

The following account is from Dukeminier & Johanson, "Wills, Trusts, and Estates, 4th edition," Little Brown & Company:

In October 1966 a 95-year-old South Pasadena millionaire, Albert Otis Birch, with an estate estimated at \$200,000,000, married his 59-year-old nurse, Pearl Choate. This was the climax of a wild 15-month chase across California, Mexico, and Texas – Birch and his first wife periodically disappearing with Pearl, only to be found by investigators lured by Birch's prospective legatees.

Pearl Choate was many times married. She had six husbands, one of whom she married twice. She also had a lengthy criminal record including an acquittal for murder in 1938 (she shot a ranch hand in the back, but was successful in her claim of self-defense). She spent 12 years in a Texas prison for murdering a carpenter who had obtained a civil judgment against her. Pearl had come to work for Birch and his 93-year-old wife, Estelle, in the summer of 1965. They procured her through a nurses' registry after Estelle developed cancer.

In April of 1966 Pearl moved the Birches from their 32-room South Pasadena mansion to her small home in Compton so she could better attend them. Two months later the Birches and Pearl disappeared. They were discovered in Mexico where Otis Birch told investigators he had come of his own volition for his health. Not satisfied with this state of affairs, several distant relatives of Birches (they had no close relatives) petitioned in Los Angeles to have a guardian of the persons and conservator of the property appointed for the couple. A cousin of Estelle, Martha Tulleys, was appointed guardian, and a bank was appointed conservator. Meanwhile the Birches and Pearl had disappeared again and were traced to Harlingen, Texas, where Birch fractured his hip in a fall. A local physician ordered Birch not to be moved for 30 days.

Dr. C. Adrian Heaton, president of California Baptist Theological Seminary, which had received large sums of money from Birch during his life and presumably would come in for a handsome gift at his death, flew to Harlingen only to find that Birch had been taken from the hospital and driven by Pearl 500 miles across Texas to Midland. There the trail was lost, and the whereabouts of the trio was not discovered until after Estelle died in Breckenridge, Texas, on October 7, 1966. Estelle's body was returned to Los Angeles and buried in Inglewood Park Cemetery.

After Estelle died, Harlan Moehn of Iowa, a relative of Estelle Birch, located Pearl and Otis Birch in Breckenridge, Texas, where one of Pearl's brothers ran a tavern. Moehn and Dr. Heaton discovered that Pearl had filed an adoption application to be named Birch's daughter. Moehn arranged to see Birch on October 25; the discussion became heated and Pearl attacked Moehn with a butcher knife, screaming, "I'll cut your heart out." He filed a complaint against Pearl, and she was arrested and booked on suspicion of assault with intent to commit murder. After posting bond in the case, Pearl put Otis Birch in a car and drove across the border to Altus, Oklahoma, where they were married in a flashy red sedan by a justice of the peace. Birch, recovering from hip surgery, was lying on a mattress in the back seat of the car when the ceremony was performed. "This was not a marriage of passion ... he suggested it to protect my interests," Pearl told newsmen. She described the churchmen and relatives seeking to wrest Birch from her as "a bunch of vultures."

Harland Moehn then sought a writ of habeas corpus in a Breckenridge court to release Birch from the control of his new wife. Pearl brought Birch to court, where he was the star witness. Almost totally deaf, he heard little of the proceedings. He had a new hearing aid, but Pearl had not yet obtained batteries for it. When handed questions in writing, Birch answered in a booming voice that he was not being restrained against his wishes and that he did not want to return to California where, he said, the “authorities” wanted to test him for insanity. The judge ruled that Birch was not being held against his will by his bride. Pearl put her arm around Otis Birch, and they both smiled broadly for photographers.

In the meantime the attorney general of California, overseer of charitable trusts, entered the case. His investigators turned up a very interesting bit of information: Pearl had married a Compton carwash worker in a proxy marriage in Tijuana, Mexico, September 2, 1965. Thus informed, the attorney general of California asked the county attorney in Oklahoma to prosecute Pearl for bigamy. But it was discovered that Mexican authorities had failed to record the marriage certificate, and under Mexican law this final step is required for a valid proxy marriage. Hence the bigamy suit was called off.

In November 1966, Birch and his bride disappeared from Breckenridge. Her relatives refused to say where they had gone. They were spotted briefly in Wichita Falls. The Harlingen law firm Birch had hired during his one-month stay there – with an unpaid bill of \$7,500 for legal services – discovered them in December occupying a house trailer in Odessa, Texas. From there they moved the trailer to Dallas, where Birch died on March 16, 1967. The next day Pearl had Birch’s body entombed at the Laurel Land Mausoleum in Dallas.

By a handwritten will dated May 14, 1966, Birch devised all his property to Pearl. A prior will of September 7, 1965, had left his estate to sixteen charitable organizations, mainly Baptist institutions. The charitable organizations claimed Birch was mentally incompetent and unduly influenced by Pearl when he made the 1966 will, but, after an extended lawsuit, in 1970 the 1966 will was ordered probated by the district court in Dallas, but only about \$50,000 in assets could be found.

After entombing her husband’s body in Dallas, the widow Birch promptly had another run-in with the law. She quarreled with a tenant, alleging the rent was overdue. When a neighbor called the police, she fired a .22 caliber rifle, barely missing a policeman and a bystander. On January 23, 1968, a jury found Pearl Choate guilty of assault with a deadly weapon. She served 20 months in prison and was released in March 1970.