An Interview with Peter E. Blau Conducted by Daniel Stashower

July 29, 2007 and August 5, 2007

BSI Oral History Project

This is a transcription of an audio recording of an interview with Peter E. Blau, which is part of the Baker Street Irregulars Trust Oral History Project. The Baker Street Irregulars™ is the world's oldest Sherlock Holmes literary society. The BSI Trust collects correspondence, photographs, recordings, and other memorabilia for the BSI Archives.

The copyright for this interview is owned by the Baker Street Irregulars. See <www.bsitrust.org> for terms of use.

Interview History

Interviewer:	Daniel Stashower
Transcriber:	David Richards
Editors:	Marsha Pollak, Peter E. Blau
Last Revised:	November 23,2021

The audio recording, along with a photo and other information, is available online at the BSI Trust website from the BSI Oral History Project page.

The Baker Street Irregulars Trust™

For the Sake of the Trust

Copyright 2007

Peter E. Blau

Interviewed by Daniel Stashower
July 29, 2007 and August 5, 2007
Bethesda, Maryland, USA

Part 1 of 3

Introduction: This recording is part of the Baker Street Irregulars Trust Oral History Project. The Baker Street Irregulars is the world's oldest Sherlock Holmes literary society. The BSI Trust collects correspondence, photographs, recordings, and other memorabilia for the BSI Archives, which comprise a special collection at the Houghton Library at Harvard University. [Eds. note: The Archives are now located at the Lilly Library at Indiana University.] In this interview, Dan Stashower speaks with Irregular Peter E. Blau on July 29, 2007. You'll hear Peter's life story, how he was introduced to Sherlock Holmes, how he was introduced to the BSI, his first dinner, how he got the investiture "Black Peter", and much more. This is the first of three parts. The copyright for this interview is owned by the Baker Street Irregulars. See bsitrust.org for terms of use.

STASHOWER: All right, today is July 27, 2007. This is the–

BLAU: Are you sure?

STASHOWER: July 29, 2007. Thank you, Peter. This is the Baker Street Irregulars Oral History Project. I am Dan Stashower, interviewing Peter Blau. We are in Peter's home in Bethesda, Maryland. Peter, thank you for taking the time to share some of your memories with us. We are going to start off with some information about your non-Sherlockian life. Please, if you would, tell us where you were born, reared, and educated.

BLAU: I was born in Cleveland, Ohio. My family escaped from Cleveland when I was six and moved to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where I was raised, educated and went to Tabor Academy, went to Amherst College, went to the University of Oklahoma for a Master of Science. And education never ends as someone once said.

STASHOWER: Someone once said. Tell us a bit about your family.

BLAU: Well, I had a nice father and a nice mother and my mother's father, I remember, and my father's mother. And when I was growing up, my grandparents were very old. Everything was very old compared to me, but I had a baby brother, Andrew. We got along reasonably well because we didn't compete on anything. I was the one who got good marks and he was the one who was good in sports. This may have been an unconscious choice on his part because I went through my education and with all the teachers and principals calling

me by my father's name and he went through after me being called by my name, but put up with it.

STASHOWER: I'm still called Fred (Blau laughs) after by grandfather and David after my father–back in Cleveland, where I was also born, as you know. Tell us about your career.

BLAU: Well, let's see. After two years of college, I spent four years in the Navy. That counts as a career I guess. The Navy–

STASHOWER: I should say so.

BLAU: The Navy was the only job that I ever had that I wasn't fired from. (Stashower laughs) They wanted me to reenlist in, but I didn't want to. So I got out and finished college, went on to graduate school and became a petroleum geologist and spent the 1960s looking for oil in exotic countries like Somalia and England.

And at the end of the sixties, came back to the United States and came to Washington in nineteen–January–New Year's Day 1970 and went to work for the American Geological Institute, which was the umbrella society for all the geological societies, and their science information department. And after a couple of years, the guy who was doing their weekly newsletter left and they came and said, "Pete, you can read and write. Why don't you do the newsletter?" So I became a journalist and went–AGI lost some funding and had to shut down my department and me. I went to work for a company called Petroleum Information and based in Denver and Houston. I was their man in Washington, telling our readers what the government was doing to or for the oil industry, which lasted until well into the eighties, when the price of oil went down to next to nothing and they called up and said, "We did a budget review and we can't afford a man in Washington." And I said, "I told you that last year." "Well, last year we didn't believe you." (Stashower laughs) So since then, I have been a freelance journalist and a consulting geologist. One of the nice things about being a geologist and a journalist is that you never retire.

STASHOWER: Right.

BLAU: You may not work very often, but you never have to say, "I'm retired."

STASHOWER: But you still are working periodically?

BLAU: Yeah. Yeah. Yep. And of course, I decided that you are not really retired until someone pays you a pension. I now get a pension from Dun and Bradstreet, which bought Petroleum Information. My pension is $223.03 a month. (Stashower laughs) I don't know if that counts as being retired or not. (Stashower laughs)

STASHOWER: Well you must make it go a fair way. Would you tell us about your first meeting with Sherlock Holmes?

BLAU: I don't remember my first meeting with Sherlock Holmes. I got in–Steve Rothman took over as editor of the *Baker Street Journal*. He asked me to do a piece on that because he wanted to re-inaugurate the department and I said I had a book. I probably read one or two of the stories in some sort of anthology at school; everybody did in those days. But, I don't remember. I had a copy of the Garden City edition, which was stolen during rehearsals for a Sherlock Holmes broadcast in New York. But, what I remember is my first meeting with a Sherlockian and that's what I wrote about for the *Baker Street Journal*, the Sherlockian being Ben Abramson at the Argus Book Shop. And he eventually got around to telling me that he published a magazine and he thought I would enjoy reading and that was the *Baker Street Journal*, 1948. And it was fun.

And here was a strange world with interesting and literate people having a lot of fun playing a game, which I thought sounded like fun. So I started writing to them–John Dickson Carr and Roland Hammond, the Dancing Men of Providence. I adopted his project; I wanted to complete the Dancing Men alphabet so that I could, when I had my *Baker Street Journals* bound, I could have Peter E. Blau stamped on the spine in dancing men. But there's no "U" in "The Dancing Men" so I had to find the complete alphabet and I wrote to John Dickson Carr and he didn't know. Ben Abramson didn't know; he suggested I get in touch with Roland Hammond who was head of the Dancing Men of Providence. I wrote to all these people saying–and nobody knew but the grand thing is they all wrote back; it didn't matter that I was a young punk. And that's how I got into Sherlock Holmes, through Ben Abramson.

STASHOWER: Tell me more about that first book, the Garden City edition.

BLAU: It was big and thick, red cover and no illustrations, but I read a lot and so I didn't need illustrations. I just read the stories in it, all–

STASHOWER: But you must have carried that edition around with you for some time to know exactly where it went missing.

BLAU: Oh–well–I was–in 1958 or '59, I was down at Fordham University doing one of Chris Steinbrunner's broadcast from WFUV. We rehearsed in the morning, went out at lunch. And I had the book along, in case we had to look something up. And I left it on the piano in the rehearsal room and we came back from lunch and it was gone. So if anybody ever finds a copy of *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* and you open it up and there is a childish bookplate in there, with a book worm that says, "Property of Peter E Blau;" it's stolen goods. (laughter) That was an interesting lunch. A bunch of us went out to lunch and there was a nice young woman there and I asked her the question I often still ask people, "What do you do in real life?" And she said, "I'm a writer." And I said, "What do you write?" And she said, "Pornography." And I (laughter) said, "Okay, why?" And she said, "I decided I wanted to be a writer and I wrote one of everything. I wrote a western, and a mystery, and a war story, and science fiction, and pornography, and I sent them all off and pornography is the one that sold, so I have been writing that ever since." (laughter)

STASHOWER: That's a real writer. How did you come to attend your first BSI meeting?

BLAU: Well. My first BSI meeting, I didn't get to attend because it was the 1957 annual dinner. In December 1956, I was just at the end of my tour in the Navy, out in San Diego, and I got a postcard from Edgar Smith saying, come to the dinner. And I had a fit because I didn't have any leave left and I was getting out of the Navy in January. So I wrote this–fortunately, he didn't keep it. It's not in the Edgar Smith papers, so far, because I'm sure it was embarrassingly plaintive saying, "I really have a good excuse for not coming. Please don't forget about me for next year." Remind me to tell you about a Julian Wolff story. Anyway, I did get an invitation next–to the next dinner, the 1958 dinner.

And I did go to the 1958 dinner and that was delightful. It was at Cavanagh's and I was the–at the U-shape table and I was way down at the end of the table, far below the salt, if there had been any salt, sitting next to Chris Steinbrunner and a *Time Magazine* cover artist named Guy Rowe. I had no idea why he was there. And across the table from Banesh Hoffmann; who explained that he was a scientist. I found out later that he was a protégé of Einstein. But every year, 'cause you moved up the table with the same people, as people died you moved up. And every year, I would say to Banesh Hoffmann, "What's new in astrophysics?" And he would give me a three-minute synopsis of everything that had happened that year in astrophysics.

Years later in Washington, now deceased, the late Norm Davis, after some of us came from New York and reported to the Red Circle about what happened in New York, Norm Davis said to me wistfully, "You know, I probably should have gone to the annual dinner." And I said, "Why didn't you go?" And he said, "Well I got this invitation from Julian Wolff and I didn't realize–I couldn't imagine how it could be for me. I thought he had made a mistake." And I said, "Did you write back." And he said, "No. I didn't want to embarrass Julian." And I said, "Alright, when you get home, before you go to bed tonight, you write an apologetic letter to Julian Wolff and tell him of that story. And if you tell it well enough, he'll probably invite you next year. (laughs) And Norm was invited the next year (Stashower laughs) and became a member of–member of the Baker Street Irregulars. (laughs)

STASHOWER: So you attended your first dinner in '58?

BLAU: 1958.

STASHOWER: Am I remembering correctly, that you were invested in 1959.

BLAU: Yeah. I went back in 1959 and they had the cocktail party in the room across the hall from the dining room at Cavanagh's. And I was standing talking to one of the few younger people there, Chris Steinbrunner and an even younger kid named Russ Merritt, who was then a senior at Boston Latin High School. He came up and asked me how you get to be a member of the Baker Street Irregulars. And I told him everything I knew, "You had to be old. You had to be a scholar. You had to be old. You had to be published. You had to be old. You had to be accomplished and you had to be old." And Russ sadly shook his head (Stashower laughs) and wandered off in pursuit of a drink. And Edgar Smith came by and clapped me on the shoulder and said, "Peter, I forgot to tell you; you're getting your Shilling

tonight." (Stashower laughs) And I went into shock, because in those days, you had to say something, not much, but you had to say something 'cause you went up and someone presented it to you. It wasn't Edgar, I got mine from Jim Iraldi and I'm told that I gave a very nice, because it was brief, mention of the references to Sherlock Holmes in the works of William Shakespeare because I was acting in Henry the Fourth at Amherst. And I came back to the table with my Shilling and my certificate and there, sitting across the table from me, is Russ Merritt with this expression of outrage on his face because I had just given him this long song and dance about how you had to be old and–I had not been published. I had not been accomplished. I was a member of one Sherlockian society and that was Chris Steinbrunner's The Priory School. 'Cause I–in 1958, he turned to me and he said, "Are you a member of any societies?" I said, "No" and he said, "You are a member of the Priory Scholars." And that's how I got mine.

I think that Edgar decided that the BSI were getting geriatric and he wanted to bring in some young punks and he just brought them in because, of course, in those days, no one would have said to Edgar, "What the hell do you think you are doing? Who are these people?" He just did it. And I have a feeling it was done on the understanding that, well, here's your Shilling, now do something to deserve it. And some of them stayed with it and some of them left. I really haven't seen Russ Merritt in a long time; he got a Shilling the next year. And–but others that are still around, Jim Saunders from that era, George McCormack from the late fifties and early sixties. We were then the young blood of the BSI and I never had the guts to ask Edgar and of course he died, so by the time I would have had the guts to ask him, I couldn't.

For years, I blamed the United States Navy for making me miss a chance to meet Christopher Morley 'cause I couldn't go to the 1957 annual dinner and he died in 1957. So when I got there in 1958, Morley wasn't there any more and I've had a grudge against the navy all these years. But then eventually I found out that Chris Morley was sick and he didn't get to the 1957 annual dinner, so I could no longer be mad at the U.S. Navy, so.

STASHOWER: The Navy no doubt breathed a sigh of relief.

BLAU: Yes. Yeah

STASHOWER: Have you attended continuously since 1958?

STASHOWER: No. I think I missed a couple, but pretty much so.

BLAU: Pretty much?

STASHOWER: Yeah. And they're all fun. I've almost always have been in the United States; one Christmas I was in East Africa and one Christmas in London. But other than that–yeah, I've gone. One Christmas, I didn't go because my father died in January. But if you lived in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, or Washington, DC, it's not that hard to get to New York. And in those early days, the Algonquin Hotel was only $50 a night. Eventually, it got

expensive and some of us started staying in the Royal the– What was the one across the street?

STASHOWER: The Royalton.

BLAU: Yeah. The Royalton. And, then it got redone, so then we moved over to the Iroquois and it got redone. And thanks to Mike Whelan's negotiations with the Algonquin, the Algonquin for our weekend is now the cheapest hotel on 44th Street between Fifth and Sixth.

STASHOWER: And the Iroquois had a couple of lean years there. (Blau laughs)

BLAU: Great place for room parties though. (laughter)

STASHOWER: Now–you are associated with a number of scion societies. How and when did you become involved with the Red Circle of Washington?

BLAU: I arrived in Washington in January 1970 and I knew there had been a society here. And–but it wasn't active and I decided, gee, there ought to be an active society in Washington. So I got in touch with Julian and said, "Who's here." And he gave me the names of two of the officers, Svend Petersen and Dorothy Bissonette. And I called them up and I said, "I think we ought to meet again." And they both said the same thing. They both said, "Yes, but I don't want to do any work." So I said, "How much work could there be?" So I said, "I'll do the work."

And Julian sent me the names of people who have been from Washington, but were coming up to Baltimore and I just decided to have a meeting in March 1970. I was working at the corner of 22nd and M and just across the street was Blackie's House of Beef, but one block over–two blocks over, there was Gusti's Italian Restaurant and I figured that would be a good place to have our first dinner. And we had our dinner up in the attic and I think there were seventeen people there. And the agenda consisted entirely of people telling other people who they were and what they've done and how they got there. And we have been meeting ever since.

Svend Petersen, our sergeant-at-arms, is deceased and Dorothy Bissonette is deceased and our vice-our founding vice president, Patricia Parkman, has vanished. Norm Davis tracked her down and she told him to go away---so we did. Apparently, she left Washington under a cloud, so to speak, because of her anti-governmental complaints during the Nixon Administration. But anyway–and Karen Kruse, a high school girl who founded the society, is still our president. Karen Kruse Anderson now and she was at our fiftieth anniversary dinner. There are very few societies, the Norwegian Explorers have done it–very few societies have had a founding member at their fiftieth anniversary dinner. Karen Kruse is still our president because we have not had any elections. Now, every once in a while someone says, "You ought to have elections." And I say, "No, because I know that this is Washington and holding no office, I can never be impeached."

STASHOWER: And Karen is president for life?

BLAU: Absolutely and possibly thereafter (laughs).

STASHOWER: You travel a fair amount to attend meetings in distant cities? Sons of the Copper Beeches–

BLAU: Philadelphia is not that distant.

STASHOWER: And well–but you don't see Steve Rothman down here very often.

BLAU: That's true.

STASHOWER: And can you tell us about the Practical, But Limited, Geologists?

BLAU: Ah. The Practical But Limited Geologists started in the 1970s when the Geological Society of America met in Dallas. And at that time Francine Morris, now Francine Swift, was living in Dallas and another geologist and I, geologist-journalist Wendell Cochran, had lunch with Francine at the Zodiac Room at the top of Neiman Marcus, and it was a nice lunch. We talked about geology; we talked about Sherlock Holmes. And we decided that we ought to do this again.

Now, there are two major geological societies and one meets in the spring and one meets in the fall. So, for the spring one, I just had a supper, dinner, and local Sherlockians and some of the visiting geologists came and that's what we have been doing ever since. It's a chance for two strange worlds to interact. Often you get all the Sherlockians sitting on one side of the room and all the geologists sitting on the other and I always make it the first order of business, everybody has to get up and mill around. You know, you want to meet new people.

And we meet in honor of the world's first forensic geologist. Now, I'm sure that the major societies think the name of our society is The Friends of Sherlock Holmes. That's how we're listed in the formal program because I realized early on, they wouldn't list us if they knew we were called the Practical, But Limited, Geologists. So, at every meeting, I start off by swearing all the newcomers to secrecy, not to tell the societies what our real name is. So anybody who listens to this oral history has got to take the oath, not to tell anybody.

STASHOWER: You came to know Edgar Smith in your early years-

BLAU: By correspondence and we only met twice at the two annual dinners.

STASHOWER: And that was it?

BLAU: That was it.

STASHOWER: And, how about Julian Wolff?

BLAU: Julian Wolff–I got to know because-of course I came to the annual dinners. In those days, in the early days, Julian would invite some people over to his apartment on the Saturday. And Chris Steinbrunner was invited and I wasn't. And, I bemoaned that fact and Chris Steinbrunner kindly said to me: "Don't worry, you know, eventually Julian will get to know you a little better, and you'll be invited." And Chris was absolutely right and I got invited. Of course, he kept inviting people and it got too crowded and he couldn't fit them all into his apartment and that's why they moved to the Grolier Club. Everybody starting coming to Julian's party at the Grolier Club and since Julian had to pay for everything, that's why they buy a ticket and come to a Sherlockian cocktail party on Saturday started.

But, again I-Julian came to Washington once to attend a meeting of The Red Circle. Julian was not a traveler either. For a guy who was in the Second World War in the Pacific, when he got home, he didn't do a lot of traveling. But-so I knew him here and I saw him in New York.

One time Paul Gore-Booth was heading from England. He had just been knighted, Baron Gore-Booth of Maltby. And so Paul and his wife, Pat, were coming to the United States. He had some business in Washington, but he was going up to New York and Julian wanted to have a reception, a little cocktail party, in his apartment for Paul and Pat. And he called me up and said, "You are going to have to come to the party." And I said, "Why?" And he said, "Well, I have never entertained a lord before." And I said, "Well, it's not that hard." He said, "I don't know what to call him." I said, "He's going to come in and he is going to say, 'Please call me Paul, and this is my Pat.' It will be very informal, don't worry." "No," Julian said, "You have to come up." So I came up to the party and that's exactly what Paul did. He came in and sat down, "Just call me Paul, and this is my wife Pat." They sat there and Julian and Eleanor had prepared tea. I mean a real British tea with the little sandwiches, the cucumber sandwiches with the crusts cut off, and tea. And so everybody had a cup of tea and some of these sandwiches and Paul and Pat finished their tea and Julian said to them, "Well, I see that you finished your tea. Can I get you get you a real drink?" And Paul looked up and said, "No thank you, another tea would be very nice." And so everybody froze because they didn't think they could have a whisky, if their guest-of-honor was having tea. And Paul looked up and said to Julian, "You go ahead; it's alright, we're Christian Science." (laughter).

STASHOWER: Fair enough.

Now, you have known–you have seen a number of Wiggins come and go–

BLAU: Well, only two.

STASHOWER: Seriously, why I suppose so.

STASHOWER: Because only two of them have been Wiggins, Tom Stix and Mike Whelan. Julian and Tom and Mike.

STASHOWER: You knew-you came to know Tom fairly well and a number of other memorable Irregulars over the years. If you had to just list some of your best friends, among the Irregulars over the years, who might they be?

BLAU: Well, my best friend in the Sherlockian world was Chris Steinbrunner. He did what so many Sherlockians do when they meet a stranger, made me feel very welcome and in so many ways, Chris and I were the same person, we were the same age, we had the same interests. And we just maintained the connection right straight through. He was-I took it very personally when he died because he'd been in so many ways, the Sherlockian world to me. And he was an odd-looking guy. There are some great stories to tell about Chris. There is a society; it's not a Sherlockian society. You don't have to be a Sherlockian to be in it. It's called the Cheap Thrills Club and in order to become a member of the Cheap Thrills Club, you had to be a passenger in a car driven by Chris Steinbrunner. (Stashower laughs) 'Cause he had an apnea, I think. He would fall asleep and he would fall asleep in the middle dinner and he would fall asleep driving. So–

STASHOWER: Was he narcoleptic?

BLAU: Yep! Un huh, but, you know, it was just these things; he would go in and out. He would show movies at Sherlockian societies in the old days when they had projectors and reels and reel film. And he would show reel two and he would fall asleep, but as soon the reel was over, he was awake, to change to reel three.

He had the Priory Scholars, so that he could do his radio broadcast, invite people over to his house. He had a basement full of film. We'd sit there and he would show every episode of a Flash Gordon serial because he had them in 16mm. And he was in the world of science fiction and he took me to my first science fiction convention, Lunacon, which was the New York convention in New York and–fascinating convention. They had on exhibit in the lobby of the hotel, photographs of an alien that these two guys had captured and the photographs show them standing there holding this alien; it's about three and half feet high. It looked very, very strange. And they were standing there in front of this photograph proudly explaining to people how they had captured an alien. And I went and took one look at that photograph and I said, "Excuse me. That's a shaved chimp. (Stashower laughs) That's a chimp without any fur." "Oh no," they said, "It's an alien." "No that's a chimpanzee without any fur. You can tell by the bone structure." They said, "What are you?" I said, "I'm a geologist. I know about bones. That's a chimpanzee, a shaved chimpanzee." But they got very upset. But it was more interesting that a lot of the people that believed the photograph got very upset too because they wanted to believe that it was an alien. I mean, that's why they went to science fiction conventions in those days. And that was the convention in which I got my first Isaac Asimov story.

I was talking to Isaac and this young women came up dressed in sort of a tube dress, a strapless dress. And she said, "Oh Doctor Asimov would-can I have your autograph please?" and he said, "Sure." Well. She's wearing this dress with no pockets and she didn't have any paper to sign. And so Isaac took my felt-tip pen and he reached out and he wrote right across her-the left side of her chest "Isaac Asimov" and then hooked the dress down just a little bit

and wrote “slept here” and then pulled the dress up so only his autograph showed. And–I remember–

STASHOWER: How did she take that?

BLAU: At the time, she thought it was great. But I met her some years later and reminded her that I had been there and she denied the whole thing. She said, “No.” By that time she was I guess, grown up and she wasn’t a little girl then, but she decided that this was not something she wanted as part of her personal history. (laughs) So I don’t tell her name when I tell the story. It’s a true story. All of my stories are based on true stories.

STASHOWER: That’s must be one of several Asimov stories you have from all the years that he came to the dinner.

BLAU: Yep.

STASHOWER: He would, I assume, do the limericks at the dinners?

BLAU: No. He did a song.

STASHOWER: A song.

BLAU: A song. But he would do limericks. And he would sit there at the table and do limericks, which he–he had done so many limericks and remembered them. So you could just come up with a word. Bev brought little Samantha to meet him. And so he just sat right down and did a limerick on Samantha. But he had those tucked away I’m sure, almost all of them anyway. But yes, he could do limericks on demand, on demand. Occasionally, he got preachy. He really didn’t think it was a good idea to have someone smoking at the BSI annual dinner.

STASHOWER: Oh really?

BLAU: Yea, because he didn’t smoke. He had stopped; I doubt if he ever smoked. But he was a non-smoker and so he urged, I guess Julian, it didn’t do any good, and Tom Stix, and urged them, “Why do you have smoking at the dinner?” And of course in those days, the answer was, because we meet in honor of one of the world’s great smokers. But social pressures took over. Now we meet in honor of one of the world’s greatest smokers at dinners in which there is no smoking.

STASHOWER: Well. Also, some would have you–some would say, one of the world’s great misogynists. And yet you were also there at the beginning of the Adventuresses of Sherlock Holmes.

BLAU: Yeah. There was a group of six college students at Albertus Magnus College in New Haven and they got interested in Sherlock Holmes and they corresponded with Bill Baring-Gould and they had actually invited him to lunch. They came down to New York to take him

to lunch and he picked a nice restaurant near Time Life headquarters and they had a very nice lunch, thank you. At the end of lunch, the bill came and these girls didn't have the money to pay for lunch. So Bill paid for the lunch and I think Ceil Baring-Gould, Bill's widow, still complains about these six girls, who came down and suckered him into buying them lunch.

But, they corresponded with John Bennett Shaw and when they came to the William Gillette Luncheon, which was then at Keens and said, you know, "We ought to come to the annual dinner." And people said, "You can't come to the annual dinner because women aren't invited to the annual dinner." And they said, "We don't think that's fair." And the lunch was over and eventually people started arriving at Cavanagh's for the cocktail hour and someone came up to Julian and said, "Julian, there are six girls out in front of the restaurant, picketing the restaurant." And Julian had a genteel fit and said to John Bennett Shaw, "John, your girls," because John gets blamed for all this, (Stashower laughs) "are down there. Do something about this." And as John explained it, he knew that just going down there wouldn't placate them. He needed to bring them a peace offering, so he brought them me (Stashower laughs). So, I went down with John and we discussed things with the girls and brought them into the first floor bar at Cavanagh's and bought them all a drink. They wrote a manifesto on a paper bag, which John promised to read to the Baker Street Irregulars and they left and John did. He explained before he read this that these were six girls at Albertus Magnus College and this was a Catholic college, but it is a very Catholic college. And of course John is a practically, professional Catholic, said, "I can tell you just how Catholic this college is. If a girl is not a virgin when she enrolls, she is when she graduates." (Stashower laughs)

So as a reward for being nice to them that cold January, they made John Bennett Shaw and me second-class members or informal members, whatever the word is, of the Adventuresses. We were members, but we couldn't come to their annual dinner, just as there has always been women who are members of the Baker Street Irregulars and weren't invited to that annual dinner, so that's how I got involved with and got to be an Adventuress.

STASHOWER: And some of them are still with us, still active in the movement.

BLAU: Of the four men who were brought in as full members in 1991, I'm the only one surviving.

STASHOWER: But the Adventuresses?

BLAU: Oh Yes. Ev Herzog and Mary Ellen Rich and Susan Rice. You want to hear-you want to read the history-you want to read one the true histories of the Adventuresses, read *The Baker Street Journal Christmas Annual*.

STASHOWER: Can you tell us more about John Bennett Shaw?

BLAU: John Bennett Shaw was one of these unique people; he was nice to everybody. He didn't necessary like it, but he was nice to everybody and we corresponded. John corresponded with everybody and I wound up in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the sixties, and I went

to see him, in his house, and I could understand what people feel when they come into my library, because that's exactly what I felt when I came into John's library.

Here was this large room completely lined, except for windows, with bookshelves. And the bookshelves were filled twice. All the books had books behind them. And I said to him, "This wasn't right. You shouldn't have books you can't see." Then in a couple of years, he had given away half his books, none of the Sherlockian books. He gave away his Chesterton collection and his Isak Dinesen collection and things like that. But I stood there in his library and just–do I like to look at people's books and I got to the L's and there was Henry Lauritzen's *Min kære Watson* which had his caricatures in it. I knew he had done this but I had never seen the book. And so I said, "This is wonderful. I had never seen this book before." John said, "Don't I have two copies?" I said, "Yes." And he said, "Which is the best one?" And I said, "This one." He said, "Well, put that back and you can have the other one." And that's something else that John did all the time. I try to do the same, give people things that are fun.

John and I wound up very close. I used to go see him in Santa Fe especially. We hardly ever talked about Sherlock Holmes; we talked about Sherlockians. John liked to tell horror stories about the Sherlockian world, about the very few society meetings he ever went to that were teetotal. And we had a short list of people who were so obnoxious that there was no sense in both of us having to correspond with them. So we divided them up and I corresponded with some and he corresponded with some. We didn't want to completely cut them off because there were good stories to be told about them.

But as we sit here, Susan Rice is up in New York hard at work in writing a chapter for the Baker Street Irregulars archival histories of the 1960s. And she's the only person, other than John and me, who's read John's letters to me and my letters to John. And so she said, "I want to edit that job." (Stashower laughs) I did not rewrite–I did not reread my letters to John, nor do I remember what I–what John wrote to me, but we, we didn't–we were always willing to name names. (laughs)

STASHOWER: You have had a number of publications over the years. You've been–have edited the *Baker Street Journal* and you've been the editor of volumes of the *Baker Street*–the BSI manuscript series. Could you tell us about some of those? Say, beginning with the edition of *A Duet with an Occasional Chorus* you edited a few years ago.

BLAU: I like *A Duet with an Occasional Chorus*. That wasn't a BSI publication.

STASHOWER: It was a Gaslight.

BLAU: Jack Tracy did that and he wanted to bring Conan Doyle's works back into print, with afterwords. And he asked me to write an afterword for *Duet with an Occasional Chorus.* Now, I had read the book and enjoyed Conan Doyle because he is a good teller of tales, as you chose for the title of your biography. And I started reading–rereading *A Duet with an Occasional Chorus* and by that time, I knew a lot more about Conan Doyle than I did when I read it the first time. And it dawned on me that this really was autobiographical in

many ways. It's about his first wife Touie and about his second wife Jean and at the time it was published, who wasn't yet his second wife. And-so I talked in the afterword about the intersection of these two women and how they appear in the book. And it's fascinating to me and it was a good afterword. And I-and I was very nice when the manuscript of *A Duet with an Occasional Chorus* came up for auction. (Stashower laughs). And someone called me up and said, "I'm thinking on bidding on this; are you going to bid on it?" And I decided he would have more fun with it and I said, "No I will not bid against you."

STASHOWER: Who? Was it Dick?

BLAU: Yes, it was Dick Sveum. So that's why it's now out in Minneapolis.

STASHOWER: Well, he has certainly made quite a study of that book.

BLAU: This manuscript Conan Doyle had specially bound and gave to Jean, his second wife. For me, it's a very personal book.

STASHOWER: But that inscription, does not appear-Dick doesn't have it. It's in-if I'm remembering this correctly.

BLAU: I'm not sure it was inscribed to her, but it was given to her.

STASHOWER: Given to her and that's very–

BLAU: It may have been. There may be an inscription. It's hard for me to believe that he didn't inscribe it.

STASHOWER: Un-um. So many of the manuscripts I have seen are. But you have also worked on a couple of volumes of the Baker Street-of BSI manuscript series.

BLAU: Yeah. We did the *Angels of Darkness*. That was fun. We knew, we the Sherlockian World, if you were paying any attention, knew this play existed because people had written about it; but no one had ever published it, the play. And Arthur Conan Doyle obviously didn't want the play performed or published and his daughter Jean didn't want it published. But the copyright laws being what they are, it came to a point when an unpublished manuscript wasn't going to be protected by copyright anymore. So, the only way to provide copyright protection was to publish it. And Jon Lellenberg and I and a few others who advised Dame Jean persuaded her to agree to have this published with some scholarly apparatus that would explain some of the strange and unusual things in there and she agreed. And I got to edit it, which was a lot of fun.

STASHOWER: I imagine so.

BLAU: And I'm looking forward to reading your new book because Jon Lellenberg keeps saying, "Well, there is new information in there." And he won't tell me what it is (laughs). I think that is his-he hopes that it will force me to buy a copy.

STASHOWER: Yes, because I doubt if you would have otherwise. (Blau laughs) And you edited the BSJ for a time.

BLAU: Yeah.

STASHOWER: And other publications that you care to have-to comment on?

BLAU: Well. My mind has gone blank. Well, I write and edit and publish what is now called "Scuttlebutt" from the Spermaceti Press.

STASHOWER: Now, I would like to ask you about that. Because am I correct-did I see somewhere recently that it is now entering its 36th year?

BLAU: Yeah. Well, informal as it was back in those days, I do not know whether the first sheet of paper I sent to John Bennett Shaw was sent in 1970 or 1971, because I didn't date them.

STASHOWER: Right.

BLAU: They are just sheets of paper I kept by my typewriter and I wrote paragraphs on the sheets and when one or two sheets got full, I would send them to John. And he would do the same with me; this was just how we exchanged gossip. And that's how it started. I would refer to them as my information sheets. They were just notes. My top sheets were just crude; now it's got a real title and six or more pages a month.

It started off-I can't remember what year it was. Well John and I exchanged these things and Ron De Waal, who came to John's house once a year to bibliograph his collection, discovered these and so he wanted copies, so I sent him photocopies. And then Cameron Hollyer wanted copies. And I said–I wound up with ten people who were getting photocopies of my information sheets. And I started getting letters from people who would write and say, "Dear Mr. Blau – put me on your mailing list." Or occasionally, "Please put me on your mailing list." Or very occasionally, "Here's a dollar, please put me on your mailing list." And I'd say, "No." People would say, "But, but, but . . ." Fortunately Ted Schulz at the time, kindly Ted Schulz, out of San Francisco was a principal, I think, at a high school and he had access to their photocopy machine. So, he would take my newsletter and shoot it down to two-to-one and mail it to people, who were desperate to have this. And I got a letter from Jerry Margolin, who complained that by the time he got his second-generation copy, all the good stuff was gone.

So I thought about it and figured out what it cost me to print and mail this and charged, said, "Okay, it's five for $6 a year." And it's gone up; it's now $10.55 a year. At one time, I had 300 and some paid subscribers. I'm down to less than 200 --180 because it's available free on the Internet. It goes out to a couple of Sherlockian mailing lists and it's posted at Sherlocktron, a website, so anybody can read the thing. I have no idea how many readers I have. I do know that some of the people who pay me for it don't read it and I have never

been sure about that. (Stashower laughs) I get letters from people who say, "Four months. I just realized that four months ago you said such-and-such." I say, "It's too late. (laughter)

STASHOWER: I remember when I first moved to Washington and you were charging just postage for the Red Circle newsletters.

BLAU: Postage and photocopying.

STASHOWER: And, I'm sending you an envelope with a dollar and then change taped to a card so it wouldn't rattle around in the envelope (Blau laughs). But it always seemed to me like-

BLAU: In those days, you didn't have a checking account.

STASHOWER: I can't think why I wasn't writing you a check, but it still seems funny to me now when I'm writing that check to you, and it comes up on Quicken and, you know, it's three whatever it is.

BLAU: Oh no, it's two eighty-five or something like that. But the people would say to me occasionally, it makes no sense to spend thirty-nine cents sending you $2.70. And I say fine, send me $27 and I'll give you credit for ten years. (laughter)

STASHOWER: That's some record keeping for you.

BLAU: I'm on the computer. It's great fun. You put it in there and if there are any mistakes, my circulation department carries the blame.

STASHOWER: One of the features of your newsletter that I always enjoy is when an actor of note or an actress has passed away. I ask myself, "Is Peter going to include this in his newsletter?" If so, what is the Sherlockian connection? And there usually is one that I have not-that I have not figured. I have to ask you; do these come to you naturally or do you go looking for them when you notice that someone like ah-

BLAU: Well. The question is where do you go looking? There are-now things are computerized, a lot of things are computerized; there are great advantages. If I see that someone has died and I think that there is a Sherlockian connection, I can first of all look in Ron De Waal's *Universal Sherlock Holmes*, which is on my hard disk and I can just see if he's in there. But there is a lot that isn't in Ron. For many years, I have been interested in Sherlockian dramatics: stage, screen, radio, and television. So I have a lot of information in my computer of new plays that are being done and I just put notes on it.

And I've got to confess that if someone has not been Holmes or Watson, I'm not liable to know them-if they act as Moriarty three years ago, I'm not going to know it, but people very nicely tell me about things. The Internet Movie Data Base is fascinating because anybody who received a screen credit for anything in the Granada series is in there, so you could, I suppose, go through the necrology of *Playbill*, run then through the Internet Movie Data Base

and come up with things that I don't know about. But I rely on my memory to nudge me into looking or on people saying, "Oh, Look. He did this or did that." But, so far, I'm still able to remember a lot of things.

STASHOWER: But I love going back and seeing some early Sherlock Holmes movies. I can't remember which one it is but I'm sure you will be able to. We were watching it the other day and there is Judi Dench, as a young woman, in the same movie with Barbara Windsor.

BLAU: Yeah. But the answer to your question, of course, is what sort of a woman was she. (laughter)

STASHOWER: Yeah.

BLAU: It was *A Study in Terror* the first Sherlock Holmes' Jack the Ripper; she was one of the girls.

STASHOWER: I don't remember what Barbara Windsor was, but you don't see those two women on the same bill all that often.

BLAU: No. There are a lot of actors, especially in England, who work a lot because in those days, and still today, for most of them, you don't get paid very much. So, you are always working. If you look at the credits for the Merrison and Williams radio series, Judi Dench was in that, playing Mrs. Hudson. She was married to Michael Williams. So, look, it wasn't difficult to get her to appear. Brian Blessed is in some-people are there. They don't get paid very much for appearing on the BBC, but every little bit helps. When I lived in England in the sixties, it was astounding; an actor who wasn't doing anything at the time, would do a play. And I got to see Alec Guinness do Macbeth. He did it for two months and I mean that was it. He could have done it for longer, but he had to go out and do a film. You were able to go to the theater, and in those days it wasn't expensive to go to the theater, and see that sort of thing. But it was delightful.

STASHOWER: From where we are sitting, we can look into the other room and see a couple of shelves of your library. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about the make up of your apartment on Tunlaw and how it came to be arranged?

BLAU: Ah. Well, I'll go back to my first apartment in Washington, which is on W Street. And that was a two-bedroom apartment and the smaller of the two bedrooms was my library and it got full. And obviously, I wasn't going to get rid of any books and I didn't want to wind up with books in the bathroom and books in the kitchen and books everywhere. So, I gave some thought as to what to do. And in those days, you could buy a townhouse on Dupont Circle and convert it and you get one floor and you rent out the others. But that was more than I wanted to spend, more work than I wanted to do. And one day I picked up *The Washington Post* and there was this tombstone ad to say, "Legum and Norman proudly announces that they are managing the new cooperative apartment building on Tunlaw Road." Well, that was my neighborhood and I knew that there wasn't a cooperative there. So

Thursday, on the way home from work, I just walked down there and found the saleslady-to-be hanging curtains in what was to be the sales office and I said, "This is a cooperative." And she said, "Well, we are not advertising." And I said, "Yes you are; it's in *The Post*." Well, she said, "That was just an announcement. We are not actually advertising apartments." And I said, "Is there a salesman here?" And she looked down from the ladder and said, "What makes you think that I'm not a salesman?" And I said, "Well, if you are, you are the first salesman I ever saw that told a customer to go away." "Oh," she said, and she came down off the ladder and showed me the plan of the apartment, which friends of the developer had submitted.

First of all, people who had been renting there had first choice on buying and then friends of the developer picked some others. At the end of one hall, there were two one-bedroom apartments right down there. And I said, "Let's go see them." We walked in and I could see that I could move a hall–move the door down the hallway and create a foyer and have one apartment to live in and one apartment for my library. So I bought them both and had one of them lined with bookshelves. That's when I discovered what bookshelves are made of, ground up one-dollar bills. (laughter) And so I had a two-bedroom apartment with two bathrooms, the only one in the-there were two-bedroom apartments with only one bathroom. And I–it was full of books and bookshelves. And when I came here, I wanted to sell those two apartments as one unit, to somebody who would value it and no one did. So I put it back into two one-bedroom apartments and those bookshelves were gone. You know, I figured there had to be a collector. It didn't have to be books; you could have put your collection of what-china or anything in there, model airplanes; I don't know what. Nobody was interested.

STASHOWER: At what stage did you realize that you had turned the corner from being an accumulator of books to being a collector?

BLAU: That was easy. I like to ask people when they became a collector, because everybody has a different answer to the question. But I know when I became a collector. I was in England and a friend of mine had a bookstore there, who said, "I know a guy who is leaving the country and he's got some books he wants to sell and you might want to buy them." So I got together with the guy. He had nine books to sell and there were six first editions of the Sherlock Holmes stories, three others including Jessie Saxby's biography of Joe Bell and I think I paid him less than 300 dollars for everything. And that was the first time I bought a book that I already had. I already had a copy of *The Hound*-I didn't have a first edition of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, but I had *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. And I wound up with more than one and I think that's when you become a collector, when you need to have more than one.

If you want to become a serious collector, you do what Don Pollock does, is collect only *The Hound of the Baskervilles* or Nathan Bengis collected-well he didn't collect only *The Sign of the Four*, but he wound up with a couple hundred copies of *The Sign of the Four* and that's crazy.

STASHOWER: Do you still have both of those *Hound*'s?

BLAU: Yes. Well, I've never-I've never disposed of a book that wasn't a duplicate. Some collectors will. I've discussed and discussed this question with Dan Posnansky, who has a wonderful collection but he'll sell things out of his collection. And, I said to him, "I could never do that." And he smiled and said, "Some day, someone is going to have something that you want and he won't sell it to you, but he will trade it to you for something you have. So you are going to have to give up something that you want in order to get something that you want. That's when you are going to have a real decision to make." Well I have not had that decision to make.

STASHOWER: That hasn't happened?

BLAU: No.

STASHOWER: That sounds a lot like baseball cards. (Blau laughs) Downstairs, you have a number of filing cabinets. I was wondering if you could tell us about those?

BLAU: What, they are about twenty-four inches deep.

STASHOWER: Not everybody has seventeen metal file cabinets.

BLAU: Got more now.

STASHOWER: Do you. More than seventeen?

BLAU: Well. It's not really the real reason I moved into this house (Stashower laughs), so I can have room to put these, and it was getting so, because well, like John Bennett Shaw, some people, a lot of people describe both of us, John and me, as completists. John liked to say that he collected with all the selectivity of a vacuum cleaner, which I learned from John. And I don't care what it is; I keep it. I keep the letters I receive. I got five or six four-drawer filing cabinets full of letters. I don't keep every letter I receive. I'm guaranteed to keep at least two signatures of everybody who's ever written to be me, unless they have only written me one letter. But at some point, the letters aren't interesting enough to keep. Now, I kept all of John Bennett Shaw's letters and I kept all of Edgar Smith's letters. And so, some day somebody is going to be able to go through my correspondence and see who I thought was interesting. And perhaps say, "That person isn't that interesting." But it's interesting to me, so I keep the letters. I can't say that my file of letters from Dan Stashower is very thick because you haven't written me very many letters.

STASHOWER: Interesting point though, I have probably sent you hundreds of e-mails.

BLAU: I have those.

STASHOWER: You do archive your e-mails?

BLAU: I do. I do. I've got those on the computer; I burn them onto a DVD. They're all electronic.

STASHOWER: They're all electronic?

BLAU: Yeah.

STASHOWER: You have never printed them out?

BLAU: No, god no, that's the whole purpose of computers. Anyway, I got the correspondence files under–there are eight drawers of my dramatics, theatre programs, film programs, radio stuff, television stuff. I don't know, twenty drawers of Sherlockian society materials.

STASHOWER: Presumably, every time you attend a meeting, you bring home handouts and file them away.

BLAU: No. People very nicely send me their newsletters, announcements. Anything I get goes to a file folder, goes in the file drawer. And, there are my chronological files, and a lot of those because a lot people send me articles. When someone writes a Sherlockian little bit, as they did for today's *Washington Post Magazine*, that will go into the July 2007 file. And, they've been an astounding resource. John did this because it's just easier to thumb through these chronologically and you see the way that Sherlock Holmes has become part of our cultural literacy. The people have Sherlock Holmes as an icon for a detective. And it will say, "Who do you think you are? Sherlock Holmes?", just in a book. But you don't find characters in a book who say, "Who do you think you are? Nero Wolfe?" "Who do you think you are? Clouseau?" It's always Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock Holmes is there. You watch *Tintin*, if you have children. You watch *Animaniacs*, or *Sesame- the Muppet Babies* or whatever it is. And you will see Sherlockian stuff in there, in shows for kids, who don't read. Well, some of it is there for the folks who have to sit there and watch it. But kids who do not read, understand who Sherlock Holmes is or what Sherlock Holmes is, even if they have not been weaned on the Sherlock Holmes stories, as your children have.

STASHOWER: Was is you who gave Sam the Snoopy with the deerstalker and a–

BLAU: Sure.

STASHOWER: Yeah. It's amazing how much there is.

BLAU: 1998, Mike Whelan and Mary Ann Bradley and I and Catherine Cooke were invited to Japan to help the Japanese celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Japan Sherlock Holmes Club. And that–it was so delightful. Everybody was nice to us. You know, Japanese are supposed to be polite anyway. But it went far beyond just being polite. You go to the Baker Street Irregulars annual dinner now and you see the Japanese are there and the French and the Germans and the Brits are out in force. Even the Canadians, although some people don't consider Canadians as foreigners, our fifty-first state. But the Sherlockian world is very hospitable.

STASHOWER: You were talking about the prevalence of the Sherlockian iconography in children's things. My son, my older son Sam, from the time he was very young, knew your house, as the house with the piece of a whale. (Blau laughs). And we–that is still how he refers to your house. We come to the annual Christmas party at the house with the piece of a whale. And with, I must say, a chocolate fountain a close second.

BLAU: Yes, I was going to say. I figure gradually–

STASHOWER: The chocolate fountain will probably overtake the piece of whale. But before we started rolling, you were talking a little about your investiture Black Peter and how it came to be available. Would you tell us a little about that?

BLAU: The investiture started out as the titles of stories and was supposed to be only the titles of stories, which meant there was supposed to be only sixty members, but before they got to the end of the sixty, someone wanted a title that was one of the unrecorded cases and they kept going. And so now, people can be characters or things or what have you. But in 1958, Morris Rosenblum, a nice teacher of Latin in New York City high schools, he had been Black Peter. And the man who had been the Greek Interpreter had died. So, Morris asked Edgar Smith if he could be the Greek Interpreter, because of classics and all that. Edgar said yes, so Black Peter was then available, very nicely timed for when Peter Blau is as close as you are going to get to Black Peter.

At the time, I had a beard and I was drinking rum and I had retired from the sea and so it seemed very appropriate. I'm not sure that it was entirely coincidental that I wound up living in Pittsfield on Holmes Road. No, it was Oliver Wendell Holmes, but just a quarter a mile from Arrowhead, which was the house in which Herman Melville was living when he wrote *Moby Dick*. But Black Peter was a whaler, so I've always had a fondness for things whaleish. In the Black Peter alcove in my library, I have pictures of whales and pictures of Black Peter and whale's teeth, fake, I have no real scrimshaw, and a collection of rum.

STASHOWER: Yes, it's quite an impressive collection of rum.

BALU: Oh, I collected the rum even before I got to be Black Peter.

STASHOWER: Did you? Just the navy–

BLAU: Yeah! Rum was fun. But yes–when my mother and father traveled, they would say, "What can we bring you?" I would say, "Bring me a bottle of the local rum." And some of it was very good and some of it was awful, because there are some countries that just don't know how to make good rum. But ah–now two or three years ago, Peter Ashman, one of the very few Sherlockians in Alaska visited here and saw my Black Peter archive and went back to Alaska and mailed me, in this very long package, a piece of a whale. Some baleen, from a baleen whale, it's ten feet long. It's the hairy stuff that's in its mouth that strains out the krill and plankton. And this ten-foot piece of baleen was the shortest piece he could find because he had to fit it in the–but the only people there that are allowed to traffic in baleen are the Alaskan natives. But it's been a law-so I have a piece of baleen and it's really great cause,

see, here, you can touch it. What is it? People don't guess what that is. It's not intuitive. (laughter).

STASHOWER: No, it's certainly not. As I say, it made quite an impression on Sam, who was then four years old. You have many unusual items in your collection. If you had to single out a favorite or favorites, what would they be?

BLAU: I hate doing that because I always say that the most interesting and most valuable items in my collection are the ones I can tell the best stories about. I like to do show and tell. It's hard to do show and tell on tape recorders. I did a series of lectures; I've only done two of them. I might do another one some day. It's called "Adventures in Collecting." And, the first one I did was my collection of nonexistent Sherlockian artifacts.

And everybody knows, if you have been reading the annotations in the Sherlock Holmes stories that when Sherlock Holmes refers to the Arcadia mixture, there is no–I mean–there is no Arcadian–no, there has never been an Arcadia Mixture. It was invented, and it was invented by J.M. Barrie, who was a friend of Arthur Conan Doyle. J.M. Barrie wrote a book called *My Lady Nicotine*, in which he wrote about his favorite pipe tobacco. He just called it Arcadia Mixture and you can be reasonably sure that he gave a copy of this book to Conan Doyle and that Conan Doyle read it because it was just there at the time when Conan Doyle was writing the story, and Holmes–he wanted Holmes to refer to the "Incident of the Arcadia Mixture."

But I have some tobacco tins for the Arcadia Mixture and I'm not sure J.M. Barrie ever saw them, but someone in upstate New York decided to make the Arcadia Mixture, and on the tins has some quotes from J.M. Barrie books about how wonderful the Arcadia Mixture is. And these are being sold. They still turn up, and not very expensive, on eBay. Thank goodness for eBay. It turns out that a tobacconist in London read the book and said, "Wait a minute, Barrie is one of our customers." They checked their records and he wrote to Barrie and said, "You wrote the book and you talked about Craven A but you smoke–you talked about the Arcadia Mixture but you smoke Craven A, our Craven A." "Well yes." "Incidentally, can we say that?" And Barrie said, "Yes." From then on, they advertised their Craven tobacco mixture as that. But there really is an Arcadia Mixture.

The other lecture was about the world's largest collection of books signed by Conan Doyle on a ship (Stashower laughs), which I have. Not on ships, on a ship. It's the ship–and there's two of them, only two of them and I was given one and I had the chance to acquire the other and there they are; they are signed the same day, the same ship, the same place. On the other hand, one of them, the guy he signed it for, J. Bennett Nolan, wrote in pencil on it, "Signed for my daughter onboard." And he got the ship wrong and the place wrong.

STASHOWER: What was the ship?

BLAU: The ship was in New York Harbor. What had happened was, Conan Doyle had come to the United States to lecture, 1923, and the ship arrived in New York Harbor. And you had to wait for quarantine and all this stuff. And he came up on deck and there was this college

girl, this friend of my mother, reading a copy of *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* that she bought at a bookstall on the pier. She looked up and saw Conan Doyle and so she had him sign it for her. And eventually she and her husband were staying at our house in Pittsfield and they saw my collection.

I was in England and they sent me this book saying you need it. This book ought to be in your collection. Well, a local dealer here in Washington called me up and said, "There's a book here you got to–it's signed by Conan Doyle. I would like to see it; it was signed. It was a terribly battered copy of *The White Company*, the same cheap edition. But it was signed with the same date, so we knew where he was, but the guy who he signed it for wrote in pencil. He had the ship wrong, the place wrong. And when I gave this lecture in Philadelphia, I said, "I have no idea why this guy Nolan didn't know where he was." And Ben Wolfe, the Philadelphia book dealer said, "I know." And I said, "What." He said, "He was drunk." And he said, "J. Bennett Nolan was a scion of a very rich family here in Philadelphia and he drank."

And his friends said to him, "You really need to do something other than drink. Why don't you go on a trip?" And he said, "Where?" And they said, "Go to Egypt. People are going to Egypt." And he said, "Egypt?" And they said, "Go to Egypt and we'll give you a letter of introduction to people and you can go see something interesting." Nolan got to Egypt and he looked up this fellow and said, "I have this letter of introduction; you might have something interesting to show me." And Howard Carter said, "Matter of fact, we just opened this tomb." (laughter) So, Nolan was in King Tut's tomb the day that Fabiola, Queen of all the Belgiums, got her guided tour. He came back to Europe and he sailed back on the same ship with Conan Doyle and I have seen his diary, where he wrote about this. And Conan Doyle, when he arrived in New York, he discovered that Lord Carnarvon had died and Conan Doyle–oh, he came to Nolan and said, "I told you, the curse of King Tut." He said, "I tried to explain to Conan Doyle that Carnarvon was sick." I mean, that's how this other book got signed.

Some–many years later I said to Dame Jean Conan Doyle, very kindly, who sent me a signature of her father's cut off a check or something like that. I wrote back to her and said, "It's lovely, but I don't need one, I've got signatures." And I told her about the book and she wrote back and she said, "I remember Daddy coming down to our stateroom and saying he'd met this college girl." (laughs)

STASHOWER: No kidding.

BLAU: Yep.

STASHOWER: Why that's terrific. She would have been pretty young that year.

BLAU: 1923. Yeah. But they travelled. He took the family with them. He had his wife, the kids and a nurse. And the story is, they arrived in Salt Lake City and Conan Doyle to his horror discovered that the nurse had told the children to be very careful because the Mormons kidnap children. (laughs) I make sure not to tell that to her. Signed stuff. I've got

a copy of the 1953 edition of *The Complete Sherlock Holmes,* signed by Arthur Conan Doyle.

STASHOWER: '53 edition? Signed by Conan Doyle who died in 1930?

BLAU: Yes. And I like to show these to people because it's a test of whether they are, quote, real book people. And here's a book signed by–well, a real book person will always look at the title page first and the title page first in the book. You want to see who published it and when. A lot of people look at *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* and say, "Oh well, that's nice." Other people look at and say, "Wait a minute, 1953." Well, what happened was, that Doubleday when–they moved and they opened up a desk drawer and found sheets of paper that had been signed by Conan Doyle for the Crowborough edition. And they were going to do a thousand of them, but they only published seven hundred and something copies of the Crowborough edition. It's all that people would buy. And they had these sheets leftover. So when they found them, they took these sheets that had printed on–sheets with just the signature printed on them and they did a special edition of a hundred forty-seven copies of the 1953 Garden City edition, with the special introduction by John Dickson Carr. And, so, it has an authentic signature. But, if you look at the paper, it's the same paper that's in the Crowborough edition. But yeah, 1953 edition sign, with an authentic Arthur Conan Doyle signature.

STASHOWER: Now, am I'm right in recalling that there is something special about your Crowborough edition?

BLAU: Oh Yeah. I had a Crowborough edition. It's a terrible conflict to have because I had a Crowborough, very nice, in dust jacket. And Dame Jean Conan Doyle bequeathed to me in her will, her set of the Crowborough edition and eventually it arrived and it wasn't in dust jacket. But it's–one of the volumes for her set had been on display in the exhibition in New York in 1952. And there, laid in is the little display card, "Loaned by Flight Lieutenant Jean Conan Doyle." And so I had two sets of this series and it didn't seem to make any sense to have two sets. You think about taking the dust jackets off the one and putting them on the other, but someone would spot that because the spines are sunned and someone would know that's a made up set and that's not the thing to do, so. I sold the one with the dust jacket. But it was a duplicate, so it's all right. So I now have not mint condition, not dust jacketed copy of the Crowborough edition, set of the Crowborough edition, but it's Dame Jean's. And, I have, not from Dame Jean; I have the manuscript of his foreword to it.

STASHOWER: Oh really?

BLAU: Yep. A Philadelphia book dealer, Ben Wolfe, got interested and he found in England, Conan Doyle's last secretary, Constance Holland. Nice little old lady, she was short. She said Conan Doyle used to call her Tiny. And she had a lot of stuff of Conan Doyle's. And one of the things that she had was the manuscript for the introduction to the Crowborough edition, which I bought from Ben.

I've been in his shop when he was showing me these things and he had–almost everything was about spiritualism. He had letters and stuff. I said to Ben, I said, "These rusty paperclips on these letters." And he said, "Yeah." And I said, "You need to take the paperclips because they're rusting through the paper." And he said, "I'm only going to have these for a week and they're not going to do that much." I said, "You really should take the paperclips off." And he thought and he said, "You want one of the paperclips don't you?" And I said, "No." I said, "I want two of them." So, I have two of them and I had them set into paperweights, clear plastic paperweights. And I gave one to John Bennett Shaw for Christmas. I sent it out to him and said, "I'm not going to tell you why this is interesting, but there is no paperclip mentioned in the Sherlock Holmes stories. You've got until the annual dinner to figure it out." And he never did figure it out; I had to tell him it's Conan Doyle's personal paperclip. And then Ben found another version of this and said, "You need to have this too." And I didn't know what it was. Finally, it took awhile but I finally figured out what it was. It was the last chapter in the second edition of *Memories and Adventures*, where he brought the book up to date. So, I have both of those manuscripts

STASHOWER: That's a very nice one.

BLAU: That's fun.

STASHOWER: That's the 1930?

BLAU: Uh-huh.

STASHOWER: Your collection also includes items of things that were advertised on the radio show–

STASHOWER: Oh yeah.

STASHOWER: –Sherlock Holmes radio show that you listened to.

BLAU: Well, I didn't start listening in 1930, when the radio show started. But, yeah, I grew up listening to Basil Rathbone. In the 40s, that's all there was; there was no television. You could play phonograph records and they still had phonographs in those days. But I decided a couple of years ago to collect sponsors. So I just collected all the sponsors of the Sherlock Holmes radio show. I have a G. Washington coffee tin. It doesn't have any coffee in it. That was the first instant coffee. I have a bottle of Kreml Hair Tonic and that's Kreml Hair Tonic in it. I have a tin of Bromo-Quinine tablets. I have a Petri wine bottle, the old original Petri wine bottle. It doesn't have any Petri wine in it. I still have to find a bottle of Petri wine. And a sports jacket with a Clipper Craft Clothes label in it, which unfortunately doesn't fit me.

STASHOWER: But you have the sports jacket.

BLAU: Yes. All thanks to eBay. (Stashower laughs) It's astounding what you can find on eBay. You can find very expensive things. But anybody, who has anything that they don't

want to give away to the Salvation Army, advertises it on eBay. And you look at it and you say, “Why would anybody want that?” Well, for five dollars, somebody will want almost anything. But yes, I collect sponsors.

STASHOWER: Are there still books you are looking for?

BLAU: Always. I don’t have *Beeton’s Christmas Annual* from 1887.

STASHOWER: Okay. (laughter) Funny, I don’t have one of those either.

BLAU: Well, you know, you have these fantasies. You go up in some small town in Maine and there’s a barn full of things, with milk cartons, full of things. And you go through–my fantasy was finding two copies of *Beeton’s Christmas Annual*. Because if I had two, I would have kept the better one and have a box made for the other one. And I was going to give that one to John Bennett Shaw because, obviously, if I had bought it in a junk shop in Maine, it wasn’t going to be very expensive. So I was going to give that to John Bennett Shaw with the condition that laid into the inside of the clamshell box was a sheet of paper, which told the story of the book. And, you know, I would sign it and John would sign it and the deal was that this book could not be sold. It had to be given to someone, bequeathed or given while he was alive. So, that over the years, there would be this series of signatures and provenance in there and there was no valuation on the book because it had never been sold (laughs). Signatures can be fun.

Yeah, I don’t have all of Conan Doyle’s books. Some of them, I only have in later editions. There are always things to go through and find. But, I hate paying lots of money for things I already have. So, I have a book that I bought so long ago and I didn’t know I was going to be a collector and the dust jacket is gone. But I can buy–I can now pay $200, $300, or $400 dollars for that and a dust jacket. But, no, I’m not interested in paying that much for a dust jacket. I figured in fact, here’s a copy in which Peter Blau foolishly let the dust jacket fall apart. I mean that will have some value (Stashower laughs).

STASHOWER: In the spirit of your *Beeton’s Annual* being passed on, you gave me a set of wooden children’s blocks a few years ago.

BLAU: Okay.

STASHOWER: And told me that they would have to be passed on to another child.

BLAU: Oh yeah. They weren’t Sherlockian though?

STASHOWER: Not Sherlockian in shape, but Sherlockian in ownership

BLAU: Yeah, I like the idea of things being passed on from hand-to-hand. We have here in the house, things that my mother and father owned, things that my grandfather owned, things that my uncle and aunt owned. I mean, it’s nice to have things to remember people by and especially with kid’s stuff, they don’t have to be new. So yes, yeah I mean, you can pass

them on to Sam's grandchildren, Sam's children. (Stashower laughs) That means you got to save them. (Stashower laughs) Listen, you are in the basement and we got Bev's books and there's Samantha's books; they still got them.

Now, you want to talk about keeping books. There was a Sherlockian named Doyle Beckemeyer who turned into a cantankerous young man. He had arthritis at an early age and was pensioned off by the railway and got a pension and lived the rest of his life with arthritis and not happily. And he repaired clocks and things like that. And he lived on the first floor of a house in Centralia, Illinois; the landlady lived upstairs. And Doyle lived there and wrote cantankerous letters to me and to John Bennett Shaw, everybody. He just–he didn't approve of anything; he didn't like anything.

And finally he said–well his mother had died. Well, I think there's $5,000 worth of insurance. Doyle buried her and bought a new suit and had a girlfriend for a while, until the money ran out. Then he decided to leave Centralia and wrote to John Bennett Shaw and said, "I want to get rid of my Sherlockian stuff. Would you like to have it?" And John wrote, you know, called me and said, "We need to do something about this." I said, "Oh, what does he want for this?" He said, "No. No. He doesn't want anything. He says he'll give it to us, but we got to come get it." I said, "Do you know what he has?" And he says, "Yes. I have been to his house. He has all sorts of stuff from the old days." So, fortunately, I was going to be in Minneapolis for a geology convention. So, I went-flew down to St. Louis and rented a car and drove to Centralia and there was Doyle. And he had in his –I mean, every room in the house had books. The bathroom had books, the kitchen had–books everywhere, his books, his folk's books, his children's books, his parents' children's books. He never got rid of a book. And I filled, I think, ten or twelve cartons full of his Sherlockian collection and shipped those back to Washington. At which time, I took some and sold some for him and sent him the money. But the day after I left, Doyle packed his suitcase and his toolkit toolbox and put them in the car and drove to Texas, leaving everything else behind as a surprise to his landlady (laughter).

Closing: You have been listening to an interview in the Baker Street Irregulars Oral History Project, conducted by the BSI trust for the BSI archives, which comprise a special collection at the Houghton Library at Harvard University. [Eds. note: The Archives are now located at the Lilly Library at Indiana University.] Check back next month for part two of Dan Stashower's conversation with Peter Blau. The copyright for this interview is owned by the Baker Street Irregulars. No copy or rebroadcast of this interview can be made without the express written consent of the Baker Street Irregulars. Go to bsitrust.org for more recordings, as well as, photos and details of each BSI dinner since 1934. You'll also find details about donating material to the trust or providing financial support, all at bsitrust.org.

Part 2 of 3

Introduction: This recording is part of the Baker Street Irregulars Trust Oral History Project. The Baker Street Irregulars is the world's oldest Sherlock Holmes literary society. The BSI

Trust collects correspondence, photographs, recordings, and other memorabilia for the BSI Archives, which comprise a special collection at the Houghton Library at Harvard University. [Eds. note: The Archives are now located at the Lilly Library at Indiana University.] This is part two of Dan Stashower's conversation with Peter Blau recorded on July 22, [Eds. Note: July 29] 2007. The copyright for the interview is owned by the Baker Street Irregulars. See bsitrust.org for terms of use.

STASHOWER: I remember a few years ago, we were walking out of the BSI dinner and you said something to the effect of, it was the first time there had ever been an electric organ played–an electric piano played at a BSI dinner. Now surely, over the course of fifty years, you noticed some fairly dramatic change in the way the dinner is conducted, the kind of things that go on at the dinner. I guess the question is: if Edgar Smith and Julian Wolff were still coming-were going to be coming to next year's dinner with you, how would you prepare them for the changes that have taken place?

BLAU: Ah! Well, unless they had been in a deep freeze some place, they would have seen what's happened to the world, so they probably wouldn't be too surprised at some of the things. In the fifties and sixties there was a lot more–certainly there was a lot more smoking; everybody smoked. There was a lot more drinking. Somewhere in the archival history series from the forties, Jon Lellenberg has published the bill for an annual dinner of the Baker–the liquor bill. And, you do the calculation and they averaged five drinks per person and some of the people didn't drink. So there was a lot of drinking going on, but that was true in that era. People got a lot drunker than they do now. Nowadays, there's not much drunk. We have the cocktail hour beforehand and at the annual dinner there is wine at the table. Maybe somebody will smuggle a flask in, but you don't see people under the influence, or what have you, anymore.

I remember, god it had to be in the seventies, I was at Julian's Saturday cocktail party and Carl Anderson, one of the old, original Sons of the Copper Beeches from Philadelphia, he was there and he was drunk because he was the generation that drank. And Julian, as a good host, said to me and Norm Nolan: "See that Andy gets a taxicab." So we took Andy down and Norm held him up and I hailed a taxicab. And Andy grabbed us by the arm and says, "You're coming with me." So we got in the taxicab with him and he gave an address and we looked at the address and it wasn't a hotel; it was an apartment building. And we went up in the elevator–and he was known to the doorman–we went up in the apartment building to whatever and down the hall and knocked on the door. And the door opened and this little old lady, nice little old lady, opened the door, "Andy, good to see you." She said, "Who are your friends." "Oh," he says. So we went in and we sat there and chatted and she got us all a drink and she had obviously known Andy for a long time. And she was Ines Hall; she was the widow of Bill Hall, Christopher Morley's friend. So, we sat there talking and she talked about Christopher Morley and about Bill Hall and then Andy said, "Ines, show them the book." She thought. "Oh," she said, "Yes of course." She went off to the other room and came back with a book and handed it to me. And it was Bill Hall's copy of *Beeton's Christmas Annual*, signed by Conan Doyle.

STASHOWER: Really?

BLAU: Yeah. So I was just sitting there holding this book. (laughs) And Ines will still tell you that story when Andy brought these two to her. Norm is not with us anymore, but he remembered that. I mean you could just discover–so, yeah, there was more drinking. Lord knows there was more smoking. One of the things that was done in the old days was Basil Davenport, who with Christopher Morley, was judge of the book-of-the-month club. His sole duty was to tell the annual dirty joke at the annual dinner. And Basil Davenport was a connoisseur of dirty jokes. And he had all year (Stashower laughs) to select a really good one. And they weren't all that dirty; they were just funny.

And I remember some years later, after a Silver Blaze in New York, some of us wound up at a restaurant in lower Manhattan and Carl Anderson, Andy, was sitting at the table. And a woman named Lynn Biederstadt, and she was very annoyed that women were not invited to the annual dinner. And Andy explained to her that there's a need for men to be able to get off with other men because they can tell stories and say things that they wouldn't say if women were present. And Lynn in high dudgeon said, "Andy, you don't know any words that I haven't heard before." She said, "I know some you haven't." And Andy didn't know what to make-I explained to Lynn that the point wasn't that you didn't tell these stories in front of women because they would embarrass the women; you didn't tell them in front of women because they would embarrass the men. I mean, there are things you didn't do with ladies present. That's why in the old days, ladies would retire and men would sit in the dining room and pass the port and the cigars. It was just a different era.

Now, Lord knows there are a lot more younger people at the dinners now. Julian Wolff brought in a lot of young punks. There's a lot more different kinds of people. In Edgar Smith's day, almost everybody there was academic or literary or something, some connection with the literary world because that's the world that Edgar knew. There were some businessmen there because Edgar was a businessman. Julian wound up with a lot of doctors and Julian was a very nice guy. He would invite you to the annual dinner and one–If you came, he just kept inviting you back. So, you wound up with people that thought it was an interesting thing to go to but had no particular interest in Sherlockian affairs. And, of course they sat in chairs that ardent Sherlockians were eager to sit in but there wasn't room. So, when Julian died, there were a lot of doctors that suddenly weren't invited to the annual dinner anymore (laughs).

Let's see, there was a–one-year a nice young Sherlockian, Barbara Mueller, now deceased, so I can tell the story. She and some of the Adventuresses had gone up to one of these lecture series in upper Manhattan, Barnard or something, anyway, Marymount. Anyway, they had gone to a lecture series to hear a guy talk about Sherlock Holmes and it turned out that he didn't know a lot about Sherlock Holmes. And he was lecturing, in the front row, to four or five of the Adventuresses, which put him at a disadvantage. But, Barbara took a shine to him and started seeing him and Barbara asked me if I could arrange for Doctor Bob to come to the annual dinner. And I said, "Well, I can always ask." So I asked Julian to invite Barbara's friend, Bob, to the annual dinner and Julian did. And presumably, Bob was very grateful and Barbara was very grateful. And Julian, being Julian, Bob, Mr. Bob, was invited the next year and I got this irate telephone call from Barbara saying, "Why was he invited?" I

said, “Because he was invited last year.” I said, “What’s the problem.” She said, “Well, I’m not seeing him anymore.” (laughter)

STASHOWER: Careful what you wish for.

BLAU: It’s bigger. I don’t object to that. I think it–I always think it’s fun to meet new people. Well, I do object that’s it bigger. I think that smaller meetings are always more fun because you have time to talk to people, talk with people. At the Red Circle, I try not to have something going on every moment. At the Baker Street Irregulars dinner, there’s something- that’s not________(??), they’re always having-there is always that. But, I’d like more of a chance to chat with people.

STASHOWER: Yeah. I have been very lucky that way. Every year I’ve been sat with people that I have not met before, who are very interesting. But-I sat next to Marcus Geisser last year. And, a more interesting–

BLAU: Oh wow.

STASHOWER: –man you could not hope to meet, but I had not meet him before until I found myself sitting next to him. I know what you mean. There was not a whole lot of time to talk, but we exchanged cards and I have been in e-mail contact with him. Those are the kinds of interesting people you–

BLAU: But the meetings are–the agenda is different; the agenda is always the same. There are new things done. Mike Whelan has started some things that I think are fun, the “The Toast to an old Irregular”. Somebody talks about the old days. Well in the old days, they weren’t talking about the old days; those were the old days. The toasts were fun. Under Julian, the agenda got to be fixed, because if it worked, they would do it again. So every year, Isaac Asimov would do something and every year John Bennett Shaw would do something. And every year they would sing us–sing the Irene Adler song. There got to be a sameness about the meetings so the decision was made under Tom Stix, that has been carried on under Mike, to do different things each year, and I think that’s been done fairly successfully. But the world changes.

The idea that we would have so many people from other countries, as we do now, would astonish Edgar certainly and Julian would have been surprised, not astonished, because in the sixties and seventies, people started to travel more. I think they would be astonished, not with anything to do with the Baker Street Irregulars, but with all the movies and television shows. In the 1950’s, there was the Ronald Howard series and the Basil Rathbone play for three performances in New York. You know, that was pretty much it. In the sixties, there wasn’t much, “A Study in Terror” and, you know, a few movies. But, god in the seventies and eighties and nineties, I think that they would be overwhelmed by the excellence in the Granada series and the idea that somebody would spend that much money making shows that were that well done. Some were better than others, but that’s true in almost everything. Sturgeon’s Law, somebody once came up to Ted Sturgeon and said, “Ninety percent of

science fiction is crap." And Sturgeon said, "Ninety percent of everything is crap." But, the Granada series beat that average by a lot.

STASHOWER: By a lot. Yeah.

BLAU: I think that the amount of pastiches in the Sherlockian world would astonish them because that really didn't explode until the seventies when the Royal Shakespeare Company came here and Nicholas Meyer's *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*. That was the "Sherlockian Boom," as they called it. That's new; that's a great change. God knows what they would have made of the Internet and the ease of communication. And I remember when you called someone and it cost you after the first three minutes–you know, the operator would come in after the end of three minutes to tell you that it's starting to get real expensive. Now you can pay forty dollars a month and call anywhere anytime, as long as it's in the United States. So, between cheap telephone calls and cheap Internet, the postal service could survive only by issuing Star Trek stamps, Marvel Comics stamps and occasionally, a Harry Houdini stamp. Whatever I–did you ever get around to digging up Harry Houdini?

STASHOWER: I haven't dug him up yet, but that does raise a question. You are one of many Baker Street Irregulars, past and present, who have a particular interest in magic and magicians. How did it start for you?

BLAU: I've got to interrupt. One thing that is different is Conan Doyle and that really is the difference. Denis Conan Doyle came to a meeting of the Baker Street Irregulars; he went home offended that nobody mentioned his father. And then Adrian started attacking the Baker Street Irregulars and they thought this was funny and made fun of Adrian, and he didn't like that at all and started a serious war with the Baker Street Irregulars. But Edgar would have loved to have met Jean Conan Doyle, as would Julian; she was a lovely lady. And the idea that in the mid-eighties, the nineties, the aughts, we had such serious attention turned to Conan Doyle, Richard Lancelyn Green's bibliography, we're collecting Conan Doyle, we're publishing Conan Doyle stuff. He's not thundering back into print; but, Michael Crichton acknowledges that he's redoing Conan Doyle with *The Lost World*. The interest in Conan Doyle was something that's–and I don't mean just in the world in general, among the Baker Street Irregulars.

Magic. We're living in Pittsfield and New York is where we went because it was too hard–there's was no Massachusetts turnpike, so it was a real trick to get to Boston, but it was easy to get down into New York on the Taconic Parkway. And my father who was really very good at making sure that I was exposed to anything that might be interesting. And he didn't have to been interested and, my god, we would go to the American Museum of Natural History, so I could see the dinosaurs. We would do everything. But, he took me to Lou Tannen's Magic Shop in New York and this wasn't the only magic shop in the world but it was **the** magic shop. And Lou Tannen-it was for professionals, it was for amateurs; it was for anyone who might come in there. And obviously I didn't have anything specific-he made me feel very welcome; he showed me things, you know.

STASHOWER: Mr. Tannen?

BLAU: Yeah. Oh, Lou Tannen. Sells stuff, you know, for a dollar. So, I went home and started learning how to do these tricks, and not very well. But, you didn't have to do tricks very well in order to amaze people because in those days, most people hadn't seen real magicians. The first real magician I ever saw was Blackstone, Harry Blackstone Senior. He came to Pittsfield and did a show at the Colonial Theater and my god, he sawed a woman in half, not putting her in a box with a saw. He laid her on a table and ran a buzz saw through her and that gets your attention and disappeared a horse and–I mean you sit there and say "god." To see live magicians perform, they didn't–you go to birthday parties that have clowns. They didn't have magicians that they do nowadays and you didn't see it on television.

So magic was astounding and, as I say, you didn't have to do it very well in order to impress people; but it was fun. I think every magician enjoys impressing people. That's probably the real reason you do magic, to have people sit there and go "Ooh". The intake of breath; that's the real thrill for magicians. And, as time passed, I never got to do stage magic. I never got to do magic for grownups. But I did magic for children and for my cousins, my little cousins, when I was in the Navy. I would come up to Washington, in the fifties, and do magic for my little cousins. It didn't matter whether their folks wanted to see me again. These kids would lie on the floor and hold their breaths and turn blue until they invited cousin Peter back again. So, I still do magic for children. I won't do magic for grownups now. It's too easy to fool grownups; children are the tough ones.

STASHOWER: Yeah, I would agree with that.

BLAU: In the movie, "Fairy Tale: A True Story", where it opens with Conan Doyle taking kids to see Harry Houdini and Harry Houdini does a trick for Dame Jean and she says, "You took that out of your sleeve." And he says, "Never do magic for children. They expect nothing and see everything." And that's real; but it's fun; you have to think like a child. And I don't mind being childish. So that's how I got there. I don't think that's what Clayton Rawson did or–

STASHOWER: Were you there that year that Clayton Rawson–

BLAU: No. I never met him.

STASHOWER: You never met him.

BLAU: That was in the forties.

STASHOWER: Forties. I thought it might have been the early fifties, but definitely before your time. And he never came back?

BLAU: Well, I never met him. I don't know when he died.

STASHOWER: Sixties.

BLAU: Yeah. Well, I'm not sure he was all that interested in Sherlock Holmes.

STASHOWER: I'm not sure either.

BLAU: People came to things in those days; they still do, because it sounds like something that's going to be wonderful. Can you imagine going to see Gypsy Rose Lee sing? Why don't we invite her to a cocktail party? And Gypsy Rose Lee came to a cocktail party before a BSI annual dinner and I'm sure that Rex Stout invited her so that everybody at the annual dinner could go home that night and tell their wife that they had a drink with Gypsy Rose Lee. (laughter)

STASHOWER: Yeah. That would be something. That would be something.

BLAU: It still happens. They had–Inga Swenson was at an annual dinner. I thought that was one of the nicest annual dinners we had where–

STASHOWER: All of us singing to her.

BLAU: Yes, Absolutely. Absolutely. I don't know, someone is going to get around to interviewing you when you get old and gray and you can tell stories about how you got interested in magic.

STASHOWER: Well. When I think about it. In the short time I have been coming to BSI dinners there have been some very interesting guests. I mean, Pataki was there one year. Mike Whelan has done a terrific job in bringing writers into the mix, Neil Gaiman, Peter Straub has been there a couple of times. And, just for me personally, it was an incredible thrill to meet Nick Meyer because I was fourteen years old when that book came out and that was a big, big book for me when I was growing up.

BLAU: The Harry Potter of your generation. (laughs)

STASHOWER: For me personally, it was. And that was really–

BLAU: I remember reading that book and got about half way through the book and I remember saying to myself, "This was a movie script"–

STASHOWER: Yeah. Well–

BLAU: And it was because I'm reading that-I didn't know going into it-it hadn't registered with me that he was a scriptwriter, screenwriter. But, yeah, screenwriters were on strike so he had nothing to do; so he wrote this book. But, when the movie came out, of course you could see all the dueling and stuff. It was a book made-to-be-made into the movies.

STASHOWER: Oh yeah. Then it's certified on the movie card.

BLAU: It was very well done. It was very well received. It had good actors in it. You see them now; they started doing it again on television. They have the "making of " they call them now. But, it's a fifteen-minute program about a movie. I remember Alan Arkin saying that he got the script and so he read all these books about Freud. And then they sent him the script and it wasn't Freud. It was Nicholas Meyer's father. (laughs)

STASHOWER: Well. And speaking of another BSI who has a Houdini connection, Nicholas Meyer's father being the man who wrote *Houdini: A Mind in Chains*. Funny the way that some of these threads intersect, the tangled skein. This year, at the 2007 Baker Street Irregulars weekend, we had Laurie King. Now, surely there would have been some Irregulars, past and present, who might have objected to her coming. You've always been a fan of hers.

BLAU: Yeah. I think she is a good writer. I'm not a purist. I enjoy seeing what people do with, or to Sherlock Holmes. It's very hard to write a good Sherlock Holmes story. Conan Doyle didn't always succeed in writing a very good Sherlock Holmes story. I think that it's more fun to read pastiches that aren't Sherlock Holmes stories. I liked it. I like Laurie King, who writes about Mary Russell. Sherlock Holmes is a character in that. Carole Nelson Douglas writes Irene Adler books. John Gardner and Michael Kurland have written Moriarty books. You come into the Sherlock Holmes stories through a different door and you can have some fun with that. And the world is full of people who think that all I have to do is write a story and put Sherlock Holmes into it and that will make it a good story or a story that everyone will read. And, it isn't true. People are buying, but they aren't good stories.

But yes, I think that the idea–I think the basic idea of this teenage American girl walking across walking across the Sussex Downs and tripping over an old guy lying in the grass, looking at bees, is funny. I mean that is a good way to start a book. And one assumes that as soon as one finds out that the book is going to go into a series, that of course, they are going to get married, because how else are you going to be able to continue this relationship? And I thought her last volume, her most recent book, *The Art of Detection*, was wonderfully done and here's–she took the book, *Locked Rooms* which is told from Mary Russell's viewpoint and in the middle of *The Art of Detection*, it is the same story but told from Sherlock Holmes' viewpoint. She made sure that story worked because that's why Les Klinger and I got thanked in it. I mean, she sent it to us and said, "If I have done anything really wrong here–" She hadn't, as far as I was concerned. But, yes, she is an interesting speaker and an interesting writer.

Sure, I would have loved to have– I don't know what they would have done in the old days. People like Nicholas Meyer would have astonished Edgar Allen Smith, ah Edgar Smith. They didn't have that sort of pastiche popularly in those days. But I think Edgar Smith would have enjoyed the Mary Russell stories. They're good books and no, it doesn't bother me a bit what they have Sherlock Holmes doing. I mean you think of Poul Anderson and Anthony Boucher writing Sherlock Holmes science fiction, real science fiction, and doing it very well so, I can't complain about that. I mean, it's not offensive to me that someone has come along and done a Harry Houdini series, stealing someone else's character. (laughs)

STASHOWER: I don’t know what you are talking about there.

BLAU: How many Cleveland boys are there that actually got their first book into print in a hardback as you did it?

STASHOWER: Oh, from Cleveland. I’ll say there are probably are a fair number. (Blau laughs) It’s a–

BLAU: There may be some who will admit it but in truth won’t admit it.

STASHOWER: All the best people are from Cleveland, as you know.

Comment: At this point in the interview, Dan and Peter continue their conversation two weeks later on August 5, 2007. They’re conducting the interview outside, so you will hear a change in the audio quality. [There is a great deal of aircraft noise overhead through out the recording, bird noises, wind-over-the-microphone noise, and the changing of tapes in the recorder]

STASHOWER: We are sitting on the back deck of Peter’s home in Bethesda enjoying cigars. And Peter was just about to me how his view of Conan Doyle has changed over the years.

BLAU: I got a copy of John Dickson Carr’s biography of Conan Doyle sent to me because, obviously, Ben Abramson thought I ought to read it. But it’s inscribed to me by John Dickson Carr, author, and Ben Abramson, purveyor. I still have it, without the dust jacket, as it’s true of a lot of books I acquired in the forties and early fifties, when I didn’t understand that dust jackets were more valuable than the books. I have a collection of things, could do something interesting, things published only on the dust jackets. Christopher Morley’s *Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson; A Textbook of Friendship* has on the back of the jacket, this little pastiche, “The Adventure of the F. W. L.”, which he wrote in close mark (??).

STASHOWER: Oh, no kidding.

BLAU: Absolutely. It was never reprinted until I did it for one of my season’s souvenirs from the annual dinners, along with the letters in which they wrote about it. And Morley also has a little poem called, “Not Quite Purple of a Perfect Circle,” which appears on the inside of the dust jacket of the first edition of his book, *Human Being*. And, I like to think about all the collectors of Morley, there aren’t that many any more, who have a copy of *Human Being* in the dust jacket and have never taken the dust jacket off, to look at the inside because that’s it. It’s been published. Morley apparently had a delicious sense of humor. (Laughs). You can’t fix that. Now I read– Okay, John Dickson Carr. I thought it was a great biography because John Dickson Carr knew how to tell a story. And, yes, only more, he didn’t tell all the story and he didn’t talk about spiritualism and he was controlled to some extent by Adrian, but he did what he did and it was a good story.

STASHOWER: Absolutely.

BLAU: He made Conan Doyle an interesting man. Well, after that, I read all the biographies, except for the one that was published in Swedish in '38. I've not read that one. But, it's interesting and almost every one of the biographies tells you a little something that you didn't know before. I like information. I thought Owen Dudley Edwards' biography; it was fascinating, because he did so much work on the school, and on Edinburgh, and on the trip to West Africa. It was the first time that he really met our ambassador to Liberia. It was great fun to read the essays on photography. And there were all the other biographies, the second hand biographies, the people that didn't come back, just to get a book, Charles Higham and Ronald Pearsall. They–it's hard for them to contribute much. When Jack Tracy asked me to write the afterword for *A Duet with an Occasional Chorus,* I read that book again, knowing a lot more about Conan Doyle than when I first read it, and realized that it was Touie and Jean that appear in that book. It makes some of the things that Frank and Maude do in that book–Conan Doyle did with Jean rather than with Touie. And there are some touches in there that I thought were intriguing. But even then, I had no inkling of how strong the relationship was between him and Jean Leckie. Yeah, It's unfortunate that their letters didn't survive because I like to read other people's mail. As a biographer, you should too.

STASHOWER: I certainly do and that's why it's been so enjoyable working on the collected letters, but also a frustration in many ways because of–

BLAU: Dame Jean once said to me that she really wished that I could have met her father. She said that the reason was: late in life, in the late twenties, he got very interested in geology and of course I was a geologist. She figured that we would have had a lot of fun sitting in the billiard room of her father's home in Crowborough talking about geology. Yeah, that would have been fun.

STASHOWER: I wanted to ask you. Do you have a favorite Sherlock Holmes story?

BLAU: No. I don't like to play the game, what or who is your favorite anything? What's the best Sherlock Holmes? Because the minute you say that this is the best and the question is either, "What's the second best in line?" or "What's the worst?" And I think all the Sherlock Holmes stories are fun, even the ones that most people sneer at. There are interesting aspects, so I sometimes say that my favorite story is the one I read most recently.

STASHOWER: Well, that is actually something else I wanted to ask you. How often do you reread the stories these days?

BLAU: To sit down and actually reread the whole story, not all that often. I don't do what some people do, is this: on January the first, start reading *The Complete Sherlock Holmes.* But, every once in a while, I have a reason to read a story that I want to look at it with fresh eyes. I like to–people say, "Oh, but you have to tell me what your favorite story is?" I usually say, "It's 'The Mazarin Stone'" which, leads to a dead silence (Stashower laughs) because most people don't think much of "The Mazarin Stone." But, it's an interesting story because it's the only story that appears to be adapted from a play and we didn't know that at the time before computerized records and people did research. I think it was Anthony Boucher who

said, “And I wonder, I wonder if this was a play?” But eventually someone found the script in The Lord Chamberlain’s household (??) called “The Crown Diamond” which, was performed before Conan Doyle wrote “The Mazarin Stone” and it’s–once you know that there is a play called “The Crown Diamond,” you then go looking at “The Mazarin Stone” and you say, “Of course. Of course. Of course.”

And as a geologist I like “The Mazarin Stone” because it has in it, a reference to the Great Mazarin Diamond, which in reality had nothing to do with Cardinal Mazarin. He didn’t collect that sort of thing; he had diamonds but not the great ________(??). And as a geologist, I was very pleased that I was able to identify The Mazarin Stone and it was–the nice thing about diamonds is that very large color diamonds aren’t all that common. There’s a book about all them and there is only one seventy carat yellow diamond in the world and it’s in the crown jewels of Persia, which if they are still in the vault at the Bank Melli [Eds. Note: Central Bank of Iran.] Some day I want to go to Tehran; it would be nice if someone would take me to the bank and say, “Would you like to see the peacock throne?” And I’ll say, “No. I want to see this seventy carat, yellow diamond.” I’ll hold it in my hand and have my picture taken. But, relations with Iran being what they are, I may not get to do that. But, “The Mazarin Stone” is fun. The stories that are essentially impossible to dramatize now are like, “The Yellow Face” because–or “The Creeping Man”, of the scientific possibilities.

But even in “The Yellow Face”, there’s this lovely line, “Just whisper Norbury in my ear.” It’s beautiful, touching. But I find depressing is how many poorly written Sherlock Holmes stories there are, written by people other than Arthur Conan Doyle. Because of my newsletter, I get to read a lot of stuff. I’m one of these people who cannot stop reading. I’m always hopeful for something with some redeeming virtue.

There is only one book I have ever stopped reading and that was Stephen King’s *Pet Semetery*. And I got three or four chapters in the book. And the first three or four chapters were about this very nice family and then it dawned on me that something really terrible was going to happen to this really nice family. And I said, “I don’t want to know.” So I put the book down and never finished it. But otherwise, I finish the story, hoping against hope, that there will be some redeeming virtue; there tend not to be.

STASHOWER: So, you still read all the pastiches that cross your transom?

BLAU: Yes. I’m reading a couple now that I’ve yet to encounter redeeming–there are people who-more than one author thinks that putting Sherlock Holmes in the world of H.P. Lovecraft is really neat. And it’s a problem for me because I never liked H.P. Lovecraft’s work and so I’m not thrilled by scaly demons with eyes on tentacles meeting Sherlock Holmes. There are pastiches that I think are well written. I like to read good writers. The best Sherlock Holmes pastiches are written by people who do not try to write a story with the voice of Dr. Watson and Conan Doyle; they come up with another way of doing it. Laurie King comes to the world through Mary Russell. Carole Nelson Douglas does Irene Adler. Michael Kurland and John Gardner come in with Moriarty. There are others that do this.

STASHOWER: Have you read these books by Steve Hockensmith?

BLAU: Yes

STASHOWER: Yeah. I have the first one and haven't read it yet.

BLAU: The Amlingmeyers are brothers. I think they're fun because, "A", he's a good writer.

STASHOWER: Yeah. That was my impression too. I haven't read that *Holmes on the Range* yet, but I will.

BLAU: But, you know, he's won awards. You can testify that winning awards generally is a recognition that you're a good writer.

STASHOWER: He and I have talked about this. I met him at the Edgar's, where he was nominated for best first novel, as was I for my Sherlock Holmes pastiche. And I recognized at the time and he recognized, lo these many years later, when he was nominated, that it is a considerable honor to get that nomination for a Sherlock Holmes pastiche, in the category, where you are up against every other first novel written that year. So I–certainly he's got much to be proud of and I have heard from a lot of people, including our friend Lloyd Rose, no friend of Lovecraft by the way (Blau laughs), that she really enjoyed that book.

BLAU: And I read, what, there's three of them and it's an interesting concept and it's well executed. There are good rituals and stories. Not having ridden the range in the 1890's, I can't testify to how realistic Steve Hockensmith's books are compared, say, to the television series "Deadwood." The language of the two series is quite different of course. But, yeah, they're fun. I like to be entertained. I finally got around to seeing the movie "The Illusionist" because my television and body __________________(??)

STASHOWER: Yeah. I did too.

BLAU: It's so good that I can't tell people why they should watch it because I don't want to spoil it.

STASHOWER: Now, you are talking about "The Illusionist" and not "The Prestige"?

BLAU: Yeah, the Ed Norton one. You think the other one is better?

STASHOWER: No. I like them both. I had read *The Prestige* and I don't know if "The Illusionist" is based on a novel but-

BLAU: Well, it's based on something.

STASHOWER: There have been a number of writers, who have been Baker Street Irregulars, over the years. Have you had dealings with a–surely you must have dealt with Isaac Asimov over the years.

BLAU: I figure I can say that I got to know Isaac Asimov because the odds are better than even, if he saw me in a crowd, he would remember the name, which is saying something because Isaac met an awful lot of people. I took him out to lunch the last time the American Booksellers Association was in Washington and he explained to me that he had just gotten a computer. And this was like the 1980s.

STASHOWER: Really.

BLAU: And I said, "Really." And he said he got a commission; he got a phone call from a magazine, a computer magazine, that wanted him to write an article for them about how he wrote his books and such on a computer."

STASHOWER: And he didn't at that time?

BLAU: And he said, "I don't write my stuff on a computer. I don't own a computer." And they said, "We can take care of that." And the next day, this guy arrived with a cart full of boxes because in those days, computers came in boxes. And Isaac opened all the boxes and found the instruction book and put the computer together and it didn't work.

STASHOWER: I think we have all had that experience. (laughs)

BLAU: And, even though Isaac has his reputation as the world's greatest whatever, he's never claimed any expertise with technology. So he took it apart and put it back together again, carefully reading the instruction book, and it didn't work. And, over the next couple of weeks, he did this over and over again. He finally, in disgust, said to his wife Janet, "I'm going to try this one more time and if I can't get this computer going, I'm just going to send it back and tell them I'm not going to write this story." And he turned to me and he said, "I think the computer heard me because I put it together again and it worked." (Stashower laughs) This is in the days of the five and a quarter-inch floppy disks, which would hold one short story. And he explained, that when he wrote a novel, he had to print out the chapters because he needed to be able to thumb back and look at what he was doing, as opposed to Rex Stout who didn't go back.

I heard that Rex Stout would sit down at a typewriter and typity-type write a Nero Wolfe novel; and he'd put the pages in a box, seal it, and post it to the publisher. And that sure isn't the way I would have done it. I had an opportunity to talk about this with John McAleer, who wrote the wonderful biography of Rex Stout. And I said, "Is this true?" and he said, "Yes." And I said, "You–it is not possible to just sit down and write a book." And he said, "Well, keep in mind that he was thinking about it for six months before he started writing."

STASHOWER: Even so.

BLAU: Even so. John said that the only preparation that Rex Stout would ever do was to take a sheet a paper and write down, on the paper, the names of all the important characters in the book, just the names. And, once, he got a quarter of the way into a book and realized that

things weren't working the way they were supposed to, so he went back and looked at the list of names and decided that one character had the wrong name and he changed that character's name, went back, and the book went just like that. It was snap.

STASHOWER: Rex Stout died in 1975. Was he still coming in his later years to the–?

BLAU: No. Rex Stout loved being toastmaster. I remember the first meeting I was at and Rex Stout was there. It was the year–well, he may have been there earlier–but I remember the year *The Doorbell Rang* was published. This was the book in which Rex Stout was really mean to J. Edgar Hoover. And I remember two things about the meeting. One of the younger and more ardently conservative Baker Street Irregulars took such offense at the homage being paid to Rex Stout that he walked out of the dinner. And–just didn't–he couldn't understand how the BSI could be so liberal, because he was a confirmed Barry Goldwater supporter. I pointed out to him that Barry Goldwater wasn't really all that conservative, strictly speaking. But, everybody was coming up to Rex Stout with copies of *The Doorbell Rang* and wanted him to sign them and some people had earlier books. And some of them had paperback copies, which Rex Stout refused to sign. He wouldn't sign paperback. Well, I said, "Why not?" He said, "Because I don't get any royalties for them." And in those days, publishers didn't pay royalties on paperbacks. All the author got was a mention. And Rex Stout was one the leaders of it; it was the Author's League's battle to make publishers pay royalties on paperbacks. I recommend John McAleer's book.

STASHOWER: I have read the McAleer book.

BLAU: I corresponded with Rex Stout but I never got to see that in print. Poul Anderson.

STASHOWER: You certainly knew Poul Anderson very well.

BLAU: Ed Hoch. Terry Anderson.

STASHOWER: Ed Hoch would come to the dinner?

BLAU: No. I don't think Ed Hoch ever came to the BSI annual dinner. Maybe we should invite him.

STASHOWER: Seems like a very good idea.

BLAU: Because he's done a couple of–one Conan Doyle, *Five Rings in Reno* and–

STASHOWER: Untold numbers of Sherlock Holmes short stories.

BLAU: We could get him as a distinguished lecturer.

STASHOWER: I think that's a very good idea.

BLAU: He's a good storyteller. I don't mean just as a writer.

STASHOWER: No and I haven't met him that many times but every time I have, he's been an extremely pleasant man to know and talk to.

BLAU: I've seen him at Bouchercons and occasionally at Malice Domestic.

STASHOWER: A few years ago when he was made grand master of the Mystery Writers of America, I believe there was some absolutely mind boggling statistic about him to the effect that he had had a story in every issue of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* for fifty years.

BLAU: Yeah. About.

STASHOWER: It's every issue! Just mind blowing.

BLAU: I have from time-to-time, unsuccessfully so far, tried to start a rumor that there was one issue of *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* in which every story was written by Ed Hoch under a variety of pseudonyms, including names of real authors, all by pre-arrangement. But, I could never get anybody to believe. But, I'm going to keep trying.

STASHOWER: Well, I'm going to be murky on the details of this, but you'll be able to correct me I'm sure. But, was it an issue of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* where they published well-known stories, including one-including a Sherlock Holmes story?

BLAU: "The Blue Carbuncle."

STASHOWER: That made it a force book?

BLAU: Yes.

STASHOWER: Well, our mutual friend and fellow Baker Street Irregular, Bill Vande Water, found a copy of this, sent it to me with the challenge to find out what the key (Blau laughs) to the force book was. And I should pause to explain briefly that–

BLAU: Maybe you shouldn't. (laughs)

STASHOWER: I'll just say that it was structured in such a way that if you wanted to play a mindreading game with your friends, you would be able to have them open the magazine–

BLAU: To any story. They'd pick their story and they choose a word–you know, count down and choose a word and think about the word and we tell them what the word was.

STASHOWER: Because one of the stories was the "The Blue Carbuncle," I was familiar with how the first page of that was supposed to read (laughter), I was able to spot the key fairly easily, but it was an unbelievably clever idea and wonderful that the Queens went along with–

BLAU: Clayton Rawson was the one who asked him do it. [Ed. Note: Blau notes he recently discovered this was done for Richard Himber.]

STASHOWER: Pulling this together, so that it would be an actual issue of the magazine that could be used in this way.

BLAU: Now I–in my old apartment, when I had the issues of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* on an accessible shelf,–I might go back to doing that–I had that issue, just slightly open (Stashower laughs). So they–because people would come to my library and say, "Have you read all those books?"

STASHOWER: Right. Right. Right.

BLAU: And I'd say, "Well. Of course." And I said and-you know, "If you enjoy them, you remember them." And they say, "But you memorize?" And I said, "You know what, just reach out and, at random, pull out a book. So here." (laughter)

STASHOWER: Well, what's great about the *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* more so than say the Sherlock–*The Hound of the Baskervilles* force book that came out a few years ago is that's it an actual issue of the magazine. I've always tried to find a cover that looked good on that *Hound of the Baskervilles* because the cover of it doesn't really pass muster as being an actual copy of the book that you would have, and read, and be displaying in that way.

BLAU: Yeah, it's always frustrating when a publisher has an idea of doing something like that and doesn't make it look real.

STASHOWER: Yeah.

BLAU: Authors. I met Laurie King. I like Laurie King as a person; she's got a great sense of humor. I mean–the coming of the–the thing she did at the distinguished lecture I thought that was good. And you have to, as an author, have a sense of humor when you read all those things, historical complaints some Sherlockians make. To small for a pileated, it's too big for a downy; of course there is a woodpecker in the tree.

STASHOWER: Beautiful bird.

BLAU: We have all sorts of woodpeckers here but the thing that is strange to me is that I have never heard them go rat-a-tat-tat. They just come in and eat. You can't complain about that.

I never thought about the authors. Well, I enjoy meeting authors and they don't have to be members of the Baker Street Irregulars. Years ago, the world science fiction convention was in Washington. The Red Circle had a cocktail party for Poul Anderson who was there with Karen, who was our founder. And so we had a little room. Back in those days it wasn't expensive to have a cocktail party in a hotel room. And Poul Anderson and Gordon Dickson had written this wonder series about the Hoka. In one of the stories, the Hoka read Sherlock

Holmes and they just empathetically turn into Sherlock Holmes fans. And so we're having this cocktail party and into the cocktail party walked Sherlock Hoka because there was a surprise entry into the costume competition the night before and some guy had come in as a good size teddy bear. Here's Dr. Covash who had won first prize for best costume, so I made sure he came to the cocktail party. Somewhere in the archives, I've got a picture of Sherlock Hoka standing there with his arms around Gordy Dickson and Poul Anderson. (laughs)

STASHOWER: He must have loved that. When did you first meet Richard Lancelyn Green?

BLAU: Well, I don't remember. But, that's my answer to a lot of questions that begin like "When did you first," not always. But, where I got to know him, is when he came on tour in the United States for the first time, doing his bibliography. And he traveled around and he bought a–at that time you could buy for $99 you could buy a 99-day bus ticket from Greyhound and just go anywhere.

STASHOWER: Oh boy.

BLAU: And he came here and he went to Santa Fe to see John Bennett Shaw.

STASHOWER: Oh god!

BLAU: With a duffel bag and that's the way Richard traveled. And he came and stayed with me and it was wonderful meeting Richard. Richard of course was like an awful lot of Sherlockians, a very interesting guy with quotation marks around interesting. I wanted to see Richard's collection. Richard, I think was basically a very shy man. Every time I was in England and–oh well maybe I could stop by and see it. Oh, it was always packed up or it was a mess or it… There was always some excuse. It just wouldn't work and so I schemed; I really wanted to get in and see his collection.

When Bev and I were on our first long trip together, and we went to southeastern England and she got to choose two things that she wanted to do. She chose Canterbury and Windsor Castle and I chose two things. I wanted a tour of Southsea by Geoff Stavert, who knew everything, and I wanted to see Richard Lancelyn Green. It turned out that they were having a meeting of the Sherlock Holmes Society of London, in which all the speakers were going to be Americans. And they said, "Well, of course you'll come to this." So I said, "Yes." Bev came and we both go, but I made it diplomatically clear to Richard Lancelyn Green that I was coming up to England–to London that morning and I wanted to see his collection. And if I didn't get to see his collection, I was going to say something about it at the luncheon. And so I got to see his collection. (laughs)

The thing that fascinated me, when I read Richard's obituaries was how many compartments there were in his life. He was a comic opera and operatic singer. He commissioned a production of Conan Doyle and J.M. Barrie's *Jane Annie* at Poulton Hall. And I never knew some of the things he was interested in because, when he was with me, we talked about Sherlock Holmes and Conan Doyle.

I sat next to T.S. Blakeney at an annual dinner of the Sherlock Holmes Society of London in 1960 something, my first Sherlock Holmes Society of London dinner. T.S. Blakeney had just been asked to write the introduction for one of the little chapbooks published by Bruce Kennedy for whatever junior scion society it was. And Bruce published for the first time in that little chapbook John Bennett Shaw's classic, "To Shelve or to Censor". The report he gave at the annual dinner about how he had just remarried and acquired two young teenage daughters and wondered whether the Sherlock Holmes stories were suitable for young teenage girls. And as he explained, he started going through the stories and discovered to his horror that there were all sorts of obscene things in the Sherlock Holmes stories. Mrs. Hudson gets knocked up. (Stashower laughs) In the "Empty House" she went to it on her knees (Stashower laughs) and he went to–he had this list of these things. As soon as he explained–he didn't go through all the stories–he had a much longer list, but he realized that he was going to have to wrap a number of his books in plain brown wrappers and tell these young teenage girls–and it was hilarious. He offered the paper to Julian Wolff *Baker Street Journal*, but Julian didn't think it was funny, and he declined it. So Bruce Kennedy published it, 100 copies of whatever it was listed. And T.S. Blakeney turned to me and said, "Does he-has he read it?" He had to read it, to write the introduction. T.S. Blakeney was one of the old time British Sherlockians, a real scholar." And he turned to me and he said, "Is this man serious?" I said, "No." And he said, "Thank god!" (laughter). There are some ______________ (??).

Marquess of Donegall, who probably can't be classified as a writer. I met him for the first time in 1958, when I was briefly in London. And we had corresponded but I had not met him, and he invited me to visit him at his flat in Dunbrody Park and I rang the doorbell and the butler answered. Of course the butler turned out to be The Marquess of Donegall and I said to him, from the beginning, "It's the first time I ever set foot in England and I knew that a marquess was just one level below a duke and I knew I would have to pronounce "duke" instead of "duke". And I said, "I have no idea how to address a marquess." He said, "Call me Don, everybody does." And I said, "Oh, Don is short for Donegall." And he said, "No. Donald is one of my eight given names. (laughter). Had a very nice, unassuming–he had a four-story house, the top story of which was his recording studio because at one time he had done jazz records. And there was no way of getting a piano up to this studio, so they had to bring in a crane and take a window out to bring it into the fourth floor. An interesting man, a lovely thing about Sherlockians, they tend to be interesting. I could explain it; if you walk into a crowd of a hundred people, if you're lucky, five might be interesting. If you walk into a room with a 100 Sherlockians, if you're unlucky, more than one will be uninteresting.

STASHOWER: I think that's a fair assessment.

Closing: You have been listening to an interview in the Baker Street Irregulars Oral History Project, conducted by the BSI trust for the BSI archives, which comprise a special collection at the Houghton Library at Harvard University. [Eds. note: The Archives are now located at the Lilly Library at Indiana University.] The copyright for this interview is owned by the Baker Street Irregulars. No copy or rebroadcast of this interview can be made without the express written consent of the Baker Street Irregulars. Go to bsitrust.org for more

recordings, as well as, photos and details of each BSI dinner since 1934. You'll also find details about donating material to the trust or providing financial support, all at bsitrust.org.

Part 3 of 3

Introduction: This recording is part of the Baker Street Irregulars Trust Oral History Project. The Baker Street Irregulars is the world's oldest Sherlock Holmes literary society. The BSI Trust collects correspondence, photographs, recordings, and other memorabilia for the BSI Archives, which comprise a special collection at the Houghton Library at Harvard University. [Eds. note: The Archives are now located at the Lilly Library at Indiana University.] This is part three of Daniel Stashower's conversation with Peter Blau recorded on August 5, 2007. You'll hear about Peter's Sherlockian Christmas tree, dinosaurs, traveling to scion meetings, and the secret to beating jetlag. They are outdoors so you'll hear a change in the audio quality. [There is a great deal of aircraft noise overhead through out the recording, bird noises, wind-over-the-microphone noise, and the changing of tapes in the recorder] The copyright for the interview is owned by the Baker Street Irregulars. See bsitrust.org for terms of use.

STASHOWER: I have been coming to your tree trimming party, off and on, for about fifteen years and I would like to hear a little bit about your Christmas tree.

BLAU: Well. It's tough. There is an old Stan Freberg recording, where he's switching channels on the radio and he said, "God, the next thing you know, they will be doing a radio broadcast of Chinese acrobats." And he goes "click" and there is a radio broadcast of Chinese acrobats. There are some things you have a really tough time doing on radio. A lot of my stories, for better or for worse, are show and tell. It's hard to show a Christmas tree on the radio.

STASHOWER: Then I'll get it rolling if I may.

BLAU: No. I'll give it a try. I've been very lucky all of my life and I'm seventy-five. There have only been three Christmases that I have not been with my family, either in Cleveland or in Pittsfield. After I moved to Washington in the early seventies, I arrived in Pittsfield for Christmas and was presented with a three and a half foot high Japanese plastic Christmas tree, naked, and a half bushel basket, in which, carefully wrapped in colored tissue paper, were the ornaments. It was explained to me that there was one ornament for every Sherlock Holmes stories and all I had to do was identify them and I did pretty well. I got them all identified, except one, and I really ran aground on the one.

And it's this little four-inch long silly looking bright red fish. And there is only one red fish in the Sherlock Holmes stories and that's the tattoo on Jabez Wilson, in "The Red-Headed

League." There was a clue for the Red-Headed League and I was sitting there; well, it's time for Christmas dinner. And by Friday, my little niece, Stevie, is saying, "I know what it is and you don't." (Stashower laughs) And my father was saying, "Well, you know, if you don't get this, I'm going to write to Julian Wolff and he'll probably take away your investiture." (Stashower laughs). Well, after dinner, I sat down, with a sheet of paper, to write down all the names of the Sherlock Holmes stories. (Stashower laughs) And I–there is only one Sherlockian I have ever met that is able to do that, Wayne Swift, the great Wayne Swift. Not only could he tell you what they all were, but he could tell them to you in the order of their appearance in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*. He had memorized them just when he heard I couldn't do it. And it's not easy to do. If you want, we can stop this radio program and sit down with a piece of paper and try to list all sixty of the stories. You'll get to fifty-three or fifty-four–

STASHOWER: Right. Right. It's like trying to list the states, I mean you know them, but you don't know them.

BLAU: And I wound up with fifty-seven, with fifty-eight, with fifty-nine. I did it from memory because all my *Complete Sherlock Holmes* were in Washington; I was in Pittsfield. I had all of the sixty stories and I had an ornament for each one of the sixty stories. And that was when I realized that my malicious sister-in-law, Kelly, had created a red herring ornament, with malice aforethought and it's tough, and it got me.

We have this tree trimming every year and there's always two or three or maybe four people who have not done it before and they get to sit down at the table, identify all the ornaments before we put them on the tree. I don't want this to go on forever so when they can't identify an ornament, then they get to turn to the people standing behind them, people who have been standing behind them snickering and say, "All right, give me a clue for this one." And of course, all the easy ones having been gone, people who have been standing around snickering don't necessarily know, because they don't remember. Sometimes one of the neophytes will identify the red herring instantly and other ones are harder.

STASHOWER: I remember the first time I saw the ornaments. One that particularly struck me was a severed thumb. And I would venture to say that there are probably not that many Christmas trees in America with an ornament of a severed human thumb.

BLAU: That's true, also an ear.

STASHOWER: Yes, some of them are fairly basic, a red circle, things like this. And there are some you really you have to think about.

BLAU: Yes. I call those, the weird ornaments. Of course, we don't let this to go on forever because people eat peanuts and drink; but the food, the chocolate fountain, doesn't come out until the tree is trimmed, so it can't take too long. But every once in a while, at the end of the party, a few people staying on talking about how easy the Christmas tree is, I'll bring out the second tree and a second set of ornaments. And the second set, of ornaments, was presented to me, some years ago by a local Sherlockian, Tina Rhea. And they're all little three-inch

circles, embroidered. And they're embroidered with symbols of the unrecorded cases. And that's the quiz I set on people who think the tree is too darn easy, because some of these things are hard. The aluminium crutch is a fairly easy one.

STASHOWER: The giant rat.

BLAU: The red leech. But some of them can get very, very obscure.

STASHOWER: Is there a matchbox containing a remarkable worm

BLAU: No. It's just a little worm. No, I take it back; there is a matchbox with a worm inside. That's the one that's not embroidered. It's not easy to name. I don't think that Tina did all the unrecorded cases. That's a real test.

It's a nice tradition, especially as long as I can find people who haven't done it. Sometimes, I may get people who have been coming for twenty years and have forgotten what they are.

STASHOWER: I don't think I could do it. I don't think I could do it because I've been sort of hanging back the last few years. So, I'm sure I would have–

BLAU: When is Sam going to do it, after you have read all the stories?

STASHOWER: It won't be this year. It's funny you should stay that. I'm very cautious about not-I don't-he's ah-he'll be eight in September and I'm cautious about forcing my enthusiasms too early or too hard and having the opposite effect. He knows I'm interested; he certainly knows who Sherlock Holmes is. I think the way in might be the Basil Rathbone movies. Although, who knows, maybe to his generation those might seem–

BLAU: Slow. Slow. It's fascinating to watch old movies and compare them to the modern movies because things go so fast nowadays. You look at the Granada series and see the speed at which they go from scene to scene to scene compared to the Universal series with Basil Rathbone. Of course, if you really want to get your son to read the Sherlock Holmes stories, tell him he's not allowed to. Tell him he's too young to read the stories and then of course you carefully leave a copy of *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* lying around.

STASHOWER: With the words "Do not read" written across the top. You were saying when we were talking last weekend that you don't actually remember your first meeting with Sherlock Holmes and I'm sort of the same way. I don't remember reading the first story, the first time but I know it must have been fairly early, but I'm not sure it was as early as eight years old.

BLAU: All I can say is, whatever the story was, obviously, I wasn't impressed enough to remember it. Some stories you remember. I remember coming up to Washington in the 1950s, in my twenties, staying with a cousin here and just at random, picking up a copy of a Shirley Jackson's book, *The Haunting*. (Stashower laughs) And I read that book when the wind was blowing and the trees were bent. I never–I didn't go to bed until that book was

finished. The movie they made of "The Haunting of Hill House," the old one with Roddy McDowell, was such a great story of Shirley Jackson. There are some stories you remember. I remember reading her a lot, but I don't remember which Sherlock Holmes story I read first. As I said before, "It's the Sherlockians that are the more interesting."

STASHOWER: Do you read other Conan Doyle books with pleasure?

BLAU: Yes. I don't reread them as often but I like to say I have read everything, all of Conan Doyle's books and probably almost all of his–

STASHOWER: We are still recording.

BLAU: Oh. Probably all of his introductions and tales in either the originals or in reprints. I haven't read all the letters to the editor and things like that because we haven't found them all. I must confess that it was very hard reading his multi-volume history of the First World War because I didn't really care about the First World War battle-by-battle, bullet-by-bullet. The people he wrote that series for did care, just the same as with the Boer War. His *History of Spiritualism* was done in two volumes. I liked *The White Company* and I liked *Sir Nigel*. It's not a suspension of disbelief, so much as willing to approach a novel or a movie on its own terms. Real books in those days were long books, multi-volume. *The White Company* was published in three volumes in the first edition.

People didn't have much else to do in those days, so reading was a real pleasure. And people spent a shilling, or god forbid, two shillings for a book, you wanted your money's worth in one thick book. It's fascinating that people complain that the *Harry Potter* books are so long by people who read them, unless they have to get all the way through them, before they can carry on with their lives. But *The White Company* is a fascinating book. But Nicholas Meyer, he has a script and the story is, and I believe it, that John Ford as one of his last projects, he wanted to make a movie of *The White Company.* And that's interesting for today.

STASHOWER: John Ford?

BLAU: Yep. It's a saga and in some ways, it's a western, a lot of guys riding around on horses.

STASHOWER: Did you enjoy the Challenger stories as a young reader?

BLAU: Yes, oh yeah. And the short stories, *When the World Screamed, The Poison Belt*. In my generation, everybody enjoyed *The Lost World* because it was **the** dinosaur book. We didn't have dinosaur books in the forties and fifties, when they made a film of *The Lost World.* Well, I never saw it. I'm sure as a kid, I never saw it. The ____________(??) and *The Lost World*. We didn't see silent films. And I remember when "The Lost World" came out in the sixties, before the days of CGI and all this stuff. In those days, dinosaurs were pretty much lizards in makeup and pretty impressive. Now they are going to have an animatronic invasion of dinosaurs at Verizon Center here in Washington. Not just standing in a museum in some place but standing right on the basketball court. Just-

STASHOWER: I hadn't heard that.

BLAU: You know why kids like dinosaurs? All kids like dinosaurs because they are big, they're bad and they're dead. But I grew up reading Roy Chapman Andrews who led the expedition into the Gobi Desert to find the dinosaur bones, negotiating with the Chinese warlords, ____________________(??). And we used to go down to New York at least once a year to go to the American Museum of Natural History to visit the Jurassic Hall, whatever it was called, to visit the dinosaurs and stuff. Of course, now we know, dinosaurs aren't dead. Dinosaurs are still here; we call them birds. And kids know this; the kids are the real dinosaur experts.

There is a wonderful movie, I thought it was fun, called *Adventures of Gerard*. It was made years ago and it was so bad, they decided not to release it. I'm going to pronounce his name wrong, Jerzy Skolimowski, who was a Polish director. It was his first film. And it had wonderful people in it, John Neville, Eli Wallach, Claudia Cardinale, John ah–Peter McEnery, and it was just a silly movie, with wonderful scenes in it, including Adrian Conan Doyle's mistress, Aude Loring. She played Massena's mistress. I remember one of the–she's now married. She married a French count of some sort. I remember one of the French Sherlockians telling me that he went to the party, having the privilege telling her husband that he had seen his wife naked (laughs). But, it was made. I think it played for a week at the Thalia Art House Theater in New York City and that was it until the 1990s when the BBC broadcast it and of course, people immediately taped it off the air.

I had seen it because one of the nice things about living in Washington is that my local library has films that you can't see anywhere else, copyright deposit films at the Library of Congress. You can go there and watch stuff. So I've had the chance to see a Chinese Sherlock Holmes film, in Chinese. I didn't understand a word of it; but some day I want to sit there with somebody that translates it for me on the fly, tell me what is going on. I'm delighted that the Russian television series is now being broadcast, in some places in the United States, with English subtitles because it's fun. And the actors are great, Vasily Livanov and so on. It won a production prize; they filmed it in in Riga, which is not so much of a backwater, but the Victorian tenements are still there.

They even managed to preserve the television program about the Baker Street Irregulars that appeared on *Odyssey* in the 1950s. They had a special meeting of the Baker Street Irregulars with Ed Smith and Rex Stout and others. They talked about how they discovered that "The Red Headed League" didn't take place in London. It actually took place in Brooklyn, so they have these members of the Baker Street Irregulars investigating "The Red Headed League" in Brooklyn. And you can see members of the Baker Street Irregulars sedately being Baker Street Irregulars, giving toasts and arguing. Of course in the early days, they gave toasts; they were serious about them. I forget, I heard or read about it; someone stood up at an annual dinner and said, "I'm a lawyer and I want to offer a toast to a lawyer" that he named. And everybody said, "Fine." And he stood up again and said, "I want to offer a toast to another lawyer." And after he did this five times, somebody asked, "How many lawyers are there?" and he said, "Forty." (laughter)

STASHOWER: You've traveled pretty far afield to attend scion society meetings.

BLAU: Well, I wouldn't say that I–well, yes. Sometimes I had just been traveling far afield and there had been meetings. But in the year 2000, I was one of the gang of thirteen that attended three Sherlockian dinners in three different countries in one week; actually it was eight days, but that's pretty close.

STASHOWER: Okay. So that's New York, London and?

BLAU: Copenhagen. Well. It was Copenhagen, London, and New York. The Sherlock Holmes Klubben i Danmark was celebrating its fiftieth anniversary and they wanted to make a big deal out of it and I did. They said, "Can you come?" I said, "I would love to, but you need to have your annual dinner on Friday" and Bjarne Nielsen said, "Why?" and I said, "Because The Sherlock Holmes Society of London is having its annual dinner on a Saturday, the next Saturday." And I said, "If you have your dinner on a Friday, people will be able to come and go to your dinner and then go to London for their dinner and then come back to New York for their dinner." And typically Danish, Bjarne said, "We've always had our annual dinner on a Saturday." And I said, "This year you need to do it on a Friday because the Sherlock Holmes Society of London can't change their annual–they're having their annual dinner at one of the Inns of Court and it's not available on a weekday evening. It's got to be on a Saturday." So, fortunately, the Sherlock Holmes Klubben i Danmark had a meeting of council, or whatever, and voted and decided to have their annual dinner on Friday. So, some of us went over a couple days early to Copenhagen and did sightseeing in Copenhagen and then went to London for their annual dinner at the Great Hall of the Honourable Society of Lincoln's Inn and then stayed on for a couple of days and came back to New York. Fortunately, I have discovered how to avoid suffering from jetlag.

STASHOWER: How do you avoid suffering from jetlag?

BLAU: I never change my watch. My watch is always on Washington time. If it's two o'clock in the morning and I have to get up and have breakfast, I can do that. If it's seven o'clock in evening and it's time to go to bed, I can do that too. And I don't have jetlag. Many people don't believe me; that's only because they haven't tried it.

STASHOWER: I'll try it but let's say I'm skeptical. (Blau laughs)

BLAU: But-In 1998, a few of us went to Japan to help the Japan Sherlock Holmes Club celebrate their twentieth anniversary.

STASHOWER: Well, that must have been quite a trip.

BLAU: That was interesting because Catherine Cooke was there and Mike Whelan and Mary Ann Bradley. Mike, Mary Ann, and I stayed on to do some sightseeing afterwards. We flew into the airport and took the train to Tokyo and then kept going because the conference

was being held one day in Kamakura and the next day in Kawasaki. And we arrived at the convention, took a taxi to the hotel and were met at the hotel by Mitch Higurashi who said, ”There is a restaurant in the hotel, but it is very expensive and not good.” And he said, “So, let’s go out.” And we said, “Fine.” So we walked along a dark street, along another dark street, a third dark street, and then came to a really big thoroughfare with cars and lights. And there right in front of us was a Denny’s restaurant. I said looking at it, I said to Mitch, “We didn’t come all the way to Japan to go to a-.” “Oh, no no, we are just going down the block here to a nice Japanese restaurant.” (laughter).

But they were very nice; we all got to give our papers in Japanese. And the way I managed to get my paper up is we sent the text of the paper to the Japanese in advance, so somebody nicely translated it into Kanji and, which was projected on the screen behind us as we gave our paper in English. And one night, the night of the big dinner, a number of the Japanese women dressed up in traditional costume and one or two of the men in traditional costume. And I’d been in Japan before and knew what to expect; it was fascinating.

STASHOWER: You had been in the Navy?

BLAU: Yeah. And wearing a true Japanese kimono, you can’t take a long step. You have to go step, step, steppy, step. And Japanese women, girls today, know how to do this. The next day everybody is back in western clothes and they have some Japanese women who are helping with arrangements and moving chairs. And now they are wearing skirts, knee high skirts, but they’re running across the stage going step, step, steppy, step because– (laughs)

And almost without exception, the Japanese would come up to us and say, “Excuse me for my very poor English.” And all I could say was, “Your very poor English is much better than my colloquial Japanese.” The problem in Japan; most Japanese face is they all learn English, it’s a required course in school, grade school, middle school and not just one year. But almost all of them learn Japanese from Japanese teachers in English so they don’t pronounce English well and they don’t understand English pronunciation. They can read very well and write. So there are a lot of Americans who go to Japan for a year or two and make a living teaching English to Japanese who need to know conversational English for work. But it was great fun. They asked me, of course, what had changed since I was in Japan forty-two years earlier? And I explained, the most important change is that the Japanese are much younger now, compared to me. (Stashower laughs) And it sure was modern; I don’t think there was any building higher than four stories in Japan when I was there in 1956 because we bombed everything. Now, they’ve got skyscrapers and neon lights.

STASHOWER: People are always remarking on the fascination with Sherlock Holmes, as over in Japan. It continues to astound me.

BLAU: I found out why.

STASHOWER: Why is that?

BLAU: I asked and somebody explained to me that-why. I'm going to go back to the movie *Shogun* with Richard Chamberlain. The Shoguns closed Japan; they didn't want any Westerners in Japan. And this went on for a long time, until the middle of the nineteenth century, when Admiral Perry arrived in his big iron ships and basically said to the Shoguns, "It's time to stop this nonsense. We are here and we want trading rights, or else." And the Shoguns decided that they really needed to open Japan to the West. So they did a number of things. They created a parliament or diet. They gave the emperor more power than he had had over the Shoguns. They started publishing books on how to be western. They sent people into the West to learn how to make railroad engines and guns and things like that, all the aspects of what was then modern civilization.

And people, a lot of people, wanted to be western; they wanted to dress western. Well, this was now the 1890s, so, dressing western in the 1890s was wearing exactly the clothes that Sidney Paget drew in the Sherlock Holmes stories. And this is what the Japanese adopted as western dress. And we have all seen this; we have seen the film of the Japanese diplomats arriving at the *USS Missouri*, to sign the documents that ended the war. We see them come up on deck, on the *Missouri*, wearing frock coats, black frock coats and striped trousers and top hats, which is what Sherlock Holmes wore in the Sidney Paget–they were still wearing that in the 1940s. That was western dress. So, when the Japanese today read the Sherlock Holmes stories, it resonates because they have seen their history books; they've seen the photographs from Japan in the 1890s. Of course, but they are crazy about all sorts of western _____(??).

I think that one of the nice things, the nicest things, I discovered about the travel is how to meet the locals. And as a professional, you can go just about anywhere and meet your fellow professionals as a geologist. I've gone to Sweden; I've gone to South Africa. I go right ahead and say, "I'm a geologist" and they welcome you. It's a professional courtesy. And especially in the 50s and 60s, there weren't that many American travelers. But you can do this as a journalist, you can do this as a doctor; some professions that have professional societies have arrangements. You can say I'm going to whatever country it is and I want to meet a psychiatrist or dentist. They'll have lists of dentists in that country that want to meet people who visit. But you can also do it with–in the Sherlockian world. There are Sherlockians everywhere.

In the sixties, I wound up in Rhodesia on vacation, Salisbury. I went to the Jameson Hotel and unpacked, and came down in the elevator and walked into the lobby and the lobby was full of geologists, which I had not expected. It just happened to be the weekend of a joint meeting between the South African and the Rhodesian geological societies. And one of the first people I ran into was the head of the geology program at college who was surprised to see me. And he introduced me to the man he was talking to, a guy named Leslie Kent of South Africa Geological Survey, and Leslie Kent shook hands with me and he said, "Mr. Blau, it's always a joy to me to meet an American." And I said, "That's from the 'The Noble Bachelor'. I'm with the Baker Street Irregulars." And, he'd had been enjoying the Sherlock Holmes stories for years and he had been quoting from them. And I was the first person he'd ever met who recognized the quote. (laughter) And here he was, this lone Sherlockian. Well, I'm sure there were more Sherlockians in South Africa, but there was no society.

Oh, I love traveling. I don't care where I go because I know that there is always somebody and if there isn't someone there, I could always start a society. That's what John Bennett Shaw used to do; he used to love to start Sherlockian societies. And John originated the quote, "All it takes to have a meeting with a Sherlockian society is two people sitting at a table with a bottle on it and in an emergency, you can dispense with one of the people." Of course, some of my favorite societies are the ones that never meet, like Bill Vande Water's society for magicians, Sherlockian magicians. I think it's a great rule; you can't be a member unless you audition at a meeting, but they've never had a meeting. I'm just as glad because now I only do magic for children. And, a couple of people said, "Well. I could pretend to be a child." And I said, "No, real children, not childish grownups." I assume that there's never been a meeting of the James Phillimore Society, unless they had one I don't know about.

STASHOWER: Certainly not in the time I've known Bill. But, Bill makes a particular study of magic detective fiction, of which there is a very considerable quantity. And, he's forever sending me envelopes with, sort of, Clayton Rawson stories that have somehow slipped through the cracks and have never been anthologized anywhere. Sax Rohmer stories. Fascinating stuff that he's dug up.

BLAU: I've always loved magic. I once–my father once took me to see John Dunninger–

STASHOWER: Joe.

BLAU: Joe. Joe Dunninger do his thing. And he didn't read my mind, which I was very unhappy with. Unless he read my mind, I just assumed it was all fake. But, he had one hell of an act.

STASHOWER: But you were saying earlier, when I asked you to talk about the Christmas tree, how hard it's to do that on tape, on the radio, but Dunninger (Blau laughs), you couldn't imagine a less likely career path than being a mentalist on the radio, but, boy, he made it work.

BLAU: Radio is a fascinating medium. Who would think that you could become a star doing ventriloquism on the radio.

STASHOWER: Exactly. But I listened to some of those Basil Rathbone, Nigel Bruce, radio programs and they are wonderful. And, of course, they dramatized a lot of stories that they never filmed that I absolutely loved hearing Basil Rathbone's voice on.

BLAU: I once went to a Bouchercon in New York, where they did a radio play, but they had one of the old-time sound effects guys there and before the play, he gave a one-hour lecture, demonstration, on how you do sound effects. And some of them, you know how they make rain and they can take a metal sheet and rattle it and make thunder. But he took–put two boards down on the floor, on the stage, and then walked across the boards, walking, and then walked back as if he was going upstairs. You could hear him going up the stairs. And then he came downstairs as a woman, in high heels. Now, he wasn't changing shoes and they

weren't elevated and it was just with his feet. And, it was astonishing. If you ever sit through the credits of a movie, which a lot of people don't–sometimes they're mean; they always have a final scene in the movie, which you don't see unless you sit through the credits. But one of the credits was always to someone whose job is Foley walker, F-o-l-e-y walker. The first time I saw it, all I could think of was some relative of Conan Doyle had done something. And, so I went and looked it up and of course, it's just the guy who does sound effects because you can't record them while you're making the movie. And a lot of times, it's just walking, footsteps. I was sort of disappointed it wasn't one of Conan Doyle's ancestors.

STASHOWER: It's funny that Charles Foley has spent so much of his career as a sound engineer.

BLAU: Charles got to live at Chateau de Lucens with Adrian.

STASHOWER: A time he recalls very fondly.

BLAU: Um-hm. I was at the chateau for the grand opening party. I was working in London and I was on holiday in Marrakesh and I got a cable from Donegall saying meet me in Lausanne. I flew up to Lausanne and he met me in his Bentley, his new Bentley.

STASHOWER: So, the cable just said, "Meet me in Lausanne."

BLAU: Yes.

STASHOWER: Come at once if you can meet me.

BLAU: Absolutely. And he drove the Bentley because the Rolls Royce would be too ostentatious.

STASHOWER: So the Bentley is so much more–

BLAU: The Bentley is a Rolls Royce, with a different hood ornament. And he took me as his guest to the grand opening party at the Chateau de Lucens, Adrian's castle. And it was a real castle built originally in the 900s, it had been a working castle north of Lausanne, on a pinnacle of rock, spur of rock, with a drawbridge. Drawbridge–you walk across the drawbridge and it wasn't just a moat; it was an abyss. You got to the other side of the drawbridge and you were facing a blank stone wall. You had to walk, half around, a ten-foot wide stone path half way around the castle to the main gate that was facing nothing. And I really felt sorry for anybody who would try and attack that castle because you had to go all the way around, presumably they were dropping something from above, and batter down the gate when they didn't have any land to make a battering ram.

For the party, the gate was open into the grand courtyard. Of course, the castle didn't have drawbridges-doorbells, no doorbells. When you went in, Adrian had hired a musician from the village to stand up on the balcony, overlooking the courtyard and blow a fanfare whenever anybody entered. We went into the great hall and it was the living room, and it

was one big living room. Some people have a living room big enough to have a grand piano in a corner, unobtrusive. Adrian had in a corner, unobtrusively, a set of medieval knight's armour sitting on a horse, a model of a horse, which was wearing medieval horse armour, holding an eighteen-foot lance. And this is the stuff that was on display, unobtrusively, in a corner of the great hall. In 1966, I think, he very carefully did not introduce me to Adrian as a member of the Baker Street Irregulars and that's because his daughter worked in dungeon in the basement of the chateau. But he was a very genial host. We had to go down to the village for dinner because the kitchen in the chateau wasn't working yet.

Jean took great offense when Charles Higham wrote his biography of Conan Doyle and mentioned that Adrian was living in manorial splendor in his medieval chateau. And Jean wrote to me and she said that it was drafty. (Stashower laughs) But it was. That's why every medieval castle worth anything had tapestries.

STASHOWER: Did you know Denis?

BLAU: No, I never met Denis; met Adrian once and did know Jean. I–to my sorrow, I was living in England in the sixties and it never occurred to me to go find and visit Mary.

STASHOWER: ______(??).

BLAU: I didn't know _____(??). It was very embarrassing, I lived in London, had an apartment in Iverna Gardens, just off the Kensington High Street by the Kensington tube station. And I used to walk north of Kensington High Street to a little alley, at the end of which was an old bookstore. It had only old books. I would go in there once a month and it wasn't until after I left London that I made the connection that the Church Street in the "Empty House", where Conan Doyle–ah Sherlock Holmes had his book shop disguised as an old book seller, that was Kensington Church Street. And that was the alley, the end of which was the bookshop and it never registered at the time, but I was standing in the book shop where Conan Doyle had Sherlock Holmes disguised as an old book seller.

It's one of the great things about going to London; you can stand where Sherlock Holmes stood. The Sherlock Holmes Society of London has these wonderful excursions around England, just to go to the places where he stood. It was wonderful that the Baker Street Irregulars, two years ago, finally decided to do that in the United States. And the only place in the United States where we could ever have Sherlockian excursions was the Vermissa Valley, the Valley of Fear. And that was a wonderful tour. At the end of it, Mike Whelan said, "Thank god that's over. We don't have to do this again." I said, "Of course you are, three years from now, we have to do another tour." He said, "There isn't any place." I said, "Yes there is." And he said, "What?" And I said, "Salt Lake City." I said, "A Sherlock Holmes story was there and Conan Doyle was there." So, we are doing Salt Lake City, by golly, is going to be Labor Day 2008." When that's over, Mike Whelan is going to say to me, "Thank god that's over, we don't have to do that again."

STASHOWER: Yeah. And what are you going to say?

BLAU: I'll say, "Three years from now, 2011." And he'll say, "I'm not going to be there any more." I said, "I don't care. I'll set the stage." "Where to?", he says. "San Francisco." It was mentioned in the Sherlock Holmes stories. Conan Doyle was there. There's a Sherlockian society there. It would be a good place for a–

STASHOWER: It would be a great place. Yeah, nice place for a meeting.

BLAU: But I'm not willing to volunteer Washington because I know how much work that is. Conan Doyle was in Washington; in 1894 he came here on his lecture tour. And you can walk where Conan Doyle walked. You can't stay in his hotel, that's been torn down; it's where the Department of Veteran Affairs is now in Lafayette Square. You can't go to the Metzerott Music Hall, where he lectured, because that was torn down so they could build the FBI Headquarters but the streets are still there. I haven't done the research on the twenties, when he was here again. I'll leave that for the Red Circle to do, in what, 2014. You're young enough, you'll still be here.

STASHOWER: Maybe. It would be nice to have one in Washington. Have you ever-every once in a while, you hear rumblings about making the BSI dinner a movable feast. What are your thoughts about that?

BLAU: Well. I'd-it's easy for me. They say we ought to have the city somewhere else. And I say, "Are you willing to make the arrangements?" And I said, because gee, "You need a hotel; you need reasonable rooms. You need someplace to have the Thursday lecture, some place to have the Friday dinner, some place to have the Friday lunch, some place to have three dinners on Saturday, some place to have the Sunday cocktail party-ah, the Saturday cocktail party." And the logistics work in New York, you got people that will do it in New York. But, I'd hate to have to make all the arrangements in Washington.

STASHOWER: I would too.

BLAU: Jon Lellenberg and I were co-conspirators for Bouchercon in 1980, where we just had it at the Press Club. It was one-track programming. I had the Hotel Washington for people that wanted to pay fifty dollars a night for a bed and Hotel Harrington for people that wanted to pay thirty. And that was basically it. Now, you got to have a hotel that will hold at least a thousand people and six different programs going on at the same time and you've got to arrange all the speakers. In 1980, we were delighted to break even; three hundred people at the convention was our break-even point. Now look, now they have three hundred authors.

STASHOWER: I've been doing a number of Bouchercons since and it's always very good and the programming is always very interesting, but my complaint about the traveling to distant cities is you never see the city. The convention is so big that it's confined to the hotel and you really don't get much of a chance to–I've been to Denver; I've been to Nottingham, England, to a Bouchercon.

BLAU: Of course, you could have gone a couple of days earlier.

STASHOWER: I could, yes, but it is my fault for not adding more on to the trip itself, but it's not a component of the convention itself anymore, even when we had-there's been a Bouchercon here in Washington again, most recently 2001. And you just can't arrange activities for fifteen hundred people to go and do the tourist things. People have to break up into their own smaller groups or do it on their own.

BLAU: For the BSI annual dinner, I mean the birthday festivities, you're talking about three hundred people, not all who come to everything, so there's nothing really that has no more than two hundred people, so that's manageable. But, you need volunteers that will do all the work. As soon as I say, "You need volunteers to do all the work," there is a deafening silence. So, if you would like to have the annual dinner in Washington, I would be glad to add you to the committee making the arrangements. It's not that hard nowadays or all that expensive to come to an annual dinner unless you want to spend money. You don't have to stay at a hundred and seventy-five dollar a night hotel; there are less expensive hotels in New York. But, you're not at the center of things, but so what. If you book your tickets far enough in advance for your airplane-there is at least one Sherlockian that already has booked his tickets for the next annual dinner. (laughs)

STASHOWER: Do you always stay at the Algonquin?

BLAU: Used to; I used to and then I stopped. And now I stay–I stayed at the Algonquin until the prices went through the roof. Then some of us moved across the street to the Royalton, chic, un-fancy hotel because we could stay at the Royalton cheaper. The Algonquin is just across the street. And the Royalton got refurbished and boosted its prices and we moved to the Iroquois, which was just across the street from the Algonquin near ___________(??). And we stayed there until it was refurbished. And now the Algonquin is the cheapest hotel–we negotiated a nice rate–the cheapest hotel on West Forty-Fourth Street between Fifth and Sixth. My family used to stay at the St. Regis when we came to New York from Pittsfield, until my Uncle Simon was offended when they raised their room rates to fifty dollars a night and we stayed elsewhere. A couple of years ago, Bev and I were walking by the St. Regis and I went and found an assistant manager said, "Show me a reasonable room here." He showed us a very nice room; it was only seven hundred dollars a night rack rate. (laughter)

I've not been there yet, but the ___(??) found the bar where one of the early Sherlockian dinners was held; they had a gathering there just before the BSI annual dinner, the Hotel Duane. It's now just a bar that people got together for a drink before the BSI annual dinner.

STASHOWER: Really, where is it?

BLAU: Somewhere near the _________ (??). You've got to read my newsletter. So, you ought be able to travel and look up tele-numbers of the Society of American Magicians or whatever the international brotherhood is called.

STASHOWER: Well, there are two, The Society of American Magicians and the International Brotherhood of Magicians.

BLAU: And, what's it called in England, The Magic Circle?

STASHOWER: The Magic Circle.

BLAU: I remember going to one of their Christmas shows where–the Iyer Theatre, where everybody had a dozen really good magicians come and do really good, really new things. It's the first time I ever a saw a magician cut a woman into three pieces.

STASHOWER: Was it the Zig-Zag?

BLAU: Yep. Didn't even have a name then.

STASHOWER: It didn't happen to be Robert Harbin who was doing it was it?

BLAU: Yes.

STASHOWER: You saw Robert Harbin do the Zig-Zag? (Blau laughs)

BLAU: I saw Harry Blackstone Senior do his stage show–

STASHOWER: Wow!

BLAU: Senior and junior.

STASHOWER: Well, that Zig-Zag just became the absolute staple of the theater because it packed very small. It was a great effect but unfortunately it got so if you went to a magic convention, it was on everybody's show so you wound up seeing it three or four times a night and so it's sort of fallen out of favor now just because everybody's doing it. But, boy that was a terrific effect.

BLAU: I saw at The Magic Castle, last time, something, but just–every time I go to The Magic Castle, I see something so new; it just blows my mind. This guy came out and did the floating ball through the hoop. He blew soap bubbles and he finally got one that was big enough; he did it and at the end, he just punctured it on the floor. Out of the whole thing, out over the audience and back and through the hoop.

STASHOWER: That was nice.

BLAU: You know intellectually, think about it, how this had to be done, but with a soap bubble? It's tough.

STASHOWER: Well, I used to be a big fan of the multiplying billiard balls. I had a pretty good routine. One, two, and then knock it against the knee and the other one would come out there, three and then four. So you would have four in one hand and then you can get the four in the other hand. I could do it pretty well. When I wanted to do it, because there is a commercially available multiplying soap bubbles, but I never found a set that looked good.

They looked clunky; they didn't look delicate enough to be soap bubbles. They looked like what they were, which is a big round piece of plastic. The edge was too thick and I just thought that would be a lovely effect to blow some bubbles with a wand and catch one and then go through the multiplying routine. Maybe they make a better set now, but I never performed it just because I didn't think it would pass muster. Instead of multiplying billiard balls, I have a very good wooden set but the one that I found much easier to handle was French (??) and you could do anything with it and it looked great.

BLAU: One of the things I loved about the movie *The Illusionist*, because they allow you to think, there is a way to do all this stuff. When he does the orange tree and you sort of briefly see the diagrams with the machinery that did it.

STASHOWER: They are not the real diagrams of course.

BLAU: You just think that all the stuff could be explained when they do something big. Well, you can't explain it. (laughs) There is a man in Chicago, Sherlockian magician, named Elliot Black who ______________________(??). The standard trick was all geared toward the Sherlockian pallet, which I have never seen. I've got to get to Chicago sometime. He's _________________(??).

STASHOWER: I've met him but I have never seen his act and I would really like to.

BLAU: So I'm not pushing on you, right, because there is plenty of sake left, but when do you have to leave?

STASHOWER: Fairly soon, I'm afraid, which is not to say that we can't continue this over another cigar, another time.

BLAU: Got any more questions or have you run out?

STASHOWER: I've run out questions for this set.

BLAU: Not like James Lipton, who sits there with a stack of note cards.

STASHOWER: No. No.

BLAU: James Lipton, of course, has a Conan Doyle collection connection.

STASHOWER: Does he?

BLAU: Yep. He wrote a book some years ago called *An Exaltation of Larks*

STASHOWER: James Lipton wrote that?

BLAU: Yep. Absolutely.

STASHOWER: I did not know that.

BLAU: And he talks about Conan Doyle sitting down with Nigel of *The White Company* who's talking about what–a cete of badgers, a pride of lions because in those days, there was a specific name for every collection of animals, a pod of whales, exaltation of larks.

STASHOWER: I've always loved that Ruth Rendell title, *The Unkindness of Ravens*.

BLAU: I don't know if it was her book but someone, somebody has written. Who does the series about inn signs, names of pubs?

STASHOWER: Martha Grimes.

BLAU: And the horse you rode in on. (laughs)

STASHOWER: It's funny, the number of Americans who do those British themed–Elizabeth George, well Laurie King.

BLAU: This is one of the things that's so awful about so many Sherlockian pastiches, they are written by people that have no idea of British writing, of British speech, or British customs. And they decide, if they sound different on the ___ (??) if they use big words, it will sound British and it's not. There are few really good, imitation Sherlock Holmes stories.

STASHOWER: Well my–my objection is always that, well often, if god help you if Holmes and Watson are going to catch a train (Blau laughs) because then you've got to hear everything about the train from the time they dug the tunnels to laying the corner stone to exactly what the timetable was and all the rest of it. And, you just get so much detail in–because the author has troubled to look it up. And you would no more–and Conan Doyle, it would no more have occurred to Conan Doyle to write it that way than it would have occurred to a contemporary writer to describe how an internal combustion engine works every time someone gets in a car.

BLAU: There's a refining of that genre and that's somebody who knows a lot about something. And so, the person writes a Sherlock Holmes story in which Sherlock Holmes also knows everything about that something.

STASHOWER: Yes. Right. Right.

BLAU: Sherlock Holmes is a wine expert or knows all about butterflies or whatever it is so-because this is what the author feels comfortable; he knows something about it. I loved Conan Doyle's nonchalance. I mean, he had Sherlock Holmes and Watson catching the train at the wrong station, in the day, when readers, if they thought about it, would have known about it. But the point was, they expected the readers to think; it's a good story. When *A Study in Scarlet* was published in Lippincott's and they were getting ready for the book edition, Conan Doyle wrote to Stoddart in Philadelphia, pointing out two mistakes in the story. One was the name of the post office, which in Lippincott's magazine was Seymour

Street. That S-e-y-m-o-u-r, instead of Wimpole. Well, obviously, the typesetter had looked at Conan Doyle's handwriting and had seen Seymour. And the other one was the dates, the date was wrong. And they corrected the post office but they didn't correct the date. And Sherlockian chronologists have been going crazy about this sudden switch from, whatever it was, April to October. But they didn't correct the mistake in the first book edition of *The Sign of the Four* and it was never corrected in any edition of *The Sign of the Four*. Conan Doyle didn't care. He never went to the trouble of saying, "Just a minute. Let's fix that." His friends told him early on of the many mistakes he had made in "The Silver Blaze" about betting on horses. Conan Doyle never took them out. One story that he did revise after it was published was *A Duet*. He got a lot of criticism because, Frank, when he met his former girlfriend, kissed her. That was–people said it was nonsense, so he revised it and that's not what he took out. He took out the cigarette smoking.

Authors, Sherlockian authors. Jack Tracy was an author.

STASHOWER: Did you know him fairly well?

BLAU: Yes. I was, for a while, one of the people on his advisory board with regards to what to do and what not to do. Which of course, meant that I got letters from people who had sent him money and hadn't received a book because Jack always fell behind publishing. And all I could do was tell people to just use your credit card, and if you don't get it you could tell the bank to cancel your charge. Of course, that's not part of the _______________.?? Jack–Jack was an interesting person.

His mother was murdered and by the time the police realized they didn't have any suspects and didn't have any evidence because they hadn't secured the crime scene because they came there and they didn't realize until a few days later, when the autopsy was performed, that she was stabbed multiple times. Somehow, the cops, at the scene, had never noticed it. They had no evidence and no clues, so they decided that the obvious person who had done this was Jack. And they went to Jack and asked him to confess and he refused. He said he didn't do it. And they said, "You didn't get along with your mother." And he said, "Well yes I did." "But you borrowed money from your mother." He said, "Yes." And they urged him to confess but he wouldn't so they started planting stories in the local press that an arrest was imminent based on new evidence. Jack got it right–called a press conference in his front yard and told the television stations that if they have any evidence, they should arrest me; they don't, so don't. That was the end of that.

Jack got his transfer made and he moved to Las Vegas. It wasn't as allergic as his home was and not too long after he moved to Las Vegas, he was killed in an automobile accident and the cops in Illinois decided, obviously, he had committed suicide and went out there and went all though his house trying to find clues and didn't find any. But he was interesting though. His encyclopedia was an important work despite the fact that he had mean things to say about Orlando Park, who had written an encyclopedia before he did.

I knew Bill Baring-Gould. I knew Michael Harrison. And I was coming back from England; I had finished my stint there with Esso. Michael Harrison called me up and said, "I got this

big package I need to get to New York." I said, "Fine." He said, "It's a big package, so it's heavy, probably very expensive." I said, "How heavy is it? Esso is paying for the bill, so what is the problem?" I went and picked a big package, which was all of the bound issues of *The Strand Magazine* with Sherlock Holmes stories in them. And he was sending them to Bill Baring-Gould so that Bill would have the illustrations for the *Annotated Sherlock Holmes*. And, it was indeed a big, heavy package.

STASHOWER: Yea. I bet.

BLAU: So, I flew to New York and went through customs and there was a courier, a uniformed courier, from *Time Life* magazine waiting for me to take custody of the package. (laughter) I went into New York the next day and had lunch with Bill at one of his favorite restaurants. Probably the same restaurant where the Adventuresses of Sherlock Holmes thought they were going to take him to lunch and they discovered that they didn't have the money to pay for it, so Bill wound up taking them to lunch. Michael Harrison is an interesting man. I keep saying Sherlockians are interesting people. He was really interesting. Did you ever meet him?

STASHOWER: Just once.

BLAU: He liked to drink. Fortunately, he didn't like to drink expensive whisky.

STASHOWER: He didn't like to drink expensive whiskey or he didn't drink expensive whisky?

BLAU: He liked to drink but he didn't like expensive whiskies. He stayed with me here in Washington once, for about ten days. No, thank you very much, he didn't need single malt Scotch. He would just take the plain Old Pearson's brand and that was fine. This made it more economical (laughs) to have him as a houseguest. And David Hammer; I mean-these aren't authors known outside the world of Sherlockian stuff.

What other authors, I'm supposed to know? In the science fiction world? Kelly Freas I met once; now, he's not an author but he's an artist. He was a great science fiction illustrator. He was an interesting guy. He illustrated a Sherlockian story called "The Return" written by H. Beam Piper and John McGuire. This is about a spaceship that lands and discovers that someone has been there before them. The survivors, a long time ago–the descendants of the survivors have built this religion around the only book that survived the crash and it is *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*. The thing is, the commander of this new spaceship was named Holmes and that's the return, he's come back. (laughs). So, I have the originals somewhere of that artwork. Well, sometime you can come back, not for the BSI archive, and you can wander through my library to see what I have.

STASHOWER: That sounds good. I would like to do that–thank you very much Peter, until the next time.

Closing: You have been listening to an interview in the Baker Street Irregulars Oral History Project, conducted by the BSI Trust for the BSI Archives, which comprise a special collection at the Houghton Library at Harvard University. [Eds. note: The Archives are now located at the Lilly Library at Indiana University.] The copyright for the interview is owned by the Baker Street Irregulars. No copy or rebroadcast of this interview can be made without the express written consent of the Baker Street Irregulars. Go to bsitrust.org for more recordings, as well as, photos and details of each BSI dinner since 1934. You'll also find details about donating material to the trust or providing financial support, all at bsitrust.org.

end of interview