



FootPrints

Dedicated to Preserving and Promoting Historic Resources in the Truckee Meadows through Education, Advocacy and Leadership.

vol. 18 no. 1 ❖ Winter 2015

Disaster on Sierra Street

by Jerry Fenwick

Prologue

The 1957 Chrysler cars and their unique style gave Chrysler Corporation its most profitable year up to that time. The 1957 high-finned designs, that looked like they were speeding along even when parked, had captured the imagination of the automobile buying public, and sales were booming. At the same time, negotiations with the United Automobile Workers Union were not going well. There was a lot of sabotage along the assembly line. Coke bottles were welded into the frames so that there was a thump every time the vehicle came to a stop, wire rings with washers were welded into the fins to create a loud rattle, and parts were deliberately installed incorrectly.

I had purchased a Dodge Custom Royal Lancer hardtop with a hemi V8 engine and single four-barrel carburetor. Not long after taking delivery, there was a loud clatter and the engine stalled. The Chrysler dealer found that the muffler had been incorrectly installed, causing a train of events that caused a valve to stick so that a piston struck it, ruining the engine. Chrysler sent a new engine that actually had been prepared for NASCAR racing. It took some time to obtain all of the necessary parts, but I was able to get all of the parts to install twin four-barrel carburetors and a manifold on top of the engine, creating a true NASCAR engine.

The work was being done at Hermann & Wilson Chrysler-Plymouth on the northeast corner of Liberty and South Virginia

streets. It took a number of days to complete and test the installation. Each day between 12:30 p.m. and 1:30 p.m., I would walk from our store, Fenwick's, on the southwest corner of Commercial Row and Sierra Street, south on Sierra Street to its intersection with Liberty, where I would turn left and walk east to the intersection with Virginia Street. I planned to do that same walk on the fifth of February, but my parents had an invitation to visit the paint company that we represented, Bishop-Conklin Paints, in Los Angeles on that day. Thus, I had to open and operate the store by myself on that day. Someone was looking out for me, because otherwise I would have been somewhere on the west side of N. Sierra Street between W. First Street and the Truckee River at a landmark moment in Reno history.



The blast first occurred in the Nevada Shoe Factory on the left and spread to Paterson's on the corner of West First and North Sierra streets. Photo by Jerry Cobb.

Setting the Scene

Today, fine modern buildings line both sides of N. Sierra Street between the Truckee River and W. First Street. On February 5, 1957, there were different fine buildings on both sides of the same block on N. Sierra Street. On the east side of the street the Elks Club overlooked the river, with the Stack Building housing Gray-Reid-Wright department store on the corner of W. First Street. On the west side of Sierra Street, adjacent to the river, was the Sanford-Biltz building with legal, insurance and real estate offices. Next door was the building housing Cambar Fabrics, Tait's Shoe Store and Nevada Shoe Factory, and on the corner of W. First Street was the new building housing Paterson's Mens Store and Sunderland's Shoes. Around the

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Disaster on Sierra Street (continued)

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corner, facing W. First Street and behind Paterson's, was the J. E. Slingerland Insurance Agency. Had it not been for my parents' trip, I probably would have been in the area of the Nevada Shoe Factory at 1:00 p.m.

The weather was typical of early February with temperatures starting in the teens and expected to rise to the low fifties. Two blocks up the street to the north, it had been a quiet morning in our store located in the northeast corner of the Travelers Hotel building on the corner of Sierra and Commercial Row. Our store occupied a space on the first floor and basement while the hotel occupied the entire second floor. There had been some remodeling of plumbing fixtures in the hotel, and a short time earlier a bathtub had been improperly installed. The plumber had failed to hook up the drain, and when a guest took a bath the water came through the pressed metal ceiling leaving us with a mess to mop up. Thank goodness it wasn't a toilet!

I was facing the back wall of the store, where there was a clock reading 1:00 p.m., when there was a loud bang or thump. Thinking that the upstairs workers might have dropped a bathtub, I checked with the hotel, to see if they knew the cause of the noise. Just then, there was a second loud thump, and I saw the doorjamb actually rise above the front doors of the store so that I could see daylight between the jamb and the top of the doors.

Now I knew that it was something more serious than a dropped bathtub and hurried outside to try to see what had happened. The wails of sirens were coming both from the direction of the fire station a block away and the vicinity of the police department on E. Second Street. I looked south down Sierra Street where the thumps seemed to have come from to see a large, billowing plume of black smoke rising. There were large pieces of what appeared to be roofing material floating down like tree leaves in the fall.

Since there was nothing else that I could see or do, I returned to the store to listen to the radio, hoping to hear where and why the explosions had occurred. The first reports gave the location

as N. Sierra Street near the Truckee River. The announcer soon revised the location to the intersection of N. Sierra Street and W. First streets and gave instructions from the police to stay away from the area. Soon the police began going from store to store issuing instructions for store employees to close and for everyone to leave the immediate downtown area. There was fear of further explosions because the exact cause of the explosion was as yet unknown, though there had been a strong odor of gas reported by some people in the area.

The Explosion

During the morning, there were complaints of a gas smell by employees and customers of the businesses on the west side of Sierra Street between the river and First Street. Calls were finally made to Sierra Pacific Power Company where employees were dispatched to check on the smell. When one of the

employees entered Paterson's, the smell of gas was strong, and he immediately ordered everyone out of the building. After calling the power company for more help and the fire department for assistance with fans to ventilate and disperse the fumes, both men started down the street to warn the buildings' occupants. The power company employees were in the basement of the Nevada Shoe Factory trying to locate the boilers in the dark when the explosion occurred. Both men survived the explosion and one even continued to aid other victims.

The force of the explosion and the heat of the fire were so

intense that the steel girders supporting the roof and walls of the Nevada Shoe Factory building were twisted like a nest of snakes. Flaming debris was blown across Sierra Street, setting fire to the Elks Club and Gray-Reid-Wright's store. Directly north of the Nevada Shoe Factory, the Paterson's-Sunderland's store was destroyed with only the north wall along First Street remaining. Debris set fire to the Biltz-Sanford building to the south, destroying the building and its contents, which included a large legal library belonging to the building owner, attorney William Sanford. The windows on the north side of the Home Furniture business on W. First Street were shattered, resulting in extensive damage from flying glass to the merchandise on display.

Automobiles parked in the rear of the buildings on the west side of Sierra Street were crushed by falling brick walls. Other



Looking north from the Sierra Street Bridge, the Elks Club burns on right and the Sanford-Biltz building burns on the left with the heart of the blast in the center of the photo.

Photo by Jimmy Smith.

Disaster on Sierra Street (continued)

autos were set on fire, and one gas tank exploded, sending a ball of fire into the air. Tow trucks did manage to move some of the automobiles in the area and others along the streets to safety out of the explosion area.

The first fire vehicle on the scene arrived just in time for the explosion and was struck by debris, resulting in considerable damage to the truck as well as its occupants. All of Reno's emergency equipment was called to the scene. The City of Sparks and others sent equipment, and the Stead Air Force Base sent personnel to aid in rescue and security. Following the fire, many of the airmen stood guard in the area to prevent looting and keep lookers out of the area to prevent more injuries. The roofs of adjoining buildings, the Granada Theater to the east and the City Garage to the west, were used to spray water on the fires to prevent further damage.

Two people were killed outright that day. The first was one of the owners of the Nevada Shoe Factory who took time to put away the money and was blown under a vehicle in front of the store where he was not found until later. The second was a woman shopper on the street; she was hit by debris. A third victim was a woman in a passing vehicle who was struck by debris and left in a coma; she survived for seven years before passing away. Some forty others, including firefighters, were injured, some seriously and others, luckily, just slightly.

Manufactured gas and oil were the fuels of choice in use in the Reno area at the time; no natural gas lines had as yet reached the area. Many of the buried gas lines were old, and their exact locations were not known. A call for all former and retired gas employees to report in was issued by the Sierra Pacific Power Company and the City of Reno in the hope that these former employees could assist in the location of the gas lines and their shut offs. The fear of further explosions decreased as lines were located and shut down, and the fires were contained and finally brought under control. Businesses away from the area of the explosion were allowed to open by the next day. Interesting, but not surprising, gambling went on unabated during the emergency; no clubs were shut down.



All that remains of the blast origin is twisted steel and rubble. Note the abandoned automobiles. Photo by Steve Johns.

Aftermath

The Stack Building which had housed Gray-Reid-Wright department store was rebuilt. However, Gray-Reid's had moved first to a temporary location, then north to 525 Virginia Street, on the northwest corner of Virginia and Fifth streets, today's location of Circus-Circus. The newly rebuilt Stack Building was converted into two theaters, United Artists Cinemas 1 and 2. Combined with the Granada Theaters 1 and 2 to the east on First Street, they formed a small theater complex.

The Elks Club was not rebuilt on the site that it had previously occupied; the area became a parking lot. The club was instead rebuilt south of downtown on a short street named Kumle Lane, after the secretary who saved the men who were eating lunch just before the explosion. At the Kumle Lane location, there was plenty of space for a swimming pool and parking.

The buildings on the west side of N. Sierra were rebuilt with some of the previous tenants returning. The Sanford-Biltz building was rebuilt and reoccupied by professional offices that included lawyers, financial advisers, real estate brokers and Walston & Company Stock Exchange. The Nevada Shoe Factory returned along with Cambar Fabrics, Tait's Shoes and Paterson's men's clothing store. Home Furniture moved south of the Truckee River into a new multi-story building on the corner of Island Avenue and S. Sierra Street.

Today the east side of the block on Sierra Street is occupied by the Palladio Condominiums and the west side of the street is filled with restaurants, shops and the downtown Century Theater complex, part of the rebirth of downtown Reno.

As with so many disasters, many Reno locals will forever recall where they were on February 5, 1957. 

Jerry Fenwick is a HRPS member, part of the HRPS team that does Fourth Grade History Tours, and the co-author, with Neal Cobb, of *Reno Now and Then* and *Reno Now and Then II*.

Have you checked your mailing address on this issue of *FootPrints* to see when your membership expires?? If you have not renewed for 2015, this will be your last issue of *FootPrints*. You can renew with the membership form on page 11 or on the HRPS website <http://www.historicreno.org/>.

The Peleg Brown / Louis Damonte Ranch

by Holly Walton-Buchanan

Early in the spring of 1864, a newly-wed young rancher named Peleg Brown built an elegant three-story house in the South Meadows that had a whopping 14 bedrooms on the second floor. He had been married for little more than a year and so far his family consisted only of an infant son. Was this pioneer rancher hoping to fill the tiny rooms with his future offspring? No, he had grander designs on their use. He would rent them out on a nightly basis to the steady stream of travelers who were stopping at his ranch on the road to the Comstock, weary from their journey by stage-coach or horseback and hoping to find a soft bed and hot meal. Just six years had passed since he and his brother Joshua had arrived here, finding the valley mostly devoid of people but ideal for cattle ranching. Peleg certainly never dreamed he would

soon be running “some kind of hotell [*sic*],” as he described his house in one of his frequent letters to his parents back home in Rhode Island. Indeed, the two brothers had only one goal in 1857 when they headed west: Go to Kentucky and buy some “choise [*sic*] stock” and push them across the continent to California, where they would set themselves up as cattle ranchers and supply beef to the miners toiling away on the Mother Lode.

The plan had worked fairly well until they arrived in western Nevada (still part of Utah Territory) in late fall and their cattle were too tired to make the final push over the Sierra. As they searched Washoe Valley and the Truckee Meadows for a place to spend the winter, they ran into several Mormon families who were reluctantly heading back to Utah in response to an urgent

call from church leader Brigham Young, who feared a confrontation with federal troops over the polygamy issue. The Brown brothers picked up about 1,000 acres with natural meadows and abundant water at the bargain price of \$250. Peleg set up housekeeping in a little stone house on their land close to the booming geysers of Steamboat Springs, while Joshua hurried over Carson Pass to San Francisco. There he took a ship back to Rhode Island, with

Prospectors discovered nearly pure silver deposits laced with gold just 13 miles away, on the slopes of a bare mountain soon to be home to Nevada’s first boomtown, Virginia City.

Now scores of miners, bankers, merchants and teamsters driving freight wagons pulled by oxen plodded by his front door on Virginia Road. He realized he could supplement his income by offering them food and lodging if he had a bigger house. His large vegetable

garden and abundant supplies of beef, lamb and cheese were already much appreciated by travelers who hadn’t seen fresh food for weeks.

It wasn’t until he met a young lady on a passing wagon train – his future wife – that he realized his dream of building a large house which could accommodate guests on the second floor and his own children on the ground floor. In a March 1864 letter to his parents, he

wrote that he will furnish all the lumber from his own trees nearby and that the \$4,000 price for the construction will produce “one of the best houses in this part of the country.”

The next year he splurged on a new barn, hay press and blacksmith shop. In the 1870s, when the Virginia and Truckee railroad tracks connected the new town of Reno to Carson City, the tracks ran right behind the ranch house and Peleg built a loading dock for passengers, hay and lumber. Brown’s Station was an important stop on the line until the 1950s, when the V&T ceased operation.

In 1878, Peleg donated the huge sum of \$2,400 for the extension of the Steamboat Ditch from the river above Verdi to Steamboat Creek near his ranch, bringing much-needed irrigation



The Damonte Ranch House on Old Virginia Road as it looks in 2014.

plans to bring his wife and two children back to Nevada the next summer, along with another herd of cattle.

Peleg’s first winter in the Truckee Meadows was lonely indeed. In 1857, only a handful of men lived here, scattered around at trading posts on the various emigrant trails crisscrossing the valley. In his letters, he longed for “some kind of society,” but his only companions were two young men he hired to milk his cows and make butter and an occasional Washoe Indian who supplied him with fresh “salmon trout” from the Truckee River. Finding the little stone house far too cold for comfort, he built a little house of lumber from his own trees and put the stone house to its best use: cold storage for his dairy products. Then suddenly the quiet pastoral scene was transformed in spring 1859.

The Peleg Brown / Louis Damonte Ranch (continued)

water to South Meadows ranchers. He also donated the land for the Brown School, where a one-room school house was built in 1878. When it proved too small, a large brick school was built on the site, which is currently used by the Washoe County School District as an office building. The “new” Brown Elementary School was erected nearby, on Spelling Court, in 1989.

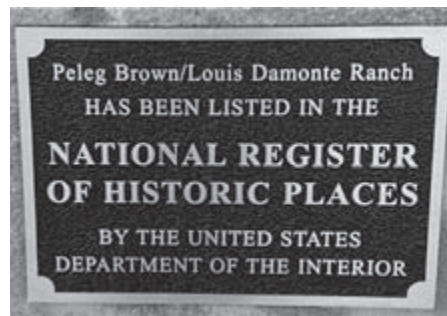
Peleg and his wife Elizabeth raised four children, the oldest of whom (Albert) ran the ranch after his father’s unexpected demise at the age of 42 in 1878. Peleg’s death apparently caused Elizabeth to suffer mentally for several years afterward, and she was temporarily committed to Dr. Clark’s Asylum in Stockton, California. Elizabeth recovered eventually and passed away in 1918, leaving Albert to co-manage the ranch with his brother-in-law George Wilcox until most of the family was gone. In 1939, the ranch was put up for auction and Louis Damonte bought it.

An optimistic but illiterate young immigrant from northern Italy, Damonte had arrived in the United States in 1911 with only \$2 to his name. Working with other Italians in the valley, Louis and his wife Louise gradually bought up thousands of acres of farm and ranch land before they added the Brown Ranch to their vast empire in 1939. Louis learned to read and write in Italian first and then English, in order to sign paychecks of his many employees. As Reno grew, the Damontes sold land to Boeing Aircraft for the new airport, as well as what is now known as the Double Diamond ranch to department store magnate Wilbur May.

Louis Damonte was a visionary when it came to water for the South Meadows, continually deepening and maintaining the Steamboat Ditch and nearby streams. Indeed, ditch rider Nick Gardella described Louis as a “self-educated engineer who could look at a piece of land and tell how many acres it contained, how much leveling it needed

and how much water to run – without any instruments.”

As the new owners of the old Brown ranch house, Louis and Louise Damonte unwittingly made a supremely important decision. They basically did nothing to it, other than replacing the old stone foundation with a cement basement and the old stoves with a central furnace. Even when they remodeled the upstairs in 1955 and expanded the tiny



The National Register plaque at the Damonte Ranch House.

bedrooms into fewer, but bigger bedrooms, they still didn’t make enough changes to cause trouble later.

That trouble didn’t appear for 40 years, but in 1994 the news was devastating. According to plans, the new freeway to connect Reno with Carson City would go right through the living room of the iconic ranch house. Ben Damonte, Jr., was in charge of the house by then, having inherited it from his father, Ben, Sr., and the only thing to do was get it placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The process was fairly easy and quick, for nobody contested its placement. It had not been visibly altered since 1864, clearing the way for its listing on the Register. The house and about eight acres were spared, forcing the freeway to make a wide curve around the property.

Meanwhile, the 7,000-acre Damonte Ranch was in the cross-hairs for urban development, and the Damonte family knew they couldn’t save all of it. Ben Damonte, Jr., went up on a hill

overlooking his ancestral land and video-taped the monstrous earth-movers in action, ripping into his family’s once-green fields of alfalfa. To this day he still hasn’t watched that tape. Shopping malls and subdivisions now fill much of what was once broad, green pastureland.

In August 2014, Ben and his wife Anna Maria (“Pinkie”) graciously opened their home to a limited number of tour participants in honor of their home’s 150th anniversary, which also happened to coincide with Nevada’s Sesquicentennial. Docents from the Great Basin Costume Company regaled visitors with tidbits about the history of the house and its many interesting photographs and antiques. Later in the day, the newly-arrived plaque from the National Register of Historic Places was officially dedicated and placed on a large stone in front of the house. A couple of the youngest members of the Damonte family were ceremoniously charged with maintaining the venerable old house in the future. “Remember that this house is a gift and it is your duty to take care of it the best you can,” Ben Damonte told the toddlers. 

Information for this article is adapted from *The Land of the Buckaroo: Historic Ranches of Western Nevada*, by HRPS member Holly Walton-Buchanan, Ph.D., published by Jack Bacon & Company, Reno, NV, December 2013.

Holly is a former Washoe County School District teacher and is the author of *Mackay Memories 1908-2008: The First 100 Years of the Mackay School of Mines, Historic Houses and Buildings of Reno, Nevada* and her latest book, *Land of the Buckaroo: Historic Ranches of Western Nevada*, highlights the important role that ranching and farming in western Nevada played in the state’s development.

HRPS Home Tour Sets New Records

Article and Photos by Sharon Honig-Bear

Even rain and surprisingly cool temperatures couldn't deter a hearty group of history lovers from attending the 5th Reno Harvest of Homes Tour. The Tour has reached new heights, topping 1,000 participants for the first time. We counted almost 900 ticketed people in attendance (about a 16% increase from last year) and over 100 incredible volunteers. The Tour raised \$22,000 for the Neighborhood Preservation Fund, to be used to fund grants to improve older buildings in Reno neighborhoods. This net income was also a hefty increase over last year.

One of our guests said it best: "Each home had its own charm."

Each year's Tour has had its own character and we called this one our Bookends Tour,

since we offered a home in each of Reno's two conservation districts that serve as the bookends, with three homes in Southwest Reno in between. We featured homes in both the Powning's Conservation District and

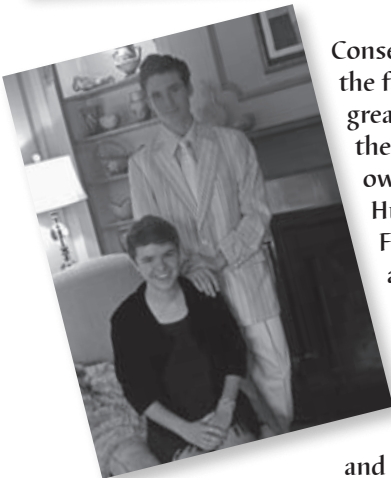
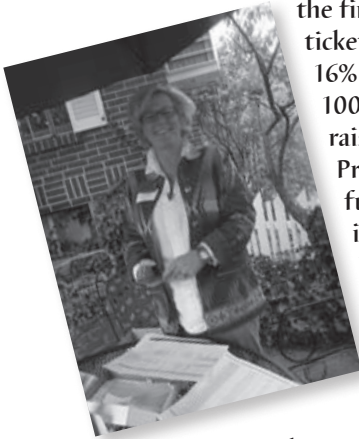
in the Wells Avenue Conservation District, illuminating the fact that there are homes with great character found throughout the city. Special thanks to the owners of the five homes: Jack Hursh, Nancy and Tim Gilbert, Francoise Batteauw, Doug and Lisa Bennett and Loretta Wright. Although all the homes had their fans, the standout on this year's tour was 587 Ridge St., elegantly and authentically restored and expanded by the Bennetts.

There were some innovations this year and one of the most appreciated was the

ability to view the entire Tour Program in advance on the HRPS website. This allowed participants to prepare better and enjoy the fine writing and information contained in the Program. We also happily placed vintage cars at three of the sites and want to applaud Clay Carlson, Loren Jahn and John and Yvonne Fuller for bringing these beauties.

Some of the homes had wait times but the attendees took it in stride for the opportunity to experience the pleasures of these classic residences. "We are looking into ways to avoid waits in future Tours," commented Chair Sharon Honig-Bear. Some ideas, like holding the Tour over two days or giving assigned times at homes, aren't practical, but many other options will be considered.

One of our favorite comments came from Dawn (Ayer) Rusk, whose father E.J. Ayer bought Greystone Castle at auction on the Court House steps in 1938 for \$6,005.30 — and whose family lived in Greystone Castle until 1998.



HRPS Home Tour Sets New Records (continued)

"Your house tours are wonderful, and my mother would be so pleased to know that her beloved cottage was honored by your society."

We would like to bring special recognition to the amazing leadership team that pulled off this multi-faceted event. This team includes Committee Members and Home Hosts—many are both—and they provide the guidance and stability that are necessary to ensure a safe and pleasurable experience for all: Cindy Ainsworth, Byllie Andrews, Sandi Bitler, Phyllis Cates, Rosie Cevasco, Terry Cynar, Charlotte Eckmeyer, Ellen Fockler, Marcia Growdon, Debbie Hinman, Sharon Honig-Bear, Jack Hursh, Elizabeth Iverson, Nancy Manfredi, Marty Matles, Joy Orlich, Denise Page, Tracy Soliday, Dave Vill, Charlotte Voitoff, Shirie Wallace and our Volunteer Co-Coordinators Jean Green, Rosemarie Nelson and Brian Cueva.

Beyond our volunteers, there are many others to thank for the Home Tour success. Students from the Performing Arts Center at Damonte Ranch dressed in costume for the event. We couldn't

reach as many people without our valuable ticket outlets. Sundance Bookstore again topped the sales chart but all the vendors did their part. Thanks to returning ticket outlets St. Ives Florist, Ryrie's Art and Home and Rail City Garden Center. We were happy to welcome new outlets at Moana Nursery, Freckled Frog, Napa-Sonoma Grocery Co. and Paper Moon. Other thanks go to Renown Health, Raley's, Kenneth N. Bickford, Anthony R. Velasco, windowinserts, VSAarts of NV, Café DeLuxe, RBC Wealth Management, Charlie B Gallery, Sage Green Design, Kitty Howard Realtor, Race 178, Wild River Grille, Antiques and Treasures and Kathy Williams Realtor for Program ads. Public awareness was supported by Sharon Walbridge, Jean Green, Sharon Honig-Bear, Greg Newman and House Detective, Dickson Realty TV, Guy Clifton and the *Reno Gazette-Journal*, and Alyx Sachs for coverage on Fox 11 and KRNv.

The Tour, based on popular demand, will be back in 2015. If you are interested in getting more involved with the Tour Committee or have a lead on a house you would like to see on next year's Tour, please contact Sharon Honig-Bear at sharonbear@sbcglobal.net.



The Missing Piece of Reno's Divorce History

by Kim Henrick

First of all, this is not an article about the history of Reno's divorce trade—or, if you prefer, Reno's divorce *industry, racket, mill, colony, headquarters, mecca, or capital*. That history (which generally spanned the first 60 to 70 years of the twentieth century) has been reported, analyzed, romanticized, mythologized, ridiculed, celebrated, scorned and defended from every conceivable angle for decades. You won't find anything new here about that.

This article is about what hasn't, before now, been attempted with this important and historically-significant part of our city's story. As I write this, a team of researchers is tackling the monumental task of consolidating, organizing and presenting to the general public, mountains of divorce-related media such as magazine articles, diaries, poetry, postcards, books, correspondence and court records, in addition to photographs, paintings, maps, music scores, films, interviews and audio recordings (for a partial list). Much of the available material that will be used is primary data (as opposed to second- and third-hand accounts) and will for the first time be readily accessible to us all, so we may research this important part of our history and draw our own conclusions.

Imagine visiting a website and clicking on an audio file to hear the reflective voice of a Reno divorcee who was stung (or in some cases *liberated*) by a divorce action. On the same site, quickly access an amazing bibliography of resources on the subject for your further research, or read an article from a top national magazine from the 1930s about its take on Reno's thriving business. View postcards and drawings that spotlighted the divorce trade and often exaggerated the humor of the times. See photographs of celebrity divorcees (like actress Mary Pickford) and scenes at our Washoe County Courthouse (at times referred to as the "House of Divide"). See some of the homes and boarding houses and

divorce ranches that catered to these "refugees," while they fulfilled their residency requirement, and realize how the divorce trade affected so many aspects of our community. Learn how the divorce industry helped Nevada survive during the Depression, while many other states sank to their lowest point.

On this website you'll be able to read about the pressures brought upon our state legislature to change the original (1861) residency period of six months to one year in 1913, then back again to six months in 1915, then down to three months in 1927, and finally to the



Bryana Dickens and Mella Harmon examine Judge George A. Bartlett's divorce case records at UNR Libraries, Special Collections Department. Photograph courtesy Kim Henrick.

incredibly-short residency period of six weeks in 1931. Find out the "grounds" upon which a divorce could be based, like the most common grounds of "extreme cruelty of a mental nature," according to divorce historian Mella Harmon. Read from court records (many from an extensive 13-box collection once belonging to Judge George A. Bartlett) and empathize with *real* people from our past, who for better or for worse, paid a significant price (literally and emotionally), to maneuver within the

walls of our courtrooms and the ever-changing laws of our state, in order to end their marital bonds.

The end product of this massive undertaking, what I'll call The Project, will be an online exhibit tentatively titled "Illuminating Reno's Divorce Industry," and the work is in progress today in the Special Collections Department of the University of Nevada, Reno, Libraries. Funded by a \$79,500 grant awarded by the Nevada State Library and Archives, it is estimated to take a year and wrap up around July 1, 2015. Coordinating and co-curating The Project is Donnelynn Curtis, Head of the Special Collections Department. Mella Harmon, adjunct assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Nevada, Reno, and recognized expert on Reno's divorce trade, serves as co-curator and project historian. Assisting Mella is intern Bryana Dickens, a UNR anthropology student, and Alicia Barber, Ph.D, acts as project consultant and advisor. To facilitate the size of The Project, it will generally be broken up into three sections: (1) the laws and their effects on society, (2) how divorce worked (from the viewpoints of the various participants) and, (3) depictions of the industry as found in magazine articles, films, fictional and academic writings.

Reno's divorce trade spawned a language all its own, with many of the terms and expressions so familiar now they need no attribution, such as the familiar "Sin City" and "quickie divorce," and "the cure." Thanks to pop culture at the time, many Americans learned of Reno's divorce trade through popular magazines.

In 1909, Allen D. Albert Jr. wrote an article for *Munsey's Magazine* and was using the already-familiar description of Reno as the "divorce headquarters of the United States." [Note: The residency requirement for the plaintiff in a divorce

The Missing Piece of Reno's Divorce History (continued)

action in South Dakota, the country's previous divorce headquarters, was changed in 1908 to one year. That left Nevada as the only state requiring a divorce seeker to stay only six months to become a bona fide resident.] Coverage of Reno's divorce trade could be negative and judgmental, but some was surprisingly positive, or at least benign. The title of Albert's article, "Reno, the Refuge of Restless Hearts," sounds rather disheartening (no pun intended), but his first-hand account describes our city in an almost-magical fashion: "It lies, as the Psalmist wrote of another mountain settlement, like a jewel among the hills. As in the hollow of Mother Nature's hand, it rests secure in its mountain amphitheater; and the tips of all the fingers that hold it are snow." In a matter-of-fact fashion Albert discusses the divorce laws of the time and describes the daily routine of the "two hundred" refugees "of all classes."

In 1932, a year after the residency requirement was reduced to six weeks, *The American Druggist* published an article by Lyman N. Clark titled, "Running a Drug Store in America's Great Divorce Center Is A Heartbreaking Job." The article is about pharmacist N. E. Wilson, who worked out of the handsome Masonic Temple building across from the Federal Building on North Virginia Street. Wilson laments the constant turnover of the migratory clientele who visited Reno for the "cure." After six weeks here, many obtained their freedom and moved on. According to Wilson, his losses were from fewer sales of perfumes, cigarettes, candies, cameras and banana splits (called "Lover's Delight" in his store). According to Clark, "The untying of the tied, Reno's biggest and best paying industry, is serious enough, viewed from any angle. But many of the visitors view their Reno sojourn as a perfectly swell vacation, and their purchases are typical of people away on vacations." It sounds like phar-



Divorce caricature by popular Reno artist Lew Hymers, no date. Courtesy UNR Libraries, Special Collections Department.

macist N. E. Wilson was less heartbroken over the endless flow of dissolved marriages he witnessed, than he was over the loss of his migratory cash cows.

You (or your parents or grandparents) might remember the interesting *Life* magazine cover on the June 21, 1937, issue. It showed a newly-divorced lady kissing a pillar in front of the Washoe County Courthouse. (Getty Images wants a great deal of money to publish that cover in this *FootPrints*, so in lieu of that, local photographer and author Paula Riley agreed to re-enact that famous pose for this article.) Not sur-



Local Reno photographer and author Paula Riley re-enacts the pose shown on the cover of the June 21, 1937 LIFE magazine. Photograph courtesy Kim Henrick.

prisingly, this issue of *Life* showed several photographs of prominent people, divorce ranches, drinking and gambling, and even a few images of Reno's red-light district. To its credit, though, it also included a few photographs of churches and some everyday people of Reno. On the flip side, in December of that same year, the *Saturday Evening Post*—so closely associated with the quaint, common-citizen drawings of Norman Rockwell—focused *only* on the divorce scene and ignored anything to do with the *everyday* side of our community, upsetting some vocal residents.

A critical component of The Project is providing access to the voices (in audible and transcribed form) of actual people involved with a Reno divorce at one time. A recent Associated Press article by Martin Griffith quoted Donnelly Curtis: "Reno changed the national attitude about divorce. We're finding a feeling of liberation from the letters of women we have in our collection." Co-curator Mella Harmon added, "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."

The Project is hoping to talk to people from all over about their Reno divorce experience. If you can share a story, please call 775-682-5640 and leave your name and contact number. Someone with The Project will contact you for an interview. And please spend some time online next summer learning about this important part of our history. 

Information for this article, if not listed in the article, is from an Interview with Mella Harmon on August 7, 2014.

Kim Henrick is member of HRPS and the HRPS Editorial Staff.

Message from Your HRPS President

Byllie D'Amato Andrews

After almost one and a half years as president of the board of HRPS, I am finally getting a grip on this job, which brings challenges and new learning opportunities each week. In my Spring 2014 President's Message, I wrote about HRPS' place in Judith Sharken Simon's *The Five Life Stages of Nonprofit Organizations*. HRPS is ready to move solidly into Simon's Stage Three: Produce and Sustain. The primary question for this stage is "How can we sustain the momentum?" In the next six months, your board will be looking at ways in which we can guarantee that our organization and all of its wonderful programs continue to produce and sustain.

A look back at 2014

The added attention to Nevada History in this year of celebrating Nevada's Sesquicentennial spiked the interest in HRPS' programs. Throughout 2014 we had unprecedented attendance numbers come out for our Historic Walking Tours, our monthly Programs, and our Harvest of Homes Tour. Even after moving to the Laxalt Auditorium with over double the capacity of Mount Rose Elementary School, we unfortunately had to turn people away from our February, March and October programs because we had reached the capacity set by the Fire Marshall. We were able to work with the Washoe County Libraries to offer the February and March programs and we are currently working to arrange another presentation by Richard Hill, who, in October 2014, showed home movies of Reno and Northern Nevada taken in the 1920s and 1930s.

HRPS continues to work with other city groups to further our mission of promoting Reno's historic resources. Barrie Schuster has been giving walking tours to groups from the Midtown Merchants Association to help them appreciate the history of buildings on and around the Virginia Street Corridor inside the Midtown boundaries. As a result, she has

not only educated the merchants about the buildings that house their businesses, she has created a new HRPS Historic Walking Tour for our 2015 season.

Change is on the Horizon

With time and growth comes change. Jack Hursh and Cindy Ainsworth will be retiring from their HRPS jobs — Jack has been Program Chair for fifteen years. Both Jack and Cindy want to devote more time to working on the Neighborhood Preservation Fund Committee. We welcome Steve Davis, former Assistant Director of Nevada Humanities and noted Nevada historian and documentary photographer, who has agreed to assume the Chairmanship of the Program Committee starting in 2015.

The board will be grappling with the loss of HRPS Administrator, Cindy Ainsworth who will be resigning her position at the end of 2014. Cindy will continue to be a HRPS volunteer extraordinaire and assist whenever she is needed.

Felvia Belaustegui reports that new schools have requested to participate in our Fourth Grade Education Program. With the increase in schools, HRPS welcome two new volunteer members, Donna and Paul Erickson, who will be accompanying Felvia, Terry Cynar and Jerry Fenwick on the next fourth grade field trip.

Other changes in the future for HRPS will be the addition of two or three new board members to replace those who have resigned due to family and work obligations.

In closing, we welcome Charlotte and Dick McConnell and Jan E. Chik, our newest Lifetime members, who join 28 other couples and individuals who have made this commitment to HRPS. Income from Lifetime Membership is used to support our Neighborhood Preservation Fund. 

HRPS Neighborhood Preservation Fund 2015 Grant

HHRPS is pleased to announce the opening of its fifth annual Neighborhood Preservation Fund (NPF) grant season. Applications will be accepted starting January 1 and will be due March 31, 2015. Guidelines and application information can be found on HRPS' website at www.historicreno.org. For more grant information please call 775-747-4478.

The NPF allows property owners the opportunity to apply for grants for the rehabilitation of historical structures. Applications are reviewed by an awarding jury and priority is given to projects that complement and enhance original historical neighborhood character and the original architectural style of the structure. Structures must be located within Reno city limits, be at least 50 years old, or of historical and/or architectural significance.

Funds raised by the very successful annual HRPS Harvest of Homes Tour support the NPF Fund. Additional funding comes from HRPS' Lifetime Memberships. We encourage you to make an extra donation towards the NPF when renewing your membership. HRPS would like to see this fund grow so we are able to continue to offer these major grants. 



An NPF grant was awarded to repaint this lovely ca. 1898 Victorian style house at 216 E. Liberty Street.

HRPS Lifetime Members

Darleen Azizisefat
Jacqueline Black
Lynn Bremer
Florence Ann Burgess
Phyllis & Tom Cates
Jan Chik
Becky Czarnik
Betty Easton
Ted & Francine Gray
Melinda & Dan Gustin
John & Susan Hancock
Sharon Honig-Bear
Jan & Jim Loverin
Jon and Linda Madsen
Dr. Francine Mannix
Charlotte & Dick McConnell
Marilyn Melton
Al & Nancy Pagni
Butch & Susan Peachy
Marshall & Pat Postman
Jonnie Pullman
Hannah Satika
Tom & Leanne Stone
Terry & Fran Terras
Charlotte Voitoff
Sharon Walbridge
Betty Watts
Kathy & Scott Williams

Thank you for joining HRPS. There are many areas in our organization where your enthusiasm, skills and dedication will be invaluable to us. Please indicate your interest in serving on the following committees by marking the appropriate committees:

- ☐ **Communications Committee:** Media, public relations, newsletter, website.
- ☐ **Special Events Committee:** Fundraising, planning, organizing, soliciting in-kind donations.
- ☐ **Outreach Education Committee:** Walking tours, school curriculum, monthly programs, membership.
- ☐ **Preservation Issues Committee:** Preservation advocacy, public policy, grant writing, historical & architectural research.

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ZIP _____

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All contributions are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by the law.

Please make checks payable to HRPS.

THANK YOU!

Annual Membership Includes:

Free participation in walking tours

HRPS Quarterly (FootPrints). Preference (Check One):
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- ☐ New Member ☐ Renewal
- ☐ Student\$15.00
- ☐ Individual.....\$25.00
- ☐ Family (Children 18 yrs & younger).....\$40.00
- ☐ Business Contribution.....\$100.00
- ☐ Supporting.....\$100.00
- ☐ HRPS Angel.....\$250.00
- ☐ Lifetime Member\$500.00
- ☐ Additional donation to help our Neighborhood Preservation fund\$ _____
- ☐ Additional donation to help our Pat Klos Volunteer Award fund.....\$ _____

RV 4.15.2014/FO-DCD

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NHS Docent Training

Would you like to assist the Nevada Historical Society and its professionals by volunteering as a docent? To become a NHS Docent you complete a 4-hour training program, two shadow sessions and attend three lectures. You must become a member of the Nevada Historical Society and the Docent Council and work a minimum of 48 hours per year.

The next docent training will be **Friday, January 23, 2015, from 9:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.** at the Nevada Historical Society, 1650 North Virginia Street, Reno, NV 89503. For information, please call 688-1190, and ask for Acting Director Shery Hayes-Zorn.



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FALL 2014 PROGRAMS

Steve Davis – Program Chair; srdavis1941@gmail.com

Historic Reno Preservation Society's free programs offer an assortment of Reno historic topics. **All program events are on the 4th Wednesday of the month at 7:00 pm at The Laxalt Theater in the Nelson Building at 401 W. Second Street, Reno.** For more program information contact Steve Davis at srdavis1941@gmail.com or call 747-4478 and leave a message. More organization information can be found at www.historicreno.org or on Facebook.

Wednesday, January 28: Elvis, Marilyn, and the Space Aliens, A Look at Nevada Films. Robin Holabird examines the intriguing ways Nevada's movies combine with iconic people, characters and places. From James Bond to Area 51, world famous names fit the extremes found in the Silver State. Robin Holabird, movie reviewer at Reno Public Radio and a retired state film commissioner, provides photos and observations.

Wednesday, February 25: The 4th Street|Prater Way History Project. Historian and author Alicia Barber heads the 4th Street|Prater Way History Project, a collaborative effort initiated by the Regional Transportation Commission of Washoe County (RTC) in 2011. Dr. Barber will share stories from this historic Reno-Sparks corridor—once the Lincoln and Victory Highways and U.S. 40—through oral histories, photographs, maps, permanent displays, smart phone apps and a comprehensive historical website.

Wednesday, March 25: LaVere Redfield. Jack Harpster is a twenty-nine year Nevadan, who retired to Reno nine years ago. This program is based on his seventh and most recent book entitled, *The Curious Life of Nevada's LaVere Redfield: The Silver Dollar King*. The biography is look at the life of Northern Nevada's most famous and eccentric multi-millionaire, and a man whose outrageous antics were page-one news for four decades.

Wednesday, April 22, Let the Cowboy Ride: Ranch Life in Northern Nevada: Paul Starrs, a UNR geography professor, will speak about his decades of research on western ranching. A former cowboy himself, Starrs will discuss ranching in the Great Basin. Starrs is the author of several books, including *Let the Cowboy Ride: Cattle Ranching in the American West*.

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