



## **Virtual Archiving: Archiving on the Web**

**Friday, May 19, 2006**

**10:00 am to 11:30 am**

Deploying archival materials, finding aids, images, and textual descriptions of both collections and summaries of history through the Internet is one of the newer developments in LGBTQ archives and history groups. Creating virtual archives and virtual exhibits broadens the reach of GLBTQ history, asserts the community's control of its own story, and establishes our history as a part of the national story.

In taking control of our LGBTQ history, we also take responsibility for seeing that our stories get out to the general public and that our archives, special collections, libraries, and historical organizations speak to the general culture.

Virtual archiving is taking off in the LGBTQ community, and along with it is virtual exhibiting. This panel will describe existing virtual archives and virtual exhibits. We will explain why we do it, how we do it, what it requires, and how others can do it as well.

The panelists represent a variety of approaches to using the Internet for virtual archiving and for virtual exhibitions.

- Milo Miller will describe the work of the Queer Zines Archive Project, [www.qzap.org](http://www.qzap.org), in Milwaukee, WI and its collectivist approach to archiving and curating past and present queer zines.
- Mark Bowman will describe the work of Chicago's LGBT Religious Archives Network a national archive sharing archival materials, documents and oral histories and presenting virtual exhibits about LGBTQ faith communities and experiences.
- Steven Nonack of Boston's History Project will describe the History Project's series of virtual exhibits.
- I will describe Rainbow History Project's growing virtual archive of documents, images, sound files, and online exhibits.

Each panelist will have twelve to fifteen minutes to talk about what their site offers, how they do it, and what the goals of their virtual histories are. Following the presentations we will take questions and comments. Please hold your questions until the panelists have finished.

**VIRTUAL ARCHIVING: RAINBOW HISTORY AS A CASE IN POINT**  
**Mark Meinke, Rainbow History Project**

A month or so ago, having read of the anti-gay hate mail campaign in Minnesota, I went online to see what I could find by way of history and/or documents of the gay civil rights movement in Minnesota. Forty years ago, I lived here but since leaving Macalester I have had no awareness of what went on.

Guess what I found? Nothing. So I thought maybe I'd try looking for background on one of Minnesota's nationally known gay men, Steve Endean. Same result. Allan Spears, Mitch McConnell, Jack Baker: no background, no documents, no images, nothing much about FREE or Koreen Phelps, a little bio, no documents, no images, no context.

Your story, our story, isn't out there.

This panel is about getting GLBTQ stories, primary sources, documents, images, collections, finding aids, and history out on the Internet. It's about using the Internet as a virtual archive for getting gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, and queer documents and images in to the global collection of the Web. It's about sharing our exhibits online so they have a wider audience.

Getting the stories of LGBTQ community out on the Internet is an intrinsically political act. By putting our history online, we increase the chances that someone or some group will see our history, that some kid in high school doing a paper might decide to write about Steve Endean, about Baker and McConnell's attempt to get married, about marches on Washington, about Frank Kameny's re-invention of 60s gay activism, or a host of other topics. It also gives us, members of the GLBTQ community, the opportunity to shape and focus our own story. Once we define ourselves publicly, everyone else who comes along is reacting to what has already been put out there.

The Rainbow History Project currently (May 2006) receives 12 to 15 thousand visits (not hits, visits) a month from all around the world. We get regular visits from Saudi Arabia, China, Australia, much of Europe, South Africa, even Iran, and almost every state in the country. In the first four months of 2006, our top five states for visitors to the Rainbow History site are Virginia, California, Washington State, New York, and New Jersey. Despite being a local archival and history site, Rainbow History also serves an international audience. After the United States, the next most site visits come from Canada, Germany, China and Saudi Arabia. And somehow, every month we get three visits from someone in Uruguay!

Rainbow History is just a local history site, so what's going on here? We have no way of questioning all those visitors to the site but we can see from the pages viewed that they're after historical documentation, images (mostly photographs),

and research articles. Something on our site connects with visitors' needs. The story Rainbow History is putting out there on the Internet is getting attention.

We began virtual archiving as an ancillary activity in support of our other programs. In 2001, the year after we started, Rainbow History began using its website to advertise topical public discussions of local LGBTQ history. Ahead of each session, Rainbow History would scan a few relevant documents from its collections and put them on the website.

As time passed, it became apparent that the topics, documents, and images needed a context so the site added background articles that framed the archival items on display.

The site also made public all of our research on local LGBTQ history: for example, the inventory of social spaces, the timelines, and the history of the *Washington Blade*. Among the most frequently accessed items by site visitors are our timelines and summaries of local history, our walking tour brochures, and the collection of articles on drag from a defunct local periodical.

Two years ago, inspired by Boston's History Project, we attempted our first online exhibit with a detailed depiction through text, images and sound clips of one of Washington, DC's major African-American clubs and its local impact. The online exhibit about the ClubHouse drew a lot of local attention and we have followed it with a series of online exhibits. Currently Rainbow History's site is presenting a series of documents, images, and sound files covering significant developments in the emergence of our local GLBTQ community in 1971.

[www.rainbowhistory.org](http://www.rainbowhistory.org) brings a wide range of local activist documents, local publications, pictures, and audio files together for public access. The virtual archive includes groups of archival materials on particular topics. Actually, documents and images on the site are often drawn into different topics and exhibits.

One of the great advantages of online archiving and online exhibiting is the flexibility you have in amending and adding to what is already online. We have frequently had documents and images donated or loaned to Rainbow History by site visitors who want to supplement what is already displayed; they can be scanned and added to what is already online. The commentary accompanying archival materials often elicits additional insights, emailed memories, comments, and corrections, which improve the reliability and the comprehensiveness of the site. Of course, this means that site visitors need to check back regularly to see what has been added or amended.

Luckily most of what we use has been donated with a deed of gift or other release allowing our use of the materials. The sound files largely come from our own public panel discussions (all of which we tape) or from our collection of

broadcast tapes from the Friends Radio program. Whenever there is doubt about the provenance or rights to materials, we get the rights before we display.

Turning to practicalities: all of this costs us \$300 a year for webhosting. Of course, the real cost lies in labor and in software. If you are going to add to the community's Internet resources, as we hope you will, you'll need a website with 250 to 500 MB storage – at least. You'll need a good scanner, website design software (Contribute 3 or Netscape Composer or the more heavy-duty Dreamweaver) and image processing software such as Adobe's Photoshop and Illustrator. For sound clips, Roxio's Media Center offers a range of useful tools for capturing and processing sound.

You will spend a lot of time processing documents and images and designing webpages. Rainbow History has 600 pages on its site and like Topsy it keeps growing. As a basic protection against copying and alteration, we are increasingly processing images and text as Adobe pdf files. To get into a pdf and change substantially or extract an image requires dedication and specialized software that most casual 'borrowers' from a site won't bother with. Google and other search engines will inventory your site. But you should add your own search engine online. Free search engines are easily available through the Internet. We use FreeFind ([www.freefind.com](http://www.freefind.com)).

Of course, once you have begun virtually archiving and virtually exhibiting, it is also smart to web search from time to time to see if your text, images, documents, or sound clips are turning up on other sites on the web. If they do, it helps to have a lawyer on your board who can write a motivating letter!

An online exhibit is much like an actual exhibit with the exception that the artifacts are scanned images, sound clips, and documents. Like a real exhibit, the virtual exhibit has a script and sequenced sections that online visitors can wander through, backtrack through, and skip around in.

Once you get into virtual archiving and exhibiting you quickly discover how very editable and amendable your collection and exhibits can be. This flexibility and ability to update with additions from your viewing and reading public also gives those contributing additional materials the satisfaction of seeing their contributions become part of the archive and/or exhibit.

One of the most fascinating virtual exhibits and online archives is the Queer Music Heritage site. The site is one of the labors of love that provide so much of our online history and documentation.

JD Doyle in Houston has spent six years putting together an almost encyclopedic queer music collection with interviews, music, and interviews. JD bases the site around his monthly programs which he preserves on the website at [www.queermusicheritage.org](http://www.queermusicheritage.org). As he puts it,

*My motivation is my passionate interest in preserving the history of GLBT music, and it was a private endeavor until a friend invited me onto his radio show to do a short presentation. The producer of the other queer show on the station heard us and offered me a regular segment.*

*The website did not come right away, but I soon had the dream of an archives "in the sky," as I like to think of it, where anyone could enjoy it. I had no experience in radio and certainly no experience in doing my own site...I had to just learn it. It certainly would have been easier with guidance, help or even a mentor, and I'm still learning, technically as I go. I am blessed with an aptitude for research and the ability to focus, and enough understanding of computers, etc, to get me this far. [personal communication]*

*Queer Music Heritage is both a radio show and a website, and the goal of both is to preserve and share the music of our culture, because I just don't think gay & lesbian music of the past should be forgotten. I also believe our music culture is a visual as well as an audial experience, so I try to share the images of this music...photos of the artists and recordings, and to pack in as much information as possible, while still trying to entertain. Each month's page (or pages) gives the playlist and additional pages of information, and you can stream or download every show." [from an article for The Journal of Popular Music]*

Doyle's motivation has been that

*As a long-time collector of music [he] was aware that there are very few avenues for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered artists to get exposure for their work, for a variety of reasons. These artists are almost always independent artists, without the means to promote or distribute a recording, and of perhaps more importance, if the work is openly gay lyrically many radio doors are automatically closed to airplay.*

In keeping with the educational and political aspects of virtual archiving and exhibiting he notes that

*... as my shows unfolded year after year it reinforced to me that there was another angle to the education, one that went hand in hand with gay activism. As the artists were describing their music and their lives, they were effortlessly and perhaps unintentionally getting across another very important message. This was the basic premise that there would be more acceptance of gays and lesbians if there were more understanding that we are people who are dealing with life issues, just like straight people.*

Doyle describes a process that resonates with those of us on this panel and anyone else crafting virtual repositories:

*So the challenges were getting to the technical level to produce my own radio shows (which I do at home on my computer) and also to **handle the***

*website. I've no website background so bought a smart program (Dreamweaver), which has served its purposes. Besides some degree of technical ability, manpower is needed... The archiving and uploading of materials is tremendously time consuming...someone has to be meticulous about the actual data, it has to be scanned into a format that can be read, and you need a huge server. Of course I pay for my own, and currently have uploaded about 6GB of material.....sound files are Huge, and my site is also very graphic heavy, as I'm trying to visually share the history as well.*

If you haven't yet been to Doyle's site, go there. But do it when you have a lot of time because like most encyclopedias you will find it leads you on from one article, interview, and sound clip to another.

It's fun and informative and is an important part of our Internet LGBTQ virtual archive.

JD Doyle and I both find virtual archiving and virtual exhibiting a time and resource intensive, politically and educationally important, part of gay activism and of gay identity.