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Descriptive Summary

Identifier  ICU.SPCL.JBWATKINS
Title        Watkins, John Brownson. Papers
Date         1895-1919
Size         2 linear feet (2 boxes)
Repository   Special Collections Research Center
             University of Chicago Library
             1100 East 57th Street
             Chicago, Illinois 60637 U.S.A.

Abstract     John B. Watkins was an alumnus of the University of Chicago. He drove an
              ambulance for several years in France during WWI. The collection contains
              his letters home during that time, as well as news clippings and a few items of
              personal ephemera.

Information on Use

Access
The collection is open for research.

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

Biographical Note

John Brownson Watkins was born June 20, 1899 in Kankakee, IL. He entered the University of
Chicago in 1916 but left to be a volunteer ambulance driver in France in 1917. When American
troops arrived in Europe, Watkins joined the Army. Between 1917 and 1919, he wrote letters
to his parents in Kankakee, IL, as well as to other family members. Some of the letters were
excerpted for local papers, and were written with this in mind.

Upon returning to the States, Watkins completed his bachelor’s degree in political economy
in 1921. He went on to receive both a Master’s degree (in 1924) and PhD (in 1929) from
the University of Chicago’s School of Commerce and Administration. His thesis dealt with
transportation issues, and his expertise in this area provided cover in future military intelligence
work.
After WWI, Watkins stayed in the reserves. He became active again in 1940, where he carried out various intelligence operations and participated in the de-Nazification of German rocket scientists in Belgium. He was re-activated during the Korean War and became one of the founders of the CIA’s Strategic Intelligence Research unit. Watkins retired from the army in 1959 at the rank of Colonel.

In addition to his military career, Watkins worked for Illinois energy company Commonwealth Edison, conducted research at Northwestern University, and taught at Roosevelt University. He retired from teaching at age 70.

Watkins was married in 1923 to Mildred W. Miller; they had a son, John M. Watkins, and a daughter, Jean Watkins Thornburg. Watkins died on November 18, 1974.

**Scope Note**

The collection is divided into two series. Series I, Papers, consists mainly of correspondence from Watkins to his parents, though there are also letters to other relatives. Of particular interest is a letter describing a victory parade in Paris at the end of the war. There are a few newspaper clippings, one which contains excerpts from Watkins’ letters. There are also a few letters to Watkins’ mother from a French woman who received assistance from the Kankakee Women’s Committee. There are a few pieces of family ephemera at the end of the series. Series II, Oversize, contains a small flag. The bulk of the material dates from 1917 to 1919.

**Related Resources**

The following related resources are located in the Department of Special Collections:

http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/spcl/select.html

Watkins, John Brownson


University of Chicago. World War I Ephemera. Collection, 1917-1922

**Subject Headings**

- Watkins, John Brownson
- University of Chicago
- World War, 1914-1918 -- Correspondence
- World War, 1914-1918 – France

**INVENTORY**

**Series I: Papers**
This series contains correspondence, news clippings, and ephemera.

Box 1
Folder 1
   Correspondence – Letter Home, March, 1915
Box 1
Folder 2
   Correspondence – Letters Home, February-March, 1917
Box 1
Folder 3
   Correspondence – Letters Home, April, and Clipping, 1917
Box 1
Folder 4
   Correspondence – Letters Home, May, 1917
Box 1
Folder 5
   Correspondence – Letters Home, June, 1917
Box 1
Folder 6
   Clippings – Sir Douglas Haig’s Despatch, June 1917
Box 1
Folder 7
   Correspondence – Letters Home, July, 1917
Box 1
Folder 8
   Correspondence – Letters Home, August, 1917
Box 1
Folder 9
   Correspondence – Letters Home, September, 1917
Box 1
Folder 10
   Correspondence – Letters Home, October, 1917
Box 1
Folder 11
   Correspondence – Letters Home, November, 1917
Box 1
Folder 12
   Correspondence – Letters Home, December, 1917
Box 1
Folder 13
   Correspondence – Letters Home, January, 1918
Box 1
Folder 14
   Correspondence – Letters Home, February, 1918
Box 1
Folder 15
Correspondence – Letters Home, March-April, 1918
Box 1
Folder 16
Correspondence – Letters Home, May-June, 1918
Box 1
Folder 17
Correspondence – Letters Home, July, 1918
Box 1
Folder 18
Correspondence – Letters Home, August, 1918
Box 1
Folder 19
Correspondence – Letters Home, September-October, 1918
Box 1
Folder 20
Correspondence – Letters Home, November, 1918
Box 1
Folder 21
Correspondence – Letters Home, December, 1918
Box 1
Folder 22
Correspondence – Letters Home, January-February, 1919
Box 1
Folder 23
Correspondence – Letters Home, March, 1919
Box 1
Folder 24
Correspondence – Letters Home, April-May, 1919
Box 1
Folder 25
Correspondence – Letters Home, June, 1919
Box 1
Folder 26
Correspondence – Letters Home, July, 1919
Box 1
Folder 27
Correspondence – L. Charon to N. Watkins, 1918, undated
Box 1
Folder 28
Ambulance Field Service Newsletter, circa 1916
Box 1
Folder 29
Commencement Program, Postcard, 1895, 1905

Series II: Oversize
This series contains oversize material consisting of a flag that was hung in Watkins' parents' window while he was in France.

**Box 2**
Flag, circa 1917