

IMPERIAL SOVEREIGN COURT of the WILD ROSE

Location 10155 105 St (Coast Plaza Hotel, formerly the Executive Hotel)

www.EdmontonQueerHistoryProject.ca



The Imperial Court of Wild Roses, later renamed the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose (ISCWR), began in 1976, when Paul Chisolm, known in drag as Millicent (Millie), was crowned Empress 1 at the inaugural Coronation Ball held at the downtown Executive Hotel.¹ Millie, who also reigned as Mz. Flashback 1, was one of a group of about ten people who, after attending a similar ball event in Vancouver, had begun work on forming an Edmonton chapter in what would later become known as the International Court System, founded by San Francisco activist and drag queen Jose Sarria.² For nearly fifty years, and in dozens of cities, chapters of the Court system have hosted "coronations" in which new "monarchs" (and Emperors and Empresses) are crowned.³

In August 1977, the ISCWR held their second Coronation Ball, this time at the Chateau Lacombe. Organizers such as Emperor 2 John Reid described the event to The Edmonton Journal as a "private social affair that included dinner, dancing, skits, and entertainment at local gay clubs."⁴ The event had an estimated audience of five hundred people, including "men dressed in formal evening attire, including top hats, white tuxedos with tails, expensive three-piece suits and ruffled shirts", as well as men in drag, "the dates of the men in formal attire."⁵ Edmonton Journal reporter Bob Remington noted how hotel patrons were "tolerant of the gays."⁶

Initially, the courts, including Edmonton's, were entertainment societies whose emphasis on fundraising was solely focused on paying for the following year's ball. This changed in 1984. The impact of HIV/AIDS on LGBTQ2 communities across the world was devastating, and government indifference forced these communities to fund both research for a cure and compassionate care for those who were often ignored and suffering from the virus. The ISCWR, like many other sister courts, rose to this occasion. In fact, the very first donation received by the AIDS Network of Edmonton's newly established Ross Armstrong Fund came from the ISCWR.⁷



Over the years that followed, many different groups benefited from the fundraising efforts of the ISCWR. Each year, the selection of charities is left to the discretion of the newly elected Emperor and Empress. Some of these charities have included the Pride Centre of Edmonton, Elizabeth Fry Society,

1 Today, the Executive Hotel is now known as the Coast Plaza Executive Hotel and has been the host for many ISCWR Coronation Balls.

2 Founded in 1965, the International Court System is one of the longest running LGBTQ2 charitable networks in the world. For more information on Edmonton's chapter, see: Ron Byers, "The Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose, Part 1: The First Twenty-Five Years," Edmonton City as Museum Project, November 18, 2020, <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2020/11/18/the-imperial-sovereign-court-of-the-wild-rose-part-1-the-first-twenty-five-years/>.

3 While perhaps not as well known as drag performance or the vogue ball scene popularized in the movie Paris Is Burning (1991) and in the television series Pose (2018-21), the Court system has been a mainstay of North American drag culture and one of the community's most successful fundraising initiatives.

4 Bob Remington, "Homosexual Ball Attracts Little Attention," Edmonton Journal, August 8, 1977, 19.

5 Remington, "Homosexual Ball," 19.

6 Remington, "Homosexual Ball," 19.

7 "Giving: The Ross Armstrong Fund," Times.10, 2 no. 7, December 1994-January 1995, 6, 21.

and diabetes, cancer, and Alzheimer's research. The ISCWR has also been a significant and long-time supporter of Camp Flyefly.⁸ In 2021, the primary beneficiary of Emperor and Empress 45, crowned during a virtual ball amid the Coronavirus pandemic, was the John M. Kerr Memorial Bursary. This bursary was founded in 1984 by Emperor 8 Rick and Empress 8 Mary Mess. Named in honour of John "Gamma" Kerr,⁹ the bursary is presented annually and has helped hundreds of LGBTQ2 students with their post-secondary education.

As one of Western Canada's longest-running LGBTQ2 organizations, the ISCWR has witnessed significant change in the community. Indeed, they have helped shape it. Initially, the ISCWR, like all chapters of the Imperial Court System, was focused on drag, which meant, for many, gay men. The ISCWR helped transform the definition of drag, welcoming not only drag kings such as their first female Prince but also straight, cisgender women and men into their fold. The ISCWR also made history by crowning Canada's first Indigenous Empress (Millie) and the first Black Empress (Gracie Spoon).¹⁰

Another significant milestone in the ISCWR's history occurred during the reign of Emperor 33 Sundance Lonestar and Empress 33 Marni Gras. One of Marni's many goals as Empress was to raise the public profile of the ISCWR outside of the LGBTQ2 community. Part of this mission was accomplished with help from then MLA Rachel Notley. Marni, Sundance, and other members of the ISCWR were introduced during a session of Alberta's Legislative Assembly. Marni was announced not only in full drag but also wearing her crown. Notably, wearing



a crown in the Legislature had been previously reserved only for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. The introduction of the ISCWR became an annual event and inspired courts in other cities to petition their own government legislatures for similar recognition of their good deeds.¹¹

Over its forty-five-year history, the ISCWR has had to adapt to changing circumstances more than once. In 1982, the city held its first organized Pride festivities in the wake of increased activism and community outreach after the 1981 Pisces bathhouse raids. Pride festivities did not include a march or

a parade that year; however, several events occurred across the city and at nearby Camp Harris. The ISCWR played a crucial role during the beginning of Edmonton's Pride movement. Some of its members sat on the Pride organizing committee along with individuals from GATE, Dignity Edmonton, Gay Fathers, the Privacy Defence Committee, and Womonspace.¹² Members such as Prince 44 Harry Schnitzel have also spearheaded initiatives to help



Edmonton's homeless population, with sock and clothing drives for Edmonton's CHEW project¹³ and the spread of "drop off" boxes to give food and water to those in need. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on traditional drag shows and venues created a need for the ISCWR to move toward virtual fundraising. Silent auctions and 50/50 draws tied to online entertainment enabled the Court to continue its long-standing mission of giving back to the community.

Recently, the ISCWR has had to pivot to address a growing decline in queer entertainment venues. The mainstream popularity of drag has made this easier in recent years as Edmonton has many spaces and pop-up events that are embracing drag as both art and entertainment. While the Court was previously limited to performances in places like gay bars and hotel conference rooms, they can now be found hosting virtual events, sold-out drag brunches at campus pubs and restaurants, and performing shows in parks, churches, and sporting venues. Some Court members have also participated in events like "Drag Queen or Rainbow Storytime" at the Edmonton Public Library and often make regular appearances at gay-straight alliances and queer proms.

When people talk about "found" or "chosen" family, the ISCWR is a classic example of the importance of this kind of queer community. With chapters now found in over eighty North American cities, the Imperial Court System is tied together by a shared history of noble and charitable deeds. In Edmonton, as in any city where a Court society can be found, this results in a tight-knit family, with all the frictions and feuds that implies. After all, what would drag be without drama?

The true importance and depth of connection can perhaps be best described by Empress 1 Millicent herself when she stepped down during the 1977 Coronation Ball at the Chateau Lacombe: "I find it difficult to put into words the love and appreciation I owe many people who helped me during my year as first Empress of the Imperial Court of the Wild Rose. It was a year of my life I will never regret and whose memories will stay with me till the end of eternity.

8 "Red Carpet Diaries." Edmonton Journal, March 14, 2009, F7.

9 John Kerr was a well-liked and respected member of the Court and community, who once worked the door at Club 70, welcoming members to the club for many years. See this feature story about John "Grandma" Kerr: Darrin Hagen "After the Pisces Bathhouse Raid: John Kerr – Dance for Grandma," Edmonton City as Museum Project, May 18, 2021, <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2021/05/18/after-the-pisces-bathhouse-raid-john-kerr-dance-for-grandma/>.

10 Ron Byers, "The Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose, Part 1: The First Twenty-Five Years," Edmonton City as Museum Project, November 18, 2020, <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2020/11/18/the-imperial-sovereign-court-of-the-wild-rose-part-1-the-first-twenty-five-years/>.

11 Rob Browatzke, "The Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose, Part 2: The Next Twenty Years," Edmonton City as Museum Project, November 25, 2020, <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2020/11/25/the-imperial-sovereign-court-of-the-wild-rose-part-2-the-next-twenty-years/>.

12 Valerie J. Korinek, *Prairie Fairies: A History of Queer Communities and People in Canada, 1930-1985* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 385.

13 Learn more about the CHEW Project: <https://chewprojectyeg.org/>.

It is also my wish to thank those people who helped in ruling over an empire which compares to none other. As my last request as Empress I, I ask only that you give my successors the same deep-felt love and warm appreciation you have given me. My continued support goes to these two people, and I hope yours as well. Once again, thank you, Edmonton. I will never forget you."¹⁴

14 "History: Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose." <https://iscwryeg.ca/history/>.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Learn more about the ISCWR's history and other milestone moments with this two-part series published by the Edmonton City as Museum Project. <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2020/11/18/the-imperial-sovereign-court-of-the-wild-rose-part-1-the-first-twenty-five-years>.

Read more about John "Grandma" Kerr: "After the Pisces Bathhouse Raid: John Kerr – Dance for Grandma," published by the Edmonton City as Museum Project. <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2021/05/18/after-the-pisces-bathhouse-raid-john-kerr-dance-for-grandma/>.

Watch the historic introduction of the 33rd House of the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose in the Alberta Legislature. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZbaHlnetOw>.

Watch the 1982 Coronation Ball entitled "Pirates & Pierrot," which was Edmonton's 6th Coronation Ball and the crowning of the 7th Emperor and Empress of the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FACuj9amKgA>

Read about the ISCWR's incredible history of charitable giving. <https://yegqueerhistory.ca/when-drag-queens-became-charitable/>.

Learn more about ISCWR and events. <https://iscwryeg.ca>

Learn about other chapters of the International Court System. <https://internationalcourtsystem.org>

