

**MAKING MONEY WITH MYTH:
THE WINCHESTER MYSTERY HOUSE
1922-2002**



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FORWARD

From the fall of 2000 till the winter of 2003 I worked part time at the Winchester Mystery House. Throughout my employment I was amazed at the tens of thousands of people who flocked to San Jose each year just to visit Sarah Winchester's rambling estate. These guests intently listened as I indulged their interest in the supernatural by repeating the same paranormal story that has been told for over eighty years. As my love for the house grew I became increasingly interested in the documented history of Mrs. Winchester's life in the Santa Clara Valley. My research revealed that very few people knew anything about Mrs. Winchester aside from the unproven tour script. Still curious to reveal the true Mrs. Winchester I began searching through old magazine articles and issues of the *San Jose Mercury News*. I found that although Mrs. Winchester had made an effort to keep her story private, those who did talk about her around the time of her death remembered her as far from the bizarre women that history would eventually label her.

Although my research discredits many of the stories I presented on my tours of the estate, I did not lose respect for the owners and the perception of Mrs. Winchester they have presented to the public. Like other paranormal attractions around the world, the Mystery House has played a crucial role in Santa Clara's history and economy. I hope my paper not only presents people with a more complete understanding of Sarah Winchester the historical person but also displays the importance of the legendary Mystery House on the Santa Clara Valley.

MAKING MONEY WITH MYTH: THE WINCHESTER MYSTERY HOUSE 1922–2002

In 1884, the recently widowed Sarah Pardee Winchester relocated herself and her massive fortune from her native New Haven, Connecticut, to California's developing Santa Clara Valley. In her new location she grieved the deaths of her husband and infant daughter through countless acts of philanthropy and the constant building and remodeling of what would become a 160-room mansion. Although these few facts are all that is definitively known about the woman, Mrs. Winchester will forever be recognized as the mythical architect of one of the world's most mysterious homes. But how did people go from remembering her as a private, charitable and pleasant woman to describing her as the chaotic mind behind one of the world's most peculiar structures?

The answer can be found in the financially-driven desires of the building's owners after Mrs. Winchester's death. These businessmen sought to make a profit on the already unique structure by fabricating mythical stories to promote their attraction. As with similar local legends, the public embraced the myths and as a result Mrs. Winchester's private hobby evolved into a globally known house of mystery. Despite its fictitious origins, the significance of Mrs. Winchester's mythical story cannot be ignored. Over the past eighty years the legend has become as important to the Santa Clara Valley's history as the millions of dollars the lady once pumped into local charities.

In addition to its economic impact on the Santa Clara Valley, the Winchester House is also important because it exemplifies how local legends emerge. Like Mrs. Winchester's carefully marketed history, stories that concentrate on the paranormal motivate countless tourists from around the world to travel to diverse locations in search

of experiencing the unexplainable. Destinations as obscure as San Diego's Whaley House and as significant as Dracula's Castle in Romania are similar to the Winchester House because they play substantial roles in their communities' history and economy. Like Mrs. Winchester's unique home, these popular places of legend achieved mythic proportions not because of their factual history, but instead because of clever marketing that appeals to society's interest in the paranormal.

Before one analyzes the Sarah Winchester of legend, it is important to understand the Sarah Winchester of history. Although documentation about her is sparse, what is known reveals a private, caring and relatively normal woman. Upon her arrival in the Bay Area people gave little attention to the forty-five year old widow even when she purchased a 161-acre property and began work on a house unique for its size and rambling architecture. Local residents could not help but take notice of her mansion, however, and by 1901 the house had gained a reputation for its distinctive design. Many people were both impressed and perplexed that a woman was behind the striking architecture. Local officials were even motivated to include a viewing of the "Valleys finest piece of real estate" on the visiting President William McKinley's tour of Santa Clara in 1900. Armaury Mars, the man in charge of chronicling the event, made this notable guest the first documented tourist to view the house. As Mars recorded, the President marveled that a woman could create such a dominating estate.¹

Although it remained a minor Santa Clara attraction, only slight notice was given to Mrs. Winchester or her unique estate for the remainder of her life. For unknown reasons, she chose to keep her home and story private by forming few personal

¹ Armaury Mars, *Reminiscences of Santa Clara Valley and San Jose* (San Francisco: The Mysell-Rollins Co. 1901) 72.

relationships with local citizens. Even when she began to bestow a large portion of her immense fortune to local charities, she often did so anonymously in order to maintain the privacy she desired. Upon her death in September 1922, the handful of people who did have personal contact with Mrs. Winchester remembered her as far from the mysterious woman she would eventually become. Her lawyer and member of her small circle of friends, Judge S. F. Leib, acknowledged in her death announcement that his late friend donated to countless charities. However, he added, "She would have disliked any notice of her good deeds, although they were many. If there is a heaven, there she must surely be."² Even those who lacked the personal contact of Judge Lieb, remembered Mrs. Winchester with nothing but positive comments. Santa Clara resident and author Ralph Rambo recalled Mrs. Winchester almost forty years after her death. "Yes, she was peculiar, shy and retiring," but Rambo claimed, "she was one of the Old Valley's finest ladies."³

The praises of Lieb and Rambo were not replaced by stories of an eccentric and spirit-driven woman until after Mrs. Winchester's death. On December 27, 1922, T. C. Barnett, a San Francisco investor, purchased the Winchester Estate. Along with the house's new manager, John Brown, he sought to turn the distinct house into a moneymaking attraction.⁴ Initially, the new owners promoted the sizeable Victorian gardens in order to attract guests. They found moderate success, which culminated in a local Bunker Hill Day celebration in 1924. The festivities were held in the Winchester Gardens, but guests vastly enjoyed the quick trip through the "Spirit House," a name

² "Sarah Winchester is Summoned by Death," *The San Jose Mercury Herald* (September 7, 1922) 1.

³ Ralph Rambo, *Remember When . . . A Boy's-Eye View of an Old Valley* (San Jose: The Rosicrucian Press 1965) 15.

⁴ Gene Tuttle, "Title Search Uncovers Strange Facts," *San Jose Mercury News* (April 14, 1979) 1.

initiated by Brown shortly after he gained control. A reporter summarized the day by informing his readers that, "Everyone who lives here should go over the house with the guides. The trip is well worth the time and small fee."⁵

Realizing that the public much preferred a mysterious building to beautiful but ordinary gardens, the owners switched the emphasis to the house. In order to appeal to society's interest in the supernatural, they saturated the story of the mansion with paranormal anecdotes. Guides highlighted aspects of the house, such as Mrs. Winchester's sprawling, quarter-inch staircases. Although Mrs. Winchester added these stairs to cope with her crippling arthritis, guests were told their purpose was to confuse vengeful spirits. In the late 1920's, Brown's daughter, Edna May Brown, produced the first pamphlet documenting the stairs and other oddities of the house, embellishing them with her father's paranormal explanations. Although clearly fictitious, Edna's pamphlet now represented the expected story of the increasingly famous woman and her even more popular estate. Mrs. Winchester's popular history portrayed her as a disturbed woman motivated by a need to appease the spirits of those people killed by the Winchester rifle. These same spirits had killed her husband and daughter and continued to torment her. She wildly built twenty-four hours a day, according to the story, and without rhyme or reason, added on to and remolded her monument to the supernatural. Although Brown does admit Mrs. Winchester was, "a woman of great charm, cultured, educated in music, art and literature," the description of the house and Mrs. Winchester's motivations appealed to the imaginations of people fascinated by the bizarre. The claims of continued

⁵ "New England Picnic, Bunker Hill Day," *San Jose Pos* (June 26, 1924) 1.

paranormal activity, even after Mrs. Winchester's death, mesmerized the home's growing number of guests.⁶

Like any good businesspeople, Brown and his family, who on Halloween 1932 became sole owners of the house, desired that as many customers as possible visit their Mystery House, as it came to officially be named. To draw a more diverse group of tourists, the owners aggressively promoted their product in publications around the country, including *The San Francisco News*, *American Weekly*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Mystic Magazine*, *Pictorial California*, *The Wide World Magazine*, and *The Family Circle*.⁷ The marketing efforts were exceptionally profitable. As early as February 1924, the San Jose Chamber of Commerce began receiving inquiries about the city's Mystery House from all around the United States. Just as quickly as the home's fame spread, so too did the city embrace its newest attraction. Officials saw it as another tool in the growing effort to transform San Jose from the "Valley of the Hearts Delight" to a metropolitan city of more cultural appeal.⁸

Although the owners' efforts encouraged people from around the world to travel to San Jose to tour the Mystery House, those who personally knew Mrs. Winchester grew increasingly annoyed by the fabricated stories about a crazy, spirit-driven woman. A movement to enlighten the community to the true Mrs. Winchester was headed by Judge Lieb, whose outrage was expressed in a San Jose newspaper. In addition to providing

⁶ Edna May Brown, "The Most Unique house in the World: A History of the Winchester Mystery House," Winchester Mystery House Archives (ca 1930) brochure.

⁷ Ernie Pyle, "Winchester House is Last Word in Daffy Architecture," *The San Francisco News* (February 21, 1938) 13; "Manse of the Spooks is Opened to the Public," *The Los Angeles Sunday Times* (November 18, 1923) Editorial Section 1; "Mrs. Winchester's Extraordinary 'Spook Palace,'" *American Weekly* (April 1, 1928) 2; Harold S. Corbin, "House of Ten Thousand Ghosts," *Mystic Magazine* (December 1930) 54; "The Mystery House," *Pictorial California* (October 1928) 8; Fred Fultersack, "The Strangest House in the World," *The Wide World Magazine* (April 1929) 481; Bob McClean, "\$5,000,000 Spooooook House," *The Family Circle* (November 25, 1938) 21.

⁸ "Winchester Home Fame Spreading," *San Jose Mercury* (February 11, 1924) 1.

rational explanations for the by now wide spread bizarre stories presented by Brown and his tour guides, Lieb “branded as false the popular belief that [Mrs. Winchester] was eccentric and mentally un-balanced.”⁹ Lieb’s greatest supporters in the effort to salvage her reputation were the carpenters, painters, and other artisans whom Mrs. Winchester had employed throughout her home’s construction. Her exceptionally kind treatment of all her employees motivated a majority of them to respect her desire for privacy by not commenting on her or her house. When the mythical stories began overshadowing Mrs. Winchester’s true self, however, many of them began to “scoff at legendary theories surrounding the edifice, and advance matter-of-fact explanations for the eccentric patterns pursued in its construction.”¹⁰ Even city officials, who encouraged the added tourism, mocked the idea of the *Mystery House*. In a Chamber of Commerce publication about San Jose, writers Clyde Arbuckle and Roscoe Wyatt acknowledged the mythical accounts, but presented the building more as a fascinating outlet for Mrs. Winchester’s hobby of architecture than a tribute to the supernatural.¹¹ Despite the minor uproar over their fanciful stories, however, Brown and his employees continued to promote the legends that brought people to San Jose and tourist dollars to their pockets.

For the next forty years, hundreds of thousands of visitors continued to hear nothing but paranormal explanations as they wound through the Mystery House. Unfortunately, because little of the money was invested in the upkeep of the house or gardens, both rapidly deteriorated. In 1974, however, a slight shift occurred when the board of directors for the Winchester Mystery House decided to restore the estate to the

⁹ “Mrs. Winchester was a Sane Woman,” *San Jose Mercury Herald* (August 5, 1925) 15.

¹⁰ Joe Custer, “Mystery Shrouds One-Time Famous Spirit Haven,” *San Jose Mercury Herald* (May 16, 1936) Five Star Weekly Section 3.

¹¹ Clyde Arbuckle and Roscoe Wyatt, *Historic Names, Persons and Places in Santa Clara County* (San Jose: San Jose Chamber of Commerce) 1948.

magnificent form Mrs. Winchester had originally envisioned. At the same time guides began including more than just stories of the paranormal in their tours. While continuing to present the legends and mythical tales they also decided to promote the house for its architecture and contribution to Santa Clara history. The coupled efforts of an expanded tour and extensive renovations eventually motivated the governments of the United States, California, and San Jose to recognize the house as a historic landmark because of its “many outstanding elements of Victorian architecture and fine craftsmanship.”¹² Today the Winchester Mystery House is one of the Bay Area’s premium tourist attractions. Although some visitors come for the architecture, it is still Brown’s mythical stories that motivate thousands of people to walk the more-than-a-mile tour through the twisting mansion.

What about human nature convinces people to accept what any rational person would dismiss as mythical lies? The answer can be found in an understanding of the public’s attraction to stories of the paranormal. A majority of humans become fascinated when they cannot rationalize phenomena that appear to be real even when reason labels them as impossible. Professors Barry Markovsky and Shane Thye have explored the social influence of popular paranormal beliefs. They found that more than 90 percent of American adults profess at least some belief in the supernatural. Moreover, Markovsky and Thye explain that people more easily embrace paranormal explanations when some form of authority tells them their beliefs are acceptable. Television, newspapers, and various types of experts all validate a person’s natural appeal to stories of the

¹² Plaque commemorating the Winchester Mystery House as California Historic Landmark number 868, presented by the State Department of Parks and Recreation in Cooperation with the Winchester Mystery House, Inc, on May 13, 1974.

supernatural.¹³ Thus, in the case of the Winchester Mystery House, people accept the uniformed tour guides as experts on the subject of Mrs. Winchester's life and home. Although these guides simply regurgitate a memorized script, people's natural interests in the paranormal allow them to trust that a guide's uniform and nametag represent credible authority on the paranormal.

Just as people have forever been attracted to stories of the supernatural, numerous entrepreneurs, like the owners of the Mystery House, have manipulated this vulnerability for a profit. The ability to capitalize on this flaw in human reason has fascinated various psychologists. University of Oregon Professor Ray Hyman has dedicated much research to proving how "the same mind built to extract good information from an ambiguous, overwhelming world can produce errors and anyone who knows these biases can exploit them."¹⁴ John Brown and other owners of the Mystery House, whether aware of it or not, exemplify how numerous people around the world utilize this trait of human nature to market their products. Whereas the Mystery House provides an entertaining way for people to indulge their interest in the unexplainable, however, Hyman warns people against possibly dangerous exploitations of this human tendency. Businesses like the Psychic Friends Network and the television show "Crossing Over," extract money from people overwhelmed by their interest in the paranormal. Many unknowing customers become so trusting of these supernatural "experts" to deliver information from unworldly sources that they may not realize they are being bankrupted in the process. Hyman encourages people to avoid these dangerous organizations that can dwindle a persons savings, and instead satisfy their need for the paranormal at places like the Mystery

¹³ Barry Markovsky and Shane Thye, "Social Influences on Paranormal Beliefs," *Sociological Perspectives* (Spring 2001 Vol. 44 Issue 1) 21.

¹⁴ Nancy Dess, "Weird Science," *Psychology Today* (September/October 2001 Vol. 34 Issue 5) 34.

House, which harmlessly allow people for a short time to experience what they cannot, or chose not to explain.

Almost every town in America contains a building popularized by stories of the paranormal. San Diego's Whaley House attracts guests in search of the ghostly inhabitants of California's oldest two-story brick structure. Countless homes on the East Coast present tourists a chance to witness the supernatural, including New England's House of Seven Gables and Lizzie Borden's infamous residence. The South's most prominent haunted structure is the Myrtle Plantation, which is said to be home to the spirits of deceased slaves. As in the case of San Jose's Mystery House, visitors to these structures add to their communities' economies by ignoring reason and embracing the fascinating tales of ghosts and other unworldly events.

The use of paranormal legends to attract visitors is not restricted to the United States. The most famous and lucrative of these mythical destinations is the Romanian home of Vlad Tepes, more popularly remembered as Dracula. The Romanian government has embraced Bram Stoker's mythical biography of the fifteenth-century warrior, and now his legendary castle is the country's definitive tourist destination. The Transylvanian Society of Dracula, with visions of millions of paranormal obsessed tourist dollars flooding their struggling economy, has even started the process of creating a multi-million dollar theme park at the castle's location.¹⁵ Like the owners of the Mystery House, the Romanian government has no doubt that the human obsession with the supernatural will perpetuate the success of their attraction.

¹⁵ Marilyn Johnson and Clifford Geoffrey, "Dracula is Dead and Well and Attracting Tourists to Transylvania," *Life* (November 1994) 66.

The importance of these paranormal destinations is undisputed. Although the stories behind these attractions are clearly fabricated, people should not dismiss their historical influence. In addition to enticing tourists and their millions of dollars, the local legends play crucial roles in defining a community's identity by presenting a common story for the population to embrace. The Winchester House allows generations to pass down the legend of Sarah Winchester and her infamous residence, which provides an intriguing legend essential to building a community's collective history and identity. Residents of San Jose, therefore, must accept the story of their Mystery House not for its factual representation of Mrs. Winchester, but for the significant role the house has played in forming their city's unique history. In her lifetime, Sarah Winchester donated great sums of money to benefit the Santa Clara Valley community. Although she may have never intended her greatest contribution to be a timeless myth, she and her Mystery House will forever benefit the society, not only as a capital producing company, but also as a community-binding legend.

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