

Hidden treasures abound in house

By TAMMY DAVIS

"...all the vast and ordered beauty of a country estate in the grand manner...and, hidden away in its heart, proud Biltmore House, filled with fabulous treasures centuries old."—Biltmore House and Gardens Guidebook.

Nestled snugly in the mountains of Western North Carolina near Asheville stands the spectacular architecture and awesome grandeur of Biltmore House and Gardens. Biltmore House remains a national historic landmark as the largest privately-owned and operated residence in the world.

George Washington Vanderbilt, grandson of "Commodore" Cornelius Vanderbilt who began the Staten Island Ferry, started the construction of Biltmore House in 1890. Vanderbilt had visited Asheville to enjoy the mountain views and mild climate of the resort town. He was so taken with the area that, at age 27, he purchased 125,000 acres of land and began planning his southern home.

Vanderbilt, his wife, Edith and daughter, Cornelia moved into the mansion in 1895. When Cornelia married John Francis Amherst Cecil, a British diplomat, the residence became the Cecil's and still belongs to their sons, William and George.

Approximately 1,000 workers took five years to complete the house under the architectural expertise of Richard Morris Hunt. Hunt, who designed the base of the Statue of Liberty, planned the house after the chateaux of Chambord, Chenonceaux and Blois located in the Loire Valley of France. Hunt also traveled throughout the world with Vanderbilt to purchase art treasures for the 250-room mansion.

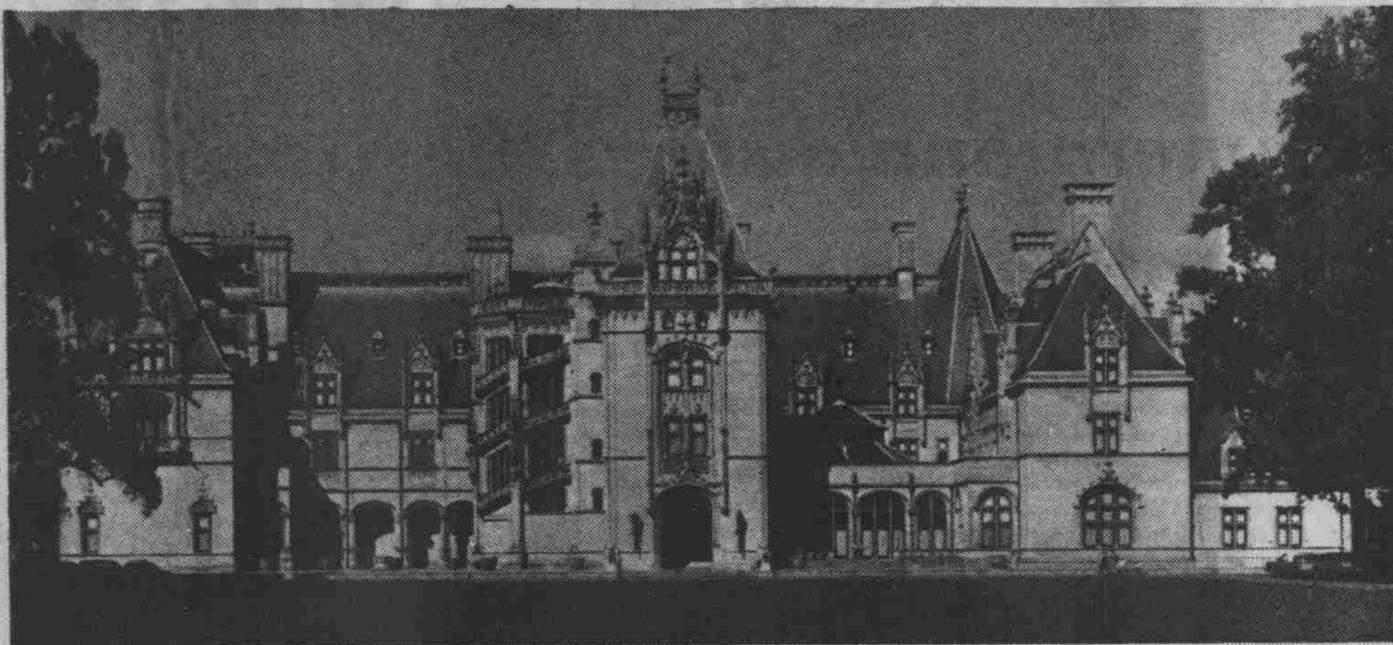


Photo courtesy of Biltmore House

Biltmore House
French Renaissance-style chateau in Asheville

To plan the gardens and parks around the house Vanderbilt engaged Frederick Law Olmsted, the foremost landscape artist of the day. The three-mile approach road to the house is the most significant thing Olmsted created because he imported 10,000 rhododendron from Europe to create a deep forest effect. Biltmore remains one of Olmsted's most successful projects and is noted for providing many of the first American experiments in practical forestry.

Vanderbilt hired sculptors from all over the world to carve the fine artistry of the house. In addition, Vanderbilt himself purchased some of the world's most valuable treasures to place in his home.

Probably the most intriguing is Napoleon's chess set. The table was actually used by

Napoleon while he was a prisoner at St. Helena. The set is carved in ivory and it is said that Napoleon's heart was placed on the table prior to being placed in his coffin.

Of particular beauty in the upstairs level of the house is the Banquet Hall. Beneath an

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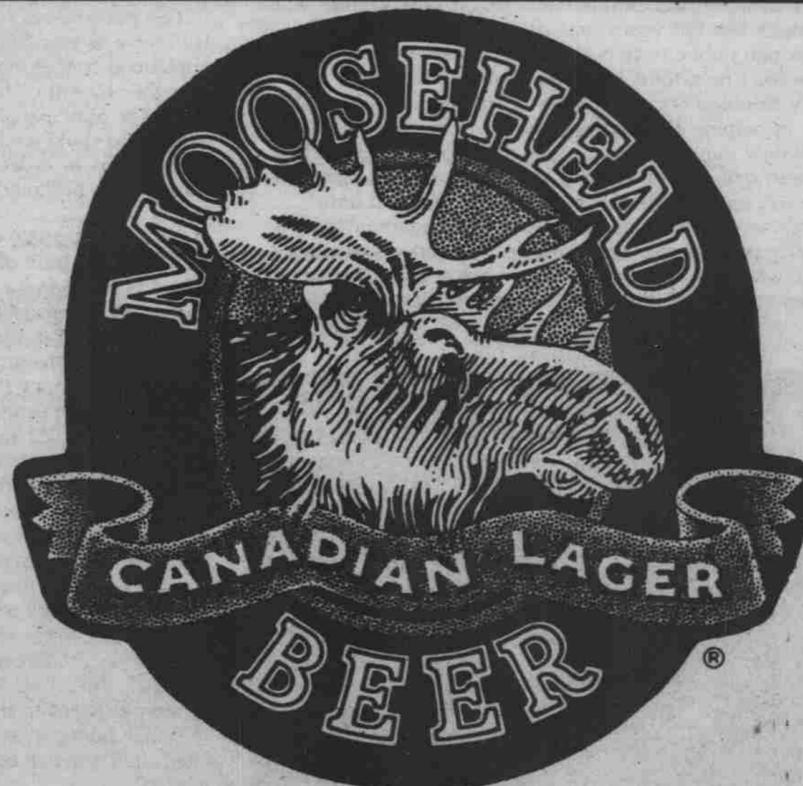
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