

March 2020

The GLBT Historical Society contingent in the 1985 San Francisco International Lesbian & Gay Freedom Day Parade.



## “The GLBT Historical Society’s History is One of Activism”: Reflections on Our 35th Anniversary



by Diana Wakimoto & Mark Sawchuk

The GLBT Historical Society, then known as the San Francisco Bay Area Gay and Lesbian Historical Society, was founded 35 years ago in March 1985. With over three decades of archival collecting, community outreach, exhibitions and programming, the society, were it a person, would be approaching middle age — a development that’s reflected in the fact that our archivists have begun processing our own organizational records.

A major birthday is always an opportunity for some self-reflection. To help us take stock of where we are and where we’ve been, we have

enlisted the support of Diana Wakimoto (pictured), a librarian at Cal State East Bay. She performed research on the GLBT Historical Society's history for a 2013 article she coauthored, "Archivist as Activist: Lessons From Three Queer Community Archives in California," which appeared in the peer-reviewed journal *Archival Science. History Happens* interviewed Wakimoto for a fresh perspective on the society's history and to celebrate this special anniversary.

**In your article "Archivist as Activist," you argue that "community archives are the embodiment of activism in the archives." How has this archival activism been manifest in the society's history?**

From its founding as a periodical collection to its present form as an archives and museum, the GLBT Historical Society's history is one of activism. As one of its founders, Willie Walker, noted and those I interviewed for my article reiterated, if community members 35 years ago hadn't saved their records, no one would have. Institutional archives such as those attached to universities were not collecting LGBTQ-related materials; there truly was a silencing. This activism remains through the society's continued commitment to documenting not only the famous and powerful, but the ordinary, too.

**You also note that the GLBT Historical Society is unusual because it "has always functioned as more than a traditional archives, serving also as a meeting space and museum." How has that set it apart?**

Community archives, in general, often function as more than traditional archives and include programming, meeting spaces and exhibitions. But what sets the society apart is that it was established from the beginning as a historical society to appeal to many interests and groups. Historical societies function as more than archives; they are important gathering places and showcase history through programming and exhibitions. The organization keeps this tradition alive. Its commitment to the working group model sets it apart and, of course, having a free-standing museum is unique and provides increased visibility and opportunities for outreach.

**How has the society worked to live up to its longstanding commitment to collect materials documenting the full range of diversity in the LGBTQ community?**

While diversity, equity, and inclusion have become buzzwords in academia over the last few years, the GLBT Historical Society has documented the full range of diversity in the LGBTQ community since its earliest days. There's always been a commitment to collecting in the "gaps and margins," even though this is difficult, and the collection development policy has reflected that. The fact that the society is deeply connected through its working groups, community curators and sustained presence demonstrates that it is a trustworthy repository for materials documenting all members of the community.

**Taking into account both the GLBT Historical Society's past history and the growing international interest in queer archives and collecting institutions, what do you envision the society's role to be in the future?**

I would never claim to have a crystal ball, but I hope that the society continues to grow and diversify its collections and its ability to connect with Bay Area communities and beyond. I hope that it continues to find balance among its programs, exhibitions and collections, as the three support each other. I can see the organization serving as a model for other community-based archives, by demonstrating how to maintain community involvement, secure funding, and remain true to the mission and values of the founders while also adapting and growing. I look forward to seeing what the next 35 years hold; the society truly is an amazing embodiment of archival activism.

*Diana Wakimoto, Ph.D. is a librarian at Cal State East Bay, with research interests in archival experience, graphic design and technology in teaching and learning.*

*Mark Sawchuk is the society's communications manager.*

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## From the Staff

### New Wayfinding Tools for Researchers



by Kelsi Evans

In the past two years, we've been making steady progress to improve researcher access to the GLBT Historical Society's extensive archival collections. In particular, we are making it easier for researchers to discover and find materials that interest them. I'm pleased to announce two new resources.

First, we have migrated our complete catalog to the [Online Archive of California](#) and integrated it with our website's [search function](#). The OAC is a robust system that allows researchers to browse a complete list and descriptions of all of our available collections. You can keyword search detailed collection inventories, making it easier to find relevant material and limit searches by date and subject. You can also access digitized material from a collection when available.

The OAC provides free public access to detailed descriptions of archival collections maintained by more than 200 contributing institutions, including libraries, special collections, archives, historical societies and museums throughout California, as well as collections maintained by the 10 University of California campuses. Integrating our catalog with the OAC means researchers can keyword search and browse material not only from the GLBT Historical Society's collections, but hundreds of other repositories, all on the same website.

#### A Step-by-Step Guide

Second, because archival research can be daunting, especially for those working in archives for the first time, we have written a

comprehensive, step-by-step, “how-to” [research guide](#) to orient researchers to our collections. This document provides a useful overview of how the catalog search function works and includes a sampling of keyword search suggestions. Many of our collections are accompanied by a finding aid — an inventory that describes a collection in greater detail — and the guide also explains how to locate and use these aids.

We have exciting plans in the archives this year, including making new digital collections available, overhauling our oral history collection, and enabling virtual access to our Art and Artifacts collection. All of our plans are designed to increase use and maximize access to the collections, so stay tuned!

*Kelsi Evans is the society's director of archives and special collections.*

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## In the Archives

### Wartime Romance in the Alpheus Koon Papers



by Isaac Fellman

Alpheus Koon was a ballet dancer; he died in 1969 at age 51, and he didn't want for love. This is most of what we know about him, except a few tantalizing hints around the Internet — a testimonial from a ballet student, a boast from a family historian about Koon's ability to teach his students while playing piano.

Last year, a sharp-eyed Floridian bought a collection of Koon's letters and ephemera at an estate sale and donated them to us. They chronicle the small but far-flung group of lovers, friends, and family who surrounded the dancer during the Second World War.

Koon spent the war performing in New York as a soloist with the American Ballet Theater, touring and keeping up an extensive correspondence. One of his regular correspondents, Jamie, seems to have also been both a dancer and Koon's lover. In a 1945 letter, he concludes an account of a crowded weekend of performing and partying, followed by a risqué poem about a sailor, with “I'll have to run, Darling, I have rehearsal (understudy) at 1:00, so I'll leave now. Will write to you tomorrow. Love me??? I love you.”

#### A Desirable Theatricality

Another of Koon's apparent lovers, Gene, was a witty and ambitious serviceman. He wrote more circumspectly, but still found space among the frustrations of battalion politics to tell Koon “the PICTURES ARE AMAZING [...] they seem to combine a wonderful amount of YOU with a very desirable theatricality.” A third correspondent, who signs as “Mimi,” sent Koon a store-bought valentine preprinted “for you, SISTER,” with an interior note, “Write me soon – ma chère Alphonse – what was the name of that Les who works here[?]”

After Koon retired from dancing, he taught ballet and had a ten-year stint as artistic director of the Tampa Civic Ballet. He returned in the end to his home state of Florida, where his father practiced medicine. It's unlikely that we will ever know what became of his suitors, but we can still be invited into their heady world of artistic labor, wartime camp and romance.

*Isaac Fellman is the society's reference archivist.*

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## Upcoming Events

### Panel Discussion You Got to Give Them Hope



Tuesday, March 3  
7:00–8:00 p.m.  
National LGBTQ Center for the Arts  
170 Valencia St., San Francisco  
\$25 | \$20 for [members](#)

Gay-rights pioneer Harvey Milk's vision for the future was based on building hope: "Hope for a better world, hope for a better tomorrow, hope that all will be all right," in his own words. This intergenerational panel will inspire LGBTQ people to embrace civic engagement and envision a better future. Hosted by Michelle Meow, the panel includes Gavin Grimm, a member of the American Civil Liberties Union's board of directors; Jose Ty, a member of the San Francisco Youth Commission; and Mark Leno, a former San Francisco supervisor and California state senator. The evening features musical excerpts from the 1995 opera *Harvey Milk*, featuring Nicholas Hu as "young Harvey." Cosponsored by the GLBT Historical Society, this is the second event in the Bullhorn Series, a set of responsive community conversations organized by the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus and Opera Parallèle, an organization that presents compelling performances of contemporary opera. The series culminates in May with the revival of *Harvey Milk*. For more information, click [here](#). GLBT Historical Society members receive a \$5 discount off the admission price of advance tickets to Bullhorn events by entering the code "GLBT" into the "discount code" box at checkout; tickets are available online [here](#).

### Community Event Meet the Curator: A Guided Tour of Gilbert Baker's Art

Saturday, March 7  
1:00–2:30 p.m.  
The GLBT Historical Society Museum  
4127 18th St., San Francisco  
[Free](#) with standard museum admission



Running through April 5, “[Performance, Protest and Politics: The Art of Gilbert Baker](#)” is an exhibition at the GLBT Historical Society Museum focusing on the life, artistic oeuvre and activism of Gilbert Baker, the creator of the iconic rainbow flag. The exhibition was co-curated by Joanna Black, the former director of archives and special collections at the GLBT Historical Society. She will lead a special guided tour,

explaining her curatorial choices and demonstrating how Baker channeled his artistic skills and larger-than-life personality into his activism, harnessing his unbridled creativity to advocate for positive social change. Free tickets are available online [here](#).

## [Film Screening](#)

### [Left on Pearl: A Chapter in Women's Liberation](#)



Wednesday, March 18, 6:00–7:30 p.m.

San Francisco Public Library

Koret Auditorium

100 Larkin St., San Francisco

[Free](#)

Tuesday, March 24, 7:00 p.m.

The New Parkway Theater

474 24th St., Oakland

[\\$12](#)

The GLBT Historical Society is cosponsoring two screenings of director Susie Rivo’s funny, fast-paced documentary “[Left on Pearl](#)” (2017), which chronicles a highly significant but little-known chapter in the history of the women’s liberation movement. On March 6, 1971, International Women’s Day marchers turned left onto Pearl Street in Cambridge, Massachusetts and occupied a Harvard University-owned building, demanding a women’s center and low-income housing for the local community. The ten-day occupation, many of whose participants were lesbians who came out during the course of the protest, embodied the triumphs, conflicts and tensions of second-wave feminism and led directly to the establishment of the longest continuously operating women’s center in the United States. A riveting and often humorous look at a fascinating historical moment, the film uses television footage, newspaper sources and extensive interviews with participants and eyewitnesses. Rivo and Executive Producer Rochelle Ruthchild will take questions after the showing. The screening at the San Francisco Public Library is free; more information is available [here](#). Tickets for the screening in Oakland are available [here](#).

## [Reception](#)

### [The GLBT Historical Society's 35th Anniversary Party](#)

Thursday, March 19



6:00–8:00 p.m.

The GLBT Historical Society Museum

4127 18th St., San Francisco

**\$15** online | **\$10** for **members**

**\$20** at the door | **\$15** for **members**

Thirty-five years ago, a band of queer history enthusiasts founded the GLBT Historical Society to uncover, document and preserve the stories of the LGBTQ past. The institution's holdings have since grown into one of the world's largest collections of LGBTQ-related historical materials. Join us to mark this milestone and celebrate three-and-a-half decades of preserving and sharing queer history. Proceeds from the event will support our ongoing efforts to establish the nation's first full-scale LGBTQ museum and research center. The evening will feature music, a rare look at photos from our history and a special drag performance by board member Kristi Yummykochi. Light refreshments will be served. More information is available [here](#). Tickets are available online [here](#).

## Book Launch

### Two Thousand Years of LGBTQ Jewish History



Monday, March 30

7:00–9:00 p.m.

The GLBT Historical Society Museum

4127 18th St., San Francisco

**\$5** | Free for **members**

What is the place of LGBTQ Jews in history? Over the past two years, Noam Sienna, a doctoral candidate in Jewish history and museum studies at the University of Minnesota, has been compiling documents that suggest answers to that question. His new book, *A Rainbow Thread: An Anthology of Queer Jewish Texts From the First Century to 1969* (Print-O-Craft Press, 2019), is the first anthology of queer Jewish history. The collection brings together over 100 sources on the intersection of Jewish and queer identities that span two millennia and have been translated from more than a dozen languages. In this presentation, Sienna will read selections from this groundbreaking collection, demonstrating that queerness and queer Judaism have been a constant subplot of Jewish history. Copies of *A Rainbow Thread* will be available for purchase and signing. Tickets are available online [here](#).

## Panel Discussion

### Tales From the OUTWORDS Archive

Thursday, April 2

7:00–9:00 p.m.

The GLBT Historical Society Museum

4127 18th St., San Francisco



\$5 | Free for members

The Outwords Archive (also known as OUTWORDS), based in Los Angeles, is the first national effort to capture in-depth, professional-quality, on-camera interviews with the full spectrum of LGBTQ pioneers and elders. So far, OUTWORDS has conducted more than 140 interviews in 26 states, including a robust cohort of subjects in the Bay Area. Some interviewees are better known to the public than others, but all played fascinating, important roles in the struggle for queer rights and representation. Join OUTWORDS founder and Executive Director Mason Funk and a panel of OUTWORDS supporters and participants for a fascinating evening, featuring clips from the completed interviews and a lively discussion of the enduring meaning and importance of these stories. Tickets are available online [here](#).

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## Current Exhibitions

### Community Gallery

[Performance, Protest & Politics: The Art of Gilbert Baker](#)

Open through April 5, 2020

[More information](#)

### Main Gallery

[Queer Past Becomes Present](#)

Long-term exhibition

[More information](#)

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**CELEBRATING 35 YEARS**  
OF PRESERVING OUR VAST QUEER PAST!

**MARCH 19, 2020**  
THURSDAY 6-8 PM

THE GLBT HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM  
4127 18TH STREET, SF

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[www.glbthistory.org/museum](http://www.glbthistory.org/museum)

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Sunday: Noon–5:00 p.m.

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Call to schedule a research appointment or make an appointment online by [clicking here](#).

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**CREDITS.** FEATURE: Photo by Sandy Morris; used with permission. Portrait of Diana Wakimoto by Collin Thormoto; used with permission. FROM THE STAFF: Photo of Kelsi Evans courtesy of same. IN THE ARCHIVES: Alpheus Koon poses on a dock, 1938; the handwritten inscription on the back reads "My first second position. 1938, Lakeland." Photographer unknown; Alpheus Koon Papers (2019-80), GLBT Historical Society. UPCOMING EVENTS: Panel Discussion: Photo of March presenters courtesy of Opera Parallèle. Community Event: Visitors contemplate a photograph of Gilbert Baker's mile-long rainbow flag in the "Performance, Protest and Politics" exhibition at the GLBT Historical Society Museum; photo by Nalini Elias. Film Screening: Still from "Left on Pearl" showing women occupying a Harvard University building; courtesy of Susie Rivo. Reception: Drag queens and their escort out for a night on the town in San Francisco, ca. 1965; Henri Leleu, Henri Leleu Papers (1997-13), GLBT Historical Society. Book Launch: Portrait of Noam Sienna (2019); photo by Erik Nelson, used with permission. Panel Discussion: Still of interviewee Mary Morten; courtesy of the Outwords archive.

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## Back Issues

