

Myth #147: When Reno Had a Bad Reputation and Flourished by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

Currently same-sex marriage, constitutionally prohibited in Nevada since 2002, is a hot-button social issue in the United States. Reno quickie weddings and easy divorces for heterosexual couples received just as much attention for years. However, you wouldn't know it today.

The once-controversial migratory divorce business died out in the 1970s when other states liberalized their divorce laws. In addition, the quickie wedding business with no waiting period, blood test or medical certificate, currently generates little controversy. It, too, has dramatically declined as heterosexual couples find it easier to tie-the-knot in the state in which they reside. Let's look back some 100 years when Reno acquired a bad reputation for making it easy for people to do what they wanted.



At the time the Central Pacific Railroad founded Reno in 1868, Nevada required the person pursuing a divorce to live in the state for six months. The residency period was liberal for its time and addressed the transient nature of the state's population associated with the boom and bust mining economy.

Just the same, Dakota Territory, created in 1861, had only a three-month residency requirement and, like Nevada, allowed multiple grounds for divorce. By 1879, Sioux Falls had a thriving divorce colony and Fargo was not far behind. After Congress created North Dakota and South Dakota in 1889 the divorce laws remained the same. Only after social conservatives successfully lobbied the state of South Dakota to increase its residency period to six months in 1893, and the state of North Dakota to one year in 1899, did divorce attorneys and prospective divorcees seek out Nevada, and particularly Reno. Any significant competition from Oklahoma Territory with its three-month residency was eliminated when Congress in 1896 established a one-year residency requirement in territorial divorce cases.

A California interlocutory divorce law in 1897 which, in effect, prohibited divorced persons from remarrying until a year after the decree also augmented Reno's growing tourist business. Soon California divorcees migrated to Reno for quickie weddings despite a question if the marriages were legal. In 1902, a California Supreme Court ruling on the Golden State's divorce law validated the Reno weddings.

The divorce of Englishman Earl John Francis Stanley Russell, a member of the House of Lords, and subsequent wedding to Mollie Cooke Sommerville in 1900, brought international attention to western Nevada. Beginning in late 1899, the couple spent their six-month residency at the Lake Tahoe community of Glenbrook. Both received divorces from their respective spouses in Genoa, then the Douglas County seat. The following day, April 15, 1900, they wed in Reno. Upon the couple's return to England, Lord Russell was arrested for bigamy and tried in the House of Lords. In 1901, his peers sentenced him to three months in prison on the grounds that Nevada divorces were not valid in Great Britain.

If Lord Russell's scandalous divorce and wedding put Reno on the world map, then U.S. Steel Corporation President William Ellis Corey's divorce kept it there. Corey's two-year public affair with actress Maybelle Gilman prompted wife Laura to take up residence in Reno in November 1905. The highly-publicized divorce brought considerable attention to Reno, particularly for New Yorkers whose state had a draconian divorce law.

When the South Dakota state legislature increased the residency period for divorce to one year in 1907 at the behest of social conservatives, and the voters approved the action the following year, the national press, including the *New York Times*, crowned Reno the nation's divorce capital.

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For years to come, just mentioning the name Reno conjured up the image of divorce. Many of the divorcees remarried in Reno--some became residents--and hundreds of thousands of others interested in matrimony made the pilgrimage to Nevada's once-largest city for a quickie wedding. Reno enjoyed the prosperity and notoriety, and except for a brief period between 1913 and 1915 when Nevada's residency for divorce was increased to one year, ignored social conservatives for the better part of the 20th-century.

The tables have turned. In 2012, the number of marriage licenses issued in Washoe County (8,662) was the lowest amount since 1938 (7,833), the year before California required couples to get a premarital exam. Other states, including California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Massachusetts, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New York, Rhode Island, Utah, Vermont, Washington, and Washington, DC are leading the way in legalizing same-sex marriage. The quickie wedding business in Reno, without the ability to perform same-sex marriages, will eventually go the way of easy divorce.

Photo credit: Cartoon by Arthur V. Buel from the May 20, 1909 edition of the *Reno Evening Gazette*.

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