

PUMPS AND CIRCUMSTANCE

On the eve of Coronation '95, we take a look at the bejeweled history of the Imperial Sovereign Rose Court

by Inga Sorensen

Listen up, you judgmental queers out there who think members of the Imperial Sovereign Rose Court of Oregon are a bunch of tired drag queens who mock and scorn women with their gender-bending and -blending play. They're here to tell you, it just ain't so.

"Unfortunately a lot of people in the gay community have that stereotype about the court," says 29-year-old Kimberlee Van Patten, a licensing specialist for the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality. "The fact is we are the oldest gay and lesbian organization in the state, we raise thousands of dollars every year for charities, and both men and women are active in the court. This is not some little exclusive club. We welcome anybody who wants to get involved, do some good work and have some fun."

On the weekend of Oct. 20-22, the Imperial Sovereign Rose Court will celebrate 25 years of electing its empress. The 1995 coronation will be held at the Portland Art Museum's North Wing, and special festivities are slated throughout the weekend. The high point will occur at the ball on Oct. 21, with the crowning of the court's 38th empress and 22nd emperor.

To the uninitiated, that may sound fantastical and far out, but think of it this way: Like any general about to acquire his fifth star, the empress and emperor are receiving the court's highest approbation for their tireless labor and demonstrated leadership abilities. All will enjoy the pomp and circumstance surrounding the respective ceremonies, it's just that at the coronation you'll find a few more men in drop-dead gowns and false eyelashes.

(Coronation participants looking to make their "entrances" are also warned that "no glitter, confetti, live animals, or open flame [will be] allowed"—a restriction not likely to be instituted during a military pageant.)

Van Patten, who has been involved with the court for 12 years and is its current board president, says about 500 people cast their ballots for the 1995-96 empress and emperor during voting that was held Sunday, Oct. 15, at Darcelle XV in Old Town. She says anyone 21 and older who resides in the tri-county area is eligible to vote.

The secret ballots are in turn gathered and counted by an attorney (this year Portland lawyer Karen Keeney is handling that hefty responsibility), and winners will be announced at the coronation, which simultaneously serves as the stepping-down ceremony for the outgoing monarchs.

The event is also a chance to acknowledge and honor the many hard-working men and women of the court who spend the rest of the year organizing events to raise money to fight antigay initiatives, to help those with HIV and AIDS, and to financially assist organizations such as Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.

In fact, the next time you are enjoying Portland's Lesbian and Gay Pride Parade or Peacock in the Park, you may want to thank the court and Van

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The reigning court (from right):
Emperor XXI Scotty Boxx,
Empress XXXVII Eden Express,
Princess XXV Poison Waters and
Prince XX Shelly

Shilts exposed to his fellow students what would likely be their first (and perhaps only) glimpse into the intricate world of the court system. This particular event two decades ago attracted 1,200 people to Portland's Hilton Hotel—hundreds of whom represented courts from throughout the west and carried titles such as "empress, emperor, duchess, czarina and baroness."

Shilts, who would go on to become a well-known reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and author of the critically acclaimed *And the Band Played On*, wrote that while "transvestism is primarily a heterosexual phenomenon, a subculture of gay female impersonators, or 'drag queens,' has evolved in most major American cities. Their complex social system is patterned after the royalty of the Middle Ages with strict court protocol and coveted royal titles."

"While virtually every city on the West Coast has a court system of its own—from Anchorage to San Diego, Denver to Salem, Ore.—Portland is the 'mother city' of the western court system, with the longest succession of empresses and most lavish coronations."

(According to Van Patten, the Imperial Sovereign Rose Court is currently one of nearly 70 courts throughout the United States and Canada.)

Writing in 1991 for the Portland-based gay and lesbian newspaper *Alternative Connection*, author Philip Staley maintained the court system in Oregon began "in or around 1958, within the hallowed halls of the original Half Moon Tavern, [when] a group of humorists created, what is, for history's sake, the oldest

'court' on the West Coast—the Court of Transylvania, complete with Queen Eugene I, some princes and princesses, a regent here, a regent there, and one Lord High Sheriff."

That "court" reportedly met its demise five years later, only to be replaced by a group known as the Pruitts, which "emerged and began plans for a Halloween Ball [where] a 'Queen of the Ball' would be chosen by audience appreciation.... More shows were to follow."

The Pruitts disbanded a few years later, but in 1969-70, an organization called the Portland Forum (which would eventually dissolve into the Imperial Sovereign Rose Court) sprang up and "[t]hey changed, through no plausible reasoning, the title of queen to empress."

According to Van Patten, in the late 1950s and 1960s, queens were chosen in quick succession during balls which were held every six months. In 1971, however, queens technically became empresses and were elected annually. (Emperors were added later.)

Patten for helping make those happenings a reality—for the past three years, she has produced an "Our Pride is Showing" dinner and drag show at Darcelle XV which has pulled in the \$1,000 to \$1,500 needed to cover the insurance costs for those events.

And remember to thank Imperial Sovereign Rose Court members the next time someone ushers you to your table at Right To Privacy's Lucille Hart Dinner—an annual fund-raiser attracting swarms of establishment queers. Court members have been handling those ushering duties for many years.

In other words, while drag performers may be pushed to the back of the parade (perhaps due to those stretch limos?), they are heavily involved in the region's most notable queer occurrences. Perhaps even more importantly, they are behind many of those less-publicized weekly fund-raising efforts for organizations and individuals in need.

Says Van Patten: "When we hold performances, we may pass the hat and each person will pop in \$5 or \$10. Or we may have a small cover charge for a show. It may not sound like a lot initially, but when

you consider we do this all the time—sometimes many nights a week—it adds up."

THE EARLY YEARS

In 1974, a University of Oregon student and fledgling journalist named Randy Shilts wrote an article for his college newspaper, *The Daily Emerald*, which chronicled that year's coronation of Empress Elsa XVII:

"Do you, Elsa Daniels, accept this cloak as the cloak of protection you are to give your people?" wrote Shilts. "The trembling brunette looked up to the enthroned figure before [her] and whispered yes."

"Do you, Elsa, accept this sceptre as a sign of authority over your people and the importance of your position as empress of the Inland Empire?" Looking to the glittering sceptre, the quivering voice again answered yes. "Then I, [Doni Lamé], 16th empress of the Inland Empire, crown you empress 17 of Portland and the Inland Empire."

"With those words, [she] placed a red jewelled crown on the head of the successor who knelt before her..."

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