

"The Case of The Vitagraph Holmes"
[Or, Cowboy in a Deerstalker]
By
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In the episode "A Scandal in Belgravia", from the BBC "Sherlock" series the following exchange takes place:

"Mycroft Holmes: My brother has the brain of a scientist or a philosopher, yet he elects to be a detective. What might we deduce about his heart?"

John Watson: I don't know.

Mycroft Holmes: Neither do I. But initially, he wanted to be a pirate."

In 1986 the British band, Boys Don't Cry had a hit song called "I Want to be a Cowboy."

What could these two disparate things possibly have in common? It is my theory that, while a modern day TV Sherlock wanted to be a pirate and became a consulting detective; the first Sherlock of film, a consulting detective, wanted to be a cowboy...and actually became 'THE Cowboy.'

Understand that I'm not including "Sherlock Baffled" in this discussion as the first Sherlock Holmes film, due to fact that it was created as a Mutoscope, to be shown in an arcade on a Mutoscope machine to one person at a time.

The film we are discussing is "Adventures of Sherlock Holmes" (aka "Held for Ransom") a 1905 American silent film from Vitagraph Studios. Internet Movie Database would give you this information about that film; released on 7 October 1905. The film starred Maurice Costello as Sherlock Holmes, H. Kyrle Bellew as John Watson, with J. Barney Sherry in an unlisted role and was directed by J. Stuart Blackton.

Thirty odd years ago, prior to the internet, when I began collecting autographed photos of actors who've played Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, my only resource for whose autographs and photos to collect (other than Basil Rathbone & Nigel Bruce), were books such as "The Public Life of Sherlock Holmes", by Michael Pointer, "The Films of Sherlock Holmes" by Chris Steinbrunner & Norman Michaels, "The Sherlock Holmes File" by Michael Pointer, and "Sherlock Holmes on the Screen" by Robert W. Pohle Jr. & Douglas C. Hart. These books, plus numerous others I came across over the years, were unanimous in declaring Maurice Costello the first Holmes of screen. Therefore, I proudly added a Maurice Costello autographed photo to my collection many years ago and never gave it much further thought.

As my collection grew and grew, and I discovered what seemed like a near infinite number of possible new candidates for the collection, I came across conflicting

information as to who played Dr. Watson in Francis Ford's 1914 "A Study in Scarlet." Some of my sources claimed it was Jack Francis and some claimed Jack Ford. I eventually solved this problem by researching old movie magazines and photos, and to make a long story short was able to determine it was Jack Ford (John Ford, the younger brother of Francis Ford). Somewhere along the line a juxtaposition of the Ford brothers' first names, Jack and Francis, by a researcher, had created the Jack Francis who portrayed Dr. Watson. The point this makes, is that if one researcher makes an error others often repeat it. No finer example of this subsequent compounding of an initial error can be found than in the crediting of Maurice Costello as the first Sherlock Holmes of film. [NB - the other fine example is the myth of black armbands perpetuated through the years.]

Leslie Klinger, a noted authority on Sherlock Holmes, wrote a superlative article in the June 1998 "Baker Street Journal" titled "Was Maurice Costello the First Screen Holmes?" Klinger brings up some strong arguments against Maurice Costello being Sherlock Holmes. A major point of contention in his claim against Costello was that the first published Sherlockian filmography, Michael Pointer's "Public Life of Sherlock Holmes" had numerous errors about the film. It stated that film was made in 1903 and that it was directed by J. Stuart Blackton and written by Theodore Liebler. Pointer also states that Sherlock Holmes was portrayed by Maurice Costello and even includes a portrait of Costello. Klinger received a personal letter from the author in which Pointer said that the date of 1903 was "a typographical error, which should, of course, be 1905.... I am now aware that Maurice Costello could not have been in that film, as he had not joined the Vitagraph Company by that date. I am sorry that my book has been misleading, but I doubt that I shall have the opportunity for an amended reprint, and should not have the time to prepare one anyway."

In the same letter Pointer also stated that "much of [his] information on the film came from Mons. M., a French film historian whom I subsequently came to realize was not always too reliable." Klinger goes on to point out: "The identification of Maurice Costello as the leading actor in the film is repeated in every other book devoted to the films of Sherlock Holmes. Significantly, all appear after Public Life." Further reasons suggest Maurice Costello was not Vitagraph's Sherlock Holmes. I will discuss these shortly.

"It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts" (SCAN). Let us view the data we have on hand and see if we can come up a sensible theory.

1905 was a key year for the fledgling movie company Vitagraph Company of America (eventually to become Warner Bros. Studios). They were expanding from a rooftop in Manhattan to a large lot in Flatbush, Brooklyn. In "Where the Dream Was Made", by Irvin Lee Matus, we learn: "The effect of the Big V's spacious location was immediately evident in its first production, filmed in 1905, probably before the first modest studio

building was finished. The record of Vitagraph's films between 1900 and 1905 is lost, but its first Flatbush release was a radical departure from the nickelodeon shorts of the earlier date. This was a 1,050 foot one-reeler (about fifteen minutes running time), a dip into the popular literary world for "The Adventures of Raffles, the Amateur Cracksman", based on the stories by E. W. Hornung and starring J. Barney Sherry, a charter member of the stock company of actors formed upon the opening of the Flatbush facility. Raffles was soon followed by a Sherlock Holmes adaptation, then a production of Booth Tarkington's Monsieur Beaucaire."

Alex Ben Block and Lucy Autrey Wilson, in their book, "George Lucas's Blockbusting, A Decade-by-Decade Survey of Timeless Movies" gives us this information on the "The Adventures of Raffles, the Amateur Cracksman": "In 1905 Vitagraph was expanding production activity to complement its filming exhibition business and its reputation for producing real-life newsreels, including some of the first from actual wars. Vitagraph's partners, Englishmen and former vaudevillians J. Stuart Blackton and Albert E. Smith and former distributor William 'Pop' Rock hired Gilbert M. Anderson to produce and direct story films for the company. Anderson had begun his film career as an actor at the Edison studio in 1903 and graduated to story development and directing. It was Anderson who suggested making the movie 'Raffles', which was also the basis for a successful stage play touring the country at the time. Anderson knew a stage actor, J. Barney Sherry, who was ideal for the title role."

Let's begin the discussion by eliminating the impossible, Maurice Costello. Leslie Klinger has already pointed out the Michael Pointer mistakes for us. What are the other facts I can give you about Maurice Costello? Yes, he became the face of Vitagraph Film Company, but he didn't join Vitagraph until around 1907. "The Big V: The History of The Vitagraph Company", by Anthony Slide and Alan Gevinson, says Maurice Costello joining the company in 1907, and it mentions a 1940 Paramount Pictures press release, which quoted Costello as saying "When I entered pictures for Vitagraph in Brooklyn in 1907....". Klinger noted the fact that neither Costello, nor his two actress daughters, Helene or Dolores, ever mentioned the film "Sherlock Holmes" in their numerous interviews, nor is it listed in any of his filmographies.

So where was Maurice Costello in 1905? He did visit New York City in early 1905, but it was in a play, "When Knighthood Was in Flower" at the Yorkville Theater. Costello was living in Pittsburgh, PA., and traveling the country with The American Stock Company. He also performed with The Spooner's Stock Company in Columbia, S.C., Boyle's Stock Company in Nashville, TN and the aforementioned Yorkville Stock Company, before joining Vitagraph. One might safely guess in September 1905, when Vitagraph was busy filming Holmes, he was back in Pittsburgh for the birth of his daughter Dolores on the 17th. He returned to New York in 1906 to direct a production of "The Convict's Daughter." In an interview in "Nickelodeon Magazine", 11/01/10, Costello comments about being happy to return to visit his Mom, having left living there 3 years earlier, which aligns nicely with the theory that he probably moved to N.Y.C. and began with Vitagraph around 1907.

Comments by Vitagraph original stock company members William Shea and Paul Panzer tell how the actors often built their own scenery and props in the early days, even in costume. William Shea interestingly commented in a later interview, that it wasn't until Maurice Costello came along, that he set a precedent that exists to this day when he declared, "I will not build sets or paint scenery." The first actual credited role I could locate for Costello with Vitagraph was as King Herod in "Salome" (1908). Ironically perhaps, Costello would go on to play the detective Lambert Chase, in nine films between 1912 and 1913. This actual movie review from "Moving Picture World" July-Sept 1912, for "The Adventure of the Thumb Print", Vitagraph, July 23, 1912 says it all: "A detective story featuring Mr. Costello as Lambert Chase, a sleuth something on the Sherlock Holmes pattern. He is called in after a robbery and makes a few significant discoveries which, with the help of chance, lead him straight to his victim. The picture is interesting; but one feels Mr. Costello is no detective and never could be." In addition, the Moving Picture World notes re Costello as Lambert Chase would SURELY have mentioned his Sherlock portrayal had it existed! Well I feel the evidence says, Mr. Vitagraph, aptly nicknamed "The Dimpled Darling", **Maurice Costello was no Sherlock Holmes** and never could be.

So who were the charter members of the stock company at the new Vitagraph Brooklyn Studios, and what films were made at that time? This may hold the key to who was the first Sherlock Holmes of film. The lists of suspects and films below have been derived from researching movie magazines, film reference books, and stories on the Vitagraph film company.

Will the real Sherlock Holmes actor Please Stand Up!

J. Barney Sherry



Gilbert M. Anderson



William Shea



H. Kyrle Bellew



Paul Panzer



William V. Ranous



Possible Actors Vitagraph Sherlock Holmes

- 1) J. Barney Sherry - Came when New Studio started 1905
- 2) Gilbert M. Anderson - Came from Edison Films when New Studio started 1905
- 3) William Shea - Original Stock Company Member
- 4) H. Kyrle Bellew - Original Stock Company Member
- 5) Paul Panzer - Came from Edison Films when New Studio started 1905
- 6) William V. Ranous - Original Stock Company Member

Costello is out. Who is in?

In 1905 William Gillette would have been the model for who you want to play the part, but that was stage, and this is silent film, and a character who might even be in disguise. Can Gillette be used as the prototype? Leading Sherlockian Les Klinger says, "Sadly, the film 'Adventures of Sherlock Holmes' (1905) is not extant, but there is a partial paper copy at the Library of Congress... of the 30 or so images... None reveal whether it's Costello... the character is heavily bearded and unrecognizable. In fact, there's nothing in the images that suggest that this is Sherlock Holmes!"



Below are stills from "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes" (1905) supplied to me by the noted Sherlockian Les Klinger.





"The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes"

The lead actor may be wearing a beard, but the stature of that actor, large chest, erect stance, dark hair, matches that of Gilbert A. Anderson, as seen below is photos of him as Broncho Billy.



Gilbert A. Anderson as Broncho Billy

So, let us see what we know of the lost film's plot. Vitagraph advertisements in "Moving Picture World" give us this synopsis; "The millionaire's child is kidnapped. Her frenzied father visits Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock Holmes meets the bandits at their rendezvous, and after many thrilling adventures and narrow escapes rescues the child. Sherlock Holmes' apartment in Baker Street, London a joyful reunion." The next week's ad tells us; "This shows one of the adventures of the noted detective in which he almost falls a victim to the band that signs itself 'The Sign of the Four'." Now we at least know we have an action film, not a parody or comedy. Perhaps we have a starring action hero type actor on our list of suspects.

Time to examine the list of suspects:

J Barney Sherry who checks in at 6'1", 200 lbs., would have been 31 years old at the time, and he did have a classic Holmes profile. He was brought in to play Raffles by new director Gilbert M. Anderson in Vitagraph's first major film of length, and first new studio's production. Why not Sherry? He sounds good. Well Sherry was picked especially for the Raffles role, because he played Raffles on stage. He was Anderson's handpicked choice. Anderson would have preferred to be the star too, but he needed to first establish his credibility with owners Blackton & Smith, since he was the director, they chose for this new longer film project experiment he had sold them on. Anderson you will see had bigger future plans, and this was his stepping stone project and company. In the 1918 "Motion Picture Studio Directory Trade Annual", Sherry only listed "Raffles the Amateur Cracksman" as a vitagraph lead. Although he made many silent films, he would eventually follow G. M. Anderson to Broncho Film Company, and always played second fiddle to Anderson. Perhaps he played Watson or a villain: but Holmes? Doubtful at best.

Kyrle Bellew was 50 at the time, perhaps that's why people are speculating he was Dr. Watson (a subject for a different investigation). Bellew had played Raffles too on stage, and even profited from selling the rights to Vitagraph for the storyline. But Bellew was doing stage at the time, besides being too old for young action director Anderson's ambitions. Bellew could be found on stage doing Raffles in Springfield, Ma. and Philadelphia, Pa. in 1905 according to "The Clipper" magazine. He seems to have returned to Vitagraph in time for for "Monsieur Beaucaire" 12/23/05. Bellew is hereby released as a suspect for the Holmes' part.

William Shea was 5'6", 160 lbs (looks even heavier in photos) and was 54 at the time. He would HAVE had to be in disguise to be Holmes: he has more the look of a Jabez Wilson or W.C. Fields. Shea, however, did star in "The Servant Girl Problem" 9/30/05 so was at the studio. In the same 1918 "Motion Picture Studio Directory Trade Annual" that Sherry failed to mention Holmes, Shea listed himself as a comedian, author, and took credits for Vitagraph's "Help!, Help!, Help!" and "Footlight of Fate", but alas no Holmes. Shea is hereby released as a suspect.

Paul Panzer, 33 years old at the time, can best be described as a Bela Lugosi, Count Dracula look-alike. It appears Panzer came over from Edison with Anderson in 1905. From Germany, Paul started out building sets and painting scenery like Shea, but probably through Anderson's help was starring in "The Escape From Sing Sing" 11/04/05 and "Monsieur Beaucaire" 12/23/05. His best know role was as the celebrated villain in "The Perils of Pauline" (1914). A stock villain, there is a good chance Panzer was one of the gang of villains in the Holmes film. Panzer is hereby released as a suspect for Holmes part.

William V. Ranous, 48 years old at the time, was a Shakespearean stage actor brought to the company as a second director to Anderson, with future plans towards Shakespearean productions. He would star in a number of Shakespearean films for Vitagraph, but not starting until 1907 and later. Ranous is hereby released as a suspect for the Holmes' part.

Gilbert M. Anderson (born Maxwell Henry Aronson) was 25 at the time, athletic build, with big ambitions. One must remember this is only 1905 - Holmes would be viewed as a young man (not an old man as in Arthur Wontner 1930's films and later adaptations), so 25 would not be a problem. Anderson's first part was in the movie "The Great Train Robbery" (1903), in which he played several parts (among them the train passenger shot by the bandits). The success of that film began Anderson on a career of directing, writing, and starring in his own films. Take note, I said starring in films! Could this at last be our star? Gilbert M. Anderson left Vitagraph late in 1906, and in 1907 founded Essanay Film Manufacturing Co., destined to be one of the predominant early film studios. Anderson gained enormous popularity in hundreds of Western shorts, playing the first real cowboy hero, "Broncho Billy" in 140 films. "He is known as the Father of

The American Western". He was an action hero actor, ever the star! Let's explore him further.

I came across this statement in a biographical article on G.M. Anderson, from "The Film Index" magazine July 30, 1910. "Mr. Anderson made his first pose before a moving camera years ago, when with the Edison Company. That was when 60 and 80 foot reels were the fashion. he 'participated' in 'The Great Train Robbery,' an act which he was never held accountable for by the police authorities. His next experience was with the Vitagraph Company, when in conjunction with J. Stuart Blackton and Albert E. Smith, 'Raffles,' 'The Servant Girl Problem,' 'Sherlock Holmes,' 'Black and White, and various other subjects were produced."

In the article "Vitagraph Becomes an Important Production Company - Films, Film, September, and Pictures - J Rank Articles" we are given this key evidence; "Information about Vitagraph's production practices during 1905 and early 1906 is minimal. In later biographical sketches, G. M. Anderson (then known as George, and later as Gilbert, Maxwell Anderson) claimed directing credit for RAFFLES, THE AMATEUR CRACKSMAN . He directed and acted in many Vitagraph films produced from August 1905 to early 1906. Vitagraph projectionist Max Hollander later recalled, "When we were idle, G. M. Anderson (Broncho Billy) would use us as extras in his pictures. Anderson was directing and acting in Vitagraph pictures which were soon to make his name famous throughout the country. After William Ranous was hired as a second director, two production units were active. One was headed by Blackton and the other by Smith. With the two partners acting as cameramen for their respective units, they adopted the collaborative model of production previously employed when working on a more intimate scale."

Robert Pohle, who once tried to defend Maurice Costello as Holmes in his book, made this statement in a Liberty Magazine article titled "Who is the real Sherlock Holmes?", "Deprived of his voice in those early silent films, Holmes was also transformed from an intellectual, armchair detective into a more kinetic action figure—almost a sort of cowboy-in-deerstalker." Little did he realize how close to the truth he was.

One of my Sherlockian mentors, the omnificent Peter Blau, B.S.I., pointed out to me, that Essanay News, Nov. 21, 1914, had an article on "Anderson Plays Role of Sherlock Holmes" about Broncho Billy in a detective role. I haven't been able to read that article, but do know it's not about the Vitagraph film, and I'm not stealing their title for this paper, no matter how appropriate it is.

"How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?" Sherlock Holmes SIGN.

Having eliminated the other suspects, and established the fact that Anderson directed and starred in his films, it is my claim that Gilbert M. Anderson was Sherlock Holmes in Vitagraph's "Adventures of Sherlock Holmes" aka "Held for Ransom". Naysayers might ask why didn't Anderson put claim to the part. To understand this, you must understand that Gilbert M. Anderson rarely did interviews. Yet, still I gave you one of those rare

interviews where he did mention the film. Anderson upon leaving a short stay at Vitagraph, had started new film companies, he had no need to talk Vitagraph. Anderson owned Essanay and Broncho Film Companies, he wrote, directed, and starred in his films, he had no need for past credits, unlike the other actors mentioned. He was "Broncho Billy" the "Father of the American Westerns", that was his legacy, that is what really mattered to him.

In conclusion one must admit we have made a far stronger case for Anderson as Holmes than exists for anyone else. As such - until further information comes to light - Anderson should indeed replace Costello as the generally accepted, most likely first Sherlock Holmes on film after Mutoscope.

YES, YES, YES, Gilbert M. "Broncho Billy" Anderson was Sherlock Holmes, but he really only wanted to be a cowboy.

My List of Vitagraph Company of America Films & Credits
for the year - 1905 New Brooklyn Studio

- 1) The Adventures of Raffles, the Amateur Cracksman 9/23/05 - J. Barney Sherry
- 2) The Servant Girl Problem 9/30/05 - William Shea
- 3) Adventures of Sherlock Holmes 10/7/05 - Gilbert M. Anderson
- 4) License #13 or The Hoodoo Automobile 10/07/05
- 5) The Course of True Love 10/14/05? - Next film after Sherlock Holmes (per Vitagraph Ad)
- 6) Black and White; or, The Mystery of a Brooklyn Baby Carriage 10/28/05
- 7) The Escape From Sing Sing 11/04/05 - Paul Panzer
- 8) Moving Day; or No Children Allowed 11/05/05
- 9) Burglar Bill 11/18/05
- 10) Oh! You Dirty Boy! 12/02/05
- 11) The Green Goods Men; or, Josiah and Samantha's Experience with the Original Confidence Game 12/02/05
- 12) Monsieur Beaucaire 12/23/05 - Paul Panzer, H. Kyrle Bellew
- 13) The Newsboy 12/23/05

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