

Confessions of a Hearstophile

by Taylor Coffman

Originally published in the San Luis Obispo daily paper, The Tribune, on Tuesday [March 12, 2013](#)—in “sporting, gentlemanly rebuttal” to a Viewpoint article in the same paper, published the previous Wednesday morning [March 6](#). That earlier article, “Citizen Phoebe Apperson Hearst,” was written by Karen Harris of Paso Robles, a former tour guide at Hearst Castle. A second Viewpoint article by Karen appeared in The Tribune on Tuesday, [March 26](#), but drew no reply.

THAT’S A FANCY WORD, “Hearstophile,” pronounced Hearst-oh-file. It means someone with a fondness or affinity for things Hearstian. In my case that applies to William Randolph Hearst. I’ll call him WRH, akin to saying FDR or JFK.

Karen Harris, with whom I’ve had lively talks, is my opposite: a Hearstophobe with regard to WRH. But she’s her own kind of Hearstophile concerning Phoebe Apperson Hearst, the mother of the man I study. I’m glad Karen has focused on Phoebe, who died in 1919. I’ve seldom had time to go that way in my years of “doing Hearst.” Instead, I dwell on the 1920s through 1940s, when WRH and Hearst Castle were leaving their lasting marks in our county. I believe, however, that Phoebe and WRH were often two peas in a pod. A book I wrote in 2002 has a chapter headed “Like Mother, Like Son.”

If it weren’t for Phoebe and especially for WRH, my life wouldn’t amount to much professionally. I partly squandered my two years at UC Santa Barbara in the 1960s; too many waves and other good times. When I began at Hearst Castle as a guide in 1972, I had little higher education. So I enrolled in the University of San Simeon, as it were; and until I left in 1983 I gained much of the learning I’d neglected. I’ve made my literary way ever since, usually beholden to WRH and the

Castle. Whether he was a good man or a bad man is of minor concern. I'll leave that verdict to God alone. What I do know is that WRH is a well-oiled vehicle of history. I'm forever in his debt. The man is never dull. He never fails to beckon, to stimulate and challenge. For any writer it can scarcely get better: conflict and pathos at every turn, the stuff that enduring drama is made of.

But to liken WRH to FDR or JFK is too limiting. Napoleon or Julius Caesar would be better. And here he is, right in our backyard. No wonder several employees at the Castle have put in 20 or 30 years—or even more. “Hearstiana” is infectious and mesmerizing. It always will be.

Despite all the attention paid to my favorite subject since 1958, when the Castle went public, there's still plenty to do. I recently researched a photograph of Gary Cooper, Marion Davies, and Mary Pickford. Formerly identified as a San Simeon pose, the photo was taken somewhere else, perhaps at the Hearst-Davies Beach House in Santa Monica. That didn't bear out either. In my fact finding, though, I learned why Mary Pickford was dressed then as Alice in Wonderland. Her costume stemmed from a screen test she'd done for Walt Disney in 1933—for a movie that wasn't made. Such is Hearstiana, time and again. Hollywood is part of it. New York is part of it. So are Europe and several other places.

To find Karen Harris misidentifying HBO as “partially owned” by today's Hearst Corporation typifies the errors we're all prone to make (A & E or Lifetime are more like it). For my part, I've been on a one-man crusade to clarify the details regarding December 7, 1941. My mantra has been: “If we can't get Pearl Harbor right, what in Hearstiana CAN we get right?” The point is that WRH, Miss Davies, and their group were at Wynton in northern California on that fateful Sunday morning, not at San Simeon, as has endlessly been claimed.

I've recently written an in-depth book on the subject, so fascinated am I with the origins of that myth and its persistence.

WRH's second son, Bill Jr., said it perfectly in his memoir, *The Hearsts: Father and Son*, published in 1991. "As every newspaper reporter comes to know, denial rarely, if ever, undoes the damage done by original falsehoods." That's so true. It haunts my own work more often than I care to recount. Karen Harris would surely agree, as would others who've played the mind-bending Hearstian game, the Sudoku of historical pursuits.

For me, at age 63, I'm getting a bit too old to reinvent myself. "Hoist, Hoist, last and foist" went a Bowery political chant of long ago. Even more so, what resonates for me are words from Winifred Black Bonfils in 1936; she was the sob sister who'd written a biography of Phoebe (as Karen well knows), a journalist who assessed her own life as she lay dying:

"It's all—all Hearst."