

illuminating Reno's Divorce Industry

An online exhibit at renodivorcehistory.org

An Interview With Dr. James Hulse

Interviewed by Alicia Barber in Reno, Nevada

February 26, 2015

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Dr. James Hulse

Interviewed by Alicia Barber on February 26, 2015

Alicia Barber: This is Alicia Barber. I am sitting here with Dr. Jim Hulse at his home in Reno, Nevada, and the date is February 26, 2015. Dr. Hulse, do I have your permission to record this interview for the University of Nevada, Reno Libraries, to be made available to the public?

Dr. Jim Hulse: Yes. Yes, you do.

Thank you. So today, our subject is Reno's divorce trade. I understand that you had a couple of different types of experiences involving divorce-seekers who were coming to Reno. One of them was your work as a quite young man, working as a reporter and coming into contact with the Reno divorce trade by actually reporting about it. So I wondered if you just could start by telling me the story of how that began, how you got involved in it, and how it worked.

Okay, I went to work for the *Nevada State Journal* in 1954 after I returned from the Army and worked there about four years, '54 to '58, before I went off to Stanford. I came back a couple of summers for summer jobs, but I would say my internship or my apprenticeship in divorce reporting was in the middle fifties. I had started as a police reporter—courthouse reporter—and when some of the older reporters who were my mentors didn't necessarily want, or were busy with other things, they asked me to look out for divorces. I'd do the titles to divorces, marriage licenses, deaths, at the courthouse.

And so it was kind of a side activity, but when you're a stringer for a while—for a couple years I was a stringer for the *New York Times*, *Buffalo Evening News*, the Watertown, New York newspaper—and once in a while those papers would say—the *New York Times* said "If there's a New York City divorce, then look in the social register and if a name's in the social register—of four or five hundred names—then send a night telegram." And then every so often when I was watching I would pick up the name of a New York celebrity and send them a night telegram

saying, “Mrs. Anne Doe of Reno divorced John Doe of New York City. The divorce was uncontested. Grounds for the divorce were mental cruelty.” Whatever, something like that. And if I’d send it to the *New York Times*, then they’d print it and they’d send me a check for ten dollars. The *Buffalo Evening News* wanted everybody from Buffalo and maybe, more often than you’d expect, you’d send the night telegram and they’d send you two dollars. So it was beer money and it was kind of fun. Well, I did that kind of thing maybe for a couple of years because I was on the courthouse beat and other reporters were doing other things. I sort of graduated into that and it was fun and interesting.

I’d also—if I went to Carson City, one of these fellows might say, “Watch out or look for divorcées who were hiding out.” And I got to know a couple of the cowboys at Washoe Pines and they would tell me things like that. This wasn’t a big time thing but if I’d drop in there for a cup of coffee or a chat I might get some information. Oh, once in a while a paper from Minneapolis or something would say, “Watch for so-and-so.” So this was very small-time activity.

The real pros at that business were people like Bill Berry whom you mentioned in your book [Alicia Barber, *Reno's Big Gamble: Image and Reputation in the Biggest Little City*, Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 2008 - Ed.]. Bill was a wonderful old man—energetic, lively, very talkative. I lived on what was then University Street—Center Street, right near the main gate of the university. Bill lived two doors up the street. And so we would see each other as neighbors and he took great interest in me and the university, so in a way, he was the big guy among the paparazzi and he worked for, I think the Hearst Newspapers—and as you say in the book, for the *New York News* and others. Anyways, he was all over the map looking for exciting things about Reno, and divorce was part of it. And so he was a wonderful, entertaining guy, a bundle of energy.

And there was an anecdote about him. They said this so-and-so man came here for a divorce—it was usually the wife—but the husband came here for a divorce for six weeks and his new girlfriend showed up. And they got the divorce in the courthouse, and went across the street to the marriage area, then they went to their honeymoon cottage and he looked under the bed.

She said, “What are you doing?”

He said, “I just want to be sure Bill Berry isn’t there.” [laughter]

So that's the story we used to tell. Bill had a way of tracking people down who didn't want to be tracked down.

So you would often be finding out about the divorces after they happened, when you went to the courthouse and the person had just gotten there?

Yes. Unless you got a rumor before or unless somebody telegraphed and said, "Watch for so-and-so." Then maybe some of the reporters would ask around and see. There were dozens of horse ranches in the area. You know more about that than I do, but Washoe Pines was a favorite or the Flying ME in Washoe Valley, or the one up the Truckee River. A.J. Leibling wrote the book on—I've forgotten it—I think he was out at the Drackert Ranch at Pyramid Lake and he wrote the thing on McCarran and the Paiutes. So anyways, they were scattered around.

Were there any specific places within Reno? Not at the ranches but within Reno where reporters would know that many of these divorce seekers would congregate?

Oh, I think yes. I think some of them lived right downtown, I mean in the hotels or the houses. I'm not exactly sure, but what a divorcée had to testify to was that she had been in Reno for at least six weeks and intended to stay to make this her permanent home and had been seen—maybe her landlady or someone would say, "Oh, yes, I've seen her each and every day for six weeks."

They weren't, I won't call them lies but they were creating depictions and everybody knew that 90% of them, 99%, intended to go home, back to New York or wherever. There's one anecdote I remember—I can't testify to the accuracy of this one—but there was a story going around that the Governor General of Bermuda, which was in a British colony, came here for a divorce. He and his wife had apparently worked it out that he would come for the six weeks and the divorce would be uncontested, of course. If a divorce were to be contested then that's a different ball game. But he came here for the six weeks and swore he intended to make his home here. And the wife must have been a real witch.

She had her attorney ask him, "If you intended to stay here, are you still going to be governor of Bermuda?"

She pulled the rug out from under him. Well once that happened, I think his case collapsed. Now I can't testify to the accuracy of that, but that's one of the stories we told and passed around.

Did you ever actually witness any of the divorce proceedings in a courtroom?

Oh, yes. Now sometimes they would do it in chambers and you wouldn't see that, but most of them were wide open and the attorneys or the plaintiff would ask the central questions and the judge would say, "Is everything in agreement here? Do you both agree?"

"Yes, your honor."

"Yes, your honor."

It would take five, ten minutes maybe. And the judges—in those days there were three judges down there. And I think they would set two hours every morning or some such time or maybe one judge would do them all. But you'd have morning court for divorce and maybe in the afternoons they would do the other trials. Something like that. That's oversimplification, but they cranked them out rather efficiently.

I didn't realize so many of them were public, actually. I think my assumption was that many of them were behind closed doors most of the time.

No, I think quite a few of them, well, you didn't necessarily—a reporter didn't sit there unless you thought something was going to happen or there was nothing else going on. You might look in to see which attorneys were on the case. Snooping around the courthouse was kind of fun.

Now I'm intrigued by this idea that some of the cowboys on the divorce ranches might tip you off that someone was there for divorce. So you said that that did happen?

Yes. I don't think they called, but if you got a rumor and were on your way to or from Carson City you might stop by.

Do you think at those ranches in general they tried to keep away reporters?

I really don't know. I know some people came here and tried to hide because Bill Berry was looking for them. And I think he may have had spies over in Carson Valley or Lake Tahoe. He had connections that the rest of us just marveled at.

Was he a photographer, too? I can't remember.

Not to my knowledge. He was involved in many things. He was very instrumental, I think, in helping get the winter Olympics here. What's the name of the fellow who engineered the games? I think he lived or had an interest in Tahoe. He was a sort of manager, manipulator, publicist for the Tahoe Olympics in 1960. And somehow I think Bill was working with him quite a bit generating publicity. So he was a real jack-of-all-trades.

Was he here in Reno until he died?

As far as I know. I went off to Stanford for a while. He may have died in the sixties. He was quite old, but I can't remember. I bet one could look it up. There'd be an obituary on him somewhere.

Now you came back and ultimately became a professor at the University of Nevada, which we now call the University of Nevada, Reno. Tell me about any interactions that you had there with people who came to Reno for a divorce.

Well, one of them—I've already spoken about Dorothy Caffrey.

Go ahead and start the story over, because we weren't recording that.

Okay. Dorothy was a dear friend whom I came to know at the Reno Little Theater because she was a widow. She was very active and in her late fifties or sixties. I remember she was born in the 1900s—she was very proud of that—and became a New York debutante. She was obviously a person of some means who married young to a fellow, I think he was a Yugoslavian who called

himself a prince. He may have had some connection to the Serbian royalty. So he has a Slovak name. I've got her book here somewhere but she of course doctored it up with other names. But she tells about falling passionately in love with him. He became a drug addict. It's a very sad story.

Dorothy came to Reno for a divorce in the early twenties and she wrote up this emotional experience. She does not, as far as I remember, put anything in Reno but she talks about the deterioration of his mind. She would tell these stories about coming here for a divorce. And then she went back to New York and married a second time in the twenties. Again, a failure, and she came here for divorce.

Then she met a fellow who ran a dairy ranch up there on Holcomb Lane. He was rustic. They fell in love and had a very good marriage and a daughter until he died, let's say in the 1950s. Dorothy was still vibrant and active. She came to Reno Little Theater because she had tried her talent in New York; it had fizzled.

It's very complicated, but she gathered in many young people for her swimming pool. She had a tennis court, theater. So she became the grand aunt to maybe a dozen of us who were in college and I happened to be one of the lucky ones. She was very generous and would throw evening parties and so on. When I went off to Stanford, she thought I was making a mistake.

Anyway, I went to Stanford but when I came back for the summer she would let me stay in a room while I was there. She had a big house. One summer when she went off to Europe she asked me to stay there and watch the place. She had an African American maid, Lulu, who was funny and lively and a real servant. Dorothy had a kind of aristocratic, privileged attitude. She once had a couple Filipino servants because after she and Lulu did something else she said, "Well you know, Orientals are more reliable as servants than Black people."

So you get the picture? She was a real character. When I brought Betty back, she fell in love with Betty and let us stay in the house that she had built for her daughter and son in law out there on Foothill Road. It was a beautiful place.

And I said, "Well how much is the rent?"

She said, "Oh you don't have to pay."

I said, "Dorothy, I'm going to pay you rent."

She said, "Oh all right. Fifty dollars a month and no more."

She was so nice. When she died it was like losing one of the family, but that was about 1970. Anyway, she had stories about divorce that she would tell. And she knew all the old attorneys, some of whom I knew by reputation. But you see all this now is mixed up in the fuzz in my brain. If I see a name like George Bartlett, who was a judge, my little mice in there try to work but I can't really testify. But she was one of the great divorcées who came here and ultimately stayed. She became a pillar in the community.

And her full name was what?

Her maiden name was Cruikshank. Dorothy Cruikshank was her maiden name. And her married name as I knew it was Caffrey. If there are annals of the Reno Little Theater—I've been told they have good records—she would be in there.

So she had married the dairy farmer, they had a good marriage and then he passed away. Did you know her only after he had passed away?

Yes, that's right. I knew her, I'm going to say, in the 1950s. So he must have died somewhere in the fifties.

Maybe she just had so many friends, but why do you think she decided to stay in Reno?

Well, I think she liked it here. Bill Caffrey had the dairy farm and it was beautiful. It's a beautiful setting up there now. She lived on 34 acres—maybe 20, 30 acres. And at that time it was all dairy. She ran the dairy for a number of years after he died. So when I would visit out there, there were still cows around. And a fellow lived next door—Chester—and his family who looked after the place. They were very good to her.

She had a daughter, Eileen. Eileen married Bob Schouweiler, who was an attorney here. I think he may have served a term in the legislature and I think he ran for district attorney once. So he was very active. She was a passionate Democrat, he was a Republican, and that—well, that gets into the field of gossip. She liked young people who were kind of liberal and Democrat.

I wonder if that ranch or that property is still out there with the house on it.

Well, I haven't been by there in a long time. But the last time I was there it's been divided up. There's the big white house sitting back. Holcomb Lane, if you go west from Virginia Street, it dips south then it turns westward again. And in maybe 200 or 300 yards there's a long lane with a lot of trees and this big white mansion. Now there are houses here, and here, and here—modern houses—but the last time I looked you could still see the big white mansion. She sort of reigned out there like a queen.

That's a great story. You were telling me that there was a professor who came to the University who was there for a divorce and who came and chatted with you. Can you tell me that story?

Yes. I can't right now remember his name but he was from New York. I think Columbia [University]. He was an American historian who came into the department in about the middle sixties, I'm going to say, and said, "I'm here for six weeks. Can I give any lectures or do anything to help you?"

Somehow I want to say his name was Jack but anyway, I'll call him that. We invited him over here for dinner. We arranged some lectures and we talked a great deal and he asked about divorce ranches. He was curious about the whole process. We asked him if there was anybody he wanted to meet and he said, "Certainly no girlfriends, I've had enough of that."

Well, anyway, he was a great person and we chatted. He was very candid about being here for the cure. I looked him up and he had quite an interesting historical writing record but again my memory doesn't serve.

And you said he was a professor at an institution back east?

Yes. Somewhere in New York. I want to say Columbia, but I know my memory plays tricks on me. Maybe Betty [Dr. Hulse's wife] would remember because sometimes she comes up with a name better than I.

Do you think he was looking for some kind of payment or he just wanted something to do?

No, no. I don't think we ever talked about money. He was just here as sort of a semi-prisoner of Nevada law for a time until he could get rid of her.

Now wasn't Countess Dandini here for a divorce? Did you know her? There was the Count and the Countess. Did you have any interactions with them?

Oh, well, yes, I knew Sandro Dandini and Juliana was her name. I knew them well, too.

Was that a divorce related story?

Oh well I'm not sure. Dandini taught Latin over here, Latin and Italian. They had a beautiful home out there and they would entertain dignitaries and young people. He had a beautiful big room with a checkerboard on the floor. If you went into their house it opened into a square with checkerboard. It was a square checkerboard design with a balcony around the edge. And it was said that he had chessmen the size of small children that he could put out there and he could sit up in his balcony and he could have people move the chess pieces. If there's a divorce-related thing there I've forgotten. [Count Dandini obtained a divorce from his first wife, Lillian Remillard, in Reno. - Ed.]

I have some notes that say "Dandini couldn't go back to California because his wife was making legal trouble after his Reno divorce."

Oh, okay! That rings a bell that somehow he had legal problems in California because of something he had or hadn't done. Too bad Bob Gorrell isn't around. He knew all those things.

Can I ask you another question about when you were a stringer writing those stories. Were they just very brief stories? Did they just want to know the names of the person and when they got divorced or did you have to research more about the people from Buffalo or New York to turn it into a real story?

No... I may have had a couple of inquiries from the *New York Times* about something. But basically it was just Jane Doe of Reno, Nevada was granted a divorce from John Doe of New York City on grounds of mental cruelty. You might mention if there was something on the custody of the children. Anything like that in the agreement, you'd mention. Most of those decrees were half a page to a page long so you'd put in the information that was there. If it were contested and newsworthy then they might want something else. But I think I saw very few of those.

So as an assignment it wasn't too difficult then. It was kind of easy money.

Oh, yes. It was something you'd do at the quiet hours at the courthouse most of the time. And I never really got into the business of chasing somebody or trying to snoop them out. If by accident I was coming back from Carson City and somebody said to watch out for Jane Smith or somebody then you might drop by.

Now when you were talking about going over to the Riverside Hotel after hours, after your scheduled time, did you say that that was kind of related, like you might see some people related to divorce or was that just a place to go?

No, that was my political snooping. I don't think I ever went over there to find out about a divorce, but if politicians or a convention were coming up or if there was some kind of deal cooking, you might go over to see who was there and sit down and have a late night beer or something. In political season that was sort of part of the assignment but it had nothing to do with divorce.

So did you, even outside of your work as a reporter, ever encounter any celebrities who were here for divorces, or see any in town?

No, I wasn't that far up the ladder. There were a number of stories about women who would come here for divorce, get to know their attorney well, and stay to marry the attorney. I think Al Hilliard—does that name ring a bell? Hilliard Plaza over at the university. He was on the Board

of Regents. A wonderful man. Al was a divorce lawyer. He came here from New York—I'm not sure if for divorce. He was a grand, tall man—beautiful hair. He looked like an authority. His wife as I knew it was Emily. Emily Hilliard was a legend. She came here for a divorce and the story was that he was her attorney, they got acquainted, and she stayed. She was one of the funniest people. Al was tall, respectable looking and Emily was a kick and a little bit silly. Dorothy Caffrey knew them well and they were good friends.

Anyway, Emily had a problem. She'd steal things—shoplift. I don't think anything very big but some five-and-dime stores. They knew it, and a couple times it was a miss. And Al supposedly said, "If Emily does that, just watch her, tell me what she did and I'll pay you for it."

So there was one of the side stories. Emily drove a car for a while but she was tiny and couldn't see very well. But if she backed up she'd [inaudible]. Then she'd pull forward and hit the car in front of her. And I heard her say once, "You see that street over there? I wrecked three cars over there."

And Dorothy said of them, "I hope Al doesn't die first because then we'll all have to be nice to Emily." I'm getting back into gossip again.

Oh, but it's okay! Just anecdotally from Dorothy Caffrey and the Hilliards, you knew at least a couple people who had come for a divorce and then stayed. Did you know any other people like that who'd come here and just ended up staying?

Well, I think that—again, I don't trust my memory—but I remember Joy Vargas-Gorrell. Joy was married to George Vargas. I believe she came here for a divorce. Did you know her? Josephine Vargas... wonderful woman. After George died and she was a widow and after Bob's second wife died, they became acquainted.

It seems that it happened quite a bit, that people stayed.

Oh yeah, I think so. Dorothy's story bubbled up. She brought her mother out after, I think. I never knew anything about her father and I never knew her mother but she brought her mother out here to live—Cruikshank. So I've heard stories about her.

It's neat. I'm just trying to fill in the picture a little. There are so many stories. This has been really helpful. I'm trying to think if there's anything else that I wanted to ask you. I could sit here and ask you about buildings in Reno, too, but that'll be another day. Go ahead, look at your list there.

One of the reporters downtown at the *Nevada State Journal* was John Burns. He was older and one of my mentors. And he was sort of in this semi-business of watching things. He told a story once that there was a fellow who came here for a divorce, got the divorce and went across the street to the old state building to get a marriage license. And John must have become acquainted with him while chatting with him, and when he said goodbye, he said, "Be careful. Have a good time."

He said, "I'm not too old to have a good time but I don't have to be careful." So there are little anecdotes like that.

You're aware of Walter van Tilburg Clark's essay "Rocky Mountain Cities: Reno." I was going to look at that. I don't think there's anything about divorce in there, is there?

I don't recall, but I'll check.

Walter was not interested in that kind of thing. That's one idea or question that popped up.

Yeah, I guess that in general, there were a lot of mixed opinions from residents in Reno about the whole divorce business. They probably ranged from people just feeling kind of dismissive of it to disapproving.

Yeah, yeah. I think you make the point well that Reno got this reputation over the years and while some people didn't like it, I think it just became part of the culture, just like bootlegging or the illicit, undercover liquor business. Everybody does it, everybody knows it.

I agree. Part of life. I think that's great. There are so many little stories we can use here, it's terrific! Thank you so much for talking to me today.