

## The Queer Omaha Archives: The First 5 Years

### <Slide>Land acknowledgment

"I would like to begin by acknowledging that the University of Nebraska at Omaha is a metropolitan university with campuses, programs, service learning, and community engagement spread across the past, present, and future homelands of the Pawnee, Ponca, Oto-Missouria, (Ooo-ma-ha) Omaha, Dakota, Lakota, Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Kaw Peoples, as well as the relocated Ho-Chunk, Iowa, and Sac and Fox Peoples. Please take a moment to consider the legacies of more than a century of displacement, violence, settlement, and survival that brings us together here today. At the University of Nebraska at Omaha, we respect and seek out inclusion of differences, realizing we can learn from each other, and we look forward to building long-lasting relationships with the Indigenous People of Nebraska."

To learn more about the indigenous and native territories and languages where you live, visit the Native Land website. <https://native-land.ca>

For my fellow Nebraskans, I want to remind us that October 11<sup>th</sup> will be the first statewide Indigenous Peoples Day. <https://indianaffairs.state.ne.us/indigenous-peoples-day-2021/>

Thank you to the UNL Native American Coalition for sharing their land acknowledgement. <https://nativecoalition.unl.edu/#:~:text=Land%20acknowledgement%20statement&text=At%20the%20University%20of%20Nebraska,the%20Indigenous%20People%20of%20Nebraska.%22>

### <Slide>About the QOA

Thank you Christa for having me back on NCompass Live to talk about the UNO's Queer Omaha Archives five years on. I am glad we could do this in October, which is LGBTQ+ History Month as well as American Archives Month.

My name is Amy Schindler and I use she, her pronouns. I am a cisgender, straight, white woman and I acknowledge that I am a colonizer here in Omaha. I moved to the Great Plains in 2014.

Today I'm going to talk about:

- The beginnings of the Queer Omaha Archives
- Tell you about this growing LGBTQ+ collecting initiative
- Highlight a few of the specific archival collections
- Share some of the outreach and programming activities

- And talk about ongoing development and future plans

The QOA's beginnings were in fall 2015 when my UNO colleague Dr. Jessi Hitchins, Director of the Gender & Sexuality Resource Center, invited a speaker to campus during LGBTQ+ history month to give a couple of talks, including related to LGBTQ+ history. This helped to generate some interest on campus and with my "yes, please" support, Jessi put out a call to campus and Omaha community folks to meet to discuss creating an LGBTQ+ collection at UNO Libraries. The folks invited included representatives from community organizations and student organizations, queer faculty members, and an archivist. Folks brainstormed people and organizations we should contact and I did some archives 101 education. We agreed that the geographic scope would focus on Omaha and Council Bluffs, but we anticipated would grow to all of Nebraska and western Iowa, particularly if a community did not have a cultural heritage organization interested in collecting LGBTQ+ archival collections. The name Queer Omaha Archives was also selected at that meeting.

*Lesson learned:* this was an early misstep as the word queer was off-putting to some members of the Omaha community, particularly folks in the baby boomer generation. I don't know if it has kept anyone from engaging with us, but it certainly meant that we spent time having conversations about language, its evolving uses, and intent.

The purpose of the QOA is to collect, preserve, and share the LGBTQIA2S+ history of Omaha, Nebraska, and western Iowa through archival material. And just so we are clear what we mean by archival material, I am talking about primary sources such as photos, scrapbooks, poster, recordings, correspondence, meeting minutes, regional newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and similar.

### <Slide>Examples

When we started, we did not accept books and only accepted periodicals from Omaha. In no surprise to any library workers out there, folks really wanted to donate their personal libraries to the archives from Day One. For example, we held an opening reception to launch the collection in July 2016 and we spoke with lots of folks who are willing to consider donating their personal papers to the archives and there were also lots of folks who had books and magazines they wanted to donate. In those cases, I explained to folks that our primary focus initially needed to be the personal papers and organizational records we believed to be out there in the storage units, garages, basements, and closets of Omaha. And how important it

is to collect and preserve those unique materials first. We assured folks we would consider books in the future. And we did.

### <Slide>What Is In the Archives?

So what is in the archives today? This is where we sit as far as some numbers.

Over 40 individuals and organizations have donated archival material and books. This includes archival material totaling over 80 cubic feet and 3 GB.

The oldest archival material is childhood photos of a man in the collection from around the 1930s. The vast majority of the archival material is from the 1970s to the 2000s

And then there are the books and magazines. For the most part these do not have a local connection as far as the authors or topic of the book. The first books and magazines we accepted as donations were part of a gift from Dr. Meredith Bacon and they were all on trans topics, so that created a rich collection early on. Then, later – like a year or so later – we agreed to accept other donations of books. The largest book donation so far was the library of the former Rainbow Outreach GLBT Center of Omaha. Their library and archival records had been in storage for a few years since their physical space closed and their owners were ready to make that gift. Dr. Jim Medder, a retiring physician was interested in donating his personal library of around 1,000 books as he prepared to downsize and relocate. And then we have continued to receive a steady stream of donated books on various LGBTQ+ topics. In the past when the library had funds available, I would also purchase a small number of items, including zines and books by folks from Omaha.

One of my development or fundraising goals for the future is a fund dedicated to supporting acquisitions, so we can buy more titles as well as pay donors to cover their shipping costs. This is not my top priority for private giving, but it is a need we have.

### <Slide>Gay Freedom

I want to share a few highlights from the collections with you now. First, are the local newspapers and newsletters. The oldest LGBTQ+ newsletter we have from Omaha is issue #1 of Gay Freedom from 1972. This was an anonymous organization, but some of its members also spoke with Omaha World-Herald reporters, so there is some coverage in that newspaper. Down the road in Lincoln

in the 1970s there were a number of publications from local and UNL organizations like the Lincoln Gay News. While back in Omaha in the late 1970s GAIN – Gay Awareness Iowa Nebraska – published for a couple of years covering a range of issues like confronting politicians who were running homophobic campaign ads and calling out the police for harassing folks or not acting on violence against LGBTQ folks.

<Slide>

From 1984 to 1998, The New Voice of Nebraska was published. It began as a Lincoln publication and then moved to Omaha after a couple of years. Thank you to generous donors, we have multiple complete sets of the New Voice and we received donated PDFs of the magazine. These scans were done by community member, Dino Andrade. Unfortunately, the digital files are not at the high quality that the archivists would have created, but they do allow for online access.

<Slide>

There were a number of other newspaper or tabloid-style local publications in the 1990s and 2000s that we are seeking more issues of such as River City Beat, Times of the Heartland, and The Buzz.

<Slide>

After the New Voice shutdown, the GayZette later started publication as a weekly events calendar and then grew to a biweekly newsletter. Its final issues were digital only and it ceased publication in December 2016. This complete run was donated by George Broadway and Jay Tremont.

<Slide>

Terry Sweeney was the first donor to our LGBTQ+ archive who was not affiliated with the University of Nebraska at Omaha. And luckily for us, he is a saver. Terry and his partner Pat were together for around 40 years before Pat's death. Terry had saved photographs, fliers and posters, scrapbooks, VHS tapes, ephemera, from their years together. This documented their lives and involvement in organizations like their church, the Imperial Court of Nebraska, leather community, and the employee resource group EAGLE.

<Slide2>national events, local people

The papers of Terry Sweeney and Pat Phalen document their lives in Omaha, but they also traveled to national events. So we have a window into their experiences at the Gay Games in San Francisco and Vancouver. They participated in the Marches on Washington, including 1987 and 1993. This participation included the marches and rallies, but also other events over those weekends. The three photos at the bottom of the slide show Terry, Pat, and friends as they create the quilt square for their friend Jonathan Schneider for the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. What would happen is volunteers would create quilt squares and send them to San Francisco where other volunteers would sew several together to make a section. The 1987 March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights was the first time the entire quilt was on display. And the archives has photos of parts of the quilt as well as Terry participating in reading the names along with documents about the quilt such as the list of names Terry read. And then there are later home movies and documents about sections of the quilt visiting Omaha and Lincoln as it traveled around the country.

#### <Slide> Bacon

Dr. Meredith Bacon was the first out trans professor at UNO. She is a political scientist and retired from UNO after spending her career at the university. She was the first trans professor to serve as the president of a faculty senate before and after her transition. For this and other reasons her transition was covered in the local and national press extensively including People magazine and Good Morning America. Her papers include scrapbooks, all of the letters, cards, and emails sent and received when she transitioned in 2005. Dr. Bacon is an important figure on campus. She is pictured on the left at UNO's Lavender Graduation reception for LGBTQ+ students. An award is named in her honor.

#### <Slide>MCC

One of the organization's to donate their records is the Metropolitan Community Church of Omaha in 2017. MCC was founded in California in the 1960s and the first Omaha church was established in 1974. Its early church bulletins functioned as an events calendar and magazine for the local LGBTQ+ community. At one time there was an MCC Lincoln as well as a Second MCC of Omaha before contracting back to just the single church community. The collection is rich in photographs as well as records from its past. The archives is fortunate to currently have an intern working on the arrangement and description of these records. Kas is a graduate student working on his library and information science degree.

### <Slide>Lavender Couch

The collection documenting Omaha's first lesbian, alternative band, Lavender Couch, came to the archives in 2018. It includes great fliers, photos, ephemera, and their self-titled cassette tape. We were fortunate enough to get the four original members back together in June for a chat on Zoom. They have wonderful stories and it was a beautiful energy. A dream or fantasy is to see if we can get together in person to celebrate the anniversary of their tape's release in a couple years.

### <Slide>LGBTQ+ Voices

The oral history part of the collection began in 2016 when Dr. Jay Irwin, a sociologist here at UNO, decided to include the archives in his Intro to LGBTQ Studies course. This was great! I could introduce the students to what we were creating in the archives and Jay decided that a semester-long project for the students would be to collect an interview. He spent lots of time creating a list of potential interviewees and contacting folks over the summer and early fall to confirm a diverse group of volunteers. In the photo here is Dr. Carolyn Fiscus, Big Momma. She is a retired UNO faculty member and director of Native American Studies and was one of the narrators interviewed by a pair of Jay's students. The initial interviews by the students were a good start, but all did not go completely smoothly. Also, it was a very intensive project and we have looked for other assignments for collaboration with later offerings of Intro to LGBTQ Studies. Dr. Irwin is a wonderful friend and supporter of the archives. He was willing to interview two emeritus faculty members himself in 2016. One who was in hospice and another who we knew was so important that the interview needed to be done by a professional rather than students. Of the interviews conducted by Jay's students, 12 of the 15 narrators agreed to have the final interview available from the archives. (Feel free to ask me about that later.)

In 2017, we applied for a Humanities Nebraska mini-grant to hire a part-time project staffer to conduct more interviews. With those funds we hired Luke Wegener and he worked on these interviews very part-time from 2017 through 2020. How did we keep paying him? After the first HN grant, we applied for an internal library matching grant and I sent out appeals to potential donors, which raised a couple more thousand dollars each. We then applied for a second HN grant in 2018, which we matched with another internal award. In 2018 and 2019 we participated in a national 24-hour day of giving for LGBTQ+ organizations called Give Out Day. The first year, I was pleasantly surprised that we raised over \$1,000

from our relatively modest mailing list. The second year, we raised significantly less and decided not to participate again given the fees and effort required. Then, in fall 2020, UNO started its own 24-hour day of giving called Wear Black, Give Back. The QOA was one of the library initiative's selected to participate and we had a respectable showing for the library. The second Wear Black, Give Back is next week and we are hoping to raise some additional dollars.

All of the money we have raised to date has been to fund Luke's wages to collect oral histories. In total we have 50 interviews. Luke is back with working on QOA for a short time this fall to tie up some loose ends, but if we can raise something like \$5,000 for 5 years of the QOA it would be great to have him back collecting a few more interviews.

The interviews have been important to the archives as an outreach tool, but they are also critical to ensuring the voices and stories in the archives are as inclusive as possible. I would say that the interviews we have collected are more diverse than the donations of personal papers and organizational records to date.

#### <Slide>Outreach

Outreach has most certainly been an opportunity for the Queer Omaha Archives. For the most part folks have been interested in and engaged with learning about what we are doing. We partnered with the Bemis when they hosted a show from the artist Cassils. We loaned posters and oral history interviews and created this display of archival boxes meant to represent the size of the papers of Dr. Meredith Bacon as a companion piece in part of the gallery. The artist Cassils included the QOA in an installation called Monument Push, that unbeknownst to me included a video component I was interviewed for.

#### <Slide>Terry

Here is our friend of the archives and donor Terry Sweeney being interviewed in an exhibit we installed about the 1987 March on Washington.

#### <Slide>

A couple years ago one of our undergraduate interns selected creating zines as one of their projects. And they made this great zine showcasing QOA that includes quotes from different interviews and photos.

And buttons. We have also made use of the library's button maker a few times for the QOA.

### <Slide>

We of course use the QOA collections in the instruction sessions welcomed to Archives and Special Collections. This includes a variety of UNO classes across disciplines. We also consciously include example QOA documents when we are welcoming local middle and high school students to the department, whether it is for a full class session or a brief tour. Seeing students, especially younger folks realize what they are looking at and get excited is a wonderful experience every time.

And then of course we have hosted receptions in the archives, taken opportunities for pop-up displays, tabled at events like Heartland Pride Festival and the River City Mixed Chorus's anniversary concert. We have also hosted corporations' employee resource groups for exhibit viewings, tours of the archives, and volunteer days in the archives.

I remind myself though that there is nothing wrong with saying no to invitations. It is OK if we do not have a table at absolutely every single event in Omaha and Council Bluffs, let alone getting further afield.

Similarly, we post on the library's social media, but we have never aspired to have a constant social media presence. We normally pick up posting in June for Pride Month and October for LGBTQ History Month, but LGBTQ history is not limited to just those two months of the year. So we are conscious to post throughout the year, like over the last week or two the library has posted oral history interviews featuring some of the Latino/Latina voices in the archives and we have done similar posting during Black History Month, Women's History Month, and others.

### <Slide>Support

I will end on this support slide, which I include in talks I give to employee resource groups and community orgs. One challenge is that there is archival material out there and we are waiting to connect with folks or waiting for folks we have connected with to make a donation. And that is OK, but managing expectations of donors and researchers to remain patient can be a challenge.

We invested student and staff time early on to digitize photos from the Sweeny and Phalen papers, so we could give folks an idea of the type of richness in the collection. Then of course we have dozens of oral histories online, a handful of home movies, and two Omaha periodicals published from 1984 to 2016 online. This part of the collection is certainly being used, but I am greedy and always want



more usage. Having as much content online as we do has always been appreciated by our students, whose research and writing schedules may not work with planning a visit to the physical archives during business hours.

And then of course the last 18 months, the archives has continued to see steady use from grad students who couldn't travel to do research and writers publishing articles and books.

The latest development is that we are leaving an Omeka.net site for pages with the library's webpages in the university content management system. The digital collections were migrated to the department's still somewhat new Islandora site. The Omeka.net site is still live, but will be saying goodbye in 2022.

Development and fundraising is always hanging out there. We have some folks excited about the potential in the QOA and continue to work on building that out.

I am continually reminded that there are more people who have not heard of the QOA than those who have, and we rely on friends and acquaintances of the archives for help on this. We have had some real champions too. The incomparable Dominique Morgan sat down for an oral history interview in the early days and they were wonderful enough to spread the word and encourage other folks to participate. That means a great deal to the archives.

I want to end on gratitude and appreciation to the donors, users or researchers, interested passers-by, and colleagues here in the archives, UNO library, and NE GLAM institutions who have shown an interest in the QOA. The archives is truly a place filled with individual and community stories and voices, much more so than I could do it justice today.

On behalf of UNO Libraries' Archives and Special Collections, I invite folks to visit online, in the library, or contact me about going to you for a pop-up display or talk. Funding to create a traveling exhibit is something we have sought in the past unsuccessfully, but may be on the horizon for us to try again next year.