

## ViewPoint

### Giving a rat's ass about LGBTQ history

BY TIM RETZLOFF

My grandfather, who in conversation would often ask "Why should I give a rat's ass?" as if out of the blue, loved to tell stories of yesteryear. Although I was never sure if his salty language came from growing up in the Thumb or working in Flint's factories, I came to understand his storytelling as a significant means of conveying personal values, culture, and history to his grandkids.

October is LGBTQ History Month. While queer folk do not typically have the same biological lineage as blood families, we too have histories to pass on to new generations. But are they important? Why should we give a rat's ass about our collective queer past?

The importance of the past goes beyond mere nostalgia. It helps explain our varied roots as a community: flirting on barstools, writing manifestos, nurturing the sick, playing softball, lip-syncing to Aretha, marching in protest. Gerry Crane, Ruth Ellis, Billie Hill,

David Krumroy, Margareth Miller, Alma Routson, Bookie Stewart, and Nancy Wechsler are all names we should not forget. How many of us know that the Woodward has been around since 1952, that Tom Zerafa came out in 1973, that the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival began in 1976, or that Jennifer Foxx won the Miss Gay America title in 1981?

The past can suggest vital lessons about struggle, pride, and unity. Local lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people have long experienced similar oppressions, which in turn sensitized them to their commonalities. For instance, important bonding across the racial divide showed itself not only with the 1981 founding of Detroit's Black and White Men Together, but back in the olden days of 1955, when gay white patrons used to gather at the Blue Crest to watch flamboyant Prophet Jones on his weekly television broadcast.

History also provides valuable connections to the present. Gary Glenn's push for an anti-marriage amendment echoes back to Rep. Mark Siljander introducing a resolution in the state House of Representatives praising Anita Bryant for her so-called "Save Our Children" campaign. Detroit police were arresting men for public sex at the Michigan Central Station in 1922, seventy-five years before Rudy

Serra penned his unnerving Bag A Fag expose for the Triangle Foundation.

Beyond direct correlations, the past can supply a sense of larger social patterns. The fierce resistance to enacting sexual orientation protections in Ferndale and Royal Oak, for example, can be seen as part of a longer history of suburban defensiveness. Might there be a link between the anti-busing crusades of the early 1970s and the virtual absence, until the mid-1990s, of any gay bars to the north of Eight Mile?

Knowing LGBTQ history can even impact our everyday lives in the realm of public policy. In last summer's Lawrence v. Texas ruling striking down state sodomy laws, Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy specifically cited the historians' amicus brief compiled under the guidance of George Chauncey. A decade and a half of pioneering queer scholarship had clearly refuted the Court's previous assertion in Bowers v. Hardwick that opposition to homosexual activity had deep societal roots.

Another reason we should care about queer history is that so much of our heritage is in danger of being lost. Each year recollections of countless lives vanish as we lose our elders. Already in 2003, we have seen the passing of Anne Tracy, LGBTQ bibliographer at Michigan State University, and Hal Lawson, founder of the first homosexual organization in the state, the Detroit council of the Mattachine Society.

Even government records thought to be permanent can perish. Within the past five years, officials shamefully destroyed a trove of legal files documenting homosexual arrests in Ann Arbor. In the summer of 1998, I made an initial survey of

Washtenaw criminal records, making notes and copies from a sampling of the cases. When I returned to utilize the material more thoroughly in June 2001, I learned that all files between 1880 and 1975 had been purged of every document except two cursory sheets for each arrest. This act of bureaucratic shortsightedness by County Clerk Peggy M. Haines not only eradicated decades of Michigan gay history, but it also gutted an irreplaceable source for local social history in general.

Fortunately efforts to save our LGBTQ past have accelerated. Roey Thorpe, Patrick Burton, and Miriam Frank have all conducted oral history interviews with queer Detroiters. Beyond the metro area, various archives have taken an active role in gathering materials about sexual minorities, including the records of the Leaping Lesbian Collective in the Labadie Collection at UM, the Jim Toy papers at the Bentley Historical Library, and vertical file clippings in Special Collections at MSU. Metro Gay News, published in Detroit from 1976 to 1978, has been preserved in repositories in Los Angeles, New York, and Toronto.

One of the favorite tales my grandfather used to tell was about the time he, my grandmother, and their best friends took their visiting aunt to a drag show at Flint's State Bar in the 1960s. The elderly Scottish woman was scandalized at how bawdy the performers were, not knowing they were actually female impersonators. It's a story I long ago learned to give a rat's ass about.

*Tim Retzloff is a history major at the University of Michigan and curator of the online exhibit "Artifacts & Disclosures: Michigan's LGBT Heritage" viewable at [www.lgbtheritage.org](http://www.lgbtheritage.org).*