

California's Fascinating...*Winchester Mystery House*

If you don't live in northern California, you may not be familiar with the Winchester Mystery House, but it's definitely worth a stop should you ever be in the San Jose area. It's a 160-room, \$5,500,000 Victorian mansion that was owned, designed, and built under the direct supervision of Sarah Winchester, daughter-in-law to the Winchester rifle scion.

Sarah met and married William Winchester at the height of the Civil War. They had one child, Annie Pardee, who died of marasmus about one month after birth [*I have no idea what 'marasmus' is*]. Then, some 15 years later, William died of tuberculosis in 1881. Sarah was deeply upset by these family deaths and consulted a spiritualistic medium. Reportedly, the medium explained that the spirits of all those killed by the rifles her family manufactured had sought their revenge by taking the lives of her loved ones. She was also told that these spirits had placed a curse on her and would haunt her forever. The medium continued, however, that she could escape the curse by moving west, building a house, and continually building on it...as the spirits directed. In this way, she could escape them and, perhaps, find the key to eternal life.

....And the rest, as they say, is history! In 1884, Sarah moved to what is now San Jose, California, and purchased an eight-room farmhouse. She then immediately embarked upon what would be a life-time building project. With a great deal of money, and very few responsibilities, she satisfied every whim and notion by keeping a staff of 18-20 domestic servants, 10-22 carpenters, and 12-18 gardeners and field hands constantly busy. She had no master plan for her house, and, according to her carpenters, she built whenever, wherever, and however she pleased, always directed by the spirits. As a result of the constant building, tearing down and remodeling, the farmhouse grew into a mansion, and the mansion constantly grew higher and higher, wider and wider, over the 161-acre estate, engulfing outlying structures that stood in its way. She built steadily, 24 hours a day, for 38 years, until her death in 1922.

The end result of this constant construction is an edifice that is both awesome and strange...*very strange!* Staircases that go nowhere; doors that open up to walls, a dazzling array of balconies, turrets, cupolas, etc...and, even more incredibly, over 10,000 windows!

During the 38 years that work continued on the mansion, local people would pass by the estate and wonder at the strange and mysterious construction. Many would try and explain it to others. From one telling to the next, many strange stories would eventually arise. Frequently, these stories would be recounted to Sarah, and, according to her niece, would upset her very greatly. Many of these stories have been retold so many times, they have now become part of the legend of the house. Some feel Sarah was a sane, albeit eccentric, person, pointing, for example, to the will that she wouldn't have left if she really believed she would have eternal life. Those who worked for her found her pleasant enough, most staying for 15 or 20 years. One carpenter, indeed, stayed and worked for her for some 36 years, all total.

I and the family were there years ago, before the admission price was so exorbitant [*I tend to notice such things*], and it was certainly a unique experience. The kids definitely enjoyed it. The Winchester Mystery House...not something you're going to see every day!

