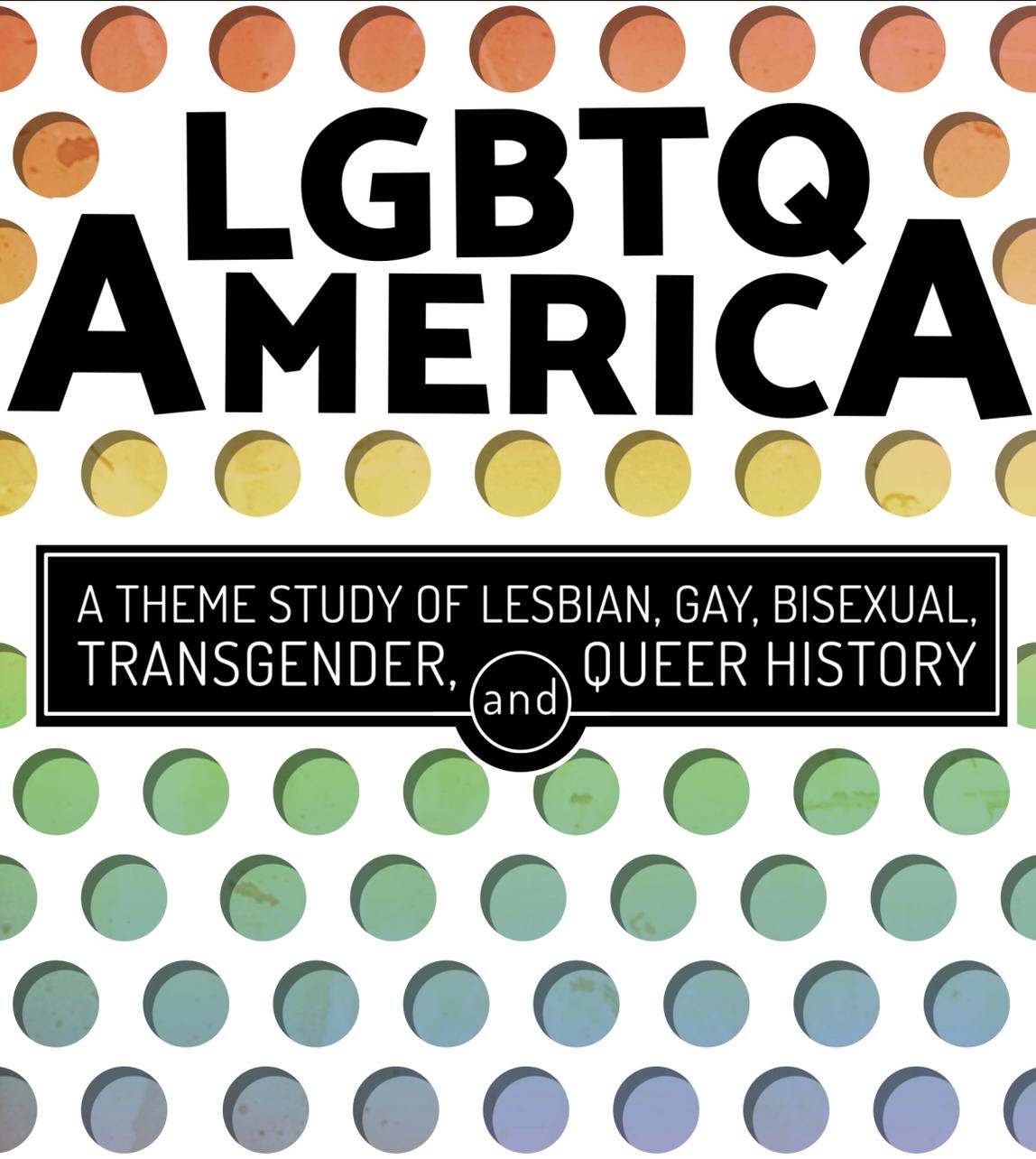


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LGBTQ AMERICA

A THEME STUDY OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL,
TRANSGENDER, and QUEER HISTORY

Edited by Megan E. Springate



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PLACES

Unlike the Themes section of the theme study, this Places section looks at LGBTQ history and heritage at specific locations across the United States. While a broad LGBTQ American history is presented in the Introduction section, these chapters document the regional, and often quite different, histories across the country. In addition to New York City and San Francisco, often considered the epicenters of LGBTQ experience, the queer histories of Chicago, Miami, and Reno are also presented.

28 QUEEREST LITTLE CITY IN THE WORLD: LGBTQ RENO

John Jeffrey Auer IV

Introduction

Researchers of LGBTQ history in the United States have focused predominantly on major cities such as San Francisco and New York City. This focus has led researchers to overlook a rich tradition of LGBTQ communities and individuals in small to mid-sized American cities that date from at least the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century. From Buffalo to St. Louis and beyond, there are many examples of small but thriving communities from this time period.¹ In the midst of these overlooked and under-researched places stands Reno,

¹ See, for example, the 1930s-1960s lesbian community of Buffalo, New York documented in Madeline D. Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993). For an example of a homosexual man living in St. Louis at the turn of the century and his experiences with seeking out other gay men, see Claude Hartland, *Claude Hartland: The Story of a Life: For the Consideration of the Medical Fraternity* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1985). Mid-sized cities in the south including Atlanta, Miami, and New Orleans are covered in James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Press, 2001); see also Capó (this volume). For a history of Minneapolis and Saint Paul, see the Twin Cities GLBT History Project, *Queer Twin Cities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). For an extensive history of Seattle, see Gary L. Atkins, *Gay Seattle: Stories of Exile and Belonging* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003).

Nevada. Reno has historically prided itself on being different from other cities in the United States especially since becoming the divorce capital of the US in the 1910s and legalizing gambling in 1931 when it was illegal in every other state in the Union.²

People with minority sexual and gender expressions lived in the American West well before European colonization. Native American two-spirit people lived and continue to live in the American West.³ Written accounts from California in the 1700s describe two-spirit people's interactions with colonists and missionaries.⁴ Ethnographic accounts give several terms used by the Northern Paiute (who currently and historically have lived in the Reno area) to describe two-spirit people.⁵ As recently as the mid-1990s, a two-spirit person who grew up in the area found it largely intolerant.⁶

With the California Gold Rush of 1849 came an explosion of growth into the far western states through the early 1860s. During this time, western states were not involved in heavily regulating the behavior of their citizens, as was increasingly the case in the east. With this lack of regulation came more opportunities for same-sex relationships and dress-based gender transgressions. In the days following the Gold Rush, there were often significantly more men than women in the west. For example, the ratio of men to women in California in 1860 was twenty-three to one; in Colorado at the same time, it was thirty-four to one.⁷ This imbalance led

² Alicia Barber, *Reno's Big Gamble: Image and Reputation in the Biggest Little City* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2008).

³ See Roscoe (this volume) for more information on two-spirit people and history.

⁴ See Ramón Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991) and Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lange, eds., *Two Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

⁵ Terms include *t'ūbās* and *moronic noho*. Will Roscoe, *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 220.

⁶ Sandra Faiman-Silva, "Anthropologists and Two Spirit People: Building Bridges and Sharing Knowledge," *Anthropology Faculty Publications*, Paper 23 (Bridgewater, MA: Bridgewater State University Virtual Commons, 2011), accessed September 19, 2015,

http://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1020&context=anthro_fac

⁷ More information about LGBTQ activity in the West can be found in Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York: WW Norton, 2000); Mary Ann Irwin and James F. Brooks, eds., *Woman and Gender in the American West* (Albuquerque: University of New

to men engaging in same-sex dancing, men dressed as women dancing with other men in masculine dress, women dressing as men, and speculation of same-sex sexual activity as well. Early European inhabitants of the Reno, Nevada area had appeared as early as the 1850s. In 1868, with the coming of the transcontinental railroad, the city was established.⁸

References to individuals that we would now think of as LGBTQ appear as early as 1882 in the local paper, the *Reno Evening Gazette*, which warned men that a Nevada statute banning cross-dressing would be enforced from that point forward by automatic arrest.⁹ As Peter Boag writes, “the adoption and popularizing of a law prohibiting men from donning female attire on the streets suggests that the practice had become noticeable.”¹⁰ As the American West was increasingly settled and its cities grew, the freewheeling attitude of the past gave way to a tightening mindset leading western states to implement stricter regulations of same-sex sexuality and cross-dressing. This included anti-sodomy laws targeted predominantly as a means to punish homosexual behavior in the context of both Chinese Exclusion and the rapid state-building that was underway.¹¹ In 1863, San Francisco was granted powers by the state to curb what was seen as “problem bodies.”¹² The groups by the city at this point were: “cross-dressers, prostitutes, disabled beggars, and Chinese immigrants.”¹³ Nevada’s growth as a state during the late 1800s and early 1900s fueled considerable legislation that focused on reigning in what was seen as transgressive racial and gendered behavior.

Mexico Press, 2004); and Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

⁸ Barber, *Reno’s Big Gamble*, 14.

⁹ “Look Out,” *Reno Evening Gazette*, September 9, 1882.

¹⁰ Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs*, 67.

¹¹ A comprehensive analysis of anti-sodomy laws in the United States is covered in detail in William N. Eskridge Jr., *Dishonorable Passions: Sodomy Laws in America, 1861-2003* (New York: Viking Press, 2008); see also Stein, (this volume).

¹² Clare Sears. *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, And Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

¹³ Sears, *Arresting Dress*, 67.

For example the Nevada Territorial Legislature was the first law banning whites and “Chinese” from marrying in 1861.¹⁴

Reno has long prided and promoted itself as a city distinct from others. First it was as a western railroad town and then, during the 1910s and 1920s, it became known as the “divorce capital of the world,” due to its lax residency laws. Gradually, Reno developed a worldwide image and reputation as a city that did not (and does not) abide by more broadly accepted moral codes. By 1931, with the Great Depression and the city in financial crisis, Reno turned to legalizing gambling.¹⁵ This helped cement Reno’s identity as a city where “anything goes,” and where people could escape the social, gender, and sexual-normative pressures common in other, older cities. Much of this was an image promoted to draw tourists versus reality for those living day to day; however, Reno has a long standing history of live-and-let-live libertarianism that has allowed more space for those who chose (and choose) to live outside society’s norms.¹⁶

From the 1940s through the 1990s, Reno’s LGBTQ community and geography shifted from isolated places of performance and audience to more permanent places of business and tourism. Reno as a city has remained relatively small but has an outsize reputation in relation to its actual size. Its moniker, “The Biggest Little City in the World,” actually does reflect people’s perceptions of Reno. Yet Reno, like many small cities, does not have as large an LGBTQ population as that found in big cities. As a result, these smaller cities tend to have had, and continue to have, more integrated LGBTQ communities.

Reno, like Nevada, has a long history in the twentieth century of not being ethnically diverse. Some of this is a result of the extreme policing and segregation that went on in the state before the casinos deregulated

¹⁴ Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law, and the Making of Race in America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 81.

¹⁵ Barber, *Reno’s Big Gamble*.

¹⁶ For an in-depth analysis, see Don W. Driggs and Leonard E. Goodall, *Nevada and Politics: Conservatism in an Open Society* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

in 1960.¹⁷ According to the 1960 census, only 3,466 (4.1 percent) of metropolitan Reno's 84,743 residents were black and otherwise nonwhite.¹⁸ A decade later, the proportion of white to nonwhite residents had barely shifted: 5,144 (4.2 percent) of the city's 115,924 residents were enumerated as black and otherwise not white.¹⁹ These African American and other nonwhite populations include people living in Reno's Chinatown and the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony which is located in the center of the city.²⁰ These demographics are consistent with other smaller to midsize cities in the West, and resulted in these cities having overwhelmingly white LGBTQ communities at the time.²¹

A longtime resident of the city, Keith Ann Libby, who moved to Reno in 1962, recalls different racial and ethnic groups being accepted in the Reno gay bars. He did remember issues related to transphobia and some discrimination against lesbians, but he countered that the gathering places were always about the bottom line; ultimately those groups were served, even if not welcomed, at the bars. In general, Libby's memories are of Reno's LGBTQ community being mixed in all senses of the word: racially and ethnically, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, and queer people as well as some straights mixing and socializing together, with no major problems.²²

Historically, Reno is part of a larger geographic and cultural area that includes Lake Tahoe and San Francisco. From its earliest days, it has been a transportation hub connecting the West to the Midwest and East. First, it was a growing stop on the transcontinental railroad, and later became an important city along Interstate 80 that connects San Francisco and New York City. The growth of Reno's LGBTQ community was fueled in part by its proximity and easy transportation to San Francisco, which after World War

¹⁷ Michael W. Bowers, *The Sagebrush State: Nevada's History, Government, and Politics*, Wilbur S. Shepperson Series in Nevada History (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1996).

¹⁸ *Demographic Trends for Metropolitan Areas, 1960-1970*, Final Report PH(2)-1 United States (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971).

¹⁹ *Demographic Trends for Metropolitan Areas*.

²⁰ Reno-Sparks Indian Colony website, accessed September 29, 2015, <http://www.rsic.org>

²¹ *Demographic Trends for Metropolitan Areas*.

²² Keith Ann Libby, in phone interview with the author, September 21, 2015.

It saw an explosion in LGBTQ residents.²³ This chapter looks at the history of Reno's LGBTQ communities through its performance spaces, bars and baths, events, groups, and organizations.

Performance Spaces

Performances in Reno from the 1930s through the 1980s were the first inklings of a highly visible presence of cross-dressing, drag queens, and transgender members in the community. From the first show in a small out-of-the-way saloon in 1935 to a major show at a casino in 1975 the performances that took place in Reno helped bring a wider queer visibility to Reno.

Belle Livingstone's Cow Shed

Emerging out of 1920s and 1930s New York City were "Pansy Craze" theatrical cabaret shows. Performers pushed gender boundaries by dressing as different genders, and by singing songs and making jokes about homosexual life. These shows were so popular that, as George Chauncey notes, "In 1930-1931, clubs with pansy acts became the hottest in town."²⁴ This movement gained national importance: it was the first time in American history that LGBTQ people participated in the broader American culture by appearing on cabaret stages in large numbers.²⁵

In the early 1930s, police began to crack down on these performances especially in places such as New York City, where city leaders became

²³ To see how San Francisco, and Reno by extension, was situated spatially and temporally in the American West, see Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

²⁴ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 314.

²⁵ For documentation about this period of American history, see chapter fifteen of Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2000).



Figure 1: Former location of Belle Livingstone's Cow Shed (now demolished), July 2015. Photo courtesy of Nicholas-Martin Kearney.

more conservative as the Great Depression wore on.²⁶ As a result of this crackdown, performers took their shows on the road to escape the harassment. In 1935, famed cross-dressing performer Ray/Rae Bourbon (stage name of Ramón Ícares) played at Belle Livingstone's Cowshed (Figure 1).²⁷ The Cowshed was located on a small ranch, and offered a casino and live entertainment.²⁸ Despite its reputation as the emerging divorce capital during the 1910s, Reno was very small in population and was not part of the vaudeville circuit where there was a long history of cross-dressing performances. By the 1920s and into 1932, Reno's population was growing, and venues—working to draw customers from the

²⁶ For example, George Chauncey covers this period of time and the crackdown in New York City, *Gay New York*, 331-354.

²⁷ On Bourbon, see Don Romesburg, "Longevity and Limits in Rae Bourbon's Life in Motion," in Trystan Cotten, ed., *Transgender Migrations: The Bodies, Borders and Politics of Transition*, New Directions in American History (New York: Routledge, 2011). The date of Bourbon's performance is based on an email correspondence between Bourbon scholar Don Romesburg and the author on March 28, 2015. The Cowshed was located at 2295 South Virginia Street, Reno, Nevada.

²⁸ Kling, *Biggest Little City*, 9.

divorce trade—expanded their performance options in nightclubs and casinos. Despite an exhaustive search of nightlife advertisements, the first cross-dressing performance or pansy act in Reno appears to have been by Bourbon in 1935, despite the fact that the Nevada papers covered the pansy craze performances in New York in the 1930-1932 period.

From Bourbon's 1935 performance on, Reno has had a history of cross-dressing acts appearing in casino showrooms. By 1937, the Black Derby in Reno²⁹ featured a young female impersonator named Billy Givens who earned rave reviews; her act did not follow Bourbon's older, more risqué style.³⁰ Bourbon's performance rises to national significance level as an example of "Pansy Craze" acts featuring members of the LGBTQ communities appearing and spreading across the country into smaller and midsize cities in the 1930s. Bourbon's performance is similarly groundbreaking at the state level as one of the first "pansy craze" performances in Nevada. The Cowshed was in business on and off from 1931 through 1937. It subsequently burned down, and is currently the site of a shopping mall.³¹

Riverside Hotel and the Jewel Box Revue Controversy: First Controversy over Drag Acts in the State of Nevada

The Riverside Hotel (Figure 2), located along the banks of the Truckee River, was built in 1927 to cater to the booming divorce trade that emerged in Reno in the 1900s. Divorce hotels, divorce apartments, and divorce ranches have a long association in community lore with lesbians.³² As places where women lived for up to six months at a time in order to

²⁹ The Black Derby was located at 1410 East Fourth Street in Reno, Nevada.

³⁰ "Black Derby Has New Show for Coronation Week," *Nevada State Journal*, May 8, 1937. Ray Bourbon was noted for his especially vulgar shows. They were so risqué that he was banned from playing the famous Garden of Allah female impersonator club in Seattle the 1950s. See Don Paulson and Roger Simpson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah: A Gay Cabaret in Seattle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 38.

³¹ Kling, *Biggest Little City*, 110.

³² There is very little written on these places and their association with lesbians. For an article on the general divorce trade in Reno, see Mella Rothwell Harmon, "Getting Renovated: Reno Divorces in the 1930s," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, Spring 1999. The Riverside Hotel is located at 17 South Virginia Street, Reno, Nevada.

meet residency requirements for their divorces, strong networks of women developed. The mythology of these places has over time become powerful in national lesbian feminist networks.³³

In February 1962, the Riverside had scheduled a performance of Doc Benner's and Danny Brown's touring Jewel Box Revue, which had its home base in Miami, Florida.³⁴ The Jewel Box Revue was a popular cabaret act of female impersonators that began in 1939, just as "pansy craze" shows were changing their billing to female impersonator or drag shows."³⁵ By the 1950s, amid Cold War homophobia, transphobia, and "sex panics," these shows faced an increasing police clampdown. Pressure grew



Figure 2: Riverside Hotel, July 2015. Photo courtesy of Nicholas-Martin Kearney.

³³ The film, *Desert Hearts*, directed by Donna Deitch (Los Angeles: Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1985), is set in 1959 Reno, and is an example of this.

³⁴ See Capó (this volume).

³⁵ "The Jewel Box Revue," Queer Music Heritage website, accessed April 19, 2015, <http://queermusicheritage.com>.

specifically on city and state leaders to ban cross-dressing performances.³⁶

The Revue opened its run at the Riverside, but from the beginning there was trouble. The Reno City Council cited calls from people complaining about the show as a reason for closing it. On February 26, 1962, the council passed an ordinance that made it unlawful for establishments with liquor licenses to present floor shows featuring impersonations of the opposite sex.³⁷ This fit into national patterns of LGBTQ retreat from the public sphere during the Cold War.³⁸ Clearly, Cold War restrictions “trickled down” to the state and local levels, playing out dramatically in venues driven by aggressive tourism and bold entertainment. The Cold War in Nevada accelerated the military presence in the state especially with the opening of the Nevada Test Site in 1951, which would be the site of atomic bomb testing throughout the Cold War.³⁹ Nevada Senator Patrick McCarran was an active Cold War participant who played a key role in passing a bill in 1952 that banned homosexuals from immigrating to the United States.⁴⁰

Harrah’s Casino – Frisco Follies – First Major Drag Show at Major Nevada Casino

In 1974 William Harrah, owner of Harrah’s Casino (Figure 3), saw the “Frisco Follies Grand Illusion” drag show starring Jamie James in San Francisco.⁴¹ Harrah opened his first casino in Reno in 1937. Over the decades he expanded his operation, and the growth of his casino along with other entertainment venues including the Riverside, brought celebrities and audiences in increasing numbers to town from the 1930s

³⁶ Senelick, *The Changing Room*, 382-384.

³⁷ “Council Holds Stand to Ban Local Revue,” *Reno Evening Gazette*, February 26, 1962.

³⁸ For example, during this time, the federal government was engaging in periodic purges of homosexual men and lesbians from civil service jobs. See David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

³⁹ A. Constandina Titus, *Bombs in the Backyard: Atomic Testing and American Politics*, Nevada Studies in History and Pol Sci (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2001).

⁴⁰ Eskridge, *Dishonorable Passions*, 102.

⁴¹ Harrah’s Casino is located at 219 North Center Street, Reno, Nevada.



Figure 3: Harrah's Casino, July 2015. Photo courtesy of Nicholas-Martin Kearney.

through the 1940s. Unlike neighboring states such as California, which banned gambling, Nevada embraced it. By 1974, Reno had become a gambler's paradise with top-notch entertainment.

Harrah was so impressed with the Follies that he brought them to his casino at Lake Tahoe in January 1975.⁴² The show was so well received there that Harrah booked them into his Reno location the following month.⁴³ The Follies was popular with casino patrons and ran at the Reno casino through 1981. Many members of Reno's white gay male community performed in the show along with straight female chorus girls. The men in the show identified as gay men in drag.⁴⁴ Symbolically, the

⁴² Bob Alessandrelli, "Frisco Follies Grand Illusion Taking Tahoe By Storm," *Reno Evening Gazette*, January 17, 1975.

⁴³ "Entertainment," *Reno Evening Gazette*, March 21, 1975.

⁴⁴ Jack Edwards, in phone interview with the author, September 30, 2015.

success of the Follies indicates a revived acceptance of cross-dressing in Reno after the many years of its prohibition since the Jewel Box Revue controversy of the early 1960s. This shift was part of a larger transition away from the Cold War homophobia of the 1950s and 1960s and the forcing of drag shows off of main stages in the late 1930s and 1940s.⁴⁵

The success of the Frisco Follies at Harrah's indicates a gradual reversal and redirection of attitudes toward the LGBTQ community. By 1974, Frisco Follies' popularity led to its booking in a prime theater of one of the major casinos in Reno, putting the act on a national stage. Frisco Follies became the first transgender act to be booked in a leading casino in Nevada.⁴⁶ Frisco Follies is a trendsetter among the many new heralded mainstream drag shows appearing throughout the United States in the 1970s. It brought added attention to and appreciation of Nevada and Reno as the first celebrated mainstream drag show to play a major casino in the state. This is important as the event of Frisco Follies took place at Harrah's Casino in Reno.⁴⁷

Bars and Baths

Reno bars were the nucleus of social networks for the LGBTQ community in Reno from the 1960s through the 1990s. It wasn't until the 2000s that non-bar based social organizations were formed in the city. Bars and baths were both incredibly important, providing relatively safe places for meeting and socializing at a time when the broader community was hostile towards the LGBTQ community.

⁴⁵ For the trajectory of drag show bookings, see Senelick, *The Changing Room*.

⁴⁶ Although it would have been considered a drag act from the point of view of the casino and audiences, many of the performers that worked shows like this in the 1970s and 1980s would now be considered transgender.

⁴⁷ Jonnie Clasen, "Among the Stars," *Harrah-Scope*, January 1976, 12; and Edwards.

The Reno Bar – Oldest Mixed Bar in Reno

Known today as Abby's Highway 40 (Figure 4), in the 1960s and 1970s this was the Reno Bar.⁴⁸ The building was originally constructed in 1900 as a single-family home.⁴⁹ By 1964, it housed a mixed bar that served mostly heterosexual people during the day and an LGBTQ clientele of predominantly gay men in the evenings. It was referenced in 1970 as being the oldest gay bar in Reno.⁵⁰ In 1970, two gay men traveling from San Francisco to Reno described the Reno Bar as "... an old bar and clean.



Figure 4: Former location of the Reno Bar, now Abby's Highway 40, July 2015. Photo courtesy of Nicholas-Martin Kearney.

⁴⁸ The bar is located at 424 East Fourth Street, Reno, Nevada.

⁴⁹ "Real Property Assessment Data," Washoe County website, accessed April 1, 2015, <http://www.washoecounty.us/assessor/cama>

⁵⁰ Don Collins, "Doing Reno on \$17," *Vector*, March 1970, 19. The Reno Bar is consistently listed in gay guides of the time as a "mixed" bar. Due to prevailing sexism and racism during the 1960s and 1970s, gay guides rarely specifically mention the presence of nonwhite, transgender people, or lesbians in their listings. The only times they are referenced is if the place is uniquely patronized by that group. For example, lesbians are listed as a clientele for Kaye's Happy Landing in Phoenix in *Barfly '73* (Los Angeles: Advocate Publications, 1973).

But it has a certain charm all its own. In addition to being the only gay bar in Reno to have a pool table, we also found it to be the campiest. When the dancing on the bar started, there was LeRoy dodging glasses with the best.”⁵¹ This location has housed a straight bar since the 1980s.

Before the 1960s, it was rare to find bars in America outside major cities such as New York that catered exclusively to an LGBTQ clientele.⁵² Until the 1970s, most bars in the United States that served LGBTQ communities did so as gay-friendly, but predominantly heterosexual bars. LGBTQ constituents chose bars to patronize in small groups, pretending to be straight and fitting in with whatever circumstances and prudence required of them. These became known as “mixed” bars.⁵³ As the 1960s progressed, more and more mixed bars appeared in urban areas around the country; influenced by the emerging gay liberation movement, an increasing number of these began to be patronized exclusively by LGBTQ people.⁵⁴ The Reno Bar is a good example of “mixed” bars in the pre-gay liberation era, and is of national importance as a representative of such bars in smaller American cities as well as state and local importance as the oldest “mixed” bar in Reno and one of the earliest in the state.

Club Baths

The Club Baths (Figure 5) opened on May 17, 1964.⁵⁵ Owned by local gay man Dale Bentley, the Club Baths was the first exclusively gay bathhouse in Reno. Opened at a time when sex acts between men were illegal in every state in the Union except Illinois,⁵⁶ this place provided a

⁵¹ Collins, *Ibid.*

⁵² For examples of pre-1960s gay bars in New York City, see Charles Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis: The Landmark History of Gay Life in America* (New York: Grove Press, 1997), 106-107.

⁵³ This is explained in detail in James Lord, *My Queer War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).

⁵⁴ For more on this, see Eric Marcus, *Making Gay History: The Half-Century Fight for Lesbian and Gay Equal Rights* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002).

⁵⁵ “New Reno Firms Receive Licenses,” *Nevada State Journal*, May 17, 1964. Club Baths first appears in gay city guides in the 1965 International Guild Guide, and appears every year in the *Bob Damron’s Address Book* (San Francisco: Bob Damron Enterprises, 1966-1993) from 1966-1989. The Club Baths is located at 1020 West Second Street, Reno, Nevada.

⁵⁶ Eskridge, *Dishonorable Passions*, 124-127.



Figure 5: Former location of Club Baths, now Steve's, July 2015. Photo courtesy of Nicholas-Martin Kearney.

safe environment for gay men to meet each other away from straight society, and an alternative to public cruising which could (and did) lead to arrest and harassment. Beginning in the 1970s, Club Baths advertised in gay publications including the magazines *California Scene* and *Data Boy*, and in the 1979 program for the Reno Gay Rodeo.⁵⁷

Commercial bathhouses first appeared in American cities in the 1890s and provided the general populace—who otherwise may not have had access to bathing facilities—a place to bathe in a safe, gender-segregated environment. Shortly after bathhouses appeared, some became known as covert meeting grounds for men seeking sex with one another. Which became sites of same-sex encounters and which ones did not seemed to rest purely on the whims of whether or not the owners and management

⁵⁷ *California Scene*, June 1974, 40; *Data Boy*, December 15, 1977, 19; and *Reno Gay Rodeo Program*, 1979.

of the baths decided to look the other way or to tolerate this activity to gain revenue. By the 1920s and 1930s, many gay bathhouses were permitting sex “in closed and locked cubicles.”⁵⁸

The Club Baths was located in what was previously a single-family residence. For the first decades of existence it looked like a single-family home. Why Bentley chose to open the bathhouse in a private residence is unknown. One likely scenario is that at the time, the house was not within the city limits of Reno and thus fell under the relatively lax policing of the county sheriff and not the more stringent policing by the city police.⁵⁹ During the 1980s, a new roof and siding changed the façade of the building to its current, more industrial appearance.

The bathhouses at this location have always operated as private clubs. This designation allows more activities and less strict clothing requirements than if it was a public business. This is a common legal strategy for “alternative” businesses that would otherwise get shut down for indecency. The club allowed men to register as members using false names to help protect their privacy in a climate where being known (or thought) to be gay was grounds for loss of jobs, housing, and children, among other forms of discrimination. While bathhouses (and bars) offered some protection from discrimination and harassment on one hand, they themselves were also sites of exclusion and discrimination. In the 1970s and 1980s, gay bathhouses and bars around the country were sites of protest for their racial and gender discrimination (requiring men of color and effeminate men/transgender men to provide more identification than other patrons, or excluding them altogether). There are no written records of these kinds of protests against the Club Baths. On trips during the 2000s there were a wide mix of race/ethnicities patronizing the place as

⁵⁸ For more in-depth analysis on bathhouses becoming places where gay men congregated, see Allan Bérubé, “*The History of Gay Bathhouses*,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 44, no. 3/4 (2003).

⁵⁹ A similar pattern appeared elsewhere, as in Los Angeles, where the unincorporated area of West Hollywood emerged as a gay enclave as it was policed by the county sheriff. See Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

well as effeminate/transgender people being represented as opposed to their being absent at Los Angeles bathhouses during the same period.⁶⁰

Club Baths was renamed Jeff's Gym in 1989, and became Steve's (no "gym") in the early 1990s.⁶¹ Advertisements for Jeff's Gym and Steve's are found in the local *Gay Life Reno* magazine, the Reno Gay Rodeo Programs from 1980-1984, and Nevada-based *Bohemian Bugle*.⁶² The bathhouse remains in business as Steve's, and is the second oldest still-operating gay bathhouse in the United States.⁶³ Club Baths is also the first exclusively gay bathhouse in the state of Nevada and in the local Reno area.

Dave's VIP – The Longest Operating LGBTQ Bar in the State of Nevada

Located at 3001 West Fourth Street, Dave's VIP was a motel and gay bar complex (Figure 6). In 1950, a motel was built at this location; at the time, what is now West Fourth Street was part of US 40, the main highway connecting Reno and Las Vegas.⁶⁴ The motel catered to the increasing number of tourists traveling by car by offering affordable lodging options. The development of Dave's at this location is part of the growth of gay tourist destinations in the West in general but also general tourism in the western United States.⁶⁵

In 1962, construction started on Interstate 80, which pulled traffic off of US 40 and caused many businesses along it (including the motel) to decline and fail. In 1965 Dave Kirkcaldy and Rex Allen reopened the motel

⁶⁰ Based on informal conversations between author and patrons between 2005 and the present.

⁶¹ *Bob Damron's Address Book*.

⁶² *Gay Life Reno*, November 1984, 8; *Reno Gay Rodeo Programs*, 1980-1984; *Bohemian Bugle*, June 1987, 20; and *Bohemian Bugle*, May 1989, 19.

⁶³ Based on a survey of bathhouses listed online as of October 18, 2015.

⁶⁴ "Real Property Assessment Data".

⁶⁵ For a broader context regarding the growth of non-LGBTQ tourism in the American West in the twentieth century, see David Wrobel and Patrick Long, eds., *Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2001); and Susan Sessions Rugh, *Are We There Yet? The Golden Age of American Family Vacations* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2008).



Figure 6: Former location of Dave's VIP, July 2015. Photo courtesy of Nicholas-Martin Kearney.

as the Westside Motel, specifically as a place for gay and other same-sex seeking men to stay on their travels.⁶⁶ This was part of a larger trend in the United States that began in the 1960s.⁶⁷ In 1966, they opened a mixed bar for gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, drag queens and others, and called the complex Dave's VIP Resort.⁶⁸ They advertised in gay travel guides and in gay magazines including the popular San Francisco publication, *Vector*.⁶⁹ It was Reno's first gay-owned and operated hotel.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ *International Guild Guide* (Washington, DC: Guild Press, 1965).

⁶⁷ For a history of this phenomenon, see Amin Ghaziani, *There Goes the Gayborhood?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁶⁸ While Dave's VIP was ostensibly open to all members of the LGBTQ community, there are accounts of discrimination against lesbians and transgender people in the 1960s and 1970s. A transgender man who was a patron during this time had harsh words for the co-partner Rex Allen, who he characterized as disliking lesbians and transgender people yet they would be allowed entry because he always wanted to keep the business afloat and couldn't turn away customers. He also remembers Dave's being racially mixed as all other places, specifically that he would attend Dave's with a group of Native American friends. Keith Ann Libby, in interview with the author, July 3, 2015.

⁶⁹ *Bob Damron's Address Book*; and *Vector* issues March – December 1967. Bob Damron Guides played an important role in gay tourism from the 1960s-1990s. During this period, LGBTQ travelers

A 1969 article references Dave's "famous V.I.P. room," and describes the expansion of the business: "The motel, long popular with the Reno crowd and visitors from Northern and Southern California, is taking on the appearance of a resort."⁷¹ Amenities included a disco, a pool, and a Jacuzzi. By 1975, Dave's had expanded to include a bathhouse on premises, and was promoting itself nationally in advertisements in the glossy gay magazine, *Mandate*.⁷² It was also profiled that year in the new gay travel magazine, *Ciao*, as "The Number One spot."⁷³ The profile describes the clientele as, "All types – butch cyclists, queens, gals, drags, cowboys, gamblers and the like. The average age is about 22. Although it isn't a large bar, it can get very crowded at night...Incidentally, some of the friendliest and most beautiful people in Reno go here."⁷⁴

By 1988, Dave's VIP Resort had been sold and reconfigured. While the motel continued to let rooms to LGBTQ travelers, the bar, renamed Visions, became the focus of the business. They continued to receive national attention, and in 1989 national gay glossy magazine *In Touch* described Visions as having "a very nice bar and good size dance floor. But it also has a nice comfortable 'living room' section to have a quiet drink, and an outdoor pool where parties are held in warm weather."⁷⁵ The motel closed in the 1990s, and units were turned into private apartments. The bar went through many owners and name changes until, known as Reflections, it closed in 2009. At that time it was the oldest continuously-open gay-owned and operated bar in Reno.

Dave's VIP made it possible for the gay male community to stay safely when travelling in and around Reno, which in turn, encouraged the growth

faced outright discrimination when travelling and needed information on safe places to go, and the Damron Guides filled this role, much as the Green Guides did for African American travelers from the 1930s through the early 1960s.

⁷⁰ For an in-depth discussion of LGBTQ travel history, see Gordon Waitt and Kevin Markwell, *Gay Tourism: Culture and Context* (New York: Haworth Press, 2006); and Stephen Clift, Michael Luongo, and Carry Callister, *Gay Tourism: Culture, Identity, and Sex* (London: Continuum, 2002).

⁷¹ "Dave's Reno," *Vector*, July 1969, 25.

⁷² *Mandate*, October 1975, 68.

⁷³ Bill Josephs, "Gay Reno," *Ciao*, June 1975, 16.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Ron Thomas, "Reno: Biggest Little City," *In Touch*, 88.

of gay male tourism in the area. It was one of the early members of the San Francisco-based Tavern Guild, the first gay business organization that formed and bound together to combat police corruption in Northern California and Northern Nevada.⁷⁶ This place is a national reminder of how LGBTQ tourism began to prosper in the United States during the 1960s. Further, it stands as one of the first three gay-owned and operated LGBTQ bars in the state of Nevada, and as the very first gay-owned and operated LGBTQ bar in the history of Reno.

Club 99 – The Second-Longest Operating Gay Bar in the State of Nevada

Club 99 (Figure 7) opened in 1971.⁷⁷ During this period, which followed the Stonewall Riots, many mixed clubs of previous generations, like the Reno Bar and low-profile gay bars like Dave’s VIP, were replaced by higher-visibility venues bars in urban areas. Club 99 was one of these, located on Virginia Street, one of downtown Reno’s main thoroughfares. This location in the heart of the Midtown District reflected a newly-confident, much less-guarded LGBTQ community starting to socialize openly in public places. During this transition to more visible clubs after Stonewall, many bars across the country became more gender specific in their clientele, geared towards gay men or women, and were more likely to exclude gender nonconforming people.⁷⁸ In Reno, this separation of clientele did not occur until the 1990s.

The business was known as Pop’s 99 in 1980 and 1981, Club 99 from 1982 through 1984, and the Ten99 Club from 1985.⁷⁹ By 1989, photographs show renovations to Club Ten99, its name painted in large

⁷⁶ Boyd, 223-224.

⁷⁷ Bob Damron, “Travel Tips,” *California Scene*, January 1972. Club 99 opened at 1099 South Virginia Street, Reno, Nevada.

⁷⁸ For examples of how this played out in cities across the US, see Donald F. Reuter, *Greetings from the Gayborhood: A Look Back at the Golden Age of Gay Neighborhoods* (New York: Abrams Image, 2008). Lesbian separatism emerged in the early 1970s. For the beginning of the lesbian separatist movement, see Del Martin, “Is That All There is?” *The Ladder*, December 1970, 4-6.

⁷⁹ Bob Damron’s *Address Books*, 1980-1993.



Figure 7: Former location of Club 99, now the Ten99 Club, July 2015. Photo courtesy of Nicholas-Martin Kearney.

graphic lettering on the windowless sides of the building and a sign hanging from a nearby utility pole.⁸⁰ In 2010, the author visited Club Ten99, which appeared to have not changed much, if at all, since 1989. Dark and enclosed inside, the club had no windows open to the outside. This is not unusual for early bars that had covered windows and discreet entrances to help protect their clientele from gawkers and harassment. In 1972, the Twin Peaks Tavern in San Francisco became the first gay bar to have open plate glass windows.⁸¹ In 2011, the Ten99 Club closed, and was replaced by straight bar called Chapel. Renovations by Chapel included open windows and a patio.⁸²

This location was an LGBTQ bar for forty years, making it one of the longest-operating gay/LGBTQ bars in the state of Nevada. When it closed

⁸⁰ Thomas, *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Marisa Lagos, "Twin Peaks Tavern – gay bar, historic landmark," *SF Gate*, January 19, 2013, accessed September 6, 2015, <http://www.sfgate.com/politics/article/Twin-Peaks-Tavern-gay-bar-historic-landmark-4208442.php>

⁸² The date of the club's closing is based on "Tronix closes after 11 years as Reno joins national trend," *TheRenoGayPage*, February 26, 2015, accessed September 5, 2015, <https://therenogaypage.wordpress.com/2015/02/26/tronix-closes-after-11-years-as-reno-joins-national-trend/>. Current description based on visit by the author on August 1, 2015.

in 2011, it was the oldest continuously-available such bar in Reno. It warrants national note as an example of the increasing LGBTQ visibility sweeping larger and smaller cities across the United States post-Stonewall.

5 Star Saloon – Oldest Continuously Operating Gay/LGBTQ Bar in the State of Nevada

The 5 Star Saloon (Figure 8) is the oldest continuously operating LGBTQ bar in the state of Nevada.⁸³ It opened in 1974 as a mixed bar called Paul's Lounge. Originally built in 1919 as a retail space, its use as a gay bar beginning in the 1970s further exemplifies the spread of high-visibility bars in the post-Stonewall 1970s.⁸⁴ Paul's Lounge was located downtown, close to the tourist areas of the casinos, and across the street from the First United Methodist Church. This level of visibility would have been unthinkable five years earlier but shows how gay/LGBTQ public presence, in Reno and in general, was becoming more accepted, even expected, in urban environments. Paul's Lounge proved so popular that it expanded in 1980 from a bar to a full disco, open twenty-four hours a day. In 1984, it was sold to a group of five owners and, accordingly, renamed the 5 Star Saloon. It has retained this name for over thirty years.⁸⁵

The 5 Star Saloon remains open as an LGBTQ club, and consistently wins local awards for being the best gay bar in Reno.⁸⁶ In 2005, the Saloon appeared to have not upgraded any of its décor since the 1980s. In 2006, the bar changed ownership, and upgrades to the interior were made.⁸⁷ With an aggressive marketing campaign geared towards a younger demographic, the Saloon became the primary gay bar in Reno

⁸³ The 5 Star Saloon is located at 132 West Street, Reno, Nevada.

⁸⁴ "Washoe County Real Property Assessment Data".

⁸⁵ The first mention of Paul's Lounge appears in an advertisement in the 1974 *Apollo's Swinger's Guide*, which was a magazine devoted to gay male personal ads. No publisher or page number available, clipping of ad in possession of the author.

⁸⁶ 5 Star Saloon website, accessed September 27, 2015, <http://5starsaloon.net>.

⁸⁷ Visits by the author, 2005 and 2006.

over the next couple of years. It is open to different classes and races as well as having activities centering on drag.⁸⁸

The 5 Star Saloon is one of the nation's most persistent LGBTQ bars founded in the immediate post-Stonewall era. Many others failed financially during the Great Recession of 2007-2008.⁸⁹ Statewide and citywide, the Saloon remains the oldest LGBTQ post-Stonewall bar still in operation.



Figure 8: The 5 Star Saloon, July 2015. Photo courtesy of Nicholas-Martin Kearney.

⁸⁸ "Disco Divas Drag Show 2015," 5 Star Saloon website, accessed September 27, 2015, <http://5starsaloon.net/photo/disco-divas-drag-show-2015>.

⁸⁹ Based on survey of bars listed in *Reno Outlands* and *Reno Out* magazines from 2007-2009.

Bad Dolly's – Reno's First Lesbian Bar

Bad Dolly's (Figure 9) was Reno's first lesbian bar.⁹⁰ The building opened in 1930 and was a popular local grocery store from the 1940s through the 1960s. By 1992, local lesbian Shelly Palmer, who had moved to Reno in the 1980s, opened a lesbian bar called Bad Dolly's in the space. Until then, Reno's LGBTQ community was unable to support a fully lesbian bar, so lesbian and bisexual women went to more gender-mixed LGBTQ bars. One reason given for this delay was that Reno's lesbian community wasn't ready for a visible public presence like the one in San Francisco.⁹¹

Bad Dolly's became an important site not just for socializing, but political mobilizing as well. For example, in January 1994 a statewide anti-gay initiative was proposed that would have made it legal to deny housing



Figure 9: Former location of Bad Dolly's, August 2015. Photo courtesy of Nicholas-Martin Kearney.

⁹⁰ Bad Dolly's is located at 535 East Fourth Street, Reno, Nevada.

⁹¹ Adrienne Rice, "The Other Gay Community: Local Women Talk about Living as Lesbians in Northern Nevada," *Reno News and Review*, October 11, 2001.

or to fire someone based on their sexual orientation.⁹² Bad Dolly's hosted a rally against the initiative attended by then-governor Bob Miller and Las Vegas Mayor Jan Jones.⁹³ Unlike the mixed and gay bars which had long histories, Bad Dolly's closed by 1999. It was not until 2001, when the Blue Cactus Bar and Nightclub opened that Reno had another lesbian bar.⁹⁴ The history and struggles of Bad Dolly's are representative of those faced by lesbian bars in many small to mid-sized American cities.

Events, Groups and Organizations

LGBTQ Events and organizations in Reno ran the gamut from the first stirrings of gay consciousness raising on the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) campus in 1969, through the move of the publication of the national lesbian organization, the Daughters of Bilitis to the area, through the success of the Reno Gay Rodeo. All of these were important as they not only brought awareness of the LGBTQ community in Reno to a national level, but an international one.

University of Nevada Reno – “Sex Week” Inclusion of Talk on Lesbianism and Formation of the Gay/Queer Student Union

In 1969, from October 6 through 9, the Associated Women Students at UNR sponsored an event called “Sex Week.”⁹⁵ This was during the broader sexual revolution, which played an important role in the history of the modern LGBTQ rights movement.⁹⁶ “Sex Week,” which was such a groundbreaking event that it brought the university international attention, featured a discussion about lesbianism by Rita LaPorte, a local out lesbian,

⁹² A far right extremist group called the Oregon Citizens Alliance tried to get the initiative on the November ballot. They failed to gain the number of petition signatures to make this happen, and political leaders were broad based in their condemnation of the initiative. For more, see Maria L. LaGanga, “Anti-Gay Initiative Fails to Make Nevada Ballot,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 22, 1994.

⁹³ “Around the Nation,” *The Advocate*, April 5, 1994, 22.

⁹⁴ The Blue Cactus was located at the former site of Dave's VIP.

⁹⁵ Associated Press, “U of Nevada to Observe ‘Sex Week,’” *Edwardsville Intelligencer*, October 1, 1969.

⁹⁶ David Allyn, *Make Love, Not War: The Sexual Revolution: An Unfettered History* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2000).

and then-president of the Daughters of Bilitis.⁹⁷ “Sex Week” at UNR is an event of national, state, and local import as an example of how the sexual revolution was enacted across the country.⁹⁸

Sixteen years later, in 1985, the Gay Student Union was formed at UNR, both despite and in response to the conservative national politics and “culture wars” of the 1980s. The Gay Student Union became the Queer Student Union during the 2000s and remains active on campus. UNR’s Queer Student Union is part of a broad trend, especially in smaller cities, of institutions of higher learning as sites for LGBTQ activism in the 1980s.⁹⁹ During this same period, LGBTQ groups at larger universities, which had formed in the 1970s, were expanding in size.

The experience of students in Nevada’s two largest cities, Reno and Las Vegas, showcase the inclusion and visibility for LGBTQ college and university students, as well as faculty and their allies—an important development in the last four decades that most contemporary observers likely take for granted as unexceptional. Educational institutions help not only create an informed citizenry but also serve as valuable sites for community formation and diversity.

The Ladder – *First Nationally-Distributed Lesbian Magazine*

The first nationally distributed lesbian magazine in the United States, *The Ladder*, was published by the Daughters of Bilitis. Founded in San Francisco in 1955, the Daughters of Bilitis was the first American

⁹⁷ “1969 Year of ‘Firsts’ in Education,” *Nevada State Journal*, January 1, 1970.

⁹⁸ For a good comparison of how the sexual revolution at the University of Kansas played out, see Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁹⁹ For another Nevada example, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas was the site of even earlier LGBTQ organizing, including the formation of the Gay Academic Union in 1983; see Dennis McBride, “Gay Academic Union,” *OutHistory.org*, accessed September 30, 2015, <http://www.outhistory.org/exhibits/show/las-vegas/articles/gau>.

organization working for lesbian civil rights. They began publishing *The Ladder* in October 1956.¹⁰⁰

In the 1960s, members of the Daughters of Bilitis were split between those who wanted the organization to embrace a more radical feminism and those who were still operating in the older mode of acceptance by conformity, which had been the cornerstone of groups formed in the 1950s.¹⁰¹ The founders Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin quit being involved in the group in 1966 as a result of the turmoil within the organization.¹⁰² The internal differences came to a head at the 1968 national Daughters of Bilitis convention in Denver. It was here that, unlike previous conventions, only about twenty members showed up.¹⁰³ As a result, final decisions on formal issues were tabled until the 1970 convention in New York City. At the 1968 convention, San Francisco-based lesbian activist Rita LaPorte was elected president, and Kansas City-based member Barbara Grier was elected editor of *The Ladder*.¹⁰⁴ With these elections there would be a major shift in the focus of the organization and *The Ladder* towards more radical feminism.

Marguerite Augusta LaPorte was born September 30, 1921 in New York City.¹⁰⁵ Her parents were Cloyd LaPorte and Marguerite Roeder. Her father was a successful lawyer who was elected president of the New York Bar in 1956.¹⁰⁶ In 1943 she enrolled in the army in Philadelphia, as a Women's Army Corps Aviation cadet.¹⁰⁷ By the 1960s she was a vocal and out lesbian activist living in San Francisco going by the name Rita.

¹⁰⁰ For a comprehensive history of the Daughters of Bilitis and an account of this time in the organization, see Marcia M. Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006).

¹⁰¹ The gay men's Los Angeles-based organization, ONE, followed a similar trajectory as the Daughters of Bilitis, as chronicled in C. Todd White's *Pre-Gay L.A.: A Social History of the Movement for Homosexual Rights* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

¹⁰² Gallo, 142.

¹⁰³ Gallo, 143.

¹⁰⁴ Gallo, 143.

¹⁰⁵ *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* XXUV, no. 1 (September 29, 1921): 226-227.

¹⁰⁶ *American Bar Association Journal* 42, no. 61 (July 1956): 674.

¹⁰⁷ John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

In the spring of 1970, LaPorte and Grier decided to take the mailing addresses and printing plates for *The Ladder* to suburban Reno, where LaPorte was living with her girlfriend.¹⁰⁸ They planned that, by taking *The Ladder* out to San Francisco and away from the interference of the old guard of the organization, they could represent a more radical form of lesbian feminism. Many members of the Daughters of Bilitis saw this as a major betrayal; despite this, the magazine continued being published. The magazine launched bimonthly publication out of Reno in June/July 1970 and continued publication until a lack of funding caused production to cease in 1972.¹⁰⁹ Rita LaPorte passed away in San Francisco on October 28, 1976.¹¹⁰

Washoe County Fairgrounds – Site of the Reno Gay Rodeo

The Washoe County Fairgrounds (Figure 10) was the location of the Reno Gay Rodeo from 1976 through 1984.¹¹¹ The rodeo was created by Philip Lane Ragsdale, a native of California, who grew up on farms there and loved participating in rodeos. He moved to Reno in the early 1970s and, strongly motivated to serve others, worked for such organizations as the Muscular Dystrophy Association, and various other local charities. While volunteering at a Thanksgiving dinner in 1975, he was inspired, imagining rodeo as a way to bring pride to the gay community, and to combat negative stereotypes about gay men—all while raising money for charities.¹¹² Although created primarily as a small men’s event with 150

¹⁰⁸ They lived at 154 Stanford Way, Sparks, Nevada (now demolished).

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹¹⁰ “Rita Laporte,” Find A Grave website, accessed October 18, 2015, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRIID=87717943&ref=acom>.

¹¹¹ For a comprehensive history of the Reno Gay Rodeo, visit the International Gay Rodeo Association website, accessed September 30, 2015, <http://www.igra.com>. For a timeline of the Reno Gay Rodeo, see “Time Line of Interesting Facts and Events,” Gay Rodeo History website, accessed May 4, 2015, <http://gayrodeohistory.org/timeline.htm>. The Washoe County Fairgrounds are located at 1001 Wells Avenue in Reno, Nevada.

¹¹² “The History of Gay Rodeo,” Gay Rodeo History website, accessed April 21, 2015, <http://gayrodeohistory.org/GayRodeoHistory.htm>.



Figure 10: Washoe County Fairgrounds, July 2015. Photo courtesy of Nicholas-Martin Kearney.

people attending in 1976, lesbians and both men and women in drag were included by 1977.¹¹³

The rodeo quickly became an international event, drawing LGBTQ people as audiences and participants from all over the globe by 1980.¹¹⁴ Approximately ten thousand people attended the rodeo that year, and forty thousand showed up for nightlife festivities.¹¹⁵ The popularity of the event provoked a homophobic backlash by the Reno City Council and various elected officials, who tried to shut it down in 1981.¹¹⁶ On March 16, 1981 newly elected Washoe County Commissioner Belie Williams said during a caucus meeting that “he did not want the annual Gay Rodeo to

¹¹³ Gary Pedersen, “Frivolity Reigns at Gay Rodeo,” *Nevada State Journal*, August 21, 1977, 40. The rodeo can be seen as a reflection of the hypermasculinity embodied by gay men beginning in the 1970s. This includes the “Castro Clone,” a style of dress that played up images of masculinity. See Michael Flood et al., eds., *International Encyclopedia of Men and Masculinities* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

¹¹⁴ Mark Crawford, “Gay Rodeo: The Competition is Just as Tough,” *Nevada State Journal*, August 4, 1980. An assessment of pictures, from the Gay Rodeo History website, of the 1979 and 1980 rodeos shows a majority male and white audience with a few, if any, people of color.

¹¹⁵ “The History of Gay Rodeo”.

¹¹⁶ The attack on the Reno Gay Rodeo in 1981 was started by a councilman; it was covered in newspapers state-wide, including the *Reno Evening Gazette* and the *Las Vegas Sun*.

be held in Reno and would review its contract with Nevada State Fair officials.”¹¹⁷ He continued, “I personally don’t condone the acceptance of the thing. It may be good for business, but I don’t think it’s business our community needs...I think they [homosexuals] have their rights, but I don’t think our community needs to endorse those rights.”¹¹⁸ Fairgrounds general manager David Drew responded that he would confer with the fairgrounds attorneys.¹¹⁹

The Reno Gay Rodeo weathered the storm, and had its best year in 1982 in terms of finances and number of attendees. The rodeo of that year was so popular that comedian Joan Rivers served as a grand marshal; 22,000 people attended the rodeo itself.¹²⁰ More trouble was not far off. In 1983, people argued that government property (the fairgrounds) should not be used for a gathering that would lead to the spread of AIDS.¹²¹ Unable to survive the economic recession of the early 1980s and increasing AIDS hysteria, the last Reno Gay Rodeo was held in 1984.¹²²

The Reno Gay Rodeo was a pioneering transnational LGBTQ event that brought the idea of a “gay” rodeo to the American mainstream. It was the first rodeo created by and participated in by LGBTQ individuals in both Reno and Nevada, and is significant for the controversies surrounding the rodeo’s use of government space. Not only did the Reno Gay Rodeo lead to the international expansion of a gay sport as a recreational and philanthropic enterprise, but it founded the gay rodeo circuit that continues on an international scale.

¹¹⁷ Rodney Foo, “Commissioner Objects To Gay Rodeo in Reno,” *Nevada State Journal*, March 9, 1981.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Mark Crawford, “National Reno Gay Rodeo: And in the Saddle,” *The Advocate*, September 16, 1982.

¹²¹ Wayne Melton, “Arguments Focus On AIDS Issue,” *Nevada State Journal*, July 26, 1983, 12A; “Foes of gay rodeo seek ban,” *Las Vegas Sun*, July 28, 1983, 17; and “AIDS Epidemic Casts Pall over Reno Rodeo,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, August 8, 1983, 8B.

¹²² “Unpaid Bill May End Gay Rodeo,” *Las Vegas Review Journal*, November 6, 1984, 2B. A comeback was attempted in 1988, but was unsuccessful.

Conclusion

This overview of Reno, Nevada highlights the contributions that it, and other smaller cities and tourist destinations have made to broader LGBTQ history. Many of the places of local, state, and national significance in and around Reno remain extant, and some, including Steve's Bathhouse and the 5 Star Saloon, are still in operation. While serving as a case study of small and mid-sized American cities, Reno's laws around divorce and gambling have uniquely shaped its LGBTQ history.