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THE LEGEND OF SARAH WINCHESTER AND HER HOME

by

Susan Matson
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Susan Matson
1866 Laurinda Drive
San Jose, Calif.
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PREFACE

By its owner, it was affectionately called the Llanda Villa. Yet by this name it is unknown. What is "it"? Llanda Villa is the name of the home of Sarah Winchester, known today as the Winchester Mystery House. However, is this house as mysterious as it seems? The house does have a few oddities, but many are logically explained. The few that remain unexplained are blown out of proportion for promotional purposes. The house is undoubtedly the largest in the Santa Clara Valley, 160 rooms on six acres. In addition to its large size, the house also has a sizable history. Today the Winchester House stands as a remembrance of what Santa Clara Valley was in its pioneer days.

THE LEGEND OF SARAH WINCHESTER AND HER HOME

I. Mrs. Sarah Winchester

Sarah Pardee, 4 feet 10 inches tall and weighing under 100 pounds, was known as the "Belle of New Haven."¹ She was a highly cultured woman. She spoke four languages, read avidly and was an excellent musician. In 1862, she was to become the bride of William Wirt Winchester. William Wirt Winchester was the son of Oliver Winchester, who, in 1857, founded the New Haven Arms Company in New Haven, Connecticut, to which William was heir. After his father's death, William took over the company and, although he was sickly, William Winchester lead the company to success. One year after the Civil War, the New Haven Arms Company took the Winchester name and became the Winchester Repeating Arms Company. The company prospered emensely from the sales of repeating rifles. The famous Winchester rifle was later to be called "the gun that won the West"² for it "killed more game, more Indians, and more U.S. soldiers than any other weapon in this nation's history."³ These successful and happy years were to be the last Sarah was to share with her family.

From that time on, tragedy began to strike Sarah. Her daughter, Annie, died at the age of one month. Her husband William died from tuberculosis fifteen years later in 1881. Sarah, now a young widow, was left with \$20,000 million and an average income of \$1,000 a day for the rest of her life. Also, the dividends from her 777 shares of stock in the Winchester company gave her an annual average income of \$43,335 from 1881-1889. Upon her mother-in-law's death in 1889, she gained another 2,000 shares of stock which increased her already more than adequate income. Sarah, still lost without her husband and child, took the advice of her friends and doctors and left the East to move to California.

II. The Beginnings of the Winchester Home

In June of 1886, Sarah Winchester paid J.H. Hamm \$12,570 in gold coin for almost 45 acres of land on what was then Santa Cruz -- Santa Clara Road (Now Winchester Boulevard). Included with the 45 acres of land was a modest 8-room farmhouse, which would eventually be transformed into the \$5.5 million mansion. Sarah was 49 when she came to the Santa Clara Valley with her sister, Isabelle Pardee Marrison and Isabelle's family. Mrs. Winchester's arrival in Santa Clara Valley was an exciting one. The residents were thrilled that the millionairess was coming to live in the area. People watched in awe as the freight cars unloaded imported furniture worth a fortune. But most spectacular was Sarah's eight-room house that had, in just six months, grown to a 26-room mansion. Sarah found that her preoccupation with remodeling and adding to her new home kept her mind off of her sorrows. She actually began to enjoy the continuous construction.

Sarah is believed to have been an extremely superstitious person. However, her close friend, Henrietta Severs, denied that this was true. The rumors of superstition cause conflicting opinions as to why Sarah Winchester left Connecticut. The succeeding story conflicts with the one previously mentioned. However, neither have been proved correct. As the story has it, a Boston spiritualist told Sarah that the death

of her baby and husband were acts of revenge for the lives lost from the Winchester Rifle. To appease these spirits Sarah moved to the West and began building her house for the spirits. If construction was ever stopped on the house, she was told she would die. Sarah followed this premonition and left Connecticut immediately.

III The Merriman-Winchester Ranch

Sarah Winchester was not to be the only member of her family with a famous house in Santa Clara County. Her sister, Isabelle Pardee Marrison, was to live at a ranch house in Los Altos which ~~was~~ appropriately named the Merriman-Winchester Ranch. This two-story home is known as the oldest house in Los Altos. Inside of the house is solid brass New Haven hardware dating from the 1800's, an Italian Marble fireplace, 1860, and redwood walls dating to the 1840's. Just as The Winchester House, additions were added on to the Merriman-Winchester House. The additions, however, were not as elaborate as the Winchester home. Mrs. Merriman was known as a "friend of the helpless".⁴ She was especially concerned for the welfare of children. Mrs. Merriman converted the house and the side cottages into shelters for her abandoned babies. In 1908-1909 the house became the Chandler's School for Teen-Girls, and was there after a boy's school. Today it is a private residence.

IV. The Winchester Home

Construction began on the Winchester house with twenty-three carpenters working twenty-four hours a day for thirty-eight years, from 1884 to 1922. The sound of the construction was probably very comforting to Mrs. Winchester. One person living in a home of 160 rooms can get rather lonely. Construction was only to stop upon Mrs. Winchester's death. She died of heart failure at the age of 85 on September 5, 1922. At this point, the house was a mansion of 160 rooms. Just some of the dramatic figures include; 10,000 windows, 2,000 doors, 52 skylights, 9 kitchens, 47 fireplaces, 13 bathrooms, 3 elevators, and five heating systems. One particularly acclaimed room is the Grand Ball Room. The room is entirely hand carved. To ensure acoustical balance, not one nail was used. However, the 1906 earthquake halted its completion. The only room in the house that was not built by day-to-day labor was the Grand Ball Room. The total cost of the room was \$9,000, and in those days, an adequate home could be built for \$2,500. The floor consists of six rare kinds of hardwood. The wallpaper was imported from France and cost \$1.50 a square foot. Other parts of the house are enhanced by glass windows especially designed by Tiffany, glass doors embedded with jewels, and an intricate spider web patterned window designed by Mrs. Winchester. The Winchester house

contained many rare, odd, and yet beautiful treasures.

In 1906, the great earthquake struck. Mrs. Winchester, asleep in her room was trapped when the 8-story tower directly above her room toppled. The crowbar marks can still be seen on the doors where the servants tried to dig Mrs. Winchester out of the debris. Terrified by this earthquake, Mrs. Winchester left her home and moved to a house boat named "The Ark". She stayed there for 6 months. Upon her return, Mrs. Winchester immediately took up her old ways, adding to and remodeling her home.

Not only is her home an amazing wonder, but also the grounds of the house. The grounds are covered with beautiful flowers and trees that are still kept in good condition. Some of the features of the garden include, a dehydrating plant for the farm's fruit, a gardener's shed which is in the shape of a key, and an elegant greenhouse with 13 glass cupolas. There are also many fountains and statues to add to the beauty of the garden. The statue of Chief Little Fawn is seen stalking his companion, a deer, in the shrubbery nearby.

Rumors, gossip, and superstition

While it is not known whether or not Mrs. Winchester was superstitious, it is known that she had a preoccupation with the number 13. In her home there are many examples of this; 13 candles in chandeliers, 13 drainholes in the 13 bathroom sinks, rooms with 13 windows, ceilings with 13 panels, staircases with 13 steps and all the turnposts are upside down, 13 cement blocks in a row at the carriage entrances, 13 hooks in closets to house her 13 robes,. Even Mrs. Winchester's will was written in 13 parts and signed 13 times.

While many things in her home were thought to be ridiculous, there are actually important purposes for them all. The 2" steps aided Mrs. Winchester in climbing the stairs, but they were eventually replaced by elevators. Because of her advanced arthritis, she had to use a wheel chair. The glass doors of bathrooms were used as a safety precaution. This was so the servants could make sure Mrs. Winchester did not slip or fall. The glass doors were not as gossip would have it, used by Mrs. Winchester to spy on her servants. The faucets that lead to nowhere were originally designed to water flower boxes that were never completed. The trap doors in the floor were used to drain the water from plants in her greenhouse. The list of logical explanations goes on and on.

Because Mrs. Winchester was such an interesting woman, she

was very susceptible to gossip. Some of the rumors include:

Each night she dined in lonely splendor, the table set with a \$30,000 solid-gold dinner service. And each night she counted every piece as it was put away in one of the mansion's six huge safes.⁵

At night, passers-by heard ghostly music wafting from the dark mansion. The bell in the belfry high in the gables tolled regularly at midnight to summon incoming flights of spirits.⁶

There are explanations for all of these rumors. The "ghostly music" was Mrs. Winchester playing her organ late at night when she had trouble sleeping. The bell in the belfry was a fire alarm and a signal to begin and end a work day for the prune and apricot orchard. Because of the many rumors that circulated about her, Mrs. Winchester grew to be a very withdrawn person. Before she became secluded, however, Sarah would often entertain young girls. She would take them to Strawberry Hill, located on her property, and feed them ice cream. Then they were allowed to play her beautiful rosewood piano. Actually, Mrs. Winchester was a very generous person. She made many donations, all private, and in 1911 established a memorial hospital in Mr. Winchester's name to treat tuberculosis patients. She also bought dozens of new clothes and donated them to charities. Sarah Winchester often asked the players of current theatrical performances to entertain her in her ballroom. The performers were eager to oblige Sarah because of her generosity. Mrs. Winchester also paid all of her servants three times the average pay of the era. When Mrs. Winchester went shopping, she only paid in gold coins and never collected change. Even though she was a bit eccentric, Sarah Winchester meant well and usually applied her money to well deserving causes.

The Winchester Mystery House

Today the Winchester House is recognized as a California Historical Landmark (#868) and has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places. In a tribute to the Bicentennial Celebration of 1976, restoration of both the interior and the exterior of the home began in 1973. These projects have not been small ones. 11,000 gallons of paint, finials, shingles, wooden rain gutters, restoration of many one-of-kind Tiffany glass windows, repairing floors, tiles and molding are among some of the materials and painstaking tasks undertaken. The Victorian Garden required renovation of 14,000 miniature boswood hedges, flowering Carolina Cherry Laurels, plants, flowers, fountains, and European statues.

There are presently two tours of the home. The House Interior Tour is the first. This tour lasts one hour and covers 110 of the 160 rooms. The cost is \$5.95 for adults, and \$3.95 for children. The Deluxe Tour includes the same tour of the house as the House Interior Tour, plus an additional one-half-mile tour of the grounds gardens. The cost of this tour is \$6.95 for adults and \$4.95 for children. Both tours also include visits to the adjoining wax museum that not only houses wax figures, but also house tools, appliances, and several hundred antique rifles, including Winchester originals.

Footnotes

1. Ralph Rambo, Lady of Mystery, p.11.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Phyllis Filiberti Butler, The Valley of Santa Clara, Historic Buildings, 1792-1920, p. 48.
5. Ralph Rambo, Lady of Mystery, p. 7.
6. Ibid. p. 6.

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