



## Denver

by Geoffrey W. Bateman

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In 1858 after rumors of gold strikes spread to the east coast, hundreds of prospectors made their way to the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains. A settlement quickly grew up where the Cherry Creek flows into the South Platte River, and two years later the city of Denver was formally named.

### Early Years

In its early years, Denver was regarded as a rough town, lacking any semblance of morality or culture. The majority of its population was male and transient, in town for short periods of time between excursions into the mountains. Catering to such men, Denver's main business was providing them with drink and entertainment.

Saloons were everywhere in the city. As Thomas J. Noel notes, in 1860 there were 35 saloons--but no churches, schools, hospitals, libraries, or banks--for a population of almost 4800. Although not explicitly homosexual, the early Denver was certainly a homosocial environment, one that reflected loose morals and same-sex bondings, with few women living in the city. Or as Lavinia Porter, an early settler, wrote to a friend back home, "[T]here are but few ladies here," indirectly alluding to the red light district that had quickly developed in the early 1860s.

According to Noel, Denver may also have had a gay saloon in its early days. In a survey of gay bars that operated in Denver prior to Stonewall, he identifies Moses Home as a possible gay establishment in the late nineteenth century. A report from a local newspaper describes a customer leaving the saloon and committing "crimes against nature" with a young man after threatening to beat him with a stick. Even though these two men met at Moses Home, it is unclear if the rest of its customers were predominantly gay or not.

Although gay life at this time remains largely invisible to our eyes, a handful of urban myths exist from the late nineteenth century that suggest that gay and lesbian people were not entirely unheard of in Denver's early history.

In her online gay Denver history project, Lisa Diguardi relates two stories from the late nineteenth century about early gay and lesbian couples. In 1889, the *Denver Times* reportedly told the story of two women--postmistress Miss Clara Dietrich and Miss Ora Chatfield--who exchanged passionate love letters and ultimately eloped after friends and family tried to keep them from pursuing their relationship. Ten years later, Denverites read about W.H. Billings, who left his wife to live with his lover, Charles Edwards, a saloon entertainer.

### Early Twentieth Century

In *Gay American History*, historian Jonathan Ned Katz presents a letter from a homosexual professor living in Denver to German sexologist and early homosexual emancipation leader, Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld.

Hirschfeld included it in his major work, *Homosexuality in Men and Women* (1914), and the letter documents a fairly well established gay network in Denver in the early part of the twentieth century and at the university where the professor taught.

Attempting to show how pervasive homosexuality was in Denver, the professor writes of a number of homosexual acquaintances, listing them according to occupation. Interestingly, many of them worked in professions stereotypically associated with homosexuality. There were "five musicians, three teachers, three art dealers, one minister, one judge, two actors, one florist, and one women's tailor." He also describes parties thrown by a "young artist of exquisite taste and a noble turn of mind" that many gay Denverites attended, some in drag.

From his vantage point as a university professor, he refers to a number of gay students whom he taught over the years. He stresses that many of them went on to successful careers in journalism, the theater, and teaching.

In spite of the presence of an emerging gay community, one that the writer characterizes as supportive, he also points out the difficulties these gay men faced. His letter also conveys the need for extreme discretion at times and a wariness of revealing too much too quickly about one's sexuality.

The professor describes in great detail a friendship he cultivated with a twenty-six-year-old student. Basing his assessment of the young man's homosexuality on signs of his effeminacy, the professor refrains from disclosing his own status for fear of offending his student: "To date, I haven't dared to tell him about myself, because he's an extremely sensitive person." This account makes clear that even when gay men identified each other, coming out to each other was not easy.

Even more disturbing, the professor tells the story of an engineering student whom the police arrested for "carrying on with the boys in the YMCA building." The young man felt such shame at his arrest and public exposure that he shot himself.

## **World War II**

World War II and the buildup to it played an important role in the emergence of local gay and lesbian communities and cultures throughout the United States, including Denver. Historian John D'Emilio notes that just before the war, gay bars appeared for the first time in Denver.

Bringing hundreds of thousands of young men and women together in same-sex environments and disrupting their traditional lives, World War II arguably made it easier for gay men and lesbians to identify and meet each other.

Historian Allan Bérubé notes how small groups of gay airmen from nearby Lowry Air Force Base transformed bars such as Mary's Tavern on Broadway into gay establishments. Rather than let the owners and police intimidate them into silence, these men maintained a visible gay presence and persisted in claiming the bar as their own cultural space.

Not only did gay men begin to band together and in small ways demand to be served as openly gay customers, but they also created their own establishments, as well. Denver's first exclusively gay bar, The Pit, opened in 1939.

## **The Mattachine Society in Denver**

After World War II, Denver's gay community continued to grow, and by the late 1950s it sustained its own chapter of the Mattachine Society, the early homophile organization that Harry Hay and a small group of activists had started earlier in the decade in Los Angeles.

Over Labor Day weekend in 1959, the Mattachine Society held its yearly national convention in Denver, which was the first and only time that Mattachine held its annual meeting outside of California or New York. D'Emilio argues that this conference marked a major turning point in the national reach and visibility of Mattachine organizing. The conference also greatly affected the local Denver homophile movement.

Based on the ideas of Denver-based organizers, the conference included a new approach to dealing with publicity about Mattachine's activities. The new strategy evinced great courage, but it backfired on Denver activists, leading to the demise of the Denver chapter of the Mattachine Society.

One of the local Mattachine leaders, "Carl Harding"--a pseudonym for Elver Barker--suggested that Mattachine hold a public press conference, in which the officers would allow themselves to be photographed and interviewed with their own names.

D'Emilio writes that this new approach to working with the press paid off. Both the *Denver Post* and the *Rocky Mountain News* covered the conference, treating the movement in a rational and fair manner. The publicity increased membership, but it also brought the unfavorable attention of the police.

A few weeks after the conference, the police raided the homes of a number of the officers, which led to one of them being imprisoned. Others lost their jobs, and many more simply panicked and stopped attending Mattachine meetings and functions. For some time, homosexual activism and networking stagnated in Denver.

### **The Stonewall Generation**

After the Stonewall Riots in New York City in 1969, however, Denver, like many U.S. cities, saw a surge of gay and lesbian activism and community growth, especially with regard to the lesbian community.

In the 1970s, the lesbian community flourished in the form of publications, community centers, and bookstores. In 1973, a newspaper collective began publishing *Big Mama Rag*, a lesbian-feminist news journal that described itself as "socialist orientated." Published once a month, it featured news on the local and national level, as well as writing about women's health and culture.

Denver lesbians also formed their own center in the 1970s, which along with feminist bookstores such as the Woman to Woman Feminist Center and the Woman's Voice provided lesbians with space for various consciousness raising and support groups, art exhibits by lesbian artists, and lending libraries.

In the mid-1970s, the Capitol Hill neighborhood in Denver emerged as Denver's primary gay neighborhood. At the same time, Cheesman Park began to serve as a gathering place for gay men. In 1974, the first gay pride rally, or "gay-in" as it was called, was held there. To this day, it remains both a popular cruising park for many gay men and the start of the local gay pride parade.

Other community-based organizations were also founded in the 1970s. In 1971 the first Metropolitan Community Church was organized in Denver, but internal divisions made it short-lived. Two years later a more permanent MCC was established, and it continues to provide services to Denver's gay and lesbian community.

In the early 1980s a small group of people grew concerned about reports from around the country about the developing health crisis confronting gay men. They met to organize a local response in Denver, and out of this meeting developed the Colorado AIDS Project, which was officially incorporated in 1983.

The fledgling organization began with limited services, primarily to gay men who struggled in the early years of the AIDS epidemic, providing a food pantry, part-time case management, and a buddy program to

clients. Since then, the Colorado AIDS Project has grown into the largest AIDS service organization in the Rocky Mountain region, serving over 1500 clients a year, many of whom are gay and bisexual men.

## **Amendment 2**

The surge of community activism from the 1970s and the community-based response to AIDS of the 1980s brought more gay men and lesbians into gay and lesbian politics, making possible local laws that prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation. This progress, however, prompted a backlash movement by conservative religious organizations in the state.

In October 1990, the Denver City Council passed an ordinance that prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation in housing, employment, and public accommodations. The following year, conservatives called for the repeal of the ordinance, but their referendum was defeated: Denver citizens voted to keep the protections.

During this time, other cities in Colorado were voting on similar issues. In 1987, voters in the city of Boulder approved a similar law prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation. Voters in Fort Collins rejected a similar measure in 1988. A few years later, the Colorado Springs City Council also failed to adopt such an ordinance, in large part because of pressure from a number of conservative religious organizations based in the Springs.

Unhappy with the trend in a handful of Colorado cities to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, these conservative groups decided to work on passing a statewide initiative. Not content with defeating the non-discrimination ordinance in Colorado Springs, they wanted to remove all such measures throughout the state, in both city and state governments.

Three of these activists, David Noebel, Tony Marco, and Kevin Tebedo, formed Colorado for Family Values, recruited Will Perkins to chair the campaign, and began working on an amendment to the Colorado State Constitution that would prohibit sexual orientation anti-discrimination legislation throughout the state. Amendment 2 was born.

In November 1993, after an expensive campaign that garnered national attention, Amendment 2 passed with 53% of the vote, surprising many in the state. The amendment read:

"Neither the State of Colorado, through any of its branches or departments, nor any of its agencies, political subdivisions, municipalities, or school districts, shall enact, adopt or enforce any statute, regulation, ordinance or policy whereby homosexual, lesbian, or bisexual orientation, conduct, practices, or relationships shall constitute or otherwise be the basis of, or entitle any persons or class of persons to have or claim minority status or claim of discrimination."

## **Romer v. Evans**

After Amendment 2 passed, gay and lesbian activists and their allies formed the Colorado Legal Initiatives Project to fight the amendment in court. The case of Romer v. Evans progressed all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ultimately ruled, on a six to three vote, against the amendment.

The ruling in the Romer v. Evans case constitutes a monumental legal victory for gay men and lesbians on the national, as well as local level. It stopped the Christian Right's bold strategy of attempting to amend state constitutions to prohibit local and state governments from protecting its glbtq citizens from discrimination, and it somewhat surprisingly signaled support on the part of a majority of a conservative U. S. Supreme Court for glbtq rights, notwithstanding Justice Antonin Scalia's intemperate and disrespectful dissent.

## Political Support

In spite of the difficult times faced by gays and lesbians living in Denver and Colorado in the early and mid-1990s, Denver-based politicians have worked hard to promote tolerance and acceptance of sexual minorities in the Denver-metro area.

In 1996 former Denver mayor Wellington Webb officially proclaimed October as Gay and Lesbian History Month in the city of Denver. The Denver gay and lesbian community continues to enjoy relative acceptance in a state that is largely hostile to its existence.

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## About the Author

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