

 Submit A **JOB FOR SHERLOCK HOLMES**

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(First in an occasional series on unusual jobs in Southern New Jersey.)

'As a rule,' said Holmes, '...it is your commonplace, featureless crimes which are really puzzling, just as a commonplace face is the most difficult to identify.'

- "Adventures of Sherlock

Holmes" by A. Conan Doyle

For an idea of what this husband and wife team do for a living, picture Sherlock Holmes skulking around the tables of, say, the Cowtown Flea Market in Pilesgrove Township, hot on the trail of, say, bootleg Gucci cigarette cases.

Or rip-offs of Rolex watches. Or fake Cabbage Patch Dolls, or any number of imposter handbags, T-shirt iron-ons, hair growth stimulants, even teeth appliques.

Bob and Cheryl Holmes, of Holmes Hi-Tech, are private investigators who catch counterfeiters. Their address and faces must remain draped in secrecy. The Holmeses do live somewhere in the Somers Point area, by the way, and neither of them looks like Basil Rathbone, the actor who immortalized on film the great pipe-smoking detective who is through coincidence their namesake.

Holmes Hi-Tech itself is one of only seven detective agencies in the country to specialize in trademark infringement cases. Clients have included Gucci, Rolex, Ocean Pacific and the makers of Cabbage Patch dolls. Flea market vendors from Cowtown to Englishtown have cowered under the Holmeses' scrutiny.

"Basically," says Cheryl Holmes, "what I do is shop."

But they go beyond flea markets. With the backing of U.S. Marshals, U.S. Customs officials, federal court orders and state and federal trademark infringement laws, this detective team has traveled the East Coast shredding Cabbage Patch counterfeiting rings, neutering a Korean bootleg Spuds MacKenzie operation, and, in all, confiscating a couple of million dollars worth of fakes.

And this month, in Atlantic City, they were faced with what wound up being either a great failure, or a great victory, depending how you look at it: The Missing Unauthorized Wrestlemania T-shirts Caper.

'It is one of those cases where the art of the reasoner should be used rather for the sifting of details than for the acquiring of fresh evidence.'

- "Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes"

Sherlock Holmes answers his own door these days, with a bark or two and a bit of his infamous sniffing around. Sherlock, the Holmeses' German shepherd, will then escort any visitors inside this office hidden somewhere in the Somers Point area.

Bob and Cheryl Holmes were downstairs recently, carefully sifting details.

"This is an official 'Rip It Off Your Back' Hulk Hogan shirt," Bob Holmes was saying, three days before the big raid.

Wrestlemania V was due to hit Convention Center over the weekend. As it has in past Wrestlemanias, the World Wrestling Federation hired the Holmeses. Enemy powers selling bootleg souvenirs were surely plotting to again solicit the Boardwalk crowds entering and leaving the event, and the detectives wanted to be ready.

Details, details. The Holmeses sifted through samples of legitimate Wrestlemania shirts, programs, binoculars and Hacksaw Jim Duggan foam rubber two-by-fours. They verified seizure orders issued by the U.S. District Court in Camden, and readied arrest packets containing receipts and item tags.

"I hope somebody comes to this party," Cheryl Holmes said to her husband while looking at a poster reading "The Mega-Powers Explode."

"They'll be there."

Holmes sat absorbed, with the expression of surprised and reverent admiration with which the botanist surveys the rare and precious bloom.

- "The Valley Of Fear"

Bob Holmes is sitting ten stories above the streets of Atlantic City, on the outer rim of the Trump Plaza parking garage.

He studies the surrounding parking lots through binoculars while undercover U.S. Marshals and licensed back-up detectives - including his teenage son - nonchalantly scour the streets and Boardwalk. It's Sunday, April 2, and Wrestlemania is about to begin. So far, no bootleggers.

Last year at Convention Center, during Wrestlemania IV, Bob and Cheryl Holmes, with the help of U.S. Marshals, confiscated the unauthorized T-shirts and paraphernalia sold by bootleggers from New York, Philadelphia and New Jersey. Bootlegging is a problem for corporations nationwide, costing an estimated \$20 million in lost sales each year.

Holmes Hi-Tech is quite used to "stadium" events. Bob and Cheryl Holmes have also been hired by 26 major league baseball teams, for whom they've stalked through crowds nation-wide in pursuit of anyone hawking cheap, unauthorized T-shirts, penants and other souvenirs.

Bootleggers are sneaky, and sometimes dangerous. In cases at Madison Square Garden, the Holmeses wear bullet-proof vests.

As Bob Holmes perches on a casino parking garage, he know's what he's looking for. Activity around a van or truck. Young men in unusually plump jogging suit jackets.

"Maybe we'll hit the mother-lode today," says Bob Holmes, who is always really hoping to catch the big fish, the manufacturers.

"Com'on, guys. Let's go guys, girls, whatever. Get your salesmen out."

Sherlock Holmes was transformed when he was hot upon such a scent as this.

- "Adventures of Sherlock Holmes"

The game is afoot.

Down on the darkening Boardwalk after the event, Cheryl Holmes is working among the tens of thousands of screaming Wrestlemania fans pouring out of Convention Center.

"This is when it gets really crazy," she says, almost with glee.

The Holmeses have other pots on the burner. They do corporate internal theft cases, and their new computer capabilities allow them to track people, criminal convictions, workmen's compensation claims, corporate and federal records, motor vehicle checks, credit checks ...

But bootlegging is their bread and butter, and their first love.

While Bob Holmes stays on the roof, 20 U.S. Marshals and detectives roam or stand sentry on the ground. Cheryl Holmes is peeking into alleyways, striding through Convention Center's parking garage, re-checking the lobby, giving barely noticeable hand signals to barely noticeable Marshals.

Nothing. Nothing but a bunch of screaming Hulk Hogan and Randy Savage fans.

"Vendors usually work against the crowd," she says. "You look for people who are stopped," she says. The enthusiasm is slowly fading from her voice.

Nothing. Not one single counterfeit plastic World Wrestling Federation Championship Belt.

"You got any T-shirts?" she asks a hot-dog vendor at Mississippi and Pacific Avenues. Then she whines "But I got three kids."

Nothing. Not one single unauthorized, bootleg, trademark-infringing Ravishing Rick Rude button. Not a clue.

"Nobody came to our party," Cheryl Holmes says, sad and stumped.

'A singular case,' remarked Holmes. '...Well, really, this is a very pretty little mystery!'

- The Sign Of Four

The Holmeses usually have a good sense of humor. They tell stories about the time counting 100,000 pieces of confiscated counterfeit Spuds MacKenzie items left them so batty they dressed the dog up in some of the stuff, calling him "Spuds MacSherlock."

Once, a man from Senegal was selling bootleg watches in New York City. Bob Holmes went up to the guy and said "Seventy dollars? You should be locked up for selling them for \$70. As a matter of fact, if you turn your head to the right, there's a U.S. Customs official ..."

Bob has also caught theiving casino valet parkers by leaving a dollar bill enscribed "Gotcha!" in invisible ink inside his car.

But as the last lingering and screaming Wrestlemania fans disperse, the Holmeses are in ill-humor indeed.

This is a singular mystery. Maybe no bootleggers came today because of newspaper accounts of the court orders. Maybe someone from the World Wrestling Federation warned the guys who showed up last year not to come back.

In the lobby of now-empty Convention Center, U.S. Marshals drop off their empty arrest packets, placing them inside one of Sherlock Holmes' empty Purina Moist and Meaty dog-food boxes.

Maybe, think Bob and Cheryl Holmes, nobody came to their party because they knew they were uninvited.

"They're scared," says Bob Holmes. "We're killing our own business."

And so, the day feels less a victory than a defeat. That is, until the Holmeses' teenage son shows up.

He has a Wrestlemania pass around his neck, round wire rim glasses, well worn Reeboks, and a knapsack full of walkie-talkies over his shoulder. As a licensed private investigator, he prefers his name not be publicized, so we'll call him Watson.

"So," asks Bob Holmes, who hasn't had a chance to see much of the Wrestlemania bout, in which hero Hulk Hogan took on bad guy Randy Savage.

"So, who won?"

"Hulk won," young Watson answers. "The good guys won."

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