

illuminating Reno's Divorce Industry

An online exhibit at renodivorcehistory.org

An Interview With Elaine Rigsby

Interviewed via telephone in North Carolina by Mella Harmon in Reno, Nevada

December 18, 2014

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Elaine Rigsby

Interviewed by Mella Harmon on December 18, 2014

Mella Harmon: This is Mella Harmon in Reno, Nevada. The date is December 18, 2014, and I am interviewing Elaine Rigsby, who is in North Carolina. Mrs. Rigsby, do you give us permission to record this interview for the University of Nevada, Reno Libraries to be made available to the public?

Elaine Rigsby: Yes.

Very good. Thank you so much. And thank you so much for helping us with our project. I'm just going to ask you a couple of questions in general, but then I also want you to tell me in your own words about your experience in Reno. Let me just ask you a couple of questions up front.

When did you come to Reno for a divorce, and where did you come from?

I came from Long Island, New York, where I grew up and where I lived when I was married. I was married for nine years, and my lawyer knew a lawyer in Reno whose name was Oscar Zapf. I'm sure he's gone. He was a pretty old man back in 1957. So I'm sure that he's not around anymore. But anyway, he was a lovely man. He looked like the Kentucky Fried Chicken one—the Colonel.

He met me at the airport. I had to fly to California and then take a plane back to Reno. And I didn't get into Reno until about a quarter to three in the morning. And there he was, standing there in his white suit and his white hat to meet me. Of course, I thought, "My god, if I get off this plane, I don't know where I'm supposed to go or anything. I just hope that he's there." And he was.

And where did he take you, the first night? Where did you stay?

Well, there was a woman named Eleanor Bengler. She had a lovely house, and she rented. She was alone—I don't know if she was a widow or divorced or what—but she had several bedrooms and she rented them out, mostly, I guess, to people that were there on a short-term basis like I was.

Do you remember where the house was located?

Well, it was walking distance, only two blocks away from the Mapes Hotel, where I worked. I don't remember the address at all. I looked through stuff to see if I could find something with the address on it, but it's long gone. I've changed names and moved a few times since then.

That's amazing that you remember these names. Okay, so you came here and you were staying with Mrs. Bengler, and then what else did you do while you were here?

Well, through my lawyer in New York and Mr. Zapf, they got me this job at the Mapes Hotel as a shill. And, you know, that was a very nice hotel. I saw a picture in the paper that they tore it down. Did they put up another hotel there or what?

No, it's a plaza now. It's just a vacant area.

Well, at the time, it was considered one of the nicer hotels. Of course, my parents had a fit when they—I mean, none of us knew what that job entailed. And of course, naturally, my father thought it must not be anything that he'd want his daughter involved in. You know how daddies are.

So what did it entail? What did you do as a shill?

I just had to gamble. They would give me, like, five hundred dollars in silver dollars, and they'd tell me when to move from the 21 to the poker or whatever. I just moved around and gambled for

the house. And if I lost too much, they'd give me more. Or if I got too much—if I won—they would take some of the money back.

I worked there a full day, five days a week. And it was wonderful, because I had four children. My youngest child was only three months old when I went out there. So it's not like I was rolling in money. But this worked out wonderful.

I don't remember what she charged us, but I shared the room with another young lady who was also from New York, and she worked for *Life* magazine. She was younger than me and didn't have any children to worry about.

Did you leave your children back in New York when you came to Reno?

Oh yes, my mom came out and stayed at my house. I lived in Levittown, Long Island. So my mom came out and stayed at the house with the children. They were used to her. So it worked out that way. But it was not a happy time of my life, I have to say that.

Understood. Yes, of course. So you worked at the Mapes every day, five days a week, for the entire six weeks you were here?

Yes.

Did you do anything else while you were here? You were probably tired after working every day.

Well, you know, they were very, very nice people there. I made friends with one girl in particular, and I've been racking my brain trying to think of her name, but I don't remember it. But anyway, she had a lot of friends—men and women friends. And of course, at the time, I was pretty young myself because I got married at nineteen. I got married in 1948, and this was 1957, so I was very young.

We went out, just locally, in the area there. I think once we went to someplace called Sparks, Nevada. They had some kind of a club there that these two guys wanted to take us to.

But it wasn't a bad experience, the whole thing. It was something different after being stuck home with four little kids, you know? [laughter]

But other than that, there was nothing else really outstanding that I did that I can remember. I was there for business.

That's right. You had a goal in mind.

Right.

Do you remember much about the time when you went to court?

Well, Mrs. Bengler was my witness in court. I had to have a witness. I asked a couple of girls that I worked with, but they didn't want to do it. So I asked her, and she said, "Yes, I usually do that." She said, "I won't charge you for that; I'll just go."

I never even thought about that! I wouldn't even have offered her anything or thought about doing that.

I do think some people charged, so that was nice.

Right, right. I mean, she had a very lovely, clean house. We had our own bathroom, this other girl and I. Everything was clean, and if we wanted to eat there, we could. And if we didn't, just let her know ahead of time that you weren't going to be there for a meal.

So then you went to court, and you just left right after that, after you had your decree?

Right.

And you flew back home to New York, I guess.

Right. I had never flown in my life. You know, you had to fly to California and then come back to Reno, and then the same thing going home again. I really didn't care much about flying, although I think it's much worse now than it was then. The planes weren't so crowded like they are now. I was just 86 this week, and I don't really think I'll be flying any more.

Well, happy birthday, and that's a gift if you don't have to fly any more, I think.

[Discussion of Rigsby's home in North Carolina.]

I'm glad you had a good job at the Mapes.

It was. It was a very nice place to work. I had never heard of that job. I knew nothing about it. Of course, it was legal. I had to go to the police station.

Oh, right, to register and get a card, right? Did you have to get a work card?

Right.

They still do that, for people who work in the casinos.

But it was fun because I never was a gambler. And I got to gamble and didn't lose my own money. I gambled with their money. [laughter]

You were probably very good at card games after that.

Yes. [laughter] I don't play cards anymore, but at the time, yes. I brought a lot of stuff home. I brought cowboy outfits for the kids. Of course, my youngest one was too young for that. But the other three, I gave them all cowboy outfits I brought home with me.

I can't really think of anything outstanding to tell you. I wish I had a more exciting time.

No, I think being a shill at the Mapes is wonderfully exciting, and I'm really happy to hear your story, and we're so grateful that you reached out to us and are participating. So thank you very much for that.

[Chats for a bit about the goals of the project.]

I couldn't think of the last name of the girl who shared the room with me, but her first name was Olga. Were you in touch with anyone named Olga?

No.

She worked for *Look* or *Life* magazine, and I'm sure she probably married again.