

Life after San Simeon

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IN THE GREATER San Luis Obispo area, everyone's heard of William Randolph Hearst and San Simeon. It's well known that Hearst, a wealthy publisher, built a hilltop mansion in the 1920s and '30s, a place where he enjoyed an enchanted, storybook life. He was also at San Simeon in the 1940s, mostly after World War II.

His intermittent presence in the area has become familiar to millions. Hearst Castle opened to the public in 1958. It's been one of the jewels of the California State Park System ever since. Much has been written about it, from souvenir pamphlets to larger books full of dazzling pictures.

What else remains to be done? Are there still new avenues to explore?

In fact there are. "Life after San Simeon" refers to a specific period for Hearst, from the late 1930s to the mid-1940s—a period when he favored Wynton, his forested hideaway on the McCloud River in northern California, near Mt. Shasta. And, yes, he was living then with the much younger Marion Davies, a former film star who was with him until he died in 1951. His wife, Millicent Willson Hearst, from whom he'd long been separated, lived in faraway New York.

Also, his five sons were grown by the late '30s. They worked in the Hearst media empire and, along with their wives and children, were part of an extended family that surrounded their father and his famous chatelaine. It was all very much the stuff of legend and

romance, “a great yarn,” as one of Hearst’s grandsons has called it, a story that never grows old.

Mr. Hearst and Miss Davies had countless friends. A small number of them, plus some favorite employees, formed an entourage that lived together, worked together, traveled together. Insiders called the group by a simpler name: “the folks.” The folks had last gone to Europe, for instance, in 1936. And then, early in 1941, the folks went to more affordable (and safer) Mexico for nearly a month. They also went there in 1942.

Meanwhile, where were Hearst, Davies, and the others in their circle on the morning of Sunday, December 7, 1941? Pearl Harbor was, hands down, the most riveting historical event in this overall part of Hearst’s life—the time from right after World War I, when he started building on his hilltop at San Simeon, and on into the early ‘40s. In other words, the vivid era capped by Pearl Harbor and our entry into World War II. On that Sunday morning, Hearst began another day’s intensive work, following his late-night editing of his newspapers with the help of Joe Willicombe, his powerhouse secretary.

It was at Wynton that Hearst did so, not at San Simeon, as has long been thought.

There were seventeen papers in 1941, down from an even larger number in the 1930s. There were magazines, too, but Hearst had always been a newspaperman at heart, ever since he took over the *San Francisco Examiner* back in 1887. In the early forties his papers were centered, as they always had been, in urban areas. Draw a line from New England to the Midwest; then, after veering down to Texas, extend that line out to California and on up to Washington state. Scattered along this cross-country path were the media interests that kept Hearst and Willicombe constantly busy.

On top of that, and despite being almost eighty, Hearst had tackled a moonlight job as of 1940: the writing of a lengthy column that appeared most days in his chain of papers, called "In the News." It was a grueling regimen. When Pearl Harbor was attacked, Hearst still had a ways to go with his column before he would shelve it. There would still be all his other managerial work to do.

And thus another reason for asking where he and the folks were at that historic moment late in 1941. On weekends he published letters from his readers. "In the News" had triggered an avalanche of mail. Some of it came from celebrities, like Humphrey Bogart and Edward G. Robinson; other letters were from ordinary, workaday people; a few poets sent Hearst their latest rhymes. These various correspondents directed their mailings to his newspapers and residences nationwide, guessing how and where the man might best be reached; their postings were promptly forwarded to isolated Wyntoon. Obviously, Hearst couldn't print everything. But, without fail, with whatever he published, he "followed copy" and included the addresses the senders had used, no matter how unlikely.

Sometimes that address was San Simeon. Yet in reality, Hearst and Marion Davies and their inner circle hadn't been on the Central Coast since April 1941. They'd been at Wyntoon in the interim, except for some short trips they'd made to San Francisco and Los Angeles (he and Marion still had a big place in Santa Monica, casually called the Beach House). Otherwise, Wyntoon had counted as home, predominantly so since the late 1930s; it would remain Hearst's headquarters until November 1944. Only then would the folks return to San Simeon, where they would remain until 1947.

Earlier, with "San Simeon" being named in his weekend column, many figured that he was holding court at the hilltop Castle right through 1941, on par with his pattern back in the 1930s heyday. And then the kicker: Marion Davies, in her posthumous memoir *The Times*

We Had: Life with William Randolph Hearst (1975), told emphatically how she and Hearst were at San Simeon on Pearl Harbor Day and how they decided, then and there, to quit their vulnerable coastal perch for the secluded safety of Wyntoon. *The Times We Had* has long been a bestseller, thanks to a steady clientele at the Hearst Castle gift shop.

But no. Marion got certain things wrong in her memoir, even dead wrong (she admitted to having a weakness for telling white lies). None of this matters a lot—unless you want to know the facts about Hearst and the folks at a decisive moment in our nation’s past.

The folks were already at Wyntoon on that “date which shall live in infamy.” There truly was, and had been for quite some time, life after San Simeon.

The author was a tour guide at Hearst Castle, mostly in the 1970s. Over the past thirty years, Coffman has written several books about Hearst, San Simeon, Julia Morgan, San Luis Obispo County history, and other local subjects. This article previews his forthcoming book, *Life after San Simeon: William Randolph Hearst, Marion Davies, and Their Circle at Wyntoon*, based primarily on rare historical documents gathered by William R. Hearst III, a grandson born in 1949.