



# Sherlock Holmes

C O L L E C T I O N S



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"Your merits should be publicly recognized" (STUD)

## The Adventure of the eBay Auction

By Timothy Johnson, E.W. McDiarmid Curator of the Sherlock Holmes Collections

**D**ear Sir, Could you tell me if there is a Coventry Street in Minneapolis. It sounds most unlikely but I am bound to inquire as it affects an experiment in psychic Research. The name & address of Philip Jackson, architect, at that address was the reference. Probably it is an error. I could not think of anyone else to whom to apply. Pray excuse me. Yours faithfully, A. Conan Doyle

The short letter quoted above, dated September 14, 1923, came to my attention in late February. A Sherlockian collector on the East coast — and a Friend of our Sherlock Holmes Collections — Robert Hess, alerted us to its existence and the fact that it was being auctioned on eBay. A link to the item was provided by our collector-friend and so I looked at the description and images on the eBay site. Along with the letter was the original envelope, addressed to "The Chief Librarian, Public Library, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA." The reactions of a couple of our local Friends of the Holmes Collections were unanimous — we had to have this item for the Library. And so began "The Adventure of the eBay Auction."

My initial reaction was the same. Doyle's letter, with its local connection to Minneapolis, was too good to pass up. But I had no idea about proper library procedure in acquiring items through online auctions. I knew that we could — and do — purchase items through traditional auctions. But online auctions are slightly different animals. After conferring with colleagues in the acquisitions department it was determined that the best approach was for me to purchase the item and then seek reimbursement for my expenses.

Unfortunately, this scenario presented a set of problems: I did not have an eBay account, a PayPal account (used by most sellers on eBay to facilitate purchases), no experience with bidding in such an auction, and perhaps not enough money of my own to cover the purchase. Also, the clock was ticking. It was now the last day of the auction, which ended at 3:58 pm. I spent the latter part of the morning and early afternoon attacking each of the problems. In short order I established my eBay account, set up and linked a PayPal account with my bank and eBay accounts, received financial backing from one of our Friends, and received valuable tips from my colleague, Lisa Vecoli, who is an old hand on eBay. Her final admonition was to settle on my maximum bid and to use a figure that was a bit unusual (so that I would not lose out on an item by a few pennies or dollars). About ninety minutes before the auction ended I settled on a maximum bid and submitted it to eBay. All that remained was the waiting.

The waiting was excruciating. The Doyle letter had been online for five days and yet, when I posted my bid, I was the sole bidder. No one else had expressed an interest with another bid. The time remaining on an auction is posted above the description of the item. When the timer hits one hour remaining the numbers turn red and count down

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# 50

## YEARS AGO

### THE GREAT ALKALI PLAINSMEN ARCHIVES

*Half a dozen jumbo three-ring binders full of minutes, newspaper and magazine article about the Plainsmen, programmes, notes and quizzes from past meetings, all issues of the Kansas City Daily Journal, the scion's newsletter of record since 1976, a wealth of correspondence, and other memorabilia of twenty-five years of Sherlockian fervor*

is how the Author's Note described the archives of The Great Alkali Plainsmen of Greater Kansas City, from which I wrote my 25th-anniversary history of my hometown's BSI scion society in 1988.

Today those archives are in the Sherlock Holmes Collections, sent there in 1989 by the late Milton Perry ("Nathan Garrideb," BSI) after that history of mine was done. Milt had been a Plainsman since 1963, the first to respond to the initial notice of its founding by three others. For me the 25th-anniversary history had been a vicarious labor of love, because I'd missed the early years. I'd left for college in California in August 1963, and was over a thousand miles away when The Great Alkali Plainsmen was founded October 20th, 1963. I was home at Christmas but hadn't seen the plug for it in an October 28th *Kansas City Times* "About Town" column, and so had no idea that their first dinner meeting was taking place December 28th. But others besides the founders were there, including Milt, then Curator of the Museum at the Harry Truman Presidential Library in Independence, Mo.

During college I fell out of the habit of rereading the Canon every year. But then one day, in graduate school in 1968, I spotted William S. Barling-Gould's *Annotated Sherlock Holmes* at the Pickwick Bookshop of blessed memory on Hollywood Boulevard.

Nothing has been the same since. I returned to the Canon with a will, discovering the Baker Street Irregulars for the first time in the process. After I removed to Washington D.C. in 1971, I got involved in organized Sherlockiana for the first time, in the BSI's Red Circle scion society that Peter Blau had revived the previous year upon his own arrival in the nation's capital.

In late 1972, home for Christmas again, I'd pressed the now-dormant scion's last known point of contact for a dinner of some kind. On December 27th, Ernest Willer and his son Robert, two of the three original founders, and Milt Perry, met me at a restaurant whose name evoked old local mob ties, which seemed appropriate enough. The third founder was out of town, but to my astonishment I found I knew all three. The Willers' home was a block or so from mine; while Bob and I had gone to different schools, we had played together occasionally as boys. The third founder, John (Stapleton) Altman, had been in the class behind mine in prep school.

I want to say a word about Ernest Willer, who impressed me that night in a lasting way. He was an accountant, strongly resembling Professor Moriarty in appearance, but with an attractive sense of Irregular fun that was infectious. He had been infected with Sherlock Holmes himself in 1920, as a high school student surreptitiously reading "The Engineer's Thumb" in geometry class. He had been a faithful reader of the *Baker Street Journal* since the 1950s, and had amassed an encyclopedic knowledge of the Canon. His love for it had infected his son Bob in turn, and also John Altman, son of the owner of the insurance agency where Ernest worked. It was a fine trio to launch a BSI scion society.

That evening I learned that The Great Alkali Plainsmen had gotten off to a very good start, quickly attracting the attention of John Bennett Shaw in his own hometown, Tulsa, Okla. Shaw knew no one there who shared his mania, and was delighted to see the BSJ's notice of the new Kansas City scion society, a few hours away by car. He proceeded to make himself such a central part of The Great Alkali Plainsmen over the next five years, that when he



Scan courtesy of Jon Lellenberg

retired to Santa Fe, N.M., in 1969, it took the wind out of the scion's sails for several years. His move put Shaw and the Plainsmen at opposite ends of the Santa Fe Trail, but with a far greater distance to overcome.

One thing led to another, though, and The Great Alkali Plainsmen revived, with me running it at long distance from 1973 to 1982. That proved easy to do, because each time a meeting was called, four or five times a year, some local party in a once-again growing membership would take responsibility for its arrangements and theme, and carry it off splendidly. I missed the majority of those, I'm sorry to say; for instance, the Dartmoor Evening on the Baskervillean grounds of the Kansas City Museum in September 1977: the history says "Lellenberg forever afterwards gnashed his teeth over missing this meeting," and how true that is to this day:

"But the moor with its mysteries and its strange inhabitants remains as inscrutable as ever," the Canon says, and the Evening's chief plotter, John Altman ("a smiling face and a murderous heart"), kept it so. After a canonical repast of bread, tinned tongue, and preserved peaches, the Plainsmen were subjected to a Something Hunt – a scavenger contest around the museum grounds based on *The Hound of the Baskervilles* – and then treated to a pantomimed reenactment of the adventure by Altman, Carl Helmstetter, Tim Kirk, Vikki Marshall, Mary Nelson, and Ernest Willer.

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## 50 Years Ago *Continued from Page 2*

"Dartmoor. The Sun sets. The Moon rises. The Powers of Altman are exalted," one spectator gleefully reported, and *The Hound* was certainly retold as only someone whose middle name is Stapleton would dare do it. Mrs. Hudson was more intimate with Sherlock Holmes than usual, Watson a trifle denser. Sir Hugo was more lustful toward his maidenly victim than ever, but alas for him, she was "not into kinky relationships." (She swooped down on Tom Gee, a very married Kansas City Policeman joining the caravan for the first time, and turned him as red as a tomato with a sudden kiss as she fled from Hugo and his wicked companions.) Dr. Mortimer showed a sinister interest in adding Holmes's skull to his anthropological museum without further delay. Miss Stapleton blew bubble gum. Sir Henry was nutty enough for the squirrels to pick up and carry off. The Barrymores bore an uncanny resemblance to "American Gothic." And when Holmes, disguised as a tramp, tried to approach Watson and Sir Henry surreptitiously, he was rewarded with a severe thrashing for his impudence.

But the Master solved the case, and Stapleton got his comeuppance with a sneering "Sic semper botanists!" from the narrator, with much cheering and hissing by the audience throughout. The purists present might have decried Altman's production as a travesty, had they not been laughing as hard as everyone else.

A fair example of what the Plainsmen could get up to. Dinner meetings were also held at atmospheric restaurants, with a long run at The Maggie Jones whose owner, the late Jerry Gaines, went far beyond the call of duty to make us welcome, comfortable, and well-fed, including roast goose at every December 27th's Feast of the Blue Carbuncle.

The Plainsmen's first decade was graced by prominent Irregulars who became part of the fun: John Bennett Shaw, as mentioned, and also Donald Redmond, then a University of Kansas librarian in nearby Lawrence, Ks. But

the archives, from which my history of its first quarter-century would be written, were the accomplishment of the youngsters. Of the three founders in 1963, Bob Willer and John Altman were high school seniors at the time. Bob was appointed the corresponding secretary, or Stangerson, with "a fervor of approach that the Prophet would have approved of in one of his Fair Crowd. It made him an ideal, almost evangelical corresponding secretary for the new scion society in its early days." After Bob got the founding mentioned in that local newspaper column, one of the others who came to the December '63 dinner was an intimidatingly smart fifteen-year-old named Margaret Weis. ("The first meeting I attended is a vivid memory, mostly because I was so terrified and excited," she says today: "After that, it all blurs in a teenage haze!") And when Don Redmond saw mention of the founding in the *BSJ*, coming with him — or perhaps the other way around — was his fourteen-year-old son Chris. Chris Redmond became the club's second Stangerson in June 1964, since Bob Willer and John Altman would be going off to college in the autumn. Chris now recalls:

the bus trip home from Kansas City to Lawrence after the Plainsmen meeting at which I was asked to become secretary — very late at night, past exhaustion for a young teen-ager; I fell asleep the moment the bus lights were turned off, and woke up upon arrival, not at all sure where I was, what had happened at the meeting, and whether I had really taken on these awesome responsibilities or was still half dreaming. It turned out to be true, and my frame of mind in pursuing the secretaryship was desperately earnest and energetic, as I sprayed typewritten letters in all directions over the ensuing months. One of them went to the secretary of state of Utah, who was not at all amused at a request for a large reproduction of the state seal, to be (from his point of view) defaced for the entertainment of a bunch of lunatics in Kansas and Missouri.

From an archival perspective, however, what was important is that the scion's young Stangersons, from the

start, not only energetically communicated outwards, but also conscientiously preserved all communications in both directions, along with notices, programmes, and minutes of meetings. Bob Willer served as Stangerson to June 1964, when Chris Redmond took over; a year later Margaret Weis took over from Chris. Bob returned to the post in June '66, about the time the Redmonds returned to Ontario when Don became chief librarian at Queen's University. Bob retained the post of Stangerson in 1967-68; still away in college, at Kansas State, but Margaret was now off to college too.

But that year, Shaw's move to Santa Fe ushered in the Plainsmen's Great Hiatus. When it ended in 1973, I became my own Stangerson, attaching equal importance to keeping copies of all scion correspondence — executed in those days, with envelopes and postage stamps, on a Selectric typewriter at home, a situation probably incomprehensible to youngsters today. But doing everything on paper, as opposed to email's evanescence (and having, like many Sherlockians, OCD tendencies — great for getting things done, if a less positive trait in other ways) meant the archives continued to grow. Starting in 1976, they were fattened further by the *Kansas City Daily Journal* newsletter, meant to connect the Plainsmen with the outside world, but also a record of 1970s and '80s scion meetings and activities; edited by me initially, and later by John Lehman ("The Danite Band," BSI) of Independence, Mo., after I turned over the Avenging Angelhood to him in 1982. So comprehensive was the compilation by 1988, as the 25th anniversary approached, that it was easy as well as fun to write an account of those years. It became roughly 85 single-spaced typed pages of text (produced inelegantly on a first-generation word-processor dinosaur called a Lexitron), ten or so drawings by divers hands, twenty photographs to preserve the likenesses of several dozen Plainsmen and Plainswomen (including Chris R. as beardless youth in deerstalker), a preface by John Bennett Shaw, and sparkling cover art and interior embellishments by the far away but ever-obliging Norman Schatell.

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## From the President

After a long snowy winter, summer is just around the corner here in Minnesota, and soon we will be gathering for our triennial conference, “Sherlock Holmes Through Time and Place.” As many of you might have heard, the hotel initially contracted for our guests is currently undergoing renovations which will not be completed by August, and therefore we have changed our conference venue. Details for the conference and our new hotel are available at <http://www.norwegianexplorers.org/2013%20brochure.pdf>.

## Acquisitions

Long time friend of the Sherlock Holmes Collections Charlie Press sent a package to Norwegian

Explorer President Gary Thaden. In his accompanying notes, Charlie explained that he was a University of Minnesota graduate student between January 1950 and August 1954 and had an opportunity to attend meetings of the Norwegian Explorers. He recalled meeting several of the founders of the scion; Bryce Crawford, Theodore Blegen and E.W. McDiarmid. He recalled



Nov. 4, 1951 Newspaper Clipping  
with Elmer Davis and  
E. W. McDiarmid

those meetings and the topics such as Bryce Crawford's trip to London. In his package, he included numerous newspaper clippings from both the Minneapolis newspaper as well as the *University of Minnesota Daily* which featured news of the Explorers.

Founding Chair of the newly formed John H. Watson Society, Donald A. Yates, PhD, BSI “The Greek Interpreter,” has recently sent in materials to the Col-

lections regarding the society as well as information regarding 221b Cellars (<http://www.221bcellars.com>). Plans are underway for the sale of their wine with a portion of profits to be donated to “the University of Minnesota Sherlock Holmes Collections and to The Napa Valley Napoleons of S.H. for educational purposes.” Their society website is [www.johnhwatsonociety.com](http://www.johnhwatsonociety.com)

I hope that everyone will be able to attend our Annual Membership Meeting and renew their connection with the Friends. Together we can make the Sherlock Holmes Collections the World Center for the Study and Appreciation of Sherlock Holmes. 🍷

Richard J. Sveum, MD, BSI

Louise Nicholson sent materials pertaining to the planned 2014 excursion of The Sherlock Holmes Society of London. “To India with Sherlock Holmes” will take place February 17 – March 2, 2014. Information on the trip is available by contacting Louise at [indianicholson@nyc.rr.com](mailto:indianicholson@nyc.rr.com) 🍷

## Musings

Our lead article this issue focuses on the recent acquisition of a letter written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. It appears that Conan Doyle was following in the footsteps of Sherlock Holmes as he attempted to solve a mystery about a Minneapolis address and a man who lived there. Curator Tim Johnson, with the able assistance of Friends Bob Hess and Gary Thaden, was able to determine that the question posed by Conan Doyle could only be answered in the negative, but in the process of obtaining the letter Tim had his own mystery of “how do I set up an account to buy the letter.” Case solved.

In this issue we've skipped our normal 100 Years Ago column in order to devote

more space to not only our lead article by Tim but also to our 50 Years Ago article written by Jon Lellenberg. Jon has given us all a look at The Great Alkali Plainsmen Archives and his history of that group. We'd like to thank not only those who contributed their memories of that experience but even more, to the care and cultivation they put into maintaining the materials that document the life of the Plainsmen. It's a good reminder that it's never too late to make sure that scion societies collect and preserve those meeting notices, correspondence and newspaper clippings that tell the history of a group.

Charles Press's recent donation of materials to the Sherlock Holmes Collections have added some unique items to the Norwegian Explorers' Archives, held at

the Elmer L. Andersen Library. No one at the Library who looked at the newspaper clipping of E.W. McDiarmid and Elmer Davis had ever seen it before. Was it a record of a Norwegian Explorer's event? Not really, but it definitely gives testimony to the relationships among those with a common interest in Sherlock Holmes and a meeting involving two great Sherlockians. Charlie's gift will help complete the Norwegian Explorers' Archives held in the Sherlock Holmes Collections.

I hope to see many of our friends here in Minneapolis in August for “Sherlock Holmes Through Time and Place.” 🍷

Julie McKuras, ASH, BSI

## An Update from the Collections

**T**he snow and iced lakes are gone. Minnesotans generally don't complain about the weather (did Holmes?), but this was a long winter. As I write, spring is on full display, classes complete, and graduation ceremonies nearing their end. Summer is just around the corner.

This time of year marks interesting transitions and some changes in our work. In early March I lobbied at the state capitol on behalf of the Minnesota Library Association. Along the way I bumped into fellow Norwegian Explorer and Friends board member Gary Thaden (who is also a member of the Hennepin County Library Board). Together we advocated for continued public library funding and for agencies supporting library activities across the state. I don't recall Holmes ever lobbying government officials (with the possible exception of his brother, who lobbied the great detective in return, e.g. "The Bruce Partington Plans"). Now, with the legislative session complete, it appears our lobbying made a difference.

Also in March I participated in another "speed dating" session, this time with members of the Loft Literary Center and Friends of the Libraries. These evening events — dubbed "Taste of the Treasures" — are part of our outreach effort and designed to give allied organizations and individuals a sense of the breadth and depth of our collections. At my station, one of eleven, I displayed items from the Collections: a page from the *Hound* manuscript, a Paget illustration, and a copy of the *Beeton's Christmas Annual* from 1887. Feedback following the event indicated that our station was one of the more popular stops during the evening.

Certainly a highlight of early spring was an extended visit from Derham Groves, one of our resident Sherlockian Friends in Australia and a faculty member at the University of Melbourne. It was a delight to see Derham again, as he was one of the very first members of the Holmesian community I met when starting my position. Together, in those early days, we collaborated on exhibitions featuring the work of his architectural students and the home designs they created based on characters in the Canon. Over the years he has also donated items to the Collections. Now, in these latter days, we renewed our conversation. It was great to have him here for two weeks. In the same way it was wonderful to see another returning scholar, Rosemary Erickson Johnsen from Governors State University near Chicago. Rosemary enjoyed an extended stay in April, using materials from a number of our archival collections for future publication.

Rosemary's and Derham's visits bring to mind our Elmer L. Andersen Research Scholars Program. This program supports scholarly research for projects that require use of one or more of the collections in Andersen Library. The deadline for the next round of applications will occur sometime this fall. More information will be available on our web site sometime later this summer.

A substantial part of my time in April was spent in a number of all-day workshops on electronic records offered by the Society of American Archivists and funded by the University Libraries. My thanks to the Libraries for allowing me the opportunity to participate in these workshops. As more archival material is created digitally, repositories like

ours need to create processes, procedures, and infrastructure to handle the influx of "born digital" materials. The Archives and Special Collections Department is preparing for this new era through training sessions such as these and the development of a new program for acquiring, preserving, and making accessible these digital materials. While we are still in the early stages of this program, we are confident in our abilities to create and administer this new kind of archive. I will attempt to keep you informed of new developments and answer any questions you might have about digital items.

Finally, I continue to be "out and about" talking about the Collections. In early May I presented a session for residents at a nearby retirement community. Most of the residents of this very active community are former faculty, administrators, or staff at the University. My presentation was part of their "Saturday Evening Forum" series. The visit brought back many memories, as this was where I reconnected with E.W. "Mac" McDiarmid and Bryce Crawford shortly after my return to Minnesota. Many in the audience knew Mac and Bryce, and our conversation together on that spring evening reminded me again of the impact both of these men had on the Collections and our life together. It was a memorable time.

Preparations continue for our August 2013 conference and exhibit. I look forward to seeing many of you at the conference. In the interim, I hope you have a very pleasant spring and summer. Thank you for your continued support and interest in the Sherlock Holmes Collections! 🍀

Tim Johnson

## Remembrances

In supporting the Sherlock Holmes Collections, many donors have made contributions either in honor or in memory of special persons.

**In Honor Of**  
Zachary James LePlavy

**From**  
Mike and Julie McKuras

**In Memory Of**  
Irving Kamil

**From**  
Mickey Fromkin

# The Adventure of the eBay Auction *Continued from Page 1*

by minutes and seconds. Somewhere around 45 minutes remaining I needed to leave my chair and attend to some other business. When I returned, the timer was under 30 minutes. No other bids appeared. I nervously sat in my chair, tapping my fingers, bouncing my foot, and then got up to attend to another errand. With about 10 minutes remaining I stayed glued to my chair, muttering "Come on, come on..." to myself, hoping that no one would swoop in at the last moment and bid the item higher. The red numbers continued their countdown: 5 minutes, 4, 3, 2. At ninety seconds I was locked in to the screen, muttering, tapping, bouncing, and hoping. I was still the sole bidder. The seconds continued to roll by. Under a minute the countdown continued second by second. 40 seconds, 30, 20, 10. I'd been told that some bidders act in the last seconds. I recalibrated a new maximum bid, just in case I needed to go higher. 5 seconds, 4, 3, 2, 1. There were no last-second bidders. I'd won the auction! The letter was mine (with an ultimate home in the Sherlock Holmes Collections).

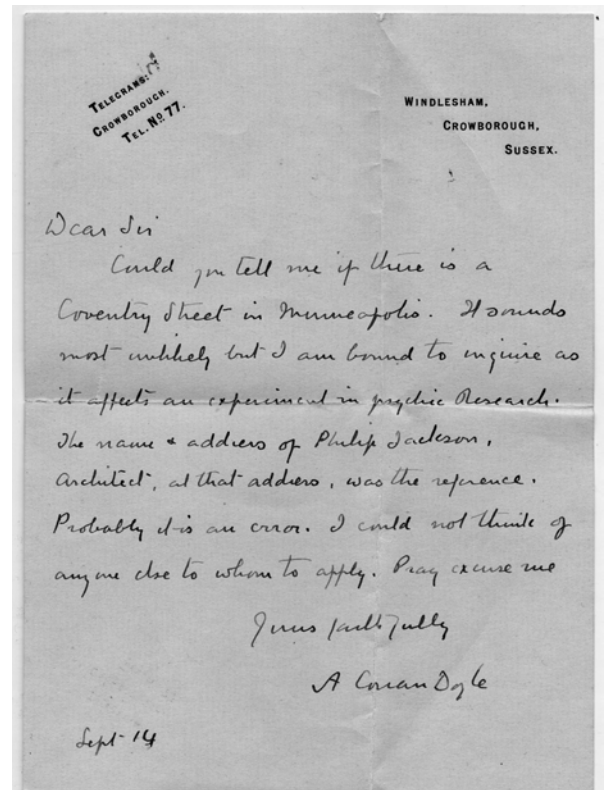
I surged out of my chair with a whoop, a holler, and fist pumps through the air. Those in the office knew what was up and shared in the excitement. Lisa was down the hall, teaching a class. Earlier, before she left for class, I told her that I might interrupt her session by coming into the room and giving her a "thumbs up." I did exactly that. Happily, her class was engaged in some activity that didn't require her immediate attention and so we gave each other "high fives" and celebrated the moment together. She was as happy as I was. With a certain bounce in my step I came back into the office, still pumping the air with my fist, and tried to settle down for a few more moments of work before calling it a day.

The next day, with all accounts now verified, I logged into eBay, went to my personal page, found the Doyle description, and hit the "pay now" button on the screen. Within moments the transaction was complete. A few days later a small box containing the letter and envelope arrived in my mailbox.

Most of what you've just read was posted to "Primary Sourcery," the blog developed by the Archives and Special Collections Department of the University Libraries, shortly after the Doyle letter was acquired. This new avenue for outreach allows all units in the department an opportunity to announce new acquisitions; publicize events and exhibits; and generally open a new window for sharing what we do. Recent postings include insights on new staff, book signings, lectures, our current performing arts exhibit, and even the challenges of learning to operate our stock pickers in the caverns.

Acquisition of the Doyle letter came with a few more mysteries and interesting relationships. The recipient of the letter, Gratia Countryman, directed the Minneapolis Public Library from 1904 to 1936. During the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the library, and in honor of Miss Countryman, Christopher Morley was invited to give a speech. Former Minnesota Governor and renowned book collector Elmer L. Andersen, (1909-2004), in his memoir, *A Man's Reach*, recounted the event and its aftermath.

The Ampersand Club, a group of book lovers in the Twin Cities, invited journalist and scholar Christopher Morley to come to Minneapolis in 1940 and deliver the featured address at an event honoring Gratia



Conan Doyle's letter

Countryman... When he began his address, he said, "Friends, Romans," and then he bowed to Miss Countryman. I thought it was so clever. The speech was beautifully written and delivered, and the Ampersand Club printed about one hundred copies of it in a small bound volume. Club

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# The Adventure of the eBay Auction

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officials then wrote to Morley and asked him to autograph them. He replied with a two-page letter detailing his dislike of such requests and his unwillingness to write his name one hundred times. "It's a matter of time and commitment and just boredom," his letter said. The letter was quite a piece of writing in itself, so the club enclosed a photostatic copy of it when it distributed the books to club members.

I kept Morley in mind after that. Two or three years later, I wrote him a letter saying that I had a copy of that wonderful talk he had given in Miss Countryman's honor, printed by the Ampersand Club, and I would love to have it inscribed by him. I told him that I appreciated his work and had a number of his books in my library. I offered to send him the volume and provide postage and a suitable container for its return. I explained the ease he would have in complying with my request. And I enclosed a postcard for him to send back if I could be permitted to send it to him.

The postcard came back with three words on it, "Send it on." He did not even sign it. The card just said, "Send it on." I did, and he put in a nice inscription and sent it back. That is the kind of thing that warms the heart of a book lover. You have the book. You have the copy of the letter saying why he will not sign it. But your copy is signed.

As to Coventry Street, the focus of Doyle's query, no such name appears in early street directories. Nor does such a street appear on early maps of the city. A map of Minneapolis published in 1916 by the Minneapolis Directory Company lists Cooper Street and Cromwell Drive but nothing under Coventry. Likewise, a 1921 map produced by the Hudson Publishing

Company jumps from Cooper Street to Crystal Lake Avenue. Cromwell Drive, apparently unprotected by civic planners, disappeared from the map.

In the same way, little if anything exists for an architect named Philip Jackson. He does not appear in the American Institute of Architects Historical Directory. The Minnesota State Census Index (which includes data from 1865, 1875, 1885, 1895 and 1905) lists five individuals of that name. Three of these appear in the 1885 census, two in the 1865 census. None are resident in Minneapolis. The online Biography and Genealogy Master Index includes no entries for such an individual. The only mention of a Philip Jackson in the Minneapolis Tribune newspaper between 1867 and 1922 is an article about one such Jackson, an executive in New York, who waged war with his neighbors over the height of his split-rail fence.

The letter conjures other mysteries and connections, such as the fact the Miss Countryman was related to a famous architect active in the Twin Cities, L.S. Buffington, who is credited by many in the architectural community with the invention of the skyscraper. Or the fact that Buffington lived a short distance, and on the same street, as our current head of the Norwegian Explorers, Gary Thaden. Other mysteries I'll leave to you. What experiment, for instance, engaged Doyle at this time? Did he ever publish his findings? What was the source of his information about Minneapolis and Jackson the architect? Such are the joys a new acquisition brings to the Collections.

My thanks to Bob Hess for alerting us to the letter's existence on eBay, for Lisa Vecoli's help in learning the ins and outs of online auctions, and to Gary Thaden in his attempts to track down more information on the architect Philip Jackson. More mysteries await, and the adventure of the eBay auction continues. ♡



The *Friends of the Sherlock Holmes Collections* is a quarterly newsletter published by the Friends of the Sherlock Holmes Collections which seek to promote the activities, interests and needs of the Special Collections and Rare Books Department, University of Minnesota Libraries.

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Archives and Special Collections

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## 50 Years Ago *Continued from Page 3*

The history recorded gleefully the founders' original impulses, Shaw's frolics (he had found it distressingly hard to get a drink at his first several meetings, something he cured for good at one held at his Tulsa home), Milt Perry's creation of a local Sherlock Holmes legend for Kansas City, the late Logan Clendening M.D. as local hero/role model, the cultural anthropology of a scion society overlapping the Kansas/Missouri border where the Civil War raged for ten years before Fort Sumter, the all too related rise of a Jesse James faction inside the scion, joint expeditions with Jason Rouby's Arkansas Valley Investors and Stafford Davis's Afghanistan Perceivers when they arose in Little Rock and Tulsa, The Maiwand Jezails in Omaha dodging the canonical knowledge contest that Shaw proposed in order to see Dick Lesh's all-male merry men defeated by Margaret Weis, and sinister representations from The Noble Bachelors of St. Louis, whose Philip Shreffler tried to strike a pose of intellectual superiority, while agitating hard to become a Plainsman so he could finally have some fun.

Reading the history again for the first time in decades, I'm struck by the Plainsmen's fertility of imagination and enthusiastic zest. I wish I could turn the clock back and do it all over again, this time from the very start in 1963.

This history, my Author's Note confessed, had "turned out longer and more detailed than its naïve author originally conceived — made possible, perhaps unavoidable, by the preservation of the scion's archives from oblivion." (And supplemented, I added, by "the personal archives and memories of [twelve] Great Alkali Plainsmen, past and present.") I also confessed that "where the archives were inconclusive, or memories were vague, I have tried to err on the side of fantasy." This was something I'd occasionally suspected of other Alkaline archivists: not Chris R., perish the thought! — but Margaret W., I noticed, had gone on to author a successful fantasy-novel series that includes a tribe of rollicking barbarians called the Plainsmen.

That May, 1988, James Bliss Austin of Pittsburgh, Pa., one of the greatest of Baker Street Irregulars, died at the

age of eighty-three. In 1984, at the BSI's 50th-anniversary dinner, he had spoken eloquently and movingly, more from memory than from his thin sheaf of notes, about the BSI's golden age at the Murray Hill Hotel in the 1940s. He had first attended the BSI annual dinner in 1944, and been one of the first fifteen to receive a Titular Investiture the following year. To most of his audience that night, including me, it was an unfamiliar and entrancing tale. Many implored Bliss to write it up and publish it, and he said he would. But he died with that undone, and some of us realized the BSI was in danger of losing its institutional memory. During the January 1989 BSI weekend in New York, a half dozen or so of us were discussing this threat, and I can still hear my voice suddenly muttering "I could do something about it." I would not have thought so or said so had I not already done the Plainsmen's 25th-anniversary history the year before. As before, I was naïve. I intended to do 1930 through 1960, concluding with Edgar W. Smith's death and Julian Wolff's selection as the new Commissionaire, and thought I could find enough primary source material for a decent 250 pp. book. Things worked out differently. I've so far done eight volumes of BSI Archival History, for a total of about 1,750 pp. (plus an historical novel about the 1930s/40s BSI, with a "sources & methods" companion volume on its way), and haven't gotten to the 1950s yet. And I'm still finding primary source material about the BSI's first three decades, as are others.

"The University of Minnesota Libraries' Andersen Library has proven to be a good facility for the Great Alkali Plainsmen archives," says Bob Willer: "Items are boxed and indexed, and accessible in its Special Collections reading room. More importantly, the Sherlock Holmes Collections appreciate having the Plainsmen archives, so it appears they have a long-term home there."

Nor are the Plainsmen's archives unique where BSI scion societies are concerned. Even clubs that didn't preserve records from the start may nonetheless be able to go back and build a significant archive today. If my BSI Archival History work has taught me

anything, it's that primary source material is out there everywhere. My one remaining file of Great Alkali Plainsmen correspondence and memorabilia shall now go off to the Sherlock Holmes Collections to be part of the Plainsmen archives there. In Detroit, Christopher Music, the current head of The Amateur Mendicant Society founded in 1946, is building its archive for the first time, something all the more important for the two Irregular giants of its early years, drama critic Russell McLaughlin and Ford Motors lawyer Robert Harris, whose correspondents included out-of-town immortals like Vincent Starrett and Edgar Smith.

Madness, of course; but a divine madness as far as I'm concerned. The BSI Archival History is one of the most rewarding things of any kind I've done, and it owes its start to the Great Alkali Plainsmen archives and that 25th-anniversary history. 🍷

*Jon Lellenberg, BSI*

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