

Guide to the Aileen Pringle Papers

YCAL MSS 56



by Timothy G. Young

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Collection Overview

REPOSITORY: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
P. O. Box 208330
New Haven, CT 06520-8330
(203) 432-2977
beinecke.library@yale.edu
<http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/>

CALL NUMBER: YCAL MSS 56

CREATOR: Pringle, Aileen, 1895-1989

TITLE: Aileen Pringle papers

DATES: 1887-1970

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: 6 linear feet (11 boxes)

LANGUAGE: English

SUMMARY: The Aileen Pringle Papers consist of letters, photographs and personal papers relating to Pringle's career as a silent film actress and her relationship with H. L. Mencken.

ONLINE FINDING AID: To cite or bookmark this finding aid, please use the following link: <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.pringle>

Requesting Instructions

To request items from this collection for use in the Beinecke Library reading room, please use the request links in the HTML version of this finding aid, available at <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.pringle>.

To order reproductions from this collection, please send an email with the call number, box number(s), and folder number(s) to beinecke.images@yale.edu.

Key to the container abbreviations used in the PDF finding aid:

b. box
f. folder

Administrative Information

Immediate Source of Acquisition

The papers were donated to Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library in 1990 by Joseph Solomon.

Conditions Governing Access

The materials are open for research.

Box 11: Restricted fragile material. Reference surrogates have been substituted in the main files. For further information consult the appropriate curator.

Conditions Governing Use

The Aileen Pringle Papers are the physical property of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Literary rights, including copyright, belong to the authors or their legal heirs and assigns. For further information, consult the appropriate curator.

Preferred Citation

Aileen Pringle Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

AILEEN PRINGLE (1895-1989)

Aileen Pringle was born on July 23, 1895, the daughter of William Bisbee, president of the Pioneer Fruit Company in San Francisco. She was educated in Paris and London. While in London, she married her first husband, Sir Charles Pringle, and made her acting debut on the stage in a production of *The Bracelet*. During World War I, Aileen and her husband, later governor general of the Bahamas, took up residence in Jamaica, then came to live in New York, where Aileen resumed her acting career, starring in a stage production of *The Green Goddess* and the motion picture *Honor Bound* with a then unknown Rudolph Valentino. As Aileen's interest in acting grew and she moved to Hollywood in 1922, precipitating her separation from Charles Pringle. They divorced 20 years later. She began her film career as a player for Metro studios (later MGM), but quickly moved into starring roles in silent features. She was chosen by Elinor Glyn for the lead in the screen adaptation of Glyn's popular novel, *Three Weeks*. Her portrayal of a runaway queen who falls for a lovelorn young man is perhaps her most notable role. She followed this success with leading roles in other Elinor Glyn adaptations as well as other popular romances, in which she was cast as the seductress. Among her best known films are: *Adam & Evil* (1927), *Beau Broadway* (1928), *Body and Soul* (1928) and *The Phantom of Crestwood* (1932). She continued working into the 1930s, but with the advent of sound films, her career faded and she was relegated to westerns and "B" movies. Her final role was a small part in *Since You Went Away* (1944).

She led an active social life in Hollywood. Living on the beach in fashionable Santa Monica, she was a frequent hostess to and guest of Joan Crawford, Eric Von Stroheim, Greta Garbo, and King and Florence Vidor. She developed a close friendship with Marion Davies that endured well beyond Aileen's acting career, though no letters from Davies are extant in this collection.

Aileen Pringle also developed a circle of literary acquaintances and friends, earning the nickname "the darling of the intelligentsia." Carl Van Vechten met Aileen in the mid 1920s and became her self-professed fan. He visited California in 1928 as Aileen's guest and used his experiences to write a series of articles about the motion picture industry. His second to last novel, *Spider Boy*, focusing on the fortunes of Hollywood types, features the character Auburn Six, a thinly disguised Aileen Pringle. Aileen played hostess to Blanche Knopf and was acquainted with novelist/gadabout Sadakichi Hartmann, illustrator Ralph Barton, playwright Rupert Hughes, and novelist Joseph Hergesheimer.

It was through Hergesheimer that Pringle met H. L. Mencken. While visiting California in June of 1926, Mencken attended a party given by Hergesheimer, where he was introduced to the popular actress. The two began a relationship that would last, despite major setbacks, until his death in 1956. The couple soon became an item in Hollywood gossip columns, and although they publicly denied any romantic relationship, they corresponded with the frequency and intensity of sweethearts. Mencken returned to Los Angeles in October 1926, where he spent much of his time with Aileen. In November 1927, Aileen visited New York City, and Mencken made the trip from his native Baltimore to see her. Their relationship remained intense until 1930, when Mencken announced to Aileen that he was to marry Sara Haardt, a writer whom he had known for years. Mencken returned Aileen's letters on his wedding day, August 27, 1930, and asked Aileen to return his. Upon receiving his letters, Mencken reportedly burned them all. The two remained polite during the next few years, then, after Sara's death in 1935, they began to correspond, and even saw each other more frequently.

Aileen married James M. Cain in 1944, but the marriage lasted less than a year. In the early 1950s, she moved to New York City where, along with her friend Saul Mauriber, she was a regular guest of Carl Van Vechten and Fania Marinoff. She became a devoted theatergoer and remained in New York until her death on December 16, 1989.

Scope and Contents

The Aileen Pringle Papers contain letters, manuscript materials, photographs, clippings, printed works, and miscellaneous personal papers which document the life of Aileen Pringle, a popular American silent film star. The papers span the years 1887-1970, with the majority falling within the years 1926-56.

The collection is housed in 10 boxes and consists of four series: *Correspondence*; *Writings*; *Photographs*; and *Personal Papers*. Boxes 8 and 9 contain Oversize material from all four series and Box 10 contains *Restricted Fragile Papers*.

[Series I, Correspondence](#) (Boxes 1-4) covers the years 1918-70. The major part of this series consists of letters to and from H. L. Mencken. After their first meeting on June 19, 1926, Aileen and Mencken began to correspond. By 1928, Aileen was often writing two letters a day to "Henry." Her letters discuss her affection for Mencken, but also include running accounts of her everyday life in Hollywood. She gossips about the fortunes of her costars (e.g. Conrad Nagel), her associates (e.g. Greta Garbo), and her bosses at MGM studios (e.g. Louis B. Mayer). Tales of her social life abound with accounts of buffet dinners at Marion Davies's estate and parties where she crossed paths with Irving Berlin and George Gershwin. Letters from October and November 1926 document Mencken's visit to Los Angeles, while those of November 1927 tell about Aileen's extended visit to New York, where she saw Mencken again; those from February and April 1928 cover Carl Van Vechten's visit to California.

Aileen's relationship with Mencken came to an abrupt end on June 19, 1930, four years to the day after they had originally met, when Mencken announced his engagement to Sara Haardt. Aileen had half-seriously questioned Mencken about his intentions towards Haardt in a letter dated May 23, 1928, but was taken by surprise at this new development in the relationship, as evidenced by a telegram dated June 19, 1930. After Mencken returned her letters in three large packages (see Box 8, folder 134), Aileen apparently returned the most personal of his, but kept many telegrams and short notes from the period 1926-30. She also retained a number of clippings and letters which Mencken had forwarded to her.

Aileen and Mencken corresponded infrequently during the early 1930s, but after Sara Haardt's death in 1935, Aileen offered her condolences and she and Mencken began to correspond and see each other more frequently. In letters of October 1935, Mencken offers Aileen advice about submitting a manuscript to *Mademoiselle*. He discusses his coverage of the presidential nominating conventions in the summers of 1936 and 1940. He expresses his pessimism about the looming escalation of war in December 1940. In July 1944, he offers his best wishes to Aileen on her marriage to James M. Cain. (A few subsequent letters are addressed Cain). Because of a stroke he suffered in 1948, Mencken's correspondence from then until his death was handled mostly by his secretary.

Series I also contains notable groups of correspondence of other literary and art world figures. Ralph Barton, illustrator and caricaturist for *Vanity Fair*, wrote to Aileen from Europe between 1926 and 1930. Carl Van Vechten was a friend of Aileen's from the time he met her in 1926. A few of his earlier letters are included, but the majority date from the 1950's, when Aileen had settled in New York City and was very close to Carl and his wife Fania Marinoff. During this period, Aileen became associated with a number of young artists who wrote to her from various locations. Elwyn Chamberlain, an artist and later a novelist, exchanged letters with Pringle from several locations where he was studying and teaching. Her letters to him between 1954 and 1957 are extent in this series; they were given to the Beinecke Library by Chamberlain in the mid-1950s. In them, Pringle describes a wide range of Manhattan theater and social events. Karl Priebe sent watercolor postcards of birds from Milwaukee. Dick Banks wrote and sent drawings from Palm Beach, Florida. Saul Mauriber, who called Aileen the "Penny Princess," is represented by several letters. The series also contains a pair of telegrams from Joseph Hergesheimer, three items from James M. Cain, and letters from Blanche Knopf, Fania Marinoff, and Joan Crawford.

[Series II, *Writings*](#), is made up of works by others. Included here are a group of poems, *Naked Ghosts*, and a draft of a novel, *The Last Thirty Days of Christ*, by Sadakichi Hartmann, and a playscript, with part-book, of "Goodnight Gwendolen!" by Rupert Hughes.

[Series III, *Photographs*](#) consists principally of photographs made by Carl Van Vechten. The subjects include many black performers from the 1950s (Geoffrey Holder, Mattiwilda Dobbs, Diahann Carroll) and others such as Fania Marinoff and the Baroness Blixen. Several large portraits of H. L. Mencken, done by a photography studio, are in this series (Box 8, Oversize).

[Series IV, *Personal Papers*](#), is made up of various items collected by Aileen Pringle. Included are: a folder of obituaries of Carl Van Vechten, a number of clippings which mention H. L. Mencken, and printed works about Carl Van Vechten.

Box 8 contains [Oversize](#) material from all four series, arranged in series order. Box 9 contains one oversize item from the *Personal Papers* series, namely a letter box, likely given to Aileen by Saul Mauriber.

Collection Contents

Series I: Correspondence, 1918-70

1.75 linear feet (4 boxes)

Series I, *Correspondence*, is arranged alphabetically by author, then chronologically. Unidentified correspondence is placed in a folder at the end of the series.

b. 1, f. 1	Banks, Dick	1955, n.d.
b. 1, f. 2-3	Barton, Ralph	1926-30
b. 1, f. 4	Bisbee, Julia	n.d.
b. 1, f. 5	Cain, James M.	1945, 1970
b. 1, f. 6-11	Chamberlain, Elwyn	1954-56
b. 2, f. 12	Chamberlain, Elwyn	1956-57, n.d.
b. 2, f. 13	Crawford, Joan	1954 Feb 6
b. 2, f. 14	Freeman, Donald	1926
b. 2, f. 15	Haardt, John Anton, Mrs.	1930
b. 2, f. 16	Hartmann, Sadakichi	n.d.
b. 2, f. 17	Hergesheimer, Joseph	1926-27
b. 2, f. 18	Hippeli, Will, Mrs.	[1918? Jan 23]
b. 2, f. 19	Hughes, Rupert	1952 Mar 7
b. 2, f. 20	Kerr Peniston, Kathleen	1954
b. 2, f. 21	Knopf, Blanche	1926-32, n.d.
b. 2, f. 22	Marinoff, Fania	1930-55, n.d.
b. 2, f. 23	Mauriber, Saul	1953-54, n.d.
b. 2, f. 24	Mencken, August	1956 Feb 6
b. 2, f. 25-41	Mencken, H. L.	1926-1927 Jul
b. 3, f. 42-70	Mencken, H. L.	1927 Aug-1928 Oct
b. 4, f. 71-93	Mencken, H. L. See also: Oversize, Box 8, folders 133-34	1928 Nov-1955, n.d.
b. 4, f. 94-98	Priebe, Karl	1952-55
b. 4, f. 99-102	Van Vechten, Carl	1927-53
b. 5, f. 103-113	Van Vechten, Carl	1952-62, n.d.

b. 5, f. 114

Unidentified

1934-55, n.d.

Series II: Writings, 1887-1920*0.25 linear feet (1 box)*

Series II, *Writings*, contains works of associates of Aileen Pringle and are arranged alphabetically by author's name and by title.

HARTMANN, SADAKICHI

b. 6, f. 115-17	<i>The Last Thirty Days of Christ</i> ; 1 typescript, corrected	1920
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[See also: Oversize, Box 8, folder 135](#)

b. 6, f. 118	<i>Naked Ghosts: Prose Poems</i> ; manuscript and typescript, corrected	1887-97
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HUGHES, RUPERT

b. 6, f. 119	<i>Goodnight, Gwendolen!</i> ; typescript, and part book: <i>Gwendolen</i> , corrected	n.d.
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Series III: Photographs, 1920-59*0.25 linear feet (1 box)*

Series III, *Photographs*, contains alphabetically arranged photographic prints of people, places and works of art.

b. 7, f. 120	Belafonte, Harry	n.d.
b. 7, f. 120	Blixen, Baroness	1959
b. 7, f. 120	Carl Van Vechten Gallery, Fisk University	1955
b. 7, f. 120	Carroll, Diahann	n.d.
b. 7, f. 120	Chamberlain, Maguire	n.d.
b. 7, f. 120	Dobbs, Mattiwilda	n.d.
b. 7, f. 120	Gracie Mansion, New York City	n.d.
b. 7, f. 120	Greek Goddess	n.d.
b. 7, f. 121	Hartmann, Sadakichi	1920, n.d.
	Hergesheimer, Joseph See: Oversize, Box 8, folder 136	
b. 7, f. 122	Holder, Geoffrey	1953, n.d.
b. 7, f. 122	Hughes, Pat	n.d.
b. 7, f. 122	Hurst, Fannie	1954
b. 7, f. 122	Lee, Alyne Dumas	n.d.
b. 7, f. 122	Lin, Yutang	n.d.
b. 7, f. 123	McFerrin, Robert	n.d.
b. 7, f. 123	Marinoff, Fania	1955-56
b. 7, f. 123	[Mauriber, Saul?]	n.d.
b. 7, f. 123	Mencken, H. L. See also: Oversize, Box 8, folder 137	n.d.
b. 7, f. 123	New York City	n.d.
b. 7, f. 123	Pennington, Ann	1939
b. 7, f. 123	Van Vechten, Carl See also: Oversize, Box 8, folder 138	1952, n.d.
b. 7, f. 123	Warfield, William	n.d.
b. 7, f. 124	Unidentified See also: Oversize, Box 8, folder 139	n.d.

Series IV: Personal Papers, 1902-65*0.25 linear feet (1 box)*

Series IV, *Personal Papers*, consists of miscellaneous items collected by Aileen Pringle. These are arranged alphabetically by genre.

b. 8, f. 125	Cards	n.d.
b. 8, f. 126	Clippings	1926-54, n.d.
	Letterbox See: Oversize, Box 9, folder 140	
b. 8, f. 127	Obituaries: Carl Van Vechten	1964 Dec
	Printed Works	
b. 8, f. 128	<i>Sadakichi March</i> by Josef Reiter	1902
b. 8, f. 129	<i>The Van Vechten Revolution</i> by George S. Shuyler	[1950?]
b. 8, f. 130	<i>Yale University Library Gazette</i>	1960, 1963
b. 8, f. 131	Programs	1928-55
b. 8, f. 132	Receipts	1952-65, n.d.

Oversize, 1920-40*3.25 linear feet (2 boxes)*

Boxes 8 and 9 contain *Oversize* materials from the four preceding series. These are arranged in series order, then alphabetically.

CORRESPONDENCE		
b. 9, f. 133	Mencken, H. L.	[1928 Feb?]
b. 9, f. 134	Mencken, H. L.	1930 Aug 27
WRITINGS		
b. 9, f. 135	Hartmann, Sadakichi <i>The Last Thirty Days of Christ</i> manuscript cover, autographed	1920
PHOTOGRAPHS		
b. 9, f. 136	Hergesheimer, Joseph	n.d.
b. 9, f. 137	Mencken, H. L.	1926, 1928, n.d.
b. 9, f. 138	Van Vechten, Carl	1940
b. 9, f. 139	Unidentified	n.d.
PERSONAL PAPERS		
b. 10, f. 140	Letterbox	n.d.

Restricted Fragile Papers*0.5 linear feet (1 box)*

Restricted fragile material. Reference surrogates have been substituted in the main files. For further information consult the appropriate curator.

b. 11, f. 141	Box 1, folder 2
b. 11, f. 142	Box 1, folder 5
b. 11, f. 143	Box 1, folder 10
b. 11, f. 144	Box 1, folder 17
b. 11, f. 145	Box 1, folder 21
b. 11, f. 146	Box 1, folder 22
b. 11, f. 147	Box 1, folder 25
b. 11, f. 148	Box 1, folder 26
b. 11, f. 149	Box 1, folder 27
b. 11, f. 150	Box 1, folder 28
b. 11, f. 151	Box 1, folder 29
b. 11, f. 152	Box 1, folder 30
b. 11, f. 153	Box 1, folder 32
b. 11, f. 154	Box 2, folder 36
b. 11, f. 155	Box 2, folder 39
b. 11, f. 156	Box 2, folder 40
b. 11, f. 157	Box 2, folder 42
b. 11, f. 158	Box 2, folder 43
b. 11, f. 159	Box 2, folder 44
b. 11, f. 160	Box 2, folder 45
b. 11, f. 161	Box 2, folder 47
b. 11, f. 162	Box 2, folder 48
b. 11, f. 163	Box 2, folder 49
b. 11, f. 164	Box 2, folder 52
b. 11, f. 165	Box 2, folder 53
b. 11, f. 166	Box 2, folder 56
b. 11, f. 167	Box 2, folder 58

b. 11, f. 168	Box 2, folder 59
b. 11, f. 169	Box 2, folder 61
b. 11, f. 170	Box 3, folder 62
b. 11, f. 171	Box 3, folder 65
b. 11, f. 172	Box 3, folder 66
b. 11, f. 173	Box 3, folder 71
b. 11, f. 174	Box 3, folder 73
b. 11, f. 175	Box 3, folder 74
b. 11, f. 176	Box 3, folder 76
b. 11, f. 177	Box 3, folder 78
b. 11, f. 178	Box 3, folder 80
b. 11, f. 179	Box 3, folder 81
b. 11, f. 180	Box 3, folder 84
b. 11, f. 181	Box 3, folder 92
b. 11, f. 182	Box 4, folder 94
b. 11, f. 183	Box 4, folder 109
b. 11, f. 184	Box 4, folder 114
b. 11, f. 185	Box 5, folder 115
b. 11, f. 186	Box 5, folder 116
b. 11, f. 187	Box 5, folder 117
b. 11, f. 188	Box 7, folder 126
b. 11, f. 189	Box 7, folder 127

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

Subjects

Actors
Actors -- United States -- Biography
American literature -- 20th Century
Motion picture actors and actresses --
California -- Los Angeles -- Anecdotes
Silent films -- United States

Geographic Names

Hollywood (Los Angeles, Calif.) -- Social life and
customs
New York (N.Y.) -- Intellectual life

Occupations

Artists
Authors

Names

Banks, Dick
Barton, Ralph, 1891-1931
Chamberlain, Elwyn M., 1927-2014
Hartmann, Sadakichi, 1867-1944
Hughes, Rupert, 1872-1956
Knopf, Blanche W., 1894-1966
Mauriber, Saul
Mencken, H. L. (Henry Louis), 1880-1956
Priebe, Karl J., 1914-1976
Pringle, Aileen, 1895-1989
Van Vechten, Carl, 1880-1964