

"The Wireless Folly", by Michael Swanwick. First printed in *Thunder's Shadow Collector's Magazine*, February 1992. Transcribed from *_A Geography Of Unknown Lands_* w/o permission.

It may have begun as a rambling Victorian resort hotel, a fantasia of gingerbread and gables, with wide verandas and oceanic lawns. Or perhaps a dark, Gothic structure, part castle and part cathedral, squatting like a toad over twisting, labyrinthine catacombs--the core is lost in elaboration and addition, the newspapers of the time are silent on the matter, and both elements are present in the mustier reaches.

Indeed, the *original* building (whatever it was) was not even finished when renovations began. It was a spirited and high-willed family that laid the foundations and they agreed on nothing. Glass photographs from its early glory days show an elaborate pile of building, recomplicated with trap-doors and hidden passages within, and topiary gardens and ha-has without. It had already overgrown several neighboring structures.

However begun, the building goes deep. The stone tunnels, with water seeping down the walls and the occasional scurrying rat, have never been thoroughly mapped. And while a few stones have loosened underfoot and the mortar is slowly melting into stalactites, so that one is never sure if a passage is natural or now, they are still serviceable.

With the scattering of the original family (there are those who claim they merely withdrew into the interior), the building fell into disrepair, ferns dying by the slow decade in the yellowed parlors, and a few disreputable roomers haunting the porches. The Great Depression was on, and plummeting property values put the structure within reach of the meager pooled resources of the newly-formed Greater Verne County Wireless Association. The Wireless Association was made up of sincerely young men with skinhead crewcuts and ears that stuck out to the side. These engineers *manque* would argue late into the night over resistors and magnetic fields and then stay up to dawn, wrapping coils. I is possible to imagine them now, a pipe stuck in the corner of the mouth, oily cup of Java growing cold by an elbow, as they earnestly invented the future. One can almost hear the sporadic sizzle of a soldering iron.

They built their additions with an absent-minded casualness. Sheds and crude barns were needed to contain the stinks and fumes and explosions of their experiments. They stuck antennae on all the cupolas and cornices, so that the roof fairly bristled, and dug concrete-lined rocket pits in the old croquet grounds.

There is a certain nostalgia for those rough additions nowadays, perhaps because some few (fewer with each passing year, alas!) of the original members are still with us. You may find them in the leather chair of the smokers lounge, gin-and-tonics in hand, maundering on about quartz crystals, and the night they first raised Kansas City, to the inexpressible embarrassment of some of the younger, more cosmopolitan members.

Early on they were joined by other eccentrics--not their type, you'd think, and yet there was the kinship of outcasts among them, or perhaps simply an aloof, unnoticing toleration. These newcomers were occultists of varied ill-defined convictions, and filled the place with orgone generators, maps of Lemuria and the hollow earth, cutaway models of the Great Pyramid, and ghost-catching machines. Many of the more whimsically useless towers and puzzlingly misleading passageways were built in this era. One inevitably thinks of the east stairway which, after many twists and turns and not an option to get off, deposits its unwary victim back at its own landing. Or the Salem room, built by a reclusive young bachelor, which is all strange and eldritch angles and has a single oculus window overlooking the moon-barren slate roofs. And from which the occasional member has been rumored to have vanished.

After World War Two, there was an influx of new members--cool-eyed, wise-talking gals and guys,

many of them ex-GI's. They wanted dance floors and jazz pavilions, roller rinks and in-house garages. They were responsible for all the neon and much of the aluminum siding.

But there is so much to see! There are at least a dozen bars scattered throughout the Folly, and none of them completely abandoned even yet. One of the favorites is a complete English pub with brown oak paneling and frosted glass and (oddly enough) a broken Wurlitzer in the corner.

It was through here, in 1968, that one of the young radicals the Association seems always to attract, ran brandishing a war ax, screaming that he was going to demolish all the older, outmoded rooms to let some air and sunshine in. Waving the weapon over his head, he charged for the core of the Folly, pursued hotly by a puffing mob of old-timers.

Two or three rooms suffered minor damage to the moldings.

Or there is the orangery which, more recently, several self-appointed bricoleurs retrofitted with network of old radio tubes, clockwork telescope drives, and ormolu bells, all operated off a rewired NASA-surplus Cray. The mechanism thus created periodically acts out postmodern notions of cosmology and then deconstructs itself. It has met with great admiration and no little puzzlement.

Predictably enough this structure served as catalyst for yet another affray involving the roused emotions of all the membership. Rubber bands yet litter the parquetry.

Alas, there is simply not the time to visit every room in the Folly. It has grown practically beyond human ken, and continues to grow. As witness the recent proliferation of indoor rifle and pistol ranges. Or the diminishing daisy-chains of replica rooms that spiral way from several of the more imposing master bedrooms.

Nor have we the patience to chronicle all the doings of the Wireless Association's members. They not mellowed with age --indeed, they can no longer agree on the purpose or goals of the Association. Several conflicting charters float about, surfacing now and again in the glass-domed aviary, perhaps, or in the empty indoor swimming pool with untranslatable runes carved on its bottom which one member (who shall remain unnamed) has converted to a pornographic movie theatre.

But they keep on building anyway. The folly increases with each passing month. Grotesque and sprawling, it slowly humps its way across the surrounding fens. And while some elements are shoddily built, and there are recurrent rumors of watch-beetles in the wainscoting and dry-rot in the dormers, taken as a whole it remains an undisputed work of genius, and one of the great eccentricities of our age.
