

Wethersfield LIFE

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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

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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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