

John and Barbara Beecher:

An Inventory of Their Papers at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

- Creator:** Beecher, John, 1904-1980 and Beecher, Barbara, 1925-1916
- Title:** John and Barbara Beecher Papers
- Dates:** 1850-2013 (bulk dates 1920-1980)
- Extent:** 138 document boxes (57.12 linear feet), 18 oversize boxes (osb), 3 card boxes, 1 serial box, 13 oversize folders (osf), 1 galley file (gf) and 1 restricted box
- Abstract:** The papers of American activist and poet John Beecher and his artist spouse Barbara (Scholz) Beecher consist of published and unpublished poetry, novels, articles, and other literary works by John Beecher, many related to the New Deal and the American Civil Rights Movement. Also present are teaching materials and records, including items related to the Levering Act, as well as correspondence, research materials, clippings, audio and video tapes, books, photographs, and family papers. In addition, the papers include business materials related to John and Barbara Beecher's Morning Star Press later named Rampart Press including Barbara's artwork and the poetry broadsides and books they produced.
- Call Number:** Manuscript Collection MS-05027
- Language:** English, Latin, French, Russian, and Greek
- Access:** Open for research. Researchers must create an online Research Account and agree to the Materials Use Policy before using archival materials
- Use Policies:** Ransom Center collections may contain material with sensitive or confidential information that is protected under federal or state right to privacy laws and regulations. Researchers are advised that the disclosure of certain information pertaining to identifiable living individuals represented in the collections without the consent of those individuals may have legal ramifications (e.g., a cause of action under common law for invasion of privacy may arise if facts concerning an individual's private life are published that would be deemed highly offensive to a reasonable person) for which the Ransom Center and The University of Texas at Austin assume no responsibility.

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Administrative Information

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Biographical Sketch

A descendant of abolitionists Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry Ward Beecher, John Henry Newman Beecher was born in New York City on January 22, 1904. His parents, Leonard Thurlow and Isabel Garghill Beecher moved their family to Birmingham, Alabama, in 1907 due to Leonard's executive position with U.S. Steel following its takeover of Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company (TCI) where he had been financial vice-president. John spent many summers attending military camp, graduated from high school at 14, and was expected to attend West Point when he turned 17. During these three years, he attended courses at the University of Notre Dame until the 1918 influenza epidemic closed classes and he returned to Birmingham, working as an apprentice chemist at TCI. He then entered the Virginia Military Institute, still with the intention of attending West Point. At the beginning of his second year, Beecher refused to testify in a hazing case in which he had been the victim and consequently was asked to leave VMI. Even after being reinstated he refused to return to VMI, instead staying in Birmingham.

After leaving VMI, Beecher worked in the open-hearth furnaces at the Ensley Steel Works of TCI, despite his father's offer to place him in an office job. In this job he saw for himself the disparities between white- and blue-collar workers and how those working long hours in the furnaces treated each other. After these experiences Beecher became active in the labor movement and what he saw firsthand is reflected in many of his poems and especially in his book *Report to the Stockholders*.

In 1921, Beecher entered Cornell University as an engineering student. Although he was typically studious, his work suffered in the social atmosphere and related new activities. These new experiences led to his novel *Big Bender*, written after he left the university to work yet again in the steel furnaces back home. His mother, a graduate of Northwestern University and one-time faculty member there as well as a popular dramatic reader on the traveling lecture circuits, encouraged him to study liberal arts. He next attended the University of Alabama where he studied writing and earned his bachelor's degree in 1924. He met his first spouse, Virginia St. Clair Donovan while in school at Alabama. In 1925, he attended the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College and published his first poem, *Big Boy*.

Although pressured to enroll at Harvard, he returned again to the steel mills. It was only while recovering from a work injury in December of 1925 that Beecher was finally persuaded by his mother to attend Harvard Graduate School. While still at Harvard in 1926, he married Virginia, with whom he would have four children: David born 1929, Leonard Thurlow born 1931, Joan Beecher Malukoff, born 1933 and Michael born 1940. For the first few years of their marriage, they split their time studying in the States and traveling and studying in Europe, notably at the Sorbonne in 1928. Beecher returned to the Birmingham steel mills at the end of 1928, this time as a statistician.

In the fall of 1929, Beecher joined Dr. Alexander Meiklejohn's Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin. While teaching English there, he also received his M.A. degree in 1930. He continued to write poetry and worked on his soon to-be-published *Report to the Stockholders* (1933). He left Wisconsin for graduate school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where he wished to study sociology. His mentor at the time, Howard W. Odum, recommended him for work with a New Deal relief program known as the North Carolina Emergency Relief Administration in Wilmington (1934-1935). After this relief program, he continued to work with other programs including the Mississippi Emergency Relief Administration, the U.S. Resettlement Administration (1935), and the Birmingham Suburban Homesteads, the Resettlement Administration (1936) later known as the Farm Security Administration, and the U. S. Department of Agriculture. He carried out the first ever study of migrant farm labor in Florida, and this study led to his appointment as state supervisor of the Florida Migratory Labor Program of the Farm Security Administration (1939). This led to time spent surveying migrant workers in Texas, Arizona, and California as well as to his testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee on Civil Liberties and to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Interstate Migration (1940). From late 1940 through 1941, Beecher worked as associate editor and editorial writer at *The Birmingham Age-Herald and News*, after which he returned to a government position with the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice (FEPC). Disillusioned, he left the agency and began to write for the *New York Post* where he voiced his thoughts on the FEPC and later on the war. During this time, he wrote poems and wrote about the failure of those administering New Deal policies in a never published novel entitled *By Bread Alone*, as well as publishing two long poems *Here I Stand* in 1940 and *And I Will Be Heard* in 1941.

Beecher joined the war effort in May 1943 aboard the U.S. Merchant Marine's racially integrated Liberty Ship S.S. *Booker T. Washington*. He sailed for two years and wrote a book about the experience titled *All Brave Soldiers*. In May of 1945, he was director of a displaced persons camp in Stuttgart, Germany as part of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). Also in 1945, he produced discussion guides for the National Institute of Social Relations in Washington. In 1946, Beecher divorced Virginia and married Lydia Robertson, with whom he had a son, Thomas Edward, in 1948. During this time Beecher also spent time in Minnesota to study the Farm Labor Movement there. He spent two years on this project and the resulting book, *Tomorrow Is a Day* was eventually published in 1980.

In September 1948, Beecher began lecturing as assistant professor at San Francisco State College where he taught sociology and creative writing in a tenure track position but in October 1950 he refused to sign the newly created Levering Oath. Although for two years he had signed an oath of allegiance for his teaching position, he saw this new oath as unconstitutional and would not sign it. This decision cost him his job, and for years he protested his dismissal. After the oath was invalidated by the California Supreme Court in 1967, he battled in the courts for reinstatement of his position.

After teaching, Beecher took up ranching in California, debated becoming a monk, and eventually met his fourth spouse, Barbara, in 1955. He had divorced Lydia, his second spouse, in 1951 and in the same year married his former student Joan Stuck, whom he divorced in 1953. These were difficult years for Beecher during which he was blacklisted from both teaching and publishing following the Levering Oath refusal. He met Barbara in Oakland where she was working as a graphic artist. They moved out to his ranch where they opened Morning Star Press, their first private press. Here they printed works of social protest and dissent, including their own works. In 1956, they published and printed *Land of the Free* and began an edited poetry journal known as *Morning Star Quartos*. They moved their press to Jerome, Arizona, in 1958, changing its name to Rampart Press. While in Arizona, he also began to teach at Arizona State University. A poem he had written in 1940 about the sharecroppers' revolt in Alabama entitled *In Egypt Land* was finally published in 1960 and the Beechers won several book awards at Huntington Library's Western Book competition.

In 1962, Beecher published *Report to the Stockholders* and began to travel more frequently for poetry readings. In 1963, he became poet-in-residence at Santa Clara University and the following year began to write for the *San Francisco Chronicle* as their correspondent for the South, as well as writing for *The New Republic* and *The Nation*. Barbara and John lived in the French Quarter in New Orleans where he reported on the civil rights movement during 1964 and 1965. He also traveled to cover the Selma to Montgomery marches. For the 1966-1967 school year, he was poet-in-residence at Miles College, a historically black liberal arts college in Alabama. While there, he published another of his poetry collections, *To Live and Die in Dixie*. He spent the next ten years continuing his reinstatement efforts at San Francisco State College, as poet-in-residence at North Shore Community College in Newburyport, Massachusetts (1967-1971), and as a visiting scholar at Duke University (1973-1975). In 1974, *Collected Poems: 1924-1974* was published by MacMillan, and Beecher worked to finish his auto-biography for publishing. He returned to teaching at San Francisco State University from 1977 to 1980, when he retired due to poor health. He died on May 11 of that year.

Barbara Marie Scholz was born in San Francisco on March 3, 1925 to Carl Paul and Elizabeth Eda (Unsinn) Scholz. She attended high school at the Immaculate Conception Academy where she made illustrations for the school newspaper, graduating in 1943. She then attended San Francisco Junior College where she took advanced art courses. In 1947, she also studied at the Rudolph Schaeffer School of Design. While living in Oakland, she studied oil painting with Jonathan Batchelor, and it was while living here that she met Beecher. Within one month of meeting they were married on August 16, 1955. Together, she and Beecher won Huntington Library's Western Books Awards, and her block printing was praised in Roderick Cave's work *The Private Press*. She is also included in *The American Book Collector*, and Lois Rather's *Women as Printers*. Throughout her life she continued to sell paintings as well as exhibit prints and oils at the Verde Gallery in Arizona, Arizona State University, UCLA, the Walker Art Gallery in Minneapolis, Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey, and at graphics exhibitions in England and Germany. After her spouse's death, Barbara returned to Burnsville, North Carolina, where they had once lived together and continued to paint until her death on December 22, 2016.

Sources:

Smith, Angela. *John Beecher: An Activist Poet Chronicles an American Century*. Middle Tennessee State University, May 2011.

"John Beecher Biography." *Modern American Poetry*, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University, 6 April 2015,
<https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/content/john-beecher-biography>

Scope and Contents

The papers of American activist and poet John Beecher and his artist spouse Barbara (Scholz) Beecher consist of published and unpublished poetry, novels, articles, and other literary works by John Beecher, many related to the New Deal and the American Civil Rights Movement. Also present are teaching materials and records, including items related to the Levering Act, as well as correspondence, research materials, clippings, audio and video tapes, books, photographs, and family papers. In addition, the papers include business materials related to John and Barbara Beecher's Morning Star Press later named Rampart Press including Barbara's artwork and the poetry broadsides and books they produced. The papers are arranged in six series: I. Literary and Printing Press Activities, 1920-1988, undated; II. Correspondence, 1856-2013, undated; III. Research Files and Professional Materials, 1906-2011, undated; IV. Photographs, Postcards, and Photograph Albums 1850-1986, undated; V. Personal and Family Materials, 1870-2009, undated; and VI. Works by Others, 1830-1997, undated.

The arrangement of the materials closely reflects the Beecher's own organization of their papers. When files were labeled in a meaningful way, that wording was retained for the container list. In some cases, the folder titles are in quotations and this denotes instances where the Beecher word choice was retained verbatim. Throughout the materials there are notes made by both John and Barbara and sometimes a story about the materials.

Series I. Literary and Printing Press Activities is organized into five subseries: A. Non-fiction, 1920-1983, undated; B. Fiction, 1924-1974, undated; C. Poetry, 1924-1980, undated; D. Published Works, 1940-1980; and E. Barbara's Artwork and Designs, 1956-1961, undated.

The works by John in Subseries A. Non-fiction include variations of his autobiography, articles, essays, speeches, reports, and his book manuscript. Subseries B. Fiction includes novels and short stories. Subseries C. Poetry includes poems and poetry collections. Subseries D. Published Works includes articles by John. Subseries E. Barbara's Artwork and Designs contains sketches, designs as well as the printing blocks she created for use at their private press. Subseries F. Printing Press Materials demonstrates the process of the work that Barbara and John carried out together at their private press and includes dummies, paste-ups and press specimens.

Series II. Correspondence is organized into four subseries: A. Beecher Family, 1856-2013, undated; B. Alphabetical, 1921-2013, undated; C. Business, 1956-1988, undated; and D. Scholz Family, 1900-2012.

Early correspondence is primarily between members of the Beecher family. From the mid-1950s to the early 70s it is mostly literary and business related, including letters related to his teaching and his social activism. The Beecher's original order is retained throughout. They arranged the majority into folders by date in descending order, but in some instances, material clearly was added to the back of the folder instead of the front, and folders from the late 1940s and early 1950s were organized with less structure. Often carbon copies of the letters to correspondents are alongside the corresponding recipient letters. Very often the Beechers included articles and other materials about the recipient in the correspondence files, but occasionally they made a separate file for material about a recipient. Correspondence is also located in a majority of the research and records files.

Notable correspondents include other poets, authors, and journalists, such as: Olga Cabral, Fred Chappell, Maxwell Geismar, John Howard Griffin, Al Krebs, James Boyer May, Howard McCord, Carey McWilliams, Penelope Moffet, Truman J. Nelson, Guy Owen, Felix Pollak, Cornelia Sussman, Studs Terkel, Louis Untermeyer. Civil rights, social, and political activists include Clyde Appleton, Herbert Aptheker, Septima Poinsette Clark, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Myles Horton, Morris Milgram, Malvina Reynolds and Pete Seeger. Advocates and attorneys including Clifford Durr and Clark Foreman, printmakers, printers, and publishers including Robert Bonazzi, William Everson, Frank Rowe, Alan Swallow and photographer Dorothy Norman, as well as Alexander Meiklejohn of the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin are also present.

Subseries A. Beecher Family. John and his parents, Leonard T. and Isabel Garghill Beecher, were frequent correspondents and the early folders of Beecher family correspondence are almost exclusively between the three. They would often use several languages throughout their letters, including French and Latin. Subseries B. Alphabetical is predominantly between friends and acquaintances, although there is overlap with business correspondence since the Beechers had printing and publishing business with many of their friends. C. Business mainly contains John Beecher's writing and personal publishing. Subseries D. Scholz Family is Barbara's family correspondence.

Series III. Social Activism, Professional Materials and Research is organized into eight subseries: A. Levering Act, 1949-1988, undated; B. Civil Rights and Southern Research Activities and Clippings, 1934-2002, undated; C. Teaching, Education and Employment Materials, 1941-2007, undated; D. Publicity, 1924-2009, undated; E. Poetry Readings and Tour Materials, 1928-2003, undated; F. Printing Press Business Records, 1951-2004, undated; G. Microfilming Material, 1941-2004, undated; and H. Research Files, 1932-2011, undated.

Subseries A. Levering Act contains materials about the Levering Oath John Beecher refused to sign in California while working at San Francisco State College. San Francisco State University (formerly SFSC) employment records, correspondence with others who refused the oath, and legal records for the proceedings brought about by Beecher and others fired for not signing the oath are also included. Subseries B. Civil

Rights and Southern Research Activities and Clippings contains many of the articles Beecher wrote while researching the South for the San Francisco Chronicle, as well as events that he attended in his capacity as a journalist. There are also clippings and other materials collected by the Beechers during this time.

Subseries C. Teaching, Education, and Employment Materials contains teaching materials from many of John Beecher's college and university instructor positions, employment records, including records from his service in the U.S. Merchant Marine, and the schoolwork John Beecher kept from his own education. Subseries D. Publicity contains clippings, book promotions, and reviews about John Beecher's literary work, as well as clippings pertaining to John and Barbara's social activism and their private press work. Subseries E. Poetry Readings and Tour Materials covers the years of poetry reading and lecture tours John Beecher took part in, as well as other guest appearances. Correspondence, posters, and travel records are included. Subseries F. Printing Press Business Records contains records from John and Barbara's Morning Star and Rampart Press including brochures, press specimens, book orders, and catalogs. Subseries G. Microfilming Material contains brochures, catalogs, guides, and royalty records for the microfilmed John Beecher papers. Subseries H. Subject Files contains the file materials of interest the Beechers collected, as well as research they conducted.

Series IV. Photographs, Postcards, and Photograph Albums is organized into five subseries: A. Photographs, 1892-1986, undated; B. Photograph Postcards, 1970, undated; C. Scrapbooks, Albums, and Oversize Photographs, 1850-1979, undated; and D. Negatives 1955-1981.

Subseries A. Photographs contains early photographs of Beecher relatives and John's immediate family. Later photographs include vacation, family, and professional photographs. The later family and event photographs were taken mostly by Barbara. Subseries B. Photograph Postcards contains postcards purchased during different European vacations and travels across the U.S. and Canada, as well as photographs purchased by John and his parents during their own early European vacations. Subseries C. Scrapbooks, Albums, and Oversize Photographs contains scrapbooks and albums created by many of the Beecher relatives. The oversize photographs contain professional photographs of John as well as family photographs. Subseries D. Negatives are from many of the photographs taken by John and Barbara of their friends, family, vacation, and social activism activities.

Series V. Personal and Family Materials is organized into three subseries: A. Genealogy and Family Records, 1904-2009, undated; B. Personal Materials, 1870-2009, undated; and C. Awards and Tributes, 1907-1983.

Subseries A. Genealogy and Family Records contains records from both the Beecher family and Barbara's Scholz, Ruegg, and Unsinn families. Subseries B. Personal and Family Materials contains medical, retirement, and financial records as well as items removed from the Beecher book collection. Also present are lists of music created by Leonard T. for Isabel Garghill Beecher. Subseries C. Awards and Tributes include awards and tributes presented to John Beecher.

Series VI. Works by Others is organized into three subseries: A. Works by Beecher Relatives, 1850-1975, undated; B. Works by Others, 1929-1997, undated; and C. Posters and Maps, 1830-1987, undated.

Subseries A. Works by Beecher Relatives contains works created by John's relatives, including sermons written by Charles Beecher and Frederick W. Beecher. There are several items in Isabel Garghill Beecher's hand that give a glimpse into her professional life as a dramatic reader. Subseries B. Works by Others contains works written about John Beecher as well as writings and artwork that he and Barbara collected over the years. Subseries C. Posters and Maps contains oversize maps and posters collected by the Beechers.

Related Material

Additional Beecher materials at the Harry Ransom Center are located in the John and Barbara Beecher Art Collection, the John and Barbara Beecher Literary File Photography Collection, the John Howard Griffin Collection, the Robinson Jeffers Collection, and the Judson Crews Papers.

Other collections of John Beecher materials are located at Auburn University, Duke University, Northern Illinois University, The University of Arizona, The University of California, Santa Barbara, and Yale University

Separated Material

The following materials were transferred for specialized housing or description:

Books owned by John Beecher were transferred to the Ransom Center's Library.

Personal effects were transferred to the Center's Costume and Personal Effects Collection.

Unpublished, non-commercial video recordings were transferred to the Center's Moving Image Collection.

Unpublished, non-commercial audio recordings were transferred to the Center's Sound Recordings Collection. There are over 300 recordings in the Beecher collection, but of particular interest are field recordings he made in Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana during the civil rights era. He interviewed victims of racial crimes and civil rights workers, and recorded community meetings, including a press conference with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. after the 1966 Alabama Democratic Primary.

Index Terms

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