



The Berlins at Lake Tahoe. Elizabeth is in white playsuit, Linda is at left, Mary Ellin in back.

NEWS COLORFOTO BY ERNIE MACK

The BERLINS' SIERRA SAFARI

Sitting out Mary Ellin's Reno decree, father and mother hit pay dirt in the gold country

By **BILL BERRY**
Staff Correspondent of *The News*

RENO

WHEN THE IRVING BERLIN FAMILY gathered in Nevada recently, they were on a sad errand—seeing the eldest daughter through a divorce. But, like Bonanza John Mackay, Mrs. Ellin Berlin's grandfather, they went away with more than they brought. Bonanza John came to these mountains with an iron nerve and the luck of the Irish. He left with hundreds of millions dug from the Comstock Lode. Ellin and Irving Berlin came with their memories and talents. One found a lively new chapter for a novel based on the life of her fabulous grandmother, Marie Hungerford Mackay. The other sketched out here, with restless energy, the basis of a new musical show. Their daughter, Mary Ellin, 21, may have found small comfort in the decree that parted her from Dennis Sheedy Burden, but the divorce itself was a formality; the young people had separated

months before. With true Berlin-Mackay resilience, Mary Ellin was laying plans for a new career of her own.

A tactful mother, Mrs. Berlin enticed Mary Ellin into sharing the thrill of rediscovering the scenes of Marie Hungerford's mining camp adventures in Plumas County, high in the Sierras, just across the California line. I was their driver and unofficial guide on the rough journey to Poverty Hill, whither Marie raced on horseback in the 1860s in a vain effort to save from death her first husband, young Dr. Edmund Bryant. I had a unique chance, another day, to see how an Irving Berlin musical is born. On a sun deck of his cottage on the northern shore of Lake Tahoe, the composer talked to me of inspiration and his family, asked dozens of questions about Nevada and then threw out a quick outline of what he thought might be a smash show for Broadway.

UNTIL WE ARRIVED, no Mackay had visited Poverty Hill since Bonanza John had gone eastward over the range to Virginia City, Nev., bound for the gold strike that made him famous. We left Reno—the two Berlin women, my wife and I—and climbed into Beckwourth Pass. At Mohawk we left the paved highway to head up into the "Lost Sierras." The one-way, low-gear road wound along the side of a precipitous canyon, where at some points the drop was 3,000 feet. There was an

occasional scar of a mine and an occasional cabin. Otherwise there was little trace of the 50,000 people who once dug for gold among these rocks and creeks. Small streams from Eureka Peak (named in the era of discovery) rushed across the road.

When we reached Rabbit Creek, the trip turned into a small parade. Word had got around among old timers at Hepsidam, Whisky Diggings and Gibsonville that Mackays were coming back to Poverty Hill. At LaPorte we were greeted by Mrs. Marguerite Delahunty, octogenarian "balsam girl" famous for her ski waxes, and a handful of neighbors, including the mail carrier of Poker Flat. These people are the remnants of the snowshoers, or skiers, of the High Sierra. They are America's original skiers but they still call their 10-foot spruce boards snowshoes. And they still need them on the deep snow that locks them in five or six months each year.

Here Mrs. Berlin picked up again the trail of her grandmother, a trail that she has been following through records and legends for the last 18 months. It was in LaPorte that Marie Hungerford buried Dr. Bryant in 1866. She had traveled an adventurous road getting there. Born at 530 Pearl St., Manhattan (not in Brooklyn, as many have believed), Marie had crossed the Isthmus of Panama with her father, D. E. Hungerford, and trudged into the gold fields of California at the age of 10. She ran errands for her father's San Francisco drug store, attended a convent briefly

Ellin Mackay Berlin, writing of fabulous grandma, revisits scenes of tragedy and triumph

and married Dr. Bryant at 16. The young couple lived in the roaring camp that was Virginia City until a daughter was born (years later the daughter was married to Italian Prince Colonna-Stigliano); then Dr. Bryant took to drink and disappeared. When Marie heard of him next he was deathly ill at Poverty Hill, a placer camp 12 miles northwest of Downieville, Calif. She packed in through the snows of Spring, 1866, and took her erring husband to LaPorte in the hope of nursing him back to health, but he died in July.

In her grief Mrs. Bryant took the road back to Virginia City. Perhaps she thought life had ended for her at 23 with her husband's death. Perhaps she didn't know she was taking the same road traveled only six years before by John W. Mackay, who had passed through LaPorte and Poker Flat after delving for gold with modest success on the north fork of the Yuba River.

What happened after that has often been told and Mrs. Berlin had no trouble finding the record. Marie Hungerford Bryant and wealthy John Mackay were wed in Virginia City on Nov. 25, 1867. As the Bonanza Mine in the Comstock Lode gave up its wealth, they tired of mining camps and sought out the richer life of the cities, first San Francisco, then New York. Mackay branched out. Communications became his field and he founded the Postal Telegraph and Cable Co.

Marie bore Mackay a son, Clarence, who became Ellin's father and later tried vainly to block her marriage to Irving Berlin, the cantor's son. That was in 1926, as Ellin well remembered. She could remember, too, as she stood on the site of the cabin where Dr. Bryant died, some of the tales that her grandmother told her before she died in 1928 at 85. One of the stories was of Marie's second race with death in 1893, which interrupted a series of social triumphs in Europe.

This time Bonanza John Mackay was believed to be dying in San Francisco. By steamer and special train, his wife crossed the Atlantic and the United States while millions followed her progress through the newspapers. Mackay did not die, though, until 1902.

Although Mrs. Berlin has notes on her grandmother's tales of the Nevada-California days, the old lady preferred to dwell on such matters as her friendship with Queen Alexandra and Edward VII. She had become a great lady and a celebrated hostess since Poverty Hill passed the hat to bury Dr. Bryant in 1866.

On the site of the cabin where Dr. Bryant died is a huge mound of white quartz debris, which gold snipers working nearby said was worth 50 cents a yard. Ellin let some of the stuff dribble through her fingers as she said: "My grandmother never came back to these mountains, but I'm here now, and it's been a worthwhile day."

MARY ELLIN had memories of her own. One not to be erased was that of her wedding in July, 1948, to Dennis Sheedy Burden, Navy veteran descended from Scotch and Irish immigrants who became rich within a few years after their arrival in the United States about 100 years ago. The marriage service was performed by the Rev. George B. Ford, a Catholic priest, in the Berlins' Beekman Place house in Manhattan. After the ceremony they received the blessing of the Rev. Morris Lazon, a rabbi who is a friend of the Berlins.

The wedding breakfast, too, was something to remember. Present were Mary Ellin's parents and her two younger sisters; her uncle John Mackay and his wife; her stepgrandmother, Mrs. Anna Case Mackay (whom Clarence did not marry until his first wife, Ellin's mother, had died in 1928); her cousin, Morgan J. O'Brien 3d; her aunt, Miss Caroline Duer (sister of Ellin's mother); her in-laws, Mr. and Mrs. I. Townsend Burden; her aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Baline, and assorted friends and more distant connections.

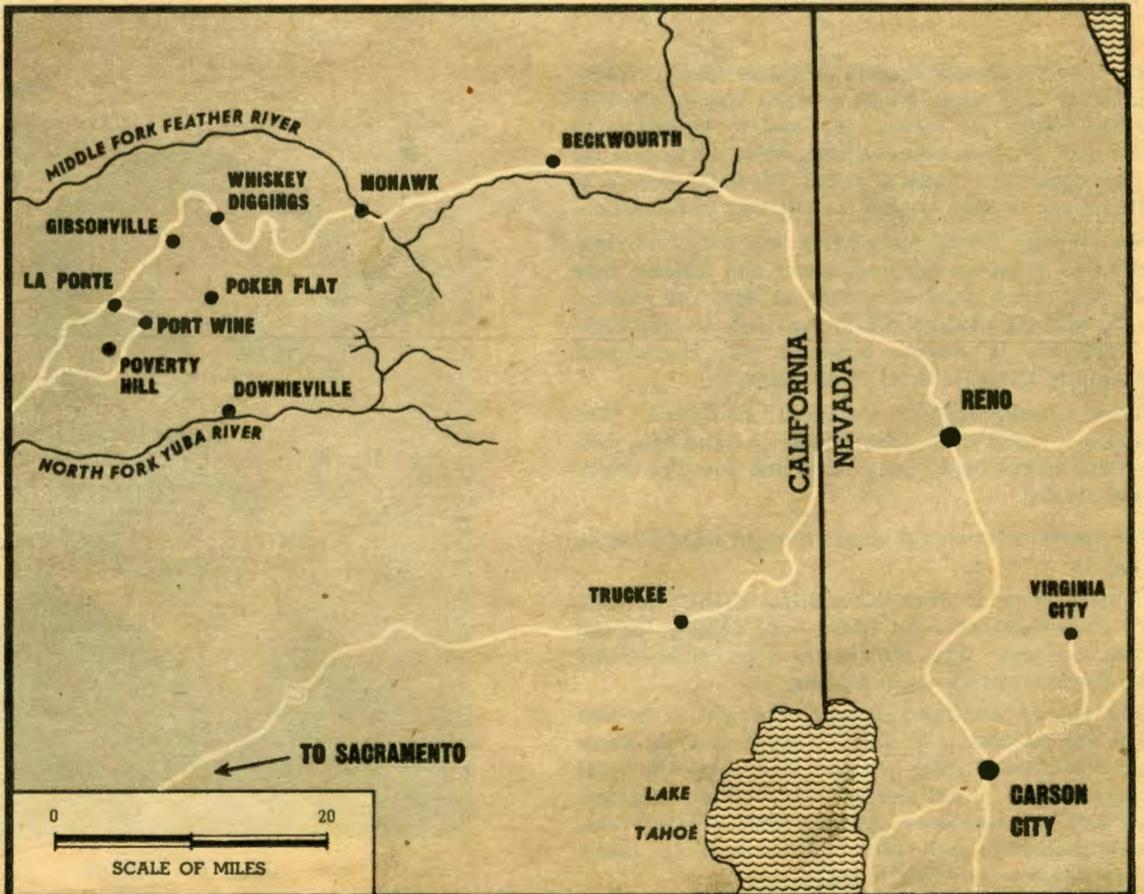
Nobody has said why the marriage broke up. It was believed to have been unhappy from the start. Mary Ellin's ground for action in Reno was extreme cruelty, which may mean anything.

While living through the necessary six weeks of residence in Nevada, Mary Ellin confined her activities to the passive acquisition of a suntan and a great deal of reading, the latter in preparation, possibly, for the magazine job in New York that she had been promised as soon as she returned from Nevada. She was much



NEWS FOTO BY BILL BERRY
Ellin Mackay Berlin and daughter Mary Ellin at site of Poverty Hill cabin where grandmother's first husband died. Map below locates California gold country the Berlins visited in research by Ellin.

NEWS MAP BY STAFF ARTIST KRAUSS





NEWS COLORFOTO BY ERNIE MACK

Irving Berlin relaxes on terrace above Lake Tahoe, where listening to Nevada tales suggested idea for new musical.

Irving Berlin spins idea for a musical out of his family's unhappy expedition to Nevada

quieter than her younger sisters. Both Linda, 17, black-haired and dark of complexion, and Elizabeth, 13, tall and fair, enjoyed the icy swimming and water-skiing on Lake Tahoe.

ALTHOUGH the Berlins showed at Tahoe what a closely knit family they were, Irving couldn't stay at the cottage the entire six weeks. He had to commute to Hollywood. He was between trips when I saw him on the sun deck. If a musical called "Nevada" ever gets to Broadway, it may be because of this conversation.

With typical Berlin nimbleness, the songsmith had turned the tables on his interviewer and insisted that I spin him yarns about this state as both the miners' Nevada and the modern playground and divorce capital. Suddenly it became apparent that Berlin was beginning to think in terms of his trade.

"What a background for a musical," he mused. "I'm surprised it hasn't been done before. I came here with something in the back of my mind and now I'm beginning to think."

The creator of scores of smash hits got right down to the details.

"I could go at it from the satirical angle," he said. "Two states—Nevada and Idaho—are fighting for the divorce business. The legislatures start undercutting each other's residence requirements.

"I've got an estranged couple. The girl is in Sun Valley and the man is in Reno. They're in a big hurry to get rid of each other. At the same time the rival legislatures are in the closing days of their sessions. Idaho cuts the residence requirements to five weeks. Nevada counters with four. Idaho goes to three. Nevada drops to two and Idaho to one."

Warming to his subject, Berlin came quickly to the love angle. While the leading lady is heading for Reno, the husband gets his quickie in Idaho. But with the divorce papers in his hand, he runs into her at an airport.

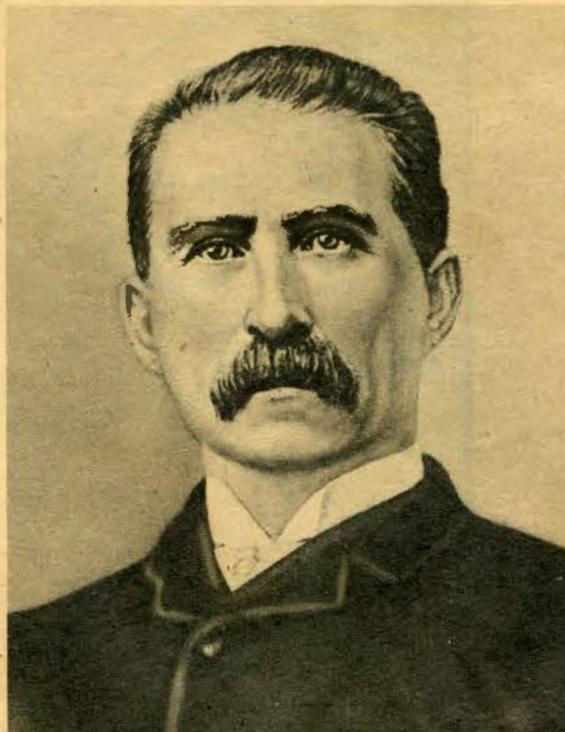
"Right then and there," said Berlin, "we have a reconciliation. The theme would be a little layer of divorce reform on top of Nevada and Sun Valley color."

It was impossible to take the genial Berlin too seriously and very likely anything that comes of this in the way of a show will be very different from his rapid

sketch of a plot. As he put it when I departed, "I've bubbled today," but he went on to explain that when he was germinating a show he tried to work himself into a state of enthusiasm. If the enthusiasm lasts, he'll compose the songs on his special piano fixed so that his only key, F-sharp, comes out right. His three daughters, all fine pianists, will stick to more orthodox instruments. His wife will plug away until she has finished the book about her grandmother. It will be her third novel.

Wonderful people, the Berlins. Wonderful state, Nevada.

CULVER SERVICE



John W. Mackay

CULVER SERVICE



Marie Hungerford Mackay