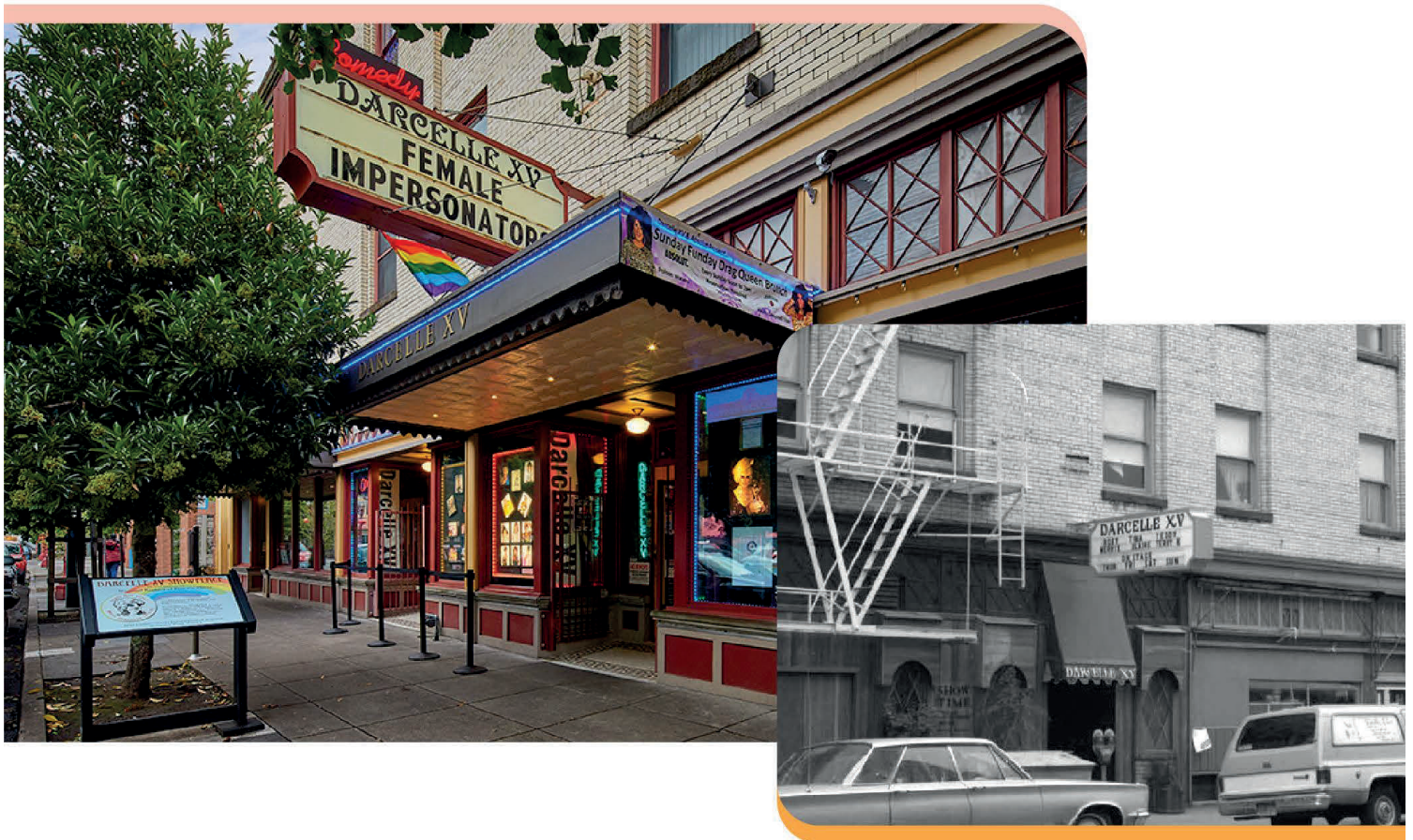


LGBTQ+ History in Portland, Oregon

A Historic Context Statement



Historic Context Statement Prepared by Cayla McGrail
for City of Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability

October 2024

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About the Author

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About City of Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability

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Queer Intimacies

“Mother McAllister” sauntered down the sidewalks of SW 4th Avenue in early 1912, the expanses of Portland’s downtown Plaza Blocks (adjacent to SW 4th Ave. and SW Main St.) stretching before him. Composed of Lownsdale and Chapman Squares, these two public open spaces were popular outdoor plazas in the early 1900s.²²⁶ Around 1904, the squares were informally segregated by assumed gender and age (Chapman for women and children, Lownsdale for men) as Lownsdale Square became associated with frequent “immoral behaviors.”²²⁷ Lownsdale’s exclusivity as a “gentlemen’s gathering place” fostered its reputation as a space for men to meet and solicit other men for intimate activity all the while blending seamlessly into the downtown crowds.²²⁸ Portlanders ebbed and flowed through the park with the hustle and bustle of the day, some catching sight of “Mother” as a familiar presence among park-goers. Should he desire more privacy for intimacy, “Mother” had options at his disposal, whether it was the nearby park bathrooms referred to as “T rooms” or a retreat to his law office a few blocks away.

Throughout the 20th century, Portlanders like “Mother McAllister” (legally known as Portland lawyer Edward S. McAllister) explored understandings of their diverse identities.²²⁹ The criminalization of diverse sexual acts starting in the late 1800s meant that intimate instances during the 1800s and early 1900s often unfolded in discreet Portland settings where such encounters could occur away from prying eyes. For some, these sexual activities were purely physical; for others, they were broader expressions of the individual’s identity.²³⁰ Over the course of the 20th century, diverse sex acts and materials were legalized, and some individuals became more open about their unique identities. Historian Josh Sides emphasizes in *Erotic City: Sexual Revolutions and the Making of Modern San Francisco* that by the 1960s, “sex radical—those individuals who willfully violated the sexual taboos of their era—asserted both their real and perceived rights to express their sexuality as fully as they desired at any given moment and in any particular place.”²³¹ Gay bathhouses, leather bars, and pornography theaters, to name a few, emerged in the mid-century as particular places to express sexuality while still providing moments of intimacy.

²²⁶ The City of Portland acquired Lownsdale and Chapman Squares in 1869. For more information on the squares, see “Lownsdale Square,” Find a Park, Portland Parks and Recreation, Portland.gov, <https://www.portland.gov/parks/lownsdale-square>.

²²⁷ This segregation was formalized by a Portland City Council ordinance passed in 1924.

²²⁸ Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs*, 114.

²²⁹ During testimony in McAllister’s trial, Portlander Harry Allen Work mentioned queer people receive “some nickname some woman’s name,” often according to the role they performed. “Mother” was a nickname given to older men who performed oral sex with other men. See McAllister Transcript, 7, 17, 20,21,40, 61. For additional history on terms used by men engaged in same-sex sexual activities, see George Chauncey Jr., “Christian Brotherhood or Sexual Perversion Homosexual Identities and the Construction of Sexual Boundaries in the World War I Era,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1989), 294-317.

²³⁰ David Halperin is one of several scholars who discusses modern social and cultural constructions of sexual identity. See David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), 10, 106.; John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (University of Chicago Press, 1983).

²³¹ Josh Sides, *Erotic City: Sexual Revolutions and the Making of Modern San Francisco* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

“Queer Intimacies” explores a spectrum of queer intimate experiences in Portland’s private and public spaces during the 1905 to 1994 period. Though public expressions of gender and sexuality are not exclusive to LGBTQ+ people nationwide or in Portland, sexual rendezvous sites were important to those who sought “collective support for their rejection of the sexual and gender roles prescribed to them.”²³² Due to the often private nature of intimate relationships, along with potentials for harm and consequences from public knowledge in a hostile society, the full extent of queer intimate experiences in 20th century Portland is largely speculative from few remaining sources.

Intimacy in Private

Moments in private spaces offered opportunities to create personal sanctuaries away from public scrutiny and potential police harassment. With the popularity of communal living in the late 1960s and early 1970s, large private residences offered opportunities to intentionally live with other LGBTQ+ people.

The unveiling of Portland’s homosexual network by the press and police in 1912 and 1913 illuminated “apartment houses, hotels, rooming houses,” and other private places’ role in fostering queer sexual and romantic connections in early 20th century Portland.²³³ In the city’s central business district, several individuals arrested for their connection to a network of individuals engaging in same-sex sexual activities referred to as the “Vice Clique” scandal lived together or near each other in the 1910s. For instance, Earl Van Hulen and Harry Wight lived in an apartment together on SW 11th Avenue and Columbia Street from 1910 to 1911 while Claude Bronner and Nathan Healy resided together on Morrison Street from 1909 to 1911.²³⁴ Van Hulen, Bronner, and Healy all moved to SW Washington Street in 1911.²³⁵ At some point between 1911 and 1912, Bronner shared a residence with Burt Thornton on SW 17th Avenue and SW Taylor Street; this apartment drew particular focus among Portland press in 1912 for the couple’s presumed sex parties and parties where individuals dressed in gender-variant clothing.²³⁶

The Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and various hotel rooms served as queer residential and sexual spaces throughout the early to mid-1900s.²³⁷ YMCA buildings nationwide and in Portland were prominent and became closely associated with LGBTQ+ life because they were primarily “physically

²³² Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 204.

²³³ “One Attempts Suicide; Eleven Under Arrest,” *The Oregon Daily Journal*, November 17, 1912, 6.

²³⁴ Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs*, 97, 100.

²³⁵ *Ibid*, 101.

²³⁶ Thornton and Bronner owned the A.B.C. Restaurant together, first opened in 1906 at 567 SW Washington St (now 1703-1917 W Burnside St.) The restaurant’s final location was 442 SW Washington St. (now 1218 SW Washington St.), which opened as the Palace Hotel in December 1912. The press referred to Bronner’s apartment as a “den of corruption so vile as to keep I from being event faintly described.” Bronner pled guilty and was sentenced to a year in Oregon State Penitentiary. See Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs*, 101.; “Indictments Are Found,” *The Sunday Oregonian*, December 29, 1912, 7.; “Bronner Pleads Guilty,” *Morning Oregonian*, March 12, 1913, 9.; “Prosecution to Cease,” *Morning Oregonian*, June 20, 1913, 13.

²³⁷ For additional history and intersections of the YMCA and YWCA see Nina Mjagkij, and Margaret Spratt, *Men and Women Adrift: The YMCA and the YWCA in the City* (New York University Press, 1997).

oriented, male-only spaces, largely free of supervision.”²³⁸ At least six men involved in the Vice Clique roomed at Portland’s downtown YMCA (SW 6th Ave. and Taylor St.) between 1911 and 1912.²³⁹ Moreso, single resident occupant (SRO) rooms in residential hotels provided short-term housing and often developed associations with vice and other illicit activities; for example, Old Town Portland’s Norton House on NW First and Couch Streets was reported by *West Shore magazine* in 1877 as being “. . . surrounded . . . by sailors’ saloons, laundries, heavy industry, and houses of ribald reputation.”²⁴⁰

Concurrently in the early 1900s, Portland’s lesbian culture developed in private residences. During the late 19th century and early 20th century, historian Micheal Helquist summarizes in *Marie Equi: Radical Politics and Outlaw Passions* that it was “not unheard of among the hundreds of young single women who settled in the West” to reside together.²⁴¹ Economic realities for young women in large cities and women’s contemporary social and sexual standards provided both a cover and a means for many to live together in companionship with little comment. LGBTQ+ historian Lillian Faderman states in *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America*, “Whether or not those relationships were usually sexual cannot be definitively known.”²⁴² Within this context, Doctor Marie Equi (1872–1952) built residential refuge with her companions in various Oregon places.²⁴³ Though she lived with various partners throughout her life, Harriet Speckart was Equi’s longest and most public relationship during the early 20th century. After meeting in 1905, the couple lived together in various Portland residences between 1906 and 1918.²⁴⁴ Helquist speculates that their residences held prominence among other lesbians and served as a “precursor of the larger, self-identified lesbian subcultures that flourished in American cities several years later.”²⁴⁵

She lives in a sphere which I approve, all gifted women, who made something of themselves, can do something, and are somebody. No small talk and social nothingness, everything is discussed and with the whole soul, it makes life spicy.

— Harriet Speckart writing to her aunt, 1906 ²⁴⁶

By the mid-20th century, Portland’s known LGBTQ+ residences extended beyond downtown’s core. Development and urban renewal forced many to affordable areas east of the Willamette River. For

²³⁸ Donald Gustav-Wrathall, *Take the Young Stranger by the Hand: Same-Sex Relations and the YMCA* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 142, 146.

²³⁹ Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs*, 112.

²⁴⁰ Quoted in Liza Mickle, Nicholas Starin, and Jeffry Uecker, “Skidmore/Old Town Historic District,” National Historic Landmark Nomination (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2008), 66.

²⁴¹ Helquist, *Marie Equi*, 29.

²⁴² Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 15.

²⁴³ Equi first lived in The Dalles, Oregon, with her companion Blessie Holcomb. See Helquist, *Marie Equi*, 28-23.

²⁴⁴ Their residences included the Elton Court (formerly 415 SW Yamhill St.) between 1906 and 1909; The Nortonia Hotel (409 SW 11th Ave., now the Mark Spencer Hotel) from 1909 to 1911; South Parkhurst Apartments (current address 1204 NW 20th Ave.) between 1912 and 1914; and a Craftsman in Portland’s Mt. Tabor neighborhood (current address 2214 SE 52nd Ave.).

²⁴⁵ Helquist, *Marie Equi*, 100.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 100.

instance, an area of inner southeast Portland roughly bounded by SE Hawthorne Street, SE Belmont Street, SE 20th Avenue, and SE Cesar E. Chavez Boulevard surfaced as a lesbian residential enclave by the 1970s. Collective living in this area became increasingly popular, reflected by the Red Emma Collective house started by Ann Mussey and four other women in 1971 who all moved to Portland together. Mussey reflected in 2000 on how the group “rented a [pink] house on Southeast 35th Avenue, a block and a half south of Hawthorne . . . Our household was one among many households of women, many of whom moved to Portland about the time period, a time span of a couple of years [during the early 1970s].”²⁴⁷

Cruising Public Spaces

During the 20th century, individuals nationwide and in Portland found various public spaces available to meet each other and engage in intimate activities. Alex Espinoza explains in *Cruising: An Intimate History of a Radical Pastime*, people “(both closeted and otherwise) had to learn to negotiate the surreptitious world of hookups and sexual gratification with tact and dexterity given the rise in anti-gay sentiments.”²⁴⁸

Public parks proliferated as popular recreational areas at the turn of the 20th century and concurrently became a prominent venue for those seeking intimate connections.²⁴⁹ Park amenities such as public bathrooms offered semi-private spaces for sexual encounters, like the men’s restroom at Lownsdale Square.²⁵⁰ The square’s proximity to SW 3rd Avenue fostered a cluster of LGBTQ+-associated businesses in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Aero Bathhouse (1237 SW 3rd Ave., demolished) and Dinty Moore’s (924 SW 3rd Ave.).

Lownsdale Square was not the sole site in Portland’s network of outdoor spaces catering to sexual encounters in the early and mid-1900s. The rise of amusement parks like Council Crest Amusement Park (SW Council Crest Dr., demolished) and Oaks Amusement Park (7805 SE Oaks Park Way), introduced a fresh dimension to outdoor leisure and entertainment. These parks quickly became associated with sexual deviance and garnered reputations for being hubs of “immorality” and disorder.²⁵¹ Testimony in 1912 and 1913 during trials of Portlanders arrested as part of the “Vice Clique” scandal intensified this association;

²⁴⁷ Oral history interview with Ann Mussey, by Justine Larson and Brooke Welch, SR 4148, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

²⁴⁸ Alex Espinoza, *Cruising: An Intimate History of a Radical Pastime* (Unnamed Press, 2019), 8. One example is the handkerchief code (aka hanky code or flagging) which developed throughout the 20th century as a system of color-coded handkerchiefs denoting various sexual activities. See J. Raul Cornier, “Hanky Panky: An Abridged History of the Hanky Code,” The History Project, April 23, 2019, <https://historyproject.org/news/2019-04/hanky-panky-abridged-history-hanky-code-0>.

²⁴⁹ While generally cost-free access to greenery in increasingly urbanizing cityscapes, outdoor spaces were not always accessible to all equally. As with all public spaces, outdoor spaces reflect power dynamics, and societal norms as they have long been a tool of “social control.” See Doreceta E Taylor, “Central Park as a Model for Social Control: Urban Parks, Social Class and Leisure Behavior in Nineteenth Century America,” *Journal of Leisure Research* 31, No 4 (1999): 420-477.

²⁵⁰ The restroom was a popular location for sexual encounters through the mid-century based on arrest records and newspaper reports. For example, see “Morals Count Faced,” *Oregonian*, April 26, 1953; “Two Sentenced to Long Terms,” *Oregonian*, September 23, 1955.

²⁵¹ “In 1905 a city council member described the Oaks as ‘an immoral place and that he had seen more drunkenness there than he had ever seen at any place in the City.’” Quoted in Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs*, 71.

individuals exposed Council Crest’s slopes as a hotspot for queer sexual activities.²⁵² Although Council Crest Amusement Park closed in 1929, Oaks Amusement Park and other outdoor spaces remained popular among Portlanders through the end of the century. By the mid-20th century, Portlanders in the know were aware of additional outdoor cruising spots; gay travel guides crowdsourced from locals and developed notations such as “cruisy areas” to inform readers about different spaces.²⁵³ Portland parks featured under this notation between the early 1970s and late 1980s included Lewis and Clark Monument in Washington Park (4033 SW Canyon Road); Delta Park (N Denver Avenue and Martin Luther King Jr Boulevard); Laurelhurst Park (SE Cesar E. Chavez and Stark Street); and Columbia Park (4503 N Lombard St.).²⁵⁴

Like parks, streetscapes were readily available spaces for individuals to find each other and engage in intimate activities during the 20th century. By the 1960s, the street and sidewalks around SW Yamhill Street and SW 5th Avenue gained notoriety as a popular gathering space for queer youth, especially those between 14 and 21 years old. Colloquially known as “The Camp,” this area offered a space without age restrictions, identification requirements, and its proximity to queer bars like Dahl & Penne’s (604 SW 2nd Ave., demolished) and the Other Inn (242 SW Alder St., demolished) fostered a vibrant streetscape where diverse individuals could forge connections.²⁵⁵ One Portlander recalled “The Camp” as “very gay and very well attended,” with scores of people regularly hanging out.²⁵⁶

It was like where a lot of gay men met just by walking on the street. And the cars would circle and they would look and make eye contact and all that. So that’s my first sexual experience, was that way because that’s the only way I knew how to do it. I had no frame of reference whatsoever for this, this activity. I just started walking and sort of figured it out.

— Portlander Larry Copeland reflecting on “The Camp,” 2011 ²⁵⁷

²⁵² Earl Taylor and W.T. Hume testimony, *State of Oregon v. Harry Start*, Transcript, 26- 27, 308-309.

²⁵³ *Bob Damron’s Address Books, The Guild Guide, and The International Guild Guide* were prominent gay travel guides which included Portland addresses. Gay travel guides are also mentioned in the theme “Queer Arts and Entertainment.” For additional history, see Larry Knopp and Michael Brown, “Travel Guides, Urban Spatial Imaginaries and LGBTQ+ Activism: The Case of Damron Guides,” *Urban Studies* 58, no 7 (2021): 1380-1396.; “About Us,” Damron, <https://damron.com/about-us>.; Payton Seda, “A Brief History of Gay Travel Guides—And What They Say About Life in Southern California,” Arts and Entertainment, LAist, <https://laist.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/more-than-just-gay-bars-a-new-exhibit-in-anaheim-explores-the-history-of-gay-travel-guides>.

²⁵⁴ Parks are also discussed in the theme “LGBTQ+ Connections in Social Venues,” and “Queer Arts and Entertainment.”

²⁵⁵ Portland Larry Copeland notes it was SW Yamhill and SW Morrison and Walter Cole Sr. notes it was a “wall on the northwest corner of SW 3rd and Yamhill between 2nd and 3rd Avenues.” The area appeared in gay travel guide *Damron’s Address Book* under “Yamhill (Camp Street)” between 1972 and 1980. The published address shifted slightly from “Yamhill St. between 4th & 6th” from 1972 to 1976, then to “between 3rd & 4th.” See Oral history interview with Larry S. Copeland, by Emily Bowen and Kenty Truong, SR 11233, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.; Don Horn (Donnie) with Walter Cole/Darcelle, *Looking from My Mirror*, (Self-published, November 2019), 162.; Don Horn, “Camp,” Youth, Umbrella Project, <https://www.umbrellaprojectoregon.com/camp>.

²⁵⁶ Anonymous, interviewed by Cayla McGrail, November 27, 2023, not recorded.

²⁵⁷ Oral history interview with Larry S. Copeland.

The street and sidewalks gained such a widespread reputation that people from “other parts of Oregon and even Idaho were frequently competing” with Portlanders who utilized this area for sexual connections and money.²⁵⁸ Many, but not all, who gathered at “The Camp” were housing insecure and/or runaway youths involved in paid sex work to financially support themselves.²⁵⁹ Despite objections by political figures and the public, “sex workers have always been part of queer history,” proclaims UC Berkeley Professor Juana Maria Rodríguez.²⁶⁰ Paid sexual interactions provided crucial financial support for those grappling with unemployment or low wages.

Indoor public spaces, such as cafes, department stores, bus stations, hotels, bathrooms, and theaters, also emerged as havens for intimate queer connections. These various types of places made cruising available in the midst of everyday urban life. For instance, the former Orpheum Theater (formerly 759 SW Broadway, demolished), the Circle Theater (516 SW 4th Ave., demolished), and the Capital Theater (626 SW 4th Ave., demolished) facilitated “at least three long-term gay couples who met in the balcony . . . in the 1950s and [these] relationships lasted over thirty years.”²⁶¹ The Circle Theater was especially known for its “two separate balconies, one to the left and one to the right. The balcony to the left was for men and women . . . and the one to the right was limited to men only.”²⁶² In the 1960s and 1970s, several older Portland theaters transformed into pornography venues. For instance, Oregon Theater (3530 SE Division St.) initially opened in 1925 and began showing pornography in 1967 while Star Theater (6 NW 6th Ave.) featured erotic films and dancers and nude dance reviews by the 1970s.²⁶³ While these venues potentially featured queer content, two theaters were noted in queer press as LGBTQ+ pornography venues: Tom Kat Theater (425 NW Gilsan St.) and Eros Adult Theater (314 SW Taylor St.).²⁶⁴ Managed by Portland drag queen Nickie/Nikkie, Tom Kat Theater opened in 1973 and advertisements declared it Portland’s “only lavender cinema,” with lineups featuring “hardcore gay action films,” “male erotic art films,” and live

²⁵⁸ Dave Kohl, “Hiking ‘The Camp’: An Annotated Walk Through Time,” *Just Out*, August 19, 2005, 25.

²⁵⁹ The full extent of sexual abuse associated with “The Camp” is unknown. See “Camping Out,” *Northwest Gay Review*, October 1976, 7, and Rod Patterson, “Sex for Sale: Teen-age Boys ‘husting’ on Portland Streets,” *Oregonian*, September 11, 1977, for discussions on paid sex work in the area.

²⁶⁰ Ivan Natividad, “Juana Maria Rodríguez: Sex work is a queer issue,” UC Berkeley News, June 27, 2023, <https://news.berkeley.edu/2023/06/27/juana-maria-rodriguez-sex-work-is-a-queer-issue/>.

²⁶¹ Cook and Painter, “1999 Portland Gay History Walking Tour.”

²⁶² *Ibid.*

²⁶³ “New Life Envisioned for Old Portland Landmark.” *DJC*, April 30, 2020. <https://djcoregon.com/news/2020/04/30/new-life-envisioned-old-portland-landmark/>; Kristi. Turnquist, “Former Portland Porn Cinema Reborn as Portland Art Museum’s Tomorrow Theater,” *Oregonian*, October 5, 2023; “Business District on Division Street.” *Oregon Journal*, December 21, 1924, 30.; Ad, *Oregon Journal*, September 6, 1925, 45.; Ad, *Oregon Journal*, December 21, 1924.; Jay Horton, “The Oregon Theater, the City’s Last Operating Porn Palace Before Closing This Year, Plans for a Second Coming.” *Willamette Week*, August 11, 2020. <https://www.wweek.com/arts/2020/08/11/the-oregon-theater-the-citys-last-operating-porn-palace-before-closing-this-year-plans-for-a-second-coming/>; Marlena Williams, “Star Theater,” Oregon Encyclopedia, Last Updated August 8, 2024, <https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/star-theater/>.

Ad. *Oregon Journal*, September 6, 1954.

²⁶⁴ Don Horn, “Eros Theatre,” Theaters, The Umbrella Project of Oregon, <https://www.umbrellaprojectoregon.com/erosadult-theatres>.

performances by “nude male go-go dancers.”²⁶⁵ Similarly, Eros Adult Theater prominently showed hardcore gay films between 1970 and 1975.²⁶⁶

Erotic Enterprises: Baths, Bars, Bookstores, and Beyond

Erotic enterprises— businesses offering sexual content such as brothels, bars, theaters, and stores— shaped Portland’s economic landscape from the early 1900s throughout the latter 20th century. While many of these businesses provided covert space for LGBTQ+ individuals from the early decades of Portland, specialized sexual venues specifically for queer clientele emerged as early as the 1950s and expanded options for finding queer intimacies.

Bathhouses

Bathhouses initially emerged as public service facilities to address the hygiene needs of rapidly growing urban populations, especially in cities where personal showers and baths were scarce in residential spaces.²⁶⁷ In addition to their primary hygiene function, historical accounts dating back to the late 1800s show evidence that bathhouses often also served as spaces for sexual connection.²⁶⁸

Starting in the 1950s, bathhouse culture evolved within the developing sexual landscape to become distinctly characterized by its exclusive catering to “the sexual and social needs of gay men” nationwide and in Portland, marking a new era for bathhouses.²⁶⁹ Gay historian Allan Bérubé contends in his article “The History of Gay Bathhouses” that baths provided crucial space where individuals could “overcome isolation and develop a sense of community and pride in their sexuality . . . gay men could be sexual and affectionate with each other.”²⁷⁰ Among Portland’s bathhouses, Aero Vapors (1237 SW 3rd Ave., demolished) emerged as a prominent location in the 1950s, reinforced by its location near other associated LGBTQ+ spaces including Lownsdale Square, adult bookstores on SW 3rd Avenue, and Dinty Moore’s bar (924 SW 3rd Ave.).²⁷¹

Downtown Portland’s vibrant bathhouse culture gained steam in the 1970s, distinguished by several bathhouses opening and rebranding. Workout Baths (531 SW 12th Ave.) first opened in 1969 and later became Olympic Baths Uptown. This opening was especially significant as “the first gay-owned and

²⁶⁵ Don Horn, “The ‘Tom Kat’ Theatre,” Theaters, The Umbrella Project of Oregon, <https://www.umbrellaprojectoregon.com/theater-history>.

²⁶⁶ Ad, *The Fountain*, April 1971, 5.

²⁶⁷ Allan Bérubé, “The History of Gay Bathhouses,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 44 no. 3 (2003): 33-53.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 37.

²⁶⁹ Bérubé’s study provides “4 major stages in which bathhouses evolved into homosexual institutions.” These include ordinary bathhouses, favorite spots, early gay bathhouses, and the modern gay bathhouse. *Ibid*, 36.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 34, 36.

²⁷¹ Aero Vapors closed in 1972 and was subsequently demolished by the South Auditorium Urban Renewal Project. It is currently Terry Schunk Plaza. For multiple references to the bath’s popularity, see Don Horn, “Aero Vapors,” Bathhouses, The Umbrella Project of Oregon, <https://www.umbrellaprojectoregon.com/aerovapors>.

operated bath in Portland.²⁷² Owner Rick Dijon (Richard Lawson) explained to the *Northwest Gay Review* that “every bath in the city was a straight [-owned] establishment getting rich off the gay community” before his venture.²⁷³ Other baths that opened during this period included the Majestic Hotel and Club Baths (303 SW 12th Ave.), Olympic Baths (509 SW 4th Ave., formerly Mahon’s Steam Bath), and Club Continental (531 SW Park Ave.).

When Portland’s Majestic Hotel and Club Baths opened in 1971, it boasted a plethora of amenities that epitomized the modern gay bathhouse experience. Advertisements in Portland’s *Northwest Gay Review* promoted the club’s themed rooms, sun deck, pool tables, TV and theatre lounges, spa rooms, and hotel accommodations in the multi-story building.²⁷⁴ The regular and deluxe hotel rooms permitted LGBTQ+ couples to openly travel and sleep overnight together; Portlander Norm Costa recalled in 2000 an instance when he and his partner “went to Club Portland and rented a room and just slept in it.”²⁷⁵ Beyond its interior accommodations, the Majestic Hotel and Club Baths’ launch on SW Harvey Milk Street contributed to the surrounding area with “a lot of late-night activity between the bars and the baths.”²⁷⁶ As a result, SW Harvey Milk became “the most visible area of the city to be identified with LGBTQ+ culture.”²⁷⁷

Other Portland bathhouses advertised similar building amenities, underscoring their transformation from public facilities to multifaceted centers for entertainment and intimacies. When Club Continental Baths opened in 1977, Dijon/Lawson emphasized the importance of this evolution:

We designed and built this bath with changes that have taken place in the gay community in mind. Gays aren’t going to go just anywhere now. They want a place with some class and respectability about it.

— Rick Dijon/Lawson ²⁷⁸

Although bathhouses proliferated in the 1970s, by the late 1980s attendance declined and spas shuttered nationwide and in Portland due to a range of challenges. Many viewed this decline as “a direct result of the ignorance and fear that accompanied the AIDS epidemic [since] the federal government placed pressure on certain local governments to close the existing bathhouses.”²⁷⁹ Nonetheless, bathhouses like

²⁷² “New Bath in Portland,” *Northwest Gay Review*, undated, clipping in Don Horn, “Club Continental Baths,” Bathhouses, The Umbrella Project of Oregon, <https://www.umbrellaprojectoregon.com/club-continental-baths>.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ad, *Northwest Gay Review*, June 1977, clipping in Don Horn, “Club Baths & The Majestic Hotel,” Bathhouses, The Umbrella Project of Oregon, <https://www.umbrellaprojectoregon.com/club-baths-majestic-hotel>.

²⁷⁵ Costa’s recollection did not include a specific date. See Oral history interview with Norm Costa, by Stephanie Munly and Ruben Reynaga, SR 4143, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

²⁷⁶ Dave Kohl, “Traipsing the Triangle: Walking into the Past, Discovering the Present,” *Just Out*, November 18, 2005, 24.

²⁷⁷ Minor, “Hotel Alma National Register of Historic Places Amendment,” May 2024, 10. This Portland area is also discussed in “Overview of Portland LGBTQ+ History, 1905 - 1994.”

²⁷⁸ “New Bath in Portland.”

²⁷⁹ “Continental Club in Portland Acquires Nation’s Largest Gay Health Club,” *City Open Press*, October – November 1986, 11.

Club Baths, which operated into the early 2000s, fostered a sense of “homosexual camaraderie” through friendships, recreational activities, sexual connections, and potential romantic relationships.

Bars and Clubs

Intimate and sexual connections flourished within the vibrant atmosphere of Portland’s bars and clubs during much of the second half of the 20th century.²⁸⁰ These venues offered a “main point of contact with others of the gay community—and one of the few places where you can ‘be yourself’ without fear . . . IN THE DIM of the cocktail lounge, romances . . . blossom.”²⁸¹ Bars and clubs served as crucibles for countless romantic encounters; many Portlanders found various relationships within these social settings.

Through the 1900s, erotic dance venues were significant places in Portland’s economic and cultural landscape. In “Myths and Measures: The Cultural Performance of Portland’s Strip Club Identity,” scholar Wayne Coffey traces pieces of exotic dance and striptease to the late 1800s; by the 1950s, boundaries between dance clubs featuring go-go dancers and striptease theaters blurred, accompanied by the unclear “legal boundary between ‘topless,’ ‘partial exposure,’ and ‘nude.’”²⁸² Within this context, Portland’s Mary’s Club and Broadway Theater introduced topless dancers.²⁸³ Mary’s (formerly 129 SW Broadway, currently 5 NW 5th Ave.) included a range of performers and emcees in the 1960s including local drag performer Scarlet O’Hara/Gary L. Alexander.²⁸⁴ Men go-go dancers and strippers became part of Portland’s LGBTQ+ bar entertainment in the 1960s and 1970s with Demas Tavern and the Pied Piper regularly advertising go-go dancers.²⁸⁵ By 1981, Don Sexton and Tom Breazeale’s Silverado (initially at 1217 SW Harvey Milk St.) opened as Portland’s all-nude men strip club.²⁸⁶

In the mid-1960s, leather bars emerged as specialized venues for the sexual subculture which was establishing alternative spaces.²⁸⁷ Portland’s Other Inn (242 SW Alder St., demolished) was the inaugural leather bar opening in 1964.²⁸⁸ As described by Portlander Rose (no last name given) in a 1996 profile on

²⁸⁰ Additional bars are discussed in the themes “LGBTQ+ Connections in Social Spaces” and “LGBTQ+ Politics and Policing.”

²⁸¹ Dean Smith, “Portland After Dark: Gay Bars Hold Key for Homosexuals,” *Oregon Journal*, August 31, 1972, 4M.

²⁸² Wayne Coffey, “Myths and Measures: The Cultural Performance of Portland’s Strip Club Identity,” (Thesis, Portland State University, 2012), 21.

²⁸³ Broadway Theater hosted the first topless show in the city in 1966, with Mary’s following soon after. See Phil Stanford, *Rose City Vice: Portland in the ‘70s – Dirty Cops and Dirty Robbers* (Feral House, 2017), 30.; “Go-Go Clubs Organize to Regulate Conduct,” *Oregon Journal*, December 22, 1964, 10.

²⁸⁴ Gary L. Alexander, *Life’s Not Just a Drag* (AuthorHouse, 2013), 97-101.; Julie Gallaher, “Mary’s Club,” *Exotic Magazine*, July 2004, 26-27.

²⁸⁵ See Don Horn, “Male Strippers,” The Umbrella Project of Oregon, <https://www.umbrellaprojectoregon.com/male-strippers>.

²⁸⁶ Aaron Spencer, “A Different Kind of Silver anniversary,” *Just Out*, February 4, 2011, 20.

²⁸⁷ “Leather” is an umbrella term for a variety of sexual practices including sadomasochism (S/M), bondage, and fetishism. Portlanders involved in the leather community expressed in 1996 that it’s “more of a personality or attitude.” For additional information on leather, see “History,” Resources, Leather & LGBTQ Cultural District, sleatherdistrict.org/history/; Matthew D. Johnson, “Leather Culture,” GLBTQ Archive, http://www.glbtqarchive.com/ssh/leather_culture_S.pdf; Inga Sorensen, “Radical Sensualists,” *Just Out*, February 16, 1996, 17.

²⁸⁸ Cook and Painter, “1999 Portland Gay History Walking Tour.”

leather published by Portland's LGBTQ+ newspaper *Just Out*, the Other Inn introduced many individuals to the intricacies of leather culture.²⁸⁹

After the Other Inn closed in 1982, Portlanders John Phillips and Ray Southwick launched a new leather space with their bar, JR's.²⁹⁰ Operating two locations, JR's West (300 NW 10th Ave.) and JR's East (4036 SE Hawthorne Blvd.), JR's boasted a welcoming neighborhood bar ambiance that appealed to a broad audience.²⁹¹ With its basement nightclub JR's Cell/The Cell managed by "Portland's leather master" Robert Dunn, JR's West garnered notoriety among Portland's leather scene. Activities at the Cell "equaled or exceed that of any bathhouse in Portland, and even, some said, San Francisco," according to some accounts.²⁹² While predominantly associated with gay men, leather became more inclusive throughout the 20th century. JR's West included a women's only night on the occasional Tuesday and, as Renée LaChance recalled in 1998, "women did play."²⁹³

A few blocks from JR's West, the Dirty Duck/Gayle's Dirty Duck (439 NW 3rd Ave., demolished) debuted as a new gay bar in January 1984, and swiftly became a focal point for the leather community as JR's closed by the end of the year.²⁹⁴ Numerous leather organizations, including the Portland chapter of the Knights of Malta, Portland leather-levi women's group Defenders of Mithra, the Portland chapter of the National Leather Association, Oregon Guild Activists of SM, Oregon Bears, and others found a new home at the Dirty Duck.²⁹⁵ Events like the Oregon Leatherman competitions further underscored the bar as Portland's prominent leather bar until its closure in 2010.²⁹⁶

Retail

Retail stores played a significant role for queer customers nationwide and in Portland by offering welcoming shopping environments and specialized products starting in the 1900s.²⁹⁷ By the 1970s, adult bookstores and sex shops emerged as venues for specialized materials, products, and intimate connections. Scholar Elizabeth Morehead explains in her thesis, "Public Policy and Sexual Geography in Portland, Oregon, 1970-2010," that "many of the products sold in these stores were not new, as some were previously available in pharmacies or by mail. What was new was that the objects and media designed to sexually arouse were available openly and in one location . . ."²⁹⁸ Between the 1970s and early 1980s, downtown Portland, specifically SW 3rd Avenue, had a high concentration of adult-oriented retail

²⁸⁹ Sorensen, "Radical Sensualists," *Just Out*, February 16, 1996, 17.

²⁹⁰ "Ray Southwick, 1946 – 2005," *Transitions, Just Out*, January 6, 2006, 4.

²⁹¹ Renée LaChance, "Cheers for Queers," *Just Out*, April 3, 1998, 3.

²⁹² "Ray Southwick, 1946 – 2005."

²⁹³ LaChance, "Cheers for Queers."

²⁹⁴ Andy Mangels, "Just Ducky," *Just Out*, April 17, 2009, 28.

²⁹⁵ Mangels, "Just Ducky.," "Defenders of Mithra Celebrate Anniversary," *City Week*, November 21, 1986, 3.

²⁹⁶ "Last Call: Two LGBTQ landmarks shut down, tear down," *Just Out*, August 5, 2011, 10.

²⁹⁷ Also see the theme "LGBTQ+ Connections in Social Spaces" for additional information on LGBTQ+ retail.

²⁹⁸ Morehead, "Public Policy and Sexual Geography in Portland, Oregon, 1970-2010," 83.

establishments with stores like Eros Bookstore (837 SW 3rd Ave.), Hard Times Bookstore (926 SW 3rd Ave.), Pink Cat Bookstore (523 SW 3rd Ave.), and Peek-A-Rama Book Store (834 SW 3rd Ave.).²⁹⁹

“Ten years ago, dildos and vibrators were more ‘in the closet.’ I’ve done a lot about getting them out of the closet,” Portlander Holly Mulcahey reflected in a 2001 *Just Out* interview.³⁰⁰ In 1991, Mulcahey opened It’s My Pleasure (first at 4526 SE Hawthorne Blvd.), aiming to provide a welcoming “tasteful adult bookstore— tasteful erotic videos and books from a feminist perspective,” feeling that “some of the men’s X-rated bookstores . . . were so intimidating and awful.”³⁰¹ With cards, jewelry, “candles shaped like labia,” sex toys, reading materials, workshops, and more, It’s My Pleasure worked to normalize sexual self-empowerment.³⁰² The store also worked to foster and support queer Portlanders by hosting potlucks for new lesbians in town, showing LGBTQ+ plays, and selling tickets for other Portland LGBTQ+ events.³⁰³ Around 1994, Mulcahey relocated the store to (4258 SE Hawthorne Blvd.) to double its size to 3,000 square feet, which allowed Mulcahey to provide space to other women-owned businesses. It’s My Pleasure continued to contrast other sex stores: it was a “high-ceilinged, colorful corner shop” with two resident cats instead of the typical “darkened windows” that often personify sex stores.³⁰⁴ It’s My Pleasure modified to keep relevant in the evolving social, political, and economic realities of LGBTQ+ Portlanders.³⁰⁵

It’s My Pleasure opened up on Hawthorne Street in a very small location. It was 15 feet wide and about 80 feet deep . . . We had a few sex toys. We had a few books—a little bit of this, a little bit of that. A part of the store was set aside for evening meetings. We had a little couch and some comfy chairs and bulletin boards. I started a lending library there with books of my own collection and customers kept donating to it, and it kept building. We had classes in the evenings about protecting yourself and relationships and good health and dating and safer sex. And at that time, back in 1991, there wasn’t much outreach towards women or towards lesbians about safer sex. So we did some groundbreaking work back then. In the early 1990s, the bi community was hardly even a community at the time . . . So we were among

²⁹⁹ “Guide to Portland Area Gay Scene,” *The Fountain*, September 1972, 17.

³⁰⁰ Natalie Shapiro, “Good Vibrations: It’s My Pleasure celebrates 10th anniversary,” *Just Out*, April 12, 2001, 12.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*; Anndee Hochman, “Pleasure-trove: Holly Mulcahey spreads the gospel of sexual self-empowerment and entices converts with a panoply of women-oriented wares,” *Just Out*, March 7, 1997, 32.

³⁰² It’s My Pleasure’s first advertisement emphasized empowering women. See Announcements, *Just Out*, July 1991, 21. For an example of workshops hosted at It’s My Pleasure, see Announcements, *Just Out*, December 3, 1993, 20.; *Ibid.*

³⁰³ Shapiro, “Good Vibrations.”; *Out About Town*, *Just Out*, August 19, 1994, 19.

³⁰⁴ Upstairs were two massage therapists and a Reiki practice. See Shapiro, “Good Vibrations.”; Anndee Hochman, “Pleasure-trove: Holly Mulcahey spreads the gospel of sexual self-empowerment and entices converts with a panoply of women-oriented wares,” *Just Out*, March 7, 1997, 32.

³⁰⁵ The location of It’s My Pleasure was 3106 NE 64th Ave. By the mid-2000s, Mulcahey sought a new owner. See “It’s My Pleasure Seeks New Owner,” *Just Out*, March 7, 2008, 9.

the first places in Portland to be open and welcoming to bi women, as well as lesbians.

— Holly Mulcahey describes her store as a haven for affirmation, knowledge, and belonging ³⁰⁶

Queer Intimacies Summary

From 1905 to 1994, LGBTQ+ Portlanders found and crafted various spaces to explore their identities and engage in queer intimacies. A spectrum of Portland places, from apartments to bathhouses and bars to parks, offered private and semi-private environments where Portlanders could cultivate queer relationships for a few hours, a few days, or an entire lifetime. Queer intimacies played a crucial role in establishing and building connections, relationships, and a sense of community, all of which increasingly became more out and public.

³⁰⁶ Oral history interview with Holly Mulcahey, by Erin Sexton, SR 4147, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.