

INSIDE JOB

Before Lachlan Murdoch paid \$150 million for Chartwell, his sprawling Bel-Air estate, it was the scene of a famed jewel heist. Decades later our writer unravels the mystery—and uncovers a dark family secret of her own.

BY JENNIFER CANNON



Lachlan Murdoch is the current owner of the famed Beverly Hills house.

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Jewel theft and Murdochs aren't the only reasons Chartwell is one of the most famous houses in L.A. It was also home to the Clampett family on *The Beverly Hillbillies*.





Left: The author's grandfather—and jewel thief—George Dordigan (circled), in the Santa Anita Park winner's circle with his horse Irish Mafia, in 1971. Below: The 20-year-old George and his wife Martha, the author's grandmother, in 1942.



completion, in 1938, it was the most expensive home built in Bel-Air during the Great Depression. According to IMDb, my grandmother Lenore Kingston Jensen, a character actress in those days, had a bit

part on *The Beverly Hillbillies* (she played Miss Murray). This would prove to be only my family's second-most notable connection to the house.

It was a home Lynn Atkinson and his family never actually lived in, though they hosted at least one memorable party. Atkinson's daughter Doris was

lauded on the *Los Angeles Times* Social Activities page, in the "Blue Book Promenade" dated May 11, 1941. The article recounts a party for the soon to be wed Vivi Wilcox and Marvin Chesebro. Lucy Quirk wrote, "Party of the week was the badminton-tennis-swimming shindig hosted by Titian-haired Doris Atkinson at her parents, the Lynn Atkinsons, Shangri-La on the tip-top of Bel-Air. Like the master builder that

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he is, father Lynn watched the younger set as they served them up on the sunlit court, scampered down the woodland paths beside the enchanting waterfall that cascades down for hundreds of feet, or played eye-blackening games of 'keep away' in the tiled pool."

But at some point during the five years it took to construct the house, between 1933 and '38, Atkinson ran out of money and borrowed from family friend Arnold Kirkeby. At a final cost of nearly \$2 million (about \$37 million today), the result was a 21,253-square-foot master class in excess. The home boasted six bedroom suites, 12 bathrooms, a ballroom with an orchestra stage and a pipe organ, the abovementioned 150-foot man-made waterfall, a landing pad for autogyros, and an elevator that went down to tunnels leading to a 75-foot pool and a badminton court. A copper roof, an entryway with multicolored marble floors, walnut paneling, mother-of-pearl bathroom fixtures, hand-tooled leather furniture, and several Baccarat chandeliers were among the original features.

Atkinson built the house for his wife Bernice, who immediately disliked it, deeming it too extravagant, and refused to move in. It has also been said that she was too ill to move in. Two things, and in this case maybe several, can be true. It has also been widely reported that Kirkeby took the house as collateral after Atkinson was unable to repay the loan he had taken to finish the project.

There were other rumors, that Atkinson handed the deed to Kirkeby to satisfy a gambling debt, or maybe, as Michael Gross wrote in *Unreal Estate: Money, Ambition, and the Lust for Land in Los Angeles* (2011), "Kirkeby's son Arnold, known as Buzz, believes that the kooky Atkinson took the loan for an ill-fated wartime engineering brainstorm: floating islands he promised to sell to the U.S. Navy. But the war ended, the navy was no longer interested—if it ever had been—and Atkinson 'handed over the keys to the house.'"

One thing is clear: Lynn Atkinson spent a stunning amount of money building a home he couldn't keep. Doris once told Kirkeby's daughter Carla that her father would gaze up at the property through binoculars from his apartment on Wilshire Boulevard.

Years later, in a twist that feels Greek tragedy adjacent, Lynn Atkinson, distraught over the Los Angeles smog, which he felt had worsened his pulmonary emphysema, jumped to his death from a different apartment, in the summer of 1961 at the age of 66.



Dordigan in Montana in the 1970s. Written on the back of the photo, which belonged to the author's grandmother, is, "George, you son of a bitch."

Meanwhile, Arnold and Carlotta Kirkeby breathed glittering life into the place. And, at the dawn of the '60s, in a decision that would cement the house's place in pop culture history, Kirkeby agreed to allow the exterior of the home to be used as a location for a new show, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, at a rate of \$500 per day. His only stipulation was that the producers not publish the address. He didn't bank on the show becoming a huge hit that would put his house on the map—specifically, Star Maps. Kirkeby wouldn't live to see any of it, as, in another tragic twist of fate, less than a year after Atkinson's death he was killed when the plane he was traveling in from New York crashed into Jamaica Bay shortly after takeoff on March 1, 1962.

At the time of Kirkeby's death, detectives with the Los Angeles Police Department were

trying to find the perpetrators of one of the biggest jewel heists in the city's history. Actually, two heists: In the fall of 1961, jewels collectively valued at approximately \$320,000 were stolen from the Beverly Hills home of real estate developer Paul Trousdale and the Kirkeby mansion. Pieces stolen from the Kirkebys included a 12-inch baguette diamond necklace worth \$150,000 that had 31 graduated stones, its center stone weighing seven carats; a pearl and diamond bracelet worth \$75,000; two other bracelets valued at \$25,000 and ➤

Embedded deep in the bones of a home are the irrevocable imprints, seen or unseen, of its previous inhabitants—memories made, secrets kept. The châteauesque manse on a hill at 750 Bel Air Road, in Los Angeles's exclusive enclave of that name, certainly holds its share. Much has been written about this house, which has been known as "The House of the Golden Door Knobs" and, more famously, "The *Beverly Hillbillies* House," and about its exquisitely designed grounds. But as fascinating as the architectural history of what is known today as the Chartwell Estate is, it pales in comparison to the history of its owners through the years.

On a leisurely drive past Chartwell, windows down, you might catch the subtle fragrance of tropical foliage, or of the redwoods (brought by the dozen from Northern California by the home's third owner) that stand watch beyond the decorative lollipop tree-lined stone wall. In 2017 the estate was dubbed the most expensive home in America and broke real estate records when it went on the market for \$350 million. Once known as Kirkeby mansion, after its second owner, Beverly Wilshire hotelier Arnold S. Kirkeby, it was eventually purchased by Lachlan Murdoch, executive chair and CEO of Fox Corporation and scion of media mogul Rupert Murdoch; Lachlan managed to snap it up for the bargain price of \$150 million.

It's less recognizable today, but the property's original exterior, with stone posts and intricately wrought bronze gates, is well known among baby boomers and Gen Xers as the Clampett residence in the 1960s sitcom *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Three decades before Americans would gather 'round their television sets to "come and listen to my story about a man named Jed," notable California architect Sumner Spaulding was commissioned to design a dream home in 18th-century French Neoclassical style for a public works contractor and engineer named Lynn Atkinson Jr. At the time of its

Growing up, I idolized my grandfather. I wouldn't encounter his darker side until later.

\$7,000; and an array of rings and earrings. Approximately \$65,000 worth of jewels were stolen from the Trousdales, the exact details of which are not known.

The burglars entered the Kirkeby residence through a side door while two maids were sleeping downstairs and a butler slept in the gatehouse. The Kirkebys, out at a dinner party that Friday evening, arrived home around midnight and discovered the break-in. Jewels had been taken from a secret hiding space in a wall in Carlotta Kirkeby's bedroom. The *Oakland Tribune* noted that the thieves had overlooked \$1 million worth of art. (The Kirkebys were collectors of 19th-century French masters; they owned paintings by Monet, Cézanne, and Matisse.)

Detective Sgt. Frank Gravante, who would later investigate the Manson murders, referred to the thieves as “professionals” and called it a “well-planned, well-organized job.” In late April 1962, there was a break in the case when a man named George Dordigan contacted Arnold Kirkeby's son Buzz, offering to return the jewels for \$75,000. This led to the arrest of Dordigan and two additional suspects at a San Francisco motel, sans jewels. The police did, however, find insurance papers related to the jewels taken from the Trousdale estate.

Although the charges against his two alleged accomplices were dropped, Dordigan was charged with five counts of burglary, grand theft, and receiving stolen property. The recovery of most, but not all, of the jewels in May 1962 was the result of one of the largest investigations ever conducted by the West Los Angeles and Beverly Hills police. The exact details behind the jewels' recovery have never been made public. That is, until now.

Dordigan, despite his denials, was the ringleader of the robberies. He was also my grandfather. Gregarious and handsome, a cross between Kirk Douglas and Ricardo Montalban, he connected easily with people. He was a kept man and a gambler—mainly on horses after he was blackballed in Vegas—and part con artist and scoundrel. He became friendly with affluent homeowners through his various businesses and romantic pursuits. He was a guy who a certain type of person trusted to fly from L.A. to New York with a bag full of cash to bet on a horse for them. One of his close friends was the fifth wife of film director John Huston, Celeste “Cici” Huston. (He took me to meet Cici a few times when she still lived in the Palisades—she breeds Arabian horses and he wanted me to meet her son, when I was in my twenties.)

On one occasion in the 1970s, a cousin of mine ran into my grandfather George having a drink at a hotel bar with the actress Jill St. John (wife of Robert Wagner). My cousin went over to him and



The author taking a pre-iPhone selfie in 2002 with Grandpa George in Woodland Hills.

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said, “George Dordigan...” He just smiled and pretended not to know her, and St. John said, “Oh, you must be mistaken. This is George Shahanian.” He was the type of man, it turned out, who had aliases.

On Sunday May 20, 1962—when George was free on \$100,000 bail and awaiting arraignment in Santa Monica Superior Court—my great-grandmother Martha “Dee Dee” Titmus came in from her back yard to find George climbing a ladder into the attic, which was reached from her bedroom. There was a police officer close by. Apparently, at some point after the original robberies, George persuaded his brother-in-law Elbert to stash the jewels in Dee Dee's attic. His plan was to play dumb and wait it out—it had already been almost six months since the heists and a month since the arrests, but the jewels still had not been located, and George wasn't giving up on them, even though he was already in hot water.

No living person knows what the initial plan was, but it didn't work out. When explaining how a cloth bag containing close to 100 pieces of jewelry ended up at the home of his mother-in-law, George cavalierly told Sgt. Gravante, “I guess somebody wants me to beat the rap and left the stuff there so it could be recovered.”

My grandmother—George's wife, also named Martha, 39 at the time—wasn't present. However, a few of her sisters were. Her only living sister remembers a chaotic scene. My grandfather's gambling had already splintered his family, which included a son and a daughter (my mother, 17 at the time), who were deeply affected by their tumultuous childhood. George and Martha married when they were 20 and 19, respectively, and George was the love of Martha's life and the bane of her existence. In her wallet she kept a photo of him standing, arms outstretched, in front of a Cadillac. The back read, “George, you son of a bitch,” written in her distinctive hand.

By September 1962, all of the most serious charges against my grandfather had been mysteriously dismissed, in spite of the fact that more than \$50,000 worth of jewels still had not been recovered, and the rest had been recovered in his possession.

On a cool night in the mid-'90s, after dinner with my grandfather (his last name by now changed to Shah), he turned down the radio as we flew (almost literally; fast was his only speed) down the 101 freeway. His thick Armenian eyebrows danced as he told a story about how he had hidden some jewels in a beach cave, gesturing out toward the ocean in the direction of Catalina Island. I only smiled and nodded, and wrote it off as another of his wild escapades.

The jewel heist was a well-kept family secret, even from me. After his passing, at age 89 in 2011, I gathered a group of his closest family and friends (including American Racing Hall of Fame horse trainer Ron McAnally) to hear their stories about George for a book I was writing. When I brought up the story about the jewels, I was met with wide eyes. My great-aunt, George's sister, leaned over and whispered, “Be careful what you write about that... It was an inside job you know.”

Indeed, the original *Los Angeles Times* story detailing my grandfather's arrest offered an interesting detail: “Dordigan, who operated a catering service with Kirkeby's son, Arnold C. (Buzz) Kirkeby, has denied knowledge of any of the burglaries. He is free on \$100,000 bail and will be arraigned June 1 in Santa Monica Superior Court.”

The catering business George co-owned with Buzz Kirkeby would have given him access to any number of homes in the area. Once George had that in with his good friend Buzz, their business grew through word of mouth and the name behind it. I tried to reach out to Buzz for comment and found out he had died in 2021. But the fact that George directly called the theft's victim—i.e., his friend Buzz—offering to return the insured and thus identifiable jewels for a price, is more than a little suspicious.

I lived the first eight years of my life alone with my grandmother Martha. In spite of everything, she never stopped loving George, and we saw him often. One of my earliest memories is of going with him to the track just before sunrise, to watch the horses exercise. He'd stop at a corner newsstand in the San Fernando Valley for a newspaper and a racing form. His partner by that time was Anne, a

prominent anesthesiologist who owned many thoroughbred racehorses during their 50 years together. One of his (and my) favorites was named Irish Mafia. George was known around the track as “Doc Shah,” perhaps because he knew how to “doctor” a race—the least of his sins. Growing up, I idolized him. I wouldn't encounter his darker side until later. For better or worse, my grandfather lived every day, unapologetically, as if it were his last. His actions shattered the lives of his family, but they shaped mine.

In the aftermath of the headline-making heists, Arnold Kirkeby's wife Carlotta remained in the home with their two adult children,

Buzz and Carla. At the time of her death, in 1985, Carlotta was a well-known philanthropist. The mansion, after being on the market for a time (listed at \$27 million), in 1986 became the home of its third owner: media mogul Jerry Perenchio, who bought it for \$13.5 million.

In 2018 this magazine published a story titled “The Enduring Legacy of French Interior Designer Henri Samuel,” which outlined much of Perenchio's renovation of the property throughout the late '80s. “The domed plaster ceiling of the Morning Room proved to be one of the most ambitious architectural features,” David Netto wrote. “Made in France in one piece, the ceiling was too large to fit through the door of a 747—so it was cut into sections for transport and reassembled on site.” Every inch of the property was meticulously transformed, from its gardens to the slope of the roof, after the Givenchy-approved Samuel was enlisted by Perenchio, who during his decades-long ownership of the house acquired neighboring properties, growing its footprint to a little over 10 acres. He renamed it Chartwell.

Meanwhile, my quest for understanding this flawed man who was my grandfather ultimately led me on another type of treasure hunt, one that's not over: Those \$50,000 in missing jewels have never been recovered. No one knows what George did with them. So today I look at those coves and outcroppings around Catalina Island a little

differently, wondering what secrets they might be keeping.

I feel the same way about my own jewelry box; I've begun to wonder if perhaps I've been the unwitting beneficiary of a piece or two. My grandmother didn't wear fancy jewelry, but when she died I received a beautiful ring I had never seen before: a three-carat synthetic round tanzanite set in white gold with baguette diamonds on each side. A piece of Hollywood history, perhaps. **T&C**



HAPPY REUNION with \$200,000 in gems stolen from her last November is experienced by Mrs. Arnold S. Kirkeby in West Los Angeles police station. Diamond necklace in right hand is reportedly worth \$150,000. Detectives Sunday recovered \$230,000 in jewelry taken from late Arnold S. Kirkeby, of Bel-Air, and Paul Trousdale, of Beverly Hills, late last year.

\$230,000 In Jewelry Recovered By Police

By DAN TOMPKINS
 Nearly one-quarter million dollars worth of jewelry lay spread on a desk in the West Los Angeles detective bureau.
 A small brunette woman, near tears from joy, ran her fingers over a diamond necklace worth at least \$150,000.
 "I never thought I would
 burglaries of two mansions in the December burglary of the Bel-Air and Beverly Hills late Paul Trousdale home at 1010 Hillcrest Road, Beverly Hills, all lay glittering on the desk.
 The woman is the widow of the late Arnold S. Kirkeby, killed in a jet-liner crash in New York.
 The recovery of the gems was a culmination of one of the largest investigations ever conducted in the November burglary of the Kirkeby home at 750 Bel-Air Road, the West Los Angeles and Beverly Hills police.
 The real story behind the... be made...

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