

December 13, 1997

## Undesirable People Need Not Try to Enter This House

*continued from last week*

Today it's better known as the Bidwell Spirit Shoppe, but this Coventry landmark was built by Mary B. Clark's grandfather, Solomon Bidwell, in 1822.



Mary Bidwell Clark hit the headlines in October, 1905 after repeatedly brandished a revolver at children who were throwing stones at the house. She posted notices on the house forbidding entry to "undesirable" people. She came to the notice of the police when neighbors complained that she was discharging a revolver, but when the police visited 74 Windham Street they were threatened with a "dose of lead." Mrs. Clark was

convinced that her house would be broken into and burgled as soon as she slept, so she kept the lights blazing all night, and fired shots at sheets hanging on a clothes in her backyard, believing them to be potential burglars. Visitors to the house also noted that Mrs. Clark locked each door behind her as she went from room to room. She was subsequently arrested for discharging firearms in the city limits.

Mary B. Clark was locked up in the Willimantic Police Station, and a nurse was hired to look after her. On November 1, 1905, a train took her to the Hartford Insane Retreat after a hearing in the local probate court. A neighbor, Mrs. Adelaide Alford and the Willimantic Chief of Police, accompanied her. The house was taken over by Windham First Selectman James Smith until a conservator could be appointed. The Hartford Retreat would be Mary Clark's home until her death almost a quarter of a century later.

Mary B. Clark's first cousin, Edgar Winchester, the son of Harvey Winchester, was appointed conservator of the estate, after a dispute with another cousin, a Mr. Fitch, who claimed that Mrs. Clark was not speaking to Edgar, because he had assisted her ex-husband, Daniel, after she had pulled a gun on him and threatened to shoot. An inventory was made of the house's contents on February 2, 1906. More than a thousand individual items were painstakingly calculated in with the price of the house itself which was valued at \$8,000. Two houses on Jackson Street, nos. 192 and 198, were valued at \$3,600. Two properties in South Coventry, including a summer house were valued at \$2,500. Also calculated in were savings of over \$2,000 in six banks. Of interest in the inventory were items such as a \$15 "wolf skin robe" and a \$100 "sealskin coat." The house contained fine Wilton carpets. Twenty-six solid silver teaspoons were valued at \$15. 60. The cellar contained an oil stove, a sixty gallon oil tank, a wash boiler, two cords of wood, a garden rake, a lawn mower, four tons of coal (\$40), a wash tub and an iron pail. The total value of the Clark estate came to \$23,891. 38. At today's prices that is worth around \$600,000. She also had half an interest in the Bidwell Hotel in Coventry.

Winchester invested the estate in stocks which accumulated until her death in the Hartford Retreat in 1929, aged 84. On March 29, 1907, Edgar obtained a probate order to sell the house, and it was purchased by James and Ella Fullerton. The Winchester family continued to invest Mary B. Clark's estate, and at her death in 1929, it was worth more than \$90,000, but continued to increase in value until it was finally estimated at more than \$100,000 in 1930.

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