

Carole knew my mother, and came to stay at our house at Lake Tahoe while getting her divorce from her then-husband William Powell. Of course, I instantly fell in love with this beautiful blonde movie star. Actor Robert Stack, *Straight Shooting*, (1980).

Carole Lombard is best remembered as a zany, comedic actress in the 1930s, fondly known as the "Screwball Queen of the Screen." She married actor Clark Gable in 1939. Las Vegas is featured prominently in the story. There in the desert gambling mecca Gable's second wife, Ria, divorced the popular leading man after Lombard went public about her affair and plans to marry.

Lombard died a tragic death on January 16, 1942 in a fiery plane crash southwest of Las Vegas, near Mt. Potosi, following a trip to her home state of Indiana for a war bond rally. Indiana U.S. Senator Raymond Willis paid tribute to Lombard in Congress. President Franklin Roosevelt sent Gable a telegram noting that he and First Lady Eleanor had lost a friend.

What most people don't know is that Carole Lombard--born Jane Alice Peters--divorced her first husband, actor William Powell in Carson City.

Powell and Lombard met while making the movie *Man of the World*, and worked together again in *Ladies' Man*. They soon became engaged, followed by a private wedding on June 26, 1931 at the house of Lombard's mother in Beverly Hills. The couple sailed to Honolulu for their honeymoon. Wire service photos filled the pages of the mainstream and tabloid press.

However, the marriage did not last long. Perhaps the sixteen-year age difference affected their compatibility. She was twenty-two and he was thirty-eight when they married. In addition, she was outgoing and outspoken, he was intellectual and reserved. According to her mother, Elizabeth, "They just decided all of sudden they could not agree."

Lombard flew to Reno in July 1933 where she retained prominent divorce attorney George B. Thatcher. She stayed at the Riverside Hotel for three days before taking up her six-week residency on July 6 at Lake Tahoe. The house, adjacent to the Cal-Neva Lodge, was the summer residence of thirteen-year-old Robert Stack. Stack, later to become a prominent actor in his own right, and Lombard became close friends. He co-starred with Lombard in her last movie, *To Be or Not to Be* (1942).



Among Lombard's many visitors were her mother; brother, Stuart; and Hollywood gossip columnist Louella Parsons. On August 6, the screen actress held the ceremonial ribbon dedicating Nevada's portion of the Tahoe Rim-of-the-Lake Highway, known today as State Highway 28.

Thatcher probably advised Lombard to seek her divorce in Carson City, the tiny state capital numbering less than 2,000 residents, to avoid the media scrutiny associated with a high-profile Reno divorce.



Myth #131: Carole Lombard's Carson City Divorce by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

The hearing was held on August 18 in the courtroom of District Judge Clark J. Guild. It lasted only six minutes during the noon recess, sandwiched in between a lengthy hearing to try and reopen the many banks that had closed in Nevada on November 1, 1932 because of the Great Depression. The court house was inundated with lawyers, banking officials and accountants. Lombard was heard to say, "It's like the first night of a stag party."

"Dressed in a smart grey traveling suit and with a blue beret partially covering her wavy blond hair, Miss Lombard answered the questions put to her by Thatcher calmly and showed no signs of agitation," wrote the *Carson City Daily Appeal*. She charged Powell with extreme cruelty calling him a "very emotional man" who often resorted to "coarse and abusive language," causing her acute unhappiness and impairing her health.

Lombard, known throughout Hollywood for her prolific use of expletives, was well coached to use the boilerplate language typical of a migratory divorce proceeding in the day. The mild-mannered Powell did not contest the suit and was represented in Carson City by his two attorneys in the property settlement. "It wasn't Hollywood's fault," she said smiling. "Just one of those things that happen."

Despite making the obligatory claim that she planned to permanently reside in Nevada and build a house at Lake Tahoe, Lombard flew from Reno back to Los Angeles with daredevil aviator "Colonel" Roscoe Turner less than two hours after the granting of the divorce decree. Filming of *White Woman* had begun with Lombard playing the lead role across from Charles Laughton.

Lombard and Powell, who became famous as Nick Charles in the Thin Man movie series, remained friends until her untimely death in 1942. They even made another film together, *My Man "Godfrey"* (1936). Both received Academy Award nominations.

The Lombard-Powell divorce was arguably the highest profile celebrity divorce in Carson City history. The *Appeal* noted Judge Guild's daughter, Marjorie, chatted with Carole Lombard in her father's chambers before the hearing. Marjorie would later marry Charles Russell and become Nevada's First Lady when her husband was elected governor in 1950. Yours truly spent many hours talking with Marjorie Russell prior to her death in 1997. If only I had known of the conversation with Carole Lombard I would have asked what the colorful actress shared with her as a teenager.

Photo credits:

Top: Advertisement for Powell & Lombard's movie *My Man "Godfrey"* from the *Reno Evening Gazette*, September 25, 1936, 2:3-4

Bottom: Carole Lombard at dedication ceremony for a portion of the Tahoe Rim-of-the-Lake Highway (Nevada Highway 28) August 6, 1933. To Lombard's left is six-year-old Hatherly Bliss, "Miss Nevada;" and to her right is eight-year-old Barbara M. Bates, "Miss California." Photo courtesy of William W. Bliss, Carson City/Glenbrook, Nevada.

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