

SECRETS/PRISM

Original Location 10249 107 Street NW

Final Location 10524 101 Street NW

Secrets II 10341 106 Street NW

www.EdmontonQueerHistoryProject.ca



In the fall of 1998, Elizabeth (Liz) Gates relocated to Edmonton from Calgary with a mission: to open a bar for Edmonton's lesbian community. That bar opened in what was formerly the Hydrant Bar,¹ so named because it was located next to a downtown fire hall. By the time Gates was ready to open, Edmonton's LGBTQ2 nightlife scene had had a fraught and tumultuous relationship with lesbian customers.² At times, lesbians were outright excluded; at other times, lesbian events were relegated to mid-week or slower nights. While Club 70 was, for its duration, a space welcoming to both gay men and lesbians, other spaces in the 1970s, such as Boots N' Saddle and The Roost, originally opened as men-only spaces. The short-lived lesbian-owned Cha Cha Palace³ (located across the alley from where Secrets would eventually be established) was Edmonton's first venue focused primarily on women. Even though venues like The Roost and The Option Room hosted lesbian events, sometimes in partnership with Womonspace, it wasn't until Shakespear's opened in 1995 that Edmonton once again had a bar specifically dedicated to its lesbian community. When Shakespear's closed in 1998⁴, Gates moved in to fill the void and opened Secrets Bar and Grill.

Prior to Secrets and its predecessor, Shakespear's, Edmonton's lesbian community had the option of existing gay clubs, which predominantly catered to gay men, or Womonspace, a social non-profit that provided a safe space for lesbians, with activities like coffee nights, socials, and monthly dances since the early 1980s.⁵ In 1993, journalist Marilyn Moysa wrote a profile of lesbian nightlife published in *The Edmonton Journal*. The piece is particularly instructive insofar as it serves as a window into the wants and needs of a community seeking spaces of kinship and conviviality while also trying to negotiate and maintain its diversity. Moysa's profile focused on "Girl Crazy," a monthly dance event held in an unnamed warehouse in downtown Edmonton. Many of her interviewees aired indifference towards The Roost, with one declaring that she "hate[d] the place."⁶ Above all, Moysa's subjects expressed

the desire for multiple and diverse spaces for women. Sheila, who identified herself as a Womonspace member, stated, "Only a small number of women go to the gay clubs. There's so much diversity, there's got to be different venues for different interests. Straight women don't just go to Barry T's every night. We're not any different."⁷



Secrets Bar and Grill took its name from the secrecy Liz operated under while preparing to open. At the time, Edmonton had two dance clubs—The Roost and 109 Discotheque—and two pubs/bars—Buddys and Boots. Elizabeth built her space leaning closer to the pub side, with a kitchen immediately open to serve brunches and burgers. Secrets also had pool tables and a stage

1 Sandy Correia, "Want to Hear a Secret?" *Times*, 10, October 1998, MS-595, Series 13, Box 78, File 400, City of Edmonton Archives, Prince of Wales Armouries Heritage Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

2 Noelle M. Lucas, "Womonspace: Building A Lesbian Community In Edmonton, Alberta, 1970-1990" (Master's Thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 2002), 70-76, <http://hdl.handle.net/10388/etd-11042009-093447>.

3 This bar appears as either Cha Cha Palace or Cha Cha Place in different sources.

4 Ron Byers and Rob Browatzke, "History of Edmonton's Gay Bars, Part 4: The Expanding Scene," *Edmonton City as Museum Project (ECAMP)*, October 7, 2020, <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2020/10/07/edmontons-gay-bars-part-4-the-expanding-scene/>.

5 Josephine Boxwell, "Womonspace: Creating Space for Edmonton's Lesbian Community in the 80s," *Edmonton City as Museum Project (ECAMP)*, August 12, 2020, <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2020/08/12/womonspace-creating-space-for-edmontons-lesbian-community-in-the-1980s/>.

6 Marilyn Moysa, "Coming Out: The Struggles to Break Through the Stereotypes," *Edmonton Journal*, March 2, 1993, C7.

7 Moysa, "Coming Out," C7.

that could double as a dance floor. One of the most immediately noticeable aspects, when you walked into Secrets, was Elizabeth's motorcycle, which was suspended from the ceiling and provided many a patron with the opportunity for a great photo. When asked about the motorcycle, Liz aptly remarked, "Every dyke likes a bike!"⁸

By Pride of the following year, Secrets had taken its spot in the LGBTQ2 community scene, working together with Boots and Buddys on hosting the Flamingo Pride Dance. Elizabeth expressed her gratitude towards these other clubs, and how the community was collectively able to "let our fences down and work side by side."⁹ Secrets had also secured working relationships with local LGBTQ2 non-profit organizations such as the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose. Drag shows soon joined the line-up of entertainment, which also included DJs, karaoke, open mic nights, and bingo.



In 2003, Rae-Anne Schatz Wood and her partner Cindy Goodwin assumed ownership of Secrets. With their current location slated for demolition, the new owners took the opportunity to relocate and rebrand. Now called Prism, the bar reopened at the end of that year on 101 Street, while continuing to offer the experiences Secrets was known for.

In 2005, Elizabeth briefly returned to the Edmonton LGBTQ2 nightlife scene with a short-lived space she dubbed Secrets II. In all of Edmonton's years, this was the period with the most LGBTQ2 clubs and bars (briefly maxing out at 7). It was truly the heyday of Edmonton's LGBTQ2 entertainment scene.¹⁰

While Secrets II was short-lived, Prism continued on. Bar manager Natasha knew what Prism offered wouldn't compete with the nightclubs of the time, so they didn't try. Instead, they came up with a rotation of events designed to try to entice people to visit them before heading to clubs like Buddys or The Roost.¹¹ One of these events was "Straight 2 Diva", an evolution of the popular "Dyke2Diva" event Prism had been hosting. This new event saw straight men put into drag, typically as a fundraiser. This event was so popular that it was later adopted by the Calgary Eagle.¹² Prism would eventually be sold to Tracey Smith and Deborah Chymyshyn who became the new owners. Tracey and Deborah had been running the kitchen at Prism for about ten months before taking over the entire bar.

With their lease expiring, Boots N' Saddle closed abruptly, ending its tenure as Edmonton's longest-running gay bar. With every ending comes a new beginning. Already on the lookout for a new space, including one that would allow them to host all-ages events, Smith and Chymyshyn were inspired on the 2010 Queer History Bus Tour and took advantage of the timing to combine the spirits of both Boots and Prism into the opening of The Junction Bar and Eatery, bringing the Secrets/Prism brand almost full circle address-wise; The Junction was located in the former Boots N' Saddle space and right across the alley from where Secrets had originally been located, twelve years earlier.

Staff and patrons of both Prism and Boots came together to help with renovations. The Junction was something different from the many other incarnations of previous clubs and bars. Whereas bars like The Roost had opened as men-only and later welcomed in lesbians, or bars like Secrets opened with a lesbian focus but still embraced gay men, The Junction was, from its inception, a space for the entire community to come together. The Junction merged the legacy of Secrets and Prism together with the spirit of Club 70 and Boots. When The Junction closed after just twenty-five months, it brought an end to those intertwined legacies.

Although lesbian-owned spaces like Mama's Gin Joint and Pink Noiz would later open, they did not last long. Other recent additions to Edmonton LGBTQ2 nightlife, such as UpStares Ultralounge or Evolution Wonderlounge, geared some events towards Edmonton's lesbian community with mixed success. With Womonspace no longer active, Edmonton's queer women sought out pop-up or guerilla events through a variety of new and informal online groups such as Edmonton Lesbian Event Network and Sapphic Speakeasy. This is a phenomenon not unique to Edmonton, as LGBTQ2 bars across North America seek new ways to survive and thrive, and the communities in those cities find ways to do the same, often outside of bars entirely.¹³

8 Sandy Correia, "Want to Hear a Secret," Times.10, October 1998, MS-595, Series 13, Box 78, File 400, City of Edmonton Archives, Prince of Wales Armouries Heritage Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

9 Times.10, Summer 1999, back cover, MS-595, Series 13, Box 78, File 401, City of Edmonton Archives, Prince of Wales Armouries Heritage Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

10 Ron Byers and Rob Browatzke, "List of Edmonton Gay Bars," Edmonton City as Museum Project (ECAMP), October 9, 2020, <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2020/10/09/list-of-edmontons-gay-bars/>.

11 Jason Cleveit, "Prism Bar and Grill: Edmonton's Lesbian Lair," GayCalgary.com Magazine, January 2007, 35.

12 Stephen Lock, "Straight to Diva 2: Straight Guys Become Radiant Divas," GayCalgary.com Magazine, March 2006, 30.

13 See: Sarah Marloff, "The Rise and Fall of America's Lesbian Bars," Smithsonian Magazine, January 21, 2021, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/rise-and-fall-americas-lesbian-bars-180976801/>.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Learn more about the history of Edmonton's LGBTQ2 bars and clubs with this 5-part series published by the Edmonton City as Museum Project: <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2020/10/07/edmontons-gay-bars-part-4-the-expanding-scene/>.

Learn more about the history of Womospace published by the Edmonton City as Museum Project: <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2020/08/12/womospace-creating-space-for-edmontons-lesbian-community-in-the-1980s/>.

Listen to this podcast featuring stories about drag kings and Prism Bar & Grill: <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/ecamp-podcast/id1116746494?i=1000527686519>.