

An Interview of Robert E. Thomalen Conducted by Francine Kitts

May 13, 2008

BSI Oral History Project

This is the transcription of an audio recording of an interview with Robert E. Thomalen, 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 Archive.

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Interview History

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Robert E. Thomalen

Interviewed by Francine Kitts  
May 13, 2008  
Algonquin Hotel  
New York City, New York, USA

*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. [Ed. Note: The collection is now at the Lilly Library at Indiana University.] In this interview, Francine Kitts speaks with Irregular Bob Thomalen on May 13, 2008. The copyright for this interview is owned by the Baker Street Irregulars. See [www.bsitrust.org](http://www.bsitrust.org) for terms of use.

KITTS: Today is Tuesday, May 13, 2008, and I'm sitting in the library of the Algonquin Hotel with Bob Thomalen. My name is Francine Kitts. It's so nice to be here with you today, Bob.

THOMALEN: Thank you Francine. It's very nice to be here with you.

KITTS: Thank you. Bob, let's start at the beginning; tell us a little bit about your family background.

THOMALEN: Okay.

KITTS: Where were you born and raised?

THOMALEN: I was born in New York City in 1934. My parents were Ed and Agnes Thomalen, although they pronounced it Tho-mal-en in those days. I was born and raised in New York City. I went to Catholic schools up through college. In 1952, I entered the Air Force, the Korean War was on and it was the thing to do, to enlist. I spent four years in the Air Force and then came out and went to work for New York Telephone. My mother had worked for New York telephone and—it was a natural thing for me to go—she had asked me if I would go; they had treated her very well. So I did and I'm a creature of habit. You know, once I started working there, I said I might as well stay here. And that was it; I spent my whole career with them. I started outdoors working outdoors on the technical end of the business and then went into sales and got involved with teaching and education.

KITTS: How many years did you spend with them?

THOMALEN: Thirty-three.

KITTS: Mmm! You received a special award while you were there called the Vail Award.

THOMALEN: Yes.

KITTS: Can you explain that?

THOMALEN: Yeah. It began years ago. Theodore Vail was the man who engineered the construction of the Bell system way back in the early part of the twentieth century. They named an award for him and presented it to people who had, I must modestly say, acted heroically in saving the lives of others. And I had an occasion to be involved in something like that not too many years ago. I was incredibly surprised, honored, and humbled when they, the company, decided to award me that honor.

KITTS: I'm sure it was well deserved. So, how many years have you and the beautiful Theresa been married?

THOMALEN: Well, let's see. What's today's date? (laughter) Today is the thirteenth. Well, in eleven more days, it will be fifty years.

KITTS: That's quite a milestone.

THOMALEN: That sure is.

KITTS: Did she share your Sherlockian interests?

THOMALEN: Absolutely not. (laughter) She thinks I'm demented. But I'll tell you, she is wonderful because she accompanies me on all my little forays into different parts of the country to attend meetings or seminars or go to meet other Sherlockians. She has been great about it, really has.

KITTS: Do any of your children share any of your Sherlockian interests?

THOMALEN: No. They have been consulting with psychiatrists for years now to see if they can have me put away. (laughter) I once threatened to allow them to inherit my entire collection. They immediately started pointing at one another saying, "Give it to him dad." "No, give it to him." "No, I don't want it." "Let him have it."

KITTS: How did you first become interested in Holmes?

THOMALEN: Let's see; it was about—I guess it was around 1978. I had always had a succession of hobbies throughout my life. Everything from being a magician, a musician, I played in chess tournaments and I did oil paintings and I learned cartooning and above all, I played ball all my life. And in 1978, I hurt my throwing shoulder and I couldn't play

anymore. So I was casting about for a new hobby and as it happened, the Rathbone films were on every Saturday. They—one of them was featured on television. And I drifted into the habit of staying home to watch these every Saturday. At the conclusion of the run, I thought, wow that was really great fun.

I really enjoyed Holmes and that's when it struck me that while I have normally been a voracious reader; that I had never read the Sherlock Holmes' stories and that was amazing. I guess everybody on the planet had and so, I went out and bought the Doubleday complete works and set about reading them from front to back, which I did. And I was really stunned because I had enjoyed the movies so much. I was astonished to discover that I enjoyed the stories, the written stories, even far more. And so, wrapped up as I was, I thought this was absolutely wonderful, but well now I have read all the stories. There are, after all, only sixty of them. So I decided to sit around and wait for the movies to come back on next year.

However, about three weeks later, I was browsing in a bookstore in Scarsdale and there, on a shelf, was a large book entitled *The World Bibliography of Sherlock Holmes*. And I looked and whoa, what is this? And I discovered that it contained an incredible six thousand two hundred twenty-one items of Sherlock Holmes. Everything from different editions of the canon, different stories, movies and radio and plays and games and toys and you name it, it was in there. But the thing that dragged me down into the mire was the fact, that in the back of that book, there was a list of societies.

KITTS: Woohoo!

THOMALEN: And when I discovered there were societies devoted to Holmes, I went right—oh, this is right up my alley. So I tried to get in touch with the Baker Street Irregulars. This is so often times as simple a thing as explaining the existence of God. You just cannot find the Baker Street Irregulars to join. But there was a group called The Three Garridebs located in Westchester County, which was my home at the time. And so I got in touch with the fellow named Bruce Kennedy. He invited me to the next meeting, which happened to be in February and I was all excited going to this. However, the night of the meeting, the day of the meeting, we had had an enormous blizzard and at seven o'clock when I was about to leave, the sleet and the slush was freezing on the ground. And on the parkway, on the way up to his house, which was twenty-five miles from my house, it was about four inches deep. And I dare say that I couldn't have exceeded a speed limit of twenty-five miles an hour, if I went that fast. And all—my wife was telling me, before I left, “You are absolutely nuts to go out in this and those people are going to think you are crazy coming out in this.” Well, I arrived at the front door and this fellow greeted me and welcomed me in and everybody in the meeting, everybody in the society was at that meeting. There were only six then. We have grown a great deal over the years, but that was my first exposure to a Sherlock Holmes meeting, The Three Garridebs of Westchester County.

KITTS: And who were members back then? Do you remember anybody?

THOMALEN: Oh yea. Ralph Williams and Mike Leighton and—Phil, oh I can't think of his last name—Phil Gelman and—

KITTS: When did you meet Bill Schweickert?

THOMALEN: Oh, he was there. That was the first time I met Bill.

KITTS: Was that his first meeting.

THOMALEN: That was his second meeting. But, yea, we seemed to hit it right off. It was great fun. The following meeting, Jim Cleary, who ultimately became an officer of The Garridebs, he joined the society. And there was another fellow, a young fellow, named—oh God, I can't think of his name. He was a student, but it will come to me. Anyway, that was the merry little band of men. The first meeting was—Kennedy was the whole show. He did all the talking and we had a little quiz and he played a thirty-three rpm record of one of the Sherlock Holmes stories. In later years, that would have bored me to tears, but since that was my first meeting I was all-agog. I was happy to soak up everything that was offered. So that was my first—that's the thing that got me going in the world of Sherlock Holmes.

KITTS: And then what happened at the CIA cocktail party with Bruce Kennedy?

THOMALEN: An extraordinary event. This was the—I don't remember whether it's the first or second. I tend to think it was the second one, the dinner held up there. And it was black tie, a lovely affair. And we were all standing around in the courtyard having cocktails and Kennedy walked up to me and said—now this was 1982, so I have been a member a couple of years now. He said, "I would like your permission to resign from The Garridebs." Which really surprised me, first of all, he didn't have to ask my permission of course. But secondly, the fact that he wanted to resign was really blowing me away; I couldn't figure out why. And, as I was about to ask him why, we were called to the table and I never got a chance to discuss it further with him that evening. Well, the upshot was that he did indeed leave the society and so Bill Schweickert and I took over.

Bill and I, we had a great relationship. We were perfectly matched for the jobs that we had with The Garridebs because he didn't like to be upfront. He liked to sit back and do all the paperwork and—he was a bank executive vice president so he was much into the banking end, even though we only had a few dollars. But he would meticulously withdraw it so we wouldn't incur interest. Now, oh my God! And I liked being up on my feet, the ham. So that's how we ran it and it worked perfectly. In between meetings, we would meet together to plan what we were going to do at the next meeting and it was a great combination of efforts because neither one of us put our egos up front. If I projected a suggestion, suggested an idea, and he didn't care for it, he would say so. And I would say, "Okay. Let's think of something else." And the same would hold true if he wanted to do something that I didn't think was proper, or not proper, but wouldn't be good for the group. I'd just say so and he would drop it and we never got insulted by that. We always suggested things that would be for the good of the membership. It always seemed to work out fine.

KITTS: You didn't say anything about his bit as Mrs. Hudson. Oh, that's your bit as Mrs. Hudson.

THOMALEN: Oh yea. That was—(laughs)—there was a meeting—I can’t remember—yea, I forget where we were; we were in a different venue. But anyway, Bill had constructed a paper and it had to do with people that never had a dinner. It was a take-off on—Red—Mickels—who was that guy?

KITTS: Buttons.

THOMALEN: Red Buttons, who had done a routine similar to this but Bill did his for different people in the Canon and it was hilarious. But he decided it would great fun if I was dressed up as Mrs. Hudson. I don’t know why we came up with this. (Kitts laughs) So they got me a wig, a shawl, a long dress somewhere and I hobbled in and two of the fellows helped me up to the chair up front. And as he was giving his paper, “Isn’t that right Mrs. Hudson?” “Oh yeah, that’s right Bill.” But then I keep dozing off and leaning into him (Kitts laughs) and he’d just push me back up straight and of course, it drew a lot of laughs from the crowd, as did his paper. So it was great fun. We loved to do things like that.

KITTS: Is that when Bill wrote “A Long Evening to Holmes”? Back in those days?

THOMALEN: Let’s see. He wrote that in—I think it was either eighty-three or eighty-four; I can’t remember which. But its first reading was at *Autumn in Baker Street*. In fact, it wasn’t on the program; he asked me beforehand, just before the program started. “Well Bob, I have a poem I wrote; can I read it?” “Well sure.” And he told me the title but in the rush of activity, cause I wanted to get up to the lectern, I said, “Yea, okay. Good.” So when an appropriate moment came, I said, “Oh and now, Bill Schweickert has a poem he would like to read. It’s titled ‘How I Spent the Night with Holmes’. Is that right Bill?” He looked at me disappointed, “No, it’s ‘A Long Evening with Holmes.’” “Oh, okay.” So, he got up and read it and whoa-boy did it catch everybody by surprise. It was fabulous as you well know. Everybody knows it now. It’s become legendary; it’s one of the two premier poems in the Sherlockian World. The other one being, of course, “221B”.

KITTS: Did he continue to read them—read the poem at The Three Garridebs meeting?

THOMALEN: Yes. We decided that every meeting would end with the reading of that and that continues to this day. So, that’s what, twenty years.

KITTS: Why is that particularly special to you?

THOMALEN: Well, Bill and I always had a great relationship. It was—he was kind of like an older brother, best friend, you name it, to me. And he loved me the way I loved him. And Bill was a funny kind of guy though. You could not give him a present. If you gave him something, by god, he’d have to give you something. And you know, I used to tell him, “Damn it Bill, forget it; it’s just a gift.” “It’s okay Bob.” Anyway, one year, the BSI patches came out so I was down there when they came in so I thought—I said, “Give me two.” I’ll buy one for Bill. So I said, “Bill, here you go.” He said, “Oh, how much is that?” “No, it’s a gift.” “Oh no!” “Bill, I’ll hit you if you try to give me something.” “Well, okay, okay.” A

couple of days later at the meeting, he walks up and hands me an envelope, a big brown envelope. I said, "What's this?" He said, "You can read it later." "Well, okay." I forgot about it. I took it home with me and when I opened it up the next day, I was flabbergasted to see that he had given me the hologram-holograph manuscript to "A Long Evening with Holmes". I was just so taken a back that I couldn't talk. The poem historically brings tears to my eyes, even at this late date, this far removed. It's just so touching and telling and indicative of how we all feel that I just couldn't believe, that here it was, in my hands.

KITTS: It must have been very special.

THOMALEN: It really is. And as much as I'll hate to part with it, I'm going to donate it to the archives up in Harvard, let them have it, let everybody see it.

KITTS: That's a good place for it.

THOMALEN: Yea.

KITTS: Now Theresa, was Theresa part of The Three Garridebs too?

THOMALEN: She was the first woman who ever attended a Three Garridebs meeting. Ah-well I shouldn't say that. If you go back to the beginning of The Garridebs, The Three Garridebs was the coalition of three different scion societies. And at the 1977 BSI dinner, Kennedy organized a dinner up in White Plains, a luncheon rather up in White Plains, and he invited several of the Irregulars and other people up to attend. And the group did go up. Bobby Katz, Jon Lellenberg and his wife Susan, Susan's brother, and a couple of others at the time. In any event, there was one or two women at that. But then beyond that, there were none until Theresa started coming. Of course, she got sick of sitting home alone while I traipsed off to Mount Kisco to attend The Garridebs meetings. Well, hard on the heels of her attending came Eleanor Schweickert and Jim Cleary's wife, Adele. And they remained with it—the society throughout. Along the way, we acted like Johnny Appleseeds. We would go down to New York and invite people from there to come up and visit our society. And we went from six members to eighty-two members in not too long a period of time. So a lot of women attended. Of course, a lot of ASH came up. And we grew like topsy. And anyway, that's Theresa's accomplishment; she was the first woman.

KITTS: Oh wow! Bob, tell us a little bit about your affiliation with The Priory Scholars.

THOMALEN: The Priory Scholars—that's the New York City group. I used to go to different functions, in fact, the first function I went to in New York was a dinner meeting of the ASH at Beatrice's Cafe. It was in Greenwich Village and it was there that I first met—the most memorable Sherlockian I have ever known and that's Chris Steinbrunner. Chris was an extraordinary chap. He was the RKO General Director for Channel 9 and he had an encyclopedic knowledge of the films of Sherlock Holmes. And it was there that I met him.

He came in and I was—there was this commotion at the door and all the ASH ran over to meet him and surrounded him at the bar. Eventually I was introduced and of course, I had heard of

him before, but I had never met him. He had great charm; you naturally gravitated to this fellow. In any event, he remembered my name apparently because, (laughs) much to my surprise, he invited me to The Garrideb—to the BSI dinner the following January. So I was just thrilled out of my skull. Anyway, Chris—Chris and I got to be friendly and we used to—we both worked in New York and we used to meet frequently for lunch or for drinks after work. And we decided to resurrect The Priory Scholars.

The Priory Scholars had been a group that had begun by Chris at Fordham University where he attended, getting his Masters degree. And he used to do a lot work on WFUV, the Fordham radio station. He'd write mysteries or get mysteries that had been written and then present them on the air. And so he said, "Let's resurrect them." And we did in New York City, at a place called—ah—Bogey's. Now Bogey's was a little bar-restaurant down in the Village and we used—Chris used to bring scripts and we'd do the scripts, but I guess after the first one, he started bringing big 33 rpm records that were sound effects and he'd say, "Okay, Bob, you do the sound effects." (Kitts laughs) And I'd say, "Okay, how do you do that?" "Well, you put this down—see on the script where I have written '7'? That's where you put the seventh one in." (Kitts laughs) Now, these things were a hair's breath wide and there was no way you could count seven in and hit it on cue. So you were apt to hear a character say, "take that," and then hear a horn go off or a car crash. I could never (laughs) get things right so, of course, the mysteries became comedies in short order. But anyway, they were great fun.

At one of the meetings of The Priory Scholars, I had the pleasure of presenting investiture into the group of Brett—ah—what's his name—Jeremy Brett. Jeremy was a lovely guy and we invited him to one of our meetings and he came. I had prepared this big investiture certificate for him and framed it and we presented it to him. To this day, he is the only one ever invested that was not a member. He is the only one ever invested in The Priory Scholars. And he was such a charming and gentle man. He spent the whole night signing things. Of course, everybody was thrilled to have him there, so they were producing all kinds of material for him to sign. He sat there graciously and he signed his full name and to the person, often with an inscription. He didn't care how long he sat there; he must have signed a million pieces of paper and cardboard—you know, all kinds of stuff.

KITTS: That must have been a nice thing.

THOMALEN: Oh, it really was. Yea, we really had a good turn out that night too. I guess there were about sixty, sixty-five, people there.

KITTS: And you mentioned something once about a stabbing party that Chris Steinbrunner had. (Thomalen laughs)

THOMALEN: Oh yeah. He's the—as I said, he's the most colorful guy I ever met, certainly the most eccentric. He lived in Middle Village in Queens and one night he was coming home. He parked his car and he had about a six-block walk to his house, part of which was in Omega, a very secluded and dark area. As it turns out, one night fate intervened and there was a mugger there, who wanted his money, and for no reason stabbed him. He wasn't



content just to take his money. And Chris staggered out; fortunately a taxicab saw him and the cab driver stopped and drove him to a hospital, where he recovered. And being the eccentric, on the date of that stabbing, every year, Chris would hold a stabbing party and he would invite all his friends. (laughter)

KITTS: Nice memory, huh?

THOMALEN: Yes. In fact, when he passed away, he left money to—for us to have a party on his death every year.

KITTS: You know, I just want to go back for a minute. What year was it that you did resurrect The Priory Scholars?

THOMALEN: I would guess it's somewhere around 1983, somewhere in there. I don't keep the exact year in my head.

KITTS: You were also—you are also a member of The Five Orange Pips.

THOMALEN: Yes.

KITTS: How did you become involved and when was that?

THOMALEN: That was – I'll take you back one quick step. The Five Orange Pips had been around forever; they were, are actually older than The Baker Street Irregulars. They started with five rather wealthy gentlemen living in northern Westchester. Each one lived on an estate and they began holding meetings once every year. It would be black tie at one of their homes; a dinner would be served and each member would have to present a paper. Well, this tradition continued down through the years, there were only five and the membership started diminishing and they would replenish it with someone, also pretty old. So at the time, almost all of them were in there eighties and they decided that they wanted somebody younger to run it. So (laughs) they invited Bill Schweickert, who was only seventy-four at the time, seventy-six. (laughs) He was the young kid they let take over. But then he said, "Bob, you got to get this guy Bob Thomalen involved." And so they invited me to a dinner and in those days, it was traditional to sit below the salt if you were new. And I did indeed sit below the salt. And then of course, as other new members came on, we would move up.

KITTS: Who ran The Pips back then?

THOMALEN: Let's see. That was Ben Clark. Ben ran it and then Bill took over.

KITTS: And you are still a member of The Pips?

THOMALEN: Yes. Uh-huh.

KITTS: Now, The Sacred Six. You were the youngest member of The Six back when Julian Wolff ran it. Is that correct?

THOMALEN: Yea. Either George Fletcher or I—I can't remember which; I don't know – George and I always seemed like the same age, we were like two kids who were always goofing off, kidding around. And we too sat down at the end. (laughs)

KITTS: What other scions did you belong to?

THOMALEN: Well, let's see. I went to The Client's of Sherlock Holmes. I went to their initial meeting in Philadelphia. Bob Katz and Scott and Sherry Rose Bond ran that. That was great fun. Let's see. There was one in Jersey and I remember Kennedy telling me, "That's a bunch of drunks." And so I was invited to go to one once. Nothing could be further from the truth; I don't know what possessed him to say that. This was one of the great fun groups in all Sherlockiana. These people just enjoyed good clean fun. There were no drunken brawls; there were no drunks. It was just a lot of fun and that was Mrs. Hudson's Cliffdwellers of course.

KITTS: Who ran that?

THOMALEN: There was a triumvirate that ran that too, Irv Kamil and Harlan Umansky. And they had a great cartoonist—what was the cartoonist name? This is terrible, I'll think of it.

KITTS: Okay.

THOMALEN: Schatell. Norm Schatell. There you go. They had great fun. It was all tongue-in-cheek. But we enjoyed every minute of it. And in Brooklyn, I discovered The Montague Street Lodgers. They were—they came into being somewhere in the eighties; I don't remember the exact year. And—let's see—who ran that? That was Peter Crupe and Tom Utecht. They ran it. In fact they still do; it's still going strong. I think they just celebrated their twentieth anniversary, recently.

KITTS: I believe so.

THOMALEN: And let's see. I took a couple of trips up to Rhode Island to visit The Cornish Horrors. That was a great group too. I had a lot of fun up there. The first time I went—Jan Prager let me stay at his house. And I had just met Jan the previous January so I had only met him once. And he invited me to stay at his house, which was certainly gracious, not knowing me either. And at night, we were about to retire and he said, "Oh Bob, Anna and I are leaving early in the morning. You just lock up when you go." What a great trusting person he was. But you figure—

KITTS: You're a Sherlockian.

THOMALEN: If you can't trust a Sherlockian, you can't trust anybody.

KITTS: Now. Did you attend any of the New York Birthday Weekend functions before you became an Irregular?

THOMALEN: Oh Yea. The first one I went to was 1979. And–

KITTS: That was your first dinner?

THOMALEN: Yes. That was my first dinner, Yea.

KITTS: And Chris had gotten you an invitation, Steinbrunner?

THOMALEN: Yes.

KITTS: And what else did you attend? Did you go to a luncheon? Cocktail Party?

THOMALEN: Oh. God. I can't remember. I don't remember.

KITTS: Okay.

THOMALEN: I tend to think that I went just to the dinner. I was so excited to go to anything. I went to that.

KITTS: Now how–you mentioned that you first learned about the BSI in *The World Bibliography*.

THOMALEN: Yea.

KITTS: And then you got a dinner invitation from Steinbrunner. What was your first impression of your first dinner?

THOMALEN: I was thrilled; I was like a kid in a candy store. I was looking around and, of course, we all had name tags. The first thing that hit me was–well it was held in the Regency Hotel and the anteroom to where we were having the dinner was where we had the cocktail party. The anteroom was about the size of your average closet (laughter). And everybody was jammed into this and the way they had it set up, you had to buy chits. You couldn't go to the bar and buy a drink. You had to go to one corner to buy the chits and then work your way through this mob to the other corner to get your drink. And I remember getting in line, standing in line, and as I was nearing the bar, there was fellow standing against the wall, his back to the wall, just watching the passing parade. And as I drew abreast of him, I was looking ahead really and I didn't know who he was. And he said, "Oh so you're Bob Thomalen." And I turned around and, "Yea. Sure." I looked at him and saw his nametag, Ron De Waal. (laughs) Whoa! This is one of the icons. Oh my god, "Oh, hi." I was that flustered and he said he knew about *Prescott's Press*, which I was then publishing. And we got to chatting and became fast friends. I corresponded with him throughout the years. But I remember it was just–the big thrill was looking at people, looking at nametags, recognizing the name. Now I could put a face to it.

KITTS: And you still do that, right?

THOMALEN: Oh sure. (laughs) Absolutely, I can't remember anything anymore.

KITTS: Who was leading the BSI at the time of your first dinner?

THOMALEN: It--Dr. Wolff.

KITTS: What was your impression of him?

THOMALEN: It's funny. Until I became a member of The Sacred Six, I always thought he was kind of standoffish. I didn't really get to know him. And the few attempts I made to chat with him were--he was just kind of distant, distracted. I don't know, he just struck me as that way. And, of course, everyone kept saying, "Julian? Are you kidding." That's the way he struck me. But when I became a member of The Pips, I mean not The Pips, The Sacred Six, then I got to know him better and then we used to kid around a lot.

KITTS: It was a smaller group probably and you were able to talk a little bit better.

THOMALEN: Yea.

KITTS: And then after Julian, the head of the BSI was Tom Stix.

THOMALEN: Yes.

KITTS: Did you know Tom at the time that he took over?

THOMALEN: I did, because he was a member of The Sacred Six also and that's where I really got to know him. In fact, we were walking home from one of the meetings one day and we were on our way and we were walking down the street. And he said, "You have been anointed." I said, "What?" "You've been anointed." "What are you talking about?" "How would you like to be Cartwright?" "Cartwright? What are you talking about?" Cause at that time, we didn't have Cartwright. He said, "Julian is stepping down." And then I got panicky. I said, "You don't mean he wants me to take over; are you crazy?" So he said, "I'm going to take over but I want you to have--be Cartwright."

KITTS: So you knew before it was announced that Tom was to become the new head of the BSI.

THOMALEN: Yea.

KITTS: And what was the role of Cartwright?

THOMALEN: Advisory and Tom used me as a troubleshooter too. Anytime he heard about any dissent that was going on in the scion, he would say, “Get in touch with these guys and tell them to knock it off.”

KITTS: How long did you hold the position?

THOMALEN: Ten years.

KITTS: And were you still Cartwright when Mike Whelan became Wiggins?

THOMALEN: No. No.

KITTS: Do you advise Mike at all?

THOMALEN: If he asks, yea. And if I feel that something should be brought to his attention, I have license to do that. He trusts my judgment. Well—I won’t say anything more about him.

KITTS: Tell us a little bit more about Tom Stix, about his personality.

THOMALEN: Tom Stix was a complex guy. He was, at once, the most generous man you’ll ever meet and the nicest guy you could possibly run into. And with a flick of a switch, he can be cantankerous and angry and vindictive, all at the blink of an eye. Amazing guy. I used to tease him unmercifully and I think that is why we got along so well together.

KITTS: He was good at teasing too.

THOMALEN: Oh yea, he was, but I never let him get away with it. (laughter)

KITTS: Probably why you had such a good relationship.

THOMALEN: Exactly. He used to call me and as soon as I picked up the phone, I knew what was coming. I’d say, “Hello.” And at the other end, I would hear, “god damn it; I’m going to take his god damn Shilling away.” (Kitts laughs) “Who is it this time Tom?” He would give me the name, “Un um, why?” and dot-dot-da, he would tell me why and then the usual, “You can’t do that Tom.” “Well, god damn it, I ought to be able to.” (laughter)

KITTS: He never did though.

THOMALEN: No. He couldn’t. He couldn’t I wouldn’t let him. (laughs) But he was comical. He would start his conversation, “And take his Shilling.”

KITTS: He was also very generous.

THOMALEN: Oh my god, was he ever. He was generous to a fault. He was—when the BSI weekend came around, he was not just Wiggins, the head of the BSI; he was the host. He would go down and sit in the lobby of the Algonquin and invariably, a circle would form

around him and people would always be coming over in dribs and drabs and ordering drinks. One year, I forget the amount, it was somewhere around a seventeen hundred dollar bar bill, just sitting there, for the Thursday afternoon session. But people would come by, order drinks, but they wouldn't pay for them. But he would—never batted an eye. He never said a word, but I knew because we were intimate friends at this point. He would do things like that. He took Pat Moran in when her health was in its final stages and she couldn't subsist on her own. He took her into his home and nurtured her for awhile.

KITTS: Tom and Dorothy were very gracious hosts.

THOMALEN: Oh, were they ever. They often hosted afternoon or dinner parties and they would invite a large number of Sherlockians and everyone would have a great time. And they spared no expense for food, beverages, whatever. They were wonderful hosts, absolutely great.

KITTS: What were some of Tom's innovations as the head of the Baker Street Irregulars.

THOMALEN: Well, I went on record some years ago saying that he was the most innovative of all as the heads of the Baker Street Irregulars. And we tend to sanctify Edgar Smith and Morley, etcetera. This guy invoked more changes than any of the others. The biggest one by which he is best known is he invested women. This had been a contentious point for years, as far back as 1968 when six young girls, members of ASH, they were students, picketed a BSI dinner in the freezing snow and rain. Now we come to 1991 and after all those years, he finally made the decision, and it stuck, and everybody applauded it. And now, of course, we have many women members of the Baker Street Irregulars.

He also made it possible for those who, because of financial circumstances, were not able to attend the BSI weekend. He made it possible for them to do so by instituting the Watson Fund. Tom decided that no one should miss out on these things because of money. He said there's just too much meaning in these weekends, especially the BSI dinner, and so he invited—he instituted the Watson Funds. Somebody is Watson, nobody knows who, except Wiggins and that's good, but Watson accepts checks and donations from people and that money is surreptitiously handed out to those who have requested assistance. And nothing is ever said; no receipts passed hand but this person has come and no one knows who among the group have been a beneficiary of this. But now people can come who couldn't come in the past and that's a wonderful thing.

KITTS: A tribute to his generosity of spirit.

THOMALEN: Absolutely. It transcended everything he did. Let's see; what else did he do. Oh, of course, he took over for his father. His dad, Tom Stix Senior, had instituted the running of The Silver Blaze every year. And after his dad died, he and Dorothy took over and they ran that for years, until his health failed and his son took over. I should say that Richard Wein took over for, I think, two years and then it passed to Tom Stix [son], Stephen Stix. And he ran it.

Let's see. One of the things that—one of the steps he took was—I'm pretty sure I had something to do with because I used to rail at him the fact that sitting around that dinner were people who couldn't even spell Sherlock Holmes. They were somebody's friend, or a dentist, or a doctor, or a lawyer, neighbor or whatever. But, "Hey, want to go to a Sherlock Holmes meeting?" "Sure." And bang, the next thing you know, we don't know how many of these people. So I used to tell Tom Stix in my own crude style that there should only be Sherlockian asses in those Sherlockian seats. And he agreed and so anytime you wanted to invite somebody, you had to ask. And if it was somebody that wasn't a Sherlockian, "Sorry. No go." And so now, when you look around that table, you will see all Sherlockians in that room.

KITTS: Thank you for that Bob. (laughter)

THOMALEN: I remember one time that the culminating moment—Charlie Goodman was still alive. I loved Charlie Goodman; he was a real old throw back. He was a great character. I loved Charlie and one day, we were sitting at the dinner and I happened to look across the room—before I tell you, well, never mind—there's Mel Allen, the Yankee broadcaster (Kitts laughs), sitting at one of the tables. So I said, "What the hell is he doing here?" "I don't know, somebody brought him." So I went to Stix and said, "Who brought this guy?" "I don't know." Okay, intermission comes; I go get Charlie Goodman; now Charlie was a dentist but his dentures kept falling down. It's like the shoemaker's boy with no shoes. "Charlie, come with me. I want you to meet somebody." "Sure Bobby. Who is it?" "Mel Allen." "Who?" "It's Mel Allen, the Yankee broadcaster. Come on over." So I bring him over and introduce myself, "Mel, how are you doing? Hope you are having a good time? I would like for you to meet Charlie Goodman. Charlie is the oldest living Irregular. Sit down Charlie." And I walk away (laughter); if you are going to come here and take up a seat, you are going to pay the price. (laughter) So Charlie tormented him until the intermission was over.

KITTS: Bob, you got your Two-Shilling award in 1988.

THOMALEN: '83.

KITTS: "83. And why did you receive a Two-Shilling award?"

THOMALEN: Probably because I was handsome, debonair, charming, witty. (laughter)

KITTS: Besides all of that.

THOMALEN: Evy Herzog once said, "When I—you came on board, you hit the ground running." And I guess I did. I really threw myself into this thing. I started, in fact my first year, a scion newspaper, called *Prescott's Press*. It's still running today, not under my tutelage, under Warren Randall. I started attending different meetings all over the place. I was winning quizzes a lot. And I was always encouraging people to come to meetings and to get involved with Sherlock Holmes. I was writing and publishing and all kinds of stuff. And so, 1983—I'm sorry, in '83 I got my Shilling. Okay, that's right, in '83 was my Shilling and

in '88 was my Two-Shilling. Yea, you're right; I'm sorry. I guess because of my work as Cartwright and all the other things I was doing.

KITTS: You also ran the BSI Weekend Cocktail Party.

THOMALEN: Yea. I used to run it and host it.

KITTS: How long did you do that?

THOMALEN: I don't know. Five years I would guess. I don't know, somewhere thereabouts.

KITTS: What were your duties? You were the emcee?

THOMALEN: Yea. I used to like that. I'm a ham; I like being in front of a group. (laughter) And another thing for which would have gotten me to the Two-Shilling was *Autumn in Baker Street*.

KITTS: That started when?

THOMALEN: In '82. So that would contribute to it as well.

KITTS: So Bob, what other memories do you have of the cocktail party when you were running it?

THOMALEN: Well, let's see. In those days, the cocktail parties had a succession of homes. First, they were held at Julian's apartment and then they moved to the Grolier Club and then to 24 5th Avenue, then the National Arts Club. And currently they are at the New York Bar Association Building, right opposite the Algonquin. Ezra used to put on six or seven limericks at each cocktail party and they were great because he encapsulated all of the highlights of the night before at the BSI dinner and he was great at this. The rhyme schemes were perfect; they were great limericks and he hit everything right on the head.

But as far as my tenure as emcee went, often times I would cast about for things to say when I'm at the microphone, but one of the great bonuses that I had was listening to Tom Stix at the BSI dinner the night before. Tom was— (laughs) always managed to have a little breakdown in one of the words that he used. For instance, he was reading a letter once and it had to do with the Watson Fund and it concluded by saying, or at least Stix concluded by saying, "It's a great effort to keep green, the member of the best and wisest." (laughter) Of course, the place was in hysterics. The next day, of course, at the cocktail party, I opened with a discussion of that letter and I quoted Tom verbatim. And of course, the cocktail party members were howling with laughter. Another year he said I want to keep green the member or the mammary (laughter) rather of the best and wisest man. So I never had to look far for material to throw out at the cocktail party; I just had to listen to Tom at the dinner.



There were some fabulous highlights, both personal and Sherlockian, at these cocktail parties. In 1990, my wife Theresa was awarded the Queen Victoria Medal. Only six people have received that; two of them were the heads of state of Great Britain. And she is really in select company. Her work for the Baker Street Irregulars has been enormous over the years. She's contributed in so many ways, it's hard to recount them all. Major among which, are the various items of calligraphy that she does. She designs investiture certificates. She's done the names in calligraphy of the receptors of those certificates, aside from doing all sorts of other work and assisting me and Tom. And she certainly richly deserved that medal. And that was in 1990.

In 1991, a great revolutionary moment came when Tom Stix stepped to the microphone and announced some people were getting a Shilling, who were unable to receive it the night before at the dinner. And the first name he mentioned was a certain gracious lady named Dame Jean Conan Doyle. Well, the place was in an uproar. When I tell you everybody was on their feet, except a certain group, from a certain city, which shall remain nameless; they mumbling to the contrary. But everybody was thrilled to death and happy as a lark and it was a very telling and emotional moment. So emotional, that Tom felt the greatest emotion of all and he got very teary-eyed and lost his composure. I happened to be standing, not five feet from him and the lectern and when I saw that he was breaking down, I walked over and said to him loud enough for the microphone, "Who?" He started to laugh and that got him back on track and we went on and he announced the other women, who would be the recipients of the Shilling for the first time in history. He had planned by the way, at the moment, the precise moment, that he was announcing the Shilling, to have one of the members of the British society at the door of Dame Jean, actually presenting her with the Shilling itself and the certificate. It was a very warm, touching moment.

Let's see, in 1994, I was working the door and checking people as they came in, making sure they got their name tags, etcetera.

KITTS: This was at the cocktail party?

THOMALEN: Yea. And I stepped away from the table for a moment and when I returned, I continued what I was doing. A little while later, one of the fellows said, "I just saw Theresa." And I said, "Theresa who?" And he said, "Your wife." I said, "Really, where?" He said, "Here." I said, "Here!" And then I got a little panicky, what's she doing here? She wouldn't come here unless something was wrong. So I was running around the place and finally found her. "Honey, what's the matter? Are you okay? What are you doing here?"

KITTS: Was this at the cocktail party?

THOMALEN: This was at the cocktail party. This was the night before cocktail party. No sorry, this was the dinner. Oh my god, I'm getting all confused.

KITTS: She would be at the cocktail party.

THOMALEN: Exactly. This was at—prior to the dinner. And so I said, “What are you doing here?” And she just looked at me and smiled. I said, “Oh my god. Are you The Woman?” She said, “Yes.” I never knew; she kept it a secret, she and Bill Schweickert. Bill was the one that introduced her to the group.

KITTS: What a woman for keeping a secret.

THOMALEN: He was thrilled to death, Bill was, and I was thrilled to death. We were all flying high that night. And I got to tell you a little a little secret, not a secret. But I’ll tell a tale on my dearest friend, Bill Schweickert. Normally he’d go into town for dinner and then go right home but because he was introducing Theresa, he was going to stay over that night. So he and Eleanor came in and they went back to the Algonquin and they went to bed. Eleanor used to walk in her sleep.

In the middle of the night, about 2:30, Bill wakes up and sees Eleanor walking and says, “Where are you going?” She kept right on going, walked out the door. Oh my god, he jumps out of bed, runs after her and gets half way to her and realizes he’s in his underwear. He runs back but the door had locked behind him. Now he’s standing in his underwear and she’s gone. He didn’t know where she went, the elevator, the stairs. He had no idea; nobody is around. Finally, he takes the elevator down to the main floor. He goes to step out and he looks out and sees one of the security men talking to the front desk. He’s just about to step out or he did step out to go tell him that his wife is roaming somewhere around in her nightgown, when the door opened and four people from Sweden, who were guests of the hotel, walked in. (laughter) And Bill (laughs) is the most conservative guy I ever met (laughs) and here he is standing in his underwear in the lobby of the Algonquin Hotel (laughter). Finally, they went and they found Eleanor and brought her back to the room. But when he told that story the next day, we were on the floor rolling. (laughter)

KITTS: So what other Irregular recollections can you share with us Bob?

THOMALEN: Well, let’s see, some of the high points that come to mind. (coughs) Excuse me. I remember when Stix first took over. For the few dinners prior to that, Julian had asked Isaac Asimov to get up and give a presentation each year. And Isaac did; he is a real ham and he loved to get up and he’d invariably tell a few jokes and sing a few songs that he had created, all with a Sherlockian overtone of course. So when Stix took over, Asimov said, “Where do you want me on the program?” Well, it was Stix’s contention that everybody should get a chance at giving a presentation to the BSI dinner. So he told Isaac, “Well, no, we don’t need you anymore.” Well, you know what a small ego Isaac Asimov had. He hit the roof and he said, “Well, if you don’t want me, then I’m never coming back.” And Stix said—who was equally as stubborn said, “Well, I don’t care if you ever come back.” And that was the last we saw of Isaac Asimov. He was always a fun addition to the program, but Stix was adamant, no more Isaac Asimov. Now Asimov had a friend, this woman who would seek me out whenever she could and say, “Bob, can’t you please do something to get Isaac on the program. Please talk to Stix, have him change his mind.” I kept telling her, “No, I’m sorry, there is nothing I can do.” So unfortunately, we lost one of our most famous members, of course, and we never saw Asimov again.

Another thing I recall, when Julian was running it, that the programs were kind of dull and he insisted on playing these old scratchy recordings of “I’m sitting on the stile Mary” and some other thing from the year two. Oh, they were horrible and everyone made a mad dash to the bathroom, when these things started going. But Julian sat there because they were part of the tradition. Well, tradition is wonderful but god help us, I couldn’t take those songs again.

Oh, another thing I recall. I guess it was my second or third; it was at the Regency and the Regency was a long rectangular room and along the long side were two doors, which lead to the anteroom in which we had the cocktail party. Well, the dinner had started and Julian was in the chair. He was at the lectern, which was directly opposite the two doors. Well, at some point in the dinner, the two doors opened and there was a young lady standing there with a microphone in her hand and a TV cameraman behind her. And she looked in and she wanted to come in and interview everybody, or at least tape the proceedings, which, of course, were verboten. Now, Julian just stood there and stared at her as did everybody seated around the tables, but there was one fellow to Julian’s right, which would make it diagonally left of this young girl. He got up from his chair, and he stood about six three, I guess. It turns out he was a police sergeant from Long Island and he got up and started walking toward this young girl and he had his arm up in the air, pointing toward the door as if “Get the hell out of here.” He didn’t say a word; he just kept walking toward her and she held her ground. She didn’t move. She wasn’t inside the room, but she didn’t move from the doorway. And as he reached her, he just leaned down and pulled the two sliding doors together, returned to his seat, and we continued the meeting. (Kitts laughs) Well, I learned years later, one of the fellows was in the hallway when the doors were shut on her and he said, she spewed out some venom with a language that would make a sailor blush. And she cursed us up and down and left in a huff. And it turned out that it was Jane Hanson, who achieved some fame with channel 5 as a reporter. So that was her exposure to the Baker Street Irregulars.

Let’s see, what else do I remember. Some other highlights, well, never ride with Chris Steinbrunner at the wheel of a car. Let me put that up front. If you want the thrill of a lifetime and see your life pass by your eyes, you would never ride with him. He was absolutely crazy behind the wheel; he’d turn around and look at people in the back while he was talking to them, going seventy miles an hour. So Chris stands out in my mind among—for many reasons, but that is one of them.

Let’s see, what else happened during my years. People that used to ask me, “What is your job as Cartwright?” And I used to tell them—well Shaw and I, I was Cartwright and Shaw was Simpson. I said, “Our job was to get between the membership and Stix because we have to act as a buffer because if we don’t, either he is going to kill them or they are going to kill him. And my money is on them, so we just have to be careful of what—who he was talking to because, for sure, he wanted to take their Shilling or kill them. So we had to try and head off those little cases that came up every now and then. It was fun to work with Tom, it was a challenge, and I always had a lot of laughs.

Let’s see, what else, what else. Oh, just recently at the cocktail party, I had the pleasure of acting in a show by Jerome Coopersmith, who wrote the 1965 play, “Sherlock Holmes”. And

this play was called—it's a one-act play called "The Other Side". And it's a fabulous story; it's the interaction of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Houdini and Mr. and Mrs., or I should say, Sir Arthur and Mrs. Conan Doyle. They get together. As you know, one was a strong proponent of spiritualism, while the other, Houdini, spent his life trying to debunk it. And, of course, it's the interaction of these two, each trying to convince the other of their positions. It's a well-written play and it was a stage reading. We did it at the cocktail party and it received a wonderful reception. The audience seemed to love it and it was really cleverly done. And so I enjoyed doing that.

KITTS: What part did you play?

THOMALEN: I played Dr. Conan Doyle, with a Scottish accent no less. Let's see, what else? Some high moments of mine, on several occasions, both at the cocktail party or at the dinner, I have been asked to recite Bill Schweickert's immortal, "A Long Evening with Holmes".

KITTS: You have been published in a number of Sherlockian publications Bob and I know you ran *Prescott's Press*; but how long did you run that?

THOMALEN: That ran for five years and most of the stuff that I have written over the years, appeared in *Prescott's Press*.

KITTS: Any other publications?

THOMALEN: Let's see. I had something in the *The Muse*, *The Best of the Pips*, the most recent edition. *A Singular Set of People*, which was edited by Marlene Aig and Dave Galerstein some years ago. I also had something written for their second edition, which they never brought to print, but they had planned a second. Not a second edition but a second book along those lines. Let's see, I wrote something for a book that Sue Dahlinger was going to publish too, but it never seemed to get off the ground. I don't recall it ever seeing the light of day. And for the most part, that's about it. I've written papers for presentations at meetings and that kind of stuff.

KITTS: Plenty of toasts?

THOMALEN: Oh god yes. I've written enough poems that would choke an elephant; but that's about the bulk of my writings.

KITTS: Okay. Now, for the thing for which Bob Thomalen is so widely known, *Autumn in Baker Street*.

THOMALEN: Ah yes, I have heard of that.

KITTS: How did it all begin?

THOMALEN: It all began with a small five-watt radio station. (laughs) It began, I guess, around 1980, the germ started. I went to a Shaw workshop and I thought, what a wonderful time I had. And I said that this is just the greatest thing since bubble gum. And then, after I had time to think about all this, I realized that with all the Sherlockians in the New York area, we'd never had a Shaw workshop. I was flabbergasted; I was amazed. I said, "Gee, you would think that New York is such a beehive of Sherlockian activity, surely we could get together and get Shaw out here." But such was not the case. So I said, "Gee whiz, that's a shame. We got to do something." Actually, I was fairly new at the time to Sherlockiana. I didn't think I had the credentials to go petitioning this guy to come here. It just wasn't my job. But nobody else was doing it either.

And in 1982, very early in 1982, I had been teaching for my corporation and we were running seminars at Bear Mountain. And Bear Mountain is a lovely wooded area and it's very rustic, and they have cabins and they have different rooms. And one building, it's not big but it's big enough to accommodate a small crowd. And I thought, gee, we have seminars here; wouldn't it be great if we could have a Sherlock Holmes-type seminar, ala John Bennett Shaw, without Shaw. And I said, well just for the hell of it, "Let's see if I can put something together." And I did. I sent out notices and I was hoping if twenty people showed up, I would be thrilled to death. Well, as it turns out, fifty-six people showed up, much to my astonishment and glee. So we had a wonderful weekend and I was exhausted when it was over and I was sitting on the edge of my car, the trunk of my car and Susan Rice came up to me and said, "Well Bob, when are we going to have this next year?" (laughs) I almost fell down, "Next year? I hadn't even thought of this." I said, "This was just something to see if we could get something together, at least until Shaw got here." She said, "We all had such a great time, we should do this every year."

And so I contemplated that for a while and I said, "Well, alright, why not? I'll give it a shot." And lo and behold, we had another great turnout. And that was '83 and again in '84. And in '85, finally, Shaw came. We had the Shaw workshop out in New Jersey. And that was great fun. And, of course, as soon as that was over, the clamor started again, "Well, we're back to *Autumn in Baker Street*?" So, I shrugged my shoulders and said, "I guess, you know, we're fated to do this." And so we did and it's been going strong ever since.

KITTS: It had become a household word in Sherlockian circles by then; I would say.

THOMALEN: Yea. It's funny some of the names that people refer to it by, The Great Sherlockian Sleepover. Some people call it My Sherlockian Fix and many have told me, it's the best Sherlockian event they have ever attended. And to think that we do it on an annual basis is just extraordinary.

KITTS: You had a little hiatus there.

THOMALEN: Yes I did. In the year 1988, I was burned over thirty-percent of my body. That happened in April and Theresa, on the way home from the hospital, said, "I don't even want to hear you even mouth the words, *Autumn in Baker Street*. Forget it. Don't think about it". And lying from my teeth, I said, "Don't worry honey, I won't." And of course, the

Sherlockian gods intervened when I got a beautiful letter from Susan Rice. Susan Rice writes a great letter anyway, but this was just absolutely beautiful. And in it, she said, “There’s a bunch of us that were talking the other night, and we were talking about *Autumn in Baker Street* and how we would all love to see it come to fruition again, but we know that you are not well. But if you would like to oversee it, just tell us what you want done and we’ll do it. We’ve got six or eight women here poised to do whatever you want.”

Well, needless to say, I was elated and I held off telling Theresa as long as I could. And I showed her the letter and I said, “Well look, we’ll just sit there. Okay?” Lying through my teeth. But it came to pass. They were absolutely wonderful and I wrote instructions on every phase of it. And they, god bless them, came through with flying colors and they put on a wonderful weekend. And so we had continuity continuing.

Well, that was fine until two years later, in the year 2000, I had the heart attack and I had open-heart surgery, the bypass and all of that good stuff. And after that, there was just too much stress in putting these things on and so we went into a hiatus. I was thinking that 2000 would be the last one. I had no idea that sometime down the road, it would resurrect itself again. But resurrect itself, it did. In 2006, we had *Autumn in Baker Street* again.

KITTS: Springtime.

THOMALEN: Oh, we had Springtime, that’s right, it was 2006, it was *Springtime in Baker Street*. And I said, “Wow.” People had been petitioning me to put it on and put it on; but I had kept backing away and backing away. Finally, I said, “Alright, let me explore.” You know, once you get into these things and you get caught up with the adrenaline and the excitement of putting one of these things on. And that was the case, so we had a beautiful *Springtime in Baker Street*, but lo and behold, the hotel at which we have had previous ones. We had moved the Bear Mountain Inn to the Tarrytown Hilton. They had suffered through an enormous flood and much of their property was ruined and so they shut down for their own hiatus, while they completely redid the entire hotel. Well, we didn’t have a venue, but the hotel came through. They have a sister hotel over in Connecticut. They agreed to take the contract we had, item-by-item, penny-for-penny and they took us in and we had a wonderful *Springtime in Baker Street*. So much so that last year, we had a return to *Autumn in Baker Street*, again at the Connecticut venue. And we had a wonderful, wonderful time.

*Autumn in Baker Street* has its own highlights for me. There are things that I recall that just tickle my ribs. The funniest was, we put on a show and it was the Baker Street–Escott’s Baker Street Music Hall and Entertainment. And there was a bunch of people singing at it. And Richard Wein was playing–was singing the role of Dr. Watson and he had a bowler hat and a fake mustache on. And about half way through his song, the mustache blew off–he must have sung the letter P because it shot out (laughter) in front of him and trooper that he is–and of course the audience was howling with laughter–the trooper that he is, he reached out, picked it up and pushed it back on and started the song again. And he got about four lines into it and again, the mustache went off. Well, of course, I was convulsed with laughter and I couldn’t hear anything for the next hour. And Richard kept right on going, god bless him. No mustache, mustache didn’t make any difference.

At one of them, we did have a show. It was called Tea Time, no not Tea Time in Baker Street. It was that same musical, Escott's, and Mary Ellen Rich sang a song called, "Has Anybody Seen my Angel?" And it's Mary Sutherland looking for Hosmer Angel. And I'm telling you that was the funniest thing I ever heard. In fact, at what I thought was the last *Autumn in Baker Street* in 2000, I asked her to reprise that, just out of nowhere. And she did, god bless her.

Let's see, what else. It was the year we were still at Bear Mountain when Herb Tinning— well I should say, we were having lunch and we were all in the big dining room and several people came up to my table and said, "Bob, there is a bag lady bothering us, taking food off the plates." I said, "Ah, damn it, let me go take care of this." And there was this grubby creature with long blond hair down to her waist, old god forsaken clothes, and carrying a big basket of garbage. And sure enough, she was taking food off the table. And I walked up and I was just about to berate her, when she turned around. It was Herb Tinning. (laughter) It was Herb Tinning in this god forsaken outfit actually going from table—he actually had this hair over his face so you couldn't see him and he was taking food off of everybody's table. So that brightened our day up there that night.

Let's see. Although the very first one, my god I forgot, and that was wrought with problems, we were scheduled to begin with lunch at twelve o'clock and then at one o'clock, we would have the first speaker. Well, it turns out that the night before there was a strike of sorts or a walk-off of some of the waitresses. So by the time we got there, there were only one or two waitresses and they were trying to take care of all of us. Now, by the time we got finished eating, it was around two-thirty because the service was so slow and the kitchen was terrible. We finally got up to Cliff House, where our first two speakers were waiting for us.

They were two colonels and subsequently they became generals, both of them. One was going to speak on the Battle of Maiwand and the other was going to speak on—he was a medical doctor and he was going to speak on the types of wounds and conditions that a doctor would have seen during the Afghan war. While we were waiting to go up there, the staff went up to the building where we were having the presentations and discovered that the microphone wasn't working so he changed the lecterns. He brought a new lectern in but he forgot to plug in the mike. So when our first speaker got on, he went through half his presentation before I realized, I'm not hearing anything out of this. My god almighty, I couldn't wait for that one to be over. But it was—it was one of those memorable days anyway; he gave a wonderful presentation.

In fact, when Arthur Jackson, the colonel who was giving the talk on the Battle of Maiwand, when he got finished, we had a big board—he and I had made a big board and on it was the manpower for the outfit and it had the commander and all the different officers. And he had covers over the names, so that as he went through his presentation, he would say, "well, next the quartermaster officer was" and then he would uncover the name. Well, the last one of the list was the medical officer. And he's going through this presentation beautifully. He gets to the last one and he says, "Now the medical officer had a lot of responsibilities because they would"— as he took the name off, it was Lieutenant John H. Watson. The place erupted; it

was wild, in pandemonium. This was an authorized—a military historian who's telling us now that this is not a joke, this is for real. This Lieutenant Watson was the medical man. The place was going crazy and finally it quieted down a little bit and somebody in the audience said, "General, this is incredible; where did you get that name?" He said, "Oh, Bob Thomalen told me." Well, I thought they were going to rise up and kill both of us, (laughter) but we escaped with our lives and then we got through the weekend.

Let's see. Thom Utecht is a valiant warrior; he got up there, giving his presentation and the lights in Cliff House, where all these presentations took place in Bear Mountain, always had problems with the lights and you could never get them just the way you wanted them. So when Thom got up there, the lights weren't proper. So I went in the back and I started monkeying with them. And, of course, you know the best laid plans, at once the place was as bright as the sun and in an instance, it was pitch black but he kept right on going, god bless him. He was a real trooper, but I think he wanted to kill me after that presentation.

And let's see. There have been some other wonderful moments throughout the plays by all the Friends of Bogie's on Baker Street, throughout the ages – throughout the years. "The Tea Time in Baker Street", which featured four women. "One Fixed Point," which was the dramatic story of Watson's demise. "Sherlockians in Paris" with Paul Singleton and Elyse Locurto. We had a wonderful tribute to Warren Randall who was a genius at creating things. He actually wrote a Sherlockian Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, which we put on.

KITTS: "The HMS Sign of Four".

THOMALEN: "The HMS Sign of Four". And once we even put on a radio show with an authentic radio sound effects man, who brought his materials up, and Earl Thomas—Earl George rather—an actual old-time radio actor. And we put on one of Edith Meiser's plays and that was great fun.

Let's see, and I would be an ungrateful sort, of course, if I didn't mention my favorite acts throughout the years. There's a bunch of ladies in the Sherlockian world called the Sherlettes. And the Sherlettes are my favorites. They get together and they get up on the stage and sing and dance and they have costumes. And, my god, it's like great entertainment and if you ever want to have a good time and you hear they are going to be playing somewhere, go see them.

And there's one more thing I should recap. In 1983 [1993], it's advertised as *Autumn in Baker Street* 10. And the first one was 1982, so you would think that 1992 would be *Autumn in Baker Street* 10, but *Autumn in Baker Street* 1993 was actually the tenth edition because in 1985, we didn't have one because of the Shaw workshop. Well, right in the middle of the weekend, Stix comes up and interrupts me while I'm at the lectern and he brings a big easel pad up there. And on the easel, he's got the years and the numbers one through ten down to match each year. And he is berating me because I can't add. He keeps saying, "Well, it's not ten years, it's eleven years. You can't even add; damn it, you're a dope." He says, "well—" I said, "Get out of here. Get out of here; take your—" He says, "Okay, but before I go, we did get you a present." And he hands me this big cardboard box. And I said, "I don't want to



open it.” “No. No. No. Go ahead, open it.” Well. I’m not often at a loss for words but I opened that box and inside—it was a big cardboard box and inside was half a toilet seat. I started to laugh. He’s calling me a half-ass, right? (Kitts laughs) And I started to laugh and I just couldn’t stop laughing. (laughs) So somebody said, “Is it the right half or the left half?” And somebody in the audience said, “It’s right; he’s a half ass.” And then Ben Vizoskie said, “Now, does Mr. Stix get the other half?” And I looked at him and said, “There goes your Shilling for that one.” (laughter) So that was funny. God, I gave him half a roll of toilet paper. Anyway, we’ve always had a great deal of fun up there.

I remember one year in 1880–18, 1989, we had a group of the ladies in beautiful Victorian costumes; they were the Baker Street Belles. And Cynthia Wein was the narrator and we had this beautiful fashion show. It was stunning and we had—the girls knew just how to walk and pose and when to turn and match their turns with the narration. It was great; it was one of the highpoints of *Autumn in Baker Street*.

KITTS: Do you have any plans to have any more *Autumns in Baker Street*?

THOMALEN: Ah. I was hoping you wouldn’t ask me that.

KITTS: You know, we would love to have you—

THOMALEN: To tell you the truth, I don’t know. I don’t have the energy that I used to have. I just don’t. And so while I’m ambivalent to a degree—let’s just leave it at that. I don’t know.

KITTS: Maybe I have to call Susan Rice.

THOMALEN: Maybe you do. (laughs)

KITTS: Well. Thank you Bob. It’s been nice chatting with you and I know you like to end this with a special recitation today.

THOMALEN: Yes I would. The Sherlockian piece most dear to my heart, bar none, was of course—is of course the poem by my dear friend Bill Schweickert, “A Long Evening with Holmes”. We close every meeting of The Garridebs with that poem. We now close every meeting of the BSI Dinner with that poem. And I would like to close this interview with that poem. So here it is, “A LONG EVENING WITH HOLMES” by William P. Schweickert, BSI, Cox and Company.

When the world closes in with its worries and cares  
And my problems and headaches are coming in pairs  
I just climb in my mind up those seventeen stairs  
And spend a long evening with Holmes.

The good Doctor greets me and motions me in  
Holmes grasps my hand and lays down his violin  
Then we sit by the fire and sip a tall gin  
When I spend a long evening with Holmes.

And while we're discussing his cases galore  
If I'm lucky there comes a loud knock at the door  
In stumbles a client, head splattered with gore  
When I spend a long evening with Holmes.

Watson binds up the client's poor face  
While Holmes soon extracts all the facts of the case  
Then off in a hansom to Brixton we race  
When I spend a long evening with Holmes.

The Adventure is solved, Holmes makes it all right  
So back to the lodgings by dawn's early light  
And a breakfast by Hudson to wind up the night  
When I spend a long evening with Holmes.

So the modern rat race can't keep me in a cage  
I have a passport to a far better age  
As close as my bookcase, and there on a page  
I can spend a long evening with Holmes.

Thank you Bill.

*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. [Ed. Note: The collection is now at the Lilly Library at Indiana University.] The copyright for the interview is owned by the Baker Street Irregulars. No copy or rebroadcast can be made without the express written consent of the Baker Street Irregulars. Go to [bsitrust.org](http://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](http://bsitrust.org).

*end of interview*