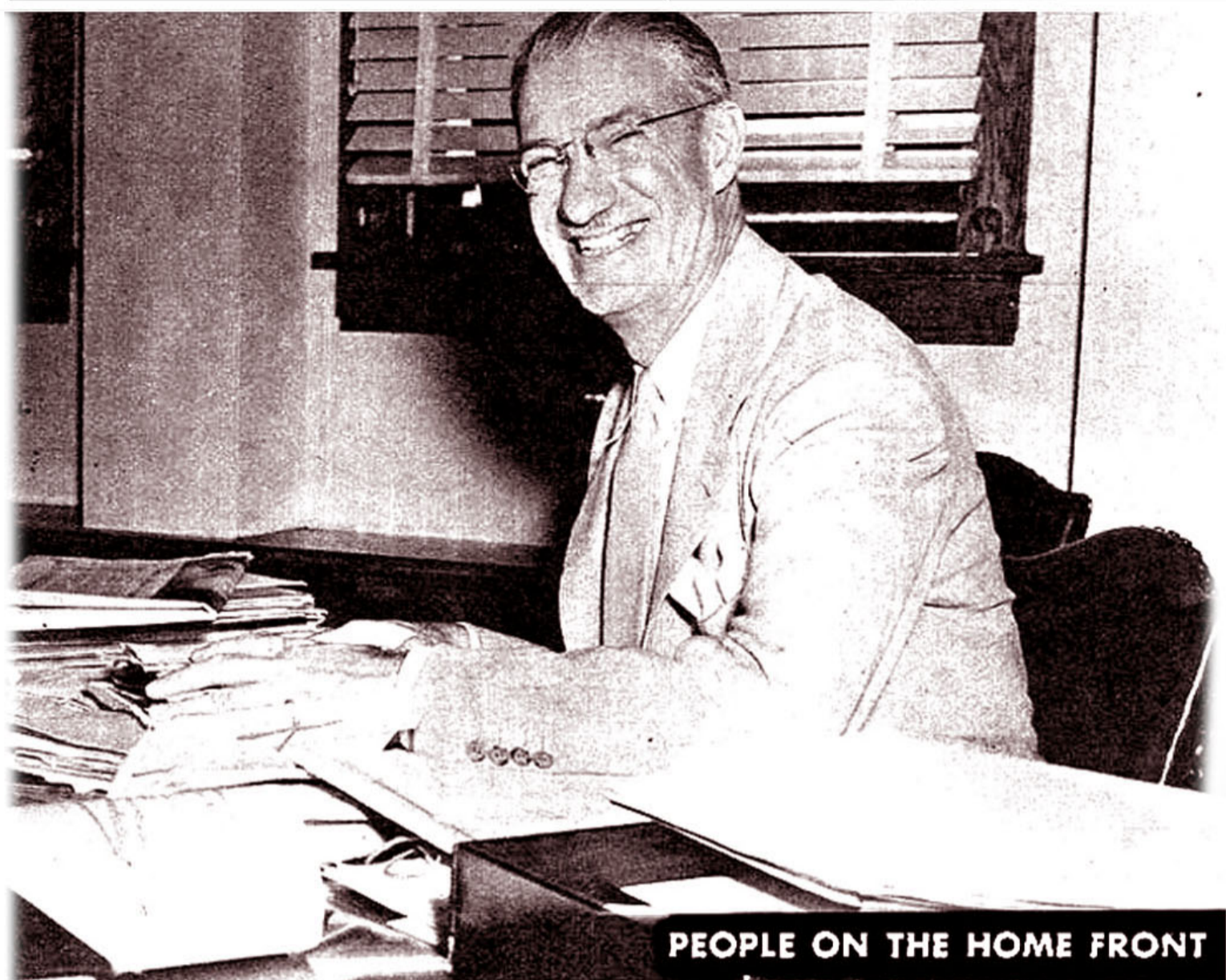


Most-Married Man in America



KANSAS CITY, KANSAS—In the county courthouse here, a tall, middle-aged man with gray hair and horn-rimmed spectacles stood beside a very pretty, very young girl. He held her hand in a casual way and stared abstractedly out of the window as a judge behind a desk intoned the solemn words of a marriage ceremony. The young woman sighed softly and her eyes were starry. When the ceremony was ended the tall, middle-aged man patted the girl affectionately on the back, gave her a fatherly kiss on the forehead and handed the judge a \$5 bill.

"Thanks a lot, judge," the bridegroom said.

"What's this one?" the judge asked. "The 38th or 39th?"

"The 39th," the other answered.

The bride, weeping a little, stood hesitantly in the center of the room. The tall man put his arm around her in nonchalant fashion and ushered her out of the courthouse.

"If you'll wait till I call my wife," he said. "I'll take you to lunch."

The bride just nodded her head as if his statement were the most natural one in the world. There wasn't anything wrong with it. Although Thomas H. Finnegan has been married 39 times and has never been a widower or got a divorce, everything was legal.

Under the proxy-marriage law of the state of Kansas, Finnegan takes the vows for overseas soldiers and sailors. And since Kansas is the only state in the Union in which people may be legally married by proxy, there's little doubt among the Kansas City courthouse crowd that he is the most-married man in America. Girls have traveled to Kansas to marry him from as far west as Los Angeles and as far east as Corona, Long Island.

Despite his 39 marriages, Finnegan has been happily married to the same woman for 21 years. A successful trial lawyer, he hasn't tried to get rich out of the proxy-marriage business. His fee for a ceremony never amounts to more than \$15.

Finnegan got into the marriage-by-proxy game purely by accident. In February 1943, at which time he was head of the Wyandotte County Bar

Most-Married Man in America

Association, he received a letter from a Miss Brown of the Chicago Legal Aid Bureau. "Miss Brown," Finnegan says, "wrote me that there was a girl out there who had been going steady with a sailor stationed at Great Lakes. They were madly in love and planned to marry but the sailor was abruptly ordered overseas. They still wanted to get married in the very worst way. Some Chicago lawyer mentioned to Miss Brown that he had heard of a marriage-by-proxy law and he thought that Kansas had it. Miss Brown wanted to know if I knew anything about it."

As a matter of record, Finnegan had never heard of such a statute, but he dug out his law books and discovered that the Chicago lawyer was right. Judge Clark E. Tucker of the Wyandotte County Probate Court told Finnegan that while the Kansas law appeared perfectly constitutional, few judges in the state had ever been willing to perform the proxy ceremony.

"Would you do it for a kid in the service who's busy with a few things in the Pacific?" Finnegan asked Judge Clark. Under the circumstances, the judge replied, he guessed he would.

So Finnegan wrote back to Chicago that if the girl wanted to come to Kansas City and be married by proxy, he would not only take care of the license but would act as bridegroom as well. In a few days the girl came to town and she and Finnegan were married, and now she and the sailor, so far as Finnegan knows, are living happily ever after.

A few weeks later Finnegan got another proposal from a Chicago girl, this one engaged to a soldier. Would Finnegan walk down the aisle again? Finnegan would be delighted. In a few months the lawyer was getting married on an average of twice a week.

Shortly before VJ-Day Finnegan had 30 future weddings definitely scheduled and at least 60 in the request stage. Before the war ended he was thinking of hiring an assistant—if he could get one. "Fellows around here are too damned bashful to help me," says Finnegan.

Finnegan, it may please absent bridegrooms to hear, dresses well for the marriage ceremony. His usual garb is a soft gray-flannel suit, a white shirt and a striped tie. He wears a carnation in his lapel and sees to it that the bride has a bouquet. Finnegan knows the marriage ceremony by heart. "If I go through 10 more of these ceremonies, I think I'll be able to recite the whole thing backwards," he says.

Most of the brides are extremely nervous and shy and though the modest lawyer himself won't admit it, his secretary says the girls feel thankful to be able to step up to the altar with such a dapper and understanding man as Finnegan.

"Frankly, the girls expect some old movielike character with a bald head and a big cigar in his mouth," Finnegan's secretary says. "And when they see the boss they're surprised. 'Gee, I didn't know lawyers were so cute,' most of them say."

After the ceremony Finnegan invariably takes the bride out to lunch. "I try to give her a little

Most-Married Man in America

advice and a few tips I've picked up in 21 years of married life," is the way he explains this part of the ritual.

The luncheon over, the bride usually goes straight back to where she came from. There seems to have been only one occasion on which the bride business disturbed the peace of the Finnegan home. An extremely good-looking girl from Chicago decided to get married in style. She brought along her bridesmaids, well-wishers, wedding dress and even rice, and hired a suite in a local hotel. All through the ceremony she kept calling Finnegan "Joe," her real husband's name. And she insisted that Finnegan come to the reception at the hotel.

"I rarely drink, especially in the daytime," Finnegan says, "but this ceremony made me nervous. It seemed too damned real. I had the guilty feeling I was committing bigamy. And at the reception some of the guests got a little tight and began congratulating me. So I took a snorter to buck myself up."

When Finnegan finally got home, it was past his dinnertime and he was a little mixed up about things. He had a hard time convincing his wife he hadn't been out on a binge. At last, however, everything seemed to be straightened out, and then he had to go and pull the boner of his life.

"I called my wife 'Elizabeth,'" Finnegan recalls sheepishly. "That isn't her name. That was the name of the girl from Chicago. From there on it was a rough night."

Although the incident marks the only time Finnegan's marriages ever interfered with his married life, his duties as the nation's outstanding proxy husband aren't always finished when he says farewell to the proxy bride. Most of the girls he marries keep up a correspondence with him, letting him know how their married life, if any, is getting on. Finnegan has so far had visits from four husbands for whom he served as stand-in. The visits, he reports, were very pleasant.

One girl who lived near Kansas City was about to have a child when her husband was sent overseas a second time. Finnegan went to the hospital with her and paced the floor in the best expectant-father tradition. "The girl was all alone and in that hospital, and anyhow it's best to have a man around at a time like that to bother the nurses and raise hell with the doctor," Finnegan says.

To date, only one of the Finnegan marriages has turned out badly. A girl he went to the altar with early in his proxy career recently asked Finnegan to handle her divorce. He wrote back that she ought to reconsider and to list all her reasons for wanting a divorce. He also wrote to the husband, suggesting that he tell his side of the case. The correspondence is still in progress.

"I haven't got them together yet," Finnegan says, "but I will. Those kids are wrangling over something very silly and unimportant. My wife and I had the same sort of argument 20 years ago."

Before the war ended, the Kansas City lawyer was planning to use his wife in the business.

Most-Married Man in America

Seems he had three requests from servicemen in the States who wanted to marry girls stationed overseas.

Mrs. Finnegan, having long ago recovered from the shock of being addressed as Elizabeth, takes her husband's many marriages in entirely good humor. "I don't mind how many girls Tom gets married to," she says, "just so he doesn't go on the honeymoons."

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