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SARAH WINCHESTER AND HER HOUSE OF MYSTERY

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Sarah Winchester, her life.....	3
The house that made her a legend.....	6
The mystery.....	11
Final thoughts.....	17

Introduction

I have been enthralled by the mystery and legend that Sarah L. Winchester has left San Jose with. Almost everyone living in Santa Clara County is familiar with the tall yellow house intertwined in gardens and statues, yet, people do not know the real story behind this huge enigma of a house and the person who made it all happen, Sarah Winchester. It would be extremely interesting to do a study of her character, however there is little information on her character that was actually written throughout the span of her life. The legend of Sarah L. Winchester has been twisted and interpreted in many ways and all we can do as observers is to examine and study these sources and determine ourselves whether many of the “Winchester Mystery House” tales are fact or fiction.

While Sarah Winchester was living in San Jose, and in the process of building her extravagant house, she was the victim of many vicious rumors and much gossip, all of which contributed to the legend that is still very well known today—perhaps better known than many of the actual facts about her. Such oddities of the house like the window built against the wall, the stairs that led to nowhere, skylights on the floor, and Sarah’s “séance” room were all reasons that made people have their suspicion’s on Sarah’s character.

Upon Sarah Winchester’s arrival to San Jose, America was being flooded with immigrants. Many people in those times were resentful by the fact that she was building such an enormous mansion while the struggling immigrants lived in tiny houses and farms. To Sarah, however, this house initially did not at all seem unusual for when she lived in the East people were used to being surrounded with palatial Victorian mansions.

Resulting from today’s frame of reference people seem to have blown certain events in Sarah Winchester’s life out of proportion. Tourists are however more partial to

learning about the mystery and legend behind Sarah Winchester than really understanding the simple course of events that occurred in this eccentric woman's life. People readily want to know about the "evil" spirits Sarah tried to conjure in her séance room but they reluctantly want to know of the suffering old woman who agonized over her painful arthritis.

In this paper I will try to show the many different dimensions of this extraordinary woman, focusing on her life in San Jose. Sarah Winchester has left the city of San Jose with a unique mark, people from all walks of life are enthralled by this "mystery" of a woman. Through doing research on her life, I feel as though I have acquired part of my city's history, and I hope to share this feeling through my paper.

Sarah Winchester- Her life

Sarah Pardee grew up in an influential home in New Haven, Connecticut. Sarah was very delicate, weighing less than 100 pounds at a height of four feet, ten inches. Sarah was a well—rounded young women, she knew how to speak four different languages, read, and had a passion for the piano. For her times she was most certainly a very cultured young woman. On September 30, 1862 William Winchester wed Sarah Pardee, and they seemed very happily married. Sarah at the time was twenty-five while William was twenty-four years old.

William became quite successful through the rifle industry. William's business, the Winchester Repeating Arms Company, continued to prosper after the Civil War due to the westward movement. Winchester's guns were later on labeled as "the gun that won the west" and became famous as "killing more game, more Indians and U.S. soldiers than any other weapon in this nation's history."

In their third year of marriage, Sarah gave birth to a baby girl whom the couple named Annie Pardee. Tragedy however hit the family soon, and baby Annie died at only a month old. This blow hit the couple very hard and Sarah never conceived again. After eighteen years of marriage another blow was to hit this family. William Winchester died after a battle with tuberculosis on March 7, 1881. Sarah was at the time only forty-four years old when she became a widow. After the death of her husband Sarah was depressed and doctors told her it was best for her to move and get a change of environment. As a result of this advice, three years later, in 1884, she arrived in San Jose, California.

Although Sarah was now a widow her financial position was not in any way jeopardized. Besides, the fortune she brought with her to San Jose, an alleged \$20 million, she has an average income of one thousand dollars a day from her holdings in the

Rifle Company. Her holdings were increased 2000 upon the death of her mother-in-law in 1897.

When she came to California, she brought along with her favorite servant, whose hobby was carpentry. Because of this, she bought an unfurnished nine-room farmhouse with the intention of giving it to her sister. When the remodeling began however, she became so enthused with the project that it became her thirty-eight year hobby, until her death in 1922. Initially, she wanted more added to the home for her relatives when they came to visit. This however, became the least important reason for her additions to her home. Her hobby was also efficient you could say for those that she employed to “maintain” her home. Because Sarah was a cultured lady, her home became her artistic expression, and most importantly it kept her mind off of her melancholy past.

She enjoyed gardening very much. She had a greenhouse on the estate, and one of her favorite past times was to spend time in her luscious garden. Because of her severe arthritis she was sometimes unable to be close with nature, however she had a room in the North Conservatory that enabled her to be close to her plants and flowers.

Sarah also has a remarkable memory. As a matter of fact, she prided herself in knowing where everything in the house was located, even the material in her large and spacious storerooms. The story goes that shortly after one of her employees fixed the gate, she asked him if he had taken six screws from the storeroom. On his affirmative reply, she informed him that they were solid gold and requested that he use something cheaper.

Generosity was another one of Sarah’s many virtues. Throughout the course of her life she made many munificent donations to charities, and most of the time she

donated large sums of money anonymously. One of her favorite charities was the General Hospital Society of New Haven, Connecticut. Besides these big contributions, she was concerned with her neighbors; it was noticed that she sent food daily to the settlers in the area, including a man dying of tuberculosis.

Her closest companion in her later years was her niece, Mrs. Marion Isabel Marriott. It was said that she nursed Sarah in her old age, as Sarah developed an acute case of arthritis.

Sarah Winchester died on September 5, 1922 of natural causes. It is still not yet known if she passed away in San Jose or in her other home in Menlo Park.

The house that made
her a legend

Sarah Winchester's house was completely designed by herself standing today with 160 rooms, 10,000 windows, 2,000 doors, 47 fireplaces, and 40 complete staircases. Originally Sarah's house stood at a whopping seven stories high, the earthquake of 1906 however caused the collapse of the top three stories leaving the four stories that are standing today. The house was built so firmly that even with the three-story destruction, the damages it suffered were only minor compared to the many effects of the earthquake on other buildings.

Although Sarah lacked any formal architectural training she designed almost every single room in her mansion with the exception of the Palace Ballroom. Oddly enough, her designs were not formally laid out, she would do her designs on wrapping paper or anything else she could get her hands on. When a mistake was made in building the rooms, corrections were almost never made. Therefore windows came running into walls, doors opened into walls, the staircases led to nowhere, and most of the other oddities of the house resulted in rumor and eventually legend.

Sarah had a love for invention and her house includes many of her innovative ideas, which at the time seemed quite unconventional. Among her many inventions was her servant-call buttons, push-button gas lighting, a window catch device patterned after the Winchester rifle trigger and trip hammer, wool insulation of the house, an inside crank to open and close outdoor shutters, three elevators, molded soap holders, her custom built shower which sprayed from the shoulder down, and her trap door conservatory in which plants could be watered simply by lifting a series of trap doors.

When the house was opened after Sarah's death in 1922, \$25,000 worth of material was found in one of her stock rooms, intended for future building products.

Among the materials in this stock room were windows containing Belgium optical glass. This glass, although very pretty, is obsolete because it distorts the images of anything seen through it. Also found in the stock room were windows of spider web pattern, with jewels in it. The spider web pattern is said to be Sarah's favorite, and this pattern is found in windows throughout the house. Because Sarah suffered from arthritis she could not easily move from part of the house to another. She then built what were called "easy-riders"- better known as the "goofy stairs" to help her get from one place to another. In addition she had three elevators for her convenience.

All the parquet floors in the home were a work of expert craftsmanship by one single man. He spent thirty-six years of his life putting these floors in the Winchester home, many of them creating optical illusions because they were so precisely constructed. Every floor in the house was $\frac{7}{8}$ inches thick, while common floors were a mere $\frac{1}{2}$ inches thick. It is said "she wanted her floors to last forever because she thought she would last forever."

Her "Blue Séance Room" was the place she went to for total privacy. The novelty of this room is that it has one entrance and three exists. It is not advisable to take the second exit because it is an $8 \frac{1}{2}$ foot drop through a metal screen and then into the kitchen sink. The third exit is really a closet door, and can only be opened from the inside, as there is no knob on the outside and it is always locked.

Her gazebo, located off the Trap Door Conservatory was one of her favorite places. When she wanted to enjoy a beautiful day in the sunshine she would spend her time in this area. The gazebo contains twelve pillars all turned upside down. It is said that

she did this because of an Egyptian proverb that says evil spirits will be warded away by upside-down pillars.

Another interesting feature of the house is the “seven-eleven” or “Lucky” staircase. It is called this because there are seven steps one side and eleven on the other. So you can go down seven steps and up eleven, and raise yourself 3 ½ feet, placing yourself on the second floor, or the floor you were originally standing on. Or you can go down eleven steps and up seven, lowering yourself 3 ½ feet placing yourself on the floor you were standing on. There are six more stairs in the center making it even more confusing. You can go down seven turn right go down six more and you will end up in the laundry room on the first floor! From there you can go six up, turn right, go up eleven, ending up in the room adjacent to the linen room.

The Hall of Fires has four fireplaces and three hot air registrars. When Sarah’s arthritis would get especially painful she would go inside this room, close the door, and turn on all the heating systems. This heat would then relieve some of her tremendous pain.

The Southern Conservatory is filled with windows. As a matter of fact, there are a total of 200 windows in this room alone. Also included is the double skylight. She built a skylight in the floor, and one in the ceiling directly above it, intending to spy on her servants. Actually, all she could see was her reflection in the window because the two windows reflected off of each other. She therefore, could not see them, but they could perfectly see her.

When Sarah wanted a new dress, instead of buying the amount of material needed, she would buy the whole bolt so her dress would never be duplicated. When she

finished with the material, she stored the rest of it in large Redwood cabinets in the Southern Conservatory. She chose Redwood because it contained a natural insecticide. Because she did not like the look of Redwood, she had the wood grained- a very long, expensive and now obsolete process- to look like pine. When the cabinets were opened after her death, there was enough material to open a small yardage shop.

When her garage was opened after her death, found inside were two Pierce-Arrow limousines, and one French Renault, each with less than a hundred miles on them.

Found in the laundry room are two of Sarah's most practical inventions- these were the scrub boards and the soap holders molded in the sink. She patented these and made over \$25 million in royalties.

The main reception room has many interesting features. The number "13" confronts us in the number of panels in the ceiling. Along the top of the walls of the room is a wooden panel. Carved into this panel are daisies, each one taking approximately three hours to carve.

Most of the wood used in the home is West African mahogany. The pillars by the fireplace are made however of Japanese Cherry wood. These pillars, like most of the other pillars standing in this home are upside- down. But, as the story is told "to confuse the spirits more, the carvings were carved right side up." The main entrance hall, which opens directly into the main reception room, also has a ceiling with 13 panels, and daisies carved in wood along the top of the wall. This room, being the main entrance to the mansion, is where a thousand-dollar door stands from Tiffany's. Also in this room, located under the servants' call buttons, were buttons for gas lighting. Sarah was one of the first people on the West Coast to have push button gas lighting.

The Palace Ballroom was the only room that Sarah did not design. She contracted to have it built for \$9,000. This is extremely expensive when in those days comfortable residences were built around \$25,000. The reason for its great expense was that there were no nails used in building any part of it, with the exception of the floor. The entire room was put together with wood pegs, glue and wedges. It remains incomplete today because its building was discontinued after the earthquake of 1906.

In one of the first floor rooms of the house lie more of the building's unusual character. A cabinet on one side of the room looks like an average size until opened, when you discover there is only $\frac{1}{2}$ inch storage space between its door and the back wall of the cabinet. In contrast, the cabinet opposite the first one contains the back thirty rooms of the home. There is also a pillar in this room. At first it was said that this was the missing 13th pillar from the gazebo, but when examined one can see there is no connection between them. The purpose of this single pillar still remains a mystery because there is a full $\frac{1}{4}$ inch between the top of the pillar and the ceiling it appears to be holding up.

All of these "mysteries" are a result of Sarah Winchester's desire to add, create, and innovate for 38 years.

The mystery

The people of San Jose were overwhelmed and shocked by this monster of a house Sarah had built. They could not make sense out of her house as they stood there standing, looking at it with total awe. This is where the legend began, and once started, it flourished without end.

The legend went something like this:

“During a Connecticut thunderstorm, Mrs. Winchester’s husband and baby lost their lives in a tragic fire. The distracted widow turned to Spiritualism and was advised to take a trip around the world. This she did, visiting mediums, spiritualists and yogis in Europe and India. Foretelling her future, one seer warned her of all the countless thousands of departed souls slain by her husband’s rifles; she must protect herself and atone for such mass murder. She was told to plan a castle and continue its building indefinitely because as long as it was under construction she would live; cessation would prove immediately fatal.”

An alteration on this story was that she learned from the mediums why her family had been killed and she would be the next, because the ghost of all the victims of the Winchester rifles were seeking revenge. She could save herself by building them a final resting-place.

The rumors that developed on this house eventually turned Sarah Winchester and her home into legend. There are however, logical explanations for every one of these rumors. The alleged “secret passageways” were simply shortcuts for the servants. The statue of Chief Little Fawn, an Indian with a raised bow and arrow, was not a tribute to the victims of the Winchester rifle, he was aiming his arrow at the statue of a deer 200

feet away. The deer became hidden by foliage, which gave the people cause to speculate on the Indian's intention.

The "ghost music" late at night was simply Sarah exhibiting her musical talent. The extra food she ordered was not to feed the spirits haunting her house, but for the servants, especially around the holidays. The bell in the gable was rung at 12 at noon, and at 5 PM to call the servants to the house. If it is true that they were rung again at 12 midnight and 2 AM, it was not for the purpose of calling the spirits in and out of the house.

Theodore Roosevelt was even a part of the legend. There are three versions: first, that he came to the front door of the mansion to ask admittance, and when told to go around to the back, was so humiliated that he left; that the Chamber of Commerce sent a request to Sarah that they might show the President her house, and were flatly refused; and that the President only drove by the house and did not stop. She apparently did not want the President and his party touring her house.

She supposedly went into her "Blue Séance Room" to contact the spirits, when in fact, she went there to look back on momentous of her deceased family.

The 1906 earthquake provided new ground for the Winchester legend. It was thought that Sarah, found on the verge of insanity in her room after the earthquake, told her servants that the spirits had come to her during the night, saying that she had spent too much money on the front 30 rooms of the house, and if they weren't boarded up, they would cause another earthquake the following day. So it was done.

Although the story sounds a bit fishy, the earthquake is a great explanation for some of the strange parts of the house. For example, this accounts for stairs leading into

blank walls- they probably led to wings that no longer exist; it can also account for two-story doors opening to the first floor- with an eight foot drop; or the blind chimneys. As for building mistakes, Sarah did not care much for them, ignored them, and went right on building.

The number 13, supposedly her favorite number, appears in many places in the house. There can be no rational explanation for the markings of “13” seen in her house. There are 13 roughened blocks in the carriage entrance, 13 amber stones in the spider web windows, there are 13 bathrooms, the 13th containing 13 windows, most staircases have 13 steps, ceilings with 13 panels, pantries with 13 shelves, drain covers with 13 holes, the 13 parts of her will, and last, but not least, she died at the age of 85; $8+5 = 13$!

The most mysterious feature of this house is the Ballroom. The two windows on either side of the fireplace have inscribed on them saying “wide unclasp the tables of their thoughts” and “These same thoughts people this little world.” The only clue is that they are both taken from works of Shakespeare.

Many of the mysteries will remain unsolved— Sarah was the only one who knew these secrets, and so they were buried along with her, most likely forever!

Her will

Sarah Winchester was a very generous woman and this quality is reflected through her will. Her will contained thirteen parties as follows:

In the first section she directed that all her debts and funeral bills be paid. For this purpose, she bequeathed \$3,000, requiring that it be "safely invested" and that the income should be used to keep up with the cemetery lot.

In the second section she bequeathed sums of money to certain servants of hers. She also bequeathed sums of \$4,000 and \$3,000 respectively, to the "Visiting Nurses Association" and the "Home for the Friendless" both charitable organizations located in New Haven, Connecticut.

In the third section she bequeathed sums of money to close relatives.

In the fourth section she set up trust funds in varying amounts, the incomes of which she bequeathed to many relatives. After the death of particular relatives, the principal sum of these trust funds would be transferred to the General Hospital Society of New Haven, Connecticut.

In the fifth section she gave her sister, Isabel Merriman, the house and lot which she occupied in Palo Alto.

She gave her niece, Marian Marriott, the house she occupied in Palo Alto, and also gave her all pictures, furniture, household goods, jewelry, etc.

In the sixth section she required her cemetery lot be taken care of, and "that no interments other than my own shall be permitted therein, except such as I may hereafter provide for."

In the seventh section, she divided up the remaining of her estate among her relatives. These remains were set up in trust funds, the relatives receiving the incomes

only until their deaths, after which principal would be given to the General Hospital Society.

In the eighth section she directed that all money she bequeathed to the General Hospital Society should be used in the best interest of the William Wirt Winchester Annex, and for the best treatment of tuberculosis patients.

In the ninth section she directed that all inheritance taxes be paid so that the amounts of money bequeathed would be the same amount received by each beneficiary.

In the tenth section she formally appointed the Union Trust Company of San Francisco as the executor of her will.

In the eleventh section she indicated the assumption that everything bequeathed in her will was owned by her, and that she had the right to bequeath it as she saw fit. Also, she provided that anyone disputing or arguing about the validity of the will should be immediately removed from the will and not receive anything.

In the twelfth section she states that in the event that any one part of her will is ruled out by law for any reason, all other parts should remain valid.

In the thirteenth and final section, she declares any previous will of hers null and void.

The will is dated and signed by her and three witnesses on March 23, 1920.

She endowed her favorite niece more than anyone else, mainly because she was her closest companion. Her niece received all of Sarah's belongings, which included her furniture. At the time of Sarah's death, her house was 75% furnished. Her niece decided to take the furniture and auction it off. It took six moving vans working for six weeks to remove all the furniture from the house.

During her life, Sarah set up trust funds for her servants so they could always collect their paychecks. Although not mentioned in her will, these trust funds were not discontinued after her death, and the servants kept collecting salaries after her death and until their own deaths. Allegedly, the last paycheck was collected in 1964.

Final thoughts

Today the house of Sarah L. Winchester is a state historical monument. It has achieved much fame throughout the years, as has the legend of Sarah Winchester. Propaganda concerning the house does nothing to dispel this legend. As taken from the Chamber of Commerce pamphlet: "The aura of mystery into which Sarah L. Winchester delved deeply is plainly evidenced in many elements in the Mystery House... trap doors, secret passageways... Then there is the mysterious quotation (in the ballroom, as mentioned) ...Who knows what...spirits moved Sarah L. Winchester to memorialize these particular lines...inside rooms with no outlet... stairs that go nowhere..."

Certainly many things are unexplainable concerning Sarah Winchester and her house, but again, many things are easily explained, it is just that no one will listen to a rational explanation when there is a sensational one.

As the years go by, Sarah Winchester and her house will live forever as they legend they began with. Only a few—the few that choose to—will know the real facts, and be able to appreciate Sarah as she well deserves to be appreciated.

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