



Castle Sherman in the late 60s.

'You're a CHICKEN!!! A big fat CHICKEN!!!'



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Upon hearing those words as a child, did you cringe, knowing that you had failed in keeping one of childhood's Ten Commandments: Thou shalt not be a chicken! And did your "chicken-hood" follow you as you matured? Alas, mine did! I'm a chicken, and because I am, I missed a golden opportunity to meet one the Coast's most eccentrically delightful grand dames - Mrs. Jessie Sherman Gundlach - and to visit her equally eccentric house, Castle Sherman.

In the late 70s a dear friend, Carlton Perrett, invited me on a Saturday afternoon outing, tempting me with promises of a big surprise to follow. It was summer, hot and moist, and a drive along Highway 90 with the windows down and a Glenn Miller cassette turned up loud seemed just the thing. As we drove, Carlton chattered on about the "tower house" in Pass Christian. I knew the house - crenellated tower, balustrades, vast arched windows, and a lush lawn crowned with flowers and a fish pond. But I did not know who lived there. Carlton did... sorta. "I know the lady's name is Mrs. Gundlach," he said. "I know she has a fondness for all sorts of people and will ask anyone in for coffee and a chat...and that house of her's! How can you say no to that down!" I sputtered out an answer, "But...but...I'm..." "A big fat chicken!" said Carlton. "You in or not?" I



Mrs. Jessie Gundlach

wasn't in, which didn't sit well with Carlton. He whirled his Plymouth Scamp around, rushed me home, and went back; his Castle Sherman adventure just beginning.

James Sherman (1854 - 1937) built Castle Sherman from the ground up. He was a retired electrical engineer, and purchased the property located at 1012 West Beach Boulevard in 1921. The original house that sat on the property was a rambling log cabin. It served as a summer home for the widowed Sherman and his daughters, one of which was Jessie Gundlach. Sherman, a man of great vigor, suffered a heart attack in 1928 when he was seventy-five years old. Refusing to give in to the depression that followed his illness, he decided to build a garage for his car and a small office. His building material of choice? Concrete. His building endeavors were highly successful, and that success inspired Sherman. He drew up plans for a house, and after enlisting the talents of McKinley Bradley - a black man in his early 20s - the two men set about the task of building Castle Sherman. In a letter about her father, Jane Sherman Johnson stated that the original plans called for a house that was "not so pretentious as a castle, but the further he got along, the bigger it became." Sherman and Bradley created the house piece by piece from molds which were shaped and filled with concrete. Everything from the dec-

orative columns and balustrades to the crenellated tower was made of concrete. (Inside the tower is circular staircase that rises from the ground floor to an upstairs balcony. It is not part of the house's interior.) The house's walls were nine inches thick, reinforced with steel rods. Work on the house lasted for ten years, and then, in 1938, James Sherman passed away. He was eighty-five years old. Now comes the fun part - enter Jessie Gundlach!

Upon her father's death, Jessie Gundlach (1889 - 1984) bought the house from Mr. Sherman's second wife. She had failed to pay her property taxes and was deeply in debt. Selling the house was her only means of escape. Jessie paid the taxes, bought the house, and moved in. It was at that point she renamed the house Chateau Sherman.

Jessie was a grand dame in the truest sense! Learned, with a keen interest in all things related to nature, she "never met a stranger," as the old-timers say. She entertained people from all over the world, sponsored a Boy and Girl Scout Troop, and was a favorite of new recruits at Keesler Air Force Base. She lavished attention on them, and was especially fond of the Korean flight officers during the Korean War. Rumor has it that they convinced the indomitable "Miss Jessie" to paint Chateau Sherman in brilliant shades of pink and green! At the end of the Korean War, the Korean government awarded Jessie with a Metal of Gratitude for the hospitality she had shown to the their countrymen while away from home.

Along with her love of people, Jessie Gundlach was an avid collector of everything from mushrooms to snakes; she adored butterflies and driftwood, which she said were "God's ornamental sculptures." Carlton told me about an upstairs room which was home to her vast butterfly collection. He stated that the afternoon sun, sharp and hot, illuminated the butterfly's wings, their deep blues, greens and tangy oranges glistening in the torrid sunlight. Through the years, Jessie filled the wonderful house that her father had built with antiques, books, and anything else that her imagination fancied.

She also left her indelible mark on the house, from its pink and green color, to the artificial flowers and old lace that she glued to the hand rail of the tower's staircase. Carlton said there were stacks of newspapers and magazine in every corner. In a way, she was the antithesis of Dickens' Miss Havisham; not a bitter recluse pining away in her rambling, old home, but a bon vivant, loving her home so much she seldom saw a need to leave it.

Even as Hurricane Camille (1969)

end, she publicly thanked him for fifty-three years of building and lawn maintenance, along with repairs to a house which he had helped create.

When Jessie Gundlach passed away, she willed her house and its collections to the University of Missouri in the hope that the university would use the house as a marine biology laboratory. The university declined to do so and sold the house. Although it has had several owners and has been renovated, the house still retains its haunt-



Photo courtesy of John Majure

made a beeline to the Coast's front door, Jessie Gundlach did not leave her home. There she stayed, alone, a witness to the storm's eviscerating combination of wind and water which ripped into her home, sucking the life from it along with the treasures of a life time. But the house stood, her father's concrete walls a bulwark against destruction.

Following the storm's devastation, Jessie, along with McKinley Bradley, began the arduous task of repairing the house and its grounds. They found the shattered pieces of her broken furniture, repaired them, and place a sign on each restored item that stated how many pieces had been found and repaired. They restored the lawn, refilled the reflecting pool, and replaced the lost koi. In 1975, Jessie honored McKinley Bradley with a weekend "garden walk," where the grounds were opened to the public. That week-

ing allure; even Katrina's vindictive wrath could not wash that away. Now, the house waits for someone to love it again, to care for it as did James Sherman, as did his daughter, the colorful "Miss Jessie." It awaits someone who's got grit and gumption, a pile of money, and who isn't a "big fat CHICKEN!"

Please remember to keep our troops in your prayers. May God bless, and keep a song in your heart.

Kal



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