

Photo by Leslie Hall

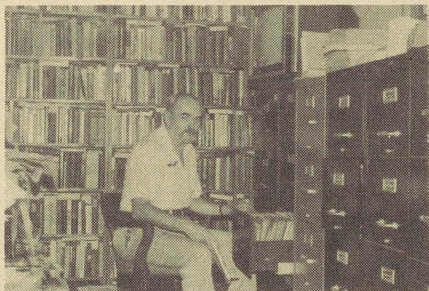


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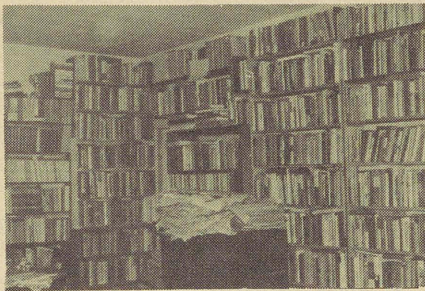
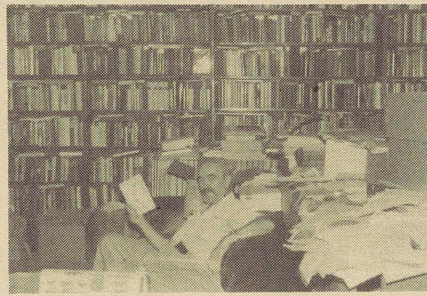


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PRESERVING GAY ROOTS

CURATOR TALKS ABOUT THE GAY ARCHIVES

By MARC KESSLER

Author, activist, magazine editor, gay rights champion, and presently gay archivist, Jim Kepner is never at a loss for a cause. Kepner is the chief curator-cum-collector of the Gay Archives Natalie Barney/Edward Carpenter Library, the largest collection (numbering close to 9,000) of Gay/Feminist publications in existence.

Currently contained in cramped, overflowing quarters in the heart of Hollywood, the Archives is reached by wending along a patio where dozens of cats crouch among trees and shrubs and broken pieces of pottery.

Scholars, high school students, college students from all over the country, and attorneys preparing briefs are among the many who have availed themselves of Kepner's collection.

When Kepner came to California from Galveston, Texas in 1943, he had many questions regarding his sexuality. In used bookstores in San Francisco he tried to find answers — both about himself and others. "I learned what the word homosexual meant, and knew instantly that it meant me."

During this period, in addition to his thirst for self-knowledge sought in books, Kepner became aware of himself through trial and error. "I was 19 and during that summer I came out very actively.

"A charming older woman with whom I worked told me about the Black Cat bar, and she also gave me some utterly useless instructions on how to cruise.

"Following her advice, I purchased a red corduroy shirt, a gauche lavender scarf and a gabardine raincoat, worn cape-wise."

All dressed up in his new outfit, Kepner added the *Well of Loneliness* to his accouterments. "The cover of the book was bright orange, and I was sure if I just let a tiny bit of the cover show, anyone who was gay would know, and so I carried that book around for months."

Kepner's first attempts to collect books seemed to be continuously thwarted. A bookstore he owned collapsed, and he lost numerous books; and at one point his father threw his books out. "He wasn't being vindictive, he just did *not* like books." A move to New York and

back resulted in the loss of even more books but eventually his collection was started in earnest. The Archives were born — thriving to this day.

Kepner, a member of some 50 organizations, radical and civil rights movements, is enthusiastic when speaking about the collection, the need for new quarters and contributions, and his aspirations. He feels strongly about gay history being known, by both gays and non-gays. "As a member of the Los Angeles Bicentennial Committee — which is planning Los Angeles' Bicentennial celebration, to start next fall — I'm very anxious to see the publication of a book on the contributions of gays to Los Angeles history.

"This would require diligent research into records — both those in the Archives and other places, such as the *Los Angeles Times*.

"We have 'roots,' as do other minorities, that we should be aware of; the histories are available, but they have to be dug out."

According to Kepner, many of the references in literature to homosexuality, are cloaked in euphemisms. "Earlier works will refer to a man as a 'woman hater' or 'effete' or 'epicene,' but they will never mention the word homosexuality. When researching the literature, one must be aware of what is *really* being stated."

Surrounded by mountains of books, Kepner, in between answering a very busy telephone, gently strokes his pet gray cat, as he weaves tale upon tale. He cites authors, playwrights, and political figures who were known to be gay, and many more who "exhibited gay inclinations."

The hours pass as he recounts our early history: The suffrage movement and the criticism its members incurred. "Too many long-haired men and short-haired women"; the communes, *circa* 1900 or earlier, which were "rife with sexual experimentation"; and, he speaks of wealthy European families who, long ago, sent their "embarrassing offspring" to such far off cities as Seattle, WA, and Vancouver, Canada. "These are our long-lost gay brothers and sisters who laid the groundwork for us."

The contents of the Archives are many-faceted. There is a wealth of information to be had, including: books, periodicals, pamphlets, newsletters of various political organizations, leaflets, slides, films, cassette interviews, and meeting notes.

The files, which contain clippings from a plethora of sources, is somewhat overwhelming, but Kepner can quickly locate any article he chooses.

He says there is an urgent need for volunteers to assist him in putting the Archives into better order; although the Archives and its upkeep are a one-person job at the moment, clearly the volume of material and requests for information will soon necessitate additional staffing.

Proudly pointing to a rare 1906 special edition of the German magazine, *Der Eigene* (this periodical first appeared in Berlin in 1896 and was to run until 1926), Kepner voices hope that the Archives will soon be housed in permanent quarters, at which time he plans to begin a program of gay cultural activities, including poetry workshops, chamber music recitals, and research workshops.

Does Kepner ever tire of the unbroken stream of information which flows into the Archives? "On the contrary, I'm always on the lookout for any material that touches on the gay lifestyle; and I hope, very much, that the members of the gay community will continue to contribute to the Archives.

"I feel that by maintaining the Archives, an indelible impression will be made upon society, providing an overall view of gays as seen through the various forms of media."

Kepner says he is trying to help provide the answers to questions of both gays and non-gays. His dream is to preserve our heritage, so that gays will understand each other and our past. And he firmly believes that the gay Archives is an invaluable tool in making this dream a reality.

Editor's Note: Those wishing to visit, contribute to, or assist with the Archives, should contact Mr. Kepner at P.O. Box 38100, Hollywood, CA 90038, or telephone him at 213/463-5450.