

Mensa Speech

A TONGUE IN CHEEK HISTORY OF MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE IN NEVADA

In early February, 2000, I was one of the members of the studio audience to watch the taping of the new Fox Television special "Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire." One of my judicial colleagues had been hired to perform the wedding which would take place on stage at the end of the show. Despite not knowing who their future husband would be, thousands of women nationwide had signed up as potential brides. Perhaps the prizes of a \$35,000.00 diamond ring, a new Isuzu Trooper SUV and an all expense paid honeymoon to Barbados in the Caribbean were also influential in enticing women to sign up for this marital adventure. The chosen one could keep the prizes even if the television marriage failed. After a lengthy selection process, this large group was narrowed down to fifty finalists. They were all flown to Las Vegas for all expense paid vacation while they worked on the taping of the show at the Las Vegas Hilton. These finalists would go through a selection process on stage in front of the audience. The unknown bachelor was watching from a special booth on stage and was not visible either to the women or to the studio audience. He had friends and relatives there to help him make the selection. Just in case, the prospective husband backed out, there was a substitute back stage to take his place so the show could go on. Finally, there were five finalists and one of them would be chosen by the unknown and unseen multi-millionaire as his bride. The five finalists were arrayed on stage in wedding dresses, ready to be married. Then the moment of truth came. The

multi-millionaire was introduced to the audience. He was Rick Rockwell, a real estate developer and business owner from California. He selected Darva Conger as his bride. The show's plans included having a member of the County Clerk present backstage to issue the marriage license and both parties had to sign a prenuptial agreement in the event that the marriage failed down the road. The paperwork was done, no one backed out and, voila, they were married in the show's grand finale. The show aired on Fox Television one week later. It was a ratings success, drawing some 22 million viewers. Fox even planned to rerun the show soon after its original airing. However, the critics considered it a bomb and Fox Television received a torrent of criticism for the show. The National Organization of Women gave Fox Television its "Network of Shame" award. Rick and Darva left on their all expense paid honeymoon. It was no honeymoon. The whole relationship fell apart rather quickly. They stayed in separate rooms the whole time. They came back to the United States to more controversy and problems. Like many people, it turns out that Rick Rockwell had a past. In early 1991, a former girlfriend, Debbie Goyne, had filed an application for a domestic violence protection order against him in the Los Angeles County Superior Court. Among the things she said in her application for a restraining order is this gem: "I am filing this restraining order because, having lived with and known Rick for 1 1/2 years, it is my belief that his elevator doesn't go all the way to the top floor." Darva did not want to go to any floor with Rick Rockwell. She decided during the honeymoon to seek an annulment. She got her annulment right here in Las Vegas a few weeks later. It was also something of a media circus. The annulment was granted on the grounds of fraud - she knew nothing about the prior restraining order against him by Debbie Goyne, and would never have married him had she known the truth. Life after television was not easy for Darva. She lost her job as an emergency room nurse in California and was the object of much scorn in the tabloids and gossip sheets. She had to hustle to make some money including doing a photo spread for Playboy

magazine and was featured in several other magazines. Darva did ultimately get her life back in order. She was later able to get a job as a nurse at a hospital in Ventura County, California. There she met a paramedic and married him about a year later. But that doesn't end her involvement with Las Vegas and weddings. Darva is scheduled to be the hostess of a new television show, Vegas Weddings Unveiled, which is supposed to air this summer. She will narrate introductions to some elaborate and unusual Las Vegas weddings. That, my friends, is just a tease, a sampler of the stories we have for you today. Nevada has a long and rich history when it comes to weddings and divorces. Las Vegas is rightfully known as the wedding capital of the world. Since the start of the new millennium, the Clark County Clerk has been issuing over 120,000 wedding licenses each year. In 2003, our Family Court issued just over 12,000 divorces. This comparison has remained rather consistent: about 10 marriages for each divorce. I have with me today Charolette Richards, the owner and operator of the Little White Wedding Chapel in downtown Las Vegas. She has been performing weddings for over 40 years including weddings of many of the rich and famous. She will go through the history of the wedding trade in Nevada. Then I will finish with a history of the divorce trade in Nevada. In preparing this presentation, I had the able assistance of Guy Rocha, the state archivist and Mella Harmon, one of his able assistants. She wrote her master's thesis on a slice of the history of the divorce trade in Reno. She is trying to write a book about the marriage and divorce trades in Nevada and generously shared with me the rough drafts of five chapters of her materials.

They also referred me to a few older books on these subjects in Nevada history. I enjoyed reading these materials about my adopted state. This presentation is intended to be entertaining. We are going to drop names, lots of names, and we will be shameless in doing so. The facts and myths of history are a source of both enjoyment and education. Without further ado, here is Charolette Richards to talk about weddings in Nevada.

THE DIVORCE BUSINESS - ECONOMICS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Nevada became a state in 1864 during the Civil War. It was first given a separate territorial status in 1861. Nevada was carved out of the Utah and New Mexico territories. At that time, Nevada had an extremely sparse population and the early settlements were in Reno - Carson City area. The big reasons for Nevada statehood was gold and silver. Gold and silver had been discovered in the Carson City area during the 1850's and many miners and prospectors who had rushed to California during the gold rush days there reversed course and came to Nevada. Virginia City was born during that time and was a very wild and woolly place back then. Today it is a colorful tourist town. The Nevada Territorial Legislature enacted a marriage and divorce act in its first session in the fall of 1861. The first known divorce in Nevada occurred in 1863. For the latter part of the 1800s, much of the divorce action took place in Virginia City. Women filed most of the divorce petitions back then, mostly on the grounds of cruelty followed by desertion and neglect. Given that Virginia City was populated with a lot of rough and tumble folks, transients, miners, etc. and with all the drinking and prostitution going on, we can understand the reasons for these causes of divorce. Divorce and repartnering were readily accepted in the local society. By the early 1880s, the mining interests had petered out in Virginia City. There was nothing unusual about Nevada and divorces until the turn of the century in 1900. That year is considered the birth of the divorce business in northern Nevada. It was in 1900 that the Second Earl Russell, an English peer, had traveled all the way to Nevada where he took up residence by Lake Tahoe to start his six month residency for the purpose of obtaining a divorce. Lord Russell wished to divorce his present wife and replace her with a young woman named Mollie Sommerfield. She came with him. As soon as his divorce became final, he married Mollie and they returned to England. They did not live happily ever after.

Lady Russell had filed for divorce in England on the grounds of bigamy. As Lord Russell and Mollie stepped from the train in London, he was arrested and charged with bigamy. His honeymoon with Mollie was deferred until he served a three month prison sentence and then waited for the English divorce to become final. Lord Russell and Mollie were divorced in 1913. Lord Russell's marital woes caused much publicity but it was two other developments a few years later that really kick started the Reno divorce business. In 1905, another famous and well publicized divorce case came to Reno. Laura Corey was the wife of William Corey, president of U.S. Steel Corporation and one of the world's richest men. She came to Reno for a divorce. Nevada's residency requirement of six months was the shortest residency period of any state in the union at that time and that made Nevada an attractive place to come for a divorce.

The Corey case was ready made fodder for the gossip columnists and newspapers. The Corey were wealthy, prominent and - Mr. Corey was leaving his faithful wife of 18 years to marry actress Mabelle Gilman.

Laura was in Reno establishing her residency period and the newspapers prominently mentioned both in their news and gossip columns. Laura reportedly got a divorce settlement somewhere between \$2,000,000.00 and \$3,000,000.00 and she got her final decree of divorce in 1906. Many people now saw the advantages of a Nevada divorce and the boom was on. So too did some lawyers. In January, 1907, New York divorce attorney William H. Schmitzer moved his law practice to Reno. A few lawyers had attempted to advertise their divorce services in a modest fashion. However, Schmitzer did it up big time. He wrote and distributed a pamphlet advertising his divorce business in Reno. He placed ads for his pamphlet in eastern newspapers and on the show curtains in theatres. This did not sit well with other attorneys and the Washoe County (Reno) bar association started disbarment proceedings against him. He was disbarred in 1911 but was reinstated later on in his career. Some lawyers felt Reno would get a bad

reputation from the notoriety of advertising for divorce business in Nevada.

The lawyers didn't have to worry about advertising Reno as a divorce mecca.

The news media was starting to do it for them. An article was published in October, 1909 in Munsey's Magazine proclaiming Reno as the new divorce headquarters of the United States. This was considered a positive article and the author touted Reno as the place to go for divorce. Even back then, there was considerable public debate about the morality of divorce. The era between 1900 and World War I is generally known as the Progressive Era. Progressives were concerned about the morality of Americans and divorce was viewed as a contributor to the moral decay of society. Progressives wanted a uniform national law on divorce that would stop the practices of the migratory divorce trade and reduce the nation's divorce rate. The citizens of Reno were part of that national debate. Many were concerned about Reno's image as a divorce destination and its negative effects on the populace and the state's reputation. In 1913, a group of Reno citizens lobbied the Nevada Legislature to lengthen the state's residency requirement from six months to one year. The bill passed. So too did Reno's prosperity. Reno went into an economic slump.

In 1915, the Nevada Legislature reversed itself under pressure from lawyers and business owners and restored the six month residency period. The Reno divorce business picked right back up and re-established itself. In 1920, another sensational divorce case created a lot of newspaper headlines and some legal controversies. Silent screen actress Mary Pickford was known then as "America's sweetheart." While she may have been America's sweetheart, she was no longer in love with her then husband, Owen Moore. She wanted a divorce so she could marry her real flame, the flamboyant and famous actor Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. She hired Reno lawyer Patrick McCarran to handle her divorce case. He met her at the Reno train station on February 15, 1920

and took her to the Campbell Ranch outside the small town of Genoa, about 45 miles south of Reno. Not too long after her arrival in Genoa, he filed a petition for divorce in Douglas County courthouse. Mary had been in Nevada only a few days and certainly not for the normal six months that others had to wait before filing. Mary said that she came to Genoa for the ostensible purpose of regaining her health. Whether it was coincidental or not, Owen Moore had come to nearby Virginia City to shoot a film there. Somehow, he just seemed to wander into Douglass County one day and was amazingly served with the divorce papers while in that county. Mary Pickford, being the highly skilled actress that she was, convinced the local District Judge that she indeed had come to Genoa to restore her health and that she had nothing to do with her husband coming into Douglass County a few days later and being served with divorce papers. Her divorce was granted on March 2, 1920. The recuperative effects and healing powers of a divorce decree are incredible. She left Nevada the very next morning and married Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. later that month. Well, this caused a big uproar back then. Her case went to the Nevada Supreme Court in 1922. The court refused to set aside her decree. Patrick McCarran, then regarded as a highly skilled lawyer, had found a loophole in the Nevada statutes that enabled Mary Pickford to get her divorce without having to wait the six month residency period. The 1923 Nevada Legislature closed that loophole and the residency requirement was made the same for everyone and every case. Mr. McCarran went on to become a U.S. Senator from Nevada from 1933 to 1954. McCarran Airport in Las Vegas is named after him. Reno had emerged during this time as the greatest divorce colony in America. Several newspaper and magazine articles were published touting Reno's advantages as a divorce colony. George Bond published a book in 1921 entitled *Six Months in Reno*. It provided all the basic information about going to Reno for a divorce. Not everyone in Reno was enamored of the divorce trade and Reno's reputation. Lilyan Stratton published a book in 1921 entitled *Reno: A Book of Short Stories and Information*.

This book is available on the internet and can be downloaded for free. I read parts of her materials for this presentation. Lilyan Stratton's protestations were for naught. The publicity mill that promoted Reno's divorce trade overwhelmed any contrarian opinions. Reno was elevated even higher in 1924 when a little book written by James H. Bolin entitled *Reno, Nevada, the Holy City of the World* was published. He started his book thusly: "This booklet is offered with no apologies. It is extended with the view of showing the western spirit still prevails in Reno, Nevada, the divorce center of the world." In 1927, the Nevada Legislature took another look at Nevada's divorce laws. There was some fear of a threat to Nevada's supremacy as a divorce capital from France and Mexico. There was also something of a divorce trade war in the United States since the end of World War I between Nevada, Idaho and Arkansas. The Legislature reduced Nevada's residency period from six to three months. This change was controversial in Nevada. Some newspapers criticized the changes. None of the criticism mattered of course since the divorce trade only got better. The number of divorces went up dramatically after that change in the law. More articles continued to be published about Reno as the divorce capital of the United States. One inspired author even came up with a motto for Reno: "Marry in haste - repent in Reno." In 1929 came the Great Depression. It was hard times for everyone. Nevada suffered too and, like the other states, the Legislature looked around for some answers for its citizens. In 1931, the Nevada Legislature passed two very major laws. First, it legalized gambling. Gambling had been around for a long time in Nevada but never in a completely legal status and in an organized fashion. The second major piece of legislation was the shortening of the divorce residency period from three months to six weeks. It was then and still remains to this day the shortest residency period in the United States. The effects on the Reno economy were electrifying. For nearly 30 years, Reno had been establishing various ways of housing the hundreds of people who came to Reno to get divorced. A number of hotels had been built. They ranged from low to high class in quality, price and amenities. People turned private homes into boarding

houses. Some people even rented their house outright and went to live with relatives or friends. Renoites also built and operated boarding houses, rooming houses, apartment houses, auto courts, camp grounds, divorce ranches and the YMCA. When the residency law changed in 1931, Reno was simply flooded with people. There were several tent camps set up along the Virginia Street and the Truckee River. People lived in these tent camps until rooms in more suitable housing was available. Some of the more enterprising business people built and operated guest ranches or dude ranches. Most were south of Reno where there were pleasant meadows and fertile land in the shadows of the Sierra Nevada mountains. It was and still is some of the most beautiful land in Nevada today. These dude ranches were mostly for the well to do people who traveled to Reno from the larger cities for their divorces. These ranches offered a variety of amenities for their guests: escorted horseback rides, hot springs, swimming, hunting, trap shooting and good home cooked meals. Prohibition did not have much effect on Reno. Alcohol was generally available through discreet channels and in private places. After prohibition was repealed in 1934, several legitimate bars and liquor distributors went into business in Reno.

Despite its distant location, traveling to Reno was not difficult. The Southern Pacific Railroad came to Reno from both east and west. The Greyhound bus made 6 arrivals and departures each day. United Airlines flew into Reno. And still others traveled to Reno by private car. Several lawyers in the divorce trade bought hotels and/or boarding houses and set their wives up to manage the properties. Other lawyers owned rental properties or rented their own homes out to clients. In March, 1935, a story swept through Reno that Barbara Woolworth, the dime store heiress, was coming to Reno to get a divorce from her then husband, Prince Alexis Mdivani. It was well known that Miss Barbara was worth about \$50 million and every Reno divorce lawyer was drooling to get her case. She arrived in Reno on March 30, 1935. She took her case to a prominent Reno law firm for an estimated fee of some \$15,000 to \$20,000. One of the senior

partners turned over his personal residence to Miss Barbara for the duration of her residency period. Reno was even an international mecca for divorces. One researcher has found evidence in the court records that during the 1930s, divorcing parties came from at least 32 foreign countries. Reno tried to accommodate various ethnic groups and cultural interests. One prominent group that often came to Reno - New York jews. There was a rabbi in Reno and others who offered various services to Jewish divorce seekers. Reno's first kosher delicatessen opened for business on July 3, 1931. Not everyone who came to Reno for a divorce was well to do. The majority of the divorce seekers were from the middle class and they often had to work while in Reno in order to pay their living expenses and legal fees. The divorce trade and the newly legalized gambling did work to create a significant number of jobs in Reno. The employment was mainly in clerical work and in the casinos. Some of the divorcees stayed in Reno after their divorces to live. There was a lot of time to kill while waiting out the residency period. The night life in Reno was active.

Many of the divorcing men and women were a long way from home and since many did not intend to stay in Reno after the divorce, they felt free to indulge their lustful tendencies. This helped cement Reno's reputation as a "sin city." This seems to be nothing new for Nevada. Even today, the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority spends millions of dollars on its latest ad campaign touting Las Vegas as an adult entertainment mecca. The current slogan is "what goes on in Vegas stays in Vegas." During that era, there were several cowboys that worked on the ranches near Reno. Some of those ranches were the dude ranches or guest ranches where the more well to do passed their waiting time. There were cowboys who did more herding of the guests than herding of real cattle.

According to one author, there were 19 dude ranches located near Reno that catered to the divorce residency trade. Many of these ranches would send a car or wagon to the local train stations to meet and pick up the new future divorcees arriving on the train from either the east or west coast. They often had cowboys dressed up in western regalia to meet their customers at the train station and to

escort them to the dude ranch. One well known dude ranch in the 1930s went by the name "Lazy Me." However, this ranch was known for its good looking cowboys and its nickname was "Lay Me Easy." I wonder why. Another dude ranch that achieved some degree of fame was the Flying M E. This place catered to the famous and well to do. It was formerly known as the Tumbling DW after one of its owners, Dore Wood. Well it just so happened that Mr. Wood became enamored of a young and soon to be wealthy divorcee and he and Mrs Wood got divorced themselves. His ex-wife, Emmy, got the ranch in the divorced and soon changed its name to the Flying M E. It was considered the exclusive of all the dude ranches that operated in Nevada. It catered to an older and wealthier clientele. References were required and walk-in business was discouraged. It was described by one newspaper columnist as "a bit of the Ritz dropped down in Nevada." Many of the guests wanted their privacy. The news media and photographers were barred from the ranch property. One exception occurred in July, 1943 when Eleanor Roosevelt, then the First Lady of the United States, vacationed at ranch and visited with one of her lady friends from back east who was there for a divorce. Mrs. Roosevelt had been writing a newspaper column entitled "My Day" since 1936.

It was carried by 140 newspapers. As a little footnote here, Mrs. Roosevelt wrote her column six days a week for nearly 26 years with hardly any interruptions. She wrote her column while on the ranch. This made the ranch and its owners famous. Mrs. Roosevelt also agreed to be interviewed by the local newspapers while at the ranch. This was quite a sensation for the local media. One famous celebrity who stayed at the Flying M E several times during his heyday was Clark Gable. He got divorced multiple times in Nevada. He was first divorced in Las Vegas in the very early 1940s. He then married Carole Lombard who tragically died in a plane crash in 194_ just minutes after taking off from Las Vegas on her way back to Los Angeles.

He married again in 1949 but that marriage only lasted 18 months and he again established a Nevada residency and got divorced. There were many well known and wealthy people who had made their way to the Flying M E during its heyday

ior a divorce. Emmy Woods was very good at keeping the identities of her guests confidential and out of the news media. In 1949, one very special guest Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., the former Ethel du Pont. She was a member of the very famous and wealthy du Pont family and had married the son of the President of the United States in 1937. The du Pont family represented old and wealthy money and were rock rib Republicans. The du Pont family had contributed over \$300,000.00 to defeat President Roosevelt in the 1936 election. The marriage of Ethel to the President's son in 1937 was something of an embarrassment to the du Pont family. Several family members refused to go to the wedding and still others slipped into the back door at the reception for the bride and groom, congratulated the bride, and slipped out the back door. It is certainly possible that the President was more delighted with the marriage and the absences of the du Ponts than anything else. The divorce business in Reno was famous. It had even developed its own vocabulary. Read some examples from The Divorce Seekers. There are many, many stories about divorces in Nevada. When there are lots of stories about certain topics, there are likely to be some tall stories or myths as well. One of the great myths about Reno divorces is that the newly divorced women would throw their wedding rings into the Truckee River after they left the courthouse. The Washoe County Courthouse is close by the banks of the Truckee River in downtown Reno. No one really knows how this myth started but there is an account of a river ring tossing in Cornelius Vanderbilt Jr.'s 1949 novel entitled simply "Reno." He was a relative of the railroad baron and himself had obtained a divorce in Reno in 1927. Despite its lack of a factual basis, the myth endured and was often promoted by tourism officials in northern Nevada. It helped promote the divorce business and is the kind of interesting folklore likely to be written about in the news media. There was evidence at the time that divorcees would walk one-half block to a nearby Woolworths and buy cheap, dime store rings and toss them in the river as a symbolic gesture of the end of the marriage. The real rings were much too valuable to toss away. Many of the divorcees were not wealthy and especially during the depression days it was a really stupid idea to throw away something of value. The divorce business peaked in Reno in 1946 when some 19,000 divorces were granted.

The divorce business finally wound down to normal numbers by the late 1960s. Divorce laws in other states had become easier and there was no longer the need to go to Reno to get a divorce. Reno was not the only city in Nevada. Las Vegas had come into being in 1905 but did not start becoming a major city until the late 1940s. People in Reno did not have a very high opinion of Las Vegas many years ago. In his 1941 book "Reno", the author noted the probability of Las Vegas rivaling Reno causes no worries - in Reno. Las Vegas is another world and it is very hot in Las Vegas in the summer. Las Vegas also has its history of marriages and divorces. Clark Gable was divorced here around 1940 or 41. He married Carole Lombard soon after and as mentioned before, she died in a plane crash a few miles to the southwest of Las Vegas soon after leaving Las Vegas. Marilyn Monroe's divorce from her first husband was done here in Las Vegas in 1946.