

Appendix VI

George S. Merritt to W. A. Swanberg, 1959

(from *Citizen Hearst*, 1961)

The biographer W. A. Swanberg was hard at work on *Citizen Hearst* when James Bacon's feature on the Beach House appeared in the *Providence Sunday Journal* in January 1960. Swanberg's book would be published the following year, in September 1961. Part of its strength lies in the correspondence he had with Hearst family members and with Hearst employees beginning in 1958; many of those people were long gone by the time David Nasaw began researching *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* in the 1990s. The letters Swanberg received, plus transcripts of the interviews he conducted with some of these old-timers, are now part of the W. A. Swanberg Papers at Columbia University, New York.

One man that Bill Swanberg heard from was George S. Merritt, a "Brentwood realtor," he was called in *Citizen Hearst*, who lived in Santa Monica, according to city directories of the 1920s. The letter that Merritt wrote Swanberg on October 29, 1959, contains some details about the Beach House's beginnings that are very much worth quoting. How veracious they are is impossible to say; at our distant remove, a good half a century later, we can take them at face value at least. Or we can doubt them and dismiss them, although that seems an unnecessarily harsh position. A letter like Merritt's brought out the best in Swanberg the biographer, the adeptly interpretive historian, as the following passages from *Citizen Hearst* show.

Appearing as they did a year and a half after James Bacon's feature of 1960, five years after Bob Thomas's two articles of 1956, and a little more than ten years after the "Sebastian Flyte" piece that Hearst himself wrote in 1951, the passages bring these appendices and the rest of *Hearst and Marion* full circle. In so doing, they place us on the edge of the modern interpretive era regarding the Beach House. The rest is ours as we look ahead from there through the 1960s and beyond, toward the delving into the lives of Hearst, Julia Morgan, Marion Davies, and many others that my colleagues and I embarked on in the 1970s.

From *Citizen Hearst: A Biography of William Randolph Hearst*,
by W. A. Swanberg (New York, 1961), pp. 390, 409–410

It was no wonder that Hearst speedily became a Hollywood legend, as he had long been a newspaper and political legend. This was as he willed it, for it seems likely that he consciously sought to make himself a legend. Like an adolescent, he loved to surprise and impress people. There was no longer any concealment of his love for Miss Davies—another sign of his waning political hopes—and the frankness of their attachment amazed even the blasé film colony.

But San Simeon was a good 200 miles from Hollywood, too far for daily commuting, so Hearst planned another castle convenient to Culver City. [Louis B.] Mayer, Will Rogers, Joseph Schenck, Harold Lloyd and others of the elect had built mansions along the beach at Santa Monica, making it the gold coast of filmland. Hearst consulted a Brentwood realtor, George S. Merritt, who showed him a large plot of beach land that was available. Merritt was then angered to discover that Hearst's agents were trying to buy the land direct from its owner in an effort to avoid paying the realtor's commission. In his annoyance, Merritt quickly sold the land to another prospect who had been interested. Hearst later called on Merritt.

"I see that land is sold," he said. "Fess up. Didn't you buy it yourself so you could resell it to me?"

Merritt, incensed at the implication that he was trying to "hold up" Hearst, told him the facts. "I don't like the way you do business," he said. "I showed you the property, then you tried to freeze me out."

Hearst's gaze was piercing. "When I try to buy anything," he snapped, "the price has a habit of going up and up."

"Mr. Hearst," Merritt said, "there's only one kind of deal I know how to make—an honest one."

Hearst relaxed and smiled. After that the two got along famously. Merritt began buying beach land, keeping it a close secret that Hearst was his client. . . .

In California [upon returning from Europe in 1928], Hearst found both of his local castles [San Simeon and Santa Monica] progressing well. Until he built in Santa Monica, the beach homes of Joseph Schenck and others had

been considered the ultimate in splendor. Perhaps he derived a puckish glee out of erecting a pile that made his neighbors' places seem like summer cottages. . . .

It happened that Will Rogers owned a small piece of adjacent land [north of the Beach House compound] that Hearst wanted for a tennis court. Hearst, who had known Rogers since the [*Ziegfeld*] *Follies* days, sent Realtor Merritt to ask the price. It was impossible in this instance to conceal the fact that Hearst was the one interested. Rogers said he did not want to sell, and backed this up by putting an outrageous \$25,000 price on it. Merritt told Hearst of this. "Well, offer him \$20,000," Hearst said.

Merritt did so, whereupon Rogers raised the price to \$35,000. Hearst then made a bid for \$30,000. The humorist went up to \$45,000. One wonders whether Rogers was annoyed with Hearst for some reason, but at any rate it was apparent to Merritt that Rogers was having a game at Hearst's expense and he urged Hearst to do without the land. But Hearst was determined to have it. He kept making bids until at length he got the plot for \$105,000.

"Pleasure is worth what you can afford to pay for it," he said philosophically to Merritt.