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**Title**

Rita Rippetoe Oral History Interview and Transcript

**Date**

August 4th, 2023

**Extant**

1 hour 49 minute audio file and 1 transcript

**Abstract**

In this oral history, Rita Rippetoe, early leader in the California Wiccan movement, discusses her family life and the varied lineages of Wiccan in California in the 1970s and 80s. These include her experiences with Nemeton, Ursa Maior - the first all-female circle (1973-1977), and then the New Reformed Orthodox Order of the Golden Dawn Silver Star coven.

**Biographical**

Rita Rippetoe is a noted author, scholar, and early leader in the Wiccan movement in California in the 1970s and 80s. She has published two books. The first is about detective fiction, *Booze and the Private Eye: Alcohol in the Hard-Boiled Novel*. The second book is *Reappraising Jane Duncan: Sexuality, Race, and Colonialism in the My Friends Novels*. She has been a passionate and unapologetic supporter of queer and trans rights for all of her adult life.

Rita was born in northern California in 1948. She has one sister who is so close in age (1 year 13 days) that people assumed they were twins. Her family lived in northern California until she was about ten years old. That is when her parents divorced, and the family moved to Los Angeles. While in Los Angeles, her mother fell in love with a salesman from British Columbia. When the salesman left Los Angeles, her mother and the two girls followed him. He told her mother he lived with his sister, niece, and nephew. Instead, the woman was his wife, and the children were his. During all this, her father sued for custody in the Canadian courts. He lost the case but instead won back his wife's heart. The reunified family moved back to Northern California, where Rita eventually graduated from Folsom High School.

She attended the University of California, Davis. It was there she met and roomed with two of her future spouses. They were Lynn Alcorn and Deborah Frankel. She married Lynn in her junior year. This was before Lynn started identifying as a woman. Lynn was admitted into what was then called the transexual program at Stanford University. The program involved counseling and Lynn living a year as a woman. The culmination of the program was gender reassignment surgery. Ultimately, the program's goal was for those in the program to integrate fully into society as women. The transition was difficult for Rita, even though she supported Lynn. One of the conditions of the Stanford program was that those transitioning had to divorce their opposite-sex spouses. One of the possible reasons was that if they were still married after the transition, their marriages would be homosexual ones, which were not yet legal in any state. In 1970, the possibility of such legal unions couldn't be imagined. This was an era when the police still actively raided gay bars. Stanford couldn't be seen as condoning illegal marriages. Rita and Lynn divorced amicably and remained friendly until Lynn's recent passing. The two continued to live together until they separated when Lynn left to study in Santa Cruz. Rita has always sought to honor Lynn's experience when speaking of her.

In between her marriages to Lynn and Deborah, she was married to Bob, a leader in the Wiccan movement in California. He was involved in a Gardnerian coven (The Diamond Bar Coven) in the British traditional witchcraft mold. She had three children with him: Robin, Roderick, and Rose. The marriage ended in divorce and Rita moved in with family to help her raise her children and start over.

The other great love of Rita's life is her current spouse, Deborah Frankel, whom she also met in college. At one point during college, Rita, Deborah, and Lynn shared a home together. Deborah left the house but stayed in contact with Rita. Deborah and Rita have a shared passion for the Wiccan/pagan movement.

After college, she moved to San Francisco. After working on her master's in literature at Sacramento State, she wrote her master's thesis on detective fiction. She eventually went on to do her Ph.D. at Reno State. She had initially intended to do her doctoral work on Arthurian tales. However, she was talked out of it by an advisor and ended up doing her dissertation on detective fiction. Her dissertation became the basis of her first book, *Booze and the Private Eye: Alcohol in the Hard-Boiled Novel*. Her intention in getting her Ph.D. was to become a professor. After some deliberation, she realized the life of a professor wasn't for her. Instead, she spent several years working for the Girl Scout organization in Sacramento. This fact points to her desire to empower all women.

The 1970s were a decade of sexual and spiritual exploration. Rita was originally a Christian who had spent time in Methodist, Presbyterian, and evangelical churches. At some point, Christianity ceased to resonate with her spirit. In the oral history, she wryly states: "I was sitting by the phone waiting for Jesus to ring, and he never did." This was not an uncommon sentiment in the 1970s when people were turning to alternative spiritualities in droves. This era was when Richard Bach's novella *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* was a bestseller. The novella revolves around a seagull who refuses to conform for the sake of conforming. Rita was much like the beloved seagull in her approach to Wicca and spirituality.

Rita's initial formal involvement with Wicca/Paganism came through the summer solstice ritual up in Ukiah, California, on the Nemeton. A nemeton (plural nemeta) is a sacred space in ancient Celtic (pre-Christian) religion. Nemetons have been primarily located in nature. Her initial connection to this tradition caused her to seek more profound experiences. She first found those more profound experiences in the Ursa Maior circle, of which she became a key member. The circle was initially made up of seven members. It was the first all-female circle in the San Francisco area. Its single-sex makeup sparked some controversy in the larger movement. The controversy was whether single-sex covens were covens or perhaps something else altogether. Rita was a powerful advocate for both mixed and single-sex covens. The controversy around single-sex covens comes from the hard stance Gerald Gardner had taken against them in his writings. We can see this, especially in the *Gardnerian Book Of Shadows*, where he writes: *.It has been found that this practice often causes a fondness between aspirant and tutor, and 'tis a cause of better results if this is so... And it is for this reason that a man may only be taught by a woman and a woman by a man, and that man and man, and woman and woman, should never attempt these practices together. And may all the Curses of the Mighty Ones be on any who make the attempt.*

Ursa Maior lasted from 1973 to 1977. Despite the group's short lifespan, they considerably influenced the burgeoning women's spirituality movement. The summer solstice ritual they led for 150 women at the Women's Spirituality Festival in Oregon in 1974 was especially powerful. The group didn't have a single influential leader like other organizations at the time but instead was run by the consensus of the members. Ursa Maior was never part of the Covenant of the Goddess, though they did have some overlapping members.

The New Reformed Orthodox Order of the Golden Dawn is an organization with daughter and granddaughter covens primarily in the Bay Area and scattered throughout the US and elsewhere. It has very little control over its covens. They are autonomous in much the same way that the historically congregationalist churches are. Rita eventually became a part of the NROOGD through the Silver Star coven. She was a member of Silver Star from its founding in 1976 into the early 1980s when the Silver Star coven disbanded after two of its key leaders moved. She ascended to the role of high priestess in July of 1978 after the original high priestess didn't return after her sabbatical. Her name in the craft was Tiponya. Her chosen name has its origins in Native American culture, where the name means Owl or wise one.

The alternative spiritualities of the 1970s (of which Paganism is an integral part) were generally more socially and sexually liberating than the mainline Christianity of which she was initially a part. They were open to the leadership of women and LGBTQIA folks. In the early 1970s, there were still several mainline denominations that stubbornly resisted the idea of women's ordination. By the late 70's in the US, all major mainline churches had started ordaining women. Rita's participation in several pioneering pagan organizations has helped shape the unique character of the movement today. It is because of the work of her and others that the movement became so empowering to women (particularly LGBTQIA women) who were marginalized in so many other religious organizations of the time.

## **Scope and Content**

In this oral history, author, scholar, and early leader in the Wiccan movement Rita Rippetoe discusses her life, families, and the varied lineages of Wiccan in California in the 1970s and 80s including her experience with Nemeton, then from 1973-1977 Ursa Maior the first all-female circle, and eventually the New Reformed Orthodox Order of the Golden Dawn Silver Star coven.

Michelle Mueller conducted and recorded this interview as part of a series of oral history interviews with LGBTQ Pagan leaders.

The biographical statement was written by Damian Baker for a Queer and Trans Theologies class at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities in 2023.

### **Access**

Open to all researchers.

### **Physical Access**

<https://www.lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/rita-rippetoe>

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### **Languages**

Collection material is in English

### **Custodial History**

This recording was given to LGBTQ-RAN archives by the interviewer.

### **Cite as**

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### **Tags**

Author/editor, Wiccan, Neo-Pagan/NewAge Movements/occultism/spirituality, Women's spirituality, Author/editor, California, Rippetoe, Rita.