Gals Getting "Reno-Vated": Individual Transformation and National Change During the Rise and Fall of the Reno Divorce Ranches

Theresa M. Iker, Scripps College

Graduation Year
2014

Document Type
Open Access Senior Thesis

Department
American Studies

Reader 1
Matthew Delmont

Reader 2
Julia E Liss

Reader 3
Lily Geismer

Terms of Use & License Information
Terms of Use for work posted in Scholarship@Claremont

Rights Information
© 2014 Theresa M. Iker

Abstract
Divorces in the United States during the twentieth century were, to say the least, extremely difficult to obtain. Most states had few grounds for divorce, and some, like New York, only allowed divorce in the instance of proven adultery. Waiting periods could stretch from one to three years. But for some hopeful divorcees, there was another way. Nevada had nine broad grounds for divorce, among them "mental cruelty." After 1931, anyone could become a Nevada citizen and divorce within the state after a mere six weeks of residency.

Before the widespread liberalization of divorce law in the early to mid-1970s, Reno, Nevada became the divorce capital of America. Divorcees, usually women, from all over the country poured into Reno to "get Reno-vated" and quickly part with their spouses. Subsequently, a complex local economy developed to accommodate the "six-weekers" during while they established residency. For the wealthy divorce-seeking elite, luxurious "divorce ranches" offered a relaxing six-week stay complete with catered meals, horseback riding, and trips to Lake Tahoe.

The ranches brought together a substantial number of women who were overtly there for the same reason: to obtain a divorce. The simple fact of this mutual understanding provided a level of closeness and openness that was very unusual for the time, facilitating commiseration, camaraderie, and friendship. The closeness of ranch relationships was amplified by their demographics; the ranches were overwhelmingly female spaces, as the majority of their guests, proprietors, and staff were women. The Reno divorce industry demonstrates that women were willing to go to great lengths, measured in miles, days, and dollars, to obtain divorces. Affirming the existence of these Reno divorcees and examining their experiences during their quickie divorces illustrates substantial shifts in marital expectations throughout the twentieth century and contextualizes the 1970s expansion of divorce rights.

Comments
The author has revised and updated her thesis (see additional file of the updated text below) and referenced her research on the Huff Post in a piece titled, Divorcing at Dude Ranches.

Recommended Citation
During the divorce boom, Reno boasted the highest percentage of lawyers of any city in the U.S. From cab drivers to ranch hands to hotel owners and judges, the economy of Reno survived the Great Depression on the back of the divorce trade. The Impact. To date, there has not been a major documentary produced that looks at the direct impact of changing divorce laws on the rights of women in the U.S. and the effect on the American family in the twentieth century. Reno & The Romance of Divorce tells the story of one small American city's place in the nation's history and also contrib