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# The House of a Thousand Candles: The Lake Maxinkuckee Link

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## **The House of a Thousand Candles: the Lake Maxinkuckee Link**

By Craighton Hippenhammer

I stumbled across Meredith Nicholson's most famous novel, The House of a Thousand Candles, by buying a house in upstate Indiana – a house that supposedly had the same name as the book. I do not generally read bestsellers, am not particularly fond of mysteries, and certainly don't like light romances, all of which this book claimed to be. But the rumors and stories that continued to circulate in the Culver area about this more than a century-old house to this day piqued my interest – murmurs about secret passageways, sliding panels, hidden staircases, and famous writer connections – and eventually drove me to read the book and find out more about the house.

I was suspicious from the outset that the house, located at 762 East Shore Drive in Culver, Indiana, on Lake Maxinkuckee, could really be the famed House of a Thousand Candles. After reading the novel, I examined the house for unusual features that might have similar mysterious purposes as to those in the book. Nicholson's novel, for example, featured fireplaces prominently in the plot; likewise my home contained three large fireplaces. Hidden entrances? A trapdoor in a first-floor bedroom closet led to the crawlspace. Nothing in the crawlspace gave a clue as to its purpose. Secret staircases? A camouflaged door in the kitchen led to a narrow

staircase descending from the kitchen to the middle basement. Also in the kitchen, there was a suspicious two-by-three-and-a-half-foot, floor-to-ceiling enclosed dead space to the right of the stove, which turned out to have nothing in it except drain and water pipes. After moving the pipes to the back of the space, my wife, Linda, and I turned it into a pantry in 2003.

On the second floor, the maid's closet held a similar floor-to-ceiling dead space at the far end, cutting off the northeast corner. Also, a tiny door, just big enough for a body to slide through, inside a lakeside bedroom closet, led to a hidden, unfinished room. Numerous under-the-eave closets and storage spaces added Victorian-era gothic ambiance as well, but it was uncertain to me just how many of these features Meredith Nicholson would have noticed, since he never actually lived in the house.

Upon an invitation in 2002 from the Culver Antiquarian and Historical Society to speak about the history and literary connections of the house, I started researching The House of a Thousand Candles and discovered immediately that two other houses claimed the same famous name – one in Indianapolis and one in Denver. I found published articles about them, but none that told the story about my Culver house. Something, obviously, would have to be done about that if rumors in the Culver area proved to be true.

Published in November 1905, The House of a Thousand Candles quickly appeared on best-seller lists and came in fourth on Publishers Weekly's bestseller list for 1906, two spots ahead of Upton Sinclair's The Jungle.<sup>1</sup> It came out in a large number of printings, was translated into six foreign languages, and became the subject of three movies and a number of plays.<sup>2</sup> According to Mrs. Roberta West Nicholson, the author's daughter-in-law, the book and its spin-offs made Mr. Nicholson over a million dollars.<sup>3</sup> Nicholson himself said that his book sold so briskly that the printers had to switch from embossing the candlesticks on the covers with

gold to painting them yellow because “the genuine gold couldn’t be laid in fast enough to meet the demand of the voracious public.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1986 the book was reprinted by Indiana University as a part of its Indiana Classic Literature series.<sup>5</sup> By no stretch of the imagination can the novel be said to have “literary quality,” that hard-to-define essence that indicates lasting merit not only for its own time but also for succeeding generations as well. The December 16, 1905, New York Times review hinted the book was not to be taken seriously when it called it a “story bristling with adventure” and ended up saying, “The secret passages and strange doings are quite as bewildering as the author intends them to be... and the cheerful reader accepts it all and asks no questions.”<sup>6</sup> The New York Herald called the book “romance chock-a-block,”<sup>7</sup> while the Chicago Tribune treated the book even rougher, calling it “a book of frank but refined sensationalism” and “a charming literary experiment,” adding that Mr. Nicholson could certainly “do better work than that,” and that his “humor, sentiment, and [good] sense”, with a bit of work could “fuse and make a serious literary worker of him yet.”<sup>8</sup>

What is it, then, that this light mystery-romance has about it that attracted so many readers more than a hundred years ago? Even though the writing now feels dated, The House of a Thousand Candles did something new at the time – placing a romance in a New-World setting but keeping an Old-World atmosphere. A gothic ambiance is important to the book, and Nicholson set out to find a setting somewhere in Indiana with a “sufficiently medieval air.”<sup>9</sup> The Hoosier author patterned the book after a number of popular 1890s European fantasies such as Anthony Hope’s Prisoner of Zenda but with the important change of setting it closer to Nicholson’s Indiana home. On a number of flyleaves in a copy of The House of a Thousand Candles owned by the Indiana State Library, Nicholson wrote that it had occurred to him to show

“that a romantic tale could be written, without an ‘imaginary kingdom’ with the scene in our own Indiana.”<sup>10</sup>

To enhance the forbidding feeling of the house, Nicholson made it huge, medieval and incompletely built with spooky scaffolding rising up all around it. The main character’s grandfather, who built the house, had a hobby of studying medieval architecture and built all the secret, special features into it using laborers from out of the area. In a modern, law-abiding state such as Indiana, Nicholson also knew that to make the old world feeling work, he had to isolate the house, which he did by using a heavy, snowy winter to enclose the place. “Otherwise,” Nicholson wrote, “The sheriff would have intervened and spoiled the tale.”<sup>11</sup>

Part of the appeal of the novel, no doubt, was, and still is, its title. Nicholson himself thought so, and said that clever advertising helped it along even further.<sup>12</sup> Various business proprietors around the world used variations of the title as advertising slogans and paid Nicholson to do so.<sup>13</sup> For example, two candy manufacturers called themselves “The House of a Thousand Candies,” a railway advertised itself as “The Road of a Thousand Wonders” and a summer resort hotel called itself “The House of a Thousand Delights.”<sup>14</sup>

Nicholson’s first novel, The Main Chance (1903), sold well, and though his second, Zelda Dameron (1904), also made the best seller list, he was disappointed with its smaller sales numbers and thus set out to write a popular story that would make his fortune. After taking this sharp departure from his usual attempts to write more serious, critic-friendly stories, Nicholson felt understandably ambivalent about having written a popular book. “It was in some bitterness of spirit,” he wrote, “that I resolved to try my hand at a story that should be a story and nothing else.” Nicholson noted that his book would be similar “to the great popular successes of several other American writers, whose tales were, I felt, the most contemptible pastiche, without the

slightest pretense to originality, and having neither form nor style.”<sup>15</sup> By the end of the same article he swore off writing such books.<sup>16</sup> Although he confessed to be surprised that he ever wrote such a book, his attitude toward writing it was not only ambivalent but also realistic. “I do not knock it,” he said in a 1915 letter, “as writers are in the habit of knocking popular efforts; in fact, I sneak up on it at times when no one is looking and admire it! No lasting reputation can be made by writing such tales, but... I’d be glad to do another one of the same.”<sup>17</sup>

[Nicholson loved telling the story about how he came to write The House of a Thousand Candles on the fly leaves of copies of the book. In one he confesses that not only did he have great fun writing it, in retrospect he got a guilty pleasure from having written it. “Confidentially,” he said, “I may say that I still think it – well, not so bad!”<sup>18</sup>]

When Nicholson married Eugenie Koontz in 1896, he married into a wealthy family. His father-in-law eventually set him up in business as a treasurer for the Northern Coal Company of Denver – a job he endured for three years. While in Denver from 1899 to 1902, Nicholson and his young family lived at 1410 High Street, which had been built by the Rev. Richard E. Sykes in 1897. Whether Nicholson had some input into finishing the house as to his liking is disputed and has not been proven.<sup>19</sup>

It is this Denver house which has also come to be known as the House of a Thousand Candles. In a Sunday supplement to the Denver Post on October 24, 1948, Edith Eudora Kohl wrote the article that first made the case for the Denver house being very much like the one in Nicholson’s book. The writer’s arguments involved the house’s gateway entrance, “the massive arched entrance with the lamp on either side, the library lined with bookcases,” the hundred atmospheric windows, wall “reflecting candle” brackets, a large storage area under the stairs described as a secret room, and an inscription carved in the fireplace mantel.<sup>20</sup>

Kohl noted that on one of Nicholson's trips back to Denver after he had moved away that Nicholson had called his previous residence not the House of a Thousand Candles, but the House of Inspiration, since it was there that he published his first book, "The Hoosiers," a history of Indiana. She also claimed that Nicholson had outlined several other books while in the Denver house, but provided no evidence to substantiate the assertion.<sup>21</sup> It is possible that Nicholson had pre-plotted future novels in Denver, as a March 3, 1970, Indianapolis News article claimed,<sup>22</sup> since the next several books he published were in fact novels. But Nicholson has been quite explicit that unlike his other novels, The House of a Thousand Candles had not been preplotted. In his own handwriting in a state library copy of the book, Nicholson wrote, "I began the tale without any definite idea of what would happen, so quite truthfully I may say that it wrote itself. I got so interested that I would run upstairs to my work room after breakfast, to see what the characters had been doing through the night."<sup>23</sup> In the front of yet another copy of the book, Nicholson wrote, addressing it to Guernsey Van Riper, "I didn't know any plot when I began, but got it one morning while I was shaving and almost cut myself in my delight with the joke of having the uncle [grandfather] alive. The tam o'shanter girl passed the house one morning when I was looking for a heroine, so I put her in."<sup>24</sup>

Roberta West Nicholson, quoted in an interview, said she had read an old newspaper clipping, probably the Kohl piece, that had stated that the Denver house "was the House of a Thousand Candles"; but then she added, "which it wasn't."<sup>25</sup> Many older homes have at least some of the features that the mansion in the book has, just like the Culver and Indianapolis homes do.

As novelists write, they bring into their stories experiences they've had, bits and pieces of people they've known, and, of course, places and structures they've seen. But the only record

we have where Nicholson stated in his own handwriting that a particular real structure had influenced the house in the book was in the Van Riper copy: “I wrote the story at the house I built on North Delaware Street (1500 is the number) in the fall and winter of 1904-5,” he jotted on the flyleaves. “That was a snowy winter, and I used to go out at night and walk around the neighborhood to get ‘color.’ An unfinished residence, or one under alteration (now the Propylaeum), suggested the idea of the be-candled house of the story.”<sup>26</sup>

After returning to Indianapolis, he wrote his first two novels while living at 1322 North Alabama Street. Nicholson and his family lived in the house at 1500 North Delaware Street, where Nicholson and his young family lived from 1904 until 1921. The House of a Thousand Candles was the first novel he wrote in his new house. It was natural, then, that the North Delaware house also came to be known as the House of a Thousand Candles. The name continues today under the house’s current owner, the Indiana Humanities Council. With such an attractive and catchy title, if a house had even the remotest connection to either the book or its author, it was likely to be given the moniker.

What, then, about the house on Lake Maxinkuckee? Previous owners of the Culver house, Dale and Collette Long, applied to the Marshall County Historical Society in 1983 and received a plaque that designated The House of a Thousand Candles as a historical site.<sup>27</sup> The Historical Structure Award Application form they filled out is overly impressed with the house’s connection to Indianapolis’s Vonnegut family, which is easy to do, as various members of the Vonnegut family have owned five or six cottages along the eastern bluff of the lake, including mine. However, it’s not likely that the Nicholson and Vonnegut families were friends as they had very different ways of looking at life. Author Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., born a couple of

generations after Nicholson, told me that he had never seen the book nor had anyone recommend it to him, and doubted that Nicholson had ever been friends with anyone in his family.<sup>28</sup>

I tracked down the Longs and invited them to come for a visit. In getting them to reminisce, they told me that the family who had sold them the house, Charles E. and Fern D. Hughes, who had owned it from 1941 to 1971, told them that it was the House of a Thousand Candles.<sup>29</sup> If the Hughes learned the name when they bought the house, then that would take the name as being attached to the house back to 1941, several years before Nicholson died. Newspaper obituaries of Meredith Nicholson asserted that he was inspired to write the book by a “rambling old house in the country situated near Lake Maxinkuckee at Culver, Ind.,”<sup>30</sup> that it was “a mystery novel inspired by a rambling old house near Lake Maxinkuckee at Culver, [which] was one of his most outstanding works.”<sup>31</sup> But Nicholson never owned a home on Lake Maxinkuckee. His vacation home was located on Mackinaw Island.

The evidence for the truth of the obituary statements came from Nicholson’s own hand. On the flyleaves of the Van Riper copy of The House of a Thousand Candles he wrote, “The scene is Lake Maxinkuckee with Culver [Military Academy] changed into a girl’s school.”<sup>32</sup> In the preface to the 1930 Culver High School Annual, Nicholson wrote that the idea struck him on a visit to Lake Maxinkuckee. “The towers of the Academy wore a sufficiently medieval air” that could provide that old “Zenda-like” European atmosphere that he was seeking for his new novel. “Of course,” he wrote, “I changed the Academy into a girls’ school and took other liberties with the landscape.”<sup>33</sup>

Nicholson added a very interesting and crucial detail in the preface to the 1915 “motion picture” edition of the book. To establish an Old-World feeling within Indiana, it struck him at first that the University of Notre Dame seemed a likely setting, but “about that time I happened

to visit some friends at Lake Maxinkuckee, also in Indiana. On a bright September morning, while looking off across the lake at the tower of a boy's school, it flashed upon me that here was an ideal scene for just the type of story I felt impelled to write."<sup>34</sup>

What friends? Who owned my Culver house in September 1904? And whoever they were, could it be proved that Nicholson knew them? Fortunately, the property's title abstract identified the owners then: Alfred F. and May B. Potts.<sup>35</sup> Alfred F. Potts had made his mark on Indiana history as an attorney who saved Indiana citizens millions of dollars through his legal work that controlled the development of natural gas in areas of the state. Potts, it turned out, lived just around the corner from Nicholson<sup>36</sup> and the two hung out with William Fortune for many years.<sup>37</sup> Nicholson also served as a pallbearer for Potts when the lawyer died in 1927.<sup>38</sup>

Still, before being able to prove my house was the one Meredith Nicholson visited in 1904, I thought I'd need further corroborating evidence. The house is ideally situated at the northeast end of the lake, only a few hundred feet south of Culver Military Academy property, where one can easily look across Aubenaubee Bay and see the lofty spires of the academy's buildings. Two late finds finally convinced me. First, one of Nicholson's literary journals, three-by-five leather-covered notebooks available at the Indiana Historical Society, has the notes he took as he walked along the lake. One of the words in that journal is "Aubenaubee."<sup>39</sup> Also, through Jeff Kenney, a staff member of the Culver-Union Township Public Library, I discovered a grandson of Alfred F. Potts. One of the Potts' daughters, Marjorie, an actress, married Walter Vonnegut, who had a daughter Ruth and a son, Walter Alfred Vonnegut. "My . . . memory," Vonnegut wrote in a letter, "concerning the origin of the novel goes like this: my other [maternal] grandparents, Alfred and May Potts, owned a cottage not far from the Vonnegut cottage. My grandfather Potts, being a man who loved the romantic view of life and was a good

teller of stories, had built into the Potts' cottage a 'secret passageway.' Actually it was only a trapdoor in the floor of an upstairs closet that led into a short stairway down to a secret door in a downstairs room (the dining room, I think). Of course, this required a double wall downstairs. Now Mr. Nicholson was a friend of the Potts's and while visiting them at the lake hit upon the tale that he later developed into 'The House of - .' That's my memory of an account that I heard many years ago."<sup>40</sup>

I was not quite sure what to make of Vonnegut's belief that the trapdoor was on the second floor rather than the first, where one currently exists. The back of the maid's closet upstairs lines up exactly with the two-foot-by-three-and-a-half-foot enclosed dead space in the kitchen below it that we recently turned into a food pantry, the east wall of which is contiguous with the dining room. If there had been a double wall here, it would have fit perfectly behind that dining room wall where the master bath toilet and tub are currently located. Nevertheless, there is a direct descendent who remembers that Nicholson not only was a friend of his grandfather Potts, but also remembers being told that Nicholson visited his grandfather's house and "hit upon the tale."

One must try to keep humble concerning owning a famous house, but certainly the Culver House of a Thousand Candles has as much right to the name as the other two homes. Come to think of it, there's only one house that Nicholson's bestseller calls the House of a Thousand Candles – and describes it as rural, on a lake, and located beside a private school. And that's the one that is located upstate Indiana.

END

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cader Books, “1900s Bestsellers.” <http://www.caderbooks.com/best00.html> (accessed July 17, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> “The House of a Thousand Candles,” The American Film Institute Film Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States; Feature Films, 1911-1920, F1.2053 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Note: “A play by George Middleton based on the novel and having the same title opened in New York on 6 Jan. 1908. The [1915] film was shot in the Selig Chicago studios, and at a private home in Wheaton, IL. Nicholson’s novel was filmed by Jess E. Hampton Productions in 1920 under the title Haunting Shadows. In 1936 Republic Pictures Corp. produced a film titled The House of a Thousand Candles, based on the same novel, starring Irving Pichel and Mae Clarke, supervised by Mrs. Wallace Reid and directed by Arthur Lubin, which was a spy story that had little similarity to the original novel.” p. 426. The only similarity in fact was the title of the movie and the name of the film’s casino.

<sup>3</sup> Allegra Stewart, Nicholson Revisited, (unpublished biography, Allegra Stewart Collection, University Archives, Butler University Libraries, n.d.), 77.

<sup>4</sup> Meredith Nicholson, The House of a Thousand Candles (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1905), fly leaf note in Harold Mountain copy signed by Meredith Nicholson on March 20, 1935.

<sup>5</sup> Meredith Nicholson, The House of a Thousand Candles, Library of Indiana Classics, 1<sup>st</sup> Midland Book Edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> “Adventures in Indiana,” New York Times, December 16, 1905.

<sup>7</sup> Meredith Nicholson, “Self Interviews by Popular Authors: Meredith Nicholson, Author of ‘The House of a Thousand Candles’ Tells the Story of His Story,” editorial preface by unnamed editor, New York Herald, magazine section, September 23, 1906.

<sup>8</sup> “House of a Thousand Candles,” Chicago Daily Tribune, December 2, 1905.

<sup>9</sup> Meredith Nicholson, “Preface,” letter, Culver High School 1930 Annual (Culver, IN: Culver High School), signed January 24, 1930.

<sup>10</sup> Meredith Nicholson, The House of a Thousand Candles (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1905), flyleaf note, Indiana State Library copy signed by Meredith Nicholson on May 23, 1932.

<sup>11</sup> John Kautz, “A Literary Friendship,” manuscript, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, 1965-1970. Kautz is quoting Nicholson’s flyleaf notes in his copy of The House of a Thousand Candles, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Anonymous, “Confessions of a ‘Best-Seller,’” Atlantic Monthly 104, no. 5 (November 1909): 579.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Dorothy Ritter Russo, and Thelma Lois Sullivan, Bibliographical Studies of Seven Authors of Crawfordsville, Indiana (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1952), 89-90. Note: according to the Peoria Star (Peoria, IL), December 16, 1906.

<sup>15</sup> Anonymous, “Confessions,” 578.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 585.

<sup>17</sup> Meredith Nicholson, letter accompanying the Motion-Picture Edition of The House of a Thousand Candles, July 19, 1915, Bobbs-Merrill Manuscripts, Indiana University Library.

<sup>18</sup> Nicholson, Candles, Indiana State Library copy, flyleaf note.

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- <sup>19</sup> Bertha French Ratliff, “Restoring the House of a Thousand Candles,” Indianapolis Star Magazine, May 1, 1977.
- <sup>20</sup> Edith Eudora Kohl, “House of 1,000 Candles,” Denver Mansions: XXI, Denver Post, Rocky Mountain Empire Magazine, October 24, 1948.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Wayne Guthrie, “Nicholson Book Set in Denver Home?” Indianapolis News, March 3, 1970.
- <sup>23</sup> Nicholson, Candles, Indiana State Library copy, flyleaf note.
- <sup>24</sup> Meredith Nicholson, The House of a Thousand Candles (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1905), Guernsey Van Riper copy flyleaf note signed by Meredith Nicholson in 1926, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.
- <sup>25</sup> Roberta West Nicholson, interview by Jerry Handfield and Allegra Stewart, November 10, 1983, transcript, Allegra Stewart Collection, University Archives, Butler University Libraries, Indianapolis, 12.
- <sup>26</sup> Nicholson, Candles, Guernsey Van Riper copy flyleaf note.
- <sup>27</sup> “Historical Society Presents Award to ‘House of a Thousand Candles.’” Culver Citizen (Culver, IN), May 23, 1984.
- <sup>28</sup> Kurt Vonnegut to author, September 27, 2002.
- <sup>29</sup> Harold D. and Collette A. Long (owners of the Culver house, 1971-1987), interview by author, July 19, 2003.
- <sup>30</sup> “M. Nicholson Dead, Author, Diplomat,” obituary, New York Times, December 22, 1947.
- <sup>31</sup> “Nicholson Dies: Funeral Set Tomorrow for Author,” obituary, Indianapolis Star, December 22, 1947.
- <sup>32</sup> Nicholson, Candles, Guernsey Van Riper copy flyleaf note.
- <sup>33</sup> Nicholson, “Preface,” Annual.
- <sup>34</sup> Meredith Nicholson, “Preface,” The House of a Thousand Candles, Motion-Picture Edition, (New York: Grosset and Dunlap), July 20, 1915.
- <sup>35</sup> Abstract of Title: To the Following Described Real Estate in Marshall County, Indiana: 762 East Shore Drive, Culver (Plymouth, IN: Cressner and Company, Inc., 1987).
- <sup>36</sup> Charles Latham, Jr., telephone interview with author, August 20, 2002.
- <sup>37</sup> Charles Latham, Jr., William fortune (1863-1942): A Hoosier Biography (Indianapolis: Guild Press of Indiana, 1994), 22, 24, 28, 31, 70, 78.
- <sup>38</sup> “Last Rites Wednesday for Alfred F. Potts,” Indianapolis News, April 26, 1927.
- <sup>39</sup> Meredith Nicholson, Literary Notebook, n.d., Papers, 1891-1947, Box 2, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.
- <sup>40</sup> Walter A. Vonnegut, to Jeff Kenney, June 16, 2005.

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