

The Enchanted Hill

By Wendy VanHatten

Thompson: *Mr. Kane was a man who got everything he wanted, and then lost it. Maybe Rosebud was something he couldn't get, or something he lost. Anyway, I don't think it would have explained everything. I don't think any word can explain a man's life. No, I guess Rosebud is just a piece in a jigsaw puzzle...a missing piece.*

Citizen Kane, the movie, and the hilltop structure known as The Enchanted Hill in San Simeon, California have much in common. The first is supposedly based on the life of American newspaper magnate, William Randolph Hearst and has been labeled the greatest film ever made. However, Hearst prohibited mention of the film in any of his newspapers.

The Enchanted Hill is what Hearst called his home with its magnificent gardens and exotic zoo. Sitting high above the Pacific Ocean, this Mediterranean style country house features guest cottages each named for its view, endless gardens, over-sized swimming pools, and countless terraces. The zoo is long gone but zebras and other critters still roam around the property mixed in with the cattle.

Check out the Neptune Pool, supposedly rebuilt three times before Hearst was completely satisfied with it. Looking at it today...it was worth all that tinkering. Marble statues of nymphs and swans around the pool were carved by French sculptor Charles Cassou. Holding 345,000 gallons of water, this pool was heated year round until the 1970's. Crystal clear it is still filtered using a sand filtering system.

Slightly smaller at only 205,000 gallons the Roman Pool, apparently styled after the Roman Baths, is decorated from floor to ceiling with one inch mosaic tiles. Blue and orange glass tiles alternate with clear ones having fused gold inside. Looking up at the roof and dome, you see more mosaics...this time midnight blue ones interspersed with stars. Eight marble statues complete the setting. 'Wow' is the only word you will be able to utter when you round the corner.

Back outside, saunter along the Esplanade walkway connecting gardens with the rest of the buildings. Every direction you look provides visual pleasures. Roses, flowering annuals, boxwood hedges, citrus trees, and palms mix with 19th and 20th century statues, ancient sarcophagi, fountains, and the Sekhmet sculptures, four Egyptian pieces over three thousand years old. Stop for a minute on the Main Terrace and look around. Endless views of the Pacific Ocean are to your south and the Santa Lucia Mountains are to the north. In the background you will hear the sound of water, an important effect in Mediterranean gardens.

Hearst inherited the 250,000 acre working cattle ranch from his mother and called it "Camp Hill", a wilderness place for family members and friends to rough it on camping trips. Keep in mind roughing it meant accommodations included elaborate arrangements, separate sleeping quarters, and dining tents. At one point Hearst decided camping out in the open was not what he wanted. Enter famed San Francisco architect Julia Morgan who worked with Hearst to build his dream home...and it ended up as one of the world's greatest showplaces.

By 1947 La Cuesta Encantada was completed. Blending the architectural styles of a Spanish cathedral and Mediterranean Revival style houses and utilizing the surrounding California land, this was a creation to behold. After all, who would expect to see this grand structure rising high on the hills complete with grazing cattle and a zoo with zebra to polar bears?

Engineering and architectural features are everywhere. A gravity-based water delivery system, private cinema with rare books lining the shelves, 56 bedrooms, ceilings imported from all over the world, an indoor pool to delight even the non-swimmers, hidden terraces, doors to secret hallways, an amazing wine cellar, and a kitchen with some pretty fascinating appliances are only a few surprises.

This is no longer just a place for celebrities and famous guests to come and enjoy. It is a palace in every sense of the imagination.

If you go: Hearst Castle is located in the hills at San Simeon, on California Highway 1, about halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles. Advanced reservations are highly recommended, especially during the summer months. Check out www.hearstcastle.com or call 800-444-4445.