



DANA JENSEN / The Day

■ Harold and Theodora Nivers of Rocky Hill portray actor William Gillette, dressed as Sherlock Holmes, and Gillette's wife Helen at Gillette Castle State Park. Gillette was best known for playing the character of Sherlock Holmes.

Meet the Gillettes

Harold and Theodora Nivers devote themselves to the memory of William and Helen Gillette

By ANN BALDELLI
Day Staff Writer

Their legal names are Harold and Theodora Nivers, but friends call them Tyke and Teddie.

In their minds and hearts, however, they will forever be William and Helen Gillette. The Rocky Hill couple (he's 67 and she is 60) have been play-acting for 30 years as the late actor, director and playwright William Gillette, and his wife.

It was Gillette, who was born and raised in Hartford, who gave life to the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes, one of the most recognized literary characters in the world today.

Scottish author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle created the detective Holmes in 1887, but it was Gillette who made him legendary by portraying him with a deerstalker cap, flowing cape, curved pipe, and magnifying glass.

The Nivers, well-known among other Sherlock Holmes' devotees known collectively as Sherlockians, volunteer their time at Gillette Castle State Park entertaining visitors in an effort to educate them about the Gillettes and Holmes.

Harold Nivers dresses as Sherlock Holmes, but plays the part of William Gillette.

"It is important that people realize it was William Gillette who made Sherlock Holmes who he is today," says Harold. "It was Will who gave life to Sherlock Holmes on stage. He gave him worldwide visibility and created the outfit."

The Nivers are walking, talking history books on William and Helen Gillette. Married for 31 years, Teddie Nivers, who was raised as a fan of Dracula, converted to Sherlock Holmes after her marriage. It was easy, she says, since both characters were products of the Victorian era.

Harold Nivers got hooked decades ago when he was confined to his home with an illness, and a friend gave him the Sherlock Holmes' mysteries to read to pass the time. Nivers decided that Doyle's stories were not tremendous mysteries, but they were great stories.

"He was a wonderful wordsmith," he says.

The couple regularly dresses as the Gillettes, and their Rocky Hill home is a

Gillette role-playing for tourists

From D1

tribute to the period and the characters. A sign at the front door reads "Baskerville Hall," and the parlor looks as if visitors have stepped into the room where Sherlock Holmes mulled over his latest case with Dr. Watson.

They role-play so regularly, that sometimes a visitor has to decide who is speaking, Harold and Teddie, or William and Helen.

"I'm really 153," he says, when asked how old he is.

"And I'm 147," she says.

William Gillette, who died April 29, 1937, married actress Helen Nichols of Detroit in 1882. Historians say that they were blissfully happy and that he fell into depression when she died six years after marrying him, in 1888, from peritonitis caused by a ruptured appendix. She was on a train and died near Cos Cob.

Gillette took a six-year hiatus from acting following her death. He never remarried. The castle home he built in East Haddam, which operates as a state park today, is filled with many of Gillette's creations and inventions.

The Nivers, who call what they do "escapism," say it is a lot of fun. They have no set schedule, and drop in when they can during the park's regular season, which runs from Memorial Day Weekend to Columbus Day, and during the November and December Victorian holiday celebration.

They expect to be "at home" the afternoons of Dec. 2 and 3.

"The Gillettes are on tour most of the time," Harold Nivers says. "So when we're here, we let people know that we just came back from a tour."

At the castle, they gauge the audience and decide which William and Helen Gillette stories visitors might want to hear: If it is a group of motorcycle riders, they'll relate the story about the time William Gillette drove his motorcycle off the pier and into the Connecticut River, or when he was stopped by local police for riding his bike at speeds in excess of 70 mph. Or perhaps they'll talk about his love for raw oysters, or his preference for coffee over almost any other beverage.

Gillette was a creature of habit, eating his meals at precisely the same time every day, regardless of who was visiting, or what else was going on. Breakfast was always at 11 a.m., lunch at 3:30, and dinner at 8.

Among the friends he entertained at Gillette Castle were Helen Hayes, Calvin Coolidge, Charlie Chaplin, and Albert Einstein, and the Nivers might tell a tale or two about the famous visitors.

Once they arrive at the state park, they are never out of character. He is meticulously dressed for the part, in striped trousers, a stiff, high-winged collar, vest, and of course, the Inverness cape, deerstalker cap, smoking pipe, and magnifying lens. His wife wears vintage long dresses, with shawls, and period jewelry.

They are members of the exclusive Baker Street Irregulars, an organization of Sherlock Holmes enthusiasts founded in 1934 by Christopher Morley. Harold Nivers started the Connecticut scion of the club, The Men on the Tor, decades ago.

Henry Alves, the park superintendent, says Gillette Castle is lucky to have the couple.

"They are very big advocates and fans of Sherlock Holmes and William Gillette respectively," he says. "This is a passion for them, and they are wonderful."

WHAT: Victorian Holiday Celebration, Gillette Castle State Park. The castle, built by actor William Gillette between 1914 and 1919 as his semi-retirement home, will be decorated for the holidays.

if you GO **WHERE:** 67 River Road, East Haddam
WHEN: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Nov. 25-26, Dec. 2-3, Dec. 9-10, Dec. 16-17

HOW MUCH: Admission is \$5 for adults and \$3 for children ages 6-17

WHAT ELSE: Also on Dec. 2-3, the castle will celebrate the Great Park Pursuit, with additional entertainment and activities, including a harpist, choral groups, letterboxing, arts and crafts, a bonfire, and organized hikes.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Call the park at 526-2336