

# William Humphrey:

## An Inventory of His Papers in the Manuscript Collection at the Harry Ransom Center

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### Descriptive Summary

<b>Creator:</b>	Humphrey, William, 1924-1997
<b>Title:</b>	William Humphrey Papers
<b>Dates:</b>	1932-1992, undated (bulk 1944-1992)
<b>Extent:</b>	28 boxes, 1 oversize box, 1 oversize folder, 9 galley folders (11.86 linear feet)
<b>Abstract:</b>	These materials document the family, life, and work of the American writer William Humphrey. The papers contain manuscripts and notebooks covering most of his books and short stories. Also included are large amounts of newspaper clippings, correspondence, and photographs.
<b>Call Number:</b>	Manuscript Collection MS-02076
<b>Languages:</b>	English, French, and Italian.
<b>Access:</b>	Open for research

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### Administrative Information

<b>Acquisition:</b>	Purchases and gift, 1994-1995
<b>Processed by:</b>	Stephen Mielke, 2001
<b>Repository:</b>	<a href="#">Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin</a>

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## Biographical Sketch

William Humphrey was born on June 18, 1924, in Clarksville, Texas, to Clarence and Nell (Varley) Humphrey. Located in Red River County in Northeast Texas, Clarksville was more a part of the old South than the Texas West. It was a community built around cotton farming and provided the setting for many of Humphrey's short stories and novels. He spent his early years with his parents in and around Clarksville, moving from one rented house to another--15 in one five-year period. His father, an auto mechanic, was described by Humphrey's own account as a quick-tempered, self-destructive son of an Indian and brother of a bank robber. An expert hunter who lived fast, drove fast, and drank more as the Depression deepened, his death in an auto accident when Humphrey was thirteen forced William and his mother to leave Clarksville and move to Dallas to live with relatives.

Humphrey excelled in school from an early age and after moving to Dallas was able to attend an art academy on scholarship. He attempted to join the Navy during World War II, but was rejected for being color blind. He soon dropped the idea of becoming an artist and began to focus on writing. He attended the University of Texas and Southern Methodist University in the early 1940s, but in 1944 he left SMU in his final semester and headed for Chicago, working various odd jobs. He later moved to Greenwich Village in New York where he met a painter named Dorothy (Feinman) Cantine. She left her husband and married Humphrey in 1949.

That same year, Humphrey began teaching writing and English at Bard College and published his first short story, "The Hardys," in *The Sewanee Review*. Fellow Texan Katherine Anne Porter had helped Humphrey get started as a writer and came to Bard as a lecturer at his invitation. The two remained close for years, but suffered a falling out in the early 1970s over his role in the publication of *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter*. While at Bard, Humphrey also formed a close relationship with poet Theodore Weiss. These two became great supporters of each other's work and corresponded often in later years, relaying thoughts and suggestions on their latest pieces.

Humphrey soon published additional stories in *Accent*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *The New Yorker*, and other magazines. These were eventually published in collected form in his first book *The Last Husband and Other Stories* (1953). These stories reflect Humphrey's life in 1930s Clarksville and are filled with characters and events based on his family and friends from that time.

Humphrey's first novel, *Home from the Hill* (1957), continued to draw on his Clarksville experiences. Although at first Humphrey was labeled a "western" writer due to the color and humor of his writing and his Texas roots, *Home from the Hill* showed his grounding in the Southern writing tradition, more akin to Faulkner in his use of dialog and his treatment of time, family, and place.

The success of the novel (made into a motion picture in 1960) allowed Humphrey and his wife to travel extensively and pursue his passion for fly fishing. They moved to England in 1958 and later lived in Italy. While in England, Humphrey met publisher Ian Parsons with whom he had corresponded for years. Parsons' firm, Chatto & Windus, published most of Humphrey's books in the UK and the two forged a lifelong friendship during Humphrey's stay.

While in Europe, Humphrey continued to publish stories in major magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Esquire*, and in 1963 returned to the U.S. for a one-year appointment as a lecturer at Washington and Lee University in Virginia. In 1965 he took a one-year position at MIT and bought an apple farm in Hudson, New York. Although he would still travel extensively in the coming years, and took other short term positions at Smith College (1976) and Princeton (1981), Hudson remained his home for the rest of his life.

Humphrey's second novel *The Ordways* (1965) again combined elements of Western comedy and Southern tragedy in a story of four generations of the Ordway family and their movement west after the Civil War. The book received strong critical reviews and was followed with equal acclaim by his second collection of short stories, *A Time and a Place* (1968). Most of the stories were written while he was living in Italy and working on *The Ordways*. Once more the focus was on the Northeast Texas of his youth, and with its themes of poverty, desperation, and prejudice during the 1930s, the book related well to the social concerns of the late 1960s.

Many of Humphrey's works reflected his love and knowledge of the outdoors, and in the early 1970s his short stories began to focus increasingly on sporting and fishing. He published numerous stories in *Sports Illustrated* and other outdoor magazines, and two of these stories were so popular that they were extended for publication as short books. "The Spawning Run," first published in *Esquire Magazine* in 1970, told the parallel tales of the sex lives of salmon and salmon fishermen in England. The second tale, "My Moby Dick" first appeared in *Sports Illustrated* in 1978, and related the personal battle between Humphrey and a great elusive trout.

While *The Ordways* chronicled the progress and change of a Texas family over several generations, Humphrey's next novel, *The Proud Flesh* (1973), showed the demise and dissolution of the Renshaw clan as its matriarch dies and the family's secrets are revealed. In *Farther Off from Heaven* (1977), Humphrey made his final literary trip to Clarksville, recounting the day of his father's fatal wreck and the lives of his family leading up to the event. Considered by many to be his finest work, it often draws comparisons to James Agee's *A Death in the Family* as a touching remembrance of a young boy's reaction to his father's death.

Humphrey continued his hard look at death and its impact on those left behind in a novel based in part on the suicide of a close friend's son. *Hostages to Fortune* (1984) takes place on a weekend fishing trip, during which a man relives the previous year in which he attempted suicide following the suicides of his son and his best friend and the breakup of his marriage.

Humphrey followed *Hostages to Fortune* with two books containing, for the most part, previously published short stories. *Collected Stories* (1985) included works from his first publication, *The Last Husband and Other Stories*, and from *A Time and a Place*. *Open Season: Sporting Adventures of William Humphrey* (1986) drew from his numerous sporting and outdoors articles and included his two small books *My Moby Dick* and *The Spawning Run*. Humphrey's final novel, *No Resting Place* (1989), was historical fiction based on the "Trail of Tears" forced migration of Cherokee Indians to Texas and then Oklahoma.

The 20 short stories in Humphrey's final published book *September Song* (1992) cover a wide range of topics, but uniformly convey his sense of frustration over his declining health and increasing age. As he approached his 70th birthday, he suffered continued loss of hearing and underwent repeated treatments for skin cancer. Diagnosed with cancer of the larynx in April 1997, he died on August 20th of that year.

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## Sources

Humphrey, William. *Farther Off from Heaven*. (New York: Knopf, 1977).

Kilber, James E. Jr., Editor. *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume Six: American Novelists Since World War II*. (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1980).

Lee, James W. *Southwest Writers Series No. 7: William Humphrey*. (Austin, Texas: Steck-Vaughn Co., 1967).

Winchell, Mark Royden. *Western Writers Series No. 105: William Humphrey*. (Boise, Idaho: Boise State University, 1992).

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## Scope and Contents

Typed and holograph manuscripts, notebooks, correspondence, clippings, photographs, and printer's and galley proofs document William Humphrey's writing, life, and family from 1932 to 1992. The papers are organized in three series: I. Works, 1948-1992, undated (21 boxes); II. Correspondence, 1932-1991, undated (5 boxes); and III. Subject Files, 1937-1988, undated (2 boxes).

The Works series is the largest of the three and contains manuscript material for all of Humphrey's books and many of his short stories. Also included are drafts of lectures he presented at Washington and Lee University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. These lectures from the 1960s focus on literary styles and various writers, but not his own writing. A 1988 interview from the *Mississippi Quarterly* details Humphrey's thoughts on other writers, but also addresses his works.

Notebooks located throughout the series provide particular insight into Humphrey's life and writing. In varying detail, they contain hand written outlines, notes, revisions, commentary, and typed fragments that trace the creation of his published and unpublished works. The majority of the loose manuscripts in the Works series are typed, late drafts with minor corrections, so early development of his work is often best documented in the notebooks. Humphrey also used many of the notebooks as diaries or personal journals while he traveled, and several contain one or two drafts of outgoing letters.

The materials in this series are in chronological order, reflecting the development of Humphrey's works over time. He often spent several years between the publication of his books and would work on different pieces simultaneously, or switch back and forth. Because of this, many of the notebooks contain entries for more than one story or novel and can span several years in content. Although most materials for individual works are filed close together, those that underwent particularly long gestations, such as *The Proud Flesh, No Resting Place*, or the unpublished novel *The Last Refuge*, have materials located in several places in the series.

In addition to typed manuscript and notebook drafts, printer's proofs or galley proofs are present for most of Humphrey's major books. Magazine tear sheets, review clippings, and small amounts of incoming correspondence are also present.

The only materials in the Works series related to the movie version of Humphrey's novel *Home from the Hill* are a small number of newspaper clippings. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer earnings statements for the film are located in the Correspondence series. Materials for a film version of "The Last of the Caddoes" include a draft of the script, a still photo from the production, and correspondence between Humphrey and the film's producer.

The Correspondence series consists almost entirely of incoming correspondence to Humphrey dating from the mid 1940s to the early 1990s. The letters are in chronological order, with the bulk filed under the heading "General," as Humphrey maintained them. The remaining correspondence is filed under headings for specific individuals and businesses, such as: Knopf Inc. [Alfred Knopf], Ian Parsons, Ted Weiss, and Glenway Wescott. There is also one folder containing incoming letters to Humphrey's wife, Dorothy, which contains the earliest letters in the series, most of them pre-dating her relationship with Humphrey.

Much of the correspondence documents the business aspects of Humphrey's writing, such as publication, promotion, sales, reviews, and copyright. There are letters of a more personal nature throughout the series, but the bulk of this type of correspondence is located in folders for specific persons. A few letters include drafts or copies of Humphrey's replies. Additional drafts of outgoing letters are found in several of the notebooks located in the Works series.

The smallest series, totaling two boxes, consists of subject files. These include general clippings, biographical and bibliographical records, personal memorabilia, travel brochures and maps, and several short works by students and other writers. Also present are a large number of photographs, including several of Humphrey as a child in Clarksville. Several folders of notes, clippings, and other documents relating to a 1987 murder in Hudson, New York, indicate Humphrey's strong interest in the case, possibly as the subject of a book.

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## Separated Material

Non-commercial sound recordings were transferred to the Ransom Center's Sound Recording collection and are described individually in a list at the end of this finding aid and in a [searchable database](#). Commercial recordings were transferred to the Ransom Center Library.

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## Index Terms

### Correspondents

Affre, Pierre.  
Antone, Evan Haywood.  
Dupee, Fred W.  
Eady, Toby.  
Faulk, John Henry.  
Foote, Shelby.  
Gottlieb, Robert, 1931- .  
Hills, L. Rust.  
Knopf, Alfred A., 1892-1984.  
Lambert, Jean.  
Lawrence, Seymour.  
Lucas, Jack.  
Lyons, Nick.  
Mewshaw, Michael, 1943- .  
Parsons, Ian.  
Porter, Katherine Anne, 1890-1980.  
Smallwood, Nora.  
Stone, Richard L.  
Thomas, Ted.  
Weis, Ted.  
Wescott, Glenway, 1901-1987.

**Organizations**

Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.  
Chatto & Windus (Firm).  
Doubleday & Company, Inc.  
Gallimard (Firm).  
Nick Lyons Books.  
Sports Illustrated.

**Subjects**

Authors, American--20th century.

**Document Types**

Audio tapes.  
Contracts.  
Diaries.  
Drawings.  
Interviews.  
Journals.  
Love letters.  
Maps.  
Phonograph records.  
Photographs.  
Postcards.  
Sound recordings.

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**Series I. Works, 1948-1992, undated**

"Commuting Distance," typescript outline, circa 1948

**box 1  
folder 1**

Notebooks

Includes drafts of "Commuting Distance, "1948

**folder 2**

Includes drafts of "Commuting Distance," and "Man With a Family, "1948-1949

**folder  
3**

Includes drafts for "The Fauve," "A Fresh Snow," "The Last Husband," "Man with a Family," "Quail for Mr. Forester," "Commuting Distance," "In Sickness and in Health," "Malcolm," "Report Cards," "Sister," "The Hardys," "The Shell," and "The Immigrant," 1948-1953

**folder  
4**

Includes drafts of "Commuting Distance," and *Home from the Hill*, 1952-1956

**folder 5**

*The Last Husband and Other Stories*

Printer's copy with corrections, circa 1953

**folder  
6-7**

Galley proofs, circa 1953

**box 2 folder 1**

Clippings, 1953-1954

**folder 2**

"Cruger's Island," incomplete typescript drafts, circa 1953

**folder 3**

*Home from the Hill*, Guggenheim Fellowship application, 1953-1954

**folder 4**

Notebook, includes drafts for *Home from the Hill*, *The Ordways*, and "Cruger's Island," 1953-1958

**folder  
5**

"Commuting Distance," holograph and typescript draft fragments, circa 1957

**folder 6**

Notebook, includes drafts of "Commuting Distance," *The Clan [Proud Flesh]*, and *The Ordways*, 1957-1968

**folder  
7**

*Home from the Hill*

Typescript draft fragment with corrections, circa 1957	<b>folder 8</b>
Notes, circa 1957	<b>folder 9</b>
Printer's copy with corrections, circa 1957	<b>folder 10</b>
Printer's copy with corrections, circa 1957	<b>box 3 folder 1</b>
Galley proofs, circa 1957	<b>folder 2</b>
Dust jackets, 1958, 1984	<b>folder 3</b>
Clippings, 1958-1960	<b>folder 4</b>
"The Mountain of Miracles," holograph and mimeo typescript drafts, 1960	<b>folder 5</b>
Washington and Lee University lectures, holograph, mimeo, and typescript drafts, 1960-1963	<b>folder 6-7</b>
<i>The Ordways</i> , typescript draft with corrections, 1963	<b>box 4 folder 1-2</b>
Notebook, includes drafts of <i>The Ordways</i> , 1964	<b>folder 3</b>
<i>The Ordways</i>	
"The Monument and the Shadow," <i>The Saturday Evening Post</i> tear sheets, 1964	<b>folder 4</b>
Printer's copy with corrections, 1964	<b>folder 5-6</b>
Printer's layout and dummy, 1964	<b>box 5 folder 1</b>
Corrected page proofs, 1964	<b>folder 2-4</b>
Galley proofs, circa 1965	<b>folder 5</b>
Clippings, 1965	<b>folder 6</b>

"A Good Indian," <i>Story</i> , galley proofs, 1965	<b>folder</b> 7
M.I.T. lectures, autograph and typescript drafts, 1965-1966	<b>folder 8</b>
Notebooks	
Includes drafts of <i>The Ordways</i> , 1965-1966	<b>folder 9</b>
Includes drafts of <i>The Ordways</i> and "The Human Fly," 1965-1967	<b>box 6</b> <b>folder 1</b>
Includes unidentified typescript fragments, 1967-1968	<b>folder 2</b>
<i>The Ordways</i>	
German translation, clippings, 1967	<b>folder 3</b>
French translation	
Typescript draft with corrections, circa 1968	<b>folder 4-5</b>
Clippings, 1968-1969	<b>folder 6</b>
Notebooks, include drafts of <i>The Proud Flesh</i> , 1968	<b>box 7</b> <b>folder 1-2</b>
"The Last of the Caddoes," bound typescript with corrections, 1968	<b>folder 3</b>
<i>A Time and a Place</i>	
"Mouth of Brass" and "A Home Away from Home," typescript drafts with corrections, circa 1968	<b>folder</b> 4
Printer's copy with corrections, circa 1968	<b>folder</b> 5-6
Printer's layout and dummy, 1968	<b>folder 7</b>
Galley proofs, 1968	<b>folder 8</b>
Clippings, 1969	<b>folder 9</b>

Notebooks, include drafts of <i>The Proud Flesh</i> and <i>No Resting Place</i> , 1969	<b>box 8</b> <b>folder</b> 1-3
"Mrs. Shumlin's Cow, Trixie," <i>Esquire</i> , typescript draft with corrections [excerpt from <i>The Proud Flesh</i> ], 1969	<b>folder</b> 4
<i>The Proud Flesh</i> , correspondence and incomplete typescript draft with corrections, circa 1970, 1983	<b>folder</b> 5
Notebooks	
Includes drafts of <i>The Spawning Run</i> , 1970-1976	<b>folder 6</b>
Includes drafts of <i>The Spawning Run</i> , and <i>My Moby Dick</i> , 1970-1978	<b>box 9</b> <b>folder</b> 1
"The Fishermen of the Seine," <i>Town &amp; Country</i> , typescript and holograph drafts and notes, circa 1970?	<b>folder</b> 2
<i>A Time and a Place</i> , German translation dust jacket, 1970	<b>folder 3</b>
"Ditches are Quicker," <i>Life</i> , autograph and typescript drafts, circa 1970	<b>folder 4</b>
<i>The Spawning Run</i>	
"The Sex Life of a Salmon Is Brief and Terrible," <i>Esquire</i> , tear sheets, 1970	<b>folder 5</b>
Dust jacket and clippings, 1970-71	<b>folder 6</b>
"Mrs. Shumlin's Cow, Trixie," Choice Magazine Listening, 1971 (audio recording separated to Library)	<b>folder</b> 7
"The Rigors of Bonefishing," <i>True</i> , notes, drafts, galleys, and correspondence, 1971	<b>folder</b> 8

Notebook, includes drafts of <i>My Moby Dick</i> and "The Fishermen of the Seine," 1972	<b>folder</b> 9
<i>A Time and a Place</i> , French translation clippings, 1972	<b>folder</b> 10
<i>The Proud Flesh</i>	
Printer's copy with corrections, circa 1973	<b>folder</b> 11
Printer's copy with corrections, circa 1973	<b>box</b> 10 <b>folder</b> 1
Clippings, 1973	<b>folder</b> 2
The Last Refugee [unpublished], mimeo typescript with corrections, 1974-199?	<b>folder</b> 3
Notebooks	
Includes drafts of <i>Horse Latitudes</i> [ <i>The Last Refuge</i> ], 1974	<b>folder</b> 4
Includes drafts of <i>The Last Refuge</i> , <i>Farther Off from Heaven</i> , and <i>My Moby Dick</i> , 1974-1976	<b>folder</b> 5
Includes drafts of <i>Farther Off from Heaven</i> , 1975	<b>box</b> 11 <b>folder</b> 1
<i>The Proud Flesh</i> , French translation	
Typescript with corrections, circa 1975	<b>folder</b> 2-3
Clippings, 1975-1976	<b>folder</b> 4
Notebook, includes notes on "Dolce far Niente," <i>The Last Refuge</i> , <i>Farther Off from Heaven</i> , <i>My Moby Dick</i> , <i>The Ordways</i> , and <i>No Resting Place</i> , 1976-1979	<b>folder</b> 5
<i>Farther Off from Heaven</i>	
Typescript draft with corrections, circa 1976	<b>folder</b> 6-7
Photocopy typescript, circa 1976	<b>box</b> 12 <b>folder</b> 1-2

Printer's copy with corrections, 1976	<b>folder</b> 3-4
Contract and publication party signature book, 1977	<b>folder 5</b>
Clippings, 1977-1978	<b>folder 6</b>
"The Royal Game," <i>Sports Illustrated</i> , computer printout, 1977	<b>folder 7</b>
Notebooks	<b>box 13 folder 1</b>
Includes drafts of <i>The Last Refuge</i> , 1977	
Includes drafts of <i>No Resting Place</i> , 1977-1978	<b>folder 2</b>
Includes drafts of <i>Hostages to Fortune</i> , 1977-1983	<b>folder 3</b>
<i>The Spawning Run</i> , dust jacket and clippings, 1978	<b>folder 4</b>
<i>Ah Wilderness! The Frontier in American Literature</i> , publicity materials, 1978-1979	<b>folder 5</b>
<i>My Moby Dick</i>	
"Prodigy in a Puddle," <i>Sports Illustrated</i>	
Computer printout, 1978	<b>folder 6</b>
Tear sheets, 1978	<b>folder 7</b>
Typescript and photocopy drafts with corrections, circa 1978	<b>folder 8-9</b>
Page proofs, circa 1978	<b>box 14 folder 1</b>
Dust jackets, circa 1978	<b>folder 2</b>
Clippings, 1979-1980	<b>folder 3-4</b>
"The Trick-shot Artist," typescript draft with corrections, circa 1979	<b>folder 5</b>

"Cast and Cast Again," typescript and holograph draft fragments, circa 1979	<b>folder 6</b>
<i>Farther Off from Heaven</i> , French translation clippings, 1979	<b>folder 7</b>
<i>The Last of the Caddoes</i> , mimeo motion picture script with corrections, 1980	<b>folder 8</b>
Holograph notes on deer hunting, 1981	<b>folder 9</b>
Notebooks	
Includes drafts of <i>Hostages to Fortune</i> , 1981-1984	<b>folder 10</b>
Includes notes on fishing, 1982	<b>folder 11</b>
<i>Hostages to Fortune</i>	
Autograph and typescript notes, circa 1983	<b>folder 12</b>
Typescript draft with corrections, circa 1984	<b>box 15</b> <b>folder 1-2</b>
Dust jackets, circa 1984	<b>folder 3</b>
Clippings, 1984-1986	<b>folder 4</b>
Notebook, includes drafts of "The Patience of a Saint" and "An Eye for an Eye," circa 1984	<b>folder 5</b>
<i>The Spawning Run</i> , French translation clippings, 1984	<b>folder 6</b>
"An Eye for an Eye," typescript draft fragment, circa 1984	<b>folder 7</b>
"Dolce far' Niente?," typescript draft fragments, circa 1984	<b>folder 8</b>
<i>The Collected Stories</i> , clippings, circa 1984-1986 (audio recording separated to Sound Recordings Collection)	<b>folder 9</b>
"Birds of a Feather," typescript draft, circa 1985	<b>folder 10</b>
<i>No Resting Place</i>	<b>box 16 folder</b>

Research material, circa 1985	<b>folder 1</b>
Holograph manuscripts, 1985	<b>folder 2</b>
Draft fragments, circa 1985	<b>folder 3-4</b>
<i>My Moby Dick / The Spawning Run</i> , audio recording contract and J cards, 1986	<b>folder 5</b>
<i>Open Season</i>	
Typescript draft fragments, circa 1986	<b>folder 6</b>
Preliminary typescript draft with corrections, circa 1986	<b>folder 7</b>
Preliminary typescript draft with corrections, circa 1986	<b>box 17 folder 1</b>
Intermediate typescript draft with corrections, circa 1986	<b>folder 2-3</b>
Clippings, 1986-1987	<b>folder 4</b>
Notebooks, include drafts of <i>The Last Refuge</i> , "September Song," and "Comfort Me with Apples," 1987	<b>folder 5-6</b>
"William Humphrey: Defining Southern Literature," <i>The Mississippi Quarterly</i> interview, 1988	<b>folder 7</b>
Notebooks, include drafts of <i>September Song</i> , 1988-1989	<b>box 18 folder 1-2</b>
<i>No Resting Place</i>	
Preliminary typescript drafts with corrections, circa 1989	<b>folder 3-4</b>
Preliminary typescript drafts with corrections, circa 1989	<b>box 19 folder 1-5</b>
Intermediate typescript draft with corrections, circa 1989	<b>box 20 folder 1-2</b>

"The Farmer's Daughter," holograph draft fragments, circa 1991	<b>folder 3</b>
<i>September Song</i>	
Preliminary typescript draft with corrections, circa 1991	<b>folder 4-5</b>
Intermediate typescript draft with corrections, circa 1992	<b>folder 6-7</b>
Printer's copy with corrections, 1992	<b>box 21 folder 1-2</b>
Master proofs, 1992	<b>folder 3</b>
Author's marked proofs, 1992	<b>folder 4</b>
Notebook, undated	<b>folder 5</b>
"A Game of Cheese," typescript and holograph draft fragments, undated	<b>folder 6</b>
Unidentified draft fragments, undated	<b>folder 7</b>

**Series II. Correspondence, 1932-1991, undated**

General	<b>box 22 folder</b>
1946-1957	<b>folder 1</b>
1958-1966	<b>folder 2</b>
1967-1970	<b>folder 3</b>
1971-1975	<b>folder 4</b>
1976	<b>folder 5</b>
1977	<b>box 23 folder 1</b>
1978	<b>folder 2-3</b>
1979	<b>folder 4</b>
1980-81	<b>folder 5</b>
1982-1983	<b>box 24 folder 1</b>
1984	<b>folder 2</b>
1985	<b>folder 3</b>
1986	<b>folder 4</b>
1987	<b>box 25 folder 1</b>
1988, 1991	<b>folder 2</b>
undated	<b>folder 3</b>
Humphrey, Dorothy, incoming, 1932-1972, undated	<b>folder 4</b>
Knopf, Inc., 1950-1985, undated	<b>folder 5</b>
Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, <i>Home from the Hill</i> earnings statements, 1960-1983	<b>box 26 folder 1</b>
Parson, Ian	
Chatto & Windus, 1953-1970	<b>folder 2</b>

Personal 1961-1980

**folder 3**

Weiss, Ted, 1949-1988

**folder 4**

Wescott, Glenway, 1951-1968, undated

**folder  
5**

William Morrow & Company, 1949-1958

**folder  
6**

**Series III. Subject Files, 1937-1988, undated**

Child's sketchbook, undated	<b>box 26 folder 7</b>
Clippings, 1960-1988	<b>folder 8</b>
Colleges and universities, 1976-1986, undated	<b>folder 9</b>
Biographical and bibliographical information, undated	<b>box 27 folder 1</b>
Gates trial	
Notes, undated	<b>folder 2</b>
Photocopy deposition, 1987	<b>folder 3</b>
Clippings, 1987-1988	<b>folder 4</b>
Honorary degree, 1969	<b>folder 5</b>
Memorabilia, 1954-1984	<b>folder 6</b>
Parsons, Ian - festschrift, 1976	<b>folder 7</b>
Passports and official documents, 1944-1980, undated	<b>folder 8</b>
Photographs and drawings, undated	<b>box 28 folder 1-3</b>
Porter, Katherine Anne - clippings and notices, 1965-1986, undated	<b>folder 4</b>
<i>Regards</i> magazine, 1937	<b>folder 5</b>
Travel and fishing, 1962-1975, undated	<b>folder 6</b>
Works by others, 1966-1981, undated	<b>folder 7</b>

**William Humphrey Papers--Index of Correspondents**

- ABC News--25.1
- *Accent*--22.1, 25.3
- Adamucci, Frank, Jr.--22.3
- Affre, Pierre--22.5, 23.1-2, 24.2, 25.3
- Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.--9.6, 10.2, 12.6, 25.5
- The Alison Press--24.2-3, 25.2
- *The American Poetry Review*--23.5
- *Anchorage Daily News*--24.1
- Anderson, Peter--23.4
- Antone, Evan Haywood--22.1, 22.5, 23.1-4, 24.3-4
- Arno Press--23.1
- *Art & Antiques*--24.3
- Ashby, Joyce--22.3
- Ashcroft, Paggy, Dame--24.3, 25.3
- Associated American Artists--22.2
- Atheneum (New York, N.Y.)--22.3-4, 23.2
- *Atlantic Monthly*--22.1
- Atwan, Helene--24.1-2, 25.3
- Atwan, Robert--24.3
- *Audubon*--25.1
- Auguste Francotte & Cie., S.A.--23.4
- Australian National University--23.3
- The Author's Guild--24.4
- Badian, Abe--22.3-4
- Badian, Barouch & Company--23.4
- Baez, Doug--23.4
- Baker, Jim--22.3
- Baldwin, C.L.--23.1
- Balkin, Rick--23.5
- Ballorian, Jean Paul--22.4
- Bard College--23.4-5
- Barret, Peter--22.4
- Barry, Jane--22.3
- Bauer, Jerome L.--23.1, 24.4
- Bazelon, David T., 1923- --22.3, 24.4
- Beadle, Pat C.--23.2
- Behrman, Cynthia Fansler--22.5
- Beldes, Jean--25.1
- Belknap Data Solutions, Ltd.--24.3
- Benkovitz, Miriam J.--24.2
- Bennet, Joan--23.5, 24.2, 25.1
- Bently Russell, Inc.--22.3
- Beodle, Lela May--25.1
- Berger, Thomas--22.2
- Berman, Jessica--25.3
- Bernheim, Alain--22.4
- Black, Don--23.1
- Boatwright, Taliaferro--22.2
- Bodio, Steve--24.2-3

- Bonner, Tora--22.2
- Books for Libraries--22.3-5
- Books, Inc.--24.1
- Boquerod, Marie-Claude--24.1
- Bosquet, Alain, 1919- --24.2
- Bosquet, Maria--24.3-4
- *Boston Globe*--22.4
- Boston University. Libraries--10.2, 22.2-4, 23.1, 23.3, 23.5, 24.2-4
- Bowers, E. W.--22.2
- Bowman, Judith--25.3
- Bradley, Jenny--22.2, 23.1-2, 23.4-5
- Brandeis, Irma--22.2
- Braude, Ben B.--24.3
- Bremer, Glenda L.--25.3
- Brooks, Bess--23.4
- Bullard, Mamie--23.5
- Byrd, Jim--25.3
- Caetani, Marguerite--25.3
- Caputo, Paula--25.1
- Carden, Ruth--23.5
- Carlisle, Henry C., Jr.--25.5
- Carlisle, Olga Andreyev--22.3
- *Carolina Quarterly*--22.1
- Carral & Graf (Firm)--24.1
- Carver, Catherine--22.1
- Chaney, Bev--23.1
- Chatto & Windus (Firm)--12.6, 22.4-5, 23.1-5, 24.1, 25.1
- Childers, Jack--23.5
- Choice Magazine Listening--9.7, 22.3
- Clemens, Cyril, 1902- --22.4, 23.3
- Coles, Janet--22.2
- Colladay, Betty--22.1
- *Collier's*--22.1
- Collin, Ken--23.4
- *Columbia*--24.2
- Combs, William--23.2
- Compton, Robert--24.2
- *Contemporary Authors*--23.2, 25.1-2
- *Contemporary Novelists*--23.5
- Conway, Jill--23.1
- Cooke, "Dink"--22.2
- Cooney, Blanche--24.2, 24.4
- Cooney, Tom--23.5
- Creamer, Robert W.--23.1-4
- Creeden, Virginia--24.3
- Cross Section--22.1
- Crowder, Bland--24.2, 24.4
- Crown Publishers--22.3
- *Dallas Morning News*--24.2, 24.4
- Dallas Public Library--23.1-2
- *Dallas Times Herald*--23.5, 24.1

- Darga, Bert--22.3
- Davis, Paxton, 1925- --22.5, 23.3-4
- Dawson, Gordon--22.5
- Delacorte Press--24.1-4, 25.1
- Dell Publishing Company--24.2, 25.1
- Dent, Larry--23.3
- *Destinations*--23.5
- *Dictionary of Literary Biography*--23.5
- Dillingham, Harry--24.4
- *Discovery*--22.1, 25.3
- Dodds, John--22.2
- Donaldson, Hal--25.3
- Doubleday & Company, Inc.--22.1, 23.1, 23.4-5
- Douglas & Gordon--22.4
- Douglas, John--22.2
- Dowling, Eddie--22.2
- Drachovitch, Albert--24.1
- Drysdale, Eric J.--22.4, 23.1
- Dugger, Ronnie--22.2
- Dunwell, Virginia--24.2
- Dupee, Fred W.--10.2, 22.2-5, 23.1-3
- Eady, Toby--22.4, 23.2-5, 24.1-2, 24.4, 25.1-3
- East Texas State University--22.5, 23.1-2
- Edsall, John T.--23.3
- Edsall, Lawrence--23.1
- Edward MacDowell Association--22.1
- Eisenhardt, Jonni--24.3
- Eliot, Robert C.--22.1
- Elliot, Lawrence--23.3
- Ellis, Ella Thorp--23.1
- Engle, John D.--23.3
- Ericson, Helen--22.3
- Erskine, Albert--22.1
- *Esquire*--22.2-4, 23.4, 25.3
- Eugene F. Saxton Memorial Trust--22.1
- Farber, Anne--25.3
- Farber, Jackie--24.1, 25.1, 25.3
- Farm Management, Inc.--22.3
- Farrar, Straus & Giroux--23.5, 25.3
- Faulk, John Henry (to Lee Goerner)--23.1
- Feeley, Patricia Falk--23.3-4
- Feinman, Paul--24.3
- Feinman, Seymour--25.1-2
- *Field & Stream* (Minnetonka, Minn.)--24.1
- Finlayson, Graham--22.4-5, 23.1-2, 24.1-2
- *First Printings of American Authors*--23.1
- Fitch, Stona--24.1
- Flax, Sam--22.4
- Foote, Shelby--25.2
- Ford, Harry T.--22.3, 25.5
- Forscher, Richard, Mrs.--22.3

- Frawley, Ernest D.--24.2
- French, Isabel K.--23.3
- Gallimard (Firm)--22.2-5, 23.1, 23.5, 24.1-4
- Gallimard, Colette--24.1-3, 25.3
- Gelband, Myra--24.1
- Gelman, Steve--22.3
- George Washington University. Dept. of English--23.3
- Gibbons, Reginald--23.4-5, 24.2
- Giddings, Ted--23.2
- Ginesi, Michael--23.2
- Ginna, Robert Emmett, Jr.--23.2-5
- Ginsberg, Harvey--23.3
- Givner, Joan, 1936- --23.1
- Gleason, Karen--24.3
- Goerner, Lee--12.6, 25.5
- Gollob, Herman--23.1-2
- Gottlieb, Robert, 1931- --25.1, 25.3-4, 25.5
- Granberry, Barbara--23.5
- Greene, A. C., 1923- --25.1
- Grimes, Martha--24.2
- Groth, John--23.3-4
- Guegan, Gerard, 1942- --24.2
- Guillou, Yannick--24.1-4
- Gunther, Max--22.2
- Guyon, Luciez--25.3
- H. W. Wilson Company--22.3
- Hackle, Sparse Grey, 1892- --22.4
- Haessler, George--23.3
- Halang, Martina--24.2
- Hallig, Klaus--24.3
- Harcourt, Brace & Company--22.1
- Harold Ober Associates--22.5, 23.1-2
- Harper & Brothers--22.1
- Harper & Row, Publishers--22.2, 23.3
- *Harper's Bazaar*--22.1
- *Harper's Magazine*--22.1, 22.3
- Harrington, Sybil--23.5
- Harrison, Kenneth--23.1, 23.5, 25.1
- Hausler, Mary--23.5
- Hayes, Harold--22.2-4
- Hays, Donald--25.2
- Hemingway, John--24.2
- Hendrix College--24.1, 24.4
- Herring, Vicki--24.1-2
- Herrington, Marie--24.2
- Heyerdahl, Yvonne--22.2
- Hildick-Smith, Kit--24.1
- Hills, L. Rust--22.2-4, 24.4, 25.3
- Holmes, Jon--23.5
- Holt, Rinehart and Winston--23.3
- Houghton Mifflin and Company--22.1

- *Houston Post*--22.2
- Houston Public Library--23.2
- Howison, John--23.2-3
- *The Hudson Review*--22.1, 25.3
- Humbert, Anne--25.
- Humphrey, Nell Varley--22.2
- International Biographical Centre--22.5
- Irving, Stefan--23.2
- J. B. Lippincott & Co.--22.1
- John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation--2.4
- Karvelis, Ugné--22.3
- Kellman, Brian--23.4
- *Kenyon Review*--22.1
- Kerr, John J.--24.3-4
- Kirk, John, Mrs.--22.2
- Kirkpatrick, Michael S.--24.4
- Kline, Judd--23.1
- Klinkenborg, Verlyn--25.1
- Kloegman, Roslyn--22.3
- Knopf, Alfred A., 1892-1984--25.5
- Koshland, William A.--10.2, 23.4, 25.5
- Kraft, Pearl Kazin--22.1, 25.3
- Krek, Lefty--22.4
- Lambert, Jean--22.3, 23.2-4, 24.1-4, 25.3
- Lawrence, Seymour--22.2, 22.4, 23.3-5, 24.1-4, 25.1
- Le Clech, Guy, 1917- --23.2, 25.3
- Lemay, Harding--25.5
- Letson, Charles--23.3-4
- Library Associates--24.1, 24.4
- *Life* (New York, N. Y.)--22.3, 25.3
- Lifton, Olga--23.2, 23.4
- Linder, Erich--23.1
- Lippe, Toinette--25.3
- Little, Brown and Company--22.1, 23.2-5
- *The Lone Star Review*--23.5
- Long, Beverly Whitaker, 1936- --23.1
- *Look*--22.1
- Lotos Club (New York, N. Y.)--22.2
- Louisiana State University--24.2-3
- Lucas, Jack--22.3-4, 24.4, 25.1-3
- Lyons, Nick--10.2, 14.3-4, 17.4, 22.3-4, 23.1-5, 24.1-4, 25.1-3, 28.7
- MacAffe, Ruth--22.2
- MacMillan & Co.--22.1
- MacRae, Jack--23.3
- *Mademoiselle*--22.1
- Manger, Rose Marie--24.1
- Marable, Mildred--23.4
- Marchetti, Giancarlo--22.3
- Mares, Bill--24.3
- Marton, Hilda--23.5
- May, Richard H.--23.4

- McCollum, Ken--22.4, 24.2
- McCormick, Bill--24.2
- McCormick, Lynn L.--23.1
- McCracken, Ursula Eland--24.4
- McIntosh, Michael--24.1
- Mears, P.--22.4
- Metcalf, Ben--25.3
- Metcalf, John--22.1
- Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer--26.1
- Mewshaw, Michael, 1943- --22.4, 23.1, 23.4, 24.2-3
- *Miami Herald*--23.1
- Miller, W. Scott, Jr.--22.3
- Mitten-Buhler, Robert L.--22.1
- Moffat, Mary Jane--23.1
- Molumphy, Olive--23.5, 24.1, 25.1
- Montezemolo, Vittorio C., di--22.2
- Moore, Desmond F.--22.4
- Moorhead, Hugh S.--23.1
- Morris, Olivia M.--23.1
- Morris, Wright--22.2
- Morrow, Mark--23.5
- Moutet, Jeanne--22.3
- Musson, Doris--23.5
- Mystery Writers of America--22.2
- *The Nation*--25.3
- National Book Awards--23.3
- National Book Committee--22.3
- National Book League--22.3
- National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities--22.2
- National Institute of Arts and Letters (U. S.)--22.2
- National Library for the Blind (Great Britain)--22.2
- National Sporting Fraternity Limited--25.1
- New American Library--22.1, 23.4
- *New York Herald Tribune*--22.2
- *New York Times*--9.6, 22.3-4
- *New Yorker*--22.1, 22.3, 23.4, 24.2, 25.3
- Newman, Judy--24.3
- Newman, Tommy--25.1
- Nick Lyons Books--23.1, 23.3-4
- North Texas State University--22.3, 23.1, 24.3-4, 25.1, 26.9
- Nova, Craig--24.3
- Olsen, Bert--23.2
- O'Neill, Charles E.--25.3
- Open Forum (Daytona Beach, Fla.)--22.2
- Oppenheimer, Evelyn, 1907- --24.2
- Oppenheimer, Shulamith Levey--23.5
- Orvis News--24.3-4, 25.1
- Owens, William A.--23.5, 24.3
- *The Oxford Guide to the United States and Canada*--23.3
- Paggi, Maro--24.3
- Palmer, Douglas Shaw--23.5

- Palmer, John--22.2
- Panstwowe Wydawnictwo Iskry--22.3-4
- Paris Junior College--23.5, 24.2
- Parker, James B.--23.1
- Parmet, Belle--24.1
- Parsons, Ian--26.2-3
- *Partisan Review*--22.1, 25.3
- Pawson, Tony--24.1
- Peake, David W.--24.3
- Pecile, Jordon--22.2, 24.1
- Peden, William--22.1
- Penguin Books--23.4
- Peregrine Smith Books--23.3
- Peterson, Donald--22.1
- Petty, Brian T.--24.3
- Phillips, Frances--25.3, 26.6
- Phoenix House, Ltd.--22.1
- Pike, June--22.3
- Poppo, Martin J.--25.4
- Porter, Katherine Anne, 1890-1980--22.4, 23.3
- Portres, Lester--14.11
- Poux, Nicole--24.1
- Prefectur de Loir-et-Cher. Administration Générale et Réglementation--28.6
- Prescott, Peter S.--25.2
- Princeton University--23.5
- Purdue University. Dept. of English--22.2-3
- Quarles, A. N.--22.2
- Quinn, Betty--23.3
- Ragot S. A.--24.2
- Rains, Bernard--23.2
- Random House, Inc.--22.3, 24.3, 25.3
- *The Reader's Digest*--23.2, 23.4
- Rees, Toinette L. E.--9.6, 25.5
- *Relevance*--22.3
- Renzetti, G.--22.2
- Richardson, James--24.1
- Rinehart & Company, Inc.--22.1
- Riodon, Owen--22.4
- Ritchie, Trekkie, 1902-1995--26.3
- Ritz, Charles C.--22.4
- Robert P. Marcucci Enterprises--24.4
- Robinson, W. Keith--23.1, 23.3-4
- Rosenau, Myra--22.2
- Rosenbauer, Tom--24.3-4, 25.1
- Rosenfield, Paul--23.4
- Roth, Art--22.2
- Russell & Volkening--22.1
- Russell, Diarmuid--22.1
- Ryan, Patricia--22.4-5, 24.2
- St. James Press--22.4, 24.1, 24.3
- Salvador, Theresa--23.2

- *The Saturday Evening Post*--22.3
- Sawyer, Sylvia--22.2
- Scenic Hudson (Organization)--24.3
- Schaap, Dick--23.4
- Schullery, Paul--23.5, 24.3
- Scott, Foresman & Company--22.3
- Seau, Sammie--22.2
- *The Sewanee Review*--22.1, 25.3
- Seybold, David--25.1
- Shafer, Margaret--24.4
- Shanahan, Edward K.--24.3
- Shand, Marjorie R.--23.4
- Shapiro, Harvey--22.1, 25.3
- Shattuck, Charles H.--22.1, 25.3
- Shattuck, Susie--22.2
- Shaw, Patrick--22.2
- Sherman, Carl--23.1
- Shuart, Stephen--24.1
- Shuckburgh Reynolds, Ltd.--24.2
- Sipes, Richard--24.2
- Skidmore College--22.5
- Smallwood, Nora--12.6, 23.1-3, 24.1
- Smith, C. L.--22.3
- Smith College--22.4-5, 23.3
- Sotheby Parke Bernet & Co.--23.5
- Soucie, Gary--25.1
- *Southern Living*--24.4, 25.1
- Southern Methodist University Press--25.1
- *Southern Review*--25.1-2
- *Southwest Review*--24.3
- Southwestern Booksellers Association, Inc.--24.3
- Sparks, Ann Marable--24.1
- Spater, George--23.1
- Spencertown Academy--25.1
- Spier, Dave--24.4
- Spohn, Marvin E.--22.2
- *Sports Afield*--22.3-4, 23.3
- *Sports Illustrated*--22.4-5, 23.1-4, 24.1, 25.3
- State University of New York at Albany--22.5, 23.3-4
- State University of New York at New Paltz--23.4
- Steegmuller, Shirley H.--22.3
- Stephen F. Austin State University--23.1
- Stillman, Chauncey--23.1
- Stone, Peter--24.3-4
- Stone, Richard L.-- 23.4-5, 24.2, 24.4, 25.2
- Storey, Robert--22.3, 24.4
- Stout, Frederic--24.3
- Stoychov, Bozhidar--23.1
- Styron, William--22.2
- Sweeney, John L.--23.1
- Symington, Donald L.--25.3

- Tappett, A. Jackson--22.1
- Tate, Joel--25.3
- Terry, Marshall--24.3
- Texas Institute of Letters--22.2, 23.2
- *The Texas Observer* (Austin, Tex.)--22.2
- *The Texas Quarterly*--22.2
- Texas Tech University. Dept. of English--22.5
- Thomas, Ted--13.3, 22.4-5, 23.3, 24.2, 25.3
- *Time*--23.2
- Tinkle, Lon--22.3
- Tinsley, Jo--24.1
- Toby Eady Associates--23.4
- Tomlinson, Charles, 1927- --24.1, 24.4, 25.1
- *Tomorrow*--25.3
- Towarzystwo Społeczno-Kulturalne Żydów w Polsce--22.4
- *Travel & Leisure*--23.2
- Travelers Indemnity Company--22.4
- *True*--9.8, 22.3-4
- Underwood, Lamar--22.4, 25.1
- United States. Internal Revenue Service--22.3
- University of Dallas--26.9
- *The University of Kansas City Review*--22.1
- University of Maryland--22.4
- University of Michigan--25.1
- University of Oklahoma--24.1
- University of Oregon--22.2
- University of South Carolina--22.5, 23.1
- University of Texas at Austin. College of Liberal Arts--24.1
- University of Texas at Austin. Humanities Research Center--23.2, 25.2
- University of Texas at Dallas--23.3
- University of Texas at San Antonio. Institute of Texan Cultures--23.2
- Uordin, Roland--23.4
- Urquhart, Fred--23.1-3
- Vannucci, Silvano--22.3
- Vaughan, Mack--26.9
- Venture Productions--25.3
- Viking Press--22.1, 23.5
- Virginia Highlands Festival--22.2
- *Virginia Quarterly Review*--22.1
- *Vision*--23.3
- Vitale, Rolando--22.4
- *Voices*--22.1
- Waisbren, Brad--24.2
- Walt Disney Productions--22.3
- Wanning, Andrews--24.3
- Wanning, Pat--23.3, 24.3, 25.5
- Watson, Gavin, Jr.--22.2, 23.2, 24.4
- Weaver, Howard C.--24.1
- Weinstock, Herbert--25.5
- Weis, Ted--26.4
- Wescott, Glenway, 1901- --26.5

- Westberg, Phyllis--22.5, 23.1-2
- Western Carolina University--24.2
- *Western Review*--25.3
- Whalen, Thomas M., III--25.1
- White, David Ashley--24.3
- White House Administrative Office (U.S.)--22.2
- Whitecloud, Thomas S.--22.2
- Whitehall, Hadlyme & Smith--22.3
- Whitton, Alistair--23.1
- Wicker, Tom--24.4
- *Wigwag*--25.1
- Wilkinson, Cletis--22.4
- Willey, John C.--26.6
- William Morrow and Company--26.6
- Wm. Underwood Co.--2.5
- Williams, Annie Laurie--22.2-3
- Winsor, Curtin--23.3
- Wittliff, William D.--23.1
- Wolfson, Martin Keith--22.4
- *Woman's Day*--22.1
- Wood, Mary--24.3
- World View Tours, Inc.--22.4
- Wright, Marilyn--24.2
- *The Writer*--22.3
- Wulf, Lee--23.3
- *Yaddo*--22.1-2
- *Yale Review*--22.1
- Yardley, Jonathan--23.3-4
- Yellin, Sherman--23.2
- Young, Frank L.--22.3
- Ziegler, Evarts--22.4
- Zielonko, Janina--22.3
- Zipser, Frederick S.--25.4
- Unidentified:
  - "Aunt" Anna--22.2
  - Bennet--22.2
  - Bridget--23.3
  - Byrd & Arthur--22.3
  - Claudine--22.3, 23.2, 24.1
  - Dan--22.2
  - Donald--22.1
  - Eduardo--22.2-3
  - Frank--22.4
  - Hank--22.4
  - Harry--25.1
  - Herve--25.3
  - Hily--22.3
  - Jim--22.4
  - Joe--22.1, 25.3
  - John--23.1
  - Matt--22.3

- Maurice--22.3
- Meg--23.2
- Michel--22.3-4, 23.3
- Odell--22.1
- Pat--23.3, 25.5
- Peggy, 24.3, 25.3
- Pete--22.3
- Pete & Kit, 24.2
- Rowie--24.2
- Susan--22.3
- Tim--25.3
- Willie--22.2
- Kitty (Eames?)--22.5, 23.4, 24.2
- Rita F\_\_\_\_--24.2
- Richard S\_\_\_\_--24.2

## William Humphrey Papers--Index of Works

- *Ah, Wilderness! The Frontier in American Literature*, publicity materials (see also Washington and Lee University lectures)--13.5
- "Birds of a Feather" (see also *Open Season: Sporting Adventures of William Humphrey*)--15.10
- "Cast and Cast Again" (see also *Open Season: Sporting Adventures of William Humphrey*)--14.6
- *The Collected Stories of William Humphrey*--15.9
- "Commuting Distance" (see also "The Last Husband")--1.1-5, 2.6
- "Cruger's Island"--2.3
- "Ditches are Quicker" (see also *Open Season: Sporting Adventures of William Humphrey*)--9.4
- "Dolce far' Niente?" (see also *The Collected Stories of William Humphrey*)--15.8
- "An Eye for an Eye" (see also *September Song*)--15.5, 15.7
- "The Farmer's Daughter" (see also *September Song*)--20.3
- *Farther Off from Heaven*--10.5, 11.1, 11.5-7, 12.1-6, 14.7
- "The Fauve" (see also *The Last Husband and Other Stories* and *The Collected Stories of William Humphrey*)--1.4
- "The Fishermen of the Seine" (see also *Open Season: Sporting Adventures of William Humphrey*)--9.2, 9.9
- "A Fresh Snow" (see also *The Last Husband and Other Stories* and *The Collected Stories of William Humphrey*)--1.4
- "A Game of Cheese"--21.6
- "A Good Indian" (see also *A Time and A Place* and *The Collected Stories of William Humphrey*)--5.7
- "The Hardys" (see also *The Last Husband and Other Stories* and *The Collected Stories of William Humphrey*)--1.4
- "A Home Away from Home" (see also *A Time and A Place* and *The Collected Stories of William Humphrey*)--7.4
- *Home from the Hill*--1.5, 2.4-5, 2.8-10, 3.1-4
- *Hostages to Fortune*--14.10, 14.12, 15.1-4
- "The Human Fly" (see also *A Time and A Place* and *The Collected Stories of William Humphrey*)--6.2
- "In Sickness and in Health" (see also *The Last Husband and Other Stories* and *The Collected Stories of William Humphrey*)--1.4
- "The Last Husband" (see also "Commuting Distance," *The Last Husband and Other Stories* and *The Collected Stories of William Humphrey*)--1.4, 2.7
- *The Last Husband and Other Stories*--1.6-7, 2.1-2
- "The Last of the Caddoes" (see also *A Time and A Place* and *The Collected Stories of William Humphrey*)--6.2, 7.3
- *The Last of the Caddoes* (motion picture)--14.8
- *The Last Refugee*--10.3-5, 13.1, 17.5
- "Man with a Family" (see also *The Last Husband and Other Stories* and *The Collected Stories of William Humphrey*)--1.4
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology lectures--5.8
- "The Mountain of Miracles"--3.5
- "Mouth of Brass" (see also *A Time and A Place* and *The Collected Stories of William Humphrey*)--7.4
- "Mrs. Shumlin's Cow, Trixie" (see also *The Proud Flesh*)--8.4, 9.7
- *My Moby Dick* (see also *Open Season: Sporting Adventures of William Humphrey*)--9.1, 9.9, 10.5, 13.6-9, 14.1-4, 16.5
- *No Resting Place*--8.1-3, 13.2, 16.1-4, 18.3-4, 19.1-5, 20.1-2

- *Open Season: Sporting Adventures of William Humphrey*--16.6-7, 17.1-4
- *The Ordways*--2.5, 2.7, 4.1-6, 5.1-6, 5.9, 6.1, 6.3-6
- "The Patience of a Saint" (see also *The Collected Stories of William Humphrey*)--15.5
- *The Proud Flesh*--2.7, 7.1-2, 8.1-5, 9.11, 10.1-2, 11.2-4
- "Quail for Mister Forester" (see also *The Last Husband and Other Stories* and *The Collected Stories of William Humphrey*)--1.4
- "Report Cards" (see also *The Last Husband and Other Stories* and *The Collected Stories of William Humphrey*)--1.4
- "The Rigors of Bonefishing" (see also *Open Season: Sporting Adventures of William Humphrey*)--9.8
- "The Royal Game" (see also *Open Season: Sporting Adventures of William Humphrey*)--12.7
- *September Song*--17.6, 18.1-2, 20.4-7, 21.1-4
- "The Shell" (see also *The Last Husband and Other Stories* and *The Collected Stories of William Humphrey*)--1.4
- "Sister" (see also *The Last Husband and Other Stories* and *The Collected Stories of William Humphrey*)--1.4
- *The Spawning Run* (see also *Open Season: Sporting Adventures of William Humphrey*)--8.6, 9.1, 9.5-6, 13.4, 15.6, 16.5
- *A Time and A Place*--7.4-9, 9.3, 9.10
- "The Trick-shot Artist" (see also *Open Season: Sporting Adventures of William Humphrey*)--14.5
- Washington and Lee University lectures--3.6-7
- "William Humphrey: Defining Southern Literature"--17.7

### **Sound Recordings List**

- C 5719 : audiocassettes : Review of book, My Moby Dick
- R 3177 : reel-to-reel audiotapes : Stories from Humphrey's A Time and a Place