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The Winchester Mystery House

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California Pioneers Essay Contest

Mrs. Gail Long

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Preface

The legend of Sarah Wichester's Mystery House has intrigued many people. This five and a half million dollar project filled 38 years of her life with the constant sound of the hammer. The mansion was never completely finished, yet when Sarah finally passed away, at the age of 82, it contained 160 rooms, 10,000 windows, 47 different fireplaces, and 9 kitchens. Some people seem to think she was afraid she would die unless she continued to build, or she could have been possessed by spirits, but who's to say? Why she continued to build for such a long time is still an unknown question.

In the Beginning...

Sarah Winchester lived in a middle-class family as a child, until she married the son of one of the richest men in New Haven. For several years, she lived with her new husband in a large, Victorian home, on Prospect Street. She and William had a child, and the two of them were very much in love. Sarah couldn't have been any happier.

Tragedy darkened their lives, when her baby became a month old, it died. After William told Sarah the sad news, he tried to comfort her. He spoke of raising a family to be proud of, yet he did not live to fulfill their dreams. William died of tuberculosis only a month after the death of their first, and only, child. After each death in her family, a terrible storm would rage over the small Connecticut sea-town.

Sarah sold the house, and tried to make a new start. She took a long trip around the world. The terrible grief she felt seemed to hang over her like a low cloud, yet she made an effort to move on, and forget her troubles.

Sarah Winchester toured Europe and the Orient in search of knowledge of occult mysteries. Mediums of London, Paris, Berlin, and Rome became her friends.¹ She traveled seeking laws of the invisible world, hoping she could apply them to herself. Although she had inherited a great fortune, and received an income of one-thousand dollars a day from royalties on her Father-in-law's famous Winchester rifle, she was known as a woman of means who was devoting her life to an exploration of the unknown world.²

She was cautious though not skeptical, and she began experimenting by holding seances in her hotel room or the villa that she leased for several months. And invariably the mediums with whom she experimented, were able to describe her past life in detail. They told of her husband and child, of her New England home, and predicted that she would settle on the Pacific Coast and build, through her guides, a remarkable center for her personal investigations.³

She learned the reason for the terrible tragedy that ended the lives of her husband and child, and how the thunder and lightening would again visit her - on the day she would die: the ghosts of all the victims of the Winchester rifles were seeking revenge, and would succeed on her, too, unless she would build for them a final resting place.⁴

One message stood out above all others, with a promise that her psychic work would continue virtually so long as she desired: "Death will never come while your home is under construction. You must build and build and build. So long as hammers sound and the hum of the saw is heard, you will live to carry on your work."

The Hammer Begins to Sound

Her tour ended in the Santa Clara Valley of California, where she bought a small house. Here she began to put the knowledge she had gained to work. She did not fear death, since she was convinced it meant only a transition. She did realize that most human lives were too short for the completion of such a project that she was about to attempt in the name of the Winchester. If her own years could be increased, her opportunity would be so much the greater.⁵

Sarah Winchester managed to keep the promise. For forty years, she employed a group of 24 carpenters who would help her construct a house for her ghostly visitors.

To avoid worldly distractions, she built a huge fence around her house to keep the rest of the world out. And to hide her work from view, she planted some thick, high hedges. She also did no shopping. She ordered stores to bring their whole line of goods to the house, and her private secretary would purchase what they needed.

She even built a driveway goin right into her house so that no one would see her, infact no one did. Other than the carpenters and plumbers and the people that worked for her, no one ever really got to see her. She usually dressed in black and was covered with so many veils, she appeared to be one of the ghosts herself.

Of course there were no human callers permitted. Members of the local four hundred from nearby San Jose presented cards to be admitted for a social visit, Mrs. Winchester's secretary returned the cards explaining that Mrs. Winchester wishes no one to bother her. When President Roosevelt was on tour of the West Coast, the Chamber of Commerce of San Jose wished to take him on a visit to see Mrs. Winchester. The servants of the house had tremendous loyalty to Mrs. Winchester, and defended her right to have visitors only if she chose to. The situation might have gotten out of hand, but the President received the hint and requested his party retreat.

The building went on. Secret passageways, trap doors, all the makings of a movie thriller filled the walls behind the high hedges.⁶ A mad jumble of domes, cupolas, towers and minarets, with few floors on the same level; a ghosts' ballroo,, cocktail lounge, dance floor, and banquet hall in which only spectral guests were sumptuously wined and dined; stairways ending in

mid-air, doors which open to the outside from the second and third stories, but without any means of descent ground except that provided by the laws of gravity; peepholes for Mrs. Winchester to watch her servants; chimneys which have no outlet to the outside, and one room with four heat registers and four fireplaces; stairs with steps two and one-half inches high which twist and turn back and forth and rise only eight and one-half feet; all stairways with thirteen stairs, her lucky number; floors with skylights and dark rooms below them; a hothouse on the second floor; water faucets under second and third story windows; bars on inner windows; screen doors on inside doorways, all this making up a sprawling Victorian tumor covering 6 acres.⁷

Every midnight the giant bell in the high belfry was rung to welcome the spirits. She held many seances in the house. During these seances she would go alone to the 'White Satin Room' and remain for hours. This room contained one small window in it and the walls were draped with yards of white satin. Later in her life, when Mrs. Winchester became confined to a wheelchair, a servant would wheel her to the door, be dismissed, and the widow would wheel herself in and lock the door.⁸ On one occasion the servant came back to the edge of the room to eavesdrop, and he heard Mrs. Winchester get up from her chair and walk around, an act doctors had

said to be impossible.

Sarah Winchester had thought of herself as virtually immortal, for upon her death she had enough lumber to supply the builders with for another forty or fifty years. Yet the end did come. On September 5, 1922 her workmen had become engrossed in a game of stud poker, and had retreated to a far garage to escape the rare storm which was rocking the city, and for the first time since 1884 the ring of hammers and the buzz of the saw were not heard. Mrs. Winchester did not live to see any more of her home completed.

The property was then put up for sale, and it was bought by Mr. and Mrs. John Brown. They have operated the house of which only five stories remain, as a museum for some thirty years. More than 60,000 visitors are attracted each year to this, nearly one hundred years old, mansion.

Today, the Museum

The Winchester Mystery House is a great spectacle that everyone should enjoy. It is located at 525 South Winchester Blvd. in San Jose. The heiress to the Winchester rifle fortune is not there to show the house to the many tourists the home attracts, but the spirits can guide you through the mansion.... Probably no San Jose landmark has received as much publicity and aroused as much curiosity. See it for yourself!

Endnotes

1. Spoon, Bruce, Sarah Winchester and Her House: How a Legend Grows, San Jose, Calif., San Jose Public Library, c. 1965, page 4
2. Ibid., page 7
3. Ibid., page 5
4. Rambo, Ralph, Lady of Mystery (Sarah Winchester), Santa Clara County, Calif., c. 1967, page 2
5. Ibid., page 3
6. Ibid., page 9
7. Ibid., page 6
8. Op. Cit., Spoon, Bruce, page 10

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