

# illuminating Reno's Divorce Industry

*An online exhibit at [renodivorcehistory.org](http://renodivorcehistory.org)*

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## **An Interview With Steven Jonas**

Interviewed via telephone in New York City by Mella Harmon in Reno, Nevada

November 12, 2014

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**Steven Jonas**

Interviewed by Mella Harmon on November 12, 2014

*Mella Harmon: This is Mella Harmon in Reno, Nevada. The date is November 12, 2014 and I am interviewing Dr. Steven Jonas, who is in New York. Dr. Jonas, do you give permission to record this interview for the University of Nevada, Reno Libraries to be made available to the public?*

Steven Jonas: I certainly do. Delighted.

*Wonderful.*

Delighted to be included. And this is, of course, oral history. My father was an American historian, and he was educated by a great historian at Columbia University named Allan Nevins in the 1930s. Mr. Nevins, as great as he was, he was old enough so that he didn't have a Ph.D., just had a great career. Mr. Nevins invented, or was one of the inventors of, oral history. He started recording on wire recorders in the 1930s.

*Oh, my gosh, that's really wonderful.*

So there's a connection there.

*This is a loop, isn't it? Wonderful. Okay, so you contacted us in response to a press release, I guess—a story that you saw. And you have a story about coming with your mother to Reno for a divorce, so I would love for you to launch in on what you have to tell us about that.*

Sure. Well, the year was 1946, and my parents—one of them was the American historian. His name was Harold J. Jonas. And my mother, Florence Jonas, decided to get a divorce. We lived in New York state. Divorces in those days in New York state were very difficult, as they were in many states. That was the reason why, of course, Reno became known as the divorce capital of

the country. As anybody who is listening to this series knows, there was a residency requirement in Nevada. Am I pronouncing it correctly? Is it “Ne-VAH-da” or “Ne-VA-da”?

*Well, we say “Ne-VA-da.”*

“Ne-VA-da,” okay. I’ve got to be in sync there. In Nevada for six weeks. And so in the spring of 1946—I believe it was April—my mother and I boarded a train at Pennsylvania Station in New York City, and we were on the train for three days. In those days, you changed trains in Chicago. Actually, we were in Chicago for about nine hours, and I remember that my mother took me to the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry, which still exists. And then we arrived in Reno.

Now, my mother chose not to stay in Reno, but about 25 miles outside of Reno—I believe it was to the west, either the west or the north—at a chicken ranch, which took in boarders who were doing the same thing, who were out there to get a divorce. So I was there with my mother for six weeks, and I went to school.

Now, I was New York City; I was born on the island of Manhattan; I grew up on what’s called the Upper West Side of Manhattan, overlooking the Hudson River. And I went to a school in Manhattan, a private school, as the case may be. And I went from that environment to being in a one-room schoolhouse. And I spent six weeks in a one-room schoolhouse. And that experience was memorable enough—I will be 78 years old in a couple of weeks—I was nine at the time, and I certainly remember it. I was one of three members of the fourth grade, and the grades ranged from one to eight.

We had a lovely teacher—I don’t recall her name—a very, very nice lady—and it was very interesting the way the classes were organized. There would be a reading class, there would be an arithmetic class, there would be maybe a geography class or whatever. And each grade did work in that particular subject appropriate for the grade. And met children—I frankly don’t remember them—but I certainly remember meeting children who came from a completely different background, a completely different upbringing, than the one that I had.

But I do recall that I enjoyed my experience very much. And even at the age of nine, I knew that I was having an unusual experience for a boy who came from Manhattan, New York—not Manhattan, Kansas.

*We have a Manhattan, Nevada, also, but it's really small.*

Oh, you do? Somebody from New York settled it, obviously.

*Were there other children at the school who were in your situation?*

I don't recall any.

*Do you recall the name of the school, by any chance?*

I don't. It was a stand-alone. It was not in a village; that, I remember. I believe that it was near the railroad, which went by us. It was not the transcontinental railroad; it was a railroad that, if I recall correctly, was a local railroad. It might even have been a narrow gauge railroad; it probably was a narrow gauge railroad. And the locomotives were even then out of the picture books.

*It was probably the Virginia & Truckee Railroad.*

It was! Yes, correct. It was the Virginia & Truckee. Was that a narrow gauge railroad?

*Yes, and it was sort of local. It sort of ran between the Comstock Lode—Virginia City—and then Reno and Carson City and kind of went around there. So in order for that to have been the case, you would have been south of Reno.*

Okay, fine.

*I'm guessing that you were probably at Franktown School. That would be about the right location. The chicken ranch story is fabulous. How did your mother find the chicken ranch?*

I have absolutely no idea. I remember the first name of the owner; the owner was Roy. I remember Roy. I don't recall his last name, and of course he had a wife, and I don't remember her name, either. But there were an awful lot of chickens. [laughter]

*That must have been an experience, too....*

For a kid from New York City, a chicken ranch was absolutely fascinating. [laughter] There were chickens, there were chicks. So, that was Roy and the chicken ranch, and the school, and the Virginia and Truckee.

There was a highway—it must have been a main highway—that went by the ranch. I remember the trucks from the highway, and the ranch was situated just before a hill. And, of course, the trucks were all standard shift, as many trucks still are. But they were loud, and I remember specifically hearing the drivers downshift, and the smoke pouring out of the exhaust as they prepared to go up the hill. And I'm not sure about this, but there may have even still been chain-drive trucks on the highway at that time. It was right after the war—the Second World War—which to me is “the war.” It's the war that I grew up with.

*So what else did you do besides go to school?*

Well, my mother was an inveterate traveler, and we did local traveling. I remember going to Carson City, which was the capital then, and it still is. And Carson City was the capital of Nevada, and it had two paved streets in 1946. One of them was the main highway that went through the city—it was a town, really. We would call it a town, or a village. And the other one, as I said in the memo, it either went to the governor's mansion or it went to the state house.

*Well, the state house is on the highway, so it would have gone up to the governor's mansion, I guess. There was a cross street to the highway.*

I remember that it was a cross street, and those were the two paved streets in Carson City in the spring of 1946. And again, as a city boy, that was striking to me. I mean, there was nowhere that I went in the eastern region of the United States where there were unpaved streets in towns. But

here was the capital of the state where there were unpaved streets. [laughter] That certainly stuck in my memory.

We went up to Virginia City, which was somewhat preserved, still, at that time. I guess it's probably all been restored now, right? It's a tourist attraction?

*It's a National Historic Landmark. It hasn't been restored; I wouldn't say that. It's still there, and it's certainly a tourist attraction, but people live there, and it's an active place.*

What I remember from Virginia City was that they had the wooden sidewalks, like you see in Western movies. They had the wooden plank sidewalks; I remember that. I sort of vaguely remember the stores and stuff.

We also went to a place that really was a ghost town. And that was Silver City. And what has happened to Silver City?

*It's still there.*

It is still there?

*It's still there. It's occupied; there are people living there. It's all part of the National Historic Landmark.*

Oh, that is also a National Historic Landmark?

*Right.*

Again, I was nine years old, and my memories are vague, but I don't recall anybody living in Silver City. I felt that I was in a real ghost town, again, out of a Western movie.

*I think the population rose and fell, depending on the mining. Mining had been reduced during the war, to a certain extent, so it could well be that the population was just so low at that point*

*that it seemed like a ghost town. It probably technically was a ghost town. But there are people living there, in these old houses.*

Okay. Now, if it's a National Historic Monument, if somebody owns a house there, are they allowed to do any renovation on it, or do they have to live in it just as it was?

*There's a process. There's a commission that approves projects to the historic buildings. They're allowed to do things within certain guidelines.*

I see. So those are the major things that I remember from the age of nine, going out to your state.

*Were you living in a cabin, or in a lodge house?*

It was a large house. It was a very big farm house which had extra rooms, which they rented out.

*Did they offer things like horseback riding trips and things like that?*

No. They had none of that. It did come with meals. I remember we had our meals there. I may have gone to Reno once with my mother. I know I did not go with her when she went in for the formal judicial proceedings; at least I don't recall doing that. Obviously, I was in Reno when we arrived by train and when we left by train. But I don't recall that she and I ever went to Reno to do any sightseeing there. And, of course, at that time, we didn't gamble, but I knew that Reno, then, was the gambling capital. Isn't that correct, in 1946, that it hadn't yet been displaced by Las Vegas?

*Yes. Las Vegas was just a drop in the bucket at that point.*

Yes, I knew that. I remember the name "Harrah's" from that time. Are they still in existence?

*Yes.*

So I do remember Harrah's—the name. But I certainly don't remember anything about Reno.

*So do you remember when you came in on the train, did someone pick you up from the ranch and drive you down there? How did you get there?*

I don't recall. We were either picked up or we were in a taxi. We did not take the train. If I had gotten on a narrow gauge railroad with nineteenth century or early twentieth century railroad cars, I was already well into electric trains at the age of nine and I certainly would have remembered that experience! [laughter] I don't recall riding on the Virginia & Truckee.

*Well, that's too bad, because they stopped operating just four years later, after you were here.*

Is that right? That long ago?

*Yes, it ended in 1950. Most of the rolling stock was sold off to Hollywood, and now they're trying to get it back for the museums.*

That's very interesting.

*So I asked you about your school. Were there other people at the ranch who were staying there to get a divorce?*

Yes. I don't remember them specifically, but there certainly were.

*Were there lots? You probably didn't do a head count of everyone.*

It was a pretty large farm house. I don't recall specifically. They probably could have accommodated maybe half a dozen people—mothers with children like mine or whatever. That's probably what their maximum was.

Another thing I remember is watching Roy's wife churn her own butter on the porch.



*Pretty remarkable.*

Yes. Well, these people were either born at the end of the nineteenth century or the early twentieth century, and they'd grown up in the countryside, and she churned her own butter. It was a remarkable experience for a little kid from the big city.

*So when you went home again, did you talk to all your friends about your adventures?*

I probably did. I don't recall specifically. After my mother obtained a divorce, we then got on the train, but not to go back to New York. We went to San Francisco, because my mother had been there, loved San Francisco, and she wanted to show me San Francisco. So we were there not too long, but *the* hotel in San Francisco was the Mark Hopkins. And it's still there, I believe.

*It is indeed.*

We didn't stay at the Mark Hopkins—it was too expensive—but my mother had to take me to the Top of the Mark. And I remember going to the top of the Mark as a little kid in 1946. And then we got on the train and came home.

*And then you just on with your lives....*

And went back to school and on with my life. And that was it.

*Wow. That must have been an interesting time for a young man.*

It was interesting, and the way my parents handled it, it was not traumatic.

*Oh, that's good.*

They had a very civil divorce. And actually, over the years, many years since that time, I ended up having a very close relationship with my father.

*That's really interesting. What made you decide to go to medical school?*

Well, we were a Jewish family, and my mother wanted me to go to medical school. So I went to medical school.

*Of course: "My son, the doctor," right?*

Right. "My son, the doctor." And I really would have preferred going to law school, but for Mom, law school wasn't good enough. So I went to medical school. I was really interested in policy, and I was very interested in the law, and I ended up with a career in public health. I did enough clinical to get my license, which I still have. But then I did my residency training in public health and preventive medicine, and that's what I spent my career in. I just retired from 43 years as a Professor of Preventive Medicine at the medical school at Stonybrook University.

And I essentially became a writer. I created the first textbook on the U.S. health care delivery system back in the 1970s, and that book is in its tenth edition. The eleventh edition will be out next year. I'm not active on it anymore; a wonderful friend/successor took it over for me years ago, but my name is on it forever, which is really nice. [laughter]

*Well, you've had a remarkable life and a remarkable career.*

Thank you. If you want to see my book list, just go to Amazon and put my name in.

*I will do that, and it will be lengthy, I'm sure. I'm looking forward to that. So just to wrap up, are there any other reminiscences you would like to share, or any other thoughts about this experience with the Reno divorce?*

No, I think I've shared everything. I have to say, I haven't held anything back. I don't remember anything bad. It was certainly a very interesting time. I went to school, we did sightseeing, we went to San Francisco, we went to Yosemite. I got to go to Yosemite in 1946. Stayed in a tent. [laughter] With beds.

It was something I certainly remember reasonably well, and remember, I have to say, fondly. I had a really good time.

*Terrific. We're happy that you did. Thank you so much for participating in this project. It's just wonderful to bring life to this story through the personal stories.*

Well, you're welcome. Thank you. I have to say that this is due to the eagle eyes of my son, who is 41 and lives in Arlington, Virginia, and he saw the little notice about this in the Washington Post. I never would have known about it.

*Oh, well, thank him for us for bringing it to your attention.*

I will. He sent it to me, and he said, "Hey, Dad, I think this is something you might be interested in." He knows how I love to talk. [laughter]

*That's great. You tell good stories, and we really are grateful for your participation.*

Thank you. Great to talk to you. Bye.