

illuminating Reno's Divorce Industry

An online exhibit at renodivorcehistory.org

An Interview With Jean Vandervoort Cullen

Interviewed via telephone in New York City by Mella Harmon in Reno, Nevada
October 22, 2014

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Jean Vandervoort Cullen

Interviewed by Mella Harmon on October 22, 2014

Mella Harmon: This is Mella Harmon in Reno, Nevada. The date is October 22, 2014, and I am interviewing Jean Vandervoort Cullen, who is in New York. Jean, we have your permission form on file, but I would like to ask your permission again to record this interview for the University of Nevada, Reno Libraries to be made available to the public.

Jean Vandervoot Cullen: Yes, you have my permission.

Thank you very much. All right, now on to the fun stuff. I understand that you married your husband, John, in Reno, the day he received his Reno divorce.

Yes.

So I would like for you to tell us what you would like to share about that whole experience—his experience, your experience, in Reno.

Well, as you say, I arrived in Reno on October 23, 1955. And the day after my arrival was the day that my husband, John Cullen, got his divorce from his first wife. He was divorced in the morning. And I remember his poking his head inside the beauty salon at the Riverside Hotel where I was having my hair done and saying, “We’re getting married this afternoon!”

It just seemed miraculous, because it was after two years of enormous tension. He tried to work out details with his ex, from whom he’d been legally separated. And at last it seemed it was going to be a happy ending and a new beginning, so it was really very exciting. So I’ll always have very fond memories of Reno.

That’s wonderful.

We both grew to love it. Of course, he spent more time there—needless to say, the compulsory six weeks. And he stayed first at the Glenwood Inn, where he met the Bliss family, of whom he was very fond, and then later, at the Riverside Hotel, where he met Janice Duncan, who worked there and has become one of our very best friends.

Oh, that's wonderful.

Actually, the next year, Janice met and married Nathaniel Goodhue of Massachusetts, who was in Reno, staying at the Flying ME Ranch for the usual reason. And Janice and Nat both grew to love Reno so much that after his retirement, they left Massachusetts and built a home in Reno.

Oh, my.

And during John's stay, he met a lot of fascinating people. One of them was Saul Bellow, the Nobel Prize-winning author, who was there for the usual reason. And coincidentally, before he left for Reno, I had given John a copy of Bellow's book, *The Adventures of Augie March*, which I signed with the pet names we'd given each other in light of all the stormy difficulties we'd encountered in our home state on our way to marriage. So it was inscribed by me, "To Flotsam, with love, Jetsam."

When we met Bellow in Reno, he counter-signed the book, saying "With best wishes from a leaf caught in the same tide."

Oh, that's wonderful.

It wasn't exactly the same tide, since Bellow had four divorces and five marriages, as opposed to John's one and two marriages. And we really had such a good time. We honeymooned for a few days in Reno, and more and more, I grew to love the place. Later, I was in Las Vegas, which I enjoyed, but Reno always struck me as a real place. Vegas is lovely and glitzy and fun, but Reno somehow seemed real to me, possibly because we made good friends there, particularly with Janice.

And after John died, unfortunately at the age of 61, I visited Reno with our daughter, who was then twelve, in 1972, and sort of showed her where her parents had gotten married, and introduced her to Reno. And then the last time I was in Reno was in 1995, when I visited Janice Goodhue, who was living in Reno at the time. And it was good to see her, and to once again enjoy Reno.

Well, my goodness, you need to come back.

Well, I'm getting a little old for travel, being 91 years old at this point. [laughter]

I think I mentioned to you that we really had a wonderful time, and after we were married, the wife of John's lawyer, who was Robert Hawkins, graciously invited us to dinner at her beautiful home. She was quite a grande dame. We really enjoyed it. She was the daughter of Clarence Mackay, and sister-in-law of Irving Berlin. And she regaled us with stories of the past. We really had a lovely time, and it was so gracious of her.

And everybody in Reno was gracious to us—that is, everyone we met.

And you were married by the justice of the peace. I noticed that you sent your marriage certificate here.

Yes. Robert Hawkins was one of the witnesses, and the other witness was actually the secretary of the justice of the peace. As I recall, she didn't even come into the room. She sat at the desk in the office—I mean, with the door open, so that she could hear the ceremony, which I'm sure was quite familiar to her.

She'd probably done that many, many times.

I'm sure. And then we went to Virginia City, and met Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg, who were then editors of the *Territorial Enterprise*. They had two railcars of the Virginia and Truckee Railroad, so that was exciting.

They were quite the characters.

Oh, they were. So we had a really wonderful time.

Where did you stay when you were in Reno? Were you still at the Riverside?

At the Riverside.

That was quite a nice hotel in its day.

Yes, it was. Sadly, that no longer exists, right?

Well, it does. It was slated for demolition in the late nineties, but a group out of Minneapolis literally rode in on a white horse and saved it, and it's been rehabbed into live-work spaces for artists, so it's artists' lofts, but they live there. So it's still here, at least its exterior form.

Well, that's very good news!

Yes. I think so, too.

I mean it's not news, exactly, but it's news to me.

It's a beautiful building. So what else did you do? You went to Virginia City, and went to the Hawkins home for dinner....

Right, and to the Flying ME Ranch, which was wonderful, because she was such a character.

Emmy Wood, you mean, the woman who ran it?

Right. So all in all, we had a lovely time. We only stayed for a few days, but of course, John had been there for a long time. It certainly seemed a long time to me, back in New York, waiting. It was not painful for him, because the six weeks were quite enjoyable.

Did he work while he was here?

Well, he kept in touch with his office in New York, which he was able to do by phone. Part of it, he just took as vacation time, and part of it, he kept in touch as best he could. But in those days, in New York, getting a divorce was almost impossible. This just seemed the best way, and it worked out very well for us. It seemed the logical solution.

Reno by the fifties had gotten the program down pretty well, so I think it operated pretty fine there for a number of decades. Are there any other reminiscences you have that you would like to share?

Oh, I don't know. I think that's pretty much it. As I say, we made one lifelong friend in Janice, and Janice adored Reno. We just had very special memories, so it made what could have been an unpleasant time really a joyous one.

That seems to be a common story. It's interesting how something as bleak and awful as divorce is turned into a pleasant memory for people.

Exactly. Very happy memories.

We're happy to hear that.

And I'm fascinated by your project.

Well, thank you. It's probably a long time coming, because it was such an important aspect of Reno's history, and Nevada's history.

Of course.

But we're very pleased to have this underway, and just so gratified that people like you have reached out to us, and were willing to share their stories, and give real life to the history.

Well, I'm intrigued with your project, and I wish you the very best.

Thank you. The pleasure was all mine.