

latimes.com

HECTOR TOBAR

## USC's Archives Bazaar resurrects L.A.'s history

**Using artifacts that participants may have cast off as unimportant, the event brings to life such moments as the Black Cat gay rights protest of 1967, which predated New York's Stonewall riots.**

Hector Tobar

October 6, 2009

They gathered outside a nightclub called the Black Cat one winter night in 1967, perhaps a few hundred men and women in all, joined together in a moment of happy subversion on a Silver Lake street. Weeks earlier, police had swept through the club and arrested 14 people after witnessing, at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve, the "crime" of one man kissing another.

It's unlikely any of the protesters had been to an organized gay-rights demonstration -- the movement in Los Angeles was then in its infancy. Someone brought a camera and snapped a few pictures. Finally the demonstrators dispersed. They put away or threw away the signs they had made.

There are precious few known artifacts remaining from the Black Cat protest, an event that preceded by more than two years the famous Stonewall "riots" in New York. People who make history are often unaware they are doing so. They don't always preserve the objects and documents that could make those momentous events come alive for future generations.

That's where a small but dedicated band of Los Angeles archivists comes in. They rescue the things that make up our collective history: a Remington typewriter owned by the Depression-era pioneer of Spanish-language radio, posters and sheet music from the jazz glory days of Central Avenue, the photographs taken outside the Black Cat on the night of Feb. 11, 1967.

On Oct. 17, the people who collect and catalog these artifacts of modern Los Angeles will gather for a kind of open house, the fourth annual [Los Angeles Archives Bazaar](#) at USC's Davidson Conference Center.

"It's a first attempt at building history," Chon Noriega told me, describing his work as director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, one of the 70 institutions contributing exhibits to the Archives Bazaar. "Three hundred years from now when somebody comes to this university and wants to write about what happened in Los Angeles, there will be something for them to see."

THE ALL-NEW 2010 SRX CROSSOVER

\$479 PER MONTH\* | 39 MONTHS \$3,954 DUE AT LEASE SIGNING AFTER ALLOWANCE

INCLUDES SECURITY DEPOSIT. YOUR PAYMENTS MAY VARY. TAX, TITLE, LICENSE, DEALER FEES EXTRA.

▶ LOCATE A DEALER ▶ VIEW ALL OFFERS ▶ EXPLORE THE SRX

Los Angeles is among the youngest of the world's great cities. Rome has a couple of millenniums of history; New York, four centuries. As late as 1880, Los Angeles was still a little country burg of 11,000 people. In a dozen decades it became a diverse metropolis, home to utopian dreamers and ambitious capitalists, to groundbreaking artists and refugees from poverty and discrimination.

Our city might look beat up and tired these days. But we still enjoy many of the fruits of the glorious, good fights of the 20th century, when L.A. became a cosmopolitan crossroads with an ample middle class. In the last decades of that century, people lived more freely here than almost anywhere else.

The raw material of that remarkable narrative is gathered in places such as the Culver City Historical Society, the Autry National Center for the American West, the Chinese American Museum and the Mayme Clayton Library and Museum, an archive built by a local librarian with a passion for black history.

All those institutions will be represented at the Archives Bazaar.

I'm writing these words today as a kind of thank-you note to the professionals and amateurs who've built those archives. Over the years, I've spent many hours perusing their collections. I've learned that there's a certain power and knowledge that comes from spending time with history in its rawest, most unprocessed form.

Michael Palmer of the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives knows that power too. A few years back, he found the photographs of the Black Cat protest in a box of materials donated to the archives. He doesn't even know who shot the images. For historians of gay culture in Los Angeles, it was like finding a Holy Grail. And it left Palmer and fellow archivist Loni Shibuyama hungry for more.

So if you know someone who was at the protest and might have materials related to the police raid that New Year's Eve and the demonstrations that followed (an arrest report, maybe, or some personal correspondence), please give the ONE archives a call.

"Basically, we'd get them in a room and beg and plead until they gave us the originals," Palmer said. In exchange, the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives would offer the closest thing on Earth to immortality. They would promise to protect those precious documents and objects so that they could live on for centuries.

Noriega at UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center can also promise the controlled humidity and temperature and careful handling of a professional archive. The center's collections are stored, along with many others, in a vast facility underneath the UCLA campus. "They're safe," Noriega said of the materials. And they're all available to researchers.

Noriega spends a lot of time thinking about how the present will look to the future. "You ask yourself, 'What is going to be useful to historians trying to reconstruct this period?'"

The 20th century saw a boom in Latino arts in L.A., so Noriega has reached out to artists like Judy Baca, who has donated papers, along with the painter and performance artist Gronk. "He gave us all of his papers, notebooks, diaries, sketchbooks, even napkins he's drawn on," Noriega said.

I thought I knew a lot about the history of Latino Los Angeles. But I'd never heard about two other men who donated their papers and mementos to the UCLA center.

Pedro Gonzalez was a one-time soldier in Pancho Villa's army who later migrated to California, where he started the first Spanish-language radio program in Los Angeles. In the 1930s, he broadcast denunciations of the immigration raids on Latino neighborhoods, and he was later arrested and deported. His typewriter survived his years of exile and is now in the center's possession.

Dionicio Morales organized protests against segregation

in Southern California theaters. His struggle began the night in 1940 when he was told to sit in "the Mexican section" of a Moorpark movie house during the opening night of "Gone With the Wind." He refused.

"I was hustled out of the theater and my 25 cents was refunded," Morales wrote. Later he organized a successful campaign to force an end to the practice of segregating seating.

Of course, the histories of protest, art and ambition are still being written in Los Angeles. People are marching, imagining and striving here as much as ever.

If you're one of them, you might want to think twice before throwing out those old letters and pamphlets -- and consider instead putting the items in safe hands. In the distant future, a lover of early 21st century Los Angeles history may thank you for it.

[hector.tobar@latimes.com](mailto:hector.tobar@latimes.com)

Copyright © 2009, [The Los Angeles Times](#)