
History Detective: Researching the BSI Archival Histories

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about researching the BSI Archival Histories. This may be the longest thank-you note you ever receive professionally, and it is certainly heartfelt on my part.

1984 was the 50th anniversary of the Baker Street Irregulars, and that year's annual dinner speaker was Bliss Austin of Pittsburgh, Pa. Bliss was one of the princes of the BSI, a gracious gentleman whom everyone admired. A chemical engineer by education, he was by then a long-retired vice president of U.S. Steel. Well-read and cultured, with interests beyond Sherlock Holmes, he was one of our great collectors and scholars. He had come into the BSI in 1944, roughly mid-point in its years at the Murray Hill Hotel, and that night in 1984 he spoke to us, familiarly and charmingly, about that Irregular golden age.

The BSI's history was something of which most Irregulars by then had only hazy ideas, and what he told us was very welcome. Afterwards we implored Bliss to write out and publish his talk, and he said he would. But he was in his eighties, and he died before that happened.

There were not many Irregulars left who went back as far as Bliss, and none of them were likely to record the BSI's history. So we were worried about losing our institutional memory. Some of us were wringing our hands over it one day, and I can still remember hearing my voice suddenly saying "I can do something about it."

Why did I say that? Why indeed! Well, I had always immersed myself in history in school, minoring in it in college while taking degrees in international relations, and doing some postgraduate work in history as well. About all I read in my free time was history and biography. And I'd recently enjoyed writing a history of my hometown scion society, The Great Alkali Plainsmen of Greater Kansas City, a task made manageable by the Plainsmen having been conscientious archivists.

And I knew I could get off to a fast start with a transcript of correspondence over the years 1930-33 between Vincent Starrett and Gray Chandler Briggs, the St. Louis radiologist who preserved many of Frederic Dorr Steele's original illustrations of the Sherlock Holmes stories. This transcript of letters recording the making of Starrett's seminal work *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* had been prepared by my friend and Baker Street Miscellanea co-editor John Nieminski, but he had not lived to publish it. I proceeded to now, with an introduction and notes I wrote, and some supplementary material including some of Bliss Austin's scholarship.

As for the rest, I planned to cover the years through 1960. In September of that year Edgar W. Smith had died suddenly, and Julian Wolff took over as the BSI's Commissionaire for the next 27 years. Julian had invited me to the BSI dinner in 1973, and given me my investiture the year after, and I did not want to make historical judgments about him. And I realized that it would be historiographically faulty to try to write history of more recent decades. But Smith's death marked the end of an era sufficiently distant for historical purposes, and I thought I could find enough material about the BSI between 1934 and 1960 to produce a decent 250pp. book.

Well, you may know what happened. I started looking for material, and started finding it. I kept on finding it, and I'm still finding it today, twenty years later. By now the Archival Histories consist of seven volumes plus half a dozen shorter items, totaling some 1750 pp., and I've only gotten through 1950 so far. I had no idea at the beginning what I was getting myself into, or I might have kept my trap shut. But actually it has been immensely rewarding, and I've loved doing it.

The heart and soul of the Archival Histories is Irregular correspondence, like the letters between Starrett and Briggs, and others I started finding in libraries and private collections. In the 1930s and '40s people wrote letters to each other. Did they ever! In the 1940s, Christopher Morley and Edgar Smith spent workdays ten blocks apart, Smith at General Motors' building at West 57th Street & Broadway, Morley at his hideaway office at 46 West 47th, and they both had telephones on their desks. But they wrote letters to each other, constantly.

Business districts then had two or even three mail deliveries a day, and on one particular day in the 1940s, Smith sent Morley a letter in the morning that Morley received in time that day, not only to reply, but for Smith to receive Morley's reply that afternoon, and send off a reply to it before he caught a train home that evening. And the originals and carbons of these and their other letters were preserved, for Smith kept BSI correspondence, dictating his letters to three successive secretaries at GM who made carbon copies of them all.

So much of the BSI's history could be recorded through vivid correspondence between remarkable men, Starrett and Briggs, Morley and Smith, and many others. There's a great deal more in the Archival History volumes as well, and so the pages have mounted up. Fortunately I love research and the thrill of discovery. I like libraries, and handling and reading papers no one else has looked at for years or decades. I love the detective work that goes into solving historical mysteries, and live for the Eureka! moment when a final piece of evidence comes to hand.

Few episodes in the 21 years of research behind the Archival Histories so far have been more like that than some chapters in my new volume, "Certain Rites, and Also Certain Duties." With your permission, I want to dissect one of them for you to demonstrate what went into the making of, not only it, but the entire book, including the role played by libraries and archives of various sorts.

Many libraries. University libraries like Minnesota's; local libraries like the great Free Library of Philadelphia and the modest Morristown N.J. Public Library; privately endowed ones like Chicago's Newberry Library; government libraries like the Library of Congress and the Pentagon's library; club libraries like The Players in New York and the Army & Navy Club of Washington D.C.; and Presidential libraries like FDR's, Harry Truman's, and even Herbert Hoover's. Private collections have also been of immense value to me, but without libraries of all descriptions, the BSI Archival Histories might be too thin and bloodless to matter.

Chapter 7 of "Certain Rites, and Also Certain Duties" is about the origins and up-bringing of Edgar W. Smith, who more than anyone else created The Baker Street Irregulars as we've known it. The BSI's first glimpse of him came in 1936, when he wrote to the author of *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* that his wife had given him for his 42nd birthday. He did not yet know the BSI existed. This was, in fact, at a time when the BSI was in hibernation, not to revive until 1940, when the annual dinners resumed. Upon that dinner, Smith became the BSI's Buttons-cum-Commissionaire, the principal source of the BSI's energy for the next twenty years, for he seemed like Athena bursting full-grown from the brow of Zeus: already engaged in canonical scholarship, already self-published, already a member of another Sherlock Holmes society, The Five Orange Pips of New York, and instrumental in organizing the BSI's 1940 revival dinner.

We know a good deal about Smith from then on, but not much about where this dynamo came from. And some of what Irregulars thought they knew seemed to be wrong. So I set out, long ago now, to discover who Edgar Smith was, and this year I felt finally ready to publish what I had learned. The research stretches back to nearly the beginning of the Archival Histories, and like so much research it occasionally benefited from serendipity. The chapter is ten pages long, with eight images, and we shall see what went into them.

It opens with a photograph of Smith younger than we've known him before, when he was thirty-four years old in 1928 — before *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, before the BSI was conceived of by Christopher Morley. I found it at Georgetown University's library, among the papers of the man to whom the photograph is inscribed, James D. Mooney, for many years Smith's boss at General Motors' Overseas Division headquartered in New York.

After a brief prologue, the exploration begins by quoting some vague statements of Smith's about his origins, in letters written by him to Morley from a private collection that once belonged to the late Marvin Epstein, a Montclair, New Jersey, Irregular and mathematician at Bell Labs who purchased Smith's papers from Edgar P. Smith, of Smith's three sons the one who also became an Irregular. In fact Marv Epstein, a sweet and talented man sadly forgotten by most Irregulars now, rescued these papers from the trash barrel at Edgar P.'s home while there one day to purchase other items from Edgar W.'s collection. One day's difference would have meant the total loss of Smith's BSI papers.

The chapter then reprints and discusses Smith's curriculum vitae from General Motors' archives in Detroit, courtesy of a Holmesian judge there, the late Peter B. Spivak, who possessed the

senior contacts at GM to research and write a chapter about Smith's GM career for my third volume, entitled *Irregular Records of the Early 'Forties*. It stated that Smith was born in Bethel, Conn., on April 1, 1894.

The chapter delves deeper into Smith's past by considering data in his birth certificate, obtained for me from the public records office of Bethel, Conn. by a local *Irregular* I call Langdale Pike in my chapter — because I also had to consider a competing belief that Smith came not from Connecticut, but from Brooklyn, N.Y., a conviction proffered to me in personal correspondence with two very different people unacquainted with each other: George McCormack, a Brooklynite in the BSI since the 1950s when Smith was running it, and the late Miriam “Dee” Alexander, second of Smith's *Irregular* secretaries at GM, who worked for him there in the late 1940s.

I had previously identified Smith's first *Irregular* secretary at GM, R. V. (Rosalie) Mouillerat, and found an obituary for her, and through it had been able to find her family and learn more about her. But finding an obituary for Dee Alexander seemed to be impossible, making me wonder if she might be alive. She'd written an article for a 1947 *Baker Street Journal*, and its *Whodunit* citation said where she'd gone to college, so with fingers crossed I wrote to her in care of its alumni office, and received a warm reply from her that began a delightful three-year correspondence until her death.

Both she and George McCormack were sure, from prolonged contact with Smith, that he was Brooklyn-born and -raised, and theirs were not opinions to take lightly. The possibility was reinforced by a 1961 *BSJ* article about Smith written after his death by a boyhood friend. It confirmed that Smith had gone to high school in Brooklyn, graduating in 1911, and depicting him as an exceptionally bright and well-rounded all-American boy in whom Edgar W. Smith the man was clearly visible.

The article didn't identify the high school, but by then I had discovered that it was Brooklyn's Commercial High School. Browsing one day through abebooks.com's entries for Edgar W. Smith (hundreds of them, with ninety-five percent of them just for his 1944 anthology *Profile by Gaslight*), I came across one for a 1912 Brooklyn high school magazine allegedly containing references to him. Instantly I tried to order it; the attempt failed. I tried to contact the dealer in New Jersey; she was no longer in business. With the help of something akin to Yahoo People Search, I finally found her retired in Georgia. She'd sold the magazine, but was happy to contact the buyer on my behalf. That turned out to be Michael Greenbaum of Janus Books in Tucson, Ariz. He still had it, and hadn't intended to sell it — but when he heard it was I who was after it — and I should add that I had never been a customer of his — he sent it to me, refusing to take money for it.

Although Smith had graduated from high school the previous year, he was still involved in its life, and the magazine contained invaluable references to his high school activities, including its literary society — making clearer than ever how a big businessman like Smith could also be a fervent Holmesian. It even contained a piece of verse and pictorial wit by him, the earliest work

of his pen we've seen. And I was also able to include in this chapter a picture of his high school in those days, from a postcard bought off another surprisingly useful research tool for BSI historians, eBay.

Smith's GM c.v. said he had served in the Army in World War I. Knowing that small-town libraries sometimes had a practice of keeping clipping files about prominent citizens, I asked a friend in the BSI, Dr. Robert Katz, to visit the one where he lives in Morristown N.J., the town to which Smith had retired in 1954. Had its library kept a clippings file on Smith? Yes it had, including local obituaries containing information not in his New York Times obit.

And among other things, a Newark newspaper obituary said Smith had belonged to the Army & Navy Club of Washington D.C. — which made me blink: that was my club! The following Monday I walked into its membership office and asked if it could confirm that Smith had been a member. Forty-five seconds later I was holding his membership file, with a full record of his Army service. After basic training as an enlisted man he was commissioned as an officer in the 305th Infantry Regiment at Camp Upton, N.Y., and then had served first in Washington D.C. and later in Paris on the staff of the Second Assistant Secretary of War (whose responsibility was procurement), until he was discharged as a captain in September 1919.

As for confirming that Smith had belonged to The Five Orange Pips from 1938, over a year before his first BSI dinner in 1940, that came from the Pips' archives lovingly built by Albert Rosenblatt with a little help from me, and now at the New York Public Library. And while it isn't known whether Smith and Morley met before or after Smith joined the Pips, which was entirely separate from the BSI in those days, another 1961 BSJ article gives an eye-witness account (by Old Irregular William S. Hall) of their first meeting, over lunch at Christ Cella's speakeasy in East 45th Street.

But some mysteries persisted. Some sources said Smith had not gone to college. Others said he'd attended New York University's School of Commerce. Its Registrar's Office confirmed for me that he had, supplying his transcript dating from 1914 when he was a young man working at J. P. Morgan — finally receiving his degree from NYU while in the Army in 1918.

But that transcript was troublesome at the same time; if I may read from my book:

[Smith's] transcript indicates that his studies there began in January 1914, and were completed while he was in the Army, with a Bachelor of Commercial Science conferred upon him in June 1918.

That tallies with his GM c.v., but the NYU transcript says that Edgar W. Smith was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., not Bethel, Conn. And on May 8, 1891, not April 1, 1894. Nothing about the Brooklyn Eagle [where George McCormack and Dee Alexander and Smith's boyhood friend in the BSJ, all said he had worked when young], or Commercial High School. It says instead that he went to P.S. No. 9 from 1898 to 1906, then worked briefly for the N.Y. & N.J. Telephone Company in Brooklyn before going to work for the Otis Elevator Company in Manhattan until

1916. And his father's name (or at any rate the name of his "parent, guardian, or reference") is given as William, not Edgar S. [as the Bethel, Conn., birth certificate has it].

Clerical errors? Or is this a different Edgar W. Smith from Brooklyn who attended NYU's School of Commerce during the relevant years? But this is the only Edgar W. Smith in NYU's records, said the Registrar's Office when I went back to ask. And to complicate matters, when I told this to the aforementioned Langdale Pike, who had looked up Smith's birth certificate in Bethel, Conn., he said "Oh—" in that tone that earnest inquirers like yours truly come to dread: "Oh—there was another certificate of some kind in which his father's name was William, but I didn't copy it."

Ruefully I concluded: "I believe I hear Edgar Smith laughing at me."

But not for long. In February, about a month after I brought out this new volume, I learned from Julie McKuras that U.S. passport applications up to 1925 are now on-line, and I found one for Smith from 1920, when working for GM after the war and preparing to go to Europe for two years. And the data he provided, under oath, confirms his birthdate as April 1, 1894, his birthplace as Bethel, Conn., and his father as Edgar Sturdevant Smith, also born in Bethel. It also provides new data about his early career at GM, and about his wife, the young Frenchwoman he'd met in Paris in November 1918. And perhaps most delightful of all, it includes an even younger photograph of Edgar W. Smith, twenty-six years old and sporting a mustache he never hinted at in his BSI years.



Edgar W. Smith, the BSI's future Buttons-cum-Commissionaire, seen here for the first time at age 26, in 1920.

The eclectic nature of the research for this chapter of my new volume is far from unique. Another chapter in "Certain Rites," for example, about Elmer Davis and the origin of his Constitution and Buy Laws for the BSI, drew upon book and newspaper resources at the Pentagon library and the Free Library of Philadelphia, correspondence held by the University of Minnesota, Haverford College, and Yale University Libraries, Davis's own papers at the Library of Congress, personal correspondence with two members of a secret society called E Clampus Vitus, information in the archives of CBS News, a 1925 New York Times Book Review by Davis, continued use of Google, eBay, and abebooks.com as research tools, and finally, for the last and conclusive bit of evidence, an only recently catalogued collection of papers that had been

stored at the New York Public Library since 1948. The process spanned ten years, and was worth the effort, because the story of the true origin of Elmer Davis's Constitution and Buy Laws comes as a complete surprise to Baker Street Irregulars.

Now we must enter the realm of controversy. To refrain would leave you with a false picture of what I've found is required for serious research in BSI history.

The BSI is endeavoring to build an archive at Harvard's Houghton Library. I was present at the beginning when it was but a gleam in Mike Whelan's eye, about twelve years into my Archival History efforts. I surprised him by being lukewarm about it, but I felt that a BSI Archive was a nice-to-have, not an essential for purposes of research. And my feeling that it was a nice-to-have suffered when no library in New York, for reasons that varied, was interested in it. If there's to be one, I believe it should be there, given the BSI's association with New York City; but even the New York Public Library's special collections department, at a time when it was headed by an Irregular, George Fletcher, said no thanks.

Last autumn, in his notice for January's BSI dinner, Mike devoted considerable space to the goal of a BSI Archive at Harvard, saying that "we've lost much —perhaps most — of our early correspondence and papers because there was no repository to receive such Irregular archival material. These very valuable treasures represent a sad loss."

I can think of only one such sad loss of early papers myself, and I'm not sure about it. When Old Irregular Charles Goodman died, by the time we knew, his landlord had thrown everything out. Which is a pity, but a different sort of problem; and actually no one knows if Charlie Goodman had anything, let alone unique items, because he was not actually part of the BSI's beginning. What's noteworthy, even now, is something different: how much in the way of early correspondence and papers is around, if you look for it.

Then Mike wrote: "if an Irregular leaves his or her papers to another institution, how will future researchers know where someone's papers are decades later?" And he continued: "For example, all papers of the Irregular high profile critic and author Anthony Boucher were thought to be at Occidental College in California. However, I stumbled upon a large collection of his papers at The Lilly Library in Indiana, including his Sherlockian correspondence."

I was very surprised to read this. Experienced researchers learn how to search for collections containing materials of interest, and it's easier today than it used to be, because libraries are constantly putting descriptions and finding aids for their holdings onto the Web. That will only be more and more the case in the future. Discoveries that took me lengthy detective work in the 1980s and 1990s could be done today in minutes via on-line tools. For example, since starting to write up this talk, and without actually looking for anything of the sort, I found another unsuspected collection of Vincent Starrett papers and correspondence that way, located less than an hour's drive from here.

As for Mike's example, well, it was a long time ago, but he had forgotten that he learned of Boucher's papers at the Lilly Library in 1999 in a letter from me, and I had learned of their presence at the Lilly exactly the same way. I had already determined that Boucher's Irregular papers were not at Occidental College, and that those at San Francisco's Public Library were limited to ones about that city's BSI scion society, The Scowlers & Molly Maguires. So I started googling for Boucher papers — on a lesser predecessor of Google like Alta Vista (it helped to know that Boucher's real name was William A. P. White) — and in maybe ten minutes found an on-line description of Boucher papers at the Lilly Library. It was brief, but the webpage's list of his correspondents included many Irregulars (and not even the most important ones like Edgar W. Smith).

I printed it out and snailmailed it to Mike, saying please go see what's there, and get me copies. He did, in July '99, and I used some of them in my *Disjecta Membra* volume in 2001, with more in the 1950s volumes to come. And God only knows how the number of such on-line descriptions and finding aids has multiplied in the years since then. But you know that better than I.

I believe that putting all known BSI papers in a single place, if it could be done (or worse, was eventually believed by people to have been done), would be a hindrance, not a boon to good research. The implicit suggestion that one-stop shopping can support BSI history research could cause people to forego many research opportunities, and to miss many discoveries waiting to be made. Anyone thinking that the BSI Archive is the ne plus ultra will miss the greater quantity of relevant material that's elsewhere.

Perhaps the Archive's main virtue will be encouraging Irregulars to donate BSI papers and correspondence to an appropriate institution, whether the Houghton or somewhere else. But that's not the entire story by any means, and I hope that my own Archival Histories have made Irregulars history-conscious and preservation-minded. That has certainly been a goal of mine from the start, and I am grateful to be able to discuss it with you today.