

# “A place of our own”: Club ‘70, Womonspace, and the Creation of Queer Social Spaces in Edmonton

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**ABSTRACT:** While queer history is an ever-expanding field, academic attention has primarily been focused on larger cities such as New York and Vancouver. However, there is immense value in studying the queer histories of smaller, more traditionally conservative areas such as Edmonton; without also centring these areas in historical research, it is impossible to develop a nuanced understanding of the various challenges that queer Canadians have historically faced. This paper aims to contribute to the larger field of Canadian queer history by highlighting a portion of Edmonton’s (often overlooked) history.

The organizations discussed in this paper - Club ‘70 and Womonspace - constituted some of the earliest formal social spaces available to queer Edmontonians. Each organization addressed slightly different needs; Club ‘70 provided a space for all queer Edmontonians to socialize, whereas Womonspace was founded specifically as a lesbian-focused organization. The existence of these social spaces allowed queer Edmontonians to connect with each other and find community at a time when the broader political climate was not especially welcoming. Both organizations significantly expanded the social opportunities available to queer Edmontonians and broadened the scope of LGBTQ+ organizational activities across the prairies. By facilitating socialization and providing a space for members to be their authentic selves, both Club ‘70 and Womonspace contributed to the development of an interconnected and distinctive “queer community” in Edmonton.

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**KEYWORDS:** Queer History, Community Building, Edmonton, History, Canadian History, Cultural History

## Introduction

Edmonton occupies a unique position within the larger queer history of Canada. Alberta's tradition of political conservatism has historically made queer life in Edmonton particularly difficult, as many queer Edmontonians faced discrimination from family, friends, and their places of employment.<sup>1</sup> A pervading sense of paranoia resulted in Edmonton's "gay scene" which remained generally hidden, consisting mostly of "groups of people who interact on a personal level in small numbers."<sup>2</sup> Compared to larger cities such as New York and Vancouver, Edmonton's queer community was often viewed as underdeveloped. However, to residents of rural areas surrounding Edmonton, the city was a "gay and lesbian mecca", providing opportunities not available in smaller towns.<sup>3</sup> This duality highlights the importance of studying Edmonton's queer history; while larger cities in traditionally progressive provinces may have more 'visible' histories involving the LGBTQ+ community, there is immense value in documenting the histories of smaller, more conservative areas as well. Without centering cities like Edmonton in historical research, it is impossible to develop a complete and nuanced understanding of the diversity of experiences that queer Canadians have historically faced.

The organizations discussed in this paper - Club '70 and Womonspace - constituted some of the earliest formal social spaces available to queer Edmontonians. Prior to the founding of these organizations, many Edmonton's queer residents were isolated from one another due to the lack of social infrastructure.<sup>4</sup> Both Club '70 and Womonspace were founded out of recognition for this need for queer social spaces, although they each addressed slightly different needs;

Club '70 provided a space for all queer Edmontonians to socialize, whereas Womonspace was founded specifically as a lesbian-focused organization. Unlike other queer organizations throughout Edmonton's history, Club '70 and Womonspace exclusively focused on the objectives of socialization and community building; both organizations remained officially apolitical and were rarely directly involved with activism. Both Club '70 and Womonspace created spaces in which their members could express themselves authentically, and this had a tangible impact on the wider community. By facilitating socialization and providing a space to 'be queer', both Club '70 and Womonspace contributed to the development of an interconnected and distinctive "queer community" in Edmonton.

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<sup>1</sup> "Newspaper Clippings A - Photocopied news clippings" (198-?), MS-1214 Box 3 File 26, Womonspace Collection, City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>2</sup> "Canadian National Canadian Pacific Telecommunications from W.H. Munro, Managing Editor, Butch Magazine, Sydney, Australia, to GATE P.O. Box 1352 Edmonton Alberta, 28 October 1972". MS-595 Series 1 Box 1, Gay and Lesbian Archives of Edmonton fonds (GALA), City of Edmonton Archives. Quoted in Valerie J. Korinek, *Prairie Fairies: A History of Queer Communities and People in Western Canada, 1930-1985* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 224.

<sup>3</sup> Valerie J. Korinek, *Prairie Fairies: A History of Queer Communities and People in Western Canada, 1930-1985* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 22.

<sup>4</sup> "Newsletters" (1982-1984), MS-1214 Box 1 File 6, Womonspace Collection, City of Edmonton Archives.

### A note on terminology

Throughout this paper, I will be using the word “queer” as an umbrella term to describe people within Edmonton’s 2SLGBTQIA+ community. To echo Valerie Korinek, my use of the term “queer” as a general descriptor is meant to “capture the range of diverse experiences and identifications” that Edmontonians have historically displayed.<sup>5</sup> However, I believe that it is vital to describe historical actors in their own terms when possible. In some sources, individuals explicitly identified using a specific label (such as “gay”, “lesbian”, “homosexual”, or “bisexual”), and in those cases I have used their chosen descriptors to refer to them. When writing about Womonspace, I have defaulted to referring to members as lesbian, because the organization explicitly labeled itself as a “society for lesbians”.<sup>6</sup> In cases where a narrator’s identity is otherwise unclear, I have defaulted to the term “queer”.

### Club ‘70 (1970-1978)

Prior to the creation of Club ‘70, Edmonton lacked spaces that were exclusively ‘queer’. Other than cruising sites, and hotels like the Mayfair and Corona that catered to gay clientele, there were few spaces available for queer Edmontonians to socialize and meet others.<sup>7</sup> The formation of Club ‘70 was kickstarted by two “former Calgarians”, who, after a visit to the west coast in 1969, were inspired to start their own social club.<sup>8</sup> The development of the club was initially a collaborative effort between twelve people, but the project grew quickly, and soon over 53 people had joined to help create Club ‘70.<sup>9</sup>

Club ‘70 stands out in Edmonton’s history because it was the first ‘official’ queer social organization established in the city. In fact, the club’s lawyer speculated “that it was perhaps the first ‘registered’ Club of its kind in Canada”.<sup>10</sup> Members-only social

clubs like Club ‘70 were “a hallmark of post-1970s Western Canadian gay and lesbian community formation”.<sup>11</sup> In a region and period where social opportunities were extremely limited, venues like Club ‘70 provided irreplaceable spaces for queer Edmontonians to socialize and form personal connections.

Existing as an officially queer organization in Edmonton at this time was not an easy task. Due to the difficulties of acquiring a liquor license, the club was initially only allowed to serve alcohol on certain nights.<sup>12</sup> Because the club was constantly monitored by law enforcement, liquor regulations were strictly enforced by management; reminders, usually along the lines of “liquor dispensing MUST BE DISCONTINUED at 1:00 a.m.... There can be NO exception to this rule” were frequently published in the club’s newsletter. Drugs were also prohibited from club premises, and attendees were required to be 18 years or older.<sup>13</sup> These measures demonstrate just how diligent the club (and its members) had to be in order to continue existing – due to the frequency of police visits, any violation of city legislation would likely result in the club being shut down.

Throughout Club 70’s lifespan, its primary directive was to create a space for queer Edmontonians to socialize. In addition to their usual hours on Wednesday nights and weekends, the club frequently hosted special events.<sup>14</sup> Dances seemed to be most popular, with themes ranging from “Old-Time-Hard-Time Dance” (jeans and plaid shirts required)<sup>15</sup>, to “Hawaiian Night”.<sup>16</sup> Holidays, such as Halloween and New Years were also celebrated at the club.<sup>17</sup> By the mid-1970s, Club ‘70 had also begun producing musicals and plays. Their 1974 production of *Hello Dolly* was attended by 244 people, with guests traveling from Calgary, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, and Regina.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Matt Cook and Jennifer V. Evans, “Introduction” in *Queer Cities, Queer Cultures: Europe since 1945*, ed. Cook and Evans (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 3. Quoted in Valerie J. Korinek, *Prairie Fairies: A History of Queer Communities and People in Western Canada, 1930-1985* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 4.

<sup>6</sup> “Newsletter - Originators of Womonspace,” (1982), MS-1214 Box 1 File 5, Womonspace Collection, City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>7</sup> Korinek, *Prairie Fairies*, 227.

<sup>8</sup> *Club ‘70 News*, vol. 3, no. 1 (February 1972). “Club 70 - Newsletter” (1970-1972), MS-595 Series 11 Box 28 File 10, Gay and Lesbian Archives of Edmonton fonds (GALA), City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>9</sup> *Club ‘70 News*, vol. 3, no. 1 (February 1972).

<sup>10</sup> *Club ‘70 News*, vol. 3, no. 1 (February 1972).

<sup>11</sup> Valerie J. Korinek, “A Queer-Eye View of the Prairies: Reorienting Western Canadian Histories”, in *The West and Beyond: New Perspectives on an Imagined Region*, ed. Alvin Finkel, Sarah Carter, and Peter Fortna, 278-296 (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2010), 286.

<sup>12</sup> Korinek, *Prairie Fairies*, 228.

<sup>13</sup> “Club 70’s Second Year Anniversary”, *Club ‘70 News*, vol. 3, no. 1 (February 1972)

<sup>14</sup> “Club 70”, Edmonton Queer History Project.

<sup>15</sup> “70 News (1970).” “Club 70 - Newsletter” (1970-1972), MS-595, Series 11, Box 28, File 10, Gay and Lesbian Archives of Edmonton fonds (GALA), City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>16</sup> *Club ‘70 News* (Sept 1971), vol. 2, no.7. “Club 70 - Newsletter” (1970-1972), MS-595, Series 11, File 10, Gay and Lesbian Archives of Edmonton fonds (GALA), City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>17</sup> “70 News (October 1971).” “Club 70 - Newsletter” (1970-1972), MS-595, Series 11, File 10, Gay and Lesbian Archives of Edmonton fonds (GALA), City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>18</sup> *Club ‘70 news* (June 1974). “Club 70 - Newsletter” (1974-1976,1978), MS-595, Series 11, File 11, Gay and Lesbian Archives of Edmonton fonds (GALA), City of Edmonton Archives.

In an effort to give back to the community, Club '70 also facilitated several fundraising drives. In 1970, the club hosted a "Toy Blitz, in which members were required to bring a "toy or children's game" in addition to the usual entry fee.<sup>19</sup> The Blitz was a success - the club managed to fill a "large box" with toys, which were donated to Santa's Anonymous.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the most notable of Club '70's fundraising expeditions was a benefit dance hosted by the club to raise money to cover the legal fees of a Saskatoon mother who was involved in a custody battle because of her sexual orientation.<sup>21</sup> This benefit dance demonstrates the extent to which Club '70 facilitated the formation of community ties within the prairies, and in cases like this, acted as a facilitator for community action. Additionally, the undertaking of this dance highlights the strong connection that Club '70 maintained with other queer social clubs across provincial lines.

It is important to note that Club '70 did not simply exist within a metropolitan bubble. Because of Edmonton's status as a major urban area in Alberta, Club '70 drew people in from areas outside of the city as well. In fact, many members of the club listed addresses outside of city limits, ranging from Sherwood Park, and Bon Accord to cities as far away as Calgary and Vancouver.<sup>22</sup> Because venues that catered to queer people were very limited within Edmonton throughout the 1970s, the club relied on support and programming from social clubs outside of the city as well. Calgary's queer social club, Club Carousel, had an especially close working relationship with Club '70, as members from Club '70 frequently traveled to Calgary on the weekends to attend events at Club Carousel.<sup>23</sup> Announcements for Club Carousel events were published in *Club '70 News* nearly every month, and the clubs often organized transportation such as charter buses between the two cities.<sup>24</sup> Occasionally, the two clubs collaborated to host joint events.<sup>25</sup> After its establishment in

1972, the Gemini Club in Saskatoon formed a similar relationship with Club '70. Members of both Gemini Club and Club Carousel enjoyed "the same rights and privileges" as Club '70 members, and membership cards for both clubs were honored by Club '70.<sup>26</sup> Cooperation with other social clubs across Western Canada granted Club '70 members access to a greater diversity and frequency of events. The cooperative relationship established between these three clubs also indicates that Club '70 functioned within a prairie-wide network of queer organizations; the interactions between these clubs fostered the development of inter-city relationships, and to some extent, the creation of a prairie-wide 'queer community'.

Officially, Club '70 was a mixed-gender organization. Women actively involved in leadership of the club, and female presidents were not uncommon - "Miss C. Jacobson"<sup>27</sup> and "Miss M. Collins,"<sup>28</sup> who both served as president of the club, are mentioned frequently in early newsletters and meeting minutes. Based on interviews conducted by Valerie Korinek, there is "evidence that significant numbers of women attended... [Club '70] dances."<sup>29</sup> However, men still vastly outnumbered women in the club,<sup>30</sup> and well-intentioned outreaches to attract more lesbian members "were often compromised by their assumptions and stereotypes about lesbians."<sup>31</sup> Some attendees lamented that the club tended to be quite gender-segregated at times; in an article discussing Club '70, Barb Plaumann noted that it felt like "there was a contagious disease involved that the members of the opposite sex don't want to catch."<sup>32</sup> She urged members not to "split into even smaller groups", as it could harm the overall strength of the queer community.<sup>33</sup> Despite these difficulties, Club '70 maintained a "policy of inclusivity";<sup>34</sup> and in the years after it closed, many people remembered the club fondly as a space for members of both genders to congregate.

<sup>19</sup> *The Inside Track*, (Nov 1970), vol. 1, no. 12. "Club 70 - Newsletter" (1970-1972), MS-595, Series 11, File 10, Gay and Lesbian Archives of Edmonton fonds (GALA), City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Club '70 news* (June 1974).

<sup>22</sup> Club '70 Membership list (September 17, 1970), MS-595 Series 11, Box 28 File 5, Gay and Lesbian Archives of Edmonton fonds (GALA), City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>23</sup> "Club 70 - Meeting documents and mailings" (1970-1975), MS-595 Series 11 Box 28 File 6, Gay and Lesbian Archives of Edmonton fonds (GALA), City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>24</sup> *The Inside Track*, vol. 2, no. 2, (February 1971). MS-595, Series 11, File 10, Gay and Lesbian Archives of Edmonton fonds (GALA), City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Club '70 News* (December 1970). MS-595, Series 11, File 10, Gay and Lesbian Archives of Edmonton fonds (GALA), City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>27</sup> Minutes from Club '70 Annual General Meeting, January 17, 1971. "Club 70 - Meeting documents and mailings" (1970-1975), MS-595, Series 11, Box 28, File 6, Gay and Lesbian Archives of Edmonton fonds (GALA), City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>28</sup> Minutes from Club '70 Annual General Meeting, January 23, 1972.

<sup>29</sup> Korinek, *Prairie Fairies*, 227

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>32</sup> Club '70 News, vol. 3, no. 7, (September 1972). MS-595, Series 11, File 10, Gay and Lesbian Archives of Edmonton fonds (GALA), City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>33</sup> *Club '70 News*, vol. 3, no. 7, (September 1972).

<sup>34</sup> Korinek, *Prairie Fairies*, 235.



Many of Club '70's members preferred to be discreet about their involvement with the organization. In a membership list from 1970, some members are listed with no phone numbers or addresses listed - it is likely they chose not to disclose that information to protect their privacy.<sup>35</sup> Having one's membership exposed to the public could result in both personal and professional setbacks.<sup>36</sup> The club strictly prohibited the invitation of straight guests; members that brought straight people into the club were subject to a \$5 fine and 30-day suspension.<sup>37</sup> Although this policy may seem harsh, it was likely instituted as another means to protect the privacy and safety of members. The locations of social groups such as Club '70 were "purposely hard to find - you had to know someone to find them."<sup>38</sup> This emphasis on discretion was a common characteristic of social groups across the prairies and speaks to the broader social climate of Edmonton in the 1970s. Queer Edmontonians - at least the ones who chose to remain closeted in their daily lives - had a lot to lose if their identities were exposed. This characteristic need for discretion would carry over to Edmonton's later queer social organizations, including Womonspace.

A defining characteristic of Club '70 is the extent to which it relied on the support of members. *Club '70 News* often published calls for volunteers to help with the regular operations of the club, such as operating the coat check<sup>39</sup> and concession stand.<sup>40</sup> Renovations such as painting were sometimes undertaken by volunteers,<sup>41</sup> and members with experience in ventilation and sound systems were asked to provide advice on issues relating to those matters.<sup>42</sup> In 1972, the president of Club '70 stressed that "for the Club to operate at its capacity it would have to have the support of all the members."<sup>43</sup> Many members of Club '70 responded enthusiastically to these calls for support. In an editorial for *Club '70 News*, a member "Rodger Stone" stated that he saw it as his duty "become immediately involved in the various club committees and projects, and to do my part in making an even greater success of the club."<sup>44</sup> The extent to which members were willing to chip in and to keep Club '70 running demonstrates the

level of commitment many of them felt towards the organization. As the years went on, members formed a relatively close-knit community that regularly contributed their time, energy, and skill to ensure the continued operation of the club.

Throughout its existence, Club '70 officially remained apolitical - in fact, the club was self-described as "basically a social club and not really actively involved in gay movements."<sup>45</sup> However, it was recognized that some members were politically inclined, and calls for activism were sometimes published in *Club '70 News*. The club also interacted with G.A.T.E. regularly, providing them with a space to sell periodicals and advertise G.A.T.E events in the newsletter.<sup>46</sup> While Club '70 avoided explicit political affiliation, their working relationship with G.A.T.E indicates that the club was by no means opposed to activism; instead, they simply chose to focus on community building.

The existence of Club '70 had a profound and lasting effect on queer Edmontonians; by providing invaluable opportunities for members to socialize, the club helped to combat the isolation felt by many queer men and women living within the city. According to Valerie Korinek, the club allowed members to openly express and explore their identities, and "became a mecca for those queer people who desired exclusively queer space"<sup>47</sup> By providing this space, Club '70 helped to facilitate the development of an interconnected 'queer community', both within Edmonton and between prairie cities.

*"It might do everyone well to sit back for a moment, and fully realize how lucky we are to have a Club such as ours. I ask, 'what would we do if it didn't exist?' For the majority of us, it would be back to cruising straight bars, and we are all aware of what a frustrating and sometimes disheartening chore that is. Here we have a Club, that allows us to be ourselves, and that makes being 'GAY' a pleasure. A place of our own where we can meet on our own, and most important of all, a place where we are accepted for what we are."<sup>48</sup>*  
- 'Rodger Stone'

<sup>35</sup> Club '70 Membership list, (September 17, 1970).

<sup>36</sup> "Club '70", Edmonton Queer History Project.

<sup>37</sup> *Club '70 News*, vol. 3, no. 1 (February 1972).

<sup>38</sup> Korinek, "A Queer-Eye View of the Prairies", 285-286.

<sup>39</sup> *Club '70 News*, vol. 3, no. 1 (February 1972).

<sup>40</sup> *Club '70 News*, (February 1970). MS-595, Series 11, File 10, Gay and Lesbian Archives of Edmonton fonds (GALA), City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>41</sup> *Club '70 News*, vol. 3, no. 1 (February 1972).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Minutes from Club '70 Annual General Meeting, January 23, 1972. "Club '70 - Meeting documents and mailings" (1970-1975), MS-595, Series 11, Box 28, File 6, Gay and Lesbian Archives of Edmonton fonds (GALA), City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>44</sup> Rodger Stone (pseudonym), "Editorial", *Club '70 News*, vol. 3, no. 4 (May 1972).

<sup>45</sup> *Club '70 News*, vol. 3, no. 7 (September 1972).

<sup>46</sup> Korinek, *Prairie Fairies*, 231.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 228.

<sup>48</sup> Rodger Stone (pseudonym), "Editorial", *Club '70 News*, vol. 3, no. 4 (May 1972).

### Womonspace (1981-2018)

Formed in 1981, Womonspace was Edmonton's longest-running "social, recreational and educational society for lesbians".<sup>49</sup> Womonspace provided a much-needed space for Edmonton's lesbians to comfortably socialize and build community ties.

In the early 1980s, Edmonton's lesbians faced a distinct lack of social opportunities. Club '70, which had previously been a popular space for lesbians to socialize with the wider queer community, had closed its doors two years previously. The remaining clubs that catered to queer Edmontonians tended to be less than welcoming to lesbians, many of whom were becoming increasingly frustrated with the absence of queer social spaces open to them.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, women involved with organizations such as G.A.T.E. were often "ignored, interrupted" and patronized by their male counterparts.<sup>51</sup> When explaining the motivations behind the creation of Womonspace, founder Jeanne Rioux stated "there has to be space in this city for lesbians - we're here. We can't go on being anonymous and oblivious."<sup>52</sup> In 1981, a group of women organized a women's dance, the success of which sparked the official creation of Womonspace.<sup>53</sup>

The official goals of the organization were to provide a space for queer women to comfortably socialize, "foster a positive sense of Lesbian Identity", and "decrease the sense of isolation felt by many Lesbians".<sup>54</sup> Services provided by Womonspace included workshops, an information phone line, and a library. Special events, such as hayrides, roller skating, and self-defense workshops also occurred regularly. A main feature of Womonspace's programming was their monthly dances, which proved to be immensely popular amongst members.<sup>55</sup> In addition, Womonspace hosted "Lesbian Drop-Ins" every Thursday night.<sup>56</sup> These drop-ins, which were informal and usually consisted of coffee

and chatting, provided a "first connection with the community" for many women.<sup>57</sup> In recognition that children could prevent women from attending the drop-ins, the organization provided a playroom and encouraged mothers to bring their children along with them.<sup>58</sup> The attention paid to the inclusion of children demonstrates the extent to which Womonspace recognized the unique challenges that lesbians and queer women faced when trying to socialize with others. Regular meetings, drop-ins, and dances helped to "create a sense of belonging with others" and thus strengthened a sense of 'lesbian identity' for members.<sup>59</sup>

In order to provide these services, Womonspace relied on volunteer work - often to an even greater extent than Club '70 did. The organization was "operated and organized completely by volunteers",<sup>60</sup> and active members were required to volunteer a minimum of 12 hours per year to maintain their membership status.<sup>61</sup>



Advertisement for a Womonspace dance, published in *Womonspace News*, October 1984 (accessed via Edmonton Queer History Project)

<sup>49</sup>"Newsletters - Originators of Womonspace" (1982), MS-1214 Box 1 File 5, Womonspace Collection, City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Jeanne Rioux, interview with Brian Chittock, *Fine Print*, (n.d.). "Newspaper Clippings B - Original news clippings" (198-? - 199-?), MS-1214 Box 3 File 27, Womonspace Collection, City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>"Newsletters - Originators of Womonspace" (1982).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Lucas, 77.

<sup>56</sup>"Newsletters - Originators of Womonspace" (1982).

<sup>57</sup> Lucas, 76.

<sup>58</sup>"Newsletters" (1982-1984), MS-1214 Box 1

File 6, Womonspace Collection, City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>59</sup> Lucas, 31.

<sup>60</sup>"Womonspace Dance Coordinating" (198-? - 199-?), MS-1214 Box 3 File 17, Womonspace Collection, City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>61</sup>"Newsletters" (1982-1984).

In addition to the programming discussed above, Womospace released a monthly newsletter starting in 1982. In addition to day-to-day administrative updates, *Womospace News* published letters to the editor, poetry, cartoons, and classified advertisements. Member submissions were highly encouraged and made up a majority of the newsletter. Recurring features from early newsletters included "Book Reviews by Lindy";<sup>62</sup> and member-submitted poetry.<sup>63</sup> Letters to the editor provided a space for debates on various topics, including "pornography, disabled lesbians, lesbians and aging".<sup>64</sup> The high level of engagement that *Womospace News* received is indicative of the role the organization played in facilitating discussions and connections between members. The material published in *Womospace News* - whether it was the latest opinion on feminist discourse, or a cartoon about houseplants - contributed to the growth of a distinct lesbian subculture within Edmonton.

Like Club '70, Womospace was an officially apolitical organization. While Womospace defined itself as a "lesbian organization" in its own newsletter, they seldom identified this way in more mainstream publications.<sup>65</sup> Existing as a lesbian in Edmonton came with unique challenges, as queer women faced heightened risks of losing their children and employment if their identities were discovered.<sup>66</sup> To protect its members, Womospace "fiercely protected anonymity";<sup>67</sup> and remaining publicly apolitical was one way to achieve this. In some ways, Womospace's apolitical approach helped facilitate the development of a larger lesbian social network in Edmonton. By focusing solely on community building, the organization drew in many women who may not have joined an explicitly political group - whether they were still questioning their identity, or simply preferred to remain discreet about their involvement. Despite this, the topic of politicization was highly contentious within the group, and some members urged the group to take a more public stance on LGBTQ+ issues.<sup>68</sup> One such member, Elizabeth Massiah, clashed with the organization's leadership and was eventually expelled because her refusal to be

discreet about her lesbianism was perceived as a threat to the group.<sup>69</sup>

Although the group identified itself as apolitical, it would be inaccurate to portray Womospace as a group with no political affinity. Much like Club '70, *Womospace News* often published calls for activism from groups such as GALA.<sup>70</sup> Members viewed socialization and community building as a means to strengthen the queer community from within; as Jeanne Rioux stated in *Womospace News*, the organization's purpose was "not to split the gay community but rather to strengthen our half of it so that both the male and female parts will become equal in our path toward freedom".<sup>71</sup> Additionally, Womospace served as a jumping-off point for many activists within the community - as members continued to socialize with each other and develop their own understandings of a 'lesbian identity', they increasingly became involved with political groups as well.<sup>72</sup>

Throughout its existence, Womospace made a tremendous impact on the lesbian community in Edmonton. By providing a much-needed social space, the organization brought many women into the community and facilitated the development of a distinctive lesbian community within the city. The personal connections formed at Womospace had effects on the wider community; as Noelle Lucas writes, "social commitments are an extension of political activism... the personal is the political."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Lucas, 95.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>65</sup> Korinek, *Prairie Fairies*, 248.

<sup>66</sup> *Womospace News*, (December 1983). MS-1214 Box 1 File 6, Womospace Collection, City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>67</sup> Lucas, 82.

<sup>68</sup> Korinek, *Prairie Fairies*, 248.

<sup>69</sup> Liz Massiah, interview with Josephine Boxwell in "Womospace: Creating Space for Edmonton's Lesbian Community in the 1980s", *Edmonton City as Museum Project*, August 12, 2020.

<https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2020/08/12/womospace-creating-space-for-edmontons-lesbian-community-in-the-1980s/>.

<sup>70</sup> *Womospace News* (January 1990). MS-1214 Box 2 File 9, Womospace Collection, City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>71</sup> Jeanne Rioux, "Some Thoughts on Womospace", *Womospace News* (September 1983). MS-1214 Box 1 File 6, Womospace Collection, City of Edmonton Archives.

<sup>72</sup> Noelle M. Lucas, "Womospace: Building a Lesbian Community in Edmonton, Alberta, 1970-1990" (Master's thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 2002), 79.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 79

### Conclusion

Growing out of a demand for formal queer spaces in Edmonton, Club '70 and Womonspace occupy a notable space in the queer history of Edmonton. While both groups remained officially apolitical, their focus on social activities did not diminish the profound impacts they made. As Korinek argues in *Prairie Fairies*, the development of social spaces, regardless of how 'discreet' they were, allowed for queer Edmontonians to connect with each other and find community at a time when the larger social climate was not especially welcoming.<sup>74</sup> Both organizations significantly expanded the social opportunities available to queer Edmontonians, and broadened the scope of LGBTQ+ organizational activities across the prairies in general. By facilitating socialization and providing a space for members to be their authentic selves, both Club '70 and Womonspace contributed to the development of an interconnected and distinctive "queer community" in Edmonton.

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<sup>74</sup> Korinek, *Prairie Fairies*, 257.

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