

Sarah Pardee Winchester, The Supposed "Lady of Mystery"

by

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INTRODUCTION

Sarah Pardee Winchester, the supposed "lady of mystery", was said to have been directed by the spirits to build the 160 room Victorian mansion that consumed her life, day and night, for 38 years (Rambo, 1967). This five and one half million dollar "house that spirits built" sat on over 160 acres of land and contained 2,000 doors, 52 skylights, 10,000 windows, 9 kitchens, 40 staircases, 17 chimneys, 47 fireplaces, 13 bathrooms, 3 elevators, 2 mirrors, 1 hothouse, and a shower. This elaborate mansion, thought to be the brainchild of ghosts, caused neighbors of Sarah to think her "...eccentric [and] mentally unbalanced...", obsessed with the occult, and crazy (Rambo, 1967). However, Sarah was none of these. In fact, she was said to have been "...just as plain and just as sweet as any grandmother could be..." ("Winchester Mystery House Video"). Sarah Winchester was not a "lady of mystery", only an old woman whose actions were misunderstood.

SARAH PARDEE WINCHESTER, THE SUPPOSED "LADY OF MYSTERY"

In 1840, Sarah was born to Leonard and Sarah Burns Pardee. Brought up by her middle-class family in New Haven, Connecticut, she was known as the "belle of New Haven", weighing less than one hundred pounds and standing no more than four feet ten inches tall (Rambo, 1967). Her pretty face caught the eye of William Wirt Winchester, son of the famous rifle magnate Oliver Fisher Winchester, and the two were married on September 30, 1862 (Spoon, 1951).

After almost four years of marriage, Sarah gave birth to their only child, Annie, on June 15, 1866. Annie, suffering from marasmus (the inability to digest food) did not live long. She died on July 24, 1866, just one month after her birth (Spoon, 1951).

The shock Sarah encountered from the loss of her child was repeated 16 years later when William died of tuberculosis on March 7, 1881.

While William's death left Sarah with much grief, it also left her with much money. William's father, although not the investor of the Winchester rifle (which was an improvement over the old Henry rifle of the Civil War), owned the patent, as well as the Winchester Repeating Arms Company (known as the New Haven Arms Company before the Civil War). The Winchester rifle was extremely popular, having been bought by the United States Government and used in the Spanish-American War of 1898 and World

War I (Woelfl, 1986). It became known as "the gun that won the West" and was claimed to have killed "more game, more Indians, and more U.S. soldiers than any other weapon in the nation's history" (Rambo, 1967). Sarah earned an income of one thousand dollars a day from the royalties on this rifle in addition to the \$20 million William left her.

According to legend, the widow left New Haven shortly after the death of her husband and traveled around the world. While abroad, she consulted several mediums who were able to describe her past life in detail. It was through them that Sarah "...learned the reason why her family had been killed...the ghosts of all the victims of the Winchester rifle were seeking revenge, and would succeed on her, too, unless she would build for them a final resting place" (Spoon, 1951). She was told to move West, and there death would never come to her while her home was under construction. She would live "...so long as hammers sound and the hum of saws is heard..." (Spoon, 1951).

However, other sources contradict this legend. There was no evidence that Sarah traveled overseas or consulted mediums after William's death. She did decide to leave the East, but only at her doctors' and friends' urging. They wanted her to seek a milder climate (she had arthritis) and search for some all consuming hobby. "One physician **did** suggest that she, 'Build a house and don't employ an architect'" (Rambo, 1967). And so that is exactly what Sarah Winchester did.

Bringing with her her favorite servant (who just happened

to be a carpenter), Sarah moved to San Jose, California in 1884. There she paid a J.H. Hamm \$12,570 in gold coins for almost 45 acres of land and the unfinished eight room house that sat on the property. Sarah began construction on the house almost immediately, and "...in just six months, the eight room house had grown into a 26 room mansion" (Matson, 1982). From then on, Sarah built 24 hours a day for the next 38 years "... whenever, wherever, and how-soever she pleased..."(Internet, 1995).

Sarah kept no blueprints for the house, nor did she employ an architect. She drew up plans on tablecloths and scraps of papers, supposedly under the direction of the spirits (Beilharz & Deners, 1980).

Sarah noted all ideas and suggestions that came to her during the meditations she held in the Seance Room. She was the only one allowed to enter the room and only she "...knew which stairways to climb and which to descend in the winding maze [of two and one half inch steps] that led to..." it (Woelfl, 1986). A Planchette Board, similar to a Ouija Board, was kept in the Seance Room to communicate with the spirits.

It was in this room that some of Sarah's spirit-friends, the Redmen-Spirits (spirits of American Indians), told Sarah "...that they never blamed her for the deaths of so many of their tribesman because she, herself never invented nor made the Winchester rifle" (Woelfl, 1986). "Sarah was sure these American Indian spirit-guides were working with the carpenters as they built..." (Woelfl, 1986).

While legend has it that the Seance Room was used by Sarah to communicate with the spirits, it is argued that she used it as a private sanctuary. When Sarah died, the Seance Room was opened and was found to have held clippings of her daughter's obituary, fishlines, socks and woolen underwear, and a pillbox containing four strands of blond hair (Spoon, 1951). Sarah had probably used the room to remember and mourn the loss of her daughter and husband.

The Seance Room also gave view to the main kitchen below. It is thought that Sarah kept a close eye on her servants from her watch above (Woelfl, 1986).

A glass plate skylight in the center of the floor of Sarah's special sun porch also allowed her to observe the activities of her servants below (Woelfl, 1986). Sarah had many ingenious structures, like the skylight, that seemed odd and strange to those ignorant of their use, but were really quite purposeful: trap doors, thought to be passageways for ghosts, were really facilitating for the plumbing installations and the watering of plants; water faucets placed under second and third story windows were waiting for the flower boxes that were never installed under them; stairways with steps two and one half inches high that twist and turn back and forth, only rising eight and one half feet were built to accommodate Sarah's arthritis; the passageways that Sarah supposedly used to make "midnight visits" to the bedrooms of her servants, arriving by way of the clothes closets, were really shortcuts for servants between rooms; glass bathroom

doors were installed so Sarah might be observed and helped if she fell; peepholes were placed in doors so servants carrying trays of food would not collide with swinging doors; and the driveway that ran right into her house was built because Sarah's arthritis would not permit her to walk the distance from car to house (Spoon, 1951).

Although many of the oddities of Sarah's house had a purpose, there are many, though explainable, that do not: bar-protected inside windows were probably on the outside before being built around (the same applies for inside screened doors); stairways leading to blank walls once led to wings which no longer exist; and chimneys that never reach the outside were built over after the bricks on the outside tumbled (Spoon, 1951).

Sarah supposedly believed that ghosts achieved their entrance through chimneys and built 47 fireplaces for their convenience (Woelfl, 1986). However, it is more likely that Sarah saw the need her 160 room home had for a heating system. One room, containing four heat registers and four fireplaces, was used by Sarah when her arthritis was extremely active. She would lock herself in this room, light the fires, and let the heat ease her pain.

Each fireplace was handcarved on the premises out of such fine material as mahogany, cherry, teak, oak, pipestone, and Italian marble. No two were alike.

Sarah always sought the highest and the best, in material and craftsmanship alike, and her pursuit for perfection could be

seen in the stunning barroom that contained a mahogany bar complete with buffet, bronze footrail, and gold-plated spittoons as well as in the magnificent Grand Ballroom. This 20 by 40 foot room was paneled in carved bird's eye maple and decorated with silver and gold leaves. The parquet floor, composed of six rare hardwoods put together with wooden pegs and glue, took one year to lay. Displayed on the ballroom's two imported stain glass windows are the following quotations from Shakespeare: "Wide unclasp the table of their thoughts" and "These same thoughts people this little world". The Grand Ballroom cost Sarah \$9,000. "In those days, an adequate home could be built for \$2,500" (Matson, 1982).

The Grand Ballroom also contained one of the six concrete safes that were located throughout the house. Sarah supposedly used its safe to store her infamous \$30,000 solid gold dinner service. Legend has it that each night she would count every piece of the service as it was placed inside the safe. However, after her death, this safe was opened, and the solid gold service was no where to be found (Rambo, 1967).

Neighbors of Sarah, after hearing music coming from the mansion in the middle of the night, claimed that "...weekly dances were held in the ballroom without a single human guest..." (Spoon, 1951). However, that night music was not coming from a ghoulish galla, but rather from the organ Sarah kept in her bedroom and used to "...seek surcease at the keys of her instrument..." when her arthritis became painful (Spoon, 1951).

Supposedly, music was not the only sound neighbors heard coming from the mansion at night. The Winchester bell was said to have tolled at midnight, one a.m., and two a.m. to ring in the spirits (Woelfl, 1986). However, this does not seem likely to have happened for the purpose of the bell was to call workers in from the gardens and orchards at meal times, not to call ghosts (Spoon, 1951).

Located between the San Andreas and the Hayward faults, the Winchester house suffered badly in the 1906 earthquake. The seven story bell tower fell on the room Sarah was said to have been sleeping in. With debris covering the windows and doors, Sarah was trapped, and servants had to chop their way into the room. Once rescued, a terrified Sarah moved to a bay side barge she called "the Ark". She lived there, not for six years, afraid that the earthquake was a warning from the spirits as some stories say, but for about six months (Rambo, 1967).

When Sarah returned to her home and found the front section ruined, she boarded it up rather than having the hard work of her carpenters torn down (Spoon, 1951). After the top three stories had been destroyed, she kept the height of her home at four stories and built out instead of up.

Sarah's house was surrounded by beautiful gardens. Her eight gardeners tended to the plants, herbs, flowers, and shrubs that she had acquired from over 110 countries. One hundred year old rose bushes and daisies, Sarah's favorite flower, were also prominent in the garden.

In addition to the abundant vegetation, the garden held several statues. A statue of Chief Little Fawn, one of Sarah's supposed spirit-guides, stood in the front of the house. Many thought him to be "...drawing a bow in futile attempt against the Winchester 75 which killed him" (Spoon, 1951). However upon taking a closer look, one would notice that Little Fawn is more "...engaged in stalking his companion piece, a cast-iron deer in nearby shrubbery" (Rambo, 1967).

Sarah enjoyed sitting in the gardens and talking to neighbors and workers, taking rides in her French Renault and Buick, and visiting local stores to buy goods. But at the turn of the century, arthritis in her hands and knees turned her indoors (Spoon, 1951). Now, unseen and unheard, the stories of Sarah Winchester began.

Sarah supposedly never saw or welcomed visitors. One story claims that when "...members of the local 400 presented cards to be admitted for a social visit, the secretary curtly returned the cards with the reply that 'Mrs. Winchester has never bothered anybody and wishes no one bother her. Good day'" (Spoon, 1951). Another story tells of how Sarah once received a call from President Theodore Roosevelt and refused to open the door to him (Woelfl, 1986).

True, members of the 400 ~~were~~ actually turned away, but it was not with the rudeness the above story depicts. Also, "President Theodore Roosevelt did not personally seek admittance to the house" (Rambo, 1967). The San Jose Chamber of Commerce

asked for him, and **they** received the definitive, "No."

Sarah's \$2,000 "...massive front door with entrancing art-glass panels..." was said to have opened only three times: for Mary Barker Eddy's (a one time visitor of Sarah - significance unknown) arrival and departure and at Sarah's death (Spoon, 1951). However, this is quite untrue, for the door had been opened dozens of times for cleaning purposes (Spoon, 1951).

For thirty-eight years, Sarah employed a group of 24 carpenters, two of which remained with her throughout the entire period of her residence. She was quite generous with her workers, paying them \$3.00 a day during the Depression when the average wage was \$1.50 (Spoon, 1951).

Sarah, the honorary director of Associate Charities in Santa Clara County, often anonymously donated large sums of money to needy organizations. Once, she even "...instructed her lawyer...to make a \$300,000 gift for her under strict orders not to reveal its source" (Spoon, 1951).

In addition to her generous contributions, Sarah also established the William Wirt Winchester Memorial Sanatorium for Tuberculosis in West Haven. She endowed the hospital with more than \$1,200,000. When she died, Sarah's lawyer, Judge S. F. Leib, said in response to her abundant generosity, "Mrs. Winchester was all that a woman should be, and nothing that a woman should not be. She would have disliked any notice of her good deeds, although they were many. If there be a heaven, there she must surely be" ("Sarah Winchester Is Summoned By Death",

1922).

On September 5, 1922, Sarah's workmen supposedly "...became engrossed in a game of stud poker...and for the first time since 1884, the ring of hammers and the buzz of saws was not heard" (Spoon, 1951). That day, Sarah was found in her bed, dead of heart failure. She was 82.

It is speculated that Sarah believed herself to be immortal as long as the building on her house continued. However, "...if she actually believed that she would have eternal life...why did she leave a will" (Internet, 1995)? It is even wondered if Sarah really was a spiritualist. She was raised in the Episcopal Church, and a Baptist minister officiated at her husband's funeral.

Some people say that the house at 525 South Winchester Boulevard was just Sarah's hobby house. It is thought that she really lived in Menlo Park or Atherton and only came down to San Jose for visits. Some even believe that Sarah was not in her San Jose mansion during the 1906 earthquake or when she died (Spoon, 1951).

Sarah's "Winchester Mystery House" was, in fact, not a mystery. Neither was she. Both were just "...preyed on by people..." and victims of idle gossip (Rambo, 1967). Much of the time, Sarah's actions, especially those regarding the house, were blown out of proportion and aggrandized. Almost everything she did was misinterpreted as occult and pertaining to the supernatural. However, that was entirely untrue. There were

valid reasons for almost everything Sarah did: from building "secret" passageways to hosting "midnight balls". And unlike what most of the stories say, she built her home for herself, for pleasure and enjoyment, not to appease the spirits or ensure herself eternal life.

Sarah Pardee Winchester was not a "lady of mystery". She was simply a lady.

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