

MENCKEN, H.L. (HENRY LOUIS), 1880-1956.
H.L. Mencken correspondence, 1926-1937

Emory University
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Descriptive Summary

Creator: Mencken, H.L. (Henry Louis), 1880-1956.
Title: H.L. Mencken correspondence, 1926-1937
Call Number: Manuscript Collection No. 255
Extent: 1.25 linear ft. (3 boxes)
Abstract: Papers of H.L. Mencken, Baltimore journalist, including letters, postcards, telegrams, and other printed material sent to Gretchen Hood, a prominent social figure from Washington, D.C.
Language: Materials entirely in English.

Administrative Information

Restrictions on Access

Unrestricted access.

Terms Governing Use and Reproduction

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

Source

Purchase, 1980.

Citation

[after identification of item(s)], H.L. Mencken correspondence, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Processing

Processed by HC, February 1984 .

Collection Description

Biographical Note

Henry Louis Mencken (September 12, 1880-January 29, 1956), journalist, editor and critic, was born in Baltimore, Maryland, the eldest son of August Mencken, a cigar maker, and Anna Abham Mencken. When Mencken was three years old, his family moved to 1524 Hollins Street in Baltimore, where, except during his five-year marriage, he lived the rest of his life. Mencken was educated at Knapp's Institute and at Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, graduating in 1896 as valedictorian of his class. Although he had developed a strong interest in journalism, he reluctantly entered his family's cigar business, where he remained until his father's death in 1899.

In July 1899, Mencken became the youngest reporter on the staff of the *Baltimore Morning Herald* (which changed in 1904 to the *Evening Herald*). By 1906, when the paper suspended publication, Mencken had risen to editor-in-chief. He worked briefly as news editor for the *Baltimore Evening News*, and then joined the staff of the *Baltimore Sun*, with which he remained associated until 1948.

By 1900, Mencken had begun contributing short stories, poetry and articles to popular magazines. His first book, *Ventures into Verse*, was published in Baltimore in 1903. With the publication in 1905 of George Bernard Shaw, he began to establish his reputation as a literary, social and intellectual critic, and he widened his audience in 1908 when he was appointed book reviewer of the *Smart Set*, a New York monthly literary magazine. As co-editor with George Jean Nathan of the *Smart Set* (1914-1923), Mencken became known as an outspoken opponent of literary censorship and romanticism. Praising such authors as Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Sinclair Lewis and other social realists, he became one of the most influential literary critics of the period, and challenged writers to produce works that reflected the uniqueness of the American language and experience.

In his column, "The Free Lance," which appeared in the *Sun* from May 1911 to October 1915, he established his reputation as an iconoclast, focusing his attention on a variety of current events and social concerns. In 1917, when the *Sun* gave him no assignments because of the unpopularity of his political sentiments, he turned to researching and writing *The American Language*, which was first published in 1919 and went through successive revisions (1921, 1923, 1936) and supplements (1945, 1948). This became one of his most respected works.

Mencken founded the *American Mercury*, a monthly magazine, with George Jean Nathan in January 1924. First co-edited with Nathan and then edited by Mencken alone, the *Mercury* reflected Mencken's broadening interest in cultural commentary and social analysis. Reaching its peak circulation in 1927, the *Mercury* began to falter during the Depression, when many of its readers were alienated by Mencken's economic conservatism. He retired from the *Mercury* in 1933.

During the late 1930's and early 1940's, with his popularity in decline, Mencken completed his three-part autobiography (*Happy Days*, 1940; *Newspaper Days*, 1941; *Heathen Days*, 1943). In January 1941, he gave up his regular column in the *Sun*.

The subject of renewed interest after World War II, Mencken reached a new audience with his later writings and public appearances. On November 23, 1948, he suffered a massive

stroke, which left him an invalid. Mencken died on January 29, 1956, at his home in Baltimore, Maryland.

Mencken married Sara Powell Haardt, a writer from Montgomery, Alabama, on August 27, 1930. She died May 31, 1935.

Biographical Source: *Dictionary of American Biography* (Scribner's, 1935) and *The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature* by Max. J. Herzberg (N.Y.: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1962).

Scope and Content Note

This collection consists of the papers of H.L. Mencken from 1926-1937. The papers include 248 letters, postcards, telegrams, and printed items from H.L. Mencken to Gretchen Hood (September 15, 1887-May 2, 1978), a music teacher, opera singer and prominent social figure from Washington, D.C., whose father, diplomatic journalist Edwin Milton Hood, was a founder of the National Press Club. [For further information on Gretchen Hood, see photocopy of obituary from the *Washington Post*, May 3, 1978, available in collection control file.]

Consisting largely of brief typed letters from Mencken's Baltimore residence or his *Mercury* office in New York City, the correspondence is usually addressed to Miss Hood's Washington home except during her occasional visits to New York. The correspondence also includes holograph letters, notes, telegrams and postcards, some of which reflect Mencken's travel during this period.

Mencken's correspondence with Hood began in December 1926, when he responded to her letter to the editor of the *New York World* in which she humorously suggested that he run for president. Through 1927 and 1928, he was corresponding with Hood frequently, as often as several times a week. His letters became less frequent during 1929 and 1930, and ended abruptly when he married Sara Powell Haardt on August 30, 1930.

After his wife's death on May 31, 1935, Mencken resumed contact with Hood, writing her three letters during 1935. She, however, declined his invitations to see him again. Mencken wrote his last letter to her in 1937.

The correspondence demonstrates Mencken's terse, witty style of writing and offers a detailed account of his activities during this period. Often included in his letters are references to his health, work schedule, family members, social and business meetings, writings in progress, and arrangements for meeting Miss Hood. His disdain for Prohibition, interest in music, and political and literary opinions are also clearly depicted. Political commentary includes observations on the 1928 national political conventions and presidential election and frequent references to Fiorello Henry LaGuardia (1928-1930, 1937). Other prominent persons mentioned in his letters include Heywood Campbell Brown (1928), Clarence Darrow (1927), Sinclair Lewis (1928), Frances Newman (1928), Dorothy Parker (1928), and Upton Sinclair (1927, 1928). Newspaper clippings, pamphlets, religious tracts, and other printed items are occasionally included in Mencken's letters.

The collection has been preserved in the chronological order maintained by Miss Hood, which she reinforced by penciling a number on each item to keep it in its proper sequence. There are, in some instances, discrepancies between the numbers she has noted on the letters and their attached envelopes. Also attached to some of the letters are handwritten notes by Miss Hood that comment on or clarify references made in Mencken's letters. These notes, which offer Miss

Hood's reactions to and opinions of the correspondence, were apparently written years after the letters were received, a few of the notes being dated June 22, 1964. She has also occasionally included copies of her letters to Mencken.

Filed before the first of Mencken's letters to her are newspaper clippings about Mencken collected by Hood and a copy of her correspondence with the *World* which initially prompted Mencken's writing to her. Also included at the end of the correspondence are photocopies of the entire collection which were received as part of the purchase. Notes concerning discrepancies between the numbering of the original letters and the numbering of the photocopies are available in the collection control file.

Arrangement Note

Arranged in chronological order.

Finding Aid Note

A calendar of the correspondence is available.

Container List

Box	Folder	Content
1	1	Preliminary material
1	2	Correspondence - 1926, December 6-1927, April 30
1	3	Correspondence - 1927, May 6-July 29
1	4	Correspondence - 1927, August 2-August 27
1	5	Correspondence - 1927, September 4-September 30
1	6	Correspondence - 1927, October 1 - October 29
1	7	Correspondence - 1927, November 2-December 30
1	8	Correspondence - 1928, January 2-January 31
1	9	Correspondence - 1928, February 2-February 28
1	10	Correspondence - 1928, March 2-March-31
2	1	Correspondence - 1928, April 2-May 29
2	2	Correspondence - 1928, June 1-July 26
2	3	Correspondence - 1928, August 2-September 25
2	4	Correspondence - 1928, October 6-December 25
2	5	Correspondence - 1929, January 1-May 19
2	6	Correspondence - 1929, June 21-September 30
2	7	Correspondence - 1929, November 6-1937, March 12

Photocopies

3	1	Photocopies - Items 1-51
3	2	Photocopies - Items 52-101
3	3	Photocopies - Items 102-150
3	4	Photocopies - Items 151-200
3	5	Photocopies - Items 201-248
