

Throwing rice in the Rotunda

Record numbers getting married at City Hall – it's 'cheap, quick and beautiful'

PHOTOS: TOM CARTER

By Tom Carter

"It's the place to get married on Friday," says commercial photographer Jim Ross of Sonoma, as he crosses his arms and leans back against the second-floor marble balustrade overlooking the City Hall foyer. Soon his clients will arrive, joining a multicultural stream of wedding parties that will tie the knot in style, one after another, that afternoon.

"It's cheap and quick," Ross says, "and beautiful." He nods up toward the spectacular, ornate dome. "The place is a landmark. And anyone can do it. It's like getting married by a justice of the peace."

Down the wide, glimmering, gray marble steps, where the palatial staircase fans out, another photographer is taking pictures of a wedding party in dark formal attire and sporting bright bouquets and corsages.



Jim Illig meets with a City Hall wedding party.

Their laughter and murmuring resound softly and lay down a pleasant ambience.

Up a second flight of steps from the landing, a man in a black robe is standing in the center of the rotunda area, starting to intone the words of the wedding ceremony. An anxious, if not beatific, Latin bride and groom stand before him. Their party of relatives, friends and scrubbed, wide-eyed children are solemnly poised. Off to the side near the elevator, parties wait, chatting nervously. Following the 10 a.m. series of marriages, this is the start of the 1-3 p.m. group of appointments. "We are gathered here...!" Jim Illig booms in a voice that rises above the din.

Illig is one of 24 deputy marriage commissioners who perform these ceremonies as volunteers five days a week for the County Clerk's Office. And he will work nonstop for 2½ hours, pausing every half hour to rush downstairs to the clerk's office to check in three or four more couples that he will then marry back upstairs.

At 6-foot-3, with silver hair, he is a striking figure, if not the paragon of authority. As a man devoted to laudable performances, he has familiarized himself with the brief biographies in his folder of those to be wed. He wants to feel a con-



Jim Illig, deputy marriage commissioner, has performed 6,750 City Hall weddings.

nection with the couple. He prohibits sunglasses because eye contact is as fundamental as the proprieties of the vows. People are, after all, pledging their profound love to each other, and his words will complete the legal union.

He once had to dismiss a young man high on drugs; another time, he flatly refused a request for nose rings to be exchanged.

By his estimate, he has performed about 6,750 marriages since 1993. It's a role he plays every Friday afternoon. It gives him a break from his job as director of government relations for Project Open Hand just three blocks away.

Now he turns to plead for quiet from the people in the wings. Decorum intact, he continues, his dynamic intonations rising and falling, infusing mounting emotion in those within earshot.

"Mutual love between two people is the greatest gift..." he continues to the transfixed bride and groom.

City Hall has been a sometimes wedding site since even before Joe DiMaggio married Marilyn Monroe here in the 1950s. But 10 years ago, the load for the eight-person County Clerk's Office staff – which deals with other duties besides marriage licensing – just got to be too much.

"The marriages were performed only at noon and not by appointment," says Nancy Alfaro, the office's director. "The staff couldn't get away for lunch until 2 or 3 p.m. And it was extremely chaotic."

The solution was to create a stable of volunteer deputy marriage commissioners, chosen as carefully by Alfaro for their special attributes as she would her own office staff. They started with two in 1992, went to 10 in 1993 and now have 24.

The process is simple enough. Couples get a license for \$80 at the office in Room 168, a well-lit place with a 20-foot-high ceiling and nice wooden counters. About 4,000 public

licenses and 2,800 confidential licenses (records closed to the public) were issued in 2001. The couple has 90 days to get married by anyone qualified to do so. But City Hall is attractive, and many couples like the nonreligious aspect of the marriage there, although some later also have a church wedding.

If numbers for 2001 hold true for this year, roughly half the marriage licenses issued in San Francisco will be for ceremonies performed at City Hall.

Booking a week or two in advance, couples have a venue choice of a room on the second floor, the balcony overlooking the foyer or the rotunda nearby. The ceremony fee is \$60 and it goes to the clerk's office. The deputy marriage commissioners don't even take tips.

Most of the 27 ceremonies scheduled on Fridays are performed in the most popular spot, the rotunda. The Monday through Thursday loads are lighter, unless they fall on Valentine's Day or New Year's, the prime times to wed. In 2003, Valentine's Day falls on a Friday. For the anticipated onslaught, perhaps 120, Alfaro will have commissioners at all three stations, morning and afternoon.

For a few dollars more, couples can request ceremonies on weekends and holidays, too. Five weeks before Christmas, 40 couples of the expected 100 had signed up for this one. Commissioners are available who speak Spanish, Cantonese, French, German and Tagalog.

The commissioners perform domestic partnership marriages, too, but only a few per month. The popular time for them is the group marriage day in March when Mayor Brown officiates. Requests are made through his office, although the clerk's office makes the arrangements.

The number of wedding ceremonies performed in a year, 3,800 by Alfaro's estimate, is up from the 2,500 during the City Hall renovation three years ago. While the building

was being retrofitted, 1997-99, the clerk's office operated out of rooms at 25 Van Ness Ave. Before that, they were temporarily at 875 Stevenson St., but few ceremonies were performed there.

To Illig, the venue is a "civic cathedral, Mayor Willie Brown's greatest achievement," and he is thrilled with his special role to which he has brought fine credentials. For a year in the mid-70s he was a Paulist priest at Old Saint Mary's at Grant and California. He went back to school and earned a Ph.D. in social clinical psychology at the Wright Institute in Berkeley and has ended up heavily involved in social services. He is president of the Coalition of Agencies Serving the Elderly and also the HIV AIDS Provider Network. He additionally serves on the steering committee of Human Services Network, which oversees some nonprofits working with the city.

Illig is impressed with the large number of tourists and foreigners who come to be married at City Hall, to say nothing of the rich span of ethnicities. His aim is to embrace the moment with them, creating, as Nancy Alfaro says, "a rewarding experience for them." In solemnizing, he becomes the figure they have dreamed about, but he reminds them he is technically not the judge they often mistake him for. He reassures to quell anxieties. But when the tough guys with the big muscles and tattoos get "blubbery," to use Illig's word, well, he gets choked up, too.



Andre Strahov and Evelina Erlich kiss after the ceremony.

Marriage at City Hall inherently has, even for the bare bones, quickie union, a dignity that is quite the contrast to the garish Nevada marriage mills with their rent-a-witness and plastic-flower features. Still, Las Vegas is a popular honeymoon destination. Recently, it was the choice of a Russian couple—but they couldn't seem to find the time.

Evelina Erlich, formerly of Ukraine, and Muscovite Andre Strahov came meekly unannounced into the clerk's office with a Bulgarian friend as their witness, as required for the license. They met five years ago at Temple in the Avenues. This trip was Strahov's fifth time back to San Francisco. They had talked of marriage. And Friday, well, it was a beautiful day. Could they get a license? Could they get married that day?

Even with no appointment, and the calendar full, they were accommodated. They didn't have rings. The bride to be, a divorced mother of two, runs a child care facility in the Sunset. She took a ring off to use in the ceremony.

Strahov, a Moscow restaurateur and store owner, couldn't speak English, so the Bulgarian translated. Pat Goldberg, the first of the original two deputy marriage commissioners in 1992, married them in the rotunda. Strahov struggled and did a passable job repeating vows. Each of them by previous marriages had 15-year-old sons who were getting along. "We're both business people, too," the bride said. "And I used to teach English. He got himself a pretty good catch."

They kissed afterward. And that Friday became their new beginning.

"I now pronounce you partners in life..." Illig says, his voice rising at the end of his five-minute monologue, then pausing dramatically before completing the poetry "... and man ... and wife!"

From the glint in his eye he could have just liberated a thousand helium balloons. The groom, a white man in a blue suit, and the bride, a Vietnamese woman in a white dress and veil, fold into each other's arms. Two men whistle. And everyone in the rotunda applauds, but none as loudly as Jim Illig. ■