Minnesota Unraveled

EP114 - Mapping History: Lesbian Feminist Cooperative Farms in Greater Minnesota

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Chantel Rodríguez:

Being a public historian has its perks, like early access to up-and-coming projects. For example, the Greater Minnesota Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA+ History Map, the Historical Society released in May of this year. That is the project I find myself clicking through in the Gale Family Library at the History Center in St. Paul. I wasn't too sure what to expect. So much of LGBTQIA+ history has been centered on the Twin Cities, but as I looked at the map, it was immediately clear that this community's history extends far beyond those urban areas and stretches to all corners of the state.

Stories are marked on the map as color-coded pens, but my eye was drawn to a section toward the northeast of the state where purple lines crisscrossed the landscape, connecting four of the points. Farms called Rising Moon, Del Lago, Mel's Place, and Molly's Cabin. When I hovered my mouse over it, a blur popped up that read Lesbian Feminist Co-op Farms 1970s. How are these farms connected? What motivated lesbian feminists to move out to rural Minnesota and live cooperatively? How does the story of these farms connect to the broader history of LGBTQIA+ communities in Minnesota? To answer these questions, I spoke to one of the people behind the project, Leila Stallone.

Leila Stallone:

I'm Leila Stallone. I am an intern with the Community Engagement Department at Minnesota Historical Society. I started working as an intern and on the Greater Minnesota Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA+ History Map project back in September 2024. I recently graduated with a bachelor's degree in anthropology and environmental studies.

Chantel Rodríguez:

And someone who spent time and documented daily life on these farms.

Meadow Muska:

My name is Meadow Muska. I grew up in Minnesota in Roseville, Minnesota and I studied photography at Ohio University and I was working as a professional photographer a short period of time until the middle of the '70s.

Chantel Rodríguez:

When I sat down to chat with Meadow, she was excited to share why she and so many other lesbian feminists were drawn to live in rural Minnesota. Meadow's personal journey to accept herself, share her identity openly and reject traditional gender roles were important parts of why she spent time at these farms.

Meadow Muska:

I came out and realized I was attracted to other women at 20 and so I got the benefit of making that life-changing, born-again reality of being a full human being. And before that, you had a little flip haircut or you had to try to figure out what people were getting all excited about with males. The programming, I mean, we had to do home ec and we couldn't do shop. It was we were conditioned and programmed to be a housewife and a mother and that was the expectation and to not do that was revolutionary. It really was.

I call myself a lesbian in that I love women and why I say the word lesbian is that that was an act of defiance. I mean, back in when I grew up, to be a woman or a female was lower class. We didn't have any sports at all. It was like 1972 or something that the Title IX came through and we got to have sports. We didn't have the same rights that men had. I mean, my grandfather asked me, "Well, what are you going to do when you grow up? Are you going to be a secretary, nurse, or a teacher?" Those were the options, and you could just stand there as a young kid and think none of the above, whatever.

Somehow I'm not doing that. But that was what was expected and so that was our reality and I chose neither and I chose as many of us did, to redefine the concept of female or woman as that's who we are, and society can change their attitudes, they can whatever. This is who we are and I love who we are and I love who my friends are, and we didn't care what the society thought we should or shouldn't be doing. We just didn't. We fought.

Chantel Rodríguez:

In the 1970s, there were many reasons that identifying as a lesbian was generally not accepted, and there were many rules in society that made it difficult for women who defied gender norms to be financially independent. For instance, before the Equal Opportunity Act was passed in 1974, a woman could not get a loan, a mortgage or a

credit card without having a man cosign. This made it almost impossible for lesbian feminists like Meadow to rent or buy land in rural Minnesota.

Meadow Muska:

If you wanted to get on the country, you had to go to a commune and that would mean the males, men, would have ownership and they would decide whether you could come on or not. And part of that decision was are you going to have sex with one of the other men here or one of the other men? And that was not going to happen as far as I and a lot of lesbians were concerned. So you just couldn't go to a commune or go on the land because you couldn't get one. Well, one woman, I think it's Jane Stedman, inherited some money and there was a downturn in farmland at that time, and I think she bought 160 acres for $3,500. I believe that is the correct information, and that was incredible because now that meant women from New York came to live on this 160 acres.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Jane Stedman alongside Linda Page started Rising Moon in Aitkin County in 1973. According to Meadow, it soon attracted like-minded women. One of them, Dianna Hunter, moved there after being inspired by the residents efforts at Lesbian Community Building. Leila shared with me that Dianna is a throughline in this history.

Leila Stallone:

Dianna's narrative is a streamline throughout all of the entries that we have on these lesbian feminist co-op farms. She ended up moving there to the Rising Moon Cooperative with her friend, Shirley. They actually rode horses from Wisconsin at a different farm location to Rising Moon, and then she, Dianna Hunter, moved throughout the different farm locations as the years progressed, as different people may have came and go at these locations.

Chantel Rodríguez:

But hold on. How did Dianna, Meadow, and other like-minded women learn about Rising Moon and the other co-op farms that started to open up? Leila told me that it was largely through print culture.

Leila Stallone:

There were also some influential magazines that were circulating during this time, some to mention the Whole Earth Catalog, Mother Earth News, and then more specific to the lesbian feminist co-op farms, there was this manifesto called a Country

Lesbian Manifesto that was written and this I believe monthly magazine called So Is Your Old Lady, which was published in Minneapolis actually through the Lesbian Resource Center. And a lot of these magazines and writings really promoted the idea of being self-sufficient, living off the land, making your own buildings and shelters and gardening and just connecting with community and getting, I guess as a job posting board where people would maybe make calls to like, "Hey, are you looking for work?" Or "Hey, are you wanting to live on this land with us?" And you would write them and write them back and become more connected with that community as well.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Nett Hart, a lesbian feminist who bought land in North central Minnesota in 1980, remembers the importance of bookstores in spreading the word. Here's Nett in a recorded oral history from 2015.

Nett Hart:

The women's bookstores were such central places for information that lesbians passing through an area and were very easily connected to information too, and that kind of institution is not around anymore, but it was so much more than bookstores when they were active in all these, I think we had 170 of them at one point, women's bookstores, and so with all that kind of hub for information to be passed out to that makes a huge difference right now. And I don't know what your experience was, they were gatherings all the time, several times a week. There was something going on somewhere.

Chantel Rodríguez:

It seemed clear to me now that lesbian feminists felt restricted by the traditional gender roles put onto women. Leila explained to me that their move out to the countryside was not just about escaping those societal roles, it was also about building community.

Leila Stallone:

Another thing to note with the farms is that a lot of the women who were on the farms or gathering at the farms or flowing through the farms were communities that may have been from the Twin Cities or may have gathered initially in the Twin Cities, and then had moved up from the Twin Cities to these rural areas in Minnesota to not essentially escape like social inequality or gender inequality or economic inequality, but lessen that gap for them in living off the land and just being in a community that supported each other and had the same views and ideology.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Lesbian feminist's decision to live on cooperative farms was a trend that went beyond Minnesota. From the 1960s to the 1980s, something called the back-to-the-land movement swept the nation. In the United States, the idea of immersing oneself in nature, self-reliance and the desire to live deliberately can be traced back to at least the mid-1800s. The resurgence of these ideas in the back to the land movement of the 1960s was a countercultural response to the establishment. Many different groups rebelled against mainstream ideas, traditional social values and governmental authority. They were frustrated and disillusioned by things like traditional gender roles, the Vietnam War, the damage of unchecked business on the environment, just to name a few.

Off-grid rural living was popular among young adults taking part in the back-to-the-land movement. Rural communes and cooperatives were created by small groups of people to develop networks of shared spaces where communities could exist and share common interests. Usually these were intertwined with the environment, art, farming, and mutual care.

So more and more people, in this case, women were choosing to invest in community building in a new way, in a rural space off the grid. What did these lesbian feminist co-op farms I saw in the mapping project look like? I asked Meadow to share her experiences at Rising Moon, the 160 acre parcel of land in Aitkin County founded by Jane Stedman and others in 1973.

Meadow Muska:

So there was a little farm Rising Moon co-op, and they had it in a little three-sided barn. What these two women did is they put hay bales all around the third side. It was like a three-sided barn that was carved into the side of a hill, which was really common know just carving into the side of the hill. So they put these hay bales around it, and this is in the middle of a very cold winter and they would stay in there with, I don't even know if they had any heat at all, if they had a little tiny little firewood stove burner or something, and then they would stay it overnight for at least a week, I don't know how long, and they'd turn on a manual timer to go off every hour so that they could get up and they could do push-ups to stay alive so their body heat would stay up. That's what was happening on this little one of the first lesbian farms in the United States. That's the kind of women that were at Rising Moon.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Can you maybe describe what maybe a day in the life looked like at one of these places? What were they doing on the daily? How were they occupying their time?

Meadow Muska:

Well, there wasn't running water, there was no electricity, there was no phone, daily life. So just washing up is an adventure because you have to get a bunch of water. I'm trying to remember if there was a pump or if they did snow, but I believe there was a pump somewhere and they had a chicken shack that they rebuilt. It had a little bit of a loft and then it had a little, I mean we're talking 10 by, I don't know, 12 feet and it had a wood stove in it. And so just daily activities of daily life, plus taking care of the horses. They had a dog and a cat. Just survival was a full-time activity. It wasn't an apartment or a condo. It was take care of the animals and figure out how to feed yourself and get to the city, the city meaning Aitkin, Minnesota, and wash your clothes. I mean, that really is a full-time activity.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Meadow did not live full-time at these co-ops. She spent time there on weekends and vacations because she was going to school or working, but she always felt like she belonged, like she was part of the community.

Meadow Muska:

And I was invited up by somebody who had already been there. And so once I started coming, I'm one of those people who will split wood and shovel and what do you need done? And then I'd bring food. I was welcomed and I was happy to be there and I was grateful and so step up. And so I would come up on the weekends with bags of food and drive in. It's dark out and I'd bring my bags of food in and maybe they just had their bath or washed up or something, and so, "Hey, great, good to see you." And then that was the weekend, but there was no way I could call them and say, "I'm coming up." I mean, it was just welcome. And then they welcomed me and it was great.

Chantel Rodríguez:

This kind of coming and going was somewhat common within the network of lesbian feminist cooperative farms. People moved from place to place as needed, expanding their own social networks as they went. Here's Nett Hart again from her 2015 oral history.

Nett Hart:

You're forgetting the very important lesbians who never settled on one particular land but moved from one to another to another to another, or basically just traveled lesbians that had particular skills and through the tools from the back of the car and just went to any land that might need that skill or whatever else. I think that we had our own lesbian minstrel troubadours going around passing the word and the gossip even as much as the print media is, but we had so much traveling going on that news moved pretty quickly.

Chantel Rodríguez:

When I looked back at the map, I followed the purple line connecting Rising Moon to Mel's place, and it looked like it was just a stroll away. So I asked Meadow to tell me more. So you talked about Rising Moon Farm, Del Lago, Mel's place or Molly's Cabin, right?

Meadow Muska:

Yes.

Chantel Rodríguez:

How close are these in proximity to each other, right? Are they just all farmland right next to each other? Do you have to walk days to get there?

Meadow Muska:

Farmland right next to each other and you have to walk to get from Rising Moon to Mel's was during the winter and full snow was a full day's hike, a full day's hike through the snow. I'm trying to imagine so many feet of snow and it's not like you're walking down a path. It's a strenuous experience.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Rising Moon operated for only a year before a fire destroyed it. Leila told me that after the fire, several of the women living at Rising Moon, Dianna Hunter, Shirley Duke, Duke's daughter, Sarah, Robin, and Lisyl moved to Mel's place for the winter of 1974, 1975.

Leila Stallone:

I was really captivated by the story of Mel's place. Mel was a man actually who owned a piece of land and a house that was located in the same area as Rising Moon and Del Lago, and he basically allowed Dianna and a few other folks to stay at his place and maintain the land and the house while he was away for the winter of 1974. And he did this because he saw that at Rising Moon there was not any electricity and it was cold. It was the wintertime, and he saw that they were in need of a place that had more amenities and were able to be kept warm and housed at his property.

And that was really interesting to see how maybe a man who may have not been maybe in the same realm or same worlds as the folks at Rising Moon, he just saw them as neighbors and as people, not as like lesbians or I don't know, women that were maybe not able to maintain land or anything like that. He saw them as strong women that were responsible and that needed help. So he was there to provide for them as well.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The cooperative aspect of these farms involved women pulling together to gather food, water, and resources. It also meant sharing the responsibilities of caring for pets, animals, and gardens. But Meadow pointed out that cooperation was also about making collective decisions. That part did not always come easy.

Meadow Muska:

Controversy. Lesbians tend to have very strong opinions, and that's a good thing and there's a thing about it in that with their strong opinions, we're willing to take action and do stuff anyways. There was an issue in that if you wanted a telephone installed, there was no women available to install a phone at that time, so that meant you had to have a man come on the land and put up a pole and some wire, or if your car got stuck in the mud, the long road to get to the back area or anywhere else, there was only dirt roads back there. You had to call up the Hesbeks or Harvey or men were the only ones who had resources or equipment or could work.

And so men would come on the land with their wives and buy stuff from the Rising co-op, and there was an intention that this would be for females only and well, there has to be a little bit of wiggle room because you can't get the car out of the mud or you're not going to get a phone or anything delivered, well, delivered meaning there's no Amazon. It was like a big pile of wood or something for rebuilding the, I don't know what happened there, but so there was an issue and then they had to fight it out. Who's going to be in charge? How are we going to do the consensus? When women get together and there's no distraction of trying to entertain men or there's sort of a blossoming of who individuals are, we have to be the ones who get the one ton truck out of the mud.

Chantel Rodríguez:

For Meadow, whatever challenges came with cooperation were worth it. The challenges came with the freedom to make their own choices.

Meadow Muska:

We decide, we figure out how to build something, we figure out how to accomplish things. It was a very powerful experience and there's a feeling of safety. The first time I went to the festival, I was walking down with my shirt off and it was in the mountains of New Mexico and I was walking with my shirt off and I had a hat on and I was going down to this little stream and I realized I have my shirt off and I am just joyously happy. I had never experienced what the word relax meant. I had never experienced that. I didn't have anything to fear.

There was nobody there who was going to predate on me, who was going to be sexually violent, who was looking at me in... I had never felt that kind of freedom, that feeling of strength and aliveness. I don't know the words to describe, but it's something to experience. If those words don't ring to you, I mean you may understand them intellectually, but a feeling. There's a feeling involved of being free. And so when we went to these farms, we could be whoever we wanted to be. I mean, if we wanted to wear sorrels and a survival jacket or a weird hat or garden with our shirt off, it's like you're alive and you can do it.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Chatting with Meadow and Leila brought to life that two-dimensional network of pins on the digital map, but the dates attached to each farm drew my attention. They each existed only for a short time. Rising Moon in 1973, Mel's place from 1974 to 1975, Del Lago farm from 1975 to 1976, and Molly's cabin from the 1970s to 1981. I spoke with Meadow about what came after these farms for her friends and community.

What happens after the '70s? Did they still continue on the cooperative farms? Did you keep visiting?

Meadow Muska:

Oh yeah.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Do you stay in touch?

Meadow Muska:

Yes. My longest-term friend of 52 years is Molly McCarthy, and she just moved. I just helped her also moved from her eight-acre land in Brule to a small house in Ashland, Wisconsin. She's 75, so it's like, okay, it's time to give up the wood, but others have died and others have passed. Different things have happened to many of us and we continued on. But you realize, okay, if you aren't allowed to work or get jobs, the idea of having a commune or having a collective or living together isn't just a philosophical idea. It's a financial reality. You don't have any money. And so it's like how do you survive? You can maybe rent a room in a low-rent place or it was financially required. I mean, the privilege of having your own place and your own house is costly. And so as women, some of them aged and moved on and somehow got a job or like Dianna Hunter became a professor and a writer of many wonderful books. You go on, they developed their lives and accomplished.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Learning more about the Lesbian Feminist Cooperative Farm Network made me wonder how did its short-lived nature impact the efforts to document and preserve these stories, and how do these cooperative farms connect to the broader history of the LGBTQIA+ community in Greater Minnesota? To start answering these questions, I spoke with Leila about the mapping project more broadly.

Leila Stallone:

So the Greater Minnesota Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA+ Mapping Project is a website and map that is using ArcGIS StoryMap software to map out different historical places, landmarks, people and organizations that have existed in the past or exist currently.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Great. So when we're talking about this mapping project and if users were to go to this landing page, what would be sort of the first thing that they would see when they got to this webpage?

Leila Stallone:

The first thing you would see is probably the title, which is the Greater Minnesota Two-Spirit LGBTQIA+ History Map and some illustrations by B. Aaron Cole, who has contributed to making the map, how it is, how it's vibing. And then you would see tips on how to navigate the map along with the map itself. And the map has a bunch of colored points on it throughout the state, and these colored points correlate with different time periods on the map. So we've organized the map through a timeline starting in the 1970s to the present day. And you would also see we've made a point to include the sovereign nations that are located within Minnesota on the map and bodies of water that are also on Minnesota land, lakes, rivers, creeks as well.

Chantel Rodríguez:

I asked Leila about that purple line that had drawn my attention in the first place.

Leila Stallone:

Another feature that we've created on the map is a tool that we call networks, which is a purple highlight of entries that connect to each other. A lot of the map entries are maybe isolated vessels of stories or history that stand alone, but we've realized as we're doing our research, including the lesbian feminist co-op farms, that there are some entries that have people that are communities that are ebbing and flowing throughout each location. And this is very visible with the lesbian feminist co-op farms that Dianna Hunter and Meadow Muska have documented and talked about in books and with us as well. The three, Rising Moon, Mel's Place, and Del Lago, were located in Aitken County, which is about an hour and a half west from Duluth, and then Molly's Cabin and there's also some other places located there that we're not mapping that are located right outside of Two Harbors, which is on Lake Superior.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The map goes beyond lesbian feminist co-op farms covering all kinds of stories of LGBTQIA+ and Two-Spirit people across Minnesota. Leila explained that users can interact with the information on the map in different ways, like viewing information by theme.

Leila Stallone:

The entries are intended to be more of like a jumping off point for the audience, the students, researchers, historians, or anyone who's looking at the site. We're wanting to make a lot of history visible, and there's a lot of text that can be written about all of the history that we are mentioning and citing on this map. So we wanted to make a short blurb so people can look through multiple points rather than have an essay that they're reading for each point.

We also have a section that categorizes our entries into five main themes, and we also note that these themes could overlap and entries could fit into more than one category. And the five themes are indigenous and two-spirit history, rural voices, drag and gender variance, celebrations, and organizing. And so that's another way people can access and look through all the entries we have that is separate from the map, but the same entries that are also existing on the map as well. For our drag and gender variance theme, we want to make note that drag is not a word that people may have used in the past prior to the 1950s or may not have labeled it as drag, but some of the points on our map display pictures of maybe men dressed in dresses and we would describe that as drag nowadays. And we also use the words gender variance to create a more inclusive kind of umbrella term of identities, traits,

behaviors, and presentations that may come from sex and gender norms. And then this also correlates with some other identities such as trans, transgender, intersex, non-binary, genderqueer or agender.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Leila raises an interesting point, one about terminology. The project has been very intentional with the language they use to describe the identities of the people at the heart of these stories.

Leila Stallone:

Our team wanted to make sure that a majority of identities could be visible within the title including two-spirit. So we decided to not include as like to spell it out queer but have it within the acronym LGBTQIA+. In addition to that, we decided to keep two-spirit separate from the LGBTQIA+ acronym. We were doing a lot of research and we reading about two-spirit identity and two-spirit narratives, and it seemed like a lot of people within that community feel like that identity is separate from this maybe more colonial LGBTQIA+ identity. And in addition to that, we also wanted to recognize the historical and ongoing existence of Indigenous gender and sexual diversity. And two-spirit is an English word used to describe an Indigenous gender expression in itself, and we wanted to have that visible but also make note that there are also other words in indigenous languages that people use to call themselves. And we also note that within the text on our website.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Leila and the rest of the team working on the map project have done extensive research to document over 100 stories.

Leila Stallone:

We've gone into the Gale Family Library and looked through different files and magazines to try to pinpoint different organizations that may have been around in the 2000s or early '90s. And then we're also looking through digital newspaper archives. My collaborator, Ulysses, he's been really awesome at taking different keywords that may be used to describe a drag show or maybe there's a word that he's been looking at female impersonator to go through old newspapers and see if we can find anything from any town or rural area that may have had someone come to town and do a drag show or may have had photographs of a person wearing a suit or wearing a dress. So that has been really cool to see actual primary sources that show that this history has been around and people have been maybe dressing differently or expressing themselves differently previous to the '90s or 2000s where drag has been more popular within the mainstream communities. And then we've also looked through existing oral histories. We're closely at outwards, think it's

outwards, out front, oral history and the Red Rainbow River Seniors oral history as well.

Chantel Rodríguez:

To document the short-lived history of lesbian feminist cooperative farms, the team relied heavily on print culture and oral histories, but what has proved to be invaluable in shedding light on the day-to-day of these farms has been the photographs Meadow snapped in the 1970s.

Meadow Muska:

I would bring my camera when I went up there and photograph, and that was sort of like what we did for fun. It was unusual to have a camera. They were mechanical devices and that's really what they are, mechanical devices that record light. So that's why I have a lot of photographs. It's like, "Okay, well, let's go out and play camera." And how I would do that is not, "I'm going to take your picture," but it was like, "Let's play camera. I'll show you how to operate this mechanical device," which meant there was no automatic focus, automatic exposure, automatic anything, and so I'd set the camera up. I explained the concept of recording light, which is critical. It's different. It's like your sound.

You have to be able to be aware of all the noise and extraneous sounds and just be able to isolate it to the sound you want to record. So how do you do that with a camera? You have to be able to see the light. You have to listen and be aware that that's all there is. So I teach that and tutor it, and I set all the distance, the exposure, everything up, and I'd hand the camera to whomever wanted to learn, and we'd all take turns using the camera, and that's why I'm in the photographs sometimes and sometimes I'm photographing. But it gave a sense of fairness and respect and trust and openness to the people in the photographs because there was no taking. It was creating, and we are creating this memoir together, and I think you can see that in the photographs.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Meadow's photography was participatory, something women on the farm could not only be a part of but have agency over.

Meadow Muska:

I took that camera and I wanted to photograph what I saw, which was amazing women who were strong and loving and accomplished and determined. I was so proud to be with them, and I wanted to present what I saw as the truth and the reality in contrast to what the culture and society believed and portrayed.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Meadow described one photo to me, she'd taken it at Rising Moon in 1974.

Meadow Muska:

Lisyli's holding the cat and Feather is leaping up to Selenkore or Robin Deeming, and they're standing in front of the shack that they pasted together, and there's a horse in the background because there's always a horse and they're not hugging, they're looking at each other or it's just a warm welcoming, "Oh, Meadow came." It's nice. It's just a friendly, this is who we are, and then oh, but it's not just who they are. I mean, Lisyli Harding had a master's from Minneapolis Institute of Art from that school right next door. These are accomplished women, and she wrote children's books. It's just she at that time did not choose to participate in what the society and culture had to offer at that time.

Chantel Rodríguez:

For years, these photos remained private. Either Meadow kept them herself or she gave them to the women pictured in the photos.

Meadow Muska:

If I had a really good photo, I would print it up and five by seven, cut half a piece of paper and print and give it to them. And so a lot of them got out and a lot of them got into archives without my name on it because who would ever know that it was that important. But yeah, I would share it with them. A lot of my photographs are now very important because there aren't a lot of photographs of lesbians in the '70s and '80s because you could be blackmailed or lose your job, you could lose your children your whole life. Violence could be involved. So in order to photograph my friends and myself, you really had to have a very strong level of trust and respect, and those photographs that I took, I kept confidential or secret for 40 plus years so that nobody would lose their children or their jobs or whatever.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Over time, her photos began to see the light of day, but not by her choice.

Meadow Muska:

My photographs, because I had given out individual prints to individual people, they were getting out there and without my name, and they were being published in TV and books and websites and archives, and so it was important for me to get ahead of that and get it copyrighted so that I could control. I mean, there could be other

people in that photograph that didn't want their photograph to be shared publicly, so by doing those things, then at least I have some control over what happens to those photographs.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Meadow wanted creative control over her work, but she also wanted to make sure that people got the chance to see these images, to see what life really looked like in these communities beyond what societal stereotypes might say.

Meadow Muska:

I always had a great respect and love for the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, so they had a new collector, a curator that they hired Casey Riley, and somehow I just felt a woman and I just felt I'm going to approach her and I'm going to see if she will allow my photographs because I have seen photographs of women in the '80s and they were like groupies for rock stars and derogatory positions as far as I'm concerned, and I just was infuriated to see that and think, oh, okay, people in the future are going to think that we in the '70s and '80s, they're going to see those images and they're not going to see my images.

And so I decided I'm going to go to the Minneapolis Institute of Art and I'm going to do whatever I have to do in order to yank my little five by seven inches paper prints and put them in front of Casey Riley and beg her to make this the image of what women and lesbians looked like. And she saw the photographs and she said, "Well, this never happens, but can you get your photographs together in six months and we'll have a show in 2019?" And we did. We were one of the top shows in 2019. It was like an award to get one of the top shows of all kinds of exhibitions. The show that Casey and I put together, Strong Women, Full of Love is the name of the show. I'm just really grateful to them.

Chantel Rodríguez:

For Meadow, her photographs highlight the women at the heart of these farms. Sharing these photos offers a window into the past and reminds us that these communities have always been present.

Meadow Muska:

Because we've been erased. If you think about that river, and like my grand aunt and her partner, Jeanetta, and my grandmother who was heterosexual, I mean a suffragette, I mean all these wonderful strong women, it's erased. It never happened, but we've always been there. And now when I'm doing my photographs, I don't think of just trying to connect with the intersectionality of the lesbians who are here now. I

want this saved so that it'll inspire and give strength to young women and lesbians in the alphabet for generations to come.

Leila Stallone:

It's just really inspiring to see Meadow's photos and the ways that she was able to capture joy, capture the ways that her friends and her community lived at these places. Her photos are very interesting to see as they tell a story themselves without the map, and the map is just there to give more context and to give a platform to some of her photos. I think all of the farms; like I personally am very interested in farming and living off of the land as well within queer and BIPOC communities in the present day, and it's really empowering to see how these women were able to have land, maintain land, build on their land, and be self-sufficient in these ways back in the 1970s.

It's important to really show that we care and we respect their story and honor their story and make note of maybe the pain and trauma that people have experienced, but also really highlight the work that people have done and people continue to do with their ideas, their passions, and whatever they're doing in their life. The biggest takeaway that I want for people to take away from the map is that queer history, LGBTQIA+ two-spirit history is everywhere. It's not just centralized within larger cities, and we do know this. We know a lot of history about maybe New York City or San Francisco and also the Twin Cities, but there is space and there is meaning and importance in archiving and showing that there are spaces outside of the Twin Cities area that relate to LGBTQIA+ history and two-spirit history.

I also want people to take away that it is an ongoing project that we want people to collaborate and engage with the map, not just by learning from the map, but talking to their own elders, their own community members, and to document it and also put their points on the map as well. We want this map to allow people to see their own hometowns and connect with their own hometowns or places that they grew up living in rural Minnesota or outside of the Twin Cities areas, and see that there is history, LGBTQIA+ and two-spirit history that exists on that land and in these spaces that they may or may not known to exist.

Chantel Rodríguez:

I asked Meadow to share what main message she hopes people will take away from her story and her photographs.

Meadow Muska:

Well, I also want to put out, okay, this is who we were in that period of time, but I mean, when I show these photographs and I talk about politics and the laws and what was happening, what I'm trying to communicate is, and the women or lesbians

or queers or however you want to describe yourself, you are the same as us. We're the same DNA, we are the same powerful leaders and social justice fighters. It's a stream. Just because we were born at a different time moment in time doesn't make us any different. If you look at the photographs, we're the same as the 20-year-olds now see us as yourself and all of the things that my great aunt was also a lesbian and she was a school teacher and her partner was the principal, and I look at them as amazing, accomplished women. There's a stream. Think of it as a river of amazing, strong women and be proud of what the past have accomplished and what those of us who stand up and decide to fight, what you're going to accomplish.

Chantel Rodríguez:

As for the map, what is in store for its future? Will stories keep being added?

Leila Stallone:

So currently we have around 115 entries points on our map, and we're expanding throughout our weeks until the launch. And then as it's going live, we are also asking community members, collaborators and groups to suggest sites to put on the map. So there are a lot of entries on the map, and we're wanting to get as many entries as we can on the map as this is an ongoing participatory project that we're working on there. There's been a lot of email correspondence that I have had with folks to either approve the writing that I've written and I've gathered through secondary sources, and then going to the individuals and asking permission to have their story on the map and also to make sure that the content that we're putting on the map is accurate and what they want to be published on the map.

Additionally, we've been doing some phone calls with some community members. We hope to expand to as many points on the map that the map can hold. We'd love to have a day where the map is just so filled with entries that we can't even see Minnesota, if that's even possible. That would be awesome. And then also have the map be a basis of people connecting with each other, having people utilize the map in ways where they're like, "Oh, hey, I didn't know that this organization like Trans Northland, which is in Duluth existed," or "Maybe this PFLAG I didn't know existed in my town." And having that kind of be a jumping point for people to start organizing in their own ways and create events, maybe around history of this history or just around their community and get to know people within different generations, not just their own.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The work that went into collecting these stories was clear. Not all photos have been well-preserved, and sometimes those with lived experience have passed on before they can share their stories or record an oral history, but the benefits of having these stories more readily available to the public are just as clear. It's the jumping off point

that Leila mentioned, the possibility of connecting across generations and geographies. Back in the Gale Family Library, the spread of the pins on the map drove home that the history of the LGBTQIA+ community is not only concentrated in urban areas, it encompasses the entire state. And this small network of pins of lesbian feminist cooperative farms is just one thread of it. Those farms did not emerge in a vacuum.

They were interconnected with other simultaneous movements and moments in history, like back to the land, counterculture, and women's rights. Meadow's photos offer insight into not just what these communities might have looked like, but how their members wanted to be seen. They were important examples of participatory history of people sharing their own personal memories, stories, and interpretations of their own pasts. The power of this type of history is its ability to paint a fuller picture of the past. It's a type of history each and every one of us can engage with each and every day. Every time we snap a photo or choose to record our stories or preserve objects we deem meaningful to our experiences. Take a look for yourself. Scroll through the stories. The project is stewarding or check out the map by following the link in the episode description.

You've been listening to Minnesota Unraveled: Pulling on the Threads of Minnesota history. I'm your host, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez. You can find more information on this episode, including transcripts, bibliographic resources, and MNopedia articles at our website, mnhs.org/unraveled. Minnesota Unraveled is produced by the Minnesota Historical Society in partnership with Pod People. Special thanks to our production team, Rebecca Chaisson, Angela Yih, and Brett Baldwin, and sound design and editing by Carter Wogahn, lead research by me, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez. Our theme music is Careless Wanderer by Arthur Benson. Funding for Minnesota Unraveled is provided by the state of Minnesota, the Legacy Amendment through the vote of Minnesotans on November 4th, 2008, and our generous donors and members. Thank you for listening. Until next time, stay curious and remember, the tapestries of history are all around you just waiting to be unraveled.