FOLK HORROR

VOLUME I



REAL HORROR IS HISTORY

JULIAN DELPHIKI

FOLK HORROR

VOLUME I



Chilling Folklore Tales

REAL HORROR IS HISTORY

JULIAN DELPHIKI

Copyright © 2026 Julian Delphiki

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotations in critical reviews and other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

The historical events in this book are drawn from the published sources listed at the end of each chapter. Where the record is silent, the text says so.

Folkhorror, Volume I · First edition

CONTENTS

Before the Lights Go Out

01 **THE HOUSE THAT GRIEF BUILT**
Sarah Winchester · San José, California · 1886–1922

02 **THE INN ON THE OSAGE TRAIL**
The Bender family · Labette County, Kansas · 1870–1873

03 **THE HEART ON THE ROCK**
Mercy Brown · Exeter, Rhode Island · 1883–1892

04 **ARE YOU A WITCH OR ARE YOU A FAIRY?**
Bridget Cleary · Ballyvadlea, County Tipperary · 1895

05 **THE SUMMER STRASBOURG DANCED**
Frau Troffea and the dancers · Strasbourg · 1518

06 **A PIN FOR THE PEDLAR**
The Pendle witches · Lancashire, England · 1612

07 **THE BEAST THAT FED THE HEADLINES**
The Beast of Gévaudan · Southern France · 1764–1767

08 **THE CANNIBAL WHO NEVER WAS**
Sawney Bean · Ayrshire, Scotland · told from the 1700s

09 **FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW**
Hinterkaifeck · Upper Bavaria, Germany · 1922

10 **SOMETHING IN THE AIR**
The "Mad Gasser" · Mattoon, Illinois · 1944

11 **TWO MISSING HOURS**
Betty and Barney Hill · White Mountains, New Hampshire · 1961

After the Lights Come On

BEFORE THE LIGHTS GO OUT

A note on this book

Every village has a story it only tells after dark. The house at the end of the lane. The family nobody visits. The road you don't take after sunset. *Folk horror* lives in those places: not in outer space or a monster's lair, but in farmhouses, theatres, and quiet country roads—places we already know.

This book collects those stories, but it follows one rule: **the record comes first.** Each chapter begins with the legend as it is usually told. Then it goes back to the letters, deeds, newspapers and testimonies to see what actually happened. Finally, it asks what the story says about us—why we needed it, and what it might still teach.

There are eleven stories here. They range from a Rhineland city in the summer of 1518 to a New Hampshire highway in 1961, and they take in a Kansas inn, an Irish cottage, a Lancashire courtroom, a French mountainside, a Scottish sea cave, a Bavarian farm and a small Illinois town at war. Some are famous; some deserve to be. One of them, you will discover, never happened at all.

You will find that the truth is rarely less frightening than the legend. It is usually more human, and that is far harder to forget.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Key Concept. Shaded boxes explain an idea, term or piece of history the story depends on. Skip them on a first read, or stop and enjoy the detour.

Legend & Record. A side-by-side table that separates what people say from what the documents show.

For Reflection. Each chapter closes with a few questions. The past is only useful if we take something from it.

01

CHAPTER ONE

THE HOUSE THAT GRIEF BUILT

Sarah Winchester · San José, California · 1886–1922

THERE IS A STAIRCASE IN San José, California, that turns back on itself seven times and, after forty-four steps, has climbed only about nine feet. Tour guides like to stop visitors at the bottom and let the silence do the work. Look at it, the pause says. Who would build a staircase like that? And for a hundred years the answer has been the one everyone came to hear: a widow who was hiding from ghosts.

It is a wonderful story. It has a woman in black, a fortune made from rifles, a medium in a candlelit room in Boston, and a house that never stops growing because the moment the hammers fall silent, the dead will catch up with her. I have told versions of it myself, late at night, to people who wanted to be frightened.

But the longer I spent with the record of Sarah Winchester's life—her property deeds, her bequests, the memories of the people who worked for her—the more I came to believe that the legend is not just inaccurate. It is a second haunting, one that has

followed her for a century. And that staircase, it turns out, was built for a reason that is much simpler, and much sadder, than any curse.

This chapter is about two houses: the one Sarah built, and the one we built around her.

A GIRL FROM NEW HAVEN

She was born Sarah Lockwood Pardee in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1839, the daughter of Leonard and Sarah Pardee. New Haven was a city organised around Yale College, and the Pardees belonged to its respectable, church-going middle. Sarah was small—as an adult she stood under five feet—and by every account bright. She was well educated for a woman of her time, loved music, and spoke French.

On 30 September 1862, in the second year of the American Civil War, she married William Wirt Winchester. William's father, Oliver, had made his first fortune manufacturing shirts and had then put his money into a struggling local gun maker. In 1860 that company's plant superintendent, Benjamin Tyler Henry, patented something new: a lever-action rifle that could fire over and over without reloading.

> **KEY CONCEPT**
>
> ### The Repeating Rifle
>
> Most Civil War soldiers carried muzzle-loaders: powder and ball were rammed down the barrel by hand, and a well-drilled man might manage three shots a minute. A repeating rifle stored metal cartridges in a magazine; a flick of the lever threw out the empty case and loaded the next. The Henry rifle of 1860, and the Winchester rifles that grew out of it, let one person fire as fast as several. Keep this in mind. It is the seed of the whole legend.

In 1866 Oliver reorganised the business as the **Winchester Repeating Arms Company**. Its rifles—above all the Model 1873, which later advertising would call "the gun that won the

West"—made the family enormously rich. William worked in the company alongside his father. For a while, the young couple's life looked like the life every family in their circle wanted.

ANNIE

On 15 June 1866 Sarah gave birth to a daughter, Annie Pardee Winchester. From the start something was wrong. The baby could not take in enough nourishment and grew weaker instead of stronger. The doctors' word for it was **marasmus**. Annie died in July, about six weeks old.

> **KEY CONCEPT**
>
> ### Marasmus
>
> A severe form of malnutrition in which the body, unable to absorb enough energy, begins to consume its own tissue. In the nineteenth century it appeared on countless infant death certificates. It named what doctors could see—a baby wasting away—rather than the cause, which might have been a feeding problem, an infection or a condition no one could yet diagnose.

Sarah and William never had another child. We have no diary in which Sarah describes those weeks, and I won't invent one for her. But anyone who has lost someone knows that grief does not stay in the room where it happened. It moves into the rest of the house.

TWO FUNERALS IN FOUR MONTHS

The second blow came fourteen years later. Oliver Winchester died in December 1880. In March 1881 William followed him, killed at the age of forty-three by **tuberculosis**. At forty-one, Sarah was a widow with no children, and in the same years she lost close members of her own family too.

KEY CONCEPT

Tuberculosis

Known as "consumption" for the way it seemed to eat its victims from the inside, tuberculosis is a bacterial infection, usually of the lungs, spread through the air. It was among the leading causes of death in the nineteenth century and had no reliable cure until antibiotics arrived in the 1940s. Sarah would spend part of her fortune fighting it.

She was also now very wealthy. William's estate left her a large block of shares in the Winchester company, and more came to her after her mother-in-law died in 1898. By the 1910s her dividends brought in roughly a quarter of a million dollars a year—millions in today's money. She had, quite literally, more money than she could spend.

This is the moment where the legend takes over the story.

WEST, FOR THE WEATHER

In the version told on tours, the grieving widow visits a medium in Boston. Through him, William's spirit delivers a terrible message: the family is cursed by the souls of everyone killed with a Winchester rifle. To survive, Sarah must travel west, buy a house, and build—without plan and without pause—for as long as she lives. If the work ever stops, she will die.

> **It is a perfect story. There is only one problem with it: there is no evidence it ever happened.**

No record names the medium, dates the visit or confirms that Sarah ever attended a séance. Her biographer, Mary Jo Ignoffo, who spent years in the archives, found more ordinary reasons for the move. Sarah suffered from rheumatism, and doctors at the time often prescribed a warmer climate. Members of her family were already settling in the San Francisco Bay Area. As

Ignoffo puts it, it was not so much that a psychic told her to go as that family circumstances and life led her to California.

KEY CONCEPT

Spiritualism

A movement that began in 1848, when two sisters in Hydesville, New York, claimed that spirits answered them with mysterious knocks. Spiritualists believed the living could talk with the dead through gifted "mediums," often at séances held around a table in a darkened room. The movement exploded after the Civil War, when hundreds of thousands of families were grieving. Sarah lived through its peak, which made the legend sound believable. Plausible, however, is not the same as true.

In 1886 Sarah bought an unfinished eight-room farmhouse on about forty-five acres in the Santa Clara Valley, near San José, for $12,570. She named it Llanada Villa. Over the following years she bought more land, until the estate covered around 160 acres, much of it planted with fruit orchards. Then she began to build.

A HOUSE WITHOUT A PLAN

Within six months the farmhouse had grown to twenty-six rooms. Sarah worked room by room, adding, removing and rearranging. Over the years she employed at least two architects, but she kept control of the project herself. She sketched ideas, changed her mind and tried again. What came out of that process was not the lair of a madwoman. It was one of the most modern homes in California, with indoor plumbing, gas lighting and later electricity, an indoor conservatory with its own drainage, and custom art-glass windows.

It was also strange. Today the house has around **160 rooms**, about **2,000 doors**, some **10,000 windows** and **47 stairways**. Doors open onto blank walls. Stairs climb into the ceiling. A window looks into the room next door. Some of these oddities really are mysteries. Most of them, though, have explanations