

# **Mrs. Fremont Older**

## **“The Pink Lady”**

by Taylor Coffman

SHE WENT BY the simpler, shorter name of Cora Older, surely not by Cora Baggerly Older or, longer still, Cora Miranda Baggerly Older, as some librarians prefer. Regardless, to me she'll always be Mrs. Fremont Older, since that's what she used on each of her four works of fiction, plus her five of non-fiction. I assume she also used that form in writing for magazines, of which efforts I've not seen a single example. But I gather that there were several articles in *Collier's* and the like many decades ago.

Mrs. Older's first book—a novel set in San Francisco—appeared in 1903, called *The Socialist and the Prince* and published by Funk & Wagnalls in New York. In a current posting on the Internet, Sally Mitchell of Temple University, a specialist in Victorian literature, regards the book as “a social melodrama.” *The Socialist and the Prince* was followed by *The Giants* in 1905 and *Esther Damon* in 1911, the latter of which Dr. Mitchell says was “mildly utopian.” I'm content to take her word for it, pending my reading the copy of *Esther Damon* I got through AbeBooks. I can say in the meantime that the book has an old-time air about it, distinctly belonging to the nineteenth century or, at the latest, to the first part of the twentieth. Such is true of all sorts of books published before World War I: as a group (this applies to fiction and nonfiction equally), those books usually have more of an antique than a modern look.

So it goes with *Esther Damon*—a product of a bygone, mostly forgotten age. Together, these three books from the early 1900s are obscure enough that only two appear in *An Annotated Bibliography of California Fiction, 1664-1970*, by Newton D. Baird and Robert Greenwood (1971). *Esther Damon* proves to be the orphan: the omitted title.

“During this period,” as Sally Mitchell says further of the *Damon* era, Cora Older also wrote “magazine articles on social questions, including a long account of the San Francisco graft prosecutions [of 1906-1909] for *McClure’s* magazine.” These I don’t intend to find. I’m content to skip ahead more than twenty years, all the way to 1933. That’s when Mrs. Older did the heavy lifting on the book about George Hearst that she co-authored with her husband, the San Francisco newspaperman Fremont Older—the “fighting editor of the West,” he was rousinglly called, a man “feared, hated, loved, and respected,” said another writer. “I worked for many months on the 201-page biography,” Mrs. Older recounted in 1966, shortly before she died. “Fremont read each chapter, corrected [them], and made suggestions, as did Mr. Hearst.” The 1933 deluxe edition of *George Hearst: California Pioneer* was privately published by the same Mr. Hearst—William Randolph Hearst, George’s son—through the renowned San Francisco printer John Henry Nash. On this note at least, the hard times seemed not to be getting in the younger Hearst’s way one bit.

In fact, Mrs. Older had this to add in 1966 about W. R. Hearst’s most famous estate and the publication of *George Hearst*. This appeared in her Introduction to the reprint issued by Westernlore Press, Los Angeles (a rare book nowadays in its own right):

“No book ever made its debut in a setting of such gaiety and luxury as did the Senator Hearst biography. The Castle guests, many of whom were famous, honored the occasion [in August 1933] by donning hastily assembled costumes in the Mother Lode styles of ’49. Full skirts and sunbonnets brightened the medieval grandeur of fabulous *San Simeon*. Fremont, wearing a sombrero and mining outfit, made the presentation speech. America’s most widely read columnist, Arthur Brisbane [of “Today” fame], also spoke. Then, surprised and delighted by the unexpected costuming of his guests, Mr. Hearst, although wearing a plain brown business suit, contributed to the gaiety by dancing a jig.”

Not bad for a man newly entering his seventies!

*GEORGE HEARST: California Pioneer* was more than just a companion to the equally deluxe Hearst-Nash effort of 1928, *The Life and Personality of Phoebe Apperson Hearst*. The latter was written by the sob sister Winifred Black Bonfils yet in many ways was also the work of an uncredited woman named Adele Brooks. No, the George Hearst biography was more a warm-up exercise, more a prelude to Mrs. Older's biography of 1936, *William Randolph Hearst: American*, described by her as the "greatest experience" of her writing career. "You may not like the book," she modestly told Hearst of his biography early that year, "but I love every comma of it." The publishing titan humbly replied from Los Angeles with words of reassurance: "I am sure the book will be fine—at least as fine as the subject will allow."

Hearst had considered producing his own biography to match the kingly Nash volumes on his parents. In the end, though, he opted for conventional publication. D. Appleton-Century Company of New York and London did the honors. Before Fremont Older died in 1935, he'd penned a foreword. In addition, as his widow noted, the book's jacket took its color from the vivid blue of the exotic Roman Pool at San Simeon. Few copies today probably retain that striking wrapper.

I have a personalized copy of Mrs. Older's *William Randolph Hearst* (minus the rare jacket). I found it in 2001 in a book shop in Menlo Park, not far from Stanford University. "All thanks and good wishes to Carl Hoffman, Editor and Proof Reader," runs her inscription, which she signed "Cora Older, Cupertino, May 10, 1936." Hoffman was soon to work at a minor Hearst paper in the Bay Area, the *Oakland Post-Enquirer*. The best thing about the book, though, isn't the inscription. It's the news clipping tucked inside the front cover:

"Death Claims Mrs. Fremont Older at 93," says the headline, under a date of September 29, 1968, in the *S. F. Sunday Examiner & Chronicle*.

"Mrs. Older was 93," her obituary said. "She outlived her husband by 33 years [he died in March 1935]."

“She remained active in the management of her Cupertino estate [west of San Jose]—Woodhills Farm, where her husband is buried—and continued writing daily until three years ago [1965]. . . .

“In her younger years,” the obituary also recounted, “she was active in aiding her husband’s brilliant career as managing editor of the old *San Francisco Bulletin* and later [as of 1929] the *Call-Bulletin*.

“She wrote often for both papers, usually concentrating on feature stories. But she could also handle ‘hard’ news, once covering a bitter miner’s strike in West Virginia for her husband’s paper.

“In writing, however, she was primarily interested in California history, although she also produced novels and biographies of Senator George Hearst and the late publisher William Randolph Hearst Sr.

“She was the author of at least nine books. Her last major publication was ‘San Francisco, Magic City’ [1961]. She wrote this encyclopedic history when she was 84 [her age in 1959].

“Mrs. Older was also well-known as a hostess and a flower lover.”

Indeed, in that guise a feature long afterward in the weekly *Cupertino Courier* (1999) told of her tending “hundreds of pink roses on the Woodhills property, a hobby that earned her the nickname ‘The Pink Lady.’”

When she first got that name is unclear, yet it’s surely a good one—The Pink Lady. It sticks in the mind, and it no doubt did Cora Older full justice as the uncommon character she was for many years in the state’s history.

THE OBITUARY of her in the San Francisco paper in 1968 continued by saying, “The Olders entertained virtually every weekend at their estate—with some of the leading writers, artists, political figures and statesmen as their guests.

“The poet Carl Sandburg and muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens were among their guests.

“But they also hosted many less illustrious. Both of the Olders devoted much of their time to the rehabilitation of criminals. Ex-convicts often stayed with them at Woodhills.”

One of the hardened men they befriended was Tom Mooney. It opens Pandora’s Box to mention Fremont Older and the tragic, embittered Mooney, falsely accused of a heinous crime: the bombing of the Preparedness Day parade in San Francisco in 1916, a cowardly act that claimed several lives. Suffice it to say, even Hearst came round in Mooney’s favor after years of editorial insistence by Mr. Older, who used his desk in the city as his bully pulpit. Mooney was eventually freed from Death Row in San Quentin (although not until 1939). Older delved into the early years of the case in his first of two memoirs, *My Own Story*, published in 1919, coincidentally the same year that saw Hearst get started at San Simeon on what became his fantasy castle. Mrs. Older naturally figures in several places in that book by her husband.

Her obituary of 1968 continued:

“And although they had no children, they acquired an unofficial family. They informally adopted a young woman named Evelyn Wells [1899-1976] who, under their guidance, became a well-known San Francisco newswoman and author. Miss Wells, now of Seattle, is Fremont Older’s biographer.”

The book by Evelyn Wells was simply entitled *Fremont Older*. It came out in 1936. Once more, D. Appleton-Century of New York and London acted as publisher. The author dedicated her biography of the recently departed editor “To Cora Baggerly Older, His Wife and Dearest Friend.”

Miss Wells’s name crops up occasionally in the William Randolph Hearst Papers at The Bancroft Library, as does Mrs. Older’s. Early in 1935, less than a month before he died, Fremont Older wrote to W. R. Hearst at San Simeon. He said he’d “like to have Evelyn Wells ‘bring to life’ Robert Shaw’s stories [in the *San Francisco Call-Bulletin*] of the early California duels, and have them follow ‘Chickie’s Daughter’”—a serialization of a recent novel by

Elenore Meherin. In the same period, Dr. Frank Barham, publisher of the Los Angeles evening paper (the *Herald-Express*), asked Hearst's preference "regarding the substitution in the HERALD-EXPRESS of 'Joaquin Murrietta [Murrieta]' by Evelyn Wells for 'Duels of California' which is similar to 'The Code of Honor,' run by the Herald in 1926."

These were newspaper pieces. With the exception of *Fremont Older*, the biography by Miss Wells in 1936, her next book didn't appear until 1939, *Champagne Days of San Francisco*. Her other California books among several varied titles were *The Forty Niners* (1949, co-authored with Harry C. Peterson) plus a solo effort called *A City for St. Francis* (1967), whose jacket identified Evelyn Wells as a "minister's daughter" and a woman who was "married to one of the Podestas, the great florist family of California."

During the mid-1930s, while busy writing her biography of Hearst, Cora Older assumed the role of watchdog. Hearst's secretary, Joe Willicombe, alerted the Chief in his super-efficient, rat-a-tat prose that Mrs. Older had sent him a copy of a letter "to Mr. [Oswald Garrison] Villard, Publisher of THE NATION, protesting [a] statement printed in that magazine which misrepresented Mr. [Fremont] Older's attitude toward Mr. Hearst." This article would be worth finding. Had Older indeed denounced his famous yet always controversial employer? *The Nation* was one of several left-wing magazines in the mid-1930s that effectively built a reputation for W. R. Hearst as an American fascist.

Mrs. Older and Miss Wells, meanwhile, can be connected through a telegram of August 1937, sent from Saratoga (near Cupertino) to Willicombe at Wynton, Hearst's northern California counterpart to San Simeon. Hearst and his entourage had recently relocated there for the weeks ahead. "Will you please ask the Chief if it will be all right for Evelyn Wells and me to come Friday [September 3]," inquired Mrs. Older about Wynton. "We saw San Simeon. Many thanks." Whether the two ladies ever made the trip north is unrecorded. What can be read between the lines here is that, even for someone like Cora Older, a recent Hearst biographer (an authorized one at that), an

invitation to San Simeon or Wyntoon was no automatic thing. Some worthies never got past the gates at all.

THE OBITUARY of Mrs. Older continued, telling that her “gardens at Woodhills were well known” and that she was “one of the founders of the Fiesta de las Rosas in San Jose, which in the 1920’s rivaled Pasadena’s Rose Parade.”

Yes, Cora Older knew the local area well. When the prestigious Book Club of California, San Francisco, issued *The Coast and Valley Towns of Early California* in 1938, she wrote “San Jose” for the keepsake assemblage. Comprising twelve monthly installments, their other authors besides Mrs. Older included Caroline Wenzel, Douglas S. Watson, and Franklin Walker.

Her obituary of 1968 went on with “Mrs. Older was born in Clyde, New York [in 1875], where her father was an apple grower. She met her future husband in Sacramento while on summer vacation from Syracuse University.”

The write-up didn’t say that when the Olders married, Cora was only eighteen and Fremont was already thirty-seven. Nor did it mention that the marriage was his second. I once talked to a young man at Hearst Castle who said he was a grandson of the Olders—this while we stood next to the Roman Pool that inspired Cora’s deep blue dust jacket for the Hearst biography. A great-great-grandson would have been more like it, given that Fremont Older was born in 1856, seven years before Hearst’s 1863. (Older was named for John C. Fremont, the Republican candidate for President in the ’56 election, the one captured by James Buchanan.) I dismissed the claim of the young man at the Castle, recalling that the Olders had been childless. But years later, upon doing some new research, I was left wondering whether the man had a legitimate story and whether he was, instead, descended in some way from Fremont Older’s first marriage—the details of which are barely known.

“[Mr.] Older,” the obituary of Cora Older continued, “then a Sacramento correspondent for a San Francisco newspaper, saw her playing a role in an

amateur theatrical. After the play he introduced himself to her, and they were married not long afterward [in 1893].”

Nor did the article mention that, early in her career, Mrs. Older had written some plays, none of which were ever published or, presumably, ever staged before a live audience. The article concluded with “Memorial contributions may be made to the California Historical Society, of which Mrs. Older was a member.”

IN THE SAME YEAR her biography of Hearst appeared, 1936, the last of her novels, *Savages and Saints*, arrived in bookstores. The pictorial jacket alone was worth the price of admission, and it remains so today for collectors of scarce Californiana. Commissioned of a commercial artist who drew with cartoon simplicity, the scene on the front jacket was of Mission San Antonio, fairly close to San Simeon, its façade visible through an archway in which two comely señoritas reposed. A Franciscan priest was visible just beyond the women, walking toward the main mission compound. Never mind that even in 1936 Mrs. Older should have been more careful about using that “S” word (as in *Savages*) as disparagingly as she did. As such, she was writing from the vantage point of an era nearly as lost to us today as is the historical period she portrayed. Nonetheless, *Savages and Saints*, according to Sally Mitchell, combines “carefully researched history with fictionalized versions of the lives and legends of Hispanic and Anglo pioneers.”

Mrs. Older turned to nonfiction in completing her next book. And she recruited some imposing names in its favor. *California Missions and Their Romances* (1938) was published in New York and contained a foreword by no less an authority than the borderlands scholar Herbert E. Bolton of UC Berkeley. The book also had a preface by the newspaperman Robert L. Duffus, whose most recent book had been *Our Starving Libraries* (1933) and who some thirty years later (1965) would produce *Queen Calafia’s Island*, a notable history of California as one-volume treatments go.



She partook of an even greater pedigree with *Love Stories of Old California*, published in 1940. This time the foreword to Cora’s book was by the grande dame of San Francisco letters, Gertrude Atherton, a woman of eighty-three then who still had two nonfiction works ahead of her, *Golden Gate Country* (1945) and *My San Francisco* (1946). Mrs. Atherton had written for W. R. Hearst many years before.

Nonfiction proved to be Cora’s final calling as well. A full twenty years elapsed between *Love Stories of Old California* and *San Francisco: Magic City*, published in 1961. The title page of the book identified her as Mrs. Fremont Older. But in parentheses appeared something unseen on most or perhaps even all of her other works: “Cora Older.” A copy recently advertised on eBay gives some further indication of how she evidently felt about her identity. Beneath a laid-in photograph of herself at Woodhills, she wrote “Cora Older wishes you every blessing in 1962 and World Peace.”

IN THE MEANTIME, in 1955, the eighty-year-old widow wrote a lengthy profile of her husband for the centenary edition of the *San Francisco Call-Bulletin*, an essay readily available today through the Internet. She alluded to 1894, when Fremont Older “became editor of The Bulletin” (a non-Hearst newspaper then). Only nineteen at the time, Mrs. Older became active for her part as that evening paper’s “dramatic critic, society editor, literary editor, special writer, [and] reporter.” No wonder she never became a mother.

“I knew nothing about reporting,” she continued in her profile of her long-dead husband—likewise a profile of herself—“nothing about dramatic criticism and, being a newcomer, nothing about society. I had a desk, but no salary. Others of the staff were trained newspapermen.

“I dreaded interviewing; it seemed impertinent to ask even bandit Chris Evans’ daughter about her father’s crimes.

“Soon, however, I interviewed such celebrities as [the prizefighter] John L. Sullivan who modestly said, ‘I was Number One [in] my class, and I guess

if I had gone into the army, I would have been a fellow like Napoleon.’”

Further on, Mrs. Older recounted a memorable episode. Sarah Bernhardt was en route from New York in 1901 to perform in San Francisco. Fremont Older arranged for his young wife, then twenty-six, to intercept the legendary diva in Wyoming.

“One interview that I shall never forget was with Sarah Bernhardt, who was coming, with [Constant] Coquelin on her special train from New York.

“By this time The Bulletin had shot ahead of its competitors, the Report and [the] Evening Post, and Fremont planned to scoop the other papers with my interview.

“Fortunately, I could speak a little French. Through her manager, Fremont arranged to have me board her train at Cheyenne and interview her even before the morning papers did. . . .

“About seven, word came that ‘Madame Sarah Bernhardt’ would receive me at dinner. Her entourage always spoke of her as ‘Madame Sarah Bernhardt.’

“Already Coquelin was standing by the dinner table when Madame Sarah Bernhardt swept in with an aureole of honey-colored hair, wearing a loose trailing white satin gown, with décolletage filled in with cream lace, covering fresh-tinted chiffon, that extended up to her chin and had high points almost touching her ears.”

The Divine Miss Sarah was a well-preserved fifty-seven in 1901. Mrs. Older’s special report continued:

“She explained to me that she was happy in white satin, always wore it, had the material especially made for her. She showed me a piece of it, heavy as broadcloth.

“Coquelin, the comedian, seemed rather dour. I recall that he remarked that Napoleon’s Marie Louise [Bonaparte’s second wife] was an imbecile. . . .

“When good-nights were said about 9 I asked if I might sit at the table and write my article for The Bulletin. Madame Sarah Bernhardt was amazed.

“‘My child, you’re not going to write an article tonight?’

“Oh, I must [said Mrs. Older]. My husband sent me here to write it and telegraph it tonight.

“‘Impossible! That is cruel. Telegraph your husband that you have a headache!’

“Had I sent that telegram of excuse instead of an article, I WOULD have had a headache. I explained that my husband wished to have the article before any other paper. She then gave me permission to write at her table. . . .

“During the night I got [off] the train, in the midst of a Nevada storm, [and] telegraphed two columns to The Bulletin.

“Fremont was delighted and wired immediately for me to send another article, which I did. . . .

“Back in San Francisco, Fremont and I had a dramatic feast, attending every Bernhardt and Coquelin performance.”

Mrs. Older went on to speak of another famed performer, a celebrity extraordinaire.

“When Frances Joliffe became our dramatic critic, she went to interview [Enrico] Caruso, who spoke neither French nor English.

“Fremont sent me along to act as interpreter because I spoke a little Italian.

“Frances and I went up to Sacramento to meet Caruso on his first visit to San Francisco [in 1906].”

NOT ONLY WAS the date 1906, it was more precisely the month of April, right before the historic earthquake that rocked San Francisco and the whole Bay Area on the morning of Wednesday the 18<sup>th</sup>, marking the close of an era.

“At this time we lived at the Palace Hotel,” Mrs. Older continued in her nostalgic account from 1955, “always dining at 6. Caruso also had an early dinner, to rest before the opera, and so he came and sat at our table. Fat, clumsy and good-natured, he bored Fremont, who said that his I.Q. was about like that of Jim Jeffries, the prizefighter. . . .

“I asked some friends to join us after the opera. I hesitated about mentioning it to Fremont until we were in the carriage going to the Opera House. He grunted displeasure.

“After the opera the women lingered in our room chatting and prettying up. When we arrived at our reserved table in the Palace courtyard Caruso had already come.

“Seated opposite him was Fremont glaring murder because we had left him with that ‘Jim Jeffries,’ who couldn’t speak a word of English.”

In 1961, in her last of several books, *San Francisco: Magic City*, Mrs. Older began Chapter 1 with a fuller account of Enrico Caruso’s visit:

“On the summery night of April 17, 1906, San Franciscans heard Caruso and [Olive] Fremstad sing *Carmen*—farewell to the old city. My husband, Fremont Older, and I returned to the Palace Hotel at midnight with the Toreador song in our ears.

“I left a six-o’clock call at the desk. I wished to catch the seven-o’clock train for William James’s lecture on Philosophy at Stanford University. At 5:13 what my sleepy mind mistook for my call began like the roaring of a monstrous train. The Palace Hotel turned on its axis; the building twisted and moaned.”

Cora’s further details included this: “A marble bust of our friend, the San Francisco novelist Gertrude Atherton, had been thrown from its pedestal to the floor and lay in fragments.”

Oh, but to have seen that portrait sculpture! We can only imagine its cool Carrara marble whiteness before the historic disaster took its toll. With

further regard to Mrs. Atherton, it was she who in her autobiographical *Adventures of a Novelist* (1932) called the Olders “quite the handsomest couple in San Francisco.”

As for Caruso, Mrs. Older gave more details in her book of 1961 than she did in her newspaper piece of 1955. “He sang as no one else in the world could sing,” she recalled of 1906, “and his voice echoed through the dreams of those who heard him.

“Next morning Caruso was jostled from his bed by the Earthquake. He roamed the streets of the burning city. [He said] ‘Ell of a place—’ell of a place—I’ll never come back! He never did, but his voice gave Wade’s old Opera House [at 8<sup>th</sup> and Market streets] and San Francisco’s pioneers of long ago one final, unforgettable night of glory.”

One has to wonder if Mrs. Older knew that after Caruso died in 1921 and his art objects were auctioned in New York in 1923, Hearst became the new owner of some choice Italian Renaissance items that had belonged to the great tenor, who was himself an impassioned collector. San Simeon has been their home ever since. Hearst also got dozens of the renowned Caruso caricatures in 1923 and had them richly bound as a multi-volume set. Unfortunately, those delectable works remain at large today.

IN 1971 a woman named Donna Harris and her husband, Earl, edited *Diaries of Mrs. Cora Baggerly Older, 1916-1923*, a rail-thin but still welcome publication done through the California History Center, Foothill Community College District, in Los Altos Hills, near the Olders’ home turf in Cupertino. “She wrote a page in her diary daily,” the Harrises noted in their introduction, “the earliest being 1906, and the last in 1966, when she fell in San Jose on a shopping trip and broke her hip.” As the Harrises also noted, “This little booklet of excerpts from the diaries of 1916-1923 are but a scratch in the surface of the writings she has left.”

Much of what Donna and Earl Harris presented has to do with Fremont Older's decision to leave the *San Francisco Bulletin* for a position with Hearst on one of his papers, preferably the *San Francisco Call*. The matter was fraught with uncertainty and, by reading between the lines, with disagreement in the Older household. On July 1, 1918, Mrs. Older wrote in her diary, "I hope he doesn't go to Hearst." He *did* go to Hearst, though, and it proved to be one of the best decisions Fremont Older ever made. Four years later she could confide to herself—on July 26, 1922—"Fremont had good news today, a contract for 5 years with W. R., all unasked for, which makes one like W. R. very much indeed. It thrills me to have him so appreciative of Fremont." That sense of good feelings and appreciation never wavered again.

Many details in the Olders' lives vis-à-vis Hearst remain to be filled in. At this juncture in 1922, the biography of George Hearst was still eleven years away and Mrs. Older's biography of Hearst himself fourteen years ahead.

Some of the missing details may lie in San Francisco, in items little consulted to this day. The California Historical Society in the city has the "Cora Miranda Baggerly Older scrapbook materials, 1900-1965." These things are described as "Loose papers that have been removed from nine volumes of scrapbooks kept by [Mrs.] Older, including correspondence (1919-1965), picture postcards, ephemera, photographs, and newspaper and magazine clippings on subjects of interest to Mrs. Older, such as Fremont Older, women's rights, politics, and writing." In addition, the material "also includes a few printed publications and miscellaneous papers, including a small amount of genealogical material on the Baggerly family [of New York state]."

Sally Mitchell mentions that Mrs. Older's diary (evidently different from what Donna and Earl Harris edited in 1971) is in The Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley. A quick search of the Internet gives mixed signals about this holding. In any event, what The Bancroft *does* have in this regard is four linear feet of Fremont Older Papers, dating from 1907 through 1941. Since Older died in 1935, his widow must have added items to his archives over the

next few years before parting with the papers. All of these leads are yet to be fully pursued by some devotee of Hearst studies.

W. A. Swanberg, in researching *Citizen Hearst: A Biography of William Randolph Hearst* (1961), was one writer who made sure to befriend Cora Older. She proved to be a godsend for him, generous and helpful with her large store of information. After all, as Julia Morgan's master inventory of Hearst's art works and other holdings shows, Mrs. Older was entrusted with three trunks of Hearst family papers when she began her biography of the man; these items went on in the 1970s to become the core of the Phoebe Apperson Hearst Papers at The Bancroft, plus those of Phoebe's husband, George, and of their only child, W. R. Winifred Bonfils and Adele Brooks saw much of the same material in the late twenties for the "Phoebe" book, but not as fruitfully.

Meanwhile, in Bill Swanberg's period, San Simeon (Hearst Castle) had become a California State Park in the same year, 1958, that saw that biographer starting work on *Citizen Hearst*. Did anyone at the Castle think to reach out to Mrs. Older? Evidently not. She still had ten years to live beyond the Castle's opening; indeed, her last book, *San Francisco: Magic City*, hadn't even been written yet. Despite her age, she was still a potential mine of knowledge and reflection.

And yet The Pink Lady was allowed to languish, and the oversight becomes more regrettable with every passing year since her death in 1968, nearly a half-century ago.

All the foregoing said, the main thing about Cora Older is to add a few words about her with regard to *William Randolph Hearst: American*, her most enduring work from our latter-day standpoint—and by the same token her most challenging work. Often maudlin, even sappy at times, her biography of 1936 "is nonetheless valuable for its wealth of family detail, which is absolutely reliable." So said a later Hearst biographer, John Tebbel, in *The Life and Good Times of William Randolph Hearst* (1952). But is Mrs. Older's

book equally reliable in non-family matters? In short, how close to zero—a perfect score—is its EQ, or its Error Quotient, as I like to say? (I'm taking the cue from golf.) Along with all other books about Hearst, all of mine included, *William Randolph Hearst: American* isn't flawless. There's obviously no way it could be, given the dizzying complexity of its subject. I'll dwell on one instance only of a factual error, one that looms substantially for my purposes.

First, though, Mrs. Older's own words, once again from her profile of her husband, the one she wrote for the *San Francisco Call-Bulletin* in 1955:

“Two or three years before Fremont died [in 1935] William Randolph Hearst asked him to write his biography, but he tried to avoid the assignment. He didn't like to explain that he had angina pectoris.” She meant that Fremont had heart disease, not that Hearst did—although the latter would eventually die from it too, in 1951.

Of the proposed biography, she stated: “Mr. Hearst insisted by telephone and letter and Fremont said that I must do it.

“I told him that I couldn't. It would be like writing the biography of Napoleon or Caesar in their lifetime and expect[ing] them to be pleased with it.”

MRS. OLDER had a point there, a very good point that many biographers can identify with, not just those who tackle once-in-a-world subjects. Still, she wasn't about to play possum, as she went on to say in that profile of 1955:

“I'd written several novels [three thus far, with a fourth soon to follow], but the Hearst biography scared me to death. The book, however, had to be written and I had to do it. Writing ‘William Randolph Hearst, American’ was a great experience. We went to San Simeon, stood on the terrace, looked at sea and mountains, one of the most beautiful spots in the world.



“At dinner I usually sat next to Mr. Hearst, plying him with questions about his life.

“Although I did this many times I never felt that I understood more than one facet of that complex genius, and I don’t believe anyone else did.

“I was assisted in writing the San Simeon chapters by architect Julia Morgan, who built the castle and guest house[es].”

Now for the one error that needs highlighting. Maybe what Mrs. Older wrote in this case was based on a dinner conversation with Hearst. Or maybe his secretary, Joe Willicombe, or some other highly placed source provided this errant detail (among other faulty details they could have conveyed). The mistake I allude to is her recounting, well into the book (on p. 412), that in 1918 Hearst “obtained an option to purchase the Los Angeles *Herald*, but the option was not exercised until 1922.”

Wrong. Hearst bought the *Herald* en toto, albeit through the dummy co-publisher Paul Block, as early as 1911. It makes a big difference in my approach to Hearst studies, with my frequent emphasis on the man’s activities in the Southland as of 1903, when he established a morning paper, the *Los Angeles Examiner*. As I’ve said in *Hearst and Marion: The Santa Monica Connection*, my online book of 2010 about Hearst’s residence called the Beach House, his buying of the *Herald* in 1911 means he had a two-paper presence in Los Angeles even before San Francisco, his birthplace, was as fully a “Hearst city.” (San Francisco got its second Hearst paper, the *Call*, in 1919; meanwhile, the publisher had been running the *Examiner* there since 1887.)

The seven years in Los Angeles from 1911 to the purported option date of 1918, and—to recall Mrs. Older’s misguided details—the decade-plus from 1911 to 1922, consist of facts and figures that some future historian still needs to unravel.

For me, as I’ve said already, this example stands as the only one I’ll cite from *William Randolph Hearst: American*. When Cora Older got such details

from Hearst or his lieutenants firsthand, she had no ready means of detecting or analyzing a conflicting version. She left The Enchanted Hill after her latest trip there. Back home in the Cupertino hills, hunched over her typewriter, she etched her facts in stone. Those concerning the *Los Angeles Herald* were re-etched nearly twenty years later by John K. Winkler in *William Randolph Hearst: A New Appraisal* (1955) and more than forty years after that in David Nasaw's book of 2000, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst*. Dr. Nasaw is an acclaimed author who usually knows better about these things through his methodical research. But not this time on the critical, eleven-year discrepancy between 1911 and 1922. One can only master so much in the Simon-says game called Hearstiana.

These handed-down errors are to be regretted. But I for one am willing to keep consulting *William Randolph Hearst: American* selectively, cautiously, its obvious mawkishness aside. I'm sure the book must truly have been the "greatest experience" of Cora Older's writing career, as she herself said. How could it *not* have been? She'll always rank highly in my mind for having tackled a thankless job, which yielded far more success than failure. And having once been a rose gardener myself in Ventura (in southern California), I'll always think of her tending her plants at Woodhills in the south end of the Bay Area, long living alone with her memories of Hearst and Sarah Bernhardt and Caruso and Gertrude Atherton. The same goes in her case for many other people of old California, her dynamic and fearless cigar-biting husband surely among them, a man who loved reading Dickens in the late evenings.

His widow, the kindhearted Cora, was the one and only Pink Lady of Cupertino—Mrs. Fremont Older.