OLE OLSEN
PAPERS, 1910–1999

Collection Information

Biographical Sketch

Scope and Content Note

Series Contents

Cataloging Information

Processed by

Paul Brockman
1 December 2003

Manuscript and Visual Collections Department
William Henry Smith Memorial Library
Indiana Historical Society
450 West Ohio Street
Indianapolis, IN 46202-3269

www.indianahistory.org

COLLECTION INFORMATION

VOLUME OF COLLECTION: 11 manuscript boxes, 2 oversized boxes, 3 boxes of photographs, 2 folders of color photographs, 2 folders of oversized photographs; 4 8X10 negatives; 13 4X5 negatives; 2 artifacts

COLLECTION DATES: 1910–1999

PROVENANCE: Charles Apfelbaum Rare Manuscripts, Watchung, New Jersey,
BIOGRAFICAL SKETCH

John Sigvard “Ole” Olsen (1892–1963) was born in Peru, Indiana, and later moved with his family to Wabash, Indiana. He attended Northwestern University and financed his education by playing the violin in a dance band. After his graduation from Northwestern in 1912, Olsen performed in the Chicago area as a musician and singer. While performing with one of the bands, he met Harold Ogden “Chic” Johnson, and when the band broke up, the two decided to team up and became part of an act in Mike Fritzol’s Frolics in 1914. While the two played and sang, they became best known for exchanging insults during their act. Olsen served as the classic straight man for Johnson’s jokes.

Olsen and Johnson performed in the Pantages and Keith-Orpheum vaudeville circuits in the 1920s and 1930s being billed as “Two Likeable Lads—Loaded with Laughs.” In 1930 they signed a movie contract with Warner Brothers and appeared in numerous films for Warner Brothers, Republic, and Universal in the 1930s and 1940s including Gold Dust Gertie and Fifty Million Frenchmen (both 1931); Country Gentlemen (1936); All Over Town (1937); and a screen version of their stage show, Hellzapoppin (1941). Because of their reliance on spontaneity, movie scripts did not allow audiences to fully appreciate the Olsen and Johnson type of humor. They made their final film, See My Lawyer, in 1945.

Olsen and Johnson experienced their greatest success on the stage where they could exhibit their zany audience-involving style of comedy. Early revues included Monkey Business in California in the early 1930s and Take a Chance in Chicago in 1933. Afterwards, they returned to their vaudeville roots touring with revues in England and Australia. The team also performed on radio with guest appearances on Rudy Vallee and other programs.

The duo achieved their greatest stage success with Hellzapoppin which opened in New York City at the 46th Street Theater on 22 September 1938. The two-act, twenty-five scene production allowed Olsen and Johnson to engage in their unrehearsed spontaneous style of slapstick comedy. The show set a Broadway record (at that time) of 1,404 performances. Other Olsen and Johnson Broadway productions were Sons O’ Fun (1 December 1941–1943) which featured Carmen Miranda and Joe Besser; Laffing Room Only (23 December 1944–14 July 1945) which included Betty Garrett; and Pardon Our French (5 October 1950–6 January 1951).

The team also performed in the rising television market. They replaced Milton Berle for the summer break on the Texaco Star Theatre with their Fireball Fun for All in June 1949. After an initial success, the show took a short break and returned at a different time and with a number of changes including the adding of singer Bill Hayes, comedian Marty May, and June Johnson and J. C. Olsen, the daughter and son of the two stars. The show, however, was short-lived and ended in October 1949.
Olsen and Johnson continued to perform in small night clubs and Las Vegas casinos in the 1950s but both their national popularity and health were declining. In 1950 Ole was involved in a serious traffic accident that left him partially crippled. Both he and Chic suffered from kidney problems. Chic Johnson died on 28 February 1962 from kidney ailments; Ole Olsen died on 26 January 1963 from the same problem. They were buried next to each other at a Las Vegas cemetery.

Ole Olsen was twice married. He and his first wife, Lillian, divorced. They had three children, J. C., Joy, and Moya. J. C. followed his father in show business but later committed suicide. Moya married William P. Lear of aircraft-production fame in 1942. Ole came to live with the Lears following his automobile accident. Joy married Gordon Pendergraft and lived in California. In June 1961 Ole married Eileen Maria Osthoff, a dancer and choreographer he had known for eight years.

Sources:
Information in collection.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The collection contains the personal and professional papers of Ole Olsen including materials and photographs relating to the team of Olsen and Johnson and their shows.

Olsen’s personal and family papers include letters and telegrams (1920s–‘60s) between him and his family members particularly his daughter, Moya, and her husband Bill Lear; his mother, Catherine; his first wife, Lillian; and other friends and relatives. These often contained drawings and elaborate lettering. Olsen writes about his shows, missing his family on the road, and general news and information. There also is a significant amount of material from the 1930s regarding his personal business such as everyday house maintenance, investments, and the purchase of a home in New York. Other subjects include Olsen’s involvement with outside interests including the Indiana Society of Chicago, and return trips to Wabash and Peru, Indiana.

The largest portion of the collection centers on the comedy team of Olsen and Johnson. Among the items in this section are scripts, photographs, publicity, and business dealings. Materials range from their vaudeville days in the 1920s and ‘30s through their success on Broadway in the 1930s and ‘40s to their later years performing in smaller venues in the 1950s. There also are photographs, newspaper clippings, and some correspondence regarding special appearances made by the duo. Of particular note are photos documenting their efforts to entertain troops and factory workers during World War II, 1942–45. Other items of note are scrapbooks, scripts and photographs from Olsen and Johnson’s Broadway productions of Hellzapoppin, Sons O’ Fun, and Pardon Our French. There are also a large number of short sketches and musical scores apparently used by the team in various shows and personal appearances, including those for television and radio programs. Additional show related items include publicity playbills for shows which featured Olsen and Johnson and publicity items such as flyers.

The collection also contains the correspondence and business records for Olsen and Johnson, 1922–62. These include correspondence with their legal counsel, royalty statements, production costs, and publicity and booking information.
There also are letters from fans and some negative letters regarding their shows.

The collection also contains a large number of newspaper clippings and related printed stories concerning Olsen and Johnson, 1922–92. These include reviews of shows, personal appearances, and general biographical stories. There also are folders of obituaries for both Ole Olsen and Chic Johnson, 1962–63, and stories published about the team after their deaths.

Additional items in the collection relate to Olsen’s death and his estate. Some correspondence and related items belonged to his daughter, Moya, 1963–98. Among these items are letters of condolences, funeral arrangements, tributes, and information on the donation of his “Humor Library” to the University of Southern California. There is also an unpublished and undated book draft of an autobiography written by Ole Olsen with assistance from Moya. This unbound manuscript contains a draft of Olsen’s life in show business and his relationships with his friends and family.

**SERIES CONTENTS**

**Series 1: Ole Olsen Personal Papers and Finances, 1912–1999**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENTS</th>
<th>CONTAINER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School Activities, 1912</td>
<td>Box 1, Folder 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Photographs, 1900s–20s</td>
<td>Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 1, Folder 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Papers, 1920s, n.d.</td>
<td>Box 1, Folder 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Correspondence, 1922–26</td>
<td>Box 1, Folder 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Correspondence and Files, 1923–63 (1 of 6)</td>
<td>Box 1, Folder 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Correspondence and Files, 1923–63 (2 of 6)</td>
<td>Box 1, Folder 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Correspondence and Files, 1923–63 (3 of 6)</td>
<td>Box 1, Folder 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Correspondence and Files, 1923–63 (4 of 6)</td>
<td>Box 1, Folder 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Correspondence and Files, 1923–63 (5 of 6)</td>
<td>Box 1, Folder 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Correspondence and Files, 1923–63 (6 of 6)</td>
<td>Box 1, Folder 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photos removed from Personal Correspondence and Files, 1923–63</td>
<td>Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 1, Folder 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Telegrams and Letters, 1926–42</td>
<td>Box 1, Folder 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Correspondence, 1927–59</td>
<td>Box 1, Folder 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Correspondence, 1934–61</td>
<td>Box 1, Folder 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Correspondence, 1940–51 (1 of 3)</td>
<td>Box 1, Folder 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Correspondence, 1940–51 (2 of 3)</td>
<td>Box 1, Folder 14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Personal Correspondence, 1940–51 (3 of 3)  Box 1, Folder 15

Bee Burtiss Wedding, 20 January 1946  Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 1, Folder 3

Telegrams, 1945–52  Box 1, Folder 16

Public Service/Charity, 1947, n.d.  Box 1, Folder 17

Broken Leg, 1950  Box 1, Folder 18

Broken Leg, 1950  Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 1, Folder 4

Personal Telegrams and Correspondence, 1960–61  Box 1, Folder 19

Poems and Letters to Family, 1952, n.d.  Box 1, Folder 20

Family Correspondence, 1953–78  Box 1, Folder 21

Family Correspondence, 1961–65  Box 1, Folder 22

Family Letters, 1962, n.d.  Box 1, Folder 23

Family Correspondence and Papers, 1964–75  Box 1, Folder 24

Personal Correspondence, 1966  Box 1, Folder 25

Family Correspondence, 1973–90  Box 1, Folder 26

Family Papers, 1999, n.d.  Box 1, Folder 27

Mrs. Catherine Olsen and Family Letters, 1920s–50s  Box 1, Folder 28

Mother Olsen  Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 1, Folder 5

Ole Olsen, Jr.  Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 1, Folder 6

Family Photographs  Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 1, Folder 7

Family Photographs  Visual Collections: 4X5 negatives

Family Photographs, ca. 1960s  Visual Collections: Color Photographs, Box 1, Folder 1
Visit to Justice Department Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 3, Folder 8

Race Horse Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 1, Folder 9

Florida Hotel Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 1, Folder 10

Surrey Hotel, Miami, Florida, ca. 1940s Visual Collections: Color Photographs, Box 1, Folder 2

Car Wash Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 1, Folder 11

International Meeting, ca. 1950s Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 1, Folder 12

Scandinavian Festival (?), ca. 1950s Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 1, Folder 13

Photos Used for “This is Your Life,” 1961 (1 of 3) Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 1, Folder 14

Photos Used for “This is Your Life,” 1961 (2 of 3) Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 1, Folder 15

Photos Used for “This is Your Life,” 1961 (3 of 3) Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 1, Folder 16

Return Trips to Indiana Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 1, Folder 17

Bust Commissioned by Moya but Rejected Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 1, Folder 18

Geneva Switzerland Letters, 1961 Box 1, Folder 29

Postcard of Statue in Switzerland, 1961 Visual Collections: OVA Photographs, Box 1, Folder 2

Family Correspondence, 1960–63 Box 1, Folder 30

CONTENTS

Early Performance, April 1910
Radio Scripts, Local Towns, 1930s
Sketches, 1930s
Sketches and Writings, ca. 1930s
Sketches, 1930s–40s
Sketches, ca. 1930s–55
Hellzapoppin scripts (2), 1940
Sketches, ca. 1940s
Script, Sons O' Fun, ca. 1941
Performances, 1944–61
Hellzapoppin, Europe, 1961–62
Sketches and Writings, n.d.
Show Material, n.d.
TV and Radio Scripts and Related Materials, 1950s
TV Script, “One Two Three O’Leary,” 1952
Sketches and Related Items, n.d.
“The Vanishing Island,” (play) 1955
Surrey Hotel, Miami Beach, 1962
Scripts Not Used, ca. 1950s
“One Hour with You,” Grant Garrett (play), n.d.
Scripts and Writings, n.d.
Scripts, n.d. (1 of 3)
Scripts, n.d. (2 of 3)
Scripts, n.d. (3 of 3)
Writings, Parodies, n.d.
“The Mink” (TV drama), n.d.
Sketches and Writings, n.d.
Writings and Drawings, n.d.
Speeches, n.d.
Scrapbook of Scripts, 1930s
Scrapbook of Reviews and Articles, Hellzapoppin, 1938–39
Scrapbook of Reviews and Articles, *Pardon Our French*, 1950–51

Olsen and Johnson Portraits

Visual Collection: OVA
Photographs, Box 1, Folder 1

Ole, Publicity Stills

Visual Collections:
Photographs, Box 1, Folder 19

Publicity Stills (1 of 3)

Visual Collections:
Photographs, Box 1, Folder 20

Publicity Stills (2 of 3)

Visual Collections:
Photographs, Box 2, Folder 1

Publicity Stills (3 of 3)

Visual Collections: 8X10 negatives

Show-Related Photographs (1 of 4)

Visual Collections:
Photographs, Box 2, Folder 2

Show-Related Photographs (2 of 4)

Visual Collections:
Photographs, Box 2, Folder 3

Show-Related Photographs (3 of 4)

Visual Collections:
Photographs, Box 2, Folder 4

Show-Related Photographs (4 of 4)

Visual Collections:
Photographs, Box 2, Folder 5

Show and Publicity Photographs

Visual Collections: OVA
Photographs, Box 1, Folder 2

*Funzapoppin Marquee* Flatbush Theater, New York

Visual Collections: 4X5 negative

Publicity Photograph of Appearance with Circus, Chicago, ca. 1950s

Visual Collections: OVB
Photographs, Box 1, Folder 1

Publicity Photograph of Appearance with Circus, Chicago, ca. 1950s

Visual Collections: OVB
Photographs, Box 1, Folder 2

F.B.I. Russian Gag

Visual Collections:
Photographs, Box 2, Folder
Publicity Stills Removed from Album, 1920s–50s Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 2, Folder 7

Famous People Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 2, Folder 8

Dressing Room, Travel, etc. Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 2, Folder 9

War Effort Contributions (from Album), Sept. 1943 (1 of 2) Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 2, Folder 10

War Effort Contributions (from Album), Sept. 1943 (2 of 2) Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 2, Folder 11

Appearances (from Album), 1944 (1 of 2) Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 2, Folder 12

Appearances (from Album), 1944 (2 of 2) Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 3, Folder 1

Personal Appearances, n.d. (1 of 3) Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 3, Folder 2

Personal Appearances, n.d. (2 of 3) Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 3, Folder 3

Personal Appearances, n.d. (3 of 3) Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 3, Folder 4

Personal Appearances (?) Visual Collections: 4Xr negatives (6)

Horse Show, New York (from Album) 1940s Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 3, Folder 5

Ft. Rucker, 1941 Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 3, Folder 6

Rats Ball, Dorchester Hotel, London, 28 December 1948 Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 3, Folder
Vaudeville Bookings, 1928 (photocopy)  Box 7, Folder 1
Public Service Correspondence, 1933–59  Box 7, Folder 2
Printed Stories, 1939–56 and n.d.  Box 7, Folder 3
Printed Materials, 1942–43  Box 7, Folder 4
Printed Materials and Writings, ca. 1940s  Box 7, Folder 5
Publicity, 1945  Box 7, Folder 6
Programs, 1940s  Box 7, Folder 7
Fan Letter, March 1945  Box 7, Folder 8
White House Show for President Truman, June 1945  Box 7, Folder 9
Letters, Criticism, 1945–49  Box 7, Folder 10
Fan Letters, 1947–51  Box 7, Folder 11
Letters, Fan and Complaint, 1948  Box 7, Folder 12
Vaudeville Playbills, ca. 1920s  Box 7, Folder 13
Playbills, 1940s–50s  Box 7, Folder 14
Playbill, Sons O’ Fun, ca. 1941  Box 7, Folder 15
Playbill, Laughing Room Only, ca. 1944  Box 7, Folder 16
Playbill, Pardon Our French, ca. 1950  Box 7, Folder 17
Playbills, Hellzapoppin, 1955, 1960  Box 7, Folder 18
Publicity, Ads and Flyers, 1940s–50s  Box 7, Folder 19
Publicity and Playbills, 1930s–50s  Box 7, Folder 20
Performances, ca. 1940s  Box 7, Folder 21
Publicity, 1940s  Box 7, Folder 22
“Citations,” n.d.  Box 7, Folder 23
Wood Cutout of Olsen and Johnson, ca. 1920s  Artifacts: 2003.0412
Cloth Labels “Stolen from Olsen and Johnson”  Artifacts: 2003.0412
Broadsides and Show Materials, 1945, 1951, n.d.  OMB 0095, Box 2, Folder 1
Scripts and Lyrics, 1926–49  Box 8, Folder 1
Music and Sketches, 1940s
Sketches and Writings, 1943–55
Lyrics and Music, 1940s
Scripts, Music and Correspondence, 1940s–50s
Sheet Music and Lyrics, 1944–49
Music, n.d. (1 of 2)
Music, n.d. (2 of 2)
Sheet Music and Lyrics, n.d. (1 of 3)
Sheet Music and Lyrics, n.d. (2 of 3)
Sheet Music and Lyrics, n.d. (3 of 3)
Music, n.d.
Sheet Music, 1957, 1959
Music, n.d.
Music Scores, n.d.
The Songster (newspaper), n.d.

**Series 3: Business Correspondence and Records, 1922–1962**

CONTENTS
General Files, 1922–45 and n.d.
Royalty Statements, 1924–25
Business Correspondence and Writings, 1926–49
Business Correspondence, 1935–50
Business Correspondence and Papers, 1937–62
Business Correspondence, 1939–48
Correspondence, Professional and Business, 1939–53
Business Correspondence, 1940
Business Correspondence, 1940–61
Gouvernor Morris Letter, 13 March 1941
Business Correspondence, 1943–48
Series 4: Newspaper Clippings and Articles, 1922–1992

CONTENTS

Newspaper Clippings (Photocopies), 1922–62  Box 10, Folder 5
Newspaper Clippings, *Hellzapoppin* (Photocopies),  Box 10, Folder 6
1938–45

Newspaper Clippings, 1922–63
Newspaper Clippings, 1934–56
Newspaper Clippings, Reviews, 1938–50 and n.d.
Newspaper Clippings, Reviews, 1942–54
Newspaper Clippings, Biographical, 1942–87
Newspaper Clippings, 1940s
Newspaper Clippings, 1950s
Newspaper Clippings, 1956–61
Newspaper Clippings, 1959–60
Newspaper Clippings, 1961–62
Newspaper Clippings, Chic Johnson Obituaries, Feb. 1962
Newspaper Clippings, Ole Olsen Obituaries, Jan.–Feb. 1963
Newspaper Clippings, 1964–92
Newspaper Clippings, n.d.


CONTENTS

Memorial Tributes and Eulogy, 1963
Memorial Book, Jan. 1963
Condolences, Jan.–May 1963 (1 of 4)
Condolences, Jan.–May 1963 (2 of 4)
Condolences, Jan.–May 1963 (3 of 4)
Condolences, Jan.–May 1963 (4 of 4)
Obituaries, Jan.–Feb. 1963
Funeral Expenses, Jan.–Feb. 1963
Obituary (Incorrect) from Dictionary of American Biography
Olsen and Johnson Tombstone Rubbing, ca. 1963
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Container Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ole Olsen Memorial Theater, Peru, Indiana, 1965–98</td>
<td>Box 11, Folder 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor Library</td>
<td>Visual Collections: Photographs, Box 3, Folder 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donation of Library to USC, 1963–73</td>
<td>Box 11, Folder 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donation of Material to USC, 1973</td>
<td>Box 11, Folder 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Display of Olsen and Johnson Material at USC, 1989</td>
<td>Visual Collections: Color Photographs, Box 1, Folder 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence, Olsen Collections at Other Institutions, 1993–98</td>
<td>Box 11, Folder 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olsen-Porter Park, Peru, Indiana, n.d.</td>
<td>Box 11, Folder 14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Contents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book Draft (1 of 5)</th>
<th>Box 11, Folder 15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Book Draft (2 of 5)</td>
<td>Box 11, Folder 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Draft (3 of 5)</td>
<td>Box 11, Folder 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Draft (4 of 5)</td>
<td>Box 11, Folder 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Draft (5 of 5)</td>
<td>Box 11, Folder 19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Cataloging Information**

For additional information on this collection, including a list of subject headings that may lead you to related materials:

1. Go to the Indiana Historical Society's online catalog: [http://157.91.92.2/](http://157.91.92.2/)
2. Click on the "Basic Search" icon.
3. Select "Call Number" from the "Search In:" box.
4. Search for the collection by its basic call number (in this case, M 0803).
5. When you find the collection, go to the "Full Record" screen for a list of headings that can be searched for related materials.