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Finding Community in the Mitchell Hotel

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Finding Community in the Mitchell Hotel — Alan Virta

“Lesbian and gay people are the only people on Earth who have to find their tribe. We aren’t born into it. You have to have a place to go find the tribe. And so you will start with the most obvious place.”—Phyllis Burke, in the documentary film *The Castro*

For gay men and women in Boise, there was no “obvious place” in their own hometown until the summer of 1976, when a group of local businessmen, with the help of friends and family, turned a corner of an old hotel into that place: Boise’s first gay bar. The hotel, known as the Mitchell, was perhaps an unlikely venue, but it was there that Boise’s gay people began building a public community. It was there that gay men and women, many just starting to come to grips with their orientation, found their tribe.

Designed by the firm of the famed architect John Tourtellotte, the Mitchell Hotel, located at 10th and Front Streets, opened to great fanfare in December 1906. “The new hotel is new from basement to roof,” reported the *Idaho Statesman*. “Every carpet, every rug, every piece of furniture is fresh from the store. The rooms are all large and airy, all heated with hot water and lighted with either gas or electricity—and all are cozily furnished.” Manager Ed Mitchell had a flock of turkeys driven to town “to grace the table Sunday at one of the swellest popular priced dinners ever served in Boise.” The new establishment was advantageously situated, directly across Front Street from the city’s railway station, making it the first hotel Boise-bound travelers saw when they got off the train.



The Mitchell Hotel at the corner of 10th and Front Streets, 1979, became a gathering place for Boise’s gay community. Courtesy of Idaho State Historical Society.



A postcard of Boise's train depot and the Mitchell Hotel at 10th and Front Streets, about 1910, presents the buildings at their finest. The Mitchell Hotel's best years were 1900 to 1924. Courtesy of Alan Virta.

By 1976, however, the Mitchell Hotel had seen better days. The downtown railway station was long gone, replaced in the 1920s by a new Mission-style structure up on the Bench. Several newer hotels were closer to Main Street and the city's business district, leaving the Mitchell Hotel a fading structure whose principal distinction was that it was the lodging place closest to the city's warehouses. On the first floor facing 10th Street, retail spaces were rented from time to time to businesses whose proprietors were attracted by the low rent. Making a space suitable for a bar was a challenge, but friends and even strangers pitched in to help the bar's owners by volunteering their time and labor to transform a small dingy storefront into a functioning establishment that could pass the building code. When the bar opened, the owners christened it "Shuckey's," a name taken from a friend's habit of uttering the phrase "Oh shuckey darn" in place of a stronger expletive.

Before Shuckey's was opened, gay life in Boise was very private, revolving around small social gatherings in individual homes. Gay people were still haunted by the notorious "Boys of Boise" prosecutions of the 1950s. In January 1971, journalist Alice Dieter wrote a profile entitled "Boise's Gay World" for the weekly newspaper, the *Intermountain Observer*. "Fifteen years after the great witch hunt," she reported, "[Boise's] homosexual community lives quietly and in peace," but one not yet ready to come out. "In other communities across the country homosexuals have organized for mutual defense and political action. . . . Boise gays are very aware of these groups, but they admit that they think Boise isn't ready for 'blatant is beautiful' action." One gay lamented to her, "So many leave for the more open life of the coast cities." Those who moved away and those who merely visited experienced the freedom of those more open societies

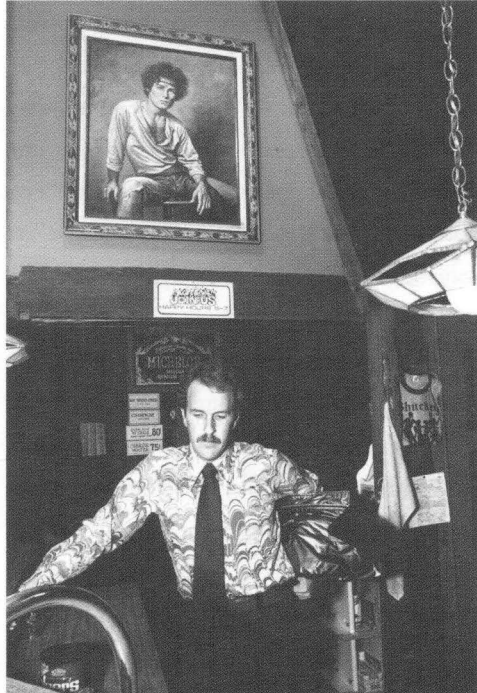
and brought back to Boise a desire to recreate that experience here.

But why did a tavern come first? Social historians have studied tavern culture and the role taverns play in society beyond the provision of food and drink. Some have noted that taverns are among the first institutions to be established in new communities and have examined their role in fostering the growth of other institutions of civil society. "It might seem odd today to begin civil society with a bar," wrote Daniel B. Thorp in a study of taverns on the early American frontier, "but in 18th century Anglo America it made perfect sense. . . . Taverns, inns, ordinaries, and other public houses . . . were important public places where a variety of community activities took place. . . . They were scenes of countless public and private functions." The social interaction there led to what later generations would call networking and community formation.

Boise's first gay bar served the same end for gays in town. For the first time there was a public institution that they could call their own, where they could meet and network, a place where the closeted could take the first steps in coming out. Several months after Shuckey's opened, some Boiseans began organizing a local congregation of the gay-oriented Metropolitan Community Church, giving the gay community in Boise both a tavern and a church. And all of a sudden, it was as if a logjam had been broken. Posting their flyers and handbills in the new bar, clubs and organizations of all kinds were established, ranging from the prototypically Western—a rodeo

club—to the outlandishly gay—a drag court for male and female impersonators. In 1977, gays in Boise and their allies initiated their first mass political action. Reacting to the plight of seven female Boise Police Department employees, Boise gays organized petition drives and protest rallies in support of the "Boise Seven," who were fired by the police chief because they were suspected of being lesbians. The women did not win their jobs back, for there was no city policy then prohibiting employment discrimination based on sexual orientation, but the very act of open protest marked a milestone in the emergence of a public gay community in Boise.

Over the next three decades a community center was organized, a gay newspaper



Tavern manager Ron Smith works the bar at Shuckey's, 1978. Courtesy of Idaho Statesman, Boise State University Library Special Collections.

was published, an annual Pride parade was initiated, film festivals and diversity conferences were held, campaigns were waged against perceived anti-gay ballot initiatives, and an openly partnered lesbian was elected to represent Boise's North End in the state legislature. Bisexuals and transgendered people began asserting their right to recognition as part of the mix. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, the gay community in Boise was out in ways those interviewed for Alice Dieter's 1971 *Intermountain Observer* article could never have imagined. The seeds for so much of this were planted in Shuckey's bar in the Mitchell Hotel.

Several years after its opening, Shuckey's was renamed The Stoplite and then, very briefly, Breakers, before closing in 1988. Those who remember Shuckey's in the early days have fond memories. In a reminiscence originally published in 1989 in the gay community newspaper *The Paper*, Sharon Matthies wrote: Those bars were "places where we could celebrate with our own kind, places where we fought against prejudice—physically and politically. This was where we first danced together as same-sex couples, where Idaho's Court was begun, where funds were collected for the seven lesbians who were fired from the Police Department. . . . It was the beginning of an AIDS candlelight march. . . . This

was where gay-bashing occurred, and where we hurt each other as well. We had Wednesday night *Dynasty* parties, we had wonderful times on Halloween and New Year's Eve." A few months after the bar closed, the Mitchell Hotel caught fire and burned to the ground. It had been listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982, largely in recognition of its distinguished architect and ornate brickwork, but members of Boise's first generation of out gays remember the Mitchell Hotel as the place where they found their tribe and started the first public institutions for their community.

Alan Virta was the head of Special Collections in the Boise State University Library from 1988 until 2011. A graduate of the University of Maryland, he previously worked at the Library of Congress and the University of Southern Mississippi, and is a past president of the Conference of Inter-Mountain Archivists. He has written numerous historical articles about Idaho and his home state of Maryland and currently serves on the Idaho State Historic Records Advisory Board. He has written this history of how Boise's gay people came together in the 1970s to coalesce and form a community because, he says, it is a piece of history not well-known, even in the community of Idaho historians.