

Two 'Divorce Ranches' Still Thriving

By JOHN BROMLEY
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A Reno divorce can be a matter of posh pastoral status, far from the routine "mill" variety, if the six-week waiting period is spent at a guest ranch.

There are two thriving divorce ranches in the Reno area considered "in" to the rich and famous. Operators of the two ranches acknowledge only each other as possible competitors.

Actually, the Donner Trail Ranch and Whitney's Guest Ranch cater to their own special clientele.

Privacy

The Donner Trail Ranch at Verdi is the biggest and the only "working" divorce ranch remaining in this area. It is designed for those with money who want privacy, some status, and believe no Reno divorce is complete without spending the days riding horseback, fishing, and socializing with others waiting for the "treatment."

The 3,000-acre ranch is managed by Mr. and Mrs. Harry Drackert, both active in Reno civic affairs and widely known. The property is leased by the couple from the Baxter Realty Co. of Los Angeles and New York.

Divorce and vacationing are the mainstay of the ranch. The sprawling white house and annex have some 22 rooms available for guests. Some eight men and women work at the ranch at a variety of jobs ranging from cooks to wranglers.

Transportation is provided for those on "essential" trips. Drackert defines such trips to include rides to the beauty parlor, law offices, the court house, and the airport. "If they want to go into town and play the

slots, they find their own way," he said.

Guests Kept Busy

During the day, he makes sure the guests are busy riding, fishing, or hunting. Pack trips into the Sierra are scheduled the year around (just like in the movies) with other jaunts to Lake Tahoe or Reno.

At night, his wife, Joan, who manages the "inside" part of the ranch, keeps everyone occupied. As 7 p.m. approaches, guests file into the living room in preparation for dinner. Perfume and small talk take command.

"How was your attorney?" "He was just fine. We signed some papers and everything seems to be going good."

Mrs. Drackert presented a guest with her "six-week" present. A box of dramamine for an airplane ride.

Not Cheap

Divorce Nevada-style is not cheap. Rates at the Donner Trail range from \$130 to \$150 per week. The guests don't blink don't blink an eyelash at transcontinental jet rides or renting cars for their entire Nevada stay.

Sometimes there are men living at the ranch waiting for the treatment. Drackert says they are "mostly the tough ones" with contested divorces. "One came and stayed four years," he said. "No grounds." Despite the sophistication of the guests, the evening activities are mostly prosaic. Scrabble, Monopoly, and bridge have been big this winter.

"With all the snow we had this year, the trails were kind of muddy for riding," Drackert said. But business was good, including several vacationers.

The guest's come from a select group. Most learn about the ranch from their lawyers. "I want to go to one of those ranches in Nevada," they ask. At least two of the current guests learned of the ranch through the Greater Reno Chamber of Commerce.

Drackert is proud of the ranch. "I have the best horses in the country, bar none," he said. He keeps about 60 horses, including some 25 for riding. Injuries are infrequent and Drackert can recall only a sprained ankle or a broken wrist among the casualties during the 12 years he has leased the ranch.

With Reno's reputation as a divorce mill still going full speed ahead at the ranch, the only cloud on the horizon is the proposed dam across the Truckee River downstream from the ranch house. "This is basically a resort area," Drackert said, pointing to the river and its bank of budding aspen trees.

Mrs. Drackert shakes her head and wonders why they (the Army Corps of Engineers) would "devastate the trees and vegetation."

Whitney Ranch

Whitney's Guest Ranch, south of Reno on Del Monte Lane, is a small (seven cottages and main house) operation owned by Mrs. L. M. Whitney. It too caters to the upper-classes, mostly from the New England states, and lately, Washington, D.C.

Shuning the "Old West" trimmings, the cottages are carpeted wall-to-wall, and are completely furnished. A maid is available for those who don't like house work.

Mrs. Whitney doesn't offer meals and guests usually do their own cooking in the cottages. She charges \$70 a week for one person and \$15 extra for any companions during the season. In the winter the rate drops to \$50 per week and \$10

extra for each additional person.

The big attractions are privacy, a swimming pool, and an evening social hour under an apple tree. Sometimes the entire group goes out together to dinner or a show.

Weddings Performed

As with the Donner Trail Ranch, many of the guests return, often with their new mates just to visit Mrs. Whitney and talk "old times." Mrs. Whitney keeps up a lively correspondence, especially during Christmas. Photo albums in the spacious house are filled with pictures of former guests at parties or attending weddings at the house. "Sometimes we perform

two or three weddings a season here," she said.

"This is not a party place, but I wouldn't say it is snobbish," she said. Business has been slow this winter, but she expects to be full this summer. Often she has to turn people away.

She dropped horseback riding as an attraction because of the cost and insurance problems. "Only one in twenty was really interested and they just wanted to say they had ridden a horse." Riding stables on nearby Moana Lane offer the opportunity for those who insist.

The Whitney ranch is likely to be the last divorce ranch in the immediate Reno area be-

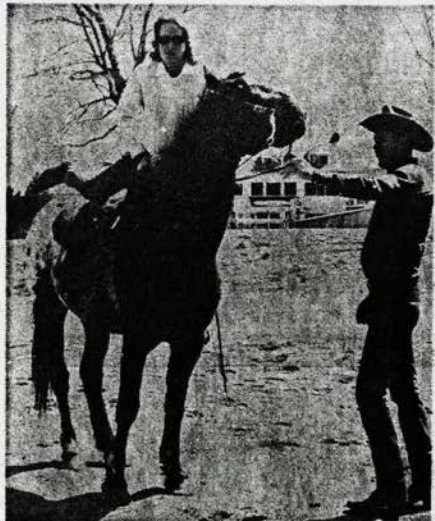
cause of zoning restrictions and spreading development. She sold some of the property for taxes, but said taxes aren't a real problem.

"I used to have a lot in Los Angeles where the taxes were higher than for this place," she said.

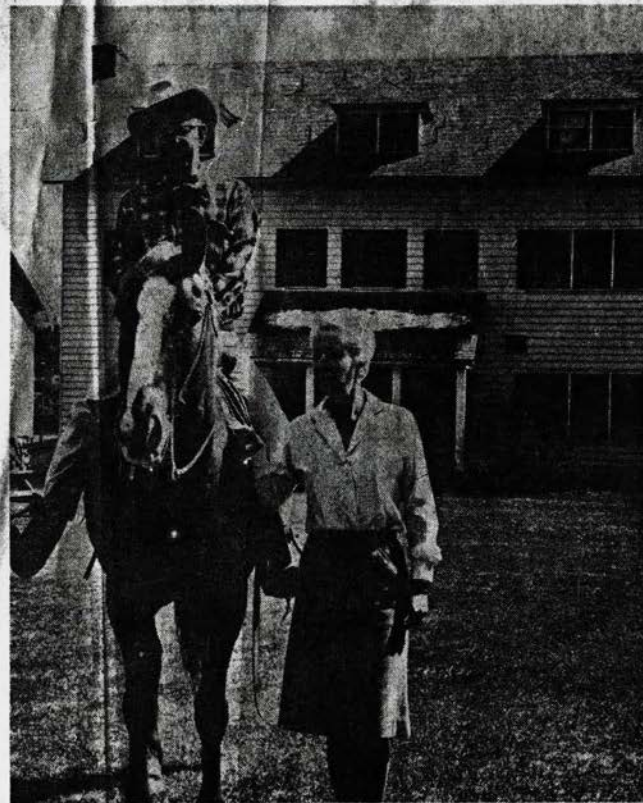
Future

The future of the divorce (dude) (guest) ranches depends upon former guests telling friends about them and eastern attorneys making recommendations.

Mrs. Whitney and the Drackerts don't advertise. With the business good, Reno's reputation as a divorce town apparently carries on.



THE IMAGE of a wrangler at a "dude ranch" helping a guest board a horse is as much a part of Nevada as slot machines as far as easterners are concerned. Not imaginary, but very real is Buddy Lasater at the Donner Trail Ranch holding a mount steady for Jane Flynn. (Journal Photo)



THESE PEOPLE, this house, and horses represent Nevada to many affluent Americans who have been here for the "treatment." The hospitality of Harry and Joan Drackert and their rambling house at the Donner Trail Ranch bring many famous visitors back each year for vacations, not divorces. (Journal Photo)