

illuminating Reno's Divorce Industry

An online exhibit at renodivorcehistory.org

An Interview With Judy Underwood

Interviewed via telephone in Fort Collins, CO by Mella Harmon in Reno, NV

November 4, 2014

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Judy Underwood

Interviewed by Mella Harmon on November 4, 2014

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

Judy Underwood: Okay, at the time, I was living in New Jersey, and I needed to get divorced. I was just 22 at the time. As I recall it was late spring. I wanted to get divorced, and at that time—it was spring of 1968 when I came to Reno for my divorce—at that time, it was very, very difficult to get divorced in New Jersey, where I was living.

I called my lawyer and he said, “Judy, if you want to get divorced, you have to go to Reno and live there for six weeks.” And he said, “You better go now.” [laughter]

So, at the time, I was involved in a relationship with another man. Scandalous, at the time.

And I called him and I said, “The only way I can get divorced is to go live in Reno for six weeks. Do you want to come with me?”

And he said, “Yes.” And so we both left our jobs and came to Reno.

And how did you get here?

Well, we flew to Reno, and my lawyer had made connections with a Reno lawyer. I don't know what either of the lawyers' names are. But he said everything would be arranged, and that the lawyer would have someone meet us at the airport when we arrived, and take us to our apartment. So, you know, it was a big adventure.

We flew to Reno, and I remember that someone met us at the plane. And the reason I remember that so well is because that person—I can't even remember if it was a man or a woman—but that person drove us to an apartment building. It was like a little garden apartment building with a number of units. And there was a big sign on the apartment that said, “Welcome, divorcées.” [laughter]

And they were all so welcome. [laughter]

Yes, and it felt so good, because, you know, at home in New Jersey, it was so shameful to be getting a divorce. I was the first one in my family to get divorced, and it was very hush-hush. I felt like I was a bad person, especially being involved with someone else. Like the Scarlet Letter. And so to see that sign, “Welcome, divorcées,” just made us smile.

And the person who met us at the airport addressed us as “Mrs. Wetter and Mr. Seeley, I have your arrangements for you, and this is your apartment.” And nobody raised an eyebrow or blinked an eye at the fact that we had different last names, we obviously weren’t married, and here we were, living in sin. [laughter]

Sin city!

Yes! Yes, and it felt so good. I just remember feeling so good and relieved and welcome, like everything was going to be okay.

And so you were staying in this little apartment, and what did you do for six weeks?

Well, I’ve been thinking back on that time and trying to remember how we spent our time. One of the things that was very noteworthy was that we had to sign in every evening. We had to come to the main office, and there was a notebook with a date. Each day it was turned to a different page with the date at the top. I say “We.” I mean, I was the one who was getting a divorce. So I had to sign in with my name to prove that I had been there every day. We were from the east, and we thought, “Oh, Reno, out west,” and we fell in love with being “out west,” and we fell in love with Reno. It was amazing to us that we were so close to California, too.

Most of the first week, we slept, because we were so exhausted, and we kept talking about the altitude. We kept attributing everything to the altitude.

To say nothing of stress and jet lag and all that.

Yes! We would get up in the morning and have breakfast, and then maybe walk around a little bit, and be so exhausted, we'd come back and take a nap. I just remember sleeping a lot and being totally exhausted for that first week. And then after we started getting adjusted to being in Reno, we bought an old, beat-up car and we bought a motorcycle.

Oh, that sounds like fun.

Yeah, it was fun! And I remember one day going on the motorcycle to California. We got to the sign that said, "Welcome to California," and we were so excited. And then we knew we had to come back the same day, because I had to sign in. So we explored a lot.

And then I remember one thing we did every day was we went to the Dairy Queen. I have fond memories of going to that Dairy Queen in Reno. Every day. We discovered root beer floats. We'd never had them before!

Really? That's not something they have back east?

Well, we hadn't had it at that time. I'm sure now, they do. But every day, we would go for a root beer float. And then, another big activity was the buffets. Neither one of us were much into gambling, but it seemed like we were able to get free coupons for some free gambling, both coupons for gambling and coupons for cheap dinners at these buffets. I guess that was a way they got people into the casinos.

Right.

And every day, we would get these coupons and go to a casino. I remember Harrah's. I think mostly we went to Harrah's; there might have been some other ones we went to. But we could trade them in for coins to use the slot machines. So we would always come in, and use up our free allotment for the slot machines. I don't know if we ever won anything; we might have won a little bit, you know, the way the slot machines do, to kind of hook you in.

To keep you going for a little while.

Yes. [laughter] But we never won anything significant. And then we would have these wonderful buffet meals. I just remember it was so amazing to get all this wonderful food for very little money. And so we did that.

At one point, we really wanted to work, to make some money. So we did spend quite a bit of time looking for jobs. We would read the papers. We hung out at the university a fair amount and looked at bulletin boards. We met with a professor of Speech Pathology there, because that was my field. We were both in that field, Speech Pathology. Ken was in Audiology. But they didn't have any jobs for us.

And I did actually wind up working at a day care center. That was short-lived; that job didn't last very long, and I can't remember why. But I did that for a little bit.

And the other thing we did—you know, we were so amazed to find that places were open 24/7. That was in the days when that wasn't true anyplace else, I don't think. We certainly had never experienced that in New Jersey. And I remember one time, making a point, we went to the grocery store at two o'clock in the morning.

Just to say you could.

Yeah, and to see what it was like. I wanted to have the experience. I wanted to have experiences, all these new things to try. Of course, it wasn't that different to go at two in the morning, but we did see some different types of people at two in the morning.

Probably so.

Yeah. I guess that was mostly how we spent our time.

Were you aware of other people who were here for a divorce? Were you aware of the other divorce-seekers?

A little bit. Not too much. When it was time for us to leave, at the end of our six weeks, we did sell our car to somebody else who was in our apartment complex, and it was a pastor who was getting divorced. And he was there with a congregant of his....

Oh, my!

...who was getting a divorce. [laughter] So we did meet those people. And we were also struck by all the wedding chapels. There were so many wedding chapels. We thought about getting married there after we got our divorces, but we decided we wanted to come back to New Jersey. And divorce decree in hand, we turned around and came home, and I got married.

And what was it like when you went home, in terms of the whole stigma?

Nobody talked about it. Nobody talked about it. I remember at my wedding, I wore a blue suit. There was a whole big deal about how it was unacceptable to wear white.

Yes, Emily Post figured prominently in those days, I recall.

Yes! [laughter] That's right. After we left Reno, before we came home, we did spend some time in California, because we thought, "Well, we're so close." And we spent a few days or a week, and we laughed about the fact that we were having our honeymoon before our marriage.

Well, you're lucky. Some people never have a honeymoon, so getting it in advance is a good thing.

Yes, it's kind of like, "Eat dessert first!" [laughter]

So was your Reno experience what you expected it to be?

It was so much better. It was so wonderful. We really didn't know what to expect. I would say that the only negative for me was the whole time I was there, I was a little bit nervous. In the back of my mind, I was scared that my husband would come to Reno and contest the divorce. What we were told was that there would be no problem getting the divorce, because in Reno at the time, the grounds for divorce were irreconcilable differences, and that as long as no one contested that, it would just go through. So because my husband didn't want the divorce, I was always kind of nervous that he would show up. But he didn't.

Do you remember anything of your day, or your few minutes, in court?

It was just a few minutes. I remember being nervous.

Because you didn't know if your husband was going to walk in the door. Surprise witness—oops!

Right. And I vaguely remember just being asked some questions. And then I answered. And it was over. I had a piece of paper, which I looked all over for, and I can't find. I have no idea what I did with it, in all the moves and everything. I'm sure it got lost. But it was unremarkable, except that it was such a relief. Such a relief.

Well, are there any other specific reminiscences that you'd like to share, that you can remember?

I emailed you some photos. I had a few photos from the time. And two of the photos had my new husband, the guy I went to Reno with, who's now another ex-husband of mine. I emailed him and I asked him for his permission to send those photos, too, because I thought if he didn't want to be involved, I would leave those out. But we wrote back the nicest email and said, "Yes, you can use those photos, and anything else you want about me. Reno was the place that gave us the legal right to start our lives together."

Oh, that's lovely.

And it's true. Without Reno, we were trapped.

I know; it was that way for many people.

It was such a wonderful thing to be able to come to Reno. And we had such a wonderful experience there, and the weather was good, and we were newly in love, and we were in love with Reno. I'm sure that affected our decision to come out west to graduate school.

Oh, lovely.

Yeah. It was 1970, only two years later, and we decided we wanted to go back to school and get our doctorates. And we went to a convention and looked at some of the programs, and there was a program in Denver and one in Seattle that looked really good. Both programs looked good. And being from New Jersey, to us we thought Seattle, Denver, they're the same. They seemed the same to us. Both out west! [laughter] In the west!

And thankfully, we chose Denver. And I know it was a lot due to the influence of Reno. Of course, Reno and Denver are nothing alike! But to us back then, we thought they were.

Well, it's a great story, and we really appreciate you sharing it. I would like to ask you one last question, and that is, is there anything you'd like the public to know about the Reno divorce—the institution or your experiences, or what have you?

Just that it was such a wonderful opportunity. I didn't at the time, because I really didn't know anything about Reno, but all the comments about "Sin City" and derogatory things about Reno that people say, and feelings about it, that just wasn't our experience at all. There was nothing negative about being there. Reno gave us freedom.

That's a great line.

Yeah! [laughter] And we needed it. We were trapped. And we weren't bad people or doing anything wrong.

No.

So that's what I want people to know. Reno gave us freedom, and freedom is so important.

It is. It truly is. That's wonderful, Judy. I just appreciate so much you sharing your story and thank Ken for us.

I will.