University of Chicago Library

Guide to the Arthur Holly Compton Papers 1918-1964

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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.

Compton died of a cerebral hemorrhage on March 15, 1962 at the age of 69. Source: Samuel K. Allison, Arthur Holly Compton 1892-1962: A Biographical Memoir, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965).

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 memos. 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

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