

Bramwell E. Franklin a.k.a. ChiChi

August 12, 1930 - May 17, 1995

Bramwell Ernest Franklin, Jr., a beloved figure in Detroit's gay and lesbian community for over 45 years, died of cancer May 17, 1995 at the Hospice of Southeast Michigan. From the late 1940s through the 1970s he performed under the stage name ChiChi at bars throughout the Metro area.

Born August 12, 1930 in Detroit, Franklin grew up in Ferndale and received a B.A. from Wayne State University, where he also did graduate work in the sociology of religion. While attending college part time, he worked as a typist, eventually running his own secretarial service for over twenty years.

It was as ChiChi, however, that he was most celebrated. In the days before gay liberation, when gay life was centered almost solely in bars, he performed a specialty act which included jokes, comic vocals, and falsetto singing. "One might say that I impersonated homosexuals of a very swishy variety, but I'm not sure it was really an act," he said in an oral history interview in 1993.

In an interview a few months ago with Patrick Burton he described performing at the old Golden Slipper: "I used to sca-reeeam at the customers, especially if they've never been there before. For instance, if a big motorcyclist with a studded bracelet came in, I would stop the show and draw

everyone's attention to this person, and how masculine and handsome he was in his leather outfit. But isn't it a shame that his wrist is so limp that he has to wear a therapeutic device."

ChiChi first appeared, while still in high school, with a popular drag revue at Uncle Tom's Plantation, a black and tan on Eight Mile near Livernois. He soon moved on to LaRosa's on Farmer Street, the only other bar that would accept his fake I.D.

After he turned twenty-one he performed for gays and "tourists" at the Rio Grande, which later became the Ten Eleven, and was the featured entertainment for the opening of the Diplomat. During the 1950s and 1960s, when police harassment was routine, he often alerted the clientele to the presence of undercover vice. Franklin's last engagement as ChiChi was at the Town Pump in the late 1970s.

When Burton recently asked what he would say to younger generations, Franklin responded, "I think it's very important if you are gay to recognize it and not particularly try to hide it."

Known to people in recent years as Ernie, Franklin operated the Little-Read

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Book Store, which also served as a community center of sorts for the Wayne campus neighborhood, until shortly before his death.

Services were held Friday, May 18 at the Wessels & Wilk Funeral Home. Franklin is survived by his sister, Marilyn Holman, four nephews, a niece, and many friends.—*Tim Retzloff*