

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist



Washoe County Courthouse in Reno, just a stone's throw from the Truckee River. *Photo courtesy of the Nevada State Museum.*

"Traditionally, divorcees coming to Reno to take advantage of the city's easy divorce laws threw their wedding rings into the river," According to the *Reno Gazette-Journal's* "Nevada Living" supplement (April 2001). "The trend may have started-or been fueled by-a scene in the 1961 film 'Misfits' in which Marilyn Monroe considered tossing her ring into the Truckee."

Some writers argue that ring tossing in what was once known as "The Divorce Capital of the World" is a myth. Others claim the legendary ritual began as a publicity stunt that was imitated by divorcees. People have been debating for years whether dropping wedding rings into the Truckee River is a long-standing tradition. Any trend started long before "The Misfits," the short story and screenplay written by playwright Arthur Miller following his Reno divorce in 1956 and subsequent marriage to Marilyn Monroe.

An early description of ring throwing can be traced to Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jr.'s first novel, *Reno* (1929). A journalist, the great-great grandson of railroad baron Cornelius Vanderbilt wrote the book after a divorce from his first wife in Reno in 1927. Vanderbilt may have read the first known account of throwing wedding rings into the Truckee River in a pamphlet titled *Reno! "It*

Won't Be Long Now" *NINETY DAYS AND FREEDOM*
(1927) while awaiting his divorce.

On page 24 of Vanderbilt's novel, one of the principal characters, John Gilbert Berkeley (J.B.), standing on a concrete bridge compares the Ganges and Truckee rivers. India's Ganges washes away Hindu sins and the Truckee is supposed to cleanse one's marital past. According to J.B., "the moment a divorcee is granted her final decree of freedom, she hurries to the river with her friends-and often the man she is to marry on the morrow-and standing upon the bank, and with some sort of prayer beginning: 'Here goes nothing,' she throws the wedding ring into the enveloping waters.-They say there is more gold now in the river's bed than was taken out by all the placer miners of the early days." A feature film *Reno*, released in October 1930 and based on Vanderbilt's novel, first introduced movie-goers to Truckee River ring-flinging.

Not long after Vanderbilt's novel appeared, newspapers throughout the nation first printed wire service stories and articles describing the "Reno custom."

"I want to tell you about wedding rings," wrote "Patsy" in a letter published in the *Chicago Daily News* (March 26, 1930). She identified herself as a "temporary sojourner" in Reno. "Every woman who gets a divorce has an unnecessary one and some of the men, too. Those who have a sentimental streak and want to put an artistic finish to their Reno adventure step over to the Truckee River, a stone's throw from the courthouse, and standing on the bridge over the place where the river is deepest, hurl the shining circlet into the tumbling torrent and beg it to roll down to the sea."

The entire letter smacks of hype, however "Patsy" probably visited "The Biggest Little City in the World" to compose the copyrighted account of her stay. She needed a geography lesson. The Truckee River flows northeast and terminates in Pyramid Lake and not the sea.

The Reno Divorce Racket (1931), includes a photograph of Mrs. Marjorie MacArthur and Mrs. Dorothy Foltz taking the "six-week cure" and "tossing their discarded rings into the river from Reno's 'Bridge of Sighs' . . . as they follow the custom of the liberated." Another photo on the same page depicts the Riverside Hotel, opened in 1927 after the state legislature reduced the length of residency from 6 months to 3 months. The photo caption reads in part: "Just a step to the judge for your 'Liberty bond' and then you kiss the pillar, and run for the 'Bridge of Sighs' to throw your wedding ring to the fishes!"

Life Magazine (June 21, 1937) ran a feature story on "Reno Divorce Seekers" and disputed any tradition of throwing wedding rings into the Truckee River. "A popular Reno myth has it that upon receiving a decree a divorcee rushes out, embraces and kisses the Washoe County Courthouse pillar, dashes on 200 feet to the Truckee River, [and] throws in her wedding ring," according to the *Life* reporter. "As every Reno citizen knows, she does no such thing. To depict the legend as a preliminary to blasting it, *Life's* photographer had to stage the scene on the front cover."

The *Life* expose did not squelch the myth. Another movie titled *Reno* was released in 1939 and a divorcee throws her wedding ring from the Virginia Street bridge into the river in an opening scene.

Journalist Max Miller, who authored the book *Reno* (1941), claimed that the Truckee River ring toss "originated a few years ago by some photographers for an eastern picture magazine. The story along with the pictures caught on somehow, so that today visitors believe it, even a few divorcees believe it. At no time have I seen a divorcee throw her wedding ring away in such a manner."

American Weekly (June 11, 1944) described author Inez Robb hanging around the Virginia Street bridge in hopes of glimpsing a wedding ring toss. "However, after the first fruitless weeks, I began to lose faith in the legend," bemoaned Robb. She was then told the last and maybe the first person to throw a ring into the river was British film actress Margot Grahame, in Reno for a divorce in 1936. The event was staged for a photographer using a ring purchased from a discount store. "The legend still persists," Robb noted, "but the rippling surface of the Truckee isn't constantly disturbed by showers of once-cherished bands of wedlock."

According to a United Press wire service story, datelined Reno, September 19, 1950, "A famous Reno legend that Nevada divorcees celebrate their new freedom by hurling their wedding rings into the Truckee River was demolished Sunday." The story went on to note, that after cleaning the river in downtown Reno, fifty Junior Chamber of Commerce volunteers with high hopes "of turning up some worthwhile loot" found only one wedding ring with the stone missing amid all the debris.

Whether or not there was actually a homegrown tradition of throwing wedding rings into the

Truckee River, many persons believed it to be true. The "tradition" may have been fakelore originating in promotional literature, then reinforced many times by publicity gimmicks. While not common practice, real wedding rings found their way into the Truckee because some divorcees acted on what they believed to be a tradition.

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