

# **Nick Yost**

## **Packer Extraordinaire**

by Taylor Coffman

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JANUARY 1, 1940, was a Monday. And thus Nickolas Yost's new job, along with a hopeful new decade, began on Tuesday that year. Nick had been promoted by William Randolph Hearst to manage the San Simeon warehouses. There were five of those buildings next to the ocean, crammed with art objects and antiques. While working there in recent years, Nick had gained Hearst's favor by becoming an expert packer. Many a precious item was to be handled, Hearst ordered, by no one but Nick Yost.

Better known as Sandy, the new warehouse manager had recently turned 34. He brought youthful vigor to the job—a type A personality, as his daughter Sharon Vandercook of Cambria fondly recalls.

Fast forward to December 1941. The day after Pearl Harbor, Sandy wired Hearst at Wynton in northern California, saying he needed lumber for more shelving at San Simeon. Did his request stem from the debacle in Hawaii? It's hard to say. Sandy may simply have been starting the new week on his usual active note. All through the war he oversaw the warehouses. Hearst finally returned to San Simeon late in 1944. By then Sandy had packed the man's Navajo blankets for the old Los Angeles Museum, a gift preceded by Hearst's knowing comment that the blankets were “the best collection extant.” They were that indeed.

Sandy also stayed sharp by shipping items from the Santa Monica Beach House to San Simeon and Wyntoon. This was in the mid-1940s. Hearst and Marion Davies would soon be selling that mansion west of Los Angeles, a showplace that in the 1930s had been their Southland equivalent of the more renowned estates farther north.

Sandy was thereby equipped for a bigger task, starting in 1949. He compiled a master inventory of San Simeon—not only of the beachfront warehouses but also of the Enchanted Hill, where the mythical Castle stood. He began with Estate #1 “down below.” By the time he’d finished in 1950 within the Castle itself, his numbers reached the 6,000s. Pairs or sets of objects were often grouped as single entries. “Built-ins” (architectural items), plus all the books in the two libraries, were separately tallied. Up at Wyntoon, the Estate numbers ranged from the 8,000s to the 11,000s.

Besides taking stock of objects at San Simeon, Sandy listed names of rooms and, outdoors, names of areas that sometimes needed clarifying. The north side of Casa Grande (the main Castle) posed a challenge. Often called the Recreation Wing before the war, that imposing structure was renamed the New Wing by Sandy, a term used by the construction crew during Hearst’s final years at San Simeon. The New Wing long remained the name of choice. However, “North Wing” has since gained favor, despite the 1940s precedent. And yet when in Rome, do as the Romans do: Sandy’s “New Wing” may not be ideal, but it’s surely authentic, with much history on its side.

After Mr. Hearst died in 1951, the warehouses still required full-time attention. They remained in Sandy’s devoted care. Meanwhile, the main warehouse in New York became a gold mine in the early 1950s for some of this country’s best museums. As the bounty dwindled, eyes were increasingly cast westward; this was shortly before the State of California acquired Hearst Castle in 1958, by gift of the Hearst Corporation. In 1956 a prime component of the Castle collection was

sold to the Metropolitan Museum of Art—for its medieval branch called The Cloisters.

Sandy Yost was the man of the hour, the one who prepared numerous Hispano-Moresque ceramics to be shipped to that facility, exceedingly valuable antiques that had once been in Hearst's private Gothic Study in the Castle. The old plates and vases had to be packed with the utmost care. The treasures were taken to San Luis Obispo by Sandy's assistant, Marguerite Brunner, and put on the train. Everything arrived in New York in perfect shape.

James Rorimer, director of The Cloisters, had visited San Simeon in 1941 while Hearst was hunkered down at Wynton on the McCloud River; he'd been given a full tour of the Castle in its creator's absence. Dr. Rorimer had never forgotten the rarities he'd seen. His museum's acquisition of the Hispano-Moresque pottery was a major triumph.

Sandy was 50 by 1956, the year of that special shipment. Related by marriage to the Plasketts of Big Sur's South Coast, he had acreage near Gorda. Sandy liked to drive up the coast from his family home in old San Simeon village and spend weekends working his land. He toyed with the idea of building a motel, even if tourism on Highway I was only seasonal back then.

He'd had a heart attack, though, while still in his forties. He knew he had to be careful. While operating his tractor on the Gorda property in May 1956, he possibly suffered a second attack; so thinks his granddaughter Tina Humphrey. Sandy rolled over and was crushed by the heavy machine. His doctor was rock hunting that Saturday afternoon at nearby Jade Cove and somehow heard the news. He rushed to the scene, but it was too late. Sandy had died almost instantly.

Life was never the same again for the Yost family. Sandy's wife, Gladys, grieved throughout her long widowhood. He'd been a loving husband and father, a member of the local school board, a hardwork-

ing pillar of the rural San Simeon community—and the trusted packer for the very particular W. R. Hearst.

Marguerite Brunner, who'd completed The Cloisters shipment right after Sandy died, took over for him in the warehouses. Those buildings soon began yielding their treasures to architects, collectors, and art dealers, many of them people with Hearst family ties. Peggy Brunner stayed on until 1971. Hers was a fascinating job, always done with methodical precision. Yet by rights that assignment should have been Nick Yost's to carry out as elder statesman, until the warehouses were all but emptied, as still holds true of them today.

The author worked at Hearst Castle from 1972 to 1983. He's written several books and articles stemming from that timeless subject. Coffman's current projects include *Hearst and St. Louis*, inspired by the former Hearst items in the Saint Louis Art Museum. He's also working on a regional California book called *Malibu 90265*. As before with his *Journal PLUS* articles, he's relied here upon the personal archives of Will Hearst III of San Francisco.