

Ormand Family Activity

January 2016: Mystery Castle in Phoenix

It is January 14. Christmas Break is over, and Faith needs to get back to Flagstaff (before it snows again) for her last semestre. She *could* just leave from Tucson and spend the next four hours by herself in the car... *or...* we could go up with her halfway, spend the day in Phoenix, see something new, and then send her off. An easy choice to make.

Besides, we have to pick up her Christmas gift to me at the Capitol. I discovered that the Arizona Capitol Museum sells stuff online, so I suggested a few things to my family. Interestingly enough, when some nice nice Arizona drinking glasses were bought, the Museum shipped them down. When a unique Arizona-shaped jigsaw puzzle was bought, the Museum shipped it down. When Faith bought a \$5 lanyard (for my Raytheon badge, when I have to retire the NAU lanyard after graduation this May)... the Museum held it for pick-up. No figuring that one out!

Our day started (later than I would have liked) with a leisurely drive up to Phoenix, with Charity keeping her sister company in her car. We parked the cars at the public garage on Van Buren and 1st, and walked down Central to the same (delicious) Focaccia Fiorentina cafe that we had visited during Phoenix ComiCon a few years previously. After lunch, we continued down Central to Munroe and then to the Phoenix Visitors' Center, where my suspicions were confirmed: the bus strike by the silly Phoenix bus drivers' union had affected the free DASH downtown shuttle, so we couldn't get a ride down to the government district. Back to the garage we went (passing a pushcart vendor selling... hummus), where we all got in the van and left to go down Washington to the Capitol.

Under the Copper Dome

We managed to find a parking spot at the Bolin plaza and walk up to the old Capitol, where we find throngs of elementary students on field trips. It takes a l_o_n_g time before the Museum gift shop staff decides that Faith's claim is valid and lets her take a lanyard. While we wait, we look at some of the historical displays on the first floor. Afterwards, we climb the stairs to the third floor where there is a new display that includes:

A LEGO Arizona State Flag!



Three Zonies in front of their big fake plastic flag.

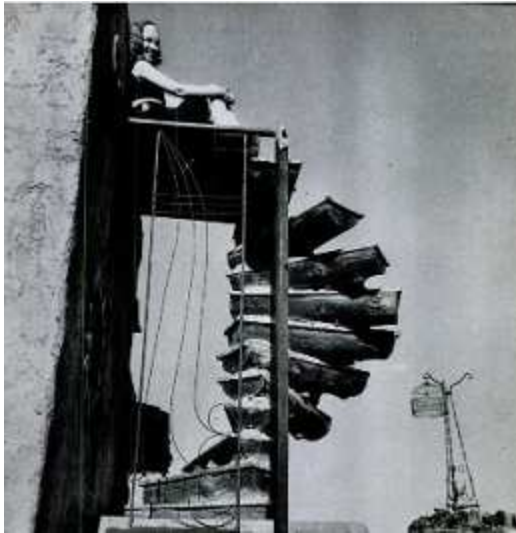
Well, that took way too long. But now we can leave downtown on 7th Street, south all the way to South Mountain Park where it tees into Mineral Road. The left branch runs half a mile and dead-ends in the Mystery Castle's parking lot. We catch our first glimpse of this unusual dwelling beyond the gate and the Arizona Landmark sign.



In 1927, Boyce Luther Gulley disappeared from his home in Seattle, leaving his wife and daughter Mary Lou, who never saw him alive again. He had learned he had tuberculosis, and (like so many others) sought hope in the Arizona climate. Because he had often promised his little girl that someday, he would build a castle for her to live in, as they made sand castles on the beach, he started to build an odd mansion on forty acres of unwanted mining claims. Fifteen years later, just before he died of cancer, he sent word back to his family. Clearly, Boyce Gulley was an odd sort of man, in the way he treated his family, and the way he built this rambling house using castoff materials.

www.mymysterycastle.com
www.discoverphoeniarizona.com/mystery-castle.html

When she and her mother arrived, Mary Lou was 22 years old. They lived in their "castle", supported by jobs in rather-distant Phoenix, and in 1948, Life Magazine came to do a story on her interesting circumstances and home. They photographed her on the platform above her patio, and tagged the handmade mansion the "Mystery Castle".



Mary Lou lived in the castle for 65 years. She married, but had no children to inherit the estate. A foundation owns the Castle and maintains it and provides tours. For \$10 per person, it is *very much* worth the visit.

Our tour started by the guide leading us around to the northeast end. Here, there is a large bedroom with an upper and lower level. The house had been built around a saguaro (I couldn't make out whether it was already dead, or whether it died after the house was finished and the cactus flesh rotted out of it), and the skeleton was rigged with Christmas lights. Next to the flight of steps to the lower level is a dual fireplace, one grate on the upper level and the other on the lower. A loft currently occupied by wickerwork is above the steps.





A door each on the upper and lower levels. We came in and out of the upper door; the lower one is a Dutch door. Two more saguaro skeletons are left rooted in the ground and converted to chairs (one is visible at the right next to the wooden saint).

One of the round windows. The glass is on the inside. The other side is enclosed by one of the wheel rims from Boyce Gulley's Stutz Bearcat auto that he drove from Seattle. I guess the bird figure is permanently stuck within.

Mary Lou must have inherited a lot of her father's idiosyncratic tastes, judging from the interior furnishings and decorations. The architectural features, including the bird here, were installed by Mr. Gulley.



The view of the upper level from the lower. Fireplace to the left. The bed frame has roller wheels that ride tracks installed into the floor, so the bed easily moves out for use and in for storage. On the upper level to the right is a cabinet given to Boyce Gulley by Governor Hunt.

Back on the upper level, there are these stained glass windows above an orange sofa that has some connection to Frank Lloyd Wright.



We leave the bedroom and move to the western end of the house. There are three chambers here. The rightmost (westmost) one is the "Chapel". The bank of windows on the lower story in the photo of the house above looks in on the chapel.



I don't think there was an original religious or ceremonial intention to this room, but at some point, people started asking to have weddings performed here. The cushions were either seats or kneelers. The mantel over the fireplace is built up with shards of rock, and the tour guide suggested that this calls to mind the Grand Canyon.

Detail of the floor with the embedded snakes. Sunlight from the porch windows spills across the floor.



Sitting room adjacent to the "Chapel" with a large round window. That's our first tour guide. To the left is a shelfcase with shoes that brides left for good luck and a durable marriage.

Just behind the wall where the couch is above is this little room containing a pump organ. Our guide explained how a woman in Bisbee had married four husbands and poisoned each with cyanide. Because cyanide poisoning was common in the copper mines (probably more the smelter), nobody suspected her of murder. She accumulated a fair bit of money from her deceased husbands and gave generously to the church - which as a result recognized her as a saintly person. When Mary Lou heard this story, she could not resist buying the organ and moving it to her in-house wedding chapel.





The next chamber is called "Purgatory", because it is between the "Chapel" and the bar. There are two built-in sitting benches at different heights - perhaps one was intended for tall people, and the other for short people.

At the other end of "Purgatory", Boyce Culley's portrait hangs next to the door to the bar.





The bar is a dark, close room, lit by one round window and some skylights. Yes, there is a "bar" in here, and some shelves for liquor behind it, but it takes some imagination to see it as a bar. Mostly, we see two beds in here which our guide explains were intended for the use of those who became too inebriated to leave.

Some more skylights over the "bar". I'm guessing the white item is supposed to be a stove for a covered wagon. I got the impression that the bar was supposed to be the bed of a covered wagon. It was pretty cluttered in here.



In the corner, behind the shelves, is the remains of a dumbwaiter, formerly used to move liquore to the patio above.

As we are leaving the "Chapel", "Purgatory", and "Bar" rooms, we pass the suit of armor holding the chain around the alligator's neck. The alligator is standing on a wooden trapdoor. *This* is why this house is called the "Mystery Castle". When Boyce Gulley died, he included terms in his will (or maybe it was the deed of the house) that the trapdoor could not be opened until the family lived in the house for two years. Life Magazine showed up when it was time to open the door. Underneath was a small chamber containing some valuables (and two \$500 bills; quite a sum in 1948 dollars), some letters, and a valentine that a young Mary Lou had given to her father. There is no longer a room under the trapdoor; it was filled in for safety reasons.



Our guide then takes us back to where we started and hands us off to another tour guide who led tours of the castle when Mary Lou still lived here, and knew Mary Lou personally. She takes us into the upper story of the eastern building, which I think is over the bedroom where we started. This is a large open room that comprises three areas; the library, the living room, and the dining room. At one end of the library is a collection of portraits of Boyce Gulley.



Along the wall of the library is a shelfcase currently occupied by fossils and other curios. The large basket in the center is a priceless piece of Apache work, our guide tells us. This is a great place for a library; it's comfortable, and the light from the tall windows on the west side fills the room.

In the living room area is a large fireplace, with a portrait hung over the mantel.

There are thirteen fireplaces in this house. That is because there is no heating system, which is not surprising, having been built in the 1930s. More significantly, there is no cooling, either. Maybe with all the stone, the building maintained its temperature fairly well. Or maybe Mary Lou, her mother, and her husband didn't have expectations for climate control, unlike us spoiled Moderns.



Across from the fireplace, between the exterior door to the patio and the kitchen door, is this support column with a built-in writing desk.

The dining room. Now, after having seen the "Chapel"/"Purgatory"/Bar, the spacious patio area, and the large library and living room areas, I was thinking that this house was built for entertaining. I don't know whether Mary Lou entertained much. That's a pretty small table for entertaining. It's more like a smallish family dining table.



Through the door at one end of the dining room is this bedroom. It's right behind the fireplace, so it would be heated radiantly. The bedframe, the guide informs us, was given by Governor Hunt. The little display case to the right used to belong to Winston Churchill's mother. I'm sure I should have asked whether it was Boyce Gulley, who must have spent most of his time building on this house, or Mary Lou who was

all palsies with the Governor and other people (John Wayne contributed decorations in the "Bar").

Other furnishings came from Jerome. I note the beautiful sliding glass windows; very unusual - like everything else about this house.



Leaving the bedroom and going back through the dining room, we have a look at the kitchen.



The ovens are built into the stone walls, and fueled by carbide. And/or the fireplace beneath. There's a gas stove to the left, and a vent hood that used to be a bathtub. The windshield from the Stutz Bearcat was up there, too, behind the bathtub/hood; not sure what function it performed.

Here's a kitchen feature to die for - a breakfast nook and a huge corner window with a view of the Phoenix valley.



The ovens and stove above might have been the original equipment, but a more modern oven and range was behind this "island" under the cabinets. The steamer was rescued from a Phoenix-area public school. There is a rickety flight of stairs out of view to the left that goes up to Mary Lou's bedroom. It is off-limits and occupied by Mary Lou's surviving cat, "Cleocatra". I'm guessing that there are some areas not on the tour to limit liability risks - those stairs really are rickety, and there are enough tripping or falling hazards in this old house for the Mystery Castle foundation to worry about. Plus, I'm sure that Mary Lou's personal bedroom was not on the tours when she was alive.



Outside again, at the end of the tour. The patio has two levels. At one end of the lower level is this circular area with some embedded snake motifs, and the skylights for the Bar beneath.

At the other end is this "Wishing Well" which is actually the head of the dumbwaiter shaft. I guess the host in the bar could load the dumbwaiter with drinks and send it up for guests on the patio.



In the floor of the patio is a compass rosette with the points correctly lined up for North, East, West, and South.

Looking along the compass "North" line, the Phoenix valley spreads out. The item in the center is one of two cat statues that for some reason (Boyce did this as he was dying of cancer) are covered with cement.



The view of Phoenix is considerably different now than it was in the '40s.





On the upper patio level is the entrance to the upper story of the west building. This is where the "caretaker" lived, originally a man who was helping Boyce with the construction work, but he was not well disposed to the wife and daughter when they arrived (and was stealing the furnishings and decorations), so he left shortly afterwards. The women applied to a family member, "Uncle Frank", to come and help with the upkeep.

That's the second, older tour guide with her cane. The spiral staircase to the left is the very one upon which Mary Lou was photographed on the original Life Magazine cover.

View of the eastern building from the upper patio level. The kitchen is in the lower level, and the doors on the balcony open into Mary Lou's bedroom. The door to the library/living room/dining room are to the right, under the niches.



Our tour of this fascinating building is over, and we climb down the (uneven) stairs (with no handrail) from the patio and proceed westward back to the parking lot. The square windows admit light and air to "Purgatory".





The round window of the barroom.

The outside of the large round window in the "Chapel".





Down on the grounds, I look back at the north side of the eastern building.

And of the western building with the west-facing porches and glass doors. What a magnificent house. I hope it fares well and survives a long time for visitors to regard the tribute of a very odd father to his apparently odd daughter.



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Since I mentioned it above, the Arizona puzzle was asked for the purpose of enjoying putting it together with my Dad and my kids. Dad lives in a retirement community (resort), and spends much of his time working jigsaw puzzles. Charity also enjoys jigsaw puzzles, and Faith, too. Any excuse to get them all together is a pleasure for me, and the puzzle is interesting in its own right.



The puzzle in an early condition, on a table in the big common room. Other residents kept passing by and remarking on the family project. The big kid in the foreground is my nephew, Jesse.

I was thinking this puzzle would not take so long, being only 1000 pieces and lots of detail. Wrong. It took all day to get it to this point, at which we had to leave for the day.





But we came back early-ish the next morning and finished it off. It's a pretty nice picture, and I was thinking, why not decoupage it and hang it on the wall? But both my girls were outraged at the prospect. So we left it out on the table for the other residents to see the finished "family project", and then back in the box it went.