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Descriptive Summary

Identifier  ICU.SPCL.COMPTONAH
Title  Compton, Arthur Holly. Papers
Date  1918-1964
Size  3 linear feet (6 boxes)
Repository  Special Collections Research Center
            University of Chicago Library
            1100 East 57th Street
            Chicago, Illinois 60637 U.S.A.

Abstract  After co-winning the 1927 Nobel Prize in Physics, Arthur Holly Compton (1892-1962) served as the Charles H. Swift Distinguished Service Professor of Physics at the University of Chicago for 22 years, from 1923-1945. Compton worked on the Manhattan Project from 1940 to 1945. This collection includes material pertaining to Compton’s time at the University of Chicago, including various correspondence, writing, and personal ephemera. Materials date between 1918-1947, 1964, with the bulk of the material dating between 1930 and 1935.

Information on Use

Access  The collection is open for research.

Citation  When quoting material from this collection, the preferred citation is: Compton, Arthur Holly. Papers, [Box#, Folder#], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

Historical Note  Arthur Holly Compton (1892-1962) was a distinguished professor of physics, Nobel Prize winner, and respected scientific lecturer. Compton continued a familial tradition of academic success established by his father, Elias Compton, who was Dean of Wooster College in Ohio. His eldest brother Karl went on to become the president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and his middle brother Wilson, after a successful business career, became the president of Washington State University. Compton himself graduated from Wooster College in 1913 before receiving his master’s degree and PhD from Princeton in 1914 and 1916, respectively.

Following his marriage to Betty Charity McCloskey in 1916, Compton worked at the University of Minnesota for a year before becoming as a research scientist for the Westinghouse Lamp
Company in East Pittsburgh from 1917-1919. However, it was his fellowship position with the National Research Council that led to the discovery that earned him the Nobel Prize, namely the Compton Effect. At the age of thirty-five, Compton co-won the 1927 Nobel Prize in Physics with C. T. R. Wilson, and was elected to the National Academy of Sciences.

After a brief professorship at Washington University, Compton accepted a position at the University of Chicago in 1923, where he would teach for the next twenty-two years. During his time at the university, Compton continued to be a prominent figure in physics while also maintaining a presence in industry. Appointed consulting physicist for the Lamp Department of the General Electric Company in 1926, Compton sustained an active commitment to the company despite increasing demands on his time.

By the late 1930s, Compton’s research interests shifted to cosmic rays. He spent a significant portion of his time traveling to lecture at universities across the globe on a range of topics scientific and humanitarian. Compton’s deeply religious background, and his willingness to speak about his belief that science and religion could coexist peacefully, made him a highly sought after lecturer.

During World War II, Compton worked to create the atomic bomb as part of the Manhattan Project. Compton recounts the stress of this period in his account Atomic Quest. A highlight of this pressure was when the Secretary of War allegedly asked Compton for his personal position on whether the bomb should be used. Compton’s close relationship with his wife Betty no doubt sustained him during this period; it is said that she was the only scientist’s wife to have the same security clearances as the scientists themselves. Compton received the United States Government Medal of Merit for his contributions in 1946.

After the war, Compton resigned from his position at the University of Chicago, and taught at Washington University in St. Louis for the next fifteen years from 1946-1961.


**Scope Note**

The Arthur Holly Compton Papers are organized into four series: Series I: Personal and Biographical; Series II: Correspondence; Series III: Writings; Series IV: University of Chicago. This collection contains biographical materials, newspaper clippings, business cards and addresses, personal and professional correspondence, recommendations written for students, photographs of experiments, typed and handwritten manuscripts, and official documents.
pertaining to the University of Chicago. Materials date between 1918-1947, and 1964. The papers primarily address Compton’s time as Charles H. Swift Distinguished Service Professor of Physics at the University of Chicago, particularly the years 1930-1935.

Series I, Personal and Biographical, contains biographical materials written during and after Compton’s life, and newspaper clippings concerning the Nobel Prize, his atomic research, and personal life.

Series II, Correspondence, contains letters written during Compton’s time as a professor at the University of Chicago. The series is divided into two subseries:

Subseries I, Personal Correspondence, contains letters written to family and friends addressed to both Mr. and Mrs. Compton, often including invitations and miscellaneous personal

Subseries II, Professional Correspondence, contains letter written to and from academics and professionals from various universities and institutions, students requesting recommendations and fellowships, questions from academics, photos of experiments and equipment, and inter-university memoros. Notably, this series includes letters written by Compton to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Niels Bohr, Nikola Tesla, and Maurice du Broglie, and letters to and from Madame Curie and the League of Nations.

Series III, Writing, contains handwritten and typescript copies of manuscripts written by Compton for publication often with hand written notes. This series also contains official reports on work for General Electric and the War Department.

Series IV: University of Chicago, contains official documents pertaining to the University of Chicago, including papers from the Office of the Registrar, the University Senate Committee, and guidelines for degree and program requirements.

Subject Headings
- Compton, Arthur Holly, 1892-1962
- University of Chicago. Department of Physics
- Physics -- Study and teaching

INVENTORY

Series I: Personal and Biographical

Box 1
Folder 1
  Biographies, 1927-1966
Box 1
Folder 2
  Newspaper Clippings – Work and Life, 1927-1951
Box 1
Folder 3
  Personal Ephemera – Household Affairs, rents, etc., 1934-1935
Box 1
Folder 4
  Personal Ephemera – Bills, Receipts, 1930-1932
Box 1
Folder 5
  Personal Ephemera – Bills, Receipts, Insurance, 1933-1935
Box 1
Folder 6
  Personal Ephemera – Correspondence from Address File, 1931-1935, undated
Box 1
Folder 7
  Personal Ephemera – Business Cards, undated
Box 1
Folder 8
  Personal Ephemera – Addresses, Notes, undated
Box 1
Folder 9
  Honors – Honorary Initiations, 1934-1935
Box 1

Series II: Correspondence

Subseries 1: Personal Correspondence

Box 1
Folder 10
  Mr. and Mrs. Compton [1/2], 1930-1933
Box 1
Folder 11
  Mr. and Mrs. Compton [2/2], 1933-1935
Box 1
Folder 12
  General [1/2], 1933-1934, undated
Box 1
Folder 13
  General [2/2], 1933-1935
Box 2
Folder 1
Professional - Nobel Prize, General, Academics, Professionals [1/3], 1924-1935, undated, circa 1920s-1930s

Box 2
Folder 2
Professional - Recommendations by AHC, General, Academics, Professionals [2/3], 1931-1935, undated, circa 1930s

Box 2
Folder 3
Professional – General, Academics, Professionals [3/3], 1933-1935

Box 2
Folder 4
Woo Orders, 1928-1930

Box 2
Folder 5

Box 2
Folder 6
Ewing College, 1930-1935, undated, circa 1930s

Box 2
Folder 7
Discussions, Inter-University, 1930-1932, undated

Box 2
Folder 8
General – Faculty, Professionals, Academics [1/4], 1930-1932, undated

Box 3
Folder 1
General – Faculty, Professionals, Academics [2/4], 1933-1935

Box 3
Folder 2
General – Faculty, Professionals, Academics [3/4], 1934-1935

Box 3
Folder 3
General – Faculty, Professionals, Academics [4/4], 1935

Box 3
Folder 4
Guggenheim Foundation, 1930-1932

Box 3
Folder 5
Letters about Lab Supplies, 1930-1932

Box 3
Folder 6
Morgenstern Letters, 1930-1931

Box 3
Folder 7
Statements of Fact, Comments on Work, Theories, 1930-1932
Box 4
Folder 1
   The Scientific Book Club, 1930-1932
Box 4
Folder 2
   Questions from Academics, etc. [1/2], 1930-1932
Box 4
Folder 3
   Questions from Academics, etc. [2/2], 1930-1931
Box 4
Folder 4
   Unsolicited Manuscripts [1/2], 1930-1931
Box 4
Folder 5
   Unsolicited Manuscripts [2/2], 1931-1932
Box 4
Folder 6
   American Philosophical Society, 1931-1932
Box 4
Folder 7
   Future / Promised Lectures [1/2], 1931-1932
Box 5
Folder 1
   Future / Promised Lectures [2/2], 1932-1933
Box 5
Folder 2
   University – Recommendations by AHC [1/4], 1931-1934, undated
Box 5
Folder 3
   University – Recommendations by AHC, Inter-University Memos, 1931-1935 [2/4],
   undated
Box 5
Folder 4
   University – Applications to Fellowships / Positions, Inter-University Memos [3/4],
   1933-1935
Box 5
Folder 5
   University – Recommendations by AHC, Applications for Fellowships / Positions, Photos
   of Experiments and Equipment [4/4], 1934-1935
Box 5
Folder 6
   American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) – June Meeting (filed
   opened Jan. 11, 1933) [1/3], 1932-1933
Box 5
Folder 7
American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) – June Meeting [2/3], 1932-1933

Box 6
Folder 1
American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) – June Meeting [3/3], 1933

Box 6
Folder 2
Requests for Lectures, 1932-1934, undated, circa 1930s

Box 6
Folder 3
Wooster College, 1933-1935

Box 6
Folder 4
Secretarial Applications, 1934

Series III: Writing

Box 6
Folder 5
Academic Paper Drafts – Typescript & Handwritten with notes, Publication Correspondence [1/3], 1934-1935, undated, circa 1930s-1940s

Box 6
Folder 6
Academic Paper Drafts – Typescript & Handwritten with notes [2/3], 1930-1947, undated, circa 1930s-1940s

Box 6
Folder 7
Academic Paper Drafts – Typescript & Handwritten with notes [3/3], 1930-1931, undated, circa 1930s

Box 6
Folder 8
Official Reports – Airplane Pilot’s Steering Sight, Airplane Inclinometer and Bomb Sight, General Electric and the S1 Lamp, 1918-1929

Series IV: University of Chicago

Box 6
Folder 9
Office of Registrar, University Senate / Senate Committee, Degree Requirements, 1931-1934, undated