

illuminating Reno's Divorce Industry

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An Interview With Judy Ainsworth

Interviewed via telephone in Surprise, Arizona by Mella Harmon in Reno, Nevada

January 6, 2015

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Judy Ainsworth

Interviewed by Mella Harmon on January 6, 2015

Mella Harmon: This is Mella Harmon in Reno, Nevada. The date is January 6, 2015 and I am interviewing Judy Ainsworth, who is in Surprise, Arizona. Now, Judy, do you give us permission to record this interview for the University of Nevada, Reno Libraries to be made available to the public?

Judy Ainsworth: Yes.

Excellent. Thank you. Well, thank you so much for contacting us and for being willing to participate in this project. I understand that you have a story about your grandfather's boarding house. I would just like you to tell us about what you have to tell us about that period in your life and his business.

Well my grandfather's name was Charles Dombroske, and sometime—I'm believing in 1945—he purchased or leased a beautiful home at the corner of Flint and Court. The address was 240 Court Street in Reno, Nevada. And it was just a gorgeous brick home. It had four entrances and from what I can remember it was the mayor's home or some dignitary because it was just a lovely, lovely home—multiple bedrooms, multiple bathrooms. It had a very large kitchen with a maid's quarter out the back. So Grandfather—why, how, I have no idea—opened this and it was called Judy Lea's guest house.

And you're Judy Lea!

I'm Judy Lea. I was his granddaughter. So in growing up as a child we used to go—we're from Santa Cruz County, California and I grew up in a small town called Watsonville.

Oh, yes.

And we would go up to Grandpa's because that was my mother's father. We would drive up to Reno on the old Highway 80 and go there on summer vacations and usually at Christmas time. So there are lots of stories about those trips, too, back in that day.

But as I got older—I would say ten, eleven, twelve—I got to go, and my mom and dad would put me on a Greyhound bus, believe it or not, and I would have to change busses in San Francisco. Then I would bus up to my grandfather's and of course he was always there to pick me up. And I would spend a couple of weeks with him.

The house had multiple bedrooms and each bedroom had two beds in it. And he turned it into—basically on his business card it's a guest house. And it was where women more so—there were some men but if there were any men to stay in the house it was only in the downstairs and there would only have been two rooms available for men. There was no co-ed, no interaction in that regard. It was very protective—very, very protective.

I stayed in whatever bedroom there was with an untaken bed because he always had two women together unless the house wasn't full. Then there'd be one room and she'd have her own room. But I met women—to me they were older women because I was a young kid—but they could have very well been young women around twenty, twenty-five and so on. But it seems to me in my memory that they were mostly older—mid-to-older ladies. They would live at my grandfather's a minimum of six weeks. That was the requirement.

And grandfather had a great working relation with many of the attorneys in town. And so he would get these referrals and the people would take up residency in Grandpa's house and they'd have their own bedroom and have a bathroom. Obviously they had to share a bathroom.

And there were rules. There were no men allowed at any time and like I said, he was very protective. But they had a big kitchen. And it was funny because back in those days they just had small refrigerators. And I used to chuckle because while the kitchen was massive, this small refrigerator sat in the corner. It would be chock-full of bags of groceries with these ladies' names on them. But when it came to cooking breakfast or lunch or dinner it seemed to me that if the women were not working and they were in the house, they would get to know each other and we would have common meals, often times sitting at the big dining table in the dining room.

And I just remember, there were women from Europe. I mean, there were women there from all over the country! Most of them got jobs as a cocktail waitress, a keno runner, possibly working in a hotel. Some of them stayed much longer than their six weeks. They just loved it there. It was inviting and in the summertime they could all lounge outside in the back yard. It was very protected. And they could just sunbathe out there, they could do their laundry out there—of course, it was one of the old fashioned washing machines on the opposite corner of the refrigerator with a wringer on it. So that's how they did their laundry. They hung everything outside past the maid's quarters on a clothes line that went all the way from the back door to a big pole at the end of the corner of the lot. So there was a lot of interaction with the women who did stay there.

When you came in the side door, which most of them did, when they'd come in at night or come in from their work, they would go upstairs to their rooms, or stay downstairs if they were rooming downstairs. But Grandfather's bed was—when you came in the side door to the right was the dining room, a big beautiful...the wood, the ornateness—I just have so many fond memories of it. He had a bed right there in the corner of the dining room and that's where he slept. And he had a little bed side table which I still personally own here in my home. He kept a knife under his bed. I never saw a gun but he kept a knife, a very large knife. He knew the comings and the goings of the people that were in his house.

And the living room was the opposite when you came in the door. You would go to the left and it was a very large room. There was beautiful stone—which I now know as river rock—and a big, huge fireplace and there was always a big fire blaring that the women would sit around and talk.

I never remember having a scary time or an unfriendly time but it was obviously a traumatic time for these women in their lives at some point. They had to live there for six weeks. Then he would go to court with them and testify that they were a resident at Judy Lea's Guest House for that six weeks and they would get a divorce. It's sad; I went through Reno this summer and of course all of those beautiful homes up on that corner—they were big beautiful lovely homes back in the day—they're all gone.

Oh, I know...

I still have so many memories of the park just down below and fishing off the Truckee River Bridge with my brothers. It was a lot of fun.

Well, do you remember any of the names of the women?

You know, the only one I remember—and her name was Rene—it's because she lived in that house. There was a bedroom—a small bedroom, I would consider it a closet—at the top of the stairs on the right-hand side and she lived in that room, oh my god, a minimum of ten years.

Oh my goodness!

Oh, she never left. She was a cocktail waitress. Rene was a tiny little thing. It's funny because as I got older—she had this hair-do and I don't even know how many days it would go before she'd have it combed out again. But it was black and she'd have it all up on top of her head in all these curls so it'd make her look taller than she really was. She wore lots of makeup and she was just funny. I used to just love to sit and chat with her.

She was a cocktail waitress and she had to have died a very wealthy woman because she had coats that she would wear to work. It was pretty funny; she had all these pockets sewed on the inside of these coats that she wore because it was not uncommon for these women to meet men. And these men would take them out gambling and have drinks and what have you. She would take half of the tips that they would give her and she would pocket them. So aside from her job, she probably pocketed quite a bit of money from the different men that she was out with.

But she lived in that small room. She did not have her own private bathroom; she had to use a shared bathroom. That little room was wall-to-wall clothes and everything else you could think of. But Rene was there the longest and I remember her because she was just there year after year after year after year.

That's amazing.

Ainsworth: I think you asked me if there were ledgers. You know, my mother was an only child and she's been gone now since '97. She was not a happy child and while I think she had a good

relationship with her father, she didn't talk much about it. When Grandpa died, I remember distinctly that she would not let any of us—distinctly my dad—no one went up to Reno with her. We have no idea what happened to the house, to the tenants, to the belongings, other than the few personal belongings that I begged her for, which I do have. I have no idea what happened to anything of that house.

Oh, my goodness.

Yeah! Everything in it, everything about it.... It's just tragic. But that's how she was. She was a very bitter, unhappy person. I have no idea why; it's always been a mystery to me. But at any rate, I have a few pictures of the house and I probably have more, but I don't know if they would be of any interest to you. I have a business card that's really kind of cute.

Would you be willing to share those with us?

Oh, absolutely!

Oh, that would be wonderful!

Absolutely! In fact, I can see what other pictures I can pull out.

I used to go up there from the time that I can remember as a child until my grandfather died. I was born in Reno but I never really lived there; however, I did get married at a very young age and was living in Reno at the time. My daughter was born in the same hospital that I was.

Oh, that's interesting.

Twenty years and one day later. But I was divorced three months later and I was divorced in one day because I was a resident and my grandfather, like I said, knew every attorney in town. So I literally was divorced in one day and my mom and dad came up and packed me up and took me back down to California. And my grandfather died twenty-one days later.

Oh, my goodness.

Yeah. So it's very sad. He was just my mentor. He was my all, he was my life. The memories of my grandfather are very, very important to me because he instilled in me a work ethic—because you know, I used to help him clean and I was kind of like the little maid when I was there. I mean it wasn't like I didn't do anything when I was there; I had to work.

Well, that's fabulous. What an experience for a young girl.

Well, it was. And I didn't know any different. And there were always different people in the house, other than Rene. There were always different people. And very few men in all those years but there were a couple of men. There were two—the maid's quarters was actually a room that he rented out, and then a beautiful, nice, big room with a private bath off of the dining room that had its own side entrance as well with a lovely room. So if there were rooms downstairs he would rent them out to men, but not very often.

Did any of those women bring their children or were they mostly by themselves?

No. There were no children at all and I don't think they were allowed, to tell you the truth.

Well, that would be hard to do in that situation; because people didn't have private rooms or what-have-you.

Yeah, yeah. And no, because they had to share a room. And I don't even know how he charged them. You know, I don't. I don't have any idea. But they had use of the house. They had use of the kitchen, the laundry, the backyard.

That would be a real comfortable situation. It's really close to the courthouse, that's for sure.

Oh, my gosh, yes! It was walking distance. Yes, well, when I had arrived there my grandpa always used to fill up my little purse with silver dollars. I used to go down by myself. I mean, I have walked that path many times and it's all different now. But as a little girl I remember walking down by the river and there was a little deli, there was a little wedding shop—and all that stuff is gone now. But I used to go into the Mapes Hotel and go in the restaurant there and plop myself down and order a hot fudge sundae for fifty cents.

Oh, that's great!

And I mean, it was huge. It was just huge! But I didn't have any fear and Grandpa didn't worry about me. I mean, I would go off on my own. I would go down to that park. What do I want to call it?

Wingfield Park?

Yes. I used to go down to that park and play for hours—hours and hours.

Wow. What a great childhood. That would be so neat.

Yeah, yeah, it was. It was great. And then—oh, gosh I can't think of her name now—but she had the big white house next to us and she was very eccentric and very weird and we just knew that house was haunted. It was the big white house that was next to Grandpa's house. But it's interesting because the corner of Court and Flint had these humongous poplar trees; they were just beautiful. All that area had those big poplar trees and, of course, all that's gone.

Do you know which corner it was on? Was it on the west or the east corner there?

Okay, well you know how Court Street goes up the hill?

Yes.

Okay and then Flint is a forty-five degree angle and there was a parking lot. So Grandfather's house was on, I guess you would call it, the southwest corner of Flint.

Oh, okay, okay.

Because if you just go down the hill a little bit that's Arlington that cuts across there.

Right, right.

So it looks like they've got some historic building....

Yes yes. The Lake Mansion is there now.

Yeah, they moved it there?

Yeah.

Grandfather's house was literally right across the street from that. There's a co-op market there now. That's where Grandpa's house was.

I was the only grandchild that spent the time that I spent with him growing up. I don't know why other than the fact that my grandfather adored me. I was very special to him as well up until he died. We spent a lot of time together.

But in hindsight, my god, I wish I knew more about his business. I don't even remember him sitting down at a desk with books but he had to have kept a ledger somewhere. He didn't have a desk that he sat down at. He had his chair in the living room, he had his bed in the dining room, he sat at the kitchen table, but all the other times he was working or doing something. He maintained that house and did everything himself. It had a big old huge boiler in a basement and they had to come and fill it with oil. And the house had those radiators.

Was he widowed?

No, he divorced Grandma when Mom was ten or somewhere around there. She lived in San Jose, California. I would go visit and stay with her as well. We'd go visit and stay with her on occasion—not as much as we would see Grandpa, though. There were many times when Grandma would come up to Reno and have the holidays with us but it was clear that they didn't get along.

They were divorced for a reason, huh?

Yeah, exactly. But my mom was the only child. So, yeah, it's kind of interesting.

Wow, what an interesting story.

Yeah. When I saw the article that was picked up—because I spend my summers, as I think I mentioned to you, up in Coeur D'Alene, Idaho—and I saw this in the local Coeur D'Alene paper and I just thought, “Oh, my god.” Because I had just come through there this summer and I had not been there in many, many, many years. And just kind of retracing my steps from childhood. And then this article is in the paper and I'm like, “Oh my god, this is meant to be. It's bizarre.”

Well, I'm so glad that you called. I'm sorry it took us so long to hook up with you.

Well I just—honest to God—I just wish I knew and could find out more history on this house, if Grandfather actually ever owned it or if he just leased it all those years. Who owned it? I just have no idea. And how did my mother go to Reno and literally just get rid of everything? I've always thought about that and wondered about that. What happened?

Yeah. How'd she do that so quickly?

She wouldn't talk about anything when she came back. She wouldn't talk about it. But I have my grandfather's clock and his table that was by his bed. So those are the remaining things that I do own from that era.

Well I don't know if there's any more information that I can give you. I mean I never met any of the attorneys.

Well, the story you told, you just told it beautifully. You know, how he ran the house and it was just perfect. What you said was perfect. So thank you.

Well, good. You know I'm happy to share it. It's part of my life, a very important part of my life. I have so many fond memories it's just hard to see that that house is gone.

Oh, I know, I know.

There was a beautiful lantern on the front porch that... Oh! In fact, there were these iron chairs on the front porch. I have two of them. They're actually in my front courtyard. I had them powder-coated and new cushions made. But they're Grandfather's set and he had a couple of them. He sat in the one underneath this beautiful lantern that was on the front porch. The house, like I said, was brick. I came home from work or somewhere one day and this lantern had literally fallen off the pillar and was all over the chair and everywhere. And I just dropped everything and went screaming through the gate to the backyard for my grandfather. He was in the backyard and had no idea that this lantern had come down.

Oh, no! Oh, my gosh.

Yeah. I have the lantern actually. I do have the lantern. I had it powder coated so I have that on my—I have another house here where I live and it's mounted in my backyard.

Oh, that's neat.

I have two of the chairs from the front courtyard and my grandfather's lantern. Yeah.

Oh that's nice. I'm glad you have something. Because when he died it all went away so quickly.

Yeah. It mysteriously did.

Well, thank you again so much.