

# The Rites of Reno

Drawings by Ronald Searle

■ Jesse Lee Reno was the very model of a Union major general. "He was upright in person," said a fellow officer, "with a face and manner so bright and engaging that it was a pleasure and a comfort to see him."

It would be gratifying to be able to say all this for the city that took his name. Not that Reno's citizens are not upright; they are certainly as honest, cheerful and industrious as any other community of 50,000-odd souls. But the clutter of motels and hot-dog stands that mars the approaches to Reno, and the jumble of convoluted neon that assaults the eye on Virginia Street are not always a pleasure and a comfort to see. And then, of course, there is the unhappy fact that the general's good name has become almost synonymous with the word "divorce."

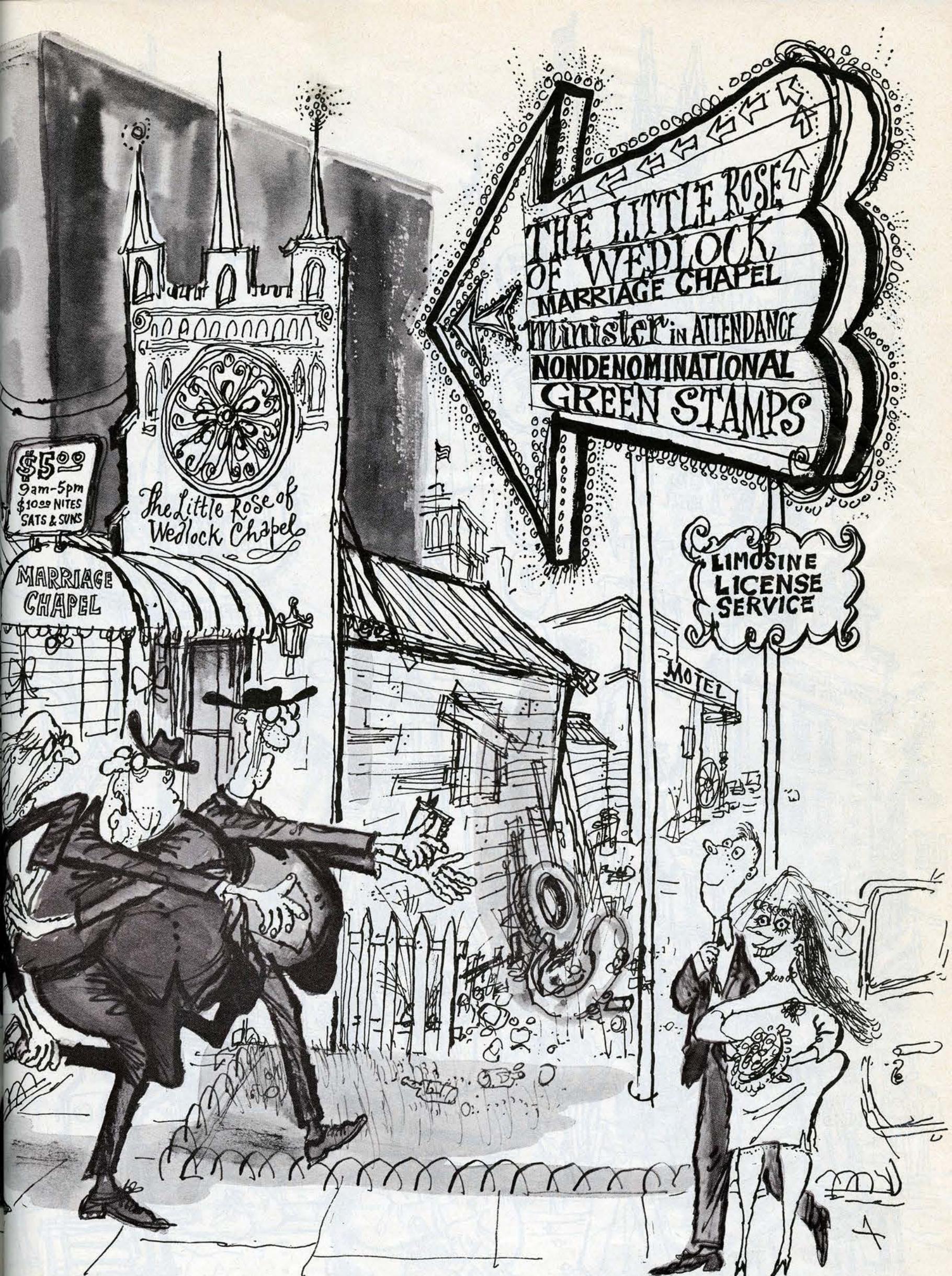
On this last count, the city has suffered unfairly. Any Renoite will be able to tell you that only 4 percent of the divorces in this country take place in Nevada, and he will probably add that marriages outnumber divorces in Reno by five to one. Still, enough newsmaking pleas of incompatibility or extreme mental cruelty resound in Reno courtrooms to maintain the city's reputation as the divorce capital of the United States.

The number of Reno divorces is kept down by the expense of establishing the required six-week residence. The well-to-do—usually women—put up at one of the cozy, scrupulously discreet dude ranches outside of town. The ranches try hard to make the stay as pleasant and therapeutic as possible, and often succeed. When the six weeks are up, there is a quiet five- to fifteen-minute court appearance and the divorce is granted. In short, a Reno divorce is as painless and dignified as such a proceeding can be. Renoites, in fact, have so well reconciled themselves to this small industry that no one blanches when the proprietress of a dude-ranch brandishes a bracelet from which dangle the wedding

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Brothers of the nondenominational cloth vie for couples attracted from neighboring states by the prospect of cheap, no-nonsense



nuptials. After the ceremony the newlyweds may retire to a motel where the lady or gent in the next room is establishing residence for a divorce.



Virginia Street (left) is Reno's booming main thoroughfare. Alias Route 395, it meanders north to Canada and south to San Diego. To Reno's visitors, who wager hundreds of millions annually, it can be the world's costliest toll road.

Striking it rich (right) is not easy, but the slot machines disgorge enough jackpots to keep customers interested. Odds are long on the sterling music made by three bells in a row, but odds on this lady's strike are even longer.



Small, secluded dude ranches (above) provide a sociable six-week home on the range for an affluent, divorce-bound clientele. Ladies in waiting may ride horseback, play bridge and meet new friends; some manage to become steady customers.

An old-timer (right) revives the Comstock days when silver dollars were as plentiful as Tahoe trout. Once standard currency in the casinos, the coins are now in short supply, since no new ones have been minted for some thirty years.



*Altruistic Harold's Club uses much of its gambling profits to put needy scholars through the nearby University of Nevada, a gesture not always appreciated by needy losers who must somehow put themselves on the next flight home.*

*Continued from Page 62* and engagement rings of former clients.

Ironically, a Reno marriage can be something less than dignified. Gingerbread-fronted wedding chapels advertising twenty-four-hour service and "resident ordained ministers" turn out young marrieds like so many Moxie bottles. All you need for a \$4.95 special, complete with flowers and music, is a license (\$5 from 9 to 5 weekdays, \$10 evenings and weekends), a ring, and a willing partner of the opposite sex. The chapels are particularly popular with eloping Californians and other couples seeking a quick ceremony. After their vows, the honeymooners can walk over to Virginia Street and burn up rent money and car payments in the gaming houses.

Gambling is Reno's big business, and for many years has been its biggest tourist attraction. Harold's Club, which advertises itself on roadsides as far away as Hartford, Connecticut, and Daytona Beach, Florida, is perhaps the most famous casino in the country. Like other Reno gambling establishments, Harold's offers big-name entertainment, acres of slot machines and crap tables, and enough bars to accommodate an airborne division. In fact, the club has provided free evenings to graduates of the nearby Air Force Survival School, and they have reciprocated by erecting Harold's Club signs in the Congo and at both Poles.

Reno's houses are now facing stiff competition from newer casinos in Las Vegas and Lake Tahoe. But if the luck of a former Reno hotelkeeper still holds, the city's future is assured. Informed that the adjacent Truckee River was about to overflow, the late Mert Wertheimer of the Riverside bought up all the boots in town, distributed them among his staff and guests and announced that the gaming tables would stay open until they floated. Stay open they did, and Wertheimer, the story goes, was rewarded with an eighteen-inch trout that swam right into the lobby.

THE END





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