

illuminating Reno's Divorce Industry

An online exhibit at renodivorcehistory.org

An Interview With Anne Sturm

Interviewed via telephone in Barnesville, Maryland by Mella Harmon in Reno, Nevada

October 22, 2014

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Anne Sturm

Interviewed by Mella Harmon on October 22, 2014

Mella Harmon: This is Mella Harmon in Reno, Nevada. The date is October 22, 2014, and I am interviewing Anne Sturm, who is in Barnesville, Maryland. Anne, I know we have your written permission, but I just want to make sure on the recording that you give permission to record this interview for the University of Nevada, Reno Libraries, to be made available to the public.

Anne Sturm: I certainly do give my permission.

Wonderful. Thank you. All right, so thank you so much for participating in our little project here. And I understand your story is about your mother, who came to Reno for a divorce in 1950. So I wonder if you could tell us that story.

Well, my mother was very embarrassed about her divorce, not only because it was rare to get a divorce in 1950, but the divorce itself was a scandal, and my father, Garvin E. Tankersley, [phonetic] was assistant managing editor of the *Washington Times-Herald*. And the woman that he was leaving my mother for was Ruth Hanna McCormick Miller. And it got into *Time* magazine, because Mrs. Miller was the publisher of the *Washington Times-Herald* at the time.

So my mother went off to Reno and was very, very sad, and came home a much happier person. [laughter]

Oh! [laughter] What made her so happy?

Well, I think the fellowship at the Flying ME really helped her feel a little more confident. And she also cared a great deal for how she looked, and of course, my father leaving her for another woman made her feel insecure. And the Flying ME took very good care of their guests, and they had a tanning cubicle for each one. I don't know how many. But my mother came home with a full-body tan, which she was very, very proud of. And she looked very, very beautiful.

She also came home with a keychain from the Flying ME, and I have looked and looked for it, but can't find it. It's been lost. But it would be such fun to send it to you all.

She also had a very funny experience happen with the end of her time in Reno. I guess the story was that after you got a divorce, an official divorce, and walked out of the court house, you threw your wedding ring into the Truckee River. And she did it. And her attorney was appalled, and he was in his suit, and he rolled up the pant legs of his suit, took off his shoes, and walked out into the Truckee River and retrieved that ring. And he gave her quite a lecture about holding onto all assets, which served her well over the rest of her life. [laughter]

But I do think she always had a soft spot in her heart for Nevada after that. And we moved to California very shortly after that, which was very out of the blue.

How old were you at the time, Anne?

I turned nine, and my brother was eleven. And the reason I know I turned nine while she was gone that spring of 1950 is my aunt came up from Lynchburg, Virginia to be with me for my ninth birthday. My mother apparently had hired some kind of professional person for the six weeks—actually she was gone a little more than six weeks, because of the flying—to be with us at that time. And it was special to have my aunt there for my birthday.

I should say. It must have been a long six weeks for you and your brother.

Yes, it was. Yes, it was. And we were confused, you know. My father seemed very upset every time he saw us, and he tried to reassure us. And he had Saturday visitation rights, so by my mother moving us to California from Virginia, that did away with the Saturday visitation. You can't do that today, of course. But my mother really became a westerner after that. She really loved it, and stayed in the west for a long, long time. She did eventually move back to Virginia, but not until she was in her sixties.

Do you know who her lawyer was?

No, and I wish I did. And I asked my brother if he did, because he certainly served my mother well. She didn't want any child support, and she didn't want any alimony, and he told her that he wouldn't represent her if she didn't get child support and alimony, because she would not be able to keep us well. She didn't have any formal skills. She was raised on a tobacco farm in North Carolina, and was one of nine children. And my father was also from Lynchburg, Virginia, one of nine children. And both of them lost their fathers when they were very young. So my father had a lot of skills and worked his way up in the *Washington Times-Herald*. But my mother, she was a farmer, basically. So that attorney served her well.

Well, that's good to know. I think they had lots of experience by the 1950s with the divorce trade.

Right, and I imagine the group therapy that just happened naturally at the Flying ME was very good for all the people attending there. You know, it was a natural thing with other people in the same boat. And even though it probably wasn't formally offered as any kind of group therapy that we know today, I imagine it really was very therapeutic.

I imagine so. Well, do you recall anything else that she told you?

No, I don't, other than the difference between when my mother came back, you know, she just seemed much more confident, and of course she looked very beautiful with her full-body tan.
[laughs]

That is such a priceless story.

It really is. And of course, my mother was a sun-worshipper from way back. You know, she baked us, even with sun lamps, in the winter. So it must have done a lot for her spirit. And someday I hope to come and see where the Flying ME was, if it still exists. I don't know if it does.

I think the ranch house still exists.

That's wonderful. Thank you so much for the opportunity to remember something that turned out to be much better than it started.