

Houston Area Rainbow Collective History Community-led Archives

By Christian Kelleher, with Larry Criscione, J.D. Doyle, Alexis Melvin, Judy Reeves, and Cristan Williams

Just over a decade ago Houston Public Library's Jo Collier brought together a group of local lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community historians, archivists, and scholars as part of the library's LGBT speaker series. Recognizing commonalities and opportunities in their diverse organizations and programs, the group formed Houston Area Rainbow Collective History (ARCH) as a space for discussion, collaborative planning, and news sharing. Houston has long had a vibrant and influential LGBT community, and the individuals and organizations that met as ARCH have taken on the responsibility to collect, preserve, and share their community's history.¹

Community-led archives are essential to the preservation of unique historical collections of books, archives, and artifacts that mainstream government or academic archives have typically neglected or undervalued. Community archives are often ventures of "self-representation, identity construction, and empowerment," and indictments of the failures of mainstream institutions to include marginalized populations such as racial or ethnic minorities, faith groups, and the LGBT community. Archivists struggle to define what a community archive is but increasingly recognize that it is the "diversity, fluidity and lack of fixity which makes the community archive sector so dynamic and vibrant." Community archives come about in many different ways, but they frequently develop organically from within the community, are led by one or two key individuals, and are often recognized as the "authentic voice" of that community. Houston's LGBT community-led archives reflect this purpose and position in their organizations and their collections. Here are some of them from ARCH.²

Charles W. Botts and Jimmy Carper Memorial Research Library of GLBT Studies

Two of Houston's longest-established LGBT community-led archives carry the name of the dedicated collector and preservationist Charles Botts. Beginning in 1977 Botts, a NASA employee, began building the LGBT library at Houston's Metropolitan Community Church of the Resurrection. Botts felt that Houston's public library did not adequately represent and serve the city's LGBT community. He called it "hopeless," and noted, "There is not a lot there and what is may be under psychology or have been stolen or just have not been put on the shelf....And needless to say, the public library doesn't stock gay periodicals." By 1986 Botts's MCCR library totaled over 5,000 titles, including Houston's first openly gay published newspaper *The Albatross* from 1965. By that point the library also included the Texas Gay Archive, created

by Charles Gillis and Kenneth Adrian Cyr in Fort Worth's Awareness, Unity, and Research Association during the early 1970s. Storage is often a challenge for thriving community archives, and the Texas Gay Archive had moved to Houston in Gillis' famous Wilde 'N' Stein bookstore in the later 1970s, then was maintained by the nonprofit gay social service organization Integrity (later Interact) Houston, and finally merged with the MCCR library.³

After Charles Botts died in 1994, volunteer Larry Criscione led the efforts to preserve and build the collection through 2012, when the church that housed the library finally needed to reclaim the space it occupied. Jimmy



The July 24-30, 1981 issue brought TWT readers the first reports of Kaposi's Sarcoma and pneumonia, the beginning of the AIDS crisis. Images courtesy of the Charles Botts and Jimmy Carper Memorial Library of GLBT Studies, now at the University of Houston Libraries.



Detail from *Mary's...Naturally* bar top. Photographs of Mary's patrons and community activities were a central feature of its history rescued by GCAM after the bar closed. Photo courtesy of the Gulf Coast Archive and Museum of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender History.

Carper, a community activist, host and producer of KPFT radio program *After Hours*, one-time Pride Parade grand marshal, and 27-year AIDS survivor when he died in 2014, acquired it from the church intact to preserve the decades of effort and over 15,000 books, periodicals, and files the library then included. The complete Charles Botts and Jimmy Carper Memorial Library has recently been donated to the University of Houston Libraries.

Among those LGBT periodicals not collected by the public library but in the Botts & Carper Memorial Library is a complete run of *This Week In Texas*, which had begun

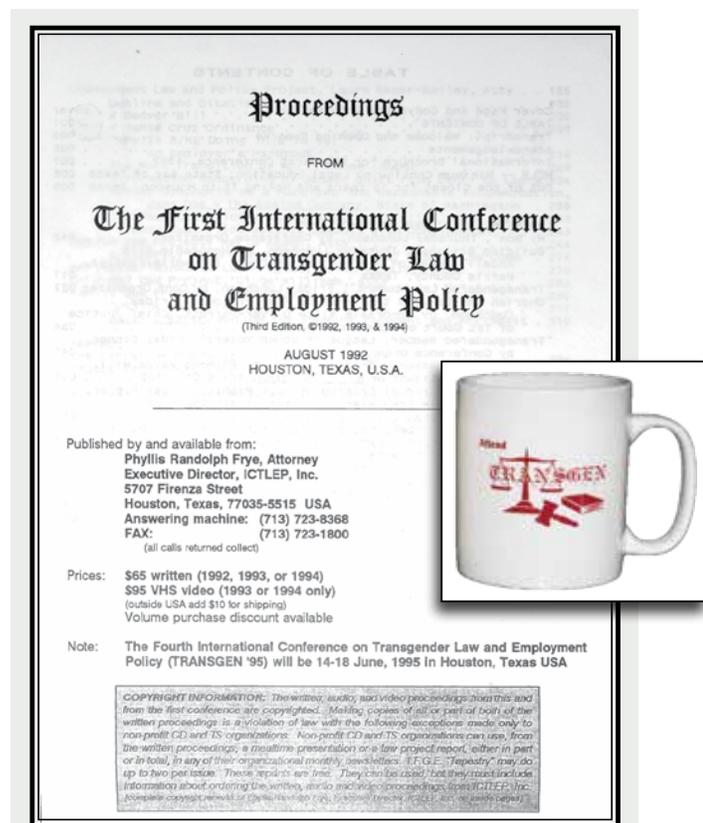
publication in Houston in 1975. Distributed statewide, TWT began as a gay business and entertainment guide, but under the leadership of editor Chuck Patrick took on a broader community focus in the 1980s, especially as the AIDS crisis quickly spread. In its July 24-30, 1981 issue, TWT published side-by-side reports titled, "Cancer Strikes in Gay Men" and "Pneumonia Strikes in Gay Men" about the rare cancer Kaposi's Sarcoma and *pneumocystis carinii* that were killing gay men at unprecedented rates. Less than a year later, TWT reported the first Texas death from AIDS, Clint Moncreif, on March 9, 1982. Soon the back pages of TWT that had featured personal ads also became crowded with obituaries.⁴

J.D. Doyle Archives

LGBT community historian J.D. Doyle has collected the TWT and other community obituaries in his Texas Obituary Project, a searchable database of nearly 7,000 LGBT Texans that includes data on race, gender, and deaths from AIDS and violence. The online J.D. Doyle Archives also includes two other major collections. Doyle's Queer Music Heritage captures LGBT music history and interviews with pioneering artists and draws from his 15-year radio program and extensive music collection in all formats from 78s to CDs. After archiving 580 hours of radio content by 2015, Doyle turned his efforts to the Houston LGBT History website that includes a massive 5,200 pages of content on Pride, politics, publications, bars, businesses, organizations, events, and individuals, among many other topics. Along with Sara Fernandez and Kirk Baxter, Doyle was also instrumental in creating The Banner Project pop-up museum of Houston LGBT history that displays periodically throughout the city.⁵

Gulf Coast Archive and Museum of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, & Transgender History

Jimmy Carper's leadership in preservation of Houston's LGBT community history had begun before his acquisition of the Botts collection when he and twelve other community activists established the Gulf Coast Archive and Museum of GLBT History almost two decades ago. The idea for GCAM originated when Rick Hurt, also known as Rainbo de Klown, posted to the Houston Activist Network listserv,



Proceedings of the first ICTLEP conference, 1992, and ICTLEP Transgen conference mug.

Images courtesy of the Transgender Foundation of America.

“Where’s *our* museum?” Though the Montrose neighborhood was part of the city’s Museum District, home to many LGBT bars and host to the annual Pride Parade, there was no space for the community to display and engage its own history. GCAM curator Judy Reeves remarked that much of the community’s history had been lost, reinterpreted or rewritten by others. “It doesn’t mean anything to them, it can end up in the garbage,” Reeves said. “But it’s important to us.” GCAM opened its first exhibit at a warehouse on Capitol Street, and subsequently moved to an apartment on West Main. Its first archival collection was donated by a prominent community member who had been preserving his deceased partner’s archives for many years, not knowing what to do with the documents. Though museum space has been difficult for GCAM to maintain, the organization has continued to raise exhibits and promote events and to rescue collections of publications, archives, photographs and artifacts, including leather, costumes, and an extensive t-shirt collection.⁶

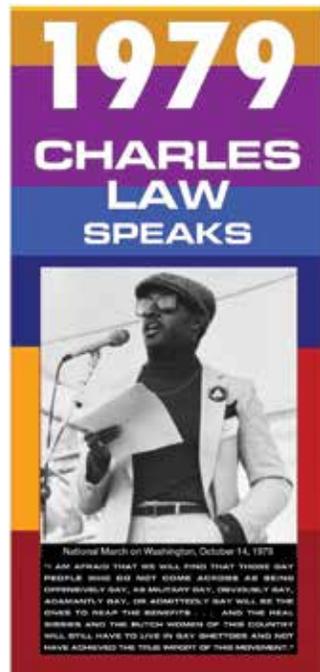
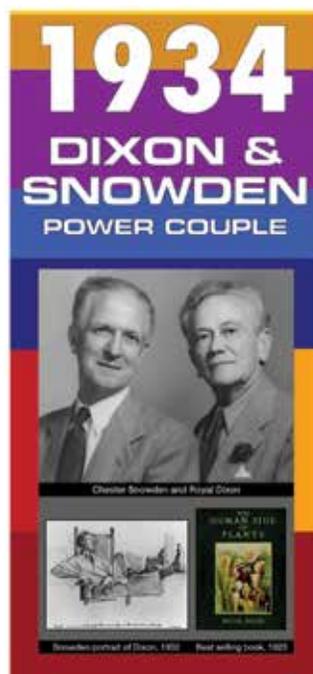
A remarkable community artifact and unique historical document rescued by GCAM is the set of bar tops from legendary Montrose institution Mary’s...Naturally. Opened in 1969 on the corner of Westheimer and Waugh, Mary’s has been described as “the mother house of all the gay bars in Houston.” Police raids—one with 61 arrests, including owner Jim “Fanny” Farmer, in a single night before Gay Pride Week in 1980—made Mary’s a rallying point for Houston’s LGBT community. Community activist Ray Hill cited Mary’s as the place where early planning for what became AIDS Foundation Houston occurred in 1980 (though AFH’s own archival history sites it in the Texas Medical Center). The Gay Political Caucus is also reputed to have begun there, with a witness writing of having seen Fanny Farmer “at one of the early meetings of Houston’s GPC when he arose to give an impassioned speech exhorting other gay businesses to donate to the then-struggling GPC, and backed his words with substantial cash.” Mary’s bar tops at GCAM document the institution’s early years as a community hub and the community members through preserved snapshots of the bar’s patrons.⁷

Botts Collection of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History, Inc.

Charles Botts’s work at the MCCR library sprouted a second community-led archival collection under the leadership of library volunteer Larry Criscione. When the church could not retain the library, Criscione began his own efforts to preserve what he had maintained and cultivated in the nearly two decades since Botts’s death, including a heroic effort to recover the archives after Tropical Storm Allison flooded the church in 2001. As with the other community archivists, Criscione felt that the LGBT community had been excluded from his and other community members’ experience in media and history. At MCCR and in the Botts collection Criscione felt represented, understood, and empowered, and he shared that sense with the community. Criscione’s effort to preserve the archives took the form of incorporating the nonprofit Botts Collection and actively continuing the work of animating the community to donate important historical personal and organizational archives.⁸

Among the personal archives in the Botts Collection is a

small group of photographs of Tom Osborn, who trained to be an ice skater and performed with three-time gold medalist, film star—and Osborn’s matinee idol—Sonja Henie and her touring ice revue from 1948 to 1953. After leaving the ice revue, Osborn came to work for Conoco in Houston and became involved with The Diana Foundation, said to be the country’s oldest continuously operating gay organization. In 1967, at the 14th Diana Awards show at the Village Theater, Osborn used his ice revue showmanship and costume expertise to become the Dianas’ first drag performer. He performed regularly through the late 1980s, and for the last time at Diana 41 in 1994 before he passed away in 2010. The



The Banner Project highlights individuals, organizations, and events in Houston’s LGBT history. Images courtesy of The Banner Project, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/banner1.html.

photographs in the archive, which feature a young Osborn on skates leaping through the air during his Henie revue days, behind the wheel of a classic roadster, and later during a Diana Awards show, were collected by a community member at his memorial service and donated to keep his memory alive in the Botts Collection.⁹

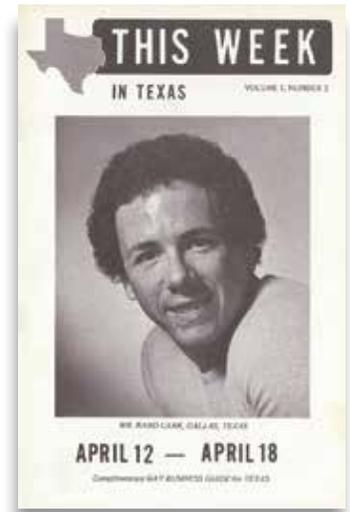
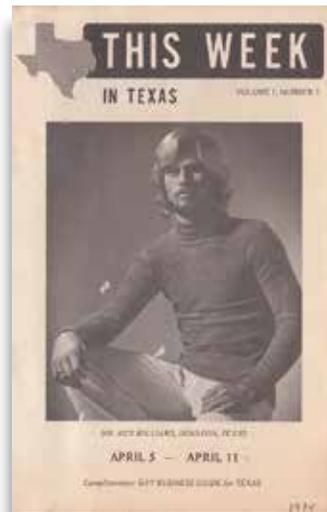
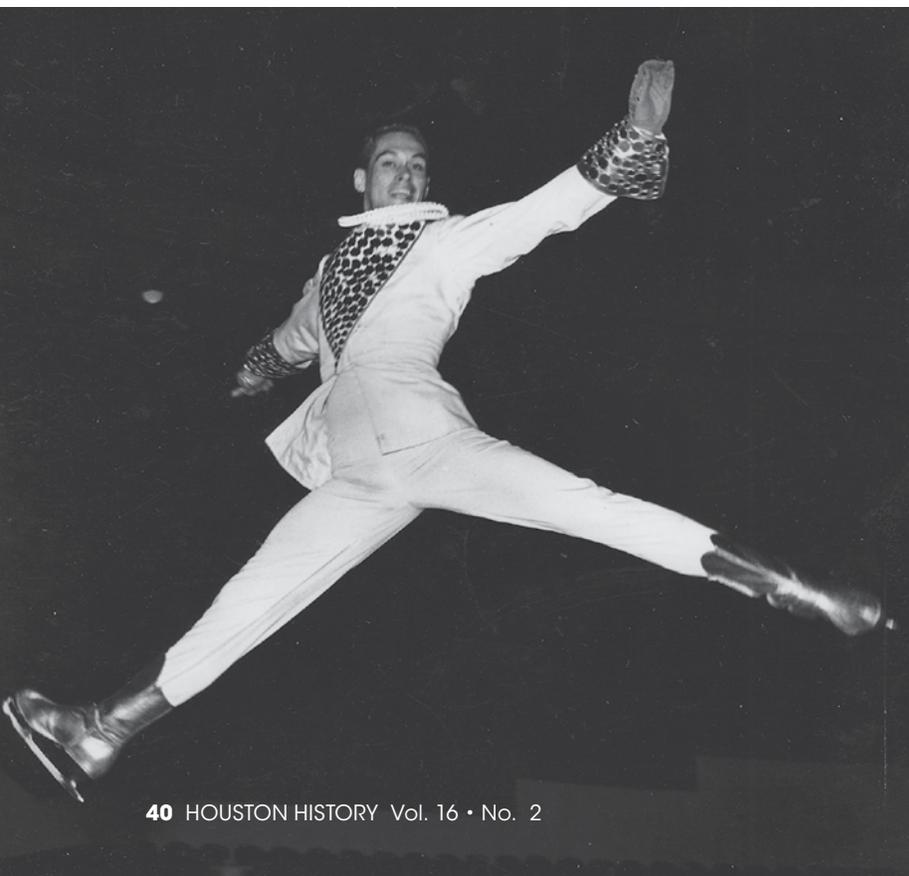
Transgender Foundation of America Trans Archive

Houston-based Transgender Foundation of America feels that its Trans Archive is the beating heart of a community space. The Trans Archive is an eclectic mix of artifacts from across the globe, from African tribal art to many American and European newspapers dating back hundreds of years. The collection includes paintings, statuary, textiles, newsletters, personal letters and diaries, photographs spanning more than a century, films and various forms of other media, an extensive library, and many other materials concerning the movement of gendered boundaries over time. The collection also focuses in upon specific aspects of trans history, whether telling the story of trans rights under Nazi persecution or in America through artifacts from Houston's own groundbreaking International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy. With Gulf Coast roots stretching back to the 1960s, TFA's mission is to improve the lives of trans people. In addition to the Trans Archive, TFA engages with its community, and the community's history, in many ways including through the annual Unity Banquet, now in its 26th year, its Trans Disaster Relief Fund, the TransAdvocate.com, a scholarship program, several support groups, and Gender Reel, in addition to its research and policy efforts.

While trans history as represented in the Trans Archive

Publicity still of Tom Osborn as a performer in the Sonja Henie's Hollywood Ice Revue from the late 1940s.

Photo courtesy of the Botts Collection of LGBT History, Inc.



The first two issues of This Week In Texas, the gay business and entertainment guide published in Houston, 1975.

Images courtesy of the Charles Botts and Jimmy Carper Memorial Library of GLBT Studies, now at the University of Houston Libraries.

goes back hundreds of years, scholars place beginnings of a national transgender political reform movement in the 1990s, and key to that movement was the International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy organized by Houston lawyer (and later Texas's first transgender judge) Phyllis Frye, and co-sponsored by the Gulf Coast Transgender Community. The first ICTLEP took place at the Hilton, Southwest Freeway—where the marquee read “Welcome Transgender Law Conference”—on August 28, 1992, and had over fifty attendees. With its second conference, ICTLEP published reports, including the International Bill of Gender Rights, Health Law Standards of Care for Transsexualism, and Policy for the Imprisoned: Transgendered that impacted fields from law to bioethics.

ICTLEP had six conferences, all in Houston, that propelled the legal rights of the transgender community on grassroots and national levels.¹⁰

There are more LGBT community-led archives to discover in Houston, including the moving and informative oH Project that collects oral histories of HIV/AIDS available at Rice University, among other initiatives. Historical memory and societal representation are stronger because of the independent, diverse efforts and foresight of community-led archives such as these.

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J.D. Doyle provides to the community three large LGBT history websites.

Alexis Melvin is President of the Transgender Foundation of America.

Judy Reeves is Curator of Collections at the Gulf Coast Archive and Museum of GLBT History.

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