AMERICAN MARRIAGE LAWS IN THEIR SOCIAL ASPECTS: A DIGEST

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649463992

American Marriage Laws in Their Social Aspects: A Digest by Fred S. Hall & Elisabeth W. Brooke

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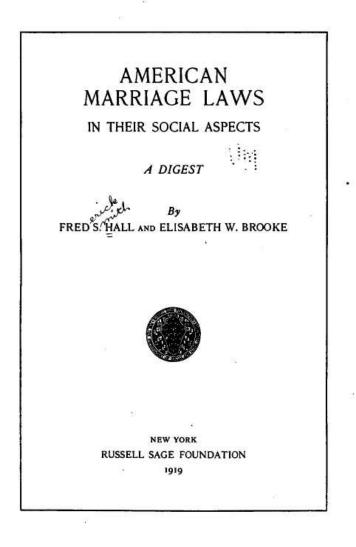
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FRED S. HALL & ELISABETH W. BROOKE

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Trieste



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PREFACE

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I have served for several years on the committee of a society for family social work to which have been referred its especially puzzling problems of individual welfare. In about three-fifths of all the cases so referred, the committee found that the core of the difficulty centered around marital maladjustments. (Their proportion in the whole work of the society, it should be added, would not be nearly so large.) These troubles of the Smiths, the Browns, and the Robinsons brought more forcibly to our attention than ever before certain ancient evils and certain proposed remedies. As a part of the general public, we had already noted the alarming increase in the number of divorces, but we had never fully realized before the close relation between divorce and our ill-devised, variously-administered marriage laws. We began to wonder why so much attention had been given to the defects of our divorce laws and so little to those regulating marriage. Of course, law is only a small part of the problem as compared with public education and early training, yet it shapes our social ideals, in part at least, besides having much to do with the practical adjustments of daily living.

To those who champion one wholesale remedy for marital unhappiness, the plans growing out of this committee work—plans for a series of brief studies to be made by the Russell Sage Foundation—will seem futile. To those, on the other hand, who believe in beginning where we are and in securing each advance step as we

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PREFACE

take it, statements that present the facts about the present laws, about their administration, and about the effect of both as observed in the lives of real people, will serve a useful purpose.

The first fruits of our endeavors will be found in a small book appearing simultaneously with this Digest—a study by Miss Colcord of Broken Homes and the social treatment of family desertion.¹

Mr. Hall and Miss Brooke have compiled the present summary of our marriage laws and of certain proposals made by others for their reform as preliminary merely to an inquiry into the way in which the laws on our statute books are actually administered. Their administration has even more to do with family welfare, of course, than have the laws themselves. This first part of the larger study is put out promptly, however, because it will be of immediate service to the many who are now at last becoming interested in marriage law reform.

Leagues of women voters are interested in bringing reason and essential justice into this much neglected field; so are the officers of domestic relations courts, the more socially minded members of the bar, the social agencies of the country, and the churches. All will be eager, therefore, to measure, with the aid of these pages, the width of the gap between the proposals for reform made by leading authorities and the actual laws of the various states as here summarized. And no one can note, in each state, the distance thus shown to exist between the possible and the actual, I believe, without becoming more interested in the subject.

Then, if readers will accept a further suggestion, their examination of the provisions in their own state could be followed by some inquiry into the way in which the statutes regulating marriage are enforced there. What, in detail, is the interpretation put upon the marriage laws in daily practice? How are licenses issued? How carefully is the intention of the law made clear to unsophisticated people? How are evasions punished? The authors of these pages would welcome any light upon these topics, which will constitute their next subject of study.

New York, May, 1919.

MARY E. RICHMOND.

¹Colcord, Joanna C.: Broken Homes, a Study of Family Desertion and Its Social Treatment. New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 1919.

4

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART I

SOME PROPOSALS FOR MARRIAGE LAW REFORM

PAGE
14 '
17
18
19
21 -
21~
22

PART II

THE MARRIAGE LAWS BY TOPICS

I. Introduction II. Summary of Laws by Topics 1. Common law marriages 2. Marriageable age 3. The marriage license		29 31 ~ 31 32 34
a. Requirement b. Where the License is Obtained c. Advance Notice, Objections, etc. d. Parental Consent e. Form of the License f. Record of the License g. Life of the License h. Other Requirements and Prohibitions	2.00	34 35 36 37 38 39 39 39
4. Solemnization		41
a. The Celebrant b. Fresentation of the License c. Form of Ceremony d. Other Requirements and Prohibitions		41 42 43 43

•

5

4

÷2

TABLE OF CONTENTS

II. Summary of Laws by Topics (continued)	
5. The marriage record	PAGE 44
a. Certificates and Their Distribution	44
b. Local Record	45
c. State Record	45
6. Inter-state relations	46 √
7. Certain other prohibitions	47
8. Other related subjects	47

PART III

THE MARRIAGE LAWS BY STATES

	PAGE		PAGE
Alabama	51	Nebraska	91
Arizona	53	Nevada	93
Arkansas	54	New Hampshire	94
California	56	New Jersey	96
Colorado	57	New Mexico	98
Connecticut	59	New York	99
Delaware	61	North Carolina	101
District of Columbia	63	North Dakota	103
Florida	64	Ohio	105
Georgia	65	Oklahoma	106
Idaho	66	Oregon	108
Illinois	68	Pennsylvania	110
Indiana	69	Rhode Island	112
Iowa	71	South Carolina	114
Kansas	72	South Dakota	115
Kentucky	74	Tennessee	116
Louisiana	75	Texas	118
Maine .	77	Utah	119
Maryland	79	Vermont	120
Massachusetts	80	Virginia	122
Michigan	83~	Washington	124
Minnesota	85	West Virginia	126
Mississippi	87	Wisconsin	127
Missouri	88	Wyoming	131
Montana	90		

6

.

PART I SOME PROPOSALS FOR MARRIAGE LAW REFORM

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