

# **BENNETT, MELVIN, 1919-2003.**

## **Melvin Bennett papers, 1942-1945**

Emory University  
Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library  
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### **Descriptive Summary**

**Creator:** Bennett, Melvin, 1919-2003.  
**Title:** Melvin Bennett papers, 1942-1945  
**Call Number:** Manuscript Collection No. 632  
**Extent:** 1 linear ft. (2 boxes)  
**Abstract:** Letters, scrapbooks, military documents, printed material, clippings, and photos relating to Bennett's activities as an army sergeant in northwestern Canada and Alaska during construction of the Alaska Highway during World War II.  
**Language:** Materials entirely in English.

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### **Administrative Information**

#### **Restrictions on Access**

Unrestricted access.

#### **Terms Governing Use and Reproduction**

All requests subject to limitations noted in departmental policies on reproduction.

#### **Source**

Gift of Melvin Bennett, 1983.

#### **Citation**

[after identification of item(s)], Melvin Bennett papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

#### **Appraisal Note**

Acquired by Director of the Rose Library, David Estes, as part of the Rose Library's holdings in African American culture and history.

#### **Processing**

Processed by AV/ELE, May 1984.

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## Collection Description

### Biographical Note

Melvin Bennett was born in Andarko, Oklahoma, in 1919. He attended Oklahoma A. and M. College, leaving during his senior year (February 1942) to enlist in the U.S. Army. After three months at the Quartermaster Replacement Training Center at Camp Lee, Virginia, he was promoted to the rank of Staff Sergeant. On April 24, 1942, he was sent as a company clerk to Dawson Creek, British Columbia (Canada), to work on the Alaska Highway project, an Army initiative to build a military route from the United States to Alaska.

The Alaska Highway project began in February 1942, immediately following the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and subsequent occupation of the Aleutian Islands Attu and Kiska. It was constructed to serve two purposes: supply a string of airports used by the U.S. Air Forces and defend Alaska from the Japanese. The highway linked the towns of Dawson Creek, Fort St. John and Fort Nelson, B.C., Watson Lake and Whitehorse, Y.T., with Fairbanks, Alaska -- a total of 1523 miles (2451 kilometers). It had several different names: The Canadian-Alaska Military Highway, the Alaskan International Highway, the Alcan Highway (the official name during its construction, nicknamed the "Oilcan" Highway).

In the project's first phase, soldiers constructed a "tote" or "pioneer" road. The Army made plans to widen this road in 1943; however, by the middle of that year, Japan was no longer considered a threat to Alaska. This ultimately led to complete withdrawal from the project area in 1945. An agreement between the Canadian and U.S. governments provided that the U.S. maintain control of the road until six months after the end of the war, when it would become Canadian property with certain rights reserved for American traffic to Alaska. Although much of the Alaska Highway remains unpaved, it has been in continuous use since its construction.

In 1942 and 1943, Bennett's used Dawson Creek and Fort St. John his base of operations, although he traveled north along the highway as far as Fort Nelson, B.C., in 1942, and Watson Lake, Y.T. (Yukon Territory), and Whitehorse, Y.T., in 1943. On July 20, 1943, Bennett was promoted to Technical Sergeant. In March 1944 Bennett was transferred to the Air Corps and moved to Edmonton, Alberta. He spent June and July in Watson Lake, Y.T., on a temporary assignment, returning to Edmonton in August. In March 1945, he was transferred to Anchorage, Alaska, to work as an administrative inspector.

On October 23, 1945, Melvin Bennett was discharged from the Army and he returned to his home in Oklahoma. He received a Master of Librarianship degree from Emory University in 1950 and currently (1984) resides in State College, Pennsylvania. Sources for this notes have been *Highway to Alaska* by Herbert C. Lanks (New York, 1944); *N.A. I: The North - South Continental Highway: Looking North* by George R. Stewart (Boston, 1957); and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (15th ed.).

### Scope and Content Note

The Melvin Bennett Papers consist of letters, photographs, Army records, clippings and notes, 1942-1945, which describe Bennett's experiences in Northwest Canada and Alaska during the construction of the Alaska (Alcan) Highway. Order of arrangement of the material is first, correspondence (ca. 200 letters in chronological order) from Bennett, followed by the few letters to him; second, printed materials and miscellaneous clippings; and finally, two scrapbooks of

photographs (ca. 300). One strength of the collection lies in Bennett's firsthand account of World War II military life; however, he provides little information on the actual construction of the road or on the war itself.

The bulk of the correspondence is from Melvin Bennett to his parents, his sister and brother-in-law, Mildred and James Kirkpatrick, and his brother and sister-in-law, Bernard and Elloveen. One letter (June 1, 1942) describes the arrival of black troops the highway project, later photographed by Bennett. Later letters (and photographs) capture the boredom and tension of idleness experienced by the troops during the long winters.

The printed materials include booklets about the highway (the official army view of the project), and two U.S. Army newspapers. Bennett's Army records include his transfer orders, letters of recommendation and certificates of merit. Two folders of miscellaneous items, including humorous clippings about military life, complete the written portion of the collection.

Melvin Bennett made two leather scrapbook covers to hold his photographs by hand. One scrapbook contains photographs taken while he was stationed at Dawson Creek and Fort St. John in 1942-1943. The original scrapbook cover and its pages remain with the collection, but the photographs have been removed from the pages and placed in separate folders. The original order of the photographs and their captions are recorded; pagination has been added. This scrapbook is particularly noteworthy for its photographs of Canadian northwest scenery. Photographs in the second scrapbook, taken by Bennett when he was stationed in Edmonton, Alberta, in 1944, remain bound and primarily illustrate road and bridge construction. Both scrapbooks offer excellent views of typical --if somewhat rugged--military life. Loose photographs and scrapbook pages and unidentified negatives complete the collection.

### **Arrangement Note**

Arranged by record type.

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## Container List

Box	Folder	Content
1	1	Correspondence: 1942 February 12-May 23
1	2	Correspondence: 1942 June 1-December 19
1	3	Correspondence: 1943 January 26-May 21
1	4	Correspondence: 1943 June 1-December 27
1	5	Correspondence: 1944 January 5-May 24
1	6	Correspondence: 1944 June 1-November 20
1	7	Correspondence: 1945 January 15-October 1
1	8	Correspondence to Melvin Bennett, 1942-43
1	9	Printed material: 3 booklets about the Alaska Highway, 1943-44
1	10	2 United States Army newspapers, 1945
1	11	Army Records: Transfer orders, 1942 February 3-1943 October 16
1	12	Letters of recommendation, certificates of merit, etc. - 1942-1943 and undated
1	13	Miscellaneous: Clippings, notes (Melvin Bennett), undated
1	14	Clippings, notes, etc. (Mr. and Mrs. L. I. Bennett), undated

### Dawson Creek Scrapbook (Photographs), [1942-1943]

1	15	Pages 1-2
1	16	Pages 3-4
1	17	Pages 5-6
1	18	Pages 7-8
1	19	Pages 9-10
1	20	Pages 11-12
1	21	Pages 13-14 (14 blank)
1	22	Pages 15-16
1	23	Pages 17-18
1	24	Pages 19-20
2	1	Pages 21-22
2	2	Pages 23-24
2	3	Pages 25-26
2	4	Page 27 (page 28 blank)
2	5	Pages 29-30
2	6	Pages 31-32
2	7	Pages 33-34
2	8	Pages 35-36
2	9	Pages 37-38
2	10	Pages 39-40

2	11	Pages 41-42
2	12	Pages 43-44
2	13	Pages 45-46
2	14	Pages 47-48
2	15	Pages 49-50
2	16	Original Dawson Scrapbook pages

**Edmonton Scrapbook (Photographs), [1944]; Loose Photographs, Negatives, circa 1942-44**

2	17	Scrapbook of Photographs (40 pages), [1944]
2	18	Loose pages and photographs, circa 1942-1944
2	19	Unidentified negatives, circa 1942-1944

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