

Long Version of Memorial Note about Elizabeth Fee (1946-2018)

by Bert Hansen

This document offers an early version of my memorial essay for the *American Journal of Public Health*, where it appeared—after being reduced by about fifty per cent—as “The Personal, the Scholarly, and the Political: How Liz Fee’s Early Career Integrated Activism around Sex, Homosexuality, and AIDS,” pp. 870-871, in the *AJPH* 109:6 (June 2019), pp. 870-871, one essay in a memorial section for Liz under the rubric of “*AJPH* History,” pp. 866-876. The longer version has been cleaned up and preserved here to provide historians with information about grass-roots activism that is not documented elsewhere.



These two images from Liz’s graduate school days are in the collection of the Elizabeth Fee personal and professional papers donated by Liz’s wife Mary Garofalo to Special Collections at the University of Pennsylvania Library in 2021. I appreciate Mary’s permission to use them. The four undated sketches by Deirdre Fee, Liz’s mother, on a visit she made to the United States in the late 1960s, capture Liz with two fellow Princeton grad students (Harvey Mendelsohn and me) and Liz’s future husband Mike Wallace. This photograph of Liz was probably taken in 1974, the day of a commencement ceremony in Princeton when she was awarded her PhD, or perhaps earlier when she earned the MA.

The 1960s

Liz Fee and I met as graduate students in the Program in the History of Science at Princeton University. I entered in 1965 with a chemistry degree and no interest in activism or politics. Liz arrived three years later with worldliness and high-level academic training in England. Importantly, she also had a very un-American awareness of social class as a factor in life and history. Although the program itself was entirely apolitical, we were coming of age in a world shaped by the 1960s youth culture, second-wave feminism (including books by Simone Beauvoir and Betty Friedan), the early effects of Rachel Carson’s eye-opening *Silent Spring*, the young New Left and the other kinds of activism opposing America’s role in the Vietnam war, the

student rebellions of 1968, and the Stonewall Rebellion at a gay bar in New York City in June 1969.

To understand Liz Fee's career and her pursuit of social change, it is useful to picture the small-scale settings of her early experiences. This was organizing without phone banks and mass mailings. It meant engaging with people face-to-face in consciousness-raising groups and other democratic-style meetings in which all participants were urged to speak up without control from a presiding officer. She was a leader in that she got people to volunteer for tasks and get them done, but without using the patriarchal tools that the old left employed as readily as did the right. She was at her best when asking people to help with the group effort on specific tasks; she was rarely refused since she was not hesitant to take on work for herself. Like other feminists of the era, Liz worked to change the modes of organizing as well as the goals. This was political activism grounded in community organizing.

I believe it was Liz's experience in these small-group settings of the late 1960s and 1970s, both in women's groups and in gay-lesbian groups (numerically dominated by gay men at that point in time) that helped her perfect skills, methods, and ambitions that she carried through her entire career. An account of her early career must not be a recitation of organizational positions, reports, and publications, but a story of face-to-face meetings and personal networks.

Although Princeton's small history of science program (with only three or four students entering each year) gave no curricular space to the histories of medicine or public health and it lacked any orientation toward policy work, several of us among the program's students in the 1960s—not only Liz and me, but also Theodore M. Brown and Michael Gross—found our way into health activism and public health history.

Liz Fee earned her PhD with a dissertation entitled *Science and the "Women Question" 1860-1920: A Study of English Scientific Periodicals*. Intentionally or not, this subject offered substantial resonance with contemporary struggles. I believe what she learned from that research grounded her teaching as well as her scholarship, and it might also be what gave her the ability to comfortably integrate politics and activism with scholarship, teaching, and other professional work. She did this at a time when many of us felt the need to keep these spheres distinct; while not completely hiding our political views and our personal lives, we usually kept them out of the classroom and out of our university offices. Additionally, I suspect that it was her slightly seductive smile that not only pulled people into activism but also may have disarmed colleagues and supervisors concerned about her mixing politics with academics.

A slogan, "The personal is the political," guided much of our activism in that era. And this feminist principle became central to the new gay movement: it urged us to proclaim that we were "gay and proud" and it implied that coming out, even at work, was a responsibility. By the same reasoning, when I was a client at public venereal disease clinics in that era, I never hid my PhD nor my background in science and medical history, as I wanted to challenge the medical establishment's assumptions about what kind of gay men would come to such a clinic. Experiences with regressive moralizing in medicine, along with our understandings of medical stigma from scholarly histories of epidemics and public health, were invaluable years later when Liz, Michael Gross, and I all moved by our separate paths into AIDS policy and AIDS activism.

The 1970s

In New York City in November 1973, Liz Fee was one of the featured speakers at the inaugural conference of the newly formed Gay Academic Union, attended by hundreds of open lesbians, gay men, and their supporters on Thanksgiving weekend. She based a talk on her

current dissertation research on science and “the woman question” in the nineteenth century.¹ At the time, she was teaching in the History Department of the State University of New York at Binghamton. Although untenured at a time when gay people and those who openly associated with them frequently faced discrimination, Liz was not hesitant to participate or to have her remarks published in the proceedings that came out in 1974. In fact, she and her husband at the time, Mike Wallace (an historian and later winner of a Pulitzer Prize for the book *Gotham*), had already played key roles in the community organizing that led up to this pioneering conference.

As that story has never been recorded, a brief account of the GAU's origins seems appropriate. In March 1973, when I learned that a Columbia University PhD student in history (who was not gay) was considering some aspect of homosexuality in history as a thesis area and had not received any encouragement or guidance from the faculty, I arranged a little meeting of some historian friends who had some kind of intellectual interest in sexuality (though no one in the early 1970s would have been regarded as an historian of sexuality). About eight of us met on a Saturday afternoon at the apartment of Michael Gross, whom both Liz and I knew from graduate school. It was not a gay group per se, though most of the attendees were gay men. The discussion was wide ranging and very engaging, so we met again two weeks later. There were further meetings, and the initially central graduate student dropped out when the group was becoming a support group of gay or gay-friendly academics, mostly historians, but with other gay professors joining in. Independent scholar Jonathan Ned Katz and graduate student John D'Emilio were part of the original group, and CUNY professor Martin Duberman joined in early.² Anthropologist Tony Ward, an experienced community organizer in East Harlem, convinced us that to be successful such a group needed both a public identity and a concrete project.

We took on the name Gay Academic Union (after much debate) and began planning a conference even as we anticipated a serious problem in finding an affordable venue willing to host a group calling itself Gay. Mike Wallace, a professor of history at John Jay College of CUNY, secured an invitation to his college, a wonderful space at no cost to us. He and Liz were both courageous in not only associating with the Gay Academic Union but in publicly supporting our activism. Their contributions were essential. The conference was a huge success. The proceedings published a year later were widely distributed and helped build the broader gay movement.³ And the effects of publicity surrounding this group extended beyond the academic

¹ Elizabeth Fee, “Science and Homosexuality,” pp. 35-39 in *The Universities and the Gay Experience* (cited fully below.)

² See recollections published by Martin Duberman in *Midlife Queer: Autobiography of a Decade, 1971-1981* (New York: Scribner, 1996), pp. 49-51, and in *Cures: A Gay Man's Odyssey* (New York: Dutton, 1991), pp. 274-301. Duberman's personal papers held by the New York Public Library include the materials accumulated from his participation in the early years of the GAU.

³ *The Universities and the Gay Experience: Proceedings of the Conference Sponsored by the Women and Men of the Gay Academic Union, November 23 and 24, 1973* (New York: The Gay Academic Union, 1974, 110 pages), ed. Bert Hansen. OCLC Worldcat records about 65 copies in libraries. Digitized versions are now available at <https://www.berthansen.com/gay-history-documents> and at <https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/gau-conference/intro>, where John D'Emilio has provided a new introductory note (2016). Early visibility came from the book's review by Ed Jackson in *The Body Politic* 17 (January/February 1975), pp. 23-24.

community since at that time, only just a few years after the Stonewall Riots and long before legislation began to protect gay people from employment discrimination, any highly visible gay group served to encourage closeted gay people to come out, which then helped more people to come out. In that era, the gay movement had not yet grown to the point where there were many specialized subgroups, yet the process of proliferation was already underway. Gay caucuses were starting to be organized within various professional groups, for example, historians, sociologists, and professors of modern languages.⁴

Typical of this early expansion of gay/lesbian groups under a professional umbrella was the Gay Caucus of the American Public Health Association, with Walter J. Lear MD as one of the organizers. At the 1977 APHA meeting, this group arranged a symposium offering a fresh and unbiased look at the health care needs of lesbians and gay men and the professional understanding of sexually transmitted diseases in the gay male community. Opening remarks by Lear declared this was the first event at a public-health conference ever sponsored by gay health workers. This Gay Caucus of the mid-1970s embodied the same kind of small-scale, conscious-raising, coming-out, face-to-face organizing that Liz understood so well. Characteristically, Lear's statement founded the proposed actions on both "the impact of the women's movement on society at large" and "the growth of knowledge of human sexuality within the professional circles." Lear is quoted as stating, "Political activity outside the political establishment requires special attributes from activists and their organizations." This moment was celebrated nearly 25 years later in a Voices installment within the *AJPH*'s "Public Health Then and Now" feature, curated by Fee and Brown. I believe the use of these individual "Voices of the Past" is another example illustrating how Liz's approach to public health history embodied the same kind of small-scale, conscious-raising, coming-out, face-to-face organizing that Liz understood so well from her own work in feminist actions and in the creation of the Gay Academic Union, as well as in her dissertation research.

One of the unspoken bonds that developed between Liz and Walter was the skill they shared at bringing individuals into active participation by face-to-face requests for help. As mentioned above, even as they did this well into the twenty-first century, it was an approach that grew out of the person-to-person community organizing they learned very early in their careers. They did it easily, democratically, and without hesitation, and both of them repeatedly saw small-scale projects grow and blossom into agents of social change.

The 1980s

When the gay community started to organize in 1981 in response to news reports of GRID or a new "gay plague" in the press, I found a revealing connection between the patterns of stigmatization and victim-blaming that I knew from past epidemics and the new situation. My experience enabled me to quickly become a community spokesperson, organizational leader, and a founder of the AIDS Committee of Toronto, the city where I was teaching at the time. Liz's work on the history of sexually transmitted disease had an immediate resonance as I sought to bring issues of AIDS into the historical community, an ambition shared by Liz and others. I

⁴ Documents showing how these groups got started and grew may be found in a collection of the early newsletters and mailings from the lesbian-gay caucuses of the American Historical Association, the Modern Language Association, the American Sociological Association, and the American Anthropology Association preserved in the Bert Hansen Papers in the Yale University Archives, ms. coll. 2042 (link to the finding aid [here](#)).

organized a panel that first brought AIDS into meetings of the American Association for the History of Medicine, "What's the Role for Historians in the AIDS Crisis?" (April 1986).

Later that year, AIDS appeared for the first time on the program of the American Historical Association (December 1986) with a panel I helped organize where Liz commented on papers by Gerald M. Oppenheimer, Robert Padgug, and Daniel M. Fox. Although I declined an invitation to join in editing a collection of these presentations plus papers by others, Liz ably took on those tasks, joined by Fox as co-editor, for a landmark volume, *AIDS: The Burdens of History* (1988). Within a few years, they followed this with another important collection, *AIDS: The Making of a Chronic Disease* (1992).

Liz's work on AIDS was also presented at another pioneering conference, "AIDS and the Historian," sponsored by the National Institutes of Health, March 20-21, 1989. The book *AIDS and the Historian* (1991), which grew out of this conference included essays by Michael Gross, Fee and Fox, and me.

The 1990s and Later

Several essays in the *AJPH* memorial pages for Liz give accounts of her contributions to history and to public health after the 1980s⁵. But I close by mentioning the remarkable presence of two sustained and sustaining efforts that exemplify Liz's ability to organize communities by the act of informing them. She was equally as effective among historians as among public health professionals. As mentioned above, she and Ted Brown maintained the journal's regular feature in the *AJPH* on "Public Health Then and Now" from about 1990. Another enduring legacy of Liz's approach to organizing is the Sigerist Circle, a caucus of self-identified progressives and activists in medical history, organized at a meeting of the American Association for the History of Medicine in 1990. Together with her comrades Ted Brown and Walter Lear (1923-2010), Liz was a vital mainstay of this caucus from its founding until her death.⁶

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⁵ "Elizabeth Fee (1946–2018)" by Anne-Emmanuelle Birn and Theodore M. Brown, pp. 867-869; "Liz Fee: Leadership in Asian Health History" by Liping Bu, pp. 871-872; "Impact of Elizabeth Fee's Ideas and Scholarship for Brazil and the Global South" by Nísia Trindade Lima and Gilberto Hochman, pp. 872-873; "Elizabeth Fee and Feminist Public Health" by Manon S. Parry, pp. 873-874; "Same as It Ever Was (Start Today)" by Linda Rae Murray, pp. 874-875; and "A Tribute to Elizabeth Fee for Her Powerful Work on Behalf of Public Health" by David Rosner, pp. 875-876.

⁶ Substantial archival materials on the Sigerist Circle are preserved in the Health Left Collection at the University of Pennsylvania donated by Walter Lear as <https://www.library.upenn.edu/collections/special-notable/groups/u-s-health-activism-history-collection-walter-j-lear> (with over 250 boxes of materials, portions still being processed in 2021), in the papers of Liz Fee (donated by Mary Garofalo in 2021, to be processed), and in a small group of Sigerist Circle materials that I donated in 2018 ([Bert Hansen collection of Sigerist Circle material, 1991-2003](#), ms. coll. 1382).