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Special Collections Department**

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William R. Amberson papers

Title: William R. Amberson papers
Collection No: MSS.36
Extent: 0.33 cubic feet
Inclusive Dates: 1933-1940

Abstract: The collection contains copies of Dr. William R. Amberson's correspondence concerning the Socialist Party and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union in Tennessee, Arkansas and Mississippi, and the Delta Cooperative Farms in Mississippi.

Donor: A. Eugene Cox, Memphis, Tennessee, July 1968, for William Amberson.
Processed by: Louisa Bowen, 1980; Gerald Chaudron, 2014.
Access: Open to all researchers.
Language: English
Preferred Citation: William R. Amberson papers, Special Collections Department, University Libraries, University of Memphis.

Publication date: February 2014

Biographical information

William Ruthrauff Amberson was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, on June 17, 1894. He received his bachelor's degree from Lafayette College in 1915 and completed a doctorate in biology at Princeton University in 1922. His first teaching position was in Memphis at the Tennessee College of Medicine in the Physiology Department, where he remained for 15 years, serving as chair of the department from 1930 to 1937. His summers were spent on Cape Cod working at the Woods Hole Marine Biology Laboratory. His research field was primarily blood physiology. In 1937 Amberson moved to Baltimore to teach at the University of Maryland Medical School. He retired from teaching in 1959 and moved to Falmouth, Massachusetts. Amberson died in 1976.

While in Memphis, Amberson was a prominent social activist and member of the Socialist Party. He organized a committee for the defense of Southern sharecroppers, served in the board of the Delta Cooperative Farm in Mississippi, and was an adviser to the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union.

Scope and contents

The collection contains xerox copies of correspondence concerning the Socialist Party and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU) in Tennessee, Arkansas and Mississippi. The bulk of the papers (1934-1937) date from the period Amberson was living in Memphis.

Correspondence, 1933-1934, provides first-hand accounts of the founding of the STFU, union organizing strategies, jailing of union organizers, and Arkansas sharecropper evictions. The collection also includes letters from sharecroppers seeking Amberson's advice and assistance in their struggle.

The 1935 files contain extensive correspondence between Amberson and Roger Baldwin of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in New York which outline farm tenancy problems and synthesize evidence for a test case involving Arkansas sharecroppers against the planter Hiram Norcross. There are many letters from people throughout the United States voicing their support for Amberson's farm tenancy work and the STFU's activities. In a November 1935 letter to Clarence Senior, Executive Secretary of the Tennessee Socialist Party, Amberson expresses disillusionment with the local party leadership and tells of being under pressure from the University of Tennessee administration to halt his political activities. Writing to Baldwin the following month, Amberson refuses the vice-chairmanship of the new ACLU committee for the Scottsboro trial because of his STFU obligations, and expresses his desire to leave the South for a teaching job in a Northern university.

The 1936 and 1937 correspondence contains accounts of evictions of STFU members by planters, union meeting raids by vigilantes, and the STFU joining the United Cannery and Agricultural Workers of America.

The 1939-1940 correspondence is mainly between Amberson and A. James McDonald, a Louisiana attorney involved in the Delta Cooperative Farm in Mississippi and other experiments in cooperative living. In one letter, a statement to the board of trustees of Cooperative Farms, Inc. from Amberson outlines how the farms ought to change their record-keeping procedures and contains his resignation from the board. It was one of several letters he wrote complaining about Sherwood Eddy's mismanagement of the farms.

Major correspondents in the collection include Roger Baldwin, H.L. Mitchell, William Stutz, Lucille Milner, A. James McDonald, Abe Waldauer, C.T. Carpenter, and Clarence Senior.

Provenance

A. Eugene Cox, acting as the agent of Dr. Amberson, donated xerox copies of Amberson's papers relating primarily to his work with the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union to the University of Memphis in July 1968. The originals of these papers were donated to the University of North Carolina Southern Historical Collection.

Related materials

MSS.26. A. Eugene Cox collection.

Allen Eugene Cox papers, Special Collections Department, Mississippi State University Libraries.

A. Eugene Cox Papers, 1953-1968. Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries.

Delta and Providence cooperative farms papers, 1925-1963, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Paul J. Vanderwood papers on the Delta Cooperative Farm, 1938-1964, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

William Ruthrauff Amberson papers, 1915-1977, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Southern Tenant Farmers' Union records, 1934-1991, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Subject terms

Agriculture, Cooperative--Mississippi.
American Civil Liberties Union.
Amberson, William Ruthrauff, 1894-1976.
Baldwin, Roger N. (Roger Nash), 1884-1981.
Carpenter, Charles Thomas.
Delta Cooperative Farm Project (Hillhouse, Miss.)
Eddy, Sherwood, 1871-1963.
McDonald, Alexander James, b.1876.
Mitchell, H.L. (Harry Leland), 1906-1989.
Providence Plantation (Miss.)
Senior, Clarence Ollson, 1903-1974.
Sharecroppers.
Socialist Party (U.S.). Tennessee.
Southern Tenant Farmers' Union.

Inventory

Box 1

Folder

Correspondence:

- 1 1933, 1934 March-October.
- 2 1934 November.
- 3 1934 December.
- 4 1935 January.
- 5 1935 February-June.
- 6 1935 July-December.
- 7 1936.
- 8 1937.
- 9 1939-1940.
- 10 undated.