

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

The Voices of Older Lesbian Women:  
An Oral History

by

Carolyn A. Anderson

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## **Abstract**

This oral history project provided a forum for fifteen lesbian women over 47 years of age, to share their experiences of living in Calgary during the 1960's and 1970's. A review of the literature exploring the essentialist versus the social constructionist debate, the social and political context of the time across North America, Canada and Alberta provides a context in which to hear the women's stories. The methodology considers the blending of a social work perspective on qualitative research and the data collection technique of oral history. Significant challenges in conducting lesbian history research related to the history of oppression of this population are identified.

The reasons that respondents chose to participate in the project are compelling as we listen to the themes of the women's life experience. A growing awareness of being different, a need to locate information and make contact with like-minded women, and the effects of lesbianism on one's life are presented in an effort to understand the internal process of self-acceptance. Finally, the issues unique to lesbian relationships, the process of coming out and women's experience of the lesbian community are explored.

The documentation of history of this marginalized, and here-to-fore invisible population challenges traditional accounts of life in Calgary and provides a broader perspective of the makeup of the city. The implications for social work practice and policy are far ranging, including the development of appropriate and culturally sensitive services for lesbians, the recognition of a need to advocate for this population and the education of frontline workers regarding institutionalized homophobia.

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## **Dedication**

To my grandmother, Mungie, who saw the Dr. in me years before I did.

I miss you.

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## Epigraph

To know what you prefer instead of humbly saying Amen to what the world tells you you ought to prefer, is to have kept your soul alive.

Robert Louis Stevenson, The Artists' Way

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview of the Project

The purpose of this project is to explore the experiences of older lesbians in Calgary. This project is a collection of the stories of 15 women who identify as lesbians, who are over 47 years of age and who have lived a significant portion of their lives in Calgary. The stories describe their individual journeys of self-discovery and survival as members of an invisible and marginalized group existing within the conservative culture of Alberta.

### Background and a Change in Direction

Before deciding to return to school, I had a successful career as a clinical social worker. I had established a social work practice with a business partner in 1982 and had received funding from the Alberta Government in 1984 to operate a child sexual abuse treatment program. As part of the requirements of my Masters degree, I developed a video called Child Sexual Abuse: The Untold Secret, which was purchased and distributed by the National Film Board of Canada and the American Journal of Nursing. I had written and published several papers and presented nationally and internationally on the Community Treatment Model of Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse. Over the years, my business partner and I had trained hundreds of helping professionals across Canada. I had established a solid reputation and identity as a competent professional in the area of sexual abuse treatment.

As my career progressed, I developed a variety of workshops for graduate students and practicing social work clinicians interested in ongoing professional development. One of the topics in great demand was self-care in social work, a field that can have a high burnout rate. I would talk to students about the importance of integrating the professional and personal self, my belief being that it is unhealthy to try to maintain two separate identities; that who we are personally is reflected in who we are professionally and vice versa. The workshops emphasized that as we integrate our personal and professional selves, we have more energy to devote to our lives and are ultimately better able to serve our clients.

In 1995, I was in a place in my career and my life where I felt I needed to return to school and use the structure of a formal program to broaden and integrate my social work experience. When I made the decision to apply to the Ph.D. program in Social Work I had a vague idea of the area of research I wanted to pursue. I knew that I wanted to write about the strength and courage that I had witnessed in the many survivors with whom I had worked over the years. I was intrigued by resilience of women who had overcome tremendous adversity to develop and maintain an inner strength and belief in themselves. Over the course of the first year and a half of the program, I worked towards formulating a research question that would explore the factors that influence the development of resilience in adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

Then one day, two years into my PhD program, my supervisor casually mentioned she was curious that I had chosen to study sexual abuse survivors, an area about which I



knew a lot, rather than exploring a new area of study. She asked if I had considered doing something in the area of lesbianism.

Lesbian, **lesbian**, **LESBIAN!** It was like I had been hit with a strong jolt of electricity. I was caught totally off guard. I suddenly felt cold. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. I sat stock-still. I looked up to see if she had noticed the effect her statement had had on me. She didn't appear to, as she continued stirring her coffee. I don't remember what happened next; if we talked about what she meant, if I defended my current plans or if I just passed out on the spot.

Later, in the safety of my truck, my mind was racing. Unknowingly, that day, my supervisor had opened the door between my two worlds and the two separate images I held of myself. As much as I talked about consistency, I had, in fact, always lived two quite separate lives. In one, I was a competent social worker and a single woman and in the other, I was a lesbian. I knew that over the years there had been speculation about my sexual orientation within the professional arena but rarely was it something that anyone spoke to me about directly. I carefully chose the people and situations in which I shared personal information and, in that way, was able to compartmentalize my life.

In my personal life, I am a lesbian actively involved in the gay and lesbian community, serving on boards, attending social functions, helping to organize conferences and offering private counseling services to the community through my private practice. In spite of the fact that I had been open about my sexual orientation in various situations and venues, the thought of spending the next several years working on research in this area suddenly seemed like a very large and public coming out statement.

I feared the rejection of my ideas, loss of status, loss of my previous safe identity in the professional field, and that doors to future job opportunities would close. I flashed back to the old fears early in my career. "Don't let anyone know that you are a lesbian. The government would never give you a contract to work with sexually abused kids if they knew, clients wouldn't trust you if they knew, your integrity would be in question if people knew and people would judge you as a lesbian rather than a competent professional social worker."

I slowly began to recognize how living in a heterosexual society had contributed to my own high level of internalized homophobia. It had insidiously influenced many of my career and life decisions. I began to wonder about other women in my situation. How had they survived? How had they lived their lives? Had they experienced that drive to live their lives in a way that goes against the very grain of the dominant society in which we live?

I am not ashamed of who I am, so I was shocked at the level of fear and anxiety that I still carried so deeply. Not trusting my own judgment, I began talking to friends and colleagues and looking at the literature regarding the impact of "coming out" on a graduate student, on an academic career and on a professional social work career.

I spoke to friends who were gay and lesbian and were in helping professions or positions at educational institutions. Often their advice was to proceed carefully. Many felt that I was very brave to consider being "out" and being true to who I was; some commented that if they had it to do over, they hoped they would have the courage to be out and outspoken. Gay and lesbian friends feared for my future.

Friends who are academics and “out” acknowledged that they felt coming out had compromised their careers. Some felt that they were often heard as lesbians or gay men before they were heard as academics or experts in their particular fields. Others believe that they had been overlooked for promotions and access to grants or various projects because of their sexual orientation. Still others, who remain closeted in their teaching positions, spoke of the guilt they carry for failing to provide a model for gay and lesbian students. They believe that they have succumbed to fear by living what they describe as a lie, with all the pressures that go along with trying to hide a large aspect of their lives.

Finally, I spoke with a group of professionals who are “out” in all aspects of their personal and professional lives. Their descriptions of the enormous freedom and personal wholeness they experience at being able to be themselves helped me to reach a decision to undertake this project.

I also realized that this change in topic still allowed me to fulfill my original purpose in graduate school, that of exploring the courage and the strength of a group of women who had challenged adversity in their lives. My dissertation would be work that would help to heal my own soul by giving voice to women who have silently, yet creatively, lived their lives with steadfast determination and resisted the norms set by society.

### **Autobiographical Connections**

My passion for this project was fueled by the recognition that I carried a longing for family stories and a shared history. My biological family could not provide the missing pieces. I was looking for something deeper; something that could connect me to

the women who had gone before me and left faint clues of their existence. Women who had loved as I did.

The first love of my life was Laurie. We shared an old double seater desk in my grade one classroom and we were six years old. She was beautiful. I wanted to touch her long blond hair as it shone in the sunlight. She had huge blue eyes, a deep husky voice and a sense of confidence that I admired. She was kind and friendly and the smartest person I had ever met. She didn't laugh at me as I struggled to tie my shoelaces; instead, she sat down beside me in the cloakroom and showed me the easier two-loop method. I use it to this day. I loved her.

Although I had plenty of opportunity to play with boys, they were irrelevant in my world. They were never as interesting or exciting as the girls and women who passed through my life. At seven years old, I remember feeling my heart jump when I saw other little girls in skirts and white knee socks. At twelve I became romantically involved with other girls and at thirteen, I fell madly in love with a woman I would stay with until I was almost thirty. She was then fourteen years old and we did everything to be together. I would miss school to be with her and she would write notes to my teachers regarding my absence. I would spend hours with her at her overnight job in a donut shop just talking. After painful cortisone shots for pain in her knees, she walked miles through Stanley Park on crutches to go to my high school football games so we could see each other.

Somehow we knew that our feelings for each other needed to be secret because other people wouldn't understand, but we had no sense that what we were doing was

wrong. We simply believed that we were more insightful than others and that the rest of the world (meaning heterosexuals) would eventually catch up with us.

I was fortunate enough to have grown up in a family where I learned that gender was not an obstacle. My parents created an environment, in which we could be strong, think for ourselves and follow our hearts rather than succumb to the pressures of the outside world. I am sure that they have since questioned the wisdom of this philosophy as each of their three daughters identify as lesbians. In spite of the safe and supportive peer group in my adolescence, I was instinctively aware of the need to be protective of my identity, relationships and activities and to create a dual existence in order to survive.

My sexual orientation was a guarded secret from my family, including my sisters, my friends, and my school and work associates for many years. As an adolescent, my girlfriend and I stumbled across the lesbian community accidentally. In 1972, a young woman who owned a Turbo gas station on MacLeod Trail, noticed us and offered my partner a part-time job while she was in school. Before long, we were going to the gay and lesbian bars and had met an entire community of women like ourselves.

The times were fun and exciting and charged with an energy that comes from knowing you are living in a secret world. The intrigue overshadowed the realities of hiding who I was to the outside world. It felt like we held a collective secret; that we were members of a secret organization. What we had, we created as we went.

What we didn't have was a sense of continuity. We created everything in the moment. We had no direction other than playing and partying. There were few people over forty out in the community at that time. We wondered what happens as lesbians

age? They seemed to just disappear. We had no sense of history; no vision of the future. Were we the first lesbians in Calgary? What would happen after the partying stopped? Our sense of community was very narrow. We had only a vague notion that there were others like ourselves outside of Calgary.

As I thought back over the years of my life, I found myself wanting to know my roots, my history. How had the women before me experienced themselves? How did they "know"? How did they find each other? How did they live? What were their relationships like? How was my experience similar or different from theirs? Where did I come from?

I needed to find "family". Someone who could hand down the stories of my history. It seemed to me that lesbian women over 50 in our community held the secrets I was looking for. They felt like part of an extended family I hadn't met yet; grandmothers that hold the memories of a fragmented kinship system. They share a history with me that my biological grandmothers may not. They know things about me and my experience that my own family cannot. I needed to meet them, to sit in a room with them; to feel connected. I needed to hear their stories.

### **The Importance of the Project**

The documentation of the history of lesbians in Calgary is important to the well being of this women's community. Albertans live in a province that still sees regularly sanctioned hate literature directed towards an entire minority group through such publications as the Alberta Report (January, 1997). This province exists in a unique political climate that demonstrates heterosexist and homophobic attitudes towards

members of the lesbian community by continuing to presume that heterosexuality is the “normal” and to deny the gay and lesbian population recognition and equal rights. These conditions make it crucial that voice be given to those deeply affected by the silence and invisibility.

The timing was perfect to complete a documented history. Despite a conservative move to resist the extension, of human rights to lesbians and gay men in Alberta, we are seeing the development of public support for the gay and lesbian community on a number of new fronts. A shift in public awareness that has resulted in such actions as the Calgary City Police establishing a Gay and Lesbian Police Liaison Committee to work with the lesbian and gay community around issues of safety and rapport building. The Calgary Board of Education is recognizing the need to advocate for safety education in order to protect gay and lesbian youths in our schools. A number of public and private funding organizations are beginning to support the development of research and resources specifically targeting the lesbian and gay community. As these opportunities arise, it is essential that older members of the lesbian community correct false perceptions of the past and assist in creating new understanding and possibilities for the future.

"Recovering largely disregarded histories provides us with resources for reconstitution of the present and imagining the future" (Ross, 1995, pg. 7).

### **Definitions of Commonly Used Language in the Lesbian Community**

This section is intended to provide an understanding of the vocabulary commonly used by lesbian and gay communities. Language can be source of confusion and misunderstanding to those both inside and outside of the lesbian community and merits

accurate definitions. "It should be recognized that as with any subculture - particularly oppressed groups - there is a constantly changing argot. Usage may vary with generations, geographic regions of the country, socioeconomic status or cultural background" (Mallon, 1998, p. 271).

The term *sexual invert* is a "pseudoscientific term used by psychologists and doctors from the late nineteenth century until the 1940's" for an individual whose primary attraction is towards someone of the same sex (National Museum and Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, p. 85). The word *homosexual* is a well-known term, which is defined as "a male or female person whose sexual attraction, both physical and affectional, is primarily directed toward persons of the same gender" (Mallon, 1998, p.272). The use of this term has changed over the past few decades. Some authors avoid using the word since it has "long been used in labeling gay men and lesbians as deviant...and although it may be used to refer to both gay men and lesbians, it is often assumed to refer specifically to gay men" (O'Neill, 1994, p. 10).

*Gay* is used to describe a "person whose homosexual orientation is self-defined, affirmed or acknowledged as such. It is believed that this term originated as a kind of code among homosexual men and women during the 1940s" (Mallon, 1998, p. 273). "Although many lesbians consider gay a male term, it remains the most frequent general term for female and male homosexuals" (Cass, 1984; Darty and Potter, 1984, p. 305).

The terms used specifically to refer to lesbians have evolved over the years.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the term romantic



friendship meant an intimate companionship between two unmarried women that was socially approved and recognized. Outwardly, there was allowed to be no erotic element to their relationship, but the language of their commitment to each other was often laced with love and romance. Whether or not these relationships were actually sexual is not known. These relationships were also known as Boston Marriages. (National Museum and Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, p.89).

A more recent description of women who relate emotionally and/or sexually to other women is *women oriented women or women who love women*. While this term technically can refer to feminist heterosexual women, it is [generally] used to refer to lesbians (Darty et al, 1984). Charlotte Bunch (1987) uses the term woman identified woman to represent “a feminist who adopts a lesbian-feminism ideology and enacts that understanding in her life, whether she is a lesbian sexually or not (cited in Saulnier, 1996, p. 79). *Lesbian and lesbian women* are terms that are often used interchangeably to mean “a woman whose sexual and romantic orientation is directed toward women” (Tracey et al, 1996, p. 14). “Lesbian woman underscores the fact that lesbianism is a characteristic some women have in common (although its meaning varies among individuals), but not their sole identifying characteristic” (Nelson, 1996, p.3). Bunch (1987, as quoted in Saulnier, 1996) further distinguishes that a lesbian has “rejected the female role on some level, but she may or may not embrace a lesbian-feminist political analysis” (p. 78).

*Lesbian community* “can refer to a group of lesbians living in one geographical area, or can be used in reference to a political sense of solidarity and encompass vast

geographical areas such as...the Canadian lesbian community” (Darty et al, 1984, p. 305). *Lesbian communities* is accepted as a more accurate term since “pluralizing these words expresses the diversity of these experiences which can often be denied under monolithic categories like a singular [community] (Kinsmen, 1987, p. 19).

In lesbian communities, there are often distinctions between butch and femme identities. *Butch* refers to a “lesbian whose self-identity takes on aspects of the traditionally ‘masculine’” (Tracey et al, 1996, p.12) and *femme* means a “lesbian whose self-identity is that of a ‘feminine’ woman. These are erotic identities, and not indicative of someone who feels uncomfortable with her lesbianism” (Tracey et al, 1996, p. 13).

*Butch-Femme relationships* refer to lesbian relationships between a butch and femme. These are not intended to be replicas of heterosexual relationships (Nestle, 1992; Darty et al, 1984). "Both butches and femmes had very difficult times with straight society, as they were the most "visible" lesbians, thus incurring a majority of discrimination and violence. They were also dismissed as "mimicking the patriarchy" by their more "androgynous" sisters" (Tracey et al, 1996, p. 13). *Kiki* is a term used in the 1940s and 1950s for a woman who could not decide if she was butch or femme. The term could also refer to two butches or two femmes who were lovers and thus confused the structured butch-femme social world (The National Museum and Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, p. 85).

The term *passing* is used in two different ways in the lesbian communities. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it referred to “a woman who dressed, acted, and lived as a man, often living with and marrying a traditionally feminine woman” (National

Museum & Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, 1996, p. 88; Witt, Thomas & Marcus, 1995). More recently the term has come to mean “the pretense of acting or appearing to be heterosexual when one is in fact lesbian” (National Museum & Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, 1996, p.88).

*Dyke* is another word for lesbian. It is “usually considered as a positive term if used among lesbians but a negative term if used by outsiders” (Darty et al, 1984, p. 305). The terms *queer* or *Q* “started out as a ‘pejorative’, but are now being reclaimed by both younger and/or radical gay men and lesbians of the late eighties and early nineties” (Tracey et al, 1996, p.14).

In the lesbian communities, *closeted* or *in the closet* or *not out* all describe “someone who is not open about his or her sexual orientation. This person, for personal reasons, chooses to hide his or her orientation from others, and sometimes even denies his or her orientation to him or herself” (Mallon, 1998, p. 275).

*Coming out* refers to “the developmental process through which lesbian women recognize their sexual orientation and integrate this knowledge into their personal and social lives” (DeMonteflores & Schultz, cited in Mallon, 1998, p. 274). Coming out is an ongoing process which lesbians must consider each time they are in a new situation or meet someone new. *Out* or *being out* generally:

Describes a person who openly acknowledges his or her sexual orientation to friends, family, colleagues, and society. Not everyone who is ‘out’ is ‘out’ to all of these groups, some people may be out to their family, but not to their colleagues (Mallon, 1998, p. 275) or vice versa.

*Outing or being outed* is quite different from being out. This describes the controversial practice of publicly revealing the sexual orientation of [someone] against her wishes. Recently, outing has taken on a broader meaning, signifying any type of unwanted or unwilling exposure (National Museum and Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, 1996, p. 87).

“*Heterosexism* is the explicit or implicit assumption that everyone is heterosexual” (Stewart, 1999, p. 184). “It entails the belief that heterosexuality is normative and that nonheterosexuality is deviant and intrinsically less desirable. Heterosexism is often manifested by individuals who would not be considered as being blatantly homophobic or holding negative attitudes” (Berkman and Zinberg, 1997, p. 320).

*Homophobia* is “a term developed by behavioral scientists to describe varying degrees of fear, dislike, and hatred of homosexuals or homosexuality. Such feelings may result in prejudice, discriminations, and hostile behavior toward people believed to be homosexual” (Mallon, 1998, p. 276). *Internalized homophobia* is “the unconscious fear of homosexuality in oneself” (Darty et al, 1984; National Museum and Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, 1996). “This term is also used to describe the internal process that leads lesbians to modify their behavior or environment to minimize the chances of others learning they are lesbian” (Mallon, 1998, p. 276).

A final concept pivotal to understanding the importance of this oral history project is that of *lesbian invisibility* (Card, 1995; Faderman, 1991; National Museum and

Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, 1996; Ross, 1995). There are three significant aspects to this issue:

The first is the omission of lesbian lives and issues from public discussions and media presentations of homosexuality. Secondly, the conflation of homosexuality with gay men, to the exclusion of lesbians and finally, the tendency in heterosexual society to obscure the fact that lesbianism exists (National Museum and Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, p. 86).

A basic understanding of the terms and concepts commonly used within lesbian communities will provide the reader with a framework with which to consider the stories presented by the participants in this oral history project.

### **Organization of the Research**

Chapter One is a discussion of the debate between those who believe the essentialist theory of lesbianism and those who hold a social constructionist view. I then explore a continuum of lesbian experience and, finally, provide a social and political context in which lesbian culture has evolved over the past century. In Chapter Two, I outline the research methodology and design used to complete an oral history project, which is based on the stories of 15 lesbian women over 47 who have lived a majority of their lives in Calgary. This chapter presents considerations of the similarities and differences between qualitative research and oral history. Chapter Three provides the identification and analysis of four of the themes that emerged from the oral history data and that relate to the participants' search for self. In Chapter Four, themes related to making peace with lesbian identity are presented. In Chapter Five, I consider the results

of this oral history project in relation to the social and political context of the participants, then discuss the implications for social work and suggest directions for future research.

Finally, I reflect on the personal impact of this study on myself as a lesbian woman.

## CHAPTER TWO: LESBIANS IN CONTEXT

Powerful and rich relationships between women have been documented throughout history (Basmajian & Wescott, 1997; Card 1995; Faderman, 1991; Marcus, 1992; Miller, 1995; Rich, 1980; Vincius,1990). At various times, these relationships have been encouraged and supported, while at others they have been regarded with contempt and hostility (Abbott and Love, 1972; Basmajian et al, 1997; Faderman, 1991; Marcus, 1992; Miller, 1995; Stewart, 1999).

This literature review introduces key concepts unique to lesbian communities. First, I review the ongoing debate between the essentialists (biological theorists) and the social constructionists regarding the origin of lesbianism. Next, various perspectives of lesbian experience are presented including the question of the role of butch-femme identity. Finally, I provide an historical overview of the evolving social and political context surrounding lesbian experience from the late 1800's to the 1980's in both the American and Canadian experience.

### **Essentialist vs. Social Constructionist Theory**

Essentialist and social constructionist scholars have long debated the basis of lesbianism. Although both sides believe that same-sex relations have existed throughout time and across cultures, essentialists support the genetic theory that lesbianism is innate (Browning, 1982; Brown, 1989; Card, 1995; Faderman, 1991; Marcus, 1992; Miller, 1995; National Museum and Archive of Lesbian and Gay Studies, 1996; Stewart, 1999; Tanner, 1978), while social constructivists believe that the development of specific social

conditions in society allowed the concept of lesbian to evolve (Brown, 1984; Butler, 1990; Card, 1995; Faderman, 1991; Gaunlett, 2000; Marcus, 1992; Miller, 1995; National Museum and Archive of Lesbian and Gay Studies, 1996; Stewart, 1999).

“In the late 1800’s, sexologists (primarily white, European, medical men from middle-class backgrounds) who were writing about sexuality...turned their attention to homosexuality” (Faderman, 1991, p. 40). Biological and psychoanalytic theories about lesbianism evolved as different perspectives on essentialism. “The central hypothesis of biological theorists has been that lesbianism originates within the individual and that various biological factors are responsible for its development” (Browning, 1982, p. 12).

In 1884, Krafft-Ebing suggested that lesbianism was an inherited disease and that, in many ways, “lesbians do not differ in physiology from heterosexual women”. However, he noted that their behaviors and patterns of interests appeared to be markedly different from other women (Browning, 1982; Faderman, 1991). Ellis agreed that defective genes resulted in a condition that was incurable. He also suggested that environmental factors and difficult life experiences, such as masturbation or having one’s heart broken by a man, might influence the development of lesbianism in some women (Browning, 1982; Faderman, 1991). As late as 1934, in support of the heredity theory, “Henry and Galbraith reported that lesbians exhibit a degeneration of their sexual organs, physiques, and endocrine systems” (Browning, 1982, p. 13).

To date, there is no conclusive evidence to indicate a biological etiology for lesbianism. Although “the biological causation theory of lesbianism remains highly



speculative” (Browning, 1984, p.14) these theories have been significantly influential in creating and maintaining stereotypes about lesbians. Browning (1984) points out that:

Biological theorists have concluded that (1) Lesbians are born homosexual, with an abnormality of chromosomes, genes, or hormonal balance. (2) This congenital ‘disease’ might cause deformities in physical appearance and attitudes, specifically mannish behaviors, attitudes, and masculinization of genitalia. (3) Certain environmental factors might elicit more homosexual behavior in a genetically predisposed individual. (4) Because lesbians are born homosexual, they are incurable and not in control of their sexual desires, hence ‘sick’ although not necessarily sinful (p. 14).

Early psychoanalytic theorists challenged the belief of biological theorists that genetics are at the root of lesbianism. (Brown, 1984; Browning, 1982; Card, 1995; Faderman, 1991; Marcus, 1992; Miller, 1995; National Museum and Archive of Lesbian and Gay Studies, 1996; Tanner, 1978). Freud was one of the first to challenge the biological theorists. He believed that “homosexuality was a natural feature of human psychosexual development” (Browning, 1982, p. 15) and that, essentially, all human beings are born bisexual. He believed that early childhood experience could change the course of an individual’s sexual development. Freud suggested that lesbianism is an indication of arrested development and not a neurosis or a disease (Browning, 1982; Faderman, 1991; Marcus, 1991; Miller, 1995). The psychoanalytic belief that homosexuality was a sickness was the prevailing view from the 1920’s to the 1960’s and produced a variety of speculative guesses about the basis of lesbianism. Adler and Rado,

students of Freud's, rejected his theory of bisexuality and suggested that lesbianism stemmed from the fear of the opposite sex and resentment towards males (Browning, 1982; Miller, 1995). Wolff believed that it was a way for women to avoid marriage and motherhood, suggesting that "predatory lesbians, women who had not been married, could be a threat to family life and society" (Browning, 1982, p. 16). In the 1950's, Caprio (cited in Browning) supported the traditional psychoanalytic view that "lesbianism is a symptom of deep-seated neurosis related to family and environmental influences such as trauma, frustration, homosexual seduction in childhood, and excessive use of alcohol". One issue about which all psychoanalysts agreed was that sexual orientation could be changed through long-term therapy (Miller, 1995). Proponents of homosexuality as a sickness succeeded in having it:

Listed among the sociopathic personality disturbances in the first official catalog of mental disorders, The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Mental Disorders (DSM-I) when it was published in 1952....by the next revision, DSM-II, in 1968, homosexuality was moved to the category of 'other non-psychotic mental disorders' where it was classified along with fetishism, pedophilia, transvestism, exhibitionism, voyeurism, sadism, and masochism (Miller, 1995, p. 249).

Today, psychoanalytic theories regarding lesbianism tend to be viewed with skepticism. Many of the concepts are difficult to define and measure and conclusions were often drawn from clinical case studies from non-representational clinical and/or institutionalized populations (Abbott et al, 1972; Browning, 1984, Faderman, 1991; LeVay & Nonas, 1995; Miller, 1992; Sang, 1989).

Nevertheless, psychoanalytic theorists had a significant impact on how lesbians were perceived and treated throughout the last century and into this one. As Browning wrote:

The major ideas postulated by psychoanalytic theories are (1) all human beings are born with a bisexual disposition, and as a result, all people experience a homoerotic phase of psychosexual development; (2) homosexual tendencies reside in every individual because repression or sublimation of homosexual desires is never totally achieved (3) psychosexual development may become arrested or fixated due to an over gratification or an under gratification of needs (4) multiple factors (hereditary and environmental components) are related to the development of homosexuality and (5) because homosexuality is a disease that has neurotic manifestations, it can be treated if the individual is motivated (p. 17-18).

The traditional theories of lesbianism assumed that “heterosexuality is the ‘natural’ outlet for female sexuality and, thus, consider lesbianism as a deviation from normality” (Browning, 1984, p. 12). Although these early beliefs contributed to a disturbing perception of lesbianism, current authors offer their own interpretation of essentialist beliefs.

Interestingly, a feminist philosopher, Card (1995), reframes the interpretation of the essentialist view and presents it in a more positive light suggesting that “there is a ‘lesbian essence’; something objective that lesbians have in common that makes them lesbians” (p.17). Lillian Faderman, on the other hand, suggests that essentialism is a

political strategy. “It is the safest position for homosexuals to take during homophobic times and encouraging homosexuals to build their own culture and institutions with the conviction that since they are born different from heterosexuals they must find ways to rely only on themselves and others like them” (1991, p. 61).

The essentialist position holds that sexologists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century “discovered” lesbians who had been there all the time (Miller, 1995, p. xii). Social constructionists such as Butler (1990), Card (1995) and Faderman (1991), on the other hand, believe that certain social conditions such as “urbanization, the creation of institutions where women could meet, increased sexual freedom, more open discussion of sexuality, and economic self-sufficiency that allowed women to live without men” (National Museum and Archive of Lesbian and Gay Studies, 1996, p. 91) were necessary before lesbians could emerge as a social entity (Card, 1995; Faderman, 1991; Marcus, 1992; Miller, 1995; National Museum and Archive of Lesbian and Gay Studies, 1996). Those conditions evolved towards the end of the nineteenth century as opportunities for education and work permitted women greater independence, and a new sexual freedom allowed woman chances to create lives with each other (Faderman, 1991; LeVay et al, 1995; Miller, 1995; National Museum and Archive of Lesbian and Gay Studies, 1996). Social constructionists argue that lesbians were created by sexologists who “formulated a person with particular, identifiable characteristics” (Miller, 1995, p. xii). They believe that women-identified women have always existed, however, once the concept of lesbianism was established they became something to examine, define and control.

The late 1940's saw a number of researchers begin to challenge the notion that lesbians were genetically defective or emotionally immature (Abbott et al, 1972; Browning, 1984, Marcus, 1992). New studies revealed that lesbians were "remarkably similar to heterosexuals" (Browning, 1984, p. 20). In a ground breaking study in the late 1940's, for example, Kinsey interviewed 10,000 people and concluded that "homosexuality was a normal variation of sexual expression....He indicated that a majority of individuals had had incidental to substantial homosexual and heterosexual experiences (Browning, 1984, p. 20; Miller, 1995). This research provided support for the developing lesbian and gay liberation movements that followed.

Browning writes that the social constructivist position began to evolve as alternative theoretical positions emerged during this time suggesting that, "there is nothing inherently deviant, pathological, immoral, destructive or dysfunctional about lesbianism as a sexual preference" (1982, p. 21). Symbolic interactionists such as Plummer and Laws and Schwartz purported that "people have a varying capacity for sexual experiences, defined and limited by both a personally constructed and a socially constructed idea of sexuality" (cited in Browning, 1984, p. 21). Feminists identified the ways in which patriarchal values embedded in traditional thought inhibited the full development of female sexuality (Browning, 1984; Card, 1995; de Beauvoir, 1952; Johnston, 1973; Morgan, 1970; Rich, 1980). As lesbian researchers and authors began to appear they contributed a new perspective to the growing body of knowledge about lesbianism and lesbian identity development (Abbott et al, 1972; Adelman, 1986; Berezan, 1988; Brown, 1989; Coleman, 1981; Card, 1995; Cass, 1979; Faderman,

1981,1991; Gershick, 1998; Griffin, 1993; Hunnisett, 1980; Jay, 1998; Marcus, 1992; Miller, 1995; Nestle, 1992; Sang, 1989; Sears, 1997; Tanner, 1978).

Whether or not lesbianism is an innate characteristic or a social construction of our times is an ongoing debate. The psychoanalytic essentialists who believed that lesbianism is a sickness rooted in interrupted childhood development challenged the biological essentialist's position that lesbianism is innate and cannot be changed. This dominant view was later called into question by the emergence of the social constructivists who suggested that lesbianism had not existed until social conditions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century offered women the freedom and ability to live independently of men. The stories of a growing number of lesbians provide more information to our evolving understanding of lesbianism.

My own position is that I believe in an essence of desire for the same sex. I do not believe that it is biological but rather, an essence that cannot be defined by the language we currently have available. While social construction gives us our current limited understanding regarding the term "lesbian", it provides only a vague shared understanding of women whose lives are women centered. The theories that guide my thinking are ever evolving and transforming and are described further in the following section.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this project is drawn from queer theory (Butler, 1990; Jagose, 1996; Minton, 1997) and feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 1991; Harstock, 1983; Smith, 1987).

## Queer Theory

Queer theory, a term coined by de Lauretis (1991), emerged in the early 1990's. It basically calls into question assumptions of gender and sexuality. Queer theory, which at one time promised to provide the place for the creative evolution of new understandings of identity, has since been rejected as "politically problematic" (Martindale, 1998).

Queer theory is characterized as evolving from the efforts of early gay liberation movements that originally were directed towards gaining recognition and acceptance. As the movement became more militant the focus shifted to demanding civil rights and struggling to "wrest control from non-gay identified individuals, such as medical experts and scientists, over who speaks for homosexuals" (Minton, 1997, p. 338). That strategy has essentially shifted over time from one of fighting for freedom to one that employs political strategies of resistance.

"Homosexual resistance has been directed at demonstrating the existence of a will and commitment by marginalized groups to empower themselves through the production of knowledge. Queer theory has emerged from the struggle by gay people to claim subjective agency for their own experiences, to speak in their own voices" (Minton, 1997, p. 347).

Further, Gauntlett commented that:

Queer theory suggests that identities are not fixed and do not determine who we are... It suggests that it is meaningless to talk in general about 'women' or any other group, as identities consist of so many elements that to assume that people

can be seen collectively on the basis of one shared characteristic is wrong...and proposes that we deliberately challenge all notions of fixed identity, in varied and non-predictable ways (Gauntlett, 2000, pg. 2).

Queer theory moves “beyond the minoritizing agenda of homosexual rights, and in its place focuses on the universalizing issues across the spectrum of sexuality...it is concerned with the agency of self-identities that reinvent themselves to effectively resist social regulation” (Minton, 1997, p. 349).

As queer theory continues to evolve it is the focus of various debates in the literature.

### **Feminist Standpoint Theory**

Feminist standpoint theory is derived from a Marxist approach to epistemology and further defined by feminist scholars (Harding, 1991; Harstock, 1983; Smith, 1974). Harding (1991) contends that:

knowledge is grounded in particular, historical social situations. In societies where power is organized hierarchically-- for example by class, race or gender-- there is no possibility of an Archimedean perspective, one that is disinterested, impartial, value-free, or detached from the particular, historical social relations in which everyone participates. Instead each person can achieve only a partial view of reality from the perspective of his or her own position in the social hierarchy. And such a view is not only partial but distorted by the way the relations of dominance are organized (p. 59).

Campbell and Wasco (2000) provide further elaboration of this perspective:



Working from the ontological assumption that there is no single objective truth, these theory claims that class, race, gender, and sexual orientation structure a person's understanding of reality. To survive, less powerful groups must be attuned to the culture of the dominant group. In fact, these individuals have the potential for a more complete and less distorted view of social reality precisely because of their disadvantaged position (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, p.781).

Standpoint theorists contend research must begin with the exploration of the experience of members of marginalized groups who have access to knowledge unavailable to the socially privileged. "Knowledge developed from the standpoint of "dominant social groups is particularly flawed...it omits information which could threaten the privilege of the powerful" (McNeil, 1994, p. 22).

Feminist standpoint theory asserts that women's standpoint has long been ignored or dismissed. It suggests that because women have been marginalized they have a more complete view of reality (Harding, 1987; Harstock, 1987; Smith, 1987).

Several authors cite reservations regarding feminist standpoint theory. Harding (1991) is concerned that feminist standpoint theory is a search for one true story. Judith Butler (1990), an advocate of queer theory, cautions that "feminists ought to be careful not to idealize certain experiences of gender that, in turn produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion (viii).

The goal of finding "the alternative truth" may obscure human diversity by assuming all members of a particular population share the same view and experiences,

when women's experiences differ depending on the variety of factors such as race, class, culture, age, and sexual orientation.

bell hooks (as quoted in Harding, 1987) states:

What makes feminism possible is not that women share certain kinds of experiences, for women's experiences of patriarchal oppression differ by race, class, and culture. Instead feminism names that fact that women can federate around their common resistance to all the different forms of male domination. Therefore there cannot be a "feminist standpoint" as the generator of true stories about social life (p. 187).

Cosgrove & McHugh (2000) are concerned about the manner in which researchers position themselves as arbitrators of truth and knowledge, of deciding what is or is not an authentic voice or a feminine voice (p. 823).

In spite of these criticisms, supporters of feminist standpoint theory maintain that concerns may be alleviated by conducting research from the standpoints of subgroups within oppressed groups (Harding, 1991). For the purposes of this project, I continually tried to encourage each woman to speak from her personal standpoint while consistently monitoring my own understanding of each woman's narrative and remaining aware that the participants only represented their own standpoints on lesbian experience in Calgary.

### Lesbian Experience

In an attempt to create understanding about lesbian experience, this section explores a variety of perspectives on lesbianism including some of the information from the theory section to create an historical context for the discussion.

When sexologists initially formulated the concept of women who love women in the early 1900's, they introduced the term 'sexual invert', meaning an individual with a reversal of normal, straight sexuality (Abbott et al, 1972; Darty et al, 1984; Faderman, 1981, 1991; National Museum and Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, 1996; Tanner, 1978). This description contributed to the long-held belief that lesbians are abnormal, unhealthy and potentially a threat to family life (Abbott et al, 1972; Browning, 1984; Faderman, 1981, 1991; LeVay, 1995; Marcus, 1992, Martin & Lyons, 1972; Miller, 1995).

Lesbian feminist authors have sought to reconfigure how we think of lesbian identity (Abbott et al, 1972; Bunch, 1972; Butler, 1990; Card, 1995; Crow, 2000; Goodloe, 1999; Jay, 1995; Martin et al, 1972; Jay, 1995; National Museum and Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, 1996; Owens, 1998; Rich, 1980; Sang, 1989). However, as Goodloe points out:

One of the problems with the construction of lesbian identity is that it most often takes place within the terms of the dominant discourse, which has established heterosexuality as the 'natural' or normative expression of human sexuality against which all other expressions are considered deviant and deficient (1999, p. 1).

Adrienne Rich (1980) suggests that women are naturally drawn to women in a variety of ways ranging from emotional; to romantic and/or physical relationships and that this connection is “disrupted by the dominant culture’s imposition of compulsory heterosexuality”(p. 649). Rich uses the term “lesbian continuum” to describe a broad range of woman-identified experience that may or may not include a shared sexual experience but which may take the form of intense emotional relationships, and “the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, and the giving and receiving of practical and political support” (p.649). She believes that women move along the continuum over a lifetime regardless of whether or not one identifies as lesbian.

Although Rich challenged early feminist theory suggesting that feminism of the 1970’s merely tolerated lesbianism as an alternative life-style, other authors believe that she supported an equally powerful and no less oppressive lesbian feminist movement that attempted to regulate or normalize lesbian sexuality (Basmajian et al, 1997; Butler, 1990; Cordova, 1992; Goodloe, 1999; Heche, 1999; Kennedy & Davis, 1993; Nestle, 1992). A conflict arose in the lesbian community regarding “politically correct” lesbianism, which generally meant the rejection of perceived traditional heterosexual roles in lesbian relationships (Basmajian et al, 1997; Goodloe, 1999; Heche, 1999; Kennedy et al, 1993; Nestle, 1992). This was manifested in the debates about the butch/femme identity of some lesbians.

“Redefining lesbian sexuality within feminist terms meant using the fear of being “unfeminist” or “oppressive” as a means of social control with in the feminist movement” (Goodloe, 1999, p. 3). Goodloe stated that the result of “enshrining ‘feminist’ or non-

role playing sex as normative and [implying that butch/femme relationships] are deviant is no different from the effect of the dominant culture exerting its influence over women's sexuality (p.3). Rubin (cited in Goodloe, 1999) argues that:

The question of identity is still in the hands of the dominant groups, so that a lesbian who defines herself as role-playing has less of a voice in naming her identity than the lesbian-feminists who declare her behavior "out-dated or misguided (p.3).

A current and common description of lesbian is identified by Card (1995) who believes that what

distinguishes some lesbians are what importance one attaches to one's lesbian experience, one's attitudes toward it and the extent to which it characterizes or organizes one's life. Self-identification as a lesbian, is not simply on the basis of significant lesbian experiences but usually indicates having made lesbian relationships central to one's life, having chosen to organize one's life around lesbian experience and possibilities, being committed to certain orientation of ones attention, energy flow, resources, etc. (p. 34).

The conceptualization of lesbianism has ignited an ongoing controversy about the nature of the phenomena. Those external to lesbian communities have struggled to define and find a context within which to understand lesbianism, while lesbian communities work to develop an understanding of the diversity of lesbian women.

As noted previously, the presence of butch and femme women has created a controversy unique to the lesbian community. Butch women take on what are

traditionally thought of as masculine characteristics including clothing, hair, and behaviors (Darty et al, 1984; Faderman, 1991; Goodloe, 1999; Kennedy et al, 1992; National Museum and Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, 1996; Nestle, 1987, 1992). They tend to have relationships with 'femme' women, those who take on more stereotypically feminine characteristics. The issue of butch-femme identity raises many questions with respect to the roles that these women have played in the development of lesbian identity. However, the cause of the majority of the debate and discomfort in the lesbian community has been the visibility of butch women both within and outside the lesbian community (Faderman, 1991; Goodloe, 1999; Kennedy et al, 1993; Nestle, 1987, 1992).

At the far end of the spectrum are women who lived their lives passing as men and who were not discovered to be women until after their deaths (Faderman, 1991; Kennedy et al, 1993; Marcus, 1991; Miller, 1995; Nestle, 1987, 1992). These discoveries were met with surprise and skepticism; however, when butch women are visible in a community it becomes even more controversial.

Butch women of the 1940's and 1950's tended to be described as a "working class phenomenon" and criticized for "role-playing" heterosexual roles (Faderman, 1991; Goodloe, 1999; Heche, 1999; Kennedy et al, 1993; Nestle, 1987, 1992). They have come under fire from feminists and lesbian feminists for imitating heterosexuality out of ignorance or a misguided desire to be men" (Goodloe, 1999, p. 6). In the heterosexual community, butch women may pose a threat to the status quo, while in the lesbian community, they are often ridiculed and rejected for the identity that they portray and for

the scrutiny that they bring to the community (Faderman, 1991; Heche, 1999; Kennedy et al, 1993; Nestle, 1987, 1992).

Vicinus (cited in Goodloe, 1999) points out the contradiction that “there have been times in history when it has been socially acceptable for women to fill male social and economic roles, for example during the wars but when there is not clear social need for gender-crossing, women who do so face public persecution” (p.5). Nestle (1987) claims that such role-playing, made lesbian communities so visible, actually helped pave the way for the subsequent women’s and gay liberation movements of the sixties and seventies.

Goodloe’s (1999) discussion of the role of butch and femme women suggests that it represents a challenge to heterosexuality and essentially serves the same ends as feminism: the deconstruction of patriarchal ideology” (p. 6). She believes that as:

Women began to achieve more economic and social independence we began to see some who “rejected the traditional female roles and conventions of ‘femininity’. They did not want to become like men, but would instead adopt the appearance of masculinity to signify their rejection of the male-defined traditional fore of ‘female’ (p. 6).

Various authors suggest that butch-femme identity is a step in the direction of creating new and unique relationships and redefining what it means to be masculine (Kennedy et al, 1992; Laporte, 1971; Nestle, 1987; 1992; Rubin, 1992).

Butch-femme women have been a significant part of lesbian history and may be considered the first silent lesbian activists. They had the courage to live their lives as they chose, in spite of their visibility during politically and socially oppressive times.

### **Social and Political Context for Lesbian Culture**

The recorded history of lesbian culture in Canada is sparse (Coalition for gay rights in Ontario, 1981; Kinsmen, 1996; Library of Parliament, 1996; McLean, 1977; McLeod, 1996; Miller, 1995; Ross, 1995; Smith, 1999; Wood, 2001). Therefore, in the following discussion, where events have shaped the experience of Canadian and American lesbians in similar ways, I have included a brief description of that history. It will become apparent that Canadian and American history has been intertwined in many ways. Faderman (1991) reminds us that in reviewing social history perhaps the singular most significant point is that:

Perceptions of emotional or social desires, formations of sexual categories, and attitudes concerning 'mental health' are constantly shifting - not through the discovery of objectively conceived truths, as we generally assume, but rather through social forces that have little to do with the essentiality of emotions or sex or mental health. Affectional preferences, ambitions, and even sexual experiences that are within the realm of the socially acceptable during one era may be considered sick or dangerous or antisocial during another- and in a brief space of time attitudes may shift once again, and yet again (p. 119)

Although references to love between women extend back as far as 580 BC when Sappho's famed girls' school was to have flourished on the Isle of Lesbos (Abbott et al,



1972; Faderman, 1991; Miller, 1995; National Museum and Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, 1996) the concept of lesbianism is a fairly recent development. Since there is little documentation or conceptualization of the nature of relationships between women until the last half of the nineteenth century, it is difficult to estimate the extent of “lesbianism” that may have existed over the centuries (Faderman, 1981, 1991; Miller, 1995; Sand, 1977). There is much speculation regarding the nature and extent of relationships between women who have left only traces of their lives in letters, journals, poetry, and stories (Faderman, 1981; Sand, 1977). These records provide us with a glimpse into the depth of their love and the intensity of their relationships but do not offer clear evidence of lesbian relationships, as we understand them today. Meaning and implication change over time, leaving historical documentation open to interpretation and distortion. As Miller notes, “in our search for the role models long denied us, we run the risk of imposing a gay and lesbian identity upon people who would not perceive themselves that way at all” (1995, p.xx).

Intimate relationships between women have alternately been celebrated and persecuted at different times throughout history (Abbott et al, 1972; Basmajian & Wescott, 1997, Duberman, Vicinus & Chauncey, 1989; Faderman, 1981;1991; Marcus, 1992; Miller, 1995). Before the turn of the twentieth century, “women’s intimate relationships or romantic friendships were seen as harmless and were often encouraged” (Faderman, 1991, p.16) until such time as the women met eligible males. Women were unlikely to find employment to support themselves in order to consider a long term or permanent relationship with another woman as viable.

The economic changes that accompanied industrialization supported early suffragettes as they fought for increased access to education, employment in the professions and independence. For the first time, the way became clear for women to live outside of the context of traditional families and to choose to live their lives with other women (Faderman, 1991; Miller, 1995). For a time, women's colleges were exciting communities in which women lived, loved and learned, however, a transition in attitude towards intimacy between women occurred "as women's close relationships began to appear especially threatening to the establishment of traditional marriage" (Faderman, 1991, p. 31; LeVay et al, 1995; Miller, 1995).

In the late 1800's, members of the European medical community began suggesting that same sex relationships between women were abnormal and unhealthy. It was at this time that they began labeling women who love women as sexual inverters (Faderman, 1981, 1991; Marcus, 1992; Miller, 1995; National Museum and Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, 1996; Tanner, 1978). In an interesting twist, these early researchers changed the course of same sex relationships not only because they cast suspicion on romantic friendships, but because:

They helped to make possible the establishment of lesbian communities through their theories, which separated off the lesbian from the rest of womankind and presented new concepts to describe certain feelings and preferences that had before been within the spectrum of 'normal' female experiences (Faderman, 1991, p. 35).

In North America, the medical profession of the early twentieth century felt compelled to inform the rest of society of the dangers and the extent of sexual inversion or homosexuality. The unanticipated result of this action was that those who were drawn to same sex relationships became aware that there were others like them (Faderman, 1991, Lauritsen & Thorstad, 1979; Miller, 1995).

Once they knew [they] were a sizable minority, they could start looking for each other.... That information carried with it potential political and personal benefits. First in Europe and later in America, it encouraged those who wished to define themselves as homosexuals to organize publicly (Faderman, 1991, p. 59).

Although the 1920's saw the development of several communities of women who identified themselves as lesbians, for the most part women who lived outside of large urban centers were isolated and had little, if any, knowledge of others like themselves (Duberman et al, 1989; Faderman, 1991; Miller, 1995). Several events appear to have influenced the perception and acceptance of same-sex relationships during this decade. The voice of Sigmund Freud began to infiltrate America suggesting that one's libido determined an uncontrollable need for sexual gratification, which could be attained in a myriad of ways. So began a new form of sexual freedom (Faderman, 1991; Marcus, 1992; Miller, 1995; Tanner, 1978). The demands of World War I meant that men left home to fight for their country, requiring women to become more active in war service or working in jobs vacated by soldiers. These circumstances enabled women to spend more time together as they gained a sense of self-sufficiency and observed an atmosphere of sexual freedom (Faderman, 1991; LeVay et al, 1995).

At a time generally characterized by “young American intellectuals, bohemians, and generic nonconformists [who] were determined to rout with a vengeance the last vestiges of Victorianism in the country” (Faderman, 1991, p. 64), these new attitudes towards sexuality were in sharp contrast to the traditional values of the previous decades. By challenging the prevailing social norms, lesbians were seen as a threat to the natural order. Lesbians experienced the oppressive nature of the morality keepers at the same time they were learning that opportunities existed for them to live as they chose. In spite of the repressive climate, underground lesbian and gay communities developed in large urban centers across America (Basmajian et al, 1997; Faderman, 1991; Miller, 1995; Marcus, 1992). Authors such as Faderman (1991), Kennedy et al, 1993; LeVay et al, (1995) found that throughout the 1930’s, working class lesbians gathered and socialized in public bars. Middle class lesbians, on the other hand, appear to have been meeting on university campuses and organizing private parties.

The depression of the 1930’s did significantly impact women’s opportunities to establish relationships and live independently of men. As jobs become scarce, women were pressured by society to leave their positions in the workforce or in educational institutions to create more opportunities for men. Much anger was directed towards those who refused to give up their livelihood. Historians suggest that large numbers of women likely chose the safety of conventional marriage and family life rather than risk the stigma and uncertain economic future inherent in living with another woman (Faderman, 1991; Kennedy et al, 1993; Marcus, 1992).

During this time, researchers continued to study the characteristics of lesbian women who were incarcerated in prisons or psychiatric hospitals promoted a picture of lesbians as pathetic, sad, depressed, neurotic and suicidal individuals who suffered from arrested development (Abbott et al, 1972; Faderman, 1991; LeVay et al, 1995; Martin et al, 1993, Tanner, 1978). In spite of this dismal portrayal, some lesbians discovered that they could create fulfilling lives that would not end in despair and suicide (Faderman, 1991; Marcus, 1992).

The 1940's began with the promise of opportunity for lesbian women as American men were once again called to war. Early in the decade, women were expected to re-enter the workforce and again experienced the rewards of financial independence. The lesbian subculture grew rapidly during this time as various industries created opportunities for non-traditional work and adventure for women. For example, women working in factories were allowed to wear trousers, and for the first time it became permissible for women to wear pants in public. Some authors suggest that this seemingly small fashion change ultimately eased the way for what would become known as "butch and femme" identities within the lesbian community (Faderman, 1991; Kennedy et al, 1993; Nestle, 1988, 1992). The military, in particular, created a meeting ground by bringing women together within the confines of a unique work and social setting (Faderman, 1991; Morgan, 1970; Miller, 1995; Shiltz, 1993).

When the war was over, the U.S. government unwittingly contributed to the establishment of lesbian and gay communities in large American cities by loading thousands of homosexual personnel on 'queer ships' and sent them with 'undesirable

discharges' to the nearest U.S. port" (Faderman, 1991, p. 126). Many lesbians choose to stay in the larger urban centers rather than return to smaller oppressed locations (Faderman, 1991).

After the war, America was once again hit by a wave of conservatism that demanded societal conformity to traditional gender roles. "Lesbians were particularly affected by the growing interest in mandating conformity through what was promoted as 'mental health'" (Faderman, 1991, p. 130). Women's resistance to return to prewar submissiveness fueled the battle between the sexes. Lesbians representing the ultimate rejection of modern day values were diagnosed with a mental disorder. Psychoanalysts reinterpreted Freud's original belief that the root of lesbianism was neurosis rendered women deeply unhappy and often unable to acknowledge their depression. This group of professionals maintained that lesbians could be cured if motivated (Darty et al, 1984; Faderman, 1991; Grahn, 1978; Tanner, 1978). The 1940's was a decade in which many lesbians were locked away in psychiatric hospitals or sent to convents as a way to demand conformity to societal mores (Abbott et al, 1972; Faderman, 1991, Martin et al, 1972; Morgan, 1970). The need for secrecy and invisibility was further reinforced. In stark contrast to this, a growing lesbian community continued to thrive underground in women's bars across the United States (Faderman, 1991; Kaiser, 1997; Kennedy et al, 1993).

As the United States struggled to find its social equilibrium, in the 1950's, a new era was dawning. This period was characterized by the irrational persecution of individuals based on their sexual orientation. What started out as an attempt to protect

America from the infiltration of a Communist enemy turned into a modern day witch-hunt targeting homosexuals. The time was known as the McCarthy era (Faderman, 1991; Kaiser, 1997; Miller, 1995 Marcus, 1992) and homosexuals were said “to represent a security risk to governmental employment and to be generally unsuitable...meaning that their sexual orientation is so contrary to the normal accepted standards of social behavior that people who engage in that type of activity are looked upon as outcasts by society” (Faderman, 1991, p. 141).

The fear and paranoia across the continent drove many lesbians underground, further increasing their isolation.

An unexpected validation and loose link to other women appeared in the form of the pulp fiction novels that proliferated during this time with such titles as “The Love that Dares not Speak its Name” or “Forbidden Love” (Bannon, 1959, 1962; Faderman, 1991, Gershick, 1998; Pettigrew, Stikeman, Weissman, & Fernie, 1993). Regardless of the fact that the stories generally ended in tragedy for the lesbians, the stories and the pictures of women together on the covers of the novels indicated the existence of other women who love women.

While much of America was succumbing to the fear created by the political climate, lesbian and gay communities began to organize. In reaction to the extreme oppression of the times, the first gay or lesbian organizations in the U.S., the Mattachine Society (1951) and the Daughters of Bilitus (DOB) (1955), were formed (Abbott et al, 1972; Crow, 2000; Duberman et al, 1989; Jagose, 1996; Martin et al, 1972). The DOB was originally founded as a “social club that would provide an alternative to the lesbian

bars of the 1950's" (Jagose, 1996, p. 26). It was the first organization dedicated to the support of lesbians and "advocated an assimilationist set of values recommending that lesbians dress in a recognizably feminine ways in order to increase their chances of better paid employment" (Jagose, 1996, p. 27). This group produced and distributed the first lesbian newsletter, which served to inform and connect members of the organization (The Ladder, 1956). DOB did not considered themselves an activist group initially, rather, they saw themselves as a supportive network of women engaged in assisting women to adjust to society (Abbott & Love, 2000; The Ladder, 1956; Martin et al, 1972). The group's purpose was clearly spelled out in the first issue of the newsletter as:

Education of the variant, with particular emphasis on the psychological and sociological aspects, to enable her to understand herself and make her adjustment to society in all its social, civic and economic implications by establishing and maintaining a library of both fiction and non-fiction on the sex deviant theme: by sponsoring public discussions on pertinent subjects to be conducted by leading members of the legal, psychiatric, religious and other profession; by advocating a mode of behavior and dress acceptable to society (The Ladder, 1(1), 1956).

The newsletters reveal that the organization identified and educated their membership regarding a variety of issues over it's twenty year run. The Ladder contained a variety of features ranging from political essays, news announcements, reviews of books, plays and movies with a homosexual theme, correspondence from the membership, notices about workshops and conferences, reviews of conferences and essays on current issues regarding homosexuality were printed. As the newsletter



developed, columns by regular writers appeared and creative writing in the form of stories and poetry was included. Some of the contributing authors included Del Martin, Rita Mae Brown, Jane Rule, and Mary Renault. The articles reflected the times and ranged from “What To Do In Case of Arrest” to “Raising Children in a Deviant Relationship”.

“In 1970, THE LADDER broke its ties with DOB in order to change officially from a lesbian periodical to a feminist magazine openly supportive of lesbians” (Weitz, 1984, p. 243). Over time the newsletter grew to a more glossy, professional look and shifted its focus and purpose, becoming more politically involved in transforming dominant concepts of lesbianism. This is reflected in the change in mandate as printed in the organizations newsletter.

September, 1970 THE LADDER, published by lesbians and directed to ALL women seeking full human dignity, had its beginning in 1956. It was then the only Lesbian publication in the U. S. It is now the only women’s magazine openly supporting Lesbians, a forceful minority within the women’s liberation movement.

Initially THE LADDER’s goal was limited to achieving the rights accorded heterosexual women, that is full second-class citizenship. In the 1950’s women as a whole were as yet unaware of their oppression. The Lesbian knew. And she wondered silently when her sisters would realize that they too share many of the Lesbian’s handicaps, those that pertained to being a woman.

THE LADDER's purpose today is to raise all women to full human status, with all of the rights and responsibilities this entails; to include ALL women, whether Lesbian or heterosexual ([14], 11 & 12, 1970).

The Daughters of Bilitis strove to create safety for their members and developed strategies such as promising protection of their membership lists and encouraging members to use false names on registration documents. These became common practices amongst early lesbian clubs and organizations across the continent (Abbott et al, 1972; Faderman, 1991; Martin et al, 1972).

During the 1940's and 1950's, the most visible segment of the lesbian community in larger cities tended to be in the bars or on the softball field (Adelman, 1986; Faderman, 1991; Kennedy et al, 1993, Kinsmen, 1996). Each provided the opportunity to meet and socialize with other women locally and or while visiting other cities. For some, the bars were a relatively safe place for some lesbians to meet each other and to see reflections of their own identities. To many other lesbians, the bars were frightening and threatening. They were often characterized as catering to a rough crowd who consumed large amounts of alcohol (Faderman, 1991; Gershick, 1998; Kennedy et al, 1993; Pettigrew et al, 1993). One of the long-term consequences of the bars as a focal point for the lesbian community has been the high level of alcoholism (Abbott et al, 1972; Faderman, 1991; Miller, 1995; Swallow, 1983).

The culture of the bars of the 1950's and 1960's was distinctive in the roles and rules that governed its environment. Lesbian identities fell into either butch or femme with prescribed rules of behavior for each and for the relationships they formed

(Adelman, 1986; Faderman, 1991; Gershick, 1998; Grahn, 1978; Goodloe, 1999; Heche, 1999; Kennedy et al, 1993; Miller, 1995; Nestle, 1987; 1992). Significant pressure was placed on women to fit a particular role and there was clear contempt for those who failed to identify themselves one way or another, these women, referred to as “kiki”, someone who didn’t know her own mind. (Darty et al, 1984; Faderman, 1991; Kennedy et al, 1993; National Museum and Archive of the Lesbian and Gay Community, 1996).

It is interesting that there appears to be a stigma about working class butch-femme women while there tends to be an awe or respect of middle and upper socioeconomic class lesbians who often adopted similar role delineation, for example Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein (Faderman, 1981; 1991). Since many bars regularly faced harassment by the local police, women who feared for their jobs or family ties tended to steer clear of them (Adelman, 1986; Faderman, 1991; Kehoe, 1989). Socializing for professional and/or wealthy lesbians tended to take the form of private parties or for some events organized by DOB. This group of lesbians tended to blend into the heterosexual culture (Adelman, 1986; Faderman, 1979; 1981; 1991; Gershick, 1998; Jagose, 1996; Kehoe, 1989; Kennedy et al, 1993; Kinsmen, 1996).

As the 50’s faded and the 1960’s arrived, a new and developing sense of entitlement grew across the culture. The civil rights movement, the second wave of the women’s movement and gay liberationists began to demand equal rights in a nation that had, heretofore, denied their equality (Abbott et al, 1972; Bunch, 1972; D’Emilio, 1983; Duberman, 1993; Faderman, 1991; Kaiser, 1997; Miller, 1995, McLean, 1977; Morgan, 1970; Radicalesbians, 1970). Nevertheless, although lesbian women qualified for

membership in both the gay liberation movement and the women's movement, they often felt inadequately represented by both (Abbott et al, 1972; *Ain't I a Woman*, 1970; Bunch, 1972; Card, 1995; Crete, 1990; D'Emilio, 1983; McLeod, 1996; *Radicalesbians*, 1970; Smith, 1999; Stone, 1990).

Many lesbians did not identify with gay men and believed that they needed to fight for far more than the equality with their oppressors that they perceived gay men to be challenging (Abbott et al, 2000; D'Emilio, 1983; Jagose, 1996; Kinsmen, 1996; *Radicallesbians*, 1970). While lesbians and gay men shared many similar struggles in relation to their sexual orientation, "many of the topics that preoccupied the discussions [gay liberation] failed to strike at the heart of the lesbian existence" (D'Emilio, 1983, p.93). Many lesbians began to recognize that lesbian issues would be subsumed by issues central to the gay men's community in gay liberation organizations. "Gay men, in so far as they are men, are part of an oppressive social structure which lesbian feminism is committed to overthrowing" (Jagose, 1996, p.50).

On the other hand, although many lesbians saw themselves as feminists, they were often not welcomed into the women's movement by those who feared they would discredit feminism (Abbott et al, 1972; *Ain't I a Woman*, 1972; Bunch, 1972; Cordova, 1992; Crete, 1990; Faderman, 1991; Hollibaugh & Moraga, 1992; Johnston, 1973; McLeod, 1996; Miller, 1995; Morgan, 1970; Ross, 1995; Stone, 1990).

The feminist movement was careful to distance itself officially from lesbianism, feeling that such an association would damage what was seen as the more fundamental project of securing equal rights for women. Betty Friedan, a

pioneering second-wave feminist...saw militant lesbianism as potentially undermining feminist gains and has been credited with naming the nascent lesbian movement 'a lavender menace' (Jagose, 1996, p. 45).

The women's movement was focused on ending the oppression of women. The issues being addressed included abortion, birth control, childcare education and labor discrimination (Ain't I a Woman, July, 1972; Dixon, 2000; Ladder, September, 1970; Morgan, 1970). Although lesbians stood to benefit from gains made on many of these fronts, a number of lesbian feminists indicated that their needs and issues were different from those of heterosexual women.

The meeting Friday night was entitled "The Lesbian in the Feminist Movement" and was to me one of those sad experiences where people divide themselves from one another either due to misunderstandings or alienation...The gay people gathered to discuss their reaction to Ti-Grace Atkinson who had spoken to the DOB the night before. The fact that Ti-Grace had not been able to deal with lesbianism...caused a great deal of hostility and gay women felt that women's liberation people were more concerned with day care, equal job opportunities, and a general equal respect status and still live with a man...[it looks like] women's liberation is for straight, married women. (Ain't I a Woman, July, 1972, p. 6). This struggle is ongoing.

The values of the sixties shifted from one of repressive attitudes towards sexuality to a sexual revolution that advocated new-found freedom in many areas (Duberman, 1993; Faderman, 1991; Darty et al, 1984; Rich, 1980;). This open climate contributed to

lesbian feminists breaking down barriers and achieving increasing acceptance of new roles and opportunities. By contrast, many lesbians still remained uninvolved in the politics of liberation and were often antagonistic and unsupportive of radical lesbian feminists drive to change the world (Ettorre, 1980; Faderman, 1991; Heche, 1999, Ross, 1995; Stone, 1990).

Ettorre (1980) in her study of lesbian consciousness identifies four types of lesbian practice: straight, status quo, reformists and marginal lesbians (p.131). The research indicates that consistent with apolitical consciousness, straight lesbians accept societies definition of lesbian and tend to live within the confines of societies traditional lesbian images; often adopting butch/femme identities. “They offer no challenge to social norms but simply collude with society’s definitions” (p. 131). Ettorre further noted that:

Status quo lesbians do not want to draw attention to lesbianism and so live a fairly closeted existence. This group tends to remain politically unaware yet in spite of their rejection of societies traditions consider themselves ‘normal people’....

Lesbianism becomes an integrated part of their lives, yet, they do not want to upset the conformist stance of their lives by becoming more involved in the lesbian ghetto...Reformist lesbians challenge traditional views of lesbianism and attempt to bring about some type of societal change on behalf of lesbians. They tend to be involved and visible in lesbian communities. When confronted with a particular issue they effectively use their leadership skills to form resistance groups (1980).

Marginalized lesbians tend to be those women whom other lesbians view as not being true lesbians or as not fully committed to lesbianism. At the time this research was completed that included women with children, bisexual women and celibate lesbians (Ettorre, 1980).

This framework for conceptualizing lesbian consciousness is helpful when considering the various communities of lesbians and their relationship to each other, to gay liberationists and to the women's movement.

Tensions between the gay community and the heterosexual community in New York exploded in 1969, resulting in the Stonewall Riots. Although much important progress had been made in the preceding years, this event has been identified as the beginning of the modern-day gay liberation, (Lauritsen et al, 1974; Miller, 1995). The gay and lesbian community rapidly became more visible and politically active in both the United States and Canada (Abbott et al, 1974; D'Emilio, 1983; Kinsmen, 1996; Marcus, 1992; Martin et al, 1972; McLean, 1977; McLeod, 1996; Millar, 1995, Nestle, 1992; Witt, Thomas & Marcus, 1995; Wolf, 1979).

The 1970's saw the rise of more militant organizations, increased communication and greater visibility of the gay liberation and women's liberation movement. A significant victory was achieved in 1973, when after much lobbying by lesbians and gay men, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-II (DSM-II) (Faderman, 1991; Kinsmen, 1996; Miller, 1995, Marcus, 1992).

It was during this time that activists within the women's liberation movements and lesbian feminists began to speak out and demand recognition and respect for their unique experience of oppression (Atkinson, 1969; Bunch, 1972; Chicago Women's Liberation Union, 1972; MaAfee & Wood, 1960; Morgan, 1970; Radicalesbians, 1970; Redstockings Manifesto, quoted in Crow, 2000) . Documents produced during this time reveal that lesbians were attempting to define lesbianism, identify issues specific to their lives, and struggling to locate themselves in relation to both the gay liberation and women's movement. Political stances ranged from groups who chose to remain invisible and offer support to lesbians to adapt to society (Abbott et al, 2000; The Ladder, 1970), to those who struggled to work together with heterosexual women in the name of women's liberation (Abbott et al, 2000, Ain't I a Woman, 1972; Morgan, 1970) to those who advocated for a radical change in the patriarchal structure of society achieved through all women rejecting heterosexuality and working together to bring down the patriarchy (Bunch, 1972; Johnston, 1973). Charlotte Bunch (1972) clearly believed that "lesbians must become feminists and fight against woman oppression, just as feminists must become Lesbians if they hope to end male supremacy" (p. 2).

In lesbian communities, the ideals of the lesbian feminists led to the development of many women/lesbian driven institutions. There was a proliferation of newsletters published by lesbian liberation groups. These modes of communication served to connect various groups around the U.S. and provided opportunities for activists to disseminate position papers to lesbian communities (Ain't I a Woman, 1970; The Furies 1970, The Ladder, 1956 -72). The 1970's saw an explosion of women's music



companies, presses, publishers and small businesses catering to the interests and needs of women (Aldridge, 1976; Faderman, 1991, *Feminist Bookstore News*, 1979; Grahn, 1978; Griffen, 1993; Miller, 1995; Morgan, 1986; Near, 1990; Nestle, 1992; Tilchen, 1984). Although many were short-lived, they succeeded in providing women with proof that, as lesbians, they could have an impact on the world around them.

Many lesbians-feminists of the 1970's envisioned a time when their values would be recognized and embraced by the rest of the world. Images of communal living, women-centered spirituality, a separatist existence and a lesbian nation led to a splintering of lesbian communities as many of the dreams evolved into rigid definitions of political correctness (Abbott et al, 1972; Bunch, 1972; Chicago Women's Liberation Union, 1972; Darty et al, 1984; Faderman, 1991; Goodloe, 1999; Johnston, 1973; Tilchen, 1984; Wolf, 1977). Although few of these dreams evolved in the manner in which they were originally conceived, new opportunities for communities of women continued to develop.

As the 1980's unfolded, new debates similar to the political correctness issues of the 1970's arose around lesbian sexuality. Controversial topics such as pornography and sado/masochism took center stage in the lesbian community (Faderman, 1991; Hall, 1996; Linden, Ragano, Russell & Star, 1982; Miller, 1995). This decade also saw an increase in the number of resources available to lesbian communities in smaller cities across the U. S. and Canada. Lesbian mothers' groups, drop-ins, potluck dinner groups, social and/or sports organizations, rodeo circuits, retreats, information lines, bookstores,

and travel clubs emerged to meet the needs of a growing and diverse community (Darty et al, 1984; Faderman, 1991; Ross, 1995; Stone, 1990).

It has taken the better part of a century for women who love women to begin to claim a place in society and in history. Although the situation for many lesbians has vastly improved over the past 100 years, there are still women who live in fear of identifying their sexual preference and who do not feel free to live openly with a female partner.

In spite of the fact that women's liberation and gay liberation were very active in the 1960's and 1970's in the United States, few lesbians in Calgary appear to have been aware of the political shifts occurring across the border. Even as Canadian lesbians began to organize and communicate with each other across the country, there is little documented evidence of a strong involvement of local Calgary women.

### **The Canadian Context**

The history of lesbians and gays in Canada is very difficult to track. As Kinsmen noted:

Gay and lesbian oppression has led to the destruction of many first-hand accounts, or to their never having been recorded or written down because they would provide evidence of 'homosexuality' with possible damaging consequences for those individuals...or these records have been destroyed by those who came later to preserve (or more accurately produce) the heterosexual 'purity' of the individual's public record (1996).

Much of the documented evidence is contained in police records, government reports, newspaper articles, medical and psychiatric discourse and sex-advice literature (Kinsmen, 1996; MacLeod, 1996). The nature of this information suggests the existence of homosexual activity in various areas across the country as far back as 1648 when records indicate that a young man was convicted of a “crime against nature” (Kinsmen, 1996). Further:

In the nineteenth century, there were also many reports of passing or cross-dressing white women in Canada. They cross-dressed to gain access to the economic and social privileges enjoyed by men, and perhaps also to establish intimate and erotic relationships with other women (Kinsmen, 1996, p. 123).

During World War II, the concern regarding lesbian relationships within the military was significant enough to warrant specific prohibitions against lesbianism, yet there are still few documented stories or histories from Canadian women in the military (Kinsmen, 1996). The late 1940's saw the first Canadian gay activist emerge when Jim Egan began writing letters to various publications and government committees protesting the treatment of homosexuals in Canada (Kinsmen, 1996; McLeod, 1996). During that time a number of mainstream bars began to be identified as locations where gays and lesbians gathered in at least two of Canada's largest cities, Montreal and Toronto however, it wasn't until the early 1960's that the first gay identified establishment opened in Toronto.

In spite of the scant documented evidence of gays and lesbians in Canada prior to 1950, the extensive lengths to which the Canadian government went to control and

prevent homosexual existence underlines the intense fear and repugnance held by society during these years. In the late 1950's, representatives of the Canadian government believed that male homosexuals could pose a potential threat to the security of the nation. As the hysteria of the American experience infiltrated Canada, Canadian homosexuals experienced similar persecution to that of the McCarthy era in the U.S. during the 1950's and 1960's. In 1959, the RCMP Security Service, under Cabinet authority, undertook a "massive hunt to identify homosexuals in the Canadian civil service, and to eliminate them as security risks" (McLeod, 1996, p. 12). They devised a contraption dubbed the "fruit machine". An individual was seated in a chair and shown a variety of pictures of nude males and females while a camera mounted on the ceiling recorded the size of his iris (McLean, 1977). The procedure purported to identify homosexual men by measuring the change in the size of the iris as they were shown pictures. While the procedure is almost certainly ineffective, the fear that it instilled in gay civil employees of the time is still evident today (Anonymous, personal correspondence, 1995).

The early 1960's in Toronto were characterized by police harassment, bar raids, continuing opposition from fundamentalist religious organizations and discriminatory practices in the work and housing situations of homosexuals (Coalition for Gay Rights in Ontario, 1981; Kinsmen, 1996; McLean, 1977; McLeod, 1996). McLean (1977), an activist of the time, observed "gay liberation emerged during the early 1960's as gays [became] conscious that their problems [were] social in origin, a product of specific social institutions, and attitudes flowing from these institutions" (p. 4). It appears that lesbians and gay men have worked side by side to advance their rights over the past four

decades. Although dealing with a much smaller population, Canada has kept pace with the United States and sometimes led the way in advancing the rights of the homosexual population.

In 1963, “the Committee on Social Hygiene was formed to investigate the extent of homosexuality in eastern Canada and to quietly lobby for reforms to the Canadian Criminal Code (C.C.C.)” (MacLeod, 1996, p. 5). In 1964, a private member’s bill called for modification of the C.C.C. to decriminalize homosexual acts between consenting adults in private. The bill never reached the floor of the House of Commons: some speculate that the Committee on Social Hygiene influenced this decision based on a concern regarding potential negative publicity (Kinsmen, 1996; McLeod, 1996).

Although homosexuality was still illegal under the Criminal Code and lesbians and gays were not protected under Human Rights Legislation, quasi-support for the community seemed to be forthcoming on several surprising fronts. In 1964, the Toronto Daily Star reported that, “a joint meeting of the Catholic legal and medical guilds held at Osgoode Hall agreed unanimously that although homosexuality is a sin, it ought not to be a crime” (McLeod, 1996, p. 3). About the same time, an Anglican minister advocated that “criminal law should be changed to permit homosexual acts in private between consenting adults, and that the church should encourage stable unions between homosexuals (McLeod, p.12).

In the midsixties, MacLean’s magazine became the first mainstream publication to print a full-scale, two-part series with a generally positive view of homosexuality. The article was entitled “The Homosexual Next Door; A Sober Appraisal of a New Social

Phenomenon” (McLeod, 1996, p. 3). “The articles were later reprinted in a pamphlet of the same name...in the Mattachine Review Reprint Series” (McLeod, 1996, p.3) indicating an established connection between the American gay liberation organizations and organizers in Canada. Inspired by the activities of the Mattachine Society in the United States, the Association for Social Knowledge (ASK), Canada’s first homophile organization was officially established to “help society to understand and accept variations from the sexual norm” (McLeod, 1996, p.7; Kinsmen, 1996). Gay men and lesbians equally represented the membership.

Gay and lesbian communities continued to make incremental steps towards their goal of gaining recognition and acceptance throughout the 1960’s. Each step forward seemed to contain a slight slip backwards. In 1966, section 61 of the White Paper on immigration policy recommended that homosexuals “could safely be deleted from the specific list of prohibited persons not allowed entry into Canada” (McLeod, 1996, p. 26). The next year, “The United State Supreme Court ruled, in a 6 to 3 decision that homosexuals were ineligible for admission to the United States (McLeod, 1996, p.30). This had implications for cross border travel for lesbians.

In 1969, The Report of the Royal Commission on Security (The MacKenzie Commission) recommended that homosexuals be allowed to work for the Public Service Commission, but that they “should not normally be granted clearance to higher levels, should not be recruited if there is a possibility that they may require such clearance in the course of their career and should certainly not be posted to sensitive positions overseas” (McLeod, 1996, p. 43).

As the Liberal government moved in the direction of decriminalizing homosexuality, great opposition arose from fundamentalists, some members of the psychiatric community and the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police. The premise, however, used to support the change was that homosexual behavior was not a legal matter but a psychiatric one (McLeod, 1996; Smith, 1999).

As the political lobbyists persisted, the lesbian and gay community continued to celebrate their successes and struggle against social constraints from the outside world. Canada's first community social center run by a homophile organization opened in Vancouver in 1966. At the opposite end of the country, as Quebec's Liquor Control Board refused to renew licenses to gay bars and clubs in Montreal in an effort to clean up Montreal's image before Expo 67 (McLeod, 1996; McLean, 1977). As well, in the same year the Canadian Nurse published an article entitled "Homosexuality among Women" describing lesbianism as an addiction, a deviation and retarded psychosocial development (McLeod, 1996).

The radical feminist organization New Feminists (NF), was formed in Toronto at the end of 1969. This group, which operated until 1973, failed to adequately address the issue of lesbianism or lesbian oppression (McLeod, 1996; Ross, 1995). "Members who protested the groups anti-lesbian stance were expelled from membership" (MacLeod, 1996, p. 40).

The 1970's witnessed a more militant approach by the lesbian and gay community. The first gay and lesbian march on Parliament Hill occurred in August, 1971, when a coalition of gay and lesbian groups marched on Ottawa and presented a 13

page brief “containing ten points calling for law reform and changes in public policy relating to homosexuals to the federal government (McLeod, 1997).

It asked that the terms ‘gross indecency and indecent act be removed from the C.C.C. and be replaced by a list of specific offences, and that gay people be allowed to serve openly in the Canadian Armed Forces” (Duberman, 1989; Kinsmen, 1996; McLeod, 1996; Smith, 1999).

In the 1970’s, Canadian gay and lesbian communities began to organize nationally although most of the political activity continued to occur in the larger center such as Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. Lesbians began holding exclusively lesbian conferences and the first lesbian journal was published in Canada under the apt name, Long Time Coming (McLeod, 1996). The Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission became the first to call for the inclusion of sexual orientation in human rights legislation...and the Toronto City Council became the first to pass a resolution banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in city jobs. They were also the first legislative body to recognize gays and lesbians as a legitimate minority with a right to equal opportunity in employment (McLeod, p. 141)

Several cities began having gay pride political rallies. These were turbulent times as lesbians struggled to find their place in relation to gay liberation and women’s liberation organizations (Ain’t I a Woman, 1972; Creet, 1990; Kinsmen, 1996; Ross, 1995). Many withdrew their support of from gay liberation, believing that the protests ignored the concerns of women and focused on fighting gay male oppression (Kinsmen, 1996; McLeod, 1999; Simkin, 2001, personal correspondence). Similar to the experience



of American lesbians, Canadian lesbians experienced difficulty having a voice within the women's movement (Creet, 1990; Taylor, 2001, personal correspondence). Lesbians tackled a variety of issues including defining lesbianism, the diversity represented across lesbian communities, sexuality, aging, organizing in smaller centers, classism, racism, disabilities, mothering, disabilities, coming out, legal issues and lesbian visibility (Carousel, 1970 - 1974; Ross, 1995; Stone, 1990)

In spite of the ongoing political struggles on some levels, a national gay and lesbian organization was formed to discuss political action. Representatives from BC, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Quebec and Nova Scotia attended the initial meeting in Ottawa.

The past two decades have seen the continued struggle for equal rights for gays and lesbians. Between 1983 and 1991, MP Svend Robinson introduced a bill to the House of Commons that would have inserted "sexual orientation" into the Canadian Human Rights Act. All of these bills are defeated (CBC, 2001). The 1990's were characterized by a series of challenges by the gay and lesbian community such as including sexual orientation in the Canadian Human Rights Act, redefining marriage to include anything other than a man and a woman, access to the same benefits and obligations as opposite-sex common-law couples and equal access to benefits from social programs to which they contribute (CBC, 2001). The most significant changes came in 1996 when the government amended the Canadian Human Rights Act to explicitly prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Lesbian and gay communities have made some remarkable strides in Canada since the 1960's, in spite of the oppressive social and political climate in the country.

Although changes are occurring across the country, Alberta has become well known for its lack of leadership in the area of extending rights and protection to gays and lesbians.

The context for this oral history project is Calgary, Alberta in the 1960's and '70's. At that time groups of individuals serendipitously began to develop pockets of refuge outside of the countries major cities: Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. These growing lesbian and gay communities appeared to have had limited contact or knowledge of each other.

### **Lesbian History in Alberta**

At this point our knowledge of gay and lesbian communities in Alberta during the 1950's and into the 1960's, indicates that they essentially existed only in Calgary and Edmonton. There is no documentation of a formal organization and no indication of any regular communication between the two cities with regard to lesbian or gay events.

Alberta's first gay and lesbian liberation organization appeared in Edmonton in 1971 and was known as the Gay Alliance Toward Equality (GATE). They developed a drop-in center, 24-hour information service, counseling phone line, speaker's bureau and a library. Their early activities included lobbying the Alberta government to amend the Alberta Bill of Rights and the Individual Rights Protection Act to outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation and asking candidates about gay rights during the 1972 federal and provincial election campaigns (McLeod, p. 72). Small gains were measured by the success of individuals. For example in 1975, in Grand Prairie, an openly lesbian mother was awarded custody of her child; the first time that this had occurred in Canada.

Although there is little documented history of the lesbian community in Alberta, it is clear that groups of lesbians and gay men were in contact. Somehow, individuals identified the need for a drop-in center and a counseling phone line and organized the development of these resources.

### Calgary Context

During the 1950's and 1960's, Calgary was a small, conservative city situated in the middle of the bible belt. Two newspaper clippings represent the prevailing attitudes of local political figures towards homosexuality in the sixties. Clearly tolerance and understanding were not the message being sent to the citizens of Calgary.

In response to the proposed Bill C-150, Calgary police chief Ken McIver declared that decriminalizing homosexual acts between consenting adults in private would represent a decay in Canadian society. McIver described homosexuality as "horrible, vicious and terrible thing. We do not need this in our country."

(Appendix G)

In 1969, as amendments to the Criminal Code Bill C-150 were being debated in House of Commons, Eldon Wooliams, the MP from Calgary North was quoted in the Toronto Star newspaper as saying, "I do not want this kind of debauchery in our nation" (McLeod, 1996, p. 41).

In spite of the repressive attitudes surrounding them in Calgary, the lesbians and gay men of the 1960's established informal meeting places in a number of bars in local hotels. The gay men could be would gather in the Carlton Hotel on 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue SW or across the street at the piano bar in the basement of the Palliser Hotel. Some men

frequented the Red Fox at the Empire Hotel, a little further away from central downtown Calgary (Maxwell, personal correspondence, 1997). Lesbians tended to gather and be welcomed by management in the backroom of the Cecil Hotel on 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue SW or up on the north hill in the bar at the Beacon Hotel on 16<sup>th</sup> Avenue NW (Anonymous, personal correspondence, 1998).

In 1975, Gay Information and Resources Calgary (GIRC) opened (McLeod, 1996). The Calgary Herald refused to print an advertisement for GIRC reasoning that “the Herald is a family medium, and it’s going to stay that way.” The Albertan, the Herald’s major competitor, printed the ad without comment. GIRC sought the help of the Alberta Human Rights Commission and the Alberta Press Council but to no avail (McLeod, 1996, p. 227). The conservative nature of the city and the province held strong well into the new millennium.

In the year 2001, Alberta has not yet amended its human rights legislation to prohibit discrimination against lesbians and gay men, have recently announced that lesbians and gays are not eligible to foster children and have passed a bill which states that the province will invoke the notwithstanding clause if a court redefines marriage to include anything other than a man and a woman (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2001).

Within this context, it becomes even more astounding that the lesbian and gay community in Calgary began developing silently and in isolation in the 1960’s. At the time, information about lesbianism was non-existent and although it was becoming more readily available elsewhere, it was not easily accessible in this city.

### **Rationale for Collecting Lesbian Oral History**

The literature review has created a context within which to consider the stories of the participants of this project. The current debate related to the origin of lesbianism, an understanding of the concept of lesbian and a discussion of characteristics unique to lesbian communities have been presented together with an overview of the social and political influences impacting the evolution and the identity of lesbian communities within Calgary.

The current knowledge about lesbian women in Calgary is sketchy and incomplete. The information is not easy to locate because life experience has taught lesbians to live invisibly within the dominant culture. The very existence of lesbians within our city leads to many questions that I will be exploring.

I made a couple of assumptions at the outset of this project. The project is based on the conviction that it is crucial to document the history of lesbian women in Calgary. The documentation of history of this marginalized and here-to-fore invisible population challenges traditional accounts of life in Calgary and provides a broader perspective of the makeup of the city.

A second assumption is that social work is an appropriate profession to undertake this exploratory research. This is true for two reasons. Social work has long been concerned for the well-being of individuals and advocated for social change and reform on behalf of oppressed peoples (Reamer, 1994; Van Den Bergh, 1998; Yelaja, 1985). Turner (1985), in his 'Introduction to Social Work Practice in Canada' states that an understanding of people leads to responsible and effective intervention. Second, it is

important that social workers understand the history and the life experiences of lesbian women in order to develop services and resources that are appropriate and relevant to their needs. The “growing interest in qualitative research in social work indicates a willingness of the profession to understand more about the subjective experiences of lesbians and to explore the meaning given those experiences by the participants” (Golie & Davis, 1998, p.1).

Lesbians are a marginalized population who continue to live in the shadows. It is time that the lesbian community claim its rich history and be recognized as an integral part of the population of Calgary.

### **Chapter Summary**

Our understanding of lesbianism has evolved over the past one hundred years. Women who love women have alternately been encouraged to look to one another for support and love and discouraged from establishing independence from men. The controversy regarding the causes of lesbianism still haunts some women as they begin to discover their attraction to other women and question whether they are sick, sinful or abnormal.

The political and social history of this country provides further understanding of the difficulty of many women in identifying as lesbian. Women living in Calgary in the 1960's experienced the narrow attitudes of a small, western Canadian city. As is often the case in areas where serious oppression exists, lesbians organized underground and found ways to exist in the safety of invisibility. How is it that a group of women estimated at 2.5 % - 5% of the total population can remain invisible? How does a woman know she is

lesbian? What are lesbians lives like? How do women connect with each other? What quality of lives can lesbians live if they have to live in secret? What are lesbian's relationships with extended family and the community like? How does a lesbian community form if everyone is invisible?

These questions form the basis of this investigation and collection of oral history from lesbian women in Calgary. It is my hope to contribute a new perspective on local history in a way that will recognize and embrace the reality and existence of the lesbian community in Calgary.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The intent of this project is to develop an historical representation of the experience of lesbians who lived in Calgary between 1950 and 1980. Lesbian researchers and authors such as Brown (1989) Davis & Kennedy (1980) Ross (1995) and Sang (1989) have advocated a complete restructuring of the manner in which research has been conducted within lesbian communities. Their premise is that previous research has been conducted within the context of heterosexist assumptions about the world. As a result, lesbian experience has been compared and judged in relation to accepted norms determined by the dominant culture and found wanting.

These authors have identified the need for research approaches that embrace the beliefs of many realities and acknowledge the researchers and the respondent's perspective of the data collected (Hunniset, 1986; Ross, 1995; Sang, 1989). This position enables the researcher to view the work as a somewhat collaborative effort combining the research participant's experience with that of the inquirer. In this manner, the personal experience of the researcher may inform and be compared with the information provided by the research participants (Hunniset, 1986; Sang, 1986). This respects the existence of multiple realities at the same time as continuing the search for a consensus of experience. Recent experience has confirmed that as this "work is gradually introduced into the academy, it presents a profound challenge to the heterosexist assumptions embedded in the fields of women's social history and the sociology of social movements" (Ross, 1995, p.5).



This chapter describes the methodology used to collect the stories of 15 lesbian women. I will discuss the blending of qualitative research and oral history and identify the similarities and differences between the two, and examine the challenges of conducting historical lesbian research. Subsequently, a description of the search for participants, conducting the interviews, ethical considerations, a document review and the strength and considerations of this approach will be presented.

This project lays the foundation for the archival of the history of a previously invisible population in Calgary. I was interested in representing the diversity of lesbian experiences in the city however in no way, intended to provide a comprehensive history or picture of lesbianism or of the local lesbian community. Nevertheless, I feel there is an urgency to recover our history from the memories of elders in communities that have traditionally been unable and unwilling to leave clear evidence of their lives and accomplishments.

### **Research Methodology - Blending Qualitative Research and Oral History**

There are no records, no historical account of lesbians in the history of Calgary, a city of 900,000 people. The purpose of this project is to challenge the invisibility of lesbians in that history by beginning to document the stories of lesbian women's experiences in Calgary between the years of 1950 and 1980. My vision was to video and/or audio record these stories with a view to preserving and archiving the data. This collection of stories will form the basis for further reclamation of lesbian history in this city.

Since this is the first project of its kind in Calgary, a qualitative research approach with an exploratory focus is most appropriate. With the goal of creating a permanent record of the stories told by the participants, it became clear that oral history methodology would be most effective. Yow (1994), an oral historian suggests that “the recorded in-depth interview, or oral history interview is a specific research method within the general designation of qualitative methodology” (p.8). Interestingly, the literature on qualitative research does not mention oral history as a data collection methodology.

Oral history is a “method of preserving historical information through recorded interviews with participants in past events and ways of life” (Oral History Association, 2000). “It collects data not available in written records about events, people, decisions, and processes” (Truesdell, 1998). Several authors (Gluck & Patai, 1991; OHA, 2000; Ritchie, 1995; Truesdell, 1998; Yow, 1994) agree that “oral history is too dynamic and creative a field to be entirely captured by any single definition” (Yow, 1994, p.1) and point out that the very term is “inadequate, imprecise, and misleading” (Yow, 1994; p. 4). In an effort to more adequately describe their work, researchers use a range of other terms to describe oral history: life history, self-report, personal narrative, life story, oral biography, memoir, testament, recorded narrative, taped memories and life review (Gluck et al, 1991; Ritchie, 1995; Yow, 1994).

Much early oral history was conducted by interviewing those of “stature” or considered “significant” players in historical events (Ritchie, 1995). These were often the voices of men. In the 1970’s, “feminist researchers angered by the invisibility of women in recorded history.... recognized the enormous potential of oral history as a tool

to “make available, in accessible form, the words of women who had previously been silenced or ignored” (Gluck et al, 1991, p. 2).

Gloria Miller (1999) describes oral history as the approach of choice when researching marginalized communities for three reasons:

- (1) it has often been employed to record the life experiences of ‘common’ people...in their own terms thereby adding missing pieces to the historical puzzle,
- (2) by recording those everyday experiences, it legitimizes the lives of cultural groups who have been invisible and enhances our understanding of the personal location of oppression and stigmatization and (3) the built-in flexibility of the approach allows the recorder to use an unstructured approach which enhances participants feelings of control in situations where there may be fear or anxiety about divulging illegal, illicit, or otherwise potentially harmful information.

### **Similarities and Differences Between Qualitative Research and Oral History**

There are several significant differences between a traditional qualitative approach and an oral history approach to research. Typically qualitative research data is collected from respondents who remain anonymous while oral history tends to be collected from individuals who are willing to openly share their stories. It is only recently that the OHA “has sanctioned the use of anonymous interviews, although only in ‘extremely sensitive’ circumstances” (OHA, 2000).

In qualitative research, the number of participants in a project is determined as the researcher begins to observe redundancy in the information being gathered or as Padgett (1998) describes, “qualitative researchers sample not to maximize numbers but to become

‘saturated’ with information about a specific topic” (p. 52). Oral historians on the other hand tend to “set a number of hours of interviews or sessions [they] intend to conduct rather than the number of individuals to be interviewed” (Ritchie, 1995, p. 25).

Traditionally, the original data and transcriptions from a qualitative research project are kept for a limited amount of time and then destroyed. In the case of oral history, the data has been collected with the purpose of creating a permanent record of the information that will be accessible to the public.

Another difference between traditional qualitative research and oral history is reflected in how the original data is used. In qualitative research the data is collected and analyzed in order to draw meaning from it and then to present the results to others (Tutty, Rothery & Grinnell, 1996) while oral history may be collected and deposited into an archive without being analyzed by the original researcher (Yow, 1994). The data then remains available and accessible for others to use with analysis and interpretive writing as an option in the future.

Finally, in a qualitative study, the participants may receive some form of remuneration for their participation in the study however the researcher must consider the consequences of offering too much or too little to respondents. The OHA on the other hand advocates that the researcher “consider sharing the rewards and recognition that might result from their profits with their interviewees” (OHA, 2000).

### **Challenges of Conducting Historical Lesbian Research**

There are a number of intrinsic challenges to completing a qualitative study about lesbian history. The first lies in attempting to investigate an invisible community

(Adelman, 1986; Faderman, 1991; Griffin, 1993; Kehoe, 1988; Ross, 1995; Sang, 1991; Vicinus, 1990). Researching older lesbian women can be especially difficult as many are not actively involved in the community or remain closeted and, therefore, not accessible to the researcher (Adelman, 1986; Kehoe, 1988; Gershick, 1999; Neild & Pearson, 1992; Sang, 1991). Those who are out and involved in the community represent only one part of lesbian existence. For example, Gonsiorek (1982b) suggests that only 10% - 25% of the gay community frequent gay bars with any regularity. At this point there are no comparable figures for lesbian communities in Calgary, and lesbian bar owners suggest that it is much more difficult to maintain a lesbian bar because the women do not tend to support bars to the same extent the gay men's community does (L. Murphy, personal communication, April, 2000). In many cases the researcher must be creative in soliciting recruits and may need to spend countless hours making contacts and eliciting participants (Alderson, 1998; Adelman, 1986; Kehoe, 1988).

A second issue that arises in researching lesbian communities has to do with the definition of lesbian and finding a vocabulary that is accepted by the participants involved (Adelman, 1986; Faderman, 1991; Marcus, 1992; Miller, 1995; National Museum & Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, 1996). As discussed previously, the definition of lesbian has "evolved in the context of a changing society" (Faderman, 1991, p.5) over the past century. There are multiple definitions and interpretations of the term. Whether or not a woman defines herself in the same manner as the researcher will impact whether or not she considers herself eligible to participate in the project. As well as the problem of definition, the terms used to describe women who love women have been

many over the years including invert, homosexual, gay, dyke, lesbian and queer (Adelman, 1986; Faderman, 1991; Gershick, 1999; Kehoe, 1988; National Museum & Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, 1996). Each term conjures up a different meaning based on a person's age and life experience. I found a number of women whose primary emotional and physical relationships were with women, but who have never identified as homosexual or lesbian, preferring the term gay. Others prefer the word lesbian and reject gay as being "too male" (Adelman, 1986; Faderman, 1991; Kehoe, 1988; Miller, 1995). Younger lesbians often choose the term dyke or queer to represent themselves, whereas these terms are considered derogatory by older lesbians (Bernstein & Siberman, 1996, Faderman, 1991; Jacobs, Thomas, & Lang, 1997; Jay, 1995; Kehoe, 1988; LeVay et al, 1995; Schneider, 1997). The lack of consensus on the terms and definitions can confound the researcher's attempt to attract potential respondents (Adelman, 1986; Kehoe, 1986).

A third area of concern in researching this population is that of guarded disclosure. Individuals who have not had the opportunity to be heard before may believe that their stories are not significant or important enough to be shared (Silverman, 1998). Even if one is open enough to take part in research on lesbianism, there is a risk involved in self-disclosure, particularly when participants are aware, in the case of oral history, their disclosures are being video recorded with a view to maintaining the tapes in an archive (Gosiosek, Sell, & Weinrich, 1995). Many older lesbians, have been witness to the eras when homosexuality was criminal, considered a sin, defined as a mental disorder and discrimination was common (Abbott et al, 1972; Adelman, 1986; Duberman, 1989;

Faderman, 1991, Marcus, 1992; Miller, 1995). The legacy of this era is one of fear and suspicion for women who remember the times. Some older lesbians, who perfected the technique of living dual lives through most of their adult years, cannot conceive of suddenly coming out into the open or demanding recognition and equal rights (Adelman, 1986; Darty et al, 1984; Faderman, 1991; Kehoe, 1989; Miller, 1995; Sang, Warshow & Smith, 1991). They have learned to be invisible and remain silent. This may impact the stories and/or the depth of the information they are willing to share (Gluck et al, 1991; Padgett, 1998).

Another challenge to completing this project was the fact that during the late 1960's and early 1970's some lesbians used false names within their communities in order to protect their anonymity (Abbott et al, 1972; Faderman, 1995; Martin et al, 1972). This lead to unique difficulties when attempting to locate research participants who had lived in Calgary and were known under assumed names.

The diversity within lesbian communities provides a different type of challenge to lesbian research. Bell and Weinberg as cited in Alderson (1998) demonstrated wide range of diversity of race, sex, age and educational level in the gay community. Alderson (1998) suggests that geographical location and the time that the research is undertaken has a significant on the data collected. The researcher must be cautious to describe the context and the degree of diversity represented by the participants in each particular study.

A challenge regarding secondary data analysis is that of selective reporting by the media around issues such as lesbianism. Researching the local newspapers, magazines

and even the Alberta Historical site at the University of Calgary failed to turn up significant information regarding lesbians in Calgary. There has traditionally been little recording of significant events related to lesbians either within the lesbian community itself, or in mainstream local media.

In summary, embarking on historical lesbian research challenges the investigator to be resourceful in securing research participants and to create an environment in which respondents are encouraged to share stories previously untold.

### **The Search for Participants**

I recruited participants by advertising in three local lesbian newspapers and newsletters, circulating 1000 flyers at gay and lesbian events in the community, sending notices to 15 local lesbian and gay organizations including the Women of Color Collective, and using word of mouth (see Appendix A for the advertising for participants). In reaction to all of the flyers and advertisements that I had sent out, I received only two responses. One woman was in her 50's and the other was in her late 70's, but moved from the city before I was able to interview her. I then utilized a snowball sampling technique in which "information is gathered from persons known to the researcher and from respondents recommended by the initial" research participants (O'Neill, 1994, p. 52). "This method is appropriate for gaining access to hidden and stigmatized groups" (O'Neill, 1994, p. 52) and proved to be successful.

Although my initial intent was to interview lesbian women over 60, it quickly became clear that I would have difficulty obtaining respondents. I decided to collect stories from those women 50 years of age or older when I found few women between 60



and 70 years of age who were willing to participate. Those who did agree to be interviewed tended to have been involved in the lesbian community at some point in their lives. Women between 50 and 60 were more willing to share their stories. In one case, a participant's story was so compelling and provided such a different perspective on living as a lesbian in Calgary, that I decided to use it even though she was younger than 50. I attempted to find diversity with respect to respondent's experience with the lesbian community, relationship experience, and their degree of being "out". One of the incentives for participation in this project was that all of the women would have the opportunity to attend a private screening of the video production at which they would all be able to meet each other.

When I completed 15 interviews, I felt that I had a preliminary representation of the diversity of lesbian experience in Calgary during the target time period. Each interview demonstrated unique characteristics of the individual woman's experience yet provided similarities that linked the women with each other in some ways. The broadest sense of redundancy that qualitative researchers generally tend to strive for tended to occur only at the level that each woman experienced the personal acknowledgement that she was "different" from other women and that each had come out to another person.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The proposal for this project was reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Social Work Ethics Committee. When each participant was initially contacted they were mailed an information package containing an introductory letter (see Appendix A) explaining the project, a consent form and an outline of possible discussion areas. All participants were

made aware that these were also available on the internet site developed for this project (see Appendix B). Participants could also observe two video clips of an interview already completed that demonstrated the look and feel of the project.

At the interview, each participant signed an informed consent describing the project and the future use of the material (see Appendix C). The consent or “deed of gift” as it is called in oral history (OHA, 2000; Ritchie, 1995; Yow, 1994) included options for each participant to give consent for her interview material to be used in the print material, an audio production and the video production or any combination of the three. Each woman was informed that she could withdraw from the project at any time.

The participants who had agreed to be video taped had been notified that a video documentary was to be produced and that they could review all material before it was released for public view. The participants who did not want their names or identities disclosed were assured that the project would not include any identifying information. Others mentioned in the interviews but who had not directly agreed to participate in this project would not be identified, for example, board members of organizations in the lesbian community.

Since this is an oral history project, participants were informed that the researcher would retain the video and audiotapes with the possibility that they would be donated to a local lesbian archive at some time in the future. Each participant would be contacted if and when that was to occur and would have the choice of whether or not to have her interview included.

### Conducting the Interviews

I conducted seven interviews with 15 lesbians over a three-year period from 1997 to 2000. The interviews ranged from a single participant interview, to several couple interviews to two groups of three or more women being interviewed together. The research participants determined the context of the interviews, all of which occurred in one of the respondent's home. The interviews were either video or audio taped and lasted an average of one and a half to two hours. I used a topical outline or interview guide to provide a framework for the interviews (Yow, 1994). This is similar to semi-structured interview formats that are frequently used in qualitative research. "The topical outline contains the topics that the interviewer will pursue but does not limit the interview to those topics because the narrator will have the freedom to suggest others" (Yow, 1994, p.36).

The topical outline was developed over the course of the first two interviews. The first interview helped to set the general areas of discussion for the project. I began with a general question asking the interviewee to "tell me about what it was like being a lesbian during the 1960's and 1970's". As she spoke, I requested further details and clarifications and began to construct the topical outline that would guide future interviews. After the interview, I recorded my impressions about the direction the interview had taken. I noted areas that I had anticipated would be covered and those that I had not. I constructed a list of the areas that had been covered and identified several themes that appeared to emerge from the interview.

The second interview was conducted with a group of four women. I approached this interview with the intention of using the same opening question in order to observe the similarities and differences between the areas covered and issues raised by the participants in the first and second interviews.

Although each of the interviews was unique, recurrent themes that emerged from the women's stories. This process validated that these were areas that the participants determined were significant in their narratives. These initial five interviews then provided direction and determined the areas for the development of the topical interview guide used for the rest of the interviews (Appendix D). Structuring the interviews in this manner provided the opportunity to consider comparable experience between the women, at the same time, providing flexibility for the interviewees to explore a diverse number of areas (Gluck et al, 1991; Padgett, 1998; Ritchie, 1995; Yow, 1994). The interviews were enhanced by pictures, documents or other memorabilia provided by the participants during the interviews.

### **Transcribing the Interviews**

Immediately after conducting the first interview, I watched the videotape and made an audio recording of it. I then transcribed the interview from the audiotape. I used this opportunity to review my role as interviewer and compare my memory of the interview with the "reality" of the tape. I recorded these observations in my journal and used this information to facilitate future interviews.

Each of the other interviews was dubbed from video to audiotape immediately after the interviews. I watched each video interview at least twice; once while it was

being dubbed and once to complete a time code for the purpose of editing a final product. During the first review of the video I made notes in the project journal on my thoughts and observations as I watched. When I began reviewing the transcripts, I realized the tremendous advantage of having each interview on videotape. During the interview, I had been so intent on listening to the individual that I sometimes missed the nonverbal responses of the speaker or, more often, those of the other women present in the interview. Being able to observe the interview again allowed me to note and consider these responses as I began thinking about the meaning of the women's stories.

I transcribed two other interviews myself: the largest group interview because I was familiar with the voices of each of the women and had some recollection of the context of the conversation and one other interview with two women whose voices were very similar on tape. A professional secretary transcribed the three remaining interviews. I reviewed each of these completed transcripts by again watching the video to ensure their accuracy. I also made notations in the margins regarding my impressions or any nonverbal cues that could not be captured in the transcription process.

Personally, I found transcribing the interviews to be an emotional experience, eliciting thoughts and feelings from my own memories intermingled with my interaction with the women.

I used that experience to challenge myself to review the way in which I was conducting the interviews to ensure that I was being open and hearing what the participants considered the important aspects of their own lives.

### Analysis of Oral History

The Oral History Association (OHA) clearly articulates the principles and standards for conducting oral history and provides evaluation guidelines for projects. The process includes project planning, developing the interview outline, considering ethical issues, preparing for and recording the interviews, preserving the archival material and sharing the information with the public (Gluck et al, 1991; OHA, 2000; Ritchie, 1995; Truesdell, 1998; Yow, 1994). Unfortunately, however, there is little information on how to analyze oral history data (OHA, 2000; Ritchie, 1995; Yow, 1994). Yow (1994) suggests that, in many cases, oral history is simply prepared for deposit in an archive, and need not be analyzed (p.225). The tapes may not be transcribed until used for a particular project. In situations where the researcher intends to write about the data collected, the structure for analysis is determined by the needs of the project at that time. Yow suggests that the data may be analyzed in terms of categories, recurring myths, themes, symbols, or rhetoric depending on the focus of the author (1992). Given this description, it appears that others analyze oral history borrowing concepts from general qualitative approaches. Since I could find no specific direction in the literature on oral history data analysis, in this project, I used a basic qualitative approach to data management and analysis (Padgett, 1998; Tutty et al., 1996).

During the first reading of each transcript, I listened or watched the tape of the original interview, listening for tone of voice, gestures or comments that I might have missed during the interview. I reviewed my pre-and post-notes of each interview and

added any new thoughts. I, then, reviewed the transcripts a second time, noting the specific topics covered by the participants in each interview.

At this stage, I needed to make a decision about the direction of this project. There is discussion in the current literature regarding the collection and reporting of oral history from lesbian communities. Some authors express a concern with reporting history the way in which research participants describe it, stating that “lesbian (and gay) grass-roots activists have long relied upon the assertion of a positive ‘minority group identity’” (Ross, 1995, p. 19). The concern that this will lead to a limited understanding of the lesbian community has resulted in some authors arguing that both the “strength *and* the fragility of lesbian-feminist identity and community formation” should be recorded (Ross, 1995, p. 19). Others suggest that the stories should be presented as research participants provide them in our initial attempts to construct lesbian identity (Abbott and Schwarz as quoted in Ross, 1995). “Sidney Abbott contends that a group that is just raising its head after centuries of bowing it under the weight of prejudice, cruelty and exclusion wants to celebrate, not conduct self-criticism” (Ross, 1995, p. 19). Judith Schwarz, an historian supports this view when she states that “I think we have to construct lesbian identity before we deconstruct it” (as cited in Ross, 1995, p. 19).

I chose to analyze the women’s stories by listening for recurring themes presented in their own words. Knowledge development is the first stage in creating an understanding of a previously invisible community. This foundation of knowledge offers opportunities for future researchers to further investigate this material using a variety of lens.

The second stage of my analysis was identifying recurrent ideas in each interview and beginning to group the women's comments on each individual concept. I then developed a series of categorization documents going through each categorization, identifying themes and sub themes. Upon completion of the analysis, six major themes had emerged.

### **Trustworthiness**

The value of a qualitative research project is determined by its trustworthiness. “A trustworthy study is one that is carried out fairly and ethically and whose findings represent as closely as possible the experiences of the respondents” (Steinmetz as quoted in Padgett, 1998). Reliability is the goal in the collection of oral history, however there are few specific guidelines by which to evaluate projects. “Oral history is as reliable or unreliable as other research sources. No single piece of data of any sort should be trusted completely, and all sources need to be tested against other evidence” (Ritchie, 1995).

In order to demonstrate the trustworthiness of this oral history project, I considered the data in relation to the strategies generally used for determining rigor in qualitative research. Credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are the four processes by which qualitative research is evaluated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Padgett, 1998).



### **Credibility**

The credibility of this oral history project was enhanced through a number of strategies suggested by Lincoln & Guba (1985) and Padgett (1998): prolonged engagement, reflexivity, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking.

Prolonged engagement occurs when the researcher invests a significant amount of time familiarizing herself with the participants and their contexts. In the current project all of the interviewees knew of the researcher through her involvement in the lesbian community over the past thirty years. Although this project was the first personal contact between the researcher and most of the interviewees, a common connection facilitated the development of a working relationship for the project. In addition, I had several contacts with each participant before and after the interviews. I initially contacted each woman by telephone and described the project to her. I then mailed out the information package including a description of the project, an example of some of the questions, some archival pictures and information I had previously gathered and the project web address. On the web page, potential interviewees were able to view a clip of the interview to see what the project would ultimately look like. After each interview, I made copies of the pictures or archival material loaned to me and returned them to the participants. This contact often entailed having coffee as they asked more questions about the project. It was from these meetings that I often received referrals for other interviews.

“Reflexivity is the ability to examine the impact of one’s self on the research” (Padgett, 1998, p. 21). I found it essential to be aware of my personal assumptions, expectations, and responses at each stage of the research. Several methods of reflexivity

were used to increase the credibility of the project. The project journal was an invaluable tool in organizing additional data related to the oral history project (Lincoln et al, 1985; Tutty et al, 1996; Padgett, 1998). As recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985), I found it useful to maintain several separate sections including my general field notes, personal reflections and analytic notes.

In the general field notes section, I kept track of each step in the process of completing the project. I recorded each contact including every attempt to recruit participants, each telephone conversation with recruits, and discussions my supervisor, videographer, community supporters and peer consultation group. After the third interview, I developed a web page that described the project, presented a video clip of one of the interviews, displayed several pictures from the archives collected and invited individuals to participate in the project by completing a questionnaire or contributing archival material. I recorded several international inquiries regarding the nature of the project and invitations by other archives to be linked to their sites.

This section also contained all information pertaining to each individual interview including the topical guide, my observations during the interview process, further information gathered in the pre and post interview sessions with respondents, notes from the debriefing with my videographer and my thoughts regarding modifications to the interview process as seemed appropriate. For example:

February 15, 1999: After reviewing the videotape of the brunch with four of the interviewees, I realized that it was not a good idea to interview while respondents are eating. The clatter of dishes and silverware overrode some of the conversation

on the videotape. Fortunately, I can remember the context of the discussion and think I have been able to recover all of the words accurately. Interestingly, on the other hand, I believe the informal nature of the brunch interview may have contributed to a different type of conversation than those that will be conducted as more formal interviews.

I made extensive use of the second section of the journal in which I recorded personal reflections of the interviews, as well as the overall process of the project, my impressions of each interview, thoughts or questions I wanted to follow up in subsequent interviews and my emotional responses to the stories I was hearing. An example of how the journal was used is reflected in the following entry in my journal, dated April 5/00.

I had an unsettling interaction with the transcriber today. It reminded me of how separate lesbians are considered to be by the dominant culture. I had known the transcriber from university and she had come highly recommended by other faculty members. When I went to pick up the transcriptions, she told me that she found this project interesting because "I didn't know you people had so many organizations". I immediately felt stigmatized as different and outside the dominant culture. I wondered if her perception could have influenced the way she transcribed the interviews and decided to carefully compare each transcript to the original tape to ensure that there were no misinterpretations. I listened to each audiotape and compared it to the hard copy she had prepared. This process revealed that number of problems with her interpretation of language used by the interviewees. For example, when a respondent would use the term "coming out"

the transcriber would type “coming down”. In another instance two of the women were talking about coming to the realization that they “could have children without being married” and the transcriber typed, “We realized we could not have children without being married”.

This experience echos those described by many of the women in their interviews. It is a reminder of how insidious heterosexism is when peers and colleagues who strive to be open and accepting unconsciously make such remarks.

This incident reinforced the need to consistently compare the tapes with the transcriptions and the importance of keeping a project journal to record the process of the entire project.

The final section of the journal included all my notes and thoughts regarding analysis of my data. Throughout the project I recorded the questions that arose as I collected data. Initially these were around the various perspectives that I had on the data that I was obtaining. As I began data analysis, I began to identify categories and themes that seemed to be emerging from each interview and compared them to those of each of the other interviews. I noted relationships between various categories and began to experiment with combining related categories and themes. I also recorded the rationale for each of the changes or shifts I made until I achieved an analysis with which I was satisfied.

As well, regular debriefing with my videographer and with three other doctoral candidates currently engaged in their own qualitative research assisted me in contemplating the various ways in which my own bias could influence my work.

Triangulation or the comparison of multiple perspectives is another strategy used to increase the credibility of a project (Lincoln et al, 1985; Padgett, 1998, Tutty et al., 1996). Since the interviews were all video or audio recorded, I had the opportunity to debrief with my videographer. This proved to be invaluable as she brought a very different perspective to the project. She is fifteen to thirty years younger than the interviewees and had no previous knowledge regarding the lesbian community during the time span being investigated. Her insights challenged or supported my assumptions and observations about each interview and assisted me in considering alternative perspectives about the data being collected.

Throughout this project, I presented “works in progress” in the form of video, print and lecture at various conferences and to groups of lesbians in the community, all of whom provided me feedback based on their own experiences in the lesbian community in Calgary.

A final technique I employed to increase the credibility of this project is known as member checking. This entails returning to the interviewees and sharing with them the researcher’s analysis and requesting confirmation of their meaning. I created a copy of the final document for each woman so that each could review the context within which I chose to use her quotes. I contacted each participant two weeks later to debrief and inquire if she felt accurately represented in the write up.

### **Transferability**

The concept of transferability is somewhat more difficult to incorporate into an oral history approach. Transferability is the requirement that the findings of the study

could be replicated in another context or in the same context at another time. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state “it is the responsibility of the researcher to provide the data base that makes transferability judgment possible on the part of potential appliers” (p. 316). The challenge for establishing transferability in an oral history project lies in the variance of time. When collecting historical data from aging participants, as time passes the possibility for creating a similar context disappears. For example, participants age, the time period being investigated becomes more distant and the number of qualified participants may diminish. A thick description of the context within which the study was conducted may assist future researchers in determining how transferable or how unique the project may be, but may assist only in the development of a project similar in essence rather than outcome.

For the purposes of this research, a clear description of the context within which the interviews occurred and an in-depth discussion of the process by which data analysis was completed were recorded in the project journal in an effort to establish transferability.

### **Dependability**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that if credibility can be established, this may be enough to demonstrate dependability. With a qualitative research project, dependability relates to the description of the research process and the process audit that allows the research to be replicated. With oral history this may be one consideration, however, another goal is to make the data collected available to other researchers for the expressed purpose of working with the data from another perspective.

Individual researchers choose from a variety of ways of working with the data (Yow, 1994). For this project, the focus was to collect the stories of lesbian women as they presented them. A clear and thick description of the context within which the data was collected is provided to future researchers who choose to rework the material.

Alternative interpreters could include those who are interested in lesbian mothering, the nature of lesbian relationships, social relationships of lesbians, symbolic representation within the lesbian community, or the chronological development of the Calgary lesbian community in the late 1960's or early 1970's (Ritchie, 1995; Yow, 1994).

Dependability in this context may be best represented as the assurance that the process of data collection is clearly and accurately described thereby providing useful raw data for future researchers.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability is demonstrated by establishing an audit trail (Lincoln et al, 1985; Padgett, 1998; Tutty et al., 1996). An audit suggests that another researcher could arrive at similar conclusions based on the same data and research context (Padgett, 1998).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify "six categories of records that need to be included in the audit: raw data (video and audio recording, transcripts), data reduction and analysis products (notes and redistributed transcriptions), data reconstruction and synthesis products (coding sheets), process notes (project journal), materials related to intentions (proposal, project journal), instrument development information (topical interview guide). Each of these was utilized in the current research.

It is clear that the strategies for ensuring rigor and trustworthiness in qualitative research can be beneficial in determining the reliability of oral history data collection and analysis.

### **Strengths and Considerations of a Qualitative Research Study Using an Oral**

#### **History Approach**

The qualitative research approach used in this project honors and attempts to understand the unique experience of each participant (Gluck et al, 1991; Padgett, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Tutty et al., 1996). A second key premise is that the researcher cannot remain indifferent to the individuals who choose to share a piece of their lives for the sake of a project (Gluck et al, 1999; Padgett, 1998; Ritchie, 1995; Yow, 1994). "The qualitative research approach expects that a close relationship between the researchers and the participants will develop and that they will have a reciprocal influence on each other" (Tutty et al., 1996, p. 13). In fact, the experience of the researcher is valued and is often included in the analysis of the data (Hunnisett, 1986; Tutty et al., 1996; Rubin et al, 1995).

The benefit of using an oral history approach within the context of qualitative research is that it provides an opportunity for marginalized populations, who do not ordinarily have access to public expression, to leave clear evidence of their existence (Gluck, 1977; Gluck et al, 1991; Yow, 1994). It has the "unique potential to move beyond the written record--which reflects the experiences of more privileged women, usually white and educated--to document the lives of all kinds of women"(Gluck, 1977, p.4).



Oral history enables the participants to attribute personal meaning to their life experiences (Gluck et al, 1991; Martin, 1995; Ritchie, 1995; Yow, 1994). They are able to put the emphasis where it is most important. This approach allows us to "make permanent the memories of people knowledgeable about a vanishing way of life" (Bloom, 1977, p. 2). Most importantly for this project, "oral history enables narrators to shape their history, even when their views contradict the assumptions of historians (Davis et al, 1990, p. 428).

In any research circumstance, many potential influences affect the outcome of the work. One of the first considerations is the influence of the researcher on the research process. Oral history research is a collaborative reconstruction of events, and the interviewer must recognize the possible effect she may have on the research interview (Lincoln et al, 1985; Ritchie, 1995; Tutty et al., 1996; Yow, 1994). The interviewees may tell you what you expect to hear, or what they believe is the social expectancy (Alderson, 1998, p. 216). The inquirer must also strive "to maintain a balance between what we think is important and what the women we are interviewing think is important" (Gluck, 1977, p. 6). If we are not careful to leave the interview space open, we can "easily end up with an oral history that is defined not by the values and rhythm of the individual but by the perspective we bring to the [work] (Gluck, 1977, p.10). In an effort to "minimize the interference from [my own] biases and preconceptions" (Tutty et al., 1996, p. 10) I used a journal to record my ideas, expectations and thoughts before and after each interview. This helped me to clear my head and be able to listen to each

woman's story without editorializing. I looked for places where the stories differed from my expectations and personal experience and also identified where they were similar.

I began each interview with the same explanation of the project and used an outline of possible questions to guide the interview. However, in each interview, I followed the participant's lead in determining which areas they were drawn to talk about. Although I attempted to cover all of the areas with each interview, the depth and richness of the topics covered varied as each lesbian woman determined what was most significant in her own life story.

An issue of particular importance in working with oral histories is that of memory (Ritchie, 1995; Yow, 1994). Our belief that memory is fixed and permanent has been replaced by an understanding that "we are constantly rewriting our memories and, in the process, creating ever new personal histories" (Kotre, 1995). Memory serves the purpose of self-preserving and is influenced by emotion, time, needs and situation (Kotre, 1995; Yow, 1994). Oral historians recognize that "people regularly reevaluate and reexplain their past....using the insights gained from their current lives to help them make new sense out of past experiences" (Ritchie, 1995, p. 13). Yow (1994) indicates that recall also depends on the individual's health, the topic being discussed, how the question is asked and the degree of emotion involved in the memory (p. 20).

One way to increase the richness of memory of individuals may be through the use of memory cues in the form of pictures, other people's stories, and other artifacts that may trigger memory (Gluck, 1977; Kotre, 1995; Ritchie, 1995; Yow, 1994). At the time I was setting times for the interviews, I asked each of the women to bring with her

photographs or objects that held meaning for her in relation to her early years as a lesbian. I also asked the women who had been involved in organizing the lesbian community in the 1960's and 1970's if they had any documentation left from those days. From these requests, I gathered copies of original incorporation documents from the Scarth Street Society, newsletters, pictures, membership cards, club crests, programs for shows held at the clubs and minutes from meetings of the executive of the society.

In an attempt to enhance the potential of the interview, participants were also encouraged to create an atmosphere that would be comfortable and conducive for them to remember and share their experiences as young lesbian women. In each interview, participants brought pictures or memorabilia and used these as a stimulus for memory. Most of the women asked to be interviewed with at least one other person. Two of the interviews were conducted in a small group after one or more of the participants stated that she didn't think she could remember much about her early days on her own.

There are differing perspectives on the need to validate information gathered through oral history research. A criticism of the use of oral history is that it "may result in a picture that is narrow, idiosyncratic, or ethnocentric" (Yow, 1994, p. 16). Gluck (1977) proposes that we should be continually asking how the information fits with what we know about this subject in that time period, while Ross (1995) works from the premise that while there is a chance of romanticizing or changing history, we should trust memory. "We have to construct lesbian identity before we deconstruct it" (Schwartz, cited in Ross, 1995, p. 19). As Yow concludes: "History is what the people who lived it

make of it and what the others who observe the participants or listen to them or study their records make of it... our definition of it is what it is (1994, p. 12)

The invisibility of lesbians in history can only be rectified through the collection of stories and archiving of the traces of evidence left by those who lived their lives in secret. The purpose of this study is not to disprove or affirm any stereotype created over the years but to investigate and record the experiences of lesbian women over 50 in Calgary. For a population that has no recorded history of its existence, this form of documentation of the stories of lesbian lives in Calgary will begin the process of giving voice to an invisible and oppressed group.

#### **Document Review**

As a part of the historical analysis, I searched the local papers, The Calgary Herald and the Albertan for mention of the terms lesbian, gay or homosexual between the years 1950 and 1980. In addition, I had the privilege of being loaned an array of archival material from the participants. As mentioned previously, three of the founding members of the first lesbian and gay organization had kept the original incorporation certificate issued by the Alberta government. They also had kept copies of the minutes from each organizational meeting, newsletters, copies of the first membership card (Appendix G) and a crest designed and worn by the association members (Appendix F). Another contributor had kept all the scripts of plays written and produced in the club opened by the association in the 60's and 70's in Calgary. Most of the women chose to contribute personal photos of themselves for the archives. This material has been scanned and, with permission, copies kept on a CD-ROM for use in future projects or publications. This

material complements and enhances the richness of the stories collected from each of the respondents.

Lincoln et al (1985) point out "historically, documents have been attacked as possibly unrepresentative, as lacking in objectivity, as of unknown validity, and as possibly deliberately deceiving (or self-deceptive)" (p. 278). This was clearly the case in reviewing historical documents to enhance this project. The fact that local newspapers made little or no mention of lesbians or of lesbian communities did not mean that they did not exist. Rather, together with the current women's stories, the documents reinforced the invisibility and under-representation of the community in the media. The documents simply reflected the bias of the times.

Accessing further documentation and records from lesbian communities proved to be difficult. Secrecy and promises of mutual protection, characteristic of many lesbian and gay communities, plagued my search for documents representing the 1950's to 1980's time period. Although I located several individuals who had personal collections of photographs, newsletters, and letters, each came with a caution not to mention names or use pictures of those who could not give their personal permission. A number of the women talked about destroying files, membership lists, pictures and other memorabilia from the early days and the clubs because that had been the original understanding of those belonging to the first organized gay and lesbian society in Calgary.

In several circumstances, one segment of the lesbian and gay community had made significant contributions to various organizations in the city of Calgary during the 1960's and 70's but identified themselves only as a "social club" named Scarth Street

Society and incorporated under the Alberta Societies Act. This discretion on the part of this community led to continued invisibility and made it difficult to track the true level of involvement and contribution of the lesbian and gay community to the larger community during this time period.

### **Chapter Summary**

This an oral history approach to collecting stories of lesbian women's experiences of living in Calgary provides a unique opportunity to document and archive the stories of previously silent voices. Since a project of this kind has not previously been conducted in Calgary, this is an important first step.

## CHAPTER FOUR: DRIVEN BY DESIRE

Chapters Four and Five present the results of this oral history project. A total of six themes emerged from the data collected. The themes presented in this chapter are the women's individual reasons for participating in the project, the awareness that one is different from other women, the need to search for information about lesbianism and to locate likeminded women, and the variety of effects that living one's life as a lesbian has on all facets of an individual's life. The nature of the relationships created by women, coming out, and connecting with the lesbian community are dealt with in the next chapter.

### Participants

The participants ranged in age from 47 to 72 years of age. One was in her 70's, 3 in their sixties, 10 in their 50's and one was 47. There were two couples who had been together thirty years, five of the others were in committed relationships with women, five were single and one of the women was living in a long term marriage with a man and had been in a relationship with a woman for three years.

Five of the participants had been married; three had children from those marriages. In two of the situations, the women chose to remain living with their partners to raise her children. One woman was out to her husband while the other was not. One other woman was not the primary caregiver to her children. Four of the women had children within the context of the lesbian relationships. Two conceived as a result of artificial insemination and two became pregnant through sexual involvement with a male.

The majority of the respondents completed high school; three have post secondary education, two have masters degrees and one has a medical degree. The range of occupations represented were factory worker, woodworker, cab driver, caterer, therapist, minister, lesbian restaurant and bar owner, engineering, medical doctor, and business management. All participants were Caucasian. They represented a range of social and economic backgrounds from a significantly higher socioeconomic level, to a middle and lower middle class existence.

The women had a variety of perspectives on the concept of lesbian community. Lesbian community meant many different things to this particular group of lesbians. Some experienced community as being organized around the bar or the baseball field, while others had seen the community as a frightening place characterized by drinking and violence. Some women found their community more like a family where they participated in social activities and felt safe; still others were unaware of any other lesbians for many years. For the purposes of this project, I will use the singular term lesbian community when I am referring to the geographic community of Calgary and the term lesbian communities when indicating various aspects of a community of women community.

The interviews were conducted in a variety of configurations. One interview included a group of four women, another three women, both couples were interviewed together, two women had been a couple for six years but were no longer together but requested they be interviewed together and two were interviewed individually. Two of



the women choose not to interviewed on videotape therefore their interviews were audio taped.

### **Reasons for Participating**

The decision to participate in this project was a difficult one for many women. In spite of a tremendous amount of advertising and promotion, only two women initiated contact with the researcher. One of the women did agree to be interviewed with her partner. After reviewing the material the other woman did not feel she qualified for the project because she had not lived as a lesbian in Calgary in her earlier life. She was 77 years old and hadn't come out until she was 71. Many women I spoke with commented that the project was a great idea but they had strong fears regarding loss of family or friends if they spoke out. Even the promise of anonymity could not provide enough reassurance that they would be safe to participate. Several women expressed envy of those who had the courage to come forward and speculated that if they had been born now, they would be able to stand up and be proud of who they are. It was clear that despite the social and political gains made in lesbian communities over the past twenty years, many women continue to be silenced by fear, shame and the confines of a deep closet.

The women who agreed to share their stories came to the project with a variety of motivations. All were happy that some of the history of lesbian communities would be preserved but they talked were concerned about the difficulty they experienced with memory as one ages. Some came with a need to remember bygone times and to celebrate with old friends. Tommy, Denise and Nancy saw one of the benefits of their participation

as an opportunity to meet with long time friends that they don't often see. They were eager to reminisce and stimulate each other's memories. Their interview was filled with the warmth, laughter and camaraderie that comes with 30 years of friendship. Nancy summed up the thoughts of the three friends:

First of all, I thought, gee, this would be neat we will get to see each other again.

We have forgotten so much about the past. We are at the age where we forget a lot of things so we are kind of hoping we will spark each other's memories.

Another group, Shirley, Karen, Sharon and Cindy, decided that this project could act as their memory bank as they get older and lose their memories. They felt they would be able to watch the video or read the book and remember the people, places and things they had done as young women with the courage and fortitude to create their own lives in the face of an intolerant society.

Shirley explained her challenge in trying to remember the past:

My God! I have 30 years of stuff. Going through tons of pictures this morning, looking for pictures that might have to do with the club I saw a lot of things that I had to kind of frown a little bit and some of them I just plain don't know who they were. I never tag anything. Never write anything down. Karen is my memory box because now I can't even remember what time I get up in the morning.

For Barb, after many years of believing that she and Madeline "were the only ones", the project offered a chance to meet other lesbians who had grown up in the same era and to share stories and experiences. "I think [doing the interview] was great and I

am actually looking forward to seeing some of the others you have interviewed and hearing what it was like for them".

A number of respondents wanted to provide hope and validation to younger women who might be struggling with their sexual orientation. Tommy, Nancy and Denise hoped to assure the next generation:

Being gay is a good life. You, yourself have to make it a good life. It is not being gay that is hard, it is what you make of it. You have to go out saying, "okay, I am gay and I am going to make my life be the best that it can be" and then relax, enjoy and let it happen as it happens. Just go with it. Be happy!

Gayle and Louise had more reservations regarding their involvement in the project but each felt a strong need to make a contribution to the history project. As she struggled with her own issues as a young woman, Louise remembered how powerful it was for her to see a film about elderly gays and lesbians produced in the 1970's in the United States.

It was so important for me. It was wonderful. When I saw it, well it just made me feel really good because all these people are senior citizens, they have survived, they look normal, they are living healthy, happy lives and it made me think it will be okay. I guess that's why I think I should do this one. I want to give something back for what that gave me.

Louise was concerned, however, about how her family members would react. She felt that some might be upset at her public disclosure because her lifestyle and relationship are not a direct topic of conversation. With surprise, Louise found herself

having to explore her own homophobia when her father turned out to be the one to give her a gentle push to be involved in the project.

I told my father I about this interview. I told him they want to do this film about older lesbians and we agreed we would do the interview. But I said, "I don't really want to do it." And he said, "Sometimes you have to do these things for other people even though you don't want to do it for yourself and then you do it and you get something out of it too." He doesn't talk about it a lot but he told me to do the interview.

Gayle's ambivalence stemmed from the fact that her struggles with her own sexual orientation issues are ongoing. At this point she lives two distinct lives. In one, she is a married woman living with her husband and children and, in the other, she has a female lover and is socially involved in the lesbian community. She tries to divide her time between the two, keeping each very separate and juggling all her commitments. Gayle felt a need to offer validation to other married women who are struggling with their own identity; something she has not found in either lesbian communities or straight communities.

I think it is interesting that you asked me [to participate in the project]. My initial reaction was, "well, what if I am really not a lesbian woman"....you don't read or hear much about women who are still in their marriages but are also involved with women. They are too afraid to talk about it. At least in the gay community, I have talked to women who have been married and left, but it's not the same as talking to someone who is still there.

Then I thought, “well, all my life I have wanted to be able to have some voice for women who struggle to be who they are. To be who God called them to be and maybe this is a way that I can contribute to women in their struggle for survival”...I don't see myself as that courageous although I am determined to stay alive. I want to somehow be a positive role model for my daughters and other young people, so maybe this is a small way I can do that so I thank you for this opportunity.

Most of the women saw the project as an opportunity to educate. Some hoped to reframe society's perception of lesbians through sharing their stories, breaking down stereotypes and debunking myths about lesbians. Sue stated:

I'm interested in being involved in most intelligent projects that have to do with lesbians. I think we don't have enough out there. The more that people know about who we really are and what we really do, the less invisible we become and the more sort of mainstream part of society we become - not that I really think I want to be that any more, but I still think it's important.

Madeline agreed:

I think there is a great value in documenting lives of lesbians and especially older lesbians because there is not much written about what our lives were like. I think generally we were stereotyped as bar people who didn't do anything else but meet in dark alleys and bars and things. So I think it is good to find out about how lesbians' lives were in those days and how they are now, and how different they are from what people think.

Bonnie's hope for this project was that people will begin to know that:

We are not just a bunch of drunks that we are in fact, human beings, people, not to be scoffed at but to be respected. We all have respectable jobs. We all contribute. We pay our taxes. God, I pay school taxes and don't have kids...I don't think we're necessarily looking for understanding but at least acceptance. I am not sure that I will ever see it happen in my lifetime but this is something I would like to see happen.

All of the women spoke about how difficult it had been for them to come into a community that had no history and little documented information. Some hadn't even known what they were looking for, but believed that, if they had seen or heard positive things about women who love women, it would have made things a little easier. Others talked about how unsettling it was to not have good role models individually or for their relationships. Still others wanted younger women to be aware of the struggles they had gone through in the hope that the fight for acceptance would continue. Most of all, the participants in this project wanted to offer validation to those coming after them that they had a right to a life lived without fear or shame. They wished to encourage others to honor oneself and celebrate life.

Without exception each one of these women wanted to leave some kind of legacy, a history for lesbians in the future. Marie believed that documenting the history and politics of lesbian lives would provide a foundation and incentive for those in the future.

Most people in the community have little idea about how we had to fight for what we have now. If they learned what we have been through and the battles we have

fought in order to get them the rights they now have, perhaps they will pick up the struggle and fight for the ones coming behind them. They don't seem to understand the trials and tribulations that lead to them to be able to walk into an open club. The fights that we had, the marches and the flyers! They have no idea what we have done. There is so much more work to do because there are all kinds of rights that we still don't have: work place rights, adoption, and marriage. We have only been able to bring it this far in this century. For the next century, let's make it better. We have been fighting for 40 years here, now it's their turn.

Reflecting on the significant changes in the community since she has been out, Cindy commented that "we have made significant changes but sometimes it doesn't feel like that. It feels like there are so many more that need to happen. We just have to make people aware". Karen agreed with Cindy, observing that "no matter who you are, be it Native Canadians or Afro-Americans, everyone wants to know their history. Lesbian communities needs to know their history too".

### **A Growing Awareness**

Becoming aware of being attracted to other women arose in different ways for each participant. Most of the women did not have a name for what they felt but they all described a "strong pull in that direction".

Each woman described a time in her life when she knew that there was something different about her from other girls or women. For some, this difference was just a fact of life; something noticed but not anything that became a focus of emotional energy. For others, it was puzzling and always in the back of their minds; something without form or

understanding. Little things would slip into the edge of their awareness but not have any meaning at the time. Some felt a sense of discomfort but were not able to identify it, still others shrugged it off for the time being and carried on with their lives. In some cases, the vague awareness would take the form of thinking that there was something wrong with her. Each woman would ultimately come to an awareness that this "thing" had to do with her emotional and sexual attraction to other women.

Each person's awareness of their orientation came at different times in various ways. Several of the women, Denise and Bonnie believed that they were born with their sexual orientation already established. Both realized at very early ages that they felt different from their peers. Each stated that they instinctually acted differently than other girls. Denise believes it must have to do with hormones:

I was born this way. I knew it as soon as the hormones kicked in. I was about 8 years old. I knew what I wanted. I had never heard of gay love but I knew that I was attracted to the same sex. So I think that it obviously has got to be hormones that make you that way. Like I think I have more men hormones that give me that urge that wants to do that...you know to chase the women. Go after the women. When those hormones kick in there is nothing that slows those things down. You are on a runaway!

Bonnie remembered a strong sense of "knowing" at three years of age:

I knew from day one. I was three years old when I watched my dad smoke cigarettes and chew tobacco and spit. I wanted to be just like him. So there I was rolling tea in my mothers permanent wave papers. From that day I knew there



was something not right here. My mother wanted to put a dress on me because in those days, a little girl never ever wore slacks when she went out. I fought like all get out about that.

Bonnie lived her life as a lesbian for 30 years but always carried a feeling that the term didn't really fit for her. It took many years to realize that what she was experiencing was really a transgender issue:

When I was 10 years old all the girls wanted to have boyfriends and I wanted to have a girlfriend. At 21 I started to think I must be a lesbian because I liked other women. Eventually I figured out that wasn't exactly what the problem was but it was my way to live with women.

Now in her fifties, she is beginning the surgical procedures to correct this situation and to allow her to live as a man as she has wanted to since she was a child.

Barb described the same sense of 'knowing' herself at a very early age. Although gender orientation is not an issue for her, she experienced similar pressure from her peers and family to "be a girl":

I think right from day one, from the minute I was born I was just Barb. I never thought I was different. I never identified as being straight or lesbian or anything. I never really gave it much thought. I always played with the boys. We would go out exploring and stuff but the girls would be playing with dolls and skipping and doing girl things. How boring!

I first started to notice it when the boys started getting interested in me as a girl. They stopped wrestling with me and wanted to kiss me! I thought, "Get out of

here. Don't go around kissing me. Are you crazy? You see Sue over there?

Well, I like Sue too, just as much as you do so I am never kissing you. If I am going to kiss anybody, it is going to be her!"

When I was about 13 all of a sudden it was like my aunts and uncles were putting the pressure on my parents, "Aren't you going to do something about Barb? When is she going to get out of that tomboy stage"? So my parents told my older sister to take me down to the hairdressers to get my hair done. So off we go, we go down there and they do my hair. We go home and it is all beautiful and I look in the mirror and say, "Who the hell is that?" So I go right back down to the barbershop and say give me a brush cut on the top and the sides slicked back and I came home. I said, "This is who I am and this who I will always be". They never sent me to the beauty shop again. I believe that you have to be who you are.

Nobody is going to change you. I was a lucky person. I knew who I was. I didn't have to pretend to be something I wasn't. I had no struggle with that.

Barb and Madeline have been a couple since they were 15 years old. When they met, Barb had been clear about her attraction to women, however, Madeline was surprised at her intense feelings for Barb. She had had no particular attraction to other females until meeting Barb:

I was always one of those little girls that just loved to be a girl. I always had a special boy friend and I mean even in kindergarten I would be put in the corner for kissing the boys so until I met Barb I never had inkling that I would be attracted to women.

A number of the research respondents found that they began to recognize their attraction to girls as they reached adolescence. Marie remembers being attracted to other girls when she was about twelve. She was already sexually active with girls her own age when, at 14, she asked a teacher for a definition of homosexual:

I just knew there was something different about me. At 12, I manipulated the girls to get them to do what I wanted. I would talk them into it because I just felt like if I don't get to touch one besides mine, I am going to have to kill somebody.

I thought there was something wrong with me. I didn't know what it was.

So I went to school and I asked my teacher for the definition of homosexual and she explained that to me. She just said it was loving people of the same sex and I thought, "By golly, there I am". She didn't use the term lesbian. In those days there wasn't a distinction between homosexual and lesbian like there is now.

Marie felt very comfortable with her sexual orientation but was aware that it was not safe to disclose to anyone and like many of the other women, became proficient at "fitting into the straight world" while living a secret lifestyle.

In high school I was always the one that got to drive the car because I never had a date. My dates were in somebody's back room somewhere and nobody ever knew about that. Then I would go hang out with my school friends and I'd drive the car and they would sit in the back and neck and drink beer. They never knew about me.

I was active on the student's council in high school and then got into sports. I got into all kinds of sports and I was good so nobody ever questioned it, nobody

except my dad. He asked "How come no boys call you for date"? [I would say] there's nobody here that I like. You find excuses for what you do. It just was never there for me with the boys.

Gayle's experience as an adolescence was very different from Marie's. Her first attempt at talking to a teacher about sexual orientation distorted her perception of lesbians for years to come:

Well the first time I talked to anybody in my life about possibly being a lesbian, it was to my basketball coach in high school and that was kind of a bad experience. She was tough and rough. She pushed me against a wall and said that because I liked to walk around with my hands in my pockets so I must be a lesbian woman. So I am learning all these things and they are all crazy. I knew that I wasn't like that so I thought that I wasn't a lesbian.

Donna and Louise have been a couple for 37 years. Each came into the relationship with very different perceptions of themselves in relation to their sexual orientation. Donna experienced a tremendous feeling of personal validation when she realized that she was a lesbian. She believes that she had always been lesbian but had had no frame of reference for her feelings:

I think on some level I always knew. It had always been just a vague sense of something being different. Then when I was about 14 I got involved with another woman and thought, "ah ha! That's what it's all about." So I have known since then. It was wonderful to know and to not be questioning what was wrong

anymore. I guess I never thought there was anything wrong, I just thought there was something different. It was a relief to finally know what it was!

Louise's journey to self-awareness was much more difficult. She struggled with her attraction to women and suffered considerable emotional conflict and turmoil:

It wasn't as easy for me. I just didn't know. Well, I knew there was something not right. In junior high I had lots of girl friends and they all started to go crazy about guys and I couldn't understand that. They are doing all kinds of stupid things and I kept wondering what was the matter with them?

I remember I thought this one girl was very, very pretty and so I told her that.

Well, the way she looked at me I knew that was the wrong thing to say. I kind of knew [I was a lesbian] then but I just put it out of my mind.

Then when I was out of high school I just fell head over heels for this gal and when I first became involved with her I knew what that crazy feeling was. I knew why those girls had been so crazy about those guys and I knew then why they would do everything to try to be with them because I wanted to spend all my time with this girl. Then I got really depressed because I thought with my background [Catholic], I thought well, that is it. You are not allowed to be this way; society does not allow that.

The recognition of their sexual orientation occurred for the other participants, when, as adults, they met other women who were identifying as homosexual or gay. Many described feeling like they had been searching for something but not really knowing what it was. For example, although Tommy had never been attracted to men,

her awareness of her sexual orientation didn't surface until she entered the air force and met other lesbians. Nancy also had never even thought about being homosexual.

I went into the nunnery and fell in love with a nun. I didn't even know what was wrong with me. I didn't know what it was until I came into Calgary and played ball and I met a lot of other women. I quickly realized what it was then.

Sue believes that if there had just been information available she might have been able to identify her as a lesbian sooner:

I was in my university days in the early 1960's and I had crushes on women but I still had no idea. I mean if there had been a gay and lesbian support group then I would have just come out and been done with it. I certainly did not know that that was an option. I had never met or I never knew I met another lesbian. Of course I had but I just didn't know that because nobody spoke of about it.

A number of the women had been married before they felt drawn to or acted upon their attraction to women. Sharon was married and had two children before she met and fell in love with Betty, another married woman. Sue and Louise married men in their early twenties but knew that their marriages were not right from the beginning. However, they didn't realize that they had other options.

Gayle, who has been married for 30 years, continues to live with her husband. She has struggled with sexual orientation issues for most of her life.

When I was in junior high, I would go over to this women couple's home. They were probably 8 years older than me and played on the ball team. They were really good to me. Every chance I could get to sneak away I would go and kind of

be around them. I think they kind of wanted me to go back to my mother and my boyfriend. Maybe because they didn't want to be responsible for me but I just kept going back to see them.

Gayle believes that:

It seems that for a very long time I have been looking for connections with women at a deeper level than I have with my friends. I guess I have lived with it by never really labeling it. I just thought about me being in a relationship with a woman, as another person. I guess I didn't allow myself to think about being a lesbian although I knew it in the back of my mind.

The participants in this project shared the experience of realizing that their feelings towards women make them different from the majority of women. Each one framed her experience in a personal way, yet they are bound by a common force that drives them to create relationships and lives that meet their needs in spite of the direct, indirect and sometime hostile resistance from family, friends and society.

Speaking together, Madeline and Barb summarize the thoughts of many of the women:

You know you have to be true to yourself. When I read things, like the Gay Matrix or I'd hear people talk, I would get a sense that they thought something was abnormal about our relationship but somehow I instinctively knew that it was right. It felt good to me. It was nurturing and loving. When the majority of people are saying it is wrong, in your heart you know you are right and it gives you strength to just keep on going in spite of them.

### Looking for the Lesbians

The women involved in this project grew up in a time when the concept of women loving women was either not recognized or was considered illegal, immoral or a mental disorder. At the time, there was little language to accurately describe this type of relationship between women. Any available information generally came from stories they heard through family, friends, the church, the medical profession or the media. Over the years, respondents formed myths and distorted perceptions about women who love women. Some searched through libraries for books and articles, while others stumbled across various allusions to women in relationships with women. A common experience was to uncover a small hint, perhaps a conversation or a line in print, and then to harbor it as a minute but precious validation of their feelings for other women and evidence that they were not alone. Some found the terms and images of women loving women disturbing and intimidating. This would impact their sense of self and the relationships they formed for years to come.

Sue was in university in the early 1960's:

I remember in 1960, 61 and 62 when I was at university, I heard the term homosexual. It was also called sexual invert. Those were the first words I ever knew. I don't know that I thought I was one right away but every time I heard that word, I kind of perked up. When I heard it in conversation I was really interested...I hated that word, you know it sounded so weird but there I was looking up every single thing I could in the library on homosexuality and of course in those days there were a bunch of books by men about inverts, sexual



inverts and all of that, I mean nothing that I read had anything to do with what I thought I might be. Then I remember reading that Gertrude Stein had a relationship with Alice B. Toklas so I read every single thing that Gertrude Stein ever wrote. Looking for a clue. Of course I never found it. I just didn't know where to look.

Karen had a similar experience when she realized her attraction towards women was called homosexuality:

It was not acceptable but at least you know what it is. The words I can remember when I realized I was gay, I didn't know the word gay then, I didn't know the word lesbian. I went to the library and I looked under H's. Homosexuals. I read every book I could find in the library that was listed under homosexuals, which was predominately about men. All of the studies were on men.

The language used to refer to women loving women has shifted and changed over the years in an effort to keep pace with the development of lesbian identity and an evolving sense of community. Initially women loving women referred to themselves as homosexuals, then the term gay came into vogue and more recently the term lesbian is being used. The women in this project described how they learned the terms for their love and the various reactions to those terms. Marie remembered being 14 years old and "not knowing the word. I didn't know what they called us. I read it in one of my mother's True Romance magazines". Tommy, Nancy and Denise agreed that they do not like the word 'lesbian' and none of them use it to describe themselves, preferring instead to refer to themselves as 'gay'. Denise summed up the feelings of the three friends:

Lesbian may be what we are, but even now I don't like the word. I like gay. I am gay. Whenever I talk about it or I tell somebody I always say I am gay. I don't say I am a lesbian.

Other terms that were used to refer to lesbians are 'butch', 'dyke' and 'queer'. It appears that the context in which the terms were used determined whether or not they are derogatory. When the terms are used by those outside the community to describe the women in a stereotypical manner, the words are heard negatively, but the same terms are used by lesbians themselves to indicate a certain look or behavior. Marie doesn't recall much use of the term lesbian, but remembered "You'd hear, hey, look at that. Here comes that big dyke. Sometimes diesel dyke or truck driver butch". Denise's perception was that the terms described and sometimes influenced how they acted. "If you were the butch, you were more the manly one and the other person was more femme. Like if you were butch, you would drive the motorcycle and she [femme] would sit on the back".

Shirley remembers the term Q having a big impact on her life as an adolescent.

I can remember in high school all the kids running around calling each other a Q. I didn't know what they were talking about. So finally, I asked somebody. They said, "Oh queer". I said, "You mean a lot of strange things?" Anyway, somebody finally told me what it meant. Well, then I was sure that I had this great gay mark on my forehead and it was just sticking out my ears and everywhere. So I was kind of in hiding for quite a long while. I didn't quite know what to do.

Denise remembers reading:

Those old little trashy novels of the 1950's. They made up these names to call us like women of the night or amazons or something and they always had awful endings but at least you could read about women who were sort of like you.

As the 1960's were ending and the 1970's dawned, significant events were taking place in gay and lesbian communities across Canada and the United States. However, information was slow to arrive in Calgary. In the late sixties, Sue discovered a lesbian newsletter published in San Francisco:

I did find out about The Ladder and I subscribed to the it. The Ladder was a lesbian newsletter that originated out of San Francisco and it came in a brown paper wrapper. When it came I devoured it and then hid it cause you know it was a lesbian magazine and you couldn't like leave it lying out. I don't know how I found out that the Ladder existed but it just became my lifeline. It meant that there were lesbians out there. I would find these obscure references and then I would subscribe to every single thing that ever had to do with lesbians....in the early '70's when Lavender Jane Loves Women came out I had it right away. Maybe I read an ad because I know she took some ads out in MS magazine but I had it immediately and I know that I had Changer and the Changed almost immediately [first lesbian woman's recording by a lesbian record company]. It was my way of feeling connected to other lesbians.

The majority of the women interviewed were not as fortunate. Most stated that they rarely heard or saw anything about gays or lesbians. Only two participants had heard about the Stonewall riots at the time they occurred in 1969. Sue, on the other hand,

was aware of the riots immediately. "I think I actually was aware of it when it happened. I mean it was a great liberation thing!" Donna remembers some mention of Stonewall in a Calgary newspaper at the time. The rest of the women were unaware of any political events beginning to take shape outside the city of Calgary.

All of the women had some understanding that being with another woman was considered wrong by society, however, most were not sure why this was so. Nancy, who had left the convent as a young woman, knew that it was a sin in the eyes of the church, but didn't know that it was illegal. Barb had no idea that it had been considered a mental disorder at the time. Donna, who was working in the helping profession in the 1960's said, "I was very quiet about it when I was in training. They would have made me take my uniform off and put me in one of the padded cells, you know. Yeah, I was really cautious at that time".

Madeline and Barb knew that homosexuality was actually illegal but didn't really worry about it. They simply believed that the law was wrong. Sharon tells a poignant story about her adult daughter recently beginning to understand the significance of the issues that her mother had faced as a young lesbian:

My daughter came up to me one night not long ago and hugged me and said, "I love you". When I asked what was going on, she said she was writing a paper on feminism for a course at university and she had just read that in the sixties it was illegal to be a lesbian. "Mom, did you know it was illegal"? she asked. "Yes", I said, "I knew it was illegal".

Shirley joked, "we all knew that it was illegal but we voted for Trudeau. We fixed that!"

With so little accurate information available, the women depended on each other, however they could never be sure what was true and what was not. Bonnie had heard stories that made her concerned about attending house parties in Calgary:

Living in that little tiny community I didn't know about anything. It was when I got into the big city I found out things. Before that I read nothing. All I knew is what my experiments were producing for me in this little community so until I came into the city, I didn't know it was against the law. I found out it was against the law to have same sex house parties. There had to be so many men in attendance. You couldn't just have an all women's party or the police could break down the door and take you away. It was against the law. The same thing with the woman's clothing. You had to have a minimum number of pieces of women's clothing on and it couldn't be bobby sox.

Madeline stated that she didn't really think to look for information for years because she didn't think her relationship with Barb was anything other than two people who loved each other and wanted to be together:

It was strange I never thought about it. Then as far as actually knowing there were others like us around and what it was all about, well it was probably quite a bit later that I figured it out and was wanting to read some lesbian literature. I probably already had children, maybe the late 1970's, when I saw an article in the Saturday Evening Post, I believe, or the Saturday magazine and it was on Jane

Rule. I would go to the library and I would stick her books underneath the kid's books and hope that nobody would notice. After that I just kept watching that section of the paper for other books of hers that had come out.

In those days, the books that were available were all negative, stereotypical type books. I remember reading one that Barb's sister had given me. It was the Gay Matrix. In that book it said that after two years of being together lesbians don't make love anymore and I know that is not true but that is the kind of stuff that was out there then.

Although the late 1970's and the early 1980's began to offer better access to accurate information, many of these women still found it very difficult to be open about their interest in the subject of lesbianism. Gayle described the fear and paranoia she experienced going into a women's bookstore and browsing through the lesbian section:

The first time I ever went into a bookstore was in Edmonton, well, a bookstore where I was looking at the lesbian section. I was looking over my shoulder the whole time. Nobody knew me in Edmonton at all. I didn't know anybody there but my best friend and here I am looking over my shoulder thinking what are these people thinking of me and pretending I am not reading this book. Of course, the only ones there are the ones that ordered the books in so it was very much a paranoia thing on my part.

The search for information about women loving women was one matter. In the early years in Calgary the search for likeminded women was quite another. The experience of finding and meeting other women varied significantly among the women. Some had ideas of where to meet women, while others felt that it was just chance that

they kept meeting and becoming involved with women. Still others found their determined search for other lesbians very challenging. Regardless of circumstance, each woman found herself inexplicably yet powerfully drawn towards the love of another woman.

Louise believed that, "if you wanted to meet girls, everyone knew you went and played ball or went into the army. I always stayed away from playing ball even though I played every other sport". In spite of her determination to not become involved with other women Louise found the lure of connection with women very strong:

I would meet women on a summer job or at university and when I was out drinking. When I drank, I got into a lot of trouble. I would have a slip [be with a woman]. That's what I called it, a slip. Of course all my friends were drinkers and they would be doing the same thing, drinking and carrying on and getting into trouble [being with women]. I'd find out about somebody [that they were gay] from somebody else then you find out that they know about a place down the road [gay club].

Several of the women stated that their primary goal in searching for other lesbians was to find support and validation to know that they were not the only ones. Donna, Gayle and Tommy described the importance of finding a support group of lesbians and other women:

I was in nursing so there were all kinds of women. There was never a shortage of women. I mean there are beautiful women everywhere. I was intimately involved with a lot of women but not sexually involved. Many of them were lesbian. And

so I was never lonely in the sense of having lots of women to be close to and that kind of thing.

Gayle met women with whom she could share her confusion when she went back to school:

I met women mostly through the Theological College I went to, other women who were bisexual or lesbian. Mostly we would study, we were friends and I could talk to them about my confusion. I didn't get involved in a relationship with any of them but some of them are still my friends.

Tommy found friends, companionship and a community in the air force:

It was more meeting other people than finding a first love, really. It was more running with the crowd that was all the same as you. I guess my first love was in the service but that wasn't the big part. The best part of it was meeting other people and knowing you weren't alone.

Sue had many adventures on her search for other lesbians. She remembered meeting a woman when she was 16 years old. Although Sue didn't really know what she was looking for at that time she sensed that this woman might have some answers for her:

She told me that I didn't want to get involved with her because she was a lesbian and well that did it for me, of course. I just followed her around everywhere I could and I actually did get involved with her but she wasn't really a lesbian actually she was a hooker...so I still was looking for the lesbians.

Then I knew that I wanted to know more and so I took every opportunity that I had. The next few women that I did go to bed with were straight women. One



who was looking for an experience of what it was like, you know those were the days when feminism was starting and people were trying all kinds of new things and it was the 60's and it was sort of cool to do these things. There was this straight married woman and I said I was a lesbian. I had no idea, I don't think I used the word lesbian but whatever the going word was in the '60's and she said she wanted to go to bed with me. I didn't even know what that meant! And I certainly didn't know what I was doing and she kind of freaked out and it was not a good, satisfying experience at all. But I still thought, I know that there have to be real lesbians somewhere.

A number of the women acknowledged that during the 1960's in Calgary many of met other lesbians playing softball. Sue had a unique approach to using softball as a way to meet lesbians:

I wanted to be involved with all these women but I didn't particularly want to play softball. I actually thought it was a pretty boring game so I became the team doctor. It seemed to suit everybody just fine. I would always take something to read like my medical books or whatever lesbian stuff I was getting in the mail and I could just be around all the neat dykes. The coach still remembers me and how she would look up into the stands and there was this woman reading through this whole game. She was totally intrigued by someone who would come to a game and read. To this day she talks about it.

After the games, some of the women tended to frequent the bars in either the Cecil or the Beacon Hotel. Except within the small lesbian community, this wasn't

common knowledge, thereby making it difficult for anyone outside of the community to "find the lesbians". Sharon and her partner, Betty, had been together for several years when they happened into one of the bars and realized that they had found a meeting place of women like themselves:

We really just stumbled upon the Cecil through a process of elimination. Before that Betty and I sort of felt we were just about the only gay people in the world. It was 1967 and Betty was doing her Centennial project, which was to visit all the bars in Calgary. For 4 years we had been visiting bars and I think we had about five left when we ended up at the Cecil one night and here were all these gay women! We thought, "This is it. It's mecca. We have arrived". Nobody spoke to us for weeks but we went back faithfully every Friday and every Saturday night just to be in the same place as other women. We would stay until closing time and then leave.

We used to watch everyone come in from the ball games, all dirty and nobody would speak to us. Then one night these two beer arrived at the table and we said to the waitress, "Where did they come from?" And she said, "They came from over there, that woman in the yellow shirt"... The beer came from Tommy.

Tommy had sent them over because she felt so bad that no one was speaking to us but she still didn't talk to us. It was several more weeks before anyone spoke to us and then one night as the bar was closing, Karen tripped us up on the way out and said, "Where do you think you are going?" And the rest is history.

Several of the women commented that it wasn't until they left the city that they found out that there were actually clubs established for lesbians. After high school, Marie did some traveling:

I had no idea that there were those kind of places until I went to the United States, Kansas City and I will never forget it. The name of the place was 'A Colony Club' and a friend of mine said, "Come on, we will go over here to this club". Well, we went over there and it was the first time in my life I had ever been in love. By God, I thought I had died and gone to heaven. The most gorgeous woman I have ever seen in my life was there. She turned out to be a drag queen, but I was 19 and up until that point I had no idea those kind of places even existed, that they did have clubs, that there were places for us to go. I just had no idea.

Sue's first experience in a lesbian bar was both exciting and disappointing:

The first lesbian bar I ever went to was in the '60's. I walked in and like there were half of the women in pants and white shirts and cigarettes tucked in their shirt sleeves and their hair slicked back and their comb in their back pocket. I looked at them and I thought, "Well, yeah, I kinda feel some kind of sisterhood with them but I'm not really like that". And then the other half of the women were in beehive hairdos and high heels and dresses and I said, "Yeah, I feel some sisterhood with them but I am really not like that!" And then when I wanted to [go in] they said "Well what are you butch or femme?" and I said "um, I don't know". And they said "okay, you're kiki". You have to know cuz you have to

know who you can dance with. You know like, if you were butch you couldn't just go ask another butch's femme to dance. That was like bad, right. Well, I ended up not dancing with anybody because nobody knew who or what I was. So here I am in my first lesbian bar and there is still nobody that I identify with - right, but at least I could sort of feel a kind of a sisterhood because up until then I had been hanging around with gay guys and I felt a kind of a kinship with them but I wanted to find women I identified with.

The late 1960's saw the advent of a gay and lesbian telephone line and a private gay and lesbian club in Calgary. Since the times were still very oppressive, finding out about these resources could be difficult, however several of these women were resourceful enough to track them down.

Sue managed to find the phone number to the gay and lesbian help line and recalls:

I don't know how I found that out but I did. I phoned them and I said I'm a lesbian new to the city and I have no idea what's in the city. Actually I still don't think I used lesbian, we still didn't use the word lesbian in 1969 but I don't remember what we called ourselves. Maybe gay. Anyway, the guy took my name and number and very quickly after that I got a phone call back from Laurie, who said, "I understand you're new here. There is a club here, would you like to meet me there" and I said "Oh, yes please". So Laurie took me to Club Carousel and then I met some other people and then she said there is a party next week at so and so's

would you like to go? And I said "Of course" and I was just off and running after that.

After traveling and experiencing the world, Marie came back to Calgary and was determined to find the gay and lesbian community:

I had come back to Canada in October and this was in January. I had hunted and I had fretted and I had written letters to the Albertan, the newspaper at the time and they sent me to the King's Arms at the Palliser Hotel [a men's bar]. I had done everything trying to find someplace for me to go. I finally get the name and address from somewhere. I know it was called the Carousel and that it was down on 1<sup>st</sup> St., under the Moose Factory. I had finally found this place and I go down the stairs to the door and Jack is on the door and he won't let me in because it's a private club. And I said to him, "You are either going to open this door or I am coming through it." Then I weighed 300 pounds and I was a big girl to be standing there arguing with this little skinny guy. He said, "Do you know what kind of a place this is" and I said, "Yes I do and I have been looking for it for six months now open the damn door!". He went in and got one of the girls to come out and sign me in.

### **The Impact of Being Lesbian**

Being a lesbian significantly impacted all of the women's lives in many different ways. Their relationships with family, friends and the community have all been altered by the secret each of them carried. Each woman developed individual ways to manage

her life and identified specific ways in which she believes her sexual orientation affected her life.

Unable to talk to anyone about what was going on in their lives, these women had to try making sense of their feelings on their own. For Marie and Bonnie, that sense of isolation came early in their lives as they grew up in small rural areas, each believing they were the "only ones". Although they were sexually active with other girls, they had a sense that their partners were not dealing with the same identity issues they were. They found that while their age appropriate peer group in many ways accepted them, they still felt separate because they did not share the same perspective on dating and relationships. Ultimately, both women felt compelled to leave their hometowns in search of others like themselves.

Bonnie says:

I think it was very hard for me, because there was no one to talk to. In the small place that I come from, there was no place to go. There I was at 15, stuck in the middle of nowhere and not another soul to talk to. Even though I was fooling around all the time I was in high school, I knew they weren't at the same place as I was. Maybe they were just curious or it was safer or easier or whatever it was, you always knew they weren't there. It is very hard to live every day like that; not to have a steady or not be able to release all the feelings and things that you have. Then you just finally give up and say I can't do this anymore and I am leaving this little tiny place. You go looking because now you have found out there are others out there somewhere, and you know that's what you need.

Marie remembers "feeling on the outside looking in" and not seeing anything that fit for her:

When I first knew there was something different about me...there wasn't anybody I could talk to or anything so I just pretty much kept it to myself. In the little place that I came from...it was a little difficult when, like I was 13 or 14 and there were parties. There were always the boyfriend-girlfriend sorts of thing and it just wasn't for me. It wasn't that I didn't have friends. I was really popular but I was just always by myself. There would be several guys and they would want to call me for a date but I wasn't interested so it did make me feel a little bit on the outside. It was little difficult for me in that respect.

Nancy's awareness of her own sexual orientation didn't come until she was in her twenties. Filled with overwhelming and tumultuous feelings she didn't understand she also felt that "the hardest part was when I thought I was the only one in the world like that. Once I met other people, I realized it wasn't that hard at all."

Some of the women felt that the myths and stereotypes that prevailed at the time they were growing up made it difficult for women to acknowledge their attraction to other women. They believed that if they could have talked to someone as they were struggling they would have achieved self-acceptance earlier.

Gayle recognizes the effects on her of the stories she heard about homosexuals:

I think that when you hear about gay lesbian people or homosexuality as a young kid, you are told that it is bad, wrong, evil, or sick. I heard all of that and I guess I believed it. I didn't want to but there was no one there to tell me otherwise.

In retrospect, Bonnie believes that as she struggled on her own to make sense of her attraction to women, she misrepresented herself to people:

I have been accused of lying to the people I am with because I told them I was a lesbian. I knew my whole life that I wanted to be a boy, a man and when I was 17, I wrote to the John Hopkins Hospital and asked for the information about having a sex change. At that time it probably cost about \$35,000. You had to go to the States and I didn't have the money. I couldn't talk to anybody about it; certainly not my mother or any of my family. So I left it. Maybe in some respects I did lie to those people because I honestly never thought that I would have the opportunity to have the operation. I guess I was never really truly a lesbian but to me it wasn't a lie. In order to live the way I wanted to live [with a woman], then to me that is how I did it.

When some of the women found partners and settled into long-term relationships, they found that as a couple they also experienced a sense of isolation. Donna and Louise lived a very closeted lifestyle for many years because Louise was so afraid of what would happen to them if "people knew". Donna describes feeling "very isolated. For me, the most difficult part in not coming out sooner was the isolation, and the lack of validation about our relationship and ourselves." They had long discussions about self acceptance and acceptance of lesbians in the world. Donna remembers that:

I was okay with talking to Louise about acceptance and that you were still okay even if you are lesbian and that kind of stuff but I thought that it probably would



have been far more impactful if there had been a community to say that to Louise and to us.

A significant shift occurred in the relationship between Donna and Louise when they discovered Dignity, a group of Catholic gays and lesbians. Finally they had found others to talk to and to discuss the implications of their sexual orientation on their lives.

Donna reminds Louise:

Part of what freed you up a lot was dealing with the church issue. You finally knew there was a nucleus of people that were accepting and weren't damning you to hell forever if you lived a lesbian lifestyle That was a real turning point.

Louise agrees:

It was my fault that we were that closeted. Dignity was very helpful for me. Then we got more out and more involved in everything else but we certainly we weren't the brave ones in the '70s.

Madeline and Barb have been together for more than thirty years. For the first eighteen, they did not know any other lesbians and each hold different perspectives on the effect of that isolation on their relationship. Early in the relationship, they struggled over Madeline's relationship with a previous boyfriend. Madeline found the isolation very difficult and wonders if, "it wouldn't have been so hard for us if we had the option of being able to talk to somebody and work through it with some outside support". Barb, on the other hand, believes that the fact that they only had each other to turn to actually made the relationship stronger.

In other cases, relationships did not survive the stress created when one woman felt a strong need to be connected and involved in the lesbian community and the other did not. Sue found it confusing to be deeply in love with a woman who did not identify as a lesbian and, therefore, felt no need to be connected to the lesbian community:

It doesn't make sense to me. That's why I left that relationship. That was the single biggest thing with that long term relationship that was difficult for me was that this was when lesbians were coming out and...there were lesbian music festivals, gay pride parades and I was so excited about all these things. She totally supported me. You want to go to the festival okay, go and have a good time but she was just not interested. For example, I'll never forget this. The first gay pride march I ever went to was in New York, and it was in the late '70's and here we are marching down the street and there were hundreds of thousands of people and I just had tears coming down my face and I thought these are my people, I've come home. My partner was saying, "this is really nice, could we go to a museum now." I mean it was a non-issue for her and it was such a big thing for me that I know that that was a big part of us separating...it is really important for me to live my life in my lesbian culture all the time. Like 100% with my partner, my friends, and my work, with everything.

Several of the women stated that when they realized that they were lesbian, they started to be more conscious of their behavior around other people. Things that had been natural, one day suddenly took on a different meaning. Madeline remembers the changes in her behavior with her partner:

I think that suddenly there was awareness that people would judge us. I know when we first got together there was lots of things that we did that boyfriends and girlfriends who were heterosexuals do quite naturally. I tend to be quite a physical person, and we would hold hands and sometimes I would lay on the couch and put my head in her lap. We were still kids and living at home and we did all kinds of things like that when we were just friends. I was doing it without any awareness but once I realized our relationship was more than that we were more careful. We didn't even talk about it, it just happened. We didn't touch in public. Sometimes I would goof up like I would say "Are you are coming to bed now" and that was a big thing when we were still living with family. They'd say things like "How come Madeline is saying that to Barb? It doesn't matter what time Barb goes to bed as opposed to what time she goes to bed."

We were very careful so there must have been some awareness at some level that people didn't approve of our relationship. There was a protectiveness I think of our relationship that we had to be careful or they would try and break us up.

Gayle sometimes now feels self-conscious and finds that she thinks twice about doing simple things like giving someone a hug.

If I let the fear get a hold of me, I find it really robs you of being yourself, of being a loving and kind person. It is like if I want to hold or hug somebody now and it happens to be a woman, I can get really paranoid and not do it because it is not the right thing to do because I have feelings towards them. It is a kind of paranoia.

Several of the women believe that their sexual orientation limited their life experiences. They feel that there have been things in their lives they have passed up or missed out on for a variety of reasons. Some decisions were made out of fear of exposure, such as Louise passing up the chance to join the reserves:

If I had not been so tied up in knots about it, not been so compartmentalized and putting so much energy into keeping it that way, I would have been freer to do a lot more things. I think it's cost me in that way. You know what it was? I was homophobic myself. I remember somebody gave me this wonderful opportunity when I was in my 20's. I got a chance to be in the sea cadets at Tecumseh, in the Reserve. This fellow was an officer and said he could get me reserve training so I could make some money on the side and they would pay for your education if you wanted to go to university. It was a wonderful opportunity but I thought no, I don't think I had better do that. I thought people would know I was gay if I did it. Looking back at it now, it sounds pretty darn stupid but that's how I thought.

It was difficult for some of the women, knowing that they would miss basic developmental markers such as dating, getting engaged, and getting married; activities taken for granted by all other women. Madeline remembers being "teased by the straight life and the acceptance that comes with being straight" when she was struggling to make a decision between being with Barb or being with an ex-boyfriend.

I got to a stage where I was just kind of immobile. If I was with Barb, I was happy. If I was with him, I was happy until it was time to go home, either way I was in turmoil. At 16, I just knew I loved Barb and wanted to be with her forever

but if I did there were a lot of things that other teenagers did that I would have to give up. I wouldn't be going to dances, I wouldn't be going to prom and a lot of stuff like that. It was more the loss of what was supposed to be and the anger about not being able to have it. I don't think I acknowledged what I was missing until he was there and he could offer it. I went through a kind of grieving process.

Gayle realized during her participation in this project that another effect of struggling with her sexual orientation is the distortion that occurred in her thinking. Although she was married, when she became involved with another woman she found herself creating ways to explain the situation.

I think I knew it in the back of my mind. I got around it by thinking that it wasn't really me. It was the other person. I thought about her being the pursuer and that I was still the married woman like I wasn't really a part of what was going on. I was just being nice. I am still struggling with this and some of the awareness about myself that I am getting even as I tell you this I'm not sure I like very much. It's like saying I kind of blamed the other person, the other woman.

I guess I never really labeled it either. I had thought about the lesbian issue but I just thought about me being in a relationship with a woman. I didn't allow myself to think about being a lesbian.

Most of the women learned to live their lives in secret, often referring to themselves as living in the closet or being closeted. The effects on the women were varied. Some experienced tremendous pain living this way while they tried to hide their sexual orientation. Louise remembers a particularly difficult time in her life:

I had a lot of trouble with this stuff so that is when I went into the closet. I was drinking and getting into trouble [sleeping with women] and I actually considered doing myself in. I remember getting a razor blade and a bottle of gin. I thought one drink, one slash. Thank God, it didn't work.

Many women found that they led two lives by being closeted in some areas and out in others. Even if they chose to be active in the lesbian community, many remained silent about their lifestyle to family, work and the rest of society. Some found it easy to remain invisible. They learned to adapt their behavior or their speech to disguise the nature of their relationships. Others never spoke about their personal lives. Most of the women describe this as being quite natural for them and did not give it much thought. Even in retrospect they do not feel as though it was a significant issue, rather it was just a part of life. Louise's experience was different and she describes always feeling on guard. "I always felt like I had to be so careful because you never knew if you would lose your job or if somebody would dislike you or hurt you"

Shirley describes the years she worked as a technical engineer with a group of men who:

Spent all of their lives trying to prove I was queer...because I wouldn't go out with them. I would drink with them and then I would just politely leave. Of course I didn't have any feelings for any of them and I would use anything I could to turn the questions around and not answer them. Those guys were always saying, "You go down to the Cecil so you must be queer". And I would say, "You think so. How many kids have you got?" "None", they'd say and so I'd say,

"Well you must be queer." They used to give me a real hard time at work. I just wouldn't react to them. Then every once and awhile I would drag my kids or one of my grandkids down to the shop or something.

Donna states that she was cautious about letting people know about her life but doesn't remember feeling the same kind of guardedness as the others.

I can't say it ever impacted the way I was or where I worked other than maybe only for the period of time I was in training. I was in psych nursing and of course, they were putting people in mental hospitals for this same thing, so you know you get quite closeted. I refer to that as my heterosexual kind of years. I didn't talk openly about being lesbian either the first few years after graduation because there was really no need. I was single and enjoying all the women that were there so it was not a big deal.

Marie agrees. Even in the '60's she felt that her sexual orientation didn't cause her problems although she acknowledges that it wasn't talked about.

I was in professional sports so it didn't matter. It was kind of expected. People thought that any woman who did that is one of those [gay]. From eighteen years old, I was in pro sports so it really wasn't an issue for me at work. I mean there were requirements about how you had to dress when you were going to the venue or whatever but that was it.

Madeline states that she doesn't really think that hiding was a big issue in her life. It felt more like her sexual orientation and her relationship had "to be a non-issue" even though it was the center of her life. "A lot of times when you are a lesbian, you are in a

relationship and you want to talk about your family like other people do but you find you always censor yourself. It's like that whole part of your life doesn't really exist at certain times".

Louise believes that even though it may seem harmless, the silence and hiding that seems to come naturally to many lesbians have a more serious effect on people:

People begin to think you are really odd. You never talk about your home life, you never talk about anything you do, and you become very clever at avoiding any questions about yourself. I was really good at that but I think you pay a cost for that. I think that hiding makes you ill after awhile. I found that out. I think you either get more accepting of yourself and more out or you get really odd.

A number of the women found that the pressure to conform to societal expectations made life frustrating and uncomfortable. For example, some of the women adopted a butch or femme identity that would often be reflected in their dress, hairstyle, and behavioral characteristics and, perhaps, the jobs they chose. In a butch-femme relationship, one of the partners tended to be most comfortable in clothing or roles generally considered masculine, while the other partner tended to be described as the more "feminine" of the two.

Neither Barb nor Bonnie were comfortable wearing "feminine" clothing or presenting in the stereotypical feminine manner. Madeline remembers, "trying to get Barb to shave her legs and wear skirts and nylons and fit in with the girls." "She tried to change me", mutters Barb.

Bonnie, who lived her life as a butch found it especially difficult in the 1960's:



My very first job was a secretarial job as a matter of fact. I hated like hell to go to work in a skirt and all this stuff, dresses and things but it was something I knew I had to do and I did it. I had to have a job, I had to work, I had to be able to keep a roof over my head and eat so I did it.

For women who loved butch women, going out in public was often stressful.

Marie describes herself as always being feminine and being attracted to butch women.

She talks about the problems that arose living in a butch-femme world:

Back in the late '50s and early '60s, it was quite butch and femme. A typical thing you always ran into would be just going out for dinner with your butch or going to the movies with a dyke [as a femme]. We were made fun of. You got all gussied up in your little high heels and things and you had this old butch with you and away you went but you were the topic of conversation in the restaurant, so it made it very uncomfortable to be there, to appear in public in places other than places you were allowed to go. You couldn't enjoy what you were doing. It wasn't a good night on the town to go for dinner or to go to the theatre or go to movies or whatever. It was made extremely uncomfortable for you.

As a butch woman, Bonnie remembers enjoying celebrating special occasions by taking her partner out to dinner:

Oh, if you were with somebody for a year or two, like a kind of an anniversary-due-thing and you want to go out and all that sort of thing. When I get dressed up, I wear either a suit or a pair of slacks and a shirt and tie or a suit jacket and of

course, my lady always looked very nice all dressed up. We'd just go out there and do it. I didn't care.

Bonnie states that she has noticed a real change over the years in people's reaction to her. With a sense of self-confidence, Bonnie lives her life as a male now as she prepares for the transgender surgery. She marvels at the difference in the level of acceptance she experiences in most areas of her life now as compared to her younger days.

Well, to tell you the honest truth, I don't really care about people staring or saying stuff anymore because of something that happened at the Legion. I am a member of the Legion here and so I was going to tell them. One night I had a few drinks and we were talking and I said something about being a lesbian. One of the secretaries looked at me and she said, "Bonnie, before you even ran for office, we all knew what you were". Somebody made it a point to go down and tell them thinking it would cause a problem. Well, it certainly hasn't. I started off as Sports Officer and now I'm vice-president and I've even got my own parking spot. I am also secretary-treasurer of the whole zone. So those little outing games don't work anymore.

It blows everybody's mind because they said, "Bonnie, that is one of the most red-necked Legions in the city of Calgary. You will never get in there and if you do and they find out..." And I said, "If I don't, I don't". Then I got in and I am accepted on equal status. I get along really well with the people down there. It just doesn't seem to matter to them. Things are so different now.

Although Madeline and Barb didn't consider themselves a traditionally butch-femme couple, they found that people made assumptions about their relationship based on Barb's look. Madeline describes an awkward incident that happened to her with a neighbor:

There were a lot of times that Barb's looks confused people. I remember we lived in a townhouse when Scot was about 1½ and he had this wonderfully red hair. This neighbor came over and she said, "Oh! He looks just like your husband"! I just looked at her and I said, "I don't have a husband". She said, "Well, he looks just his dad. He has Barb's hair". I was embarrassed because she mistook Barb for a guy. I never got used to that.

A significant portion of the lesbian community chose not to adopt a butch-femme type of presentation and found they were able to live in the broader community unnoticed. This invisibility was an act of survival for many women. Sue tells a story typical of the way many lesbians participated in the broader world while keeping their secret safe:

The whole time I went through medical school, my lover and I had boyfriends but they were really gay guys. It worked out very well because the two men were lovers as well, so the four of us went everywhere together. All through the five years I was in medical school and completing my residency everyone thought he was my boyfriend. The four of us loved to dance so we went to all the medical school things and danced like crazy. It was great. I got to be with my lover (we never called each other partners then either) and participate in everything at

school. But when I think back on it, I'm kind of envious of all the people in medical school today. There are gay and lesbian groups and all that now. I would have loved to have had that. On the other hand, I don't think I would have lasted being out then. I had enough trouble being a feminist and staying in medical school. They thought I was too radical!

For several participants, the most significant effects of being lesbian was feeling cut off from their most natural support systems; friends and family. Many felt that they were unable to talk to their families much about their lives.

Gayle finds that one of the biggest effects of struggling with sexual orientation is the tremendous internal drive that doesn't go away. It occupies her thoughts in one way or the other everyday:

I guess I just have always had the hopes and dreams that I could just provide for my husband and my kids and have a stereotypical normal life. But I find I just have to keep looking for something. I have been looking all my life, in all the corners of my life and I keep thinking, why haven't I settled that? Why can't I just settle down? Why can't I wake up in the morning, have my cup of coffee, plan my day with my kids and my husband? I am always searching.

As the women looked back over their lives, they tended to agree that in spite of the hardships and the difficulties they encountered, they believed they had lived their lives in the only way they could have. Bonnie expressed regret that it had been such a battle. She states, "I wish that I could have been what I wanted to be (male) or that I could have been "normal" but I guess that all of that got me to where I am today."

The rest of the women believe that living the way they wanted to has made them stronger and happier in the long run. They are proud that they have been true to themselves and believe that they are to be more open and free in the world as a result. Most believe that life has been wonderful to them and that there is nothing they would change if they were to do it over again.

Madeline can't even imagine what it would be like to live life in any other way:

I guess I have been lesbian for so many years of my life that I can't imagine anything else. I think we have children, I am in a relationship, I am loved, I love. I just think it is how my life is meant to be. I can't imagine if I hadn't been a lesbian, I would probably still have children. I would be in a relationship with a man. I would probably be unhappy knowing at some level that something wasn't right but not really sure what. Maybe that would be the difference. I can't really think how it would be to not be lesbian. It is funny too for me because I don't think it was a big struggle. All I knew is that I loved Barb and that has made it right. This is my life and I love it!

Sue also values the freedom that being a lesbian has allowed her in terms of creating her life:

Being a lesbian is the best thing that ever happened to me. I can't imagine being a lesbian and not realizing what you are or not allowing yourself to follow your feelings. If I were living straight, I fear I would be the most repressed, uptight, bitter, angry, hostile person, assuming I was still alive.... I mean being a lesbian

made me me. I think that we are all like little flowers and the more that we're ourselves, we just bloom and I'm blooming.

Nancy, Denise and Tommy agree that there would be very little they would change about their lives. With the wisdom of age, Tommy comments that, "she wouldn't change anything except to start buying RSP's a lot younger", while Nancy's only regret is that she didn't have a child. Denise speaks for the three friends when she says:

I don't think I would change anything. My life was a party and I enjoyed it all: even the painful parts. I didn't like it but that is what life is all about and I would do it all over again. I would do this round one more time.

Marie believes that she gained personal strength from living her life as a lesbian: I think it has made me one hell of a strong person. It has taught me how to survive, it has taught me how to live in a harsh and cruel world and get along. It made you want to stand up and fight a bit. Not just lay down and die as a passive, submissive human being. There were struggles but I believe they made me the strong woman that I am today.

The effects of lesbianism on a woman's life are varied. The participants in this project identified isolation as one of the most difficult things issues. Whether individually or as a couple, all experienced times when they felt like they were the "only ones". Even in situations where they surrounded themselves with friends and family, there was rarely any discussion about their sexual orientation and no opportunity to validate their feelings or relationships. Some of the respondents indicated that living a

secret life affected their behavior towards other people, put pressure on their relationships and sometimes led to them passing up opportunities for fear of being found out.

In spite of the struggles the women have experienced in their lives, the majority was adamant that they would choose to live their lives exactly the same way again, given another chance. All of the women agreed that they feel they have found an inner strength that comes with trusting their natural instinct to live life on their own terms.

## CHAPTER FIVE: MAKING PEACE

Chapter Four considers the personal impact of a woman's recognition that she is attracted to other women and the individual process of understanding what that means in her life. Chapter Five explores the experiences of the participants in a variety of relationships including significant others, family, work and each woman's perspective of lesbian community. Finally, I present a summary of the data collected.

### The Nature of the Relationships

As women loving women, the participants in this project created innovative relationships that met their individual needs. Their observations provide insight into both common relationship issues and the unique experiences of same-sex couples. The individual stories illustrate the tenacity of these pioneers. Some of the women were torn between the obligation to conform to societal standards and the pull of their hearts in the opposite direction. For some the journey was difficult as they wrestled with their feelings and tried to escape the well-entrenched expectations of their upbringing. Others never questioned the direction in which their lives were moving: they did what worked at the moment. Reflecting on the relationships in their lives, several women expressed a sense of freedom and release from the expectations of traditional roles as they were able to experiment with their relationships and to create scenarios that worked within their individual circumstances.

Sue describes a positive side of living outside of traditional relationship structures:



One of the best things about being in a lesbian relationship is that you can make up your own rules. You don't have societal role models imposed upon you. You can both hold equal power. It's not to say that everybody does half the floors or half the dishes or stuff like that but you get to be in a partnership in a way that is most comfortable for each individual. And in straight society that is rare. It's kind of an adventure in making things up.

Louise agrees that there are certain benefits to forging new patterns in relationship but also sees inherent difficulties:

I think that because we live an alternate lifestyle, we can free ourselves of certain roles, however, we are still brought up to think of ourselves as having certain roles and responsibilities in relationships. With no role models, we can kind of flounder around a bit.

The relationship patterns represented by the participants are diverse. Two of the couples met as young women and have been together for more than 30 years. Four of the women have had several long-term relationships lasting between 5 and 15 years. Sharon has created a strong foundation of relationships in her life, which incorporate her husband, children and female partner. Shirley and Karen, once partners, have since developed an enduring friendship of 35 years in which their lives are intimately intertwined. After several long-term relationships Tommy finds that she prefers to be single and cherishes the companionship of family and friends. Gayle lives in a straight marriage of 30 years, has a separate and distinct life with a female partner of two years and continues to struggle with sexual orientation issues.

Snapshots of the women's relationship stories provide a remarkably rich view of the diversity of those experiences during a time in which the lesbian community was virtually invisible in Calgary. As the women wove the patterns of their lives in the everyday, they encountered issues unique to lesbians and formed individual perceptions about relationships between women. Their lives often took unexpected twists and turns, always challenging them to improvise and create new ways of relating to each other and the world around them.

The stories told by those who have maintained long-term relationships reveal some unique issues lesbian couples face. In their narratives are elements that sustain enduring relationships. Each believes that the strength of their relationships came from sharing a common long-term history and an equal commitment to working through the hard times together. Madeline and Barb shared the story of their first meeting and early struggles to be independent from family. These demonstrate the type of foundation they created that has resulted in 37 years together. Madeline begins:

I was about 13 when I was out with my friends and I saw Barb across the street. I remember saying to some of the girls, "Who is that cute guy across the street?" And they said, "That is Barb. She's a girl." I was intrigued, so one day I just walked over and said "Hi! My name is Madeline". Barb said, "Yeah. I know. Come on in and I will lend you some of my dad's books". Somehow she knew that I read and she gave me this big stack of books knowing that I would have to bring them back. We had this great long, really intense conversation. That's how we started our relationship. As I look back now, it was a lesbian relationship right

from the very beginning. We started a kind of a friendship/courtship. We would hold hands and act like the kids we were. I would say to her, "If you were only a guy." and Barb would say, "Hrmp! Doesn't matter if I am or I'm not. I like you anyways." We exchanged rings and then we both went away for the summer. I worked on playgrounds and Barb went back down to Ontario. While we were gone I think we wrote to each other every day but it was still not a physical relationship.

By the time I came back from the summer holiday, there was a young fellow who was in the services that had taken an interest in Barb. My room was right across from her house and when he was there I would see the light in the front hall go off and I had this overwhelming feeling of jealousy. I wanted him gone big time. That's when I thought this is not just a friendship; it is much more. Around that time we kissed for the first time and that was it!

When Barb's father realized what was happening he decided to relocate the family to keep us apart, but Barb refused to go so we stayed with my mother while Barb went to school and took a keypunch operators course. Then she went pounding on doors looking for work. Barb remembered "I walked everywhere so I could save my bus fare. I had no money and I had to save bus fare so when it came to Christmas I would have enough money to buy Madeline a present".

Soon we just had to move out. We had \$40 for one months' rent and food because Barb had worked at the post office and, after quitting school in grade 12, I started babysitting. I had a little hope chest that I had been saving for when I got

married. There we were we had 2 cups, 2 glasses, 2 plates, a couple of dishtowels, and one blanket. We found this nice little basement, two room little place with a shared a bathroom. So we had our place and then it was time for Barb to find a job or we'd have to move home at the end of our first month!

Barb continues the story:

I clearly remember the day I was laying in bed and Madeline said, "Come on, get up. You have got to go looking for work today". It was 40 below zero and I was tired of looking for work. In those days you had to put nylons on and a skirt to get a job. I didn't like wearing skirts but you couldn't go for an interview without a skirt. But she made me get up. She made me get dressed and off we went down to the Unemployment Office. There was a job at Imperial Oil on the board. It was so cold we couldn't walk there even though it was only about six or eight blocks so we had to take this long bus ride around to get there. We got there about three in the afternoon. I filled out the application and they said, "We are closing at 4 o'clock. Can you come back tomorrow"? So I went back the next day and finished the interview. Well, 35 years later, here I am still at Imperial Oil. Just last month they have finally given us same sex benefits: after all those years.

Madeline was there the day I got my job and Madeline is still here today. This is my first and my last relationship. When I go into something, I go in full hog and there is no turning back. So when I make the commitment, it is not for today or for tomorrow, it is forever.

Donna and Louise met as young adults when they worked at the same residential care center for children. Although Donna was comfortable with her own sexual orientation, Louise was still struggling. Aside from regular relationship adjustments, they had to work out a way to deal with Louise's extreme fear of being "found out". Donna describes her first interaction with Louise:

Louise was a flaming red head and I would see this red head sort of flash by on the campus now and again and I would think, "Who is that?" and lo and behold if she didn't get a job there after she completed her practicum.

The first time we really talked she came in to my office and said, "So, do you ski?" I said, "No". And she said, "Do you golf?" "No". "So what sport do you do?" I said, "I don't do sports". She said, "You don't do sports! What is there in life if you don't do sports?" Well, I just didn't do anything like that. So then I invited her to go to the Stampede with a group and it was kind of like saying, "well, I do do this. Do you want to come? "

Louise remembers the angst of meeting Donna:

I was living on my own when Donna asked me if I wanted to go to the Casino. I came home and thought and thought about it. I had that funny feeling. When I went I kind of knew what I was getting into.

Like many lesbian relationships we spend that first night together and by morning we were both very smitten and it just got worse from there:

Of course, I thought the usual stuff. "Oh hell, I have really slipped now. This is really bad!" I was quite upset about it and I phoned a friend of mine who is not

gay and said, "Oh boy, I am really in trouble now!" She knew me and said, "Oh my goodness. Was it somebody at work?" And I said, "Yes and she said, was it the boss?" And I said, "No" so she said, "Oh well, then it is not too bad." I still remember that because I thought I had really gone too far. I am going to lose my job and everything else.

I don't know how you can think this way but I was so scared. It seems funny and stupid now but I really thought I couldn't be doing this. I had slipped and I would say, "Okay, all right, I am just going to act like it never happened". I would be nice and everything but I will just act like well it was just a slip and it won't happen again. So I went in to work very hung over and Donna was very hung over too. She had great big sunglasses on. It is very hard to talk to anybody with sunglasses on. But the problem was we just couldn't stay away from each other, after that. I agonized over every minute, though.

For many years, Louise was very frightened about people finding out she was gay so she chose to live a very closeted lifestyle.

I just wanted it [being gay] to be like just part of my life. I totally compartmentalized it. This part of my life was separate from everything else. Donna just kept talking to me about self-acceptance for years! I wouldn't let Donna tell anyone I was her partner or anything and then she would do things like come home and say "We're going to do a talk at the counseling center on gay relationships and I would say "What?!". And I would go, usually kicking and

screaming but afterwards I would feel really good about it. That would be about 1975 or so.

Donna respected Louise's fears and her need to be private about her lifestyle but continued to look for opportunities for the couple to connect with the outside world:

I love Louise very much and I think that is what is most important. I value long term commitment and long term relationships and the growth and the personal development that comes from pushing through all the hard stuff. I think the other thing that has been important for us as a couple is Dignity [gay and lesbian Catholic organization]. That really was important for Louise to meet other people who were Catholic and questioning themselves. We met some really wonderful people there and were accepted as a couple.

Louise talks about her perspective on her relationship with Donna:

I think the strength of our relationship has been that we have always talked about things and respected each other's point of view. When we first got together and I was so frightened or stupid or whatever about the whole thing, Donna was there. She was strong in one way and I would be strong in another way. We have sort of grown together in helping each other that way. That doesn't mean we haven't had our struggles. We are both very headstrong and have locked horns on many issues but I think it has always been resolved because of the respect and love we have for each other.

When a woman is attracted to another woman unique challenges can that arise. Several of the research participants found that their first lesbian attraction was to straight women. Sharon had never entertained the notion of being attracted to women and describes the confusion and apprehension when two seemingly straight women found themselves attracted to one another.

In 1963, I was living in Calgary with my husband and two children. My husband was in the services and they had a women's bowling league that my neighbor kept asking me to join. I didn't want to bowl but one morning when the kids were in school she said "Come and spare for us". I didn't meet Betty right away. She was on a different team. I just saw a whole lot of women and felt quite comfortable there, so I went back to bowl and eventually I ended up meeting Betty and bowling with her on Friday mornings:

We started going out to shows and did things together for about a year. Then one night I was driving her home from the bar and she said, "I am in love with you" and I said, "Well, I like you too. That doesn't have to interfere with our friendship". I mean I actually said that! I was thinking that it was her problem but we could still be friends. So there was poor Betty hanging out there on a limb and we continued to go out and do things together for another six months or more after that. I felt like I was running backwards as fast as I could because I didn't understand all these feelings I was having.

We started doing these little wrestling things and stuff and I thought this is kind of nice. Then one day we were bowling and I was writing the score down and she



came over and leaned across me and [I felt her so close] and I thought “Aghhhh, this is not just her problem”. We ended up together for about three months before we told our husbands.

We both stayed married and lived with our husbands for the whole of our thirteen-year relationship. She lived about three blocks away. Her husband wasn't very accepting of it: more just tolerant, I guess. He didn't interfere but he just wasn't really nice about it. Les, my husband, was nice. He was really good about it.

Sue reflects how a number of her relationships have been with women who did not consider themselves lesbian in the same terms that she defined herself:

My first long-term relationship was with a straight woman but it was a fine lesbian relationship. After that I moved to Calgary and I had another relationship that was on again off again for almost 5 years. She did consider herself a lesbian but she doesn't now interestingly enough. When I got involved again, I had a relationship for 15 years with another woman who didn't consider herself a lesbian although we lived together as lovers and partners all those years.

Denise remembers her first love and a painful issue that arose for her as a young gay woman:

My first love: that would be Marsha. I started working for Tommy and I was in love with Marsh. I would do anything for that girl. She was swinging (sexual with both men and women) though. She was both ways so it was hard. I remember standing at nighttime between two houses watching her house when she would

come home from dates with guys. It just used to tear my heart out. It was so hard because you can't compete with a man!

As they have aged, some of the women have found that different types of relationships fulfill their lives now. Shirley and Karen have lived together in a variety of configurations over thirty-five years. Shirley provides a sketch of the history of their relationship:

I met Karen on a ball diamond. I was coaching first base and she was the first baseman. I got this buzzing in my ear – mental error, mental error while I was trying to concentrate. Here I thought it was because I had had a few drinks the night before!

Karen adds:

I looked over and here are these crinkly eyes that looked very kind. She was just laughing at me. I went to the bar with her after the game and probably within six hours of this meeting I said, "We should live together" and so we did.

Shirley continues:

Yeah, first we lived upstairs in the house with Karen's mother. Then we had a big kafuffle and her mother lived downstairs for a while. Then, I left for a while.

When I came back and I lived downstairs with another girlfriend and when she left, I just stayed. Karen and her mother were upstairs and I was downstairs. I am just moving out of the downstairs and we are going to try to live together on the same floor. She will have her room and I will have mine but we will share everything else.

Through all of these changes over the years, we have still lived in the same house. Nobody else would have us. We have always been involved in what each other does. Like financially or if one wanted something and the other could help her get it, we would and vice versa. She was my bank. Even in business, I borrowed money from her rather than the bank and paid her the interest. And so we have always been connected. It has been a really strong friendship and that is really what it is now I guess. Karen is my family.

I am even her guardian and she is mine. Legally now! I had to set that up because I turned 70 and my memory started getting bad. She said, "Do you want your daughter to have jurisdiction over what happens to you?" So, we went down to a gay lawyer and got fixed up.

At 64, Tommy has reached a place in her life where she is happy to be on her own. She values the companionship of family and friends:

I guess I have changed. I am just not interested in a relationship anymore. I have two nieces that live with me and companionship is all I really want right now.

The reason I am alone now is because I don't want the responsibility anymore. I want to do what I want to do and not have to consider another person's feelings all the time. I am very selfish I guess.

I like to see my friends and I look forward to it but you know, when I get together with my friends, I don't even think about the gay part. I am just meeting friends.

The gay thing, to me, is kind of far removed. I even forget that I am gay half of the time.

### **Relationships with Men**

The majority of the women interviewed have had some form of relationship with men at one point in their lives. In some cases, they had had boyfriends or husbands before they had any idea that being involved with another woman was an option. Others felt a need to try to conform to societal expectations and so made a conscious effort to try to develop a relationship with a man. The conclusion for most of the women was that something was missing for them in heterosexual relationships: at times it was intangible and at times they could clearly articulate what was missing.

Gayle, Sharon, Louise and Sue all felt pressured by family or societal expectations to get married. Gayle and Sharon both chose to stay in their marriages but worked out significantly different patterns of relationships.

Gayle's attempts to reconcile what she sees as "a normal" woman's responsibilities and her draw to a completely different lifestyle creates ongoing turmoil for her. She describes her life over the past 30 years:

I was never with a woman until after I had been married for six or seven years and throughout those six or seven years it was an incredible struggle. I concentrated on first of all being mom. I put my own need for love on hold. I never paid much attention to it unless I had sex with my husband. Then those feelings would come to the surface. I would feel hurt and angry. I would feel used and abused. I didn't feel met at all. If I allowed myself to think about what I needed, that is when I would think about being with a woman. But because I am married to him, I don't know if this makes sense to you but I could live with my husband, probably for

the rest of my life if we never needed anything sexual. Because I am so used to putting myself on hold, until I met my lover I was willing to not have any needs. No need to be loved or held or cared for It was okay for me to look after my kids and do the things a normal woman was supposed to do.

I have only had one sexual relationship in all my life with a man and that is with my husband. I've had numerous affairs with women. I was willing to love my husband and treat him well and have him treat me well back but now it just doesn't seem like enough.

Like Gayle, Sharon met her husband when she was 16. She didn't question that the next step was marriage and a family:

In hindsight, I probably was gay all the way along but I met my husband when I was 16 and he was 17 and I was really attracted to him. I came from rather a rough background. Rough in that my father was not a good man, to put it mildly, and a couple of my brothers weren't really nice to me so I didn't know that I didn't like men until a long time after I was married. I was married for about 10 years and had 2 children before I was aware that I was gay.

My husband and I worked out something we could both live with and it's been like that for 40 years.

Louise and Sue each found that they were unhappy in their marriages and had to leave the relationships. Louise states:

I dated nice guys that I really liked but just the thought of being with them seemed like settling. I was married for two years and I have never been more lonely in my

life. The intimacy was not there and I started doing strange things that you are not supposed to when you are married. I would go to parties and or other events and people would say, "Where is he?" and I would say, "Well, he is at home." I never thought about taking him anywhere with me. I tried because I did like men and I thought I could just keep trying not to weaken. I thought I could be strong but I just like women better. There is no comparison.

Sue found herself in similar circumstances in her early twenties:

There was a time when I had a lot of relationships with men. I guess the word is promiscuous. I got married to a man in 1962. I shouldn't have. I didn't even really want to at the end but nobody believed me. I didn't stay married to him for very long. I lived with him for about a year and then I got legally divorced after about five years. Before I married him, I wanted my best friend, who was straight, to run away with me.

Three of the women in the project dated men, became engaged but realized before the wedding that they couldn't follow through with marriage. Donna says that for:

A couple of years there, I was dating fellows and got engaged about three times. It was kind of fun doing that but it was not for me. I knew it and I would call it off. I think mostly I would just tell them why.

Tommy found she always had boyfriends:

Now when I think about it, I guess it is not very nice to say, but I guess I was mainly using them because the people[straight] I chummed around with, well, you had to go to dances and things so I had to have a boyfriend. I always made

sure I had a date. I could have been married a lot of times. There were many men but I guess we were friends more than anything. I knew I never even wanted to try [sleeping with them].

Karen had what she describes as a close call:

I was engaged and I had this ring on my finger and it was way, way too much. I got a case of beer and went to a ballgame and picked out the pitcher who was a very good pitcher and moved in with her. Actually, I flushed [the ring] down the john. Isn't that awful?

Nancy and Denise made conscious decisions to try to be with men after they realized that they were attracted to women. Bowing to pressure from her family Nancy tried to conform:

I tried going straight once after I realized I was gay. I went out with a gentleman from work trying to please my family but it just didn't work for me. It wasn't really the gentleman's fault. First of all, I didn't really care for him. I cared for him but it is not like it is being with a woman. So I thought I can't please my family if I can't please myself, so I went back to being gay and is why I know I am gay now and always will be.

Denise chuckles at the memory of her attempt to "try the other side":

Well, I thought I should give it a chance too one time. This is when I was younger. Now I don't know why I even thought I wanted to try it because I knew I wasn't interested. I had a guy that was interested in me and he knew I was gay. So this one night, I thought okay, I am going to let him do it tonight and off we

go. We are parked somewhere in his car and he starts with me and then realizes that I was going to let him. All of a sudden he stops and I looked at him and said, "What's wrong?" He said, "I don't think I can do this." And I said, "Why not?" He said, "I don't think I can satisfy you." I said, "Take me home". That was it. That was my big chance.

### **Lesbian Mothers**

Children were a topic of discussion by a number of the women. Several came to their lesbian relationships with children from previous heterosexual relationships while others chose to have children within the context of their lesbian relationships. Both scenarios presented potential problems. In 1963, Sharon was married and had two children when she found herself attracted to another married woman and felt compelled to be honest with her husband:

I didn't feel bad about being gay but I felt bad about lying to Les and I am not a good liar so after about three months, I told him about Betty. I said to him, "I am not saying I am a better mother than you are a father or you are a better father than I am a mother. I am not planning to take the children away from you and I am not planning on you taking them away from me. Now what do we do?" He said, "Well, we work it out. You are a good mother, a good wife and a good homemaker and that is what the children and I need. So we will just keep our private lives to ourselves. You do what you need to do and I will do what I need to do but the children come first."



He was in the military, so he took a lot of postings away from home. I raised the kids basically alone but he always came back and he always sent the money home. He used to keep \$10.00 a month for himself. The rest went into a joint account for the kids and I; he did that for 25 years. When he spent time at home he would say, "if you guys [Betty and I] want to go out somewhere, if you want to go away for a week or two or whatever, then go. I will look after the kids".

Betty and I were together for 13 years. We never lived together. She lived with her husband and I lived with mine and we all worked out our time together.

In the 1960's, all of the women were very selective about whom they chose to confide in regarding their sexual orientation since they also had to contend with an oppressive legal system and mental health community. Lesbians who wanted to have children outside of marriage faced significant obstacles. Many didn't believe that having children was even an option because of their sexual orientation; adoption was not available to single women at that time and accessing sperm was a problem.

Those who took steps to become pregnant described facing the disapproval of family members who did not think that two women should raise a child. One option for lesbians was to have sex with a male. This increased the complexity of the endeavor by introducing issues such as who that male would be, how cooperative he would be, how safe was it and the question of his future involvement in the life of the child. Three of the women stated that when they decided that one of the partners would have to be sexual with a man in order to get pregnant, it created tremendous turmoil in their primary relationship.

Marie talks about the issues that arose for her when she and her female partner decided to have children:

My first relationship produced two children. My partner had one and I had one. It was 1963 and few people had ever heard about artificial insemination and we couldn't adopt so we decided we would have to find a couple of guys. She had the first one and then it took her 7 years to talk me into getting pregnant. I wasn't crazy to do it and then it took me 3 months to get pregnant. I can tell you, twice a week for 3 months is a long time to be doing stuff you didn't want to do. I was able to handle what she did in order to get pregnant, but she wasn't able to handle it when I did it in order to get the little boy. So it caused lots of strife. Every once in a while, she'd get on to "you probably liked it [sex with a man] didn't you?" and she just couldn't come to grips with it so after 12 years I left. I just couldn't do it anymore. It didn't seem like it was ever going to get any better.

Madeline and Barb were together for seven years before they decided they would have children. The process of getting pregnant put overwhelming stress on the relationship. Madeline says:

I always knew I wanted to have children. We had discussed it and we said we would find a way. It was 1969 or 70 and an artificial insemination clinic was opening in Edmonton and I phoned right away and said I would like to make an appointment. They asked for my husband's name and I said, "What if I don't have a husband?" "Well, you can't have an appointment!"

Then, right around that time that my ex-boyfriend showed up. His wife had left him and I thought this could be an opportunity for Barb and I. I told him that I wanted children but that I was never going to leave Barb and he said, "It's okay. It doesn't matter. If you want to have kids, that is fine." But in reality, that is not really what he meant. He meant if you get pregnant you will want to be with me. Well, I always knew what I wanted and the reality was I didn't want him. I wanted Barb and I wanted children.

For Barb, the whole process was very difficult. The fact that Madeline was having sex with her ex-boyfriend was traumatic. She could not be 100 percent sure that Madeline would want to stay with her after she got pregnant and had the option of "living a normal life." Barb remembers it as:

The very hardest, most traumatic time of my life! It was a major thing that turned my whole world upside down. I struggled with the fact that Madeline could leave me so how could I get close to this baby? I couldn't. So even after the baby was born, it took me a long time to start to warm up to her. It took a while to recreate what we had before all that began.

Madeline agrees that it was a very trying time for Barb:

Barb really didn't know at first if I was leaving or not. It was a real threat. I certainly was tempted. I was very tempted by what was acceptable. What it amounted to is I would have had public acceptance but it wouldn't have been who I was that was accepted. It would have been a false picture.

Madeline and Barb believe that as stressful as it was, the experience made them stronger in the end. Barb reflects on the time:

We had to start over [emotionally] but then we had two children by the same father. They were 2 ½ years apart so we had that emotional roller coaster going on in our life for about 3 years. When I look at it now though, in the big scheme of things 3 years as opposed to 37 years together it was just something that had to be done.

Denise and her partner were saved from some of the stress experienced by other couples as access to artificial insemination became more available to single women in the mid 1980's:

Well, when I started going with my partner, she told me right away that she wanted children. As she got older, it became more urgent. She went the artificial insemination route and it worked on the second take. She was pregnant and everybody was excited. Well, we were. I shouldn't say everybody because strangely in my family, who all knew about me, nobody really liked the idea of two women raising a child. They didn't think it was right. So that tells me they obviously still don't think it is normal. But it was right, she got pregnant and I was there through the delivery and when they said it was a girl I was very excited. It has been great for my partner and I. It gives you something more in life. Life is great anyway. It just added something more.

As the children grew, these lesbian moms faced the dilemma of whether or not to tell their children about their sexual orientation. Some chose to keep the information from

their children and adjusted their way of living to protect the child. Denise and her partner made a decision from the beginning not tell their 15-year-old daughter:

She doesn't know and we don't flaunt it in front of her. We have separate rooms. My partner is not out so that is probably why, otherwise I probably would have [told her].

Gayle has chosen not to talk to her children about her struggle with her sexual orientation. She currently lives with her husband and has one daughter still at home. Her other children are married and out on their own. She experienced her family's anger when allegations of her lesbianism arose years ago. Gayle fears that if she acknowledges her attraction to women, her children would turn against her:

I had an experience with my son when he was in grade 8. I came into the city and to go to school and his dad was home with him and the rest of the kids. When I got back there was a drastic change in his relationship with me. His dad had found a letter from a woman to me and then he talked to him about me being a gay woman, a lesbian woman so it painted in his mind a very horrible picture of his mom. He has lived with that for years. At one time, he was in about Grade 10, he came to me and said, "Mom, I love you but if you are a lesbian, I want you to move far away."

At 23, he was out drinking with his dad. When he came home he was kind of out of control. He yelled in front of his wife and his wife's mother that he hated me, that I am the worst mother on the face of the earth because I was a queer and that he wished he wasn't my son. I left then, because my daughter came and said,

“Mom you don’t need to hear this”. It took him a few weeks and he came to my house and apologized and cried and said he was tired of being in the middle between his dad and I and that he loved me.

We have talked about it in a round about way but they have never really asked me the question and I have never really said. What they have heard has come from gossip and rumors. If I do [acknowledge it] there will be no going back.

Sharon chose not to tell her children and found that they asked when they were ready to know. She says that one thing her daughter did ask was whether or not her dad knew. When Sharon reassured her that he did, she was fine. Other mothers were open about their relationships with their female partners and allowed the children to see them relating to each other in the natural course of their lives. At 70, Shirley looks back and reflects on the decisions she made regarding her children:

Well, they never had much to say about it [Shirley's sexual orientation]. They all felt that they came second and in a funny sort of a way, I guess they did. Because I couldn't drink with other people and work and raise kids, I had them boarded out a lot and that was perhaps, not the best thing but for the time that I was drinking heavily, it was a good thing.

Your kids don’t always understand your preference to another female instead of them first. So there have been some bad things about it but if I had it to do it over again, I probably wouldn’t do that much different except I would hope I wouldn’t get so snackered. But it's all done and I'm now a great grandmother many times over.

Madeline and Barb say that they never acted differently in front of their children. They describe themselves as loving and caring with the children and each other throughout the years. Madeline describes a typical situation that arose when their son was young and in school:

We had come to call each other partners and when the children went to school, it became quite an issue, especially with our son. He didn't know what to call Barb because Barb was his parent but not his mother. He struggled when there were friends that came home and he didn't know what to call her. We just said you can call Barb your other parent or your co-parent.

#### **Other Issues Unique to Lesbian Relationships**

Several of the women had been in more than one lesbian relationships lasting between 5 and 15 years. They identified a number of unique issues with which they believe lesbian couples struggle. These issues ranged from the problems with lesbians meeting in bars, to self acceptance, to lack of commitment, to lack of support, to lack of recognition of relationships, and the need to remain invisible.

Marie and Bonnie were together for six years. Their issues forced them to re-examine their individual needs in a relationship. Bonnie was struggling with her gender orientation while Marie was clear that she was a lesbian and wanted to be with a woman. Marie recalls:

Bonnie has always talked about this sex change thing. And I said to her, "Well then, you have to go, get out because I won't do it." It caused a lot of friction because I wouldn't say, "Well, yes, sweetheart. I think this is probably the best

thing you could do". I said, "Hey, I am a lesbian honey. You want one of them things, out you go". Finally after six years we called it quits. We are way better friends than we ever were lovers. I like it this way better.

Marie's beliefs about the relationships in her life are shaped by her experience in the lesbian community:

I have only ever been in long-term relationships, one 12 years, then 6, 6, and 10. One of the problems is that we meet in the bar. All lesbians do as far as I can tell. Everything is wonderful in the beginning as it is in every relationship and then it comes to a point it seems that it doesn't work anymore. Things change and when you are young you outgrow one another.

Bonnie also experienced several long-term relationships. She is concerned that lesbian relationships lack commitment:

Well, my relationships have lasted for 8, 3, 6, and about 5 years. You know, it starts out just wonderful, four years is good and after that I am not sure what happens. I think our relationships are loving and caring but a relationship is something that you have to work at and if you are not prepared to work at it, it falls apart. I think people let their relationship get stagnant. They are not working together. I think what happens a lot of times then is it's much easier to walk away and say to hell with it than to stay and try to work it out. There is not any real commitment there maybe because [nothing is formalized]. You don't have to worry that someone is going to take your house away from you or that they are



coming after you for alimony. So you just walk away from one and try something new.

Several of the women identified the fear of coming out, the lack of acceptance and support from society as stressors unique to lesbian relationships. Sue observes that:

The fear of coming out is a huge problem. I mean I know a lot of people are afraid if they come out they'll lose their jobs, or if they come out their parents will hate them or they will lose their children. I think fear interferes in the development of strong relationships.

When lesbian relationships are hidden they are not recognized or celebrated by society. Sue believes that this also takes its toll on same sex relationships:

Not getting a full kind of recognition from society is a difficulty for lesbian relationships. We need validating environments. I mean, if you and your relationship are not getting validation from your world, then you cannot validate yourself quite as much either. We need to surround ourselves with validating people so that we can maintain our sense of self and our sense of self worth. A lot of people don't have that and I think that that does a huge amount of mental health damage.

Madeline agrees and talks about the significance of being able to publicly celebrate markers in her relationship:

When we hit our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, some of our friends put on an anniversary party for us. It was wonderful because we don't have celebrations of our special days.

For so many years nobody even knew about our relationship.

The stories of the relationships of older lesbian women demonstrate the tenacity and creativity of those individuals who are willing to follow their hearts in the face of adversity. These women have met and surmounted significant challenges to be with the women they love. These challenges included the risk of meeting partners who were struggling with their own identity issues, the pressure to conform to societal standards, the challenge of having children, the lack of acceptance from family as well as the general lack of recognition of lesbians and their relationships.

### Coming Out

Coming out is the acknowledgement of one's attraction to a member of the same sex. When a woman recognizes and acknowledges her attraction to other women she is said to have begun the process of coming out. The first step is for an individual to come out to herself. For some women this is an incredible struggle while others readily incorporate their newly found sexual orientation. For example, Barb had no difficulty accepting her attraction to women; she believes in living life the way she wants and has never felt a need to label it. She states, "that I have never hidden who I am but I have also never felt a need to come out and state that I am a lesbian. What would be the point?"

For the majority of the women, however, coming out began with admitting to that they are attracted to women. Once she was comfortable with herself, each woman then had to decide whom she could trust with this secret. Most of the respondents describe different degrees of being "out". Some women chose to be out privately but not publicly. This could mean that a woman's lifestyle is common knowledge only among other lesbians, or that both the lesbian community and her family are aware, while, in other

cases, it may be that a woman is out in her work and lesbian community but keeps the secret from her family.

The fact that the secret is out does not necessarily mean that an individual is free to be open and discuss her life with those around her. There are a variety of levels of acceptance from those around a lesbian woman. Acceptance can run the gamut from those who are totally accepting and supportive of the individual and her lifestyle to those who reject her upon disclosure and abandon her. In between, may be family or friends who acknowledge the disclosure but do not talk about it, those who maintain contact but want nothing to do with partners or other lesbian friends, or those who accept the individual and her partner and friends including them in larger family or community events but do not want to talk about sexual orientation.

### **Coming Out to Family**

Telling family is often a difficult task and one with which most women struggle. In some situations the decision to come out is taken away. When someone is caught in a compromising situation or another person informs a lesbian's friends, family or work of her sexual orientation, it is called being "outed". In such cases, an individual has no opportunity to prepare emotionally for the disclosure and the aftermath, which may be difficult. Marie's family all experienced a crisis when her parents found out that their daughter was a lesbian:

I didn't tell, I got caught by my mother. My dad went through a terrible time because he thought it was his fault. My parents took me for family counseling.

[The counselor] kept telling them there is nothing you are going to be able to do

about this. When my mother heard that, she rushed me off and put me in a convent for two years. She thought the nuns were pretty strict and they were going to fix me right up but she just threw me in the lap of luxury, in paradise. I thought I had died and gone to heaven when she put me in there and I was surrounded by all those women.

Gayle felt helpless when someone else chose to share information that she was not yet ready to disclose:

A lot of people know more about my life than I would like them to. I have been outed by my husband and my community in a way that has been incredibly abusive to me.

Many of the women described feeling extremely anxious and fearful that they would be rejected, abandoned and judged. Madeline and Barb were always on guard with their families. They remember:

Our families held such stereotypical ideas and we knew they were talking about our relationship but things were never brought out into the open. There was a sense that we were too involved but they wouldn't say what it was. For quite a long time they wouldn't actually say anything and neither would we. We told Barb's sister some years later but as far as telling our parents the extent of our relationship and how close we had become, we weren't honest either. We were afraid they would try to break us up.

The reactions to individual disclosures varied among different family members. When Nancy came out to her family it created severe rifts between her and her siblings:

I had two other sisters that didn't care at all but when my other sister found out I was gay she kicked me out of the house; I wasn't even allowed in her house!

Over the years it's worked out and now we have the best friendship.

My brother didn't want any part of me for the longest time. He said he would accept me but he didn't. We have had a few fights over it. Like when we were drinking he would bring it up and stuff like that. It did bother me but he wouldn't talk about it until recently I went to my sister's 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary and he had me crying because he apologized for the way he was. My whole family knows now and accepts me for what I am.

Nancy states that even though her family had already struggled through her disclosure it didn't make it any easier when her brother came out many years later. Her family experienced a whole new turmoil. Nancy finds:

The irony is that I have a gay brother and it took him 40 years to come out. My family is weird about it. For me as a lady being gay is totally different for them. They leave their kids with me but they would not leave them children with my brother. They look at me as a gay woman completely different than my brother as a gay man.

In Karen's situation, the events surrounding an older gay sibling affected the way her mother reacted to her daughter's disclosure:

Well, my brother had been gay before me and he committed suicide because of it. My father was out of the picture and then I came up right after that and discovered that I was gay. I had just broken up with [my girlfriend] and I wanted to go back

to Calgary so I told my mother and said kiddingly "Why don't you come with me?" and she said, "Okay." So my mother sort of came out here with me. I really didn't expect her to say okay but she came out here to save my life from this disaster of being gay.

Sue remembers the tremendous trepidation she felt as she gathered the courage to come out to her sister:

I decided that I better tell my family in the late '60's. I decided the first person would be my sister because I'm closest to her so. She was coming with her little infant daughter to visit me in Calgary and I was so nervous. I was just shaking. I remember I picked her up and I was so scared. I thought I better tell her on the way from the airport because if it was going to be a bad week I really needed to know. So I said "Um- Judy Um- um there is something I kinda have to tell you. She said "What?" I said, "Well, um - um I think I, uh, am a homosexual". She said, "Oh shit, Sue I've known for years!" Well that was the end of that part of it. When I told my mom, I had already been with my partner for several years and we had split up and I was really depressed and my mom was visiting and she asked me "What's the matter" and I said "Oh, Mom you don't really want to ask. You don't really want to know the answer" and she said " Well, would you rather I go on having my suspicions after all these years?" I said, "Well, okay, Joanne and I split up." My mom wasn't thrilled about me being a lesbian but she certainly was supportive. She said, "Don't tell your father." I don't know when my father actually found out, but he was actually the coolest in the whole family

about it. He used to tell me all the things that he read about lesbians and I used to send him all my lesbian articles and he always accepted anybody I was with as just another daughter-in-law.

Sue describes her overall sense of family support:

I mean I am lucky, and my whole overall family all my aunts and uncles and cousins you know they all know and they have known for decades, many decades and they have always accepted whoever I am with as Sue's partner and it is literally a non-issue. If I am with somebody, we both get invitations to whatever, both contribute to the family gift fund and both get the gifts.

In many families, sexual orientation was never directly identified or acknowledged. Louise explains that her family seemed to accept her lifestyle without really acknowledging it directly and by not talking about it:

My family sort of pretends it is not really there and they deny things. If they don't want it to be it's not. My brother knows but he just doesn't acknowledge it. He is sort of like my mother was, "Don't tell me, I don't want to talk about it or think about it". It's all right because it really doesn't change anything. We still see hem; we just don't talk about it.

Tommy's experience with family was similar. "It wasn't hard when I came out. My family all knew. It is still something that is not discussed a lot but I don't have to hide anything".

The prevailing sentiment amongst the interviewees is they feel a level of acceptance from family members. Few of the women felt a need to force families to talk

about their sexual orientation directly and are content with the level of acceptance their families offer. Much of the support seems to be unspoken.

Louise felt as though her grandmother was the one person who gave her blessing to her relationship with Donna, even though they never spoke directly about the nature of the relationship. "I was close to my grandmother and she knew Donna. She said "Donna was a grand lady. You deserve each other".

Shirley remembers feeling like she had also received her grandmother's support in her first relationship when she said "Oh Shirley!, isn't it nice that you can have a friend like that. I wish I could have when I was younger."

### **Coming Out at Work**

The participants in this project indicated that their work environments added another dimension to coming out. Nevertheless, of those women who were out at work, none had experienced any particular difficulties on the job as a result of their sexual orientation.

Sue had decided that she wanted to be out from the beginning of her career:

I came out the day I graduated from medical school in 1973. I mean out in a big way. My family already knew so when I finished my residency I came out in a splash in the newspapers and TV and I have been out ever since. Any time I have applied for a job the first thing I say is "I am a lesbian if there is a problem with that let's discuss it right now." I haven't really had any problems.

Tommy found that the Canadian Armed Forces posed more of a problem for lesbians than did other employers:



The only time I had a hard time was in the air force. You are not supposed to be gay in the forces? I was accused of being gay once in the air force before I really even knew for sure myself. I had to see a psychiatrist but I proved them wrong. Then I got clearer and it was after that then when I started hanging with the gay people.

I haven't had a problem at any civilian jobs although I haven't had that many. I have been at the same job since '62 and those people knew right away. I told them. I am not very good at keeping secrets so first thing if somebody meant anything to me, then I wanted them to know and if they were still there, fine.

### **Coming Out Socially**

For women who had recognized their sexual orientation and were actively searching for others, finding the lesbian community in Calgary during the 1960's and 1970's proved challenging. The community was invisible, closed and tight knit. Lesbians were wary about coming out to each other and often took great care to hide their sexual orientation from outsiders. Tommy and Cindy describe typical situations that would occur as the women "sized each other up".

When Tommy first went into the air force, all she knew was that she had met a group of women that she partied with and enjoyed:

I met a lot of the airwomen when I was stationed in New Brunswick. And I guess they were all gay. I still really didn't know [I was gay] at the time. They were always very careful around me but they also wanted me at their parties. A couple of them took me to Fredericton and they warned all the civilians there, this girl is

not gay so be very careful around her. So when I was the first one that made a move on one of the girls, my friends were all called liars! All these girls had behaved themselves for weeks. Every weekend we went there, they would be on their best behavior and who was the one that finally blew it? Me. The best part of being in the services was meeting other people like yourself and knowing you weren't alone.

In the early 1970's, Cindy had already had a relationship with a woman when she met a group of women while out drinking. Everyone was so secretive and cautious about whom they were that Cindy found it difficult to break into the group:

I was just recovering from a breakup with my girlfriend when I started drinking at the Majestic Inn and that is where I met all these women. We would party and laugh and have a really good time, but every Friday and Saturday night about 10 o'clock, they would all say, "Well we gotta go!" and I would say, "But the party is just starting." Anyway they would leave me all by myself drinking at the bar. I would go home at the end of the night thinking, nice people but they don't like to stay up late. I found out later they were all going off to the [gay] club, which didn't open 'til 10 p.m. on weekends.

Then one of the guys invited me to a party but I guess everybody was so nervous about me showing up that they told him if I was invited, they weren't coming, so he had to tell me it was cancelled.

In spite of the risks involved in coming out, many of the women identify it as a significant turning point in their lives. Madeline had been with Barb for 18 years before she identified as a lesbian:

It took me many, many years to think of myself as a lesbian. I just thought Barb and I had this unique relationship. I really believed that if anything ever happened to her I would probably be straight because I had always identified as being straight even though I knew that this was the relationship of my life. It took me many years, probably about 18, before I started saying, I am a lesbian, yes, I am a lesbian. It was great!

Madeline was surprised at the strength of her need to connect with other women like herself:

Barb's sister had seen a poster for International Women's Day and she said, "Come to this meeting." Barb was working out on the road so off I went. I can remember we went to that meeting and I listened to other peoples' stories. Then they said there was a group forming for lesbian mothers on the next night and I can remember feeling just in this total turmoil. Now I know that was the beginning of my coming out. At some level, it was just like a drive inside me. I have got to go to that meeting. It was a horrible one of those blizzards where there is snow up to here but I got on the bus and went down to find that meeting. All the time I was looking for it, I was so scared. I had to go up those stairs but once I was at the top, I thought, that's it. I was never coming down.

Coming out is hard to describe. It just changes everything. I remember it felt like something wonderful but it was terrifying at the same time. And it's something you can't stop. It just starts rolling and it is just like I need to know more. I needed to talk to somebody. Barb was out on the road for a few days and then she was going to spend the weekend in Edmonton. I was here with the kids but I could have gone for a week non-stop talking about being a lesbian to anybody who would just talk to me and there was nobody around. The need to talk was so strong that it motivated me to get in there full force. I worked the lesbian information lines and gay lines. I went to potlucks dinners and I helped with the women's collective dances and lesbian mother's dances for years.

Donna and Louise were together for many years as well, before Louise felt comfortable enough to acknowledge her sexual orientation to herself and others. Donna remembers a tremendous feeling of freedom when they were finally able to be out.

As soon as Louise decided that she was ready to be more out, I told everybody. I had been waiting for so long. I think it made me feel much more like I could be me. There was much more access to a support system and we could be involved in the community. It just made a big difference. I would never have outed us prior to Louise being ready, but once she was, it was really hard to pull back. It was like the gate's open, let's go!

For the most part, the women in this project agree that while the anticipation of coming out was frightening, it was rarely as difficult as any of them thought it might be.

Louise agrees that the whole coming out experience has been much easier than she had anticipated:

I sort of felt like I was dragged out although I wouldn't have done it if I didn't want to. Although I agreed, I sort of felt like in a way I was being dragged kicking and screaming but then all the experiences were good.

I would be really worried about something we were going to do and I would complain that I didn't want to do it. Then I would go and do it and it would always be fine. I mean we certainly had some disagreements and some tough negotiating around some of the stuff but I got comfortable very quickly.

For the amount of fear I had about the whole thing there have been a few unpleasant things that have happened but nothing big really. Now I think it is a pity it took me that long to come out.

Donna found that:

People range from being really accepting and okay with it to being noncommittal. Some may say, "Well, I really didn't need to know that" but I have never had a negative reaction. I think that to some extent it has to do with the fact that I just don't expect it. I have always just acted like this is who I am and that is it.

Gayle found that she experienced far more acceptance from friends and those at school than she did from her own family. She finds it confusing to live in a dichotomized world:

I outed myself to my best friend and to my instructors and teachers at theological college and to my counselor. They were totally supportive! To my friends,

counselors, and colleagues it was kind of a non-issue. We just love you just the way you are, whoever you are and we just want you to be happy. Yet I just can't take that step.

Sue understands the reluctance of people to come out but also is concerned about the long-term effect of those who remain closeted:

I think the fear of coming out is a huge issue for most women. I mean I know a lot of people say if I come out I'll lose my job, if I come out my parents will hate me, if I come out I will lose my kids. I am such a huge proponent of coming out because you don't have to lie. You are free, you can get on with living your life from the inside out not having to live as a patchwork quilt kind of thing. A lot of people think that if they just shut up and go to bed and turn off the lights and make love under the covers that everything will be fine but I don't believe that they will be after awhile. Their own homophobia is a problem for same sex couples. No matter where they are in the world.

Coming out is never a one-time event. As the lesbians in this project demonstrate, coming out is an ongoing process that must be considered with every new person they meet. Whether to tell, what to say, and how much to tell are all questions that arise when one considers sharing their orientation with another.

Women sometimes agonize over the decision to come out. At other times, it is a natural extension of one's open communication with others. In some cases, women experience the act of coming out as empowering and freeing, while in other cases they are met with rejection, abandonment and isolation.

Members located at different positions within lesbian communities debate the merits of coming out. Some women live with overwhelming fear about the possible consequences of coming out, while others believe that being open and honest about their sexual orientation and their lives enables them to live proudly without having to fear discovery.

Coming out is a unique issue that lesbian women face many times in their lives. The consensus of the lesbians in this project is that the damage done by living in fear and hiding far outweighs the risks inherent in being open about one's life.

### **The Lesbian Community**

The participants in this project had varying knowledge, perspectives and connection to a lesbian community over the years. The definition of community varied. For the most part, when the women referred to "the community" they were referring to lesbians and gays who lived in Calgary during the 1960's and 1970's. However, they also identified several significant communities within Calgary, the most common being the softball community of lesbians, the group of women who socialized in lesbian tolerant straight bars, those who were members of Club Carousel and those who chose to socialize at private house parties.

Some of the participants created their own sense of community with friends, neighbors, family or work contacts and had limited awareness of the existence of other lesbians. A number of the women participated peripherally in the lesbian and gay communities, sometimes going to Club Carousel when it opened and occasionally attending the special events or dances that the club sponsored. Others had some

awareness of that a community existed but were afraid of what the lesbian community represented and so seldom ventured out to activities. The final group was the organizers of one facet of the lesbian community: the ones who worked to create a community with an identity.

In the 1960's with no organized lesbian communities in Calgary, a common meeting place for lesbians was on women's softball teams and in the bars they frequented after their games. Shirley and Karen describe the lesbian community they were familiar with in Calgary in the 1960's:

There were really two cliques. With the ball teams, you had your north side gang and your south side gang. We were the south side gang and we all went to the Cecil hotel on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue SW. The Comets wouldn't go to the Cecil. They went to the Beacon on 16<sup>th</sup> Avenue NW. We went up there a few times but the bartenders were nasty so we said, "What are we doing up here?" and we went back to the slums. We liked the Cecil because there was a nice private back room there. It was marked for Ladies and Escorts and we'd laugh because we didn't know which we were! God, we used to have a lot of fun there. They used to cater to us because we were the best part of their business.

Denise, Nancy and Tommy also fondly remember the backroom at the Cecil:

That is where we used to go all the time. It was all gay people. All the guys and the straights in the front part of the bar left us alone. There was never a problem. I remember walking in from the parking lot through that alley at night by myself



and I never felt afraid. Even if somebody came in from out of town and ended up in that room at the Cecil, they were friends by the time the evening was over.

Towards the end of the 1960's, things changed with talk about forming a private club. For the first time, gay men and lesbians began to work together to establish an identified lesbian and gay club. Shirley and Sharon piece together the story of the development of the first private gay and lesbian club in Calgary:

In 1967 there was an older fellow who was sort of a swinger and he had a club underneath the Grand movie theatre downtown. A lot of the gays, the guys particularly, went there but he used to sell tickets for straights to come down and look at the queers so the gay community decided to boycott the place and they started to have these big house parties. About that time Betty and I discovered all the lesbians at the Cecil Hotel and because we were new to the scene everybody wanted us to go down to this club and see if anyone was breaking the boycott. So down we would go and then we would go back and report who was going and who wasn't. For a number of weeks there were hardly any gay people there and the guy basically went bankrupt.

In the meantime we decided we would start our own club and so we found a place in the basement of 1207 - 1<sup>st</sup> St. SW and worked like horses painting and cleaning. About 25 people had paid \$10.00 in advance for a membership in this club that might or might not ever actually open and then three of the guys put up between \$50 - \$100 each so there was enough money to pay the first month's rent. We sort of knew we needed to have a charter or something but nobody knew how

to go about getting one. We opened in the spring of 1968 as Club Carousel.

People also knew it as 1207 which was our first address on 1<sup>st</sup> S.W..

The first night we opened the police came down and charged us with operating a club without a license. There we were, men were dancing with men and women were dancing with women and wondering what was going to happen. When the police officers were leaving one of them sort of stayed behind. He spoke to one of the organizers and said, "You guys need a good lawyer. Harvey Ghitter is your man". We contacted Harvey the next day and he told us we needed to apply for a charter under the Societies Act. He drew up the papers and we had to get people to agree to be on the membership list. In those days everyone was pretty scared to put her name on anything even though it didn't say it was a gay society. They were afraid of losing their jobs, family finding out, getting arrested and things like that so because they were supposed to use their own names on the membership list we promised to always protect it and never disclose who was on the list. Then the organizers thought they should have a woman on the board as a founding director and decided Sharon was a great choice because she was married and reputable.

The court case dragged on for some time so we found ways around the legalities like not charging an entrance fee at the door but just having a donation basket so we could continue operating. When the court case finally did come up we didn't have the charter yet and three of us were in court to testify for this club with no charter. One of the guys was on the witness stand and our lawyer's assistant was

stalling and stalling when finally Harvey came in from the back waving the papers. The charter had come through so Harvey just took over and we left with a charter in hand and permission to carry on. We were named it the Scarth Street Society because that was the original name of 1<sup>st</sup> Street SW where our first club was located. Scarth Street Society owned and operated Club Carousel.

We didn't get a liquor license for a long time so we were a bottle club. That meant that you brought your own bottle and kept it under the table. During that time we had many visits by the police and the drug squad checking for underage people and drugs on the premises. The liquor control board would come and check us out and finally we were granted one liquor license a month.

There were people who would harass us. Sometimes they would find out where the "queers" hung out and they would come by and yell things or throw stones at people coming in the door but we didn't feel harassed by the police. In fact they used to say "Just before closing time you go up to the street and take a look around. See who is up there. You know who should be and who shouldn't be. If there is somebody there that shouldn't be, give us a call. We will come." and they did. They did that regularly so they were protecting us.

The Club Carousel served as a social sphere for 650 lesbians and gay men during the early seventies. For many, "The Club" became a place to meet people and to feel connected to a community that validated each other's experience of the world. Bonnie talks about her first visit to the club:

I couldn't believe it! In such a big city we could actually walk down the street and go there without somebody harassing us or arresting us. I had come from Ontario where a gay club opened way out in the sticks and all the windows had to be blackened out. It was bad for most of us butches because we weren't into wearing dresses and stuff like that and at that time down east you could be hauled off to jail if you were caught out and didn't have at least three articles of women's clothing on if you were a female. So when I came here everything seemed so free!

Sue remembers the club in Calgary as being very different from the ones she had visited in larger American cities:

The Carousel was very different because you could walk down there and there would be men and women and people like me - not asking me if I was butch, femme or kiki. It was very friendly. I remember that there was always a huge line up to go to the bathroom. It sort of was part of the socializing. You stood in line for two hours; usually you had your drink and chatted to all your friends while you waited to go to the bathroom.

Those who were members of Club Carousel paint a picture of an underground community that created its own identity and took care of its own. Two doors protected the club's entrance. The first was the door from the outside. Once inside people would ring a buzzer to alert the doorman who would appear and ask for identification. Cindy remembers a high school friend finally taking her to the club:

I remember going up those stairs and seeing everybody who I drank with at the Majestic. So this is where they go! M. was the first one I saw at the door with J., giving each other a kiss good night and I just thought, “Oops, where am I?”.

When I walked in I think I thought I was going to see people on mattresses on the floor in this dark and dingy place. What a surprise and then I couldn't get enough. You couldn't get me out of there.

Later, as board member and a volunteer for Scarth Street, Cindy worked the front door:

I can remember working that door and saying to people. “You will have to be signed in by a member. Do you know what kind of a club this is? Can you prove you are gay?” We were so afraid and so careful.

Marie remembers the closeness of the community:

When I first actually did any stepping out in Calgary, I was already 27 years old because I had gone traveling. There was so much camaraderie within the community. When there was just one private club and it was the “only” place to go we looked after one another. You know, if your house burned down, everybody in the community gathered together and saw to it you had clothes and a place to live and at Christmas time, women with children were taken care of, hampers were sent to them and toys and things.

Club Carousel provided a range of other social activities to its membership.

There are many stories about the shows produced by the members (Appendix G), the

crowning of their own Stampede King and Queen, drag shows, camping, snow shoeing, barbeques, and motorcycle rallies, all events sponsored by the club for its membership.

Marie reminisces about the live theatre and shows the club sponsored:

All the boys and girls were involved in creating these amazing shows. We produced or rewrote major shows so they were about us. You don't see them anymore. I mean we still have our drag queens for sure but we don't have those big production shows like we used to have. It involved everyone. There were many, many good times there.

Club Carousel designed a crest that many members wore on their jackets (Appendix F) and adopted a theme song that many of the original members still sing (Appendix G).

Shirley laughs about the motorcycle rallies that were characterized by all the "girls" having the motorcycles and the guys having little compact cars, if they had vehicles at all:

We would take our motorbikes and go out to a pasture somewhere and play games on them. For example the girls would drive their motorcycles and put the guys on the back. The guys would have to carry a full glass of water while they road across a bumpy pasture and not fall off. Those boys would be screaming and carrying on!

Cindy and Shirley remember loading up their cars with alcohol to take to various events:

I always remember the time we were getting booze to go to the dance at the Highland Golf Course. We had that little Renault and we had it filled so high with beer that the front end came up and we couldn't get up that hill. We didn't have front wheel drive in those days so there was nothing to pull us up.

Sharon tells about the snowshoe party where it was so cold the chili froze before they could eat it:

We went out to Elbow Falls and it was between 40 degrees below. R. made the chili and it was way too hot but it froze right to your spoon before you could get it to your mouth anyway! The drinks too! Everybody was drinking rum and coke. The rum held up to the problem but the coke froze and it was just the pure rum at the bottom of the glass.

The Scarth Street Society, a registered society in the province of Alberta, took seriously their responsibility to conduct some form of community service. Sharon states "to maintain our position as a chartered society, we were expected to do some charitable donations". This organization made many significant contributions to the city of Calgary without ever identifying the nature of the group. For example in 1973, Scarth Street raised funds and purchased the first TTY machine for the City of Calgary Police force (Appendix G). This enabled direct communication between the city police and deaf citizens of Calgary. The only record is a thank you letter from the president of the Calgary Association of the Deaf acknowledging the significance of the technology to the deaf community.

Shirley remembers making up Christmas hampers for families in Calgary:

We did hampers for several years in a row. I would get the turkeys and things through where I worked because they always bought for the employees and I said, “I want your extras. They always gave us lots for our hampers and then we bought the rest. Sharon’s husband always got some turkeys from the army. We just all pitched in.

Other evidence of community contributions is reflected in the numerous thank you letters from the Calgary Humane Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the City of Calgary Children’s Service Center and the Glenmore Auxiliary Hospital.

In the early 1970’s, the Scarth Street Society were also involved in public education. A letter kept by one of the participants in this project indicates that members of the society participated in training counselors at the Pastoral Institute in Calgary for sometime before homosexuality was removed from the DSM:

For the last three years a group of your members have met with our classes in training in counseling and human sexuality. Our workers are often called on for counseling of homosexuals. Many of them have never knowingly met one face to face. To meet as a class and listen to your members talk about their situations in our society has been very helpful. We hope to call on you again this year for your valuable training assistance and friendship (Appendix G).

Those who were actively involved in this aspect of the lesbian community during the late 1960’s and into the 1970’s remember feeling like part of a large extended family. Although aware of the opening of Club Carousel, Sue found that her group of friends preferred house parties to the bar or club scene:



Well, our group was mixed men and women. We didn't tend to spend much time at the bar. We were all very close and we used to have a lot of fun. Almost everything we did was fun. There were no politics then. Nobody sat around thinking - hm - let's see if we can get same-sex benefits or anything like that. It was how could we have more fun? What can we do? How much can we drink? How late can we dance? All the people that I ended up becoming friends with were really good people. We started having parties at my house just because it was a big house and it was out in the country and well those were two pretty good reasons. Even there, we would be dancing and the men would be dancing with men and the women would be dancing with women and the doorbell would ring and nobody would say anything but immediately everybody would just switch partners. A man would grab a woman partner just in case whoever was at the door was straight - good forbid they should see two men or two women dancing. Sometimes my neighbor would see cars and would say "Oh, are you having a party?" And everybody would have to dance with other sexes for a while and then he would go. He knew we were all gay and lesbian. We knew he knew but nobody could do it - but that's what the community was like. Getting together, having parties, and pretending we were straight to the outside world. Sometimes we went to the Carousel, but not very often.

Denise, Nancy and Tommy characterized the lesbian community they knew in Calgary in the 1970's as small and focused on having fun. They remember that things seemed to be much easier then. As Denise noted:

House parties used to be so easy. I mean whoever thought of food? Now you go to a party and you have to put on a huge spread and everybody goes to eat. Well, we never even thought of food for days. A bucket of Kentucky fried chicken and we were happy!

Nancy agrees:

We used to party in that little house of mine from Friday night until Sunday. You didn't organize it. Now you have a party and you have to organize the food and clean your house. That's why we stopped having parties. We found out it was too much work.

These three remember being faithful supporters of Club Carousel. However, one of the issues for Denise was the "location of most gay clubs during those days":

What bothered me about the clubs is that we were always going down into a dungeon. They always seemed to be in the basement of an old building and you usually went in through an alley. I always wondered what would happen if there had been a fire. It just seemed like we were sneaking around.

After several years, Club Carousel outgrew its premises. For awhile it tried to make do by renting halls for occasions such as Valentine's Day, Halloween and New Years but, as regular attendance grew to an average of 135 people at the club on Friday and Saturday nights in a space that was only licensed for 60 people, the members complained that they wanted more space. Sharon was president during the transition:

It was cozy and the guys really liked the wall-to-wall bodies but it was a firetrap.

The consensus was we would look for a bigger space. We looked for months and

months. We had a housing committee that was looking for places but there didn't seem to be anything available within our price range in the downtown core. We were paying \$210 a month in the basement of 1207. Finally we found a huge space; five thousand square feet. It was half of the upstairs of Sidorsky's Furniture store, now it's the Brick on 16th Avenue NW. The rent was only \$250 a month.

We started to have problems there. The place was too big. It wrecked the ambiance. People rattled around in there and it never looked busy. We tried cutting it in half and put pool tables and shuffleboards on one end and the bar and the dance hall sort of at the other end but it was still too big. It kind of echoed. The other thing was that the guys quit coming at that point. It was out of the downtown core and the majority of them walked everywhere because they didn't have cars. Another big factor was that there wasn't a park near by for them to go cruising. At that point our membership was about 1/3 female and 2/3 male and the men were really the financial supporters of the club. In this community the guys are the money; they go out every night. Women don't go out as frequently. They tend to go out on special occasions but they have a hard time sustaining their own location.

The members of Scarth Street regarded their involvement as essential to their well-being. For many, it provided a safe place where they could gather and experience the acceptance that comes with being surrounded by likeminded individuals.

For Donna and Louise, the lesbian community represented something unfamiliar and somewhat frightening. Their experience at a number of events in the early 1970's left them reluctant to venture out very often:

In those days, there were a couple of bars and some dances but they were pretty rough. It was mostly men at the other events things. There were very few women and if there were women there, you probably couldn't tell them from a man. It was the politics of it all at the time. Some people would dress so it was real clear who was who but some didn't and that really made a dilemma. You just really didn't know what kind of trouble you could get yourself into and it was big trouble. There were very rigid rules about that; you had to be very respectful of it like some would refer to their partners as their wife or something.

You would hear stories about the women fighting and people getting beaten up. Even if you didn't believe it, it made you stop and think. There was a lot of what did they used to call it? Cruising! That used to go on and it used to create just enormous problems. You know things like "Don't look at my woman!" and all this kind of stuff. I think we were both chicken about that kind of stuff, both ran like hell because we didn't want to get caught in the middle of it. So we would usually try something out of town. We would find one of those bars out of town and try them when we went on holidays.

We went to a dance on New Year's Eve in '79 or '80 and there were all those people there who were very much into roles: some butch and femme. I got far more scared there than I ever was in a heterosexual place saying I was gay or

lesbian. You would be scared that that was the wrong person to dance with or talk to so we just didn't talk to anyone. We just sat there. I would talk to Donna and she would talk to me and we would just stay to ourselves.

On the other hand, some women never considered the possibility that other lesbians lived in Calgary and thus, they had no contact with any form of lesbian community for many years. The idea or possibility of communities of women, who loved and formed familial relationships with other women, did not occur to Madeline and Barb. They didn't really think about their relationship as anything other than two people who loved each other and wanted to have a family. They didn't question whether or not there were others like them:

You know, I think we are so insulated in our relationship because we were totally happy. When I realized I wasn't going to the prom or to dances and house parties or having couple friends, it wasn't something that I missed because we did family type things with Barb's sister. She had children too so we were quite active with them. All of our friends were straight and had children when we had young children so we visited with them. They knew of our relationship but it was never brought up. Then in the daytime there were other single mothers or other heterosexual mothers that I had great conversations with and we had lots of things in common so there wasn't really a lack in our life.

We didn't even look for a lesbian community and it wasn't visible for us to just see and think "Oh yeah, this is where I can go". Apparently there was a lesbian

mother's group in town but I never saw anything about it anywhere until much later.

Barb found that learning there was a lesbian community in Calgary didn't really affect her:

I didn't need to find community. I stayed home and looked after the kids when Madeline went out and found the community. That is what I did because I know who I am. Madeline didn't know who she was. It took her that long to get there and so she had to go and do what she had to do. I just did what I always did.

By the time that Madeline and Barb connected any lesbian community, they had been together for twenty years. At that time, there were few visible lesbian couples that had been together for such a long period of time and they became something of a novelty. Madeline remembers, "It was such a big deal to people. They couldn't stop talking about it and asking us questions. It was kind of strange because we had lived so many years never talking about our lives to anyone and suddenly we could!"

The late 1970's and early 1980's saw a shift in lesbian and gay communities in Calgary. Political and social support groups such as CLAGPAG, (Calgary Lesbian and Gay Political Action Guild), the Lesbian Mother's Support group, and the LIL (Lesbian Information Lines) appeared. The gay men's community was becoming larger and more diverse and several more public and commercial gay clubs opened in Calgary. Club Carousel saw its membership dwindle, as new alternatives for socializing were made available.

Cindy remembers one of the new establishments opening:

I think it was the Parkside that opened first. It was on 4<sup>th</sup> Street SW across from Memorial Park. It was a Steak House and when you went in there were just curtains separating two sides of the place. If you were gay you went through the curtains and if you were straight you went straight into the restaurant. Shortly after they opened they went totally gay. After that Merts, The Backlot and the Marquis opened. They mostly attracted the men's community and that really changed things for all of us.

Sharon believes that several factors contributed to the shift in the community: Of course the other bars started opening up and also being gay was becoming more acceptable. The younger crowd wasn't as afraid or as closeted. They went back to the commercially run clubs that we had boycotted originally. The new clubs were aimed at the men and the guys were always the bread and butter of the club as far as money was concerned.

Although many outside influences contributed to the change in the lesbian community, the participants also identified changes occurring in their own lives. Denise believes that people change and their needs change:

Years ago when you went to the dances, you were cruising. It was exciting. You were looking for somebody. There was always something new and something happening. Then you get older and settled and you are not looking anymore and you are content.

Tommy agrees, "the older crowds don't go out like that anymore. I don't have the interest anymore. It is not that I wouldn't go, it's just not my interest now. My life is

different.” Shirley points out that, “we don’t sit at the bar quite as often or as long as we used to. We’re too old to do that.”

Marie misses that connection with a small, tight community. “It was much smaller then and you could stay in touch with each other. Nobody seems to do that anymore. I see a few of the old ones but it’s not like ‘hey get over here and barbeque some steaks with us’ like we used to do.

Madeline who became involved in volunteering with a variety of lesbian organizations, says that she and Barb have taken a break from their involvement with the community:

It was really intense for a long time. I would get phone calls in the evening from women who were coming out and just needed to talk.

I can remember this one woman who would phone me in the middle of supper and I would still be talking to her when Barb would be saying good night to me after she bathed and put the kids to bed and I still hadn’t finished my supper.

It seems to be really important to be involved at some point in your life. I guess you do it while you need it and then you want to give back what you got but there comes a time when you do need to get on with the rest of your life.

The experience of the lesbians in this project is diverse. The lesbian community represented different things to different women and, ultimately, each one created a way to meet the needs she identified in her own life.



### Chapter Summary

Six themes emerged from the oral history data. Chapter four presents the participants unique experiences of a common process occurring for each of them in different places at different times. The pattern that emerges is one of a growing awareness that one is different from one's peers: often as early as three or four years of age. The next step was to look for more information about same sex attraction and often to begin the search for like-minded women during a time of significant oppression for lesbians and limited access to accurate information. The respondents then describe the various ways in which their sexual orientation impacted their lives both in positive and limiting ways.

Chapter five begins to examine the nature of lesbian relationships, individual decisions regarding coming out and each woman's perception and connection to a lesbian community.

These stories reveal that despite their apparent isolation and lack of awareness of other lesbians, the women in Calgary embarked on a similar journey to that of lesbians across North America. In view of the fact that all participants were living in a world where heterosexuality is the presumed norm, their sexual orientation impacted all of the relationships in their lives including significant others, family, friends and social and work contacts. Each contact with another person presented the dilemma of whether or not to come out. Some lesbians found connection and support from a lesbian community while others found it frightening and threatening.

The women involved in sharing their stories provide detail and insight into the historical development of one aspect of the lesbian community in Calgary. From a time when lesbians met informally in the softball field to the development the first gay and lesbian society in the province, we are privy to a fascinating underground organization of women.

The narratives of lesbians not involved in any aspect of a lesbian community provide a contrasting view of the experience of women loving women who were connected to other lesbians during the same period of time in the city.

## CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

Current local history obscures the existence of lesbians in Calgary, both decades ago and currently. This project compiled a collection of stories told by older lesbian women who have lived in this city for many years. It reveals a rich and dynamic culture of women who love women, which that has existed since at least the 1960's. The experience of the respondents challenges many prevailing notions about lesbians.

This chapter considers the significant experiences described by 15 lesbian women over 47 years of age in the social and political context of the times. In order to maintain the integrity of this oral history project, I chose to report the themes that emerged from the women's stories in the ways in which the women understood their experiences rather than to analyze them through the lens of understanding grounded in 2001. In my initial discussions with the project participants, I informed the participants that I was collecting their stories in order to build a foundation for the development of an archive of lesbian experience in Calgary from 1950 - the mid 1970's.

In writing the analysis, I was aware that I would be asking the respondents to read the findings and verify that I was accurately reflecting what they had shared. As the researcher, I struggled with the both accurately reporting the participant's experiences and offering an alternative perception of their experiences. Even during the interviews, I resisted reframing the women's experiences in theoretical terms familiar to me, but not to them. For example, when they described feeling like there was "something wrong with them" or when they talked about how being a lesbian had affected their lives, it was

tempting to speak about heterosexism and oppression. When one of the women spontaneously stated that “they never got what those feminists were all about and certainly did not want to be one”, my natural inclination was to begin to introduce the topic of women’s rights and to help them to understand from my own frame of reference. I decided that this would not meet the needs of the project and, in fact, would jeopardize the integrity of the work. My belief is that I have stayed true to the purpose of this project as described to the participants when they agreed to be involved. It is important to me that when the women read the final project, they recognize not only their words but also the context in which I have placed their stories.

The experiences of these local women across each of the six themes are compared and contrasted to the descriptions of lesbian experience found in the literature. The strengths and limitations of this project are reviewed, suggestions made about directions for future projects and research with this population. I then consider the implications of the findings for social work practice and policies and conclude with a reflection of the personal impact of this endeavor on the researcher.

### **Reasons for Participating**

The women involved in this project chose to participate for a variety of reasons including the chance to meet with old friends and reminisce, the opportunity to meet other lesbians of a similar age, and an interest in preserving lesbian history. Some participants viewed the project as a way to create their own memory banks for the future when individual memories fade. The group wished to have a voice, to educate both the

lesbian and non-lesbian communities, and to offer hope and validation to younger lesbians. Several women also felt that it was important to give back to the community.

### **Reviewing the Six Major Themes**

These women's stories reveal a diversity of experience as each grappled with her sexual orientation, yet together they describe a similar pattern of self-discovery. The women lived a significant portion of their lives in and around Calgary at some time between the late 1950's and the late 1970's. Since there is so little literature on the experience of Canadian lesbians during the 1960's and 1970's, I attempted to consider the findings of the current research in relation to literature about the American experience, as well as within the context of the limited activity of the gay and lesbian community across Canada. The experiences of the participants in this project are consistent with much of the present literature although it would appear that the Calgary experience seemed to be ten to twenty years behind the experience of those living in the United States or larger urban areas in Canada such as Toronto and Vancouver. For example, although lesbian clubs and organizations began to appear in the 1940's and 1950's in the U.S., Calgary lesbians tended to be unaware of their existence until the 1960's and 1970's.

### **Growing Awareness**

The first major theme in the oral history was titled growing awareness. Each of the women indicated that she remembered experiencing an internal sense of being different from other women. However, the ages at which the informants recognized their intense feelings towards women varied considerably. Three describe "knowing" as

young as three years old or as children, while six began experimenting with other young women in their early teens. The remainder indicated that their first attraction to women occurred in their early to late twenties. Several of the respondents were married before they understood their attraction to women.

Some authors suggest, “the earliest signs of ‘lesbian feeling’ or erotic interest in other females is not particularly different from the childhood crushes that many have described as normal in the young” (Faderman, 1991, p. 8). This sounds somewhat patronizing and ignores the personal experience of several participants in this project who are adamant that they “knew” at three to eight years old that there was something more permanent about how they felt about other females.

Ten years ago, research was indicating lesbians tended to identify an attraction towards the same sex around the age of 15 years (Rust, 1993). Recent studies find that 70% of lesbians feeling a sense of “differentness” at an earlier age (four or five years old) (Owens, 1998). This holds true for some of the interviewees in this project. In the literature, this early stage of awareness is identified by some authors as the first step in lesbian identity development (Cass, 1979; Stewart, 1999; Troiden, 1984-85). Characteristically, individuals initially struggle with the confusion of changing feelings internally during which time everything a woman has known and understood about herself shifts. It is expected that she will begin to feel alienated from the heterosexual world but not yet connected to a lesbian community. Although a number of the participants describe experiencing this phenomenon at various levels of intensity others did not. A few struggled with their own suspicions within the context of individual and

family value systems and in some cases, this struggle led to a profound personal crisis that challenged them to rethink their entire self-perception. However, others described the realization that they were lesbian as a relief, since they finally had a name to put to their feelings. Others stated that they had never considered the “option” of being heterosexual and so did not go through the type of confusion described by some authors (Cass, 1979; LeVay et al, 1995; Stewart, 1999; Troiden, 1982-83).

Recently published works indicate that the angst of discovering one is lesbian seems to be less troublesome than it once was. There is speculation that heterosexism is being challenged and exposed on many fronts and education and information is more readily available to those just coming out, however as most women in this project reveal, there have always been lesbians who have readily embraced their identity and established a clear sense of self. Many of the women describe an inner sense of knowing. Perhaps these are the women who have a true understanding of the essence of queer theory. Their sexuality and gender became an issue only when it is constructed as such by society. Much research has been done on those who have struggled with their sexual orientation. Perhaps an exploration of the resilience of these lesbians could provide a new perspective on this concept. We have much to learn from those individuals who have not questioned their very essence.

### **Looking for the Lesbians**

The second theme to emerge was entitled looking for the lesbians. Once the respondents realized that they were different from others around them, they began to look for validation for their feelings. This often entailed turning to the few sources of

information available at the time: medical journals, pulp novels or searching for other women who love women.

The narratives provided by the informants indicated that their experience mirrored the documented literature in many ways. At the time that most of the participants began to acknowledge their feelings towards other women and to search for more information, they found it difficult to locate any material. There was limited vocabulary to describe these women and their experiences. Most of it was medical jargon not readily accessible to the public.

The literature review indicated that well into the 1960's, lesbians were identified as sexual inverts and described in negative and derogatory terms both within medical texts and in some of the 1950's pulp novels (Abbott et al, 1972; Bannon, 1959; 1962; Basmajian et al, 1997; Faderman, 1995; Miller, 1995; Wysor, 1974). The portrayal of women who love women was dismal and the impact of this literature was devastating to some. It is significant to note, however, that in this sample of lesbians, the majority tended to read the definitions or descriptions and simply dismiss them. They did not incorporate the negative portrayals into their identity. The majority of respondents expressed, in one way or another, a "knowing" in their hearts that their love was right. In spite of the negative reflection of lesbians in the world around them and the struggles they have encountered, the respondents described an incessant drive to create lives that are women-focused.

Before 1970, many participants found that their contact with like-minded women occurred as if by chance, particularly in public bars that had unofficially become



gathering places for lesbians or in women-specific organizations such as softball teams or the armed services. A question that arose was “How did the women begin to meet at certain bars that went on to become unofficially known as a meeting place? None of the women knew how it had begun. The majority tended to say they just knew or heard from someone else that that was the place to go.

Although women’s liberation and gay liberation was beginning to emerge, the majority of the women in this study were not aware of many of the activities or publications of the time. The women who were involved in postsecondary education at the time tended to be the most informed. One woman made a point of finding lesbian material and organizations and one other stated that she would read feminist material in relation to her employment, however most stated that they were unaware for the most part about challenges and changes being advocated by the liberation movements until there was a significant breakthrough such as Trudeau and the “legalizing of homosexuality”. Communication and accessibility to information were limited and controlled by local media who are not supportive of lesbians or gay men. The women had few opportunities to hear that there were others like them or that there was a growing resistance to the negative perception of homosexuals. However, by the mid 1970’s, informants remembered seeing more references to homosexuality, of literature or newspaper articles, in addition to notices for support groups in Calgary.

While many of the women made a concerted effort to locate information about women who loved women by examining books, asking others, and searching for women’s bars, some of the lesbians participating in this project did not even consider the

notion that there might be other women like themselves and created communities of support drawing from neighbors, work contacts, family and others around them until well into the 1970's or 1980's.

### **The Impact of Being Lesbian**

The impact of being lesbian was the third theme emerged from the data. The early literature on lesbianism described a dismal existence with the prominent theory indicating that sexual inverts were unstable, mentally ill and perverted (Faderman, 1991; LeVay et al, 1995). However, the late 1970's began to see a shift in understanding women who love women. The research and the literature began to suggest that lesbians maintain the same level of mental health as the rest of society although they live with the added stress of being members of an invisible, oppressed minority population (Goss & Strongheart, 1997; Kehoe, 1989; Raphael & Robinson, 1980; Sang, Warshow & Smith, 1991; Tanner, 1978; Wright, 1998). In fact, research conducted by lesbian scholars during the 1990's indicates that lesbians may be happier and have more equal relationships than heterosexual women (Stewart, 1999). Sang's studies have also revealed that aging lesbians tend to describe experiencing a greater self-confidence, self-acceptance and self-direction at this stage in their lives than do heterosexual individuals (1991).

It is interesting that in spite of the long-term oppression of this group of women, their perception of the experience is frequently framed in a positive manner and therefore similar to the results of more recent research (Owen, 1998; Sang, 1989; Stewart, 1999). These women described their experience of having to be invisible in terms that suggest more than just surviving. The sense that they provided was more one of pride in their

adaptability and their determination to reject the expectations of the dominant society. They suggest that there is a thrill or satisfaction in living their lives with integrity in the face of an unaccepting world. It is tempting to see denial or limited vision in their perception, however, there is also much to be learned about the tenacity of women making heartfelt choices.

Although many of the women recognize strength gained from facing the adversity of living life as a lesbian, they also acknowledge that their lives were impacted in a myriad of ways. The same place and time resulted in completely different experiences for each woman. For example, when the common belief was that homosexuality was wrong or an illness, many women rejected that notion and created stable lesbian relationships, while other women felt obligated to follow social norms and date or marry men.

Most of the respondents identified a lack of support as one of the main problems they encountered as they began their journey of self-discovery. Initially, none of the women felt that they could talk to family or friends about their feelings and they knew instinctively to keep their identity a secret. This led many to feel isolated and believe that they "were the only ones". They felt separate from their peer group when they were young and disconnected from family and friends because they did not feel free to talk about their feelings for other women. Several talked about needing to leave the small towns in which they grew up in search of like-minded women.

All of the participants described living two separate lives. Some found this stressful and lived in fear that co-workers, family or straight friends would find out they

were lesbian. They feared a number of negative consequences. Others kept their private lives private but didn't particularly feel afraid of being found out. For the most part, this group of lesbians indicated that the biggest effect of living dual lives was that no one really knew them as whole persons. The straight world knew them one way and the gay community knew them another. These issues are identified in some of the older literature (Abbott et al, 1972; Martin et al, 1972; LeVay et al, 1995) however more recent authors find that these issues are not as prevalent (Jay, 1995; LeVay et al, 1995).

Several respondents indicated that their sexual orientation impacted their lives by limiting some of the choices they made. One woman had passed up a chance to be in the armed services because she thought that people would know she was gay if she joined. Although most of the women did not feel limited in terms of work or career, several participants agreed that lesbianism did affect their behavior in some situations. Some women remembered being more cautious or self-conscious about physical touch in public or with women friends, once they realized that they were lesbian. Another individual felt that her struggle with sexual orientation resulted in distorted thinking about herself, other women and lesbianism.

The stories of the participants reflect a number of similar themes to those identified in the literature that describes the 1960's, 70's and 80's. It is particularly striking to consider the changes that have occurred over the last four decades in the external environment in terms of shifting attitudes towards homosexuality, yet to recognize how the life experience of some participants continues to influence her perception of lesbians in society. Recent material regarding younger women indicates

that there is less angst and more support readily available for the younger age groups (Bernstein & Siberman, 1996; Jay, 1995; LeVay & et al, 1995).

Recently academics have begun to examine the experiences of lesbians through a lens of heterosexism. This has resulted in the reframing of many of our previous conceptions of lesbians and their existence. The ways in which their women lived their lives and the activities they engaged in become seen as resistances to the heteronormativity assumed by the dominant society. These terms are perplexing to many of the research participants who believe that they are simply living their lives in a way that makes sense to them.

Most of the women agree that the most importantly being lesbian has made them stronger individuals and taught them that they can deal with anything life hands them.

### **Relationships**

The fourth theme emerging from the oral history was relationships. This included relationships with significant others as well as with family, work environment, social supports and the lesbian communities to which they belonged. The literature in the area indicates that range of acceptance of lesbians and their relationships (Berzon, 1988; Clunis & Green, 1988; Fairchild & Hayward, 1989; Goss et al, 1997; Stewart, 1999; Wright, 1998). This range was demonstrated by the stories of the interviewees.

One of the issues that the respondents identified was the lack of modeling for lesbian relationships. The women indicated both pros and cons to not being confined to a traditional heterosexual model. Although they agreed that there are benefits to having the freedom to develop unique relationship models, they also recognized the downside to

having no role models for women when they begin a life together. The literature over the past ten years indicates that the lesbian community has been struggling with this concern and several authors have presented their ideas about ways to construct intimate relationships that value equality (Berezon, 1988; Clunis et al, 1988; Goss et al, 1997; Wright, 1998).

The data also revealed that the majority of lesbians in this group had had some form of relationships with men, usually before they were aware that creating longterm relationships with women as an option. Several had been married, a number had been engaged and others had felt some responsibility to “try being with a man”. Only two women had not pursued any form of heterosexual relationship.

Since the 1970’s, authors became increasingly interested in the topic of lesbian parenting. The women in this project represent the range presented in the literature on this topic. Five of the informants were mothers. Several had children from their previous heterosexual relationships while three of the women chose to conceive after establishing a lesbian partnership. Although this issue is much more common now, these respondents represent some of the frontrunners of lesbian parenting. They demonstrate both the creativity and determination in developing a model of living that met their own needs.

Other issues unique to lesbian relationships included the circumstances under which lesbians meet, partners who are at different stages of self acceptance in relation to their sexual orientation, the pressure to conform to family and societal standards, and the lack of acceptance, recognition and sanctioning of relationships. These concerns are

echoed by authors involved in the ongoing study of lesbian relationships (Berezon, 1988; Coleman, 1981-82; Goss et al, 1997; Wright, 1998)

### **Coming Out**

The fifth theme, coming out, has many implications for lesbian women (Browning, 1987; Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1981-1982; Ross, 1995). The literature suggests that women often fear loss of family supports, friends, job and the potential for physical violence with this decision. All of the participants in this project were out at some level. Several had lived closeted lives for many years before they came out to family or friends and ventured into the lesbian community. Others informed family and friends when they were in their early twenties. Reaction to the news varied from some families rejecting a lesbian daughter or sibling to those who heard the news, carried on and never talked about it again, to those who accepted and supported the individual woman and her partner.

Most of the women described the anticipation of coming out as highly stressful. Over the years, the respondents were out in varying degrees with some being out only to members of the gay community, while others were out to family and friends but not to their work associates. Still others who were out to everyone in their lives. This range is consistent with that described by a number of authors (Browning, 1987; Ross, 1995).

The consensus of the group was that being closeted is stressful, unhealthy and ultimately leads to illness. Although one respondent still lives an extremely closeted lifestyle, the remainder believe that coming out has empowered them and allowed them the freedom to live with pride and dignity. This belief is well supported by the literature

and a large variety of international lesbian and gay services (Jennings, 1994; Kaufman & Raphael, 1996).

### **Community**

The final theme to emerge was that of community. The results of this study offer some new insights into the experience of western Canadian urban lesbians. Although the literature provides evidence of lesbian communities in some of the major American cities during the 1940's and 1950's (Faderman, 1991; Marcus, 1992, Miller, 1995) there do not appear to have been similar organizations in Canada until the 1970's (McLean, 1977)

The participants in this project come out into an invisible and self-protective lesbian community. They had varied experiences in relation to the lesbian community in Calgary. No one was aware of an organized, identifiable lesbian community in the city before 1969. Rather, the women met on the softball field, in public bars after the games or at private parties in individuals homes.

Over the past 40 years, there appears to be a serendipitous nature to the development of lesbian community in Canada. Lesbians who had no contact with each other simultaneously began to develop relationships with larger groups that would meet their needs. For example, the Scarth Street Society, Alberta's first incorporated gay and lesbian society, was formed during the late '60's at a time when the organizers had no knowledge that other gays and lesbians were beginning to organize in Toronto, Vancouver, Ottawa, Saskatoon, Edmonton and Regina (MacLeod, 1996).

Four respondents played significant roles in the development of The Scarth Street Society and Club Carousel that it operated and which became a community-meeting



place for lesbians and gay men. In 1968, applying for a private club license for a gay and lesbian organization in Calgary may have seemed a bold political move, however, the organizers did not consider it as such. The development of the society and the club represented the community taking charge of their own entertainment and refusing to be exploited by the straight bar owners.

Operating a society that was gay and lesbian-owned was a way to create a safe place for lesbians and gay men to gather and to socialize. In order to ensure the safety of their membership, like many American organizations, the members sometimes used false identities and the organization took great care to protect the membership lists (Abbott et al, 1972; Miller, 1995). The society was identified only as a social club that also made charitable donations to various services in the Calgary community. The recipients of the services were never aware that a gay and lesbian organization was making the donations.

Those who participated in Club Carousel activities described the lesbian community as close and like family, however, some who were peripheral experienced it as rough and somewhat scary. Another group of lesbians represented by the participants in this project, chose not to be involved with the club and preferred private house parties. For women who were just coming out, locating the essentially invisible lesbian community was difficult and frustrating. These descriptions of the range of experience of lesbians across Alberta in the 1970's are reflective of that described by other historians across North America (Faderman, 1991; Miller, 1995; Marcus, 1992).

The informants observed that older lesbians are not visible in the community. This issue is echoed in the writing of Kehoe (1989) and Sang (1991) in their studies on

lesbians over 60 years of age. Several members of the group were active in lesbian communities when they were younger. They then reached a point where they preferred to pursue their lives and allow younger lesbians to create communities.

In the latter part of the 1960's, as lesbian and gay communities were building across the Canada and the United States, most lesbians living in Calgary were unaware of these developments (Faderman, 1991; Miller, 1995; Ross, 1995; McLean, 1977; MacLeod, 1996; Smith, 1999; Stone, 1990). Only two of the participants remembered hearing about the Stonewall Riots or the American Medical Association's change in the DSM-II in 1973 (Miller, 1995). However, most of the respondents were aware of Prime Minister Trudeau's role in the decriminalization of homosexuality and indicated that they had gained a small but significant sense of power by voting for him (MacLeod, 1996).

Many of the informants had little awareness or understanding of the women's or the gay liberation movement during the 1960's. Several stated that they would not consider themselves feminists and did not believe that they had experienced discrimination as a result of being a woman.

The experiences of the lesbians in this project, are consistent with the information reported by E. Ettorre (1980). She described four main groups of lesbians: straight, statusquo, reformist and marginalized. She identified that some lesbians chose to remain apolitical. According to her study this could mean living traditionally often in butch/femme relationships or silently resisting heterosexuality by living in lesbian relationships but not aggressively challenging the dominant society. Reformists tended to be lesbians who were prepared to challenge heteronormativity and are often involved and

visible in lesbian communities. The respondents in this project assumed a variety of roles. By virtue of the fact that they chose to love who they wanted to, they were resisting the dominant view of the times. Several were involved, in the 1970's, in organizing Club Carousel or speaking at a local city counselling center but did not see themselves as challenging traditional culture. They instead saw it as educating others. They did not see themselves as particularly innovative or leaders in the community as much as they saw themselves doing what they needed to meet their own needs. With the luxury of looking back, we can identify leadership and politicize the actions of the organizers of the first lesbian and gay society, yet that is not the view of the women who were there.

One of the women in the project tends to see herself as marginalized in the lesbian community. She believes that because she remains married to a man, other lesbians mistrust her and do not accept her as openly into the community.

Even well into the 1970's, there was so little reported in the popular media about gay liberation efforts occurring in Canada that few of the women knew of the work of Canadian gay activists. (Coalition for Gay Rights in Ontario, 1981; MacLeod, 1996; MacLean, 1977; Smith, 1999). Although gay newspapers and lesbian newsletters were beginning to appear in the '70's, circulation was often confined to the three major centers, Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, so that those living in Calgary rarely had the opportunity to see them (MacLeod, 1996; Ross, 1995). The results of the present study suggest that participants who were students in post-secondary education or in professions tended to have access to somewhat more current information.

The respondents did acknowledge that significant changes occurred in the 1970's in Calgary in relation to the lesbian and gay community with the introduction of commercial clubs aimed at the men's community. These clubs were often exclusively male and drew significant income and support away from Club Carousel. In the mid-1970's, support groups and political organizations began to appear and information about the gay and lesbian communities became more accessible.

The local newspapers in Calgary published the little information on homosexuality that was available to the public, during the 1960's and 1970's. These publications were very conservative and focused on the negative attitudes of those in public office who perpetuated the myths that homosexuality was immoral, a mental illness, a sin and considered to be a criminal activity. However, despite the negative press, it is interesting to note that at the same time the city police were actively involved in protecting gays and lesbians. Another notable event occurred between 1969 and 1973 when the Pastoral Center invited lesbians and gay men from Scarth Street to assist with training counselors about homosexuality. In spite of the apparent homophobic attitudes of the time, the Calgary lesbian and gay community associated with Club Carousel, apparently experienced an extraordinary level of support within the larger community from a variety of service areas. Most American and eastern Canadian documentation of the same time period indicated less support from traditional services. However, it may be that, similar to Calgary, despite the prevailing negative attitudes there were liberal-minded individuals from many walks of life defended the community.

Since little literature or research on the experiences of Canadian lesbians is available, this study contributes the perspectives of women who lived in a small urban center in a conservative part of the country during the 1960's and 1970's. Although these particular women do not define themselves as feminist, they clearly believe that they have the right to make decisions affecting their lives. While access to information about being lesbian has changed tremendously, it is evident that the experience of those years has left its mark. As the conversation turned to the current Pride Celebrations and parades, several respondents questioned the need for such events stating, "We don't have to flaunt it or be in your face. We just need to live our lives."

The life experiences of the women involved in this study reflect knowledge that we have only recently begun to collect. Their experience is both consistent and unique in comparison to that of other research data collected across the North American continent. In spite of the geographical distance and lack of communication between the members of this marginalized group, the commonality of experience reinforces the presence of some form of kindred spirit between lesbians.

#### **Implications for Social Work Practice and Policy**

The results of this project may have significant implications for social work practice and policy. Social work has long been concerned with the well-being of individuals and advocated for social change and reform on behalf of oppressed people (Reamer, 1994; Van Den Bergh, 1995; Yelaja, 1985). With this documentation of the experiences of lesbian women in Calgary, social workers may begin to work towards the development of responsible and effective strategies that can effect positive change for

this population (Levy, 1995; Turner, 1985). Increased awareness of the experience of lesbians in the community may encourage individual social workers to advocate for education and the development of inclusive processes and policies within their own agencies. For example, social workers might ensure that intake forms inquire about partners rather than husbands or wives. Further, informed social workers can encourage their professional associations to support the lesbian community in its bid for basic human rights in this province as well as to lobby for the rights of lesbian couples to foster and adopt children in Alberta.

Social work has the potential to contribute to the development of the lesbian community in several significant ways. By virtue of their training, social workers are in a position to propose and advocate for culturally sensitive services for this population. While the needs of lesbians are as diverse as those of any other client population, there are unique challenges posed by women's sexual orientation. Social workers need to be cognizant of the effect that a history of persecution and discrimination may have on individuals and groups seeking professional assistance. Clients may not expect acceptance of their orientation by a professional and may not be as forthcoming with significant information from fear of being judged. This may hinder the development of a productive social worker/client working relationship. Older lesbian clients may have more significant experiences of oppression. The results of this project also indicate that older lesbians often use a different language to talk about their lives, in which case the social worker will need to become familiar with the changing nature of language within this community.

Finally, social workers have a responsibility to advocate for policy changes at each level of government or to promote agency decision-making, to ensure and protect the human rights of this oppressed population. Lesbian researchers and authors suggest that a true understanding of the social position of a lesbian will challenge the heterosexual assumptions embedded in the values of the dominant culture (Brown, 1989; Ross, 1995; Sang, 1989). The challenge to social workers is to consider how intervention would change if a lesbian standpoint were central in our understanding rather than being considered a marginalized view.

Although advocacy for oppressed populations is clearly spelled out as a professional responsibility in the Social Work Code of Ethics, social workers and social work education have not had a strong history of advocating for the lesbian community (O'Neil, 1994). It is my hope that the revelations from this project will encourage individual social workers to become more informed and more active in the development of knowledge and resources for the lesbian community in Calgary.

### **Limitations and Strengths of the Project**

There are inherent limitations and strengths in any research. The most significant limitation of this project is that it does not represent closeted women. My original intention was to interview lesbians over 60 years of age, however many of these women were reluctant to be involved. They usually demonstrated this by not returning my phone calls or failing to send a response to the initial packages of information I delivered. When I broadened the sample to include women between 50 and 60 years of age, this age group was much more willing to participate. My speculation about the reason for this is that the

older women's experience of oppression may have been different from the younger women's. The women in their 50's now would have been adolescents and young adults during the 1970's, when significant social changes began to occur, whereas ten years earlier, homosexuality was still a crime in Canada and lesbians were considered mentally unstable. One experience that underscored this difference in age and self-perception, was that while I was working on this project, I had the opportunity to speak to an elderly gay man who had participated in the Stonewall riots in 1969. Recently, he had been asked to ride in an open convertible in the 1999 Gay Pride Parade in New York. He shook his head in disbelief, stating "They used to arrest us perverts and now I am riding in a parade???" (Bob, personal correspondence, October, 1999).

Connecting with respondents was dependent on their hearing about the project and volunteering to participate. The older lesbian population remains somewhat invisible to both the lesbian and non-lesbian community. There is no way to know if closeted lesbians were aware that the project was being conducted or if they were aware but chose not to participate. It is also likely that individuals who have been fairly open about their orientation felt more inclined to participate. This project cannot reflect the voices of those too frightened to participate, those who do not define themselves as lesbians in spite of being in long term committed relationships with same sex partners or those who have no contact with the lesbian community.

Another consideration is the possible impact of the researcher on the research process. Most of the woman I interviewed were familiar with me; potentially either a strength or a limitation of the project. It is possible that some women may have withheld



some stories or information, in reaction to knowing me. However, the fact that I was lesbian and familiar to most of the women more likely, contributed to the depth of the stories shared in the interviews.

A strength of the project was that in most situations the respondents either brought pictures or had acquaintances there to stimulate her memory. The unstructured interview format together with the memorabilia encouraged the women to talk about what was important to them in a variety of areas. This resulted in-depth accounts of the women's experience and the meaning that they attributed to those experiences. Many of the women allowed me to include some of the pictures and memorabilia in the archives of this project.

A major strength of the project is the presentation of the voices of lesbians who have broken the silence. Although these narratives represent a relatively small number of women, they described lesbian life in Calgary during the 1960's and 1970's in a way that has not been previously recorded.

#### **Directions for Future Research**

The results of this study suggest a multitude of future research projects. This oral history project is only the first step in documenting the history of lesbians living in Calgary. The contribution of lesbians who have never had contact with the lesbian community would further enrich the current archives. Possibly a project conducted through seniors centers and programs for seniors would access this highly invisible portion of the lesbian population. A chronological history of the development of the lesbian community from 1970 through to the present would contribute to building a

foundation of knowledge. Another study could look at the connections between the development of the lesbian community and the gay men's community. The current findings indicate that the two have been intertwined.

Individual oral history projects documenting the stories of particular aspects of the lesbians community are also required, such studies could enlist the experiences of lesbians who served in the armed services, collect stories of women who come out after 40, and the narratives of lesbian women's experiences in their relationships. As I was writing this chapter, I received a call from an older woman who asked me if I was going to include something about the drag kings of the 1980's, an aspect of the community of which I was not aware and that no-one mentioned during the interviews. Clearly, there are many further stories to document with respect to the lesbian experience.

The paucity of literature with respect to the lesbian community in Canada suggests a tremendous need for further qualitative research. Most current research about lesbians is American based (Adelman, 1986; Cass, 1984; Duberman et al, 1989; Faderman, 1991; Gershick, 1998; Gosiorek et al, 1995; Gonsiorek, 1982b; Hall, 1996; Hunnisett, 1980; Jacobs, Thomas, & Lang, 1997; Jay, 1995; Kehoe, 1989; Marcus, 1992; Miller, 1995; National Museum and Archive of Lesbian and Gay History, 1996; Sang, 1989; Sang et al, 1991; Swallow, 1983; Witt et al, 1995). It is important to research our own Canadian population to compare and contrast local experience and characteristics with the documented literature.

As well as the continued collection of lesbian history, further qualitative research could explore a vast number of areas of lesbian experience. Questions could address

lesbian women's experiences of community services, the characteristics of lesbian relationships, lesbian health needs and how are they met, the needs of the older lesbian population, how lesbian women deal with the termination of a relationship, the experience of a lesbian couple when one is chronically ill, or, more generally, the lives of older lesbians? Research could explore the experiences of lesbian social workers with respect to whether or not they are out, their experience of social work education, observations of the treatment of lesbian clients in the field, and the impact of sexual orientation on practice. Another gap is the attitude of the heterosexual population towards lesbians in Calgary, Alberta and Canada. This knowledge building will ensure recognition and meaningful attendance to the social issues of lesbians.

Opportunities also exist for quantitative research projects within this population. Quantitative approaches could provide descriptive data on lesbians residing in the city, the variety of ways in which these women contribute to the community and the types of services required.

The invisibility of the lesbian community means that little research has been conducted to date. Many opportunities for knowledge building and contributing to the understanding of the lesbian community exist but have not been taken up. I invite other students and academics to build upon this initial effort.

### **Personal Impact of the Project on the Researcher**

This project has represented a journey in self-discovery and coming home. The beginning of the journey was difficult, as I struggled to overcome the fear of coming out in such a public manner. Conducting the literature review was tiring and emotionally

draining at times because it entailed reading negative, stereotypical publications which, as lesbians, we learn to deflect. As I developed a clearer picture of the social and political context in which the respondents and I grew up, I came to a deeper understanding of the courage and strength of the women that surrounded me.

I was particularly moved as I read the material on the experience of butch women. I remembered my own struggles dating a woman who was often mistaken for a male in the early 1970's and the disdain of some lesbians for the butch women in our community. As the project developed, I could feel myself becoming more and more whole. I began to recognize that while growing up I had collected information from the world to build a sense of myself. I had inherited my father's blue eyes, blond hair and work ethic. My mother shared with me a strong sense of the independence of women in our family. My sisters challenged me to decide what was important while as a whole, the extended family taught me the stories of our ancestors who had traveled from Sweden to the United States and later to Alberta to farm the land. As I moved into the world of school and work, I learned about my ability to work hard and learn quickly. A passion for working with people swept me away. From the women in my relationships I learned that we could challenge the status quo to live as we chose. We did just that: sometimes in hiding and other times not.

Over a lifetime, I created a façade that provided me a safe way to move through the world; always with a sense that in many respects this existence was fragile. As I began to collect the stories for this oral history project, I learned details about the women who had come before me and felt a kinship with those who fought to live life on their

own terms, long before I did. I began to feel connected. The outside part of me began to feel the inside come alive and feel comforted. I began to understand the questions that I had wondered about as an adolescent. Why did the world react so strongly against us? How did I know instinctively to hide and to protect myself? How did I "know" that my destiny was to be with women? I realized that the world around me had created the doubt and the questions. Through my connection with these remarkable women, at my core I learned to trust where I needed to be in each moment of time.

The participants in this project confirmed that kinship is not only about blood relations. I feel a spiritual kinship with lesbians that I have never met. I know that they have a deeper understanding about some parts of my life than those who are actually related to me. In many ways, completing this project has not only filled a missing place in my soul but has allowed me to feel better connected to those around me.

### Chapter Summary

This chapter summarizes the findings of the oral history project, comparing the current results to the available literature. From my perspective, the participants in this study have contributed a new perspective on lesbian experience in Canada.

Much of the literature and the archival material available in other lesbian history archives has been collected from women in larger American urban centers. That material was valuable in creating a context within which to hear the voices of lesbians in Calgary. The stories of the latter resonate with the voices of those documented in the literature. However they are also unique as they represent lesbians isolated from the activities of other lesbians or gay men. In spite of a lack of direct information, the women in this

project somehow learned “the rules of the game” such as living dual lives, butch-femme dress codes and finding each other on the softball fields. These women constructed their similar identities to lesbians around the country in spite of limiting beliefs, myths, and attitudes surrounding them.

Their stories provide a personal history of the lesbian community in Calgary. They reflect the family legacy in a way that our biological family cannot. Most minorities socialize their youth within the context of the nuclear family and send their offspring out into the world with a sense of identity. Lesbians are a unique minority who cannot socialize their young. They rarely receive validation of their experience within the nuclear family and must enter the wider world with no clear understanding of their sexual orientation or the characteristics of their culture.

Although we are a diverse culture, we have experiences in common with each other that make us separate from other women. We are courageous, tenacious and strong. We existed long before there were words to describe us. Whether the words and actions of the majority work to change or control us, attempt to eliminate us from view, or strive to prevent us from discovering ourselves we will continue to survive, driven to live the lives that call us.

### **How the Research Affects Individuals and the Lesbian Community**

The fact that I wanted to hear and record their stories initially puzzled many of the women participants. As in much oral history, respondents often do not believe their individual stories to be significant (Silverman, 1998). As the project progressed, I found that the women were intrigued by the growing awareness of the history of the

community. I hope that their participation assisted these lesbian women in placing their life experiences in context and helped them to value the courage and fortitude it took to pursue happiness in spite of the oppression of the dominant culture.

Another outcome of this project is its effect it has on the lesbian community in Calgary. As I spoke with other lesbians about the results of oral history project, I began to gain a sense of what this project meant, not only to me, but also to the community. Young lesbians have besieged me with questions about the history of older lesbians. Many were as fascinated as I was about where we came from, how we have been perceived over time, our silent connections with so many women from the past. These young women understood the initial confusion of feeling and thought experienced by many lesbians. They were intrigued by the concept that countless unknown women knew us better than our biological families did.

A particularly poignant moment occurred with two women aged 35 and 40 who listened with tears in their eyes as I described the evolution of the concept of lesbianism and its social and political context. Later the women came forward and one said “Thank you for giving us back our history. I hadn’t thought of it before but as soon as you said these are our spiritual grandmothers, I knew what you meant! It filled an empty spot inside me that I didn’t even know was there”.

I am grateful to have been able to share in the historical documentation of the lives of lesbians living in Calgary.

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**APPENDIX A: Advertising for Participants**

**PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
ON THE  
LESBIAN AND GAY COMMUNITY  
OF CALGARY**

**THE PROJECT**

This project is designed to gather and document the histories of older lesbians and gay men (40+) in Calgary.

**THE PROJECT LEADER**

The project leader is Carolyn Anderson. Carolyn has been a member of the lesbian community in Calgary over the past 27 years. She has been actively involved in a number of community organizations and services and currently serves as president of the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Association (G.L.C.S.A.)

**THE PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR THE STUDY**

The participants needed for the study are any lesbians and gay men who lived in Calgary at any time during the 1920's - 1980's. Participants may or may not have considered themselves to have been lesbian or gay during that time. Also anyone with stories or information about lesbians or gay men in Calgary at that time are welcome.

**THE FOCUS OF THE PROJECT**

The focus of the oral history will be the variety of experiences of lesbians and gay men in this city during the 1920's to the 1980's.

**THE PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT**

The purpose of the project is to begin to document a history of the lesbian and gay community in Calgary through the stories of individuals who lived that history.

**THE TIME COMMITMENT**

The participant will be asked to take part in a two-four hour interviews with the possibility of a follow-up interview. Participants may be invited to participate in a group interview. Participants will have a choice of having the interview audio or video taped. Tape recording is optional.

**ANYONE INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY  
PLEASE CONTACT:**

**CAROLYN ANDERSON AT 217-6892 ANYTIME**

Thank you for your consideration.

# CALGARY'S LESBIAN HISTORY PROJECT

by  
**Carolyn Anderson, Phd Candidate**

The purpose of this project is to explore the experiences of older lesbian women in Calgary by conducting an oral history research project.

Historically, it has not been safe for lesbians to leave clear evidence of their lives. Silence and invisibility have robbed us of a rich heritage. The lesbian community has little sense of continuity or historical root and few role models. Lillian Faderman observes that "our world seem[s] to have been invented in the moment of time. We had no past - or if we did, no one knew... because we had no knowledge of those who came before us.

Joan Nestle explains that lesbian history is made up of myths because "for many years our only social existence was on pages of medical, psychological, legal and religious texts - all dedicated to proving our pathology".

This project is a one step on the road to reclaiming our history. We reclaim that history in order that we may correct false impressions of what was and create new vision for the future.

I am looking for women who are 45 +, who lived in Calgary at some time in their lives and who lived in a relationship with another woman. Women do not need to have perceived themselves to be lesbians and the age at which you began a relationship with another woman is not relevant. I am interested in hearing from women who were active in the lesbian community and those who were not.

Every woman's experience is valuable. Together we have woven a rich tapestry of experience that speaks to our courage, strength and creativity in this life. We have much to teach the world about the more subtle forms of individual and collective resistance to oppressive conditions.

<a href="#"><u>HOW CAN I PARTICIPATE?</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>EXCERPTS FROM THE PROJECT</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>IMAGES OF HISTORY</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>ABOUT THE PROJECT COORDINATOR</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>LINKS</u></a>	<a href="mailto:canderson@mtroyal.ab.ca"><u>canderson@mtroyal.ab.ca</u></a>

[Back to Home Page](#)



**APPENDIX B: Letters to Participants**

**UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY****LETTER OF CONSENT****LESBIAN HISTORY  
PROJECT**

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**Research Project Title: An Oral History of the Lesbian Community of Calgary**

**Investigator: Carolyn Anderson, MSW, Doctoral Candidate**

**Dear Participant:**

**This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, please ask. Please take the time to read this form carefully and to understand any accompanying information.**

**I would like to request your participation in an oral history research project documenting the experience of older lesbians in our community. Without the stories of our lives, the lesbian community has no sense of continuity and little recognition of lesbian existence or contribution to the community as a whole. It is difficult to envision a future for ourselves if we don't know our past. Every woman's story is a valuable piece of that history.**

**Other lesbian communities across the United States and Canada have begun to gather and document their own histories. This study will gather stories about the experience of lesbian women in Calgary between the years of 1920 and 1980. I am interested in stories as well as photographs, newsletters, and/or other memorabilia that you may have available for recording purposes.**

**If you are willing to be involved in this oral history research, I will be asking you to participate in a two hour interview. Participants may also be asked to be involved in a group interview. In some instances, it may be necessary to conduct a follow up interview to clarify issues from the first session. The format for the interviews will be very informal. I will be asking you to talk about what it was like for you as a lesbian in Calgary. I will use an interview guide to conduct the interview.**

**I will be requesting permission to video or audio tape the interview in order to preserve this history for archival purposes. With permission, some of the tapes may be utilized for future projects. With the recording of the sessions, you will have a choice to remain anonymous or to identify yourself.**

**A number of precautions will be taken for participants who may be concerned with anonymity and confidentiality. Your participation in this study will be held in the strictest of confidence. When the tapes are transcribed, no names or other identifying information will be used. The tapes will be stored in a safe place in my home. If you should decide to participate, you are completely free to withdraw at any time and any information obtained from you will be destroyed.**

**The final research product will be an exciting collection of stories that will serve to make the history of this community real. It will identify themes of the stories collected and make use of selected quotations which will enhance the richness of the history.**

**Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate. In no way does this waive your legal rights or release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Your continued participation should be informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation in the project.**

**Your participation in this Oral History Project would be a valuable contribution to the creation of a Lesbian History of our Community. Please feel free to contact me if you have questions or suggestions of other women who may be interested in participation in this project. I may be contacted at Mount Royal College, 240-8974 or at home at 217-6892 evenings or weekends.**

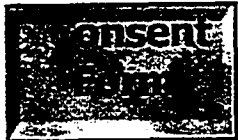
**If you have any questions concerning your participation in this project, you may also contact the Office of the Vice-President (Research) and ask for Karen McDermid, 220-3381.**

**A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.**

**Thank you for your interest in this project.**

**Carolyn Anderson**

**MSW, Doctoral Candidate**



**APPENDIX C: Website**



**CALGARY'S  
LESBIAN HISTORY  
PROJECT**



by

**Carolyn Anderson, Phd Candidate**

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**The purpose of this project is to explore the experiences of older lesbian women in Calgary by conducting an oral history research project.**

**Historically, it has not been safe for lesbians to leave clear evidence of their lives. Silence and invisibility have robbed us of a rich heritage. The lesbian community has little sense of continuity or historical root and few role models. Lillian Faderman observes that "our world seem[s] to have been invented in the moment of time. We had no past - or if we did, no one knew... because we had no knowledge of those who came before us.**

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**I am looking for women who are 45 +, who lived in Calgary at some time in their lives and who lived in a relationship with another woman. Women do not need to have perceived themselves to be lesbians and the age at which you began a relationship with another woman is not relevant. I am interested in hearing from women who were active in the lesbian community and those who were not.**

**Every woman's experience is valuable. Together we have woven a rich tapestry of experience that speaks to our courage, strength and creativity in this life. We have much to teach the world about the more subtle forms of individual and collective resistance to oppressive conditions.**

---

**[canderson@mtroyal.ab.ca](mailto:canderson@mtroyal.ab.ca)**

**APPENDIX E: Questionnaire**

# LESBIAN HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW GUIDE

NAME:  
PHONE:  
BIRTHDATE:  
LIVED IN CALGARY:

AKA:

Why are you interested in participating in this project?

What do you see as the value of this project?

## AWARENESS OF SEXUALITY

1. What is your first awareness of lesbianism or homosexuality?
2. When did you know you were a lesbian?
3. Did you tell anyone? Who?
4. What kind of reactions did you get? Friends? Family? At Work? In general?
5. How "out" were you?
6. How did the "times" effect the way you lived your life?
7. What terms did you use to refer to yourself or others who were gay?
8. Did you use terms like butch, femme, kiki, passing, hiding? What did they mean to you?
9. How did your sexual orientation affect you in the work world?
10. Who were your role models?



## RELATIONSHIP TO THE COMMUNITY

1. What awareness did you have of a lesbian or gay community in Calgary?
2. What was your involvement in the community?
3. How were you characterize the community? What was it like?
4. How/where did people meet?
5. What kind of resources or services were available in the community for lesbians?
6. What kinds of events happened in the community?
7. What kinds of things did you do to socialize?
8. What role did alcohol or drugs play in the community?

## RELATIONSHIPS

1. Were you ever involved with men?
2. Tell me about your first relationship with a woman.  
- how did you meet etc.
3. How would you characterize your relationships with women?
4. If you answered yes to #1: How are relationships with men different from relationships with women for you?
5. Have you ever had children or been involved in raising children in your relationships?  
- tell me about that experience.
6. Who are your significant supports at this time of your life?
7. What do you think are the issues that pose the most difficulties for lesbian relationships?

## POLITICS

1. What did you know about what was happening in other parts of the country or world regarding lesbians and gay men?
2. Were you aware of Stonewall in 1969? Did you know at the time that homosexuality was considered a crime and a mental health diagnosis until the early 1970's?
3. What books, magazines, newsletters were you aware of?
4. Were you involved in any politics of the lesbian community? (organizations, speaking, education, marches, letter writing etc.).
5. Did you have any personal experience of discrimination or harassment because of your sexual orientation?

## SUMMARY

1. Overall, how has being a lesbian impacted your life?
2. Are there things that you think would have been different if you had been straight?
3. If you could change one thing about your life - what would it be?
4. What does the future hold:
  - for you personally as a lesbian?
  - for you in relation to the lesbian community?
  - for lesbians in general?
5. What was it like for you to participate in this interview?
6. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

If you have any pictures or memorabilia that you would feel comfortable sharing with this project, I would be happy to talk to you about them. This can be done by the participant showing me the pictures or items while we video or audio tape the descriptions or we can have them scanned into the computer so they may be used in an upcoming book on Lesbian History. I would take responsibility for obtaining permission from those in pictures to use them in any publication.

My sincere thanks to you for participating in this project. Too often we feel that our stories and lives are not significant enough to be included. I believe that every story is our collective history and it is our responsibility to preserve it.

Thank you again.

Carolyn Anderson  
Project Coordinator



# LESBIAN HISTORY PROJECT



## INTERVIEW GUIDE

This interview guide is used by the interviewer in audio and videotaped interviews. It is meant only to be a guide. The interview can go in whatever direction the participant feels is important in describing their own experiences as a lesbian. For those who choose to write and submit their own stories, I urge you not to feel confined or limited by this outline. In fact the boxes provided for your answers will expand to allow you to write as much as you would like.

When you have completed the questionnaire, you mail return the questionnaire to me via email. The questionnaire must be sent as an attachment.

The alternative of course is to mail it to me at 2815 32 St. SW Calgary, Alberta, Canada T3E 2S1

**Warning:** There is a possibility of conflictions when sending the survey information via the Internet if the user is in an 'open' lab. The computers in an open lab are NOT register to the user because of many, other users utilizing the same computer at any given time. It is possible to print the information out and filling it out by hand and mailing it to me.

NAME: AKA: \_\_\_\_\_ PHONE: \_\_\_\_\_

BIRTHDATE: \_\_\_\_\_ YOUR E-MAIL ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

I HAVE LIVED IN CALGARY SINCE: \_\_\_\_\_ (DATE)

**WHY ARE YOU INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING IN THIS PROJECT?**



**WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE VALUE OF THIS PROJECT?**



**I AM INTERESTED IN THE STORIES OF THINGS THAT HAVE HAPPENED IN YOUR LIFE IN RELATION TO YOUR SEXUAL ORIENTATION. PLEASE FEEL FREE TO SHARE AS MANY OF YOUR STORIES AS YOU WOULD LIKE, WHETHER OR NOT THEY SEEM TO ADDRESS ANY OF THE QUESTIONS INCLUDED HERE. YOU MAY TYPE AS MUCH AS YOU WISH SINCE THE BOXES WILL EXPAND TO CONTAIN ALL YOUR ANSWERS.**

**AWARENESS OF SEXUALITY:**

**WHAT IS YOUR FIRST AWARENESS OF LESBIANISM OR HOMOSEXUALITY?**



**WHEN DID YOU KNOW YOU WERE A LESBIAN?**



**DID YOU TELL ANYONE? WHO?**



**WHAT KIND OF REACTIONS DID YOU GET? FRIENDS? FAMILY? AT WORK? IN GENERAL?**



**HOW "OUT" WERE YOU?**



**HOW DID THE "TIMES" EFFECT THE WAY YOU LIVED YOUR LIFE?**



**WHAT TERMS DID YOU USE TO REFER TO YOURSELF OR TO OTHERS WHO WERE GAY?**



**DID YOU USE TERMS LIKE BUTCH, FEMME, KIKI, PASSING, HIDING? WHAT DID THEY MEAN TO YOU? ARE THERE OTHER TERMS YOU USED?**



**HOW DID YOUR SEXUAL ORIENTATION AFFECT YOU IN THE WORK WORLD?**



**WHO WERE YOUR ROLE MODELS?**

	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**RELATIONSHIP TO THE COMMUNITY**

**WHAT AWARENESS DID YOU HAVE OF A LESBIAN OR GAY COMMUNITY IN CALGARY?**

	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**WHAT WAS YOUR INVOLVEMENT IN THE COMMUNITY?**

	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**HOW WERE YOU CHARACTERIZE IN THE COMMUNITY? WHAT WAS IT LIKE?**





**HOW/WHERE DID PEOPLE MEET?**



**WHAT KIND OF RESOURCES OR SERVICES WERE AVAILABLE IN THE COMMUNITY FOR LESBIANS?**



**WHAT KINDS OF EVENTS HAPPENED IN THE COMMUNITY?**



**WHAT KINDS OF THINGS DID YOU DO TO SOCIALIZE?**



**WHAT ROLE DID ALCOHOL OR DRUGS PLAY IN THE COMMUNITY?**



**RELATIONSHIPS**

**WERE YOU EVER INVOLVED WITH MEN?**



**TELL ME ABOUT YOUR FIRST RELATIONSHIP WITH A WOMAN. - HOW DID YOU MEET ETC.**



**HOW WOULD YOU CHARACTERIZE YOUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH WOMEN?**



**IF YOU ANSWERED YES TO #1: HOW ARE RELATIONSHIPS WITH MEN DIFFERENT WITH RELATIONSHIPS WITH WOMEN FOR YOU?**



**HAVE YOU EVER HAD CHILDREN OR BEEN INVOLVED IN RAISING CHILDREN IN YOUR RELATIONSHIPS?**



**TELL ME ABOUT THAT EXPERIENCE.**



**WHO ARE YOUR SIGNIFICANT SUPPORTS AT THIS TIME OF YOUR LIFE?**



**WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE ISSUES THAT POSE THE MOST DIFFICULTIES FOR LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS?**



**POLITICS**

**WHAT DID YOU KNOW ABOUT WHAT WAS HAPPENING IN OTHER PARTS OF THE COUNTRY OR WORLD REGARDING LESBIANS AND GAY MEN?**



**WERE YOU AWARE OF STONEWALL IN 1969?**



**DID YOU KNOW AT THE TIME THAT HOMOSEXUALITY WAS CONSIDERED A CRIME AND A MENTAL HEALTH DIAGNOSIS UNTIL THE EARLY 1970's? HOW DID THAT EFFECT YOUR LIFE?**



**WHAT LESBIAN AND/OR GAY BOOKS, MAGAZINES, NEWSLETTERS WERE YOU AWARE OF?**



**WERE YOU INVOLVED IN ANY POLITICS OF THE LESBIAN COMMUNITY? (ORGANIZATIONS, SPEAKING, EDUCATION, MARCHES, LETTER WRITING ETC.).**



**DID YOU HAVE ANY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF DISCRIMINATION OR HARASSMENT BECAUSE OF YOUR SEXUAL ORIENTATION?**



## SUMMARY

**OVERALL, HOW HAS BEING A LESBIAN IMPACTED YOUR LIFE?**



**ARE THERE THINGS THAT YOU THINK WOULD HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT IF YOU HAD BEEN STRAIGHT?**



**IF YOU COULD CHANGE ONE THING ABOUT YOUR LIFE - WHAT WOULD IT BE?**



**WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD:**

**- FOR YOU PERSONALLY AS A LESBIAN?**



**- FOR YOU IN RELATION TO THE LESBIAN COMMUNITY?**



**- FOR LESBIANS IN GENERAL?**



**WHAT WAS IT LIKE FOR YOU TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS INTERVIEW?**



**IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADD?**



Submit Query

Reset

**If you have any pictures or memorabilia that you would feel comfortable sharing with this project, I would be happy to talk to you about them. This can be done by the participant showing me the pictures or items while we video or audio tape the descriptions or we can have them scanned into the computer so they may be used in an upcoming book on Lesbian History. I would take responsibility for obtaining permission from those in pictures to use them in any publication.**

**My sincere thanks to you for participating in this project. Too often we feel that our stories and lives are not significant enough to be included. I believe that every story is our collective history and it is our responsibility to preserve it.**

**Please remember to forward me a signed consent form to enable me to use the material you are contributing.**

**Thank you again.**

**Carolyn Anderson, MSW, Phd Candidate Project Coordinator**



**APPENDIX D: Consent to Participants**



# Consent Form



---

**Please sign and return one copy to Carolyn Anderson**  
by mail: 2815-32 St. SW Calgary, Alberta, Canada T3E 2S1

by email: download this form and email it as an attachment to  
canderson@mtroyal.ab.ca

If you have any problems please call me at 403-217-6892

I have decided to participate in the Oral History of the Lesbian Community in Calgary. My signature indicates that I have read and understood the information above, and am willing to participate. Furthermore, I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time should I decide to do so.

Signature _____	Date _____
-----------------	------------

I agree that parts of my interview may be used in the dissertation report.

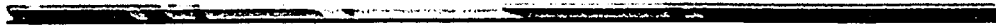
Signature _____	Date _____
-----------------	------------

I agree that parts of my interview may be used in future video and/or print projects.

Signature _____	Date _____
-----------------	------------

I agree that parts of my interview may be used in Web page presentations.

Signature _____	Date _____
-----------------	------------



**APPENDIX F: Visual Archives**

# IMAGES OF HISTORY

---

Club Carousel Jacket Crest - 1969

---



Infamous stairs leading to the women's washroom at the club frequently referred to as Sidorsky's.

1971?

---

If you have pictures or archives you would like to share please contact me at  
[canderson@mtroyal.ab.ca](mailto:canderson@mtroyal.ab.ca)

[Back to Home Page](#)

## APPENDIX G: Text Archives

**Calgary Herald December 22, 1967**

**Copies of letters of thanks for charitable donations made by Scarth Street Society**

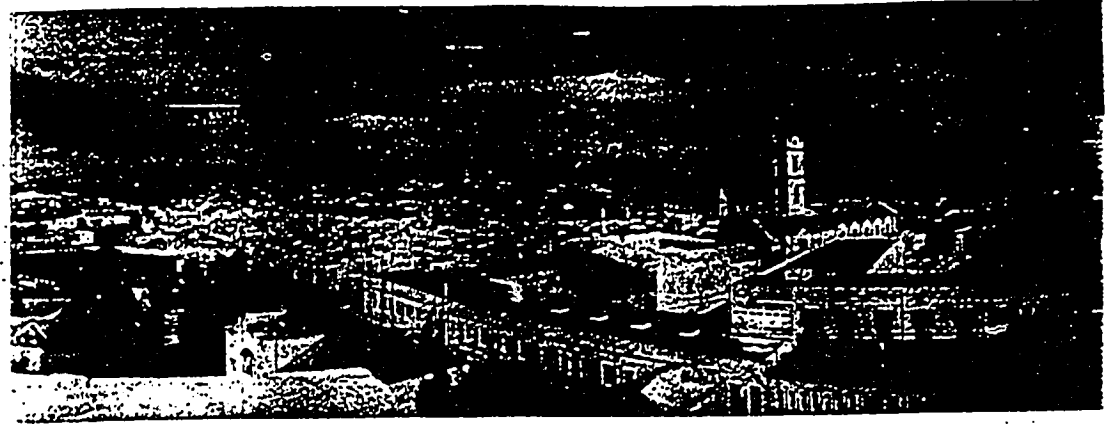
1972	Calgary Auxiliary Hospital	Wheelchair
1972	City of Calgary: Children's Shelter	\$100
1973	Calgary Humane Society	\$150.00
1973	Calgary Association for the Deaf	TTY at City Police Office
1973	Calgary Pastoral Care Institute	Staff training

**Club Carousel Show Programs and Scripts**

**Club Carousel Song**

## And Rubble Mar The Ancient Road From Jerusalem

is the final article of three written by Murray of Southam News Services' London after visits to the cities of the Holy Land under a single political control for the first time since 1948.



A VIEW OF JERUSALEM, THE CITY SACRED TO THREE OF THE WORLD'S MAJOR FAITHS ... for the first time since the rise of modern travel unrestricted access to the holy sites is guaranteed to all

... the wise men came this year from the east, they would find their way blocked by guns and red tape. To reach Israel-held Jerusalem and Bethlehem, they would first need to apply to the government of one of the Arab countries bordering on the east — Syria, Jordan or Saudi Arabia.

the frontiers where Israelis and Arabs watch each other through gun sights. Instead, the gold — if not the frankincense and myrrh — will be brought by travellers from the West. And this year, the revenue will go to Israel instead of Jordan.

The June war disrupted tourist traffic to both countries but while Jordan's tourist trade — based mainly on Jordanian possession of the chief Christian holy places — remains dead, Israeli trade has revived and is currently exceeding last year's totals. By the end of the Christmas season, the number of tourists is expected to reach 100,000.

Once past the scrutiny of the Arabs, the application would go on to the International Red Cross to be passed over to Israel. Israeli authorities have promised sympathetic consideration for pilgrims from Arab countries but few are expected to cross

See Page 14—ROAD FROM

From Page 1

### Changes

posed amendment is a threat to society itself.

Commenting on other proposed amendments, the chief welcomed compulsory breathalyzer tests although he said the measure appeared "a little drastic."

"But, it is something that has to be done and will no doubt help reduce accidents and clear a lot of arguments at the national level."

Chief McIver was disappointed by the acceptance of lotteries and claimed they would not be good for the national economy if held on a large scale. But, he was pleased to see the tighter control on obtaining master keys for cars which up until now had provided an open door for professional car thieves.

The Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police had advocated the measure for some time, he said.

Harassing telephone callers are numerous in Calgary, he said, but the province has already covered the proposed Criminal Code amendment under the Telephones Act which makes the calls an offence punishable on summary conviction.

#### LAWYERS HAPPY

Meanwhile, Calgary lawyers are very pleased with the changes to the Criminal Code of Canada. William Gill, president of the Calgary Bar, said today.

He said the reforms are "timely and certainly necessary," and the Canadian Bar has been asking for the changes for a long time.

"We are certainly pleased that they are finally coming through. They are all sensible reforms that thinking lawyers and practising criminal lawyers have waited for some time."

# Drinking Drivers Face New Attack

## McIver Opposes Change

The legalizing of homosexual acts between consenting adults in private is an indication of a decay in society, says Police Chief Ken McIver.

In an interview today, the Calgary police chief attacked the proposed amendment to the Criminal Code of Canada and said: "It is time Canadians got up on their hind legs and protested this thing."

Chief McIver described the practice as "a horrible, vicious and terrible thing. We do not need this in our country."

#### INCREASE SEEN

He said the incidence of homosexuality in Calgary is "quite common," and will immediately increase as soon as the law is passed.

"I am for helping these people but I don't accept they are necessarily sick. Morals don't change although some things are accepted by society. By changing this law we are accepting something that is wrong and sick."

On the homosexual law change, he said Britain, where a similar law now exists, was once held up as an example of high standards, but in recent years the country "has been going down the drain." Chief McIver said apart from being an indication of decay, the proposed change would mean that

See Page 2—CHANGES

## NO HERALD CHRISTMAS DAY

There will be no Herald on Christmas Day, but regular editions will be published Tuesday, Dec. 26. Display advertisers are re-

### CRIMINAL CODE CHANGE HIGHLIGHTS

OTTAWA (CP) — Highlights of the omnibus bill to amend the Criminal Code given first reading Thursday in the Commons:

Homosexual acts committed by consenting adults in privacy no longer illegal.

Permission for running of lotteries by federal or provincial authorities, charitable or religious organizations, agricultural fairs or persons licensed by provinces.

Abortions made legal where hospital committee certifies continued pregnancy could endanger the mother's life or health.

Breath analysis tests mandatory for persons suspected of impaired driving.

Publishing of evidence at a preliminary inquiry prohibited if the accused wishes.

Increase to 14 years in the maximum jail penalty for forging passports or using passports known to be forged.

Harassing telephone calls made an offence punishable on summary conviction.

Possession and use of firearms and other weapons subject to more stringent controls.

Provision for persons convicted of cruelty to animals to be prohibited from keeping animals or pets for two years from conviction.

## 'Christmas Present,' Says Lottery Backer

For Mary English, the federal government's move towards legalized lotteries in Canada is "a wonderful Christmas present."

The 55-year-old Calgary widow, Canada's leading proponent of legalized lotteries, said today she is "delighted" by news of the Criminal Code amendment on lotteries introduced in the Commons Thursday by Justice Minister Trudeau.

Mrs. English ended her six-year, 165,000-mile campaign on lotteries last week after presenting a massive submission—including a petition with

ers, if it's run properly. I hope whoever is in charge when the bill is passed will keep the lotteries above board."

Mrs. English's brief to Justice Minister Trudeau suggested a national lottery supervised by a sweepstakes board, with sales of tickets through banks or computer machines.

"Parliament has shown in ... Page 14—DRINKING DRIVE

## Reforms To Code Outlined

(more stories on page 28)  
By BRUCE PHILLIPS  
(The Herald's Ottawa Bureau, Copyright, 1967)

OTTAWA — Compulsory breath tests for suspected drinking drivers are provided in a sweeping revision of Canada's Criminal Code unveiled Thursday, which also includes legalization of homosexual acts between consenting adults.

Other major provisions include authorization of lotteries operated by federal or provincial governments and charitable organizations, and permission to conduct abortions in cases where the life or health of the mother is endangered.

An 82-page bill includes these and other significant changes in the criminal law was introduced in the Commons Thursday by Justice Minister Pierre-Elliott Trudeau. It was given first reading and will be brought forward for debate soon after the House reconvenes in late January.

Mr. Trudeau described the bill as the most comprehensive review of the criminal law since the early 1950s. Certainly dealing with such matters as homosexuality, abortion and lotteries, previous governments considered too hot to handle.

Mr. Trudeau predicted the changes will win rapid and overwhelming approval.

## OPERATION RESTORES EDMONTON BOY'S VOICE

CALGARY AUXILIARY HOSPITAL

AND



NURSING HOME DISTRICT No. 7

6909 FOURTEENTH STREET S.W.  
CALGARY 9, ALBERTA

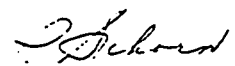
March 6, 1972

Mrs. Lois Szabo,  
Scarth St. Society,  
1207 1 St. S.W.,  
Calgary, Alta..

Dear Mrs. Szabo:

On behalf of the patients and staff at the Glenmore  
Park Auxiliary Hospital, I would like to take this  
opportunity to thank your Society for the wheelchair  
they so generously donated to our hospital.

Thank you.

  
P. Schorn, R.N. (Mrs.),  
Hospital Administrator,  
Glenmore Park Auxiliary Hospital.

PS/mn





THE CITY OF CALGARY  
SOCIAL SERVICE DEPARTMENT

1001 - 17th Street N.W.  
Calgary, Alberta  
T2N 2E5

November 19th, 1972

Scarth Street Society  
Box 6395, Station D  
Calgary, Alberta

Gentlemen:

RE: Donation of \$100

On behalf of the children at the Children's Service Centre, may I take this opportunity to thank you for your generous donation of \$100. I can assure you this money was put to good use.

I would like to also apologize for the delay of this letter, we were waiting for the receipt. I understand the receipt has been forwarded directly to you.

It would be very difficult to carry out our responsibilities without the support and confidence of people like yourselves.

Thanking you again for your kind consideration, I remain,

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "L. Keith Wood".

L. Keith Wood  
Manager of Institutions  
Social Service Department

LKW:mw

"WE SPEAK FOR THOSE THAT CANNOT SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES"

# The Calgary Humane Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

FOUNDED 1922



A UNITED FUND SERVICE



Mailing Address:

P.O. BOX 1011

CALGARY — ALBERTA

Shelter:

515 - 35th AVENUE N.E.

CALGARY 64, ALBERTA

PHONE 277-4097

January 19th 1973

Mrs M. Szabo,  
Treasurer  
Scarth Street Society.

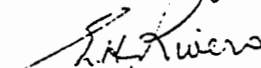
Dear Mrs Szabo,

Our Society is very grateful for the generous donation of \$150.00, to assist in feeding the animals in the Shelter. We do have help from the United Fund, but our work must be mainly supported by the generosity of friends and by our members. It always helps us a great deal to know that Societies such as yours has our welfare at heart.

We are finding that the facilities at our Shelter are very inadequate and we are hoping that it will be possible for us to provide much more suitable premises during the coming year.

May we wish your Society all possible success and, again, many thanks for your help.

Yours sincerely

  
E. H. Rivers,  
Treasurer

904 - 33rd St. N.W.  
Calgary, Alberta  
T2N 2W8  
October 20, 1973

Mr. Roy Bishop  
President  
Scarth Street Society  
1632 Centre St. N.  
Calgary, Alberta

Dear Mr. Bishop:

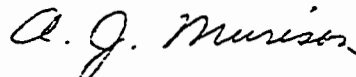
May I, on behalf of all the deaf citizens of the City of Calgary, thank the members of your society for your donation of a phone control unit located in the police department. The phone control unit will prove to be very useful for every deaf caller when they have an emergency or must contact the police department. We hope that the police department will keep it for many years.

Thank you for your thoughtfulness of the welfare of the deaf in Calgary.

Yours truly,

Calgary Assoc. of the Deaf

per



A. J. Murison

President

# The Pastoral Institute



Medical Arts Building (6th Floor)  
329A - 6th Avenue SW.

Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2P 0R6

Phone 265-4980

Area Code 403

September 27, 1973

Board of Directors  
The Scarth Street Society  
Box 6395, Station D.  
Calgary, Alberta

## TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

The purpose of this letter is to thank members of your society through you for their assistance to our training programs.

For the last three years a group of your members have met with our classes in training in counselling and human sexuality. Our workers are often called on for counselling of homosexuals. Many of them have never knowingly met one face to face. To meet as a class and listen to your members talk about their situations in our society has been very helpful. The openness and honesty with which your members have been willing to respond to questions has been great.

We hope to call on you again this year for your valuable training assistance and friendship.

Sincerely yours,

W. E. Mullen  
Pastoral Director

WEM/sd

Ulan  
" IT'S A CAROUSEL WORLD "

Stage: Piano to side by backstage door - mike side of stage.  
Large Can Flag together with small flags from as many countries  
as possible - Globe turning. Theme - International

Light On Donna & Wayne - Costumes - Can Flag T Shirt, Jeans & Shoes White.  
Facing sideways to audience and globe - singing "Around the World"  
Cast singing backstage and repeating 3 times - Around the world while Donna  
and Wayne dance around globe.

BLACK OUT

Light Small spotlight on stagedoor - Jean entering on motorcycle - roaring  
motor. Costume - Blue Jeans, wearing helmet - toolkit as luggage.  
Light follows her to front where Ian on floor studying world map -  
lot of luggage beside him and wearing neat summerclothes.

Stage: Clear stage as soon as in darkness and set up for U.S.A.  
(sign: - GERALDINE'S BAR) - 2 chairs and 1 table.

Light spotlight following Jean on bike as she rides towards Ian -

Jean Are you all set? Where are we going first?

Luggage have Canada or Calgary stickers on them. Ian wearing helmet  
also. Ian gets up quickly and together they pack luggage on bike  
Ian San Francisco U.S.A. Heard you can get a directory there for the  
gay cities all over the world.

Jean Hey, what's all this (pointing at Ian's luggage then looking at herself)  
How much do you think this machine can hold buddy!

Ian (Laughs) Ohhhh..... I just brought along some soap and..... a good  
supply of you know what! (laughs)

Bike is loaded quickly - Ian getting on top - both leave for stage  
door singing San Francisco here we come. They get off bike quickly  
and sit on stage (in Geraldine's bar)

Light Full on stage - background music - softly. Larry.

Ian (Loud) Here we are in San Francisco!!

Jean Are you sure this is a gay bar????????? (noise starts backstage of  
a party going on Someone will say "What are you wearing to the party  
tonight darrrrling?" Etc. Etc.

Ian Sounds like we are!

Light Spotlight on Geraldine making entrance thru stage door - Larry playing  
introduction music.

Ian Loods like we are! (Both looking at K. entering)

Kendrick Woocooweee (Geraldine bounces around swinging hips etc. making great  
entrance wearing short dress - sexy! Honey, when you come to Geraldine'  
you'll know you've come to the swingiest (keeps swinging and carrying  
on) place in the U.S.A. Woocooweee!!!  
At Geraldine's you won't be disappointed-----{stops emphasizes figure}  
and you won't leave disappointed.  
Ian looking very interested and Jean the opposite - unconcerned, looking  
relaxed and bored

Jean We just wondered if you could tell us where we can get a directory

the gay cities of the world. Geraldine pays very little attention to Jean however keeps making eyes at Ian. Geraldine pulls up dress and makes sure Ian notices her legs. Then directs next lines to both of them while winking at Ian

Kendrick Wellll, I don't know about the rest of the world, honey but here we serve the straight in the front (wiggles front) and the gay in the back (wiggles ass) Woocoooweeee'!!!.

Ian And what a back!!! (touching Geraldine's back and looking very interested.)

Kendrick Don't touch me, honey - You watch it honey, don't let your mouth write a cheque that your body can't cash (slowley) Woocoooweeeeee!!!

I may like it honey, but business is business - you're in a respectable place - things are not cheap at Geraldine's - nothing but the best! (shows off body)

I said to my boyfriend Killer the other day - enough of this cheap stuff!! Woocoooweeee.

Voice from backstage

Killer Geraldine - GET IN HERE!!! (very masculine voice)

Kendrick (Facing audience) Speaking of the devil..... And what a devil, honey Woocoooweeee!

Come ...and meet the devil that made me buy this dress! (Ian follows anxiously and willingly while Jean gets up slowly and wait till they are off stage then says.....

Jean Shit.....Give me Ann Murray anyday!

BLACK OUT

Jean walks motorbike to front during blackout while larry plays "I left my heart in San Francisco Ian rushes back to front and joins Jean - both get on bike.

Light Spotlight on Jean and Ian while stage is being set up for Vina's Hidaway. MEXICO.

Stage Large sign: VINA'S HIDAWAY - cactus, donkey etc. backdrop.

Ian What a fabulour party that was!

Jean Oh yeahhhh

Ian Yeah! Look what I got (holds up address book)

Jean Well, I hope that's all you got! (laughs hilariously)

Ian Look, (pointing at page in address book) here's a girl's bar in Mexico. Let's go to Vina's Hidaway.

Light Black out on Jean and Ian - LIGHTS ON STAGE (Vina ready and waiting to sing mexican song.

BLACK OUT

STAGE During blackout staged is cleared and set up for the Phillipines.

Sound NO LIGHTS - AIRPLANE SOUND - During blackout dancefloor is being set up for Australia while conversation on airplane goes on.

Jean Get a load of that stewardess!!

Ian Cool it, baby! You flew so igh last night - now just sit back and fasten your seat belts

NO LIGHTS ON UNTIL DONNA IS THRU.

Donna's voice only Attention all passengers! - We are now flying over Australia - look out of your windows and you will see the coastline of AUSTRALIA.

Light LIGHT ON DANCEFLOOR ONLY.

Marlene, Jenny, Bernie and Connie doing their act - KEEP LIGHTS OFF  
STAGE - being set up for the Phillipines. (Leo ready)

BLACK OUT

Donna's voice only (during black out)

Attention all passengers! Please fasten your seat belts - we will be landing  
at Manilla, Phillipines in approx. five minutes!

Sound Drums

Lights FULL STAGE - Leo performing

BLACK OUT

Stage Clear stage during blackout and set up for London, England

Light On Ian and Jean halfway up dancefloor (Stage still black out)

Jean Damn, it's hot!

Ian Pffft... Reminds me of a steambath

Jean Steambath?????? Hell, it reminds me of Club Carousel!

Ian (cooling himself) You know who I'd really like to see??

Jean Who?

Ian THE QUEEN.....

Jean What queen? The Real Queen or you're kind?

Ian (laughs) And if I can't see the Queen --- I wouldn't mind seeing  
BIG Ben

Jean You size-queen!

BLACK OUT

Lights Lights come on almost IMMEDIATELY AGAIN ON IAN AND JEAN (front of  
dancefloor. Larry plays softly - Foggy London

Ian Here we are in London town!

Jean We've been away so long I sure do miss the kids back home.

Ian Why not call them!

Jean Okay by me - lets (Ian picks up phone and rings number)

Ian Hello Operator - Please connect me with Club Carousel in Calgary  
Alberta - Canada (repeats slowly)

BLACK OUT ON IAN AND LIGHTS IMMEDIATELY ON

MARSHALL.

Marshall Does his act as telephone operator - too busy to connect Ian

Stage set up for HOLLAND BLACK OUT ON MARSHALL AND LIGHTS BACK ON IAN

Ian

Jean I've just about got enough of this land of the queens - LET'S GO  
~~xxxx~~ to the land of the DIKES.

Ian (laughs) Okay Jeany dear - but ofcourse you realize it takes a  
ferry (fairy) to get there.

BLACK OUT

Larry plays softly - tiptoe thru the tulips. Ian walks towards  
stage - looking at stage while full light comes on Holland Scene.  
Jack stands with back to audience holding finger in dike - N. is  
on the other end of dancefloor.

Ian (seriously) According to the story I'm sure it was a boy who stuck  
his finger in the dike!! Jack turns around.

Jack I hate to disappoint you honey - but THAT is not my finger!

Nick Hey, Jacob - let's Dance!

Record Jack and Nick dancing.

BLACK OUT

Stage Set stage up for German Oktoberfest ( quickly )

Light On Jean and Ian front of dancefloor.

Jean I'm thirsty - Let's go to Germany for the Oktoberfest.

Ian Great Idea - A German beer would taste prrrretty good right now.

BLACK OUT ON IAN AND JEAN

Lights Full on stage - Alta and Shari do their song.

BLACK OUT ON ALTA AND SHARI

Jean and Ian lying on air mattresses (Larry playing Auf Wiedersehn during short black out)

Ian I don't know about you but that Oktoberfest just knocked me right out.

Jean Wake here Let's get some shut-eye. - Sweet dreams

BLACK OUT ON IAN AND JEAN AND LIGHTS GO ON IMMEDIATELY ON LARRY AT THE PIANO doing a medley of songs - France, Spain Italy and Russia.

BLACK OUT ON LARRY AND BACK ONTO JEAN AND IAN.

Ian sitting up - Jean snoring.

Ian Wake up sweetie! - I'm raring to go again. (both get up and walk toward bar.

Stage SET UP FOR UKRAINE

Ian (Arms around her) Before we take off for home - there is just one more place we have to go and see

Jean (Still sleepy and yawning) And that is!

Ian (Very agreeable) ~~Okay!~~ Well.. These two friends of mine do this Ukranian dance and they are really something

Stage Ukranian background

BLACK OUT ON IAN AND JEAN

Lights Full on stage

Record Len and Rene do their act.

BLACK OUT

Sound Airplane sound during black out

Stage Clear stage and set up for Finale " Club Carousel"

Light On Jean and Ian - both on motorbike - wearing no helmets. As soon as light comes on them front of dancefloor they say in unison (sighing) CA WA DA. Mountie comes up to them in uniform.

Bob (strict and deep voice - loud also) Where have you been? Don't you know it's illegal to drive this bike without helmets? (starts writing tickets) Your driver's license please! Ian nervously pulls out addressbook by mistake What's that? (takes book out of his hand) Jean has driver's license ready Bob ~~smiles~~ smiles - very interesting (changes tone of voice) Ian gets off bike - Mountie tears up ticket and puts arm around Ian and both walk off leaving Jean on bike. As they walk away Bob says And what are your plans for tonight! Jean starts bike. Ian can hardly wait to get back to Calgary and Club Carousel.



## IT'S A CAROUSEL WORLD



It's a Carousel World that we live in,  
So come on - let's be happy and gay,  
You can't sing the blues,  
When you're being cruised,  
You're lucky in a lot of ways.

We're the "Carousel Kids", and we like it,  
Stick together through the thick and the thin,  
If you're short or tall  
If you're big or small,  
As long as you are gay, you're in!

The world is your playground,  
Try it for size.  
Open your eyes,  
And see all the guys.  
The world is your snowball,  
Just for a song -  
Get out and roll it along.

It's a yum-yummy world made for lovers,  
Take a walk with your favorite girl.  
It's a pleasure ride,  
When we're side by side  
In Calgary it's a Carousel World