

Exhibit to show Reno as world's divorce capital

By Martin Griffith, AP

RENO – For nearly six decades, Reno was known as the divorce capital of the world because of liberal divorce laws that drew hundreds of thousands of estranged spouses from across the country, including Arthur Miller, Jack Dempsey, Clare Boothe Luce and Cornelius Vanderbilt Jr.

Now, a group of Nevada researchers is seeking personal stories from those who traveled to Nevada for “quickie” divorces from roughly 1910 to 1970.

UNR library's Special Collections Department plans to feature recorded interviews in an extensive multimedia online exhibit about Reno's 20th century divorce trade, which hastened the acceptance of divorce in America.

“Reno changed the national attitude about divorce,” said Donnelyn Curtis, head of special collections and project co-curator. “We're finding a feeling of liberation from the letters of women we have in our collections.”

Organizers hope firsthand accounts about heading to Nevada for the “Reno cure” will lead to a better understanding about it, said Mella Harmon, historian and project co-curator.

It became a major industry for the state, spawning dude ranches where spouses stayed, and gave Reno an international reputation, she added.

“It's one of those important areas of history that has faded away and not everyone remembers Reno was known as the divorce capital of the world,” Harmon told The Associated Press. “We thought it's something that needs to be captured in some way

so people can understand the significance of the industry to the area.”

By repeatedly passing legislation that shortened the time required to establish state residency, Nevada lawmakers encouraged what became known as the “migratory divorce.” Estranged husbands and wives traveled to the Silver State to establish residency and take advantage of its lenient divorce laws. The time required for residency was lowered from six months to three months and, in 1931, to six weeks.

By the 1960s, other states had loosened their own divorce laws, rendering the migratory divorce unnecessary.

From 1931 to 1934 alone, people from 32 foreign countries and all 48 states at the time got divorces in Reno, Harmon said.

“Recognition about Reno’s divorce trade entered the national consciousness in such a way that nearly everyone understood what it meant if people said they were going to Reno,” said Harmon, an adjunct assistant professor in the university’s Department of Anthropology.

While most divorce-seekers returned home, many chose to remain in Nevada, including former U.S. Rep. Barbara Vucanovich. She traveled from New York to Reno in 1949 to get a divorce and ended up staying and becoming the first woman to be sent to Congress from Nevada, serving seven terms in the House as a Republican. She died in 2013 at the age of 91.

Researchers not only want to speak with anyone who traveled to Reno for a divorce, but with those with a relative or close friend who did so.

In addition to personal stories, researchers will review essays, oral histories, novels, postcards, newspaper and magazine articles, and Hollywood films to include in the digitized project.

Scheduled for completion in July 2015, the project will be the most thorough portrayal of Reno's divorce industry in any format, Harmon said.