

HOST: A few decades ago, a person named Jean-Nickolaus Tretter in Little Falls, Minnesota started collecting documents and objects related to LGBT culture and communities. They were concerned those artifacts might be lost to history, and with them, an understanding of the history of LGBT communities.

A few years ago, in 2000, that collection came to the University of Minnesota, and it's now called the Jean-Nickolaus Tretter collection in LGBT studies. Producer Britt Aamodt was curious about the collection, so she spoke with its new curator Aiden Bettine.

BRITT AAMODT: I was doing research on the HIV AIDS crisis in Minnesota, and the place to go for me was the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota for the original documents from that era. And I heard that the Tretter had a new curator, and I was really excited to talk to him. He's here with us now, Aiden.

AIDEN BETTINE: Hello.

BRITT AAMODT: So for those who might not be familiar, what is the Tretter Collection?

AIDEN BETTINE: So the Tretter Collection is in GLBT studies, so is an all LGBTQ or queer archives. We hold books, periodicals, magazines, journals, and then personal collections, organizational records, and then other types of ephemera relating to queer life, so T-shirts, buttons, different types of posters, maybe some hats. So we're really about the materiality of LGBTQ life.

We certainly prioritize the twin cities and Minnesota but also collect broadly across the midwest, the nation, and internationally.

BRITT AAMODT: Are there any collections within the Tretter archives that really, really intrigue you?

AIDEN BETTINE: One that I'm kind of particularly fond of that I've found in the collection is actually the Gay and Lesbian Postal Employees Network Collection. I'm a big USPS enthusiast and avid correspondent. So I love mail. This Postal Employees Network started in the twin cities in 1992, so 30 years ago. And it was for gay and lesbian postal employees who wanted to meet each other but also advocate for their rights as federal employees locally in the twin cities.

And then, in 1993, they went to the national march on Washington for gay and lesbian rights. Going to the march and meeting other LGBTQ postal employees turned into a national organization. And it looks like, from reading their newsletters, punnily enough called *Outpost*, they were advocating for things like domestic partnership benefits through USPS, working with different unions and associations, as well as an end to discrimination or harassment for same sex attraction.

So again, we see a Minnesota first where the postal employees network, or PEN, started in the twin cities but really had a national effect until the early 2000s when it disbanded.

BRITT AAMODT: That's an amazing story. When we look back at the history of LGBTQ archives, when did we begin seeing that preservation of that history in the United States?

AIDEN BETTINE: Oh, that's a great question. So there certainly were early collectors, and I think Jean Tretter, the namesake and original curator and founder of this collection is a great example of individuals who were personally and privately collecting LGBTQ history really from the 1940s and probably a little earlier through to today.

We have a lot of private or personal collectors that are building apartment archives and keeping records, but we don't see formal organizations, whether they're community archives or become part of institutions, like the Tretter Collection, emerge until after gay liberation.

So we're looking at the early 1970s. Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, New York was one of the earliest in 1974, in the US to open their doors and collect lesbian history very intentionally. We have a few that opened in the 1980s, like the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco, the Gerber/Hart Library and Archives in Chicago.

And as you can see, through just some of that naming, these places were in big, urban cities and often on the coasts, in San Francisco and New York, and really became the pinnacle of where we understand and come to know LGBTQ history. So I think that's why you see something like Jean Tretter's Collection moving to the University of Minnesota in 2000 as a younger, more Midwestern-grown collection, although Jean was collecting well before the year 2000.

BRITT AAMODT: Well, what would we have lost if we didn't have somebody like Jean Tretter collecting these stories?

AIDEN BETTINE: Of what I've named, everything has been an independent, grassroots effort by LGBTQ community members, who may or may not be librarians or archivists by day, doing this work in their community historically and intentionally on volunteer time, maybe unpaid.

And that trend has really continued, and I think it's because we as LGBTQ people, especially in the library and history oriented professions, are aware of whose history is being collected and whose is not. And it was really evident to these early ancestors of LGBTQ libraries and archives that if nobody, if no other institutions were going to collect LGBTQ history, we were going to lose it.

So we were going to lose the stories, the materials, the photographs, the memories. There's a lot of oral history projects around the country, including here at the Tretter, that really do capture the lives and stories of everyday LGBTQ people. And we would lose this because other places don't essentially value it or prioritize it.

Or sometimes, when you look in an archives and are trying to find LGBTQ people and their history, it's simply just not labeled that someone was part of the community. They're not identified as part of the community. They might have been a significant author, maybe a famous actor, or done something important in their local community that got them into the archives. But it wasn't because of their queerness or their identity. And so they're hard to find.

And so LGBTQ archives, as a collecting focus, really make it easy to know that the material you're moving through and the people and organizations you're looking at are part of the LGBTQ community and part of our history.

BRITT AAMODT: Well, so I want to get to know you a little bit more. In 2017, I believe, you moved to Iowa to get a library science degree. Now, you had come out as a trans man at a very young age. I think you were 17. Is that correct?

AIDEN BETTINE: Correct, yeah.

BRITT AAMODT: And then you move to the University of Iowa. And how was that period transformative for you because I think you were coming from Chicago and you're moving to college small town Iowa.

AIDEN BETTINE: Yeah, it was a really transformative moment in my personal life but also in my career. So I'm originally from Milwaukee and went to undergrad and did a master's in Chicago. So have been very much part of urban LGBTQ life in the midwest for most of my young adulthood as a teenager and then in my 20s.

And so moving to Iowa city, I won't say it was a culture shock, but there was an evident absence of LGBTQ spaces to inhabit, to go to, to avoid, whatever, whatever you might want to do. It was really hard to find LGBTQ owned and operated businesses, support groups. There was only one gay bar in town, and a lot of organizations you either had to be maybe an undergraduate student on campus, and there's wonderful resources for them on campus, the University of Iowa, or maybe affiliated with a church group.

For me, I went from urban spaces that had a lot of affordances for what it meant to be queer and trans and have time and space in community to a place that I knew there were LGBTQ people around me, but it was really hard for us to find each other. And so Iowa city, and I think Iowa more broadly, demanded building queer community space.

BRITT AAMODT: And you ended up building or founding the LGBTQ Iowa Archives. Is that right?

AIDEN BETTINE: Correct, Archives and Library.

BRITT AAMODT: Is that similar to the Tretter? Or what is that?

AIDEN BETTINE: It is very similar to the Tretter. Definitely smaller scale, a very young community archives. But it's-- in twin cities terms, it's like if you combined the Tretter Archives with the Quatrefoil Library. So there's a lending library and community space where things like Queer Threads, a craft circle happen, board game nights, book clubs and different meeting groups.

But then, on the archive side, there's a really intentional effort to collect Iowa's LGBTQ history and ensure that it's preserved across the state.

BRITT AAMODT: Can you give us a sneak peek, perhaps, at some of the items that have just come in or will be coming in to the Tretter soon?

AIDEN BETTINE: Yeah, so we received six gowns or dresses from a female impersonator named Sunne Teal, who was active in the 1960s in North Dakota. These dresses were collected by Sunne's mother, or saved by Sunne's mother after she tragically died in a plane crash in 1966.

So that is just a really rich and beautiful collection to have these gowns from queer history before the 1970s. Folks can come on a tour, and that'll probably be something that I'll love to pull and show off as one of my favorites once those dresses are properly housed in the next couple of weeks.

BRITT AAMODT: Well, I'm wondering if there are collection areas you like to emphasize or explore or stories you'd like to bring into the Tretter as a curator.

AIDEN BETTINE:There's too many areas I'd love to grow. Definitely the already intentional efforts to collect Black, indigenous, and communities of color collections and history here in the twin cities but also around the country and internationally.

I also really want to look at rurality. For me, as an urban raised queer person, Iowa really opened my eyes to what does it mean to be in rural spaces and living out your LGBTQ life. And so I want to do more intentional collecting around rural life but also queer farmers.

BRITT AAMODT:Thanks so much for coming on to talk to us on Minnesota Now, Aiden.

AIDEN BETTINE:Absolutely.

HOST: That was producer Britt Aamodt. She was speaking with Aiden Bettine. He is the new curator of the University of Minnesota's Tretter Collection in LGBT studies.