

**Setting the Stage for Denver's Royalty:
The ICRME from 1974-76**

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Since the late nineteenth century, cross-dressing in Colorado has been a notable source of scandal and entertainment. One of the oldest lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender organizations in Colorado, internationally known as the Imperial Court of the Rocky Mountain Empire, has utilized the performance of drag as a means of positively contributing to the Denver community and advocating for the queer community of Colorado. Established in 1974, the Imperial Court of the Rocky Mountain Empire has embraced the power of “drag,” or the performance of gender illusion, to foster gay culture, unify the queer community, and benefit both the queer community and the straight community of Denver, through means of entertainment.

The Imperial Court of the Rocky Mountain Empire, or ICRME, is a 501 (c) 3, not-for-profit organization that raises money for charity, holds functions for the queer community, supports organizations within the community, and fosters cooperation with community organizations and businesses.¹ The ICRME is a part of the International Court System that includes the courts of many major cities in the United States and Canada. Members belonging to the various Courts attend annual galas called “coronations,” which are glamorous events where new representatives are elected to represent their Court. As the ICRME’s realm stretches from Castle Rock, Colorado to the Wyoming Border, only members of the Court residing within those perimeters are able to elect the Court’s representatives. The ICRME has acted as a major contributor to the formation of Denver’s queer culture and also exposed Denver’s gay culture to the straight community in a non-threatening and charming manner. The Imperial Court has played a significant role in the shaping of

¹ “About Imperial Court of the Rocky Mountain Empire,” *Imperial Court of the Rocky Mountain* accessed December 6, 2015, <http://www.icrmedenver.org/about-us/>.

Denver's contemporary queer community. However, a lack of awareness of the organization, their philanthropic donations and legacy as community advocates, remains.

The ICRME demonstrates drag's ability to transcend class and gender by transforming a working-class person into a Monarch championing for the rights and protection over their region's queer people. The ICRME utilized gender illusion as a form of entertainment, yet it also functioned as a site of social, political, and economic agency. Drag encompasses the power of the performative and serves as means of carnivale that subverts the gender binary and disrupts heteronormative ideals of gender. The role of drag in ICRME's function has historically been both foundational and formational to the organization and ultimately the entirety of Denver's LGBT community.

In recent years, a growing interest concerning topics of gender, queer sexuality, and drag has contributed to a considerable amount of research in the field of history. My research engages with the scholarship produced by leading experts in the field including: Verta Taylor, Leila J. Rupp, Judith Butler, and J. Jack Halberstam. The vast sum of scholarship produced on the subjects of gender, queer sexuality, and drag prove that the topics have a significant and relevant role within Western society and culture. Scholarship on gender and sexuality demonstrates the performative nature of gender and the complexities of sexuality. The culmination of scholarship regarding gender illusion highlights both the historical and theoretical significance of drag. Furthermore, the scholarship regarding gender, queer sexuality, and drag reflects an analysis of the legacy of queer culture and queer community. The scholarship produced by these scholars also reaffirms the importance of queer narratives as a reflection of non-normative and oppressed groups.

The majority of my research references information extracted from primary sources such as the oral histories provided by the Colorado LGBT History Project regarding their activity in ICRME and specifically their political, social, and philanthropic work. My research also relies on analysis of issues from *The Scene*, a popular and regionally distributed gay magazine representative of the gay “social scene,” from the years 1974-1976. Both the oral histories and magazine articles reflect the culture of gender illusion as entertainment, the social and political atmosphere of the time, and ICRME’s role and actions in the community during that timeframe. These sources regarding the Court’s role in Denver’s queer community during the mid 1970s contribute indispensable narratives to Colorado’s queer history. These voices represent our history and our heritage.

The history of gender illusion as both a signifier of Denver’s gay community and a vehicle for social and political change has remained a mostly invisible part of Colorado’s history. This project seeks to bring visibility to this unique part of Colorado’s history of gender illusion, or what is commonly referred to as drag, and how it has acted as a vehicle that both fostered unity within a fractured community and advocated for social and political change. My research focuses primarily on the formative years of the ICRME that spanned from 1974-1976 and seeks to answer the questions: To what extent did ICRME act as a social and political stage for Denver’s gay community during this period? How did the Court foster Denver’s queer culture and solidify a sense of unity within the gay community? And what role did the Court play in creating a “future” for Denver’s queer community? Through visibility, philanthropic activity, and entertainment, the Court advocated for the community, cultivated queer culture, and helped unify Denver’s gay community in order to build a lasting foundation for future generations.

What Is Drag?

Queer theorist Judith Butler claims “gender is culturally constructed” and therefore “gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way.”² In asserting this, Butler suggests that gender is separate from the sex of one’s body and enforced as a method of behavioral regulation. Butler’s theory claims a “performative” function of gender, meaning gender is constructed from repeated performance, and therefore is unstable and susceptible to mimicry.³ The art of drag utilizes the performative aspect of gender for entertainment and social commentary. Scholar Judith Halberstam defines gender illusion or “drag” as “the theatricality of all gender.”⁴ In this way, drag allows an opportunity for a theatrical and performative landscape that serves to disrupt constraints of gender binaries and heteronormative expectations. The disruption of the gender binary and heteronormativity facilitated by drag performance provides a vital space for the queer community to challenge the oppressive systems of the hegemony. In their study of the “drag queens” working at the 801 Cabaret, Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor suggest that drag should be understood as “a political event in which identity is used to contest conventional thinking about gender and sexuality.”⁵ In this way, drag performance is more than just frivolous entertainment. Drag is also an important vehicle for social and political action as it subverts conventional norms applied to gender and sexuality. Although women do perform masculine drag, the drag discussed in this essay is focused on female impersonators—biological men performing gender illusion.

² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990) 6.

³ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 236.

⁴ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 236.

⁵ Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 2.

It is important to note: drag performance should not be confused with transgender identity. The term “transgender” refers to individuals whose gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth.⁶ The performance of gender illusion constitutes a form of entertainment, not an integral part of one’s gender identity. In this way, drag operates as a form of performance while transgender identity is deeply embedded within one’s selfhood. Scotti Carlyle who reigned as Empress II of the Imperial Court of the Rocky Mountain Empire said: “When you’re doing drag you end up doing a lot of different faces. You do comedy, you do something serious, you do something silly, you do something beautiful, you do something ordinary, but for every one of those you look and have a different attitude.”⁷ Thus drag acts as a performative mimicry of gender for entertainment purposes, and not as an expression of one’s internal gender identity.

Female impersonation has been utilized throughout history in a variety of different ways. Due to taboos forbidding women to appear on stage in Elizabethan England, men dressed and performed women’s roles in theatrical productions.⁸ Similarly, men and boys often portrayed female roles in seventeenth-century Japan.⁹ Boys dress as girls during initiation ceremonies in the Nandi, Masai, and Nuba tribes of Africa.¹⁰ Historically, cross-dressing has played a role in theatrical, political, religious, sexual, and social functions in

⁶ “Transgender FAQ,” *GLAAD*, accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.glaad.org/transgender/transfaq>.

⁷ Scotti Carlyle, interviewed by David Duffield, *Colorado LGBT History Project*, September 3, 2015.

⁸ Rupp and Taylor, *Drag Queens of the 801 Cabaret*, 180

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 17.

numerous cultures and geographical locations around the world.¹¹ In this way, the utilization of drag has served numerous purposes in a variety of contexts.

However, laws condemning cross-dressing had existed in Denver since the 19th century and deemed “drag” as a form of social and sexual deviancy. In an attempt to control public space, Denver enacted a series of “obscenity, lewdness and vagrancy laws” in 1886, which effectively criminalized cross-dressing.¹² One could be arrested and jailed for wearing “dress not belonging to their sex.”¹³ Historian Clare Sears explains in her book *Arresting Dress*, such law protecting “good morals and decency” in San Francisco during the 1880s were initially enforced to control prostitution as female prostitutes used cross-dressing to advertise their vocation.¹⁴ Although, in 1954 the vagrancy laws of 1886 changed to exclude women dressed in male clothing from receiving punishment, men dressed in women’s attire remained subject to the law.¹⁵ Legal condemnation of cross-dressing remained part of Colorado’s history well into the 1970s.¹⁶ Influential female impersonator, Empress VI Christi Layne recalled such restrictions placed on drag in Denver during this period: “All of the restrictions were made to control us [the gay community].. to keep us under the control of the police department.”¹⁷ These leftover “moral laws” or “blue laws” were used to control the gay community and limit their agency within Denver. Such

¹¹ Rupp and Taylor, *Drag Queens of the 801 Cabaret*, 180.

¹² David Duffield, “Criminalizing Cross-dressing,” *Out Front*, February 24, 2015, <http://outfrontonline.com/news/hallmarks-denver-lgbt-history/>.

¹³ Duffield, “Criminalizing Cross-dressing.”

¹⁴ Clare Sears, *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 44-5.

¹⁵ Duffield, “Criminalizing Cross-dressing.”

¹⁶ Scotti Carlyle, interviewed by David Duffield, *Colorado LGBT History Project*, September 3, 2015.

¹⁷ Christi Layne, interviewed by David Duffield, *Colorado LGBT History Project*, April 27, 2015.

laws reflect a long legacy of discrimination against drag in Colorado. These restrictions allowed the police to regulate the gay community.

In 1974, Denver's gay community felt the weight of social alienation from the straight, hegemonic community. Queer theorist of the time Arthur Evans explained, "witchcraft actually represents a gay culture," in that the oppression of the gay community was likened to the witch hunts of 15th-18th century Europe.¹⁸ The theorist's statement indicates a sense of moral panic regarding the "deviance" associated with homosexuality and gay culture during the time. Evans words also evoke the fear and isolation felt by many in Denver's community during the time of rampant sexual discrimination. The need for an organization hinged on leadership, service, representation, and visibility within the oppressed community became increasingly apparent in Denver. However, the founding of the Imperial Court of the Rocky Mountain Empire in 1974 initially failed to solve the problems within the community.

Bridgette Peters and Phil Brant ascended to the throne of the ICRME, and served as the first co-presidents of the organization. Elegantly dressed in full drag, Bridgette Peters, reigned as the first Empress of the Rocky Mountain Empire alongside Emperor Phil Brant, a good-natured, butch-presenting gay man donning a mustache. The two candidates were selected as the regional representatives of Colorado's gay community during the First Annual Cotillion Ball on April 20th at the VFW Hall in downtown Denver. Nearly 200 people from the community attended the "Pre-Civil War Southern Society" themed ball that would mark the beginning of a major institution in Denver's queer community, the Imperial Court of the Rocky Mountain Empire. Lance Clem of *The Scene* magazine noted that the Cotillion

¹⁸ Phillip Nobile, "Gays Start to Fight Back," *The Scene*, February, 1974, 3 +11.

“truly represented a new landmark for personal liberty in Denver.”¹⁹ Twenty female impersonators sat in audience of the Cotillion, a number exceeding more than the queens in drag participating in the competition on the event’s stage.²⁰ The presence of these female impersonators at the Cotillion speaks to the support that these female impersonators had for the community and also demonstrates the important role that drag played in signifying gay culture in Denver. The Empire was founded on the entertainment of drag.

Drag performance contributed a powerful vehicle for fundraising, celebrating queer culture, and expressing queer identity within the organization and community, yet also contributed to a theatrically charged political climate. In an interview, female impersonator Christi Layne, an active member of Denver’s gay community, who reigned as Empress VI of the ICRME, noted the dysfunctional nature of the Court’s beginnings. Empress Layne recalled the foundations of the Court as superficial in nature: “We started the Court and elected the prettiest queen, that queen [would] be in charge of the city, so to speak.” Empress VI clarified that it “didn’t ever, really, turn out that way, because everybody resented her for some reason... either for being the prettiest queen or because she was in power. It didn’t matter.”²¹ Layne’s memories shed light on the precarious beginning of Reign I and the unsure community it was created to serve and represent.

In addition to the questionable election process, changes within the Court’s leadership occurred at the beginning of the Reign. Terry Peters replaced Emperor Phil and gained the title of “Emperor Regent” before receiving the official title of Emperor I in

¹⁹ Lance Clem, “Cotillion is Big Success,” *The Scene* May, 1974, 3.

²⁰ Clem, “Cotillion is Big Success,” *The Scene*, 3.

²¹ Christi Layne, interviewed by David Duffield, *Colorado LGBT History Project*, April 27, 2015.

1975.²² Although Bridgette Peters and Phil Brant emerged from the First Cotillion's selection as Denver's gay royal representatives, they were met with some opposition within the community. Although homophobia saturated straight society and drove gay culture into an underground subculture, perhaps the most challenging hurdle the Court faced during its premier year came from the gay community itself. Empress Layne of Reign VI recalled community members' reactions to the founding year of the Court: "[the gay community] elected Empress I... So, we're watching Empress I and this 'protocol person' comes in and says that everyone has to stand up and bow when the Empress comes in." People within the community viewed these newly prescribed instructions of seemingly feigned regal etiquette as laughable. In fact, Empress VI explained that many active members within the community viewed this behavior as ridiculous and superficial. Empress Layne simply stated the reaction of many members in the community as: "What the fuck is the matter with these people?...They think they're *real*'...[N]ot only did [some members of the community] have that feeling, that was the overwhelming feeling of the community. It was like: 'What the hell is *this*? And, what's this [The Court] all about?'"²³ Members within Denver's gay community continually spouted criticism towards the newly appointed representatives of the Royal Court even as the monarchs actively sought to establish a positive organization within their community. Thus, the Court faced the tremendous challenge of attempting to unite a divided community while simultaneously establishing a social organization worthy of respect.

²² "Reign II," *Imperial Court of the Rocky Mountain Empire* accessed December 6, 2015, <http://www.icrmedenver.org/about-us/college-of-monarchs/reign-2/>.

²³ Christi Layne, interviewed by David Duffield, *Colorado LGBT History Project*, April 27, 2015.

Despite the skepticism their own community expressed towards them, Empress Bridgette and Emperor Regent Terry received support from the royalty of other Courts in the United States. In 1974, Empress Sarina of Salem, Oregon wrote of Empress Bridgette, “Denver and Colorado has their first Empress and she is a damned good one. She is working hard to let the Gay people in the United States know that Colorado is here and alive.”²⁴ The Empress from Oregon explained to Denver’s gay community the role and function of an Empress and encouraged the gay community to stand out of respect and solidarity when monarchs arrived to a gay function.²⁵ By writing this in an article featured in the popular regional gay magazine *The Scene*, the West Coast Empress explained the proper etiquette expected from the gay subjects of the Royal Court of the Rocky Mountain Empire. The editor of the magazine mentions that the same respect and etiquette is also expected when one is in the Emperor’s presence.²⁶ Although the procedures listed above might seem like an unnecessary performance serving as an ego boost of the Empress and Emperor, the act of standing in solidarity with one’s community representatives demonstrates a tangible sense of unity. Thus, when the Empress and Emperor walk into a bar, they are physically able to recognize who stands at their presence, and therefore who stands behind them as Colorado’s representatives. Empress Sarina of Oregon explains the need for such recognition at community events in the article: “[i]t takes a lot of work and long, late hours of dressmaking, heartache, and sometimes a lost friend.”²⁷ The Empress’s words reminded the newly formed Court of the hours of dedication required not only to represent Colorado

²⁴ “The Empress—Around Town,” *The Scene* October 1974, 9.

²⁵ “The Empress—Around Town,” 9.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

and serve its community, but to do those things while in full drag. In this way, Court etiquette was intended to demonstrate solidarity within the queer community being represented by the Court. Yet Denver's gay scene remained skeptical of the new organization.

Empress Bridgette received less than respectful acknowledgement of her role in the gay community during the beginning of her reign. In fact, she received quite the opposite when entering certain bars: "I don't expect bows, announcements or praise but while I am trying to represent all of the gays in Colorado, I do not need to subject myself to the rude, crude and ridiculous comments."²⁸ Empress Bridgette's commentary speaks to the difficulties within the community that the Court faced during its first years of existence. Some members in Denver's gay community frankly opposed the idea of a female impersonator representing the entire gay community due to fear of further isolation from the straight community. Members of the community recognized female impersonators or gender illusionists as entertainers, not social leaders of Denver's gay scene. During the formational years of the Court, the Emperors and Empresses faced discrimination from members within the gay community and strived to gain legitimacy as gay social activists. With the skepticism of their community building against them, the Court needed to justify the weight of their titles. The monarchs continued to serve their community with the intentions of obtaining the respect of the community.

The gay bars in Denver played a crucial historical role in the formation of the queer community. The major gay bars in Denver during the mid 1970s included: The 1942, The Back Door III, Mother's Apartment, Court Jester, The Triangle, The Broadway, and The

²⁸ Bridgette Peters, "The Empress Around Town," *The Scene*, November 1974, 15.

Brew.²⁹ Gay-identified bars provided an indispensable space for gay culture, community, and identity to develop and crystallize, as they continue to do today. Scholar Thomas Jacob Noel notes in his article on the emergence of Denver's gay community "[gay bars function] as a multifunctional gay community center where activities are planned and gays exchange insights on how to deal with the disapproval of the straight world."³⁰ In this way, the gay bars "served as the haven and activity center for an otherwise and elsewhere unwelcomed subculture."³¹ Police harassment of the gay community was commonplace in Denver during the 1970s. In fact, until the police agreed to stop "gay harassment" in October 1974, many were arrested for: "[c]onduct such as kissing, hugging, dancing, holding hands between members of the same sex."³² Despite the police raids, the space gay bars allowed gay people to congregate, socialize, and exist in community with one another in a safe and accepting environment. In this way, the gay bars of Denver served as foundations for Colorado's queer heritage.

As representatives of the queer community, Empress Bridgette and Emperor Regent Terry frequented Denver's gay bars in order to provide a visible presence of representation for the community. By attending these various "community centers," Empress Bridgette and Emperor Regent Terry Peters established their position as advocates for the community. Empress Bridgette encouraged the community to actively engage with the Court during the first month of her reign in saying, "If you have any questions, or wishes, I

²⁹ "Colorado—Where it's At," *The Scene*, March 1975, 19.

³⁰ Thomas Jacob Noel, "Gay Bars and the Emergence of the Denver Homosexual Community," *The Social Science Journal* 15 (April 1978): 59.

³¹ Noel, "Gay Bars and the Emergence of the Denver Homosexual Community," 75.

³² Cecil Jones, "Gays, Police Agree to End 'Harassment'," *Rocky Mountain News* (October 4, 1974): 19.

am in the bars... nearly any night of the week. So, feel free to come up and talk—after all, how else are we going to meet each other?”³³ In doing this, the Court’s presence at the gay bars demonstrated their dedication to the community and advocacy on behalf of the community. By attending the gay bars, the Court also actively socialized with the community in the hub of gay culture. The Court engaged with its people in this way.

The Court also sought to bring the community together through the implementation of entertainment and socializing. Since the first year of the Court’s existence, the Royal Empire has designed social events to bring the community together as a means of solidifying a sense of unity within a diverse and multifaceted culture. Through events like a “beer give away” in Cheesman Park on the 4th of July, the Court facilitated a celebration of gay culture and queer family in a public space. In this way, the ICRME’s first social event speaks to the legacy of the Court. Empress I also organized a dance in order to formally introduce the members of the newly formed Royal Court and therefore expose the community to their regional representatives and create a space to celebrate gay identity.

Emperor Regent and Empress I also orchestrated multiple charity events during the first year of the Court. In doing this, the Court established its foundations on the grounds of helping the community, both the gay community and the straight community, at large. The Court’s positive philanthropic activity within Denver also shed a positive light on the gay community. Such social events reflected the heart of the Court as they made positive contributions to Denver’s gay community by entertaining and reaching out to the straight community through the utilization of drag performance as a means of raising funds. These social events facilitated philanthropic community building.

³³ Bridgette Peters, “The Empress Speaks,” *The Scene*, June 1974, 8.

Multiple articles published during the latter part of 1974 in *The Scene* magazine reveal that Empress I felt the pessimism held by some individuals in the community regarding her leadership. However, the monarch persisted to represent the gay people of Colorado and offer her service both on behalf of the gay community and for the community. In an article published about two months after the First Cotillion, Empress Bridgette shot back at the criticism directed at the first Court family. The critics of the Court claimed “[Empress] Bridgette couldn’t get anything done, and won’t get anything done.”³⁴ However, the Court had already accomplished the organization of two dances for the community, a picnic where “200 gays drank free beer,” facilitated an award show for Denver’s gay community (The Tobies), and planned a benefit show to raise money for an orphanage.³⁵ The Court’s monarchs actively contributed to benefit the gay community and also made positive contributions to society on behalf of the community. The Court benefitted their community despite the obstacles they faced.

One of the most celebrated shows of 1974 was an award show that honored the “best” and most talented members of the gay community of Denver that would last as an annual tradition. The Tobie awards showcased and represented Denver’s gay culture as it flourished in the 1970s in a night of entertainment. Female impersonators, bartenders, and bathhouse attendants were among those honored by the gay community at the award show. This event not only speaks to the friendly competition amidst the gay community of Denver, but also speaks to the need to celebrate roles exclusive to gay culture through awarding the “Nelliest Bartender,” “Friendliest Bathhouse Attendant,” “Best Publication”

³⁴ Peters, “The Empress—Around Town,” *The Scene*, July 1974, 4.

³⁵ “The Empress—Around Town,” 4.

(given to The Scene), and “Best Event of the Year” (awarded to the Court’s “Cheesman Park Beer Bust”).³⁶ Moreover, when Empress and Emperor Regent I arrived at the event, everyone in attendance stood, and most in attendance bowed out of respect.³⁷ Both the award given from the community to the Court’s Beer Bust event in Cheesman Park and the display of respect and allegiance for the Court from the members of the community who attended the show, demonstrates the progress made by the Coloradoan monarchy despite their critics. The Court’s event ultimately won the community’s vote.

Hamilton Clark and Empress Bridgette hosted the awards and explained the nomination process. The hosts explained that a committee nominated gays and straight allies from the Colorado area for the awards. The entire state then voted for the various nominees and elected the winners. “The Tobies are a symbol for the best,” explained the Empress.³⁸ As the Tobie awards serve as a night to reflect the most notable parts of Denver’s gay culture, the community’s recognition of the Court demonstrates their firm establishment within the community. Thus, the Tobie Awards served as a form of communal affirmation for the Court’s first family and the work they had done for their community. Mayor Penfield Tate of Boulder also received a Tobie Award for Public Service for his support of the gay community as he backed the Human Rights Bill—a piece of legislation that would have ended discrimination of gays in the workplace, housing markets, and any other related areas.³⁹ The Tobie Awards thus functioned as more than just a night of glamorous entertainment and pageantry for the gay community; the Tobie

³⁶ Mike London, “Tobie Awards is Smash Hit for Colorado,” *The Scene*, October 1974, 14.

³⁷ London, “Tobie Awards is Smash Hit For Colorado,” 14.

³⁸ London, “Tobie Awards,” 14.

³⁹ “Mayor Tate Accepts Tobie Award,” *The Scene*, October 1974, unpaginated.

Awards ultimately celebrated gay culture and represented the voices of the gay community. The Tobies reflected the opinions of the community and celebrated the community's best.

Empress and Emperor I not only reigned as the social and political representatives of the Colorado gay community during 1974, but the monarchs also represented Colorado's gay community at a national level. With the help of money raised by a "Fall Benefit Show," the royal subjects of the Rocky Mountain Empire sent Empress I to the 17th Coronation of Portland's Royal Court.⁴⁰ In doing this, Empress I represented the Rocky Mountain Empire at a national level and was recognized as the "legal holder" of the title by the monarchs of Portland's Court. Empress I explains the importance of her attendance of the event in an article featured in *The Scene*:

The standing ovation I received upon my first introduction [at the Coronation] brought tears and smiles of happiness because my people, you, the Gays of Colorado, have official recognition as an up-and-coming, together group of people.⁴¹

Through attending Portland's 17th Coronation, Empress I not only introduced Colorado's gay community to the 1200 in attendance, but also established national recognition for the gays of Colorado. In doing this, Empress I identified Colorado's gay community as part of the national organization representing all of the gay communities across the United States, the Imperial Court. The Rocky Mountain Empire became nationally recognized because of Empress Bridgette's actions.

Members of the community expressed their support for the monarchs during the remainder of the Court's first year. "Doc. T," an older member of the community and

⁴⁰ Bridgette Peters, "Empress Bridgette Attends 17th Coronation," *The Scene*, November 1974, 4.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

contributor to *The Scene* magazine, expressed his disapproval of the young gays' unwillingness to respect or support the monarchs of the Rocky Mountain Empire in an article titled "Before Your Time."⁴² The author reminds the younger members of the community, "one of these days the places will be changed. The middle set will be the older, the younger set the middle and there will be a new young group on the scene."⁴³ The author explains, "the Gay Community is fortunate to have Empress Bridgette and her Royal Court who are fighting very hard to unite the entire community... She and her court cannot do it alone, however, they need your help."⁴⁴ The author then concludes the piece with a call to unify the intergenerational gay community of Denver in order to progress together towards the future. The intergenerational aspect of the queer community is essential to unifying queer people under a common identity because queer identity and culture is typically not learned from one's biological parents or ancestors. Therefore, it is necessary to synthesize and recognize an intergenerational element within queer communities in order for the youth to learn about their queer heritage. This article reflects the opinion of those members in the community who viewed the Court for what it was: a social organization striving to mend a divided community by reclaiming and celebrating shared queerness. The older gays within the community supported the actions of the Court.

The Court of Reign I established an annual tradition that brought the community together to aid underprivileged children. On December 15th, 1974, Empress I sponsored the "Children's Charity Snowball Dance."⁴⁵ The social event functioned as a vehicle to collect

⁴² Doc. T, "Before Your Time," *The Scene*, November 1974, 8.

⁴³ Doc. T, "Before Your Time," 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ "The Royal Mouse Squeeks," *The Scene*, November 1974, 26.

donations from the gay community to give to the Toys-for-Tots charity.⁴⁶ Over 200 people from the community attended the event held at the Radisson Hotel.⁴⁷ The attendees of the event donated toys as part of the door admission for the event. The night also included a contest for the “King” and “Queen” of the charity dance and awarded trophies to two local celebrities—Rose of The Broadway bar as King, and female impersonator extraordinaire Scotti Carlyle as Queen.⁴⁸ Empress I, and the Emperor Regent, presented the large amount of toys collected at the door to a pleased Sergeant Casey Simpson of the Denver Police Department.⁴⁹ Before the event ended, the members of the Imperial Royal Court of the Rocky Mountain Empire were publicly announced and crowned.⁵⁰ This public announcement of the Court allowed the dance’s attendees to recognize those in charge of orchestrating the charity event. In this way, the event served a dual purpose as it utilized a party atmosphere to unite members of the gay community and contribute to a noble cause: collecting toys for underprivileged youth. The dance also served as a way for members of the community to publicly recognize the Court’s accomplishments and contributed to the greater good on behalf of the gay community. The community came together for a good cause.

After the success of the Court’s charity event and the beginning of the New Year of 1975, a member of the community criticized the Court’s ability to represent the entirety of Colorado’s gay population.⁵¹ In an “Open Forum” featured in *The Scene* magazine, one

⁴⁶ “The Royal Mouse Squeeks,” 26.

⁴⁷ “Results of Snow Ball Released,” *The Scene*, January 1974, 4.

⁴⁸ “Results of Snow Ball Released,” 4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Joey Michaels, “Open Forum,” *The Scene*, January 1975, 17.

member of the community explained his concerns of the Court's inability to represent the gay community.⁵² In his letter to the magazine, Joey Michaels explained that although "not an active member of any gay sponsored organization," he attended their functions and took issue with the election of the Empress of the Court. Michaels expresses his concern in his letter to *The Scene*:

I personally was not asked to give my vote for empress, and I feel the use of the position of empress to represent the entire gay community is not only misleading but also in very poor taste... In my opinion the empress is a drag queen. Certainly the majority of the gay community are not drag queens, nor do I feel any media or public exposure we gays can get should be aimed at a drag queen who claims to represent 'us.'"⁵³

During the 1970s, the term "drag queen" functioned as a derogatory phrase used to describe female impersonators. "Drag queen" in reference to gender illusionists was an attempt to invalidate and even mock the art form of drag by emphasizing the negative stereotype that paints gay men as effeminate, and therefore lesser than masculine, heterosexual men. Michaels finishes his letter urging the community "to dump campy unrealisms" referring to the titles of the Court, and adopt "more acceptable and constructive realisms."⁵⁴

This "Open Forum" letter effectively reflects the fears many members of the gay community held during the Gay Liberation Movement of the 1960s-80s regarding the association linking gay men to effeminate gender expression. The author did not want to be associated with the most detested part of gay identity—overt femininity. In this way, the author's concerns illustrate a fear of gay men being perceived as more effeminate than they

⁵² Joey Michaels, "Open Forum," *The Scene*, 17.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

already were perceived to be by the general public. Thus, the author's concerns with the inclusion of a female impersonator as Empress I, represents the discrimination held against the members of the community who performed drag. This rejection and repression towards expressing femininity reveals the deep roots of misogyny within the gay male community during this time. Drag was continuously delegitimized and challenged.

Just as Michaels's letter reflects larger issues present within the gay community during 1975, the response to his letter in the "Open Forum" reflects a different commentary central to the gay community. The author defines the gay community as a diverse community including "drag queens, leather, western, butch, femm[e]" expressions of gay identity.⁵⁵ The author points out that "drag queens" are indeed as representative of the gay community at large as "butch" presenting gay men. The response to Michael's letter goes on to explain:

Even with this great divergence [of identity] we submit that unity is possessed. Our common ground [is] sexual preference but beyond this is our tenacity for individual expression. We challenge the straight society to allow us to live our lives in peace and freedom from straight standards, and in the next breath condemn our own for doing just that.⁵⁶

In stating this, the author eloquently conveys the problematic nature of discrimination aimed at any member of the gay community on the basis of their personal expression of sexuality or gender performance. Thus, the author illustrates that such discrimination against members of the gay community from members within the gay community only acts to further weaken an already oppressed group. Such discrimination against drag ultimately weakens the whole community.

⁵⁵ Ted, "Open Forum," *The Scene*, January 1975, 18.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

However, some individuals within the community who criticized Empress I placed their efforts towards improving and fostering the Court's future as opposed to merely "throwing shade" in the "Open Forums" of *The Scene*. For example, Empress VI explained: "Bill Olson [of the gay leather community] didn't care for what Empress I was doing and thought that there was viability behind the idea of having a social figurehead. He went and approached the 'big boys'—the 'leather boys'—and asked to support Scotti for Empress II so that we could take over the organization, so that the city [of gay Denver] could take the organization back from private ownership, so to speak."⁵⁷ Through such efforts, members active in the community made efforts to redirect the power of the organization from boosting an individual's ego to the progression and betterment of the gay community of Denver.

The Second Coronation, "Love Around the World," took place at the Hilton Hotel on April 26th, 1975 and was attended by 800 people.⁵⁸ The community chose local celebrity and female impersonator Scotti Carlyle to reign as Empress II and Richard "Bucky" Reed to reign as Emperor II. The Court's new representatives inherited the throne through popular vote and a panel of four judges based on the quality and creativity of the chosen theme, dinner etiquette while dining at the Brown Palace hotel, performances, and also the ability to represent Colorado's gay community.⁵⁹ The monarchs of Reign II ruled the Rocky Mountain Empire through active engagement in community functions, social and political

⁵⁷ Christi Layne, interviewed by David Duffield, *Colorado LGBT History Project*, April 27, 2015.

⁵⁸ "Coronation '75 Attended by 800," *The Scene*, April 1975, 13.

⁵⁹ Richard Bucky Reed, "The Emperor II" *The Scene*, April 1975, 15; Scotti Carlyle, interviewed by David Duffield, *Colorado LGBT History Project*, September 3, 2015.

advocacy for the community, and sponsoring fundraising events to benefit community organizations.⁶⁰ Reign II strengthened the ICRME's role.

During this time, Scotti Carlyle, or Empress II, brought her powerful presence to the bars, discos, and stages she graced and the community she served. In a letter to *The Scene*, Empress I, Bridgette Peters, commended Empress II for her contribution to Denver's drag scene. Empress I noted in her letter "[Empress II] has given unpaid non-professional entertainers a chance to perform and be recognized on a professional stage in her Wednesday night talent shows."⁶¹ In promoting and encouraging the talented female impersonators of Denver's gay community, Empress II played an active role in establishing a solid foundation for drag performers in Denver. Empress II supported the community through drag by allowing a safe space for drag experimentation within the gay community and involved the straight community through the entertainment of drag performance.

Despite resistance within the gay community, drag was an important foundation for the formulation of a queer identity that could stand in contrast to heteronormativity. Drag, as an art form, draws gender constructions into question and demonstrates the performativity of gender, including those which uphold and fortify heterosexuality as "natural." As queer theorist Judith Butler describes in her book *Gender Trouble*, gender is "structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity."⁶² Yet, the necessity for the repetition of these acts highlights the fragility of normalized, gendered identities and the way they can easily be tampered with.

⁶⁰ "Reign II," *Imperial Court of the Rocky Mountain Empire* accessed December 6, 2015, <http://www.icrmedenver.org/about-us/college-of-monarchs/reign-2/>.

⁶¹ Bridgette Peters, "Letters," *The Scene*, May 1975, 19.

⁶² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990), 141.

Empress Carlyle herself proclaimed in an interview, “in drag, you can be anybody. You can be anything because it’s all in makeup, and the attitude, and the costume”⁶³ Through her promotion of events featuring drag performances, Empress II encouraged a safe and vital space for Denver’s queer community to experiment with alternative gender and sexual identities. As Butler argues, drag allows for “performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality.”⁶⁴ Thus, the events promoted by the second court of the Rocky Mountain Empire served not only to raise money for vital charity organizations, but they also allowed for a space to question and invert the very system of oppression under which the gay community of Denver suffered.

Empress Carlyle was well connected in the gay community, and utilized the power of friendship to foster a sense of unity within the community through a common ground of entertainment.⁶⁵ Empress VI Christi Layne spoke of Empress II as, “so effable, charming, reliable, sweet... [Unsusceptible to] confrontation, even if you threw a baseball bat at her... she would step over it.. and go on. Scotti was just that way.”⁶⁶ During her reign, Empress II facilitated many drag shows in order to raise money for organizations within the gay community.⁶⁷ The Court facilitated a show to raise funds for the Singles Club of the Metropolitan Community Church on November 9th, 1975, an event that supported the gay

⁶³ Scotti Carlyle, interviewed by David Duffield, *Colorado LGBT History Project*, September 3, 2015.

⁶⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 141.

⁶⁵ Scotti Carlyle, “Candidate View,” *The Scene*, March 1975, 11.

⁶⁶ Christi Layne, interviewed by David Duffield, *Colorado LGBT History Project*, April 27, 2015.

⁶⁷ Scotti Carlyle, interviewed by David Duffield, *Colorado LGBT History Project*, September 3, 2015.

community by celebrating gay culture through the entertainment of drag.⁶⁸ The benefit shows raised funds for the queer community (such as raising money to found the Gay Community Center) while exposing the general public to gay culture through entertainment and charity aimed at the larger, “straight” community. In 1975, the Court hosted the 2nd annual Toys for Tots Drive.⁶⁹ This event served not only to help needy children, but also to improve the rocky relationship between Denver’s queer community and Denver’s police department, and increased queer visibility. In doing this, the benefit shows also positively represented the gay community to the straight world. The monarch’s passion for female impersonation and entertaining bled into her reign and benefitted the community.

During Reign II, Emperor Bucky also regularly engaged in supporting community functions and sponsored the first event to raise funds for building a Gay Community Center. In doing this, Emperor II set an example for the rest of the gay community to follow and helped strengthen the community. Emperor Bucky contributed news of the monarchs’ activity on a regular basis and encouraged the community to work with the Court in order to improve Denver’s gay scene, participating in “Unity” which was aimed at “trying to get Gay Colorado together.”⁷⁰ Throughout his reign, Emperor II showed his stewardship to the community by demonstrating his consideration for the community’s health. The Emperor proposed monthly VD screenings at the bath houses around Denver “as more gays might be willing to be tested there than at a hospital.”⁷¹ The monarch showed his affection for his

⁶⁸ Ron Wilson, “MCC Benefit is Success,” *The Scene*, November 1975, 23.

⁶⁹ “Snowball to be on December 14,” *The Scene*, October 1975, 23.

⁷⁰ Ron Wilson, “Community Unity Meeting Held,” *The Scene*, November 1975, 31.

⁷¹ Richard Bucky Reed, “Bucky Babbles,” *The Scene*, July 1975, 21.

community and its wellbeing, and his philanthropy helped establish a vital community resource. While the public medical facilities may have shamed those in the gay community for their sexual orientation, Bucky's outreach spread a message for a safe space for gay men to be tested and treated for illnesses that greatly affected their community.

The representatives of the Court of Reign II also played a role in fostering unity within the community. Various representatives from organizations and businesses in the gay community gathered regularly to form a group called "Unity" that called for the cooperation of the queer folks of Denver to promote community solidarity.⁷² Unity held monthly meetings and functioned as a think tank that shared ideas centered on facilitating solidarity within the gay community.⁷³ Emperor Bucky encouraged members of the community to attend the monthly Unity meetings and explained that the members of Unity "were all elected by you [the gay community] and should be looking out for your interests."⁷⁴ The Court's activity within Unity reflects their commitment towards providing representation and improving intercommunity communication.

Throughout Reign II, the monarchs and the Privy Council, which was comprised of the board members of the Court, frequently engaged in the functions of Denver and Colorado's gay community and benefitted the community in a multitude of ways. Through the utilization of gender illusion, Empress Scotti Carlyle created safe spaces for gay culture to thrive, for gay community to convene, and gay identity to materialize. The Court utilized the vehicle of drag to accomplish all of these things while simultaneously raising monetary funds for community organizations. Emperor Bucky promoted the community's health and

⁷² Richard Bucky Reed, "Bucky Speaks Out," *The Scene*, December 1975, 2.

⁷³ "Community Unity Meeting," *The Scene*, December 1975, 37.

⁷⁴ Richard Bucky Reed, "Bucky Speaks Out," *The Scene*, December 1975, 10.

actively participated in rallying solidarity within the community. Both monarchs also exercised their authority as social and political representatives of the Rocky Mountain Empire by fighting against the police harassment inflicted on the community through unnecessary jaywalking tickets.⁷⁵ Reign II helped reinforce the cracked foundations of the Court caused by the disrespect thrown at the first Court family and the first monarchy's struggle for support, the leadership of Reign II strengthened the Court's presence and visibility by serving the community and making improvements within the organization. The monarchs set an example for the community, promoting solidarity and philanthropy. Their actions fortified the organization's role and stimulated its legitimacy.

The Coronation of 1976 celebrated the bicentennial of the nation and marked "the largest event to ever be held in the Gay Community in a number of years."⁷⁶ The event featured the most candidates in the running for Emperor and Empress since the Court's debut in 1974 and drew an audience of over 1200, including four members of Vancouver, B.C.'s Royal Court.⁷⁷ The Coronation of Emperor and Empress III employed the use of voting machines for the first time and required voters to purchase tickets to the event.⁷⁸ The Coronation named the female impersonator Billie Cassandra as Empress III, and Chuck Anderson as Emperor III of the Rocky Mountain Empire. Ron Wilson wrote an editorial in *The Scene* magazine on the event: "Coronation '76 this year was the largest event to ever be held for the Gay Community... We wish [the monarchs] the best during the coming year and hope that they can do a lot to bring the Gay Community of Colorado closer together and

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ "Coronation '76—Over 1200 in Attendance," *The Scene*, April 1976, 5.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ "Eleven in the Race," *The Scene*, March 1976, 3.

move out into the open.”⁷⁹ The monarchs of Reign III did just that. Not only did they work to unite the divided community, but they also helped send delegates to the 1976 Democratic National Convention in New York City to lobby for a Gay Rights Platform in alliance with the National Gay Task Force.⁸⁰

Missy Sullivan, a female impersonator who moved to Denver after abdicating from the Court of Los Angeles due to corruption caused by the organization’s private ownership, questioned the intentions of the entire Court system. During this time, Sullivan called into question the priorities, validity, and functionality of the Courts of each empire and ultimately revealed the need for a system to regulate the actions of the Courts— The International Court System. During an event in 1976 at The Back Door III, Missy auctioned off all the drag accessories she had accumulated over her career in order to send members of the community to fight for gay rights at the Democratic National Convention in New York City. In doing this, the culmination and effective end of Missy’s drag career sent ten more delegates from the community than previously anticipated to attend the Democratic National Convention to lobby for gay rights. The delegates included influential members within Denver’s gay community and the ICRME, including drag performers like Christi Layne and Causha (contemporaries of Empress II in Denver’s drag scene and advocates of the community), alongside members of the leather community, such as Bill Olson among others. These delegates lobbied on a Gay Rights Platform in alliance with the National Gay Task Force through intercommunity cooperation and battled for rights to simply be who

⁷⁹ Ron Wilson, “Editorial: Coronation ’76,” *The Scene*, April 1976, 5.

⁸⁰ “Reign III,” *ICRME*, accessed on December 4, 2015 <http://www.icrmedenver.org/about-us/college-of-monarchs/reign-3/>.

they were.⁸¹ As Empress Layne stated in her oral history, “The Court was becoming apart of the [gay] community... [and] the [gay] community was beginning to understand it had responsibilities to a country as a whole.”⁸²

POLICE PERMIT First Denver Pride Permit by
Chris Sloane and Tobie
Foundation 1976

Nº **701** Denver, Colo., June 25, 1976

BY AUTHORITY OF THE MANAGER OF SAFETY –

TOBIE FOUNDATION INC. %CHRIS SLOAN

Address 1111 St. Paul St. Phone 778-0481 Bus. 320-4467 Home

is hereby granted permission to have a parade on Sunday, June 27, 1976

at 2:15 p.m. Route: Chesseman Park to Franklin St. - down Franklin to Colfax Avenue to the Civic Center

\$4.00 fee paid

Expires June 27, 1976 (after parade) Manager of Safety

Retain this Permit for inspection By David Cronin Secretary

Form 9 (Rev. 1/72) Dept. of Safety

In addition to their diligent service to the gay community on social and political fronts, the monarchs of Reign III helped organize active members of the community to facilitate the first Gay Pride Parade held in Denver—a milestone openly and publicly celebrating the progress and achievements made by Denver’s gay community. The gay community wanted to have a proper march to celebrate Pride during Pride Week in 1976 like other major cities across the nation. Having a Pride Parade in Denver would signal Denver’s place among other cities with visible gay populations. Layne volunteered to “procure the march permit and festival permit for seven days running in The Center so we had ‘set up and tear down’ time.”⁸³ Layne had obtained all the permission for the parade

⁸¹ Christi Layne, interviewed by David Duffield, *Colorado LGBT History Project*, April 27, 2015.

⁸² Layne, interviewed by David Duffield, *Colorado LGBT History Project*, April 27, 2015.

⁸³ Ibid.

under his given name “Chris Sloan” but wanted the Community Center to have a board to help organize and facilitate the festival.

In her oral history, Christi Layne recalled planning the event. According to the interview, the Tobie Foundation sat down and decided that Denver’s gay community should have a march and demonstrate their pride just as the gay communities in other major cities across the nation had done in previous years. Layne went to the City Manager’s office to procure a permit and explained her group “wanted to do a march for civil rights” and asked for a “march permit” instead of a “parade permit” as it required less cooperation with police, and would be less expensive.⁸⁴

However, when Layne requested the permit be changed for a week earlier in order for *The Scene* magazine to provide advertisement for the event, she accidentally outed the march as a Gay Pride event to the City Manager. According to Layne, The City Manager firmly explained that Denver did not have permits for the gay community. Although Layne explained to the city official that she had already been promised a date for the march and signed paperwork, the City Manager retorted: “Where is it written? I want to see the paper.”⁸⁵ Because the permit didn’t explicitly state the purpose of the event to the City Manager’s liking, the Pride Parade was threatened.

In her oral history, Layne recalled the entire gay community as being “Stonewalled” in that moment when it became clear which community intended to participate in the march and who it was for. The Gay Pride event that was supposed to occur in only two weeks lost its permit. The gay bars all began to communicate with each other, and the

⁸⁴ Layne, interviewed by David Duffield, *Colorado LGBT History Project*, April 27, 2015.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

community desperately pulled together their resources with the hopes of remedying their situation.⁸⁶

Layne recalled a news reporter approached her inquiring about the City's denial of the permit for the Gay Pride march. Layne explained that she indeed had the paperwork for the permit (although it technically did not mention anything about the march being for the gay community) and explained the City would not stop the gay community from marching. Layne told the reporter that if the City intended to arrest those participating in the march, they should "bring paddy wagons, and a lot of them."⁸⁷ Layne did everything in her power to regain permission for the permit. Through persistent attempts and indirect intimidation towards the City for the permit, Layne finally got a call from the Governor's office explaining that no one would be arrested at the march but that she should steer clear of making any more bold statements regarding the gay community's situation to the press.⁸⁸ The day of the event Layne got the permit from an official from the Governor's office in a limousine, and due to the hassle caused in the previous weeks, two police cars acted as a motorcade for members of the gay community to march proudly down Colfax in what historically is remembered as Denver's first Gay Pride Parade.⁸⁹ The march of 1976 marks the beginning of the decades-long tradition of Denver's Gay Pride annual festival. The history of Denver's first Gay Pride march also exemplifies the kind of obstacles the community faced during

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

this time. Although city officials discriminated against the gay people of Denver, the gay community marched forward. The gay community came together and marched as a singular unit despite internal fractures and external harassment from the City.

Perhaps what is most striking about 1976 for Denver's gay community is the amazing accomplishments that came to fruition. Due to the efforts of all three of the courts as of 1976 and the other queer advocacy groups of the time, Denver's gay community became more organized and visible—the events and accomplishments instilled hope for a future. Among a community that had been denigrated, disrespected, hidden, and divided, the first Pride Parade, the opening of the Center, and the sending of delegates to Washington represented unprecedented leaps toward more fair and equal treatment and a more united community. Western views of homosexuality had always been psychologically stigmatized as being a life filled with emptiness, loneliness, and hopelessness. Yet, the actions of Denver's gay community, including the ICRME, were able to unite a community and prove the value, ingenuity, and vitality of gay individuals and the gay community. The strategic use of drag to rally support and fundraise for noble causes served as an entry point into gay culture for the straight community and laid the foundations for philanthropic outreach. In short, the ICRME organized to unite a fractured community and build a future for the gay people of Colorado.

The Imperial Court of the Rocky Mountain Empire acted as a multifaceted social and political stage for Denver's gay community. The very foundation of the Court of the Rocky Mountain Empire in 1974 provided Denver's queer community with social and political representatives. Although, Denver's queer community had many groups with social and political motives, the Court incorporated and even revered community members who often

fell prey to the discrimination of other gay men—female impersonators. By utilizing the power of queer performativity through the art of drag, the Court not only benefitted the gay community, but also the straight community of Denver. What would become annual events, like the “Snowball Dance” established by Empress I, exemplify the foundations laid by the Court of the Rock Mountain Empire during much of its formative years. The social events sponsored by the Court brought members of Denver’s gay community together, celebrated various expressions of gay identity, and nurtured a positive relationship between the gay and straight communities in Denver. The events functioned as more than social gatherings hosted by and organized for the gay community. They allowed a space for queer culture to benefit both the straight and gay communities. Such events allowed the Court to cast a positive light on the gay community, as opposed to the subversive and criminalized association often prescribed by hegemonic society during this time.

The Court created a social and political space inclusive of a variety of queer expression, including drag performance. Empress II’s passion for performance and her dedication to the community illuminates the significant role drag played in encouraging acceptance within the community. Empress Carlyle promoted drag performance not only to foster drag as an expression of queer identity and culture, but also as a form of entertainment welcome to all audiences, queer or not. Drag performances created a space for straight audiences to experience queer culture through entertainment, allowing a space for the queer and straight communities to interact in a positive and nonthreatening manner.

Despite the disrespect thrown at the leadership of the Court, the Emperors and Empresses of the Rocky Mountain Empire frequented the community’s cultural centers,

composed of the gay bars, discos, and clubs in downtown Denver. In doing this, the monarchs fostered a sense of visible representation in these gay-identified spaces and offered themselves as social and political advocates of Denver's queer community. The monarchs of the Court of the Rocky Mountain Empire also provided national social and political representation for the queer people of Denver and Colorado. The ICRME was part of a network of many courts active in the United States during this time, situating and connecting the queer community of Denver and the entirety of Colorado with the other gay Empires across the nation. The ICRME's formation and active role within the larger national court system placed the presence of Denver's gay community on a national stage. The ICRME ultimately established Denver's gay community as an organized, actively progressing, and nationally recognized entity regardless of its internal factions. In doing this, the ICRME placed Denver and Colorado's gay community among major gay centers such as San Francisco, New York City, and Portland. The monarchs of the Court functioned as both leaders and representatives active within their own community and advocates for queer rights and general advancement within society at a national level.

The Court fostered Denver's queer culture by upholding drag performance as a means to benefit the entire community while simultaneously entertaining an audience. The Empresses of the Court actively represented the queer residents of Colorado at a national level in addition to fostering Denver's queer culture. The Empresses reigning from 1974-76 demonstrated drag entertainers as major assets within the community who actively supported the culture thriving in the queer bars and discos of Denver. Moreover, the Court's events embraced drag as a platform to unite a fractured community in order to celebrate a shared queer identity while endorsing drag as a critical part of Denver's queer

culture. Despite internal disputes and external discrimination, the leadership of the ICRME encouraged the community to unify and uphold queer culture for the community's advancement. The Court's drag shows acted as spaces for straight audiences to experience gay culture, their events stimulated a celebration of gay pride amidst societal oppression, and their actions called their divided community to mend wounds and move bravely forward towards a brighter future.

The actions of the ICRME contributed towards raising funds for a community center that would come into fruition in 1976, establishing a lasting foundation for future generations to utilize and cultivate. The formation of the ICRME in 1974 marked the humble beginnings of a queer advocacy organization with a legacy spanning over four decades. In this way, the formative years of the Court of the Rocky Mountain Empire fostered a social and political institution rooted at the intersection of the juxtaposed queer traditions upheld by masculine gay men and femme gay men. By including both drag entertainers and butch men in the leadership of the organization, the ICRME set an example for the rest of Denver's community to unify regardless of differences of sexual or gender expression. The efforts of the ICRME during 1974-76 ultimately contribute a positive narrative concerning Colorado's queer history to the broader historical narrative of Colorado. The Court's story offers a short historical narrative focused on queer spaces, queer identity, and queer culture to the vast pages of the dominant, hegemonic narrative of Colorado history. Moreover, such queer history provides a visible heritage for future LGBT identified Coloradoans comprised of philanthropy, activism, resilience, and courage—a heritage worthy of distinction and pride.

My research offers only a limited remembrance of the role of the ICRME during its premier years, but the stories embedded within these pages exemplify the brave example the Court set for their community. The ICRME emerged during a time when the societal majority willfully (and legally) discriminated against the gay minority on the sole basis of their identity. Despite the organizations' flaws, the Court served as leaders and advocates for their community, creating a tradition and institution for future generations to utilize. Themes regarding the importance of visible queer representation, the necessity to foster queer culture, and the call to advocate for gay rights were prominent among the primary sources acting as the bulk of my research. Such themes act as bold reminders of the significance of this specific historical narrative, and why it is so important to uncover the dust masking it and make it accessible to others. The members comprising the ICRME during the 1970s and even throughout the years of the AIDS crisis were not without imperfections, but their commitment and passion for bettering their community undoubtedly deserve noteworthy praise.

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[Note by David Duffield: When I first met Sarah in the Summer of 2015 at Pride in Denver she was very excited to take on work with the project. We have been truly fortunate to have a student of her vision, tenacity, and fortitude who took on this project and I uphold this scholarship as an example to others of what our youth can achieve if given the opportunity. We owe her a debt of gratitude for the tireless work shown here.]

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