

Meet William Gillette; Tryon, North Carolina, and Henry Zecher

EDITOR'S NOTE: We have been in communication with Henry Zecher for several months, but we never had the pleasure of meeting him in person until we attended the William Gillette/Sherlock Holmes Festival in Tryon, NC on Nov. 7.

A 1971 journalism graduate of the University of Maryland, Henry Zecher has been a newspaper reporter since early in his career, and is now a free-lance writer specializing in historical topics.

He began writing for his high school newspaper in Rockville, Maryland. At Montgomery Junior College in Rockville, he served as sports editor of the *Montgomery College Spur* (runner-up for the best junior college newspaper east of the Mississippi River).

At the University of Maryland he became a sports writer for the University *Diamondback*.

On one glorious day when the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Star* went on strike, the *Diamondback* was the largest circulating daily newspaper in both the state of Maryland and the entire Washington, D.C., metropolitan area!

After graduation, Zecher served for five years as sports writer and sports editor of the *Delaware State News* in Dover, Delaware, where he won the 1973 Keystone Press Association Award for Best Sports writing for his coverage of the second Muhammad Ali-Ken Norton heavyweight prize fight.

Among his other credits, Zecher lists "History of Motorcycle Racing in Delaware" which appeared for several years in programs at American Motorcycle Association Grand National Championship races in the First State.

In 1971, however, Zecher began reading *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* and discovered a new writing hero, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and a new major interest, Sherlock Holmes.

His interest in Sherlock Holmes has resulted in his recent publication of a three-part series, "Sherlock Holmes and the 21st Century," an overview of the entire Holmes phenomenon as well as forecasts of the great detective's place in the oncoming century.

This series appeared in *The Pipe Smoker's Ephemeric*, a private magazine enjoying worldwide circulation to aficionados of the pipe and cigar.

It was while working on the Sherlock Holmes trilogy that Zecher began researching and writing a series of articles on William Gillette for the *Ephemeric*.

The series on Gillette is now appearing in seven parts in the *Ephemeric*, and from that series sprang the idea for an accurate and up-to-date biography of the great actor, which is soon to be published by the Tryon Publishing Company in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Zecher is active in both evangelism and children's ministries at First Alliance Church in Silver Spring, Maryland, and in his "day job" works as a position classifier in the Human Resources Management Division for the Architect of the Capitol in Washington, D.C.

He resides in Rockville, where his favorite pastimes are bicycling, golfing, music, writing, and babysitting his one-year-old granddaughter, Jacqueline Amber Zecher (JAZ for short).

The year 1999 marks the 100th anniversary of William Gillette's first portrayal of Sherlock Holmes.

No one, except Arthur Conan Doyle himself, has had so great an impact on the Sherlock Holmes legend as has William Gillette.

While Doyle's Sherlockian cases were popular long before Gillette ever thought about dramatizing them, it was Gillette who single-handedly turned the master sleuth of the printed page into a legitimate, flesh-and-blood, action hero, thereby giving living substance to a literary character.

In so doing, Gillette established a style of portrayal which set a model to be followed by every actor who has subsequently played Holmes -- from Ellie Norwood and Basil Rathbone to Jeremy Brett.

Gillette established, for all time, the formula for the detective mystery for stage and screen; and he infused into the Holmes image the two items most commonly associated today with the master sleuth, i.e., the deerstalker cap and the calabash pipe!

It was also Gillette's Holmes, and not Doyle's, who first said four of the most famous words in the English language, "Elementary, my dear Watson."

In addition, Gillette gave boosts to the stage careers of some of our most distinguished thespians.

He also developed stage effects, particularly the fade-in and fade-out at the beginning and end of scenes, that are still in use today. He helped champion the modern style of natural acting, as opposed

to melodramatic declaiming always popular prior to the 20th century.

And he built one of the most eccentric homes in America -- Gillette Castle in Hadlyme, Connecticut.

The first William Gillette/Sherlock Holmes Festival, held in Tryon, NC, on 8 November 1997, came about almost by accident.

It was proposed by a frame shop owner named Jerry Soderquist, formerly of Lake Forest, Illinois, who says that he finds the serene life in Tryon far more appealing than the early grave he was working on as a big-time, but overworked, engineer designing malls, buildings and train stations.

In reading about Gillette's tenure at Tryon, Jerry noticed that Gillette's Sherlock Holmes had opened at the Garrick Theatre on Broadway on November 6, 1899.

Soderquist wrote to the editor of the Tryon Daily Bulletin (which claims to be the smallest daily newspaper in the world) and asked, "Why not hold a festival to honor Gillette's work?"

Since Gillette lived in Tryon for nearly 20 years, from about 1891 until 1910, and was, in fact, living there when he first played Holmes, it seemed fitting that Tryon should host such a festival.

But, as Soderquist found out, "It's like I plugged into some cosmic source while sitting at the computer that day.

I began writing and when it was through, I had written a proposal

for a William Gillette/Sherlock Holmes Festival.

I sent it to a few people asking for their thoughts."

And, once his proposal was published, "The Festival has taken on a life of its own."

Soderquist contacted various Sherlock societies; but, because he began all this in the summer of 1997 -- extremely short notice for a festival to be held that same autumn -- there was not likely to be a huge turnout for the first festival.

Still, many of the society representatives suggested that there could be a much larger turnout in subsequent years.

The 1998 Festival was, in fact, an unqualified success; thoroughly organized and well stage-managed.

Mrs. Hudson's Breakfast Saturday morning fed 195 people in three shifts at a church, with Mrs. Hudson herself making appearances for her very satisfied customers.

The Tryon Fine Arts Center hosted the film festival that afternoon, showing the two Basil Rathbone films: *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

Area students had already taken part in a mystery writing contest in their respective schools, with prizes awarded to the winners, and on Saturday there was a trivia contest in which people received a list of trivia questions and had to find the answers in the various shops around town.

Joel and Carolyn Senter of Classic Specialties were on hand, with their display of "items appertaining to Mr. Sherlock Holmes and his times" set up in the Melrose Inn across the street from the Fine Arts Center.

And, that evening, the festival culminated with two major productions on the Fine Arts Center stage: a dramatized "radio play" of *The Adventure of Silver Blaze* by the Blue Ridge Radio Players, and Henry Zecher's dramatic slide presentation on the life and career of William Gillette.

Zecher, a free-lance writer specializing in historical subjects as well as Holmes, had written a series of articles on Holmes for *The Pipe Smoker's Ephemeric*, an informal periodical devoted to pipe and cigar smoking and published by Tom Dunn of College Point, NY.

His Holmes Trilogy, *Sherlock Holmes and the 21st Century*, led to another series of articles, this time on Gillette, which is currently being published in *The Ephemeric*.

This series was enlarged, this past summer, into a small biographical book soon to be published by the Tryon Publishing Co.

While researching Gillette, Zecher had taken many slides of old photographs of Gillette, and offered to Soderquist and the folks running the 1998 Festival to put together a biographical slide presentation on Gillette.

In response to this "commission," he created a slide show which runs

about 50 minutes and contains 140 slides.

It provides an overview of Gillette's life, his career in the theater, and his impact on the American stage.

This presentation includes details of his personal life (many of which are not widely known) and many photographs have not been seen -- except by a few scholars -- for more than a hundred years!

Here we have Mr. Zecher, costumed (as were many people at the Tryon Festival) in a proper Sherlockian "dressing gown," on stage preparing to charm his audience with his William Gillette biographical presentation.

His slides were made mostly from original prints found at the Stowe-Day Library at Nook Farm in Hartford, Connecticut, where Gillette was born and grew up, and at the Polk County Historical Association Museum in Tryon, North Carolina, the town where Gillette lived during the busiest and most productive years of his career.

There is humor, sadness, inspiration and triumph in this program, just as there were in Gillette's life.

And there are quite a few surprises.

One of the biggest surprise audience reactions came after a slide showing a 12-year-old boy who played Billy the Pageboy in the play *Sherlock Holmes*, which originally starred H.A. Saintsbury in

the touring production of 1903 and then starred Gillette in 1905.

Mr. Zecher then told the audience how this boy, in his subsequent career, always credited this portrayal as his first important stage role and how he credited the experience and training he received from Saintsbury and Gillette with guiding him for the rest of his life.

The lad went on to a career spanning more than half a century and featuring more than 200 movies.

He was the all-time king of comedy and the first great superstar in the history of motion pictures.

That boy became the Little Tramp -- Charlie Chaplin!

Mr. Zecher's slide program is especially suitable for weekend Sherlock Holmes conferences, seminars, and festivals.

In exchange for no more than expenses (i.e., travel, and, if necessary, room and meals) for out-of-town appearances, he would be pleased to travel anywhere to present this slide program.

Such engagements will enable Mr. Zecher to make new Sherlockian friends around the country, and enable those Sherlockians to meet - - as "first hand" as it can be made today-- one of the most fascinating characters in the history of the world's theater and in Sherlockian folklore.