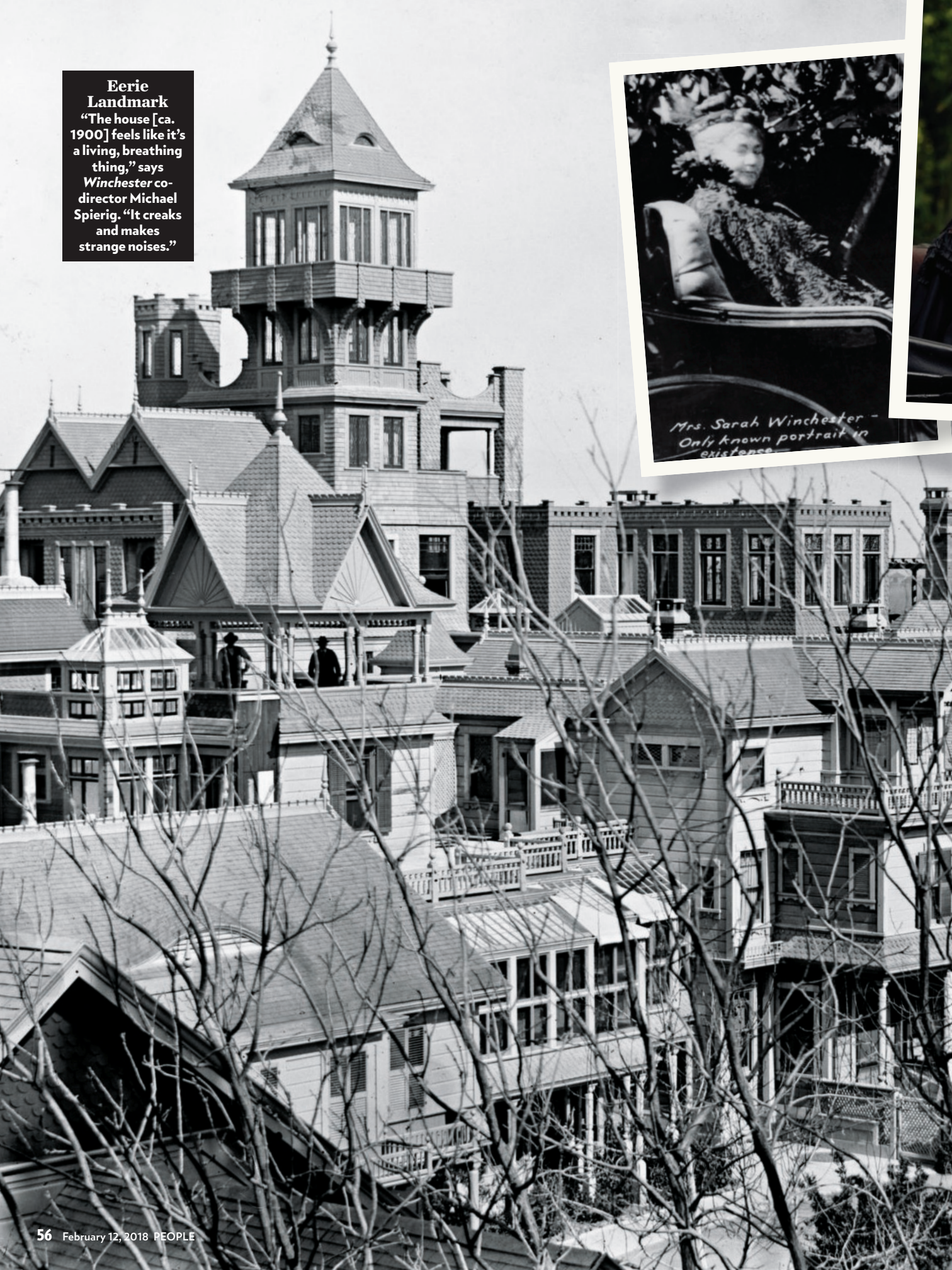


**Eerie
Landmark**
“The house [ca.
1900] feels like it’s
a living, breathing
thing,” says
Winchester co-
director Michael
Spierig. “It creaks
and makes
strange noises.”



*Mrs. Sarah Winchester -
Only known portrait in
existence.*



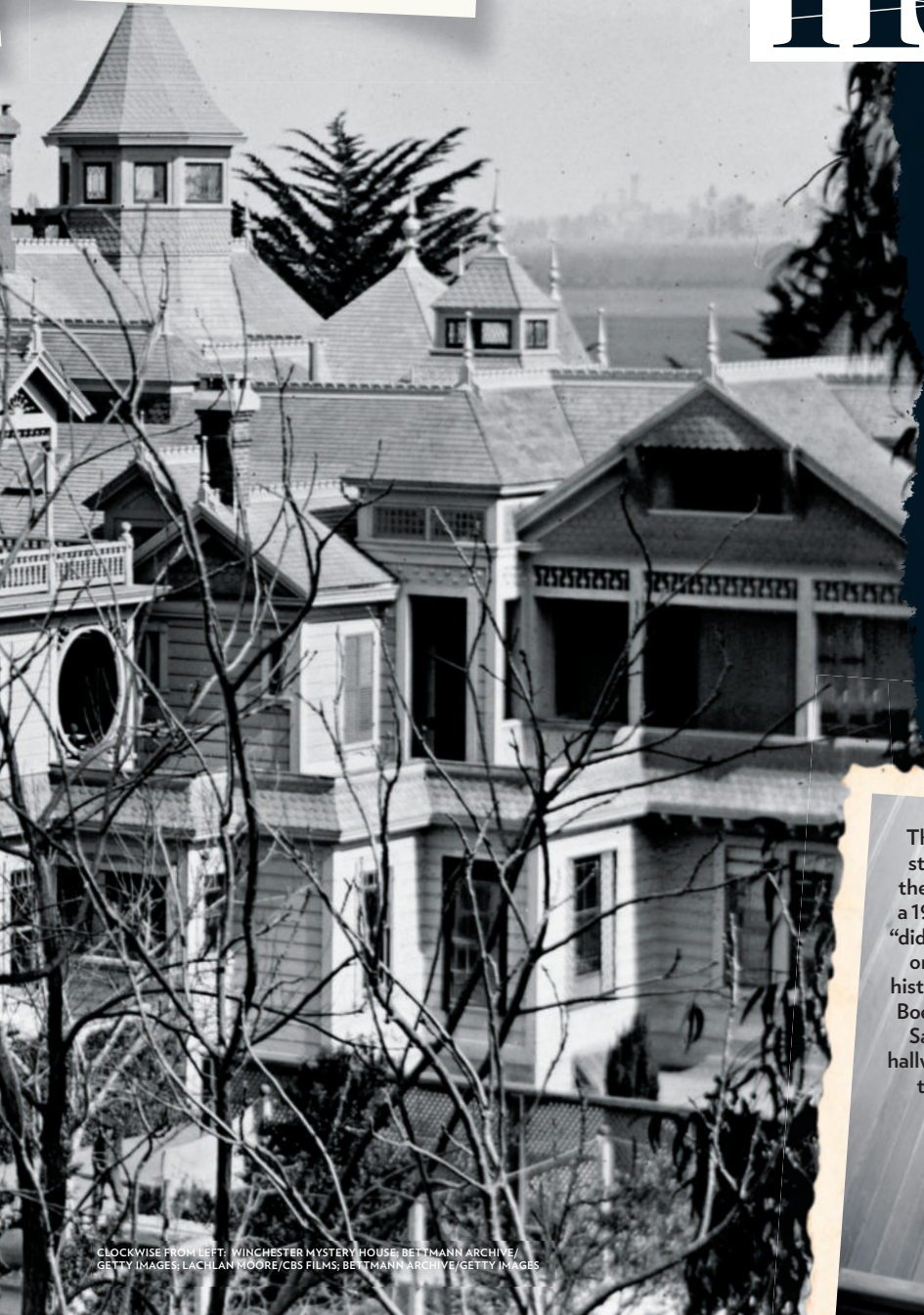
Owner Sarah Winchester (left, ca. 1906) “is absolutely shrouded in mystery,” says Helen Mirren, who plays the heiress.

THE
WINCHESTER
MANSION

America's

Most Haunted

House?



THE INSPIRATION FOR A NEW HORROR MOVIE, THIS SPOOKY SAN JOSE ESTATE HAS A TRAGIC REAL-LIFE PAST, A BIZARRE INTERIOR AND MAYBE SOME LINGERING SPIRITS

By **KARA WARNER**

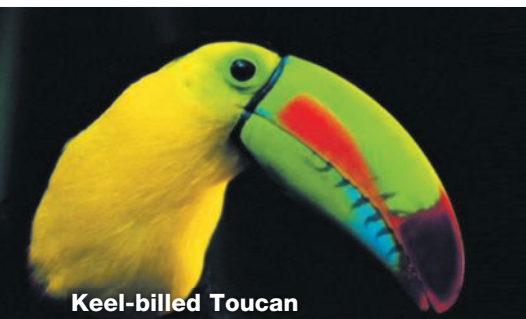
A staircase that dead-ends at the ceiling. A door that opens into thin air. A turret known as the “witch’s cap.” An affinity with the number 13: panes in the windows, steps on the stairways, petals on a stained-glass flower. The labyrinthine, sprawling 160-room Queen Anne-style Victorian known as the Winchester Mystery House in San Jose, Calif., has been spooking visitors as a tourist attraction for almost a century. Now the house and its haunting past are coming to the big screen in *Winchester*, a horror thriller starring

The famous staircase to the ceiling (in a 1938 photo) “did go upstairs once,” says historian Janan Boehme. “But Sarah put a hallway over the top of it.”





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Architectural Oddity
The second floor features a door to nowhere.



The ballroom cost \$9,000 to build, more than three times the cost of an average home at the time.



The “witch’s cap” turret may have hosted séances.



Sarah Winchester died in one of the 40 bedrooms.

Helen Mirren as its mysterious owner Sarah Winchester. Following the deaths of her young husband and infant daughter, the heiress to the Winchester rifle fortune started construction on the house in 1886. The reclusive widow was said to have never stopped building, with workers laboring 24 hours a day until her death in 1922. Some historians think the compulsion was an effort to deal with her grief and possibly a way to escape the gnawing weight of countless deaths caused by the family business’s weapons. Spirits may or may not visit the property to this day. “It’s a fascinating mythology, the notion that somebody feels haunted by all the deaths at the hand of the rifle,” says Michael Spierig, who directed *Winchester* with his twin brother, Peter. “It’s a blessing and a curse to profit from them but then also feel responsible. It must’ve been a hell of a burden for her.”

‘It took an obsession and also great wealth to build it. It’s really beautiful and strange’

—JASON CLARKE, WINCHESTER COSTAR



Born in Connecticut, Sarah Lockwood Pardee married William Winchester, whose father founded the rifle company at 22. The couple’s

only child, daughter Annie, died at 6 weeks old. William died in 1881, making Sarah a widow at 41 and an heiress to \$20 million (more than \$450 million today). Her new home “started out as a simple two-story farmhouse,” says Winchester Mystery House historian Janan Boehme, but it spread helter-skelter as Sarah’s passion turned into an obsession. No one today is sure why. “There are all sorts of explanations,” says Boehme. “Like she was trying to disconcert bad spirits she didn’t want to have in her house, or she was just a really bad architect.” Gossip ran rampant. “People were curious about her,” says Boehme. “She was extraordinarily wealthy, she bore a very famous name, but she was also a very private person, and since people didn’t really know, they made up their own stories.”



‘It’s a classic ghost story based in truth and real history’

—HELEN MIRREN
ON THE MOVIE

is pushing a wheelbarrow,” Boehme says. “He’s still looking after the place.” In 40 years of working for the Mystery House, Boehme claims she has never seen a ghost herself—but that she senses energies, sometimes sad and lonely, but mostly kind. “The psychics I’ve worked with here all say it was a good energy, especially up around the third floor near the servants’ quarters,” says Boehme. “I’ve heard things I can’t explain,” she says. “I don’t ever feel unsafe here. But I never feel alone here either.” ●

But is the house haunted? “We’ve had a couple people claim to have seen a shadow of Sarah, and often psychics will say that they can sense her presence,” says Boehme. A “wheelbarrow ghost” is also rumored to roam the premises, though he’s a friendly type believed to be the spirit of a loyal employee of Sarah’s. “Generally he’s dressed in overalls, and he carries an old wooden toolbox or

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