

# Romance on the Range

Was the dude wrangler a predator? Sometimes. Did she care? Not always.

By Donnelly Curtis

Long before Reno was known as a gambling destination, it was known as *the* place to get divorced. From 1910 through the 1960s, Nevada offered a solution to tens of thousands of couples living in other states where it was difficult to end a failed marriage and move on with their lives. The only catch was that Nevada law required one party in the divorce to become a resident.

The initial six-month residency requirement was reduced to three months in 1927, and then to six weeks in 1931. The “divorce industry” that expanded to serve a growing number of migratory divorce seekers cushioned the blow of the Great Depression for the state’s economy.

Most of the temporary residents were



The cowboy gigolo is Reno’s own special product.

women. Whether or not she initiated the proceedings, a woman in the first half of the 20th century was generally freer to leave home for the six-week “cure” than her husband, who was more likely to be employed.

Women (and some men) from all levels of society flocked to Reno, populating a “colony” with its own culture, living in hotels, boardinghouses, rooms in private homes, and—for those who could afford it—nearby dude ranches, or divorce ranches as they came to be known. For some, the waiting period was something to be endured and forgotten as quickly as possible. For others, their time in Nevada was an adventure, an eye-opener, and a transformative experience to be remembered. A few divorcees never left.

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PRIZE STORY

## Reno Madness

JOE LANE and I were very young when we ran away and married. We would probably have waited until we were older and better able to marry, if it hadn't been for my mother. Mamma was so anxious to keep us apart that she virtually threw us into each other's arms.

Ours was a sweet love story, with roots entwined deep in childhood friendship. Away back in the eighth grade Joe picked me for his girl, and used to wait to walk home with me after school. But nothing would induce him to come into our flower-filled sunny yard, to play. All the other children in the neighborhood gathered in our yard and the big place rang with laughter all the afternoon. Mamma would come out and look around and when she saw all the nice little boys and girls of Crestwood, she would smile approvingly and order the maid to bring us milk and cookies.

But Joe never shared in these delights. He would walk me to the gate; but when I coaxed him to come in he would squirm and groan red, explaining that he had to run some errands for his mother, or cut wood, or mow the grass on the tiny strip of lawn in front of their shabby house in the sprawling outskirts of Crestwood. I'm sure he had time to play. He was simply in awe of Mamma and our great house.

He was such a serious little fellow, and he took his responsibilities so hard. I suppose being the only son of a poor widow did that. He was always planning for the future.

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Mamma felt I could never make any but a brilliant marriage. My whole girlhood, in Mamma's eyes, was a preparation for marriage. She spent more money on me than she should have. Dad was no millionaire—just comfortably well off. But Mamma was determined to show me off to the best advantage. She superintended the buying of my clothes and, because she had exquisite taste, made a beauty of me where Nature had intended me to be merely a pretty girl. My hair, abundant and long, was tended weekly by skillful hands until it gleamed in honey-colored curls. Never, from childhood on, was I permitted to bob it. It was my chief glory, and formed a bright frame for my small, delicately featured face and blue eyes.

In the summer, Mamma took me from one resort to another. We must meet the “right people!”

Naturally, there was no place for Joe in Mamma's scheme of things. She resented him furiously. When we were children, she merely sniffed at my friendship for “that awful Lane boy.” But now I was growing up, and Joe was a menace. He was poor, and a nobody—both crimes in Mamma's eyes. If he hung around too much, he might frighten off really eligible men. Mamma ordered me to stop seeing him.

I tried to rebel. There was a terrible scene and Mamma had one of her heart attacks. Mamma could always count on winning a battle with a heart attack.

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“Reno Madness” was the first part of a very long feature in True Story Magazine in March 1936. INSET: Dudes and cowboy, Pyramid Lake Dude Ranch, ca. 1934.



ABOVE: *Preparing to ride, Pyramid Lake Ranch, ca. 1950.*  
 LEFT: *A Lew Hymers postcard, ca. 1942.*



meets the handsome, virile—or kindhearted, rugged or tender, wise, free, experienced or innocent, candid or enigmatic—devoted cowboy, good with horses, good with his hands, and together they experience moonlight rides, campfires, stars, perhaps danger, rivalries or other drama, with interesting side stories and secondary characters. It was part of the cowboy’s job to drive her (and the other guests) to town for errands and for entertainment at the dance hall. In stories and novels, a romantic relationship would be inevitable.

Most of the pop-culture writers called upon their own experiences and observations while staying in the area for their own divorces. The amount of truth varied, of course. But dude wrangler was a real occupation, and they were usually hired at the ranch for cowboy work as well as for “other duties,” based on qualities or attributes that went beyond their ability to ride and take care of horses. Some of the cowboys married divorcées they met on the job, and some even went into the dude ranch business with their new wives.

In real life, affairs between female “dudes” and cowboys were commonplace in Reno’s divorce colony, although relationships between real people were sometime less tidy than those in stories and novels. “Rebound” relationships are not always successful, especially when there are cultural differences to transcend. Sometimes there was a broken heart at the end. But the divorcée would generally return home and adjust to her modified, yet still familiar life, and the cowboy would meet fresh guests.

Was he a predator? Sometimes. Did she care? Not always.

Eventually, laws in other states were relaxed and there was no longer a need to travel to Nevada. Divorce ranches closed or evolved into other kinds of operations, and a colorful era came to an end. ■

*Donnelyn Curtis is the head of Special Collections at the University of Nevada, Reno Libraries, which recently launched “Illuminating Reno’s Divorce Industry,” an online exhibit. Within the site at <http://renodivorce-history.org> is a wealth of information (stories, books, cartoons, photographs, research materials) on the history and lore of the dude ranch cowboys, among other topics. The project was funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services.*

Nevadans for the most part welcomed these marital refugees and made them feel at home. Many in the trade offered emotional support and diversions to help ease the pain, the dislocation, and the boredom that might afflict the visitors. The most successful proprietors of boardinghouses and divorce ranches were able to lend a sympathetic ear to their guests, to keep them occupied, to introduce them to new experiences, and to bolster their self-esteem when needed.

Divorce ranch managers got some help

Others called them “cowboy gigolos,” a characterization that oversimplified the many types of dude wranglers and the roles they played on divorce ranches.

For decades, popular culture fed the stereotype of Reno’s cowboy gigolo through tales of divorce ranch romances in magazine features, cartoons, novels, plays and movies. It made a great story—the beautiful but demoralized—or fragile, crushed, angry, frustrated, disturbed, or just spoiled and bored—debutante from the East Coast

with all of these services from their staff—particularly from their hired cowboys, or “dude wranglers” as they called themselves.