

An Angeles Abbey Story

In the early 1920's a Long Beach shipbuilder named George Clegg decided that folks in South L.A. needed a unique and very special way to lay their family members to rest. After sending a pair of architects to India to study, he used what they learned to construct a huge community mausoleum on a tract of land in Compton, just north of Long Beach. Completed in 1923, known as Angelus Abbey, its turrets and tiled domes reminiscent of the Taj Mahal shelter more than a thousand crypts stacked six high in a complex of marble corridors.

In October of 1933, Warren Winchester's uncle, Toi Winchester, driving with the husband of Warren's grandaunt Coll Smith, was involved in an automobile accident. John Smith, Coll's husband, was killed. John was forty two years old and his only child, Carl Smith, was six. The family decided John would be interred at Angeles Abbey.



Four months later, in February of 1934, Warren Winchester's mother died of tuberculosis. Warren was two years old, his mother Alice was forty. [This picture of young Warren with his mom and dad would have been taken near that time.] Alice followed John Smith to the Abbey.

In 1945 Warren's father joined them, at the age of forty seven.

The Abbey is ten miles northeast of the Winchester home in Wilmington and in this picture, taken in 1928, we see the suburbs of L.A. approaching from the north. The Abbey, however, is still surrounded by lots of open ground. In 1945 a crypt cost about \$580, more than two months salary for most folks. Today the only remaining crypt is available for \$5,600 – so Tookie's "rule of ten" still works just fine.



In 1951 Toi Winchester was badly burned in a fire at the Standard Oil refinery where he worked and he died of complications from the burns. He was 45 years old. He joined his brother William at the Abbey.

Warren's grandparents, Rilda and Anthony Winchester, had lost both of their sons, two of their five children. Rilda and Anthony joined them at the Abbey in 1954 and 1967, respectively.

Rilda's sister, "Aunt Coll" Smith, was our family's final addition in 1971.

In subsequent years the area around the Abbey commercialized, suburbanized and gradually turned very nasty. Compton has been rated one of the most dangerous cities in the United States, with a long history of gang violence and racial conflict. The Abbey gradually became a fortress, surrounded by high fences and iron gates, patrolled by guards at night and on weekends. Tookie expressed concern as the condition of the grounds deteriorated.

When I decided to pay my first visit to the Abbey, Warren advised me, only partially in jest, to go armed! The key, it turns out, is to go during the week, in daylight (business hours for the Abbey are 9 AM to 4 PM). Then you can park on the grounds, well inside the iron gates. You don't want to park on Compton Boulevard! Let's check it out:



The first look, from a parking spot just inside the main gate.

Standing directly in front of the Abby, the main entrance is under the middle arch.

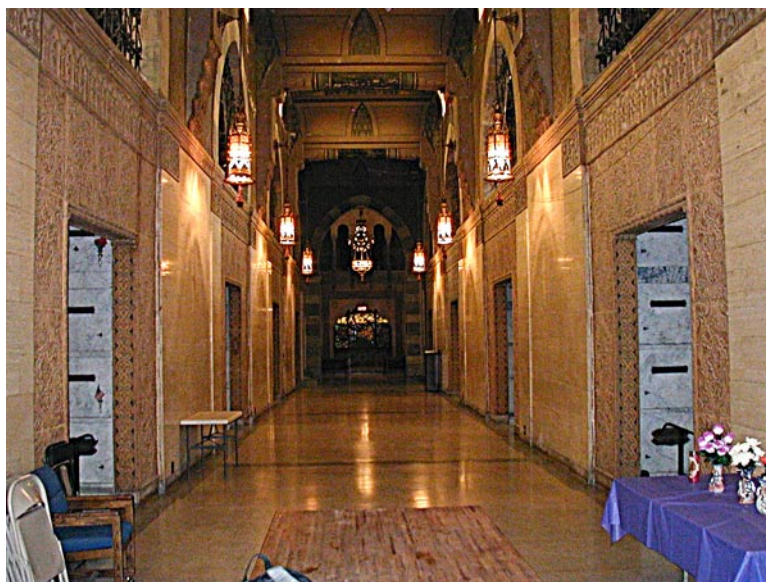


Every door and ground floor window is covered with metal security barriers and locked tight, even during business hours. You must request entrance from the office personnel.

Considering the challenges faced by the current custodians of the Abby, I was pleasantly surprised at the condition of the grounds and buildings. The tight security is obviously necessary but their determination to keep the place clean and presentable was apparent.



With the iron gate open you enter a marble corridor that extends the length and height of the building. Five smaller corridors lead off to the left and right, where we find the individual crypts. Alice, William and Toi are in the last corridor to the left; Rilda and Anthony are in the last corridor on the right.



We'll start with Rilda and Anthony. Entering the last corridor on the right, we find two alcoves off the corridor. Looking down the second alcove, we see how the crypts are arranged. Rilda was placed on the left side of the alcove, bottom row at the end. Because Anthony died thirteen years after Rilda, there were no adjacent crypts available – so Anthony was cremated and an urn with his ashes was placed in the crypt with Rilda.



Virgie and Tookie visited the Abbey on a regular basis and they always took silk flowers for each crypt. The flowers were still there, a little dusty, after more than a decade since the last visit.

Now we proceed across the Abby, into the last corridor on the left, and in the last alcove we find Alice, William and Toi Winchester. Alice's crypt is the upper left in this picture, William is the upper middle, Toi is the lower right. Each crypt still has the flowers.



John Smith, Coll's husband, was placed in one of the Abby crypts in 1933. When Coll was making arrangements for her interment there were no crypts available near John's. So she purchased two adjacent crypts in a nearby building on the grounds, and had John's remains moved to one of them. In 1971 she joined him. They are housed in the rather Spartan "Building #3" (the 1970 custodians of the Abby grounds apparently didn't have lyric naming capabilities), the entrance to which is pictured below.



Just inside the entrance to Building #3, on the left side of the corridor, we find Coll's crypt in the upper left corner of the picture, John's in the lower right.



There were no real surprises in the inscriptions on each crypt. Here are each of the bronze plaques, in order of internment, and the folks we want to remember.



