

Sarah Winchester's ghostly penance

By John Stark

At 4 feet, 10 inches, Sarah Winchester couldn't have cast a very big shadow. Yet, for a woman of such unassuming stature, she projected an image of august mystery that has never been solved. The clues to her madness are jumbled, refracted like colored light through her Tiffany windows. It was 54 years ago that she presumably joined the spirits that obsessed, haunted and mapped out the last 38 years of her existence—years spent constructing the world's most opulently crazy mansion.

Sarah's legacy occupies six acres of downtown San Jose. It's a Victorian acid trip, with 160 rooms, 10,000 windows, nine kitchens and 47 fireplaces. Doors lead to secret passageways and windows open on to blank walls. The staircases alone suggest a fun house—several lead nowhere, one has seven switchbacks to rise only nine feet, while another requires walking down seven steps in order to go up 13. Open the wrong door and you're liable to fall an entire floor.

And as if for real comic effect, she had all of the mansion's carved wooden pillars installed upside down.

President Theodore Roosevelt was so intrigued by the looks of the house that he personally stopped by to pay a call on Sarah. He received a sharp "No!"

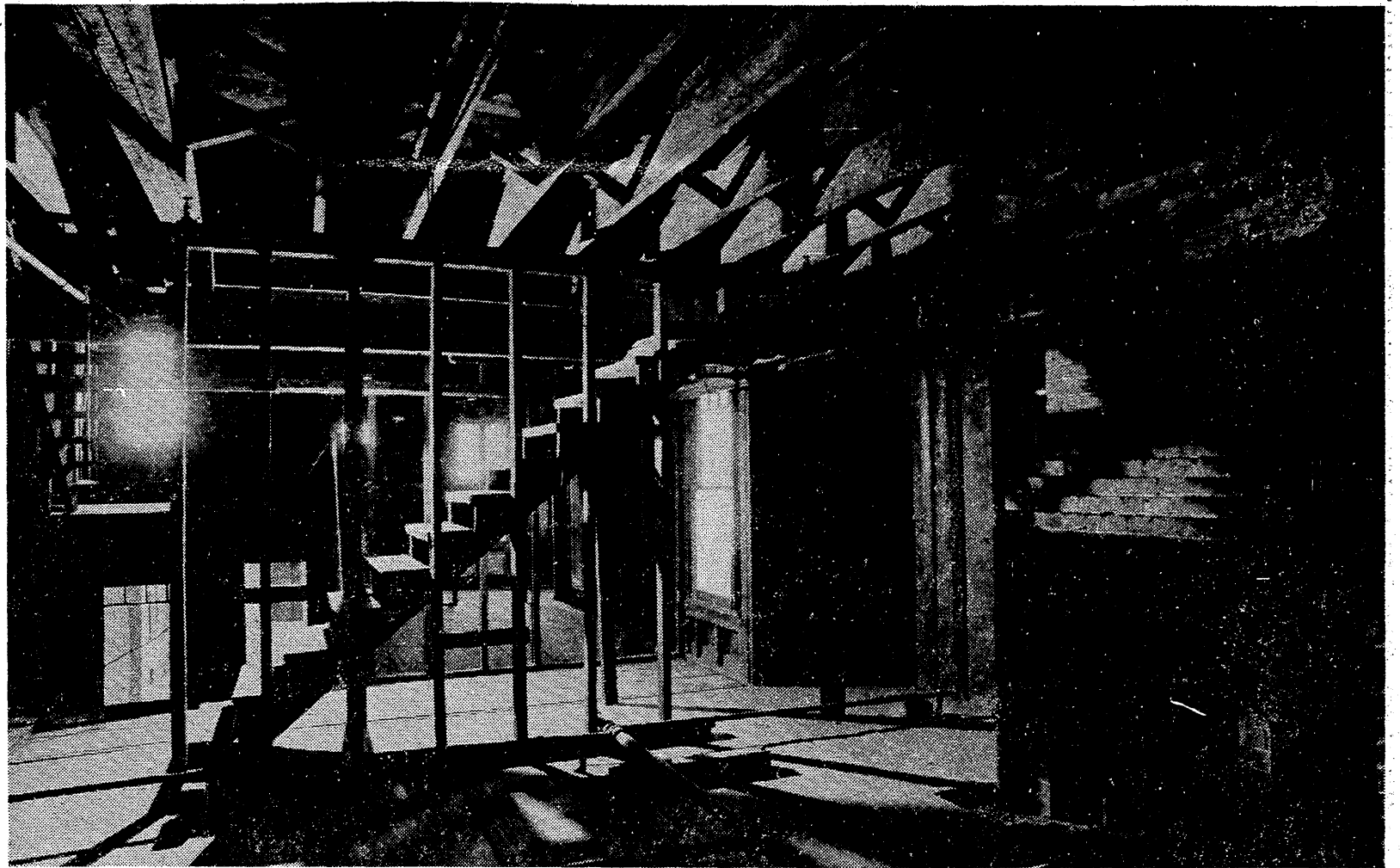
Sarah called her estate Llanda Villa, an Indian name which has never been explained. It was a working farm, and its 162 acres blossomed with apricot and plum trees. Today, the rambling, roller-coaster house is held tightly at bay by freeways, mushroom-shaped movie theaters, hamburger havens, post-war houses and 12-way traffic lights. The occult-patterned iron gates leading down a path to the main porch have been pushed in closer and closer to make room for the ever-widening Winchester Boulevard.

The front doors, made of rock quartz and crystals inlaid in German silver, bronze and lead, were made by Tiffany's of New York. After being installed, they were rudely jammed shut by the 1906 earthquake, and never opened during Sarah's mortal life.

It was that same quake that almost killed her. An eight-story tower directly above her bedroom toppled, trapping her in her room. She was dug out by servants, and the gashes from the crowbar can still be seen on her bedroom door. Terrified by the ordeal, she said she was visited in her room by angry spirits who took credit for the disaster.

Sarah's life is as complex and baffling as the house she built. Since she was a spiritualist, she would not allow any photographs of her to be taken. Only one exists, and that was snapped secretly by a gardener. The few facts that can be agreed on is that Sarah Pardee Winchester, heiress to the Winchester Arms Fortune, moved West from Connecticut in 1882. While back East, her only child, a one-month old girl, died, and 15 years later her husband, William Wirt Winchester, succumbed to tuberculosis.

A Boston spiritualist supposedly told the grief-stricken widow that the deaths of her husband and daughter were acts of revenge for lives lost from the Winchester Rifle—"The Gun That Won the West."



Round-the-clock construction stopped with Sarah Winchester's death, leaving many of the rooms permanently unfinished

Sarah was told the same fate awaited her unless she moved West and built a mansion for the spirits on which work would never stop or be completed. She would live forever, as long as she kept building.

Were Sarah's blueprints the work of an erratic mind, or was she deliberately trying to confuse and outsmart the spirits by building a house full of labyrinths, trap doors and odd-shaped rooms?

In the heart of the Winchester House is the seance room, where only Sarah and her departed friends were allowed. The walls contain 13 hooks which held 13 colored robes which she wore during the seances. Her dead architects were a demanding, fickle lot, and to keep them happy, Sarah would construct and alter room after room, balcony after balcony and fireplace after fireplace.

She spent \$5.5 million of her \$20 million inheritance on the mansion. Occult signs are everywhere. The spider web, Sarah's favorite design, is seen on doors, windows, ceilings, floors and walls. Most windows have 13 panes, nearly all walls 13 panels; chandeliers, 13 globes, and stairs, 13 steps. There are even 13 bathrooms.

In the courtyard of the house is the belltower, said to have been tolled by one of her servants each midnight to welcome incoming flights of good spirits and again at 2 a.m. as the ghosts returned to their sepulchers (the rope to ring the bell could supposedly be reached only through a secret underground passage). Sarah was an accomplished organist, and liked to fill the house with her music in the pre-dawn hours.

Two years after her death, Harry Houdini was given a special midnight tour of the mansion during his worldwide crusade against spiritualists. Imagine the legendary escape artist trying to grope his way out of the maze!

Cryptic quotes from Shakespeare are inlaid in Tiffany windows in the mansion's exquisitely beautiful ballroom: "Wide unclasp the tables of their thoughts" and "These same thoughts people this little world."

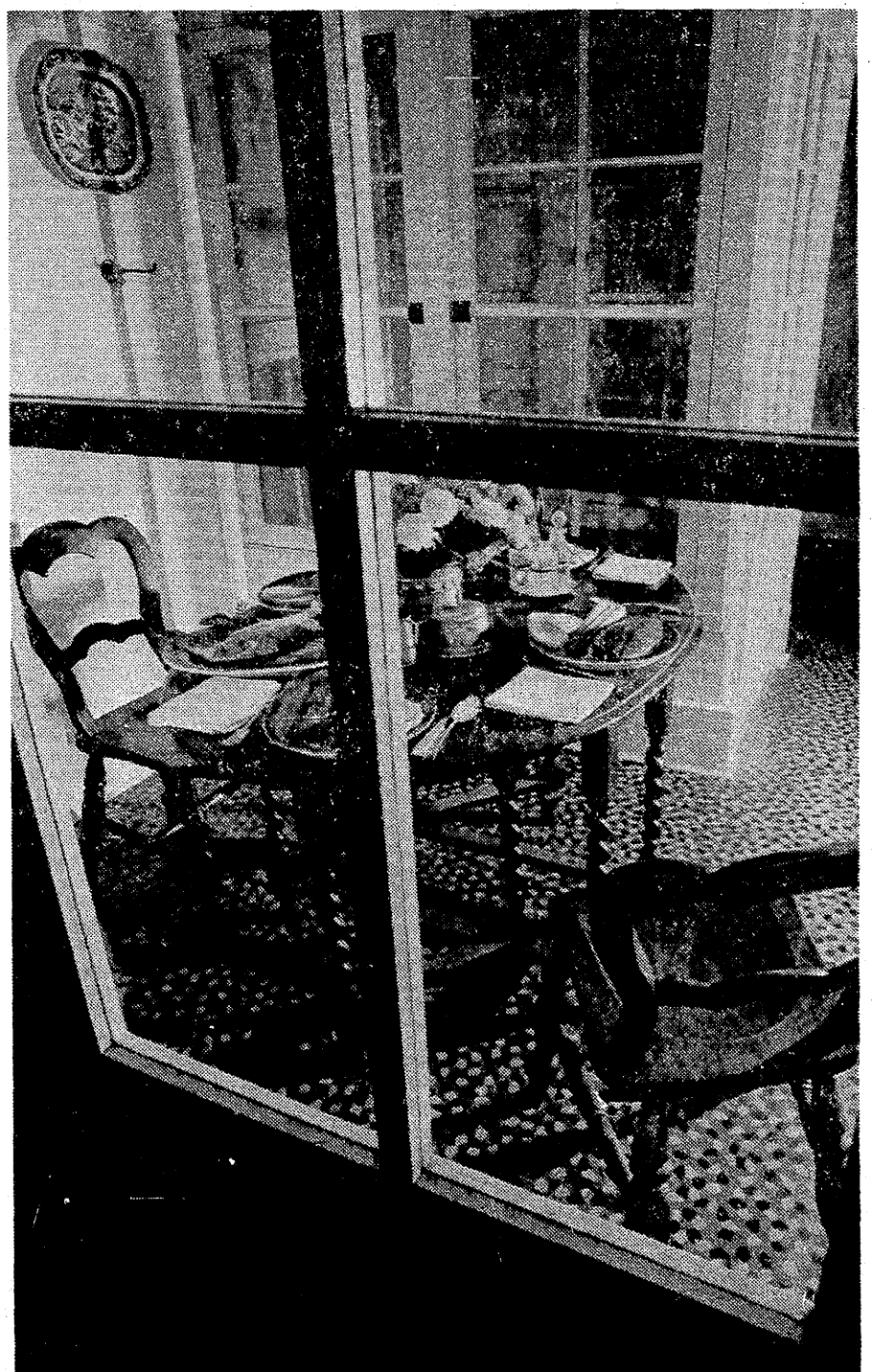
Sarah ruled Llanda Villa with a tight hand. Skylights and windows were strategically placed throughout the house so she could spy on the help. Even the bathroom door in the servants' quarter is made of glass.

It would be too easy, however, to simply write Sarah off as eccentric. Besides drawing up the blueprints of her house, she designed a highly complex, underground drainage system. She invented labor-saving devices, such as curved brass plates in stair corners to foil the dust, porcelain wash-tubs with built-



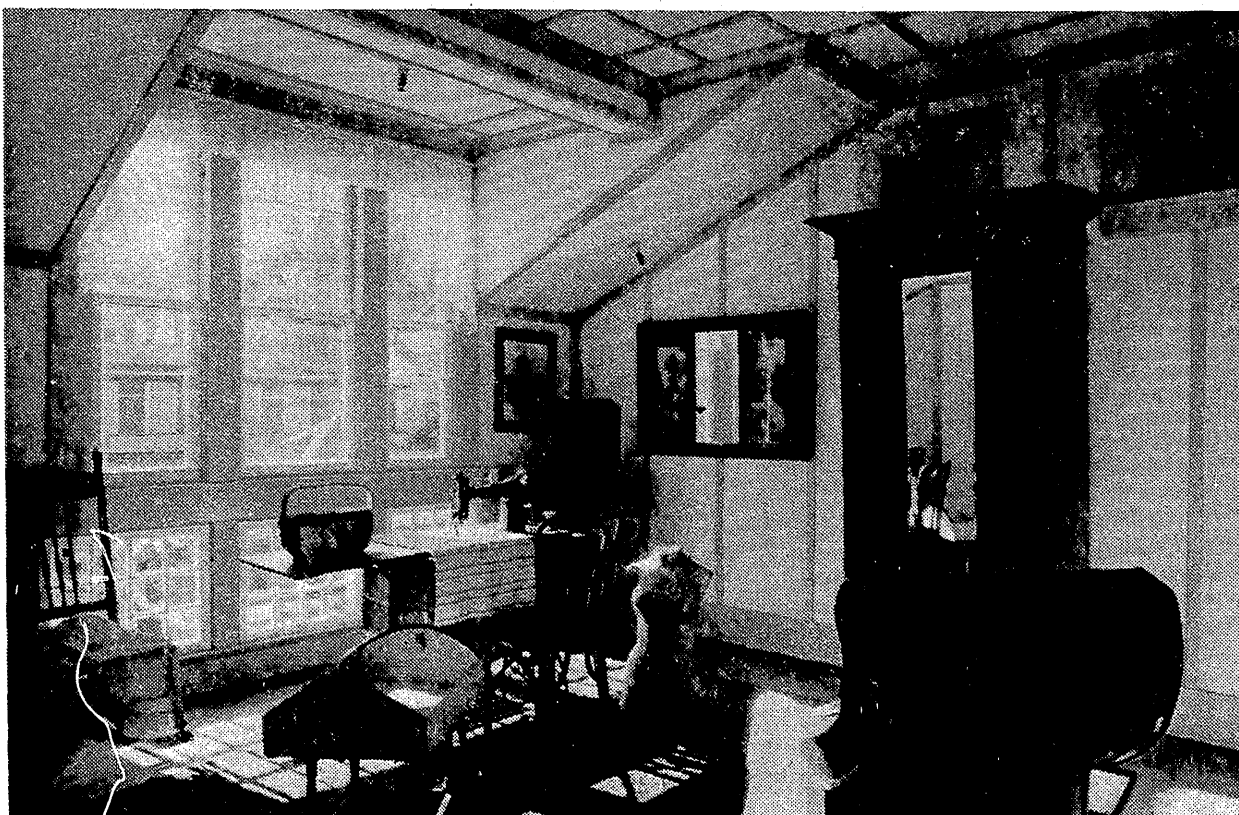
Restored grounds and house of Llanda Villa (above) and servants room-within-a-room (right)

Examiner photos by Paul Glines



Tiffany window lights 13 steps

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Sarah's sewing room looks out over the front gardens