

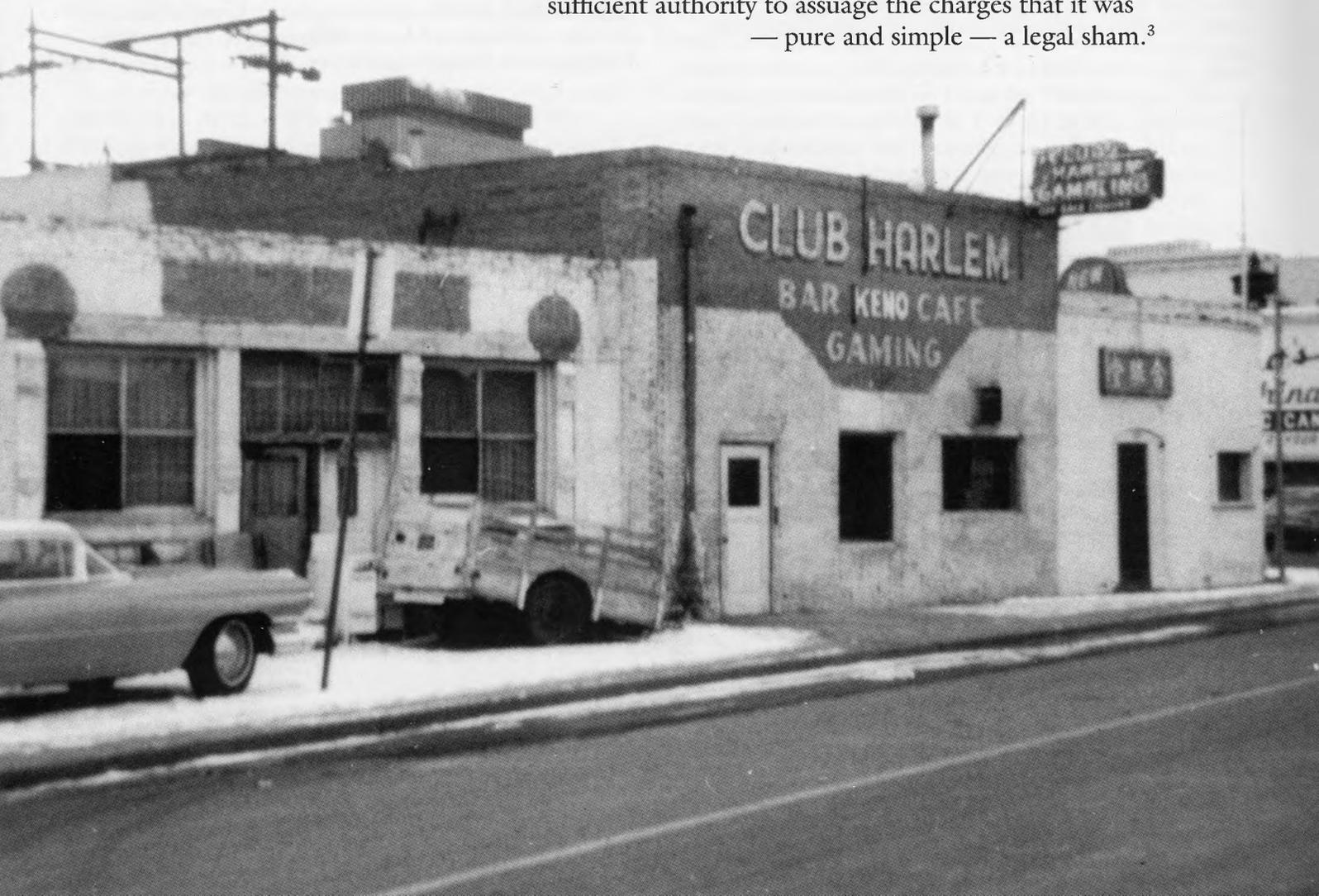
"500 Negro Wives Annually"

Reno's African-American Divorce Trade

By Mella Rothwell Harmon

From 1906 until the late 1960s, Reno, Nevada, held the title of Divorce Capital of the World. Before the modern age of no-fault divorce, legal dissolution of marriage could take years or it was simply not allowed. Early in the twentieth century, a number of states were vying for the nation's migratory divorce trade. These states saw economic opportunity in offering relatively quick divorces. Lenient divorce laws were usually centered on a residency requirement and allowable grounds for divorce.¹ By 1931, when the Great Depression was raging, Nevada had cornered the migratory divorce market by lowering its divorce residency period to six weeks. Reno, as Nevada's largest city at the time, was the center of the divorce trade. During the 1930s, Reno's Washoe County Courthouse processed more than 30,000 divorce cases, mostly for people from other states and countries.²

Reno developed a well-oiled divorce machine, which included a wide selection of divorce lawyers. Numerous hotels, divorce ranches, and boardinghouses provided the necessary housing. Boardinghouse managers and divorce ranch operators were the grease that kept the gears of the quick Nevada divorce running smoothly. They not only provided housing, but also ensured that the residency requirement was given sufficient authority to assuage the charges that it was — pure and simple — a legal sham.³



The Reno divorce trade was known far and wide and was often depicted in film and fiction. From these many contemporary portrayals, however, it would seem that only rich white women arriving in plush Pullman cars partook of Reno's divorce services. In fact, more than a few men came to town to get divorced, and many of both sexes came from lower socio-economic levels and diverse ethnic origins. In addition to the train, automobiles were the transportation mode of choice for a large number of divorce-seekers of all backgrounds.

Reno was in no way progressive in its dealings with racial minorities, however. From the early 1900s through the 1960s, Reno openly practiced *de facto* racial segregation. In November 1904, Reno's police chief ordered all unemployed African-Americans out of the city, reportedly in response to the shooting of a police officer by a black man. In 1907, when the first African-American church was established in town, Reno's African-American population numbered around 225. Bethel AME Church completed construction on their small white clapboard church on Bell Street in 1910. The 50 or so members who made up the founding congregation would go on to make a significant mark in Reno's history. They were the founders of the first branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Nevada, and the center of community service and culture for Reno's African-American population. The church also played a pivotal role in Reno's black divorce business.⁴

Although not formally legislated, Reno practiced strict segregation. Most minorities were restricted in their housing and employment options, were not served in white restaurants and bars, could not enter white casinos, or seek accommodations in white hotels. Churches, of which Bethel AME was the largest, played an important role in the social lives of black residents and visitors alike. Bethel AME held weekly dinners and operated a boardinghouse. The 1951 *Negro Motorist Green Book* listed two tourist homes in Reno: Carner's at 875 East Second Street and Billie Ross's at 520 Spokane Street. Only one motel was known to take blacks in the 1940s: the Siesta Motel on East Fourth Street. Beyond these limited resources, Jim Crow was alive and well.⁵

As for entertainment, there were a few places in downtown Reno on Douglas Alley and along East Commercial Row that catered to minorities. Dixie's Social Club operated from 1943 to 1949. Run by Bill Bailey, Dixie's Social Club served Asians as well as blacks. Bailey also operated the Harlem Club from 1946 to 1958. The Harlem Club served meals and offered a wide variety of casino games. Bill Fong ran the New China Club on Lake Street from 1952 to 1971 specifically for an Asian and black clientele.⁶

Short of distinctively ethnic surnames, or possibly residency addresses, nothing in the divorce records suggested a divorce-seeker's race. Had I not learned of the book, *Special Delivery: the Letters of C.L.R. James to Constance Webb, 1939-1948*, I would never have considered the existence of a black divorce trade in Nevada. C.L.R. James was a noted black Trinidadian Marxist writer and intellectual who came to Reno from New York to divorce his first wife

so his marriage to white actress and socialist, Constance Webb would not be bigamous. The bigamous nature of his marriage was the result of a Mexican mail-order divorce that was not recognized in the United States. He was also evading immigration officials because he had let his British passport expire. In his letters to Webb, James described his experiences as a divorce-seeker in segregated Reno.⁷

Cyril Lionel Robert James arrived in Reno on August 2, 1948. Asking for a recommendation for a place to stay, a white taxi driver took him to a boardinghouse at 539 Sierra Street that the driver called "a black person's place." Eating out had its limitations, as well. There were two or three integrated restaurants — a Chinese restaurant and a "Negro place." Otherwise, James found "the Jim Crow here in restaurants is powerful." He also found quick acceptance by the small African-American community and he was struck by their solidarity. James tried to find an African-American lawyer to handle his case. Finding none with the proper credentials, he engaged Charlotte Hunter. Miss Hunter was one of very few female attorneys in Reno, and James found her to be liberal, sympathetic to radicals, and "strong on the Negro question."⁸

Like many divorce-seekers, C.L.R. James needed to find employment to help finance his six-week stay in Nevada. It was decided that the best place for James to go was the Pyramid Lake Guest Ranch, where Harry Drackert reluctantly agreed to hire him as a handyman. His job was to keep the yard clear, supervise the irrigation system, mow the lawns, help take luggage in and out of the ranch's station wagon, and wash dishes twice a day. In his spare time, James wrote letters to his wife, read French literature, and began an English translation of *History of the French Revolution* by the French Trotskyist historian Daniel Guérin. After about a month of unaccustomed physical labor, Harry Drackert terminated James's employment, but allowed him to stay on as a lodger. This did not help his precarious financial situation, but gave him more time to devote to his demanding writing schedule.⁹

In between his work on "a series of philosophical reflections on the Hegelian dialectic," James traveled the 35 miles from the ranch to Reno to play the slot machines. He tagged along with Drackert, who would typically have a contingent of women to deliver for shopping or a trip to the beauty parlor. James would visit the library, the "Negro restaurant," then go to the drugstore to play the slots — and work "feverishly day and night to make up for the loss."¹⁰ James's letters during his stay in Reno and at the ranch shed

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Opposite: The New China Club on Lake Street opened in 1952. Owner Bill Fong developed the business specifically to cater to Asians and African-Americans. — Nevada Historical Society.

light on both the life of an important twentieth-century intellectual and on racial conditions in Reno. As Professor Dennis Dworkin stated in his article on James, "The time that James spent in Reno and at Pyramid Lake is also part of Nevada history. His observations on what it meant to be black in Nevada in 1948 are themselves noteworthy. Equally important, Nevada was not just an abstract backdrop for his intellectual pursuits. James became enmeshed in Nevada life; from divorce and divorce ranches, and lawyers and cowboys, to gambling and the scenic sublime."¹¹

In August 1950, *Ebony* magazine showcased the story of a young woman from Richmond, California who came to Reno for a divorce. The article asserted: "Nuptial knot cut by 500 Negro wives annually in divorce city." What a surprising statistic that is! The story reveals an image of Reno and a class of visitors whose presence in town had gone mostly unnoticed — or certainly unreported. To be sure, African-American celebrities came to Reno for divorces. *Ebony* noted examples such as Mrs. Bill Robinson in 1944, Mrs. Adam Clayton Powell in 1946, and the wife of Ink Spots star Bill Kenny in 1949. The majority however, the article claimed, were "unpublicized West Coast wives."¹²

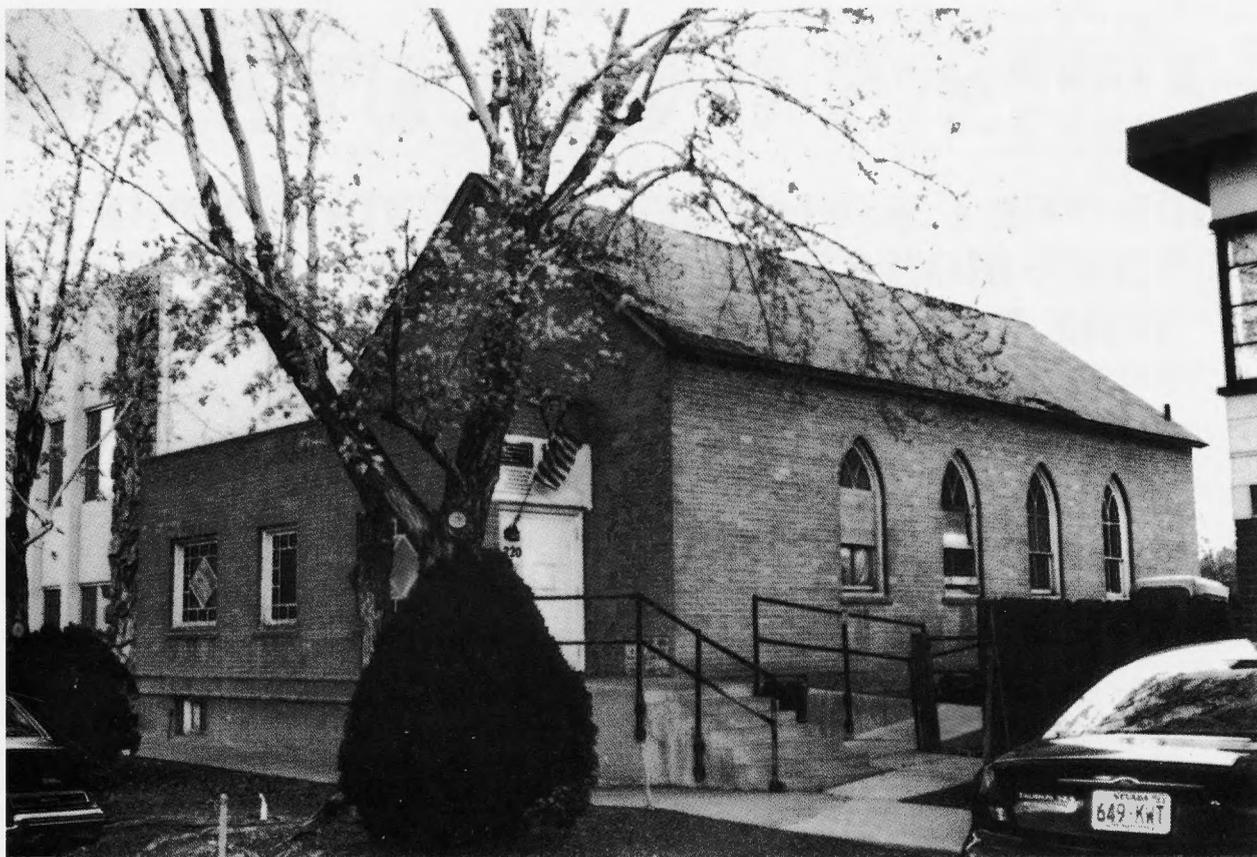
Confirming what had long been known, the article acknowledged that black women were barred from the swank hotels, dude ranches, and auto courts, but touted "the Negro-run boarding houses where rates are low." As for cutting costs, the article suggests that "if she is careful and stays away from the gambling casinos, the total bill [for a Reno divorce] can be kept down to \$300." The *Ebony*

article featured a young woman named Emma Allen, who found in Reno a friendly and hospitable community of some 500 African-Americans. She found a room at Doris Needham's boardinghouse on Elko Street. Mrs. Needham, whose husband was an elder at Bethel AME church, started her business for black divorcees because there were so few decent places for them to stay in Reno. Of her home, Mrs. Needham said, "We keep a neat, clean house and we don't tolerate any monkey business. Women are not allowed to bring any male guests home."¹³

While in Reno, Mrs. Allen met Reno's leading African-American citizens. Bill Bailey, who ran the only two integrated nightspots in town, and Reverend R.F. Thompson of the Bethel AME Church welcomed the young woman to their respective establishments. She attended an NAACP meeting and a church social at Bethel AME, which touted itself as the "Biggest Little Church in the World." All in all, the *Ebony* article painted Reno in a surprisingly good light. Although most restaurants held a strict segregationist policy, Mrs. Allen reported that she could shop in any store in town, including "fancy fashion shops which carry the latest New York and Hollywood exclusives."¹⁴

Despite what would seem like paralyzing discrimination, Reno's African-American community embraced the divorce trade as vigorously as did white Nevadans. It functioned as a nearly invisible microcosm of the bigger divorce scene, as Reno's black population opened their homes to temporary visitors and made them welcome in a town that was not welcoming of their race. ●





Above: Bethel AME Church was Reno's first black church. It was the social and spiritual center of the African-American community. Opposite: Club Harlem, located on Reno's Douglas Alley, was opened in 1946 by William Bailey. The club was patronized mainly by African-Americans. – Both images Nevada Historical Society

¹ The residency requirement was related to the amount of time a person had to reside in a state to be considered a bona fide resident, which affords the right to file lawsuits in the state's courts.

² Technically, the law stated that permanent residency was required, but most divorce-seekers had no intention of complying with that aspect of the law (despite testifying to it under oath). Mella Rothwell Harmon, *Divorce and Economic Opportunity in Reno, Nevada during the Great Depression*, unpublished master's thesis (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1998).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mella Rothwell Harmon, National Register Nomination for Bethel A.M.E. Church, Reno, Washoe County, Nevada. On file at the State Historic Preservation Office, Carson City, 2001.

⁵ Ibid.; *Negro Motorist Green Book* (New York: Victor H. Green and Company, 1951).

⁶ Dwayne Kling, *The Rise of the Biggest Little City: An Encyclopedic History of Reno Gaming, 1931-1981* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2001).

⁷ Anna Grimshal, ed., *Special Delivery: The Letters of C.L.R. James to Constance Webb, 1939-1948* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Dennis Dworkin, "C.L.R. James in Nevada," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* 44(2), Summer 2001.

¹² "Reno Divorcee, Nuptial Knot Cut by 500 Negro Wives Annually in Divorce City," *Ebony*, V(10), August 1950.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.