

# illuminating Reno's Divorce Industry

*An online exhibit at [renodivorcehistory.org](http://renodivorcehistory.org)*

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## **An Interview With Barbara Davis**

Interviewed via telephone in Las Vegas, Nevada by Mella Harmon in Reno, Nevada  
November 19, 2014

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**Barbara Davis**

Interviewed by Mella Harmon on November 19, 2014

*Mella Harmon: This is Mella Harmon in Reno, Nevada. The date is November 19, 2014, and I'm interviewing Barbara Davis, who is in Las Vegas, Nevada. Barbara, do you give permission to record this interview for the University of Nevada, Reno Libraries, to be made available to the public?*

Barbara Davis: Yes, I do.

*Very good. Thank you so much. And thank you so much for participating in our project. I'd like to talk to you today about your experiences with your Reno divorce and what you did while you were here, which is an interesting story in its own right. So would you like to begin and tell us your story?*

Yes. I hope I can remember the right things that you need.

*Let me start by asking when did you come to Reno for a divorce, and where did you come from?*

Okay, first one, I came in 1945—no, 1947—from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. I had lived there for several years, because I went down in a show to the Copacabana Casino as a showgirl. It was an interesting country, and my experiences were not so interesting. [laughter] Well, they were—it's just the way they turned out. Anyhow, I was there in the show. Do you want to know about my romance?

*Well, you apparently reached a point where you felt you wanted or needed to get a divorce....*

Yes, I'd better say I got married first. [laughter] Anyway, I met a Brazilian playboy while I was down there who played polo, belonged to several country clubs, etcetera, etcetera. So we were

introduced and went places, all over Rio, particularly, because that's where we were. And he didn't want me to come home. He wanted me to stay down and marry him, but I didn't. I went home, and should have stayed there.

It was very exotic. He kept sending presents and calling from Brazil, wanting me to come back. And everyone thought it was so romantic. In those days, only society people seemed to marry inter-country like that. Anyway, I guess I was flattered. Everybody said, "Oh, go back, go back! Marry him!" So I ended up going back and marrying him, and was there for several years. And it was impossible. So I finally was able to escape. It was not easy, because a husband had to give permission for a wife to leave the country for any reason. The American Consulate would not help. And of course, I had to be sneaky about it, saying that I just needed to go home and see my family.

Anyway, that's what happened. I came home and went up to Reno immediately to get a divorce. I was just so eager to do that.

*How did you know Reno was the place to go? Just because everybody knew that?*

I had lived in California all my life, and was well aware of Reno, although I had not been there before. So I went to Reno, and found myself...first of all, I started looking around at—we used to call them "dude ranches" or something, where divorcées would go. They were very popular in those days. And everything was so expensive that I just ended up living in a boarding house. I didn't come home with a lot of money, because I didn't want him to be suspicious. So I brought quite a goodly amount, but I didn't want to spend it on ranches.

I have a picture of the little place that I found, this boarding house. I was there, and I think I had my old car. It wasn't old at the time. I was looking for part-time work, which I didn't find, and then one day I discovered that the maid had quit, at the boarding house, and I asked if I could have the job. And the woman couldn't believe it, because I had very elegant clothes with me. Plus, nobody knew it, but my husband was a marquis. He had a title from France. So I was a marquise while I was washing the toilets. [laughter]

So anyway, that title was of course nothing that I deserved. I have the name of my attorney. His name was Samuel Platt. And the clerk was Beemer.

*Do you remember where your boarding house was located?*

No, I don't. I have no idea. So I spent my six weeks there, cleaning the house and sightseeing. There were several divorcées. I would say four or five other roomers. I don't think there was any food involved there—I don't remember that at the boarding house—but there must have been. But there were four or five of us there. Some were from New York, others someplace else, you know, from all over the country.

Well, I guess that was their specialty. Maybe the attorney recommended it to me. I don't know how I found it.

*So then you went to court, and you had your moment in court? And then what happened with your ex-husband?*

Oh, he was still in Brazil. He was very vindictive and would have liked to come up and kill me, but he didn't. He sent his poor little sister, who couldn't speak a word of English, to the Beverly Hills Hotel all by herself. She was such a lonely little thing and very bashful and problematic to start with, but I went and got her, and brought her over to my parents' house, where I was staying ultimately.

He sent her to see if she could get me to come back. So that was sad for both of us. And I think as I recall, one of the things that she was supposed to tell me is that he had bought a new—not a Ferrari—a Lamborghini or something—for me. [laughter] Because he had one of very few cars at the time in Rio. There weren't many. Wealthy people had them. But he had imported a Packard convertible, so that's what we had when I was down there with him. And at the time, there was no gasoline because the war was on. So it had a coal burner on it.

*Oh my goodness. I've not heard of such a thing. That's remarkable.*

No, most people haven't. I have a picture of it, thank goodness, with me looking over the rear end or something. But he had to get underneath it with a rolled-up newspaper and light it with a match, and then get underneath the back of this coal burner and start the fire, to start making oil or whatever.

It was really fantastic. I tried to do some research on it a couple of times. Very few places in the world in that time were using that technique. Not enough that it got very well known. Anyway, that's another story.

So we'll just culminate it. He did finally send back a trunk of my things that I had left there. Not all of them, because I had taken a sewing machine and I had taken quite a few things that were heavy. But he sent the trunk back, and in it was a portrait that had been painted of me by a famous Brazilian painter, Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, with knife marks sliced all the way through it. [laughter]

It was too bad. It's unfortunate. It came to my parents' house, this trunk, and when my mother saw that picture, she took it and immediately threw it out in the trash, which is too bad, because we could probably have had it somewhat repaired, because the man who did it is world famous.

*Oh, that's a shame.*

So that was about the last I heard from him, though I did hear from some of our Brazilian friends that we had socialized with, who wrote to me. They spoke perfect English, of course.

*My goodness, what an adventure! Did you say you had more than one Reno divorce?*

Yes, that was one, and then I had another one. For the second one—I went back and was working and did various things. I married an actor who was the lead actor in a play in Hollywood, a very famous play called “The Drunkard.” Anyway, we were married for several years. The attorney on that one was Clel Georgetta.

*We have Clel Georgetta's papers here at the library.*

Of course, he's long gone.

*What year was this, Barbara?*

This was 1951, I think. The judge who signed it was Harold O. Taber. And Beemer, again, was the clerk.

*Yes, forever. [laughter] And where did you stay when you came for that divorce?*

At the Riverside Hotel. I don't know which happened first—the cart or the horse. I got a job in the show at the Riverside Hotel. You remember the Riverside?

*Oh, absolutely. It's still standing.*

I know! Artists or something are living there now, right? Well, at the time it was still rip-roaring, and they brought in four showgirls. Not dancers. Dancers and showgirls were different in those days. There were four of them, and then there was a line of about twelve or fifteen dancers. So we were four tall girls, and I drove up there, and they had rooms. All of the girls stayed at the hotel at that time. The rooms were included in the contract.

So that was nice. And, let's see, what else would be interesting about that? That was in 1951. Anything else about that?

*So you were here for six weeks then, also. Did you stay here afterwards, after your decree?*

Yes. So I just had to walk next door. Very handy. And get everything taken care of. And again, I had Clel Georgetta.

*I have to ask you. Either time, did you throw your wedding ring into the Truckee River, off the bridge?*

Heck, no! [laughter]

*That would be my response, too!*

A lot of people claim that that is a lie, and that nobody ever threw their rings in there. Well, it is not a lie, because I did see a woman do it. So I know for sure that at least one woman threw it in there, because I saw it.

*So when you were here the second time, you were really busy, because you were working.*

I was working, yes. I had plenty to do.

*So that took up your time. You didn't need to be entertained; you were entertaining.*

Not at all. But I'm trying to think which year it was. I think it was the first time I was there. You remember, Virginia City had all the cribs up there? I think they were kind of done away with by law in '47 or something like that. I did get up there and I think that was the first divorce.

One of the other divorcées that was staying at the rooming house and I drove up. I had my car. We drove up to Virginia City, and the cribs were still there at that time. We started to drive down the street and the girls all saw a car coming, and got all excited until they saw the driver was me, was a woman. [laughter] But there was a man in the car, so not all was lost. I mean, it was shortly after that, that they closed them all down. Because I did check that.

I've written a book about all this, so that's why I have some information on it.

*What is the title of your book?*

The working title is *Craps and the Showgirl* because after I got the second divorce, I went to work for Harolds Club. I stayed in Reno, and I went to work for Harolds, and they trained me to be a high limit craps dealer. It was really something.

*How long did you work there?*

I worked there and I went to the University of Nevada at the same time, finishing up my undergraduate degree. That was about 1952 when I went to work for Harolds Club and worked there for about five or six years. And I graduated; I got my degree, and started on a master's

there. And then I had a third marriage, but I don't know that I want to get into that. I mean, I think this is enough. If people read about the third time, they'll think "This woman is nuts."

*What was your major at the university?*

Speech and English. I used to go on trips with the debate team. Harolds was wonderful. They would let me off to go to things like that. They'd let me off the night before there were finals and things like that. It was great. Really nice. They were wonderful.

*Especially in that period when women working wasn't that common.*

Women dealers were rare. Well, Harolds started it, I think. They were the most wonderful people. I've read a lot of books people have written since then, about the gambling casinos and all that sort of thing, and all of the terrible things and nasty stuff. These people were not like that at all. Even though they were carny people, they were human and very nice. Great to their help.

*I know a number of people who worked for Harolds over the years. There's a group here called the Harolds Club Pioneers.*

Yes, I'm in touch with one of them. His name escapes me. He wrote a book.

*I think you mean Dwayne Kling.*

Right. I know him. He was there at Harolds for a while, at the same time as I was. But I didn't know him. I don't know why. Maybe different shifts or whatever it was.

*How long did you work as a showgirl?*

When I was at Harolds, that was the end, after I left the Riverside. I had done a lot of showgirl work in my other days, earlier.

*How did you get into being a showgirl?*

Oh, just for fun one time, I was living in Hollywood, and heard about a call for showgirls. And I thought, “Okay, I’m just going to go see what this is about.” So I did. And I got picked. My first show was “Folies Bergère”—have you ever heard of it?

*Oh, indeed I have, yes.*

It was the French producer who came from France and he put this together, and we rehearsed in big gymnasiums and stuff. It was a huge cast. We went to San Francisco. It was 1944, “Folies Bergère.” It was a beautiful show—elephants, ballet, horses.... [laughter] It was really something. It was beautiful.

*What a fascinating life you’ve had.*

Yes, I’ve been very lucky to have some interesting things.

*Well, thank you so much.*