

Reno bids farewell to famous divorce bridge

By Scott Sonner, AP

RENO – Reno is bidding a bittersweet farewell to an iconic 110-year-old bridge made famous by newly divorced women – and a Marilyn Monroe character– who walked from the courthouse to cast their past and their wedding rings in the river below.

The “Wedding Ring Bridge,” also known as the “Bridge of Sighs,” became a symbol of Reno as the “Divorce Capital of the World” until other states relaxed their divorce laws in the 1960s.

The legend of divorced women walking a block from the Washoe County courthouse to the bridge over the Truckee River dates to the 1920s. Photographs, postcards and Hollywood movies depict the scenes – the most famous with Monroe in the 1961 film “The Misfits.”

Major demolition work is scheduled for the bridge, which will be replaced by a span critical for flood control.

The classic double-arched, concrete span is officially named the Virginia Street Bridge and was designed by architect John B. Leonard. Iron rails and ornate lamp posts adorn the bridge.

Historic preservationists had been pushing for its protection even before its addition to the U.S. National Register of Historic Places in 1980. Ten years ago, they celebrated its 100th anniversary with a re-enactment, tying ribbons to plastic rings and throwing them over the side.

“We were still trying very hard to save it at that point,” said Alicia Barber, an author and historian who was a Reno Historical Resources commissioner at the time.

“It’s played a central role in the city for more than a century,” she said. “It wasn’t just the divorce trade. It really anchors the civic heart of Reno.”

City planners eventually decided they couldn’t afford the nearly \$40 million in necessary repairs. Preliminary demolition work began a week ago and the bridge was closed June 2.

“A few people were down there last weekend to take one last trip over it,” said Jeff Bean, a vice president for the contractor, Q&D Construction.

The bridge was built in 1905 on the downtown site where the first permanent wooden structure crossed the Truckee River in 1860.

Kerrie Koski, the city’s project manager, said the bridge’s structural integrity ranks among the worst in Nevada. She said there wasn’t any feasible way to make it safer and still meet flood control objectives on the river that tumbles out of Lake Tahoe 40 miles upstream.

Reno has experienced significant floods at least once a decade since the 1950s. The biggest flood came on New Year’s Day in 1997 and caused \$1 billion in damage across six counties, \$700 million in Washoe County.

In 2005, the center pier supporting the bridge again became a choke-point where trees and other debris dammed up, flooding the casino district. The new “bowstring truss” bridge – expected to be completed next May at a cost of \$18.3 million – will be supported by arches above.

Researchers at the University of Nevada’s Special Collections Department are gathering historical accounts from individuals nationwide for an extensive multimedia online exhibit about Reno’s 20th century divorce trade.

Many mention the bridge tradition, which apparently was referenced for the first time in a 1927 brochure, said Barber, who's assisting project co-curator Mella Harmon, an historian and adjunct assistant professor of anthropology.

Cornelius Vanderbilt told the tale in his 1929 novel, "Reno," which was made into a movie in 1939. A scene features a woman tossing her ring after a "quickest divorce." In "The Misfits" shot in Reno in 1960 with co-star Clark Gable, Monroe played a depressed, divorced woman who contemplated doing the same before changing her mind.

"The big question is not whether rings were thrown into the Truckee River," Barber said, "but whether it began as a fictional story or really started as a spontaneous act."

It's uncertain how many women actually tossed their rings off the bridge, unlike Monroe's character.

New accounts include a woman who "thought that everybody just threw their wedding rings into the river so she did," Barber said. "She said her lawyer waded into the water and plucked it back out again and told her she needed to protect her assets."