

died long before he was born. All of San Francisco joined in the game just as they had in the earlier era.

Encouraged by his success at the Ice Follies, Sarria in 1965 founded the Court System both as an outlet for gays to make fun of themselves, and also as a political statement. Sarria felt he was free to stand up for gays and lesbians, in part because he had much less to lose than his closeted brothers and sisters. He was not going to be fired from his performance jobs for being gay, because being gay was an integral part of his stage persona and he was used to taking flak for his unabashed belief in the basic equality of gays. He believed that dressing in drag itself was a provocative and defiant act, which emphasized that it took courage to be different; from the first he included women in his movement, and Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon became the first duchesses.

His willingness to go public as a homosexual meant that he was a political figure, sought out by others who wanted to make contact with or get support from the gay community. He expanded his influence by nominating empresses in San Diego and Los Angeles and many other communities. Each year in San Francisco there was a new empress, along with a slate of offices including an emperor, dukes, duchesses, and assorted czars, czarinas, jesters, and keepers of this and that. Initially he had tried to appoint the court members, but soon gave this up, taking a motherly delight in each new court and empress. He, however, remained Empress One of San Francisco, overseeing her growing family and heirs, and the ceremonies, which grew increasingly elaborate. Sarria began an annual memorial service for "her" late departed husband, the Emperor Norton, in Woodlawn Cemetery in nearby Colma. Even the cemetery got into the act by putting a new marker over the grave, a marble obelisk declaring the plot to be the final resting place of Emperor Joshua Norton I, Emperor of North America and Protector of Mexico.

As the movement has spread across the United States and Canada, Sarria's influence has become more tangential, but the growth of the movement remains an indicator of the ability of the gay and lesbian community to make fun of itself. Although the Mattachine Society named itself after the court jester, Sarria's imperial court brought the whole royal family into the game, and in the process made gays and lesbians more part of the mainstream, even while laughing at themselves. Quite clearly, as the Stonewall riots later demonstrated, the gay and lesbian community owe a lot to the pioneering gay queens of whom Sarria is a prime example.

#### REFERENCE

- Gorman, Michael. *The Empress Is a Man: Stories from the Life of José Sarria*. Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 1998.

## Charlotte Coleman (1923- )

Roberta Bobba



Charlotte Coleman was more or less forced to resign from the Internal Revenue Service because of her suspected lesbianism, and, deciding to become more open about her same-sex preferences, she opened the first lesbian-owned bar in San Francisco, *The Front*. This was the first of many gay bars and restaurants she established; when one closed she moved on to another, including the *Golden Cask* and the *Mint*. She was not a passive owner but an active one, and her bars and restaurants hosted many a fund-raising event in the gay community and served as a safe meeting place for others. She was among the founders of the San Francisco Tavern Guild, which,

aided by the wholesale liquor dealers, served as an effective political force in opening up the bar scene in San Francisco. She was instrumental in the foundation of the first gay bank, was important in the development of the Gay Olympics, and was a strong supporter of the Daughters of Bilitis.

Born September 5, 1923, in Rhode Island, she grew up in the small town of Somerset, Massachusetts. Because of her growing awareness of her attraction to other women, she believed it best to leave home and enlisted as a member of the women's reserve SPAR in the U.S. Coast Guard. She received an honorable discharge after completing two years, and wearing the "Ruptured Duck"—the pin given to discharged veterans—on her uniform, she decided to see the United States, which she could do for three cents a mile, courtesy of the U.S. government. The government also gave returning veterans twenty dollars a week for fifty-two weeks to get back on their feet. After visiting most of the major cities in the country she ended up in San Francisco, where she decided she wanted to live. She got a job as a bookkeeper, where she spent her days, while her evenings were spent socializing in gay bars where she met many friends with whom she still keeps in con-

tact. In 1950 she passed a government examination that enabled her to work as an auditor for the Internal Revenue Service. Shortly after this the IRS cut back on hiring new employees and the New Employee Investigation staff, determined to keep busy in this slack period, made a decision to reinvestigate all employees who were about to be elevated to a new grade raise, of which Charlotte was one. She was soon summoned to the investigation office, where she found the IRS had collected a file four inches thick of information about her. The investigators had read her mail, tapped her telephone, followed her to parties, bars, and even on weekend trips that she had taken to Sacramento and Santa Cruz. Events in her life that she had been unable to explain became clear. For example, at a Santa Cruz weekend party, the hostess observed an unknown driver circling the block both day and night throughout the weekend. At a Walnut Creek party a heap of cigarette butts had been discovered under a window shortly after the party. IRS agents had recorded all vehicle license plate numbers and traced down the names and addresses of everyone who had driven to these and other parties.

During her interrogation, the investigators mentioned many names of people, some of whom she knew well, others with whom she had only a fleeting acquaintance. She later learned that several of her friends had been arrested but had not communicated this fact to anyone. Although the IRS was not able to prove definitively that Charlotte was a lesbian, they concluded that she was guilty of "association with persons of ill repute" and should be released. Even though the head of the IRS personnel department confidentially advised Charlotte that she probably would win her case with the IRS if she contested it, Charlotte felt that then everyone in the IRS building would know she was a lesbian, a situation that might have been difficult to confront in 1959. Shortly after she left, she was invited by the IRS to participate in an awards ceremony at which she was given the Superior Performance Award for her exemplary service to the IRS, one of three such awards given in California that year. Such was the life of a lesbian woman.

Using the small amount she had received from her retirement account, Charlotte invested in a small beer and wine bar in the produce area of San Francisco, which she named *The Front*. Because the area was deserted at night, it was unlikely that women would be seen entering the bar, and it quickly became popular—before it was demolished to make way for a massive redevelopment project. Before that happened, however, the Alcohol Beverage Control (ABC) agency had filed "morals charges" against the bar in an attempt to revoke the liquor license, mainly for the observed actions of homosexual men in the bar. Charlotte did not fight the charges because the building was going to be demolished, but when she opened her new bar and restaurant, the *Golden Cask*, on Haight Street, she had to use a friend's name (who became her bartender) for the liquor license. The night of the grand

opening, four police cars and a paddy wagon with sirens blaring sped up to the front door, and several cops swarmed into the restaurant, arrested and handcuffed the bartender, and drove her off in the paddy wagon. When Charlotte pressed the police on why they were arresting her bartender, an irate policeman replied that she had a "two-month unpaid parking ticket." Obviously this was part of a police harassment campaign that continued for several months. Police no longer entered the bar but rather arrested patrons as they left the bar, charging them falsely with being drunk in a public area. Charlotte bailed out her patrons the next morning and had her attorney seek dismissals of all cases, a demand in part motivated by the fear that the ABC board would use records of the arrests to deny her a license. Interestingly, all charges were dismissed.

Her bars and restaurants served as venues for many money-raising events in the gay community. The Daughters of Bilitis, spearheaded by Phil Lyon and Del Martin, used The Front for a St. Patrick's Day brunch. The Golden Cask was important in fund-raising for the Council on Religion and the Homosexual. She and her staff helped raise funds for the gay and lesbian community through a series of auction sales, but also sponsored the Memorial Day tricycle race to raise money for guide dogs for the blind. Still there was widespread homophobia, which was blatantly manifested in the city's police department who made a regular practice of harassing members of the gay community, particularly focusing on the city's restaurants and bars which catered to them. After the organization of the San Francisco Tavern Guild, aided by wholesale liquor dealers who did not want the lucrative businesses closed, police harassment decreased. Charlotte and various partners then opened a series of bars and restaurants in the San Francisco area including Gilmore's, The Answer (in Redwood City), the Campground (in Berkeley), and others. She sold her last two establishments in 1996 after thirty-seven years in the business.

She was very active in launching the first all-gay savings and loan bank in San Francisco, Atlas Savings and Loan Association, which, after great initial success, went bankrupt in the savings and loan crisis of the late 1980s. Charlotte still believes that it could have been saved if it had not been for the homophobia of the government officials involved. She was instrumental in raising money to support Tom Waddell in organizing the competitive event that initially was called the Gay Olympic Games. Although the International Olympic Committee refused to allow the use of the name "Olympic," the games have continued to grow and survive.

Since Charlotte has retired, she has become interested in creating a gay senior retirement home in San Francisco and is still talking and planning for it as of this writing.