

The Hearstian Calendar

by Taylor Coffman

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TOUR GUIDES at Hearst Castle quickly learn that 28 is the magic number. That's how many years figured in William Randolph Hearst's creation of his Enchanted Hill at San Simeon, 1919 to 1947. And yet there were times of inactivity in that eventful stretch, especially during World War II. Overall, though, that's how long Hearst pursued his grandiose dream. He died in 1951. Come June 1958, Hearst San Simeon State Historical Monument opened to a spellbound public.

Ironically, the first half of that 28-year period is better known in many ways than the second half, despite being closer to the present. That's largely because Hearst and his West Coast architect, Julia Morgan, corresponded a great deal in the early, formative phase. A trove of their messages has been at the Cal Poly Library, Special Collections, since 1980. That rare material has substantially rewritten the history of San Simeon. However, the Hearst-Morgan correspondence starts running thin in the late 1920s. There's even less of it to reconstruct the 1930s.

Across town at the History Center of San Luis Obispo County, the George Loorz Papers account for the years 1932 through 1937. Nonetheless, that still leaves the last part of Hearst's 28-year performance in need of fuller coverage, from 1938 through 1947. Fortunately, there's much to be told beyond what the Morgan Collection and the Loorz Papers disclose. The files of William R. Hearst III in San Francisco—comprising thousands of vintage items—are among the best means of filling the gaps.

Part of the historian's job is to summarize effectively. In doing so, accuracy is always of the utmost importance. In Hearst's case, especially through the second half of those 28 years, the challenge of "getting it right" never ends. In short, certain myths and misportrayals have proved enduring. Thus the highlights that follow.

The second-half stretch, beginning in 1934, included a trip to Europe made by Mr. Hearst, Marion Davies, and their entourage—the group of movie people and various other notables known as "the folks." Upon returning late in 1934, the Hearst party hunkered down at San Simeon for a long stay, lasting until March 1935. That summer, the party spent much of its time at Wyntoon instead, San Simeon's counterpart in northern California, a sylvan retreat on the McCloud River near Mt. Shasta.

Then in 1936 Hearst faced a state tax burden that caused him to remain outside California for six months straight. He, Miss Davies, and the folks made another trip to Europe, this one being their final sojourn overseas. They weren't back at San Simeon again until early in 1937. The oft-told story of his depleted finances, which largely stymied his building efforts, is set in that late-Depression year, 1937, and the few years immediately afterward. Meanwhile, in 1938 and 1939, the party divided its time mostly between San Simeon and Wyntoon.

In February 1940 a terrible flood engulfed Wyntoon. Hearst and Marion (as they're now widely known: his last name and her first name) spent the early part of that year at San Simeon. They'd wanted to rely more on Wyntoon by then, even with its winter snows. But the big flood intervened. By the summer of 1940 they were finally able to move north from San Simeon. They spent the remainder of the year at Wyntoon, the place that was becoming their preferred address regardless of the season.

In the winter of 1941, not having been to Europe since 1936 and with financial woes having cramped their style of late, Hearst et al. paid a month-long visit to Mexico. Upon their return they were briefly at San Simeon in April 1941. By the time of his birthday on April 29, always a major event, they were back at Wyntoon for what, with brief exceptions (quick trips to San Francisco and to their Beach House in Santa Monica), would become a greatly extended stay. This means they were at Wyntoon on Sunday, December 7, 1941—not at San Simeon, as has long been mistakenly thought. Pearl Harbor reinforced their earlier choice of Wyntoon as a new home base, both for financial reasons (San Simeon was ruinously expensive to operate) and now, under wartime conditions, for obvious security reasons. As Marion told Bing Crosby later in 1941, “Please come and stay with us in a haven of safety. The Japs don’t know this place.”

Despite the wartime conditions, Hearst and Marion made three trips to the Beach House early in 1942. Then in December that year, they went to Mexico again. Julia Morgan traveled with them: Hearst had plans for building on his huge Babicora Ranch in Chihuahua. Upon returning from Mexico, the party remained in the Los Angeles area from January through May 1943. And then it was back to Wyntoon, which would remain a full-time residence until late in 1944.

A fire broke out at Wyntoon in August 1944. It ruined the building called The Gables, leaving the party without a dining room. After three months of improvising, a frustrated Hearst decided to move back to San Simeon, where he hadn’t been since the spring of 1941. Although the war was still raging, the coast was no longer vulnerable. Thus began his final two and a half years on the Enchanted Hill, a period in which he resumed building as of 1945 but also during which his movements can be hard to trace. At least we know he never went back to Wyntoon once he left there in November 1944.

The man turned 84 in April 1947. His health would soon force him to relocate permanently to Beverly Hills. Old-timers said he bid San Simeon a sad farewell in May 1947. However, records that surfaced later indicate July was the date, two months further down the time line.

William Randolph Hearst had truly gone full circle. Twenty-eight years prior, almost to the month, he and Julia Morgan had convened on that remote coastal hilltop for the first time, poised to launch what would soon become a great American epic.

The author was a guide at Hearst Castle from 1972 to 1983, during which he led what his longtime editor, John Porter, calls “the Coffman revolution”—a grass-roots effort focused mainly on W. R. Hearst’s art collecting and its role in San Simeon’s architecture and decoration.