

# COMING FULL CIRCLE TO HONOR AND REMEMBER JOHN BENNETT SHAW

## Why I decided to build a website for my Sherlockian mentor, and how I went about doing it.

By JIM HAWKINS

There is so much more to the Sherlock Holmes stories than meets the eye. An unsuspecting reader coming to the Canon, the sixty tales written by Arthur Conan Doyle from 1887 to 1927, soon discovers a world of scholarship and devotion, of fandom and adulation, of preferences for the Ten Favorite stories, the favorite Sherlock Holmes film, and the “perfect” actor for the leading role. One needs a mentor, either in person or in print, to guide him or her through it all. Most Sherlockians find one early on; mine was John Bennett Shaw, and I was already 40 when we began our friendship.

You’ve heard of John Bennett Shaw — “The Hans Sloane of My Age,” BSI (1965), the “Sage of Santa Fe,” the “Johnny Appleseed of Sherlockian Scions,” the creator of The Shaw 100, the Ragged Shaw quiz book, and the Really Ragged Shaw quiz book, right?



Perhaps you were fortunate enough to have met him or even known him as a personal friend. His name crops up in annotated editions of the Canon (William S. Baring-Gould’s and Leslie Klinger’s) and in the BSI histories by Jon Lellenberg. There is a reason for that: Shaw was unique in the annals of Sherlockian lore in the United States and around the world. No one had more fun with Holmes than John Bennett Shaw.

When I met Shaw in the summer of 1985, I was just beginning to discover the fascinating group of people around the world who identify themselves as Sherlockians (or Holmesians, or even Doyleans). These people, so devoted to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s detective, collect rare and expensive books, write schol-

arly papers, spend time reading annotated publications of the stories noting every detail about them, and, on a regular basis, meet with others just as passionate in literary societies called scions. These people were the ones Shaw was in contact with through letters and phone calls, offering suggestions for starting a scion society, or ideas on expanding their group, or negotiating for a book he didn’t have, and hints on how to be more thoroughly Sherlockian.

My friendship with Shaw lasted less than ten years, as he died in October 1994. Our visits together were brief, and only a couple of times a year, but those encounters had a lasting influence on my life. Originally from Tulsa, John lived in Santa Fe from 1970, the city to which my work as a Baptist music consultant took me every summer and fall for a period of two weeks each, beginning in 1985. It turns out that we had more in common than devotion to Sherlock Holmes: Like Shaw, I was from Oklahoma and had been in the funeral business. Our visits were on Saturday mornings, between my two weeks at my assignment at Glorieta, a Baptist retreat twenty miles east of Santa Fe. I always took our children with me. As John and I talked about Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes, and collecting, Dorothy Shaw would entertain Travis and Hannah, showing them the miniature model of 221B she constructed, or even better, baking Sherlockian shaped cookies.



One of the familiar phrases about Sherlock Holmes is that “he is everywhere.” This was true of John Bennett Shaw as well. The centennial of Sherlock Holmes’s appearance in print occurred in 1987, and Sherlockians around the world were gearing up to celebrate the event. News media sought Shaw out for interviews beginning as early as the summer of

1986. He was quoted in national magazines, in newspapers around the country, and on National Public Radio. I began to pay more attention to those NPR soundbites coming from the annual January gathering of the Baker Street Irregulars in New York City, when Sherlock Holmes’s birthday is traditionally celebrated. Shaw, always a popular interview because his quips were so arresting, was a frequent target of NPR reporters. When asked whether he believed Holmes was a real or a fictional character, Shaw’s reply would be “Yes.” Asked if he believed if Holmes was still alive (keeping bees in Sussex), he would point out that no one had yet produced a death certificate with the name Sherlock Holmes on it.

Shaw had created a weekend workshop equivalent to a college course in Sherlock Holmes, holding the first one at Notre Dame in 1977. Ten years and some fifteen conferences later, I finally attended my first and only one, in Williamsburg, Va. at the College of William and Mary in the



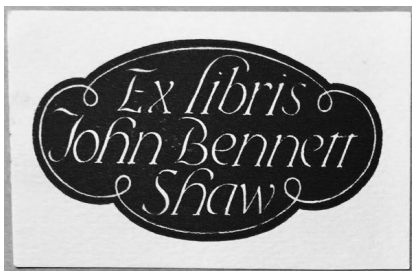
summer of 1987. Several of us from Nashville attended the event. I was especially elated to see my Santa Fe friend in action, leading seasoned Sherlockians and neophytes alike into a closer walk with Sherlock. He administered several of his fiendish quizzes, making sure no one carried eggs or vegetables into the room to throw at him in their frustration. It was a grand weekend with Shaw and Michael Harrison, organized by a friend I would know much better in the future, Ray Betzner.

As I got busy with my work, though, and got away from my connection to Holmes a bit, my visits with Shaw tapered off. On a visit to Santa Fe early in 1995, I happened to be in my favorite bookstore,

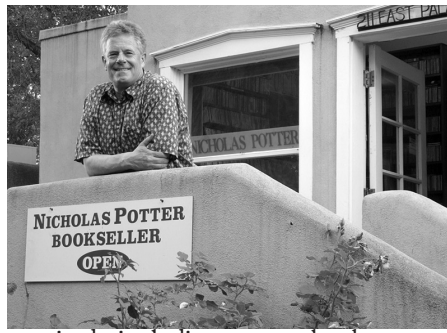
Nicholas Potter Books, when I asked my friend Nick if he'd seen Shaw lately. He broke the sad news to me that John had died the past October. I was shocked to realize that I had been so out of touch, and I reflected on missed opportunities, realizing there would be no further visits or chats with a man I'd admired so much. Not long after that encounter I got news that Shaw's collection was to be dedicated at the University of Minnesota's Wilson Library in October. I knew I had to be at that event, and it was the first step in my journey of publicly remembering John Bennett Shaw.

After attending the dedication, I posted a story about my friendship with Shaw on our Nashville Scholars website. As the web designer of the site, I'd begun a series of posts honoring people I referred to as Significant Sherlockians, and Shaw was the first person so designated. The Friends of the Sherlock Holmes Collections at the University of Minnesota saw the post and invited me to write it up for their newsletter's September 2002 issue. (*Friends of the Sherlock Holmes Collections*, Vol. 6, No. 3.).

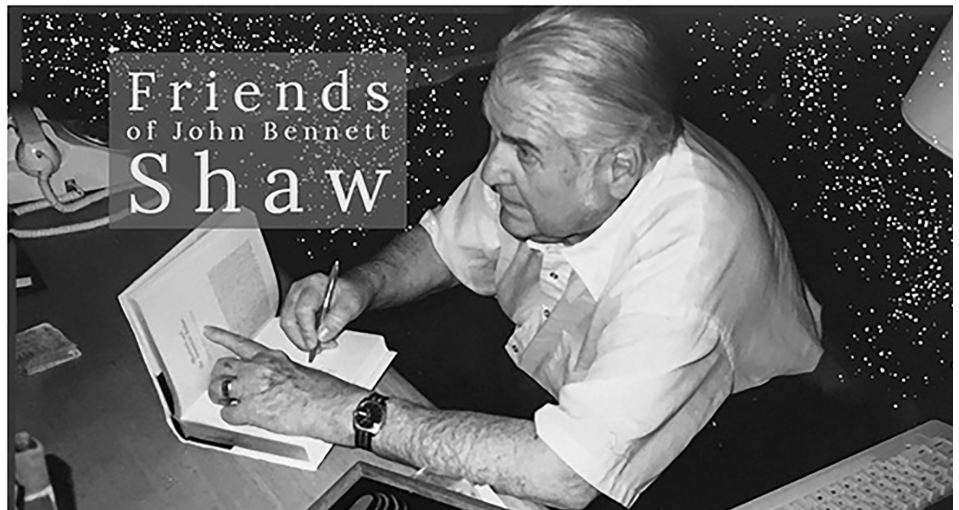
That article, "From a Little Adobe House in Santa Fe to the Sherlock Holmes Collections," was later seen by Swedish writer Mattias Boström, whose *From Holmes to Sherlock: The Story of the Men and Women Who Created an Icon* won Malice Domestic's Agatha Award for non-fiction in 2017. In his research, he contacted me about my friendship with Shaw. My article, on The Friends of the Sherlock Holmes Collections website, had caught Boström's attention as a personal experience between Shaw the mentor, and me the neophyte.



The progression of the acquisitions that became the Sherlock Holmes Collections is detailed in its first newsletter. As early as 1974 the University library had purchased the James C. Iraldi collection consisting of 160 books, 150 periodicals, and much ephemera, "especially strong in British and American first editions of the Canon." Three years later the magnificent library of Dr. Philip S. Hench was



acquired, including 1,750 books, 1,400 periodicals, and almost unbelievably, four copies of *Beeton's Christmas Annual* for 1887, in which Sherlock Holmes was introduced to the world. In a period of just over ten years the University of Minnesota had become the repository of several valuable Sherlock Holmes collections; not just books and journals, but radio scripts and recordings (Edith Meiser), Sherlock-



ian artwork (Frederic Dorr Steele), papers (Christopher Morley and Vincent Starrett), and seemingly endless ephemera. Shaw was therefore drawn to Minnesota for the safe-keeping of his own enormous collection. According to Jon Lellenberg, "He did not want the collection he had built broken up and sold off to hundreds of different collectors, scattered to the four winds." From that point forward libraries and materials from Sherlockian collectors have been added annually.

Researchers were beginning to frequent the Collections' website for information about John Bennett Shaw. The enormous popularity of Boström's book, highlighting the history of the Sherlock Holmes phenomenon, brought Shaw's extraordinary life back to mind for many. Because of Boström's mentioning my association with Shaw and my article in the Friends newsletter, I began to hear from life-long associates of his who wanted

to share stories about him, and from a younger set of Sherlockians who wanted to know more about him. The "Friends of John Bennett Shaw" Facebook page and in time the website would both benefit from this desire to share and know more about "The Johnny Appleseed of Sherlockian Scions." I hoped to tap into this growing reservoir of feeling about Shaw.

Boström's inquiry got me to thinking about the true accessibility of Shaw's collection. The Friends of the Sherlock Holmes Collections newsletter has been published quarterly since 1997 and is the main source of information about items in the collection and news about additions to it by generous donors. The Collections' library staff frequently go to great lengths to display rare items they hold, but to really spend time within the Collections

one has to plan a trip to the University of Minnesota, arrange for one of the staff to bring out items for display, and spend a very limited amount of time with a few items. Shaw's unequalled collection is safely protected, professionally catalogued, and completely intact at the University's Andersen Library, but still a bit unwieldy for the general public.

The other option for accessing the collection is to "see" on-line items that have been photographed, but that has been limited by the software used by the University and the skill of the person searching from his or her desktop. Earlier this year the University Library system installed new software vastly improving image searches, making items easier to find, and with the graphic resolution wonderfully increased. What I felt was missing in an on-line visit of Shaw's items was a verbal interpretation to go along with whatever item was brought up on screen. Tim Johnson, curator for the Collections, has



done a marvelous job of labelling the photographs, but my idea was to display the items along with an experience of being in Shaw's library, virtually "hearing" him comment about a book or poster or statue. I determined what was needed was a Facebook experience, posting images that invited comments from members signed up to participate in a Facebook group we would call Friends of John Bennett Shaw. Members were invited to contribute images of their own. Today there are 130 Sherlockians around the world visiting the page, contributing photos of items from their private collections, and making comments about what they're seeing and sharing. These contributions, with permission granted by the contributor, are often posted on my more recent Friends of John Bennett Shaw website where a more logical sequence of theme and timeline can be created.

As a self-taught web designer I'd been building sites for lasik vision surgeons from 1995 on. When I went to work for



Southwest Airlines in 2001, I had to give it up. But I knew one day I would build a website honoring John Bennett Shaw if no one beat me to it. I was surprised no one ever did. My dream of honoring Shaw has now become a reality in my retirement. After having been away from active participation in Sherlockian events for almost sixteen years, it was time to reclaim my hobby/passion for Holmes and the people I met along the way, especially John Bennett Shaw. The men and women who really knew him are becoming scarce. I simply had to go looking for them.

Now it was 2018, and I began to search for a domain name and a web host for the site. I was absolutely taken aback when, much to my surprise, the domain of johnbennettshaw.com was available. Often, name-sites like that are bought up by would-be designers hoping someone will ask them to build a site using the domain, or to sell it at a very steep price. I felt very fortunate to find it available. Fellow web-dabbler and blogger Ray Betzner had set-

tled on Squarespace for his popular "Studies in Starrett" blog, and, being impressed with his work, I too chose Squarespace for my platform and web host. Squarespace.com employs "drag and drop" software, very simple to work with, to add to, and to make corrections in. The technical support has been fantastic; I've been very happy with the result.

Of course many of the Sherlockians active when Shaw was Big Brother in The Brothers Three of Moriarty, his Santa Fe secession society, have passed off the scene, and many of the Baker Street Irregulars who gathered in New York City every January along with Shaw are no longer with us. But the ones I contacted via email or phone calls were elated that I was doing a Facebook page and then a website to remember a man they had loved so much. These are not folks who frequent Facebook or even the internet necessarily. Most have an email address, but signing up for a Facebook page was out of the question. They were willing to forward images of event programs and share stories about Shaw, but they had misgivings about joining Facebook and Friends of John Bennett Shaw. Susan Rice and Evelyn Herzog both told me that if I would put it on a website, they would be glad to visit and read. I loved this comment, in an email, from Susan Rice.

I have just spent (oh my!) nearly two hours reading the JBS site and I have seldom spent a couple of hours more pleasantly. You really are making a beautiful memorial to a man so many knew and loved, but who died twenty-five years ago, and those who knew him are slowly traveling beyond the Reichenbach. It's a handsome site too, and the various typefaces make it seem we're reading history, which of course we are. I loved his dreadful typing and was especially pleased to see you trace the exact font he used. I know in my bones it's the right one because the sight of it brought his letters immediately to mind.

Moving testimonials came from mainstream Sherlockians, publishers and authors of important current blogs, periodicals, and websites read in print or online by members of the movement. Steven Doyle, publisher of the *Baker Street Journal*, shared an experience he'd had at the 1977 Notre Dame Shaw Conference:

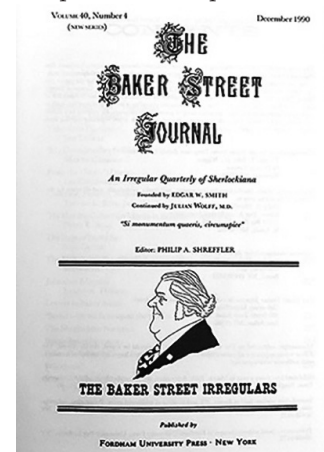
I was a teenager in South Bend, Indiana,

and attended this conference. I distinctly remember John Bennett Shaw, who took pity on the shy, intimidated boy in the back row during a break, coming back and striking up a conversation about Sherlock Holmes. Not talking at me, or down to me, but instead with me about our mutual love of the Great Detective. It was a foundational experience for me, and every conference I've ever put on (be it *Sherlock Holmes Review* or From Gillette to Brett) has its origin with this epic weekend.

A similar story by Ray Betzner (Studies in Starrett) was included on the Facebook page and website. In a letter to John, written as the introduction to the reprint of *The Shaw 100*, two years after John died, Ray wrote,

(Dear John,) I remember one of these workshops well. I was still new to the movement and too impossibly shy to introduce myself to anyone. I had sat in the shadows watching you move about, working the room like a Chicago politician. And now, here you were, towering over me. "Are you doing anything after dinner?" I looked up from my seat to see you there, a rotund man with your two constant companions: a cocktail in your left hand and a packet of paraphernalia in your right. "A few of us are getting together for drinks in my room. Come join us." I followed you up. Your lovely wife, Dorothy, was already there, as were a few others. I sat on the floor of your suite and luxuriated in the camaraderie. The bad puns, the gossip, the spontaneous book reviews, all this and more made me feel as if I was at home among friends.

Phillip Shreffler, a past editor of the



*Baker Street Journal* and an influential Sherlockian, offered a similar comment about Shaw's generosity:



*John Bennett Shaw and SRL editors Jon Lellenberg and Philip Shreffler in Kansas City*

At this distance in time, I do not remember the words that passed between us, though they certainly had to do with the care and feeding of a scion society of The Baker Street Irregulars. But the most remarkable thing was this: John treated me, a fledgling Sherlockian, with an amiability and respect that I might have imagined would be reserved for the likes of Edgar W. Smith or Julian Wolff. I had done nothing to deserve it; John gave it freely all the same.

In addition to meeting and conversing with important Sherlockians, it was my happy pleasure to point interested

people to two major sources of information about Shaw: a little booklet titled *The Sage of Santa Fe: Adventures and Public Life of John Bennett Shaw*, and the December 1990 *Baker Street Journal*, then edited by Philip Shreffler with this particular issue devoted entirely to Shaw, with ten articles contributed by friends and scholars who knew him intimately. Unfortunately a *Sage of Santa Fe* co-author, Vinnie Brosnan, had passed away in 2013 soon after the booklet's publication, but I was fortunate to have several email conversations with his co-author Susan Rice whose input into the website was invaluable.

Another highlight of my journey to meet these friends of Shaw happened on

my visit to the home of Saul Cohen at Santa Fe. I'd searched for him for some time, and was about to put him into the category of those "who have passed beyond the Reichenbach," when Jon Lellenberg, prolific author and historian of the Baker Street Irregulars, discovered I was planning a trip to Santa Fe and asked if I'd like meet Saul Cohen. "Absolutely!" I replied. This turned out to be a great surprise gift for me, having celebrated my 75th birthday the day before this historic visit.

These men had been closely associated with the Conan Doyle Estate in England, and both were friends of Dame Jean Conan Doyle, daughter of Sir Arthur. Cohen, an original member of The Brothers Three of Moriarty, had been the attorney for the Conan Doyle Estate in the United States, and Lellenberg for many years was Dame Jean's U.S. representative in licensing work for the Estate. On a beautiful afternoon last September I spent three hours in Saul Cohen's home above Santa Fe's historic Bishop's Lodge, visiting with him and Jon talking about John Shaw.

So I had come full circle, back in Santa Fe having made new friends, having said farewell to John Bennett Shaw and looking forward to keeping his memory alive, well into the foreseeable future. Thirty-four years and counting...

