

# WHALEY HOUSE

**W**elcome to Whaley House," said June Reading with a smile. It was October 9, 1960, and the guests were a Dr. and Mrs. Kirbey from British Columbia, Canada. June Reading was director of the historic house, which stands as one of the finest remaining examples of early American architecture.

<sup>2</sup> Built in the Old Town section of San Diego, California, in 1857, Whaley House was restored and turned into a historical museum in 1957. It opened to the public in April 1960.

<sup>3</sup> After signing in, the Kirbeys wandered by themselves through the gracious home that San Diego pioneer Thomas Whaley had built for his wife and six children. Downstairs are a parlor, a music room, a library, and the kitchen. A large one-story annex is attached to the first-floor rooms. Upstairs are four large bedrooms.

<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Kirbey loved old houses. In fact, she considered herself something of an expert in early architecture. But in Whaley House she found more than she had bargained for.

<sup>5</sup> "Have you ever noticed anything unusual about the upstairs?" Mrs. Kirbey

*Whaley House in San Diego's Old Town was built between May 6, 1856, and May 10, 1857.*



asked June Reading, when she had completed her wanderings. "What do you mean?" asked June Reading. "When I started upstairs," Mrs. Kirbey began, "I felt a breeze over my head. I didn't see anything, but I felt a pressure against me that made it hard to continue up the stairs. Then when I looked into the rooms, I had the feeling that someone was standing behind me. The person was so close I expected a tap on my shoulder!"

6 At the time, June Reading did not know what to make of this. True, she herself had occasionally heard odd noises, such as the sound of heavy footsteps, but she had never experienced anything like what Mrs. Kirbey had related.

7 June Reading next led the Kirbeys to the annex, which had once served as the San Diego County Courthouse. When they entered the annex, Mrs. Kirbey stopped dead in her tracks. "Someone is here," she whispered. Neither June Reading nor Dr. Kirbey saw anyone.

8 "Can you describe what it is you are seeing?" June Reading asked. "I see a small figure, that of a woman who has a swarthy complexion. She is wearing a long, full skirt that reaches to the floor. The skirt appears to be made of calico or gingham cloth, with a small print. She has a kind of cap on her head, dark eyes, and she is wearing gold hoops in her pierced

ears. She seems to be staying in this room—living here, I gather. I get the impression we are sort of invading her privacy."

9 After the Kirbeys left, June Reading pondered long and hard about the incident. Mrs. Kirbey did not seem to be the kind of person who would make up such a story, but could it be that there were actually ghosts in Whaley House? Baffled by the incident, June Reading tried to forget it, but she couldn't, for the sound of footsteps in the house continued. "For the next six months," she later said, "I often found myself going upstairs to see if someone was actually there." No one ever was.

11 June Reading was not the only person to hear strange noises in Whaley House. Workmen often commented on eerie sounds, and so did several volunteer guides. Eventually, still stranger things began happening.

12 Starting in October 1962, windows on the upper level of the house would suddenly and inexplicably fly open. June Reading had bolts installed to ensure that the windows would remain shut. They did, but then the burglar alarms began ringing at odd hours.

13 In the months that followed, Whaley House volunteers reported literally scores of strange utterances. One volunteer

reported hearing music and a woman's voice singing "Home Again." He said he later heard organ music, but when he investigated, he found the music room empty and the organ covered. Another volunteer reported seeing a woman dressed in a hoop skirt. A third told of coming upon "the figure of a man, clad in a frock coat and pantaloons," and a dog, "spotted...like a fox terrier, that ran with its ears flapping, down the hall and into



*Psychic Sybil Leek tried to communicate with the spirits haunting Whaley House*

the dining room." Still others told of seeing a rocking chair moving for no apparent reason, and of smelling cigar smoke and perfume.

14 These incidents might well have gone unrecorded had it not been for a local TV personality, Regis Philbin. Believing that the strange goings-on at Whaley House would make an interesting subject for his show, Philbin set up a program that featured the well-known ghost hunter Hans Holzer, June Reading, a medium, and himself.

15 On June 25, 1965, Philbin, Holzer, a TV crew, and the medium, an English woman named Sybil Leek, met June Reading at Whaley House. Sybil Leek had been told nothing of the strange occurrences, yet from the first, she felt "presences" in the house. She immediately felt drawn to the kitchen. As she was on the way to that room, an apparition presented itself. "A child came down the stairs and I followed her," said Sybil.

16 Later, on live TV, Sybil Leek appeared to withdraw into a trance. Many mediums try to communicate with spirits by entering into trances. While Sybil was in the trance, a voice quite unlike her own emanated from her lips. It spoke of four ghosts in Whaley House. One was that of a man who often wore heavy boots, opened windows, and rang bells—Thomas Whaley himself. A second was that of Annabelle, a friend of the Whaleys, who had died at the age of 13, of poisoning from some food she had taken from the

Whaley House kitchen. The strange voice went on to say that the organ music came from Anna Lannay, Thomas Whaley's wife, who had died in the house in 1913. And who was the fourth ghost? It was that of a man called Yankee Jim Robinson. Unjustly charged with stealing a boat, Yankee Jim was hanged in 1852 on the very site where Whaley House would be built five years later.

17 So the ghosts of Whaley House now had identities. But *why* were they haunting the house? Well, it's often said in ghost stories that the spirits of people return because they are uneasy, because they have suffered some great injustice, or because they have left something unsettled. Do any of those reasons fit the four ghosts?

18 Thomas Whaley suffered an injustice. In 1869 he signed a contract with the county of San Diego, agreeing to build an annex onto his house to be leased by the county as a courthouse. He built the annex, but after two years the county broke its lease. Whaley, understandably furious about the breach of contract, petitioned to be reimbursed for building the annex. The matter was never settled. Mrs. Whaley, it can be presumed, also suffered in this matter.

19 Yankee Jim suffered an even more profound injustice. He was hanged for a crime he did not commit.

20 As for the youngest Annabelle, maybe she just liked the Whaleys so much that she didn't want to part from them. During

her short life, she spent more time at their house than she did in her own.

21 Whatever the reasons, the ghostly signs continue in Whaley House. In fact, Whaley House is regarded as one of the most actively haunted houses in the world. People claim that Thomas Whaley roams his house, the odor of his beloved Havana cigars trailing behind him. Organ music and singing are heard, and the fragrance of Mrs. Whaley's violet-scented perfume wafts unaccountably through the air. The apparition of a young girl continues to materialize in the kitchen. And Yankee Jim still reportedly wanders the grounds. ❧

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