

Gina Wiese

When I first proposed the topic of the lavender scare of the 1950s, and how the Cold War and the culture of suspicion it fostered made lives more dangerous for LGBT Americans, my professor explained to me that I would have to decide whose voices to amplify in my paper. Declassified FBI files gave me insight into the minds of the oppressors, while the voices of the oppressed were more difficult to find. But concentrating on the FBI files would again marginalize the voices of the oppressed. The database Independent Voices, a collection of independent magazines, opened up the possibility of seeing the topic through the eyes of LGBT Americans. This database provided access to a number of local newsletters in which LGBT folk described their experiences during the lavender scare. These newsletters changed my focus from the nature of the oppression LGBT people faced in the 1950s to the ways the community survived and grew from their challenges, in which they laid the groundwork for the gay rights movement. Unlike the FBI files, these sources allowed me to see the strength and ingenuity of individuals as they fought to find their voices, and uncovered previously unknown networks and methods of communication within the LGBT movement. The transformation of the topic also demonstrated weaknesses in the body of secondary literature; the secondary sources also focused primarily on government action rather than on how those actions affected targeted Americans. The absence of significant secondary sources illustrated the importance of expanding literature on the topic. Structuring my research around LGBT voices was significant to me as a bisexual historian, as was treating the subjects of my writing with profound love and respect. This topic allowed me to have a dialogue with the past and reflect on how that community has since transformed today. The most important lesson I carried away from this assignment was to think creatively about the different types of sources there are for underrepresented voices; while they may often be harder to find, the history that can and must be written from them provides an essential broadening of the history of American society. With the help of the resources and the staff of the Wyndham Robertson Library I was happy to have made a small contribution to that broadening of the voices.