

The Drink Tank Issue 31

My Favourite Places Part Uno

One of the concepts I've been playing with is producing a travel guide for those folks who are whacky/witty/weird enough to think at least a bit like me. I know that scares some of you, thinking that there might be others like me out there, waiting in the shadows, but I know that there



are and I want to tap into them. My plan is to produce several pieces that explore the places that I love for various odd reasons. And with an idea like this, you really have to start some place that has real meaning to you, and there's no place on Earth more important to me than the Winchester Mystery House and the environs.

Let me start from the beginning of the house. The Winchester Mystery House wasn't always the Winchester House, nor was it a mansion. It was Dr. Caldwell's simple six-room farmhouse. Sarah Winchester bought it and over the next 38 years, the building and remodeling never stopped.

But why would one of the richest women in America leave New Haven for San Jose, barely a spot on the map in those days? That's where History and Mystery come into contact with results that range from ridiculous to unusual. Sarah Par-

dee Winchester was a typical woman of her time. Well-educated, tiny, and married to a wealthy man by the name of William Wirt Winchester. He was the heir to the Winchester Repeating Rifle fortune and sadly, he died young. Before his death, the couple had conceived a daughter who died very young from a gastrointestinal defect. This left the couple shaken. Sarah had no one left but a niece named Frances Marriot. She would eventually become Sarah's personal secretary and Sarah would also leave her the estate.

The stories vary somewhat as to why she chose San Jose. The first, and most famous, is that Sarah, a big fan of the occult, visited a well-known psychic in Boston in 1882. She may have said many things, but the best known ones are "Thousands of persons have died because of it (the Rifle) and their spirits are now seeking vengeance"

The Winchester Mystery House has hundreds of just about everything, but only one shower- -There's only one known picture of Sarah Winchester at the House in San Jose. There are less than 20 total photos known.

and ““You must start a new life and build a home for yourself and for the spirits who have fallen from this terrible weapon too. You can never stop building the house. If you continue building, you will live. Stop and you will die.” That’s the one that seems to stick. Others say she simply told Sarah to move as far West as she could. Either way, the result is the same.

The other theory goes like this: Sarah Winchester was a genius. The design of the house shows that she knew a great deal about the weather in the Valley of the Heart’s Delight, and since she was suffering greatly from arthritis, she may have chosen to come to the

weather of San Jose. Doesn’t have quite the same meaning now, does it?

What really matters is that she came out in 1884 and had already bought the Caldwell Farm House and 160 acres. She also hired twenty-two carpenters and various others to start work on the house.

Now, you can’t tell what of the original house remains and what was built after, save for the back steps that are now well within the built-up home. The rest had been remodeled and added to and divided so many times that it’s impossible to tell what was what. Her team started work, with Sarah herself as the main architect. Sarah would have a morning meeting with the head of the carpenters and would give him her plans. His job was to make them happen, no matter how strange they seemed. And some of them were downright dumb. There are conflicting stories here as well.

The first theory is that Sarah just wasn’t very good at the whole architecture thing. She would draw up designs without

consulting previous designs, would mix up drawings so that she wasn’t aware of what had been done when (which makes sense as often, before rooms would be completed she’d have them remodeled) and she refused to have any help. The other story is the more popular one.

You see, Sarah Winchester spent much of her nights in a room called the Seance room. She would use an automatic writing system using a planchette and pencil. From these instructions, she would build. The strange designs were intended to delay or confuse spirits. They certainly confuse the living, as even seasoned tour guides

regularly get lost in the house.

For 38 years she kept building. She had trouble sleeping, so she would often stay up well past 3 am (when the bell was rung to announce to the spirits that it was time to leave) and she would stay up playing the organ or piano all

night. There are stories that the servants would tell of Sarah sleeping in a different bedroom every night (this is actually something that many wealthy dowagers do when they have a large home) and that she sometimes could be heard having conversations with no one else in the room. Not surprising, since she had a tough time dealing with the death of her daughter and husband and had been known to talk to herself.

Sarah had a few minor set-backs. One of them was the 1906 Earthquake. She was asleep in the Daisy bedroom on the East side fo the house. The strong quake collapsed the fireplace, shifting the room so that the door was pinned shut. That’s a great wake-up call. She remained trapped



The House pre-1906, when that tower collapsed

[Sarah Winchester was once visited by then-President Theodore Roosevelt. The story goes that he came to the front door, which no one ever used since Sarah did not take visitors. He was told to go ‘round back, so he left.](#)



The Bedroom where Sarah was Trapped Following the Quake

in that bedroom, which was unfinished at the time, until she was freed several hours later by her employees. On the doorframe, you can still see where the prybar was put to free the door.

In typical Sarah Winchester 'Oh My God, They're Out To Get Me' fashion, she supposedly thought that the Earthquake was meant for her, that she was spending too much time on the front (East) portion of the house, that she was too close to completion, etc. This led to the front 30 or so room being sealed off and never completed. This is a shame because some of the in-laid parquet flooring in those rooms is the finest I've ever seen and I hang around at historical houses.

The room where Sarah died seems to have been one of her favourites. It had an organ, a lovely view out over the South and Westside garden. Just a lovely room. Sadly, none of the furnishings are originals. They were all sold at auction and no records were



kept. Some may have made their way back, as Sarah's likes and dislikes were well known and some individuals have claimed they got piece that were sold at auction in the 20s and so they may have been Winchester's. It's possible. She was crazy over particular brands and makers, many of which were

not to be found in California save for having been brought there by one of Sarah's buyers.

The room where she died is a good place to start if you're into the whole idea of ghosts. The room is somewhat airy and magnificently appointed (in its recreation), but it also has a heaviness to it that's hard to explain.

I guess here is a good time to explain why I'm such a huge fan of the Winchester Mystery House. Of course, it all goes back to my Dad. My Dad has always had an interest in parapsychology and other strange phenomena. At times, it's hard to pin down the truth of my Dad's life pre-1978 (when I start to have actual memories of Dad doin' stuff) but according to most, Dad was friendly with the local ghost hunters. I'm not sure how friendly, but I do remember meeting Sylvia Brown a few times as a kid and Pops chatting with her. Supposedly, Dad was supposed to go on the famous Toys-R-Us visit that produced the famous photo of the farmhand ghost. I have no idea if that's true or not, but it's possible. Dad took me there a lot over the years, often once or twice a month. I learned the tour almost by heart back in the late 1980, when Dad and I were regulars. Some dads and sons have throwing the baseball around in the backyard, Pops and I shared the Winchester Mystery House (and I think my Dad ended up dating one of the docents there, which might also explain why we were there so often.)

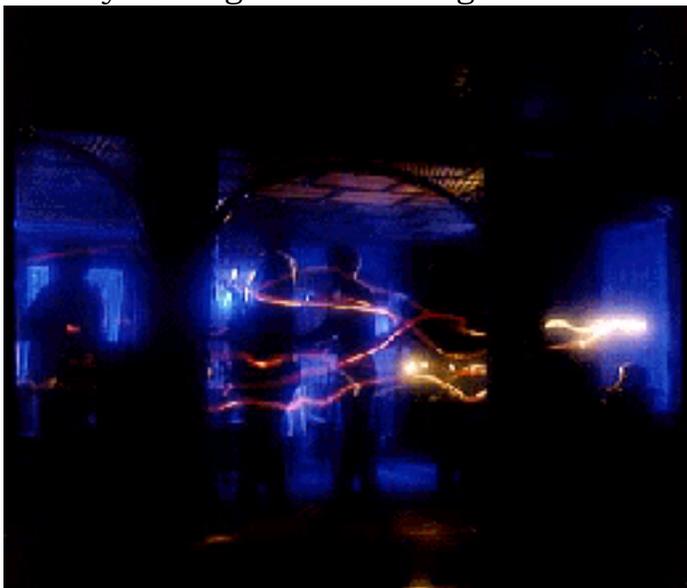
I loved heading over, getting a light lunch in the awful cafe place they set up

The Winchester House once sat on 160+ Acres, though it's now down to just four. The sale of the land started before Sarah's death, but afterwards, the rate of sale increased. 5,000+ people live on her former land.

and then wandering around the gift shoppe. Good times indeed for the Garcia guys.

After I went off to college, folks from back East used to come and visit pretty regularly. There were a few required stops: Fry's in Santa Clara to see their historical exhibit, the Stanford Theatre in Palo Alto, and The Winchester Mystery House, and maybe the Mystery Spot if they were here for 4 or more days. I actually hadn't been to the place for a couple of years when I went back in 1994, just having finished my freshman year. It was even more fun with my friends who had heard my stories while we were at school.

Like most of the places that I really love, there are personal victories involved. I went to the House for a tour with a lass I was interested in and she basically told me that she had a crush on me for as long as I had one on her. I once played a game of cards in the cafe and won nearly fifty dollars. I shot a great little paranoid chase scene in the gift shoppe without any notice to management and it may have been the best thing I ever personally shot. And every woman I was ever serious about ended up taking the Flashlight tour with me at least once. That's right, you heard me, FLASHLIGHT TOURS! They turn out all the lights and stay open 'til after Midnight and give tours by flashlight. You even get a comem-



erative flashlight when you take the tour. They only offer them on the weekends of Friday the Thirteenth and Halloween Weekend, which means that they tend to sell out, sometimes weeks ahead of time. They've changed them a bit, as when I first went on one, they had folks jump out at you a couple of times and make loud noises. They stopped doing that and now it's just a regular tour with a little bit of ghost stuff thrown in. That's one thing they don't talk about on the regular tour. You're on a tight script, and there are no mentions of actual ghosts allowed to be told. Everyone who works there has a story, but if you get caught, you lose your tour giving privileges and all the other at the place suck.

The flashlight tour can be very scary, as the place is dim and the nooks and crannies seem to come out at you with eery shadows that seem to expand as you get closer. It's spookier when a large chunk of the group agrees to not use the flashlights, so more of the tour is in the dark.

A typical tour starts with the Gift Shoppe. You come in, look around at the Ghost Books and Branded Shot Glasses. You get your tickets, almost always for a tour that is at least 90 minutes in the future, and you wander around. There's a nice little exhibit in the gift shoppe of Winchester-brand items that were guns. There are shotgun shells, flashlights, roller skates, knives, pretty much everything that

One of the few good Writer's Workshop pieces I ever read was called Winchester Station about a Mega-rich guy who visits a medium and is told to leave Earth and never stop building a space station! Weird, but fun

a company could sell back in those days. In the same room, there's a large gingerbread house of the estate. It's been there as long as I can remember.

Eventually, you get bored with the gift shop and either head for the terrible cafe or you head out into the courtyard. There's a beautiful garden around the way, but right in front of you is a door marked "The Winchester Firearms Museum". It's really just a bunch of display cases with a bunch of guns, but some of those guns are spectacular. There are pistols and rifles of every flavor, including an early arcade game pistol made by the Winchester Company in the 1930s! That was always my favourite. Most of the guns are in amazing shape considering how long they've been on display and their age. Guns tend to age much faster than other military objects (like swords) due to the presence of powder and wood/metal interactions. Still, these are in marvelous shape and I hope that they will choose to do

something new with them at some point. I could always serve as a special curator!

After you're done looking at the guns, you walk out and you have the choice of going into the small arcade or walking around the gardens.

I always choose the arcade because they have old video games, but the Gardens really are spectacular.



The tour takes you by the old working buildings that remain, notably the dehydrator and a tool shed. There are hedges everywhere, and lots of flowers. I believe there are a few dozen statues and maybe ten fountains with the one in the front (shown above) being the largest by far. The walk is lovely and you can easily lose track of time if'n you ain't careful. From the outside you get to see a lot of little details that you might miss on the inside. There are beautiful stained glass windows that you get a better look at from the outside, as well as a door to nowhere.



The Door to Nowhere and a Daisy Window



The Winchester Mystery House is especially popular with Japanese and German tourists. I've been told that some 45% of large tour groups and nearly 20% of all visitors are from one of those two countries!

The trees are my favourite part of the gardens. There are 13 Palm Trees and a huge number of other trees. As a denraphile, I always spend way too much time looking at them for my own good. The Winchester Orchards were well known and busy, mostly producing fruit to be sold, but a fair amount was used to feed Mrs. Winchester and her crew. The original lay-out included dehydrators, a large canning operation and the normal shipping areas. One thing that is somewhat unusual is that Mrs.

Winchester fully understood the climate and did not restrict herself to the normal items that folks were growing in those days. She grew dates and figs and plums (and prunes, in those days, were the Santa Clara Valley's main export) and grapes and oranges (I've heard this refuted, though I've seen it mentioned by more than one source) and on and on. There were at least forty varieties of fruit and vegetable grown on the Winchester land.

By this time, your tour number is being called and you hurry back to the courtyard to start the tour. The first few minutes are your typical introductions, with all the numbers and names of folks who were important to the story. Then you go in and see a storeroom with millions of dollars of items ranging from wall paper to stained glass to other materials. These were never



sold and some of the glass was removed from the house over the years.

The tour's first thing of weirdness is a staircase that dead ends in the ceiling.

The premise is that spirits would get confused and end up at the ceiling not knowing where to go. It's a strange thought, but I can kinda see that if you take a view of ghosts similar to that of the Chinese back in the day. It's one of the most famous parts of the house and there are thousands of pictures of it out there. I've got one with a weird splotch on it in the shape of a potato.

The tour continues through the normal parts of the house, mostly on the South and West side of the house. You see the Seance room and the room where Sarah



The Winchester Plot in New Haven

On average, there are three film crews at the Winchester House in a week. These range from extremely long shoots from foreign crews to A+E and The Travel Channel, which seem to come out about once a month each.

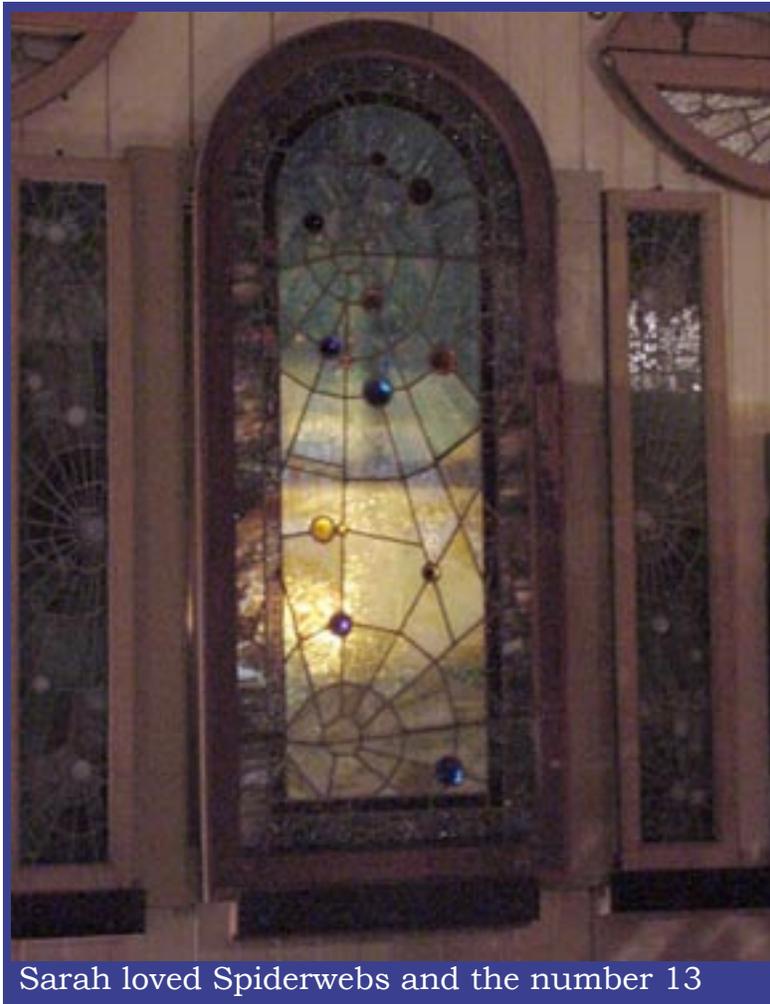
died. As the tour continues, there are some nice touches they've done in the decorating. There was a room with a very Eastern wall treatment, so they redid it in a Far Eastern motif, including a beautiful 26 rod abacus. The Lincrusta Wallpaper is still shiny and kinda mesmerizing. The stained glass is beautiful and I'm always amazed at how many places she found for these windows. In fact, several of the windows were placed early on and as building continues, their source of light was blocked, making them pretty but not spectacular like they were when they got the sun. There's one window that now gets a sliver of sunlight every day for roughly an hour. I've been on the tour during those times and truly it gives off a glow that is amazingly beautiful.

Pretty quick, the tour guide will make you aware of a few things. First, Sarah Winchester was obsessive-compulsive. She loved the number 13 and would go to extreme lengths to incorporate the number into all the elements of design. There is a beautiful hanging chandelier that had 12 candleholders on it. Sarah insisted that another one be added, so they simply made one that looks completely out of place and attached it. Sarah also loved spiderwebs, and as you can see from the stained glass window, she incorporated that design in many places around the house. She was also a fan of daisies, much

like my Crazy Southern Ex-Girlfriend. She liked the daisies that would show up in the house to have 13 petals. There are several examples of all three of those design elements coming together in one piece.

Once you get to the East/Front of the house, things change. This is the area that was boarded up after the 1906 quake, so

parts of the walls are crumbling and nothing looks finished. There are a few places where you can see beautiful tile and parquet work and you think about how much that must have cost. When you then look it up when you get home and adjust for inflation, you realise that she boarded up nearly 2 MILLION dollars worth of hardwoods and marble and tiles. There's even a kitchen that got locked away, though some say it never stopped being used (see later stories)



Sarah loved Spiderwebs and the number 13

I've always liked this part of the house, as it's the one that shows the most of Sarah's obsession. At places it seemed like she was nearly finished and at others you can tell there had been constant reworking of areas until the day they boarded it up. If you are looking for signs of the maker, here they are.

The tour ends with two ballrooms, one mostly finished and one just begun, it seems. The nearly-finished one has an organ and a beautiful pair of stained glass

Many visitors have come to the Winchester House knowing many stories about it. One of the first visitors after it was turned into a tourist destination was Robert Ripley of Believe it or Not Fame who made it famous



The Windows in Question

windows that have two cryptic Shakespearean messages. The window on the left reads: "Wide unclasp the tables of their thoughts." from Troilus and Cressida. The right says "These same thoughts people this little world." from Richard III. There is a lot of debate over why Sarah chose those two quotes for the most lavish room in the house (and that's sayin' something) but in my eyes one of them is fairly obvious. The Richard III quote is spoken by Dick as he is imprisoned, which is analogous to Sarah being imprisoned in her home, trapped by whatever message came from the Boston Medium and her severe arthritis which limited her walking. I'm not 100% sure, but I believe that this was part of the area that was closed off after the '06 Quake.

The end of the tour dumps you out in the gift shop. You've walked about a mile or so, or so they say, and you've seen rooms of all sorts. If you're really into it, you can take the Behind-The-Scenes tour which shows you more of the grounds, one of the basements, and a few rooms not shown on the regular tour. I've never been on that tour, but I've heard it's only so-so.

Then again, I doubt you care about any of this. You just want to know one thing: what about the freakin' ghosts? Well, that I can tell you about in some

detail.

While Sarah was still alive and living in the house, there were a number of strange things. Many employees often heard strange foot steps in empty sections of the house, and more than one saw 'unusual people' milling about. At least one claims to have seen an indian walking the corridors late at night. The popular theory is that those killed by the Winchester rifle, which certainly included a great number of Comanche, Sioux, Navaho and Pawnee, were haunting the house. No one in modern times has reported such a sighting that I've heard of, but it was there.

Once the front of the house was boarded up, there were frequent reports of sounds coming from inside. Some claim they heard the sounds of work continuing on the inside, though no one was allowed in that area. Some even claimed that they saw people moving in the windows when they looked from the street.

After Sarah's death, there were a great many strange things that happened. While moving out, at least one crew said that they had set things down in one area and they were moved to another. Now, in a house like the Winchester house, it's easy to get confused, but they claimed that these things were only left for a minute or two and were right back where they started.

Once tours started, there were occasional sightings. Some claim to have heard organ music playing from a distance. Others say they've seen strange balls of light moving in the shadowed corners. One



[Sarah was not the best of bosses. She paid very well for the time, somewhere around double what the average per-hand would make at the time. She also paid at the end of each shift, so she could fire you on the spot. She was a demanding boss, but she had her favourites who stayed on for years in some cases.](#)

strange thing that many folks have noted, and I've experienced myself is the former kitchen in the part of the house that was boarded up. For some reason, once in a while, it will smell like fresh cooking chicken soup. They don't serve it in the cafe and it's an obvious smell and as you get closer to the spot where the stove would have been, it becomes more and more pronounced.



Most folks note that some rooms make them nervous. The one that I hear that the most about is the Daisy bedroom where Sarah was trapped in 1906. There are a lot of folks who say that they get short of breath. There is also a legend of a video tape that shows the door to the room with a strange kind of energy gathering into the centre of the door. I've never met anyone who's seen it, though there are many records to it existing.



Detail of a very Sarah Winchester like reflection. The room where this was taken is nearly empty and the tour goes through it so that the tour guide would be on the other side of the guests, making it unlikely that this is a reflection of her.

There are hundreds of photos taken of the house every day. Most are pretty normal, but some of them are a little strange. There are many that show the windows and doors that have odd reflections. The current craze seems to be orbs, odd balls of light that seem hard to explain.

I don't buy most of them, but there are a few that make me go 'well, maybe' since they seem to be moving and are certainly not insects in flight.

There are only two distinct 'person'-type sightings that I've ever heard of. One is a carpenter or a handyman. He frequents the basement and has been seen in the house proper, often setting up a ladder and climbing to fix or paint something. One sighting, told to me from an employee who happened to be a friend of mine, happened on a winter day in 1999. He was vacuuming in area nearest to the Gift Shoppe and a co-worker came running. She was crying and he calmed her down and she told him that a man had come up to the room where she was cleaning. She called out to him, asking why he was still in the house. He ignored her and went about doing some work. When she went closer, she could see that he wasn't fully opaque and when she got closer still, he vanished. She ran out and left the vacuum resting against the wall. He went up with her to retrieve the vacuum, and it was standing upright in the centre of the room. She quit a few days later.

There are many reports coming out of the basements of the same workman. About fifty percent of the workers have either seen him, and many more have heard him hammering in rooms that aren't in use on the tour or as offices.

The other full-bodied spirit is that of Sarah herself. The reports of Sarah aren't

There was a San Jose band in the 1960s called The Count Five. They had one hit, which was very much like a Byrds song, that managed to chart fairly well in 1966. For one of their photo ops, they shot themselves in Dracula capes in front of the Winchester House. This shot led them to always wearing capes in concert.



Typical Winchester House Orb

just in the house, but on the grounds and in the neighboring areas.

The first story I ever heard of Sarah in the house was also

from a former employee. He had worked at the house for almost ten years and had never seen anything. One day, when walking through to make sure everyone was out of the house, he saw a flutter of cloth in the bedroom where Sarah died. This was odd as there was no wind that he could feel. When he looked closer, he saw that the flutter was attached to a small woman who he instantly recognised. She turned and walked to the piano in the room and as she sat, she disappeared. He continued his walk-through and saw her again, this time slowly making her way up one of the staircases. As he finished his walk-through, he heard the distant sound of a piano playing. He worked there another decade, finally leaving in 1989.

He said that after that night, he saw



This Room Always Gives Me the Creeps Bad

her on the average of twice a month, typically in the bedroom where she died or the Daisy bedroom. He first saw the carpenter a year or so later, when there was a minor change in the path of the tour. The day he left was October of 1989, the day after the Earthquake, which he took as a sign to get out.

Most of the sightings of Sarah happen on the grounds. There have been several sightings late at night in the courtyard and carriage house. The best known of these is one where Sarah seemed to be looking at the house as if she were following the construction. She has been seen walking about and perhaps even getting into her carriage, though I've never had good confirmation on that one.



One of the areas where she is most frequently seen is the parking lot to the Century Theatres. These would have been orchards and a few small buildings for the workers. While it's doubtful that she spent much time out in this area since she often had trouble walking, once she was free of her body, she may have begun taking walking tours. The employees of the theatres all have stories, with the three most famous all happening in the year 1995, the last year I worked at the Century 22. The first was a simple case of some walking across the parking lot at one thirty. She seemed to be pacing around a lot and one of the guys who was getting off work approached her and

The Owners of the Winchester House decided to downplay the ghost angle and sell it as a marvelous piece of Victorian Architecture. Few bought that idea. The house, though not the land, has been secretly on the market for a few years now. There have been no buyers.

she disappeared. I was working a shift at the Century 23 (which is the closest of the three giant domed theatres to the Winchester House) and saw three employees come in, all terrified, saying that they had seen a small woman walk through the fence into the Winchester property. Everyone who worked for the theatres heard about that story. The last one was in December, during a heavy rain. A woman who used to manage the Century 21 (the theatre in the middle) was walking to her car. Jogging across the street, she saw a woman in the middle of the road. She was just standing there, not moving. The manager made her way to the car and then pulled out onto the road. The woman was there until the manager's headlights rolled over the place where she had been standing.

At that point, there was nothing there.

There are other stories, including the tale of a storeroom in the Century 22 where the storeroom is haunted.

These tales are harder to believe, but I've met several folks who had first hand stories that had much credibility.

There are a number of strange coincidences that happen to me and my friends around the place, and there's one that was reported in the national papers back in 1984. To celebrate the 100th anniversary of the beginning of Sarah Winchester's building, they rang the bell that Sarah had used to call 'spirits' thirteen times, in honour of Sarah's favourite number. On Friday the Thirteenth of April, the bell was rung thirteen times. Here's the opening line from George Orwell's 1984 "It was a bright cold

day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen."

Indeed, the weather was cold, but sunny.

For a while, I was getting the same number everytime I came. I would always be sold ticket #718. I happened to live at 718 Pritchard Court at the time. That happened to me three times. I also used to do the Where's George Dollar Bill tracking thing. I once got a bill that I saw was stamped and when I looked it up, I had spent it before...twice, and one of those times was in Boston! My pal Joker had the unusual problem of meeting the same guy, a delivery man, who also delivered to his work. His name: Manny S_____, the same as Joker's real name. I was there to witness



The Century Domes in 1968, Century 23 is on the far Left

the two of them meeting three times over the period of five months. M once found a postcard that someone had filled out and dropped on the floor. It was addressed to M.

Lloyd, 121 West Brighton St. It turned out that they were just using an abbreviation for Martin, but M had once lived at 121 West St., and had for a time lived in the Brighton area of Boston.

These were really things that happen to folks all the time, but they still kinda creep me out when they always happen in the same place.

There are a lot of other stories, but they are best left to the places that document ghost sightings and the such. They're all over the place, and you'll find a number of them with a simple Google search.

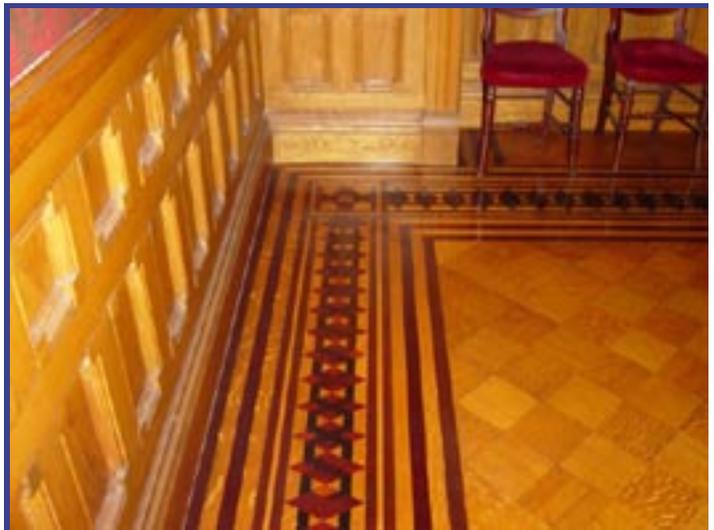
[There was a great episode of the radio show called Jym, Debbie, and Bob. They did an entire three hour broadcast from the house called The Winchester Mystery House Project, riffing on the Blair Witch Project. They even posted pictures of the event at the time they were doing it.](#)



Previously Mentioned Gingerbread House

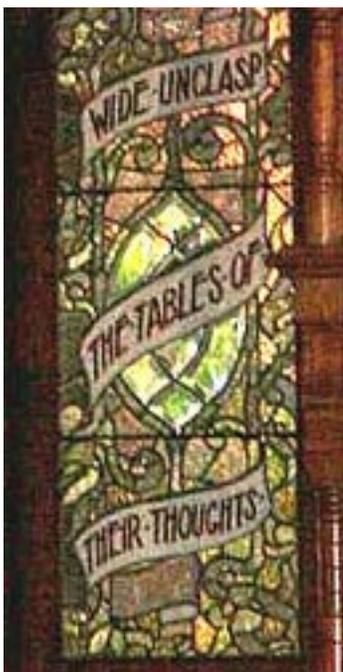
The Winchester Mystery House is one of those sites that you just have to visit once in your life. If you don't, then you'll be mocked and berated by those that love you best. If you go, bring a light coat in the winter. It's pricey, but usually worth it. Just remember to avoid the cafe. There's lots of parking, and if you drop me a line, I'll be

happy to join you on the tour.



Some of that fabulous floorwork that was boarded up after the 06 quake

The Winchester Mystery House is located at 525 Winchester Blvd. in San Jose. Write to garcia@computerhistory.org to ask me if I want to go...and you'd better ask!!!



OK, That's enough of that. I'll be back with a regular issue next week. I've been saying to myself for the last few issues that a little Science Fiction content might just hit the spot, and I think it's time that I ran my article on Computers in The Movies. Coming soon will be a story by Jay Lake, which should be fun.

In other news: I'm hoping that The Chick Magnet will go over well at WorldCon in Glasgow. It's the second European showing (the Germans got to it first) and only the fourth or fifth off of North America (The Kiwis and Aussies had it earlier).

The Drink Tank Issue 31 has been brought to you by Christopher J. Garcia and posted to eFanzines.com by the Lord High Protector, The Honourable Bill Burns.

