

Myth #49: Divorcing Myth From Truth: Mary Pickford's Divorce by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

We can thank the *Saturday Evening Post* for giving us the long-standing myth that "America's Sweetheart," film actress Mary Pickford, was divorced in Reno. In a story published on December 11, 1937, the popular national magazine declared, "Mary Pickford gave Reno its best ad when she established residence and bought a house there in 1920 to divorce Owen Moore. When she left she gave the house to her lawyer. It is the home today of United States Senator Pat McCarran. He was her lawyer."

The bell had been rung and to this day journalists and others claim that Pickford was divorced in Reno.

A publication entitled *The Reno Divorce Racket* generated confusion as early as 1931. Reference is made to Mary Pickford, "who first made Reno divorces famous." However, other text and a photo caption note that her residency in Nevada was "at Genoa." The assumption being implied was that Genoa and Reno were in the same county when, in fact, the two communities are some 45 miles distant, in two different counties, with a county separating them.



Maybe the initial source for the confusion was the Associated Press (AP) stories concerning the Pickford divorce in 1920 that had a Reno dateline.

Among the recent stories listing Mary Pickford in a string of celebrity Reno divorces is a *Smithsonian Magazine* article published in June 1996 (posted on its website) and an article in the April 22, 2002 edition of the *New York Times* entitled "A Push to Preserve Reno's Landmarks as Divorce Capital."

Can you ever "unring" a bell once rung?

It is true that McCarran, a former Nevada Supreme Court Justice, represented the twenty-seven year old Pickford, nee Gladys Louise (aka Marie) Smith, in the divorce suit against her husband actor Owen Moore. However, after McCarran greeted Pickford at the Southern Pacific Railroad passenger station in Reno on February 15, 1920, he transported the well-known, silent-film star by automobile to the Campbell Ranch outside Genoa. The divorce papers were filed in the Douglas county seat of Minden, 45 miles south of Reno. State law in 1920 required a residency of 6 months before a district judge could grant a divorce, or so it was believed until Mary Pickford came to Nevada ostensibly to live here.

"This case not only created a public sensation but also raised some important and disturbing legal questions," wrote McCarran's biographer Professor Jerome Edwards. "Pickford's divorce in Nevada had several unique and peculiar aspects which at first glance appeared to violate both the letter and spirit of the state divorce law," Edwards continued. "But McCarran skillfully discovered a loophole in the law large enough to shepherd the popular Miss Pickford through her divorce travail, at least five months sooner than might have been the case with less wealthy or famous clients."

On March 2, Mary Pickford explained to Judge Frank Langan that she had permanently relocated to Genoa to regain her health, and had not come to Nevada to get a divorce. The judge was told that her husband Owen Moore, who had deserted her after a stormy marriage, was making a movie in Virginia City and "just happened" to be found in Douglas County when he was served papers notifying him of the divorce proceedings. She testified that she and Mr. Moore had at no time colluded to avoid the six-month residency requirement. However, according to Pickford biographer Scott Eyman she gave Owen Moore \$100,000 to play along with their divorce scheme. Granted a divorce on the same day, Pickford was driven back to Reno and took the train bound for California on March 3. "America's Sweetheart" married her lover and motion picture leading man Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. on March 28.

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"Miss Pickford never gave a finer performance," claimed Professor Edwards. "Despite her sworn statement, the divorce appears to have been planned between her and Owen Moore from the beginning, and McCarran must have been party to the deception." The divorce generated an uproar in Nevada, however the language of the law was ambiguous and the Nevada Supreme Court upheld the divorce in 1922, over the objections of the Attorney General, arguing it could not legislate a remedy. The voters in the 1922 general election passed a 1921 legislative substitute for an initiative petition which amended Nevada's divorce law and eliminated the loophole McCarran had so adeptly used in garnering Pickford's divorce in 16 days.

Two months following the Pickford divorce, McCarran bought a mansion on a small bluff overlooking the Truckee River in Reno. In all likelihood, his attorney fees from the controversial divorce helped purchase the imposing residence. In countering the *Saturday Evening Post's* erroneous story in 1937 in a letter to the magazine that was never printed, McCarran emphatically denied that Pickford had anything to do with Reno or the ownership of the house:

. . . Mary Pickford never lived in Reno. Mary Pickford never owned nor possessed a house in Reno. Mary Pickford never secured a decree of divorce, nor did she ever apply for a decree of divorce in Reno. Mary Pickford did not give her lawyer her house or any other house located either in Reno or any other place in Nevada. . . . The records in the County Recorder's Office in Reno, the county seat of Washoe County, will bear out and confirm every statement I have made here.

"Still," Edwards wrote in 1976, "the Pickford divorce case long titillated attorneys, the state, and the nation with its notoriety and unfounded rumors." Those "unfounded rumors" claiming Mary Pickford was divorced in Reno are now very much a part of the lore of Nevada. The myth may never be divorced from the truth, but if so, certainly not as easily as Mary Pickford was divorced from Owen Moore in 1920.

Mary died of a cerebral hemorrhage in Santa Monica, California on May 29, 1979 at the age of eighty-seven.

Photo: Carson Valley Historical Society

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