an early age, recalling, "I don't think there was a boy in the first, second, or third grade who I didn't give a good bloody

nose to because they called me a 'wop' or a 'dago.'" Marie's father proudly served under General Pershing in World War I. Later, when Marie was 11, he passed away, leaving five children. It was the Depression, and in those days there were no veterans' benefits. Marie talked her way into a paper route, even though they were supposed to be for boys. And the children went out on farms to trade their labor for food.

"At harvest vacation, if you did not own a farm, you had to farm out to some farmer," Marie said. "We would sit on the steps of our house and the farmer would pick us up between 3:30 and 4 [in the morning]. And we picked potatoes and onions and carrots and cabbage. Most of the



kids would pick for money. We did not; we picked for the supply. So, for every 300 pounds of whatever we picked, we got 100 pounds for ourselves. And, in two weeks' time, we had apples and carrots and cabbage and onions. And so, really, the only thing we needed to spend money for was shoes and sugar or flour."

Marie's family lived 12 miles from an Indian reservation, and she learned to speak Shoshone and Blackfeet. One of her first playmates was Lucille Pocatello, Chief Pocatello's daughter. They would swim and hunt and climb and fish, and became very close friends.

"I'd sit on the porch when my mother was so ill," Marie said, "and people would come by and ask me, was I going to be a nurse like my mother, and I'd say, 'Hell no! That's the last thing I want to be!' I really did *not* want to be a nurse. No way, no how. I wanted to go work on the railroad."

Marie did briefly work at the railroad. She put on a pair of overalls, blue shirt, packed a lunch bag, and went to work at the roundhouse in Pocatello—and loved it. "I loved to come home with my greasy hands and use my Lava soap." But Marie's mother died, and she knew nursing would be the quickest way for her to get money to support her brothers and sisters. During her nurse's training, she did a six-week stint in Alaska, going by dogsled from village to village to deliver Eskimo babies.

Marie's first real crush began when she was a junior in high school, on Ann. Ann was straight and unmarried her entire life, and they kept up their friendship for over 40 years, until Ann's death in 1977.

Marie: "Ann was my first. Ann to me was the lady. I put her coat on for her, I walked on her left, I opened the door for her, I treated her to all these things. I think when I see the show *Fried Green Tomatoes*, my relationship with Ann reminds me of this girl and her relationship with her friend. It really brings back the memories. I think Ann could've told me, 'Jump in the lake,' and I would've jumped. . . . When I went in the Army, if she was anywhere close, I would visit her. . . . Ann a lot of times would say to me, 'Marie, I'll meet you at the courthouse. I want you to . . .' She'd tell me what to wear and I'd wear it. She's the only one who could get away with that."

Around 1940, when she was 19, Marie went to San Francisco with Ann. While Ann attended to family business, Marie went to have a drink in a bar.

"I don't think we were cowards. I just don't think we had any choice back then."

Marie: "I wore a good-lookin' Western shirt, I had cowboy boots, I had a good-looking pair of Western pants on and my wide Western belt. And I thought, 'Boy, I'm a good-lookin' Westerner.' . . . So I'm sitting in this bar, and along comes this—I guess what they call today—a diesel dyke. Anyway, she sat down and talked to me. And I'm a friendly person, I talk to everybody. And she asked where I was and what I did, and a whole bunch of questions, which I answered.



1939



1945



1946



1997

"So, she said, 'Why sit here? I've got an apartment just a couple of three blocks down. You might as well come and relax and rest there.' So I said, 'Well, I'm tired of the bar. I'll go.'

"So we get up there, and she says, 'Make yourself comfortable.' Well, I'm comfortable, in my boots and things. I'm not used to being any more comfortable than that. So, I'm sitting there at the table, and then she puts her arm around me. And, I'm not a person that touched a person. Anyway, the next thing you know, she picks me up! And she's a big gal. And at that time I didn't weigh any more than about 120 pounds.

"She grabs my shirt and she says a whole bunch of things to me. And she said, 'Don't give me that old crap! Don't sit here and tell me you don't know what I'm about.' And I said, 'I just thought you were a friend who invited me up here.' She said, 'Oh, that's a bunch of . . .' Man, she really hit me hard. It's a wonder she didn't knock me out. But I got away from her, and really run, back to the apartment. And I was black and blue all over. In fact, it took me three whole days to really move. . . . When Ann come in, she said, 'My Lord, what happened to you?' I said, 'Well, my cowboy boots got caught on a step, and I fell down the whole damn steps.'"

Pearl Harbor intervened, and in 1944 Marie joined the Army as a second lieutenant. She would go to the rifle range with the men, and could assemble an M-1 rifle blindfolded. She played softball with the WACS when off-duty. One time, when she was home on leave, she visited a man she knew who had a wonderful vacation cabin. Dr. Dean was sort of a father figure to her.

Marie: "We became real good friends. Dr. Dean says to me, 'I know you want to go skiing. But I've got a favor to ask you. . . . You know Ernest Hemingway? Hemingway at that time had built this place in Ketchum, Idaho, which was only about a mile and a half from where Dr. Dean's cabin was.

"I said, 'Oh, yeah, I've read his books.'

"He said, 'Well, he's up there and he wants to go after a bighorn sheep.'

"I said, 'He's going to kill a bighorn?'

"He said, 'Yeah, he wants it for a trophy.' I didn't say anything. And he said, 'The man who was to be his guide didn't show up. Will you take him on up into the Sawtooth and be his guide?'

"I said, 'Golly.'

"He said, 'You aren't scared of him, are you?'

"I said, 'Oh, hell no. I'm not scared of him. It's just the idea of shooting a bighorn.' . . . Well, Dr. Dean had done a lot of things for me, so I thought, 'Well, I guess that little favor I'll do,' though I had no use for people who killed things for trophies.

"So, anyway, I went up and I put on my boots, and my special gear for mountain climbing. And I put on my pack. And here comes this guy. And he said, 'You want to see my guns? I think I wasted

45 minutes looking at the stocks of his rifles, which were hand-carved. I don't think, even to this day, have I seen such beautiful hand-carved stocks for guns. So he asked me what to take, and he had every gun there. I said, 'Well, take a thirty-aught-six.'

"And he said, 'Aren't you going to take a gun?'"

"I said, 'You're going to shoot the bighorn, not me.'

"So, I'm glad he's dead and God rest his soul, but I took him the opposite direction where any bighorn would be. I don't believe he ever did get a bighorn."


After World War II was over, Marie came back from Japan and was assigned to work at the Army prison ward and the psychiatry ward at Fort Hood, where she often stood up for humane treatment for the men in prison.

Marie's first "friend" was Kathy, a native Texan, and they lived together off the post at Fort Hood. Although the words weren't spoken, it was at Fort Hood that Marie knew she was a lesbian. She said to herself, "Yeah. This is where I belong. It was a group of these girls that were very fond of each other. But you couldn't express it. You're in the Army. You don't breathe it. . . . I don't think we were cowards. I just don't think we had any choice back then." But, even though she and Kathy lived together, they didn't have a sexual relationship. "I knew, but didn't know what to do," she recalls.

Marie was transferred to El Paso and hung out with a Native American woman, Flattary.

Marie: "Flattary and I had a good time, as friends. She and I bowled on the bowling team, and chased around together. Then, Flattary disappeared for about three days. I said, 'Flattary, my God, have you been in the hospital sick? What's happened to you?' She said, 'I have been through three days of torture. Someone has said I am homosexual. I have been grilled worse than anybody ever could've been grilled in the FBI. They kept me under lights. They questioned me. They threatened me. I'll never live through what they've done to me.' And, I'll never understand why they took her and they didn't take me. I'll never know. But you know, she got orders, and I never did hear from her again."

Marie left the Army to finish her nursing education, and moved to Houston. In her spare time she souped up her sports cars, and even won some money racing them. One day she went down to the nearby magazine rack for her *Road & Track*. It wasn't there, and she chewed out the woman responsible. "I told her, 'I go to school, and I work, and I've been here three times, and all I want is a *Road & Track*, why isn't it here?' She says, 'Uh, I-I-I-I'll be back on Wednesday, and I'll see that you get it.' I said, 'I'll appreciate it.' →



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Two days later, I come back to my apartment. And under my door must've been every damn sports car magazine that existed."

That was the beginning of her relationship with Sarah. They moved in together, at Sarah's insistence, even before they became lovers. Sarah died in October of 1987. "If she'd lived until April, we'd have been together 30 years," Marie said. "We had a very good life together, a very good life together. She was a very hard worker, and she put up with a lot of crap from me, believe it. She really did."

During Sarah's long illness, Marie sometimes got only four hours' sleep between working and caretaking. After Sarah's death, Marie lived "like a monk," only doing things with straight friends, for years. She finally volunteered to help at a hospice, and met a number of gay men with AIDS who made her laugh again. Marie was 73, had never said the word "lesbian," never been in a gay bar or bookstore, when she ran into a lesbian couple there. "I was trying to go home and I don't know, something turned me around. I walked in and sat down with the two women. And I told them about Sarah and me."

The two women told her about Lesbians Over Age Fifty (LOAF), which opened up a new world of lesbian friends, books, movies, and music for Marie. She calls it simply "a salvation."

Marie: "I love LOAF. . . . The people that I worked with at the hospital supported me with Sarah. But it's a different kind of support. I went to LOAF to talk to people who would understand and know what I had been through. People who I could sit down and talk to, about Sarah and our life together, the crazy things we did, the crazy things we didn't do, the problems we had, the problems we didn't have. And, it was just . . . to have somebody you could talk to. I was so happy."

Marie was honored a few years ago for founding the neuro nurse unit at Methodist Hospital, where she worked for 36 years.

Marie: "My conclusion is—and I've thought of this many times—when I sat on the steps and people would ask me was I going to be a nurse like my mother, and I'd say, 'Hell no, that's the last thing I'm going to be!' It *was* the last thing I was!" She laughs. ■

Rebels & Survivors



Fran Eaton

Age 70



How long has Fran Eaton known she was gay? "Since I was born! I can remember going to movies with little girls and putting my arm around 'em, you know, and trying to neck with them. In the movies! You know, never even thinking it was unusual! But, no, I always knew I was gay. It never crossed my mind to be anything else."

Fran would roughhouse with the little boys. And never wanted a doll. "Used to break my mother's heart. What did I want for Christmas? Chaps. Guns. Soldiers. You know, all that neat stuff. And I got it every Christ-

mas. But somebody always threw a doll in. One of my grandmothers was a fantastic seamstress, and she'd sew all these frou-frou little dresses and little lace things. I wouldn't wear 'em. Well, I'd have to wear 'em to school because you couldn't wear pants and all that to school then. But as long as I can remember, there was never a question in my mind. Everybody in my family knows. Forever. I've always taken my lovers home. We slept in the same bedroom, same bed; they never said, 'Do you want this bed?' It's easier, you know, you don't have to play games."



Born in Dallas in 1930, Fran was the oldest of three sisters. Her mother was certainly quirky. The kids would go off to school, and their mother would decide to move; they'd come home from school to find that all the contents of their house would have been moved to another location. Sometimes this would happen every few months. "There was nothing stable about my mother—ever," Fran said. "She was like a child." Fran's father was an accountant by day and a jazz musician by night. Having been dragged along as a small child to many of his gigs, Fran reflects that jazz music was probably her church. She worshipped her father, even as she was scared to death of his temper.

Fran hated school. She got a job pulling stock at a dime store, and would go down to the gay bar a few blocks away for a beer. In 1946, at age 16, with her hair cut like a man, she ran away with some gay people she met there. She came back after a year of traveling with this rough crowd, and promptly was arrested while visiting a friend who was in jail for being a prostitute . . . something about being an accessory to the crime. Her father finally put Fran in a Catholic school to "straighten her out." This was successful in only one sense of the word.

At age 22, Fran was involved with a woman whose family found out about it. "I thought they were going to have me quartered and drawn, and tarred and feathered." Fran decided that maybe she'd do best to leave town for a little while, and left for Chicago with "two queens, a small suitcase, and \$63." Before she left, she went to see a psychiatrist about "that little problem with that young lady." He didn't try to change her orientation, just suggested she find a career that would be long-lasting and enable her to support herself and another person.

So Fran decided to go into retail and became a clothing buyer for a department store. She enjoyed the travel, general acceptance in the industry, and, she admits, got a little spoiled from spending five or six million dollars of somebody else's money. "Like, you know, 'That looks good!' 'Write that up!' 'Buy that!' I did well."

Fran had a lover for 12 years, then another for 10, while in Chicago. Then Fran had an assistant, Barbara, in Chicago whom she liked, but who left and went to Houston. They'd run into each other in different cities on retail business, have dinner, and that was about it. "Then in about 1973, I ran into her in California and it just clicked. And all of a sudden we became traveling lovers. I had a lover in Chicago, one who had been married, had three children. Barbara had her lover in Houston. So we just decided we'd be traveling

lovers. It was fun!" Finally, Fran couldn't handle the distance, and in 1975 moved to Houston to be with Barbara. After managing stores for Joske's and Battelstein's, she quit retail. On her 50th birthday Fran started her own business. That was 20 years ago, and she still runs it, managing a crew of six people who clean houses for new construction.

Fran and Barbara were together for 20 years, and did the usual things—dinner with friends, movies, remodeling the house. One night Barbara went to bed saying she didn't feel right. That night, she died of a heart attack. Fran was really mad at her for leaving her like that. That was seven years ago. Fran is still working through her loss. "I think it's a thing of, you learn how to live without somebody, but you never get over missing 'em. It still hurts a little, but not like it did." She put Barbara's ashes out in their yard, by the lemon tree. After her lover's death, Fran found out about LOAF, and also joined AssistHers.

Betrayal: Fran tells the story of her gay uncle Bob

Fran had a gay uncle who lived in Dallas. They weren't terribly close, but she got to know him better when she moved from Chicago to Houston; he'd stop by for a drink when he came to town for the holidays. Uncle Bob and his lover Jim were together for 47 years.

"After Bob had a stroke, he was able to walk and things. [But he] couldn't talk. Two years after Bob's stroke, Jim, his lover, who was 10 years older, had a heart attack and died. And I said, 'Barbara, I really should go, just for Bob, as a support person.' So I went to Dallas, and went over to the house. And it was unbelievable filth that they were living in. Because, I guess Jim was so old and he was senile. He was in his 80s. And my uncle couldn't do anything. Oh, God. I cleaned the whole day. Because I'm a clean freak. It was very involved because he had no control of his bladder or anything else. So they were getting

him dressed to go to the funeral. And I got over there, and they'd just got him dressed and he had a bowel movement, and it was all on his shoes and everything. Well, they just let him sit there, because they went out to buy rubber gloves and all this stuff. For God's sakes! So I went in, cleaned him up, and got him ready. And then none of them would ride in the limousine they sent over. And he and I rode by ourselves to the funeral.



"I can remember going to movies with little girls and putting my arm around 'em, you know, and trying to neck with them. In the movies! You know, never even thinking it was unusual!"

"Jim's two sisters were very devout Catholics. After the funeral, they didn't invite us to the house of the sister that lived there. So he and I went back to the house and my stepfather was there. And some friends of theirs came over and brought some food. I went back over the next morning, my stepfather and I, just to talk to him, see what was going to happen. And one of the sisters and her husband were there, and they evicted him from the house. They took everything from that man.

"So I inherited him. And I said, 'No, he can't leave now. I have to make everything ready for him. It'll take me at least a week.' So, that weekend, Barbara and I flew up. Because the only thing he got out of the deal, Bob had an old Cadillac. That was the only thing in his name in the whole house. About six months before, Jim, his lover, had signed everything over to his sisters. Jim had told me, 'I just hope I did the right thing.' Jim and Bob had CDs, they had money, and they had invested stuff, and they had the house that was paid for, and Jim had signed everything

Betty Rudnick

1924-2000



over to the sisters, because a sister had convinced him that if he died and Bob couldn't take care of everything, then they could. So they really did.

"I'm still mad at them! I wrote 'em a 10-page letter, but Barbara wouldn't let me mail it. Oh, I just went into a tirade! So, anyway, we drove him back to Houston. And he came and lived with Barbara and I for about four months. But, he needed too much supervision and I couldn't handle it. He couldn't talk, but he understood everything. I'm sure it was frustrating for him. So, anyway, I put him in a nursing home which wasn't too far, and then again I felt guilty about that.

"So I went and got him every weekend for about three years. And it was just wearing me out. All weekend with him, and then Barbara got to where she'd say, 'God, can't we have any time alone?!' You know, 'You're taking better care of him than you are of me' type thing. And my blood pressure must've gone up to 290 over 100,000, whatever it was.

"I moved him to another nursing home because there was a gay woman there who had run the one we first put him in. And her assistant and also the administrator, they were all gay. Bob was helpful. He'd run around the hall and help people. He couldn't talk, but he'd 'Huhmmh.' He was pretty wild, too; he was fun. And he died two years ago. I'm sorry we couldn't have found a gay nursing home for him, because he would've liked that.

"The admission girl was gay, and cuter than hell. And it's a terrible story to tell, but she called one afternoon and she said, 'Fran? You've got to talk to Bob.' I said, 'What happened?' She said, 'Well, I was sitting in my office and all of a sudden the head nurse came running in and said, 'Lily, get out in the hall quick! Come here!'" There was an emergency, all right. Uncle Bob and another fellow were engaging in oral sex right there in the hall!

"God! He didn't forget how to do it, hell no! So I had to go talk to him and all the nurses, like he was in grade school! So I said, 'Now, Bob, I don't want you to do anything like that again. It's all right if you go to your room.' Because, even the nurses said, 'You know, in the privacy of his room with the consent of the other person, it's okay.' But not out in the hall. When he could talk, Bob told jokes every minute. He was always lively. I have his ashes in there. Someday I'll take 'em back to Dallas, back to the house they'd lived in all those 47 years." ■

Betty Rudnick was a woman with a big laugh, a big heart . . . and a weakness for women in uniforms. It was 1941. "I was afire to join the Army. And I wasn't even old enough to give blood to the Red Cross. The Army didn't have anything for 17-year-old girls," recalled Betty. "Actually, even at that time, what I thought I would like to do was be a lawyer. But, number one, women weren't being that readily admitted to schools of law. And number two, there wasn't any money."

Betty learned about a bill in Congress to let nursing students go to school for free, after which they could go into the Army, and she thought, "Aha!" Although she had no interest in nursing "whatsoever," she saw this as a way to get into the Army. So she wrote to the dean of the School of Nursing in Galveston and was ready to go when the bill

was passed. And what does she recall of her three years in nursing school? "The Cadet Nurse Corps had a uniform," she laughed. "It had a little Montgomery tam with some piping, a particular cross on it, and an overcoat and a gray suit. . . . And, I was very fond of the association with all of these other girls."

By the time she graduated in 1946, they were demobilizing the Army Nurse Corps, so she never made it to the Army. But Betty eventually became dean of the School of Nursing for the University of Texas, and at 37 was the youngest dean of a major school in the country.

"And, so, after I graduated—oh, I almost forgot. . . ." Thus begins the tale of her two-year marriage. She had dated a pre-med student at UT. After he went off to war, was wounded, and returned, "we decided to get married, which we did very quickly. And very



quickly after that happened, I had the suspicion that it had been a mistake. Living with him was not as much fun as living with the girls in the dormitory." Things came to a head when Betty was summoned out of the operating room for a phone call from her husband, who was in West Texas for a bar mitzvah. He had bought a linen shop there on a whim, and he told her she should quit nursing school and come there to help him with it. "I decided this whole thing was ridiculous. I didn't like anything about it." So the marriage ended.

After she graduated from nursing school, it was while working at St. Joseph's in Houston that she met Sammie, who was finishing

Betty became dean of the UT School of Nursing, and at 37 was the youngest dean of a major school in the country.



Age 6

up her nursing school training. After a while, the two became lovers and moved to Amarillo together, then returned to Houston to both work at Hermann Hospital.

After they had been together about five years, Sammie fell in love with a patient, a fellow who had been injured in the rodeo. After Sammie married him, Betty went to a psychiatrist. "I decided this was not any kind of life. It was obviously unacceptable. If a person had ambition, they were not going to get anyplace with this lifestyle. The psychiatrist said, 'What did you plan to do instead?'" She laughs. "I recall that question, and I said, 'Well, there aren't too many options, are there?' You can be celibate, or . . . So, at that point, for a time, I dated men."

Betty had grown up in Houston, the youngest of four sisters. One of her uncles owned the Heights Theater, and another relative owned Lewis & Coker Grocery. Betty grew up in a household where her mother was quite active. In 1917, when a New York

organizer came to Houston to organize the first chapter of Hadassah, the women's Zionist organization, Betty's mother became a charter member, and eventually served as president of the whole region.

Betty, however, was the first one in her family to graduate from college. When she decided she wanted to get a master's, she packed up her little Chevrolet and went to New York, since at that time you couldn't get a master's in nursing in Texas. She worked at hospitals and attended Columbia, finishing her M.A. in 1956, going on to ace the admission exam for the doctoral program, doing "better than anybody had practically ever done."

While back in Houston, Betty convinced a woman she'd met to ride along with her to New York, and then "one thing led to another." Betty and Cass were together for the next few years, with both enrolled in graduate programs in New York City. But, Cass started drinking excessively, and dropped out and returned to Texas, to Galveston. Betty finished up her doctorate, and moved to Galveston, where she became dean of the University of Texas Medical Branch's School of Nursing. At the time, 1963, she had the first earned doctorate in nursing in the state of Texas. She and Cass were reunited, but things were rocky; Betty didn't know how to handle her partner's alcoholism, and the relationship ultimately ended.

Betty, in attempting to strengthen the nursing program in Galveston, ran up against a big adversary. The president of UTMB, Truman Blocker, was a huge fellow about 6-foot-6 and 300 pounds. He wanted control of the nursing program, and there were turf wars, none of which was benefiting the nursing students or the program. "One day I decided it just wasn't worth it all, and I resigned. And most of the faculty resigned with me." As we will see later in the story, Blocker did not forget Betty.

Two Women, a Bank Robbery, and the FBI

After holding down nursing jobs in Houston and Louisiana, Betty got a call from the dean at the University of Kentucky, and moved there to be an assistant dean for medical surgical nursing. While living in Lexington, Betty helped start a women's group in 1974 that met in people's houses and went on to start a rape crisis line.

Two of the women who started coming were new in town, having been honor students at Brandeis University in Boston. One became a baker at a health food store near the university; the other one, according to

Betty, was "this funny-looking kid." The "funny-looking" one wanted to start a women's self-defense course. "At my house, okay?! I had a house with a yard, and she would teach people how to fall."

"So one day she called and needed \$100. Her mother was sick, and could I lend her \$100?" The woman said it needed to be in cash. "I gave her the \$100 and went on about my business. And soon one of my friends came into the faculty lunchroom and said, 'Have you seen this week's *Time* magazine? Doesn't this look like that funny kid that's been following you around for the last six months?' I said, 'It does seem to resemble her. . . .'"

So there in *Time* magazine were pictures of these two women from Brandeis, appearing on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list! Betty called up a friend who was in the women's group and happened to be a top director for the Girl Scouts, and asked her if she'd seen the *Time* article. "She said, 'I have, and I think it would be a good idea if we didn't make contact for a while.'" Betty answered, "Gotcha."

Within a day or so, sure enough, the FBI (the "federal fuzz," as she called them) appeared at her office, wanting to know all about the young women. Although she had researched the law, and knew she wasn't required to answer, nonetheless, "with great courage and bravery, I told him everything I knew, hoped to know, ever would know."

It came out later that these women wanted to "take back the streets for women." However, they got mixed up with a couple of ex-offenders who had their own ideas of how to achieve social change, recalled Betty. "These fellas met these young women, and they told them, 'If you are going to take back the streets, you are going to need money. And you are going to need armaments.' And so the ex-offenders planned these robberies from armories, and then a bank. And, in the robbery of the bank, they killed a guard." The two young women had driven the getaway car.

The FBI assigned an agent to keep tabs on Betty from that point on, for 11 years. "They would call me and say, 'Have you heard from so-and-so?' No, I hadn't heard. Hadn't hoped to hear."

Susan Saxe was picked up on the streets of Philadelphia in March 1975. Katherine Powers made her way to Oregon and ran a couple of restaurants. A former winner of the Betty Crocker Homemaker Award for Sewing, Powers eluded the FBI for 23 years before turning herself in.

(Historical note: During this period in 1975, the FBI was intercepting phone calls and mail and generally intimidating leftists and lesbians

continued on page 92



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Betty Rudnick

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in Lexington. Unlike Betty, six people refused to testify, and were arrested, held, and mistreated [as chronicled by Jim Sears in *Rebels, Rubyfruit and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, to be published June 2001 by Rutgers University Press]. Lesbians around the country feared that the FBI could come knocking on their doors at any time during this period, as the FBI used the fugitive situation as a cover to go on a "fishing expedition" in lesbian communities.)

The shadow of the FBI persisted in Betty's life. In January 1986, when Betty was teaching at Texas Woman's University in Houston, President Reagan was coming to NASA to make a speech commemorating the crew members who died in the Challenger explosion. The day of the visit, Betty received a call from the FBI asking her what she was planning to do that day. "Well," I said, "I had in mind to go to work and teach a couple of classes." And they said, "Well, we would like for you to go to work, and for you to stay at the Texas Woman's University until we call you and tell you that President Reagan has returned to Washington."

The president could rest assured that he was safe from any threat from Betty Rudnick, thanks to the diligence of the FBI.

That was Betty's last contact with the FBI. "When I retired, they retired my agent, I think. I have not heard any more from them."

After nine years in Kentucky, Betty came back to Texas to be closer to her mother, spending six years as dean at T.W.U.'s Denton branch and four more years teaching and advising graduate students at their Houston branch, finally retiring after 42 years of nursing in 1987.

During her career, Betty basically never identified herself as a lesbian to any co-workers or supervisors. There was one instance when her old nemesis, Truman Blocker, had told a member of the board of regents that Betty had made physical advances to same-sex students, and therefore should not be appointed dean of the Texas Woman's University School of Nursing. Betty got advice from friends, and from high-profile Houston attorney Percy Foreman, who referred her to a Dallas attorney. When he asked what kind of evidence they had, Betty said, "They can't have any evidence because it did not occur." When Betty went to the board meeting, "I approached the [member of] the regents, [asking] 'What kind of evidence did Dr. Truman Blocker offer you, that this was so?'"

"None."

"The president called me at the end of their board meeting that night, when everybody got back to Denton from Dallas and said, 'It's over.' And it was over. And life proceeded from there."

When asked about her view of butch/femme, Betty said she really didn't see her world divided up that way, and mostly knew about it from reading books. Most of the women she knew were more androgynous. She thought of a couple in LOAF, and said, "Well, I guess if forced to it, then you'd say that J. was the femme . . . but not very femme," she said, laughing. "Tell you the truth, I think it's silly. And I think it's silly in this way, that people who feel ugly about lesbians always come to this question of who is playing the role of the man and who is playing the role of the woman. And I think that's silly. But, in the house, I cooked as often as my partner cooked. And I've never been all that good with the hammer and the screw-

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driver." She laughs again. "So it hasn't really been a part of my life."

During her working life, most of Betty's activism revolved around taking stands in the field of nursing. But after her retirement in 1987, Betty became an active volunteer for liberal political causes, for the Houston Area Women's Center Hotline for Battered Women, and for LOAF.

Betty's health began to fail in 1999. She had a horror of winding up in a nursing home, so for the last months of her life, a support network of friends, along with hospice and 24-hour aides, made it possible for Betty to stay in her home. After her death in January 2000, her friend Arden Eversmeyer recalled that Betty's family "was going to put her in the ground without any public acknowledgment, not even a prayer. She was an embarrassment to them." Betty had always threatened that she was going to come out at her funeral.

So the lesbian community planned the funeral, with support from one of Betty's sisters. Recalled Arden, "The Jewish community filled up one side of the chapel, and the lesbian community filled up the other. We talked about her activism in the community and her lifelong commitment to women. Annise Parker gave a wonderful talk. . . . Without using the L word, we did in effect out Betty Rudnick, and honor her years of activism." Her friends still chuckle at their memories of her, and what they call their "Betty stories." ■


Pokey Anderson's activism in Houston stretches back over 25 years, including co-founding the Gay/Lesbian Political Caucus, co-hosting the Breakthrough show, and managing Inklings Bookshop for nearly a decade. Pokey is now an independent financial planner in Houston.

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













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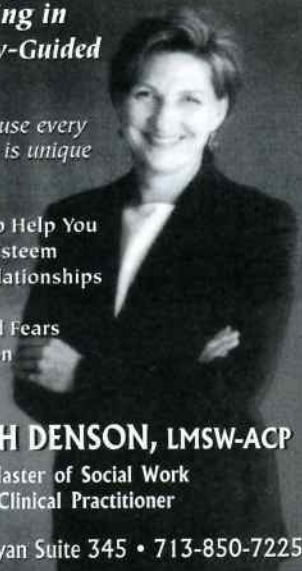
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