

# the reactor

By Paul Azevedo



When Honora Sharp died on February 8, 1905, a legal battle over her will began which lasted 10 or 12 years. The pile of legal documents that resulted—15 inches high—showed some interesting aspects of her personality.

She had wanted to honor her late husband, George, with a memorial gate at the entrance to Golden Gate Park. I don't know yet why her dream was scuttled. Perhaps a bit more digging will turn up the reason.

INSTEAD, her ranch on the San Mateo coast was donated to the city and county of San Francisco by Samuel Murphy, her executor.

After I looked at her will, in her lawyer's old-fashioned handwriting, I headed for the San Francisco public library.

The Call, the Chronicle and the Examiner each carried her obituary. The Examiner was short and routine. William Ran-

dolph Hearst's hobby-horses were given much more play.

THE CHRONICLE was more detailed, but the Call went all-out. The Call featured a large photo of Mrs. Sharp—and the bequests—in large, bold type.

(Mrs. Sharp reminded me of another well-known lady of the 1905 era, Lydia Pinkham, the patent medicine queen.)

The Call's lengthy article included the entire text of her will, with all codicils. It must have struck the editor as being a very unusual will; at least I have never seen any will quoted in its entirety in any other newspaper article in my experience.

The Chronicle also quoted from the will extensively. The Call gave her age as 60. The Chronicle put her age at "over 60" (in 1901).

THIS WOULD put her about 65 in 1905. Husband George—a prominent attorney when he wasn't making profitable real estate investments—had dropped dead in the early 1880s while arguing a case in court.

She continued their custom of living in hotels. George Sharp had lived at the Lick House, then at the Baldwin, two of San Francisco's finest hotels of the day, the latter belonging to the famous horse fancier E. J. "Lucky" Baldwin, who later founded Santa Anita race track.

The Chronicle said that her final illness had lasted three months. It went on to say:

"In 1901, Mrs. Sharp greatly surprised her friends by marrying ex-judge W. L. Pierce.

"He was the parent of grown children and the bride, at the time, was over 60 years old. The wooing and subsequent wedding were romantic affairs. An extended honeymoon in the east followed.

"Shortly after their re-



Honora Sharp

This is a reproduction of the photograph of Honora Sharp which appeared in the San Francisco Call on Feb. 9, 1905, the day after her death. The credit line, "Taber Photo," appears within the wreath.

turn to this city. Mrs. Pierce suddenly left her husband and took up her abode in the Hotel Langham.

"No reason was ever divulged for the action and her husband laughed at the finale to his married life. Later he stood a suppliant at the Bar pleading to have the marriage dissolved on grounds of desertion."

THE DIVORCE was granted, uncontested. Judge Pierce, it was said, had been a widower only seven months when he married Mrs. Sharp, and he remarried again in a year after the divorce. You can almost hear the Victorian clucking of tongues.

Mrs. Sharp was a native of Quebec; she was buried from St. Mary's Cathedral with a high mass. She also specified that she be buried in her plot in Holy Cross cemetery. It seems strange, then, that she left nothing to any Catholic charity, but bequeathed \$25,000 to the Salvation Army.

The local Salvation Army official who was quoted as expressing "great sorrow" at her death had not heard of her before, nor had he known of her bequest.

She named Samuel Murphy, a friend and the president of the First

National Bank of San Francisco, as her executor. But she had never had a bank account.

IN HER WILL, she attributed her wealth to her husband, who left her well off. Since she had lived for almost 25 years on his wealth and was still able to bequeath substantial amounts herself, he must have left her a large sum. She didn't want his money to go to her distant relatives, so she devised a plan to honor her husband's memory with a donation to San Francisco's park system.

It became, instead, the gift of a ranch which would eventually become a golf course, in San Mateo county. And the name which is remembered today is not George Sharp's but Honora's. Such irony.

In its records the park commission sometimes called the property the "Honora Sharp ranch." It was also referred to as "The Honora Sharp bequest."

But George got lost in the shuffle.

I plan to follow this up when I can, to try to learn why Mrs. Sharp's memorial gate was never built. Perhaps the reasons will be found in the minutes of San Francisco's park commission.