

illuminating Reno's Divorce Industry

An online exhibit at renodivorcehistory.org

An Interview With Janis

Interviewed via telephone in Austin, Texas by Mella Harmon in Reno, Nevada

November 12, 2014

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Janis [last name redacted]
Interviewed by Mella Harmon on November 12, 2014

Mella Harmon: This is Mella Harmon in Reno, Nevada. The date is November 6, 2014 and I am interviewing Janis, who is in Austin, Texas. Janis, do you give permission to record this interview for the University of Nevada, Reno Libraries to be made available to the public?

Janis: Yes, I do.

Thank you. So I understand that you have some stories about your mother coming to Reno for a divorce. When did that occur?

It occurred in 1944. My mother had lived in Los Angeles. She was separated from her husband, and she moved up to San Francisco. While up there, it's kind of a cute story, because actually, her mother moved up to San Francisco first, and had met a very nice other woman that she became friendly with.

And what happened was the woman that my grandmother had become friends with told a sad story about her son who was a widower. And my grandmother told this sad story about her daughter who had a child as well, and was separated from her husband. So these two little old ladies decided that they were going to introduce this couple to each other. And of course, this couple didn't want to meet each other, because their mothers were going to do this.

So it was kind of cute, and it ended up that they did meet, and they actually went out with each other to shut their mothers up, and they subsequently fell in love. And my father had a little five-year-old son; his wife had died when my brother was a year. And my mother had a two-year-old daughter. They fell in love and back in the day, it took well over a year to get a divorce. And you also had to have grounds; I think they were adultery and a few other things. It wasn't like it is now where you can just claim irreconcilable differences; there was no such thing then.

And so it was quite a process to get through a divorce—financially, emotionally, and time-wise. So my mother told me that because she was in San Francisco, she decided to go to

Reno. So she went up to Reno and then if you established residency, in six weeks you could get a divorce. So she showed me this apartment building that she lived in, and I don't know the exact street, but it's the street when you come into Reno, it's that main street—Second, Third, Fourth, I'm not sure.

Well, Virginia Street is the one that runs north-south; that's the main road.

The one off of Highway 80, where you turn right onto this street, and you come by and I think Harrah's is on the right-hand side.

Yes, that would be Virginia Street.

Okay, well, across the street from there was an apartment building, and it was a large building. I don't know if it's been torn down since. But that's where my mother told me all the ladies that were going through divorces—or gentlemen or whoever it was that lived there—lived at the time, and they all became good friends, because they were all there for the same purpose.

And there was a specific building where you could live for six weeks. She didn't have a roommate, to my knowledge, but she had to do something for six weeks, so she worked as a shill, she told me, at the blackjack table at Harrah's. [laughter]

Oh, that's wonderful.

I know! So that's what she did, and she said that she became friendly with all the other little women, and everything was fine, and I guess my father came up a couple of times in that six weeks to see her, and visit with her. And then she did tell me that it was kind of amusing, because the morning of September 22, 1944, the judge granted her divorce—she'd been there for six weeks—and that afternoon, the same judge married her to my dad.

That's such a great story.

It is wonderful. And then they honeymooned in Truckee, and she did show me—it was some little place, it was very cute—if I saw it now, I would remember it. It was quite an amusing little place; it looked like something that would have been kind of fun in the forties. They spent their wedding night there, and then they continued home to the Fairmont Hotel to have their honeymoon. They were married 54 years before my dad died.

Oh, that's lovely. That's really lovely. Did your mom tell any stories about working at Harrah's?

You know, it's interesting. My mother loved to gamble. She loved to play cards. She continued to play cards after that. I don't think she knew how to play cards when she got up there.

[laughter] But I guess she didn't know what to do with herself.

My mother actually worked for Disney and things like that, and she was a script girl down in Los Angeles. But when she moved up to San Francisco, they didn't have movies and things like that. So I don't know what she did for employment at that point. She had moved in with my aunt, because her husband, who was a doctor, was in Europe. It was during the war. So she and my grandmother moved in with my aunt, to help my aunt take care of her children.

And I guess then when she went up to get her divorce, she had to figure out a way to earn a living, because she was going to be there for six weeks. And I also think she'd have been bored to tears, sitting up there for six weeks, trying to find something to do.

So I don't know whoever suggested it to her, or what happened. Maybe one of the other ladies told her. But she was a very good card player. I didn't know they hired skills. [laughter] But she said she'd sit at the blackjack table, and I guess when they didn't have people that were playing cards or something, she'd sit down and she'd play. I guess she obviously played with their money, and they obviously paid her to do it. I don't think she was a cooler or anything. [laughter]

But that's what she did, and she did tell me that on her days off, she used to like to go horseback riding. And she'd go horseback riding, and it wouldn't have been bad weather, because it was August and September, so it would have been nice. There wasn't any snow or anything like that.

She did say that there was a hotel or an apartment building, and it was on the left hand side of the street, across from Harrah's, when you first came in. I don't know if it's still there or not. That's where she told me she stayed, with the women seeking divorces.

And she did take me by the courthouse one day, and did show me up the stairs: "This is where I married your dad."

So how old were you when she told you about the divorce?

It's kind of interesting, because back in the day, people didn't talk about that kind of stuff. I was probably at least eight or nine before I ever knew about it, because it just so happened that when my sister had gone down to Los Angeles with my mother and I—we used to go down for holidays to Los Angeles to visit my mothers' relatives—and I remember one day, my sister was going somewhere, and I said, "Why can't I go"?

And I remember my mother saying, "Well, because your sister's going to see her father."

I must have been at least nine or ten, because I remember this conversation. And I wouldn't have remembered it as a tiny child. And I said, "What do you mean, her father? Dad's her father."

"Well, not exactly."

And I do remember my sister being adopted by my father, but I didn't know what that meant. When the time came when my dad adopted my sister, they made a deal, but I don't remember at the time what that meant.

But I did know that at that point my mother told me, and I said, "I just don't understand," and then she proceeded to tell me that she had been married before. And she told me the story of my dad, which was a very sad case. His wife died when my brother was a year old. It was one of these things where they were treating her back in the day for tuberculosis, and actually it was lung cancer.

Oh, dear.

But they didn't know back then, which probably means that it metastasized from something else, because at 26, you wouldn't have had lung cancer. So he was left alone. He was thirty years old and left alone with a year-old child to raise.

And the cuteness of this all is that my uncle, the doctor, was the obstetrician who delivered my brother, and that's how when his mother came up, he knew this family, and that's how my grandmother met my other grandmother. He was the doctor to my father's wife, who had passed away. So that's what a small world it was, and that's how it worked out for them.

That's a nice story, I think, for your mom.

It's a nice story, because if my grandmother hadn't met my dad's mother, then the two of them would never have gotten together. And it was a nice situation. Back in the day, I think people separated more than got divorced, because divorces weren't easy to get. So people would separate. They would separate from each other, and they'd live apart, and that's what my mother did. She came up to live with my grandmother and my aunt, because that was what she could do. So that's kind of what happened.

And then my mother told me this story. I think we were twelve or thirteen, the first time that I really remember ever going to Reno. And I remember we went to Reno, and I remember in the old days, you didn't stay in fancy hotels; you stayed in these little motels. And I remember swimming in the motels, and my mother telling me that she had lived here. I guess she figured I was old enough to know. I think she started telling me these stories when I was a teenager. And of course, I was amused, you know, because she liked to gamble, and I wanted to know about this gambling stuff.

My mother taught me how to play gin rummy, and all those things. She enjoyed playing cards, and she was very good at it. My mother was really a smart woman, and she passed away—both my parents passed away well into their eighties. And my mother didn't lose a brain cell. Unfortunately, she succumbed to COPD, but her brain was just as sharp as a tack, and she was always just very good with all that. So I'm sure she was a great skill. [laughter]

I'm sure she was probably the best skill they had! [laughter]

And she was in her twenties at this point, so that was kind of an interesting time. But yes, she did fine.

But I don't know any more than that. I don't know who her lawyer was, or any of that other stuff. I just know this story that she told me, and when I saw that, I went, "Wow, my mother did that." Of course, now there's a million things I wish I would have asked my mother, but you don't think to ask those questions.

No, you don't at all.

You don't ask about so many family things. I remember I did have her write down where everybody was from in the family, and things like that. And there are certain things now, something will come up and I'll go, "Oh, why didn't I ask her that?"

But when we were younger, we weren't that interested.... I'm so glad your mother told you something of her experience in Reno.

Do you have any idea how many divorces were granted during that time?

Thousands and thousands and thousands. My personal research topic is the divorce trade in Reno during the Great Depression years, the decade of the thirties, and there were more than 30,000 divorces granted just in that decade.

I didn't even know it was going on back then. I didn't even know when it started, and I don't even know, was it a moneymaker for the state? Is that why they decided to do it?

Yes.

What brought it about?

Well, Nevada doesn't have a lot going for it. Mining and agriculture were the two main economic factors here. But those are both really boom and bust sorts of economies. And about the turn of the century, someone figured out that because of our law here, the residency law, that it was a place to get a quick divorce. What's called the "migratory divorce trade" has been going on since colonial days, actually, where it's easier to get a divorce somewhere else than where you live. And Reno just sort of picked up on that in about 1906. That was its first really high-profile divorce. And then it just became a business, and the state—

I'm sure all the movie stars came up there because it was fast for them.

Oh, yes. Lots of them. And so the state realized this was a really good deal. And of course, Reno was the biggest city in the state at that time, and so it garnered all the trade until probably the forties and fifties, when Las Vegas started getting some of it, but not that much until almost toward the end.

I think either that or they had to go to Mexico, right, to get a quickie divorce?

There were Mexican divorces; other states had liberal divorce laws, not quite as liberal as Nevada, so Nevada was what they called the "divorce mecca of the world." But there were other places you could go.

I think California and New York had the strictest divorce laws.

At least your mother, when she remarried, it was a stable relationship.

It was stable. And my brother, at that point, had been raised by my father's sister and mother, because they were all living together. He bought a pair of flats up in San Francisco, and he put my grandparents in one flat, and my aunt and my uncle in another. And then he had somebody to help him with his little son while he went to work. And my brother was only five when my

parents got married, and my sister was like, two-and-a-half. So they didn't really know any different.

Right. So what they knew was the stable relationship that your parents had.

Exactly. It's just an interesting story that they would meet that way. Here he was, taking care of my dad's first wife, and delivered my brother. It was a strange little circumstance, but it worked out well for everybody.

Yes, I think it was in the stars, don't you think?

Yes. I think so, too. I think so, too. I wish I could give you more information, but it's all I've got.

It's really a lovely story, and we appreciate it so much. We really appreciate your seeing the article and thinking that you'd like to share your story.

I hope you get some more great stories.... Did anybody else mention this apartment building, where the other people lived?

Well, there were many, many places where people lived. There were divorce ranches, there were apartments, hotels, motels, you name it, people lived there, because there were that many people. They needed to find places for them to live.

It's neat that you're able to find these stories.

I know; we're really fortunate that that story went out over AP and have gotten calls from all across the country, which is really neat.

Very interesting. Like I say, I just saw it on AOL one day, and just happened to click on it and thought, "Well, that's kind of interesting, because I remember Mom's story."

Well, I'm glad you saw it, and thank you very much.

You're very welcome. Good luck.