Sherlock Holmes is Still in his Castle

Take a “DayCation” to a castle in Connecticut

By Ben Amato

There stands a castle on bluff, overlooking the Connecticut River, north of Essex. Its stony towers and massive walls have withstood time to hold the memory of its lord, William Gillette, the most famous actor in the world during the early 1900’s. His playwriting brought Sherlock Holmes to life from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories. His thousands of performances on the world’s most famous stages established his image as the person we still envision Sherlock Holmes to be.

The extraordinary life of William Gillette has extended beyond the grave through his words, his charismatic skill as an actor, the parts he played and the castle he left behind.

He followed his childhood passions for the theater to become the most famous actor and playwright in the world. During his decades of touring, Gillette often lived aboard his 144 foot yacht, the Aunt Polly and sailed the Long Island and Connecticut shorelines. On a 1913 trip up the Connecticut River, he stopped in Hadlyme, taken back by the beauty of this valley surround by the Seven Sisters Hills. He bought over 120 acres on the tallest and began the construction of his first real home, a 14,000 square feet combination Rhine castle and hunting lodge. He called his home a “small boy’s dream of paradise.”
Gillette Castle is built out of local fieldstone, with granite walls 5 feet thick at the base and tapering up to 2 feet thick on the two towers. He designed and built an aerial trolley system to move all of the building materials up the 200 foot ridge. There are 24 rooms, the Grand Hall being the most impressive and elaborate, with a huge fireplace, French doors and a 19 foot tall paneled ceiling.

From 1913 until 1919, Gillette designed and supervised every facet of his mansion, including the 47 solid white oak hand carved doors, each with a unique wooden latching and locking system. There are secret passageways, hidden rooms, catwalks and a complex mirrored surveillance system so Gillette always knew when to time his “grand entrances” to impress his guests.

In 1943, the State of Connecticut took over the estate and in 2002 it reopened after an extensive restoration. Today Gillette State Park offers wonderful wooded trails, acres of pristine forest and hillsides and tours of William’s home, his art collection and memorabilia. The Gillette family donated almost all of William’s things so they may be preserved and presented to the public.

“The state was lucky to get everything from the family. It is a good representation of his character through his paintings and books and writings,” said Nicole Shaw, the castle’s historian. The third floor of the castle was added by Gillette in 1926, to house his art collection and library. Here many landscapes and seascapes are permanently displayed, along with an “original first edition” of mystical Tarot cards, created and painted by Pamela Colman Smith, one of the many famous people who visited Gillette.

Beginning in the summer of 2011, a Railroad Room will be opened at the castle’s visitor center, featuring another passion of Gillette’s, trains. To get around his estate, he designed and built his own narrow gauge rail line, the Seventh Sister Short Line Railroad, complete with two locomotives, a steam
powered one and an electric and his own version of “Grand Central Station.” This 3 mile long track circled his property, crossing bridges, trestles and through one tunnel. Albert Einstein and his wife were reported to be terrified when William was at the controls. President Calvin Coolidge simply enjoyed the rides his friend William offered. Other famous visitors and friends of Gillette included Helen Hayes, Ethel Barrymore, Mark Twain, Charlie Chaplin and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

But it is the fictional Sherlock Holmes who is the most important figure in William Gillette’s life, propelling this revolutionary actor into fame and wealth. When author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle first met William in 1899, he was “open-mouth” at first sight, for Gillette was exactly what Doyle imagined Holmes to be.

“In height he was rather over six feet, and so excessively lean that he seemed to be considerably taller. His eyes were sharp, piercing... and his thin hawk-like nose graced his whole expression with an air of alertness and decision. His chin, too, had the prominence and squareness which mark the man of determination.” A portion of a letter written by Doyle, from “A Study in Scarlet: a biography of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle”

From the first moment he played Sherlock Holmes in Buffalo, in 1898, until his last stage appearance in 1932, at age 79, William Gillette was that famous detective. It was he, not the author Doyle, that coined the line, “Elementary, my dear fellow! Elementary.” Sherlock’s deerstalker hunting cap and curved pipe were Gillette’s improvisations and in many of the magazines, book covers and Broadway promotions, it was Gillette’s face, profile and postures. Because of 1,300 performances, two Broadway plays he wrote and several CBS radio broadcasts, there was no better representation of Sherlock Holmes than William Gillette. Nearly 70 years after his passing, there is no better representation of Gillette than the castle he lived in.

During the holiday season, Gillette Castle is decorated as it was in the 1920’s, this season involving themes connected to “The Nutcracker.” The volunteer tour guides are wonderfully knowledgeable and enthusiastic.
On Sunday afternoons, especially after Memorial Day, local residents Harold and Theodora Nivers visit Gillette Castle portraying William Gillette and his wife Helen. These two “performers” do more than just appear in costume. Because of their years of research and passion concerning Sherlock Holmes and the Gillettes, the Nivers become the Gillettes to entertain and educate all about Sherlock Holmes, William Gillette and the “Golden Age” of the turn of the last century.

- The Niver’s website is: [http://www.sherlockholmesct.com/home.html](http://www.sherlockholmesct.com/home.html)
- For details about the Gillette Castle State Park Holiday Celebration go to: [http://www.depdata.ct.gov/calendar/viewev.asp?id=4142](http://www.depdata.ct.gov/calendar/viewev.asp?id=4142)
- The website for Gillette Castle State Park in East Haddam, Connecticut has detailed driving instructions and is located at: [http://www.ct.gov/dep/cwp/view.asp?a=2716&q=325204&depNav_GID=1650](http://www.ct.gov/dep/cwp/view.asp?a=2716&q=325204&depNav_GID=1650)
- The volunteers who work so hard to make every visitor feel special belong to the Friends of Gillette Castle State Park. Their website is: [http://www.friendsofgillettecastle.org/](http://www.friendsofgillettecastle.org/)