

THE HAUNTED WOMAN

By Elizabeth Roman

Sarah Pardee was intelligent and married well. Her in-laws, the Winchesters, owned one of the biggest American businesses of the mid-1800s. No, they weren't train barons, nor did they own mines. Instead, they owned the patent on the "gun that won the West," the hugely popular Winchester Repeating Rifle.

Not long after the marriage of Sarah and William Winchester in 1862, disaster struck the newlyweds. In 1866, their infant daughter died. The loss of her only child caused Sarah to sink into a deep depression. Fifteen years later, her husband died. Both her daughter and her husband seemed to have been taken from Sarah before their time; now she was alone. She was richer than most people ever dream of being, but miserable nonetheless.

Then Sarah consulted a medium. Mediums claimed to be able to contact the spirits of the dead. Although most women consulted mediums for sheer entertainment, Sarah put all her faith in what the medium had to say. The message was a shock: Sarah's family was being haunted by the spirits of all those killed by Winchester rifles. "Go west," advised the medium. "Build a house in which these spirits can come and dwell. Then they will end their campaign of revenge." Sarah believed she would be spared as long as the construction continued. Sarah found an eight-room

farmhouse just west of San Jose, California. With piles of money at her disposal, she hired several full-time carpenters and began adding on. She built room upon room, story upon story. She made the passageways as confusing as possible to foil whatever evil spirits might visit. Thirteen was her favorite number, so she tried to build everything in thirteens. For instance, the chandelier held 13 candles, some rooms had 13 windows, and one suite had 13 fireplaces. Of course, everything had to be custom built.

Sarah's whims drove all her employees crazy, but at least she paid well, almost twice the going rate. Plus, there was never a dull moment in the Winchester Mansion. One day, Sarah would have a room painted bright red. The next day, she wanted it white, because that's what the spirits wanted. At one point, Sarah boarded up the wine cellar for a similar reason. (It has never been located.) Sarah also installed a total of 47 fireplaces, because that's how she imagined that her "spirit friends" came and went.

One might say that Sarah was innovative as well as obsessed. She installed a washboard sink, modern elevators, and a heat-control device on her shower to keep the water the right temperature. As she grew older and became afflicted with arthritis, she had zigzagging stairways built

with two-inch risers, to ease her climb from floor to floor.

By 1900, the Winchester Mansion was seven stories tall. Sarah lived with her niece and servants in utter luxury. Then, in 1906, the great San Francisco earthquake tumbled three stories off the enormous structure. Sarah was trapped by the rubble for hours before her niece and servants discovered her. When she emerged, the first words spoken by the wire, gray-haired woman regarded a new "revision" the spirits had demanded: Sarah must seal off the front thirty rooms, for she had worked too long on them and neglected the others. Evidently, the earthquake was Sarah's fault.

Sarah died in 1922, at the ripe old age of 78. Numerous rooms of the mansion were still under construction, with materials for additional ones still in storage.

Visitors today can tour the Winchester Mystery House, which covers six acres with 160 rooms. No one knows whether it is really haunted. All we can say for sure is that its owner certainly was.