

A Wandering Archivist

by Dr. Graham Willett

I have been involved with the Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives since about 1994, when I started using the collection for my PhD research on the Australian lesbian and gay movement. I very soon realised that without the collection the history that I was proposing to write would have been near impossible. Being of an activist inclination, I found myself volunteering. From there it was short step to committee membership – and from there there is no escape.

I don't remember when we got our first website but it was then that I began to realise that our collection was not the only one of its kind. The web creator had set up a whole bunch of links to other GLQ archives around the world. In New Zealand, in New York, in Berlin, in San Francisco, in Johannesburg people just like us were collecting, preserving, disseminating homosexual histories. It was my first brush with the transnationality of our little world of collectors. (It was some time later that one of ALGA's founders told me that he had been inspired by the work of the Canadian Gay Archives (as it was then) when he was visiting Toronto – so we were in that sense born transnational.)

As my career advanced and I started to teach, research and publish in the field of gay and lesbian history, I started to get study leave and travel grants and I got the chance to actually visit these collections, and the people that created and sustained them. Suddenly our work seemed less cut off from the rest of the world. Despite our being in a country – as a future Prime Minister had so charmingly put in 1990 – at the arse end of the world, ALGA could see that we were, in fact, part of a global network of activity that was much denser than we had realised. Scattered across the globe there were houses and warehouses, basements, garages, cupboards filled with newspapers and newsletters and magazines, badges, t-shirts, flyers and leaflets, banners and photos and audio tapes which contained the rich and priceless history of a vilified, marginalised and – in the case of men – criminalised minority that has been changing the world in quite remarkable ways.

More recently we have started to institutionalise these networks – but institutionalise in a good way. The LGBT ALMS may have a silly name, but the opportunity for people involved in archives, libraries, museums and special collections to get together every couple of years to share our pleasures and pains, to solve problems, to float ideas, to envy each other's problems (apparently a million dollar bequest creates as many problems as it solves!) is invaluable. These gatherings bring together old archives and new, large and small, globally-focussed as well as national and local, community-wide and sectional (leather and lesbians).

And there are more informal collaborations as well. Collections share their finds and link to each other's websites. EG Crichton's Migrating Archives is an example of the application of art practices to the disciplines of archiving and history that generates new uses of archival materials, new insights in our histories, and new kinds of pleasures.

I have always said that I do gay and lesbian history not because it is important (though I think it is) but because I love it. I love archiving especially – the thrill of the chase, the struggle to understand what a particular artefact is and what it means, the opportunity to explain it to wider communities in ways that make sense to them. As we wander the world – whether physically, or in our imaginations, or electronically – we are making all this possible in richer and more wonderful ways than anyone could ever have imagined. And we are not done yet ...