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**GALS GETTING “RENO-VATED”: INDIVIDUAL TRANSFORMATION
AND NATIONAL CHANGE DURING THE RISE AND FALL OF THE
RENO DIVORCE RANCHES**

by

THERESA MICHELLE IKER

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR MATTHEW DELMONT
PROFESSOR JULIE LISS
PROFESSOR LILY GEISMER**

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
“A Grade A Mess”: A Geographical and Historical Examination of American Divorce.....	19
“We don’t come to Reno for a divorce, we are ‘here for the cure’”: Friendships and Female Space at the Reno Divorce Ranches.....	47
“I did a lot of things that I wouldn’t have ordinarily done”: Sex and Self-Discovery at the Divorce Ranches.....	77
Conclusion.....	104
Bibliography.....	124

Introduction

“I wear a very short bright-yellow cotton dress and dark glasses to hide my red-rimmed eyes on the plane on my way to Reno, Nevada. I am dreading this trip,” Lily Tuck wrote in 2012, remembering her fateful trip west over forty years later. “The month is April, the year 1970, and earlier, before leaving, I had telephoned to check the median temperature in Nevada and was told it was 90 degrees. They must have meant Las Vegas because when I land in Reno, it is snowing.”¹ Lily’s piece for the “Nostalgia” column of *Vogue Magazine* beautifully recounts a surreal, wrenching, and freeing six weeks spent as a young woman in Reno.²

But Lily’s trip, as her *Vogue* essay reveals, was not intended as a vacation. She arrived in the dreamlike, snowy landscape of the mythic American West with her two squabbling sons, anticipating a painful six-week sojourn that would quickly and efficiently end her marriage:

The reason we are here is that in 1970, most states—including Virginia, where I have been living—require divorcing spouses to prove that one of the spouses is a criminal, impotent, or guilty of adultery, while a divorce based on ‘irreconcilable differences’ can take three years. However, in more liberal Nevada, only a six-week

¹ Lily Tuck, “On Her Own,” *Vogue*, June 2012, 72.

² In my discussion of individual divorcées, I will generally use their first names. The use of first names in this thesis, while rather unusual, is helpful for two reasons. First, it provides clarity when referencing individuals who have changed their surnames as a result of their divorce (or divorces). Second, it facilitates identification with the divorcées as individuals, rather than as distant artifacts of the past. Because divorce is such an emotional experience, I felt that my academic discussion of divorcées should foster a personal connection with the reader.

stay is necessary to meet the residency requirements and acquire a divorce.”³

Lily, like many women before her, had come to Nevada to achieve the famous Reno “quickie” divorce. After establishing residency as a Nevadan for the state’s lenient six-week requisite, women like Lily could divorce under any of Nevada’s flexible nine grounds without proving their charges. In contrast to the Virginia laws that Lily cited, Nevadans could divorce for any number of reasons, including desertion or, most popularly, the wide-ranging charge of “mental cruelty.”⁴

To the casual *Vogue* reader, Lily’s story makes perfect sense. At the time of her quickie divorce, Lily was a reasonably well-off white woman with a hopeful writing career, options, and access; she was looking to end her marriage, she was aware that divorce would be much easier in Nevada than in her own state, and she had the means to temporarily relocate. Furthermore, the historical context in which Lily navigated her marriage and divorce seemed to foster her apparent awareness and agency. In 1970, Lily could have read *The Feminine Mystique* in a neighborhood book club. She might have even joined a consciousness-raising group, found herself sympathetic to the efforts of the National Organization for Women, or read literature on the growing feminist interest in the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. She got a divorce, it stands to reason, because she wanted to and, just as importantly, because she could.

³ Ibid.

⁴ William and Sandra McGee, *The Divorce Seekers: A Photo Memoir of a Nevada Dude Wrangler*, (St. Helena: BMC Publications, 2004), 328.

Lily had come to Reno during its final days as America's most prominent "divorce mill," the popular term for a migratory center that attracted out-of-state divorce seekers. Reno was the last and most famous of a long series of divorce mills that sprang up in the opportunistic environments of various Western territories and states. Throughout the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries, as Lily recounted, many northeastern and southern states maintained restrictive laws that made the divorce process long, difficult, and expensive. Some states, like Virginia and New York, only allowed extremely limited grounds for divorce suits and stipulated long waiting periods. Others, like South Carolina, did not permit divorce at all.⁵ Conversely, after a six-week residency in Reno, divorce seekers could spend fewer than ten minutes in the courthouse before walking out with their divorce decree in hand.⁶

But in 1970, Reno's illustrious reign as the divorce capital of America was actually coming to a close. It had exploded onto the national scene at the turn of the twentieth century, and its so-called "Golden Age" spanned from the Great Depression to the 1960s. The various factors that made Lily's divorce seem understandable, if not perfectly natural, do not emerge as readily in a consideration of women in preceding decades. How do we make sense of someone like Winifred Higinbotham-Dunaway, a New Jersey woman who divorced in Reno in 1946? Or Marilu Norden, a young Connecticut housewife who lived out her six-week requirement in 1951? This thesis will provide a deep

⁵ Glenda Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 70.

⁶ McGee and McGee, *The Divorce Seekers*, 347.

analysis of Reno's long history as a divorce mill, which unearths thousands of such puzzling counterexamples to the Lily Tuck archetype. Affirming the existence of these Reno divorcées 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.

Conceptualizing of a divorcing woman at any point during Reno's lengthy period as a divorce mill, whether she was ending her marriage in 1910, 1930, or 1950, contradicts an image of content, stable twentieth century marriages. Marital instability, trends toward cohabitation, and the rising divorce rate are often touted as recent social ills or problems of modernity.⁷ The reality of interwar or postwar era women wanting to divorce, much less being willing to uproot themselves and relocate in order to divorce even faster, does not easily reconcile with this idea of secure, staid marital trends.

Several scholars of women's history have demonstrated that many women's day-to-day lives, including their marriages, were far from secure or staid. They have reinterpreted the mainstream cultural memory of twentieth century women, particularly the image of the 1950s housewife. Some, like historian Stephanie Coontz, argue that we are nostalgic for a time, sensibility, and family that never really existed, and certainly did not exist for everyone. Other historians, like Joanne Meyerowitz, closely examine the images themselves. In the introduction to her book *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, Meyerowitz describes the pervasive stereotype of post-

⁷ Rachel L. Swarns, "More Americans Rejecting Marriage in 50s and Beyond," *New York Times*, March 1, 2012.

World War II women: “Domestic and quiescent, they moved to the suburbs, created the baby boom, and forged family togetherness.”⁸ She reminds her nostalgic audience that this image is just that: an image, and, furthermore, one that is firmly bounded within the realm of the white middle class. Before Meyerowitz goes on to dispel the illusion of the postwar female stereotype, one that recalls cultural icons like June Cleaver and Donna Reed, she makes a very astute historical intervention: “While some women fit this stereotype, many others did not. To state the obvious, in the years following World War II, many women were not white, middle-class, married, and suburban; and many white, middle-class, married, and suburban women were not wholly domestic nor quiescent.”⁹

Lily Tuck and thousands of her Reno divorcée predecessors, to use Meyerowitz’s words, were neither wholly domestic nor quiescent. The thousands of women who came to Reno for quickie divorces in the twentieth century did so at great financial and emotional cost, especially given that prevailing social norms privileged marriage and stigmatized divorce.¹⁰ Contrary to the dominant cultural image of housewives in stable marriages, the experiences of women like Lily, Winifred, and Marilu were part of a larger trend of out-of-state, carefully planned migratory Reno divorces.

Yet the historical memory of the famed Reno divorce is limited at best.

Although noteworthy celebrity Reno quickie divorces featured in gossip columns

⁸ Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver, Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 1.

⁹ *Ibid*, 2.

¹⁰ Anita Ernst Watson, “Fading Shame: Divorce Stigma in American Culture, 1882-1939,” (PhD diss., University of Nevada, Reno, 1997), 12.

and society pages, there is little record or analysis of the thousands of other divorce-seekers who came to Reno throughout the twentieth century.

Additionally, films like *The Women* in 1939 and *Desert Hearts* in 1985 made use of the scandalous, emotionally fraught environment of the divorce colony, along with countless newspapers and magazines. But the daily reality of thousands of ordinary Reno divorce-seekers has been almost ignored in popular culture and left largely unexamined by scholars.

The invisibility of standard Reno divorcées represents the larger invisibility of the topic of divorce in twentieth century America. As Meyerowitz argues, women like the Reno divorcées do not comfortably align with a mainstream cultural memory of the ubiquitous early to mid-twentieth century housewife. Historian Stephanie Coontz makes a similar claim in her book *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. A key example of an aptly termed “nostalgia trap,” according to Coontz, is the divorce rate. “The issue of divorce is a good example of how changes in behavior preceded changes in attitudes,” she writes, contradicting the assumption that the divorce rate suddenly rose following the advent of feminism. Feminist views on divorce did not abruptly trigger the sustained post-World War II rise in the divorce rate, Coontz argues, “because new attitudes did not arise until marital behaviors had already changed substantially.”¹¹ In other words, people were divorcing long before it was widely considered appropriate or acceptable to do so, a trend that only gradually prompted a shift in attitudes toward divorce.

¹¹ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 167.

Reno divorcées in the early to mid-twentieth century, to borrow from Coontz's terminology, were changing their marital behaviors well before the accompanying shift in attitudes occurred. They traveled great distances and invested substantial financial resources in order to divorce during an era when the practice was socially stigmatized and legally restricted; indeed, tight historical constraints in divorce law necessitated the migratory divorce system in the first place. It is perhaps easier to immediately visualize the circumstances of Lily Tuck's 1970 divorce, which follows in a logical progression from the second wave of feminism to the 1960s surge in divorce, than it is to imagine Winifred Higinbotham-Dunaway's 1946 divorce.¹² But, as the historical reality of the complex Reno divorce trade demonstrates, women in fact traveled great distances to obtain quickie divorces throughout the early to mid-twentieth century.

An examination of the historical development of the Reno divorce trade illuminates the largely forgotten stories of these women. While both men and women came to Reno in great numbers to take advantage of the local divorce laws, the ratio was overwhelmingly skewed toward female divorcées. Though they almost certainly didn't conceptualize of themselves as revolutionaries or even feminists, these women nonetheless broke with prevailing marital traditions and became socially transgressive. Studying their emotions and experiences during their six-week stays facilitates a social history approach to the larger phenomenon of the twentieth century rise and surge in the national divorce rate. Exploring how these women felt and acted during their six-week quickie divorces

¹² Ibid.

provides a rare opportunity to examine social mores and attitudes in flux: if these women indeed demonstrated drastically new marital behaviors before they became socially permissible, why did they choose to act in defiance of the mainstream? Perhaps more importantly, how did it feel to divorce, an already painful process, before it was considered normal or acceptable?

Divorce ranches provide a space in which to explore the inner thoughts and emotions of female divorcées in twentieth century Reno. The famous divorce ranches were just one part of the intricate Reno divorce trade and economy catering to migratory divorcées, which included boarding houses, hotels, legal offices, and entertainment. Proprietors of divorce ranches, most of which had originally been working dude ranches, quickly capitalized on the influx of divorce-seekers needing temporary housing and converted their businesses to western-style resorts. Advertisements for divorce ranches emphasized their amenities and leisure activities, packaging a six-week experience that would provide a divorce and vacation at the same time. Of the manifold housing options for divorcées, the ranches were the most exclusive and among the most expensive. Their guests were almost exclusively white, middle and upper class women.

Studying divorce ranches, nevertheless, serve two historically useful purposes in understanding the larger divorce trade. First and foremost, they were the most consolidated, specialized housing options for divorce seekers. Subsequently, ranch owners and staff have left behind an extensive historical record documenting their relationship with divorcées, including advertisements and correspondence. Less formal and specialized living arrangements, like

boarding houses or hotels, would not provide the same level of access for a focus on the divorce trade in particular, rather than Reno's general tourism industry. Finally, the small, close-knit environment of the ranches created the conditions for intimate relationships amongst and between the divorcées, ranch proprietors, and Reno locals. The privileged, literate ranch guests left a paper trail detailing their experiences and the friendships made during their six-week stays. A specific focus on the divorce ranches, though not a comprehensive study of the Reno divorce industry, provides a level of detail and access to the interior lives of Reno divorcées that is most conducive to a social history perspective.

As this thesis will demonstrate, the Reno divorce ranches served a purpose beyond their historical convenience. Given the unusual, even transgressive, position of the migratory female divorcées in the early to mid-twentieth century, the ranch environment itself provided a much-needed site of bonding, healing, and growth. Most significantly, 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. Additionally, the physical site of the ranches provided the guests with a sense of safety and refuge from the dominant culture, an experience that was emotionally significant amidst the strong stigmatization that divorcées faced. The ranch environment also

allowed for a degree of sexual and romantic exploration, as it was physically and emotionally removed from the divorcees' "real lives" at home. The divorce ranches were clearly tremendously meaningful for their guests.

While the lived experiences of the divorcees profoundly inform this study, a deep exploration of the Reno divorce ranches creates a broader historical understanding of national shifts during the early to mid-twentieth century. Far from a curious piece of state history, the reign of the Reno divorce mill marks a transitional period for American understandings of marriage and divorce. Prior to Reno's rise and fall as the American divorce capital, the institution of marriage was undergoing a slow but steady change in its very structure. Originally an obligatory social and economic institution in the United States, the perceived purposes of and expectations for marriage gradually began to shift. With the post-Revolutionary War and industrial period came a rising emphasis on individualism, personal fulfillment, and romantic love.

By the time Reno rose to prominence at the turn of the twentieth century, marriage had become a much more private and fragile arrangement between two individuals, both of whom increasingly enjoyed the ability to end it when it no longer proved satisfactory. Alongside these changes in marital practices, especially the hope for a love-based union, grew accompanying changes in divorce practices. As nineteenth and early twentieth century Americans increasingly viewed marriage as contractual rather than permanent, many also started to expect the right to promptly and easily divorce.

The story of Reno as the last in a series of western divorce mills is ultimately the story of American divorce. Beginning with colonial law, the United States has always allowed for limited, tightly controlled incidences of divorce, though these practices varied between localities and regions. As the colonies became states and the states became more numerous, the geographic idiosyncrasies of divorce law multiplied. White westward expansion prompted the advent of western divorce mills in states like South Dakota and Indiana, in which looser divorce laws attracted migratory divorce seekers. But America's complex, often clashing attitudes toward the morality and legitimacy of divorce combined with the reformist drive of the Progressive Era to tighten divorce laws nationwide, effectively eliminating western divorce mills. Laws became more restrictive in this period even as the divorce rate continued its steady rise, which had started directly after the Civil War.¹³ Divorce reform led to the closure of all but one western divorce mill. By the early twentieth century, only Nevada's laws remained untouched.

Between 1930 and 1960, Reno, Nevada occupied the center stage of American migratory divorce. Nowhere else could divorce seekers find more numerous and lenient grounds or a shorter residency requirement. But the laxity of Reno's laws essentially brought about its own demise as America's divorce capital. Amidst a national context of restrictive grounds and lengthy waiting periods for divorce certification, Nevada allowed what the modern reader can loosely compare to no-fault divorce. Before the 1970s, all states operated under a

¹³ Andrew J. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 76.

fault system, in which one spouse had to sue the other for a specific charge in order to end their marriage. Beginning with California in 1970, however, divorce reformers argued that a no-fault system made the process less adversarial, as well as shorter and cheaper. Instead of filing under a specific charge like habitual drunkenness or abandonment, spouses now had the right to end their marriages swiftly on broad-based grounds like irreconcilable differences.

Reno's success as a divorce colony lies in its close approximation to modern no-fault laws, a reality that ultimately ended its reign as a divorce mill. Because uncontested cases in Reno could be filed on nine flexible grounds, one of which included the nonspecific charge of "mental cruelty," many out-of-state divorcées took advantage of the lenience and vagueness of the charges. Additionally, the migratory nature of the divorce trade required a degree of collusion between spouses, or cooperation and exchange of information before the court proceedings. Collusion in fault-based divorce suits was technically illegal, but flourished in practice in Reno cases because spouses generally planned their divorces before one of them made the six-week trip.¹⁴ The modern no-fault system presumes that divorces are inherently collusive and therefore removes the lawsuit element, but at the time, the out-of-state divorce system implicitly operated under this assumption. Ironically, the national enactment of no-fault rendered Reno's divorce tourism completely useless. Throughout the 1970s, divorcées no longer needed to travel to obtain faster and easier divorces, and Reno's hold on the

¹⁴ Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*, 143-144.

divorce trade dramatically weakened. Lily Tuck, having divorced in 1970, was part of the last cohort lacking access to no-fault divorce.

Therefore, just as Reno's rise to prominence illuminates a deeper national history, its eventual fall facilitates an understanding of the most recent changes in divorce practices and legislation. Reno's Golden Age as a divorce mill comprises a fascinating chapter in national history. It is bookended by profound changes in marital expectations and divorce practices. The Reno divorce trade, with the particular example of the divorce ranches, institutionalizes a national transition toward viewing the twin forces of marriage and divorce as a means of personal fulfillment. The accessibility of the ranches, albeit for a racially and economically privileged subset, helped develop this view for women in particular, who increasingly assumed agency in their marital behavior throughout the twentieth century. Eventually, the sweeping legal reality of no-fault would attempt to fully equalize men and women's access to divorce, though this was to achieve mixed ends.

* * *

In order to capture the emotional and personal depth of divorce, my research drew upon firsthand accounts of life at the Reno divorce ranches. I first turned to an oral history methodology. This approach enables firsthand participants to recount historical events, reaching beyond the ability of written sources to tell a personal, detailed story. While oral history is vulnerable to the

limitations of memory and the potential bias of hindsight, it can be used to supplement existing sources and add human interest to a historical narrative. Because oral history necessarily involves human subjects, I went through the IRB approval process to learn how to ethically engage with my interviewees. I then interviewed six people: Marilu Norden, a divorcée at the upscale Pyramid Lake Ranch in 1951, along with her son Phil, who accompanied her to the ranch as a four-year-old child; Bill McGee, who worked as a cowboy and wrangler at the famous Flying M E Guest Ranch in the late 1940s and early 1950s, along with his wife Sandra, who extensively researched divorce ranches in order to co-author a photo memoir about Bill's experiences; and Beth Ward and Robbie McBride, two sisters who helped their mother run the Whitney Guest Ranch until it closed in the early 1970s. All of my interviewees had either written or publically spoken about their experiences and I received their consent to use their real names and preserve their recorded interviews. I conducted their interviews as semi-structured conversations, which enabled them to relax and tell their stories.

In order to understand the inner workings of the ranches as well as access the thoughts and feelings of other guests and staff, I then visited local archives, including the Nevada Historical Society in Reno, the Nevada State Library and Archive in Carson City, and the University of Nevada, Reno Special Collections. With the help of the knowledgeable archivists and librarians, I made many important and sometimes surprising discoveries at these archives. I found a wide range of historical material, including: advice books and pamphlets; sermons; newspaper columns and articles; magazine articles; personal correspondence from

divorcees to divorce ranch owners; correspondence from Nevadans to governors; business correspondence of divorce attorneys; photographs; petitions regarding the residency requirement; and fragments of diaries of divorcees.

The interviews and archival research were especially important because few academic discussions of the Reno divorce industry exist. My work is indebted to the handful of authors who have extensively studied this historical topic, and particularly the divorce ranches. Two of my aforementioned interviewees, Bill and Sandra McGee, co-authored an informative photo memoir entitled *The Divorce Seekers: A Photo Memoir of a Nevada Dude Wrangler*. Their work includes Bill's firsthand account of his time working at one of Reno's most exclusive divorce ranches, which meaningfully complemented his oral history interview. The book also greatly enriched my archival research with its compilation of detailed records and media coverage of the other ranches in the area. Nevada historian Mella Rothwell Harmon's dissertation, "Divorce and Economic Opportunity in Reno, Nevada During the Great Depression," further informed my study of the ranches by providing an economic perspective on the local divorce trade. In it, she emphasizes the economic necessity of Nevada's divorce laws amidst the hardship of the Great Depression, an argument that helped place the phenomenon of the divorce ranches in a deeper understanding of state and national history.

Several historians deeply informed my study with their work in women's history, marriage, divorce, and family life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Historians Andrew Cherlin and Stephanie Coontz have both written

several books detailing continuities and changes in marriage culture and practices, which created a strong framework for understanding the parallel rise in divorce. I also used Cherlin's work alongside divorce historian Glenda Riley to establish America's long history of desertion, annulment, and divorce, which spans from the colonial period to today. Finally, historians Anne Enke, Barbara Ehrenreich, Deirdre English, and Elaine Tyler May have made prolific contributions to American women's history. Several of their books have proven instrumental in contextualizing the experiences of the female divorcées at the center of my research. While all of these authors seldom directly referenced Reno in particular, much less the smaller subset of divorce ranches, their books were instrumental in situating the divorce ranches in their broader national context.

These secondary sources appear and reappear throughout the thesis, which tells the story of the Reno divorcées and their ranch experiences alongside the larger story of changes in American marriage and divorce. Chapter 1, entitled "A Grade A Mess': A Geographical and Historical Examination of American Divorce," lays the groundwork for the national shifts that preceded and precipitated Reno's rise as a divorce mill. The following chapters provide an in-depth analysis of life at the ranches and therefore principally focus on the original oral histories and archival research I conducted. Chapter 2, "We don't come to Reno for a divorce, we are here for the cure": Friendships and Female Space at the Reno Divorce Ranches," examines the influence of the ranches' structure and female dynamics upon the divorcées emotional experiences and friendships. The third and final chapter, "I did a lot of things that I wouldn't have ordinarily

done': Sex and Self-Discovery at the Divorce Ranches," delves into the sexual experimentation and personal growth fostered by the liminality of the ranch environment. Finally, the conclusion describes life after the ranches, both for the newly unhitched ranch guests and for the dying Reno divorce trade following the rise of no-fault divorce.

**“A Grade A Mess”: A Geographical and Historical Examination of
American Divorce**

In 1931, George A. Bartlett wrote a very controversial book about his experiences as a judge in Reno, the quickie divorce capital of America. Part memoir, part advice manual, *Men, Women and Conflict: An Intimate Study of Love, Marriage and Divorce* expounded upon Bartlett’s many years hearing migratory divorce cases and granting certifications to out-of-state divorcées. He also recommended a range of divisive measures to ensure marital happiness, among them freely available contraception, delayed marriages, and female financial independence. Most shocking to his contemporaries, Bartlett regarded his extensive divorce-granting record as a point of pride and eagerly anticipated an even steeper divorce rate in the future. “Divorce—like medical anesthesia—so lately despised, is beginning to be recognized as the next great step along the way,” he wrote. “The way to where? The only answer is happiness.”¹

Bartlett certainly seemed to enjoy making such dramatic claims, particularly in the form of incendiary sound bites, for the impending publication of his book. A brief survey of newspaper headlines reporting the book’s release indicates widespread sensationalism of both the book’s content and Judge Bartlett himself, their eager interviewee: “Need More Divorce Not Less: Reno Jurist In South Says Unhappy Pairs Lack Courage,” “Reno Divorce Judge Glad He Has Freed 15,000,” and “The Reno Divorce Mill Grinds Faster.” Bartlett even penned

¹ George A. Bartlett, *Men, Women and Conflict: An Intimate Study of Love, Marriage and Divorce*, (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1931), 5.

his own article entitled “Easy Divorces Are Moral, Says Famous Reno Judge.”²

The language used in each of these dramatic headlines was deliberately provocative, drawing on anxiety regarding the rising divorce rate and toying with hotly debated conceptions of its relationship to freedom and morality. But Bartlett also seemed fully aware of how deeply troubling the rising divorce rate was to many Americans, particularly those who resided outside of Reno. In a moment of seriousness in *Men, Women, and Conflict*, Bartlett wrote, “What I want the reader to grasp is that, whether we like it or not, divorce is here; it is increasing; and it is difficult to evade the conclusion that it is by all means here to stay.”³

For Bartlett, the stark reality of modern divorce was undeniable. A “readjustment of standards” in the form of liberalized divorce law, he argued, was inevitable alongside the social and economic transformations of the era.⁴ So-called “alarmists” and “reactionaries” decrying the divorce rate struck him as anti-progressive, as did many state laws that unnecessarily lengthened or complicated the divorce process.⁵ He especially criticized the geographic patchwork of existing divorce law in the United States: “Marriage and divorce are wholly within the jurisdiction of the 48 states. Therefore there are 48 ways of getting married and divorced, geographically speaking.”⁶

² George A. Bartlett Papers, “Newspaper Clippings,” Box 44, George A. Bartlett Papers, University of Nevada-Reno Library, Special Collections Department.

³ Bartlett, *Men, Women and Conflict*, 51.

⁴ *Ibid*, 46.

⁵ George A. Bartlett, “Easy Divorces Are Moral, Says Famous Reno Judge,” *The Baltimore Sun*, September 10, 1922. From George A. Bartlett Papers, “Newspaper Clippings,” Box 44, George A. Bartlett Papers, University of Nevada-Reno Library, Special Collections Department.

⁶ Bartlett, *Men, Women and Conflict*, 242.

In Bartlett's mind, the migratory divorce industry that had been expanding in Reno throughout the early twentieth century was one way to mitigate the complexity and imposition of other states' cumbersome laws. Fortunately, the Reno divorce system achieved a notable victory just as *Men, Women, and Conflict* went to press, which Bartlett jubilantly described in the book's foreword. On the heels of the early days of the Great Depression, the Nevada State Legislature reduced Nevada's residency requirement to six weeks and further simplified the divorce petition process.⁷ From 1931 onward, divorce seekers could stay in Nevada for just six weeks before gaining state citizenship rights, among them the ability to divorce their spouses on the basis of nine flexible grounds without specific charges.⁸ Bartlett regarded this as a sign of the times: "My basic idea about this marriage and divorce business is that we must approach the subject with open minds. Just because our people of two generations ago frowned upon divorce is no reason why we should frown upon it. It may be a very good thing for us."⁹

Many of Bartlett's arguments were as prescient as they were scandalous. He accurately predicted the long-term uptick in the divorce rate, the dissolution of traditional fault-based divorce proceedings, and the social and economic transformations that would continue to destabilize marriage as an institution far beyond the 1931 publication of *Men, Women, and Conflict*. But Bartlett made two

⁷ Bartlett, *Men, Women and Conflict*, Foreword.

⁸ William and Sandra McGee, *The Divorce Seekers: A Photo Memoir of a Nevada Dude Wrangler*, (St. Helena: BMC Publications, 2004), 328.

⁹ "Reno Judge Glad He Has Freed 15,000," April 13, 1931. From George A. Bartlett Papers, "Newspaper Clippings," Box 44, George A. Bartlett Papers, University of Nevada-Reno Library, Special Collections Department.

arguments in particular that contextualize the seemingly rapid expansion of divorce in the twentieth century: he draws attention to the geographic contingency of American divorce and posits a linkage between the rising divorce rate and happiness.

Both of these points set the stage for a historical analysis of Reno's rise, and eventual fall, as the divorce center of America. In turn, an understanding of Reno as America's final and most memorable "divorce colony" facilitates a deeper exploration of the social forces driving the transformation of divorce in the twentieth century. Using Bartlett's conclusions as a guide, it is possible to trace the interactions between the "48 ways" to obtain a divorce in the United States and shifting expectations of marriage and divorce as "the next step along the way" to happiness. Within an inflexible and complex web of state-controlled divorce procedures, the growing individualism of American marriage culture and its heightened premium on personal happiness profoundly destabilized the institution of marriage itself. As twentieth century marital expectations rose, particularly as they related to love-based unions, so did the divorce rate.

Reno's so-called Golden Age as a divorce mill, from the 1930s to the 1960s, marked a period in which the national divorce rate steadily and then rapidly rose as a result of these new marital expectations, facilitating a boom in out-of-state divorce seekers. The national upswing in divorce collided with Nevada divorce law's permissiveness and the relative conservatism of other states, launching Reno into the national divorce spotlight. Of the "48 ways to get married and divorced, geographically speaking," Nevada's was the easiest,

quickest, and most nationally visible. Until Nevada's forty-seven contemporaries overwhelmingly liberalized their laws in the 1970s and effectively eliminated the patchwork of American divorce law, Reno reigned as the divorce center of the United States.

The peculiarities of geography and American divorce, as many scholars have argued, have existed since the earliest days of colonial law. Establishing America's long, complicated history of divorce contextualizes the varying strictness of state divorce laws; the United States, in contrast with other Western countries, has always allowed forms of divorce, but they always have been limited. Furthermore, tracing divorce history from its colonial origins dispels a notion that the mid- to late twentieth century surge in divorce came out of nowhere. Increased cultural visibility and anxiety surrounding marital dissolution in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries contributed to a modern tendency to sensationalize the divorce rate without acknowledging its extensive past. Finally, a detailed historical analysis also provides a historical basis for patterns of migratory divorce, in which hopeful divorcées generally flowed from east to west seeking quicker and simplified ends to their marriages than they were able to access in their home states.

Historian Glenda Riley and sociologist Andrew Cherlin both extensively describe colonial divorce history before delving into the implications of the current divorce rate. While many modern analysts emphasize the negative effects of divorce on the family and the general public, Riley and Cherlin demonstrate that early American divorce in Puritan jurisdictions was in fact intended as a

means of preserving the social order. While Cherlin stresses that Puritans highly valued the institution of marriage, regarding it as “the fundamental building block of the new nation,” they also allowed for divorce in special, closely regulated circumstances.¹⁰ Riley expands on this point, writing:

Typically, Puritan ministers rebuked erring mates and coerced alienated couples to reconcile...But some Puritans feared that forcing all estranged couples to remain harnessed by law would eventually undermine the social harmony they were trying to achieve...Divorce could dissolve highly dysfunctional marriages while controlling the terms and processes of parting. And it created the opportunity for divorced spouses to form more orderly and stable marriages in the future.¹¹

Puritans sympathetic to divorce, according to Cherlin, followed the teachings of Luther and Calvin, who believed that divorce was deplorable yet permissible in limited cases, especially adultery.¹² While it was not a desired outcome, divorce was occasionally justifiable and even beneficial as long as it was tightly controlled.

As Riley demonstrates, not all Puritans were united on the proper grounds for marital dissolution, or whether such grounds even existed. Additionally, some New England colonists with different religious beliefs preferred to adhere to

¹⁰ Andrew J. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 48.

¹¹ Glenda Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 11.

¹² Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round*, 49.

English canon law. The predominantly Anglican southern colonies overwhelmingly followed these practices and subsequently prohibited absolute divorce. Initially, Anglican ecclesiastical courts were permitted to grant only divorces of bread and board¹³, which were extremely limited dissolutions that prohibited remarriage.¹⁴ The early split between Puritan and Anglican communities regarding divorce law, as well as the fractures within these communities, laid the foundation for longstanding differences between northern and southern states that would remain until widespread twentieth century divorce reform.

Though both regions gradually moved divorce jurisdiction from state legislatures to judges, northeastern states were more hesitant to entrust equity to individual judges and subsequently established more inclusive grounds for divorce than their southern counterparts. Of northern states, Connecticut was the most generous with its divorce provisions, which included habitual intemperance and intolerable cruelty, while New York permitted absolute divorce on the sole ground of adultery.¹⁵ By way of contrast, Alabama still allowed divorces of bread and board “long after many states had judged them to be ineffective and inhumane,” whereas South Carolina prohibited divorce in any form while creating

¹³ Divorces of bread and board are often understood in a modern context as a means of legal separation. Couples who obtain divorces of bread and board remain legally married but are no longer compelled to live together. Historically, couples living in relatively restrictive states that only allowed divorces of bread and board had no means of formally and permanently ending their marriages.

¹⁴ Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*, 11.

¹⁵ Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*, 46.

legal provision for mistresses in inheritance law.¹⁶ This stance implicitly announced that even adultery did not constitute legitimate grounds for divorce and, in cases of men's extramarital relationships with women, could actually enjoy certain legal protections.¹⁷ These geographic differences lasted well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, meaning that accessibility and ease of divorce depended upon the region in which hopeful divorcées lived and, ultimately, upon the legal idiosyncrasies of their particular state.

The divisions between and within states created conditions for uneven and often confusing divorce practices in a national context. Beginning with the earliest disagreements between Puritans and Anglicans, Riley argues, "American divorce law grew sporadically and inconsistently."¹⁸ Cherlin contends that divorce was consistently frowned upon yet always permissible in the United States, creating conditions for its stigmatization as well as its prevalence: "Divorce was difficult to obtain, seen as shameful, and never granted merely because the spouses wanted to end their marriage. Nevertheless, the seed of divorce was planted in the soil of the northern colonies."¹⁹ Indeed, though divorce was tightly controlled and often condemned from the earliest days of the colonies, it has been occurring and expanding since the mid-1600s.²⁰ Thus, America's relationship with divorce has been longstanding, contentious, and irregular, all of which would influence the ways in which individuals sought and obtained divorces.

¹⁶ Ibid, 125.

¹⁷ Ibid, 70.

¹⁸ Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*, 11.

¹⁹ Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round*, 49.

²⁰ Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*, 5.

The long-term and steady rise in divorce, according to Cherlin, also has deep historical roots beginning in the colonial period. The American legal tendency to consistently, though restrictively, allow certain forms of divorce was just one factor driving the expansion of divorce. Several historians and sociologists have devoted books to these considerations, but it is possible to simplify their findings into three general themes: the individualizing effects of Protestantism and liberal contractualism on marital relationships; transformative socioeconomic shifts accompanying urbanization and industrialization; and the rise of the love-based marriage ideal. Each of these broad historical forces combined to place unprecedented strain on the stability of the marriage bond and arguably led to a redefinition of marriage itself.

Cherlin emphasizes the longstanding importance of individualism in American religious and political traditions, which he argues has facilitated the increasing instability of the marriage vow. As with his study of colonial divorce law, Cherlin traces these tendencies to New England's early Protestant settlers. Just as Calvinist and Lutheran writings provided a legal basis for limited divorce, these religious traditions also abstractly contributed to America's unique relationship with divorce. These core strands of Protestantism broke with Catholic communal and hierarchical traditions and instead placed ultimate importance on the individual, stipulating that "salvation could be achieved through personal faith alone."²¹ Cherlin maintains that Luther and Calvin did not deliberately pave the way for twentieth-century understandings of individualism, but that their high

²¹ Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round*, 42.

regard for the emotional experiences and personal faith of their followers was nonetheless wholly transformative: “Their revolutionary reinterpretation of a person’s relationship to God formed the basis for individualism’s later growth.”²²

With the growing importance of the individual’s feelings and experiences, alongside the Reformation’s elevation of marriage over celibacy, a growing gap between individualism and marriage emerged. Cherlin writes of the difficulty in reconciling the ideal of the individual with the sanctity of the married pair: “For if marriage was the union of two people who could act as individuals, how could it be a functioning unit that society could rely on? Wouldn’t the interests of husbands and wives clash? Wouldn’t it split apart easily?”²³ Initially, a colonial adaption of English common law seemed to resolve these problems. Men were instated as the heads of the family, a system bolstered by the legal doctrine of coverture, in which “husband and wife became one legal person upon marriage, and that person was the husband.”²⁴ Thus, rising respect for the individual did not immediately lead to full equality between married individuals, which could have led to a “clash” of interests, as Cherlin puts it. The legal and social effects of coverture managed to temporarily mitigate the instability created by a union of individuals, each with their own expectations, desires, and agency.

As historian Stephanie Coontz argues, new Euro-American political ideals marred the temporary balance instilled by the patriarchal structure of coverture, further bolstering the rise of individualism. The late seventeenth century Glorious

²² Ibid.

²³ Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round*, 43.

²⁴ Ibid.

Revolution in England and the American and French Revolutions in the late eighteenth century “dealt a series of cataclysmic blows to the traditional justification of patriarchal authority.”²⁵ Underlying these national upheavals were socially transformative Enlightenment philosophies, many of which began to indirectly and occasionally directly link the tyranny of the political order with the structure of the family. The enormously influential Enlightenment philosopher John Locke explicitly made this connection. He wrote that, just as governmental authority derived from a contract between ruler and ruled, “marriage too could be seen as a contract between equals.”²⁶ Most importantly, he emphasized the inherent transience of any such contract: rulers, and by extension husbands, who violated their authority could and should be replaced.²⁷ As Enlightenment thinkers began to emphasize the mutuality of all relationships, whether they were between governments and the governed or between husbands and wives, rigid absolutism gave way to contractualism, and, by extension, impermanence.

Though Coontz concedes that only a small minority of Enlightenment thinkers espoused full equality between the sexes, she demonstrates that the political tumult of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries fostered widespread criticism of absolute authority. According to Coontz, the abstract connections between political theory and marital expectations became more overt, diffusing beyond the intellectual circles of Locke and a handful of Enlightenment women’s rights advocates. “During the eighteenth century people began to focus more on

²⁵ Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 148.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

the mutual obligations required in marriage,” she writes. “Rejecting analogies between the absolute rights of a husband and the absolute rights of a king, they argued that marital order should be based on love and reason, not on a husband’s arbitrary will.”²⁸ When viewed as an extension of a social contract, the marriage vow became decisively less stable. As the eighteenth century ended and the nineteenth century progressed, the contractual marriage ideal further implanted and reshaped marital expectations. Marriage became widely perceived as a contract between two individuals who should love and respect each other, an idea that critics correctly warned would “open a Pandora’s box.”²⁹

After the Revolutionary War and into the nineteenth century, westward expansion further destabilized the institution of marriage by complicating the existing geographical intricacies of the American divorce system. Many contemporary commentators and historians have interpreted the social effects of the pull of the West, ranging from Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis to scholarly conceptions of the West as a migratory safety valve. But migration held tremendous implications for individual families alongside these macroscopic social trends, particularly in the realm of marriage and divorce. “As the rapidly growing population of the United States began to spill over the Appalachian Mountains,” Riley writes, “the institution of divorce took on additional flexibility and even an air of casualness.”³⁰ Huge distances and limited means of communication often accompanied resettlement in the western territories, which

²⁸ Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 149.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*, 47.

lent themselves to marital breakdown. “Men went west, some believing that they would eventually reunite with their wives, others knowing that they would not. Women refused to join their migrating husbands or left their western-based husbands and returned to their former homes,” Riley elaborates, providing the most common of many scenarios in which westward migration strained or ended marriages.³¹

Desertion, bigamy, and formal divorce suits all contributed to rising marital breakdown in the American West. In 1908, the famous Wright report provided the earliest data detailing this trend. Using census data beginning with the year 1867, Commissioner of Labor Carroll D. Wright unequivocally stated, “The divorce rate increases as one goes westward.”³² According to the Wright report, the nationally rising divorce rate rose faster in western states and territories than in any other region of the United States following the Civil War.³³ The Wright report and its basis in census data cannot measure the full extent of marital breakdown in the West, nor can court records, as many voluntary separations and involuntary desertions never reached divorce courts.³⁴ Therefore, the rate of marital dissolution in the West, already noted as disproportionately high, was most likely even higher.

As western populations increased and contributed to marital breakdown in eastern home states, territorial and new state legislatures were compelled to consider their own divorce laws. In her careful study of western divorce

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid, 86.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid, 87.

legislation, Riley concludes that it was originally “neither totally innovative nor wildly innovative.”³⁵ In other words, some western states drew from more permissive northeastern laws while others resembled more restrictive southern laws. Still others borrowed from both legal traditions and many also revised existing legislation, as when Illinois lawmakers adopted southern bed and board divorces but loosened their constraints.³⁶ Though western divorce laws were clearly based in longstanding American legal tradition, Riley notes that the region as a whole was “widely known for its dedication to individualism, breaking ties, and reshaping institutions.”³⁷ Divorce in the American West, therefore, became distinctive both in proportion and practice. More western residents chose to divorce than anywhere else in America, and various divorce laws started to reflect that tendency.

Throughout the nineteenth century, some growing western territories and states began to pass more lenient divorce legislation. Riley attributes this tendency to two general features of western migration: revision of customary practices and a tendency toward haste.

Although settlers carried established ideas and institutions westward, most refused to be bound by them. Instead, they revised customary procedures whenever it suited their purposes. In addition, western settlers frequently acted in haste. Because they

³⁵ Ibid, 49.

³⁶ Ibid, 48.

³⁷ Ibid, 85.

were anxious to establish government and other institutions, westerners often skipped time-consuming deliberations.³⁸

Both of these migratory patterns contributed to the increasing permissiveness of western divorce laws, including more numerous and more flexible grounds. Most importantly, the impatience of various western legislatures often prompted the passage of relatively short state residency requirements.³⁹

Western divorce statutes began attracting national attention, which encompassed a wide range of reactions. Some found the western laws liberal, while others regarded them as frivolous and even dangerous. Regardless of the emerging disagreement regarding their perceived social effects, western divorce laws started to attract divorce seekers from across the nation. The geographic disparities in the availability and ease of divorce undeniably facilitated a system of migratory divorce. As word of western divorce liberalism spread, unhappy spouses in residing in more restrictive states realized they could simply relocate. In this regard, the most significant aspect of the permissive western divorce statutes was the brevity of their residency requirements; in western states with broader grounds for divorce or shorter certification periods, out-of-state divorce seekers could gain full state citizenship, and accompanying divorce privileges, within a matter of months.

As a result, the mid- to late nineteenth century witnessed the rise of popularly termed western “divorce mills,” or nexuses in which out-of-state residents flocked to temporarily reside, obtain divorce decrees, and return to their

³⁸ Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*, 85.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

home states. Various western divorce mills, all with varying numbers of migratory divorces actually granted, included regions in Utah, the Dakotas, Oklahoma, Indiana, and, eventually, Nevada. Though the liberalism of divorce law was necessarily statewide, meaning that a Nevadan divorce seeker could establish residency as easily in Reno as in Carson City, particular cities in each state emerged as well-publicized divorce centers. These locations usually appealed to outsiders because they were the most developed, providing amenities like convenient railroad lines, decent lodgings, and local entertainment. True divorce mills quickly developed a strong local trade to accommodate divorce seekers, including an abundance of lawyers and courts.⁴⁰ Though Riley contends that the number of divorces actually granted in western divorce mills was almost certainly exaggerated by contemporary pundits and journalists, these locations nonetheless received national notoriety for their lenience and attracted many out-of-state divorce seekers.⁴¹

The nineteenth century proliferation of western divorce mills, already aided by geographic variance in divorce law and social shifts in marital expectations, received an additional boost from the rapidly urbanizing nation. Alongside the temporary and long-term migratory patterns of westward expansion, national demographic changes dramatically affected the ways in which men and women related to each other. Cherlin describes the formative ways in which these changes affected individuals, couples, and families: “Urbanization put people closer together in settings where their behavior was often unsupervised

⁴⁰ Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*, 103.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

by family and neighbors...Moreover, as industrialization began, wage work drew husbands out of their homes and into factories, a development that undermined the older husband-wife partnership.”⁴² As single men and women mingled with fewer communal restraints, familial control on their marital choices weakened. Parents found themselves with diminishing authority regarding the romantic pairings of their children, who were increasingly selecting partners based on their own desires rather than the economic or social needs of their families. At the same time, the spread of wage labor further undermined the absolutism of the patriarchal familial structure.

As people left behind their agrarian family economies in rural areas of the United States and increasingly consolidated into the wage labor system of the cities, a divide between the workplace and the home widened. In order to simultaneously accommodate these social shifts alongside the idealization of individualism, Coontz contends, people “thrashed about in search of a new understanding of the relationship between men and women, one that did not unleash the ‘chaos’ of equality but did not insist too harshly on women’s subordination.”⁴³ Starting in the beginning of the nineteenth century and lasting throughout the Victorian Period, the doctrine of separate spheres flourished.

In this worldview, Coontz writes, an emphasis on “mental, emotional, and practical differences between the sexes” was believed to sustain married love and family life.⁴⁴ Men and women lived within separate spheres of existence, with

⁴² Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round*, 55.

⁴³ Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 153.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

husbands confined to breadwinning in the marketplace and wider economy and wives managing the household. These activities were intensely separated, as were men and women themselves. Men were believed to specialize in earning for their families, while women were meant to create a loving home that instilled character in their children and provided an emotional refuge for their husbands.⁴⁵ While these values were primarily confined to the middle and upper classes, they started to trickle down to the lower classes towards the end of the nineteenth century, further widening their scope of influence.⁴⁶

Alongside her description of the social controls created by the doctrine of separate spheres, Coontz pointedly writes that “the critical word here is *temporary*.”⁴⁷ The deep divide between men and women began to feed into the instability wrought by individualism, contractualism, and industrialization, all of which combined to “subvert the family hierarchy and destabilize the relations between men and women.”⁴⁸ According to Coontz, the underlying agent of instability was the rise of the love-based, companionate marriage. As people began to expect both a choice in their marriage partners and a sexually and romantically fulfilling marriage, the institution itself became less obligatory, permanent, and stable.

The warnings of conservatives and skeptics, which had seemed premature in the eighteenth century, suddenly became more compelling. Coontz elaborates on their questions, all of which placed the future of marriage in jeopardy:

⁴⁵ Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 155.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 175.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 160.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

If love was the most important reason to marry, how could society condemn people who stayed single rather than end a loveless marriage? If love disappeared from a marriage, why shouldn't a couple be allowed to go their separate ways? If men and women were true soul mates, why should they not be equal partners in society?⁴⁹

Earlier patriarchal systems of coverture and separate spheres, primarily meant to reign in the agency of women and generally intended to preserve the longevity and stability of marriages, gave way as the ideal of the love match took hold.

The divorce rate rose alongside individuals' hopes for their spouses and relationships. Alongside industrialization, urbanization, westward migration, and women's changing roles, Riley writes, "Another stress factor was America's rising expectations of marriage, which created more disappointment with marriage—and thus divorce."⁵⁰ The combined effects of these shifts were decisive, especially in the Victorian period: between 1880 and 1890, the national divorce rate increased by an astonishing seventy percent.⁵¹ Overall, the divorce rate began a sustained rise following the Civil War, which occurred in the midst of these manifold changes. It would continue to rise throughout the twentieth century, spiking in the years following World War II and in the 1960s; the only periods in which the divorce rate leveled or dropped were during the economic hardships of the Great Depression and the elevation of domesticity in the 1950s.⁵²

⁴⁹ Ibid, 176.

⁵⁰ Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*, 55.

⁵¹ Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 181.

⁵² Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 167.

But as the divorce rate rose and occasionally surged, men and women's abilities to divorce actually became more tightly restricted. Historian Elaine Tyler May describes the conflicting divorce trends that arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: "Between 1889 and 1906, as the divorce rate began to accelerate rapidly, state legislatures across the country, most of them in the East, enacted more than one hundred pieces of restrictive marriage and divorce legislation in an effort to stem the tide."⁵³ Subsequently, western divorce mills seemed more appealing to those who could afford to relocate for a temporary residency period. For a hopeful divorcée living in a state with limited or even nonexistent grounds for divorce, or perhaps one with an unbearably long certification period, divorce mills like Sioux Falls, South Dakota or Guthrie, Oklahoma provided an attractive alternative.

These new legal restrictions, which may outwardly seem counterintuitive amidst the social and economic changes sweeping the nation, were intended as a means of curbing the divorce rate and reinstating the stability of the marriage vow. Divorce reform became a topic of heated debate and substantial civic engagement in the late nineteenth century, an era that witnessed the rise of many similar moral reform movements. Activists in new groups like the New England Divorce Reform League and the National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws directed special attention to the western divorce mills; reformers linked the spread of western divorce mills, and the implicit questions

⁵³ Elaine Tyler May, *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 4.

they posed regarding the morality and availability of divorce in the United States, with the rising divorce rate. Riley elaborates on this connection and the significant controversy it prompted:

Increasingly a new breed of divorce reformers, located largely in the northeastern states, blamed the rising divorce rate on divergent laws and argued for uniform national divorce laws. Number of divorces would be reduced if every state and territory enacted identical, stringent divorce laws. And migratory divorce would disappear because strict and lenient jurisdictions would no longer exist.⁵⁴

Subsequently, divorce reformers often advocated for uniform divorce law, substantiating their claims with the release of the first Wright report and its evidence of a steady rise in the divorce rate.⁵⁵

The movement resonated with several novelists and religious leaders, and even received President Roosevelt's attention.⁵⁶ Though a 1906 conference on uniform divorce law convened, featuring representatives from each state, the movement gradually lost momentum. "It was increasingly apparent that states and territories could not, or would not, agree on divorce provisions," Riley writes.⁵⁷ Because the federal government never passed a constitutional amendment

⁵⁴ Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*, 108.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

regulating any divorce law, much less a stricter one, the movement collapsed altogether by the mid-twentieth century.⁵⁸

Although the national divorce reform movement technically failed, its substantial influence is visible in the conservative shifts in many state divorce laws. As May demonstrates, many states tightened their grounds for divorce, eliminated certain grounds altogether, extended waiting periods in which remarriage was forbidden, and increased their residency requirements.⁵⁹ All of these changes also occurred in western states, which effectively destroyed the famed western divorce mills in Utah, the Dakotas, Oklahoma, and Indiana. Cherlin argues that the rise and fall of these various divorce mills all followed a similar pattern predicated upon local moral agitation: “The history of migratory divorce is of states passing liberal laws, attracting migrants seeking divorces, engendering opposition to the practice among their own citizens, and then passing more restrictive legislation.”⁶⁰ A Cass County, North Dakota district attorney named Charles Pollack aptly summarized moral opposition to the state’s liberal divorce laws, calling them “a burning disgrace to the state.”⁶¹ Even if the number of actual migratory divorces granted was negligible, media attention and citizen activism often compelled legislators to tighten their laws and dampen out-of-state interest in establishing residency.

Yet one divorce mill defied this pattern and reigned as the divorce capital of the United States. Reno, Nevada began to attract notoriety as a divorce mill at

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ May, *Great Expectations*, 4.

⁶⁰ Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round*, 60.

⁶¹ Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*, 101.

the turn of the twentieth century and continued its reign until the nationwide liberalization of divorce law in the 1970s. While other western states made their divorce laws more restrictive in the wake of local protest and national notoriety, Nevada did the opposite. Given the national climate of increasingly restrictive divorce laws amidst the rising divorce rate, the reasons behind Reno's success as a divorce mill are clear. Among the more stringent northern, southern, and western states, Reno, Nevada positioned itself as a divorce center that could meet the rising national demand for easily accessible divorces.

Reno first attracted media attention in 1906, when Mrs. William E. Corey sued her husband, a prominent industrialist, for a divorce after she discovered his involvement with an actress.⁶² The scandalous case made international headlines and attracted a famous roster of divorce seekers hoping for privacy and swift proceedings, further elevating Reno's cultural visibility. In 1920, actress Mary Pickford famously divorced her husband Owen Moore to marry actor Douglas Fairbanks just weeks later.⁶³ Highly publicized Hollywood divorces followed for the next few decades: Clark Gable divorced Ria Langham Gable in 1939,⁶⁴ Rita Hayworth divorced Prince Aly Khan in 1951, and Arthur Miller divorced Mary Slattery in 1956 to marry Marilyn Monroe.⁶⁵ While Hollywood supplied a steady stream of actors and actresses from California, Eastern socialites took notice when New York attorneys began promoting their out-of-state services. In 1907, one

⁶² John Clausen, "The Reno Quickie," May 1979, 25. From "Divorce Clippings File," the Nevada Historical Society Archive.

⁶³ Mary Pickford Case File, Folder 2531 A, Nevada State Library and Archives.

⁶⁴ McGee and McGee, *The Divorce Seekers*, 83.

⁶⁵ Priya Jain, "The Six-Week Cure," *Bust Magazine*, December/January 2010, 58.

enterprising New York attorney named William H. Schnitzer even established a Reno office and aggressively advertised in playbills and newspapers, attracting many wealthy clients with the ability to relocate and end their divorces quickly.⁶⁶ As the twentieth century progressed, many members of American “first families,” among them Astors, Roosevelts, Rockefellers, and du Ponts, came out West to divorce, as did several titled Europeans.⁶⁷ While these wealthy and famous divorcées cycled in and out of Reno, its national and international fame as a divorce mill soared.

Even as Reno built its reputation as a premier divorce mill, it was not immune from the moralizing forces of the grassroots divorce reform movement. Local agitation began in earnest in 1913, when many Nevadans professed fear for the moral reputation of their state. Countless women’s groups protested the perceived disgrace of the state’s divorce law,⁶⁸ as in the case of the Divorce Initiative League. In its petition to “the women of Nevada,” the organization implored wives, mothers, and homemakers to consider that “the immoral practices of some who come for divorce are flaunted in the faces of decent citizens.”⁶⁹ Divorce reform pressure briefly succeeded at a state level in 1914, when the state legislature changed the residency requirement from six months to twelve months

⁶⁶ Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*, 136.

⁶⁷ Jain, “The Six-Week Cure,” 58.

⁶⁸ Assorted women’s groups’ petitions and letters, “Legislation/Legislature, Divorce & Racing Bills” Folder 011, Gov. Emmet D. Boyle, 1915-1918. From Nevada State Library and Archives.

⁶⁹ George C. Hunting, Women’s Petition from the Divorce Initiative League, November 4, 1922. From “Divorce Clippings File,” the Nevada Historical Society Archive.

in an attempt to deter quickie divorce seekers.⁷⁰ But, as journalist Robert Wernick wrote, “the triumph of virtue meant the bankruptcy of law offices and hotels and taverns.”⁷¹ Local business suffered so significantly from the loss of out-of-state divorce seekers that the law was reverted back to six months within a calendar year.

The famous Reno quickie divorce, however, took much less time than even the reinstated six months. Reno’s “Golden Age” as a divorce colony began in 1931, when the residency requirement was further cut to a mere six weeks. As historian Mella Harmon argues, the six-week residency requirement was just one of several of Nevada’s “sin solutions” passed for economic, rather than social, reasons in 1931.⁷² Just as the rest of the nation fell into the pit of the Great Depression, Nevada attempted to draw in more out-of-state business to stay afloat, enacting its abbreviated divorce law alongside the legalization of prostitution and gambling. The legislation, even if it was morally repugnant to some state residents, was immediately successful. According to Harmon, “the number of divorces granted in Reno doubled between 1930 and 1931, when the residency requirement was reduced.”⁷³ As a result of its divorce trade, Nevada survived the Depression years and went on to flourish.

The six-week residency was just one of many attractive features of Nevada divorce proceedings. Between 1931 and the 1960s, Nevada offered some

⁷⁰ McGee and McGee, *The Divorce Seekers*, 328.

⁷¹ Robert Wernick, “Where You Went If You *Really* Had to Get Unhitched,” *Smithsonian*, June 1996, 66.

⁷² Mella Rothwell Harmon, “Divorce and Economic Opportunity in Reno, Nevada During the Great Depression,” (PhD diss., University of Nevada Reno, 1998), 15.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

of the most lenient divorce laws in United States history. Historians Bill and Sandra McGee illustrate the state's remarkable permissiveness:

Nevada law allowed for nine legal grounds for a divorce: impotency, adultery, desertion, conviction of a felony, habitual drunkenness, neglect to provide the common necessities of life, insanity, living apart for three years, and extreme cruelty entirely mental in nature. The most popular ground was mental cruelty and it could cover a wide variety of complaints, even something like 'She talks to me when I'm trying to read...' And plaintiffs did not have to prove their charges.⁷⁴

Reno emerged as the primary location for the Nevada divorce trade, as did its western divorce mill predecessors, because of its many amenities. As Harmon writes, "It had a reputation as a jurisdiction that combined lax laws, leisure pursuits and pleasant climates, and was highly publicized..."⁷⁵ Until the 1970s, when most states passed liberal divorce legislation, Reno was the only western divorce mill still in existence to meet the rising tide of twentieth century divorce seekers.

As late as 1957, journalist Robert L. Heilbroner echoed Reno Judge George A. Bartlett and his frustration with the "48 ways of getting married and divorced, geographically speaking," in the United States. In an *Esquire* article called "How to Get a Divorce," Heilbroner wrote, "Of the 400,000 couples in the U.S. who yearly seek divorce, a considerable number find themselves in a Grade

⁷⁴ McGee and McGee, *The Divorce Seekers*, 328.

⁷⁵ Harmon, "Divorce and Economic Opportunity in Reno," 15.

A Mess. I'm not talking about the alimony problem. I'm just talking about the simple technique of getting rid of a spouse. It can be sheer hell."⁷⁶ The "sheer hell" of the American divorce process dates back to the geographic patchwork of its original colonial divorce laws. Even though the Protestant doctrine guiding many of the colonial settlers consistently allowed for limited divorce, drastic regional and state differences in divorce law prevailed from the very foundation of the earliest Puritan and Anglican New England communities.

White settlement of the American West further complicated the intricacies of American divorce laws. Though westward expansion contributed to increasing national rates of marital breakdown, especially with the advent of western divorce mills, the push for divorce reform led to a sweep of late nineteenth and early twentieth century legal restrictions. The widespread tightening of state divorce laws persisted alongside, and directly because of, a national rise in the divorce rate. Although the moral outrage and hysteria of divorce reformers might suggest otherwise, the uptick in the divorce rate was far from sudden or unexpected; instead, it arose from an overdetermined set of historical forces that had been steadily destabilizing the institution of marriage from the Protestant Reformation and the French and American Revolutions onward. As the United States industrialized and urbanized in the nineteenth century, prompting tremendous shifts in family structures and courtships, people also began to approach the marriage relationship with stronger individual preferences and higher romantic

⁷⁶ Robert L. Heilbroner, "How to Get a Divorce," *Esquire*, October 1957, 100. From "Divorce Clippings File," the Nevada Historical Society Archive.

and sexual expectations. As a result, the marriage vow became progressively less stable and less permanent over time, culminating most visibly in the late nineteenth and twentieth century spikes in divorce.

In the midst of national divorce reform, Reno, Nevada emerged and survived as the last remaining western divorce mill. Within a climate of restrictive laws but increasing demand for brevity and simplicity in divorce proceedings, Reno's local divorce trade flourished. Even though Nevada experienced considerable local divorce reform agitation, the state passed even more liberal laws out of necessity in the early days of the Great Depression. As Reno's Golden Age as a divorce mill progressed, a rich local economy developed to meet the needs of the waves of divorce seekers. One special subset of the divorce trade, the popularly termed "divorce ranches," would attract thousands of well-to-do divorcées, and particularly women, seeking privacy and relaxation during their quickie divorces. With the advent of the divorce ranches, the six-week divorce experience would be packaged into a vacation, retreat, and divorce all at once; divorce ranches would provide a site of respite and community for women seeking divorces during a time when the stigmatization of the practice failed to change as quickly as the rising divorce rate.

“We don’t come to Reno for a divorce, we are ‘here for the cure’”:

Friendships and Female Space at the Reno Divorce Ranches

A divorce seeker named Winifred Higinbotham Dunaway took the train from Glenrock, New Jersey to Reno in September of 1946. The conductor screamed her destination, or so it seemed to Winifred, as he looked at her ticket. “Couldn’t he be a little quieter about it, I thought, or does everyone on the train have to know?” she wrote in her diary, humiliated. By this time, Reno had gained a national reputation as the divorce capital of the United States. Indeed, its notoriety was enough to mortify someone like Winifred, who worried that her dinner companions on the train would know she was headed to the famous divorce mill. “The whole trip was pretty grueling,” she remembered. Matters only became worse when she happened to run into her gynecologist in her railcar. This reminder of her old life so upset Winifred that she “became sick all over [her] green suit.”¹

Women like Winifred came from all over the United States to seek quickie divorces in Reno. Winifred’s experience provides a useful point of comparison, as she typifies the middle range of the Reno divorce industry in many ways. To begin with, she came for her divorce in 1946, which falls almost exactly in the middle of Reno’s so-called “Golden Age” as a divorce mill from 1930 to 1960.² Winifred, a white woman of relative means, also represents the average class status of divorce seekers. Working class divorce seekers would not have had

¹ Winifred Higinbotham Dunaway diary, September to November 1946, Divorce Clippings File, Nevada Historical Society, 1.

² William and Sandra McGee, *The Divorce Seekers: A Photo Memoir of a Nevada Dude Wrangler*, (St. Helena: BMC Publications, 2004), xxiii.

access to the ease and comfort that Winifred's diary describes, while the most elite divorce seekers would have enjoyed more luxuries and privacy even than Winifred. Black divorce seekers, regardless of their financial situations, would have far fewer lodging options than their white counterparts. Winifred also came to Reno from New Jersey, which, along with New York and California, produced the most out-of-state divorce seekers.³ Finally, Winifred was a woman, as were the majority of divorce seekers. Even within the brief sentences describing her train journey in to Reno, Winifred captured the feelings and fears that many other women must have felt before, during, and after what they commonly called their "six-week cure."

Using Winifred's story as a starting point, it is possible to examine the complexities of the Reno divorce industry during its peak. After exploring the variety of divorce seekers' class backgrounds, housing options, and legal arrangements in the divorce colony, one elite subset of divorcées emerges. As the local industry developed, "divorce ranches," or functioning dude ranches that specialized in accommodating the wealthiest migratory "six-weekers," emerged and dominated the cultural landscape. The romanticization of divorce ranches in films like *The Women* and *Desert Hearts*, alongside extensive popular press coverage of the various celebrities and socialites among the ranch guests, prompted a widespread fascination with these Western luxury hotels.

But the significance of the divorce ranches in Reno's Golden Age extends beyond their prominence in the popular imagination; the ranches, for a particular

³ Elizabeth Ward and Roberta McBride, Personal Interview, 22 July 2013, 5.

group of racially and financially privileged women, provided physical sites of support and camaraderie for divorce seekers. Due to the strong stigma against divorce during the historical era in question, the early to mid-twentieth century, the ranch environment was tremendously meaningful for the women and children who found themselves there in a state of suspended marital dissolution. In particular, the preponderance of female staff and guests at the ranches sheltered women during a vulnerable time in their lives. The supportive network of women established at the ranches constituted an early incarnation of female space, impactful sites of bonding and resistance during the feminist movement, that enabled women to make sense of their emotional experiences and build long-lasting relationships.

Winifred's shame after the conductor announced Reno as her final destination reflects the widespread disapproval of her 1946 divorce. After her difficult journey, Winifred arrived in Reno late at night, embarrassed, and completely alone. It is easy to imagine how overwhelmed and exhausted Winifred must have felt as she disembarked and surveyed the dark train station. Fortunately, she wasn't by herself for long: "I would have had a very lost feeling if my lawyer hadn't met the train," she wrote. "He is quite pleasant, a little of the undertaker manner."⁴ He then drove Winifred to the Judson Guest House, where she would live for the next six weeks in order to establish residency for her Nevada divorce.⁵ While it may seem that picking up clients at train stations would fall out of the purview of divorce attorneys, this was a standard practice in Reno.

⁴ Higinbotham Dunaway diary, Nevada Historical Society, 2.

⁵ Ibid.

Lawyers helped plan the six-week stays of reasonably wealthy women like Winifred before they even left their hometowns, ensuring that they would be provided for from their arrivals until their departures.

The intricate, lucrative Reno divorce industry had developed and flourished by Winifred's divorce in 1946, even alongside widespread stigmatization of divorce. Lawyers, hotel and ranch proprietors, and local business owners all profited from the waves of out-of-state divorcées who found their way to Reno from all of the forty-eight United States and as many as thirty-two foreign countries.⁶ Historian Mella Rothwell Harmon writes, "Many divorce seekers were steered toward a particular Reno attorney by their hometown lawyer, who would have written a letter on his client's behalf arranging for fees, accommodations, and presenting the conditions of the case."⁷ Even the most prominent Reno attorneys personally came to meet their new clients upon arrival, as it added a human touch to their business and helped with future referrals. Famous local judge and attorney George Bartlett trained and dispatched his daughter to attend to this very task.⁸

Lodgings like the Judson Guest House, where Winifred stayed, were common for comfortable, well-connected Reno divorcées. Private guest houses and hotels occupied the middle range of the Reno divorce accommodations. There were many divorce seekers who could not afford such housing. In her survey of the economic side of the Reno divorce colony, Harmon demonstrates that locals

⁶ Mella Rothwell Harmon, "Divorce and Economic Opportunity in Reno, Nevada During the Great Depression," (PhD diss., University of Nevada Reno, 1998), 75.

⁷ Ibid, 33.

⁸ Ibid, 51.

found many different ways to profit from the divorce business and quarter the wide range of six-weekers. Those who lacked Winifred's means would have stayed in any number of less expensive options, among them third-rate hotels, apartment houses, boarding houses, private homes, auto parks, or the YMCA.⁹ In such situations, hotel and boardinghouse managers might refer these clients to a relatively inexpensive lawyer for a small cut of their fee; as evidenced by correspondence with out-of-state lawyers and prospective clients, Reno lawyers were often willing to adjust their charges for poorer clients.¹⁰

Even with these accommodations, working class divorce seekers faced quite a few challenges during their six-week stays. Despite the brevity of the six-week requirement, it was nonetheless costly to establish a separate household out of state. In order to afford their living costs and legal fees, these divorce seekers were often compelled to work their way through their six weeks. According to Harmon, many divorce seekers "were middle-class...and getting a job was a necessary aspect of their Reno experience."¹¹ In Reno, six-weekers could find stints as stenographers, waitresses, housekeepers, and nurses, to name just a few options. These divorce seekers might have been just as embarrassed or uncomfortable as Winifred as they journeyed to Reno, but they most likely would have had a much harder time settling down and facing the prospect of their six week stay. They almost certainly would not have had a lawyer to pick them up, as

⁹ Ibid, 41-42.

¹⁰ George A. Bartlett to Mrs. May, April 29th, 1931, Box 35, Folder 12 "Correspondence—Divorce Inquiries 1930-1933," George A. Bartlett Papers, University of Nevada-Reno Library, Special Collections Department.

¹¹ Harmon, "Divorce and Economic Opportunity in Reno," 61.

they might have had to contact the Reno Hotel and Housing Bureau, YMCA, or locals to find their lawyers and housing. Some simply went knocking on doors.¹²

Black divorcées experienced the added strain of finding lodgings in the segregated divorce economy. A 1950 *Ebony* article explored the unique difficulties facing the reported five hundred black women annually divorcing in these conditions: “Barred from swank hotels, dude ranches and motor courts, they live at Negro-run rooming houses where rates are low.”¹³ Lawyers reportedly adjusted their rates for poor women regardless of race, and the article establishes that black women could receive legal counsel for \$150 dollars or less. While blacks were able to shop anywhere in Reno, churches and casinos remained as racially stratified as the housing. Many restaurants barred black customers: “Only the Club Harlem, Woolworth’s, and a small Chinese restaurant will serve Negroes.”¹⁴ Amidst the restrictions and discrimination enacted in the Reno divorce colony, some black women managed to find solace in the existing community. Black boarding house owners facilitated connections between divorcées and local black leaders like casino owners and pastors. Still, the reality of segregation in a system of migratory divorce was harsh, which accounts for the whitewashing of cultural representations of the Reno divorce industry. Few films, books, or novels address the troubling implications of racial segregation for the six-week residency requirement.

¹² Ibid, 53.

¹³ “Reno Divorcee: Nuptial Knot Cut by 500 Negro Wives Annually in Divorce City,” *Ebony*, Vol. 5, Issue 10, August 1950, 15. Nevada Historical Society Divorce Clippings File.

¹⁴ Ibid, 18.

In contrast to working class and black divorcées, someone like Winifred may seem to exemplify the privileged upper echelon of the Reno divorce industry. However, the wealthiest and best-connected divorce seekers would not have stayed with Winifred at places like the Judson Guest House. Instead, they would have spent their six weeks at the private, upscale divorce ranches on the fringes of Reno. According to Harmon, these ranches were yet another example of the Reno locals' ingenuity: "A number of local ranches turned their working stock operations into 'divorce ranches,' catering to wealthy (mostly Eastern) women, offering a healthy outdoor experience and the company of handsome cowboys."¹⁵ Divorce ranches, in other words, capitalized on the shortened six-week residency requirement and marketed their establishments to the divorce seekers with money to spend. For the leisure class, divorce could be an enjoyable and even restful experience. As one ranch's brochure advertised as early as 1936: "Divorce seekers—Enjoy a healthful, relaxing vacation at the same time."¹⁶

Reno and its surrounding areas offered a range of ranches tailored to various price points and preferences. Some of the less exclusive ranches had seedy reputations around town. One such ranch, the Lazy ME, was famous for its handsome, smooth-talking cowboys and was subsequently nicknamed the "Lay Me Easy."¹⁷ The three ranches of interest in this thesis, however, were far more reputable and selective. The Whitney Guest Ranch, the Pyramid Lake Ranch, and

¹⁵ Harmon, "Divorce and Economic Opportunity in Reno," 1.

¹⁶ "Pyramid Lake Ranch, Sutcliffe, Nev." Brochure, 1936, Mary Bean Papers, Collection Number 95-10, "Pyramid Lake Guest Ranch, List of Guests and Brochure, 1936" Folder, University of Nevada-Reno Library, Special Collections Department.

¹⁷ Harmon, "Divorce and Economic Opportunity in Reno," 53.

the Flying M E were expensive, intensely private operations run by proprietors who specialized in hosting divorce-seekers. Each of these ranches was highly ranked in the business, particularly due to the discretion of their owners. Due to the comforts, entertainment, and privacy of the divorce ranches, which were located on closed grounds in the outskirts of Reno, many socialites and celebrities chose to obtain their divorces there. One interviewee, Beth Ward, co-owned the Whitney Guest Ranch with her mother. She remembered that many local reporters would call and ask about rumored guests at her ranch, but that “Mother never gave out information about any of the guests” even when pressed or bribed.¹⁸ Emmy Ward, the renowned owner of the Flying M E, banned press and photographers from the ranch and only accepted guests with references.¹⁹

The owners of these three specialized ranches provided for their guests during every part of the divorce process. Ranch owners and employees immediately collected their guests from the airport or train station; had Winifred stayed at such a place as the Flying M E, she would never have been collected from the train station by her lawyer.²⁰ Interviewee Marilu Norden stayed at the Pyramid Lake Ranch in 1950. Its seasoned owners, married business team Harry and Joan Drackert, expertly managed multiple Reno divorce ranches. Pyramid Lake, with its exquisite lakeside property and wealthy clientele, was their most famous establishment. Marilu recalled Harry Drackert himself picking her up from the airport. She had arrived that afternoon from Connecticut with her four-

¹⁸ Ward and McBride interview, 9.

¹⁹ McGee and McGee, *The Divorce Seekers*, 83.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 368.

year-old son. The personal touch of Harry's pickup apparently found mixed reactions in Marilu: she said she felt instantly comfortable with Harry and Joan, but that Harry's driving skills made her nervous. The ride out to Pyramid Lake, she remembered, "was so fast through the desert," with Harry's Woodie station wagon "lopping off jack rabbits left and right."²¹ Marilu, who was only twenty-five at the time, had been forced to obtain a quickie divorce by her husband just two weeks after giving birth to their second child.²² The surreal drive to the ranch was probably much less frightening for her than the overwhelming six weeks that awaited her once she arrived.

Despite the rather depressing nature of their business, the divorce ranches were carefully managed to make the entire divorce process as simplified and painless as possible. In exchange for their high prices, ranches like the Whitney, Pyramid Lake, and the Flying M E helped arrange day trips and horseback rides and covered room, meals, and daily transportation to Reno for shopping or legal appointments.²³ Additionally, the owners of these ranches offered their services as residence witnesses. In order to walk out of the Reno courthouse with a divorce decree in hand, divorce seekers had to prove that they had resided in Reno continuously for every day of their six-week stay. The owners of the ranches were well versed in the legal process and often testified in their guests' hearings as part of their services covered under the ranch rates.²⁴ But no matter how much a guest was willing to pay, the owners of reputable ranches like the Whitney, Pyramid

²¹ Marilu Norden and Phil Jones, Personal Interview, 27 May 2013, 4.

²² Ibid, 3.

²³ McGee and McGee, *The Divorce Seekers*, 368.

²⁴ Ibid, 347.

Lake, and the Flying M E could not be persuaded to lie on their behalf. Beth Ward and her sister, Robbie McBride, remembered that the Whitney's guests frequently asked if they could spend a few days in nearby California attractions like San Francisco or Lake Tahoe. According to Robbie, her mother would always say, "Well, that's just fine. You have to add it on to your six week stay."²⁵ Had ranch owners like Mrs. Ward been caught lying for a client, they faced a severe fine and a penalty of up to fourteen years in prison.²⁶

While many ranches set curfews in order to regulate the full-time residence of the divorce-seekers, the ranch owners were certainly not strict or domineering figures. Their primary concern was to ensure that their guests had pleasant stays, especially given that these six weeks at the ranches might be among the most vulnerable and lonely periods of their lives. In his retrospective of the Reno divorce industry, "Where You Went If You *Really* Had to Get Unhitched," journalist Robert Wernick captures the fears facing the divorcées at the ranches:

The average, and certainly the symbolic type conjured up by the word 'divorcée' in those days, was a young woman from the East who had never seen a live coyote or a live cowboy. Now, she was thousands of miles away from home and hubby, with six weeks to fill with a heady, frightening freedom. No job, no housework...and

²⁵ Ward and McBride interview, 7.

²⁶ McGee and McGee, *The Divorce Seekers*, 347.

in a country town where the conversation and the social conventions were different from anything she had ever known.²⁷

Of course, this was merely a loose sketch of the upper-class, East Coast divorce seeker, and Wernick goes on to acknowledge the broad “human spectrum” of divorcées in Reno. Nonetheless, this passage vividly describes the various emotions of the newly arrived divorce ranch guests, especially women, who faced uncertain futures in an alien environment.

The prevalence of female divorcées in Reno was representative of a broader national trend. In historian Glenda Riley’s study of colonial Massachusetts, she notes that female divorce petitioners began to outnumber their male counterparts beginning in the 1700s. As the eighteenth and nineteenth century progressed, this pattern became even more pronounced on a national scale. Riley traces this prominent trend to the fault system of American divorce suits, which generally linked the attribution of fault to the allocation of alimony. In order to divorce, one spouse had to sue the other on a fault ground, such as insanity or adultery. If the wife was the plaintiff, she had the right to ask the court to mandate financial support from her husband. As Riley writes, “Because she was free of fault, she deserved to have the financial support that her husband had pledged at the time of their marriage.”²⁸

But if the wife was the defendant, she lost her right to alimony because her own misbehavior had prompted the divorce. “Given this policy, it was

²⁷ Robert Wernick, “Where You Went If You *Really* Had to Get Unhitched,” *Smithsonian*, June 1996, 68.

²⁸ Glenda Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 15.

advantageous for a woman to be a plaintiff rather than a defendant,” Riley argues.²⁹ Although alimony was a highly flawed system, women had little other recourse to support themselves after their marriages ended. The legal advantage of suing for divorce first, rather than being sued and suffering the consequences, compelled women to file in higher numbers than men. This tendency, Riley contends, was intensified in western states, where women overwhelmingly obtained more divorces. In western states and territories, women got at least two-thirds of divorce decrees and even higher percentages in states like California, Colorado, and most significantly, Nevada.³⁰

The number of women at Reno’s divorce ranches in particular, while statistically unclear and somewhat disputed, appears to have been very high. To my knowledge, there exists no formal record of the gender breakdown of ranch guests. In her examination of the Reno divorce industry, Harmon cites a 1932 study of County Clerk Elwood Beemer. After appraising all of the divorce cases that passed through his office in that year, Beemer concluded that men had received one third of the final decrees. Final decrees were granted to the divorce seekers who had established residency, meaning that Beemer’s figures would suggest that about two thirds of migratory divorce seekers were women.³¹ This statistic, of course, exactly matches the figure that Riley cited in her study of divorce in the American West. However, Harmon uses this figure to argue against the “popular theme” that women divorce-seekers outnumbered men. “Some

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*, 90.

³¹ Harmon, “Divorce and Economic Opportunity in Reno,” 75.

writers,” she writes, “have claimed the ratio of women to men to be as high as 10 to 1, but the records do not support that estimate.”³²

Still, even Harmon’s conservative two-thirds estimate places female Reno petitioners in a comfortable majority. Yet firsthand participants in the divorce industry claim that women outnumbered men even more dramatically at the divorce ranches in particular.³³ Interestingly, two interviewees placed the ratio of women to men at the exact ratio that Harmon disputes, 10 to 1. Beth Ward, the owner of the Whitney, unequivocally stated that “the women outnumbered the men by ninety percent.”³⁴ Bill McGee, wrangler at the Flying M E, remembered, “[There were] at least nine that were women to one man in my experience, at the ranch I was at. But I think that was pretty true for the entire era...”³⁵ Even if Beemer’s findings are taken into account alongside these estimates from firsthand participants in the ranch business, it is clear that women comprised a strong majority of ranch guests.

The image of a ranch teeming with female divorcées in the years between 1930 and 1960 might seem rather odd. It is difficult to reconcile this idea with

³² Ibid.

³³ Beemer’s findings, and by extension Harmon’s deduction, are questionable for a few reasons. First and foremost, Beemer’s study applies only to one year, 1932, which was among the early years of the so-called “Golden Age” of Reno divorce.³³ A study of random years throughout this period, if not every year should data permit, would enable more accurate conclusions, as a sample of just one year is not representative of broader trends during the era. Furthermore, this study was conducted out of one office that processed the entire county’s divorces; it does not differentiate between out-of-state, migratory divorce seekers and true Reno residents, nor does it specify which decrees were processed on behalf of residents at divorce ranches. Thus, Beemer’s study cannot be applied to construct the gender breakdown of out-of-state guests at divorce ranches.

³⁴ Ward and McBride interview, 15.

³⁵ William and Sandra McGee, Personal Interview, 4 June 2013, 6.

what historian Joanne Meyerowitz writes is “a well-entrenched stereotype of American women in the post-World War II years” who “moved to the suburbs, created the baby boom, and forged family togetherness.”³⁶ Women obtaining quickie divorces in the company of Reno cowboys upset this stereotype, as divorce ranches were a far cry from the suburbs and certainly from “family togetherness.” However, Reno divorce ranches comprised a specialized, upper-class microcosm of a nationally rising divorce rate. Even though attitudes and state divorce laws did not generally liberalize as quickly as the divorce rate rose, more and more people were parting with their spouses throughout the United States during the Golden Age of the Reno divorce industry.³⁷

Additionally, many women who came to Reno to obtain divorces did so after making agreements with their husbands in advance to quickly dissolve their marriages. Technically speaking, such prearranged divorces in the existing fault system of American divorce were illegal. Obtaining a Reno quickie divorce inherently comprised an act of collusion, as it entailed agreement between spouses to travel to a more lenient jurisdiction. And when the “defendant” spouse promised to refrain from contesting the divorce or attempting to alter its terms, as did many Reno divorcees’ husbands to avoid drawing out the divorce process, they were also practicing collusion.³⁸ Regardless of the illegality of these actions, the Reno courts seemed to ignore the presence of collusion, just as they

³⁶ Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver, Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 2.

³⁷ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 167.

³⁸ Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*, 144.

overlooked the fact that out-of-state divorcées testifying as to their intent to become Nevada citizens were committing perjury.³⁹

Thus, in an entirely collusive and therefore illegal fashion, women often agreed to come to Reno for the six-week requirement because it made the most practical sense; as Bill McGee said in his interview, more women came out to Reno for divorces, particularly to the ranches, because they were homemakers. “They weren’t working, or they weren’t the breadwinner in the family. And a man stayed in his job and kept providing for the cost,” he remembered.⁴⁰ Beth Ward painted a similar picture, adding, “And nine times out of ten also, they had children. And he didn’t want to take care of the kids while she was here in Reno, so she brought the children with her. So I think that was probably it, mainly. You didn’t see too many men.”⁴¹

Even though many of the ranch guests’ divorces were prearranged, women usually had a broad range of experiences and emotional responses upon arriving in Reno for their divorces, many of which were colored by pervasive social disapproval of their actions. Journalist Robert Wernick, who stayed at Pyramid Lake Ranch for his own divorce, analyzed the divorcées around him in a humorous article. He identified a few categories of guests that seemed to recur throughout six-week cycles, including: “the poor, shell-shocked girl,” “the boastful gold-digger,” “the secret drinker,” and “the all-too-public drinker.”⁴² Wernick found the breadth of mournful, troubled guests entirely understandable

³⁹ McGee and McGee, *The Divorce Seekers*, 349.

⁴⁰ McGee and McGee interview, 4.

⁴¹ Ward and McBride interview, 15.

⁴² Robert Wernick in McGee and McGee’s *The Divorce Seekers*, 86.

given the inhospitable social climate surrounding divorce at the time: “Nice people did not do it, and in most jurisdictions the breaking of a marriage was deliberately made a slow, costly and embarrassing process.”⁴³ Historian Anita Ernst Watson emphasizes the humiliation of divorce in the era: “Divorce was perceived as a broken link in the chain of the family. Moreover, it was a deliberate break of the link; voluntarily deviant behavior that was not respectable, and behavior that was stigmatized.”⁴⁴ Fortunately, Wernick notes, “more tolerant views prevailed” in Nevada, the divorce capital of the United States.⁴⁵

One of the co-owners of Pyramid Lake Ranch, Harry Drackert, didn’t seem to remember as many despondent or alcoholic women as Wernick: “Most guests who come here for a divorce aren’t the usual depressed types depicted in movies and television. The hard part is over. They’ve already decided to come to Nevada to get a divorce. Most get out and enjoy the area.”⁴⁶ However, some women were much more distraught than Harry Drackert’s recollections imply. Interviewee Marilu Norden, who incidentally also stayed at Pyramid Lake, had technically agreed to a divorce before Harry Drackert picked her up at the Reno airport. But for her, the “hard part” certainly wasn’t over.

In 1950, she was a homemaker in rural Connecticut. She and her husband already had a four-year-old son, Phil, and she was eight months pregnant with their second child. “It was heart-wrenching,” she remembered, “when my

⁴³ Wernick, “Where You Went If You *Really* Had to Get Unhitched,” 64.

⁴⁴ Anita Ernst Watson, “Fading Shame: Divorce Stigma in American Culture, 1882-1939,” (PhD diss., University of Nevada, Reno, 1997), 45.

⁴⁵ Wernick, “Where You Went If You *Really* Had to Get Unhitched,” 64.

⁴⁶ McGee and McGee, *the Divorce Seekers*, 375.

husband told me...that he wanted a divorce. And he wanted to send me to a divorce ranch. And I had never heard of such a thing back then, even.”⁴⁷ Despite her protestations and pleas to speak with a marriage counselor, her husband arranged to send her to Pyramid Lake just weeks after the birth of their daughter. Marilu never even spoke to their lawyer. “I was behind the eight ball, and there wasn’t anything I could do. It was really tough. And I didn’t drive at the time, and so I had no recourse.”⁴⁸ While Marilu technically agreed to the divorce in advance, qualifying it as a no-contest case that could be resolved within the six-week residency, she was evidently very upset.

Indeed, a woman’s voluntary residence at a divorce ranch didn’t necessarily mean that she was happy about the impending divorce, nor did it mean the divorce was truly amicable. And some divorcées struggled even after relatively cordial and mutual decisions to part. Journalist Lily Tuck, who obtained a divorce at another of Harry and Joan Drackert’s ranches in 1970, arrived with her two sons in “dark glasses to hide my red-rimmed eyes.”⁴⁹ “My husband and I settled relatively amicably—our most heated arguments were over the dog,” Tuck writes. “And not until I was actually packing and getting ready to leave did it occur to me in a sudden sickening instant that from now on, except for my children, I was going to be on my own. Then I did cry.”⁵⁰ Other divorcées from different decades experienced similarly sudden reactions of fear and distress.

Louise, fellow guest and friend of Winifred Higinbotham Dunaway, confided in

⁴⁷ Norden and Jones interview, 4.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Lily Tuck, “On Her Own,” *Vogue*, June 2012, 72.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Winifred in 1946: “I don’t realise [sic] why I’m here, and won’t until I get back and begin rattling around in that big apartment in New York by myself...As soon as I knew what the set-up was I left before I had time to think...the second day I was here one of the boys asked me “How’s everything going?” I burst into tears.”⁵¹ In a time when divorce was generally frowned upon and women had few economic opportunities outside of marriage, it is understandable that women like Marilu, Lily, and Louise felt overwhelmed, frightened, and simply sad.

Ranch owners were generally very sensitive to these feelings, and many were widely renowned for their compassion, warmth, and discretion. “Keeping their flocks amused, distracted and out of trouble,” journalist Wernick wrote, “demanded a special breed of divorce-ranch manager.”⁵² The owners of the Whitney, Pyramid Lake, and the Flying M E all seemed to fall into this “special breed” category. When asked what her day-to-day experiences were like while running the Whitney, the first thing interviewee Beth Ward said was: “Oh, I don’t know. Wipe away the tears, I guess, on occasion.”⁵³ Her sister, Robbie, also said that their mother sometimes took divorcées under her wing, introducing them to good attorneys if they were unhappy with their current legal counsel or even matchmaking with locals or other divorce seekers.⁵⁴ After her frightening ride through the desert with Pyramid Lake co-owner Harry Drackert, Marilu fondly remembered, Harry’s wife, Joan, helped her settle in right away. Dazed and

⁵¹ Higinbotham Dunaway diary, Nevada Historical Society, 4.

⁵² Wernick, “Where You Went If You *Really* Had to Get Unhitched,” 70.

⁵³ Ward and McBride interview, 21.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 11.

leading her confused four-year-old by the hand, Marilu felt “lovingly and warmly welcomed.”⁵⁵

Joan herself had first come to Reno for a divorce before meeting her future husband and business partner, Harry. She worked at ranches to support herself, eventually deciding she liked Reno and the divorce business enough to stay. Her personal history might have contributed to her ability to connect with her guests.⁵⁶ Another interviewee, Bill McGee, was a wrangler at the Flying M E. He spoke very highly of the Flying M E’s owner, Emmy Wood. Incidentally, Emmy came to Reno with her former husband, Dore, in the hopes of starting a lucrative divorce ranch. After opening what was to become the Flying M E together, Dore left Emmy for a young, wealthy divorcée.⁵⁷ After her own divorce was finalized, Emmy decided to stay and manage the ranch on her own for another ten years. But first, she changed the name of the ranch from the Tumbling D W, Dore’s initials, to the Flying M E, which sounded out her own first name.⁵⁸ The personal backgrounds of Joan and Emmy, who were both well known for their expert management of their ranches, were hardly coincidental. These women almost certainly drew from their own experiences to support their guests.

Aside from their sympathy and advice, the female proprietors at the ranches I studied also seemed to provide comfort in the ways they structured their businesses. By virtue of their genders, these proprietors created private, generally all-female spaces. Indeed, at the Whitney Guest Ranch, Pyramid Lake Ranch, and

⁵⁵ Norden and Jones interview, 5.

⁵⁶ McGee and McGee, *The Divorce Seekers*, 365.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁸ McGee and McGee interview, 15.

the Flying M E, only one man was involved in the management of the ranch. This man, Harry Drackert, certainly played an important role in the ranch's operation, but his wife Joan seemed to form much closer and longer-lasting relationships with the guests, as evidenced by her sustained correspondence with many of them.⁵⁹ Interviewee Beth Ward ran the Whitney alongside her mother, with the occasional help of her sister, and only hired men to help with the horses and the upkeep of the grounds.⁶⁰ Interviewee and former cowboy Bill McGee was one of the only male employees that Emmy Wood hired at the Flying M E. Like Beth Ward, Emmy Wood only need men to manage the horses and lead the divorcées on pack trips.⁶¹ The Flying M E cook, maid, and hostess were all women.

These management decisions may have been inadvertent, but they greatly contributed to the success of the ranches. The preponderance of women working at the ranches certainly helped facilitate a soothing, private space for the divorcées. Several feminist scholars have noted the importance of female space, including historian Anne Enke. Enke argues that the creation of women's spaces was instrumental in the formative years of second-wave feminism, which occurred during the Golden Age of the Reno divorce mill. These women's spaces "interfaced with public institutions to increase women's sexual, economic, and spatial autonomy."⁶² While women like Joan Drackert, Beth Ward, and Emmy Wood might not have identified as feminists at the time, or even fully understood

⁵⁹ Harry and Joan Drackert Papers, Box 5, "Correspondence" Folders 91/49/5/1-3, 7, University of Nevada-Reno Library, Special Collections Department.

⁶⁰ Ward and McBride interview, 21.

⁶¹ McGee and McGee, *The Divorce Seekers*, 67.

⁶² Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 177.

the term, the ranches that they created and managed fall under Enke's description. At a time when it was an extremely difficult and lengthy process to obtain a divorce, Reno offered people, and particularly women, the opportunity to end their marriages. The divorce ranches offered almost entirely all-women environments in which women could come to terms with the ends of their marriages.

Aside from comfort afforded by the primarily female management and staff, the dynamics among the guests were also helpful for the divorcées. At a time when divorce was relatively unusual, it would have been unlikely that many divorced women would personally know others in their situations, much less freely discuss their experiences. The ranches offered divorcées the opportunity to live amongst each other, creating close bonds and commiseration throughout the decades. *New York Times* reporter Charlotte Curtis observed the female bonding at one upscale ranch, writing, "In many ways, it is as if a group of sisters were living together, trying to keep one another's spirits up."⁶³ In 1946, Winifred Higinbotham Dunaway and her fellow female guests closely connected. Her diary indicates that she and her new friends sometimes had emotional conversations about their divorces, but they also developed their own set of day-to-day rules, terminology, and behavior to help each other heal and move on: "We call each other by our first names. Most of us don't wear our wedding rings... We don't

⁶³ Charlotte Curtis, "Reno Ranches: Divorce Havens for Rich," *The New York Times*, October 28, 1963. University of Nevada, Reno Special Collections Department, 91-49/5/107.

come to Reno for a divorce, we are ‘here for the cure.’ At the end of six weeks [sic], we ‘get our diploma.’”⁶⁴

The language that Winifred and her friends used is particularly noteworthy. Their automatic use of first names, for example, established a sense of familiarity and camaraderie based on the commonality of the divorcees’ experiences. Additionally, their terminology describing the divorce process was pointedly optimistic, which indicates a conscious effort to shield each other from the harsh reality of their situations. Euphemistic words like “cure” and “diploma” capture the finality of obtaining a divorce decree but also connote much more positive outcomes, like receiving a clean bill of health or moving on to a new phase of life. These codes of conduct, aside from being humorous and touching, demonstrate the variety of ways the women helped each other through these difficult times.

Marilu Norden remembered her friendships made in 1950 at Pyramid Lake fondly. It was difficult to avoid close friendships, she said, because “It’s like being on a desert island with a group of people that really have to stay there...for six weeks!”⁶⁵ Even though she only spent six weeks living alongside them, Marilu corresponded with some of the friends made at Pyramid Lake for decades after she left with her divorce decree. In 1970, Lily Tuck met a seasoned Reno guest obtaining her second divorce: “Karen and I become fast friends. We go to Reno together to do our laundry. While the clothes wash, spin, dry, we gamble. I play

⁶⁴ Higinbotham Dunaway diary, Nevada Historical Society, 3.

⁶⁵ Norden and Jones interview, 6.

the slot machines. Karen plays baccarat, she wins and I lose.”⁶⁶ The image of Lily and Karen together at a Reno Laundromat is a touching one; even if they never discussed their ex-husbands, details about their divorces, or their fears for the future, it is easy to summon the feelings of support and mutual understanding that the two must have felt as divorcées going about their daily lives together.

As they formed these friendships, many divorcées also had to find the emotional strength to balance the needs of others: their children. The ranches generally allowed children, as the proprietors understood that many divorcées were primary caregivers in their families, but few allowed infants. This added a layer of pain to the divorces of women like Marilu, who had to part with their babies for the six weeks required to establish residency. Marilu’s infant daughter, Christine, was just two weeks old when Marilu left for Reno. Tears formed in Marilu’s eyes during her interview when she remembered placing the baby in the care of her sister-in-law: “Oh, that was very hard. That was terrible. I mean, what new mother wants to do that?”⁶⁷ After Marilu obtained her divorce, her husband brought the baby out to Denver, where she resettled: “I held her for the first time. That was hard because, you know, I felt like, ‘That poor little thing. What did she think?’”⁶⁸ Clearly, the emotional cost of a quickie divorce could be very high when children were involved.

Marilu was, however, able to bring her four-year-old son to Pyramid Lake. Older children often accompanied their mothers to the ranches. The summer was

⁶⁶ Tuck, “On Her Own,” 73.

⁶⁷ Norden and Jones interview, 22.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

often the busiest time of the year because parents scheduled the six-week divorce for their children's summer vacations.⁶⁹ According to Beth, children didn't usually seem too upset to staying at divorce ranches, despite the fact that it meant the end of their parents' marriages: "...everything was so new, and it was such a young age. And of course, some of them just had great imaginations. They could just see the Indians over here and over there."⁷⁰ Marilu, however, was very sensitive to the fact that her son would most likely be deeply affected by the experience. In his interview, her son, Phil, affirmed that he remembered "a huge amount of this, from the perspective of a four-year-old, but still."⁷¹ While living in their model home in Connecticut before coming to Reno, Phil was fully aware that his family was starting to fall apart. Still, he didn't understand the concept of divorce, even while he was at the ranch.⁷² Though his parents tried to shield him from the reality of the divorce with the best intentions, Phil found his sudden relocation to Reno very confusing: "I didn't know what was going on. But we were sort of swept up and landed in Reno, Nevada, you know? And, like, where's my dad? Where's my little sister, who was all of three weeks old?"⁷³

Phil, despite this upheaval, was among the many children of divorce seekers who ended up enjoying his time out west. He made friends with the other children at the ranch, went horseback riding with "real cowboys," won and lost

⁶⁹ Ward and McBride interview, 20.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 16.

⁷¹ Norden and Jones interview, 46.

⁷² Norden and Jones interview, 54.

⁷³ Ibid, 47.

some potato sack races, and drank a lot of orange soda.⁷⁴ Although he and his mother were in Reno without his father and newborn sister, he remembered that “all these interesting people and kids sort of in the same position I was” provided some comfort.⁷⁵ Lily Tuck, who divorced in Reno twenty years after Marilu, brought her two young sons along. She spent time with them horseback riding, trout fishing, skeet shooting, and going to rodeos throughout her six weeks.⁷⁶ Some women, according to Beth Ward, were not so attentive of their children during their stays. One mother, she remembered, accidentally slammed her young son’s hand in a car door and then toted him along to cocktail hour, where she enjoyed a drink.⁷⁷ Another woman, who Beth described as a self-important New York socialite, refused to let her thirteen-year-old daughter associate with any of the other children at the ranch.⁷⁸ Understandably, children seemed to face a range of emotions and experiences at the divorce ranches. While these elite businesses offered plenty of activities and distractions, some children were bound to be more adversely affected than others due to their awareness, age, and relationships with their parents.

Many children maintained relationships from the ranches well after they left, suggesting that the ranches were often as formative for them as they were for their mothers. At the time of interview, Phil still had postcards from Sage, a woman whom his mother befriended at Pyramid Lake. She often babysat for him

⁷⁴ Ibid, 47-48.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 49.

⁷⁶ Tuck, “On Her Own,” 74.

⁷⁷ Ward and McBride interview, 13.

⁷⁸ Ward and McBride interview, 8.

when Marilu needed a few hours to herself. Phil had a lisp as boy, and Sage always mimicked it in her letters, writing “We mith you” instead of “We miss you.”⁷⁹ Other children wrote letters to the ranch owners, often addressing them as aunts and uncles. A set of siblings named LaVergne and Laretta wrote Joan and Harry Drackert for multiple years, telling them how much they missed the ranch and enclosing updated pictures “so that you can rember [sic] what we look like.”⁸⁰ Another wrote that she constantly counted back four hours in her new home so that she could see what time it was in Reno. She ended the letter with a “miss ya, and love ya.”⁸¹ Lily Tuck, who resettled out west after her divorce was finalized, invited Harry and Joan to celebrate Thanksgiving with her sons in her new home.⁸² After the tumult of a six-week relocation to a foreign environment, such long-term, affectionate relationships between the children and the adult figures they met at the ranches provided stability and comfort.

Correspondence between the ranch proprietors and the divorcées themselves was equally moving. The sheer volume of correspondence in some archival collections was staggering, indicating that guests often felt the need to stay connected over the course of many years. Ranch owners received updates from previous guests varying in detail: Joan and Harry Drackert’s personal papers included birth announcements, marriage (or remarriage) announcements,

⁷⁹ Norden and Jones interview, 21.

⁸⁰ LaVergne and Laretta to Harry and Joan Drackert, 1960, Box 5, Folder 91/49/5/1, University of Nevada-Reno Library, Special Collections Department.

⁸¹ Julia North to Joan Drackert, 1960, Box 5, Folder 91/49/5/3, University of Nevada-Reno Library, Special Collections Department.

⁸² Tuck, “On Her Own,” 74.

Christmas cards, short notes, and extremely long, double-sided letters.⁸³ Some of the ranch owners themselves were famous for their prolific letter writing. Emmy Wood, owner of the Flying M E, spent the entirety of her time between Christmas and the New Year addressing “hundreds of envelopes” to former guests and including “a personal note in each card.” One year, according to interviewee Bill McGee, she was still writing cards well into March.⁸⁴

Robbie McBride, who helped her sister Beth run the Whitney, remembered: “Quite a few of [the divorcées] remained friends through the years. And Beth still corresponds with some of them after all the years...And one of them, Beth’s gone all over the world with her.”⁸⁵ Keeping in touch with divorcées was probably somewhat motivated by business interests, as the often ranches operated on a referral system and even had the occasional repeat customers. However, the correspondence unearthed in personal papers indicated that the relationships formed at the ranches during the ups and downs of the divorce process were deep and long lasting.

The heartfelt letters and poems from the divorcées themselves support this conclusion. The poems that divorcées wrote to reflect on their experiences at the ranches were equal parts humorous and touching. Sue Higgins, a guest of Harry and Joan Drackert’s at Pyramid Lake, wrote:

Six weeks that I just dreaded

Turned out to be a ball—

⁸³ Harry and Joan Drackert Papers, Box 5, “Correspondence” Folders 91/49/5/1-3, 7, University of Nevada-Reno Library, Special Collections Department.

⁸⁴ McGee and McGee, *The Divorce Seekers*, 250.

⁸⁵ Ward and McBride interview, 10.

And everyone I've met here
Had added to it all!
I've grown a bit
I've learned a lot
I've lived in a heavenly scenic spot—
I've fretted some
And laughed much more—
Thank you for letting me darken your door!
Over this I will not tarry!
But thank you Joan—and Thank you Harry.
Bless each and everyone I've met—
My memory's long—I shan't forget—⁸⁶

Personal letters from the divorcées included similar themes. Like Sue, many guests remembered “dreading” the impending six weeks when they arrived at the ranches. A freshly certified divorcée named Mary wrote Harry and Joan as she was leaving for her new life in Seattle: “I really wanted to hop on the plane and return when I heard your voice on the phone Friday. As I've said before, what was to have been a dull dreadful six weeks turned out to be a fabulous vacation.”⁸⁷ A man named Will from Connecticut thanked Joan profusely for welcoming him as a “Den Mother” and taking care of him, “a fellow who was practically

⁸⁶ Sue Higgins, Untitled Poem, Box 3, Folder 91-49/2/10 “Donner Trail – Poetry,” University of Nevada-Reno Library, Special Collections Department.

⁸⁷ Mary to Joan Drackert, 1960, Box 5, Folder 91/49/5/3, University of Nevada-Reno Library, Special Collections Department.

brought in on a stretcher.”⁸⁸ One guest captured their feelings succinctly in a quick note to Joan: “Thank you again for the wonderful divorce!”⁸⁹

While it may seem trivial and slightly odd to thank someone for a divorce, much less call it “wonderful,” such were the emotions and memories of the divorce ranches. The ranches and their owners provided an environment of support and community for their guests during what were possibly the most difficult six weeks of their lives. Even if guests arrived in despair and completely alone, they were able to form lasting bonds with the ranch owners and other divorcées. Surely not every divorce at the ranches was “wonderful,” but the memories and writings of divorce seekers suggest that the relaxed, close-knit environment at least made their divorces more bearable.

The ranches comprised one extremely complex and specialized part of the Reno divorce industry. Their outward function, of course, was to market a high-end, luxurious divorce experience in the most popular twentieth century divorce mill. However, the ranches were not merely businesses; despite the ranch owners’ obvious financial interests, they were also deeply invested in their guests and their children. Likewise, many guests formed friendships with the ranch owners, who helped distract them from their personal struggles and guided them through every moment of their six-week divorces. Given the high proportion of women at the ranches, the ranch owners, perhaps inadvertently, created supportive female spaces for their guests. Widespread social disapproval of divorce during Reno’s

⁸⁸ Will D. to Joan Drackert, 7 December 1961, Box 5, Folder 91/49/5/3, University of Nevada-Reno Library, Special Collections Department.

⁸⁹ Tuck, “On Her Own,” 74.

Golden Age made it all the more upsetting for women to face the prospect of life as divorcées, but the ranches provided a sense of community that lasted long after women had taken their “six week cure.” The interpersonal experiences that the ranches fostered, however, were not limited to female friendships. Amidst the relative freedom and anonymity of the ranch environment, many divorcées found themselves exploring new sides of themselves, as well as new romantic partners.

“I did a lot of things that I wouldn’t have ordinarily done”: Sex and Self-Discovery at the Divorce Ranches

In her interview, Marilu Norden mentioned that she almost missed her midnight curfew one evening during her residency. Because ranch proprietors testified at their guests’ court hearings, they often set and stringently enforced curfews to monitor their guests’ whereabouts throughout their six-week stays; violating the curfew, even by minutes, was a very serious infraction. It may seem surprising that Marilu, a conscientious young mother, would risk her divorce certification for an evening out. However, her reason shortly presented itself: as Marilu put it, “There was a guy.”¹

Marilu met “the guy,” a local cowboy, at Pyramid Lake Ranch. That evening, she visited him at his lodgings further out in the desert. “I got back in time so nobody knew I had been gone. I had made arrangements,” she said, including childcare for her young son.² Throughout her interview, Marilu requested that the cowboy’s name be excised and coyly referred to him as her “friend.” Though she did not wish to discuss the intimate details of her relationship with the cowboy, she confirmed the accuracy of her earlier description of their affair in her novel, *Unbridled: A Tale of a Divorce Ranch*. In *Unbridled*, Lara, closely based on Marilu herself, experiences a sexually charged romance with Chance, the resident wrangler. Their passionate affair ends when Lara leaves the ranch at the end of her six-week residency. While the two part ways permanently, Lara’s life is forever changed by the feelings of worth and

¹ Marilu Norden and Phil Jones, Personal Interview, 27 May 2013, 7.

² Ibid.

capability that she found within herself during her time at the ranch, and especially during her evenings with Chance.³

Like Lara, Marilu felt that her affair marked the beginning of a formative period of personal growth. In her interview, she even referred to her time with her “friend” in Reno as “the first step to finding myself.”⁴ While Marilu strongly associated the affair with her growing sense of autonomy, she did not appear to believe that her sexual liberation in and of itself precipitated her feelings of empowerment. In other words, the affair helped Marilu become more independent than she had been in her first marriage, rather than dependent on a different man. Indeed, she ended up killing off the character of Chance in her novel, which she said was a conscious decision to demonstrate Lara’s need to “fly by herself.” Laughing, she continued, “Fly on her own. And she did. And I did.”⁵ Though Marilu’s “friend” was in fact very much alive, and even tracked her down after her divorce was finalized, she realized they didn’t have much in common and decided against continuing the relationship. Their time together, which Marilu remembered fondly, appeared to be a stepping stone to a lifelong process of self-discovery.

Dalliances between divorcées and cowboys were just one form of widespread sexual experimentation and liberation at the ranches. Descriptions of such affairs frequently appeared in songs, films, and, of course, novels, about divorcing in Reno. They seemed to be as common in life as in art: Between 1930

³ Marilu Norden, *Unbridled: A Tale of a Divorce Ranch*, (Marilu Norden: 2008), 87.

⁴ Norden and Jones interview, 34.

⁵ Norden and Jones interview, 36.

and 1960, Reno's heyday as a divorce colony, divorcées entered and left a dizzying array of romantic relationships during their six-week stays. While some divorcées engaged in trysts with handsome wranglers, others took up with any number of locals. Several divorce seekers came to Reno "with a spare," or their intended future spouse, whom they would often marry immediately after their divorces were finalized. Still others experienced a change of heart and returned to their current spouse before their six-week stays concluded. As she reflected on the complex web of divorcees' romantic entanglements, interviewee Sandra McGee aptly remarked, "Sounds like musical chairs."⁶

The whirlwind "musical chairs" structure of Reno romance and sexuality appeared and reappeared in interviews, correspondence, and popular culture. Like Marilu, many divorcées embarked on journeys of emotional self-discovery alongside their sexual forays at the ranches. Examining the divorcees' experiences within the unique divorce ranch environment provides a broader understanding of rising cultural expectations of marital sexual satisfaction in the early to mid-twentieth century. The national shift toward individual fulfillment and sexual liberalism within marriage simultaneously weakened the strength of the marriage bond and exalted the ideal of conjugal bliss, placing Reno divorcées in an unusual position. Though their marriages were ending, effectively removing their only socially acceptable sexual outlet, divorcées maintained, and even deepened, their hopes for individual happiness and sexual gratification.

⁶ William and Sandra McGee, Personal Interview, 4 June 2013, 15.

As they faced the prospect of life on their own after their divorces were finalized, the divorcées found themselves ensconced in the relative safety of the ranches, which offered them more opportunity and privacy to seek out different personal experiences than they might have had at home. Because of their physical and emotional distance from their “real” lives, the ranches provided a site of emotional refuge and a sense of liminality for the female divorcées, enabling them to more freely seek out different experiences and identities. The sexual and romantic experimentation, new personal responsibilities, and introspection that the ranches fostered combined to facilitate periods of personal growth and discovery. Bolstered by the female networks of solidarity and support that flourished at the ranches, many divorcées learned, in Marilu’s words, to fly by themselves.

Yet in the national cultural climate of the Reno divorce industry’s Golden Age, the prospect of a single, autonomous woman was highly unusual. As historians Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English have argued, early to mid-twentieth century social expectations revolved around the two-parent family. A rapidly growing body of psychological literature, including sexology theory, marriage manuals, and child-raising guides, extolled the individual and social importance of this family ideal.⁷ According to Ehrenreich and English, the idea of single parenting was met with widespread “alarm and confusion” by the mid-1950s.⁸

⁷ Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of the Experts’ Advice to Women*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2005), 265, 267, 274.

⁸ Ehrenreich and English, *For Her Own Good*, 274-275.

Acclaimed experts barely knew what to make of single mothers in particular, who were doubly handicapped by their lack of partner and their femininity. Dr. Spock believed that they should create a mythical father figure for their sons and “even suggested that the very helplessness felt by the single mother...could be turned to good account, since to admit to inadequacy was to be more fully a woman.”⁹ Authorities increasingly insisted upon the importance of men and women acting within their defined roles as parents and spouses for the health of their children and marriages.¹⁰ Marital happiness captured the attention of medical and psychological experts, who argued that healthy marriages, with mothers and fathers performing their key, gender-identified responsibilities, formed the cornerstone of functional childrearing.¹¹

Among the most important of these responsibilities, according to the prevailing wisdom of early to mid-twentieth century sexologists and marital experts, was sex. “Marital sex was not only permissible, it was obligatory,” Ehrenreich and English write.¹² In her examination of divorce in the 1920s, historian Elaine Tyler May attributes the growing focus on passionate marital sex to a widespread social trend toward individualism and personal fulfillment: “As the nation’s concern for production began to shift toward a preoccupation with consumption, there was a parallel trend away from work toward leisure...and a

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ehrenreich and English, *For Her Own Good*, 265.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ehrenreich and English, *For Her Own Good*, 267.

corresponding decline of sexual repression in favor of physical gratification.”¹³
The availability of the birth control pill in 1960 further accelerated this trend.¹⁴
Sexual pleasure, when securely bounded within marriage, provided a physical and emotional outlet for spouses and strengthened the marriage bond itself.

The rewards of a robust marital sex life were further extended in the postwar period. Female sexual fulfillment was perceived to directly benefit children, as it allegedly reduced the risks of Momism, or overinvolved mothering.¹⁵ Experts were especially suspicious of single mothers because they lacked an appropriate sexual outlet, which could tinge their “unmitigated mother love” with “repressed sexual desire.”¹⁶ In May’s study of family life during the Cold War, she argues that the perceived social advantages of sexually gratifying marriages extended even beyond the family unit. Enjoyable sex between spouses played a key role in the domestic and international containment ethos of the era. According to May, all forms of nonmarital sex became a focal point for Communist hysteria in the 1950s, while “contained” marital sex represented responsibility, maturity, and, most importantly, social stability: “Sexual containment—unlike sexual repression—would enhance family togetherness, which would keep both men and women happy at home and would, in turn, foster

¹³ Elaine Tyler May, *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 94.

¹⁴ Elaine Tyler May, *America and the Pill: A History of Promise, Peril, and Liberation*, (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 3.

¹⁵ Ehrenreich and English, *For Her Own Good*, 265.

¹⁶ Rebecca Jo Plant, *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 58.

wholesome childrearing.”¹⁷ Thus, sexual passion and pleasure within marriage assumed officially sanctioned, widely discussed benefits that permeated the domestic and public spheres.

While such attitudes constituted a pattern of increasing “sexual liberalism,” the stigma against premarital sex stubbornly persisted. Single women faced a double standard of sexual conservatism, one that was predicated on the “tacit assumption that single men could experiment sexually with ‘loose’ women, but brides had to be chaste.”¹⁸ Although the consumerism and urbanism of the early to mid-twentieth century increasingly permitted a culture of private dates and early coupled courtships, premarital sex was still considered taboo.¹⁹ Should couples choose to experiment with sex before marrying, possible consequences were grave. According to May, “the force of familial shame, public ostracism, and legal coercion was likely to weigh heavily upon them.”²⁰

The combined force of sexual liberalism within marriage and the stigma against premarital sex placed significant strain on marriages in this era. In the event of discovered premarital sexual activity or, worse still, pregnancy, forced marriages might ensue. Based on May’s analysis of divorce records in Los Angeles in the Progressive Era, these hasty marriages “would not necessarily last.”²¹ Even marriages formed under the appropriate code of discreetly

¹⁷ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 99.

¹⁸ May, *Great Expectations*, 114.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 68.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 100.

²¹ *Ibid*.

experienced grooms and virginal brides suffered as a result of these conflicting sexual mores. May elucidates the effects of this tension:

With premarital sex carrying such a heavy stigma, how would newly wedded couples justify the transition into legitimate conjugal relations? A sinful act one day was to be holy the next, merely through the ritual of a ceremony. Given this tension is it any wonder that erotic passion was not always incorporated into marriage with ease?²²

Making the adjustment from extreme sexual repression to encouraged marital passion was confusing at best, especially for women. Failed attempts to progress into full-fledged conjugal bliss increasingly ended in divorce. In May's samples of Los Angeles divorce records, sexual differences made their way into divorce proceedings with growing frequency. Women, previously discouraged from all forms of premarital experimentation, tended to file due to their distaste for their husbands' sexual appetites, while men often complained "about their wives' sexual stinginess."²³ Conflicting attitudes within couples about what constituted an appropriate and enjoyable sex life clashed headlong with rising expectations for individual fulfillment, dealing an unprecedented blow to marriage as a national institution.

Alongside the stress of such contradictory attitudes, new sexual expectations intersected with other broad social trends to threaten the increasingly fragile marriage bond. As May notes, the early twentieth century witnessed a rising divorce rate alongside a rising marriage rate. She argues that the same

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid, 108.

forces most likely contributed to these seemingly oppositional trends.²⁴ One of the most important factors underlying these shifts was the increasing acceptance of sexual gratification for married couples, as it “undoubtedly encouraged young people to marry, in order to ease their guilt over erotic feelings and actions and legitimize their sexual indulgence.”²⁵ Indeed, this tendency to marry young met official sanction as the twentieth century progressed: “Public health officials, social workers, and popular writers started to encourage early marriage as the best way to contain sexuality among young people.”²⁶ May contends that the pressure to marry young was probably a factor in both the increased marriage rate and the declining marriage age, while the stressors of conflicting sexual expectations, the sexual double standard, and rushed marriages contributed to the increasing divorce rate.²⁷ The promise of sexual fulfillment, along with its strict confinement to the boundaries of marriage, clearly influenced steady rises in both marriage and divorce rates. The ideal of enjoyable sex, it seemed, simultaneously provided an immediate impetus to marry and an eventual reason to divorce.

The complex web of Reno divorcees’ romantic relationships is a testament to the strength of the opposing forces of marital sexual liberalism. Though Reno divorce seekers actively pursued the dissolutions of their marriages, they did not abruptly discard their expectations for loving or sexual partnerships. While the widespread sexual double standard and cultural stigma against premarital and extramarital sex prevailed relatively unabated, my research indicates that women

²⁴ Ibid, 7.

²⁵ Ibid, 95.

²⁶ Ibid, 97.

²⁷ Ibid, 95.

at the ranches did not view the ends of their marriages as the ends of their sex lives. In fact, many women actively sought out new partnerships, whether they were intended to result in their next marriage or a two-week affair. According to interviewees, some women were more forward than others; Beth Ward and Robbie McBride, who helped their mother run the Whitney Ranch, described one divorcée as a “nymphomaniac” who went after Robbie’s husband. “Got him cornered down by the barn,” Beth recalled, laughing. “That scared the devil out of him.”²⁸

More commonly, divorce seekers like Marilu entered monogamous extramarital relationships during their stays at the ranches. Though ranch guests were technically still married until the final day of their six-week residency, few seemed to view affairs as morally wrong or even particularly notable. In her interview, Marilu specifically addressed the ethical implications of her affair with the cowboy at Pyramid Lake:

When you’re away like that from your usual life, you have more opportunity to feel a little more free and toss aside some...maybe some of your [laughs]...your standards that you were living with. And not that you’re being immoral or anything, truly, but just because you just need to get away and feel like you’re a worthwhile human being, you know? I mean, it’s really tough.²⁹

In this statement, Marilu unambiguously denies the immorality of her affair.

Additionally, her ability to laugh about her experience, as well as her candor in

²⁸ Elizabeth Ward and Roberta McBride, Personal Interview, 22 July 2013, 8.

²⁹ Norden and Jones interview, 7-8.

describing it in her novel, suggests that she didn't feel guilty about her relationship with her "friend." She went on to build a happy, forty-year marriage with her second husband after her time in Reno, clearly indicating that she still valued monogamy and marriage after the pain of her divorce. Still, something about the experience of living temporarily on her own in a divorce ranch enabled Marilu to, in her words, "get away" and "toss aside" some of her standards. And Marilu was far from an anomaly in this regard; as she noted in her interview, "I think it happened a lot."³⁰

Affairs certainly happened "a lot" throughout Reno's Golden Age as a divorce colony. The ranch environment itself seemed conducive to these relationships, as many divorcées and observers noted. In 1946, Winifred Higinbotham Dunaway described her fellow divorce-seeker and friend Helen's blossoming romance: "Helen has fallen in love. That's one of the interesting things about this place, there's even more romance than divorce."³¹ Winifred detailed the shocking suddenness of Helen's relationship in one humorous diary entry. Helen and her paramour, a man visiting from Texas, went on their first date on a Saturday, apparently spent the night together that Tuesday, and started planning to marry by Friday.³²

While it may seem unimaginable to condense the process of courtship, engagement, and marriage into a six-week period, especially alongside the time it

³⁰ Ibid, 7.

³¹ Winifred Higinbotham Dunaway diary, September to November 1946, Divorce Clippings File, Nevada Historical Society, 7.

³² It is unclear how Helen planned to obtain her decree, as her overnight excursion might have cost her the necessary six-week residency testimonial.

would take to heal from a divorce, whirlwind romances like Helen's were relatively common. Sandra McGee, a historian and the wife of a Reno cowboy, discussed such relationships at length in our interview. Like Winifred, she attributes the speed and frequency of these romances to a particular quality of the Reno ranch experience: "[It was] the mix of the Easterners coming out West and the ladies meeting cowboys and the men meeting the hatcheck girls or the waitresses. And everyone kind of mixing it up and getting involved. And some relationships didn't last, and some did."³³

Clearly, the ranch environment was conducive to sexual and romantic exploration. As discussed in the previous chapter, the prevalence of women at the ranches created a female space for the divorcées, which provided a rich network of female friendship and support. Based on the way that divorcées remembered their sexual and romantic experimentation, it seems that the divorce ranch also constituted what emotional historian William Reddy describes as a site of emotional refuge. Within contexts of emotional refuge, Reddy writes, "norms are relaxed or even reversed. Affective connections, otherwise illicit, may be established, even celebrated." According to Reddy, "They make the current order more livable for some people, some of the time. For others, or in other times, they may provide a place from which contestation, conflict, and transformation are launched."³⁴

³³ McGee and McGee interview, 8.

³⁴ William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: a Framework for the History of Emotions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 128.

Amidst the dominant, conformist sexual standards of the early to mid-twentieth century, divorce ranches provided such refuge to divorce-seekers, and female divorcées especially. As Reddy's work attests, sites of emotional refuge like the ranches provided a range of protections, whether they were havens from dominant norms, locations of connection with others, or environments for personal transformation. Reno divorcees' experiences closely fit this model. Some women like Marilu identified a sense of respite and privacy at the ranches, enabling them to "get away" and "toss aside some of their standards," while others also found the mix of company intoxicating. For many divorcées, especially those from the East Coast, life out West provided many temptations.

As Marilu's story demonstrates, temptation often came in the form of the Reno cowboy. Interviewee Sandra McGee's husband, Bill, was one of these perennially alluring figures. In 1947, the midpoint of the Reno divorce colony's Golden Age, Bill found out he had landed his dream job as a wrangler at one of Reno's best divorce ranches. Born in rural Montana, Bill had worked as a cowboy in Wyoming until he managed to hitchhike his way to Reno. For men with his work experience, wrangling jobs at the exclusive divorce ranches were highly coveted. After working odd jobs and acquainting himself with the local divorce industry, Bill received a call in October from a connection at the Flying M E, one of the most famous ranches in Reno.³⁵ A job as a dude wrangler at such a location, according to Bill, required a "specialized area of cowboying," as wranglers provided several unique services. Aside from managing the ranch's horses,

³⁵ William and Sandra McGee, *The Divorce Seekers: A Photo Memoir of a Nevada Dude Wrangler*, (St. Helena: BMC Publications, 2004), 63.

wranglers were expected to help guests ride and encourage them to take travel rides and overnight pack trips. Wranglers also offered daily transportation to the guests into town for legal appointments, shopping, and nightlife. As Bill remembered in our interview: “And the unique combination of knowing horses and recognizing how to handle people, a person-to-person type skill, is necessary. Not just horse skills.”³⁶

These abilities, as many ranch owners were fully aware, necessitated the presence of cowboys at the ranches. And amidst the overwhelming female to male ratio of both guests and staff at divorce ranches, young, handsome cowboys were very conspicuous figures. Some ranch owners consciously capitalized on this inevitable aspect of dude ranching and packaged it into the divorce experience, encouraging cowboys to take guests to dances and “show them a good time.”³⁷ The Flying M E, as Bill quickly found out, was no such place. Emmy Wood, the ranch’s sole owner, actively discouraged fraternization between the wranglers and guests, as she thought that affairs within the Flying M E’s close quarters would be disruptive. Though Bill seemed to appreciate the logic underlying Emmy’s policy by the time of our interview, he was not as understanding as a young cowboy: “I could see potential problems with that down the road,” Bill wrote in his memoir, “but [I] decided to let sleeping dogs lie.”³⁸ He enthusiastically accepted the job and proceeded to start his illustrious career at the Flying M E.

³⁶ McGee and McGee interview, 12.

³⁷ Ibid, 11.

³⁸ McGee and McGee, *The Divorce Seekers*, 63.

While he was excellent at his job and discreet in his personal life, Bill repeatedly violated Emmy's fraternization rule.³⁹ During his very first day on the job, Bill led a pack trip with two attractive divorcées, Helen⁴⁰ and Elizabeth. That evening, Helen softly knocked on his door and immediately fell into his arms. Though guests stayed in the main house with shared walls and even roommates, Bill enjoyed a private cabin. A male presence in the house would have been instantly noticed, but Bill reported that he had no shortage of visitors to his detached living quarters. For a moment, he hesitated with Helen in his cabin. But his decision didn't take long. "Emmy's rules about 'non-fraternization' with the guests flashed before me briefly as they flew out the window," Bill recalled. "Whatever was going to happen was already happening."⁴¹ Illicit liaisons with the guests continued throughout Bill's time at the Flying M E.

Bill's plentiful, varying experiences with a long succession of ranch guests exemplify the spectrum of relationships that the ranches fostered. Unlike Bill's brief fling with Helen, some of the relationships that the divorcées entered were very serious. In their joint interview, Bill and his second wife Sandra recalled the deeper attachments that several divorcées appeared to form. "He had some rather interesting offers from some of the divorce seekers," Sandra told me. "One woman wanted to buy him a ranch in Colorado...Another woman wanted him to go to Mexico City or Acapulco, and live on her place down there....As a young

³⁹ Ibid, 70.

⁴⁰ Presumably, this is not the same Helen referenced in Winifred's diary, as Bill changed the names of his paramours for his book.

⁴¹ McGee and McGee, *The Divorce Seekers*, 107.

cowboy, you can see how that happened.”⁴² While Bill never even entertained these offers, he ended up marrying one young divorcée named Joan in 1949. Although his boss, Emmy, prohibited such relationships between employees and guests, she inadvertently connected the two when she encouraged Bill to teach Joan how to ride horses. According to Bill, Emmy “knew there wasn’t anything she could do” and accepted their open “fraternization” when they started publicly dating.⁴³

Long-term relationships like Bill and Joan’s were far from uncommon. Even divorcées who planned to return to their homes in the East sometimes fell in love and stayed in Nevada. According to journalist Priya Jain, several noteworthy and even scandalous marriages emerged from the divorce colony: “Penna Tew, a New York debutante, fell in love with a saloon owner...Lord Wellesley came for a divorce in the ‘30s and decided to stay after falling in love with a hat-check girl.”⁴⁴ Other divorcées arrived to Reno with their intended spouse in hand, something that Bill and Sandra referred to as a “spare.”⁴⁵ Their second marriages essentially began before their divorces were finalized as a formality, prompting some divorcées to apply for marriage licenses on the same day they received their divorce certifications. A number of famous socialites and celebrities came to Reno with “spares,” including actors Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks in 1920.⁴⁶ Marilu discovered that two fellow guests at Pyramid Lake Ranch in 1951

⁴² McGee and McGee interview, 11.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Priya Jain, “The Six-Week Cure,” *Bust Magazine*, December/January 2010, 58.

⁴⁵ McGee and McGee, *The Divorce Seekers*, xxii.

⁴⁶ “Mary Pickford Case,” Nevada State Library and Archive, Folder 2531 A.

were each finalizing their divorces to marry each other, but that they were using pseudonyms because the man was the future Premier of Greece.⁴⁷ Sometimes, however, these relationships dissolved and the “spares” were reshuffled amongst the divorcées. Bill remembered one woman who flew her intended spouse to Reno toward the end of her six-week term before deciding to end the relationship. Before long, the man eloped to San Francisco with a different ranch guest.⁴⁸

While these romantic entanglements were rife with confusion and heartbreak, they pale in comparison to the unfortunate divorcées who weren’t entirely certain about their impending divorces. Before Marilu embarked on her path to self-discovery and empowerment, she was one such ranch guest. Her husband had shocked her with his demand for a divorce, and as she was unemployed in rural Connecticut with two young children, she remembered feeling that she “there wasn’t anything” she could do.⁴⁹ In the early days of her six-week residency, she cried whenever she answered her husband’s short phone calls, as she still loved him and felt committed to their marriage.⁵⁰

Though Marilu began to move on from her first marriage fairly quickly, both individually and with her cowboy “friend,” others found themselves deeply ambivalent. Bill remembered one woman who went back to her husband in Maine after lasting five full weeks in Reno:

She was miserable from the start: depressed one minute, bravely resolved the next. The phone calls were endless, and the mailman’s arrival was

⁴⁷ Norden and Jones interview, 11.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 15.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 4.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 19.

always a cause for drama. (“I got a letter today and he still loves me!”
“There was no letter today. Oh, what does it mean!”) The guests and staff
were glad to see her leave, and [ranch proprietor] Emmy made a note in
her file, ‘Suggest Mrs. Burns stay somewhere else when she comes back
again for that divorce.’⁵¹

Though proprietors were often sensitive to the emotional predicaments of their
guests, Mrs. Burns’s situation was apparently too disruptive for the other guests at
the Flying M E, many of whom were trying to move on from their own troubled
marriages. It is therefore unsurprising that Flying M E owner Emmy Wood tried
to rein in the turmoil at her ranch, whether she did so by prohibiting affairs
between staff and guests or by discreetly moving the most outwardly indecisive
divorce-seekers elsewhere.

In other wrenching cases, divorcées were paralyzed by the indecision of
their distant spouses. In her diary, Winifred wrote about one woman whose
husband sent her to Reno for a divorce after he announced his long-term affair.
After she arrived in Reno, “Her husband wired her and wrote her and sent her
flowers, finally called her to say that he had to go to Chicago on business and
asking her to take a plane and join him...It seemed he wanted her to come to
Chicago so he could be sure which one he really wanted; as it turned out, the
other one.”⁵²

Sometimes, the indecisiveness of the divorcées was more humorous than
sad. As evidenced by the correspondence of the illustrious Reno divorce attorney

⁵¹ McGee and McGee, *The Divorce Seekers*, 311.

⁵² Higinbotham Dunaway diary, Nevada Historical Society, 8.

and judge George Bartlett, divorcées occasionally went missing and eventually resurfaced with their current spouses. In a series of letters to Bartlett in October 1932, for example, Los Angeles attorney Le Roy French incredulously asked, “What has become of our client Mrs. Kehlet?” French informed Bartlett that he hadn’t heard from Mrs. Kehlet in the nearly two weeks since her husband had come to find her in Reno. “Perhaps they are living happily together again,” he wrote. “Let us hope so.”⁵³ Bartlett promptly responded that he had just heard that the couple had returned to California without any warning. “I am very much surprised at the whole situation,” he wryly observed, “If you know her husband’s address, I wish you would please send it to me and for my part, I am certainly going to send her a bill, as I feel you should also do.”⁵⁴

In the midst of these long-term pairings, Bill also experienced his share of short but pleasurable affairs, none of which ended badly. Such brief entanglements were fairly standard. Women like Marilu seemed to enjoy and empower themselves during their time with the cowboys before moving on relatively painlessly. Twenty years after Marilu’s tryst, for instance, journalist and divorcée Lily Tuck met a cowboy named Mike, who she remembers fondly but distantly: “I like Mike. He is a handsome, tall, lean cowboy who likes me as well. His eyes, I notice right away, are the exact same color blue as Paul Newman’s.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Le Roy N. French to George A. Bartlett, October 11th, 1932, Box 35, Folder 12 “Correspondence—Divorce Inquiries 1930-1933,” George A. Bartlett Papers, University of Nevada-Reno Library, Special Collections Department.

⁵⁴ George A. Bartlett to Le Roy N. French, October 26th, 1932, Box 35, Folder 12 “Correspondence—Divorce Inquiries 1930-1933,” George A. Bartlett Papers, University of Nevada-Reno Library, Special Collections Department.

⁵⁵ Lily Tuck, “On Her Own,” *Vogue*, June 2012, 73.

Lily's diction suggests a certain detachment; she "liked" rather than "loved" Mike, and seemed more interested in his Paul Newman eyes than a future with him. Like Marilu, she seemed content to leave him behind after her six weeks, a period that she also viewed as transformative. In her article about her time in Reno, Lily doesn't mention a wrenching goodbye with Mike, or taking up with him again as she settled nearby in Verdi. But she does write about their brief courtship shortly before remembering how meaningful her time in Reno felt to her: "At the risk of sounding like a cliché, for the first time since I have been married, I feel independent and strong. Better yet, I feel good about myself."⁵⁶

Echoes of Lily's feelings of independence, strength, and self-worth appeared in many primary and archival sources. Just as many divorcées were recreating their romantic and sexual identities amidst the ends of their marriages, countless others discovered latent or entirely new capabilities within themselves in the process. From a modern perspective, this phenomenon may not seem very surprising; contemporary divorce literature and media coverage often emphasize the transformative and even healing effects of ending unhappy marriages. During Reno's Golden Age, however, the general public roundly frowned upon divorce as a practice and divorcées as individuals. Divorcées, and most particularly their sexual behavior, signified psychological maladjustment and deviance. As late as the 1950s, journalists labeled divorcées "selfish," "irresponsible," and "immature."⁵⁷ In 1948, one psychiatrist described the typical divorcée in similarly harsh terms: "She is unhappy, struggling, neurotic, misunderstood and maligned

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ May, *Homeward Bound*, 193.

by herself and her environment. Even her frequent promiscuity is a neurotic symptom.”⁵⁸ Alongside these images, it is remarkable that so many Reno divorcées were able to experiment positively with new relationships and leave the ranches with a stronger sense of self after their marriages ended.

In fact, a close analysis of the memories and language of Reno divorcées indicates that many viewed their divorces as new beginnings, rather than endings. The emotional refuge quality of the divorce ranches appeared to provide a safe outlet for these women to embark on paths of self-discovery. Just as the privacy and distance of the ranch environment seemed to lend itself to sexual experimentation, it also provided a site for looser conduct and relaxed gender-based restrictions. Divorcées seemed to regard their six weeks at the ranches as a time and place distinctly removed from their normal lives. As Marilu’s fictional protagonist, Lara, observes about her time in Reno: “This ranch has a certain unreality to it, like purgatory, somewhere between heaven and hell...It’s like a way station on the way out of something not so good to something better, or worse, depending on how the cards are played.”⁵⁹ Thus, both the extraordinary personal circumstances of the divorce process and the the ranch atmosphere enabled divorcées to discover new interests and abilities, most of which had been inaccessible or inappropriate in their home environments.

For example, divorcées often reported letting their hair down dancing and gambling at the local bars and hotels. Women may have felt more comfortable

⁵⁸ Edward Bergler (M.D.), *Divorce Won’t Help* (New York: Harper, 1948) in May, *Homeward Bound*, 193.

⁵⁹ Norden, *Unbridled*, 98.

doing so at the ranches because they were separated from their husbands and social networks, but, as historian Mella Rothwell Harmon writes, local law also facilitated their practical ability to partake in these activities: “Newly-legalized gambling in Nevada provided many activities to fill the forty-five days and nights until the divorce was final. Reno’s gambling halls further demonstrated their nonconformity by allowing unescorted ladies to play the games and drink.”⁶⁰ In their hometowns, female divorcées may not have been legally permitted to engage in these entertainments by themselves. Even if they were, it is likely that their husbands would have restricted their wives’ access to such amusements during their marriages, especially if they were unaccompanied.⁶¹

In Reno, women found themselves with far fewer restrictions, an experience that was equal parts exciting and astonishing. Ranch proprietors made conscious efforts to incorporate access to bars and dancing in their divorce residency packages. While most ranches advertised their privacy and relaxation-oriented amenities, they also often emphasized their proximity to Reno for, as one 1933 brochure described, “a taste of city life.”⁶² Because nightlife featured so prominently in the divorce ranch experience, proprietors specifically assigned certain employees with the nightly task of driving divorcées to and from Reno and nearby Carson City. Flying M E cowboy Bill remembered this ritual fondly,

⁶⁰ Mella Rothwell Harmon, “Divorce and Economic Opportunity in Reno, Nevada During the Great Depression,” (PhD diss., University of Nevada Reno, 1998), 16.

⁶¹ May, *Great Expectations*, 82.

⁶² “Pyramid Lake Ranch, Sutcliffe, Nev.” Brochure, 1936, Mary Bean Papers, Collection Number 95-10, “Pyramid Lake Guest Ranch, List of Guests and Brochure, 1936” Folder, University of Nevada-Reno Library, Special Collections Department.

recounting proprietor Emmy's rules to ensure the safety and decorum of these evenings out: "Don't make a pass at [the divorcées]. When you take them to Carson City, if you take six, you come home with six. You never let one of the guests get sped off by some handsome dude that wants to bed them down somewhere. You bring them home...And you can only have two drinks."⁶³ With the careful supervision of ranch employees, women were safe to unwind as they gambled, drank, and danced, so long as they made it home by midnight.

Marilu, who stayed at Pyramid Lake in 1951 as a young mother, closely associated her nights out with her journey of empowerment. She remembered developing a penchant for Moscow Mules during her stay in Reno, something that amused her adult children. In our interview, her face lit up when she recounted her nights out at Reno's Mapes Bar:

I got up on the bar and danced to the music that was booming out from the lounge. They dared me and I did it [laughs]. So I did a lot of things that, you know, I wouldn't have ordinarily done [laughs]. It was kind of nice. I kind of liked seeing that wild side of myself. I liked that [nods, smiling].⁶⁴

Although Marilu was a dancer, even she seemed taken aback by her daring in her interview so many years later. As she notes in the above passage, dancing on the bar was not something she felt she would have "ordinarily done." However, her time in Reno, and especially her access to freeing social experiences, seems to have coaxed out a different, "wild" side of her, a side that Marilu said she liked.

⁶³ McGee and McGee interview, 9.

⁶⁴ Norden and Jones interview, 34.

Reno divorcées from markedly different historical periods adopted similar language to describe their paths of self-discovery that they began as they obtained their divorces. A theme common to each of them was a growing awareness of being “on their own,” as journalist and divorcée Lily titled her essay about her 1971 ranch experience. This realization was equal parts frightening and empowering. In 1947, for instance, divorcée Winifred received her divorce papers in her final hearing with mixed emotions, writing: “I will not soon forget the utter loneliness I felt as I walked down those court house steps.” But in the same breath, she described her incredible new support system cultivated during her six weeks in Reno. She remembered, “Walking about the town and greeting my hospital friends, the thought occurred that I probably know more people here than I do in Amarillo.”⁶⁵ Her diary concludes with that entry, which ends with her confidently leaving Reno to start a new life, alone and on her own terms.⁶⁶

A few years later, Marilu came to similar, profoundly transformative realizations. After the initial shock of her impending divorce wore off and she confronted the uncertainty of her future, she found herself facing deeper questions: “Who was I, you know? And then all the sudden it began to dawn on me that I had substance that I didn’t know I had, you know? Who was this person I was living with?”⁶⁷ In order to figure out who she was, Marilu started to question everything that she had taken for granted in her marriage. She remembered feeling stifled in her relationship with her first husband: “I was

⁶⁵ Higinbotham Dunaway diary, Nevada Historical Society, 10.

⁶⁶ Higinbotham Dunaway diary, Nevada Historical Society, 10.

⁶⁷ Norden and Jones interview, 19.

always trying to fit in, and trying to please.”⁶⁸ After she became “free of him, on my own” in Reno, everything changed. “You get a chance to see yourself under different circumstances, which calls upon different strengths that you didn’t know you had,” she said about her time at the ranch. “And maybe a different way of looking at life, and how you fit into it. So, I just think it’s quite beneficial...I think it was very helpful to me.”⁶⁹ The “different circumstances” that her divorce and the Reno ranch experience provided seemed to create a new sense of self-worth and aptitude, something that Marilu said continues to guide her. Smiling, she said, “I found something in myself that’s been there, that I appreciated all my life from then on...it was a strength of purpose and knowing that I could do this, and I was capable.”⁷⁰

For some divorcées, as with Marilu and Lily, romantic and sexual relationships cultivated at the ranches were closely linked with new feelings of worth and empowerment. This chapter emphasized the importance of the sexual experimentation that the ranches fostered, as the relationships formed at the divorce ranches featured so prominently in the cultural and personal memory of the Reno divorce colony. Whether ranch guests took up with cowboys, arrived hand in hand with their intended fiancés, or ended up returning home to their current spouses, it is clear that the Reno divorce experience often failed to align with the dominant cultural expectation of enjoyable sex within healthy marriages.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 18.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 20.

While prevailing sexual mores strictly circumscribed sex within marriage during this era, Reno divorcées seemed to regard the ranches as a liminal realm, one in which they had more freedom to enjoyably and guiltlessly pursue new relationships; in Reno, sex occurred and romances developed amidst pending divorces, in the process of remarrying, as an act of renewal in existing marriages, and everywhere in between. Notably, many divorcées actively sought out new romantic and sexual experiences as they obtained their divorces and tended to remember them fondly. These tendencies indicate that they did not base their expectations of sexual fulfillment or individual happiness on their marital status, in sharp contrast to the dominant social standards of the era.

Still, it is crucial to view the sexual and romantic relationships at the ranches as just one part of the divorcees' experiences. The relationships themselves might not have survived, whether they were affairs or second marriages, but it seems that the lessons the divorcées learned and the inner strength they discovered at the ranches remained with them for the rest of their lives. The emotional refuge of the Reno divorce ranches, constituted by their simultaneous privacy, freedom, and transience, enabled divorcées to discover new sides to themselves, whether they were unexpected romantic interests, new dancing abilities, or a previously hidden capacity to survive alone. As Winifred's diary demonstrates, it was sometimes terrifying to face the reality of life after Reno, especially in the national climate of strong stigma against divorce. However, the prospect of being "on my own" as a Reno divorcée could also provide a different outlook on life, one that drew from new feelings of

independence and inner strength. Though women generally came to Reno ranches for a divorce decree, it seems that many left with much more.

Conclusion

Reno's Washoe County Courthouse, the site of countless divorces throughout the twentieth century, sits on South Virginia Street across from the Truckee River. According to local legend, the daily droves of out-of-state divorcées would leave the courthouse with their new divorce decrees in hand, walk across the nicknamed "Bridge of Sighs," and toss their wedding rings into the river. This image was made famous by a 1937 *Life* cover, which featured an exiting divorcée planting a lipstick-smearred kiss on the stone column of the courthouse steps before crossing over to the bridge.¹

However, the so-called ring toss "tradition" was in fact little more than a myth. "I don't know how true that really was," divorcée Marilu Norden remembered.² Local cowboy Bill McGee dismissed the idea of throwing away an expensive ring, especially during the Great Depression and war years: "As far as throwing valuable rings into the river, it just didn't happen."³ The image of the ring-tossing divorcée represents the popularly perceived glamor, and perhaps frivolity, of the famous Reno quickie divorce. The reality of obtaining the six-week cure, as this thesis has demonstrated, was in fact far more complicated, and divorcees' experiences did not neatly conclude with the symbolic disposal of their wedding rings.

¹ Fig. 1 *Life* Magazine cover, June 21 1937.

² Marilu Norden and Phil Jones, Personal Interview, 27 May 2013, 38.

³ William and Sandra McGee, Personal Interview, 4 June 2013, 26.



Fig. 1 *Life* Magazine cover, June 21 1937.

Yet one legendary ring tradition actually did take place in Reno, although on a much smaller scale. At the elite Flying M E divorce ranch, beloved owner Emmy Wood had her own priceless collection of former guests' rings. According to Bill and his wife Sandra, who wrote a photo memoir about Bill's experiences at the Flying M E, they were shocked to discover a picture of Emmy's legendary

gold chain laden with dozens of rings.⁴ The newly certified divorcées, or Flying M E “graduates,” entrusted Emmy with these expensive keepsakes of their past lives. According to Bill, Emmy did not solicit these donations. Instead, her devoted guests learned about the tradition and added to it as the years went by, creating a private ritual to commemorate the ends of their stays at the ranch.⁵ A former guest remembered: “There must have been hundreds of precious stones—diamonds, rubies, emeralds and sapphires. Emmy never wore it; that wouldn’t have been her style. She told me the rings were given to her by former guests. They just didn’t want to keep them afterwards.”⁶ The only surviving photograph of the chain is a touching image of an aging Emmy sitting upright in bed, surrounded by the bowed heads of divorcées poring over the collection.⁷

Ranch staff and guests alike adored Emmy, who was renowned for her gracious hospitality, sympathetic ear, and infallible discretion. Emmy and her former husband, Dore Wood, opened the divorce ranch after falling in love with Nevada on a trip out west. Originally named the Tumbling DW, Dore’s initials, the ranch came into Emmy’s possession after Dore left her for a young, wealthy guest. One of her first actions as the ranch’s new owner was to rename the ranch after herself, and she then expertly managed it alone for the next ten years.⁸ Her own heartbreaking divorce experience seemed to make Emmy especially

⁴ Ibid, 27.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Joan Allison in *The Divorce Seekers: A Photo Memoir of a Nevada Dude Wrangler*, by William and Sandra McGee, (St. Helena: BMC Publications, 2004), 320.

⁷ McGee and McGee, *The Divorce Seekers*, 316.

⁸ Ibid, 67.

sympathetic to the plights of her guests. As her close friend and assisting ranch manager, Allie Okie, put it, “Emmy’s very special. She’s one of a kind. Some people come here very upset, and Emmy’s a good listener at a time when they really need it.”⁹ Bill remembered Emmy’s prominence about town: “Everybody loved her. I mean, the toughest looking cowboy rancher, cowboy, miner, didn’t matter. Lawyers, judges, she knew them all and they all loved her.”¹⁰

In 1961, Emmy retired and moved to Carson City. Just two years later, in September of 1963, the leased Flying M E property abruptly burst into flames. Though there were no reports of injury, the one-hundred-year-old historic main house burned to the ground.¹¹ According to Bill and Sandra, it was rumored about town that many of Emmy’s possessions were pilfered and sold while the property was vacant. In 1965, Emmy sold what remained of the Flying M E. A year later, she died. In his interview, Bill recalled her death with tears in his eyes. As he and Sandra researched their book, they tried and failed to find out what happened to Emmy’s ring collection.¹² They suspect that whoever cleared out Emmy’s room after her death found them first.¹³

The events of the Flying M E’s final years comprised what was perhaps the most dramatic end to a Reno divorce ranch. But it was far from the only ranch closure in the 1960s. In their exhaustive history of northern Nevada dude ranches, Bill and Sandra McGee detail the operating functions of no fewer than seventeen

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ McGee and McGee interview, 18.

¹¹ McGee and McGee, *The Divorce Seekers*, 317.

¹² McGee and McGee interview, 28.

¹³ McGee and McGee, *The Divorce Seekers*, 317.

guest ranches in the Reno and Virginia City areas, all of which served divorcées throughout the early to mid-twentieth centuries.¹⁴ By the mid-1970s, according to the McGees, “there were only two guest ranches in northern Nevada, and they were finding more and more guests came for a Western vacation rather than for a divorce.”¹⁵

The demise of the famed Reno divorce ranches was as swift as their original ascent. Just as divorcées cycled in and out of Reno, sometimes more than once, for their six-week requirements before moving on to new lives beyond the ranches, eventually the nation outgrew its need for the quickie divorce system. Reno’s time as the divorce capital of America, and with it the success of the ranches, was a transitional period for marital attitudes and practices. Its Golden Age, during the years 1930 to 1960, witnessed a sustained rise in the divorce rate and accompanying, though gradual, changes in cultural perceptions of divorce. The Reno divorcées, who transgressed the strong marital values of the early to mid-twentieth century, faced social and economic repercussions as they rebuilt their lives following their quickie divorces. But their actions, combined with those of the steadily growing pool of divorcées nationwide, contributed to a growing acceptance of divorce.

As more Americans viewed marriage as a fulfilling, contractual relationship between two individuals, they started to expect the right to end marriages that no longer met the needs of one or both spouses. The West, which had already introduced the nation’s most liberal divorce laws, responded to

¹⁴ Ibid, 383.

¹⁵ Ibid. 289.

critiques of the existing restrictive, fault-based divorce system. Beginning in California in 1970, western states initiated widespread divorce reform. The very lenience that had made Reno an attractive destination for out-of-state divorcées was reincorporated into the sweeping new system of no-fault divorce, a process that ultimately rendered Reno's migratory divorce system unnecessary. Once most people nationwide gained access to broad grounds and faster certification processes, they no longer needed to travel to end their marriages. By the late 1970s, the no-fault system was firmly entrenched in most states, and the era of the divorce ranches was largely forgotten.

Although deep shifts in national attitudes regarding the propriety of divorce were underway throughout the twentieth century, the Reno divorcees' immediate options were limited. Following their six-week residencies at the divorce ranches and six-minute divorce proceedings in the Reno courthouse, the newly minted divorcées found themselves with a difficult decision to make: what to do next. Given how overwhelmed and despondent many were when they first arrived in Reno for their divorces, it is easy to imagine the mixed feelings they experienced after they officially ended their marriages. The next steps the divorcées took following their six weeks were as varied as the divorcées themselves. Some remarried on the spot, having already brought their intended groom out West or having met a local Nevadan. Those who quickly married again managed to avoid the stigma of life as a divorced woman in the early to mid-twentieth century as well as the accompanying strain of single motherhood.

Following their violation of the robust marital norms of the early to mid-twentieth century, divorced women faced extreme social and financial consequences nationwide. “Women who took the risk of divorce may have escaped oppressive or even brutal marriages,” historian Elaine Tyler May writes in her study of Cold War family life. “But they also encountered...poverty, loneliness, difficulties in caring for their children, and the exhausting life of being a single parent. Divorced women often experienced an immediate and sharp decline in their standard of living.”¹⁶ The financial realities of life as a single woman were compounded when mothers had custody of their children, as they often lacked adequate and consistent child support.¹⁷ Post-World War II childcare experts also contributed to the existing social stigmatization of single motherhood. As historians Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English argue, child-raising theorists met the increasing incidences of the dreaded “‘father-absent’ situation” with “alarm and confusion.”¹⁸ Divorced mothers themselves were denounced as neurotic and irresponsible, May concurs, and experts increasingly placed their children at high risk for emotional trauma and maladjustment.¹⁹

While some Reno divorcées managed to avoid these hardships by remarrying swiftly, others looked onward to the next phase of their lives alone. In her interview with her husband Bill, historian Sandra McGee said that the stigma against divorce factored into many divorcees’ geographic considerations as they

¹⁶ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 213.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 213.

¹⁸ Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of the Experts’ Advice to Women*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2005), 274.

¹⁹ May, *Homeward Bound*, 193.

planned for the future: “Some of the women were actually nervous about going back to their hometowns because they knew that they would be regarded differently, you know, as a divorced woman.”²⁰ Others, she said, simply fell in love with Nevada and decided to stay. Whether they were pushed from the feared judgment of their former homes or pulled by the freeing anonymity of the West, many divorcées ultimately chose to live in western states.

The women I studied, whose divorces spanned Reno’s Golden Age, fell into this westward resettlement pattern. After leaving the courthouse with her divorce decree in 1946, Winifred Higinbotham-Dunaway realized that she probably knew more people in Reno after six weeks there than she did in her hometown. She felt the initial urge to stay in Reno, which she had come to love during her stay, but ultimately decided against making a permanent home there. “It would be a grand place to live if it weren’t for the aura of heartbreak, of living a little too fast, that is as much Reno as the mountains, the Truckee, (surely the world’s loneliest river),” Winifred wrote in a poetic end to diary.²¹ Instead of staying in Reno or returning to her hometown, Winifred set her sights further west and promptly left for San Francisco.²²

In 1951, Marilu Norden never even seemed to consider moving back to her hometown in Connecticut. “I had to be out on my own after that,” Marilu remembered, “and to be a single mom and take care of two little kids and try to

²⁰ McGee and McGee interview, 22.

²¹ Winifred Higinbotham Dunaway diary, September to November 1946, Divorce Clippings File, Nevada Historical Society, 9.

²² Ibid, 10.

find my way in the world. And that was not easy.”²³ “Easy” is one of the last words that comes to mind when imagining Marilu’s situation as a single mother in 1951. She left Pyramid Lake Ranch without so much as a backward glance toward her old home, instead choosing to temporarily resettle with family friends in Colorado. After renting a small house in Denver and getting acquainted with life out West with her children, Marilu moved to Los Angeles to share a small house with her sister. It was at this house that she would meet her second husband, Tom, a few years later.²⁴

Nearly twenty years later, Lily Tuck found herself so sad to leave Reno that she in fact “didn’t really leave”; instead, she decided to move to Squaw Valley, a California resort area close to the recreation of Lake Tahoe and the Nevada border. “I will live there for the next four years,” Lily wrote, “during which time I will make lasting friendships, learn how to shovel myself out from under a six-foot snowstorm, and begin work on a novel.”²⁵ Her new home’s proximity to Reno also enabled Lily and her sons to stay in close contact with divorce ranch owners Harry and Joan Drackert.

Though social and financial struggles awaited many Reno divorcées after their departure from the ranches, Reno’s Golden Age witnessed the beginnings of significant cultural shifts regarding marriage and divorce. The transgressive actions of early to mid-twentieth century divorcées gradually brought about changes in the way others perceived them and their children. In her study of

²³ Marilu Norden and Phil Jones, Personal Interview, 27 May 2013, 19.

²⁴ Ibid, 40.

²⁵ Lily Tuck, “On Her Own,” *Vogue*, June 2012, 74.

divorce stigma, historian Anita Ernst Watson argues that the widespread censure of divorce and divorcées weakened throughout the twentieth century for two reasons. First, media coverage of celebrity divorces made the practice seem more accessible and even glamorous. Second, and most importantly, the experiences of divorcées started to ripple throughout their communities: “The rising divorce rate meant that there were more couples, families, circles of friends, and neighborhoods affected by divorce each year; always more people to provide the contact and the familiarity that resulted in acceptance.”²⁶ Watson’s observations closely align with historian Stephanie Coontz’s argument regarding the twentieth century shifts in perceptions of divorce. According to Coontz, people’s marital behaviors had already started to change substantially before mainstream attitudes slowly followed suit. “This change in attitude,” she writes, “seems to have been a result of experience rather than ideology.”²⁷

By the 1960s and 1970s, a new understanding of marriage and divorce began to mainstream. Although mere decades earlier, prominent experts had deemed divorce selfish and irresponsible, a rising culture of individual fulfillment recast the decision to divorce as acceptable and even occasionally advisable. “Beginning in the 1960s people began to judge the success of their marriages not by their material standard of living or how well they raised their children but rather by whether they felt their personal needs and desires were being fulfilled,”

²⁶ Anita Ernst Watson, “Fading Shame: Divorce Stigma in American Culture, 1882-1939,” (PhD diss., University of Nevada, Reno, 1997), 264.

²⁷ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 167.

sociologist Andrew Cherlin argues.²⁸ He emphasizes the role of psychotherapy in this process, which enabled individuals to turn inward and weigh the benefits of their marriages. The dominance of a culture of individualism, according to Cherlin, meant that unfulfilled spouses felt increasingly justified in ending unsatisfactory marriages.²⁹ Similarly, Watson writes: “Directly recast as a necessary step for life and health, divorce became a changing aspect of social norms. It was less a deliberate flaunting of social strictures and more an unfortunate response to unavoidable circumstances.”³⁰ The reduction in divorce stigma “was clearly and repeatedly expressed in the public discourse,” featuring prominently in magazines, essays, news reports, novels, and films.³¹ As people prioritized their individual feelings and fulfillment over the communal or familial benefits their marriages provided, the institution of marriage became less enduring and binding overall.

Accompanying the surging divorce rate and the growing individualism of marriage culture came an expectation for speed and access in divorce proceedings. The West had already proven itself progressive in regards to divorce, with its historic chain of divorce mills demonstrating the migratory pull of its lenient legislation. Reno, of course, was the longest lasting and most successful of the mills. But it was because of the very lenience of Reno’s laws that its out-of-state divorce industry became unnecessary. Many of Reno’s pioneering tenets of

²⁸ Andrew J. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 31.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Anita Ernst Watson, “Fading Shame,” 269.

³¹ *Ibid.*

divorce law and practice, the very features that made it an attractive destination for migratory divorcées, were eventually reincorporated into a new system of divorce: no-fault divorce. The collusive element of prearranged migratory divorces, the flexibility of Reno's nine grounds, the introduction of its broad "mental cruelty" charge, and the brevity of its six-week residency requirement were all elements that legislators eventually recast into the non-adversarial and efficient new system.

Reformers criticized the existing fault system on the basis of the same logic that had driven Reno's divorce laws. Economist Allen Parkman details the numerous problems with the fault system that had been legally or practically eradicated in the Reno divorce trade: "The fault divorce system was predicated on the belief that unless the breakdown of a marriage could be attributed solely to the wrongdoing of a single, identifiable spouse, divorce was not permitted... The procedures used under fault divorce encouraged perjury and brought an adversarial process to situations calling for conciliation."³² By removing the fault grounds, reformers hoped to avoid the inherent hypocrisy, perjury, collusion, gender inequality, and antagonism that dominated many divorce proceedings and settlements.³³

In keeping with the western tradition of legal permissiveness, plans for divorce reform began in earnest in western states in the mid-twentieth century.

³² Allen M. Parkman, *No-Fault Divorce: What Went Wrong?*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 2.

³³ *Ibid.*

Historian Glenda Riley illuminates the geographic link between the western divorce mills and the no-fault system, which originated in California.

As the divorce rate climbed, a growing number of people became concerned about the effects of the divorce process on spouses and children. Not until the 1940s, however, did Americans begin to discuss the possibility of replacing adversarial divorce with a nonpunitive procedure....It was westerners who finally acted on the matter.³⁴

In 1969, California Governor Ronald Reagan signed the Family Law Act, which went into effect the following year. The bill replaced California's seven grounds with two broad no-fault provisions, irremediable breakdown of a marriage and incurable insanity. Other states swiftly and overwhelmingly followed California's lead; by 1977, only three states, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and South Dakota, retained the previous adversary system of divorce.³⁵

The efficacy of the new no-fault system has been a topic of ongoing debate for historians, sociologists, psychologists, politicians, and economists across the political spectrum. Some, like Parkman, argue that the progressive intentions of the legislation backfired, especially on women and children, the most vulnerable groups involved in marital dissolution. Divorced women and children of divorced parents, according to Parkman, experience an enormous and immediate deterioration in their financial condition following divorces. The

³⁴ Glenda Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 132.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 11.

hardest hit of these populations are women in long-lasting marriages, whom Parkman maintains lose their negotiating power in no-fault proceedings.³⁶

Historian Elaine Tyler May adds that the presumed legal equality of men and women under the no-fault system ignores the inequalities created in marriage.³⁷

Others agree with Parkman and May regarding the symptom of single mothers and financial hardship, but disagree regarding its cause. Historians Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English affirm that women are vulnerable to falling into poverty after divorcing, but they attribute the continued existence of this problem to the gender gap that prohibits single mothers from earning a family wage.³⁸ Coontz expands on Ehrenreich and English's conclusions, writing: "Most research shows...that no-fault divorce has *not* left women worse off overall than has adversarial divorce; it has simply failed to mitigate the economic losses that women have *always* experienced after divorce."³⁹ A return to the adversarial system, according to Coontz, would fail to help women, and more importantly, "would only exacerbate the conflict that is associated with the *worst* outcomes for children."⁴⁰

Although the practical outcomes of the new no-fault system are still points of contention, especially for women and children, its effect on the Reno divorce trade was immediate and decisive. In the early 1970s, newspapers were already covering the demise of the divorce ranches. A 1972 *Reno Evening Gazette* article

³⁶ Parkman, *No-Fault Divorce*, 79.

³⁷ May, *Homeward Bound*, 213.

³⁸ Ehrenreich and English, *For Her Own Good*, 173.

³⁹ Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 206.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

interviewed the proprietors of the final two divorce ranches in Reno, the Silver Circle and the Whitney. “One of the reasons given for the decline in the number of guests who come for a Nevada divorce is that many other states have recently made it easier to obtain a divorce,” Mary Solaro reported. Her interviewees suggested making the Nevada residency requirement even shorter to attract more divorcées.⁴¹ In an article entitled “Dude Ranch Survivors,” reporter Susan Voyles affirmed: “Changing attitudes about divorce and more liberal laws in other states put an end to the dude ranches.”⁴²

By 1979, journalist John Clausen reported on the Reno quickie divorce as a curious artifact of the past. The tides in Nevada had already turned, according to interviewee and County Clerk Alex Coon: “Coon says the city has turned from a ‘separation center’ to a ‘marriage Mecca.’”⁴³ Nevada, already well known for its legalization of gambling and prostitution, became associated in the public mind with quickie marriages rather than quickie divorces. Within just a decade, the divorce trade had almost completely dried up, driving the divorce ranches out of business.

The Reno divorce industry, at once a financial system, migratory hub, and emotional center of marital dissolution, ended as its progressive laws and values mainstreamed. Once nonadversarial and prompt divorces were available in almost

⁴¹ Mary Solaro, “Chosen Few Patronize Last Few Guest Ranches in Reno,” *The Reno Evening Gazette*, February 23, 1972. University of Nevada, Reno Special Collections Department, 91-49/5/107.

⁴² Susan Voyles, “Dude Ranch Survivors,” *The Reno Gazette – Journal*, October 7, 1984. University of Nevada, Reno Special Collections Department, 91-49/5/107.

⁴³ John Clausen, “The Reno Quickie,” April 1979. Divorce Clippings File, Nevada Historical Society, 27.

every state, the need to temporarily relocate in a more permissive location vanished. The economic boon of the out-of-state divorce trade, and the subsequent loss that rippled through Reno's hospitality and legal sectors, deeply underlay Reno's national standing as a divorce capital. The importance of the financial aspect of the divorce trade cannot be overstated, especially given that the pressure of local business interests prevented Nevada legislators from permanently lengthening their residency requirement and thus killing the out-of-state divorce industry in 1914.

But it is the human core of the Reno industry, and especially the divorce ranches, that has held the deepest significance. In his 1996 article commemorating the history of the divorce trade, "Where You Went if You *Really* Had to Get Unhitched," journalist Robert Wernick reminds his audience of this point: "Besides being a financial salvation for Nevada, divorce was a drama acted by tens of thousands of ordinary people, all with individual problems."⁴⁴ The deeply emotional component inherent within the divorce ranch business, of course, stemmed from the nature of the trade: whatever their reasons and circumstances, predominantly female divorcées stayed at the ranches to end their marriages, an already difficult process made still more challenging by the financial and social repercussions of living as a divorced woman in the early to mid-twentieth century. Furthermore, the ranches themselves comprised a complex, often intimate web of friendship and support between women in similar situations and proprietors who were there to "wipe away the tears."

⁴⁴ Robert Wernick, "Where You Went If You *Really* Had to Get Unhitched," *Smithsonian*, June 1996, 68.

Reno's rise and fall as a divorce mill was also a period of transition for the nation, both in terms of marital practices and attitudes. It fell into a long history of America's irregular and peculiar history of divorce, one that was characterized by a geographic patchwork of differing state divorce laws. But, as Coontz argues, social mores regarding divorce did not undergo shifts in tandem with the long-term rise of the divorce rate. Because people's attitudes did not significantly change until practices had already been in flux for decades, divorcées faced serious challenges and hardships within a social climate that stigmatized their choices and disadvantaged their children. In many ways, the physical and emotional landscape of the ranches mitigated these difficulties, sometimes for six weeks and sometimes for much longer.

By staying in a predominantly female space, Reno divorcées found themselves in a unified, supportive network. Whether or not the female environment was a conscious management decision on behalf of the ranch proprietors, it undoubtedly bolstered camaraderie and enduring friendships amongst the divorcées. Additionally, the physical site of the ranches distanced the divorcées from the restrictions and potential judgment of their home environments. At the ranches, women found sites of emotional refuge in addition to female space, allowing them respite from the stigmatization or loneliness that they might have experienced in their hometowns. The ranches were also liminal, as they marked a threshold between women's past lives during their marriages and their unspecified futures as divorcées. For some, this sense of distance and impermanence facilitated new sexual and romantic experimentation with ranch

staff and Reno locals. Others turned inward, finding a new sense of self-worth and capability as they handled the unprecedented challenges of living alone.

The women of the Reno divorce ranches, a largely white and middle to upper class group, directly contradict the nostalgic image of stable, content marriages and families throughout the twentieth century. While their existence does not mean that this era was rife with divorces, annulments, and desertions, it does illuminate the longevity of America's relationship with divorce and the depth of the transformative trends that altered the nation's marital practices. Examining the divorcees' stories and emotional experiences, aside from making a largely unexamined history more visible, also foregrounds these broader themes in a national context.

Reno's success as the final and most successful western divorce mill is a direct result of these long-term cultural changes. Beginning with America's colonial period, legislators allowed limited forms of divorce in the hopes of creating a stable, healthy society. The inherent and unanticipated instability of such a system, temporarily mitigated by the coverture system, began to crack during America's revolutionary inception as a nation. As Enlightenment thinkers questioned absolute authority and espoused the benefits of contractualism, these revolutionary ideas filtered into family life and marital expectations. A contractual understanding of the marriage vow rose alongside the desire for a love-based union, further destabilizing the fragile institution. By the nineteenth century, demographic shifts accompanying industrialization and urbanization

combined with these ideological changes to create a sustained rise in the divorce rate, one that be traced from the Civil War onward.

The rise in the divorce rate did not, however, precipitate an immediate loosening of various states' restrictive divorce laws; in fact, it created the opposite. Alarmed by the growing divorce trend and its potential damage to the social order, divorce reformers turned their attention to divorce mills. These western cities and their permissive divorce laws were almost entirely eradicated as states responded to moral outcry and tightened their requirements. One city, however, remained. Nevadan legislators, pressured by Reno business interests and frightened on the eve of the Great Depression, passed the most lenient divorce laws in national history in 1931. Reno's dominance as America's divorce capital remained unquestioned until the 1970s, when its own lenience essentially brought about its demise.

After examining Reno and the historical events that bookended its dominance, it is evident that its Golden Age was a tipping point for the nation as a whole. The pronounced, outwardly sudden changes of the 1960s and 1970s were in fact the overdetermined result of historical shifts that had been brewing for centuries. Throughout these two decades, which not by coincidence were Reno's final two decades of prominence, the national rate skyrocketed, eventually reaching the point at which fifty percent of marriages ended in divorce.⁴⁵ And, in order to accommodate the rising demand for easier and more accessible divorces, California introduced the no-fault system. The Reno divorce industry, with the

⁴⁵ Ehrenreich and English, *For Her Own Good*, 321.

specific examples of the ranches and their guests, demonstrate that the twin forces of individualism and marital instability were long underway by this time. The practical outcomes of these changes, such as the emotional effects of widespread divorce on a generation of children or the economic consequences of divorce for their mothers, can and should be debated. But decrying the divorce rate as a sudden problem, or the no-fault system as botched reform that must be undone, overlooks the depth of their historical roots. Divorce always has, still does, and will most likely continue to exist in the United States, the irreversible result of marital expectations predicated on individual choice and fulfillment.

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Mary Bean Papers

Harry and Joan Drackert Collection

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