

# THE ROOST

Current Location **10345 104 Street NW**



[www.EdmontonQueerHistoryProject.ca](http://www.EdmontonQueerHistoryProject.ca)



Today, the Excelsior Lofts sits across the street from a squat, square building housing the offices of the Canadian Border Patrol. It is an unremarkable stretch of road, one which, without the recently installed Neon Museum, you would drive down without a sideways glance outside your window. This wasn't always the case. Had you driven down 104 Street in the 1980s, you would have found yourself in the heart of Edmonton's gay disco district, with the legendary Flashback to the west and The Roost to the east. These two juggernauts of LGBTQ2 nightlife dominated Edmonton's gay culture for over a decade. Flashback was born in one location, came into its own in another, and finally died in a third. The Roost was born, grew, and died all in that red brick square; all that remains now is a fading and long-forgotten rainbow pride flag painted across the front cement step.

For most of the 1970s, Club 70 was Edmonton's LGBTQ2 watering hole, serving multiple roles as a pub, dance club, and de facto community centre. Club 70 was a private members' space run by a community volunteer board. The founding team of The Roost all served on that board at some point, and as a result, opened The Roost with some experience in Edmonton's nightlife. Seeing the business potential in a new venture, Dow Hicks, Eugene Keith, Robert (Bob) Dean (aka "Hannah"), and Paul Tilroe established The Roost in the fall of 1977,<sup>1</sup> the same year that disco was dominating airwaves across the world with groups like The Bee Gees. Disco was of particular significance to gay male culture in the late 1970s and into the 1980s,<sup>2</sup> when it quickly lost commercial viability in the straight world with American campaigns like "Disco Demolition Night" and "Disco Sucks."<sup>3</sup>

Originally known as "The Cock's Roost,"<sup>4</sup> The Roost opened initially as a gay men's club. Paul Tilroe recalls the pushback against this exclusivity from Edmonton's lesbian community, resulting in the bar eventually becoming a mixed space for all genders, a focus which remained steady for the duration of The Roost's thirty-year run.<sup>5</sup> The first dedicated night at The Roost focused

on women was Wednesday, less than ideal for Edmonton's lesbian community, but it was a start.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Carl Austin (who managed The Roost from 1995 to 2001) notes that once the strong lesbian faction took hold, they remained steadfastly loyal, even saving The Roost from closing in the early 1990s when competition arose in the form of The Option Room.<sup>7</sup>



It wasn't long after The Roost opened that Flashback relocated directly across the street. The Flashback team had already been seeking out a new location, and it just so happened that Edmonton's two LGBTQ2 discos would soon be located right across from each other. Yes, this created competition, but also opportunities for collaboration, especially in a fight against the Alberta Liquor Control Board, whose regulations prohibited basic actions like walking around

1 Paul Tilroe, personal communication, February 18, 2021.

2 Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 40.

3 Although as cultural studies scholar Tim Lawrence clarifies, this backlash was not necessarily experienced as homophobic by those in the gay community. Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 423.

4 Ron Byers and Rob Browatzke, "History of Edmonton's Gay Bars, Part 3: The Long-Running," Edmonton City as Museum Project, October 2, 2020, <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2020/10/02/history-of-edmontons-gay-bars-part-3-the-long-running/>.

5 Paul Tilroe, personal communication, February 18, 2021.

6 Lindy Pratch, "#Nightlife," produced by Edmonton Queer History Project, June 9, 2015, YouTube video, 8:04, [https://youtu.be/3FQ\\_rgG7jmU](https://youtu.be/3FQ_rgG7jmU).

7 Carl Austin, personal communication, April 5, 2021.

---

the space with your own drink.<sup>8</sup> Intense competition between the two clubs also resulted in The Roost expanding to include a second level in 1988<sup>9</sup>. The two levels enabled The Roost to play with music formats and cater to different trends and styles over the years often with country music downstairs and dance music upstairs.

The Roost opened up its popular outdoor patio in 1980, the first of its kind in Edmonton. This patio, located at the back of the building, was expanded in 1985 and then again in 1995.<sup>10</sup> Not only did the patio provide a place for patrons to cool down from the packed and sweat-soaked dance floors, but it also provided space for the club and partner groups to host events like BBQs and community gatherings. Originally designed to have an entirely outdoor bar station, it was short-lived due to intervention from ALCB. As government restrictions changed, The Roost always managed to strategically adapt.



Nightlife, particularly LGBTQ2 nightlife, always comes with a dark side, and The Roost was no exception. Tilroe recalls how “many gay folks who were not as outgoing or good looking would hang out till the bitter end hoping to find a friend and other folks who clearly were unhappy and had drowned their sorrows.”<sup>11</sup> Austin, too, laments the amount of substance use and abuse often happening in the bar and noted how it could sometimes be an “unhealthy atmosphere for the staff” and the customers. Austin relayed how “LGBT bars are lifesavers and on the flipside are unhealthy atmospheres for addictive personalities.”<sup>12</sup> Another dark aspect of The Roost was the risk of violence and harassment. Well into the 1990s, it was not uncommon for gay-bashers to drive around in trucks looking to cause trouble for patrons. In September 1992, The Edmonton Journal ran a story in which then manager Patrick Ryley

bemoaned local taxi drivers pressuring The Roost’s customers for sex in exchange for a free ride.<sup>13</sup>

Notably, Tilroe recalls the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on venues such as The Roost, which rose to the challenge to help its community<sup>14</sup>. For over twenty years, the November long weekend was home of The Roost’s Annual AIDS Benefit<sup>15</sup>. This benefit performance, which later evolved under beloved drag queen Sticky Vicky, started raising money for Kairos House, a hospice run by Catholic Social Services, before pivoting towards supporting HIV/AIDS research at the University of Alberta.<sup>16</sup> One of the staples of the fundraiser was a “Cut-a-Thon” where local stylists donated their time and talents to give patrons \$10 cuts right in the Roost lobby. Austin isn’t sure if “The Roost was even given [enough] credit for the bigger picture of its charitable donations.”<sup>17</sup>

With any long-running bar, the “competition” changed over time. The long-standing rivalry between The Roost and Flashback, which had on occasion even resulted in staff from one venue being barred from the other, began to wane when Flashback relocated for a second time, this time moving one block over to 105 Street. That third Flashback location was short-lived, but equally fleeting was The Roost’s dominance over Edmonton’s LGBTQ2 nightlife. The Option Room rose to fill the void created by Flashback’s departure from the scene, and while it had its own legal battles and issues, Austin recalls that it came close to putting The Roost out of business for a while. In its later years, The Roost found competition in Buddys, which had opened as a pub in 1996 and rebuilt itself as a dance club in 2000. When the Roost finally closed, Buddys also enjoyed a short-lived dominance in Edmonton’s LGBTQ2 nightlife. Dow Hicks attributed The Roost’s success and longevity to its customer service. “We have been here so long that people really feel this is a home,” Hicks told Outlooks Magazine in the mid-1990s.<sup>18</sup> Austin admits that the competition sometimes got unfortunately ugly, with “bad blood between owners.”<sup>19</sup>

One way The Roost was able to compete so well for so long was its second floor. Originally added to help compete against Flashback, Roost management in the late 1990s also realized that the second floor was perfect for theatrical productions. Joe Achtemichuk, manager from 2001-2007, convinced Dow of this, and Dow was ready to try something new. Although the upstairs had been built for the massive Saturday night crowds, Dow was eager to see it used as much as possible the rest of the week. Starting in 1996, The Roost became an annual “Bring Your Own Venue” for the Edmonton International Fringe Festival, with plays such as Achtemichuk’s own “Yes I Am” as well as drag productions like “Priscilla, Queen of the Tundra” and “Place Commercial Here.” The popularity of drag at the Fringe had been pioneered by Edmonton’s Guys in Disguise, and The Roost was able to build upon that success. Achtemichuk had a deal with Dow:

---

8 Ron Byers and Rob Browatzke, “History of Edmonton’s Gay Bars, Part 3: The Long-Running,” Edmonton City as Museum Project, October 2, 2020, <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2020/10/02/history-of-edmontons-gay-bars-part-3-the-long-running/>.

9 Carl Austin, personal communication, April 5, 2021.

10 Shawna Mochnac, “Interview with Dow Hicks,” Times.10, November 2002, 30.

11 Paul Tilroe, personal communication, February 18, 2021.

12 Carl Austin, personal communication, April 5, 2021.

13 S. Erwin, “Free-Ride-for-Sex Offer Alleged in Letter: Taxi Firm Rejects Gay Men’s Claims,” Edmonton Journal, September 17, 1992, B3.

14 The Roost and Flashback played an important role in helping to support and mobilize community outreach and education during the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Both bars frequently supported a variety of community fundraisers and allowed outreach workers to share information and distribute safer sex materials at the clubs.

15 There is a discrepancy over how many years this event ran. A 2006 [GayCalgary.com](http://GayCalgary.com) Magazine article indicates it started in 1984. Other sources indicate November 11, 1985 as the first benefit. The 1985 date seems to fit better with the history of the Edmonton HIV/AIDS Network and Kairos House.

16 “23rd Annual AIDS Benefit,” [GayCalgary.com](http://GayCalgary.com) Magazine, November 2006, 30.

17 Carl Austin, personal communication, April 5, 2021.

18 “Better Service is the Key to Business,” Outlooks, June 1997.

19 Carl Austin, personal communication, April 5, 2021.

---

that after every successful show, he could use the money to improve the upstairs for future productions. In later years, the upstairs was utilized as a venue for drag shows produced by groups such as the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose (ISCWR) and Grant MacEwan College student groups.<sup>20</sup>

In September of 2007, The Roost celebrated its 30th Anniversary, making it the longest-running nightclub in Canada.<sup>21</sup> What very few people knew at the time was that this would be the bar's last anniversary. Earlier that year, Dow had told a few key staff that they would be closing at the end of that year.<sup>22</sup> Dow had owned the building for over a decade and had rejected many offers to purchase the space. One offer finally came along that was too good to pass up. As societal acceptance of LGBTQ2 people increased this led to the less obvious need for dedicated gay bars, which sadly meant business declined. "You can't pay the bills with it full only one day a week," one of the staff's partners told The Edmonton Journal.<sup>23</sup> The announcement to the public about the closure came late that fall, with the final party scheduled for New Year's Eve.<sup>24</sup> The reaction was immediate and felt far and wide. One "ageing gay man" in Gloucester, England, lamented the loss, saying, "The Roost was the best watering hole that I have visited, not only in Canada but also in the world."<sup>25</sup> At first, there was talk of relocating to a smaller venue. Unfortunately, the relocation plans never materialized. Paul Detta, one of the last staff to leave The Roost's employment, knew "it was time for the next generation to run their own party on their own terms."<sup>26</sup>



After a 30-year run, The Roost is fondly remembered as a pillar of Edmonton's LGBTQ2 community. A space where people found love, sex, intimacy, but perhaps above all else, an irreplaceable sense of safety, friendship, and community.

---

20 Joe Achtemichuk, personal communication, February 24, 2021.

21 "30 Years of the Roost," [GayCalgary.com](#) Magazine, September 2007, 42.

22 Paul Detta, personal communication, April 7, 2021.

23 McMillan & Gerein, "The Party Is Over," Edmonton Journal, December 29, 2007, B5.

24 McMillan & Gerein, "The Party Is Over."

25 A. Harley, "Opinion," Edmonton Journal, January 2, 2008.

26 Paul Detta, personal communication, April 7, 2021.

#### 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/2020/09/23/history-of-edmontons-gay-bars-part-1-the-beginning/>.

Watch "Reviving the Roost" by Vivek Shraya: <https://www.nfb.ca/film/reviving-the-roost/>.

Watch Edmonton Queer History Project's #NIGHTLIFE: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3FQ\\_rgG7jmU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3FQ_rgG7jmU).