



Carl Withers Papers (SP0081)

Collection Number: SP0081

Collection Title: Carl Withers Papers

Dates: 1929-1972, bulk 1939-1942

Creator: Withers, Carl Loraine, 1900-1970

Abstract: The Carl Withers Papers are field notes, drafts, and correspondence pertaining to Carl Withers' book, *Plainville, U.S.A.*, a social survey of the town of Wheatland, Hickory County, Missouri, and materials for an unpublished follow-up book on *Plainville* folklore and history.

Collection Size: 2.1 cubic feet
(69 folders, 49 photographs)

Language: Collection materials are in English.

Repository: The State Historical Society of Missouri

Restrictions on Access: Collection is open for research. This collection is available at [The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Springfield](#). If you would like more information, please contact us at springfield@shsmo.org. Collections may be viewed at any research center.

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Preferred Citation: [Specific item; box number; folder number] *Carl Withers Papers* (SP0081); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Springfield [after first mention may be abbreviated to SHSMO-Springfield].

Donor Information: The papers were donated to the State Historical Society of Missouri by Lisa Jablow on January 25, 2023 (Accession No. CA6672).

Related Materials: Additional materials related to the Carl Withers Papers can be found in the following collections:

Adolf E. and Rebecca Schroeder Folk Song and Folklore Collection (C3826)

Processed by: Processed by Niki Cox, May 4, 2023.

Biographical Note:

Carl Loraine Withers was born March 20, 1900, near Sheldon, Cedar County, Missouri, to Horace Smith Withers and Sarah Virginia (Adams) Withers. Withers was the youngest of five children and was raised in a very rural area of the state, which later inspired the *Plainville, U.S.A.* book and project. Despite his modest background in childhood education and socioeconomic challenges, Withers attended Harvard University, where he graduated magna cum laude with honors in English, with ambitions of being a writer. He taught as an instructor in English at Northwestern University and the College of William and Mary, and he became head of English at Deerfield Academy in Deerfield, Massachusetts.

After a period of two years of study and travel in Europe from 1925-1927, where he began a graduate program at the University of Copenhagen as a Fellow of the American-Scandinavian Foundation, he returned to teaching at Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute in New York City. After reading an anthropology textbook by A. L. Kroeber and works by Charles Wagley, he pursued a graduate degree in the field at Columbia University, all while teaching English at Brooklyn College.

His first anthropological field work, in the summer of 1938, focused on highland indigenous peoples of Guatemala. His next project, which prompted him to take a leave from teaching for the field work from 1939-1941, was the *Plainville, U.S.A.* project in Wheatland, Hickory County, Missouri, and the book itself was published in 1945 under the pseudonym "James West" to protect the subjects' anonymity. It was one of the earliest anthropological studies of contemporary American communities, but far from the last, as by the time of Art Gallaher's 1961 follow-up book, *Plainville, Fifteen Years Later*, Withers writes in the book's foreword that others had followed his lead and done "many excellent studies of contemporary communities."

In 1947, after the *Plainville* project was published, Withers took on a role as Grolier Society's New York office editor-in-chief, where he helped publish a ten-volume young adult reference work *Lands and Peoples*. The same year, Withers submitted a successful proposal to conduct field studies in Cuba, which he undertook in the summer of 1948, staying in and studying in Mayajigua, Los Villas on the north central coast of Cuba, and Trinidad, a city in central Cuba.

After his initial Cuban field study, Withers accepted the position of Research Associate at Yale University's Department of Student Health, where he worked with Columbia University's Ralph Linton, his former graduate advisor. His work there on the psychological stress experienced by undergraduates was included in the co-authored work *Psychological Frontiers of Society* with Abram Kardiner, Ralph Linton, and Cora Du Bois.

Between 1949 and 1950, Withers returned to Cuba and expanded his field studies to other regions, though he never completed preparing work for publication even with a three-year grant, as other roles and projects continued to take up his focus. In 1952, Withers secured a grant from the American International Association that allowed him to travel to Venezuela, where he introduced and taught vocational skills in several rural schools. The next year, he was visiting professor at the University of Brazil and conducted a field study of coastal fishing village Arraial do Cabo, which was used in field work training he conducted for the employees of the National Museum of Brazil.

In 1959, he began his role as Social Science Research Analyst at the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare and, the next year, with grants, launched a pilot study on American teen culture in St. Louis, Missouri. This position provided Withers with the opportunity to serve as visiting professor at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri during the study.

Carl transitioned out of government service in 1961 to focus on writing and researching folklore. As he transitioned out of teaching and field studies, he applied this interest in children's literature and folklore by publishing several children's books, the most well-known of which was published in 1948, *Rocket in My Pocket*, and was still considered a best-seller at the time of his death. He also continued to work on compiling *Plainville* folklore in hope of publishing what was meant to be, according to Joseph Jablow, his longtime friend and colleague, his "capstone" work, but he never was able to complete the project to his satisfaction. Carl Withers died of a stroke at his home in Greenwich Village on January 5, 1970.

Arrangement:

The collection has been arranged into the following six series:

Correspondence
Field Notes
Research and Source Materials
Hickory County
Transcripts and Typescripts
Personal Papers

Scope and Content Note:

Correspondence

This series contains letters pertaining to the *Plainville, U.S.A.* social survey book and project by Carl Withers. It has been placed first in the collection as it provides helpful context for many of his field notes. In his correspondence, he describes his methods and how they evolved from what he had been taught to do as an anthropology student in order to better suit the practical challenges involved in collecting information about Wheatland, Missouri residents. The letters include the ideas and notes that did not make the final draft, such as psychoanalyzing dreams and memories.

Many letters pertaining to methods are to and from colleagues in the field, like James "Jim" and Marie Evans, Joseph and Alta Jablow, Ralph Linton, James Wright, Cora DuBois, and Art Gallaher, while the letters in Folders 3 and 4 contain a significant amount of correspondence with the Wheatland residents involved in the *Plainville* study, much of which is follow-up communication after the end of the field study and friendly correspondence. This series is arranged in chronological order.

Field Notes

This series consists of materials Withers compiled and created during the process of doing his field research in Wheatland, Missouri. The folders contain a mix of notes, drafts, interviews, observations, and collected resource materials. While the core of the series seems to have

originated in the 1939 to 1940 research phase, Withers was rearranging, updating, and drafting from his notes for an upcoming folklore and history book about *Plainville*, a project briefly outlined in a grant application in the Personal Papers series and described in Jablow's memorial article in the same series. Dating the material in this series is complicated, as many of the original notes are from the original field study, while notes and drafts were compiled and reworked for the remainder of his life. This series is arranged by subject. The materials within the folders have been kept in their original order.

Research and Source Materials

This series contains content primarily created by other people both inside and outside of Wheatland that provided information Carl Withers used both directly and indirectly in *Plainville, U.S.A.* The content consists of newspaper articles, correspondence, notes on family histories, local legal and agricultural booklets, and content collected from students at Wheatland High School. The Wheatland High School content consists of English composition assignments donated to Withers in 1940 and selected excerpts copied from past students' autograph books that span from 1929 to 1936, the latter of which preserves the common and notable missives students left for one another during the period. The series has been arranged by subject. The materials within the folders have been left in their original order.

Hickory County

This series contains two completed essays collected by Carl Withers from other writers and compilers, as well as one published essay written by Withers himself, pertaining to Hickory County history and folklore after his publication of *Plainville, U.S.A.* The article on riddles, based off of his folkloric research in Wheatland, Withers wrote for *Good Housekeeping* in 1946 under his *Plainville, U.S.A.* pseudonym, James West. Each essay includes any related notes written by Withers. This series is arranged in chronological order.

Transcripts and Typescripts

This series contains typed and, in several cases, bound copies of drafts, interviews, and notes for the *Plainville, U.S.A.* project, as well as a bound copy of a seminar Withers taught. These provided Withers with a more legible or organized set of polished notes he could use for drafting and reading, as indicated by the notes about page and word counts, suggestions for revisions, and interpretation guides written in the bound copies. This series is arranged by subject. The materials within the folders have been left in their original order.

Personal Papers

This series contains notes, correspondence, drafts, and proposals for post-*Plainville* projects and interests, as well as employment information about his position as Social Science Research Analyst at the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and this also includes his proposals for a study on St. Louis, Missouri, teen culture. In addition to a working draft for a folklore chapter on feuds, folder 64 contains forty-one photos of people and places in Wheatland and Hickory County, Missouri, sent to him in correspondence by people who had read the book or had been involved in the original project, as the senders expressed a sentiment that Withers might be interested to see how the town had changed since the book's release. Of note in the series are the project and grant proposals for the folklore and history *Plainville* book that Withers worked on throughout his final years and that has largely influenced

how he organized and categorized the folders in the overall collection. This collection is arranged by subject. The materials in the folders have been kept in their original order.

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Box 001 f. 1	Research correspondence colleagues and <i>Plainville</i> research plan, circa 1938-1940
f. 2	Lee Ruth Brunk letters, circa 1938-1940
f. 3	"Important Letters," 1939-1955
f. 4	Wheatland letters, circa 1938-1942
f. 5	Art Gallaher, <i>Plainville Fifteen Years Later</i> correspondence, 1954-1955
f. 6	Art Gallaher correspondence, 1963
f. 7	Frank Snowden Hopkins, Joseph Jablow, and Alta Jablow correspondence, 1965-1972
f. 8-35	Field Notes
f. 8	Introduction, introspective narration about <i>Plainville</i> experience, no date
f. 9	"Index: Notebook 1 - 1YA," 1939
f. 10	"Miscellany or Intro" drafts and notes, circa 1939
f. 11	Fragments and new writing, "Intro and Narrative," no date
f. 12	Reflections and early drafts "for Intro and Interlude," circa 1939-1940
f. 13	Narrative introduction drafts and notes, no date
f. 14	Narration notes and drafts, 1939-1940
f. 15	"Riddles and Jokes," local compositions, circa 1939-1940
f. 16	"Obscene stories," no date
f. 17	"Folkloric Amusements," 1939-1940
f. 18	"Practical Jokes," no date; letter to Dr. Myerson regarding rural "folkloristic scapegoats," 1948
f. 19	Medicine, sign-lore, beliefs, and superstitions, no date
f. 20	"Magic" drafts and notes, no date
f. 21	"Magical Thinking," no date
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f. 24	"Tall Tales," notes, interviews, and chapter drafts, no date
f. 25	"Famous Dead and Notable Residents," no date
f. 26	Ella Bennett; miscellaneous notes; Party Line transcript, no date
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f. 28	Handwritten, loose-leaf journal, circa 1939-1940
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f. 32	Loose half-sheet notes, no date
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f. 34	Wheatland names and titles; reflections on writing books for children, no date
f. 35	Book publication description; interview notes, no date
f. 36-40	Research and Source Materials

- f. 36 Autograph book excerpts, 1929-1936, no date
- f. 37 Hickory County Circuit Court bar docket, 1939; agriculture record book, 1940; postcard; notes, 1939-1968, no date
- f. 38 Farm and agriculture records; Dent Family History; notes; correspondence, circa 1937-1940
- f. 39 May Kennedy McCord articles, 1939-1940
- f. 40 Wheatland High School English poems and compositions, circa 1940
- f. 41-42 Hickory County
 - f. 41 "Do You Like Riddles? Then Riddle Me This," *Good Housekeeping*, by "James West," 1946
 - f. 42 *History of Hermitage*, 1947
 - f. 43 *History and Tragedies of Hickory County*, 1957; notes, no date
- f. 44-61 Transcripts and Typescripts
- Box 002
 - f. 44 Carl Withers seminar, 1940-1941
 - f. 45 Lura Box interviews, 1940
 - f. 46 Lura Box interviews, memories, and dreams, 1940
 - f. 47 Lura Box interviews, loose-leaf selected portions, 1940
 - f. 48 Earl Box interviews, 1940
 - f. 49 Earl Box interviews, July to September 1940
 - f. 50 John W. Herbert and John Crates interviews, no date
 - f. 51 John W. Herbert interviews I-V, no date
 - f. 52 John Crates interviews, no date
 - f. 53 D. Foster interviews I-II, circa 1940
 - f. 54 "I Remember," Dale Wright interviews and stories, December 1939-July 1940
 - f. 55 Typewritten chapter drafts, no date
 - f. 56 Chapter and topic drafts, no date
 - f. 57 First draft of *Plainville, U.S.A.*, no date
 - f. 58 Books S1, S2, S3, and SS1, containing notes and interview content, 1939
 - f. 59 Notebooks 1 to 4, circa 1939
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 - f. 66 Newspaper clippings and folklore publications, 1944-1969
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Appendix: Description of images were added by Springfield Research Center staff from details on the photographs and in the folders.

Folder	Image Description	Date
4	Unidentified man with Carl Withers, accompanying a letter to Webster Murphy dated November 4, 1940	circa 1940
64	John Williams, Wheatland, Missouri	August 1961
64	Bandstand, Wheatland, Missouri	August 1961
64	John Williams, Wheatland, Missouri	August 1961
64	Wheatland Agriculture Building, Wheatland Missouri	August 1961
64	Wheatland Baptist Church, J.L. Wright, Pastor, Wheatland, Missouri	August 1961
64	Wheatland Post Office, Wheatland, Missouri	August 1961
64	Unidentified building, Wheatland, Missouri	no date
64	Businesses, Wheatland, Missouri	August 1961
64	Businesses, Wheatland, Missouri	August 1961
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64	John Williams's store, Wheatland, Missouri	August 1961
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64	Henry Staten's blacksmith shop, Wheatland, Missouri	August 1961
64	Unidentified woman reading, Wheatland, Missouri	no date
64	Unidentified woman reading, Wheatland, Missouri	no date
64	"Fisher" playing "Fox & Goose," Wheatland, Missouri	no date
64	Wheatland Christian Church, Wheatland, Missouri	August 1961
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64	Wheatland High School, Wheatland, Missouri	August 1961
64	Hermitage Jail, Hermitage, Missouri	August 1961
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64	View of old tree and bandstand from southwest corner of Wheatland square, Wheatland, Missouri	October 31, 1954
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64	Church building under construction on south edge of town, Wheatland, Missouri	October 31, 1954
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64	Postcard of Pomme de Terre Motel & Café, Hermitage, Missouri	No date
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69	Carl Withers	January 1970
69	Carl Withers	January 1970