

Joan Didion::Marrying Absurd

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Marrying Absurd

by Joan Didion



To be married in Las Vegas, Clark County's Nevada, a bride must swear that she is eighteen or has parental permission and a bridegroom that he is twenty-one or has parental permission. Someone must put up five dollars for the license. (Sundays and holidays, fifteen dollars. The Clark County Courthouse issues marriage licenses at any time of the day or night except between noon and one in the afternoon, between eight and nine in the evening, and between four and five in the morning. Nothing else is required. The State of Nevada, alone among the United States, demands neither a premarital blood test nor a waiting period before or after the issuance of a marriage license. Driving in across the Mojave from Los Angeles, one sees the signs way out on the desert, looming up from that moonscape of rattlesnakes and mesquite, even before the Las Vegas lights appear like a mirage on the horizon: "GETTING MARRIED? Free License Information First Strip Exit." Perhaps the Las Vegas wedding industry achieved its peak operational efficiency between 9:00 p.m. and midnight of August 26, 1965, an otherwise unremarkable Thursday which happened to be, by Presidential order, the last day on which anyone could improve his draft status merely by getting married. One hundred and seventy-one couples were pronounced man and wife in the name of Clark County and the State of Nevada that night sixty-seven of them by a single justice of the peace, Mr. James A. Brennan. Mr. Brennan did one wedding at the Dunes and the other sixty-six in his office, and charged each couple eight dollars. One bride lent her veil to six others. "I got it down from five to three minutes," Mr. Brennan said later of his feat. "I could've married them en mass, but they're people, not cattle. People expect more when they get married."

What people who get married in Las Vegas actually do expect—what, in the largest sense, their "expectations" are—strikes one as a curious and self-contradictory business. Las Vegas is the most extreme and allegorical of American settlements, bizarre and beautiful in its venality and in its devotion to immediate gratification, a place the tone of which is set by mobsters and call girls and ladies' room attendants with amyl nitrite poppers in their uniform pockets. Almost everyone notes that there is no "time" in Las Vegas, no night and no day and no past and no future (no Las Vegas casino, however, has taken the obliteration of the ordinary time sense quite so far as Harold's Club in Reno, which for a while issued, at odd intervals in the day and night, mimeographed "bulletins" carrying news from the world outside); neither is there any logical sense of where one is. One is standing on a highway in the middle of a vast hostile desert



saying "I do" .. the Las Vegas way.

looking at an eighty-foot sign which blinks "STARDUST" or "CAESAR'S PALACE." Yes, but what does that explain? This geographical implausibility reinforces the sense that what happens there has no connection with "real" life; Nevada cities like Reno and Carson are ranch towns, Western towns, places behind which there is some historical imperative. But Las Vegas seems to exist only in the eye of beholder all of which makes it an extraordinary and interesting place, but an odd one in which to want to wear a candlelight satin Priscilla of Boston wedding dress with Chantilly lace insets, tapered sleeves and a detachable modified train.



..get ir done!

And yet the Las Vegas wedding business seems to appeal to precisely that impulse. "Sincere and Dignified Since 1954," one wedding chapel advertises. There are nineteen such wedding chapels in Las Vegas, intensely competitive, each offering better, faster, and, by implication, more sincere services than the next: Our Photos Best Anywhere, Your Wedding on A Phonograph Record, Candlelight with Your Ceremony, Honeymoon Accomodations, Free Transportation from Your Motel to Courthouse to Chapel and Return to Motel, Religious or Civil Ceremonies, Dressing Rooms, Flowers, Rings, Announcements, Witnesses Available, and Ample Parking. All of these services, like most others in Las Vegas (sauna baths, payroll-check cashing, chinchilla coats for sale or rent) are offered twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, presumably on the premise that marriage, like a craps, is a game to be played when the table seems hot.



..you can see the arrow of Cupid's ways.

But what strikes one most about the Strip chapels, with their wishing wells and stained-glass paper windows and their artificial bouvardia, is that so much of their business is by no means a matter of simple convenience, of late-night liaisons between show girls and baby Crosbys. Of course there is some of that. (One night about eleven o'clock in Las Vegas I watched a bride in an orange minidress and masses of flame-colored hair stumble from a Strip chapel on the arm of her bridegroom, who looked the part of the expendable nephew in movies like Miami Syndicate. "I gotta get the kids," the bride whimpered. "I gotta pick up the sitters, I gotta get to the midnight show." "What you gotta get," the bridegroom said, opening the door of a Cadillac Coupe de Ville and watching her crumple on the seat, "is sober.") But Las Vegas seems to offer something other than "convenience"; it is merchandising "niceness," the facsimile of

proper ritual, to children who do not know how else to find it, how to make the arrangements, how to do it “right.” All day and evening long on the Strip, one sees actual wedding parties, waiting under the harsh lights at a crosswalk standing uneasily in the parking lot of the Frontier while the photographer hired by The Little Church of the West (“Wedding Place of the Stars”) certifies the occasion, takes the picture: the bride in a veil and white satin pumps, the bridegroom usually a white dinner jacket, and even an attendant or two, a sister or best friend in hot-pink peau de soier, a flirtation veil, a carnation nosegay. “When I Fall in Love It Will Be Forever,” the organist plays, and then a few bars of Lohengrin. The mother cries; the stepfather, awkward in his role, invites the chapel hostess to join them for a drink at the Sands. The hostess declines with a professional smile; she has already transferred her interest to the group waiting outside. One bride out, another in, and again the sign goes up on the chapel door: “One moment please– Wedding.”

I sat next to one such wedding party in a Strip restaurant last time I was in Las Vegas. The marriage had just taken place; the bride still wore her dress, the mother her corsage. A bored waiter poured out a few swallows of pink champagne (“on the house”) for everyone but the bride, who was too young to be served. “You’ll need something with more kick than that,” the bride’s father said with heavy jocularity to his new son-in-law; the ritual jokes about the wedding night had a certain Panglossian character, since the bride was clearly several months pregnant. Another round of pink champagne, this time not on the house, and the bride began to cry, “It was just as nice,” she sobbed, “as I hoped and dreamed it would be.”

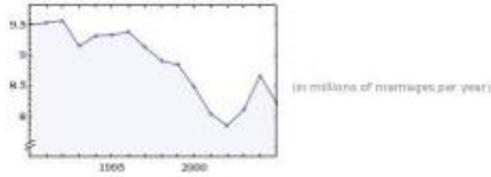
Joan Didion wrote this essay in 1967, which has since become part of classic literature. 40 years later, forget about marrying absurd in Las Vegas, it is not inconceivable to see in a future not too far ahead where marrying in itself will become an absurdity. Once created to provide an order and structure within the civilizations and then institutionalized as a ritual through religious ceremonies to make everyone practice it, it is increasingly viewed as an archaic, sentimental and purposeless tradition. Just as the religious institutions are being increasingly questioned with continuing human evolution, the societal practices are challenged and discarded at an even higher rate.

Joan in the essay refers to the merchandise “niceness” provided by Las Vegas to children who do not know how else to find it, how to make the arrangements, or how to do it “right.” While that might still be true, the reason for doing it “right” is now replaced by the disenchantment in doing it at all, without a truly clear purpose for having or wanting to go through the exercise. These stats depict the clear trend of increasing disillusionment in the institution of marriage – all over the world (*courtesy of info from Wolfram Alpha, I was able to search and compile this in a matter of minutes*):

China annual marriages

Result:
8.231 million marriages per year (2005 estimate)

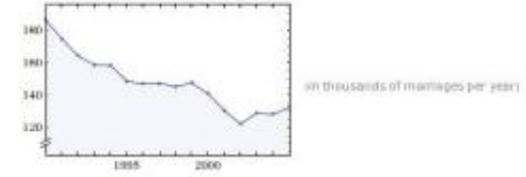
Annual marriages history:



Argentina annual marriages

Result:
132 720 marriages per year (2005 estimate)

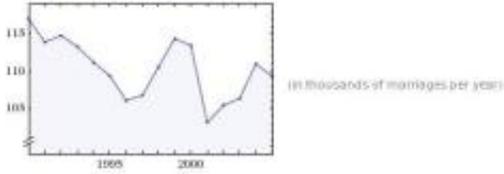
Annual marriages history:



Australia annual marriages

Result:
109 323 marriages per year (2005 estimate)

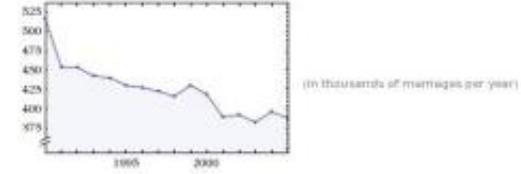
Annual marriages history:



Germany annual marriages

Result:
388 451 marriages per year (2005 estimate)

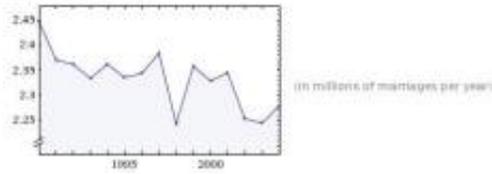
Annual marriages history:



United States annual marriages

Result:
2.279 million marriages per year (2004 estimate)

Annual marriages history:



a continuing rapid reduction in marriages per year through out the world

With that drastic downward trend, the absurdity of the Las Vegas chapels are soon to become a novelty for future generations not that far down the road.