

PART II

EARLY YEARS

"...the highest authority to which he could refer..."

Like many other Sherlockians, Milt Perry had been reading William S. Baring-Gould's Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street, published the year before. According to Baring-Gould, as a young man Holmes had visited America as a member of an English theatrical company. "The troupe even crossed the great Western plains," he wrote, "an exciting journey during which the train was once halted by a great migration of buffalo across the tracks. It was a sight Holmes never forgot. 'If a herd of buffaloes had passed along there could not have been a greater mess,' he complained to Watson during his investigation of the murder of Enoch Drebber," the case that had given The Great Alkali Plainsmen their name.

Said Milt Perry, at the Plainsmen's first irregular dinner on December 28, 1963: "What more natural a place to start a trip across the Great Plains during 1879 than Kansas City?"

A good question, and like a good historian, Perry was in search of evidence. Over the next twelve months, he would ascertain that English theatrical companies touring America had certain established circuits that would in fact bring one of them to Kansas City during the 1879-80 season, stopping to perform here for several days, at no less striking a time than January 6, 1880, Sherlock Holmes's birthday. And in December of 1964, Perry would inform the Plainsmen of an unexpected surprise in the course of his research: the discovery of an unsolved mystery in Kansas City at that very time, in which Sherlock Holmes may have played a role.

But that was a year away. Perry would be able to announce the exciting discovery to an expanded circle of Plainsmen.

"We are of those who believe in those sacred writings."

Those were the good old days, when Julian Wolff edited and published The Baker Street Journal out of his Riverside Drive apartment in New York City. Today, a notice sent to the downriver editor of the BSJ, and by him to the publisher Back East, can take up to six months to appear in print. Not then. The founding of The Great Alkali Plainsmen in October 1963 was promptly reported in the December '63 BSJ.

Announcement of the founding of THE GREAT ALKALI PLAINSMEN has been received. The founders and officers are: Avenging Angel (President), John Altman; Prophet (Vice-President), Ernest Willer; Stangerson (Secretary), Robert Willer, 4919 Adams Street, Shawnee Mission, Kansas 66205.

It struck no immediate sparks, though. It was not until early March '64 that the scion's Stangerson, Robert Willer, received an inquiry. It was from a high school student in Lawrence, Kansas, asking to join the Plainsmen. His name was Chris Redmond.

Today every literate Sherlockian on either side of the ocean should recognize that name, and the name of his father, too, Donald A. Redmond. But in those days the Redmonds were only beginning to win their now exemplary reputations for keeping the Master's memory green. Canadians by nationality, the Redmonds had come to Lawrence in 1961, when Don Redmond accepted the post of science librarian at the University of Kansas. He was now the assistant director of libraries at KU -- which, Chris informed Bob Willer, had no mean Sherlockian holdings on its shelves. Lawrence was some forty miles away, of course, and Bob Willer evinced some initial nervousness about whether Chris Redmond would really care to belong to a Sherlockian society that distant. No fear of that, Chris replied, in the frequent and intense correspondence that sprang up between them: "Sherlock is my biggest hobby." Chris was already deep into chronological problems of the Canon, especially as they related to his greatest interest at that time, Holmes's unpublished cases. He was hard at work on an important study of them.

The addition of the Redmonds to The Great Alkali Plainsmen provided a strong scholarly note at the scion society's outset. Chris was only a high school freshman at the time, but in those days his energy and efforts preceded and even exceeded his redoubtable father's, who went unmentioned as a Sherlockian until the following month; Don was then urged to come as well to the next Plainsmen meeting called for June 2nd. (The idea of a May 4th annual dinner had given way to the fact that school was still in session at that time.) Bob Willer described the fourteen-year-old Chris as "the most eloquent Sherlockian of all the Plainsmen" in a letter to another member, confessing himself impressed by Chris's correspondence "with a few Sherlockian bigwigs back East." Bob had another nervous moment in late March when it occurred to him that "Chris" might be short for Christine, but he was relieved to learn that it was not. "I was responsible for admitting our one female member," he said, "and at least one other member is unhappy about it." (John Altman, stand up.)

The Plainsmen returned to the Plaza III on June 2, 1964 -- hope springs eternal? -- with John Altman, the Willers, Milt Perry, Fred McGraw, Margaret Weis, David Vanzant, and the Redmonds in attendance. The Plainsmen were delighted to see two new devoted Sherlockians join the caravan. Don Redmond had a serious-minded demeanor and a conservative, scholarly appearance to match. A very professional librarian, he was probably not suspected by many of his academic colleagues of possessing the strong imaginative streak that he employed as a Sherlockian. Chris was then a quiet beardless youth, unlike today. For a boy his age, he possessed a precocious intellectual maturity that gave him a sober outlook on affairs; he inclined to a businesslike studiousness that once led John Bennett Shaw to exclaim, when he heard that Don but not Chris would attend a 1968 Plainsmen meeting, "then we can tell jokes, and look at girls, and drink, thank God." Chris was determined to excel as a Sherlockian, and he would.

An earlier starting time of 6:30 p.m. had been chosen, because the Plaza

III had informed Stangerson that, yes, the Plainsmen would again be ejected at 9:00 p.m. to make room for other customers. The Plainsmen adopted a motto at this meeting, Sherlock Holmes's statement "We can but try -- the motto of the firm", at Chris Redmond's suggestion. The idea of a different scion insignia, based on Utah's state seal, was approved, though this idea (and that of an insignia generally) died out when Utah's secretary of state refused to cooperate -- perhaps familiar with A Study in Scarlet's portrayal of the Mormons!

On a scholarly note, Chris Redmond presented copies of The Tin Dispatch-Box, his study of the unpublished cases, which Ronald De Waal, Sherlockiana's great bibliographer, would later describe in his World Bibliography of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson as "an invaluable reference work listing and dating lll cases, with brief comments and a five-letter abbreviation for each case." "May it be the first of many by the Great Alkali Plainsmen!" exulted Bob Willer in the minutes. Greetings to the new scion society from Baker Street Irregulars elsewhere were read: from Dean Dickinsheet, once a Kansas Citian, now of The Scowrers of San Francisco, and Robert Hahn, of Hugo's Companions of Chicago. Since both Bob Willer and John Altman would leave for college in the autumn (Bob to Kansas State, John to the University of Pennsylvania), "pseudo-elections" brought in a new slate of officers. Ernest Willer became Avenging Angel, the office of Jefferson Hope was left open as a trifle superfluous, and Chris Redmond became Stangerson. ("I remember riding home on an intercity bus, sleeping the limp sleep of a teenager," he recalled years later, "and waking up back in Lawrence not sure how much I remembered and how much I had dreamed!")

Milt Perry's flair for publicity prompted a story about the dinner in the next day's Kansas City Times. "Kansas City has no fabled Baker Street; obscuring London fogs are meteorological rarities here," it began: "Yet the spirit of the famous detective Sherlock Holmes, and his assistant, Dr. Watson, might well develop a local following, for the times are propitious." They seemed so indeed. The Plainsmen resolved to meet again on December 28th, and for the first time this winter event was called the Feast of the Blue Carbuncle; the name was Don Redmond's idea, it seems. They had had enough of the Plaza III, though. A more suitable, even dramatic venue was envisioned, in the Downtown Club's Cloud Room atop the Power & Light Building.

"Say, it's awful dry, ain't it?"

The Plainsmen's circle continued to expand in 1964. It acquired considerably more girth on July 17th, when Bob Willer received a letter written two days before in Tulsa, Oklahoma, by John Bennett Shaw.

Shaw was then not quite the household name in the Baker Street Irregulars that he is today, although he was well on his way. He was in the oil business in his native Tulsa, as well as owning a bookshop there (he had gone in to buy a book, he claimed, and ending up buying the shop), and inheriting a funeral parlor, of which he has made much in subsequent years. When Shaw wrote to Bob Willer about the Plainsmen, he was actually behind in his Sher-

lockian reading, unlikely as that may sound to those who know him. He was just then "catching up on my studies in the Great Scholarship," he said, and had only just noticed the report of the Plainsmen's first irregular dinner in the March '64 Baker Street Journal.

THE GREAT ALKALI PLAINSMEN

Correspondence: Robert Willer, Stangerson
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The first Irregular dinner, with an attendance of seven, was held at the Plaza III Restaurant on 28 December 1963. After toasting the Master and John Ferrier, the members sat down to eat. Two traditions were established: (1) The chair at the head of the table would always be left vacant; (2) At the end of each meeting, all members will stand with bowed heads while Vincent Starrett's sonnet, "221B," is read. The quiz was won by the youngest member, the only female present. No wonder that he disliked and distrusted the sex. A good deal of Holmesian nonsense and discussion was dispersed throughout the entire meeting, and the important decision was reached that there will be no constitution.

He had been trying for a long time to form a BSI scion society in Tulsa, without success, he told Bob; could he come to the Plainsmen's meetings? "I will be quiet, pay for my drinks, and admire scholarship where I find it," he said, adding modestly, possibly for the last time: "I have a good Holmesian collection and am always trying to improve on it."

Distances are vast out on the Great Alkali Plain, and the hardy souls who live here are used to thinking in big terms. But Tulsa is a good 250 miles from Kansas City, and Bob Willer was worried that Shaw might not find the scion's gatherings worth the long trip. The meetings "have been just quiet dinners with only Sherlockian conversation and discussion and no program," he warned. No matter: Shaw was coming. And as Bob would soon learn, the irrepressible Shaw had a way of transforming gatherings of which he was a part. Overweight, Irish, gregarious, folksy, with an infectious sense of humor, gleefully cynical about everything, even the Church affairs in which he was heavily involved, Shaw added a breezy Irregular fellowship that the Plainsmen found refreshing and welcome. Here clearly was one of those people that Christopher Morley, the founder of the Baker Street Irregulars, had called "kinsprits".

The summer of '64 was spent hearing from other people as well, most of whom the Plainsmen never met. Some were indecisive souls in Wichita, 200 miles down the new high-speed Kansas Turnpike, who nonetheless found the distance too great to contemplate. There was also the possibility of another female member, Chris Redmond reported to Bob Willer, and it may give pause to Chris's wife today, Kate Karlson Redmond, fiery founder of The Adventuresses of Sherlock Holmes, to learn that Chris added to the news the comment: "Perish the thought; is this allowable?" Bob grudgingly confessed that it was. "Ladies generally interested in Sherlock Holmes would be admitted," he said, though "others would be barred." Perhaps the unknown lady was lacking in true interest, because she never materialized.

Autumn brought more luck. Bob Willer ran a notice of The Great Alkali Plainsmen in the K-State campus newspaper, and was rewarded by hearing from

a couple of people. One, Robert Curry, a physics major from Emporia, proved a worthy addition to the Plainsmen during the next several years. He signed himself "Believer" in letters, and Bob Willer described him as "really on the ball as far as Sherlock Holmes is concerned." Curry made his debut at the Feast of the Blue Carbuncle in December. And the Redmonds' efforts at KU produced Jim Helyar, a colleague of Don's, and Frederick Kittle, a professor of medicine, and a Conan Doyle collector who had contributed a paper on "Arthur Conan Doyle: Doctor and Writer" to the Kansas Medical Society Journal in 1960.

But when the Plainsmen met in December, it was on the 30th, not the 28th, and not at the Downtown Club, whose financial troubles had closed its doors in September. No one wanted to return to the Plaza III, so the officers cast about for another suitable location. Fred McGraw went so far as to offer his home for the meeting, but by that time the Avenging Angel had agreed to the Redmonds' proposal to hold the Feast of the Blue Carbuncle in the Kansas Union's English Room, on the KU campus in Lawrence. Eighty mph on the Kansas Turnpike, in the days before President Peanut, brought Lawrence pretty close to Kansas City.

Don Redmond charmed everyone by preparing an evocative announcement on genuine Post Office Inland Telegram forms, obtained from his booksellers in England. \$5.00 covered the costs in those days of a roast beef dinner, the rental of a projector and two films (Baker Street Kino and Basil Rathbone's Adventures of Sherlock Holmes), plus "minor expenses of the organization," as Chris Redmond put it. In addition to newcomers Shaw, Curry, Kittle, and Helyar, the Feast was attended by the Willers, Milt Perry, Fred McGraw, Margaret Weis, and of course the Redmonds. The films were enjoyed, the scion toasts were drunk (in what, we shall see), Shaw discussed other BSI scion societies, and Perry and Don Redmond rivetted the Plainsmen with two remarkable discoveries. Don revealed the "first known concrete publication from the pen of Sherlock Holmes, an article entitled 'The Tsar'." (His talk appeared later as "The Countess, the Master, and the Tsar" in the Spring '66 Sherlock Holmes Journal, published by the Sherlock Holmes Society of London. His first Baker Street Journal article, "Some Chemical Problems in the Canon", had already been published in its September '64 issue.)

Milt Perry's news struck closer to home. In his continuing research on the Master's visit to Kansas City, Milt had learned that, shortly before Holmes's theater company had left for its next stop -- Topeka, shades of The Three Garridebs! -- a body had been discovered beside the tracks of Kansas City's old Union Depot -- shades of The Bruce-Partington Plans! The mysterious death was reported in the next morning's newspaper, and there were clear signs, according to Milt, that Holmes himself had taken a hand in the investigation before leaving town with the rest of the troupe.

Don Redmond had billed his talk as "an unprecedented Sherlockian discovery". Milt's news had rivalled Don's. But for John Bennett Shaw, there was another unprecedented Sherlockian discovery that night, and it was not a welcome one. "Like most Sherlockians, I had read the Constitution and Buy-Laws of The Baker Street Irregulars," he recalled years later,

and I took it in the spirit in which it was written: in fun and as



HOLMES FANS AT WORK—Members of the Great Alkali Plainsmen, preparing for a Sherlock Holmes Blue Carbuncle Day dinner at the Kansas Union this evening, inspect cigar ashes, Holmes' favorite evidence. In the foreground are, left, Don Redmond, 801 Miss., and his son Chris. Standing behind is Jim Helyar, 808 Tenn. St. (Journal-World Photo)

an indication that such folk have a fine time enjoying good food, drink, scholarship and fellowship. I especially enjoyed the parts of the documents that tell about sending down for ice and mixes, and about the contests to determine who shall buy the round. I was sure that it didn't really matter who won or lost, what did matter was that the round got bought.

In 1964, I came to attend the fourth meeting, held at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, in the English Room at the Kansas Union. A fine place, appropriate and in a great building on a beautiful campus. The date was December 30, 1964. It was wet and foggy, and I had a dreary drive from my home in Tulsa, Oklahoma, 215 miles away. Alas, only the long drive was wet. No cocktails, no wine at table, and the toasts were drunk in grape juice!* The dinner was well-cooked, the program excellent, and the members kind, intelligent and friendly. But the Kansas Union was dry. I went home wiser but sad.

The Lawrence Journal-World's January 13th story, "Sherlockian 'Discoveries' Listed at a Meeting Here", was Don Redmond's work. It was the first report of Milt Perry's research to see print, alluding to the parallels between the mystery of the body beside the tracks in Kansas City and Sherlock Holmes's later adventure of The Bruce-Partington Plans. Don followed this up in "I Hear of Sherlock Everywhere" in the February '65 KU library bulletin, The Gamut: "Why were there no bloodstains on the railway track, that day in 1879 [sic] in Kansas City, and who was the stranger who pointed out this fact, then melted into the crowd and left the coroner to blunder on unheeding? Was it Sherlock Holmes?"

Of course it was! the Plainsmen cried. The scion's folklore was taking shape. Milt had also ascertained where Holmes and the rest of the troupe had performed and slept. The splendid Coates Opera House at 10th & Broadway had burned down in 1900, but the once equally splendid Coates House hotel across the street was still in business, if in much reduced circumstances. How many other American cities could boast of such strong connections to the Master?

The Plainsmen were also pleased to learn around this time that John Bennett Shaw had received the investiture of "The Hans Sloane of My Age" at the Baker Street Irregulars' annual dinner in New York in January -- the first member of Kansas City's scion society to be so honored. (He would go on from one Sherlockian feat to another, earning the BSI's coveted Two Shilling Award for "continued and faithful service beyond the call of duty" in 1980.)

The Plainsmen continued to expand their circle and their contacts with other scion societies. St. Louis's Watsonian Society surfaced about this time, but disappeared soon without much of a ripple. More lasting were The Maiwand Jezails of Nebraska, founded by Richard Lesh barely a week before The Great Alkali Plainsmen. Our scion's mailing list approached thirty names in

* In "beautiful white fizzy grape juice," Chris Redmond remembers: "I have had a taste for the stuff ever since." Shaw has never tired of telling him how horrified he was.

1965, some at farflung outposts on the Great Alkali Plain, including more KU faculty members like Floyd Horowitz of the English department, who had already published one Sherlock Holmes parody, in the December '64 Baker Street Journal, and had another one forthcoming in next December's issue.

It is unclear how many attended the next meeting on June 12th. It took place at Fred McGraw's home in Overland Park, picking up on his earlier offer to host one. John Altman reported on the Broadway musical Baker Street that he had seen in New York, the Plainsmen celebrated Shaw's BSI investiture, and "elections" were held again. Perry became Avenging Angel, Shaw the Jefferson Hope, and Margaret Weis the scion's secretary (the office being changed for the duration of her term to the Lucy Ferrier, in honor of her sex). Also present were the Willers, the Redmonds, Fred Kittle, and Jerome Wigglesworth of Topeka, the son of one of the most eminent Baker Street Irregulars, Belden Wigglesworth, whose investiture had been one of the earliest awarded. Fred McGraw laid out a crowd-pleasing collation of cold beef, chicken, and partridge, with tempting complements on the sideboard, but the menu was dismayingly forthright about the beverage of the evening: Water. "Washing it down with a long draught of water," it read, quoting from The Five Orange Pips. Brother Shaw was agog. He had driven 245 miles to Overland Park,

on dry highways this time, thinking it was an omen. It was, but I interpreted it incorrectly. The food was simply excellent, the company again friendly and intelligent, the graphics handed out very desirable. But -- and I am a slow learner, I decided -- no cock-tails, no wine to complement the fine food, and, St. George forgive us, we drank a toast to the Queen in water. Fred McGraw, it turned out, was a teetotaler.

So back to Oklahoma. I did not burn the Baker Street Irregulars' Constitution, but I was tempted. The next meeting of The Great Alkali Plainsmen, fortunately, was held on the Missouri side of State Line, and Missouri is a very wet state; the meeting after that was at my home. And the Great Alkali Plain has never been dry again.

Shaw's reaction was so forceful, and so sustained over the next few years, that today's Plainsmen surely owe whatever unhealthy alcoholic excess in which they indulge to Fred McGraw's teetotalism that night. Brother McGraw would not have had it that way; but Brother Shaw had different ideas,* and more weight to throw around.

"...some nomad people..."

The scion's archives are thin for 1965 and 1966, though not from laxness on Margaret Weis's part. When she turned them over to Bob Willer again upon his resumption of the office of Stangerson, they amounted to some ten file

* "Teetotalers just offend me like a virgin must have offended Casanova," was the way he put it to Bob Willer.

The Great Alkali Plainsmen



**another investigation in which
a bird will be the chief feature*

JUNE 12, 1965

folders. But, alas, not all have survived. All that the archives contain today about the latter half of 1965, and the Feast of the Blue Carbuncle, held December 29th at the Golden Acres Clubhouse near Milt Perry's home in Independence, is a Kansas City Times report of December 30th. Known to have been present were the Willers, Milt Perry, Fred McGraw, Margaret Weis, John Bennett Shaw, the Redmonds, Bob Curry, Robert Harvey (an Overland Park high school English teacher), and Nels Strandfjord (a KU Medical Center professor of radiology). "The gathering had an air of fantasy," felt the Times; it was an elegant, candlelit occasion, with a somewhat uncanonical turkey dinner served on the Perrys' china and silver. The Blue Carbuncle was discussed, especially the character and occupation of Henry Baker, "and for three hours [the Plainsmen] lived in Holmes's world of 1895." The 1965 Feast was a happy harbinger of later roast goose feasts to come.

Early on, this history made the seemingly libellous remark that Milt Perry was responsible for the scion's near-extinction once or twice, but such is the truth. Fount of inspiration and local Sherlockian folklore though he is, organizationally Milt has placed the Plainsmen on the endangered-species list occasionally. The Great Alkali Plain can be an arid and repulsive desert, the Canon tells us, and our scion suffered the first of what Bob Willer later called its several dry spells. During Milt Perry's first term as the Avenging Angel, no summer meeting was ever called. The sole meeting in 1966 was the Feast of the Blue Carbuncle on December 28th, and that was at John Bennett Shaw's home in Tulsa, very much under Brother Shaw's planning and direction. The programme alone was enough to show that: Cocktails, Wine, Brandy, Port, all appeared prominently on it at various spots.

The dinner was held at a motor inn a short distance from Shaw's home, where the Plainsmen repaired afterwards for the rest of the program. But something outré occurred at the dinner. "We had a private room next to the lobby," Shaw recalled, "and another door opening onto the pool area outside. A very cold sleet storm was raging and all was going well. As usual a place setting and vacant chair for Holmes, with a violin on the chair. Suddenly the door leading out to the dead pool opened, and a tall man in long overcoat, very muffled up, walked in slowly, looked us over carefully, stopped to gaze at the vacant chair, and then disappeared out the other door. 'Holmes!' Ernest and I both exclaimed. I was accused of staging it, but did not. All true."

In addition to the scion's usual toasts, one was drunk to "The Scholarly Redmonds". They had indeed been busy. Don had published "Some Notes on the Ceylon Problem" in the Winter '64 Sherlock Holmes Journal, but Chris had exceeded his father, publishing "Art in the Blood: Two Canonical Relatives" in the June '65 Baker Street Journal, "The Commission from the Sultan" in the December '65 BSJ, and "Nihilism, NKVD, and the Napoleon of Crime" in the Spring '66 SHJ -- not to mention founding The Baker Street Pageboys, a corresponding scion for younger Sherlockians, in July '65. So busy was Chris, in fact, that his efforts were recognized by the Baker Street Irregulars in January 1966 with the investiture of "Billy", making him the youngest person ever to receive a BSI investiture. (Three years later, Don Redmond received "Good Old Index" from the BSI.)

Alas, the Redmonds were gone now, having returned to Canada earlier that

year. Don had been lured back by the position of chief librarian at Queen's University, in Kingston, Ontario, where he still presides today.

And not all the other Plainsmen managed the trip to Tulsa that December, either. Present were the Willers, Milt Perry, Margaret Weis, and Bob Curry, plus several Oklahomans, including a Tulsa high school student, Raymond Funk, who attended several Plainsmen meetings in the '60s, and Belden Wigglesworth himself, now retired and living in the beautiful Ozark Mountains town of Fayetteville, Arkansas. A dim, foggy photograph from that evening survives in the Plainsmen's archives, showing a rotund but still dark-haired Shaw, a buttoned-down, crewcut Perry, a young Bob Willer and an ageless Ernest Willer, a dapper Curry, plus Wigglesworth, and a few Tulsans. Shaw made The Three Garridebs the adventure of the evening and showed off his awesome collection, Perry reported on his continuing research, and Weis replaced the absent Fred McGraw in reading 221B. A Tulsa Daily World reporter drank it all in, and was evidently captivated by Milt's interim report, for his January 1, 1967, article devoted itself to the "Visit by Sherlock Holmes to Kansas City Disclosed".

Plainsmen affairs continued irregularly in 1967, with John Bennett Shaw as Jefferson Hope providing organizational zeal that Milt Perry as Avenging Angel lacked. Not that Shaw found it all easy. What he desired most was a joint meeting with another scion society, and he turned first to The Maiwand Jezails 200 miles northwest in Nebraska. He wrote to Richard Lesh in March, proposing a joint meeting in May or June on neutral ground in Topeka, and challenging the Jezails to a canonical College Bowl-type contest: it would be "tense fun," Shaw promised. But it never took place. Shaw had heard nothing from the Nebraska Territory by April, and followed up his letter "with properly worded insults." But the Jezails continued to evade, and by September the Plainsmen had gained the distinct impression that the Jezails were afraid to take them on in a College of Canonical Knowledge. "It seems clear, I must say, that the Jezails are of a lesser caliber than anticipated," snorted Jerry Wigglesworth in Topeka, who had volunteered to make local arrangements for a joint meeting, and even to produce Lysander Starr's latter-day successor as mayor of Topeka to award the prize to the victorious scion.* At last, in October, Shaw heard from Lesh that the Jezails felt unable to offer the Plainsmen a worthy contest.

* It was around this time that John Bennett Shaw, driving through Topeka one day, stopped to visit the Kansas State Historian. "He was a real Milquetoast type," Shaw remembers: "big desk, little man, big glasses." Shaw told him that he was trying to locate a Kansas town formerly called Moorville, where a famous man, Alexander Hamilton Garrideb, had died circa 1895. "Moorville --" mused Shaw's victim; "I don't remember that name." He had a clerk bring in several old atlases of Kansas, and for half an hour, as Shaw sat and watched, he searched for Moorville in vain. "Are you sure there ever was such a town as Moorville?" he finally asked. "There must have been," Shaw replied, "it's mentioned in a very famous book." "Well," said the much abused civil servant, "I'll keep looking and let you know." A few weeks later, Shaw received a letter from him. "I know you must be right," it read, "but I just can't find Moorville."

Other plans had also gone unfulfilled. Bob Willer became the Stangerson again in the spring of 1967, but found the combination of marriage in August and school again in September interfering with his responsibilities. Rather too irregularly, no summer meeting had been called, in hopes of the Jezails agreeing to a joint meeting. What passed instead for one was an abruptly arranged irregular dinner between John Bennett Shaw, Ernest Willer, Milt Perry, and Fred McGraw, at the Muehlebach Hotel on August 22nd, when Shaw came to town for a conclave of the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre, of which he was the Lay Master. It was short on program but long on conversation.

That autumn, after a final exclamation of disgust in Nebraska's direction, Shaw turned his attention to the now rapidly approaching Feast of the Blue Carbuncle. The Speckled Band appealed to him as a theme, and Union Station appealed to Ernest Willer and Milt Perry as an appropriate setting, with the Master's Kansas City connection in mind. That was fine with Shaw, as long as the dinner was not watery. After past experiences, he was taking no chances. "What about wine," he queried Bob Willer on November 19th: "I will NOT ever again drink any toasts in grape (shudder) juice. What about drinks before dinner -- Belden Wigglesworth and I have a few belts to share. Can we have either a bar or bar service. We must have. What about brandy after."

The Feast took place in Union Station's Westport Room on December 28th, with John Altman, the Willers, Milt Perry, Fred McGraw, John Bennett Shaw, Bob Curry, Jerry Wigglesworth, Belden Wigglesworth, Kansas City Star reporter Ivan Goldman, and a few others. The elder Wigglesworth gave a fine paper on Holmes's French ancestry, Shaw provoked a heated discussion of The Speckled Band, with Ernest Willer and Milt Perry trying to discredit the story, and Shaw subjected the Plainsmen to a very tricky quiz on the animal kingdom in the Canon; Bob Curry and John Altman were lucky to tie as high as 35 percent. Shaw became Avenging Angel. Ivan Goldman's January 2nd article, "Dedication to Sherlock Holmes Is Not Elementary to Followers", touched on the many canonical topics discussed, debated, and debunked that night. "All Sherlockians are united in the reverence they pay to the master detective," he observed. "It might be escapism, but one member called the study of Holmes 'an adventure in intellectual perception.'"

Shaw might be living some distance away down in the Oklahoma Territory, but he did not shrink from the responsibilities of Avenging Angel. Always a friend and supporter of libraries, he had agitated earlier for a BSI scion society within the American Library Association, and The Sub-Librarians Scion had dutifully come into being the year before, meeting for the first time during the 1967 ALA convention in San Francisco. The '68 ALA convention was to take place in Kansas City in June, and Shaw as an officer of both scions promptly called a joint luncheon meeting of The Great Alkali Plainsmen and The Sub-Librarians for June 25th. Once again Union Station was the site, and the gathering was a memorable one, with some thirty-five Kansas City and out-of-town Sherlockians present. The complete rollcall is not available, but the Plainsmen were represented in part by Altman, the Willers, Perry, McGraw, Weis, Shaw, and Star reporter Ivan Goldman again. The goodly volume of Sub-Librarians present included Don Redmond, making a return appearance here; Dean Dickinsheet of San Francisco, the former Kansas Citian who had sent Irregular greetings to his hometown's scion in its earliest days; Ron De Waal,

from Colorado State University; and Howard Haycraft, one of the great Old Irregulars, a noted mystery critic and historian who actually wrote books.

One of the best Plainsmen meetings ever, probably, the printed programme called attention to the Master's Kansas City connection, and Brother Perry gave for the first time a complete account of his research, in roughly the form that we know today as "The Body Beside the Tracks". He held the visitors spellbound with his discoveries: Baring-Gould's account, in Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street, of the young Holmes joining a theater company for the 1879 season, touring America and crossing the Great Plains -- of such a company coming to Kansas City that season, before setting out across the Plains, and arriving on Holmes's birthday of January 6, 1880 -- Baring-Gould's description of the company's repertoire, and the roles Holmes played, matching the performances given in Kansas City -- the subsequent discovery that, shortly before the troupe left Kansas City by train for Topeka, a body was found on the tracks at the station, in circumstances anticipating those of The Bruce-Partington Plans -- and finally, the next day's newspaper report recording an unidentified "third man" involved in the discovery of the body, who had advised the authorities about the evidence, and then disappeared shortly before the train pulled out, never to be seen or heard from again.

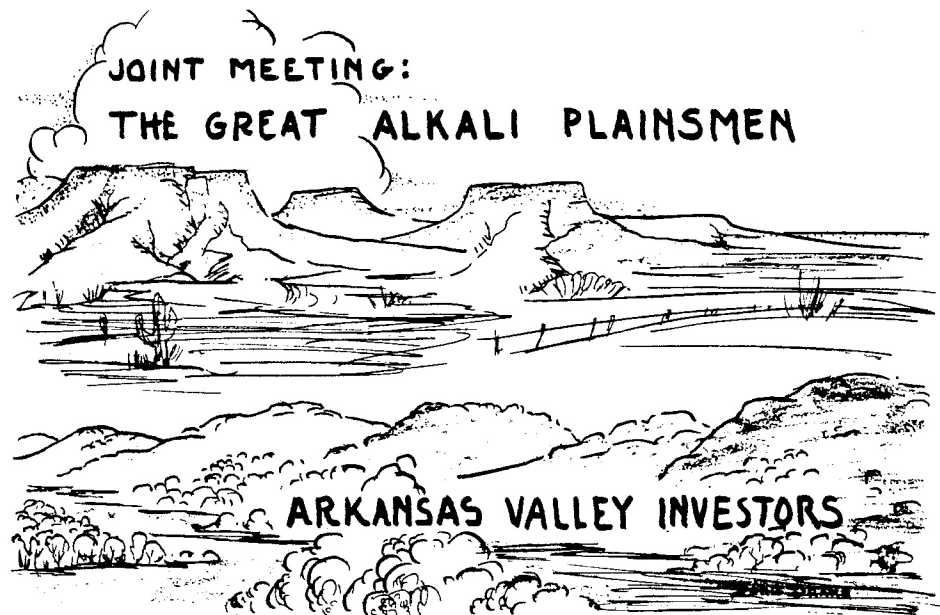
Goldman's article in the next day's Kansas City Star reported Milt's talk and other highlights of an exceptionally rich meeting, including the toasts, canonical disputations, Shaw's usual nasty quiz, an eloquent tribute to the help that librarians in the Canon had given Holmes and Watson, and a wondrous talk by Dean Dickinsheet that expounded a complicated but impressive, and well-nigh convincing theory that Sherlock Holmes had invented novocaine.

"...to lose sight of those awesome plains..."

Brother Shaw's first thought for the next Feast of the Blue Carbuncle had been to hold it again at Union Station, but his wife Margaret was gravely ill the remainder of 1968, and he had been unable to make plans. So in November, Belden Wigglesworth stepped forward with an alternative suggestion. He and Jason Rouby in Little Rock, with Shaw's help as scion society accoucheur, had held a premiere meeting of The Arkansas Valley Investors in October '67, and were looking for further opportunities. Belden wrote to Bob Willer proposing a joint meeting of the two scions, on December 27th at his home in Fayetteville, Arkansas. (Wigglesworth thought that Union Station was about to be torn down. It still stands today, a vast imposing stone monument to the slow and tragic decline of American railroads.)

The joint meeting was agreed, and planning got underway. The attractive programme designed by Belden's hospitable wife shows that a sumptuous English holiday repast was served, toasts representative of the Baker Street Irregulars, the Great Alkali Plainsmen, and the Arkansas Valley Investors were drunk, and papers, a quiz, and readings were presented. All three papers were given by Wigglesworth and other Investors, and it is just as well, for The Great Alkali Plainsmen were sadly under-represented that night. A savage snowstorm had struck the Plain that day, bringing road and highway traffic

nearly to a halt, and cancelling flights. Only Shaw and Ernest Willer of all the Plainsmen succeeded in travelling to Fayetteville. Shaw had missed the worst of the storm on his drive east from Tulsa, and Willer had left early enough that morning to make it without serious mishap.



Six PM
27 December 1968

At the home of Belden and Doris Wigglesworth
1910 Austin Drive, Fayetteville, Arkansas

It was a disappointment for all. The Plainsman tradition of an empty place setting had been observed by the Wigglesworths, who had also carried out a White and Blood Red color scheme. But at least Shaw was there to inflict his latest wicked quiz, and Willer to close the meeting with 221B as the programme promised. And Ernest reported that its other promise of "Adjournment, conversation, libations ad infinitum" was also fulfilled. (The December 30th Northwest Arkansas Times claimed that Shaw had played a violin solo as well, but eyewitnesses, including Shaw, scoff at the idea.)

The Great Alkali Plainsmen have always been very proud to count Brother Shaw a member, for he is not only an endearing *bon vivant* and raconteur, but also one of the most devoted and remarkable of Baker Street Irregulars. In addition to his accomplishments as a collector, his energy as a correspondent, his long list of highly desirable printed Sherlockian *jeux d'esprit*, and his celebrated series of Sherlock Holmes workshops beginning in 1977, Shaw has long been widely recognized as the Johnny Appleseed of the BSI. Where he goes, scion societies seem to spring up afterwards. "All you need for a scion," he once declared, "are two people and a bottle. In a pinch, you can dispense with one of the people." He has been a successful sparking plug for any number of scions. While The Great Alkali Plainsmen had been in business for the better part of a year when they first heard from him, Shaw's

energy and enthusiasm were so great that, even from Tulsa, he became the driving spirit of Kansas City's scion society in the late 1960s.

So much so, that when tragedy struck Shaw, disaster befell The Great Alkali Plainsmen. By early 1969, Shaw's wife Margaret was dying. By April 1970, he had decided to retire in Santa Fe, New Mexico. That August, he and his new wife Dorothy relocated there permanently. Meanwhile, as he went through this period of tragedy, transition, and relocation, he turned over the office of Avenging Angel to Milt Perry.

But while an office may be transferred, sparking-plug spirit is not so readily transfused along with it. Without Shaw to encourage, to exhort, and to act, The Great Alkali Plainsmen encountered their Reichenbach. The scion had had dry spells before, but this was a godawful drought. No meetings were called throughout 1969, nor any in 1970 or '71. "Listen as one may, there is no shadow of a sound in all that mighty wilderness; nothing but silence -- complete and heart-subduing silence." The scion's Great Hiatus had come.

