

KING EDWARD HOTEL

Location **10180 101 Street NW**



www.EdmontonQueerHistoryProject.ca



In a time long before gay bars, it was far more challenging for LGBTQ2 Edmontonians to be able to openly socialize and find community. Club 70, Edmonton's first gay bar, did not open until 1969. Before that, folks often had to be more secretive and creative. Sometimes, this meant hosting private house parties, searching for companionship along Edmonton's riverbanks, or seeking out other clandestine spaces.¹ There were only a few public spaces that LGBTQ2 people could sometimes find and enjoy. They weren't gay in any official sense, but tolerant and safe and sometimes even catered towards a gay and lesbian clientele. In Edmonton, these spaces were often found in hotel bars. Over the years, several downtown hotels were known at different times, to be welcoming to the LGBTQ2 community, so long as you weren't too loud or perceived to be too flamboyant. These hotels included the King Edward, Royal George, Corona, Macdonald, and Mayfair.

Maureen Irwin, a prominent local lesbian activist, described this hidden subcultural world: "The queens frequented bars in the Mayfair Hotel. The gay and lesbian university crowd went to the Corona.... [and] the King Edward Hotel and Royal George Hotel were patronized by gay men and lesbians."² Paul Gessell noted that "the back five tables at the Mayfair Hotel were known as gay – even the doorman was aware that this was gay space."³ A letter sent by the Gay Alliance Towards Equality (GATE) to the managing editor of Sydney, Australia's *Butch* magazine in 1972 also indicated the popularity of bars in the Ambassador and the Grand; the letter went on to note how the Ambassador had "begun refusing service to gays," making the Grand the most popular space for gays and lesbians to socialize.⁴

The King Edward, known affectionately as the "King Eddy"⁵, was located in the heart of downtown, in the same spot where Holt Renfrew would one day open its Edmonton location. Established in 1906, the hotel had a basement tavern accessible via the main lobby. Shortly after opening, each day, many of the tables would be filled with gay men.⁶

The King Eddy was also a regular haunt of "Mother Jean" Lawson. This was the infamous Mother Jean, who would go on to be honoured as the first straight Empress of the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose (ISCWR) in Reign 10. Mother Jean was a staunch ally and supporter of Edmonton's early LGBTQ2 community. Long after her days at the King Eddy, Club 70's refusal to allow her in was a defining moment in the creation of the nightclub Flashback.



The King Edward, designed by Edmonton architect Herbert Magoon, quickly became a popular drinking spot during the pre-prohibition era. Hotel owner and businessman John Calhoun named the hotel after the reigning monarch of the day. Expansions to the hotel during its early years gave the King Edward the most rooms of any hotel in Edmonton at the time. Even Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier stayed there during a 1909 visit to Edmonton. Further renovations occurred in 1945, 1951, and 1964, keeping the hotel a vibrant part

1 Valerie J. Korinek, *Prairie Fairies: A History of Queer Communities and People in Western Canada, 1930-1985* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

2 Korinek, *Prairie Fairies*, 222.

3 Korinek, *Prairie Fairies*, 227.

4 Korinek, *Prairie Fairies*, 225.

5 Ron Byers and Rob Browatzke, "History of Edmonton's Gay Bars, Part 1: The Beginning." Edmonton City as Museum Project, September 23, 2020, <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2020/09/23/history-of-edmontons-gay-bars-part-1-the-beginning/>.

6 Byers and Browatzke, "History of Edmonton's Gay Bars, Part 1."

of downtown.⁷ In the late 1960s, the King Edward Hotel boasted Italian chef Angelo de Fanti.⁸ In 1978, The King Eddy was destroyed by arson; two men tragically died in the blaze.⁹

In what is now City Centre East, kitty-corner from the King Edward, stood the extravagant Royal George hotel. The founder of the Royal George was Abe Cristall, whose family were the first Jewish settlers in northern Alberta.¹⁰ Cristall had visited Edmonton in 1893, immediately falling in love with the “dusty little town full of hookers, peasant immigrants, and rough-talking men.”¹¹ Cristall soon won the respect of Edmonton’s business community, including Frank Oliver, who had been quoted as saying, “Edmonton could well do without Mormons, Chinese, Slavs, Jews.”¹² Cristall built The Royal George in 1910, boasting how each of its 117 rooms had a telephone and many had hot and cold running water.¹³ The Royal George became embroiled in a controversy when one of its staff members denied a room to Edmonton Eskimo player Rollie Miles because he was Black. Eskimos founder Henry Singer led a crusade against the hotel that didn’t end until the employee was fired.¹⁴ The Cristall family owned The Royal George until the 1970s when they sold it to Oxford Developments, who tore it down and turned it into the present-day Edmonton City Centre shopping complex.



The Corona Hotel was also known as a safe and welcoming space for the LGBTQ2 community. The Corona was located where First Edmonton Place currently stands, its name living on in the location of the Corona LRT station. The Corona Hotel was built by James Edward Wize in 1908, initially as an apartment building. During the First World War, it became “the city’s leading

hostel on the European plan.”¹⁵ The hotel was rebuilt in 1932 after being destroyed by an explosion and fire.¹⁶ The lounge at the east end of the lobby became known as a friendly space for LGBTQ2 Edmontonians.

In 1975, the Corona Hotel hosted a group called the “Fantasy Follies.” This troupe of performers, which had previously existed in a slightly different iteration as the “Fab Freaks,” was a drag ensemble, and had once performed at Club 70. The troupe was directed by Jamie Durette and Justin Ames. In an interesting and perhaps queer twist of fate, Ames went on to become the first male stripper at Chez Pierre.¹⁷ In addition to their spring of 1975 gig at the Corona, the Fantasy Follies put on a show at the Convention Inn South during the 1975 Klondike Days Festival.

The Corona also gained notoriety as the site of a well-publicized murder in 1977. Peter Paquette killed Ian McLaren, alleging self-defence. Paquette had recently been involved in the theft of some amphetamine, resulting in a confrontation in the tavern. McLaren assaulted Paquette, and Paquette shot him dead.¹⁸ In the fall of 1980, the Corona was demolished.

The Mayfair, another notable hotel, was located on Jasper Avenue and 108 Street, where a new apartment complex now stands. The Mayfair, featured as Canada’s “first drive-in hotel,” was the latest of the hotel hangouts to visit, having been built in 1944 at a cost of 1.6 million dollars.¹⁹ By 1955, the Mayfair was operating two lounges: a ladies’ lounge, which seated seventy, and a larger men’s lounge, which seated three hundred.²⁰ It wasn’t until 1967 that Alberta liquor laws changed to permit men and women to drink together.²¹

The tavern at the Mayfair was accessible through a back door, which was itself located down a back alley. This discretion was a vital part of the Mayfair’s relationship with Edmonton’s LGBTQ2 community.²² That secrecy was only needed until gay and lesbian bars began to open. Then, instead of the hotels where LGBTQ2 people found companionship and community for decades prior, Edmonton’s LGBTQ2 community could more openly explore the pubs and discotheques explicitly catering to them.

A proliferation of queer bars wasn’t the end to the mutually supportive relationship between hotels and the LGBTQ2 community. Community organizations like the ISCWR frequently hosted their annual Coronation Ball, and a variety of other drag shows and events, in various hotels across Edmonton for many years. Likewise, groups such as the Fellowship of Alberta Bears also hosted hotel parties when gay bars weren’t available. The Crash

7 Jarron Williams, “King Edward Hotel,” *Lost Edmonton*, <https://lostegeg.wordpress.com/tag/king-edward-hotel/>

8 “Experienced Italian Chef at King Edward Creates Many Appealing Dishes for Guests,” *Edmonton Journal*, October 24, 1969, 83.

9 “Two men die in fire at Edmonton hotel,” *The Globe and Mail*, April 24, 1978, 13.

10 “Claim to Fame,” *Edmonton Journal*, November 2, 2003, 24.

11 Ric Dolphin, “Abe Cristall: Success by the Spoonful,” *Edmonton Journal*, June 27, 1999, B1.

12 Dolphin, “Abe Cristall,” B1.

13 “Claim to Fame,” *Edmonton Journal*, November 2, 2003, 24.

14 Misty Harris, “Style Proves to be Genetic in Edmonton’s Singer Clan,” *Edmonton Journal*, July 13, 2002, A1.

15 “Corona Completes Renovations,” *Edmonton Journal*, June 21, 1968, 54.

16 “Today in History,” *Edmonton Journal*, February 21, 1997, F6.

17 Anne Elliott, “He Takes ‘Em Off for His Bread,” *Edmonton Journal*, May 15, 1975, 3.

18 Doug Swanson, “Self-Defence is Claimed in Paquette Murder Trial,” *Edmonton Journal*, May 13, 1980, B2.

19 “First ‘Drive-In’ Hotel Features Underground Parking for 50 Cars,” *Edmonton Journal*, July 5, 1955, 7.

20 “First ‘Drive-In,’” 7.

21 Bob Harvey, “Goodbye to the Pub with No Cheer,” *Edmonton Journal*, September 13, 1968, 57.

22 Ron Byers and Rob Browatzke, “History of Edmonton’s Gay Bars, Part 1: The Beginning,” *Edmonton City as Museum Project*, September 23, 2020, <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2020/09/23/history-of-edmontons-gay-bars-part-1-the-beginning/>.

Hotel (which now has new life as inner-city supportive housing), was located where the Grand Hotel once stood. For several years, Crash had been the host to LGBTQ2 pop-up events like the famous Fruit Loop parties. In 2019, the Fairmont Hotel Macdonald hosted a sold-out “drag brunch” sponsored as a fundraiser for the Edmonton Pride Festival Society. Drag brunches are now a staple in many hotels and restaurants across the city helping to bring new visibility to Edmonton’s LGBTQ2 community.

