

The Stronghold

In 1928 Walter A. Strong, then owner and publisher of the Chicago Daily News, decided he wanted to build a summer home for his growing family of five children, then ranging in ages from fourteen down to four.

The Rock River valley was well-known to the Strong family largely because Mr. Strong's father-in-law, Towner K. Webster had built a summer home in 1917 just four miles north of Oregon.

Wallace Heckman, who owned considerable property on both sides of the river which included the area around Blackhawk statue and also what is now Lowden State Park, agreed to sell him some three hundred acres on the west side of the river south of Mud Creek.

Work on opening a quarry and building the roads was started in November 1928.

The conception and design of Stronghold that was completed for the initial house-warming on Thanksgiving Day 1929 is a unique and fascinating story.

The publisher William Randolph Hearst was, of course, a competitor and business acquaintance of Walter Strong. In their social relationship, Mr. Strong had been a guest at the fabulous San Simeon Castle in California. Certainly with tongue in cheek there was the feeling that the publisher of the Chicago Daily News was not to be outdone by the owner of the scurrilous Herald Examiner and the Chicago American.

Funds were not unlimited and when preliminary family discussion got under way with the architect Maurice Webster, Mrs. Strong's youngest brother, he was admonished that a silo with an adjoining barn and lean-to would have to be the starting point.

The "Castle" when it was completed with its 25 rooms including 16 bedrooms and 9 baths, swimming pool, tennis court, and toboggan tower certainly represents a compromise between those two extremes.

Domestic help in the early days of the depression was more available than it is today with the result that the staff consisted of nine people. They

were kept busy when there was a house party that might have included as many as forty in family and guests.

The stories of secret passageways and rooms are completely correct, though some of these are now closed off. Probably the most interesting one is the hinge bookcase in the library that originally was separated electrically so that when a certain book was moved the entire bookcase slowly swung back to reveal a passage over the archway into a large room originally designed to be a chapel, in reality remained a storeroom.

The ceiling of the library was painted by a well-known Russian artist, Nickolas Kasaroff, who with many others was suffering the effects of the depression, unemployment. As a friend he had been invited out from Chicago and for room and board and a modest stipend did not only the library but the mural of the fairy tale, Rumpelstiltskin, on the fourth floor of the tower. For those who know the faces many of the characters depicted resemble members of the family including the two dogs.

Walter Strong himself was not a pretentious man but fully enjoyed his family and friends and relatives in spiritual discussions at breakfast around the 2 ton 10' x 6' solid oak table or around the swimming pool or on a cool evening in front of one of the ten fireplaces.

A number of ornamental iron works including those on the main stone gate were made by Mr. Strong himself in a small blacksmith shop he had built not far from the garage. An extremely powerful man, he must have given to pent up business frustrations by bending red hot iron.

The tragedy of Stronghold is that Walter Strong lived to enjoy his lifelong dream only the one summer of 1930. He died of a heart attack in May 1931 at the age of 47. His widow main-tained Stronghold and lived there every summer for thirty years until she died in 1961. Her heirs, after receiving numerous dubious offers, sold it to the Presbyterian Camping Association for its most worthwhile use.

Towner K. Webster, Jr.
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