

Collection #  
M 0803,  
OMB 0095

## OLE OLSEN PAPERS, 1910–1999

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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

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### 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,

29 May 2003

RESTRICTIONS: None

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ALTERNATE FORMATS:

RELATED HOLDINGS:

ACCESSION NUMBER: 2003.0412

NOTES:

## BIOGRAPHICAL 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 46<sup>th</sup> 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.

Stumpf, Charles. "Olsen and Johnson: The Zaniest of the Zanies," [www.classicimages.com/1998/october98/olsenandjohnson.html](http://www.classicimages.com/1998/october98/olsenandjohnson.html), accessed 3 September 2003.

IBDB (Internet Broadway Database) [www.ibdb.com/person.asp?ID=7943](http://www.ibdb.com/person.asp?ID=7943), accessed 27 October 2003

"Moya Olsen Lear, i.e. Mrs. William P.: She is Our Lady of Perpetual Motion," B/CA ShowNews online, [www.awgnet.com/shownews/01nbaa2/topsto13.htm](http://www.awgnet.com/shownews/01nbaa2/topsto13.htm), accessed 25 September 2003.

*Dictionary of American Biography*. New York: Scribner's, c. 1964. Reference Room Collection E 176 .D563, Supplement 7, pp.588–89.

*American National Biography*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Reference Room Collection CT 213 .A68 1999, vol. 16, pp. 706–07.

## 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.

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Ole, Publicity Stills

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Visual Collections:  
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Visual Collections: OVB  
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### **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/>
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.