

# Mysterious Mansion in Lewiston Woods was Home to Eccentric Family

It was one of Lewiston's most revered landmarks -- a mansion from the town's earliest days that looked like it was part of a haunted movie set. The same family owned the mansion for generations and old timers in town remember the place as both imposing and spooky. In fact, the play and film, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, was inspired at the property. Dr. Seymour Scovell (1786-1852) built the home in 1834 and called it "Oak Hill" though locals know it better as the "Starkweather Mansion."

## Famous Play and Movie was Inspired at Lewiston Mansion

The late Margaret Laurie, in her book, *Lewiston: Crown Jewel of Niagara*, wrote: "Perhaps the old and reputedly eccentric sisters -- Seymour Scovell's granddaughters Isabella and Minnie, and Isabella's daughter, Nina -- contributed to its sinister reputation. At least one of their guests from New York City found them peculiar. He was Joseph O. Kesselring, a published playwright but hardly a famous one until he visited the owners at Oak Hill and wrote a new drama, which he set in New York City, rather than Lewiston."

"On April 21, 1974, an article in the Buffalo News identified the sisters as models for Kesselring's 'homicidal little old ladies of *Arsenic and Old Lace*,' and the set where they poisoned visitors was the Scovell Mansion of Lewiston. In writing about the strange, rich old women, Kesselring produced a hit play."

Kesselring was born in New York City and spent much of his life in and around the theater. About 1924, he left teaching and returned to the stage, working for two years with an amateur theatrical group in Niagara Falls which is when he may have met the now famous sisters. He died in Kingston, New York in 1967.

*Arsenic and Old Lace* is a 1944 film directed by Frank Capra based on Kesselring's play of the same name. Capra actually filmed the movie in 1941, but it was not released until 1944, after the original stage version had finished its run on Broadway. The lead role of Mortimer Brewster was originally intended for Bob Hope, but he couldn't be released from his contract with Paramount. It went to Cary Grant.



## Nina Starkweather Never Forgave Mother and Aunt for Ruining Romance

Nina Starkweather fell in love with a young man who lived down the street. His name was Mike Mellany, who later became a very successful attorney. However, Nina's mother and aunt were against the romance and forbade Nina from marrying him. She turned bitter and resentful. She barely spoke to her mother after that and dined alone in the big mansion. She was often seen walking around the village wearing a white dress and walking a white dog. Was it the wedding dress she longed to be married in?

Nina was Seymour Scovell's great granddaughter and had a reputation of being eccentric and mysterious. She was the last Scovell descendent who lived at Oak Hill. A painting contractor said that she had a room in the mansion she kept locked and that no one was allowed to enter. Was it a shrine to a lost love? No one will ever know.

Seymour Scovell

Cynthia Scovell

Isabella Starkweather

Nina Starkweather



Nina Starkweather  
1885-1966



## 1834 Mansion Destroyed in 1964 Fire, Was Located on Artpark Property

Also known as the Starkweather Mansion, the mysterious home was a tempting and spooky place for local teenagers to dare each other to explore. It was located in the woods at the top of the knoll, very near where Artpark's 4th Street entrance is today. (In the woods to the left of the toll booths as you enter Artpark.) Nina Starkweather vacated the property around 1962 when she left to reside in a nursing home. The Power Authority purchased the property in 1963 and a fire destroyed it in 1964. The carriage house burned in 1971. Artpark began managing the property in 1974 when the park opened.

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Historic Lewiston placemats written and designed by volunteer, Lee Simonson.

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## Tuscarora Heroes

The amazing and true story of how the Tuscaroras saved Lewiston citizens from the brutal British attack during the War of 1812. The book is now available at DiCamillo Bakery and the Lewiston Museum. Price: \$10.

Don't miss the unveiling of the Tuscarora Heroes Monument on Dec. 19, 2013, on the 200th anniversary of the Tuscarora's brave action -- the only time in American history when Native Americans saved the lives of white settlers against a foreign attack.

## Very Long Driveway Became Today's Niagara Street

In this 1941 picture you can see the old wooden bridge at the end of Niagara Street that crossed over Tuscarora Street below. Scovell's long driveway was a straight shot from the mansion to the Frontier House, where Seymour enjoyed eating and drinking. The driveway eventually turned into Niagara Street. The bridge was dismantled in the 1960s.



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