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Opening the Info Vault: Preserving, Digitizing, and Funding the International Women's History Periodical Archive

Laura X

The Laura X-Laura Rand Orthwein, Jr. World Institute for the Legacy and Learning of Social Justice Movements

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Introduction from Ken Weyerbacher:

I was honored to have as one of my co-panelists at Bryn Mawr College's "Women's History in the Digital World 2015" conference the most important feminist archivist of the sixties and seventies as well as the founder of Women's History Month and so much more: Laura X.

In her talk, which appears here in this guest blog, edited for publication, Laura talks about the rediscovery of International Women's Day, which then led to the creation of the central archive of the Women's movement from 1968 to 1974, and the founding of both Women's History Month in 1969 and the Women's History Library. Previous to 1969, she was a Head Start teacher in New York and a CORE picket captain and then active in the Berkeley Free Speech Movement in 1964 as well as the emerging peace and women's movements.

* * *

Ken, you are my hero for this digitizing of our early movement materials and your [Voices from the Underground Series](#), including our chapter on *It Aint Me Babe*, the first U.S. national Women's Liberation newspaper. I am so happy to be involved with the ingathering of feminist and lesbian periodicals for digitizing.

Ken asked me to tell our historical origin pre-story for the International Women's History Periodical Archive. (Women's Liberation Movement publications included the note "This publication is on file at the International Women's History Periodical Archive" and our address, which caused other publications from 40 countries to place themselves on file in our archive as well.)

I'll start with the strike that was inspired by Russian women in 1917, the discovery of which inspired me to help organize a demonstration in Berkeley for International Women's Day on March 8, 1969, and to begin to build the idea of Women's History Month around March 8. Our Women's History Library, which maintained the International archive of our movement from 1968 to 1974, took a quantum leap forward from the national publicity as a result of that Berkeley demonstration. There had been no such demonstration for IWD in the U.S. since 1947. By the next year, 1970, there were Women's Liberation events in 30 cities around the world for March 8.

So, to begin: Back in late 1968, I saw the 1929 Soviet film *The End of St. Petersburg* by Vsevolod Pudovkin. The women's demonstration in St. Petersburg on February 23, 1917 for "bread, peace and land" is clearly the spark that ignited the strike for the Putilov factory workers. Their strike toppled the rule of the czars within four days of the women's protest. What is not known, partly due to the confusion of the use of another calendar system by the Eastern church, is that their February 23 was March 8 on the Western calendar; the Bolshevik women who organized the demonstration over the protests of their male comrades were in fact deliberately celebrating International Women's Day, which had been declared seven years earlier.

Although by 1969 I had considered myself a socialist for thirteen years, had been immersed in Left politics in New York and Berkeley, and had been to the Soviet Union twice to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary in 1967, I still did not learn until late 1968 that International Women's Day was based on a U.S. event that took place on March 8, 1908. It had been celebrated big time in the Socialist countries around the world, but by 1969 in the USSR it had deteriorated into something like Mother's Day in the U.S. where women are given flowers, and the day was ignored here.

In November 1968 I called for U.S. celebrations of IWD in a review of *The End of St. Petersburg* for the UC Berkeley newspaper *The Daily Californian*. I had just been told by Noel Ignatin, a socialist active in Chicago, about the Russian women inspiring the 1917 strike by demanding an end to World War I as well as bread and land. He also told me that the Socialist International meeting in Copenhagen in 1910 had declared March 8 to be International Working Women's Day in a motion made by Clara Zetkin, a German Communist, and seconded by Lenin, the Russian Bolshevik (majority) party leader whose triumphant return from exile was made possible by the so-called February Revolution of 1917, the one begun by women on March 8 on the Western calendar. I believe his source was Isaac Deutscher's *The Unfinished Revolution: Russia, 1917-1967*.

But what really ignited me was that once again American history had been stolen from us. I had just recently been angry about discovering that May Day, the enormous international socialist event on May 1, commemorated the Haymarket Square massacre of the workers in Chicago who were struggling for an eight-hour day in 1881. Noel told me that the resolution for International Women's Day in 1910 was to commemorate a demonstration in New York in 1908 of garment workers who were demanding an end to sweatshops and to child labor, and also the right to vote.

The part about the vote intrigued me because women on the Left as late as 1969 were being hooted down and dismissed as bourgeois whenever we demanded our rights as women—indeed as human beings. And Leftist men were perpetuating the myth that no one in the working class wanted any women's rights, including the right to vote. I had been collecting mimeographed manifestos and letters to the editors of the Leftist press about many such outrages by men in the antiwar and Civil Rights movements for six months or more in order to try to recapture my sanity after having been battered and nearly killed by my own comrade and lover. (He had been a child prodigy violinist and was by then a revolutionary poet. We met demonstrating in Puerto Rico against the U.S. invasion of Santo Domingo. The grief over the loss of that relationship and my fright over how it ended seemed insurmountable until I discovered the rising up of women in all the movements of the sixties.)

In January/February 1969 I was invited to a little party of sociology professors to show the mimeos and pamphlets to Pauline Bart, who was considering teaching a Women's Studies course, the first at UC Berkeley. As we were being introduced, everyone's favorite male radical professor, David Matza, whose courage had been demonstrated on the Third World Strike picket lines on campus, overheard us, and before I could speak he told Pauline not to bother teaching such a course, because there was not enough about women to fill a quarter course. That betrayal knocked me into the orbit of the pure fury of those heady days. In three days I pestered friends

everywhere and pulled together a list of 1,000 women in world history: politics, the arts and sciences.

I had had the immense privilege of going to girls' schools and a women's college. It was only in my last year in college, at UC Berkeley, that I discovered that not everybody knew that women could do everything! I nailed the list to Professor Matza's door (in homage to Luther) and went in search of a local women's liberation group through the father of one of its members.

Bill Mandel had a show on the Soviet Union on Pacifica Radio that I started listening to in 1960 in New York, though it originated from Pacifica's mother station in Berkeley. He regularly read from the Soviet press on International Women's Day. His daughter, Phyllis, a long-time activist, took me to the Berkeley Women's Liberation group, which then organized the first street demonstration about International Women's Day since 1947 in the U.S. Many of us dressed up as women in history from my list. I was a cross between Alexandra Kollontai, the Bolshevik feminist, and Isadora Duncan, the American woman who lived for a time in Russia and transformed the world of dance away from the confines of the ballet.

[Liberation News Service](#) picked up the story from a San Francisco paper about our parade in Berkeley and its sources from my list. The publicity from their article caused people from this and many other countries to begin to send me everything imaginable about women in history, including information about their own family members. People also came to visit from around the country, and to volunteer. Ten thousand copies of the list, by now called the HERSTORY SYNOPSIS, were sold within a few short years. Five thousand people have volunteered here.

We put out the only national women's liberation newsletter from April to December 1969, *SPAZM*: the Sophia Perovskaya and Andrei Zhelyabov Memorial Society for Peoples' Freedom through Women's Liberation. Sophia and Andrei were lovers. She was the 16-year-old daughter of the governor of St. Petersburg and the two of them assassinated the czar in 1881. I was not comfortable about assassinations as a political tactic, having just lived through several in the sixties: John Kennedy, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy.

But I liked the part about the comrade-lovers, and the rebellious adolescent daughter of a powerful man. The name was also in the style of rock groups, but the last part of it fully embodied my philosophy for peoples' freedom, which I still hold today. By January 1970 we had to put *SPAZM* into newsprint as it was too unwieldy as a zine. Other people wanted to do a paper, too, so *It Aint Me Babe*, the first national newspaper of the U.S. Women's Liberation Movement, was born. (People from *off our backs* called me to pick my brain for their name, which ended up being a combination of the quote from the Grimke sisters about getting our brothers off our necks and revulsion at the quote attributed to Stokely Carmichael about the position of women in [SNCC](#) (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee) being prone and silent. Their paper came out only a few weeks later, the first national feminist paper to emerge from the East Coast.)

There were many other firsts from the Women's History Library:

- the anthology *Masculine/Feminine* in 1969 with all the great manifestos;
- *The Women's Songbook*;
- *Female Artists Past and Present: Films by and/or about Women Internationally, Past and Present*;
- *Bibliography on Rape*; and
- *Women and Religion Bibliography*.

Most lasting are the microfilms of the records of our movement: nearly one million documents now available through the National Women's History Project in Santa Rosa, California (707-636-2888; nwhp1980@gmail.com).

Besides handling the distribution of our library's resources, the people at National Women's History Project have carried on the ideas we had when we founded our library beyond our wildest dreams, including their idea and work making Congress declare March as Women's History Month. They also have put up [the fabulous website](#) for all of the celebrations in 1998 for the 150th anniversary of the Women's Rights Movement in the U.S.

My archive features documents, media, and other materials collected over the last fifty years. The collection pertains to the Civil Rights movement, the women's movement, and a wide array of precursors and overlapping social movements from the second half of the twentieth century, with special emphasis on the women's movement, including references to my own successful state-by-state campaign to abolish the legal privilege and exemption for marital and date rape. The presence of my materials in the Laura X Social Movements Archives most directly addresses the need to "understand the moral and ethical values of a diverse society and understand that many courses of action are guided by value judgments about the way things ought to be"

The important reservoirs of tens of thousands of documents from local, national, and international sources that constitute the Laura X Social Movements Archives have been carefully preserved and maintained for historical research and presentation. The collection is derived from my participation in an extensive array of social movements, including the anti-nuke, peace, Civil Rights, Free Speech, women's rights, and environmental movements; my life in St. Louis and beyond; the organizations I founded; the materials I produced for my organizing work around the country; materials produced by other organizations that I collected for posterity; and smaller collections donated to me.

The staff and volunteers of the [Laura X Institute](#) (see text of informational flyer below) are currently engaged in sorting, cataloging, and assigning "finding aids" to the 580 boxes of materials, in order to keep them vibrant, accessible, and available for researchers, curators, film makers, and other interested parties. Once finished, the Institute's archive will be a resource for students, professors, historians, film documentarians, museums, exhibitions, high school teachers, activists, and other members of the general public.

Our prior collection, covering up to 1974, was converted to microfilm and the master microfilm donated in 1989 by the Women's History Research Center (WHRC) to the National Women's History Project (NWHP). Since 1974 the microfilm copies have been distributed through NWHP

and WHRC, now currently through [Primary Source Media/Cengage Learning](#) to some 450 libraries in fourteen countries so far.

We recently were displaced after the Missouri legislature removed funding to the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Many programs were cut, including our archives. So it is vital now that we get this project finished. We are experiencing many challenges in maintaining our collection of over 500 boxes. We also have to raise funding to rent our rooms near Harris-Stowe State University and St. Louis University. Museum-quality storage is expensive; HVAC systems, filtration, and proper shelving all come at high costs. Accessibility to our documents also is challenging; right now we can't afford the price of digitizing all of our work and the equipment needed for it, which is why we are reaching out to other sources of funding. We would like our collection to be fully cataloged first so we can then get the large donation to digitize. Even cataloging our collection is costly and time consuming for only a few individuals.

If our collection were being funded under the Reveal Digital model, they would put it up on their [crowd-funding website](#); once we had the support from libraries, we would go into production. No library pays a lot and yet every library benefits. My archives could be invaluable to courses in women's history, the environment, the social movements of the sixties and seventies, and many others. The collaboration between libraries and archives is important; as we step into a more digitally focused age, the importance of these documents and publications becomes more apparent for researchers.

We are not trying to recreate history, but learn from it.

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[Following is the text of the flyer from the Laura X World Institute and Archives]



Laura X World Institute and Archives

Legacy and Learning of Social Justice Movements

JOIN US TO SAVE 47* YEARS OF FEMINIST HISTORY

MEET THE CHALLENGE: Raise funds, find homes, send your favorite interns, and even swing by St. Louis to be inspired.

BACKGROUND HISTORY

The legendary Women's History Library, created by pioneer feminist Laura X with a mostly-volunteer staff, gathered nearly a million documents on the changing lives of women from 1968-1974, including the only comprehensive records of our movement, nationally and internationally. The library divided the archives into three collections for microfilm publishing: HERSTORY (90 reels of 821 serial titles: 20,000 issues of journals, newspapers, and newsletters from 40 countries); WOMEN'S HEALTH/MENTAL HEALTH (14 reels) and WOMEN AND LAW (40 reels covering Education, Politics, Employment, Abortion, Family, Rape, Prison, Prostitution, etc).

This historic treasure, described by the American Library Association as "the most comprehensive record of any social protest movement" is now available on microfilm in nearly 500 libraries in 14 countries. These microfilms can be purchased from the National Women's History Project (707-636-2888), the great group that convinced Congress to make National Women's History Month official. (The Week was approved in 1981 and the Month was recognized in 1987.)

Once the first stage of the Women's History Library's work was accomplished—the preservation of the first part of the woman's liberation movement until 1974—Laura X, again with volunteers, founded the National Clearinghouse on Marital and Date Rape in 1978. Documents and papers from numerous women's movement groups and individuals continued to flow in despite the Library's announced 1974 end of collecting, while Laura X accumulated more material from her own work on rape.

The University of Illinois took over many of the Clearinghouse resources in 1985, but Laura X continued until 1993, when she succeeded in making marital and date rape a crime in all 50 states.

THE PROBLEM—Without You

For proper preservation of perishable materials, an apartment was rented for storage where room temperature, humidity, pesticide use, and other factors could be controlled. Laura finally gave up the non-profit in 2000. **She has now spent over 41 years trying to stop the flow of materials to her while searching for funding and institutions to take over the materials!**

Temporarily the bulk of the materials since 74' were housed at the University of Missouri-St. Louis but, the legislature of Missouri cut \$4 million dollars worth of project and program funding including ours. We moved to a strategic storefront next to Harris-Stowe State University and St. Louis University to be available to researchers and interns.

The papers, approximately 580 boxes, must be sorted still!

THE SOLUTION—With You

You will seek to find repositories for the remainder, with all the energy and brains you can muster!

Your tax-deductible donations and grants for the work of the Institute and archives as well as those for interns and digitizing may be sent to:

Website: lauraxinstitute.org Email: laurax@sbcglobal.net

*PS. It should be noted that, as a social activist since her student days in the Sixties, thousands of documents from other social movements are also available.

The Laura X - Laura Rand Orthwein, Jr. World Institute is the teaching arm of Laura's new nonprofit, Laura's Social Movements Archives, which feature documents and other materials collected by Laura and so many others, over the last fifty years since the Free Speech Movement. We have moved into a new location and would love any advice on lighting, archival materials, and digitizing equipment to use.