

Judge reminisces about two decades of weddings

By Cindy Coglianese

When lawyer Ralph Slocum was appointed as acting county judge in 1952, one of his assignments was to perform marriages in Lancaster County.

He performed this duty for over two decades until his retirement in 1977, but he never used "a little black book" to recite wedding ceremonies from. He is quick to boast of the ceremony that he memorized on strict orders from the county judge in the 1950s.

After diligent research to find the ceremony to memorize and use throughout the years, he found a standard ceremony and set about memorizing it.

Off the paper

"The first couple that I married—they were an older couple, real nice,—well, I had to ask them if it was all right if I read the ceremony off the paper because I didn't have it quite memorized," Slocum recalled.

"But the second couple that came in, I performed their marriage without reciting it from paper."

Slocum also recalled a time when he was told to visit with a couple before they were married. They were waiting for their license in his office.

"This tall black couple came in. The woman had on a bright green dress and purple shoes. Well, what do you say to a couple that are going to be married? I said to the girl, 'My, your dress is pretty,' and she said she dressed up special for the occasion.

Experimental wedding

"I told them they were the first black couple I had ever married. They said they were glad to be an experiment.

"Then I commented on what a healthy-looking couple they were and told them they'd have a nice family. The said 'Thank you, we have three already.' After that I decided no more conferences."

Slocum also recalls "sad times" when the state law prohibited marriages of caucasians to persons with other ethnic backgrounds. He said there were times he would have to refuse to marry couples.

"There were these airplane guys (referring to servicemen from the air base in Lincoln) from Canada or Alaska or somewhere who fell in love with Hawaiian girls. Well, I'd have to ask the girl what nationality she was and she'd be a quarter Japanese. But Iowa was ahead of us with their laws so I'd let them use my phone and call Council Bluffs so they could go over there and get married."

Student marriages

Slocum said he married many students from Lincoln's universities as well as performing marriages for servicemen from the airbase. One of the most memorable of the university student marriages happened on a "cold day in November."

"It was a hell of a cold day in November and this couple walked in barefoot. They were really well dressed so I said to them 'I've heard a lot about hippies but you're

the best dressed hippies I've ever seen'."

"They both were attending the university. The girl was from California and she told me if she married a Nebraska resident she would have to pay in-state tuition rather than the more expensive out-of-state tuition she had been paying.

'Barefoot marriage'

"I asked them if that was the only reason they were getting married and they told me they had planned on getting married sometime anyway. Then I asked them about their barefeet and they told me that that is how they lived in California—in bare feet. So that was my first barefoot marriage."

Slocum once was asked to marry a couple over channel nine on a citizen's band radio, the man in his truck, the woman in her car and Slocum in his car. Though Slocum said it would have been fun to pronounce a couple man and wife over the CB, he said he didn't want to do it.

More than once, Slocum was asked to perform wedding ceremonies in airplanes.

There were even times when a female couple would come to his office and ask if they could be married, but Slocum said it was the male couples who were most insistent that he marry them. Slocum said he would refer these couples to the Attorney General.

Appreciative couples

Slocum, though he preferred not to take tips, made \$40 to \$50 his first year performing marriages. Occasionally, a mysterious bottle of whiskey or box of candy would appear at his backdoor—no doubt a gift from an appreciative couple, he said.

During another wedding ceremony, in the sunken flower gardens in Antelope Park, the Hawaiian bride asked if Slocum would include a native rite in the ceremony.

The ritual, she explained, called for Slocum to put a dollar bill down the front of her dress immediately after pronouncing them man and wife. She told him that on the wedding night the first thing her new husband was to do was look for the bill.

Slocum, not wanting to spoil the wedding rituals of the bride's native land, agreed. After pronouncing the couple man and wife, Slocum said the biggest stir in the crowd came from his wife.

wedding supplement

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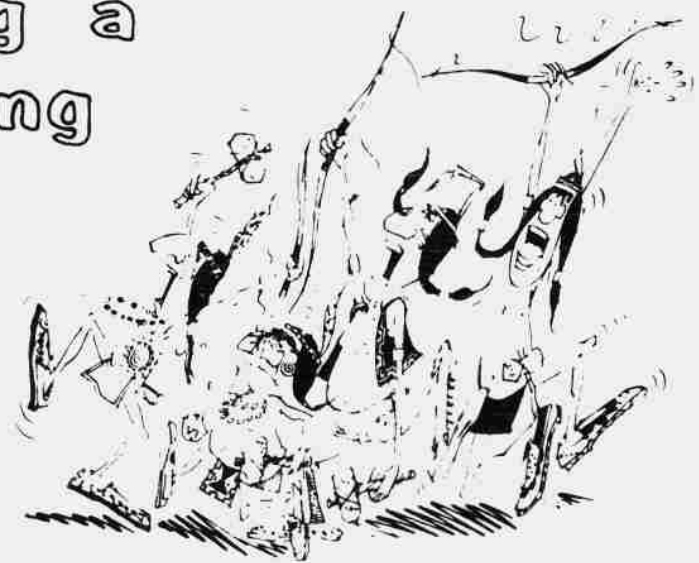
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