

# Wethersfield

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❖ *The Tri-Town YMCA basketball program teaches basics. Story, page 56. Photo by Steven Frank.*

❖ *Harold and Theodora Niver as Mr. and Mrs. Gillette. Story, page 24. Photo by Wayne Sassano.*

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## Neighbors

### Have cape and pipe, will travel

Meet Mr. and Mrs. Gillette — Harold and Theodora Niver

by Joyce Rossignol

Visitors to Gillette Castle this summer and fall sometimes found their hosts at home. William and Helen Gillette, also known as Harold and Theodora Niver, were there to greet them.

Sherlock Holmes is the Nivers' hobby, which is why they are also interested in the actor William Gillette who played, who was, Sherlock Holmes on

the stage for 30 years.

This July, the Nivers visited Gillette Castle on the occasion of William Gillette's birthday. One of the guides told them they were looking for somebody to dress up as the Gillettes.

No problem. Harold and Theodora Niver already had the costumes, and they were ready to show up that very weekend as Mr. and Mrs. Gillette. Now "it's almost like we actually own the castle,"

Mr. Niver said.

"The guides have a lot more knowledge about the castle than we do, but we have learned many things about William Gillette," he said.

"A friend of ours is writing a book about him and through networking we found another gentleman who is also writing a book. They have been more

*The Nivers, page 26*

## The Nivers/24

than generous sharing anecdotes. So we can wow the guests with little inside stories about his life and career and connection with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who created Sherlock Holmes."

William Gillette, who made a career playing Sherlock Holmes, was born in 1853. Sherlock Holmes was "born" six months later, not as a real person — though his fans sometimes seem to have a problem with that — but as a fictional character created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

William Gillette became the Sherlock Holmes of his day. He wrote the play, owned it, starred in it and made his fortune from it.

Harold Niver said Doyle had become tired of Sherlock Holmes, when Gillette wrote to him asking, "can I marry Sherlock Holmes?" Doyle wired back, "you can marry him, you can murder him, you can do whatever you like with him."

It took Gillette four weeks to write the play and in 1899 the first performance, starring himself, took place in Buffalo, N.Y. He wrote a dozen other plays. If one wasn't going as well as he liked, he would say "OK, I've still got Sherlock Holmes."

So do Harold and Theodora Niver.

As they remind themselves and others, their fascination with Sherlock Holmes is just a hobby. But the English Tudor house they had built is Sherlockian. It's as if Sir Conan Doyle had taken up residence in Rocky Hill, or Sherlock Holmes himself.

There is the overgrown Yew Alley to the front door. Inside is a trip back in time. Even their dogs bark like the hounds of Baskerville. Their Sherlock collection is on view throughout.

Their house and their hobby have been featured in *Us Magazine*, *Yankee*, *The Smithsonian* and *Fortune*. One of reporters wrote, "If Sherlock Holmes walked in the front door, he would feel at home."

Every room has something Holmes might have had. On the mantel is a little coal scuttle like the one Sherlock kept his cigars in. There is a Queen Victoria room, with pictures of the queen.

Upstairs is Harold Niver's Study in Scarlet library. The couple has a 221-B Baker Street room. Their main bathroom is named for Dr. John B. Watson. There is also a painting of Harold Niver as

Sherlock Holmes.

Sherlockians from different states and countries have visited. Hughes Rudd of ABC News was here.

"He was a delightful old curmudgeon," Mr. Niver said. "We were also on PM magazine three times," a show formerly aired on WFSB-TV 3.

Harold and Theodora Niver have been married for 27 years, dressing up and having fun all that time. When they met, he was managing a piano store and she came to work there as a piano teacher and "I wound up marrying the boss."

He was already into Sherlock Holmes. She had an interest in Dracula. They combined the two.

He has written a paper proving that Sherlock Holmes was helping in the Dracula story and that the character Moriarty actually was Dracula.

"We tied the two together. You can prove anything with Sherlock Holmes," he joked.

She proved she was descended from the real Dracula "not really, but I could tie it in so close it was amazing. Even the translation of my maiden name is open box, that could be used for coffin, and my family came from near Transylvania."

Does the line between reality and fiction blur a little here? If it does, it's not just for the Nivers.

Sherlock Holmes is a character who after 100 years is still alive in the minds of his fans. Harold Niver claims with a sly smile that "Sherlock Holmes never dies. His obituary has never been in the *London Times*. One famous Sherlock Holmes buff, John Bennett Shaw, when asked if Sherlock Holmes is fact or fiction, would just say yes."

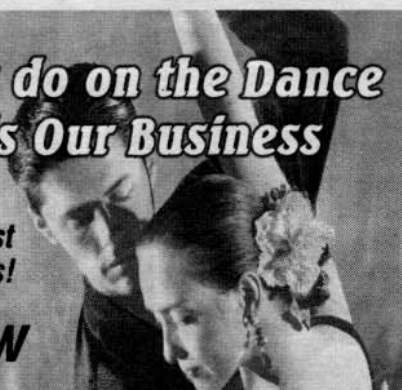
What is it about Sherlock Holmes that has such a hold on his fans for all these years?

"His intelligence and powers of observation. He was a scientist, like an instructor Sir Arthur Conan

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Doyle once had at Edinburgh University, who could tell you where you came from and which side of the street you walked on to come to his office," Mr. Niver said.

"He'd say I know you walked on the north side of the street because the sidewalk by the post office is being dug up there and there is fresh clay on your shoes. I knew you were from Sussex because there is a ticket stub protruding from your pocket that says Sussex."

Hence the phrase "elementary, my dear Watson."

The Nivers enjoy joking around as to whether Holmes is real, but he said their real pleasure comes with the "reading, writing, networking with other people who have similar hobbies and dressing up."

They are far from alone in their Sherlockian adventure. There is a parent society called the Baker Street Irregulars which meets every January in

New York City.

"We go down there and meet people from all over the country. We stay at the Algonquin, and we all dress in Victorian costumes that evening, tweeds, furs and so on, it's just a fun night," he said.

The Connecticut offshoots of the Sherlock Holmes Society are known as scions. Harold Niver's group is the Men on the Tor. A tor means a craggy outcropping so "since we live in Rocky Hill, we felt it appropriate," he said. "We've had meetings at the Griswold Inn, the Hawthorne, at Dinosaur

(State) Park and at Gillette Castle itself." At one time the Nivers had their own piano store on the Silas Deane Highway in Wethersfield. They called it Sherlock's.

Mrs. Niver is best known in Wethersfield as musical director and organist at the Church of the

**"Sherlock Holmes never dies. His obituary has never been in the *London Times*."**

—Harold Niver, portrayer of William Gillette, actor known for playing Sherlock Holmes

Incarnation, where she has served for 26 years.

In 1978, they built their house on the west side of Rocky Hill, on a wooded site Mr. Niver said was "almost like Gillette walking up on the top of the hill where he built his castle. We saw the view."

The plaque on the front door welcomes visitors to Baskerville Hall.

He said, "Henry Baskerville walked up Yew Alley, so we planted yews out front, to carry out the theme."

The overgrown look was planned. Even his license plate carries out the theme: Shrlx for Sherlock. Hers is Wdsney. Mrs. Niver is in the Disney Hall of Fame for her work in the Disney Store at Westfarms Mall.

This year they found a new home at the Gillette Castle. There they are William and Helen Gillette. He dresses as Will. She dresses as Helen, who was the love of her famous husband's life.

She never lived in the castle because they had been married only six years when she died.

- He promised on her death bed that he would

*The Nivers, page 28*

## The Nivers/27

never remarry and he didn't.

Mr. Niver said, "Will was a handsome man and successful and his leading ladies were attracted to him, but he was always very proper."

Mrs. Niver added, "At that time the clergy had no respect for the acting profession, until William Gillette. He brought respectability to the stage. The clergy told their congregations they could go and see William Gillette because there was nothing disrespectful in anything he did on stage."

The Nivers themselves rarely go on stage now, though he said "we used to lecture on Sherlock Holmes and once in a while on Dracula."

They also have a repertoire of English music hall songs such as "Daddy Wouldn't Buy Me a BowWow" or "The Baggage Coach Ahead" that they will be bringing to the women's club at Incarnation in April. Meanwhile they're just having fun pursuing their interest in the Gillettes and Sherlock Holmes.

That started for Harold Niver when he was a boy who liked to read and started reading the Sherlock Holmes stories.

"There are only 60. Once I had read them all, what else was I going to read? I was at the old Huntington Bookstore in Hartford and I asked if they had other books about Sherlock Holmes. I turn around and see this man dressed as Sherlock Holmes.

"He said he had been a Sherlock Holmes enthusiast for many years. He introduced me to the Baker Street Irregulars and authors who had written parodies and I started buying and collecting and networking," Mr. Niver said.

"In 1977 we started our group. The Sherlock Holmes play was on tour and the Bushnell asked us

to help publicize it, to walk around as Sherlock Holmes. In the lobby that night people who were interested in Sherlock Holmes gave us their names.

"That group still goes on. There is no real membership. You just show up. We had 80 people at one meeting. We've never had less than 20. They come as Sherlock Holmes or as Queen Victoria or as villains from the stories."

Mrs. Niver, who dresses as a lady of that day, said when they are in costume, as Holmes and friend or as the Gillettes, everybody wants to know them.

"From the second we get out of the car (at the castle) people are stopping us constantly. One day they had a record crowd of about 6,000 people. We never stopped talking. When we are in the castle, it's like our house. We get to really feel a rapport with Gillette."

Will Gillette, as the Nivers call him, is becoming as fascinating to them as Sherlock Holmes.

Not only was he an actor when that was not a gentleman's trade, but when other people with money were building mansions in Florida, Gillette built a castle in Connecticut. When other wealthy men were riding polo ponies, he set up his own little railroad on his property.

Mr. Niver said "Will Gillette was a private person with a wide circle of acquaintances and a small circle of friends."

Albert Einstein visited the actor at his castle and had a ride on the train, full speed, 20 miles an hour. Calvin Coolidge stopped by. Helen Hayes stayed there.

William Gillette loved speed and Mr. Niver said "when he was in his 70s he became enamored of motorcycles and the Middlesex County Courthouse had him on the docket for going over 70 miles an



*Helen and William Gillette, also known as Theodora and Harold Niver, appear in costume at Gillette Castle.*

hour. One day he was tooling along down at the docks where the ferry came in and his brakes gave out and he went into the river. A lot of bikers visit the castle."

In profile, Harold Niver looks somewhat like the actor William Gillette.

"A photographer once told him he had the perfect profile and he never lets me forget it," Mrs. Niver said.

William Gillette died in 1937 at the age of 83. He now lies in a small cemetery in Farmington beneath a plain tombstone sheltered by a large pine tree.

In his castle high above the Connecticut River in East Haddam, Harold and Theodora Niver for a moment bring him back to life — and Sherlock Holmes, too. **WL**