
Accession number: 1995-24

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society
San Francisco, California

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Old Wives' Tales Bookstore records,
Date (inclusive): 1976-1995
Accession number: 1995-24
Creator: Old Wives' Tales Bookstore
Extent: 1 linear foot in 3 boxes
San Francisco, California.
Shelf location: Housed at the GLBT Historical Society.
Language: English.

Acquisition
The records of Old Wives' Tales Bookstore (#1995-24) were received from Marieka Brown, collective member upon the store's closing in October, 1995.

Access
Collection is open for research.

Publication Rights
Copyright to unpublished manuscript materials has been transferred to the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California.

Audio-Visual Materials
There is one folder of photographs.

Preferred Citation

Historical Note
Old Wives' Tales Bookstore (OWT) was a feminist bookstore whose purpose was to support the empowerment of women by providing books and information that are socially and politically relevant by providing books for and about women that were not available elsewhere. The bookstores collection focused on lesbian, multi-cultural, international and feminist
publishing; specially featured works included titles from small, often obscure or emerging presses. OWT along with other women's bookstores worked as a distributor with the feminist publishers that were created during the second wave of feminist. In addition, it was the goal of OWT to provide a community space for women.

OWT was founded on Halloween in 1976 by Carol Seajay and Paula Wallace. The initial capital to set up OWT came from a loan from the Bay Area Feminist Federal Credit Union. Sales totaled $39,000 during the first year of operation. Paula Wallace left OWT in the fall of 1978 and Jill Limerick (leaving the store in January 1981) starting working full-time as a partner (collective member). Sherry Thomas joined the collective in the winter of 1979. On May 15, 1980 OWT moved up Valencia street to larger quarters. By 1981 the collective consisted of 5 full-time members. 1982 saw the collective shrink to 4 ½ members. In 1983 OWT incorporated as a not-for-profit corporation with founding member Carol Seajay resigning. Carol Seajay went on to publish Feminist Bookstore News.

OWT expanded in 1988 to twice the floor space. In 1991, the collective was forced to return to the original space by financial constraints. This meant the elimination of a community lounge, no more wheel-chair accessibility, and no more public bathroom. At the time the collective made a plea for women to continue to support OWT in various ways. The end of 1993 also found OWT on the brink of bankruptcy.

As a community resource OWT has consistently provided readings and cultural events to the public. Thursday Nights, a series of programs and readings was inaugurated in 1976. In 1992 with a grant from the Women's Building, Women's Voices, a cultural events series, was started.

Unfortunately the California recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s and the inundation of large chain bookstores to the Bay Area, that carry extensive titles of feminist books, led to the closing of OWT on October 29, 1995. OWT and the many other feminist bookstores begun in the 1970s left a lasting legacy showing the demand for feminist and lesbian books, which have made it to the shelves of the chain stores and women's voices continue to be heard.

Scope and Content

The Records of OWT comprise one linear foot spanning the years 1976 to 1995. The Records provide documentation of the running of a feminist collective enterprise almost always close to financial instability. The files document the day to day operations of the bookstore from daily logs to calendars listings, collective minutes, author readings and other cultural events. The Records are arranged in four series; Administrative, Printed, Miscellaneous, and Photographs.

The Administrative Records Series contains correspondence, minutes of collective meetings, daily logs and various other miscellaneous files concerned with store operations. The correspondence is organized chronologically and is uneven in its coverage depending on the year. The files only contain author/presenter requests for 1984. The general correspondence varies in type from thank you letters to notes from past collective members. The appeals for support (financial and other) and replies (1991-1994) provide the best documentation of OWT financial crisis of the 1990s and how they managed the crisis.

In general collective meetings were held weekly, the records contain complete minutes from November 1982 through October 1995. Issues discussed at meetings range from the mundane (the majority of entries) such as concerns over scheduling and display to formulation of store policy, finances and collective process. The daily logs were a method of communication between collective members and part-time workers on a daily basis. A sampling of entries include notes to others, cash receipt information, suggestions of books to order, and housekeeping chores. The Women's Voices series folder contains the initial grant application to the Women's Building along with supplementary materials on the series. For a complete list of the other miscellaneous files in the administrative series please see the folder list.

The Printed Materials Series documents the outreach and publicity efforts of OWT. The files are organized alphabetically by title, with the exception of the calendars which are in Box 3 - Oversized. The birthday statements provide an excellent source for the history of the first decade of OWT. The calendars were generally sent out monthly and provide a listing of all author readings and other cultural events at OWT. The records are missing calendars for 1980 to 1982, and 1991. The records contain no information about whether calendars were produced for these years. The calendar's announced regularly scheduled Thursday evening events starting in December 1976. In later years OWT expanded to also provide cultural events on other nights of the week, these events are also recorded on the calendars. The calendars, in some years, also provide a listing of new books, gift ideas, and announcements. In 1992 with the introduction of Women's Voices, the mast head was changed. These listing have been filed with the calendars because they provide the same information.

Catalogs were produced starting in 1986 and continuing through 1990. The catalogs allowed OWT to expend their business through mail order. The catalogs are organized by subject and provide titles, authors, price and in some cases a short annotation. The flyers advertise a variety of events at OWT including; sales, readings and other cultural events. The Lesbian Guides to the Bay Area provide addresses and other contact information for bars, clubs, cafes and the like to the area.

The Miscellaneous Series contains a variety of files from ad copy to OWT bookmarks and bags in the ephemera folder. The slogan sheets are photocopy sheets containing political slogans from "fuck you gender" to "vegetarians taste better"
among others. For a complete listing of files in the Miscellaneous Series see the folder list. The Records also include 2 folders of photographs, descriptions are listed with the folder titles at the end of the folder list and a quilted cloth banner with OWT stitched on it that hung in the store.

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Lesbians
Feminism
Literature

Materials Removed from the Collection
A small amount of printed materials available elsewhere.
One folder of Tee Corrine vagina sketches, that were for sale at OWT, has been removed to the ephemera collections.
One folder of 1970’s feminist pamphlets to the ephemera collections.

Materials Housed Elsewhere at GLHS
Photographs have been removed to the Photo Room.
The cloth banner is stored with other textiles at GLHS.

Title: Oracle Books (Hayward, CA) Records
Identifier/Call Number: 1994-11

Title: Woman’s Place Bookstore - Records and Audiotapes
Identifier/Call Number: 1993-10

Title: San Francisco Women’s Building Records
Identifier/Call Number: 1996-15

Administrative Records

Box 1

Correspondence
Complaints, various years
Authors/Presenters Requests, 1984
General, 1992-1994
Appeals for Support (Financial and Other) and Replies, 1991-1994
Seajay, Carol re: Sherry Thomas’ claims concerning founding OWT, 1994

Minutes of Collective Meetings
No date
Nov 1982-May 1983
Nov 1983-Jan 1985
Jan 1985-Dec 1986
Jan 1987-Aug 1988

Daily Logs
Nov 1978-Apr 1979
May 1984-Oct 1985
Nov 1985-Aug 1987

Box 2

Sep 1991-Sep 1995

Arruda, Tiana - Resignation letter, 1992
Employee Evaluation Forms, nd
Mission Statement and Work Ethic, 1993?
Principles of Unity, 1992
Procedure Manual, nd
Process Meeting Agendas, 1987, nd
Thursday Evening Program - Policies, nd

Printed Materials

Box 2
Calendars see Box 3 - Oversized
Catalogs
- 1986
- 1987
- 1988-1989
- 1990
Flyers
- No date
- 1976
- 1977
- 1981
- 1983-1984
- 1988
- 1992
- 1993-1995
Lesbian Guides to the Bay Area, 1992-1995
Publicity/Promotional Materials, various years
Reading Lists
- Abuse of Women and Children, 1989
- Alcoholism/Recovery from Alcoholism, 1985-1987
- Chicana/Latina Authors, nd

Miscellaneous

Box 3
Ad Copy, 1979
Audre Lorde Room - San Francisco Women's Building, 1994
Awards, 1985, 1995
Ephemera

Box 3
Guest Book, 1977-1979
Logo Design Contest, nd
Slogan Sheets, nd

Oversized Materials

Oversize OS
Calendars
- No date
- 1976-1977
- 1978
- 1979
- 1983
- 1984
- 1985
- 1986
- 1987
- 1988
- 1989
- 1990
- 1992
- 1993
- 1994
- 1995
Oversized Materials

Laminated Sign
Other Material

photo-folio Photo Room

OWT general

Front Window with Marieka Brown and Darlene Pagano, 1994
OWT's Booth Lesbian Gay Day, 1994
Book Signings, nd
Letter from Kim photos, 1993
Fund-raising Event, nd
Publicity photos of authors and performers
Cloth Banner 68" x 72"