

Pilgrims' Process



How the Reno Legend Began and Flourished Into a State Industry

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RENO, Nev., July 19.—"Now, therefore, it is hereby ordered, adjudged and decreed that the bands of matrimony now and heretofore existing between the plaintiff, John Smith, and the defendant, Mary Brown, be, and the same are hereby dissolved; that said plaintiff and

defendants are hereby released from all the obligations thereof and restored to the status of single persons; and that the plaintiff be, and he hereby is granted a decree of divorce from the defendant, final and absolute in form, force and effect; the laws of the State of Nevada providing no interlocutory period of conditions or restrictions on remarriage.

"Done in open court this nineteenth day of July, 1940.

"William McKnight, District Judge."

There it is, the final paragraph of two small pages of typewritten legal language, the cure that matrimony-weary pilgrims travel miles, spend six weeks in Reno and perjure themselves to obtain. Perhaps it is because so few are turned away. Or is it like the tourists who come in droves to the Taj Mahal, remove their shoes, examine the interior and go away never knowing in whose memory the beautiful marble was erected? Few Reno pilgrims know the origin of the remedy they crave, but that is not remarkable, since the most dyed-in-the-Sierra Renoites are also pretty hazy as to just when Reno began acquiring its silly reputation as America's unhitching post.

Gary's Divorce and Gift.

Without going back to Deuteronomy, Greek and Roman law, the granddaddy of divorces in and around Reno was that decreed to the old Steel Trust's Judge Elbert H. Gary in 1904. Attorney Sardis M. Summerfield, father of the now prominent Reno lawyer Lester Summerfield, handled the case, and it was not without note since seven years after the divorce the former Mrs. Gary awoke on Christmas morning to find a \$500,000 pearl necklace in her stocking, a present from the judge.

Reno received more notoriety in 1905 when another steel tycoon, William B. Corey, of Pittsburgh, was sued for divorce by his wife Laura B. Corey. Mr. Corey had become infatuated with a chorus girl, and his wife sought relief in Nevada. Naturally, it was a case that claimed a lot of press attention.

Then an enterprising lawyer named Bill Schnitzer inserted the following advertisement in theater programs, newspapers and magazines throughout the country where it should get speedy results:

"Divorce laws of Nevada. Have you domestic troubles. Are you seeking a divorce? Do you want quick and reliable action? Send for my free booklet."

It Got Results.

It turned a stream of divorce cases to Reno. It got Lawyer Schnitzer disbarred, but that was only a face-saver in more conservative days in the State of Nevada. He was later reinstated.

It is common knowledge that Political Boss George Wingfield later engineered the six-month residence requirement down to three and then down to six weeks in 1931 when the state legislature actually stopped the clock and passed the new law late at night when nobody was looking.

It was an out-and-out subterfuge to corral the nation's divorce business, and it brought tons of riches to Reno, but at the outset it did not please the year-round citizens of the Biggest Little City in the World. The first to feel their wrath was Judge George A. Bartlett. Some months later he handed down a liberal opinion outlawing alienation of affection actions in the State of Nevada, and the distaff voters ganged up on him, dumped him off the bench on which he had tried thousands of divorce cases in his ten years of service.

Wit on the Bench

No small cog in the wheel which ground out divorces was George A. Bartlett in his terms on the bench. The black hat habit he picked up in his terms in Congress in Washington, the long gray hair which he trims himself when it starts overlapping his coat collar, the gray side-whiskers, the black-ribboned pince nez, black suit, black flowing bow tie. Judge Bartlett was a figure when he walked through the streets.

On the bench he was a wit and a liberal beyond the borders of popular approval. When he was

Grounds for Divorce.

"Better hate than sever," says Judge Bartlett, "is some wag's formula for the religious attitude on the subject of divorce. It is the attitude that condemns married people to stay together no matter how miserable they may be; despite the fact that unhappy people are usually inefficient people, half-hearted in their work, troubled and discouraged. It is the attitude that is blind to the daily torture of constant nagging, neurotic emotion, jealousy, hate, spite, selfishness and fear. It is the attitude that condemns a nervous girl to the perpetual bullying of a thick-skinned husband; a nervous man to the roistering ribaldry of a woman who would make a better barmaid than a wife. It is the attitude that permits mother-in-law to torture a man into suicide and a woman into incipient dementia. . . . I could go on all day telling you what mental cruelty is," declares Judge Bartlett, making out a case for himself and the District Court of Reno.

He once gave a divorce to a woman who complained that the mental cruelty she suffered was a husband whose eyes watered because he smoked a pipe that was

He Defines Sin.

Judge Bartlett even undertook to define sin for his court:

"Sin," he said, "is not necessarily an offense against civil law, though it may coincide with such offense. Stealing, for instance, is forbidden by statute as well as by God and by conscience. Perjury is forbidden by statute and by God, but not always by conscience. . . ."

Seventy-one-year-old Judge Bartlett is in divorce practice again. He sits in his office surrounded by dusty legal volumes, pictures of dogs, horses and airplanes. There are more pictures on the floors than on the walls.

He has a filing system all his own, but it seems to work well enough. All the judge has to do is shuffle some papers on his desk, mutter "Where in hell is that thing?" and in no time he has it in his hand.

Judge Bartlett has led a fuller life than most Renoites. His attitude is tolerant, his manner mellow, his wit rakishly Irish. He likes to recall by fable the day of his birth in San Francisco, October, 1869:

"I sat on that rock with God, and he created all things. Then on the last day he created the most perfect spot, San Francisco. But now that Harry Bridges has taken it over you can have the whole place. It has been fouled."

But lest anyone think that Judge Bartlett is getting as old as his years he is quick to suggest a gin drink of his own invention and go into the subject of aviation. His blue eyes twinkle with defiance when he announces that he has not been on a railroad train in 16 years. That dates his first interest in flying, and he roars when he recalls the day he and his bench associate, Judge B. F. Curler, first took lessons in a Waco, just outside of Reno.

"We took off and were having a fine time until Curler came down and tried to put her on the ground right in the backwash of a twin motored army bomber that was warming up on the field. We went

hind over up and were dumped out on our heads. It certainly would have slowed up the divorce business around here if both of us had cashed in on that trip."

Flies His Own Plane.

Judge Curler sort of proves Judge Bartlett's contention that "a judge's job is good for life if the women don't get after you." Judge Curler is still sitting in Reno's District Court. He's 73 and as quick as a bullet. He still flies his own plane on Saturdays unless the gin-marriage business in his chambers is extra heavy. A judge of the District Court is paid \$7000 a year, but if he's industrious and the crowds pour in from California to be married he can clear \$100 or more extra each week.

Judge Curler's associate on the District Court bench now is Judge William McKnight. Judge McKnight is a newcomer, having been voted into office early this year. He was a practicing attorney before he became a judge. He is a man of 55, gray-haired, ruddy complexioned and appears to be one of Reno's model citizens.

He has refused no divorces since he accepted his post, has had none contested, and he proceeds at an even pace of handling about six divorce cases a day. In one day in 1931 Judge Bartlett's court tried 200 divorce cases.

Unless there are children involved or a question of monetary settlement, all divorces take the same route.

The Regular Outline.

The plaintiff files the petition in the morning with Clerk Elwood H. Beemer. The lawyer is there and the witnesses. When the case is called the courtroom is cleared, the mental cruelty alleged and the oath of permanent residence taken.

The judges consider this uniform perjury no worse than the phony adultery cases that come before the courts of the State of New York, so they have no qualms of conscience or feeling of inferiority. Like most other barristers they are proud of the title, judge, and look forward to appointment to the Supreme Court of the State of Nevada some day.

Occasionally a divorce case is out of the ordinary, but there is little about the private lives of miserable couples that these judges have not heard. However, if the divorce cases begin to wear, the District Court judges halt the issuance of those expensive two-page decrees and take up other business, since their court handles everything from juvenile delinquency to corporation and surrogate.

Living at High Speed.

Frequently a moment after the judge has handed down a decree of divorce he is requested to marry the divorcee to somebody else. Hundreds of women have gone through the portals and processes of Reno's District Court and in 10 minutes passed through three stages of life.

It is not true that hundreds of divorcees have kissed the courthouse pillars for good luck. That is one of the thousands of fictions that have gone abroad strictly from the typewriters of imaginative reporters. After a week's crouching to snare a picture of a divorcee leaving her lip rouge on the courthouse granite this correspondent had to enlist the services of two professional models and a transient Look Magazine photographer to illustrate the point.

Neither is it true that unshackled women by the hundreds run to the banks of the shallow Truckee River and cast their old wedding bands into it. When Judge Bartlett was on the bench he had an enterprising daughter who used to collect the wedding rings as souvenirs. Later on she tired of "collecting," however, and on occasion could be persuaded to part with one for a price from one of the gin-marriage couples hurrying from California.

The usual disposal of old wedding rings by fresh-made divorcees is in the local hockshop, which is owned by New York's Jack Dempsey and a Frank Collins of Reno.

Tomorrow: Love in Reno.



Washoe Court House (left), where the Reno decrees are granted, and (right) the way divorcees kiss the building's pillars for good luck.