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Walsh, Ellen, alias Mayfield, Ida (1838–1932)

THE FAKE SOCIALITE

She was a belle of New York in the 1860s and seventies, having married Benjamin Wood, a copperhead congressman and newspaper publisher. She was the former Ida Mayfield; she had been a New Orleans belle before she became a New York belle, the vivacious daughter of Judge Thomas Henry Mayfield of Louisiana.

She was a true beauty and Ben Wood lavished gifts on her, and when he took her to New York, where he ran the *New York Daily News*, she was socially active, danced with the Prince of Wales (who became King Edward VII), and counted Samuel J. Tilden among her personal friends. She entertained President Grover Cleveland. She was widowed in 1900. Then in 1907, she simply vanished—not before she walked into the Morton Trust Company, drew out all her money, amounting to nearly a million dollars, in cash, and stuffed it into a large brown shopping bag, never to return to the bank again.

Mrs. Wood did not resurface until 1931, when she was found living in New York's Herald Square Hotel, in what can only be described as Dickensonian squalor. She was 93, and the contents of the room, including huge stacks of yellowed newspapers, seemed that old as well. Hundreds of letters and old pictures carpeted the floor. Cardboard boxes were piled to the ceiling. All over lay half-century-old ball programs from New Orleans, as well as all sorts of inscribed portraits of famous personalities. Lying promiscuously amongst the litter were all sorts of jewelry. When police started opening some of the cardboard boxes, they found them stuffed with negotiable securities worth as much as half a million dollars. They opened a cracker box and out fell a diamond-and-emerald necklace.

Mrs. Wood was found to have a canvas pouch tied to her body. It contained fifty \$10,000 bills. The courts declared Mrs. Wood incompetent and supplied legal counsel to look after her interests. The old lady was almost deaf, but she was amused by the official action. She had taken her money out of the bank in 1907, before the Panic of 1907, protecting her entire fortune. "I did quite well, you know, and it seems very strange they should call me incompetent. I made money and I kept it. So many people whom everyone considers quite competent can't do that." She may have been a

recluse but she certainly knew of 1929 and, having kept her fortune in good hard cash, she had survived that as well.

Legally, it seemed there was no reason to deprive her of her money. If she wanted to live in squalor and keep her money out of banks that failed, there seemed little reason not to allow her to do so. However, the matter became a moot point early the following year, when Mrs. Wood contracted pneumonia and died.

There was, not surprisingly, much rejoicing in Louisiana, where scores of Mayfields pushed into view to claim a share of the former Ida Mayfield's fortune. Then came a bizarre twist. The courts rejected all their claims. Careful research determined that there had never been any Ida Mayfield. Actually Mrs. Wood had been born plain Ellen Walsh, and her father was an Irish immigrant peddler who had lived for a while in Malden, Massachusetts, and died in California in 1864.

Ellen took the name of Ida Mayfield to satisfy her desire to crash high society. Not even Ben Wood ever suspected the truth. She even pinned the Mayfield name on her mother, brother, and sister. Her sister became Mary E. Mayfield and her brother, Michael Walsh, changed his name to Henry Benjamin Walsh. Ellen even changed the name on her father's tombstone to Thomas H. Mayfield. And when her mother died in 1883, Ellen had her buried as "Ann Mary Crawford, widow of Thomas Henry Mayfield."

The shattered Mayfields returned to Louisiana. Eventually the Wood estate was divided by ten Walsh descendants who received \$84,490.92 apiece from an eccentric ancestor they hadn't even known had ever lived.

Teed, Cyrus Reed (1839–1908)

THE INSIDE-OUT MAN

Unlike hollow-earthers Captain John Cleves Symmes (*q.v.*) and Marshall B. Gardner (*q.v.*), Cyrus Teed concocted what scientists regard as an even more preposterous variation of that theory. By Teed's standards, Symmes and Gardner were towers of sanity. Under

Teed's version of the universe the earth was indeed hollow but the difference was that *we were the people inside*.

Symmes and Gardner arrived at their conclusions by mere intellectual achievement. But Teed enjoyed some help from a heavenly character. One night in 1869, Teed was alone in his laboratory in Utica, New York, working on his previous line of endeavor—alchemy—when a beautiful girl appeared to him in a vision. She informed him of his past incarnations and told him that he was a new messiah. Rather offhandedly, she let him in on the secret of the true cosmogony.

The cosmos was not anything like the way scientist-writer Carl Sagan was to describe it a century later. No, really it was rather like an egg, with mankind living on the inner surface of the shell; the hollow inside contained the entire universe—the sun, moon, planets, comets, and stars. At the center of this open space was a huge sun, half light and half dark, and our sun was really just a reflection of it. Only because this central sun rotated did we suffer from the illusion that our sun rises and sets. The moon? A mere reflection of the earth. The planets? Reflections of “mercurial discs floating between the laminae of the metallic planes.” The heavenly bodies? Focal points of light, all explained away later by Teed under his various “optical laws.”

For 38 years Teed labored away with unflagging dedication to spreading the gospel of this view of the universe. It was quite a step up for this former farm youth who had served as a Civil War private. Later Teed went into practice as a doctor in Utica, New York, having graduated from the New York Eclectic Medical College. Eclecticism was a 19th-century medical movement relying mostly on herb remedies.

As a sideline to his medical practice, he dabbled in alchemy, looking for a way to make gold. He junked that enterprise when it became apparent that the heavenly forces had greater things in mind for him.

And it must be said that Teed's inside-out theory enjoyed considerable success, attracting thousands of followers. His first two works, *Illumination of Koresh: Marvelous Experience of the Great Alchemist at Utica, New York* and *The Cellular Cosmogony*, attracted a wild-eyed following. Later a number of observers, including author Carl Carmer in his *Dark Trees to the Wind*, would note that the great appeal of Teed's cult was its clear representation of a “return to the womb.”

Not surprisingly, Teed's early interest in Koreshanity (*Koresh* is Hebrew for Cyrus) led to a falling off of his medical practice. Folks

began calling him Utica's “mad doctor.” His troubled wife left him, but Teed paid that little mind. In 1886 he shook off the dust of Utica and headed for Chicago. There he established the headquarters of his Koreshan movement, including a commune called Koreshan Unity, a magazine called *The Guiding Star* (later succeeded by *The Flaming Sword* which, along with the womb theory, was in later years to delight the Freudians), and a “College of Life.”

The *Chicago Herald* in 1894 described Teed as “an undersized, smooth-shaven man of 54 whose brown, restless eyes glow and burn like live coals. . . . He exerts a strange mesmerizing influence over his converts, particularly the other sex.” Indeed, approximately three out of four of his followers were women. He traveled from coast to coast spreading the word, clad in a Prince Albert coat, black trousers, flowing white silk bow tie, and wide-brimmed hat. In California alone he had 4,000 followers.

Of course he had no followers at all in the scientific community. Perhaps this was because these “humbugs,” as he called them, could not in their doltishness fathom his simple explanations. Thus Teed lost them when he called planets “spheres of substance aggregated through the impact of afferent and efferent fluxions of essence,” and described comets as being “composed of cruosic ‘force,’ caused by the condensation of substance through the dissipation of the coloric substance at the opening of the electro-magnetic circuits, which closes the conduits of solar and lunar ‘energy.’”

Somehow this made his female followers swoon, and they added their amens when he announced: “. . . to know of the earth's concavity . . . is to know God, while to believe in the earth's convexity is to deny Him and all his works. All that is opposed to Koreshanity is antichrist.”

In the late 1890s Teed established a new town called Estero, about 16 miles south of Fort Myers, Florida, and announced it was “The New Jerusalem.” He predicted that it would eventually have eight million inhabitants and become the capital of the world.

Teed also began to prepare his followers for his physical death, promising that he would then arise and lead the faithful to Paradise. He got out a book, *The Immortal Manhood*, on this theme just in time. In 1908, at the age of 69, he got into a physical dispute with the marshal of Fort Myers and died as a result. Death occurred on December 22, and 200 members of the colony took up a constant prayer vigil over the corpse. Forty-eight hours later it started to take on a rather distinct odor. Christmas passed; the odor had become so pronounced that the county health officials ordered immediate burial. Teed's distraught followers put him in a concrete

sarcophagus on Estero Island, off the Gulf Coast. They waited for the next 13 years for Teed to arise like Lazarus, but he never did. Then a tropical hurricane pounded the tomb and carried Teed away to the ocean depths. The last of Teed's followers remained until 1949, awaiting his return to New Jerusalem. Then they finally disbanded.

Winchester, Sarah Pardee (1839–1922)

THE UNFINISHED MANSION

The mansion—perhaps the most fantastic and certainly one of the most expensive structures ever erected—stands today as a museum open to the public, a still uncompleted monument to fear and guilt. Sarah Winchester, the widow of William Wirt Winchester of the Connecticut gun family, began to build her mansion in San Jose, California, in 1884; it was to become an incredible obsession, always being built and rebuilt because she was tortured with the idea that she would die if it were ever finished.

Sarah Pardee had married Winchester in 1862, when she was in her early twenties. It was a luckless marriage, childless save for an infant who died shortly after birth. Winchester himself died in 1881, and Sarah apparently developed the notion that she and her family were being punished for the sins of "the gun." Thousands of people, white and red, had died by the Winchester rifle, and she became obsessed with the belief that these victims had cursed the Winchester fortune and would haunt her the rest of her days. Spiritualists whom she consulted confirmed the theory, but, happily at last, one offered her a solution to her dilemma. She had to build a magnificent mansion to protect herself from these vengeful ghosts, one that would at the same time attract friendly spirits, including her late husband, to keep her from harm's way.

Sarah Winchester was convinced. She took her \$20 million inheritance and moved west, to San Jose; in 1884, work began on Winchester House. While the widow was sure the good ghosts would take up their duties, she was not content to leave her worldly safety to the spirit world. The bad ghosts would be sure to come,

she knew, and she would have to employ all the guile she could to frustrate them. She would fool them with secret passages, false doors, and stairways that would end in midair. Thus, for the next 38 years, work went on without pause at the mansion. Some carpenters did no work elsewhere for periods of upwards of two decades.

And Winchester House grew. Eventually it had blossomed into being eight stories high, containing 158 rooms. There were five fully equipped kitchens (plus four more in ready-reserve), 13 bathrooms, 48 fireplaces, five separate heating systems, and no less than 2,000 doors and 10,000 windows. Hundreds of these doors and windows opened on blank walls, all part of the scheme to confuse the ghostly invaders. Secret passages twisted for miles between the walls of the rooms, many of which would over the years be torn down and reconstructed according to some new inspiration of Mrs. Winchester. If an intruder, earthly or unearthly, got into the place, he might well go mad trying to find his way about. One stairway had 44 steps and seven turns but at the end rose less than 10 feet. The uninvited would no doubt give themselves away if they lighted the wrong fireplace. Some bore chimneys that did not reach the roof, and the smoke would quickly spread the alarm.

Although she had no architectural background, Mrs. Winchester made up her own plans or altered those of others. She had a huge bell tower constructed, inaccessible save for a torturous climb over the roof, and the bell rope fed into a concealed well that emerged only in a secret cellar. Thus the widow would be able to move to safety and ring an alarm if the spirit invasion occurred.

For 38 years—on weekends and holidays—construction work never ceased on Winchester House. Mrs. Winchester could awake each morning to the comforting sounds of workmen shouting and hammers pounding, and she would realize she had remained safe within the bizarre multi-walled structure. When she died in 1922 at the age of 83, the mansion, on which she had expended more than a quarter of her legacy, had already achieved the status of a legend. In 1973 California made Winchester House a state historical landmark.