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WordsArchivist's vast collection speaks
volumes on Portland drag history

BY ERIN ROOK

Dusty Polaroids, faded posters, yellowed newspaper clippings. To some, these items are nothing but clutter, better off recycled. To community archivist Greg Pitts, their mere existence is a miracle.

"I literally had to go to the back of an apartment one time to pick up a couple of boxes of photos that the garbage man was gonna throw away," Pitts (aka Port Bear) recalls. "The family said, 'We don't want that gay crap, get it out of here.' I got a call saying, 'We heard you might want this, but if you don't come get it in 30 minutes it will be gone.'"

Pitts, 55, is a self-described pack rat, so it seems only natural that he would inherit his friends' old photos. His vast collection—which includes about 25,000 photos, posters, event fliers, coronation programs and newspaper clippings—started some 15 years ago with "closets full of gay memorabilia" inherited from his close friend Randy "Radar" Burdick after he died of AIDS.

Burdick was one of those with "the money and the wherewithal" to take photos at various bar functions. Pitts later inherited other relics from the Portland drag community, including video, from two other friends—Sandford "Sandra Dee" Director and Lance "Blanche de Portland" Cartwright.

Pitts began digitizing and archiving the items in an effort to keep busy during his recovery from an auto accident, but soon found himself immersed in a decade-long project.

"I didn't have anything to do for therapy. The doctor said, 'Well, you have this photo collection, why don't you archive it?'" Pitts recalls. "So that kinda kept me from going crazy for a while. That was 10 years ago and I've been doing it ever since."

The former bartender and retired U.S. Postal Service worker is, perhaps, perfectly suited to the task. In addition to having the time and resources to process the photos, he was often at the events they document. Pitts is a Portland native who came out in the city in 1971. He quickly made a name for himself as someone with connections, he says, because he bartended not only at many of the gay bars, but also for the other gay bartenders once they closed up shop.

"I used to be the welcoming committee for out-of-towners," Pitts says. When members of San Francisco's court system came to town, Pitts could expect calls from bar owners asking him to show people around and make sure they had a good time. As a result, he can look at old photographs and often identify the people, places and events, allowing him to categorize them properly.

Pitts now spends four to eight hours a day scanning, categorizing and tagging photos. He



IMAGES COURTESY OF THE GREG PITTS ARCHIVE

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—GREG PITTS

has started uploading many of them to Facebook, though he would ultimately like to create a website and perhaps host a show.

"It's a learning process of how to do all this," Pitts explains. He's taught himself everything he knows about the digital archiving process by "hunt and peck," trial and error. Pitts has no formal training in the technology he uses but says he plans to start taking web design classes with a friend soon.

In some ways, the archiving project allows him to reprise his role as a gay in the know. When people come through town for coronation ceremonies and other drag community functions, he often gets requests for old photos. He does his best to oblige, sharing photographs when he has them and can find them.

It's that connection to a personal past and shared history that motivates Pitts to continue with the project, as daunting and emotionally charged as it can sometimes be.

"It's just saving some of the history. I'm realizing as I'm getting older that the younger generation is wonderful but they take everything so for granted because everything is so accessible," Pitts explains. "Back in the day it was a big issue if you wanted to be a drag queen and rent an apartment. You were kicked out because, you



TOP: A gaggle of queens cooling their heels at Gay Pride 1988

ABOVE: Gracie Hansen performs at the Hoyt Hotel, September 1970

know, 'We don't want your kind here.'"

Pitts feels compelled to share this history in part because many of those who lived it are no longer around to tell their stories. He estimates that about 65 percent of the people in his photographs are no longer living.

"The hardest thing about this whole collection is yes, it's wonderful to relive all this but it's also horrible," Pitts says. "A lot of the people who are in these photos from the early '70s and '80s are gone because of AIDS. So it's very hard to look at some of them."

But Pitts isn't one to shy away from a difficult subject. In addition to the archiving project, he's working on a documentary called *AKA "Bobbi"* about a female impersonator's journey from surviving rape in Vietnam to be invited to Sydney's 2011 Gay Pride (see "Give It Up," p. 21).

It's all about keeping the history alive for another generation.

"A lot of this stuff that I'm doing harks back to 'this is the way that it was,'" Pitts says. "I think some of you [young] people ought to appreciate this." ☐

To Pitts' collection, search for "Port Bear" on Facebook or email portbear@yahoo.com.