

"The Gay West"

by

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That homosexuality is ubiquitous throughout Colorado history is perhaps too obvious to need demonstration.¹ That homosexuality and homosexuals have been systematically written out of the record of the history of the American West² is equally patent. The importance of rectifying this omission or perhaps even the desirability of so doing, should need even less reflection. That our idea of the social pattern of the West is skewed in so fundamental a way as to eliminate 13% ² of the frontier population suggests a fundamental error in perspective. The selective collecting, and therefore in a sense censoring, of data in which libraries and historical societies have traditionally engaged has resulted in a biased record of the social pattern of the nineteenth century American West. Gays in the American West³ represent a case study of a divergent group ^{who} ~~which~~ could ^{not} or would not be absorbed into the American Ideal completely, and ^{who} ~~which~~ existed more or less sub rosa as a living rebuke to the cultural normative values imposed by ^{the} conformity-conscious society. ~~We see in Western gays~~ ^{equivalent} a group whose existence was

~~then~~
denied ~~us~~

The first gays on the American Frontier were, ^{among} the native inhabitants. Alvar Nunez, one of the earliest chroniclers of the newly discovered North American Continent, observed in 1534-35 that the Indian's mythology already included that ambiguous man/woman person who would later become known to us under the word berdache.¹ The word itself comes from the French bardach meaning homosexual male. (Some definitions include the element of prostitution as a "kept boy".)²

It is very difficult to generalize about the berdache, as the institution while not universal among American Indian tribes, was a widely recognized practice and always with local variations. The essential features shared by all tribes which had berdache among its members were three in number: 1) Berdache, though male (female equivalent to berdache existed along parallel lines in many tribes) wore at one time or another clothing of the female gender; 2) The berdache worked at women's work or in other ways assumed a substantial part of what was thought to be appropriate feminine behavior; 3) The berdache was granted wide latitude in sexual contacts with members of his own anatomical gender.

The berdache tradition was both ancient and widespread before any European influence in North America. Bossu in his Travels through Louisiana, 1771, and Pedro Fages, second military governor of California, both reported the berdache well established in their respective locals. Fages wrote in 1775:

I have substantial evidence that those Indian men who, both here and farther inland, are observed in the dress, clothing, and character of women--there being two or three such in each village--pass as sodomites by profession (it being confirmed that all these Indians are much addicted to this abominable vice) and permit the heathen to practice the execrable, unnatural abuse of their bodies. They are called joyas, and are held in great esteem.

The same basic information is repeated by many 18th and early 19th century travelers with only slight variation.

That the berdache tradition was pervasive and ancient when first encountered by Europeans cannot be doubted; the exact nature of the phenomenon in each tribe, however, is more difficult to determine. The problem of describing the berdache customs of the various tribes is that it is really a group of customs and only becomes unified in the minds of western invaders who tried to classify and simplify and who invented the word. The three earlier mentioned characteristics of the berdache aside, little is found in common between the berdache of the divergent cultures of the American Indians. The initiation into the state is a case in point.

In some cases the boys who ^{became} ~~will be~~ come berdache ^{and} ~~are~~ observed in early childhood to have typically feminine interests and characteristics. They ^{are} ~~are~~ often fond of pounding acorns and engaging in manual labor, two generally feminine characteristics. The reaction to this situation is dependent on the particular tribe's view of the desirability of the berdache state. In those tribes where berdache ^{were} ~~are~~ highly regarded, Mohave and Pima for

example, the boy ^{will} is encouraged to assume more stereotypical masculine behavior, viz, weaving and war. In tribes where berdache is a welcome and desirable member of the group as in the Prairie Potowami the young boy is actually encouraged to develop into a berdache and is given special favors so long as he continues toward that goal.²

The other, and more dramatic avenue into the berdache state was for the youth to mature and develop in the usual manner for a young boy until it was time for him to go upon his Spirit Quest. The Spirit quest was undertaken by each boy upon reaching the age of puberty. In the spring of the year each youth preparatory to entering into the full status of man and warrior among the Omaha and several other tribes had to go out upon his Spirit Quest--his search for a spiritual identity and guiding force from the other world. Alone in the forest, woods or Plain the youth fasted and prayed for four days. There, amid the vast and natural retreat the boy sought a vision which would guide him through his life. In some instances boys who had evidenced no inclination toward becoming berdache were transformed by the vision into the role. A report collected from the Omaha at the close of the last century attributes the transformation to the moon. When the youth is in the vision state the moon appears to him and proffers him a bow with one hand and a burden strap used by women in carrying in the other. As the youth reached for the bow the moon would quickly cross his hands. If the youth was not careful he would grab the strap and thus seal his fate. If he woke from the dream before he picked

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the strap or if he was successful in catching hold of the bow he could escape becoming a berdache.¹

Once the change into a berdache had been decided upon a ceremony was performed to acknowledge the transformation and to provide a rite of passage for the youth. Generally these ceremonies had an element of testing in them--especially in tribes which did not value the berdache-- to determine if the youth was actually destined to become a berdache. The ritual almost always involved removing the boy's breech cloth and substituting a skirt and other feminine apparel. In the Mohave a ritualistic washing away of the boy's masculinity was performed in the Colorado River.

The question of berdache sexuality was very problematical for Victorian observers. At the turn of the century one timid anthropologist reported: "There is a side to the lives of these men which must remain untold. They never marry women, and it is understood that they seldom have any relations with them."² In actual fact, some of the berdaches have had rare lapses into heterosexuality but the general consensus is that the preponderance of sexual activity among the berdache was with members of their own gender. Westermarck, who, perhaps alone of all the noted observers of his time, was not burdened with a heterosexual viewpoint or bias³ refutes the tendency of the Victorian anthropologists to ignore or whitewash berdache sexuality.⁴ The sexual partners of the berdache were recruited among the youths and young men of the tribe, with frequent casual connections

with older married men of the community as well. The type of sexual activity engaged in was culturally determined. In some tribes, Creek, Oto, Karacopa, and others, anal intercourse was the preferred and accepted practice. while the Crow berdache usually resorted to fellatio to entertain his partners. This fact goes a long way toward demonstrating the socially conditioned nature of sexual responses.

It is impossible to generalize about the Indian attitude toward the berdache. In some tribes they were highly prized and valued members of the society. They were credited with special supernatural powers and were afforded a position of economic advantage and social prestige. This was particularly true among the *Zuni* and *Potawatomi* tribes. This feeling was by no means universal, however; among the *Mohave* tribe the berdache was looked upon as an unfortunate necessity and in the *Sioux* tribe they were shunned and barely tolerated.

Even in tribes which valued the berdache, those who married berdache wives were generally ridiculed. Though casual, superficial sexual encounters with a berdache were regarded as a harmless sowing of wild oats, marriage to a berdache brought the husband into great ridicule and constant harassment of the most cruel type. This constant pressure from a hostile society drove many spouses away and was the direct cause of the suicide of the berdache in some cases. One of the primary reasons for this attitude was perhaps the belief that the husband of the berdache was only interested in the spiritual powers and material wealth that the berdache

possessed. It was beyond their ability to imagine that a masculine Indian could be more sexually attracted to a berdache than he was to a woman. The idea of genuine sexual preference and love between these two was impossible to conceive.

The Europeans upon first encountering the berdache were shocked and horrified to find sodomy pervaded so openly. Pedro Font, an early California traveler, after describing the berdache among the California Indians, observed: "...From all the foregoing I conclude that in this matter of incontinence there will be much to do when the Holy Faith and the Christian religion are established among them.^a And, indeed much was done, when the Christians acquired the power to act. An early 19th century traveler describing the berdache in the Southwest recorded in 1807: "...Many of them were cut off by the Spaniards, who, conceiving that they were subservient to the most shameful passions, delivered them over prey to furious dogs. . ."

The first permanent western settlers were far less open about being gay than were their Indian contemporaries. The same ruthless proselytizing zeal ^{that} which was used by the missionaries to destroy the gay Indian culture was also used to keep down domestic gays. Hatred and fear of gays was only one of the many social attitudes ^{that} which the settlers brought west with them. Despite this fact, however, the West provided opportunities ^{that} which could not have been experienced elsewhere. The unsettled conditions enabled people to conduct themselves in ways ^{that} which would have been impossible in the East on the same scale. The wearing of clothing of the opposite sex is a case in point.

One of the most curious features of the far western frontier is the ^{possible} presence of transvestites in large numbers. A. D. Richardson reported ^{that} that during 1859 ^{in Colorado} ^{that} he encountered several women in male attire, ^{in California} and that one business advertising for an apprentice penned "No young women in disguise need apply" to the bottom of the ad, in order to discourage in advance the numerous transvestites in the camp. The same source goes on to comment ^{regarding} regarding these women: "Some were adventurers; all were of the wretched class against which society shuts its iron doors, bidding them hurry un-cared-for to destruction."¹

Just what class he ~~is~~^{is} referring ~~to~~^{red} here is ~~not~~^{un} clear. This language is more virulent than the language he used elsewhere when ~~referring to~~^{discussing} prostitutes, but whether he was alluding to these women as ~~being~~^{being} gay is hard to determine. That these ~~women~~^{females} were tough and able to take care of themselves is obvious. One of them claimed that she had twice served as a drover on the trail to California.¹ This pattern was repeated often with only superficial changes from case to case. A typical one perhaps is that of Charles Vaubough of Trinidad.

During the closing years of the decade of the 1870^s, Charles Vaubough and his wife moved to Trinidad and opened a French restaurant. The couple ~~gave out~~^{reported} that they had been married in Missouri during the first months of the Civil War and that their only child, a daughter, had died in infancy before they moved to the southern Colorado town. "Frenchie", as Mr. Vaubough was known, was a French immigrant and soon developed a reputation as an excellent cook. In Trinidad, where French restaurants were few during the 1870^s, the establishment became popular with the best local cafe society. The couple prospered until Mrs. Vaubough died, leaving the restaurant in the sole care of Charles, her husband of thirty years standing. The loss was great for Charles;

he left Trinidad and secured employment as a sheep-herder on the Brown Ranch south of Trinidad in Las Animas County. There he remained for the next twenty years until he became too old to work. He was sent to Trinidad, ^{and} declared a pauper, ^{and} he developed pneumonia ^{and} was taken in by the sisters of San Rafael Hospital. At first he refused medical attention but finally was convinced that he would die without seeing a doctor. As a contemporary newspaper reported:

"...Vaubough at last reluctantly consented, and then with tears welling in her eyes and coursing down her wrinkled cheeks, she called for the sister in charge and parted with her secret..."¹

The sisters were mortified to learn that "Grandpa" Vaubough was not an elderly gentleman as everyone had assumed in Trinidad for ^{more than two decades.} ~~over twenty years~~. The other shepherders at the Brown Ranch, with whom Frenchie had shared one room bunkhouses for twenty years, were surprised to say the least. The reaction of the people of Trinidad sheds much light on the opinion of the times. The sisters replaced the overalls and boots with crinolines, lace, and bonnets appropriate for a "lady" of eighty-one. The doctor who had been called in tried to get a case history for his notebook and the Press tried to get a story. No one seemed to be interested in Vaubough as a person,

a desperately frightened eighty-one year old person, who had lost a cover after nearly sixty years. ^{Following} ~~After~~ ^{a lifetime} ~~all the years~~ of wearing trousers, dresses and bonnets were humiliating. "Katherine" ^{seemed} ~~sounded~~ strange after more than ^{one} a half century of "Charles". ^{and the name of} But the sisters insisted that dresses it would be. At this point the local Jesuit came to the rescue. He ordered the confiscated clothes returned to "Grandpa" Vaubough and instructed the sisters to keep the patient sequestered from curiosity-seekers. Frenchie lived on as a man at San Rafael Hospital for two more years, ^{dying} ~~passing on~~ of old age in 1907. Charles was buried in a black ^{suit} ~~suit~~ donated by the priest.

The reaction of the Press to the unfolding story of Charles Vaubough's life demonstrates ^{the era's attitude on the subject.} ~~their thinking.~~ The first stories dispatched from Trinidad and printed in the Denver papers when the news of her sex broke included her denial of any "love affairs". Later, when old-timers undoubtedly remembered the days when Frenchie ran the restaurant with Mrs. Vaubough, the denial of any love affairs was dropped from the accounts. In 1907, when Frenchie died, the Trinidad and local papers again ran stories, but this time the "wife" was prominently mentioned. The original denial, in spite of the danger or perhaps inevitability of being found untrue, demonstrates perhaps that Frenchie

felt the need to defend himself from the possible criminal charge of male impersonation or even sodomy. In actuality, the social repercussions were more to be feared than legal penalties, as male impersonation, although a statutory offense in most jurisdictions, was usually a misdemeanor, and the ^{Colorado}sodomy law did not apply to women.

Some transvestites were not as fortunate as Charles Vaubough in living out their lives without being discovered. In Meeker in 1911, "Jack Hill" was arrested and charged with male impersonation and "false pretences" for marrying a local woman, Anna Shifka, the daughter of a wealthy Rio Blanco rancher. The couple had enjoyed only eighteen months of marriage when someone who had known "Jack" in Denver informed the bride's brother, who had Jack arrested and charged with male impersonation. During the course of the subsequent investigation, the bride claimed that during the year and a half of her marriage she was unaware of the fact that her husband was not a man. Helen Hilsher, as Jack was called by the Denver papers, had started her career as a man by staking out and later "proving up" on a homestead of 160 acres twelve miles southwest of Wiggins, Colorado. During the course of the final filing on the homestead it was necessary to have some of her neighbors present to file

affadavits affirming her residency and the improvements
~~which~~^{that} had been made on the land. As the filing had been
made in her own name as a woman, she was forced to appear
during the proceeding in a dress and wig. The shock of
her neighbors from Wiggins was profound when they realized
that Jack was a woman. She was able to establish her claim
to the land but left Wiggins under a cloud to reappear in
Meeker later, where she was charged with male impersonation
for marrying Miss Shifka.

These two cases are not atypical. Often the sex of
a person was only discovered when the mortician prepared
^{for burial after} the body ^{1 2} for death. Sometimes, doubtless, it was never
discovered at all. A celebrated case of this type was
reported among the laundresses of the Seventh Cavalry
during the 1870s.

The famous chronicler of this singular laundress is
Elizabeth Custer. Mrs. Custer became acquainted with Mrs.
Nash, a laundress with the Seventh Cavalry when they were
both stationed in Kentucky immediately after the Civil War.
Mrs. Nash was married to a member of the Seventh, who
appeared to be good to his wife. She did laundry work for

the Custers and was remembered as being excellent at her craft. After having saved several hundred dollars from her laundry work and tailoring on the side, her cash was stolen by her errant husband as he went AWOL. Without much time spent in regret Old Nash as she was called entered into a second marriage with a member of the company. After riding with the other laundresses in wagons all the way from Kentucky to Dakota and settling in with her ^{second spouse or} ~~new husband~~ in laundress row ^{at} on the far western post, her new husband ^{too} stole her reconstituted savings and departed as the first had done. She found solace in going to the company balls in low necked gowns "...notwithstanding her architectural build and massive features ..." as Mrs. Custer remarked. Soon another husband was recruited from the ranks of the cavalry and, again without the formality of a divorce, another marriage was contracted. This time she captured the handsomest soldier in the company and ^{his} ~~his~~ uniforms ^{that} which she tailored for him were said to be remarkable for showing off his well proportioned and manly figure.

Mrs Custer relates the subsequent fate of Old Nash:

"...Her past life of hardship and exposure told on her in time, and she became ailing and rheumatic. Finally, after we had left Dakota, we heard that when death approached, she made an appeal to the camp women who surrounded her and had nursed her through her illness; she implored them to put her in her coffin just as she was when she died and bury her at once. They, thinking such a course would not be paying proper attention to the dead, broke their promise. The mystery which the old creature had guarded for so many years, through a life always public and conspicuous, was revealed: "Old Nash," years before, becoming weary of the laborious life of a man, had assumed the disguise of a woman, and hoped to carry the secret into the grave. The surgeon's certificate, stating the sex of "Old Nash," together with the simple record of a laundress in the regiment for ten years, was all the brief history ever known. After enduring the gibes and scoffs of his comrades for a few days, life became unbearable to the handsome soldier who had played the part of husband in order to gain possession of his wife's savings and vary the plain fare of the soldier with good suppers; he went into one of the company's stables when no one was there and shot himself...."

That Mrs. Custer could be so indifferent to the grief of the husband is remarkable in a woman as sensitive as she was. If the man had wanted merely to avoid the cruel jokes of his fellow soldiers he could have deserted, or perhaps waited it out until his enlistment was up. The average Victorian mind was almost incapable of realizing that gay people existed, and the possibility of love between them was unthinkable.

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"The Gay West"
Terry Fitzgerald

In an Army that refused to enlist married men [#] and ~~that~~ ^{who} officially discouraged enlisted soldiers from marrying,¹ gay activities could not have been rare. With men sleeping two to a bed, opportunity met inclination. In 1879 the Surgeon General's Office issued a report on ^{Army} barracks ~~in the Army~~ in which these double bunks were roundly criticized: "The only possible argument in favor of their retention is that they enable more men to be packed in a given space, and that they cost a little less than single bedsteads; neither being worthy of consideration in view of the evils to which these relics of barbarism give rise...."² These bunks were used in several Colorado posts: in Fort Reynolds "Wooden double bunks arranged in tiers are used" ^{and} at Fort Lyon "the bunks, in two tiers and double, accommodate four men each" ^{while} at Fort Garland "double wooden bunks are furnished with the usual bedding".³ It is not surprising that the report also records "constitutional syphilis is the only disease meriting the designation of 'prevalent'". That Army conditions lent themselves to gay sexual activities was well known by contemporary experts. Fellatio among army personnel was even a subject of discussion in at least one medical journal.⁴ Medical records of military posts do not prove as useful however, as initially might be expected. A hasty conclusion would be that a report by the post surgeon of anal syphilis or oral gonorrhea would probably indicate gay sexual activity.⁵ The problem is that "syphilis" in the 1870s was not as clearly diagnosed as it is today. Many eminent medical authorities were

still arguing whether gonorrhea and syphilis were the same disease or two or more separate diseases. It is quite likely that much in the way of nonspecific urethritis, and probably many ~~other~~ nonsexually transmitted diseases were included under the name of syphilis, in much the same way that everything from pneumonia to lung cancer was often referred to as consumption. What is certain is that venereal diseases spread through the troops in remote posts with few or no "laundresses" or "hog ranches" around. In light of the intimate sleeping accommodations, this is not surprising.

Another peculiarly naive institution in the army of the far western frontier was the company theatre. At Fort Garland the theatre still stands at the edge of the parade ground. With no women to play the parts of the leading ladies, young recruits were pressed into service, some undoubtedly volunteering, to fill the need. The institution of female impersonators on stage, as in Shakespeare's time, was revived, probably with analagous results. Whether the army drag queens were ever an important stepping stone into the gay world is doubtful, but it is undoubtedly true that they provided one of the few opportunities for anyone so inclined to try his hand at female impersonation.

drag shows
in early Colorado

drag shows
in early Colorado

The majority of female impersonators, however, were professionals. By the first years of the 1880's Colorado ~~could~~ already boast^{ed} of saloons where unusual entertainment could be found. In Leadville during the early 80's, one such saloon ~~boasted~~^{offered} an elaborate stage production ~~which~~^{that} included a drag show with live orchestra.

"...we come to a large concert saloon, whose pretentious appearance proclaims it to be above its fellows as a temple of pleasure. The large billboard in front tells us that every artist who appears tonight is world-renowned....First on the list of this wondrous array of talent comes "Billy LeRoy, the Greatest Female Impersonator of Our Age, Whose Wonderful Performances Have Been the Delight and Admiration of the Leading Cities of the United States and Europe"... 'Order, please,' shouts a fat-bellied man from the stage, and comparative silence ensues. 'Mr. LeRoy, the greatest female impersonator in the world will now oblige. Jake,' he continues, addressing the "renowned Signor Montari", 'play "I'm Lonely Since Alphonzo Skipped".' Jake waved his baton and the orchestra played a few bars of the ballad, and on comes "Billy LeRoy" dressed in the costume of a swelle society belle. His face, circled about with blonde tresses, looked as fair and bewitching as that of a houri. The crowd yelled and clapped their hands in approval of his "make up," and as soon as their applause subsided, he began singing. As clear and as sweet as that of a prima donna his voice rang through the hall, thrilling his auditors with wonder and delight. Notes that would baffle the majority of female throats were trilled in the most bird-like manner. Every grimace and action accompanying the words of the song were executed as natural as life.

"As he finished and turned to go into the wings, the audience broke into a chorus of shouts. Three encores were demanded, and rather than comply with the fourth Billy snatched the blonde wig from his head and stood revealed in his true character...."

Teeny Hanger

How many of the drag performers were gay is impossible to assess. Some contemporary authors would have us believe that the majority of female impersonators are straight.

author later written
 In Mother Camp ~~in her book,~~ takes exception to this,¹ and it is certainly at variance to the norm in Colorado during the last ten years. Nearly all of the professional female impersonators here during the past ~~ten years~~ ^{decade} have been solidly gay with a few lapses into bisexuality. This same view was widely held by authors ^{and early twentieth} during the late nineteenth century.²

It is also interesting to observe that Billy LeRoy, when not thrilling his auditors with his bird-like song, spent his leisure moments robbing stage-coaches and holding up banks. He was finally captured and ~~hung~~ ^{arrested} in on the th of , 18 .³

Neither of the two occupations seem to fit the other in light of the popular stereotypes of female impersonators or of western bad men.

One of the interesting questions which will remain forever moot is the possibility that Oscar Wilde was among the patrons of Billy's Saloon on that night in April of 1882 when he visited Leadville. He apparently spent some time traveling around the saloons of Leadville and may well have passed through the swinging doors of the hall where Billy LeRoy

had entertained a year earlier. Wilde, who was not indifferent to rugged good looks, remarked in a letter to a friend:

~~My dear Miss Nellie, Since I wrote to you~~ I have been to wonderful places, to Colorado which is like the Tyrol a little, and has great canyons of red sandstone, and pine trees, and the tops of the mountains all snow-covered, and up a narrow-gauge railway did I rush to the top of a mountain 15,000 feet high, to the great mining city of the west called Leadville, and lectured the miners on the old workers in metal--Cellini and others. All I told them about Cellini and how he cast his Perseus interested them very much, and they were a most courteous audience; typical too--large blonde-bearded, yellow-haired men in red shirts, with the beautiful clear complexions of people who work in silver-mines. "After my lecture I went down a silver-mine, about a mile outside the little settlement, the miners carrying torches before us as it was night. After being dressed in miner's dress I was hurled in a bucket down into the heart of the earth, long galleries of silver-ore, the miners all at work, looking so picturesque in the dim light as they swung the hammers and cleft the stone, beautiful motives for etching everywhere, and for Walter's impressionist sketches. I stayed all night there nearly, the men being most interesting to talk to, and was brought off down the mountain by a special train at 4:30 in the morning."

Wilde was the center of controversy while he toured the country. He was an apostle of a new attitude, an attitude which many considered unwholesome. His notoriety was revived later when he was arrested, and local papers picked up where they had left off during his visit. The vague rumor, unsupported by references, that Wilde visited a bordello while in Leadville is intriguing. If it is true, (which is doubtful at best, as he was so much in the

spotlight), it is conceivable that he visited one of the more unusual houses which were already flourishing in Colorado at the time.

Gay prostitution ¹if first recorded in the early 1880's. In a paper on "The Social Evil" presented to the Colorado State Medical Society at its twelfth annual convention in Pueblo, Dr. George W. Cox touched lightly on an aspect of prostitution hardly mentioned by his contemporaries: "The full purpose of this paper would not be accomplished without at least alluding to a class of individuals who, for want of a better name, I shall designate as male prostitutes...." Describing male prostitution in the Midwest he states: "They occupy an elegantly furnished house in a fashionable neighborhood, dress in women's clothes, adopt women's names, powder their faces, pad their forms and entertain their gentlemen friends in the highest style of the art."² Whether Cox was speaking from personal observation or not he failed to make clear to his audience. As much of his observations were gathered in Colorado, it is probable that he had some knowledge of the gay hustlers of the state. The general pattern for these bordellos seemed to be a burlesque of the contemporary female parlour houses. The male prostitutes

were attired in the best fashion of ladies apparel and sat around the "parlour" chatting with gentleman callers while the callers drank and listened to the piano, or later the phonograph. After the gentlemen had had enough idle conversation, they selected their companions of choice and retired upstairs. In the cases reported by Cox, fellatio was the most common form of sexual activity. This is at variance with Josiah Flynt, a contemporary expert on tramps, who states that gay tramps almost universally engaged in inter curral or anal intercourse.¹ This may be another instance of the strangely dogmatic acceptance of normative behavior even among a minority, (i.e. deviant), group. People tend to act in accordance with their expectations, or how they think people who are as they perceive themselves to be, should act. Often when a young person discovers that he or she is gay, the immediate reaction will be to ape what they perceive as the "proper role", (community stereotype), for gay persons. In the case of the well-established male prostitute, the insistance on fellatio in preference to anal intercourse or some other form of sexual activity may likely stem from expectations about behavior. It is unlikely that fear of disease motivated the choice, since as late as 1911,

the best medical authorities in the area of venereal disease were of the opinion that homosexual intercourse did not spread the malady.¹

The extent and duration of the male bordello in Colorado are difficult to determine. That at least one seems to have been flourishing in Denver in 1882 can be inferred from Cox. It seems likely that business would not get worse through the years, so perhaps they were a regular feature of Denver's Red Light District. The directory of bordellos issued for the Templar's Convention in 1893 fails to list any brothels with male boarders, but this is not conclusive. The directory is known by an apparently unique copy which was formally in a private collection in Denver. One page is missing from this copy, apparently torn deliberately from the pamphlet with some care. Research among the houses which flourished at the time has suggested which heterosexual establishments were probably on the verso of the lost page, but no candidates appear likely for the other half of the sheet. It could be that on the missing page, conventioners would find reference to a "special" type of house. In that case, we would know a great deal about the general attitude among their customers toward gay prostitutes of the period.

My guess is that, at the time, the subject was too daring even for the habitués of the Pleasure Palaces. The scandalous and privately printed My Secret Life published in England at about this time makes voluminous reference to the heterosexual adventures of the narrator among the bordellos of that country and only briefly mentions, and then in terms of regret and guilt, a casual gay encounter.

Whatever the case with male brothels at the turn of the century, by 1912 they were flourishing in Denver, according to an oral history ^{source} I took in 1974.¹ One of the houses in question was said to have been situated on a corner of Market Street, although the person interviewed could not remember which corner. Laura Evans recalled that during her period of active business life as a prostitute in Denver, (she was approximately thirty in 1892), ~~that~~ a male bordello was located "Around the corner from the boarding house I worked in for a time...".² There exists among elderly gays in Denver a legend that there were several largely straight houses which had an occasional male prostitute to meet the unusual demands of discriminating customers, although no written source has been found to verify this oral tradition. I have also been unable to find men who had actually visited

these houses, (or would admit to having done so), perhaps due to the prohibitive cost for the average young gay man. One elderly Coloradan recalled hearing about the brothel, but by the time he was old enough to get a job and save sufficient money for a visit, the entire red light section of the city had been closed by the Progressives in their anti-liquor, anti-smut, anti-sin campaign about the time of the First World War.¹

It is ironic that the same social force which closed the brothels and the saloons also opened up a new form of all-male nude activity--the gymnasias and dormitories of the Young Men's Christian Association. The significance of the timing was not lost on several ~~keen~~ ^{contemporary} observers: "...What effect will the intensive revival of the public bath by such organizations as the Y.M.C.A., simultaneously with the suppression of houses of prostitution, have on contemporary male youth--nay, what already has been the effect?"²

With the impetus of the Progressives and the World War, the "Y" rapidly became an established part of the scene across the West. That in Grand Junction was begun about 1911, and when completed was one of the two or three most modern and imposing

structures in town. That it was also the centre of gay activities for the entire area of the Western Slope is reported by all contemporary gay informants. One of these recalled an incident that occurred while he was working in a store on Main Street in 1925. One of his customers was a distinguished young man, a traveling salesman from Chicago in his early twenties. Conversation, sparked by mutual interest, elicited the time at which the young clerk was leaving work, and dinner was arranged at the La Court Hotel, then the Beau Monde of Grand Junction social dining. After dinner the couple walked the five or six blocks to the "Y", where they spent the night together. ^QIt is an interesting commentary on the sexual activity of rural gays at this time that "messaging around" seemed to be the only sexual outlet in vogue. When pressed for details, respondents in Grand Junction, Pueblo, and Denver all agree that neither fellatio nor sodomy ^{at first} were common among the boys and young men who frequented the "Y" during this period. Masturbation in concert, mutual masturbation, or inter curral intercourse seemed to be the gamut of sexual activity. As one participant put it: "In those days you were so glad to get together with someone that just messaging around was all right--even--all we did--mostly."

Another interesting area into which gay activity was channeled was the social world of the vagabond. Denver and San Francisco were the two major centers for tramps during the late nineteenth century. Both cities were important transportation centers, San Francisco because of its shipping industry and Denver because it was a major rail center. It was common for tramps to pass through Denver and perhaps stop off for a time on their trans-continental trips. The phenomenon of the railroad freeloading ~~tramp~~ or hobo sprang up after the Civil War. Many railroad construction workers learned after the war that they could travel the rails across the country as the unpaid and uninvited guests of the railroads. This made Denver the low-budget travel center of the West. Josiah Flynt, the leading nineteenth century authority on American tramps, and a sometime hobo himself, wrote in 1901: "If one meets a westward-bound beggar beyond the Mississippi, he may usually infer that the man is on his way to Denver....I have met in the city, at one time, as many as one hundred and fifty bona-fide tramps, and every one had been in the town for over a week...."¹ Denver's popularity with the low budget tourists was not to the liking of many of her more Establishment-oriented citizens. By 1870, William Byers was commenting in the Rocky Mountain News about the disreputable influence of the tramp population along the city's Whisky Row.²

The influence of the out-of-work element continued to be felt, ^{however} and during 1873, Byers wrote a series of articles attacking the lawless and corrupting presence of the tramps. The aspects of ^{the} tramp ^{subculture} society which made it particularly odious to Society-at-large were precisely those elements which enabled gay men to find shelter in tramp circles.

Tramps were outcastes; they set themselves beyond the Pale by refusing to perform the expected tasks and accept the requisite responsibilities. By establishing themselves as social rebels, they tacitly acknowledged the freedom of others to make their own decisions affecting their lifestyles. Thus, the social milieu of tramps was more open. Flynt reports that tramps talked openly of "unnatural intercourse" during his period of study of their habits in the 1890^s. This in itself was not common for the period in America, but even more unusual was the fact that gay tramps often openly defended homosexuality in discussions with other tramps. This same willingness to defend a lifestyle ^{that} which in the mainstream of American culture was considered too vile to be mentioned, except perhaps in medical circles, was also discovered by Nels Anderson when he studied tramps in the Midwest immediately after the First World War.¹ This fact alone goes far toward establishing that the tramp society was more tolerant of social variance than the society at large.

The number of gay tramps during any given period is hard to assess. The 150 tramps whom Flynt mentioned as being in Denver is a difficult figure to interpret, as he does not mention the year of the observation. If the number represents tramps in Denver during 1893 for example, we can infer that there were probably never many more than 150 in Denver at one time during the entire ~~Period~~, as the economic depression of that year brought a sharp rise in the number of tramps on the rails. If the number can be regarded as an average, and if Flynt's further statement that ten percent of the tramps he met were gay, we can suppose that there were about fifteen gay tramps in Denver during most of the period of tramp prominence. If this number is correct, it is surprising that more of the tramps did not run afoul of the law in sexual matters. The number of gay tramps who were arrested during the ~~Period~~ is slight. The Denver newspapers between 1887 and 1930 reported less than half a dozen cases of boys being "molested," while nearly thirty-five cases of child-molesting were reported.¹ This is surprising in light of what both Anderson and Flynt say about the practices of gay tramps.

The primary object of sexual interest to gay tramps appears to have been boys between the ages of twelve and seventeen. These boys were recruited by tramps from the

slum urchins who frequented the track areas of cities. By flattery, stories of adventure, promises of anything, the tramps lured the youths into their first experiments on the road. "In time he learns to think that he is the favorite of the tramp, who will take him on his travels, and he begins to plan secret meetings with the man. The tramp, of course, continues to excite his imagination with stories and carresses, and some fine night there is one boy less in the town."¹ One such abduction occurred early in 1906 in LaSalle, Colorado. The tramp named Wilson, aged 21, met a thirteen year-old boy and succeeded one way or another in getting him into a boxcar bound for Greeley. The boy later told authorities that he had gone against his will and had escaped from his captor at Merino. The situation seems to have been more complicated than newspaper accounts would suggest, because after arresting Wilson and charging² him with a "crime against nature", they arrested the boy and charged him with juvenile delinquency. As the older man was himself only 21 years old, it appears that this case may be another example of tramps trying to proselytise in the fertile fields of lower class or borderline criminal youths who lurked about the tracks looking for excitement.² The fact that this case reached the authorities may be due to the age of the tramp. At 21, it may be that this was his first

attempt^{at} finding a lover. Perhaps he became more expert as time advanced.

The important thing about the case is that it is so unusual; that is, it is noteworthy because so few tramps were charged with similar offenses. And this in the face of the peculiar social system of tramps at this time: The most important element in the gay social milieu of the tramp is that mature men had sexual relations with males between the ages of twelve and seventeen. ^qIt is interesting to note that the well-known tramp song "Big Rock Candy Mountain" was a musical setting of a seduction speech and can probably be regarded as the earliest gay folk song in America:

^qWhen the boys had been sufficiently impressed to travel with the mature tramp, he was known in tramp argot as a "prushin", meaning wife or woman. His protector being called "jocker" or "wolf", meaning male or dominant, the latter is still used in prisons to signify the same circumstance. The reason so few complaints reached the authorities during the ~~Period~~ is probably because the boys

themselves did not object to being shanghaied. Flynt and Anderson both report that the "prushins" liked their positions and often took the initiative to incite their jocker to sexual activity with them. In one case, Flynt reported, a youth joined eight men in a boxcar and as the car was underway, he was "seduced" by each of the eight in turn. Rather than objecting, he laughed and joked, making light of the entire affair.¹ This promiscuity was possible only with unattached boys, however, and the usual rule was for a boy to become the prushin of one particular tramp. This was probably an exchange of his exclusive sexual favors for the protection of the jocker. The pattern of the older man fighting off other males and defending his sexual prize is reminiscent of the fights trappers mention "defending" youths,² and is still widely practiced in prisons. In the instance of prisons, a case can naturally be made for the argument that the men are only reacting to the deprivation of women. In trapping and tramp life, however, it is evident that if the lack of women were so sorely felt, the men would either abandon the form of life or at least modify it to the point that other forms of sex could be included. For many men the absence of women was an inconvenience, for others it was an incentive.

The peculiar system of age differentiation deserves special attention in comparison with the gay systems

which manifested themselves later. That the attachments were genuinely warm cannot be doubted, as many of the prushins and jockers stayed together for some years. Many of the boys remained with their first jocker until they were themselves old enough to recruit a lover. That so little attention was drawn to the subject by contemporary moralists can be attributed both to the masculine appearance of the tramps and the generally willing attitude on the part of the youths. Unless one wishes to believe that everyone is potentially gay, and that almost any twelve or thirteen year-old boy is a potential "prushin", we must assume that the older tramps had a fair working knowledge of psychology and could spot boys who would be willing students. Both of these points are summarized by Flynt:

"The general impression made on me by the sexually perverted men in vagabondage is that they are abnormally masculine. In their intercourse with boys they always take the active part. The boys have, in some cases, seemed to me uncommonly feminine, but not as a rule. In the main, they are very much like other lads, and I am unable to say whether their liking for the inverted relationship is inborn or acquired. That it is, however, a genuine liking, in altogether too many instances, I do not, in the least doubt."

From the cross dressing customs of its primeval inhabitants through the unsettled gold rush period and ~~through~~ the entire 19th century, Colorado's social structure offered, in at least a limited way, places for homosexual men and women to exist. Even as the indigenous gay customs of the American Indians were being destroyed by the white Christian invasion the very army of occupation in North America was a haven - albeit a reluctant one - for many who could fit ^{only} poorly into the more settled east. Following closely behind the army were the waves of settlers; men dressing and living the life of frontier women, women driving cattle and plowing fields in the dress and manner of men.

As the cities became more urban the established order of things in other cities was transplanted into the west. Gay prostitution in the west closely paralleled developments in many ^{major} metropolitan centers of the late 19th century. Professional female impersonators were introduced by 1880, and ^{The Group} a subculture of social misfits grew up, ^{which} openly tolerated gay sexual activity.

~~In~~ ^{all} these things ^{can be seen} the emergence of probably the universal minority in all human cultures, the gays. The realization of the existence of this group makes the 19th century west seem more like the world we know today and much less remote and romantic than it ^{usually} has been painted.

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