

## Crazy Man's Castle

**T**HIS PHOTO IS WHAT COMES UP when you type “crazy” into the MNHS photo-search database, which is something I do for fun: enter words like “witch” and “crazy” and “haunted” and see what results. Crazy Man's Castle was built in the 1870s by Civil War veteran J. Putnam Gray, 17 miles north of Winona on the Mississippi River on the site of the vanished village of Mount Vernon (now Minneiska). Gray was an eccentric riverman who married his second wife when he was in his 80s.

Steamboat passengers were sure to notice this mansion. At night, when they asked the captain to shine his electric light on the castle, they would see Gray's daughters dancing, covered by white sheets, ghost-style, which helped the building develop a reputation for being haunted.

The castle was green construction by today's standards. No new materials were used—the lumber and nails were salvaged from raft and steamboat wrecks as well as scraps that floated downriver. Its erection earned a mention the San Francisco newspapers, which called the building “about the queerest-looking inhabitable structure to be seen between the poles.” Its style has been referred to as “Victorian packrat.” Gray advertised the castle in St. Louis, and its image appeared on colored linen postcards. While started in the 1870s, it was never completed.

No one knows how the house met its demise—through fire, flood, or general neglect—but it was gone by the early 1900s. What were the rooms like? What were the inhabitants like?



*J. Putnam Gray's home near Minneiska (Winona County), about 1890 (MNHS COLLECTIONS)*

What else did they do besides impersonating ghosts?

Putman Gray is known for inventing a wooden amusement ride in the shape of a wheel. In 1892 he brought his invention to Winona, set it up in a vacant lot, and started taking riders. His amusement-ride career came to an end one day when passengers fell out of the wheel due to a malfunction, and he brought the contraption back to Minneiska, where it rotted away in the countryside. Some Min-

nesota old-timers claim that George Washington Gale Ferris Jr. visited Minneiska and was inspired to build his own version. Maybe some of the wood from Gray's wheel made its way into Crazy Man's Castle.

—Lacey Prpić Hedtke

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**LACEY PRPIĆ HEDTKE** is a Minneapolis photographer working in nineteenth-century photo processes. She can be found online at: [www.laceyprpichedtke.com](http://www.laceyprpichedtke.com).



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