

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Virginia Prince's autobiography appeared in her magazine, *Transvestia*, 100 (1977).
- Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough. *Cross Dressing, Sex and Gender*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.

José Sarria (1923-)

Vern L. Bullough



José Sarria early on recognized that he was a homosexual, and brags he screwed his way into the U.S. Army after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Turned down by the Navy and Marines because he was slightly under five feet tall and weighed only ninety pounds, he vowed to get into the Army even if he did not meet the height minimum. He believed he had found a way to do so when he became acquainted with an Army major whom he had met at several gay gatherings he had attended in San Francisco. The major had been interested in Sarria, but José had only flirted with him until he found out that the officer was assigned to the recruiting station.

Knowing what he had to do, Sarria contacted the major; the two had lunch together and then went to a nearby hotel on the condition that the major would approve him for enlistment. Sarria soon found himself in the Army, where he was sent to attend classes to be a cook and baker. Eventually he ended up as an aide to a high-ranking officer and from there became the operator of an officers' dining hall in occupied Germany. He also became an expert in dealing with the black market and throwing parties. Although there was a lot of gossip about his possible sexual orientation, he was accepted by most of his colleagues.

Born to an unmarried woman, Maria Dolores Maldonado, and fathered by Julio Sarria late in 1922 or early 1923, Sarria was brought up by Jesserina and Charles Millen, while his mother lived with another family as a full-time maid. In fact, she used her wages to buy a house and to move the Millen family into it. José's mother tolerated his early cross-dressing and encouraged his artistic development by having him take lessons in dancing, violin, and voice, and the young boy had dreams of becoming an opera star. His adult voice was a high tenor, and he could reach high C in his normal voice and so he never

had to camouflage his voice to sing as a woman in his shows. Unlike many other female impersonators, he always sang in his own voice.

When he left the Army in 1945, he enrolled in college and on the side became a cocktail waiter at the Black Cat bar in San Francisco, a Bohemian bar in the North Beach area used as a hangout for people on the fringes of acceptability in society, from actors to anarchists, including a significant number of gays, prostitutes, writers, and others. It served food, drinks, and irreverent entertainment. Sarria was the only male cocktail waiter and he soon became hostess and began singing and doing female impersonation on the side. He quickly became a star and a centerpiece of the San Francisco nightclub scene. He also became deeply involved with Jimmy Moore whom he had met at the Black Cat.

Angry over a growing estrangement between him and Jimmy, Sarria went out for a night on the town on his own and found himself arrested in the men's room at the St. Francis hotel by a vice squad officer whom he knew. He felt then and still feels that it was a set-up since all José did was use the urinal. Although the trial was handled discreetly, the fine was heavy and he had to sell some property of his to pay for it. Believing that the arrest and conviction ruined any possibility for getting a teaching credential, he left college without getting a degree. Feeling he was labeled a homosexual and a queen, he decided that he would be "the best goddam queen that ever was!" He was also a crusader. San Francisco, as did many other cities at that time, had a law prohibiting men from dressing in women's clothing with an intent to deceive. Although the police usually looked the other way on Halloween, as soon as midnight passed anyone cross-dressed on the street would be arrested, even though the bars and clubs did not close until 2 a.m. Sarria, with the cooperation and advice of attorney Melvin Belli, had tags made up for each cross-dresser to wear, stating that "I am a boy." He distributed them widely advising everyone that when the police attempted to arrest those leaving the bars after midnight, the person could clearly state that there was no intention to deceive and show the tag. This marked the beginning of the end of police Halloween raids.

Sarria became a well-known female impersonator in the San Francisco clubs. He was increasingly flamboyant; for example, once a week, he would ride in a sidecar of a motorcycle in drag and red high-heeled shoes to make a deposit at a local bank, and then go shopping for a dress or shoes. When he didn't want to be flamboyant he dressed in men's clothes. Still, he enjoyed the role of impersonator, not only on stage; occasionally, in real life, he would appear as a housewife. He performed in the first camp opera at the Black Cat in 1958, a parody of *Madame Butterfly*.

Sarria, known everywhere as a gay queen, quickly became an activist for gay rights, preceding the actions of the gay queens of Stonewall. In 1960, he

organized the League for Civil Education to do public education programs on homosexuality, to provide support for men trapped in the police sweeps, and to hold public meetings at which men facing discrimination and ostracism because of their homosexuality could vent and get support. To gain publicity for his cause he ran for county supervisor in 1961 on a program of equal justice for all. Although he lost, he became a San Francisco fixture.

Although Sarria had been the organizer and the financial angel of the League for Civil Education as well as its treasurer, the public spokesman was Guy Strait, and the two, after some three years, split apart over publication of a newsletter. A new foundation was organized in 1963 under the title of Society for Individual Rights (SIR) and the league disappeared. Both men remained active in the new society, and to raise money the SIR began putting on shows called "Celebritycapades" with dinners featuring female impersonators including Sarria.

Unfortunately for the Black Cat bar, Sarria's reputation led to a change in the nature of the clientele, which increasingly came to be identified as a welcome place for gays and lesbians. This reputation caused the state liquor commission to revoke its license in 1963. Because it could not survive without a bar, the Black Cat closed its doors the next year. Sarria, however, continued to fight in his own indomitable way. The Tavern Guild, which had been organized by tavern owners and their wholesale liquor supplier allies to fight incidents such as what happened to the Black Cat, began sponsoring an annual event featuring female impersonators.

In 1964, at a Tavern Guild ball, José was proclaimed queen of the ball. A week later, when he was asked as a San Francisco celebrity to appear at the opening of the Ice Follies, he declared himself Empress José Norton the First. He deliberately planned to be tardy. When he finally appeared with a court of attendants and in his capacity as empress, he proclaimed the opening of the follies, which brought the house down.

Sarria had looked to San Francisco tradition to establish his court, using the example of Joshua Norton, a prominent merchant during the gold rush era. After disappearing from San Francisco for a number of years, he reappeared wearing a feathered top hat and a blue military-style tailcoat, proclaiming himself Joshua Norton the First, Emperor of North America and Protector of Mexico. The amused newspapers treated Norton with all the deference due an emperor, and all of San Francisco joined in the game, treating him as a ruler in all social matters. Restaurants served him free meals, the board of supervisors appropriated funds for his clothing, and children followed him when he appeared on the streets because of his habit of throwing candy to them. Following his death at the turn of the century, his story became part of the folklore of San Francisco, and it was on this legend that Sarria seized, proclaiming himself the widow of the emperor who had

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, czarinias, 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-