

LOCATING QUEER POSSIBILITIES: LGBTQ+ FOLKS NEGOTIATING  
COMMUNITY AND BELONGING IN IDAHO, 1969-2011

by

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## DEDICATION

“Idaho: such an enigma. But isn’t that what home is? The dreaded place where  
your heart sings.”

—Tom Spanbauer, queer novelist and Idaho native

To all the queer Idahoans who have come before me, and all those who will come  
after.

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## ABSTRACT

Americans—regardless of their sexual orientation or home state—generally assume that Idaho is hostile towards queer folks. Linking rurality to homophobia and bigotry, they believe queer people are safer and happier in metropolitan settings with visible queer communities. However, the lived experiences of queer Idahoans reveal that LGBTQ+ people have built communities and found belonging around the state, even outside the state’s most populous city, Boise. Whereas queer people in urban areas like San Francisco historically emphasized the ways they differed from the straight public, queer Idahoans found safety and belonging by emphasizing their similarities with straight people. Through archival research including newspaper editorials written by queer folks and their allies, and oral histories collected from Idahoans throughout the state, this thesis explores how queer Idahoans have negotiated their relationship to the Gem State. Queer Idahoans built community based on their beliefs about place, comparing their communities at city, regional, and state levels to how they imagined queer people lived elsewhere. Some queer people found the state’s atmosphere repressive to LGBTQ+ existence, but others found joy and even liberation in the possibilities available in Idaho. This publication is the first academic thesis about queerness in Idaho, a state often neglected by academic analyses.

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## INTRODUCTION

A shadowy space beneath the stairwell in my high school cafeteria was the safest place for me growing up as a queer kid. I ate lunch out of my lap, sitting on concrete benches with about a dozen friends in a semi-circle. We found each other in middle school before any of us came out—that magical coincidence of queer kids learning to trust one another before learning why they needed each other so much.

Without meaning to, we carved out a queer space in an otherwise indifferent environment. Middleton, a city in Idaho with about nine thousand residents today, hardly cared about queer kids by the twenty-first century. Many of our classmates supported gay rights, and anti-bullying policies shielded me—a mostly closeted bisexual person—from outright harassment. Yet I felt out of place. I dreamed of moving to New York City, somewhere I figured it would be easier to be myself. I floated adrift on my family's undeveloped five acre plot on the far outskirts of town, reading voraciously in my spare time. As far as I knew, I was one of the first queer people to live there. I figured there was no collective queer past to examine—not where I was from. Even though I had my friends, other young queer folks building lives and identities from the scraps our culture afforded us, I felt lonely. I wanted more. But Idaho was the devil I knew, and it scared me less than the hurried, impersonal landscape of big American cities. I stuck around and settled.

Even when I decided to study Idaho's queer history for my graduate program, I worried I had made a mistake. College failed to convince me that queer joy could be



found everywhere and anywhere. But I had heard about the Boys of Boise—the state capital’s witch hunt of gay men at the height of McCarthyism. I wanted to avoid rehashing that heartbreaking story of homophobia and systemic discrimination. I dove into my research, finding a vast array of documents about Boise. Of course Boise had a queer history! It was a city, after all, with a population of more than 200,000 people. Middleton remained outside my focus.

I discovered Middleton’s queer history accidentally, in the first few months of my research. In 1955, as city investigators began searching for men who had engaged in homosexual sex acts, an elevator operator named Morris Foote fled Boise, fearing for his safety. He moved to Middleton for refuge and lived there for the rest of his life. Foote only began to visit Boise again when the city’s first gay bar opened, and he became involved in queer activism shortly thereafter. He remained an icon in Boise’s queer community until his death in 1998, two years before I was born.<sup>1</sup> I learned, also, that Morris Foote lived a short walk away from my middle school. I wonder sometimes, would I have felt less alone in Middleton if I knew that a queer hero made his life there? Would that knowledge have reined in my self-centered imagination of queerness in my hometown? I can only speculate.

Regardless, I cannot pretend to be objective about Idaho, especially not about queerness here. This thesis represents two years of culminating academic research, but it is also the result of desperation and drive. It is a defense of my dignity as a queer Idahoan, and a proof of existence—joyful and otherwise—in the face of real and

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<sup>1</sup> “Morris Foote,” Making Gay History, accessed January 12, 2023, <https://makinggayhistory.com/podcast/episode-16-morris-foote/>.

imagined limitations. It is a cited, peer-reviewed refutation of the legislature's and my immediate family's homophobia. Their prejudice may not be overtly violent, but they fail to conceive of a queerness native to Idaho.

My experience represents a commonality among many queer Idahoans. These pages are filled with stories from other individuals around the state struggling with the same question as me: if a queer life is best lived elsewhere, what does it mean for me that I chose to stay here in Idaho? Spanning decades of lived experience and hundreds of miles of geographical separation, this question is universal to Idahoan queer life. When I shared my research subject with people in conversation, I was often asked, "have you found anything?" Or, "are you depressed by what you find?" Clearly, people still internalize these uninformed assumptions about Idaho. The idea that the state is hostile to queer people stems from unfounded beliefs about history, namely that queer Idahoans have never existed, been happy with their lot, or received support from the public. All of these assumptions are wrong on their face, but they have certainly shaped the trajectory of queer experiences here.

As a consequence of collective imagination, real limitations emerged for creating queer community, coalitions, and social change in this state. In Boise, the urban model of queer liberation, politics, and personal fulfillment struggled to survive at an institutional level, as progressive organizations like Your Family, Friends, and Neighbors (YFFN) ultimately collapsed due to lack of public support. Despite the mixed results of efforts to create a strong public presence for Boise's queer community, the city came to imagine itself as an island in Idaho, a state Boiseans believed was otherwise hostile to queerness—ignoring the impressive, successful efforts of gay communities elsewhere in

the state. Of course, other cities around Idaho imagined their own queer communities quite differently, proving that such judgements about place were subjective, and relative to one's own region. Though the cultures and backgrounds of these cities differed substantially from one another—including in Kendrick, Moscow, and Pocatello, the locales I profile—queer Idahoans struggled to navigate the same assumptions of how they ought to live and what should make them happy. This shared difficulty was not enough to unite them in the long term, though, even against common threats. Longstanding questions about Idaho's quality of life for queer people were only reiterated—and the option to leave reaffirmed—as the state's government became more bigoted. For queer people, it seemed Idaho was second-rate compared to other places around the United States. Many of Idaho's most progressive and mold-breaking queer people moved away, leaving behind a subset of queer people more willing to concede political and social ground to avoid rocking the boat.

My analysis centers queer people's perceptions about life in Idaho. I especially focus on tensions between queer people's lived and articulated experiences, in which social stereotypes sometimes become more powerful than their lived realities. To that effect, I rely on oral histories and primary source documentations from within queer communities to explore these phenomena. Two oral history collections were essential to my work: the Idaho LGBTQ+ Oral History Project and the Idaho Queered collection. The former was produced in 2011 by Dr. Riley Caldwell O'Keefe, a professor at Boise State University. She asked her students to conduct oral histories with local LGBTQ people as the culminating project for a semester-long course on local queer history. These interviews varied wildly in content and scope, although most of the students asked similar

questions of their narrators. While the narrators originated from locales around the United States, most of them lived in Boise when they were interviewed, giving the collection an urban slant. A few years later, the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded a grant to Denise Bennett, a researcher at University of Idaho, to conduct oral histories with queer Idahoans. Those interviews focused much more on queerness outside Boise, skewing slightly towards Idaho's panhandle where the university is located.

I also conducted oral histories with queer people from Idaho. I helped Dr. Lisa McClain interview Sharon Matthies, who came out as a lesbian in Boise in the 1980s, as well as Ned Brewer, who was a teenager when the Boys of Boise scandal rocked the state's capital. I was present for the interviews of several Episcopalian parishioners from eastern Idaho, also interviewed by Dr. McClain. On my own, I interviewed Ann Dunkin, who was instrumental in creating Boise's first pride parade along with Brian Bergquist in 1990. Because the questions posed in these interviews were tailored to each narrator and their individual background, our conversations produced richly textured transcripts. Quotes from these narrators appear sparsely throughout my work, but their commentary deeply influenced the direction of my thesis.

The other key source related to my research was Idaho's gay newspaper, a publication which ran from 1985 to 2011. Its title changed several times from *The Paper* in its initial run, to *Out!* in the early 90s, and to *Diversity* in its final form. In terms of consistency, its usefulness was unparalleled. There were no other sources that so closely documented the inner workings of queer communities around Idaho. Aside from news reports that the editor typically sourced from other American queer publications, the newspaper contained columns written by queer Idahoans and occasionally straight allies

about current events, local politics, social occasions, faith practices, and rurality, among other issues. Over the years, several columns meditated on Idaho's public and character. Those were especially crucial for Chapter 3. Though the newspaper mostly focused on Boise, it was distributed in locations all over the state, including eastern Oregon.

*Diversity*—as well as mainstream local sources like the *Idaho Statesman*—thoroughly documented one of the most crucial elements of my thesis: the 1994 fight over Proposition 1, an anti-gay ballot initiative and a watershed moment in Idaho's queer history. Angered that three lesbian mothers were invited to speak at Meridian High School, the Idaho Citizens Alliance proposed an anti-gay ballot initiative similar to Measure 9, which had failed in Oregon just two years before. Proposition 1 intended to prevent teachers from saying anything supportive about queerness and would have explicitly excluded homosexuals from becoming a protected class under state or local anti-discrimination laws. Queer Idahoans reasonably identified the proposition as a threat to their safety, dignity, and ability to secure rights in the future. The fight against Proposition 1 was significant for a few reasons. It was the first time that all of Idaho's queer communities faced the same challenge at the same time; it represented the only decisive political victory for queer Idahoans in the state's history; and queer people succeeded in defeating it because they had diverse strategies suited to different locales around the state. The initiative appears in all three chapters of my thesis, but the second chapter explores these themes and the consequences of Proposition 1 in much more detail.

My thesis is certainly not a complete history of queerness in Idaho. AIDS makes relatively few appearances. And whiteness—an overwhelming but largely unspoken

reality—goes unaddressed, though the public’s ideas about respectability and urban stereotypes are implicitly racialized. Not to mention, many organizations and significant events played smaller roles in the development of Idahoan imagination about place, and so receive less attention in this study. Additionally, the time scale I address only ranges from the Stonewall Riots in 1969 to about 2011, the year that *Diversity*—Idaho’s gay newspaper—stopped publishing. More could be said about queerness in the preceding years. And though non-binary and transgender individuals began speaking for themselves through local literature starting around the 1990s and especially in the early 2000s in *Diversity*, their experiences remained secondary to lesbian, gay, and—to a lesser extent—bisexual people in Idaho. Stories of trans individuals take a secondary role in my narrative, but overall, their feelings of lack of safety and concern about wellbeing in a supposedly hostile environment mirror those of cisgender queer people. Obviously, more could be said about the trans experience specific to Idaho, but thematically, their narratives mesh well with the rest of my work.

Throughout my thesis, to describe anybody with a non-normative identity or experience, I use the word “queer.” I also use the word “gay” as an umbrella term to describe queer people regardless of their gender identity. However, I avoid using words like “gays” and “queers,” using the terms “gay people” and “queer people” instead. I do this with the knowledge that any language I use might alienate some readers. Such difficulties are a regular part of writing about queerness. As social conventions change, so does the preferred language used to describe queer experience.

Across the spectrum of LGBTQ+ identities, queer people assumed Idaho was oppressive to sexual minorities. Conversely, San Francisco represented the pinnacle of

queer possibility in the American West. Analyzing the city's significance in *Queer Sites: Gay Urban Histories Since 1600*, Les Wright explained, "San Francisco's appeal has always been as a rough-and-tumble, morally wide-open frontier town[...] remove[d] from the structured moral spaces of the urban and even rural communities of mid-nineteenth-century America."<sup>2</sup> The city was imagined as a reprieve from oppressive forces elsewhere, and by the early twentieth century, urban centers had earned a reputation for fostering queerness.<sup>3</sup> In 1983, early in the field of queer history, John D'Emilio identified industrialization and urbanization as key factors in the development of gay sexual identity.<sup>4</sup> Though historians have complicated and countered D'Emilio's thesis, the premise of his argument—which locates cities as a liberating force for queer people—remains influential. As gay people became more politically active and organized, overt forms of communal gay life proliferated in San Francisco, including the Mattachine Society, the Castro district, and networks of bathhouses. The visibility of gay life in these places—and the tendency of urban areas to create more records—cemented the stereotype of queerness as metropolitan in the public imagination, including among gay people themselves.<sup>5</sup> Of course, this possibility existed out of reach geographically, if not materially, for queer Idahoans. The phenomenon of urbanism partly explains why

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<sup>2</sup> Les Wright, "San Francisco," in *Queer Sites: Gay Urban Histories Since 1600*, ed. David Higgs (London: Routledge, 1999), 164.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Boag, "Gay Male Rural-Urban Migration in the American West" in *City Dreams, Country Schemes: Community and Identity in the American West*, Kathleen A. Brosnan and Amy L. Scott, eds., (Reno: University of Nevada Press: 2011), 285-287.

<sup>4</sup> John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharan Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press), 100-113.

<sup>5</sup> Boag, 293-296.

Boise is central to Idaho's narrative of gay progressivism despite a well-documented history of prejudice. As Idaho's most populous city and the center of state politics, Boise represents a closer match to that urban ideal than other cities in the state could reasonably aspire to.

My work builds on the rural turn, a trend in queer history countering the idea that queerness is inherently urban.<sup>6</sup> As is typical of specialists in queer history, many of us were motivated by similar experiences of marginalization in historical narratives and public understanding. Unfortunately, the same notions these historians have tried to dispel still resonate with the public. Michael Riordan wrote *Out Our Way: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Country* in 1996, but it was inspired by similar questions posed to me in 2022 by curious, confused Americans. When Riordan moved to the countryside, people questioned his decision: "Aren't you scared out there? Don't you get lonely? How do you make a living? Are you out of your *mind*?" It's to answer such questions that I've

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Peter Boag, *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Ryan Lee Cartwright, *Peculiar Places: A Queer Crip History of White Rural Nonconformity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021); Mary L. Gray, Colin R. Johnson, and Brian J. Gilley, eds., *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Colin R. Johnson, *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013); E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South, An Oral History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008); John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Michael Riordan, *Out Our Way: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Country* (Canada: Between the Lines, 1996); Brock Thompson, *The Un-Natural State: Arkansas and the Queer South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2010); Stewart Van Cleve, *Land of 10,000 Loves: A History of Queer Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).



written this book.”<sup>7</sup> My research differs from established historiography because I focus on queerness in Idaho, which is still novel in itself. The only academic historian to broach the subject beyond article-length publications is Dr. Peter Boag. His 2003 book, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest*, explored the queer subculture among transient working-class men. Though his main focus was an early twentieth-century homosexuality scandal in Portland, Idaho featured prominently in the chapter about relationships between migratory adults and adolescents in rural settings.<sup>8</sup> However, combining queerness in Idaho with the public’s imagination of location has never been done before in an academic historical text.

My work also expands on shorter works of queer history written about Idaho. Most archival collections about Idaho queer life are concentrated at repositories in the state capital, many of which were collected by one man, Alan Virta. While working as the head of Special Collections and Archives at Boise State University, he accessioned the papers of local activists and institutional bodies in Boise’s gay community. Because Virta primarily worked with Boise’s gay community, his ability to speak about communities around the state was limited. For example, his slideshow “The Gay Life in Idaho” never mentioned Idaho’s first gay political organization, which was founded in Moscow.<sup>9</sup> Such omissions helped perpetuate the myth of Boise’s singular progressivism, as he presented the slideshow frequently to audiences around the state.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Riordan, *Out Our Way: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Country* (Toronto: Between The Lines, 1996), xi.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (California: University of California Press), 15-44.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Virta, “The Gay Life in Idaho” (Powerpoint presentation to Melissa Wintrow's Gender 200 class, Boise, ID, October 20, 2020).

Virta's work highlights one of the unique problems in queer history: academic institutions have disregarded the importance of gay history, so gay people have written, collected, and shared it themselves.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes, their efforts became the only representations of particular queer pasts, leaving gaps in the records. Because historical analyses of Idaho queerness replicate local mythology, this paper relies on popular discourse in primary sources rather than academic work to buoy its narrative.

The philosophy of imagination, which has been well-explored by other researchers, helped inspire this line of inquiry. In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread on Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson argued that “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”<sup>11</sup> The same might be said about queer Americans and how they built community with one another. Queer people building communities, like people building nations, imagined themselves as tied to one another by a sense of shared experience; for queer people, they shared a common experience of non-normative desire and gender expression. To what extent they shared a culture, language, or singular history is up for debate. As there are factions within nations, there are factions within queer spaces involving dissent, separation, and belief in assimilation into the broader heteronormative culture. Rural queer people—and even queer people who are simply less

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<sup>10</sup> George Chauncey, Martin Duberman, and Martha Vincius, eds., *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Penguin Random House, 1989), 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread on Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), 5-6.

urban—find themselves on the outskirts of a broader queer community that imagines its nexus residing in metropolitan spaces.

Location has been central to how queer Idahoans understand their experience of themselves and their sexuality. In *Space, Place, and Sex*, Lynda Johnston and Robyn Longhurst explained that “place and sexuality are mutually constituted. Sexuality has a profound effect on the way people live in, and interact with, space and place. In turn, space and place affect people’s sexuality.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Johnston and Longhurst argued sexuality as a function of place operated at varying scales, an idea which influenced the chapter-by-chapter organization of my thesis.<sup>13</sup> The imagined possibilities of queer community changed based on what scale I employed, and sometimes the imaginations of various places were at odds with one another. For example, how could Boise imagine itself as a safe space in Idaho if Idaho was wholly hostile to queer people? And why have Idahoans typically imagined northern Idaho to be homophobic if it also spawned Idaho’s first gay organization? While my paper answers such questions to an extent, I am more concerned with the material realities such belief create. This thesis is about how queer people conceived of place, and the consequences of their beliefs—less so about the logic of such imagination, which was faulty at best.

Chapter 1 chronicles the narrative arc of Boise’s queer community. Though the city had a flourishing network of hook-up spots for sexual encounters between men during the first half of twentieth century, this landscape was suppressed by the city’s

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<sup>12</sup> Lynda Johnston and Robyn Longhurst, *Space, Place, and Sex: Geographies of Sexualities* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

moral panic of 1955. Gay people went underground, and did not reemerge until several years after the Stonewall Riots, when the gay community went public with its first gay bar in 1976. Even as time passed and the community gained temporal distance from the 1955 moral panic, it largely rejected aesthetics of queerness that might alienate them from the straight public—aesthetics they often related to San Francisco and other urban settings. The insular, guarded nature of Boise’s gay community caused local activists to struggle to mobilize the community not only for political causes, but for social events and organizations as well. And as queer people gained mainstream acceptance in straight society during the early twenty-first century, the demand for exclusively queer spaces and organizations declined.

Chapter 2 explores the variety of queer communities around Idaho. Proposition 1 takes a central role in this chapter, serving as a unifying point chronologically and thematically for diverse queer communities around the state. The plurality of strategies specific to local contexts helped secure the narrow margin of victory against the ballot initiative. Despite the optimistic attitudes of activists after the defeat of Proposition 1, efforts to create a statewide coalition of queer Idahoans failed. Cultural differences between Idaho’s queer communities proved too much to overcome for political purposes, even though experiences of marginalization based on the intersection of queerness and relative rurality were universal. First, I briefly examine Pocatello as an example of queer life in eastern Idaho. The community there sprang up as a direct result of organizing against Proposition 1. Next, I profile Moscow and their queer community’s origins, which went public before Boise. Moscow’s approach to fighting Proposition 1 was more openly and ostentatiously queer than Boise’s No on One Campaign. Finally, I look at

Kendrick, a small town outside Moscow, as an example of how queerness functioned in the context of rural Idaho. Queer residents in Kendrick convinced their neighbors to vote against the ballot initiative primarily through one-on-one conversation and a letter in the local paper.

Chapter 3 surveys the state as a whole, investigating patterns of queer migration in and out of Idaho, as well as the beliefs that motivated those relocations. Nuances of queer life in Idaho's many cities, towns, and regions were flattened into a singular narrative—one that elevated the state's oppressiveness above all else. Americans at large and even some queer Idahoans accepted this. However, other queer Idahoans pushed back, claiming the reality was that Idaho's public politically and socially preferred style over substance—as long as that style was polite and conventional. On that rubric, both queer people and anti-queer bigots could offend Idahoan sensibilities. It also meant queer people who led conventional lives found acceptance in Idaho, a fact that often surprised visitors and Idaho natives alike. Queer people typically moved to Idaho based on circumstance; perhaps a relative needed care, or they got a job opportunity in the state. However, it seemed nobody moved to Idaho to pursue their “big gay dreams,” as one narrator put it. On the other hand, tired of living somewhere so ambivalent about queerness, some queer Idahoans—especially progressives—moved to places they believed would be more accepting. They pursued an embodied form of queerness they felt was impossible within the state. These migrations gave Idaho's queer communities a slant away from political engagement around sexual identity.

I hope that by writing and publishing this thesis, other queer Idahoans can find a sense of continuity among their lives and those who came before them. The questions

raised here about how one selects and shapes a place to call home must be answered at a personal level by all of us. Perhaps my work might shed some light on how others have answered those questions, and offer a variety of roadmaps and perspectives for people who have not settled comfortably on answers. Furthermore, because there is a burgeoning interest among the state's public for more local stories about queer history, I hope this thesis inspires more people to research and read about queer history at local level.

Finally, for queer individuals who have the resources, safety, and desire to do so, I hope that they might also consider sharing their stories and preserving them in archives for future generations. We all have so much to learn from one another.

## CHAPTER ONE: BOISE

By 1979—ten years after queer bar patrons rebelled against police oppression at the Stonewall Inn in New York City—the gay liberation movement was in full swing. Massive protests and parades across the nation commemorated the Stonewall Riots annually in June. The events featured pithy signs, Pride flags, leathermen, the lesbian motorcycle club Dykes on Bikes, and drag queens waving like royalty from their floats. Hundreds of thousands of Americans turned out for these events, which were noteworthy for their inclusivity, bravery, and disregard for the straight public’s sensibilities. Right after describing the large-scale parades taking place elsewhere that June, the *Idaho Statesman* described how gay Boiseans celebrated with “a float trip on the Boise River... and a memorial service at Metropolitan Community Church [MCC],” Boise’s gay church. Reverend Ken Storer, MCC’s pastor, said, “It was a very enjoyable day... I saw lots of people smiling and saying ‘we choose to be a productive part of our community without denying ourselves.’”<sup>14</sup> Putting their best faces forward was important for gay Boiseans, and Pride events like those they observed in San Francisco sent the wrong message to straight onlookers.

Historians have recognized the division within queer communities about how to fight for social acceptance. In his 2020 book *The Deviant’s War: The Homosexual vs. The United States of America*, Dr. Eric Cervini explored how these different philosophies

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<sup>14</sup> “Homosexuals March on East, West coasts,” *Idaho Statesman*, June 25, 1979, 1A.

shaped campaigns for gay rights even before the Stonewall Riots. Frank Kameny, an astronomer employed by the American government, lost his job in 1957 when his superiors learned of his previous arrest for lewd conduct in a bathroom with another man. Kameny's subsequent court cases arguing that gay people should be employable launched a movement. His approach emphasized gay people's respectability. Importantly, gay people involved with his protests were more likely to be white, middle-class, and gender-conforming; overall, they had fewer barriers to appearing respectable. Underrepresented groups were alienated from Kameny's movement. Besides being queer, they had so little in common with people considered respectable that they were unlikely to garner sympathy. With so little privilege to lose in the first place, they took a riskier approach. After all, it was drag queens and butches who fought back against police violence at the Stonewall Inn. However, both groups—those who preferred respectability politics and those willing to riot—contributed to the gay rights movement.<sup>15</sup>

Boise's queer community aligned itself with Kameny's approach, constructing their community relative to and apart from the aesthetics of difference politics, which they associated with urbanity. They distanced themselves from licentiousness, rebellion, and gender-bending, while emphasizing their similarities with the straight public. While a few activist locals lamented that Boise's gay community looked so different from San Francisco's, most others appreciated that fact, complicating community politics as individuals wrestled with how they wanted to appear and who they wanted to be. The community remained small compared to those in truly metropolitan settings, and its

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<sup>15</sup> Eric Cervini, *The Deviant's War: The Homosexual vs. The United States of America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).



insularity made it possible to regulate the behavior and politics of other community members. Furthermore, the queer community's small scale made differences surrounding mission and purpose much harder to plow through. Some people had a vision for a more progressive community with activist organizations at its center, but most queer Boiseans—a majority of whom were not activists—prioritized making friends and not rocking the boat. Boise's queer organizations struggled to find their niche among queer people who were rather uninterested in difference politics to begin with. The fractured nature of their debates and of the community itself caused several businesses and organizations to go under. At the same time, a plurality of activist groups trying to accomplish similar goals tore one another apart.

An episode of brazen homophobia during the 1950s came to define the city's relationship to queerness in the coming decades. Colloquially known as The Boys of Boise after John Gerassi published his book with that title in 1966, the scandal made national headlines when it occurred in 1955.<sup>16</sup> A moral panic swept the city that year, after the *Idaho Statesman* reported that three adult men had been arrested for having sex with teenage boys. Though the paper painted the high school students as victims, authorities acknowledged that the boys were willing participants who blackmailed their adult partners into staying silent and paying them money.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, in response to the arrests, the *Idaho Statesman* published a fear-mongering article titled "Crush the Monster": "The situation calls for immediate and systemic cauterization... the job is one

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<sup>16</sup> John Gerassi, *The Boys of Boise: Furor, Vice, and Folly in an American City* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966).

<sup>17</sup> Ned Brewer, interview by Dr. Lisa McClain and Rachel Taylor, February 7, 2022, from the author's personal collection.

in which the full strength of county and city agencies should and must be enlisted.”<sup>18</sup> During the ensuing investigation of homosexual behavior in Boise, more than 1,400 people were questioned about their connections to and knowledge of gay men living there.<sup>19</sup> One man fled the state out of fear, and authorities hunted him down all the way to San Francisco. Despite the city’s reputation as a safe haven for gay people, it could not shield him from the law.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, sixteen men were charged with sex crimes—several of them for consensual encounters with other adults.<sup>21</sup>

Boise’s gay community remained extremely insular for decades after, staying underground for the next twenty years. During that era of silence, few records indicated how gay people fared in the city. By 1971, though, as the rise of the gay liberation movement made more straight, progressive readers interested in gay issues, journalist Alice Dieter managed to secure interviews with several gay individuals, documenting their social circle for an article titled “Boise’s Gay World.” Her subjects were a small group of anonymous gay locals who met for brunches, dinner parties, and picnics mostly attended by young, middle-class professionals.<sup>22</sup> One gay person quoted in the article opined, “So many leave for the more open life of the coast cities.”

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<sup>18</sup> “Crush the Monster,” *Idaho Statesman*, November 3, 1955, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Etlinger, “Attitudes Changed Since ‘Boys of Boise’ Scandal,” *Idaho Statesman*, December 21, 1975, 1G.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 109-119.

<sup>21</sup> John Gerassi, *The Boys of Boise: Furor, Vice, and Folly in an American City* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), xv-xviii.

<sup>22</sup> Tom Grote, “Gay Bar Patrons Speak Out on Lifestyle,” *Idaho Statesman*, March 13, 1977, 1B.

Gay folks who stayed in Boise, however, preferred the city's moral rectitude and respectability to supposed promiscuity elsewhere: "We wouldn't want to live in San Francisco, there are so many pretty boys there... homebreakers. Here it is quiet. We can live a normal life without too much pressure." The article discussed the growing homophile movement, but said of gay Boiseans, "Far from being ready to declare themselves publicly, they spend a lot of time and energy covering up in their contacts with the straight world." Though they called gay elders who experienced the 1955 witch hunt "paranoid," the gay people Dieter interviewed remained quiet about their own identities and sexual practices, fearing the social and economic consequences of coming out.<sup>23</sup> The gay liberation movement had opened up possibilities and conversations for gay folks in communities around America, but in Boise, gay people still felt the effects of a traumatic past.

Efforts to create a public and sustainable queer community were immediately met with systematic oppression by local institutions. In 1976, as the gay liberation movement enjoyed success across the United States, Boise's gay community finally went public when a gay dentist opened Shuckey's—Boise's first gay bar—giving them a rallying point and visible face for the first time in decades. Queer people made new social ties with one another. For example, Morris Foote, a gay man who fled Boise during the 1955 moral panic, reentered city limits for the first time in twenty-one years to visit Shuckey's

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<sup>23</sup> Alice Dieter, "Boise's gay world," *The Intermountain Observer*, January 16, 1971, 4-5, Map Case 9, MSS 192, Collection on Gay Life in Boise, Idaho, 1978-2018, Boise State Special Collections and Archives, Boise, ID [*hereafter referred to as CGLBI-BSSCA*].

after reading about its opening in a newspaper.<sup>24</sup> The new gay bar provided gay locals with an easily accessible supportive outlet and a meeting ground to discuss organizing; Boise's first gay organization, a parish of the Metropolitan Community Church, started up a few months after Shuckey's opened.<sup>25</sup> However, the bar immediately drew the ire of the Boise Police Department. The police received a high number of complaints about the bar during its first year open, so they attempted to have Shuckey's liquor license revoked. While the police claimed homosexuality was not the primary motivating factor for going after the bar, one officer stated, "That atmosphere cannot be allowed to exist for the simple fact that people are not ready for it to exist, not here anyway."<sup>26</sup> Police surveilled Shuckey's from unmarked police vans, writing down license plate numbers and reporting the bar's patrons to their employers.<sup>27</sup> The Police Chief even admitted to filming "some pretty gross activity—obscene gestures and certain conduct between men."<sup>28</sup> Bar patrons entered Shuckey's through a door in the alleyway, hoping to avoid police and public

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<sup>24</sup> "Morris Foote," Making Gay History, accessed January 12, 2023, <https://makinggayhistory.com/podcast/episode-16-morris-foote/>.

<sup>25</sup> Alan Virta, "Finding Community in the Mitchell Hotel," in *Boise @ One Five Zero: Essays and Poems from the City of Trees* (The Donning Company Publishers: 2013), 65-68.

<sup>26</sup> Rick Ripley, "Police Oppose 4 Beer Licenses," *Idaho Statesman*, December 13, 1977, 1A.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Brinkley-Rogers, "Gay hangout protests police scrutiny," *Idaho Statesman*, November 12, 1978, 1B; Ned Brewer, interviewed by Dr. Lisa McClain and Rachel Taylor, February 7, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Brinkley-Rogers, "Gay hangout protests police scrutiny," 1B.

harassment.<sup>29</sup> After failing to get Shuckey's liquor license recalled in 1977, the police decided not to pursue the matter again the following year.<sup>30</sup>

To create a stronger link between themselves and straight people, gay Boiseans presented themselves as ordinary locals, while rejecting aesthetics and attitudes associated with urban queer people. Gay locals particularly worried about effeminate men, whom they marginalized through comments about cross-dressing. A patron of Shuckey's remarked to a reporter in 1977, "[Straight people] don't know what we look like or what we think... They think we wear dresses, but they don't realize that we live next door to them."<sup>31</sup> More than anything, gay Boiseans wanted to be regarded as normal, non-combative citizens. A well-intentioned local journalist wrote to that effect: "To [the patrons of Shuckey's], their sexual preference is a personal matter and although they are not ashamed, they are not about to put on a sandwich board with "I'm Gay" printed in large letters."<sup>32</sup> Queer people announcing their sexuality so explicitly and openly would have alienated them from the wider public, associating them with queer people who made too much out of their sexual orientation.

When Boise's gay residents began organizing politically in the early 1980s, they adopted similarly moderate stances and respectable fronts as opposed to bolder demonstrations that big cities were known for. Their first protest was unsurprisingly

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<sup>29</sup> Ned Brewer, interviewed by Dr. Lisa McClain and Rachel Taylor, February 25, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> "Boise council OKs liquor-license renewal for Shuckey's Tavern," *Idaho Statesman*, December 28, 1978, 1B.

<sup>31</sup> Tom Grote, "Gay Bar Patrons Speak Out on Lifestyle," *Idaho Statesman*, March 13, 1977, 1B.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

demure. After a visit to Boise from Moral Majority leader Reverend Jerry Falwell in 1981, progressive church leaders—who happened to be in town for a conference—held a rally titled “I Love America, Too” at the capitol building late at night. Singing “Kumbayah” and holding hands, visiting church leaders used their much higher numbers to shield Boise residents from news cameras.<sup>33</sup> In 1983, to begin educating the public about gay issues and AIDS awareness, and to start coordinating events for the gay community, gay Boiseans created The Community Center (TCC)—their first sustainably supported, political gay organization. The group held dinners, health clinics, video nights, and hosted an annual Picnic in the Park for the first time in 1984 attended by 75 people. They curated a small library of gay and lesbian reading materials as well, and surveyed local politicians about their stances on gay rights.<sup>34</sup> Their activities—like their unassuming name—emphasized normality and cooperativeness.

As gay Boiseans gained visibility, they struggled with tension between their desires for an out-and-proud Pride and fears about social consequences. In June of 1985, Dennis Barrett wrote about his feelings in Boise’s small gay newspaper, which was simply titled *The Paper* in its early years: “I read, with some envy, about the many activities, parades, parties, and shows planned for [Pride Week in other cities] and wished that someone had taken charge here in Boise to plan a special week for us.” But rather than call for an improvement in visibility or take it upon himself to coordinate a Pride celebration, Barrett asked, “What is ‘gay pride’ anyway? Does it require a parade down

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<sup>33</sup> John Dean, “Boise homosexuals hold rally to protest Falwell,” *Idaho Statesman*, May 24, 1981, 1B-3B.

<sup>34</sup> “Presenting The Community Center: Resources for gay and lesbian people, Inc,” August 9, 1986, Folder 1, Box 1, CGLBI-BSSCA.

Main street? Or can it be a quiet celebration, a time to remember where we've been and how far we've come?"<sup>35</sup> For gay Boiseans, Pride was a celebration of progress rather than a display of rebellion. While suggesting that Boise's progress might be measured by standards other than Pride parades, Barrett's article also conveyed a sense of resentment at Boise's sheltered gay existence. Other gay locals worried about how Pride appeared to straight people. Nelson Brown, who wrote the controversial column "Jaundiced Geriatric" for *The Paper*, argued that "infiltration is always much more effective than a frontal attack. Give [straight people] a chance to know us and love us and THEN put on the high heels and red dress and parade down Main Street."<sup>36</sup> Again, the imagery of urban pride—with its displays of gender non-conformity and overt sexuality—troubled gay Boiseans.

It took two queer people from outside Idaho to begin official, public demonstrations for Pride in Boise. Boise did not have a Pride parade until 1990, when two newcomers to the state of Idaho formed the activist group Your Family, Friends and Neighbors (YFFN). Brian Bergquist, a communications specialist who became Boise State University's student union director, and Ann Dunkin, a Hewlett-Packard employee with an activist background in college, decided to organize a parade after attending TCC's annual Pride picnic.<sup>37</sup> According to researcher Jennifer Edwards, YFFN was

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<sup>35</sup> Dennis Barrett, "Gay Pride Week—Did it Pass us By?" *The Paper*, July 1986, 2, SpcCol. HQ75.P63 1985-1988 Oversized, The Paper: For Our Community, Idaho State Archives, Boise, ID [hereafter referred to as *TPFOC-ISA*].

<sup>36</sup> Nelson Brown, "The Jaundiced Geriatric," *The Paper*, February 1986, 5-8, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>37</sup> Ann Dunkin, interview by Rachel Taylor, August 4, 2022, from the author's personal collection.

intended “to be the political arm that [The Community Center] was not. [The organization] sprung from the division created by some community members’ need to maintain the relative safety of living as a mostly closeted community and others’ desire to see it become more public and political.”<sup>38</sup> In his bid to garner support from the community for a Pride parade, Bergquist criticized the complacency of Boise’s gay residents. He called for them to “throw off the constraints of local history and fear,” implicitly dismissing the past fifteen years of community organizing efforts of gay locals and claiming that the gay community “kill[ed] [their] gay and lesbian youth” by not being out and proud. “Face the reality,” he wrote to the capital’s gay community, “The Boys of Boise was 35 years ago. The time has come for Boise to step out of its closet.”<sup>39</sup> As an outsider, Bergquist failed to grasp how much that incident traumatized gay Boiseans, some of whom had experienced the moral panic firsthand.

YFFN succeeded in putting on the parade, but not without some queer Boiseans raising serious concerns about optics. Sharon Matthies, a lesbian who got involved with gay rights activism in Boise during the 80s, worried about the presence of the Lion Regiment, a local group of leathermen, appearing at the Pride Parade: “There’s an S&M community in the heterosexual community, and we never see them on Main Street. So let’s not make it about [fetishists]. [That’s] not specific to us.”<sup>40</sup> In a 2022 interview, Ann

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<sup>38</sup> Jennifer Edwards, “Visibility as Power: A Historical Analysis of the Boise Gay Pride Celebration,” *McNair Scholars Research Journal* 3 (Spring 2007): 17. Punctuation errors corrected.

<sup>39</sup> Brian Bergquist, “Don’t Let The Parade Pass You By...,” *The Paper*, November 1989, 2, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>40</sup> Sharon Matthies, interviewed by Dr. Lisa McClain and Rachel Taylor, November 14, 2021, from the author’s personal collection.



Dunkin recalled “drama” around the community’s presentation: “There were people who really didn't want the drag queens to show up. There were people who really didn't want the leather community to show up. They wanted everybody to look nice and respectable and gender conforming and fit in.” She even remembered that some people refused to march because of their presence in the parade.<sup>41</sup> Supporters from the public, however, made their feelings clear that June, a fact that YFFN celebrated in their annual report: “Over 200 people viewed the parade along its route, the great majority of them there to cheer [the parade] on.”<sup>42</sup>

However, the visibility of Boise’s gay activism following the creation of YFFN also spawned backlash from conservatives—exactly what the city’s gay folks had feared. In 1993, after three lesbian mothers were invited to speak at Meridian High School about their parenting experiences, Idaho native Kelly Walton formed the Idaho Citizens Alliance (ICA). Just a few years before, Walton had unsuccessfully worked to pass an anti-gay ballot initiative in Oregon.<sup>43</sup> Turning his attention to his home state, Walton and the ICA helped create and promote Proposition 1, a measure that would prohibit teachers from saying anything supportive about homosexuality and prohibit adding gay people to the list of protected minorities under anti-discrimination ordinances in Idaho. By July,

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<sup>41</sup> Ann Dunkin, interview by Rachel Taylor, August 4, 2022, from the author’s personal collection.

<sup>42</sup> “YFFN 1990 Annual Report,” Folder 2, Box 1, CGLBI-BSSCA.

<sup>43</sup> Kelly Walton, interviewed by Troy Reeves, March 29, 2005, transcript, OH #2420 A-B pg. 24, Oral History Collection, Idaho State Archives, Boise, ID.

Walton had enough signatures to put Proposition 1 on the ballot, but gay people had been preparing for that eventuality for months.<sup>44</sup>

In order to defeat the measure—which gay Idahoans accomplished by a margin of less than one percent—gay Boiseans found common ground with straight libertarian Idahoans. A 1996 analysis of the No on 1 campaign explained that a nuanced focus on legality and human rights would not resonate with Idahoans: “Conventional campaign wisdom says that complicated messages that rely on increased awareness usually fail... The campaign slogan became; *Too Much Government, Not Enough Idaho*, with government interference, taxpayer expense, constitutionality and censorship as other themes in descending order of importance.”<sup>45</sup> Leaders of Boise’s opposition campaign recognized that anti-interventionist messages would play well to Idaho’s moderate conservatives. Diane Sands, campaign manager for the No on 1 Coalition, noted that “Idaho is a very conservative although not a particularly right-wing state. It’s much more of a live and let live kind of state.”<sup>46</sup> They did this partly by understating their own queerness, creating distance from an image of uppity queer people asking for rights.

In the years following Proposition 1, encouraged by the ballot initiative’s defeat, Boise experienced a proliferation of queer organizations, including Treasure Valley Pride

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<sup>44</sup> Jeremy Maxand, “Proposition One: Prototype of a Web-Based History of Idaho’s 1993 Anti-Gay Rights Initiative” (MAHR thesis, Boise State University, 2005), 10-30.

<sup>45</sup> Joan M. Faber, “Government Interference, Taxpayer Expense and Constitutionality: The De-Gaying of Idaho’s Anti-Gay Initiative,” (n.d.) submitted to the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Studies Interest Group International Communication Association for the 1996 annual convention, Chicago, Illinois, 10.

<sup>46</sup> Dyke TV, Episode 80, 1994, Sophia Smith Collection, Women’s History Archives at Smith College, accessed March 27, 2022, [https://media.smith.edu/departments/ssc/dyketv/dyketv1994\\_playlist.html](https://media.smith.edu/departments/ssc/dyketv/dyketv1994_playlist.html).

Association (TVPA), Bears of Idaho, YFFN Youth Group, and The Tree Fund. However, they often overlapped in terms of mission and purpose, causing troubles with infighting. In 1999, as YFFN expanded its number of events and community outreach programs, the group decided to step down as organizers for Pride. Queer Boiseans had started TVPA to pick up the slack, but their new presence in the queer community immediately drew suspicion from activists involved with other groups. In an impassioned plea for understanding between Boise's multiple queer organizations, Travis Riggs—who became a prominent activist in Boise's gay community while he was still in high school—emphasized the severity of conflict: “The gay community will cease to exist in Boise if we do not stop the bickering, in-fighting, back stabbing and gossip. YFFN, TCC, *Diversity* and Treasure Valley Pride Association WILL DIE if we can't start acting as friends rather than enemies.”<sup>47</sup> The fighting continued anyway. A few months later, Alexander Anneker wrote into *Diversity*, “If TVPA members want to step up Boise's Pride celebration to the level of cities such as San Francisco, Seattle or San Diego as they have mentioned, they should start acting more like a group of adults and less like children fighting over a toy.”<sup>48</sup> In response to the controversy, YFFN hosted a town forum to determine how the new group would operate and what their goals might be. More than

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<sup>47</sup> Travis Riggs, “FREE YFFN! STOP COMMUNITY IN-FIGHTING!,” email from IdahoYouth@aol.com, June 30, 1999, Folder “Pride 2000 YFFN-TVPA,” Box 1, LGBT Activism Series, MSS 328, CLNLP-BSUSCA.

<sup>48</sup> Alexander Anneker, “TVPA Has little to be proud of,” *Diversity*, September 1999, 2, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

seventy people gathered for the two-hour forum about the new organization, but ultimately, no answers were decided upon.<sup>49</sup>

Meanwhile, TVPA expanded their own efforts beyond organizing Boise's Pride events. They planned to open the Idaho Pride Centre, "a year round reminder of the presence of pride in Idaho." The services they provided also mirrored ones that already existed from TCC, YFFN, and other smaller organizations around the state. Such services included "a speakers bureau, training and education, counseling, newsletter, website, literature, statewide visibility campaign, safe schools campaign, organized faith network and media representation for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people."<sup>50</sup> Despite the overlapping mission and services, TVPA eventually found acceptance at a meeting with several Boise organizations, including TCC. After explaining the purpose of TVPA, the groups agreed that there was no conflict at play: "We are not in competition with The Community Center. We are an alternative... There is no animosity between TCC and Idaho Pride... It might have caused a rift right at first, but now groups are coming together and we are going to see that we can all work together."<sup>51</sup> The Idaho Pride Centre opened in 2001, making sure not to overlap their hours with TCC.<sup>52</sup>

This bout of in-group fighting led to the dissolution of a local business. Auntie Em's, a queer coffee and gift shop, considered whether to remain open as sales

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<sup>49</sup> Rich Keefe, "Community looks for solutions to local pride debate," *Diversity*, September 1999, 3, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>50</sup> Ken Carter, "Vision 2001: Idaho PRIDE Centre," *Diversity*, March 2001, 19, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>51</sup> Rick Keefe and Robert McDiarmid, "Idaho Pride: moving in a new direction," *Diversity*, April 2001, 8, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>52</sup> Casey Fisher, "Idaho Pride Reaches Out," *Diversity*, May 2001, 16, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

plummeted and their lease expired. The owner, Dennis Grau, published an open letter in *Diversity* about his trepidation around staying in business. He suspected that he had been the target of a “silent boycott” because of his involvement with Treasure Valley Pride Association.<sup>53</sup> One local, Theresa Silva, wrote in response that Grau had failed to apologize, and that the boycott was a natural response to his affiliations. She argued that political affiliation was a reasonable basis to avoid associating with his business, and that not everybody agreed with Grau that the conflict could be settled.<sup>54</sup> Association with the wrong organization was enough to kill local queer businesses. After the publication of Silva’s response letter, Grau chose to close Auntie Em’s.<sup>55</sup>

By 2001, underlying conflicts had escalated, and in-fighting almost shut down TCC entirely. Published reports vaguely outlined what happened that year, but few people involved spoke candidly about the details. Four members of TCC attempted a hostile takeover of the organization’s board, taking advantage of the group’s bylaws to oust dissenting organizers. Though the group’s bylaws allowed such actions, Idaho law did not, making the takeover an illegal effort.<sup>56</sup> According to an article published later in *Diversity*, they even attempted “to ‘out’ several people in the *Boise Weekly*,” a local newspaper. Though the takeover was unsuccessful, TCC lost thousands of dollars as a

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<sup>53</sup> Dennis Grau, “An open letter to my gay and lesbian family,” *Diversity*, March 2000, 4, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>54</sup> Theresa Silva, “Your business is your business,” *Diversity*, April 2000, 3, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>55</sup> Ron J. Laske, “With Auntie Em’s gone, now what do I do?” *Diversity*, June 2000, 3, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>56</sup> “TCC adopts new bylaws,” *Diversity*, February 2003, 5, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

result.<sup>57</sup> In the wake of the scandal, TCC board member Robert McDiarmid called upon the local queer community to become more involved with the organization to keep it alive, to “truly decide where you are in the lgbt [sic] community and make a new dedication to it, regardless of your visible commitment.”<sup>58</sup> TCC also amended its bylaws to prevent such actions in the future, and changing their mission statement to read, “TCC will offer services and programs to further community cohesion and education, with the specific intent NOT to duplicate services and programs offered by other agencies or groups.”<sup>59</sup>

Boise’s queer organizations struggled to find their niche in a community that was small and rather politically disengaged. By 2000, TCC argued that its primary function was “bringing together all of the various organizations, providing a central hub for sharing information and getting that information out to the community (and to those outside our community).” Their rented space could be used as a queer event center for groups that might otherwise not find space or funding.<sup>60</sup> TCC continued to struggle with naming their specific purpose in the context of the community. They even considered acting as a queer historical society, as none existed locally.<sup>61</sup> TCC especially had trouble remaining stable in location, funding, and purpose. Between 1986 and 2004, TCC had

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<sup>57</sup> John Julian, “TCC survives controversy and recommits itself to bringing the community together,” *Diversity*, July 2001, 3, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>58</sup> Robert McDiarmid, “Just Being Human,” *Diversity*, July 2001, 2, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>59</sup> “TCC adopts new bylaws,” *Diversity*, February 2003, 5, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>60</sup> Mark Baradziej, “From the chair,” *Diversity*, July 2000, 12, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>61</sup> “Historical society initiative,” *Diversity*, December 2003, 7, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

four different locations, at times combining its space with the Metropolitan Community Church to cut costs.<sup>62</sup> They struggled to recruit people to become board members for the organization.<sup>63</sup> In one instance, strapped for cash, TCC sent letters to everybody on their mailing list soliciting donations—even from members who had been inactive for years and moved out of state.<sup>64</sup>

Many of Boise's queer organizations folded due to lack of interest and funding because they had served their purpose, which was providing queer people with space to make friends. Queer Boiseans started and shut down a queer bookstore, a leather and fetish group, a bowling league, and a gay rodeo organization, among many others.<sup>65</sup> The Tree Fund, a once highly visible effort to plant trees in Ann Morrison Park in memoriam for AIDS victims, slowly declined.<sup>66</sup> By 2011, The Triangle Group, a local queer organization active since the 1980s, disappeared. In 2011, Alan Virta, the group's leader, commented it may have "just ran its course."<sup>67</sup> Even YFFN, once one of the most prominent queer organizations in the state, could not keep its doors open. In 2007, they

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<sup>62</sup> Ed, "TCC: The First 20 Years," *Diversity*, February 2009, 14, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>63</sup> "TCC looking for more directors," *Diversity*, February 2003, 7, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>64</sup> "Fundraiser successful," *Diversity*, February 2004, 7, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>65</sup> "Gay book store celebrates first anniversary," *Diversity*, November 1995, 13, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA; "Saying 'good bye,'" *Diversity*, April 1998, 11, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA; "We're here, we're queer, and now we bowl..." *Diversity*, October 1998, 12, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA; "Cowboys on barrels," *Diversity*, November 2003, 6, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>66</sup> Dr. Don Oster, "The city that remembers," *Diversity*, September 1996, 3, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>67</sup> Alan Virta, interview by Jasmine Olmedo, November 17, 2011, MSS 338, ILOHP-BSUSCA.

released a statement explaining their insufficient resources and choice to shut down: “Our decision to close shop is not reflective of a failure of the local LGBT equality movement... Because of YFFN’s 17 years of community organizing on behalf of LGBT families, the queer liberation movement in Idaho is more poised than ever to gain significant ground with its allies.”<sup>68</sup> Boise’s most long-lasting, thorough source for queer history eventually shut down as well. As many of Boise’s historic queer organizations went under, *Diversity* folded suddenly in 2011. Nothing in the final issue indicated that the newspaper knew it was going to stop publishing soon, suggesting that the staff of *Diversity* did not know about the imminent closure.<sup>69</sup> In fact, it had just begun a series of articles called All American Families that it stated would be ongoing over the next several issues.<sup>70</sup>

Queer activism, community, and expression based on difference politics thrived in more urban settings of the United States, but never took off in Boise. Queer people who chose to live in Boise often emphasized their similarities with straight people, rather than wave around their proverbial gay sandwich boards. Most of their activist efforts were more fractured because of the individualist mindset and insularity that defined Boise’s gay community. The city’s residents measured their community against places like San Francisco, finding ways that they might measure up, and ways that they might avoid becoming like the queer communities they believed they would find there. At times, the

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<sup>68</sup> YFFN Board, “Idaho LGBT institution closes its doors,” *Diversity*, November 2007, 12, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>69</sup> Travis Riggs, “Editorial: a year of change,” *Diversity*, July 2007, 1, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>70</sup> *Diversity*, May 2011, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.



centrality of that idea created a pressure cooker of expectations that would fail Boise's residents, and most queer Boiseans disengaged from the community after they found the personal relationships they desired. Consequently, the political and social community that a few individuals struggled to build in the 80s and 90s began to dismantle itself in the early 2000s.

## CHAPTER TWO: REGIONS

In 2022, Ann Dunkin explained she had heard about queer people living outside Boise when she lived there in the early 90s. However, queer people outside the capital had few prospects for good queer living: “People from all over Idaho came to Boise because there was nothing for them in terms of their community.” Dunkin speculated that Boise might have had a higher concentration of queer people because rural queer Idahoans moved to the city for safety, a story she heard repeatedly from queer folks around her. She acknowledged that Boise was imperfect, but better than available alternatives: “The acceptance in Boise was sort of hit or miss, but there was some. Outside of Boise, it was impossible.”<sup>71</sup>

Even Boiseans with personal experience of the city’s oppression counted it as more welcoming than other places around Idaho. Ned Brewer was a teenager in 1955 when the Boys of Boise scandal occurred. Despite his personal experience with the city’s systematic discrimination against gay people, Brewer stated in 2022 that “the communities in the bigger cities are more diverse... Boise itself has been an island... You always felt safer in Boise... It’s always felt like Boise didn’t belong in Idaho.”<sup>72</sup> Queer oral history narrators often shape their stories around progressivism even when

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<sup>71</sup> Ann Dunkin, interview by Rachel Taylor, August 4, 2022, from the author’s personal collection.

<sup>72</sup> Ned Brewer, interview by Dr. Lisa McClain and Rachel Taylor, February 7, 2022, from the author’s personal collection.

their recollections undermine the notion of linear progress. As Lauren Jae Gutterman explained in her analysis of negative feelings in queer oral histories, “The politics of pride has worked to marginalize and stigmatize our negative affective experiences, thus compounding our bad feelings and making them even more difficult to express publicly.”<sup>73</sup> Brewer tied his own gay pride to a particular place, conforming his feelings about the city to fit progressive narratives.

Even without ideas of queer progress muddying the waters, Idaho has been notoriously divided by region. Intrastate regionalism fostered a diverse, asymmetrical development of gay communities around the state. A 2004 study of regionalism in Idaho politics confirmed that the state is composed of three regions, one of which contains two sub-regions. Mormons compose most of the deeply conservative southeast. The more moderate southwest revolves around Boise, whose residents are least likely to consider themselves activist compared to other Idaho regions. Finally, the study digressed from historic understandings of Idaho’s northern region by arguing it contains two sub-regions of distinct liberal and conservative enclaves.<sup>74</sup> To highlight cultural differences between Idaho’s regions—and between rural and urban areas— I chose Boise, Moscow, and Kendrick to contrast how gay communities have developed a relative sense of place. While Boise resides in Idaho’s southwestern region, Moscow and Kendrick are situated twenty-four miles apart in northern Idaho’s panhandle, close by the Washington border.

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<sup>73</sup> Lauren Jae Gutterman, “‘Not My Proudest Moment’: Guilt, Regret, and the Coming-Out Narrative,” *Oral History Review* 46, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 50.

<sup>74</sup> Leslie R. Alm, Ross E. Burkhardt, W. David Patton, and James B. Weatherby, “Political culture and ideology in the Mountain West: regionalism in the state of Idaho,” *The Social Science Journal* 41 (2004): 163-178.

Some commonalities existed between Boise and Idaho's other gay communities, but their histories were too disparate to be flattened into a single narrative—let alone a narrative that centered so singularly around the capital.

Proposition 1—the 1994 anti-gay ballot initiative—marked an interesting point of comparison as one of the few events that all queer Idahoans had to grapple with; the initiative acted as a catalyst for creating community and visibility for queer folks across the state. Ultimately, it was defeated by roughly three thousand votes, a margin of less than one percent. Every effort by activists and queer people around the state was necessary to defeat Proposition 1. Though their collective efforts succeeded, their methods of argument and activism differed due to cultural and historic differences between the communities. Importantly, this chapter does not address all gay communities in the state. Rather, it presents a holistic overview of a few communities emblematic of regional difference. The gay communities I reviewed were neither more important nor representative of the state than others. Their comparative differences captured a great deal of nuance, and primary sources about their histories were better represented in archives, but they did not comprise a comprehensive account of gay communities in Idaho.

Sources from around the state documented relatively little about queer communities in eastern Idaho, making it more difficult to write about them. It appeared, however, that most queer communities in eastern Idaho actually emerged as a result of organizing during the Proposition 1 era. No openly gay bars existed in that region before the ballot initiative, and the overwhelmingly Mormon culture discouraged queer identities in its ranks. But the same conservative Mormon forces that repressed queerness

in the region also voted against Proposition 1, partly because of No on One's libertarian messaging, which appealed to voters' concerns about unnecessary taxpayer spending and government overreach rather than their regard for human rights.<sup>75</sup>

The Mormon reputation of eastern Idaho helped cement the area as anti-queer as well, though queer residents of eastern Idaho resented that characterization. In 1995, shortly after Proposition 1 was defeated, Brenda—a mostly anonymous source from Pocatello—wrote an op-ed to *Diversity* about fighting the initiative in her city. Up to that point, *Diversity* covered little about Pocatello's activism. Brenda's friend from Colorado had notified her about a disparaging remark made by a Boise No on One activist to *The Advocate*, a widely-read national gay magazine. The activist joked, "There are no gays and lesbians in Pocatello, at least none that we can identify." Brenda was insulted by the sentiment: "I felt slighted and angry. I felt the statement negated the efforts of lots of good people on this side of the state. I guess a person has to be gay or lesbian *and* out to matter to No on One." She compared the way Pocatello was treated by Boise activists to the marginalization of efforts in Moscow: "Up north, the Lesbian Avengers are too out for Boise; I guess we in Pocatello are too in." Brenda hoped her commentary might correct such assumptions and commentary from Boiseans who did not know better: "I feel some of our efforts need to be detailed so that they are not lost in the Boise background. I do sincerely appreciate Boise's leadership; they led us to come out on top

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<sup>75</sup> Joan M. Faber, "Government Interference, Taxpayer Expense and Constitutionality: The De-Gaying of Idaho's Anti-Gay Initiative," (n.d.) submitted to the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Studies Interest Group International Communication Association for the 1996 annual convention, Chicago, Illinois, Boise State University Special Collections and Archives, Boise, ID [*hereafter referred to as TCCR-BSUSCA*].

November 8 on Proposition 1. I just want Pocatello and Idaho Falls to be appreciated for our efforts.”<sup>76</sup> Brenda cited Pocatello’s queer activism during Proposition 1 as evidence that an active queer community existed there, forming Eastern Idaho for Equality. The group organized letter-writing campaigns to politicians and Mormon bishops, distributed information about queer issues, invited a lesbian speaker to Idaho State University, and held fundraisers. Though their efforts were less recognized than those of other groups throughout Idaho, Brenda called her activism “pretty radical for Pocatello.”<sup>77</sup>

Queer organizing in Moscow, however, already had a longstanding radical bent compared to eastern Idaho. Composing a pocket of liberalism in northern Idaho, the small city revolved around the University of Idaho, Washington State University just a few miles across the state’s border, and the nearby city of Spokane. Realizing that no resources existed for gay people in Moscow, Gib Preston, Vicki Rishling, Jennifer Nielsen, and Don Sinclair formed the Gay People’s Alliance in early 1974, and shortly thereafter renamed it the Northwest Gay People’s Alliance (NWGPA).<sup>78</sup> The gay community in Moscow traced its origins back to the civil rights and anti-war protests of the late 1960s, which brought University of Idaho students in contact with the gay liberation movement. Vicki Rishling, who attended the university during the Vietnam War era, discovered that two lesbians lived in her dorm. In 2017, Rishling reflected that she was comfortable with the women’s identities because of her connections with other

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<sup>76</sup> Brenda, “Letter to the Editor,” *Diversity*, December 1994/January 1995, 2, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>77</sup> Brenda, “A Southeast Idaho perspective on Proposition 1,” *Diversity*, November 1994, 3, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>78</sup> “University of Idaho,” *Palouse LGBTQ History Project*, accessed March 27, 2022, <http://digitalexhibits.wsulibs.wsu.edu/exhibits/show/lgbtp/campus/ui>.

progressive causes.<sup>79</sup> Other college students discovered gay life by visiting cities in the Pacific Northwest. Don Sinclair recalled that there were few visible examples of gay life in northern Idaho during the early 1970s: “There were two gay bars in Spokane, and I had no clue they were up there. I mean, I had no clue there were any other gay people in the world.” Sinclair’s partner, Gib Preston, introduced him to the nearby gay world outside Idaho.<sup>80</sup>

Gay people in Moscow situated themselves within a landscape of rural hostility, as an anonymous person wrote for the *Argonaut*, the University of Idaho’s school newspaper: “If you are gay in Moscow, you soon realize that it is best to be a quiet gay... In any rural area it is difficult for a homosexual to live an open life style [sic]. Moscow is no exception to this.” However, gay people were emboldened—either by the college environment or the new organization—to act unapologetically gay in public. In the same article, the author recounted a bold display of queerness: “Over our spring break a group of gays from the Moscow-Pullman area congregated at the Rathaus [a local tavern]. There were maybe 18 of us, male and female... When [two of the women] kissed, some straights from other tables began snickering. Gays that we are, we all kissed our lovers and friends in a symbol of unity—the snickering stopped.”<sup>81</sup> The club also made itself explicitly distinct from the other parts of the state, saying “Moscow is more accepting

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<sup>79</sup> Vicki Rishling, interview by Denise Bennett, April 05, 2017, MG 499, Idaho Queered collection, 2014-2018, University of Idaho Library Special Collections and Archives, Moscow, ID [hereafter referred to as *IQC-UILSCA*]. This collection can also be accessed online at <https://www.lib.uidaho.edu/queered/>.

<sup>80</sup> Don Sinclair, interview by Denise Bennett, March 15, 2017, MG 499, IQC-UILSCA.

<sup>81</sup> “Homosexuality: Views From My Closet,” *Argonaut*, April 26, 1974, 3.

than a lot of towns in Idaho... For the most part, people tend to be more open-minded and willing to talk and exchange ideas with anyone.” But another student quoted in the same article said about homosexuality, “[Students] think it’s somewhere else if it exists at all.”<sup>82</sup> Though local gay folks believed the city was relatively welcoming compared to other parts of Idaho, its residents remained oblivious about the presence of gay people near them, likely due to low visibility and inadequate education about gay issues.

Despite some trepidation over the surrounding landscape—both political and geographical—the gay community in Moscow immediately began working from a political angle, incorporating as a non-profit to advocate for their rights locally. According to Rishling, as a progressive college town, Moscow was an ideal location for the gay community’s burgeoning political activism: “[Moscow] really wasn’t representative of the rest of the state at the time. I mean, in the 70s and 80s, it was pretty liberal [there].”<sup>83</sup> While the NWGPA created social and educational events, they did not shy away from their intent to attain gay rights for Idahoans: “Our most important goal lies in political action... We wish to see gay rights legislation enacted in this state and in the community that will give homosexuals the rights that every citizen is entitled to... We wish to serve as a hub for uniting gay people politically in the Northwest, and most specifically in Idaho.”<sup>84</sup> The group hosted a conference for gay people in 1975, drawing roughly 250 people to the event.<sup>85</sup> In 1976, they even attempted to add the words “sexual

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<sup>82</sup> Sandi Stacki, “Gays want recognition as ‘ordinary people,’” *Argonaut*, October 28, 1977, 5.

<sup>83</sup> Rishling, MG 499, IQC-UILSCA.

<sup>84</sup> “Organization,” *Argonaut*, Decemeber 10, 1976, 12.

<sup>85</sup> “250 attend gay people’s conference,” *The Spokesman Review*, April 22, 1975, 10.



affection” to a Moscow housing ordinance to protect gay people from discrimination.<sup>86</sup> However, their efforts went unrecognized outside northern Idaho. In 1991, Ann Dunkin claimed that Your Family, Friends and Neighbors was “the first Idaho group dedicated to lobbying for homosexual rights.”<sup>87</sup> Based on the article that quoted her, it was unclear whether she knew about the Northwest Gay People’s Alliance. Too much time, distance, and social division separated Dunkin, a queer activist in Boise from out of state, from Moscow’s queer history.

Gay people in Moscow were substantially bolder than gay Boiseans of the same era, going on TV with their names and faces in 1976 as Boise residents still ducked into alleyways to enter their local gay bar. The documentary “Sweet Land of Liberty: Moscow Pullman Gay Community” aired in Moscow on KUID-TV in response to controversy over the housing non-discrimination ordinance. Mike Kirk, who graduated from the University of Idaho and later became famous for his work on PBS’s *Frontline*, produced the documentary and conducted interviews with gay people from around the city. The video opened with a comment from NWGPA member Chuck Bishop-Pizarro: “From what I understand from people who have lived here for a while, it seems that Moscow is the place where you get called ‘fag’ but nothing happens to you. It’s southern Idaho where you get beaten and people didn’t bother saying ‘fag.’ They just [went] ahead and beat you to death.”<sup>88</sup> Gay people in Moscow contextualized their own experiences with

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<sup>86</sup> Mike Kirk, pro., “Sweet Land of Liberty: Moscow Pullman Gay Community” (Moscow: KUID-TV, 1976), Videocassette (VHS).

<sup>87</sup> “2nd annual event draws hundreds, PAC announces,” *The Times-News*, June 23, 1991, B4.

<sup>88</sup> Kirk, “Sweet Land of Liberty.”

gay life in Idaho by comparing themselves to other parts of the state. Throughout the documentary, all references to southern Idaho associated the region with violence.<sup>89</sup> Though “Sweet Land of Liberty” never talked about it explicitly, Boise’s moral panic of 1955 influenced how gay people thought about that city for decades. That incident probably affected Bishop-Pizarro’s perspective of southern Idaho more than any concrete statistics.

Despite Moscow’s liberal nature, the queer community still grappled with intolerance from institutions around them. Moscow activists experienced massive pushback from other locals for becoming visible, especially after the documentary. Police officers publicly arrested Gib Preston, the NWGPA president, for unpaid traffic tickets after a strange notice was put out in the local paper, calling for “all members and associates of the NWGPA to pay all outstanding traffic violations to avoid police harassment.”<sup>90</sup> At the same time, the Moscow Chamber of Commerce sent a letter to the university requesting that the documentary not be aired anymore.<sup>91</sup> Sinclair eventually moved to San Francisco with Preston, when he “decided [he] had had enough.”<sup>92</sup> However, the *Argonaut* editorial staff was supportive of the NWGPA: “Let the rest of the world know that this city is aware of the problems of its minorities. That it does not feel that those minorities ARE its problems. The *Argonaut* congratulates KUID-TV and Mike Kirk [the producer] for an outstanding and worthwhile production.”<sup>93</sup> The news segment

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Jim Borden, “Controversy rages over KUID gay broadcast,” *The Argonaut*, April 20, 1976, 4.

<sup>91</sup> Rishling, MG 499, IQC-UILSCA.

<sup>92</sup> Sinclair, MG 499, IQC-UILSCA.

<sup>93</sup> “Sweet land of liberty,” *The Argonaut*, April 20, 1976, 4.

aired in Albuquerque and Phoenix on PBS, and the nationally syndicated gay magazine *GPU News* published an article about the program.<sup>94</sup>

In 1976, Moscow's queer residents defended their right to exist in northern Idaho in a public forum for the first time in the state's history. Due to controversy over "Sweet Land of Liberty," the local station held a roundtable discussion about gay rights in Moscow. Three members of the NWGPA sat across from three concerned citizens—a local politician and two preachers. While the anti-gay roundtable members made derogatory remarks about homosexuality, the callers were very supportive of gay people. The moderator read a piece of friendly feedback: "I like this comment. It says, 'The program is in excellent taste,' and feels that a true Christian would accept gays." The anti-gay speakers not only attacked the NWGPA members on a religious front, but on a practical, political one as well. Al Deskiewicz, a member of the Moscow Chamber of Commerce, worried that the city might draw an influx of gay people if it earned a reputation for its gay community, saying his concerns extended to other political organizations as well: "If the American Nazi Party or John Birch Society came to town, and suddenly designated this town as headquarters, I would have the same basic questions for them." Rishling responded, "We didn't come to town. We were here. We're members of the community."<sup>95</sup> NWGPA members refused to be relegated to outsider status, staking their claim to live openly on their home turf.

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<sup>94</sup> Guy Bishop-Pizarro, "Moscow, Idaho—Sweet Land of Liberty," *GPU News*, July 1976, 10-12, from the author's personal collection.

<sup>95</sup> Kirk, "Sweet Land of Liberty."

By 1980, the NWGPA had incorporated into the University of Idaho as a student organization, subjecting their work to the whims of the Idaho legislature. Worried that public funding was being used to promote homosexuality, conservative state politicians attempted to halt the NWGPA's 1980 gay conference by slashing the university budget.<sup>96</sup> A news report in the *Argonaut* noted that NWGPA funded its projects through membership dues and donations, as it had since its founding. As for whether the group could host events on campus, the *Argonaut* noted that "because NWGPA is recognized as an ASUI organization, it has as much right to use university buildings as any student group."<sup>97</sup> Ultimately, the legislature decided not to cut the budget.<sup>98</sup>

Progressives at Moscow responded to the legislature's threats with distinctly regionalist, anti-Mormon sentiments. In an op-ed titled "Mormons and gays don't mix," one student linked southern Idaho, the Mormon church, and bigotry together: "The Mormon Church wields a lot of power in Idaho, but even they should not be allowed to deny the rights of others. Several of the ignorant, southern Idaho bigots calling themselves legislators are attempting through legislation to block the U of I from hosting a gay conference." The author saw the legislature's attacks through a religious and regionalist lens, pitting Mormons and gay people against one another: "There are many people, especially in northern Idaho, who feel the Mormon Church should not be allowed

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<sup>96</sup> "Threatened cuts just a fairy tale," *Argonaut*, March 25, 1980, 2.

<sup>97</sup> Jim Wright and the *Argonaut* staff, "Gay conference criticized; legislators attempt ban," *Argonaut*, March 14, 1980, 1.

<sup>98</sup> "Threatened cuts just a fairy tale," 2.

to meet at the university... However, those objections have never been used to deny Mormon students from meeting in U of I facilities.”<sup>99</sup>

On this backdrop of progressive activism and regionalist sentiment, a chapter of the Lesbian Avengers formed in Moscow in the early 1990s, eventually inviting a group of sixteen activists from the group’s headquarters in New York City to fight Proposition 1.<sup>100</sup> The Lesbian Avengers was a feminist, lesbian organization that used intentionally eye-catching and provocative methods to draw attention to their causes—most notably by fire-eating. They brought that same energy to northern Idaho. Rather than run a massive ad campaign targeted at conservatives, the Lesbian Avengers mobilized gay locals to protest Proposition 1 and educate the public. They staged confrontational displays involving local queer people, including one demonstration in which they crowded into a club known for being “homophobic and violent.”<sup>101</sup> Notably, they partnered with unions to promote their cause, unwittingly tying themselves to northern Idaho’s history of homosexual subcultures in transient working men. Historian Peter Boag found that among migrant workers who traveled for seasonal jobs in the early twentieth century, adolescents paired off with older adult men for protection and support; many of these relationships were explicitly sexual.<sup>102</sup> Most likely, the Avengers and union workers were both unaware of this history, but northern Idaho union workers famously voted Democrat with a libertarian streak, making them attractive allies.

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<sup>99</sup> Hegreberg, “Mormons and gays don’t mix,” *Argonaut*, March 14, 1980, 4.

<sup>100</sup> Sara Pursley, “Gay Politics in the Heartland: With the Lesbian Avengers in Idaho,” *The Nation*, January 23, 1995, 92.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>102</sup> Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 15-45.

Differing values and cultural backgrounds pitted Moscow's Lesbian Avengers against Boise's No on One Coalition, even though they fought for the same goal. Linda Coates of Moscow wrote to *Diversity* about the Avengers, attacking them for their pretentiousness. She claimed their tactics were divisive: "Armed with big mouths, (they taught us country bumpkins how to say *queer* and *dyke* and *faggot*), a casual acquaintance with the truth, and an insatiable lust for publicity, they soon created a rift in Idaho's gay community where none had previously existed."<sup>103</sup> Clearly, the Lesbian Avengers' brand of bold activism did not resonate with everybody, including locals where they worked. Javier Smith, a Boise activist, wrote a response defending them. He admitted to doubting their tactics initially, but they won him over. He even credited the group with helping areas that Boise's campaign neglected: "No on One had a difficult time finding people to run the campaign in remote areas of the state, but the Lesbian Avengers took it upon themselves to go into those areas and help organize."<sup>104</sup> In her "Open Letter to the Lesbian Avengers," Joann Muneta of Moscow thanked the group for their meaningful activism in northern Idaho, but kindly asked them to credit other northern Idaho organizations that helped defeat Proposition 1, noting that the group did not defeat the initiative "singlehandedly."<sup>105</sup>

The Lesbian Avengers refused to downplay the implications of Proposition 1 for gay Idahoans, criticizing the No on One Coalition for its tactics of appeasement. Michele

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<sup>103</sup> Linda Coates, "Letter to the editor," *Diversity*, February 1995, 2, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>104</sup> Javier Smith, "Queer visibility and unity enter new era," *Diversity*, February 1995, 2, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>105</sup> Joann Muneta, "Open letter to the Lesbian Avengers," *Diversity*, February 1995, 3, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

Kelley, an activist with the group, stated that the Lesbian Avengers were accused of being unwelcome transplants from out of state: “The issue was almost always brought up by people hundreds of miles away from our activity, people who wanted to centralize the campaign... Throwing around the word ‘outsider’ is a lot easier than dealing with political differences... It’s a pretty transparent way to deny the existence, not to mention the strategies, of the local activists we worked with.”<sup>106</sup> Even though locals participated in the Lesbian Avengers’ efforts, it was unthinkable to gay Boiseans in the No on One Coalition that northern Idahoans would join forces with such a bold group. By the time the sixteen Lesbian Avengers from New York City left northern Idaho, their activism had helped foster “two Lesbian Avengers chapters (one in Moscow and a brand-new group in Coeur d’Alene), the Lewiston Lesbian and Gay Society, a Lesbian and Gay Rural Organizing Project, a pro-lesbian and pro-gay youth group at Sandpoint High School, and the seeds of an anti-violence project.”<sup>107</sup> The explicitly queer visibility politics that No on One avoided actually worked well in northern Idaho. In an interview for Dyke TV, Lesbian Avenger Christina McKnight explained, “What [No on One has] to do is appeal to certain voters... [by talking about] government intervention and censorship in the libraries... I just think that they’re not enough, and they’re not the only message. And if you’re not visible and out, then a lot of times, people don’t believe you.”<sup>108</sup> The Lesbian Avengers’ activism centered visibility as a means to sway public opinion in favor of

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<sup>106</sup> Pursley, “Gay Politics in the Heartland,” 94.

<sup>107</sup> Pursley, “Gay Politics in the Heartland,” 94.

<sup>108</sup> “Episode 80, 1994,” Dyke TV, Sophia Smith Collection, Women’s History Archives at Smith College, accessed January 2, 2023, [https://media.smith.edu/departments/ssc/dyketv/dyketv1994\\_playlist.html](https://media.smith.edu/departments/ssc/dyketv/dyketv1994_playlist.html).

queer rights, whereas No on One intentionally avoided the issue of queerness at all. The two groups differed somewhat in their long-term goals; the Avengers wanted to leave behind a visible, activist, organized queer community, but No on One was created specifically to defeat the ballot initiative.

The Lesbian Avengers' grassroots organizing undeniably helped them secure the votes of Latah, Bonner, and Nez Perce counties—the northern Idaho areas the group organized in. To celebrate the victory, they ate fire in front of a crowd, chanting “the fire will not consume us, we take it and make it our own.”<sup>109</sup> The Lesbian Avengers took credit for the narrow margin of votes that defeated Proposition 1, citing county statistics about constituent votes.<sup>110</sup> Latah County, where the University of Idaho is located, voted liberally in general; they might have voted against Proposition 1 regardless of the Lesbian Avengers' activism. However, Bonner and Nez Perce counties were highly conservative. While the group's activist tactics like fire-eating may have alienated residents of those counties, the Lesbian Avengers also mobilized gay locals to assert themselves and their queerness to their neighbors. Christina McKnight's assertion about the importance of visibility proved to be correct.

Missing from Boise and Moscow's assessments of the Proposition 1 battle was the role that exceptionally rural gay people played in stopping the initiative. For example, although Kendrick was located within the Lesbian Avengers' range, and the group's report mentioned gay activism in small towns nearby, it did not discuss Kendrick—

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<sup>109</sup> “Lesbian Avengers celebrate win: Group eats fire following defeat of gay measure,” *Idaho Statesman*, November 13, 1994, 3B.

<sup>110</sup> Pursley, “Gay Politics in the Heartland,” 94.



probably because the town refused to fit the Lesbian Avengers' mold of out-and-proud advocacy. Kendrick fought Proposition 1 through one-on-one conversation, a method suited to their context of rural, tight-knit community. Though they made a difference in their own town, the decentralized, personal nature of their efforts defied easy measurements of success as defined by systematic campaigns.

Kendrick, a town of fewer than 400 people located about twenty-five miles outside Moscow, has a rather well-documented queer history. A nearby landmark used to be known as Bachelor Ridge in the early twentieth century, named for the many lifelong unmarried male farmers who lived there.<sup>111</sup> Decades later, when Vicki Rishling attended Kendrick High School in the late 1960s, she and a closeted gay classmate cross-dressed for prom: "He wore the formal, and I wore the tuxedo, and we were very popular because we had a stash of alcohol in our car... Everyone loved it. It was really funny... I don't think anyone really thought 'queer' or 'gay' or 'lesbian,' and I didn't either, really." Rishling recalled that her classmate "obviously was gay," but his belonging to the community prevented him from being ostracized.<sup>112</sup> Historians have noted similar patterns elsewhere. E. Patrick Johnson argued that queerness often existed as an open secret in the American south. Despite the region's reputation for bigotry, southern modes of gentility required discretion and respect at a superficial level.<sup>113</sup> Kendrick functioned similarly, allowing gay behavior to continue as long as it remained unnamed.

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<sup>111</sup> Michael Moody Culpepper and Nikki Draper, dir. *Bachelor Farmer* (New York: Filmmakers Library, 2005), Compact disc (CD).

<sup>112</sup> "Rishling," IQ-CDIL-UIL. Filler words removed for clarity.

<sup>113</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 4-5.

The 2004 independent documentary *Bachelor Farmer* illustrated what happened when Kendrick's gay residents came out. Though the timeline of their community's formation was unclear, some of the town's gay residents lived there outside the closet before the 1994 fight over Proposition 1. The film explored how queerness, rural community, and the public's imagination interacted to affect the lives of Kendrick's five gay residents—Jerry Galloway, Kari Galloway, Steve Dunning, Greg Couch, and Matt Hudleson—as well as one gay man who grew up there and moved away—Mark Mustoe. Filmmakers clearly made the documentary because most people believed queerness and rurality were incompatible; those elements combined would fascinate audiences.<sup>114</sup> As the film showed, though, small-town social dynamics were more complicated than most Americans believed: Kendrick's gay residents found that cultivating personal ties and belonging to the community were more important to straight townspeople than their sexual identities.

By the twenty-first century, respectability politics governed how out gay folks conducted themselves in Kendrick. Jerry Galloway only allowed himself to discuss “safe topics” with neighbors, and Greg Couch self-monitored public displays of affection with his partner, Matt Hudleson, attributing his carefulness to the locale: “You can't walk down the street hand-in-hand. I mean, that's one of the things that you give up when you live in a small town. It's just the nature of the area in which we live.” Of the six gay people in the documentary, one had left town years before, in part due to blowback from his divorce. Mark Mustoe came out to his parents, divorced his wife, lost custody of his

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<sup>114</sup> Culpepper and Draper, *Bachelor Farmer*.

kids, and moved off the family farm. Mustoe's queerness was not the central problem; it was that his actions hurt other community members. By leaving his wife, kids, and farm, Mustoe irreparably damaged his social standing. Kari Galloway, Jerry Galloway's lesbian niece, commented on the town's reaction to the scandal: "Whenever the subject came up, it was, oh, what a shame. Poor Carolyn [Mark's ex-wife] and the kids. Poor his parents... In some ways, it probably would have been easier for them if Mark had just died."<sup>115</sup>

While the film rarely discussed life in urban centers—with its excesses like bathhouses, pride parades, and drag queens—those stereotypes constantly hung over the heads of Kendrick's gay residents, which informed how their straight neighbors treated them. The documentary itself felt threatening to some townspeople. Couch remarked, "I heard some of the most irrational things, like 'you're gonna show that gay life in Kendrick is wonderful, you're gonna bring an influx of gays and lesbians into the community... you're gonna make San Francisco North.'" Like Boise and Moscow, Kendrick's straight residents worried about how newcomers might change the town's social fabric. When Couch and Hudleson made an offer on a house in Kendrick, a woman attempting to buy the property told the seller that the couple would make the house a "gay sex haven."<sup>116</sup>

Kendrick's gay residents also grappled with urban stereotypes at a personal level. Steve Dunning explained that promiscuity was a long-gone part of his past: "I got into the gay lifestyle, but I did not like it at all. The anonymous sex, just the stereotypes of it all, just didn't seem to fit me one bit. I decided, you know, I don't have to do this." However,

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<sup>115</sup> Culpepper and Draper, *Bachelor Farmer*.

<sup>116</sup> Culpepper and Draper, *Bachelor Farmer*.

when he decided against sleeping around, he did not start seriously dating male partners. Instead, Dunning married and divorced three women. It took him several years and plenty of therapy to accept his sexuality. However, his attraction to men was only part of the issue; Dunning also had to accept that his expression of queerness and gay identity was substantially different than the urban options culturally available to him.<sup>117</sup> Similarly, Jerry Galloway, who grew up in Kendrick, did not realize that he could live outside metropolitan areas and still experience a fulfilling life as a gay man: “I wish when I was growing up, I had someone say, ‘Jerry, you’re alright,’ because I struggled a lot believing I was alright—that I could be gay and be myself... And I didn’t have to move to a big city to be me. I could be me here.”<sup>118</sup> Galloway and Dunning both came to these conclusions on their own without broader cultural support.

Though the idyllic landscape dominated the documentary, and Kendrick’s gay residents repeatedly stated the town was safe, concerns about retaliatory violence lurked just below the surface. Jerry Galloway admitted, “Unfortunately, in the back of my mind, I always think, ‘okay, what day are we going to come home and someone’s gonna spray paint ‘fag’ on the house or kill our dogs or something?’ And I wish I could get over that.” Fear occasionally intruded on special moments. A startling noise frightened Betty McMahan, a straight guest at Jerry and Steve’s wedding: “There was this loud bang against the side of the church. And I jumped up and another person jumped up. And we’re just ready... It was the wind [that] blew the door closed.” Though all of the

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<sup>117</sup> Culpepper and Draper, *Bachelor Farmer*.

<sup>118</sup> Jerry Galloway, interview by Denise Bennett, January 30, 2017, MG 499, IQC-UILSCA.

documentary's subjects clarified that genuinely violent encounters were rare, Jerry Galloway had experienced harassment. He left a tree in his yard unattended during a controlled burn, and a straight couple passing through warned him about the fire. When Galloway explained that he set the fire on purpose, the man yelled at him, "You're a fucking faggot." Galloway's dumbfounded, horrified tone conveyed the pain he felt at the recollection: "That blew me away, because no one had ever said that to me, and no one had said it to me in this house where I felt so safe all my life." But he refused to let that experience force him to leave Kendrick: "I can't be scared. I can't live somewhere just because I'm scared."<sup>119</sup>

Knowing that gay life looked easier elsewhere, Kendrick's gay residents justified their decision to exist in a small town by citing the benefits of rural life. Couch remarked, "If I wanted to live in San Francisco, where I could hold hands, I would give up a lot of peace of mind. I would give up a life that I greatly love in this community in rural America." Couch posed his decision to stay in terms of a tradeoff: the joy he felt about living in a small, close-knit community outweighed the hurt he felt about having to abide by restrictive respectability politics. Furthermore, the landscape, neighbors, and relative isolation attracted Couch to Kendrick, rather than scared him away. Those features of rural life gave him space to create a more secure sense of self as a gay man: "Kendrick was a place that for the first time probably in my life, I felt at home and safe enough to start... allowing myself the ability to explore what [being gay] meant. And I don't mean in behaviors, I mean in a sense of how I integrated that into myself, you know, what it

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<sup>119</sup> Culpepper and Draper, *Bachelor Farmer*.

meant to be gay, and how that defined who I was in many ways.” Rural gay men outside Idaho expressed similar feelings, a pattern John Howard noticed in his 1999 study of queer experiences in Mississippi *Men Like That*. A community’s insistence that queerness not be discussed or displayed offered queer people a unique freedom: “In many cases, silence not only deflected the sometimes harmful repercussions of disclosure, it created psychic space for individual contemplation and affirmation.”<sup>120</sup>

While Kendrick’s gay residents defined themselves partly in opposition to urban queerness, they also used positive qualifiers to explain why gay life in Kendrick was so important to them. Galloway mapped his sense of self onto the scenery around him: “having this—living here where I grew up—makes me feel connected to my family, to my roots. To me, that’s important because this home, the trees, the farm—it’s all the same.” He linked landmarks to loved ones and childhood memories: “my parents are buried down the road. My grandparents are buried down the road... All the pets I’ve had my whole life are buried out here in these woods... This little creek has ran here all my life. We played in it when we were kids. It’s always been here... It never changes.”<sup>121</sup> In addition to his sexuality, a connection to the landscape was a part of Galloway’s identity, which made it important for him to remain in Kendrick.

A majority of Kendrick’s residents voted against Proposition 1, which Couch attributed to the small but well-known gay presence in the town. Though social expectations of respectability required gay people in Kendrick to act civilly, straight

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<sup>120</sup> John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 32.

<sup>121</sup> Culpepper and Draper, *Bachelor Farmer*.

people reciprocated by listening to gay locals' concerns about how legislation and prejudice affected them. McMahan, in her capacity as a straight ally, claimed that the other small-town residents meditated on her defenses of gay people in casual conversation: "A few days [after our discussion], they'll come back. 'I was thinking about what you said.' And we'll talk a little bit more. And a few days after that, 'well, I was thinking you might be right on this part.' It's just this ongoing, lowkey education that can happen in a small community that might not happen anywhere else." Small-town life afforded queer people unique opportunities for activism. Gay people in Kendrick helped defeat Proposition 1 not through radical grassroots activism like the Lesbian Avengers in Moscow or appealing to libertarians as gay Boiseans did, but through conversation. They drew upon richly textured relationships with their neighbors to convince the town that such legislation negatively affected them at a personal level, while also publishing a letter in the local newspaper and placing No on One signs in their yards. For the most part, Kendrick's straight residents treated their gay neighbors with consideration as a matter of mutual respect—a key factor in their local defeat of Proposition 1. Galloway remarked, "For people that I've known all my life, being gay is almost irrelevant because I'm one of theirs." His belonging to the community outweighed existing prejudices. Betty McMahan noted that small-town living required more negotiation of social expectations than places with high populations: "Because we're a really small and isolated community, there aren't enough people to have enemies. You can't upset one person and go to another group for new friends."<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Culpepper and Draper, *Bachelor Farmer*. Filler words removed for clarity.

The massive outcry against Proposition 1 proved that queer people existed everywhere around the state, and that they could successfully mobilize for the improvement of queer communal life. In 1994, even before the initiative was defeated, Robert Shaffer reflected that queer prosperity in Idaho was becoming a statewide phenomenon: “We are doing just fine in Idaho. Who would have ever thought there would be a lesbian and gay pride parade in Boise? But we have held five. Gay and lesbian people are coming out in Mountain Home, Moscow, Ketchum, Sandpoint.”<sup>123</sup> In a *Diversity* article immediately after Proposition 1 was defeated, Robert Shaffer described several individuals who would otherwise be absent from the historical record. He especially recalled rural queer people and their allies, including individuals in Burley and Challis.<sup>124</sup>

After it became apparent that queer communities had formed all around Idaho during the fight against Proposition 1, Boiseans attempted to reach out to other queer communities around the state, an effort primarily driven through *Diversity*, which rebranded itself as a statewide newspaper. In a 1996 report from a TCC secretary, the author listed “regular columns from persons in North Idaho and Eastern Idaho” as one of the organization’s achievements.<sup>125</sup> Apparently, though, the paper continued to receive critical feedback from queer people outside the capital, stating that they felt marginalized in the publication’s coverage. In 1999, *Diversity* editor Michael Healy amended the

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<sup>123</sup> Robert Shaffer, “NYC Library exhibit traces history of lesbians and gays,” *Diversity*, August 1994, 14, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>124</sup> Robert Shaffer, “Proposition 1 strengthened Idaho’s gay & lesbian community,” *Diversity*, November 1994, 3, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>125</sup> “Secretary’s Report 1996,” Folder 40, Box 1, MSS 183, The Community Center Records, 1983-2003, TCCR-BSUSCA.



publication's tagline to "Idaho's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender News for the 90's." He explained, "*Diversity* decided that we wanted people all over Idaho to know that this is their paper also, not just Boise... We are currently enlisting writers from all over the state, and our hope is that there is no doubt that *Diversity* serves all of Idaho."<sup>126</sup> However, events outside the capital remained secondary to Boise news, and *Diversity* was an inconsistent record about queerness in Idaho outside Boise, if still the most constant one.

In the year after Proposition 1's defeat, Boise activists' effort to create a statewide queer organization folded due to lack of interest. At first, the successful defeat of the anti-gay initiative inspired queer people around the state to try creating an effective, long-term coalition for queer rights. In January of 1995, a conference of queer activists sponsored by YFFN met for the first time to discuss creating such an organization, with representatives from "McCall, Hayden Lake, Moscow, Mountain Home, Hailey and Boise" meeting together.<sup>127</sup> The group met twice more that year.<sup>128</sup> *Diversity* reported on those meetings as the group made progress, but suddenly stopped discussing the matter altogether. Though nobody wrote an article to specify why the organization failed, a comment from reporter Javier Smith offered some explanation for what undermined their efforts: "One of the biggest obstacles faced that weekend was the question of trust. The

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<sup>126</sup> Michael Healy, "From the editor," *Diversity*, February 1999, 2, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA. Errors edited.

<sup>127</sup> Rich Keefe, "Plans continue for communication & leadership network," *Diversity*, April 1995, 1, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>128</sup> Javier Smith, "Meeting explored new goals in Idaho," *Diversity*, February 1995, 1, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA; Rich Keefe, "Idaho regions band together to share information," *Diversity*, September 1995, 5, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

same fierce independence and ingrained wariness that allows homosexuals to survive in a sea of prejudice and homophobia, makes it difficult to give complete support and confidence to others.”<sup>129</sup> Smith attributed the project’s collapse to a general sense of distrust among gay people, but said nothing about suspicion of and misunderstandings between Idaho’s various regions. Gay Idahoans from diverse communities around the state probably struggled to have their localized concerns taken seriously by one another, especially with Boise at the project’s center.

The fight against Proposition 1, despite community infighting and disagreements over strategy, yielded the strongest collective power that gay communities around Idaho ever wielded. Michel Foucault argued in *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* that naming homosexuality gave authorities a means to oppress gay people, but also provided a vocabulary for gay people to find one another and rally together. To that effect, prohibitions create and solicit oppositional activity.<sup>130</sup> Proposition 1 had the same effect on gay Idahoans. The number of participants in Boise’s pride parade doubled between 1993 and 1994.<sup>131</sup> Gay Idahoans raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to fight Proposition 1, and their massive effort spawned varied activist methods.<sup>132</sup> Their efforts succeeded, and Proposition 1 was defeated by a margin of less than one percent—about 3,100 votes.<sup>133</sup> Like Foucault theorized, though, the varied activist approaches that

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<sup>129</sup> Javier Smith, “Meeting explored new goals in Idaho,” *Diversity*, February 1995, 1, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>130</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Penguin Random House, 1976), 43.

<sup>131</sup> “1,167 turn out for gay parade,” *Idaho Statesman*, June 12, 1994, 1A.

<sup>132</sup> Maxand, “Proposition One,” 40.

<sup>133</sup> Maxand, “Proposition One,” 44.

empowered gay people ultimately brought them down. Rather than embrace their differences, gay Idahoans stayed divided about their own heterogeneity. In 2006, Idaho citizens voted in favor of a state constitutional amendment to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman. The opposition from gay locals hardly paralleled the historic fight against Proposition 1.<sup>134</sup>

All of Idaho's queer communities battled common sources of homophobia and similar expectations of queerness, but they were not able to unite in the long term on that basis. Despite their differences, though, these communities shared a lot in common. All gay Idahoans lived in danger of losing their lives, jobs, or personal relationships because of their sexuality. Some gay people set outspoken boundaries against those threats, while others emphasized their commonalities with straight people to avoid harassment, but they all negotiated their place within a homophobic framework. They also struggled to imagine a place for themselves in a national gay culture that scorned the lifestyles of Idahoans and rural gay folks. The general public—and often gay people themselves—could not imagine queer people leading fulfilling lives in Idaho. Sometimes, the existence of gay communities outside urban meccas even angered straight people who felt entitled to the sexual purity of that space. An inability to think beyond cultural and geographical differences—some real, others constructed—ultimately undermined long-term political efforts. Proposition 1 was a rare instance in which gay Idahoans turned their hyperlocality and cultural differences into a political strength.

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<sup>134</sup> Sharon Matthies, interviewed by Dr. Lisa McClain and Rachel Taylor, November 14, 2021.

## CHAPTER THREE: IDAHO

Two years after the Stonewall Riots, a national gay directory remarked of Idaho in 1971, “This state draws a complete blank, and chances of anything happening are very remote.”<sup>135</sup> The writer’s assumption was clearly not informed by contacts from Boise or elsewhere around Idaho—otherwise, he may have learned about Boise’s cruising spots and gay-friendly bars. In 1998, decades later, Cristi Jenkins moved to Washington from Idaho. When she told other queer people where she was from, they responded negatively: “The reaction from gays and lesbians that learn I moved here from Idaho has been kind of disturbing. They’ll usually comment that Idaho is such a repressive state. I ask them how they know that. ‘Well, isn’t it?’ They usually query.”<sup>136</sup> Queer people from Idaho anticipated paternalistic reactions in conversations with people outside the state. In 2002, Jed Taylor—a gay Boisean who grew up in Moscow—explained, “Whenever people in other places or online learn that I’m from Idaho, they either apologize or behave as though they feel sorry for me. Everyone seems to believe that most Idahoans are the up-tight [sic] ultra-conservative types who can’t accept anything they aren’t intimately familiar with.”<sup>137</sup> Their assumptions followed naturally from national media’s coverage

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<sup>135</sup> Alan Virta, “The founding of TCC,” *Diversity*, January 2004, 1, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, *Diversity: Gay and Lesbian News for the 90s*, Idaho State Archives, Boise, ID [hereafter referred to as *DGLN-ISA*].

<sup>136</sup> Cristi Jenkins, “...And through the woods,” *Diversity*, October 1998, 7, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, *DGLN-ISA*. Punctuation corrected.

<sup>137</sup> Jed Taylor, “The Gay, The Bad And The Ugly,” *Diversity*, August 2002, 4, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, *DGLN-ISA*.

of Idaho, which often focused on events involving bigoted political extremists. When queer people imagined Idaho, they probably pictured the standoff at Ruby Ridge in 1992. Or perhaps, they thought of the Aryan Nations, a group of white supremacists who had their headquarters in northern Idaho from 1974 until 2000, when they were bankrupted by a lawsuit.<sup>138</sup>

Both queer activists and anti-gay bigots used the idea of Idaho as an anti-gay place to contextualize the successes, failures, and mere presence of queer people here. In a 700 Club broadcast from 1994, Idaho anti-gay activist Bill Proctor claimed, “The homosexual lifestyle is not acceptable to cowboys, ranchers, and farmers.” Queer people were “threats to the Idaho way of life” who migrated to the state, importing a homosexual lifestyle with them.<sup>139</sup> Homegrown queerness in an Idahoan context was an oxymoron; conservatives had no way to explain queer locals living “out” without alluding to a progressive invasion. On the other hand, in 1999, local Misty Schymtzik celebrated the ongoing success of Boise Pride by suggesting that its success marked a deviation from Idaho’s awfulness: “Not bad for a state known for the Aryan Nations, potatoes and intolerance.”<sup>140</sup> Several queer people who moved to Idaho remarked that they exercised caution by removing their rainbow bumper stickers before crossing state lines.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Odette Yousef, “Idaho’s fight against the far right, then and now,” *NPR*, June 27, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/27/1106828549/idahos-fight-against-the-far-right-then-and-now>.

<sup>139</sup> Robert Schaffer, “700 Club spins the anti-gay effort in Idaho,” *Diversity*, September 1994, 4, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>140</sup> Misty Schymtzik, “Ten years—who’d a thunk?” *Diversity*, May/June 1999, 5, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>141</sup> Jody May Chang, interview by Sarah Podvin, December 2, 2011, MSS 338, Idaho LGBTQ Oral History Project, Boise State University Special Collections and Archives, Boise, ID [*hereafter referred to as ILOHP-BSUSCA*]. This collection can be

Some queer Idahoans, though, argued that the state did not deserve its reputation for anti-gay bigotry. Jed Taylor stated that bigots were the exception to a general rule of kindness in his community: “I grew up with a few people like that, but for the most part, those around me didn’t focus on my superficial qualities and accepted me for my more meaningful characteristics.” He believed that media coverage of fringe far-right groups like the Aryan Nations unfairly portrayed Idaho as a dangerous place: “People see that in the media, and then every time they hear about Idaho, that’s the image that comes to mind. Stories like that make the national news, but when anything encouraging happens, we’re lucky to see it on the local news.”<sup>142</sup> Without using the term explicitly, he chalked up media coverage of Idaho to confirmation bias.

With Idaho’s conservative reputation well-entrenched by the twenty-first century, Fred Phelps attempted to literally astroturf homophobia onto Idaho’s capital. In 2003, Phelps—the infamous leader of Topeka’s Westboro Baptist Church—intended to purchase small plots of land to erect statues of Matthew Shepard, the victim of an anti-gay hate crime. In 1998, two men sodomized and murdered twenty-one-year-old Shepard in a field in Wyoming. Phelps’ monuments would have read, “Matthew Shepard entered hell October the 12th, 1998, at age 21 in defiance of God’s warning. Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind: it is abomination’—Leviticus 18:22.” Phelps bragged in an interview, “We are going to pockmark this nation from sea to shining sea with this

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accessed digitally at [https://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/idlgbtq\\_oral\\_histories/](https://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/idlgbtq_oral_histories/); Amelia Bloom, “Enchant Me, Captivate Me, IDAHO ME!” *Diversity*, October 2001, 15, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>142</sup> Jed Taylor, “The Gay, The Bad And The Ugly,” *Diversity*, August 2002, 4, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA. Punctuation corrected.

message on the monument.” After reaching out to Minidoka for land and being rejected, Phelps settled on Boise as a prime location, as a religious monument to the Ten Commandments already existed in Julia Davis Park.<sup>143</sup> His efforts fared no better in Boise than in Minidoka.

Like the Aryan Nations, Fred Phelps’s homophobia landed far afield of Idahoan acceptable behavior. In 2002, before trying to erect his statues, Fred Phelps attempted to mobilize Idahoans against Boise’s queer community. Instead, he inadvertently mobilized gay people instead: “Phelps’s first appearance in Idaho, during Pride 2002, drew over 125 people to the Pride kickoff party, held at TCC—an event that normally draws 25 people. The media came, hissing queers united, dollars were raised... we had a hell of a good time!”<sup>144</sup> Phelps was apparently so embarrassed by this failed attempt to transplant his virulent homophobia that his own website buried the story.<sup>145</sup> And when Phelps attempted to erect the statue of Matthew Shepard, hundreds of Idahoans—both gay and straight—joined counterprotests organized by the progressive local faith organization Interfaith Alliance. In 2004, instead of erecting Phelps’s statue amid fears of a lawsuit, “the Boise City Council voted four to two, January 20, to remove the Ten Commandments monument, to preempt the threatened legal action.”<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Brendan Burke, “Phelps targets Rupert,” *Diversity*, December 2003, 1, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>144</sup> Mike Esposito, “Phelps, friend or foe?” *Diversity*, October 2005, 2, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>145</sup> Lady Longstockings, “Fred and Boise,” *Diversity*, August 2002, 7, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>146</sup> “Phelps pickets everybody,” *Diversity*, February 2004, 1, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

However, Idaho only made such progressive decisions to save face. The debacle with the Aryan Nations in northern Idaho embarrassed Idahoans so much that they were forced to make progressive decisions in spite of themselves. By 1990, when Idaho adopted Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, it was one of only five states that had not already done so. Conservative holdouts in the state legislature argued that King's work was irrelevant to Idaho, considering its geographic removal from the Jim Crow south and that the holiday represented an unnecessary expense. Even when the state government finally adopted the holiday, they did so by creating Human Rights Day on the same day, as a symbol of Idaho's progressivism.<sup>147</sup> They attempted to prove, after all, that Idaho was "Too Great for Hate," as a popular bumper sticker proclaimed.

Gay people responded with cynicism to Idaho's politeness and occasional progressiveness. In 2002, the city of Boise dedicated the Idaho Anne Frank Human Rights Memorial, a monument that drew connections between various forms of discrimination, decried such bigotry, and celebrated humanity's diversity. Though the gay community at large celebrated the memorial, Mike Esposito—a leader in Boise's queer community—wrote that the memorial was essentially meaningless in the face of the state legislature's discrimination against queer folk: "This monument commemorates equality but does little to advance it... Which is better?—a human rights memorial or actually having human rights? For Idaho to ever live up to the ideals emblazoned in the wall, we will need statutes more than statues."<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Jill Gill, "Idaho's 'Aryan' Education: Martin Luther King, Jr., Day and Racial Politics," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 102, no. 4 (Fall 2001), 159-177.

<sup>148</sup> Mike Esposito, "Statutes not Statues," *Diversity*, October 2002, 7, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.



Embarrassment and image concerns motivated Idahoans to make progressive decisions in the face of extreme racism, but the same concerns fell short of extending to the state's reputation for anti-queerness. Idaho's anti-sodomy laws were still on the books, and in 1996, several years before Esposito's op-ed, legislators had passed a law preventing queer couples from marrying within Idaho. Unsurprisingly, Idaho's laws protecting minorities from discrimination had not been amended to include queer people. To Esposito, the memorial was borderline offensive: "As we walk through the memorial, lgbt [sic] people should bow their head, knowing our rights—in Idaho—are resting in peace."<sup>149</sup>

Some gay Idahoans characterized the state as neither gay-friendly nor anti-gay. Overall, they believed that straight and gay folks alike were apathetic to gay issues. In an article about her difficulties navigating employment as a trans woman, an Idahoan complained that protections for queer people in the state were scant because of willful ignorance: "What do we have in Idaho? Why is it an attitude of, if I don't look at them, they don't exist?"<sup>150</sup> Such assumptions were only reinforced when Idaho activists, allies, and queer people disappeared into the woodwork after definitive opponents disappeared. In 2005, *Diversity* editor Raven Usher opined, "Ever since the anti-gay marriage amendment was defeated in February, the LGBT community has been a ghost... Our two biggest obstacles to achieving civil rights and true equality is the ignorance of others and

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> JacLynn Rose, "Glen or Glenda? Getting a Job While Transitioning," *Diversity*, October 2005, 11, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

our own apathy.”<sup>151</sup> Mary Beth Healey, who moved to northern Idaho from Missoula in 1990, noted that “[queer] people were doing a lot more drinking and a lot more ignoring.” She explained that they—the drinking queer people—were probably “uncomfortable” with the state of things where they lived, and yet, they did nothing about it.<sup>152</sup> Their drinking and ignoring may have been directly connected; the exhaustion of defending their own existence may have led to burnout.

Because the public was apathetic to queer issues, the legislature got away with enacting damaging anti-gay policies. In 1996, a news report for *Diversity* noted the underwhelming response from legislators as Idaho’s anti-gay marriage law passed through official channels: “There were few public comments made by any supporters or government officials. On March 18, Governor Phil Batt continued the silence—he signed it into law without comment.”<sup>153</sup> In 2006, Idaho’s public voted to amend the state’s constitution to prevent gay couples from marrying. Local politician Nicole LeFavour commented that unlike in 1994, when Proposition 1 was defeated at the hands of the same public, the anti-gay marriage amendment of 2006 had failed to garner nationwide support or massive community mobilization. LeFavour argued that greater mobilization and resources could have swayed Idaho’s public against the amendment.<sup>154</sup> But without

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<sup>151</sup> Raven Usher, “From the Editor,” *Diversity*, October 2005, 3, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA. Errors corrected for clarity.

<sup>152</sup> Mary Beth Healey, interview by Denise Bennett, July 11, 2018, MG 499, Idaho Queered collection, 2014-2018, University of Idaho Library Special Collections and Archives, Moscow, ID [hereafter referred to as *IQC-UILSCA*]. This collection can also be accessed online at <https://www.lib.uidaho.edu/queered/>.

<sup>153</sup> Rich Keefe, “Governor Batt signs same-gender marriage ban,” *Diversity*, March 1996, 1, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>154</sup> Nicole LeFavour, “Guest opinion: Idaho after marriage,” *Diversity*, June 2007, 8, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

such proactivity from gay Idahoans, the amendment passed by a wide margin of 63 percent.<sup>155</sup>

Anti-gay political outcomes in the twenty-first century stretched gay locals' capacity to tolerate Idaho. Brian Norman, a gay man living in Pocatello with a long-term partner, wrote in the months before the 2006 vote, "As a proud and productive member of our community who is also a sexual minority, I cannot express fully the deep personal hurt caused by knowing I live in a hostile land." He questioned why the state would feel comfortable taking away the rights of queer people, but not women or people of color. For Norman, the affront posed by the legislature's vote on the ballot initiative cut deeply: "My heart feels that Idaho is attacking mine and my family's personal dignity."<sup>156</sup> Hostility at the level of state politics even caused people to consider leaving. In 2011, in an anonymous interview, one queer Boisean tempered her positive associations of the city's gay community with the reality of the state government's hostility: "I love Boise. I don't love the political atmosphere of the rest of the state. I like the liberal pockets that Boise has and that's—it's really hard. Every year, around election time, I question why I'm here."<sup>157</sup>

When the state's politics and social conditions directly limited their access to queer possibilities, queer Idahoans visited other areas around the United States for a

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<sup>155</sup> "AmericaVotes2006: Key Ballot Measures," *CNN*, <https://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2006/pages/results/ballot.measures/>. Accessed March 17, 2023.

<sup>156</sup> Brian Norman, "On Anti-gay Discrimination," *Diversity*, April 2006, 1, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA. Grammar errors edited for clarity.

<sup>157</sup> Anonymous, interview by Melissa Howard, November 19, 2011, MSS 338, ILOHP-BSUSCA. Edited for clarity.

reprieve, and for opportunities they could not access in their home state. In 1986, Boise's gay newspaper, *The Paper*, proudly announced that a few locals were pictured in *The Advocate* at San Francisco's Pride Parade.<sup>158</sup> In 1994, Robert Shaffer marched down New York City's First Avenue with thousands of other queer people, as the only Idahoan in the parade section representing various states.<sup>159</sup> In 2001, when Vermont established civil unions as an option for gay couples, several Idahoans went to Vermont to get their civil union licenses, even though those documents only had symbolic and emotional significance in their home state.<sup>160</sup> Access to these resources and political privileges was deeply important to some queer Idahoans.

Possibilities outside Idaho tempted queer residents to leave permanently as well. Susan Baumgartner, a writer and native northern Idahoan, expressed the temptation to leave, but still held back from taking the plunge. She began writing for *Diversity* shortly after coming out as a lesbian in 1993. Her writer's biography highlighted that she was "one of the few openly lesbian columnists in America."<sup>161</sup> Though she felt a sense of "freedom" after announcing her sexuality in the *Moscow-Pullman Daily News*, for whom she also wrote a column, she expressed trepidation around being queer where she lived, remarking, "There are some limits. This is still Idaho." But she held out for the possibility

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<sup>158</sup> Dennis Barrett, "National News Roundup," *The Paper*, August 1986, 3, SpcCol. HQ75.P63 1985-1988 Oversized, *The Paper: For Our Community*, Idaho State Archives, Boise, ID [hereafter referred to as *TPFOC-ISA*].

<sup>159</sup> Robert Shaffer, "Remembering Stonewall: 25 Years of gay life," *Diversity*, August 1994, 5, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>160</sup> Joel Boone, Mark Kester, Steve Martin, "Three Idaho gay couples travel to Vermont to participate in civil union ceremonies," *Diversity*, September 2001, 16, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>161</sup> Susan Baumgartner, "Living in the land of elephants," *Diversity*, August 1994, 14, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

that Idaho could improve: “I can’t quite see myself, yet, holding hands with another woman and walking down Main Street of Genesee. But that doesn’t mean I can’t work for that to someday be a possibility.”<sup>162</sup> She read in an article that Idaho was a “red state” for gay people, offering practically no civil protections, while New Mexico was a “yellow state” with some protections. After her visit to New Mexico, which she enjoyed, she recommitted to staying in state. Though she felt a temptation to move there, Baumgartner argued that she might lose her edge if she left: “I’d miss us, the special feistiness we’ve developed from surviving in this hostile environment, the euphoria we feel when we do get the chance to gather together in numbers larger than three or four. Maybe gay life would be too bland for me in one of the green states.” She concluded her article with a shrug: “Guess I’ll sign my teaching contract, commit myself for another year, and see what happens.”<sup>163</sup>

In 1996, the temptation to leave ultimately overpowered her initial commitment to Idaho upon coming out, and Baumgartner moved to Santa Fe. She wrote a long, thoughtful article about her decision to leave, titled “Fight or Flight?” Deciding whether to stay or go clearly weighed on her as she asked, “Do I stay and keep trying to make Idaho a comfortable place to live or do I bolt?” Northern Idaho’s beautiful landscape, relative isolation, and kind neighbors still captured her heart, but the knowledge that things could be better elsewhere outweighed the possibility that things could be better in Idaho, but only someday, and only maybe. Her initial optimism about conditions

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<sup>162</sup> Susan Baumgartner, “Coming out: the first year,” *Diversity*, October 1994, 16, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>163</sup> Susan Baumgartner, “Being gay in Santa Fe,” *Diversity*, July 1995, 15, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

improving had faltered: “When I came out in the fall of 1993, I assumed I would merely be one of the first of hundreds of gay people in the area to proudly claim who we are... But Idaho is a slow, slow place.” She felt that her outness—her embodiment of queerness—simultaneously alienated local straight people and discomfited gay locals. Baumgartner remarked that her decision represented part of a larger trend among queer north Idahoans: “It’s a cliché in the local gay community that most of us last here about five years, long enough to grow strong and come out, and then we’re driven to move somewhere freer and more accepting... Only a few of us have such a strong commitment to Idaho that we can stay year after year, slowing our spirits to the slow crawl of change in such a sheltered place.” Baumgartner had run out of patience. But part of her still hoped that Idaho could change, and she expressed some pre-emptive remorse for her decision to leave other queer people behind. Her article ends on a hopeful note, though: “I hope to come back, healed and strong, ready to torture you all some more.”<sup>164</sup>

Baumgartner’s move away apparently afforded her the breathing room she was looking for. She reveled in the tolerance and lack of hostility in Santa Fe, grateful for the reprieve.<sup>165</sup> She wondered how Idaho could retain any gay population at all, given that better options existed for them.<sup>166</sup> New Mexico and the possibilities Baumgartner imagined there gave her the opportunity to come out again, this time as Sean Gardner—something that may have been unthinkable in Idaho. In 1978, Gardner had attempted to

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<sup>164</sup> Susan Baumgartner, “Fight or flight?” *Diversity*, June 1996, 11, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>165</sup> Susan Baumgartner, “Going for days without intolerance,” *Diversity*, September 1996, 15, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>166</sup> Susan Baumgartner, “How ya gonna keep ‘em?” *Diversity*, April 1997, 16, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

medically transition, but felt isolated in his experience of gender dysphoria and queerness, choosing to remain socially and medically female instead, remarking, “I didn’t even know any lesbians or gay men. So for 20 years I repressed my APA-designated gender dysphoria or gender identity disorder.”<sup>167</sup> At least one Idaho reader wrote into *Diversity* to commend Gardner for coming out: “You never fail to amaze me with your incredible courage and honesty. Because of this, you’ve been a big inspiration to me through the years that I’ve known you. Thank you.”<sup>168</sup> Gardner continued to write for *Diversity* for several years afterwards despite moving away.<sup>169</sup>

Moving away from Idaho was a means of escape from intolerable conditions. During the 1960s and 70s, Bruce Roby grew up in Idaho in Gooding and Fairfield working on the farm during summers. School certainly was not safe for him: “The worst thing you could ever call somebody--of course gay wasn’t in the vocabulary when I was in school--it was a fag. The horrible fear every time I heard that word.” Nothing improved when Roby went on to college. Safety only existed outside his hometown: “To me it was like, if I move to the city I’m anonymous. Nobody knows me, nobody cares... Unless your family is open and supportive as you’re growing up you’ll never believe your community is either. So you have to run.” He moved to LA.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Susan Baumgartner, “Coming out yet again,” *Diversity*, October 1997, 5, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>168</sup> Natalie Shapiro, “Incredible courage is an inspiration,” *Diversity*, November 1997, 3, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>169</sup> Sean Gardner, “Bustin’ Out All Over,” *Diversity*, June 2000, 8, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>170</sup> Bruce “Grumpy” Roby, interview by Rebecca Scofield, September 11, 2016, Voices of Gay Rodeo, <https://www.voicesofgayrodeo.com/interviews/robybruce.html>.

Queer Idahoans sometimes felt that their dreams of queer joy and rurality were incompatible. Debra Jane Kendall was born in 1952 and raised in American Falls, Idaho, a very conservative Mormon town. She visited her brother living in San Francisco, and though she wanted to have a ranch with a woman partner, she didn't think it was possible where she was from. Kendall remained on the ranch until she was thirty-two, eventually using her skills as a professional sign painter to get out of her small town. She got work in San Francisco painting movie and TV sets, where she worked on *Mrs. Doubtfire*. Kendall integrated with San Francisco's gay community through her brother, and her brother's AA meetings, and the women's softball teams, attending country western dances in Oakland. Even though she moved back to Idaho in 2009, Kendall maintained that her dream life of coupled lesbianism on the ranch was out of reach: "That's one of the things that I find very unfortunate. You know, twenty years later I come back and it hasn't changed much."<sup>171</sup>

Some queer Idahoans, though, simply left the state for practical reasons, as Idaho's rurality and relative poverty provided fewer opportunities for people of all stripes. In 2017, reflecting on patterns of gay migration, Jerry Galloway remarked, "A lot of gay people leave because there are not a lot of jobs in rural America... Whatever you want to be, you pretty much are gonna have to move to a more urban area to get that."<sup>172</sup> Events in Idaho supported Galloway's claim. In 1992, in one fell swoop, YFFN lost several key board members mostly to work opportunities in Seattle, Atlanta, Vancouver,

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<sup>171</sup> Debra Jane Kendall, interview by Denise Bennett, September 14, 2018, MG 499, IQC-UILSCA.

<sup>172</sup> Jerry Galloway, interview by Denise Bennett, January 30, 2017, MG 499, IQC-UILSCA.



and San Francisco. Ann Dunkin, the YFFN director, admitted she was among those leaving in the 1991 Annual Report: “I am reluctant to leave Boise, but I cannot pass up this opportunity... Never forget how far we have come and how far we must go. Remain united, and work for freedom.”<sup>173</sup>

While Idahoans like Gardner found liberation outside the state, others were surprised and disappointed when supposedly progressive places failed to live up to their imagination. In 1998, Cristi Jenkins wrote about her move to Washington, where she experienced anti-gay harassment on her first night there. A driver called her “dyke” as he sped past while she took her dog on a walk. Jenkins explained, “I had heard people in Washington were more gay-friendly. That’s one reason why I moved here... For a few weeks I was ready to pack my bags and go home. I missed the wide-open spaces, and the lack of people. I missed my friends.” At the time of her article, she was still deliberating over whether to move back.<sup>174</sup> Likewise, Steven Lanzet found that gay life in San Francisco was not what he imagined. Lanzet was born in New York City, and college-educated at Rutgers University. He had never been west of Pennsylvania when two of his uncles offered him work in Boise and San Francisco respectively. He moved to San Francisco, but found the open queerness of the city distressing as a closeted person, and moved to Boise within a year: “San Francisco was not a good place not to be gay when you're gay... So I moved to Idaho, I think in the back of my mind, thinking luckily, you

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<sup>173</sup> “YFFN 1991 Annual Report,” 2, Folder 10, Box 1, MSS 211, Your Family, Friends, and Neighbors Records, 1989-2006, Boise State University Special Collections and Archives, Boise, ID [*hereafter referred to as YFFNR-BSUSCA*].

<sup>174</sup> Cristi Jenkins, “...And through the woods,” *Diversity*, October 1998, 7, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

don't have to deal with being gay in Idaho... [It] turned out not to be true, but that was my plan anyway.”<sup>175</sup> Idaho proved not to be an effective shield against his own queerness, but even after coming out, he chose to stay anyway because he liked Boise’s proximity to nature.

Gay folks from outside Idaho sometimes remarked that the state was less hostile than the supposedly progressive areas they hailed from, offering an interesting counternarrative to what most people assume about the state. Rick Ramos was born and raised in Santa Monica, and claimed that Idaho was less homophobic than people assumed. He experienced discrimination in California, but not in Idaho, though he still had reservations: “I’ve known much more homophobic environments in Los Angeles than I have here. But I think it could just be [that] I was lucky.”<sup>176</sup> Before Albert Stansell transformed a local pub into Boise’s most recognizable gay bar—The Balcony Club—he tried operating gay bars elsewhere around the US. His Atlanta establishment with firebombed, and another burned down in Denver. Boise, however, was welcoming: “We didn’t feel any of that here. At all. Period.”<sup>177</sup>

Idaho’s unexpected tolerance surprised people from out of state. In 2001, Amelia Bloom wrote for *Diversity* about her decision-making process to move to Idaho. While she knew about Idaho’s reputation for bigotry, she recognized that she had no tangible evidence of the state’s hostility at a public level: “It was difficult to figure out just how

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<sup>175</sup> Steven Lanzet, interview by Denise Bennett, August 19, 2018, MG 499, IQC-UILSCA.

<sup>176</sup> Rick Ramos, interview by Chuck Aguilera, December 4, 2011, MSS 338, ILOHP-BSUSCA. Punctuation edited for clarity.

<sup>177</sup> Albert Stansell, interview by Danielle Peterson, December 2, 2011, MSS 338, ILOHP-BSUSCA.

the day to day lives of Idahoans were actually affected by [intolerance]. Were they getting beat up? Fired from jobs? Burned out of their houses?” To find out more, Bloom called TCC and spoke with a volunteer who convinced her that, actually, queer people found a nice home in the state despite the political climate. Furthermore, the resources available through TCC and the established queer community in Boise impressed upon her that queer life was possible in the state: “It was the news and articles in this very newspaper for which I now write that helped cement our decision to move to this conservative city because, well, it seemed like a nice place to live.” Since moving to Boise, Bloom had encountered a few “bigots [and] conservatives,” but she was not fazed, saying, “You know what? Sometimes it’s the oddballs who actually make this a rather interesting place to be.”<sup>178</sup>

Idahoans showing basic decency shocked and confounded queer people—visitors and locals alike. Statistically, though, Idaho’s general apathy made it a safer place to live than other places around the United States, a fact that was not lost on all queer residents living here. Raven Usher noted that—of the hundreds of transphobic murders over the last several decades—none of them had occurred in Idaho. She mulled over the significance of that fact: “Maybe that is because we number so few in Idaho and not perceived [sic] to be quite so threatening. Maybe we hold a niche of an oddity to be gawked at but not touched. Maybe no one believes we really exist here. Or maybe it is just that nobody has thought of killing an Idaho transgender. Who knows?”<sup>179</sup> Another

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<sup>178</sup> Amelia Bloom, “Enchant Me, Captivate Me, IDAHO ME!” *Diversity*, October 2001, 15, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>179</sup> Raven Usher, “A day of counted sorrows,” *Diversity*, November 2003, 12, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

guest writer for *Diversity*—a Californian gay activist—got married to his partner in San Francisco, and they decided to visit Idaho for their honeymoon, as he was “hankering for a glimpse of snow.” The couple’s car broke down, and they had to get help at a remote lodge, a site that clearly made the two gay men uncomfortable: “In the urban gay mecca of San Francisco queer folks often harbor prejudiced views of rural people, and the Christian quotations and animal heads decorating the lodge encouraged my narrowmindedness.” However, their expectations were subverted by locals, who treated the couple with respect, and generously helped them take care of their car to reach safety. The pair concluded their trip with a visit to Boise and the Human Rights Memorial, which impressed them. Their attitudes about Idaho had changed: “We headed back to San Francisco with our snow-urge satisfied, several rolls of great photographs, and with a new appreciation for Idaho. We know we’ll soon be back!”<sup>180</sup>

Because Idaho was not a queer mecca, gay folks moved to the state for mundane reasons. Many gay people relocated to Idaho upon retirement, especially to escape the harried pace of big city life. Compared to the sprawl of Los Angeles, even Boise appeared small.<sup>181</sup> Others moved to be closer to family.<sup>182</sup> In 2009, Debra Jane Kendall migrated back to Idaho as her mother aged, and her son and daughter-in-law were expecting a child. The financial dip caused by the 2008 recession also convinced her to

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<sup>180</sup> Eric Rofes, “Honeymoon in Idaho,” *Diversity*, August 2004, 12, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>181</sup> Robert Shaffer, “Boise’s Hank and Bernard celebrate 50 years together,” *Diversity*, September 1997, 10, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>182</sup> “Canfield joins TCC board,” *Diversity*, June 2004, 3, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA; Nikki Scheibe, interview by Denise Bennett, November 20, 2017, MG 499, IQC-UILSCA.

return.<sup>183</sup> Likewise, Alan Virta applied for a job in Idaho before he came out as gay, and never considered whether the area would be conducive to queer life: “The question didn’t come up. You know, I was just applying for a job and I didn’t think much of it.”<sup>184</sup>

The lifestyle afforded by Idaho’s rurality—the factor that supposedly made the state so unlivable for queer people—also attracted them here. Christopher J. Morse, a drag queen from northern Idaho, juxtaposed Idaho’s political and environmental nature against one another. While the former frustrated him, the latter proved to be an attractive element: “As much as I dislike conservative Idaho... I love the geography of this place. I love the climate besides the winter. Our summers are beautiful.”<sup>185</sup> When asked why she chose to stay in Idaho where she grew up, Danielle Scott replied, “I just love like the wide open spaces here. And like the agriculture part of it.”<sup>186</sup> Aside from the gay community ties Amelia Bloom found in Boise, she and her partner also appreciated nature in the state: “We longed to see stars twinkle in the night sky, and the leaves turn colors in the autumn; to watch the snow fall in the winter and the blossoms bloom in the spring—things we didn’t have in our old hometown.”<sup>187</sup> Even farming became a source of support for some queer people in Idaho. Janie Burns commented that she was not involved with the local gay community, preferring the ties she made through rural work:

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<sup>183</sup> Debra Jane Kendall, interview by Denise Bennett, September 14, 2018, MG 499, IQC-UILSCA.

<sup>184</sup> Alan Virta, interview by Jasmine Olmedo, November 17, 2011, MSS 338, ILOHP-BSUSCA.

<sup>185</sup> Christopher J. Morse, interview by Denise Bennett, July 11, 2018, MG 499, IQC-UILSCA.

<sup>186</sup> Danielle Scott, interview by Denise Bennett, May 21, 2018, MG 499, IQC-UILSCA.

<sup>187</sup> Amelia Bloom, “Enchant Me, Captivate Me, IDAHO ME!” *Diversity*, October 2001, 15, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

“There’s something about being a farmer and sharing common experiences that make you support each other and accept each other... The soil really doesn’t care who you are.”

Burns’ wife moved from Illinois to Idaho for similar reasons. She explained, “I think [my wife] was more of a mind to come to a place where there were mountains.”<sup>188</sup>

The type of queer person who chose to live in Idaho typically disavowed a queer identity that substantially differentiated their experience and lifestyle from their straight counterparts. In his book *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Jack Halberstam suggested that a “queer way of life” represented a meaningful deviation from heteronormativity. Such queer reformulations of ordinary life included “subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric modes of being.”<sup>189</sup> Queer Idahoans mostly avoided that eccentricity. In her article about why she moved to Idaho, Amelia Bloom explained that queerness did not occupy a central place in her life: “I don’t particularly seek out gay experiences, people or activities, and I don’t necessarily draw my identity from my gayness.” Her distinctly queer experiences in Idaho and the few remarkable instances of queerness she had seen were outliers in an otherwise average experience of the area: “I don’t have many striking gay Idaho experiences to speak of. I guess that my life in Idaho is not really about being gay.”<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Janie Burns, interview by Heather Bourdon, November 28, 2011, MSS 338, ILOHP-BSUSCA.

<sup>189</sup> Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York City: NYU Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>190</sup> Amelia Bloom, “Enchant Me, Captivate Me, IDAHO ME!” *Diversity*, October 2001, 15, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

Queer Idahoans who stayed in-state attempted to make peace with the public's ambivalence towards queerness. In 2011, Janie Burns offered advice to new gay people moving to Idaho: "You are not in downtown San Francisco where anything goes. You're not in the streets of Manhattan where you can do anything... If you want to be over the top, this may not be the community for you." However, she believed queer people willing to accept Idaho's standards of respectability could find a good home: "If you're trying to lead a good and decent life and be honest with yourself and everyone you come in contact with—and be yourself—then I think you'll make great headway."<sup>191</sup> Similarly, Fred Marcum found that by leaning into his commonalities with straight people, locals accepted him, going so far as to pack the Lutheran church when Marcum and his partner married: "People see that I'm a normal person. I live a normal life. I work hard, have integrity, go to church and people are really supportive of me because I think because I'm not out there in their face." Marcum, a gay man born and raised in eastern Idaho, was excommunicated from the LDS Church when he initially came out. Of the fifteen men on his church court, most had been his friends before his excommunication. He recalled, "Every one of the twelve I knew gave me a hug, told me they loved me and wished me well. And then the three that didn't know me shook my hand and—" The interviewer cut in, "And then that's it. You probably never heard from them again." But Marcum corrected the interviewer, saying he heard from them "anytime I see them in the store. I'm friends with them on Facebook."<sup>192</sup> Marcum did not believe his friends' exclusionary

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<sup>191</sup> Janie Burns, interview by Heather Bourdon, November 28, 2011, MSS 338, ILOHP-BSUSCA. Punctuation edited for clarity.

<sup>192</sup> Fred Marcum, interview by Denise Bennett, September 13, 2018, MG 499, IQC-UILSCA. Spelling edited for ease of reading.

opinions overrode the relationships they already formed. Importantly, neither did his friends.

A few people, however, linked queer and Idahoan identities together as mutually constitutive. For Barbara Cole, a transgender woman struggling to find a community of other gender-variant people in northern Idaho, was tempted to leave by the possibility of a better elsewhere: “There are hundreds of people like me in Seattle or San Francisco. So I could just move, couldn’t I?” But Cole refused to leave, seeing the tide pulling her away as an oppressive force: “I feel that if I do [leave] that I am still letting society tell me what I can do and where I can live. Today I choose to live in Idaho.” She decided to build community in Lewiston instead of moving away, creating a support group for locals.<sup>193</sup> In 1997, YFFN chose “Absolutely Idaho” for their Pride theme. They denounced the minority of racist extremists in northern Idaho, stating that those people did not represent the state despite giving it a bad reputation. However, queer people and their allies represented a better truth about the state: “Those who believe in the equality of all people and equal access for all people, those who believe in sharing with and caring for all our citizens, including those who would deny rights to others, are absolutely Idaho.”<sup>194</sup>

Though many queer Idahoans pushed back against notions of their state as an intolerant, unsafe place, most of them still had complicated feelings about living there. They largely situated themselves in a landscape of hostility. Idaho’s most radical, mold-breaking queer people often moved away, fed up with the straight public’s stale,

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<sup>193</sup> Barbara Cole, “Transsexual seeks support groups in Idaho,” *Diversity*, June 1996, 12, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.

<sup>194</sup> “Pride 1997! (Diversity Insert) Published by Your Family, Friends, and Neighbors, Inc.,” June 1997, 2, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, DGLN-ISA.



uninvested attitude—leaving behind a less political, more ambivalent queer public. And despite a few efforts to change the whole public’s behavior—not so much towards tolerance, but action—Idaho has remained conservative. But that is exactly what most queer people expected. By holding the bar so low, there was little chance that the straight or queer publics would attempt to clear it.

## CONCLUSION

History isn't so much repeating itself as it is moving in a straight line. On June 11, 2022, a group of white nationalists piled into a U-Haul, preparing to attack a Pride event in Coeur d'Alene. Seeing militia members indiscreetly gathering into a truck in a public setting, a concerned citizen called the police, who promptly arrested the men on conspiracy to riot. Most of the 31 armed members of Patriot Front who joined in the excursion were transplants from other areas, arriving "from at least 11 states."<sup>195</sup> As an NPR story noted, "only one was from Idaho." Though the Patriot Front group never made it to the event—partly because of their militia aesthetics—other conservatives managed to harass the event anyway: "Several men carrying long guns and handguns walked around and throughout the crowd... At one point, several men, including one with a long gun and pistol, unfurled a banner that propagated a false narrative about [LGBTQ people] harming children." Shanell Huggins, a local ally, commented that their presence made a statement about the place itself: "I love Idaho. I never wanted to leave but they're making me question it." But the two most problematic conservatives at the event were arrested, and they were transplants from elsewhere: "Both had brought sound amplification devices to protest the Pride activities; one was arrested for disorderly conduct and the

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<sup>195</sup> Andy Rose, "31 people with ties to White nationalist group arrested for conspiracy to riot near a Pride parade in Idaho," *CNN*, June 13, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/06/11/us/31-people-arrested-for-conspiracy-to-riot-near-idaho-pride-parade/index.html>.

other for trespassing... Both were from Oregon.”<sup>196</sup> Naturally, the flashy, negative antics of bigots from out of state superseded coverage of the events’ success, which outshined other gatherings from previous years.<sup>197</sup>

I heard about the Coeur d’Alene incident days after the fact; I was too busy having fun at Rexburg Pride, a little-known event in its second annual iteration. Rexburg is a college town in eastern Idaho, notably the location of Brigham Young University-Idaho, a college for devout Mormons from around the United States. As I prepared to conduct research statewide, I had planned to travel to Pride events around the state, particularly hoping to find queer elders to speak to about their experiences in eastern Idaho. Unfortunately, Pride is largely a young person’s game, as I should have known from my previous experiences at Boise Pride, which generally resembled a concert attended by colorful high school- and college-aged queer people. Rexburg was no different.

The event, however, was wonderful. I believe, because people had few expectations of Pride in Rexburg in the first place, the city was free to cater to a more specific local context. A high proportion of the booths advertised queer-affirming local therapists’ offices, and small local organizations ran most of the others. Few booths catered to brands and businesses, as is typical at Pride events in larger communities. It

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<sup>196</sup> Odette Yousef, “31 members of the white nationalist Patriot Front arrested near an Idaho Pride event,” *NPR*, June 12, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/11/1104405804/patriot-front-white-supremacist-arrested-near-idaho-pride>.

<sup>197</sup> Quinn Welsch, “Coeur d’Alene’s Pride in the Park was biggest event yet, despite the threats, organizers say,” *The Spokesman-Review*, June 22, 2022, <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2022/jun/22/coeur-dalenes-pride-in-the-park-was-biggest-event-/>.

seemed—based on what I gathered from talking to a few queer locals—that a sense of community initially formed out of private group therapy settings, where participants were required to sign non-disclosure agreements. Furthermore, the event itself was sponsored by Flourish Point, a counseling service specifically intended for queer people living in Rexburg. But even though the community grew in a conservative, modest context, there were still folks brave enough to appear in fursuits and colorful outfits. I went with Tirzah, a recently-out lesbian attending BYU-Idaho, which still has policies in place that penalize students for engaging in queer relationships, even if it does not punish them for acknowledging their sexuality outright. Despite the university's repressive policies, queer college students appeared in droves. And even though the city itself votes conservatively, I saw no protesters at the event. Rexburg Pride and its success also received little news coverage.

Over the course of this project, when I told people I study queer history in Idaho, they responded positively to my efforts, excited to learn more. However, many of those same people, often self-proclaimed progressives, asked me if I found anything, and whether my findings were sad. One person even asked me if I was depressed as the result of my research. That response was part of what inspired me to write about this subject, in this manner, in the first place. One of the consequences of believing a place to be anti-queer is historical erasure. If people do not believe there is any life-giving history to be found in a place, they will not seek it.

There is also a high turnover rate in Idaho's queer communities. Queer activists here are constantly attempting to reinvent the wheel, as I did as a naive teenager in Middleton. Queer organizations are not always in contact with one another or with their

predecessors. In 2009, the editor of *Diversity* explained that few resources existed for her to learn about Idaho's queer history, and that many important local figures were slowly forgotten: "Every few months I hear a name I have never heard before. And this name is usually followed by comments lauding that person as a founder or major ally of the LGBT community. Why have I never heard of this person? Every time this happens, I feel like I have missed out on something very special..." She bemoaned that Idaho did not have a way to record, preserve, and discuss Idaho's queer history: "Ignorance is not bliss, it's tragic."<sup>198</sup> I concur.

It seems that although Idaho has made substantive strides in LGBTQ acceptance along with the rest of the United States, straight and queer Americans alike cannot imagine Idaho as an ideal place for a queer person to live—that queer existence in the state is whole and good in and of itself. We are not yet ready to imagine ourselves as whole without seeking an explanation of substance from elsewhere. After fifty years of mulling over the question, and putting an imagined landscape at the center of our queer lives, are we ready to move on? Is Idaho better than what people believe about it? Can it get better? Or is it good enough as it is?

Young, queer Idahoans express the same trepidation that their older counterparts expressed in interviews from fifty years ago. Austin Maas, a college student at the time of his oral history interview from 2018, explained that the pull away from Idaho still exists: "Many young people that grow up in Idaho have this notion of like escapism like they

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<sup>198</sup> Amy Stinnett, "Editor in Chief," *Diversity*, November 2009, 3, SpcCol. HQ75.D58 1992, *Diversity: Gay and Lesbian News for the 90s*, Idaho State Archives, Boise, ID. Errors corrected for clarity.

have to get out... I think I grew up with this idea like you have to leave Idaho because Idaho is such a stagnant pool.” Austin still felt the need to mold himself to the landscape, a change he described in physical terms: “There's still this thing that occurs on the two and a half hour drive up [to Sandpoint] where I'm sitting alone in my car and I can feel myself becoming a quieter version of me as I get up there.” He also expressed remorse even for considering leaving, knowing that his presence in a small town could affect changes that might not occur elsewhere: “I certainly have a regard for staying in small towns because I think that's important, but I think I'm also still one of those people that's in that face of like I'm very tired and I need to go somewhere else for a bit.”<sup>199</sup>

And truly, there are complicated consequences for this pervasive attitude that Idaho is second-best. It is not reasonable to expect that gay organizations in Idaho last forever; they can only last if they meet the needs of people who participate in them. However, the social fabric of the gay community that was so necessary in the 1980s and 1990s seems not to be necessary anymore, and many historic queer organizations have fallen away. As queer people—particularly those who emphasized their similarities with straight folks—found mainstream acceptance, the need to create queer spaces for self-protection and social support was less dire. Alan Virta, the most prominent historian of queerness in Idaho, called the end of *Diversity* the end of Boise's classical era of queer community from the 80s and 90s.<sup>200</sup> And truly, as far as Boise is concerned, queer social life today looks more like it did in 1975 than it did in 1995. According to local writer

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<sup>199</sup> Austin Maas, interview by Denise Bennett, September 24, 2018, MG 499, Idaho Queered collection, 2014-2018, University of Idaho Library Special Collections and Archives, Moscow, ID.

<sup>200</sup> Alan Virta, in conversation with the author, May 24, 2022.

Dean Worbois, who self-published the 2021 book *Gay Bars in Boise, Idaho, 1976-2021: A General and Very Personal History*, “Gay clubs provided community gathering places that were part of an identity that was growing nationwide. At one time there were five gay bars open in Boise. Today there is one. It is a testament to the pioneers of bringing the fact of homosexuality into the open that today few people care if a club is gay or straight. It should just be fun.”<sup>201</sup> A second gay bar opened recently, but that is hardly unusual for a city of more than two hundred thousand residents. While there are a couple public spaces specifically intended for queer people to congregate, most gay social life has reverted to small groups of friends hanging out together.

The project of making space—real and imagined—for queer people to exist in Idaho has been ongoing for decades. Making space for queerness in Idaho is a project of liminality, a place between what is real and what is possible. In many ways, that project is at the center of Idaho queer life, which I have highlighted in this thesis. But that project comes with a certain heaviness. Austin Maas hinted at his exhaustion, as did Sean Gardner, and many others I quoted. It is truly exhausting to wonder, sometimes, if it could get easier. I thought I could master that question by studying it inside out. I guess I thought my feelings of ambivalence about Idaho might be transformed through exposure therapy. I wrote several long papers about Idaho, and what it means to live here. I wrote a philosophy paper about history to feel less alone. And somehow, I failed to put two and

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<sup>201</sup> Dean Worbois, “Boise Gay Bars, 1975-2020,” email to Gwyn Hervochon, March 5, 2020, 3, Folder 7, Box 1, MSS 342, Dean Worbois Papers, 1982-2022, Boise State University Special Collections and Archives, Boise, ID.

two together. This thesis was always about marginalization. Not just others' feelings at the margins, but my own. And I am tired, too.

I am leaving Idaho at the end of this project. If I ever choose to come back, Idaho will be waiting for me, exactly as it is—exactly as I must accept it. No more, no less.



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