

Fraud - The Drake Inheritance Scam

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Hartzell's mother had already invested \$6000 in the scam and the opportunity sounded like just what Oscar needed to turn his fortunes around. He was right about that much, anyway. Hartzell was about to be swindled by a scam that he would eventually take over from the scammers themselves, making millions in profit.

The Drake was based on real-life Admiral Sir Francis Drake and adventurer who became insanely rich after helping England defeat the Spanish Armada in 1588 and collecting his share of the Spanish treasure. Drake died without heirs and at some point, that inspired the notion that there were millions and millions of dollars waiting to be collected by some heir, somewhere. By the time Hartzell and his mother became involved in the fraud, it had already swindled thousands of people in the American Midwest, all of whom purchased "shares" to help defray the legal expenses in the fight to free up the Drake fortune. The "shares" promised to pay out as much as a thousand to one. People were happy to fork over cash by the bushel basket, all in hopes of being amply rewarded when the legal battle was finally won.

For some reason - no one will probably ever know why - the con artist running The Drake took Hartzell under her wing and employed him to run errands. Eventually, after the con artist, her lawyer and Hartzell moved to England to run the scam from afar, Hartzell realized that The Drake was indeed a fraud and he decided to take it over for himself. By 1922, he had succeeded, cutting out his former employers and writing letters to their "shareholders" stating that he had taken over the legal battle for the Drake fortune.

Hartzell greatly improved on what was already a successful scam, introducing drama to his letters and accusing his former employers of all kinds of evil doings. He even added a new wrinkle to the scheme: Hartzell's alleged discovery of a direct descendant of Sir Francis Drake named Colonel Drexel Drake. Of course no such person existed. Despite continual promises that the legal battle would soon be over and the billions would start flowing, Hartzell kept stalling, as the best con men do. The scheme roared through the 1920s and even survived the Great Depression. The desperation caused by the Great Depression only fueled speculation. Hartzell even claimed that the impending release of the Drake fortune had CAUSED the Depression!

Hartzell was finally caught thanks to a determined US postal inspector who eventually convinced Scotland Yard to investigate and arrest Hartzell in 1933. He was deported to the United States and his trial turned into something of a comedy, with many of Hartzell's victims stalwartly defending him against charges. Many of the people who had been along with him for so many years simply could not believe the scheme wasn't real. Hartzell was convicted and sentenced to 10 years in Leavenworth.

Amazingly, Hartzell struggled to keep the scam going, even from his prison cell. Eventually he went mad, dying in prison believing that he was Sir Francis Drake himself. Michael Russell Your Independent guide to Fraud