



BHC-MSS 0228
Guide to the Papers of William Carlson
By Lisa Furchtgott
2022

Descriptive Summary:

Creator: Ruth Carlson Horn

Title: Guide to the Records of the Metropolitan Body Company

Dates: 1919-1971, undated

Quantity: 3 manuscript boxes

Abstract: These papers concern William Carlson, along with his brother Philip the founder of Metropolitan Body Company, a vehicle-producing firm in Bridgeport, in 1919. A small number of materials related to the company accompany a larger collection of Carlson's correspondence, philanthropic efforts, and role as Ringmaster in Bridgeport's 1952 Barnum Festival, as well as tributes following his death in 1970.

Language: English

Repository: Bridgeport History Center

Administrative History:

The Bridgeport-based Metropolitan Body Company was founded in 1919 as a new version of its predecessors, Metropolitan Carriage Company, begun in 1908, and the Metropolitan and Carriage Company, begun in 1912. The firms were established by Philip and William Carlson, brothers who had immigrated from Novomish, a small town near Minsk, then under Russian-imperial rule, to New York in 1905 and 1907, respectively. By 1908, both had moved to Bridgeport. After holding jobs in textile and sewing-machine plants, the Carlsons began a blacksmithing business, reflecting the trade practiced by their Jewish family in Novomish. A door-to-door setup quickly evolved into a stable shop building and selling horse-drawn wagons. By 1919, Metropolitan's carriages had evolved into gas-powered commercial trucks. Its first popular model applied technological patents filed by Philip, which placed engines under the front of the truck, increasing cargo space in the rear.

The Metropolitan Company claimed a sizable body of customers by the 1930s. Bakeries and dairies were major clients, but many others were public, ordering Metro trucks for mail delivery, highway repair, and Army transit. During World War II, the firm landed substantial contracts with the Navy, winning awards for high-quality and efficient production. In 1948, the growingly-profitable company was bought out by International Harvester, a Chicago-based corporation with a division devoted to selling farm and highway trucks. That year Metropolitan moved into larger Bridgeport plant grounds – formerly the site of Saltex, a textile manufacturer –and installed new equipment, including a quarter-mile-long assembly belt. By 1959, its employees numbered almost 1200 and

typically produced about 66 trucks per day, sold to private companies, government services, and abroad.

In October 1968, suffering operations costs, International Harvester sold the plant to Dynamics, a conglomerate aiming to continue manufacturing Metro truck bodies. Although the new "Dyno-Truck" subdivision was awarded contracts with International and the United States Postal Service, their terms could not be met and profits sank. Production was halted in 1972 and the factory shut down in 1973.

Scope and Content Note:

While the collection includes a small number of materials related to the company, it primarily contains materials belonging to William Carlson, who founded the Metropolitan Body Company along with his brother Philip, and memorial documents collected by his daughter, Ruth Carlson Horn, after his death in August 1970 at the age of 84. Carlson immigrated to the US in 1907 and took up factory jobs in Bridgeport. When Metropolitan came into being he served as its financial executive, overseeing a contract granting Harvester International an exclusive, high-volume access to one truck model in 1939 and arranging its \$2-million buyout of Metropolitan in 1948.

After retiring from the company that year, Carlson embraced philanthropy and civic leadership over the 1950s and 1960s. With Metropolitan's profits surging in the late 1940s, he and Philip began the Carlson Foundation, committed to donating money supporting Bridgeport universities, hospitals, youth organizations, and the Chamber of Commerce. He served as Financial Chairman in 1950 and Ringmaster of the city's PT Barnum Festival in 1952, its fifth year, celebrating the city's industrial power alongside its history of spectacle and showmanship. He was also feted by Bridgeport's branch of Circus Saints and Sinners, a national charity organization, in 1958.

Carlson's friendships, were eclectic: for instance, he corresponded with the Virginia governor and later Senator Harry F. Byrd, over his four decades of service an ardent leader of the Jim Crow regime in the South, but also with his friend Bernard Baruch, advisor of Woodrow Wilson, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, and Harry Truman. Many of the collection's communiques – written from 1943 through 1969, with the bulk of them from the late 1960s – are of a political nature, expressing Carlson's feelings about legislation in process. Others seek to secure scholarship donations from other corporations and keep in touch with his social circles.

The collection includes a sizable assortment of photos, many of them taken during Carlson's performance as the Ringmaster of the 1952 Barnum Festival. Some were incorrectly labeled as being taken in 1953.

Arrangement notes:

Series 1 consists of materials related to the company itself: metal nameplates, distribution of stocks in 1919, catalogs, announcement of the purchase of the 19-acre Saltex mill in August of 1947, office stationery, cost calculations, an announcement of the company's closure in 1968 authored by Bridgeport's then-mayor, and a 1948 "Get-Together Dinner" invitation. Series II, containing materials directly connected to Carlson, includes folders of correspondence sent or received by Carlson, primarily over the last two decades of his life. Correspondents include Connecticut political

officials Abraham Ribicoff, John Lodge, Thomas Dodd, and Prescott Bush. Requests that large and lucrative corporations, such as Standard Oil, consider supporting university scholarships or invest in Bridgeport businesses are also included, as are communications with administrators of University of Bridgeport, a major recipient of his gifts. Materials concerning Carlson's participation in the Barnum Festival include a 1952 report he submitted to it Committee Chairmen, evaluating advertisements, events, budget, and cash intake. Ticket applications, photos, and other materials detail the Circus Saints and Sinners luncheon honoring Carlson in 1958; photos and a company announcement document a dinner he organized to honor Herman W. Steinkraus, a former president of the Bridgeport Brass Company, in 1960. "Biography," consisting in part of timelines and memorial correspondence related to Ruth Carlson Horn's efforts to assemble her late father's list of beneficiaries, also includes a transcript of Carlson's own account of his life, recorded in 1968, along with a rough-draft adaptation undergoing editing. Folders in the following sub-series illustrate his donations in more detail.

Series III consists of photos of Carlson's participation in the 1952 Barnum Festival Ringmaster parade as well as his official address, given alongside the city's mayor, Jasper McLevy. Another set shows an undated meeting held by the Carlson Brothers, Inc., a financial holding-company, over lunch.

Series IV contains newspaper clippings and photos related to Carlson's donation funding the Carlson Library at the University of Bridgeport, built in 1955.

Series V holds large items, including an advertisement for an International Harvester delivery truck; a scrapbook of the 1951 Barnum Festival, a year Carlson served on the budget committee; a scrapbook of photos of the 1952 Festival; documents produced by the federal House of Representatives, the Bridgeport Chamber of Commerce, and the sale of the Investors Capital Corporation.

Administrative information: [Labeled by staff]

Provenance:

Preferred Citation:

Records of the Metropolitan Body Company (BHC-MSS 0203), Bridgeport History Center, Bridgeport Public Library.

Names and Subject Tracings

Corporate names

Subject tracings

Series I, Metropolitan Body Company

Box 1

1. Metro Body Co. metal nameplates, undated
2. Motor Vehicle Trading Co., 1919
3. Metropolitan Body Co. materials, 1921 – 1950, undated
4. International Harvester Co., Metro Truck Division, 1940, 1946, undated

Series II, William Carlson

Subseries A, Correspondence

5. Correspondence, 1943 – 1945
6. Correspondence, 1952 – 1956
7. Correspondence, 1962 – 1965
8. Correspondence, 1966
9. Correspondence, 1967
10. Correspondence, 1968 – 1969
11. Correspondence, undated

Subseries B, Civic engagement

12. Barnum Festival, 1958, 1962, 1968, undated
13. Barnum Festival Report, 1952
14. Awards, 1952, 1956
15. Circus Saints and Sinners, 1958
16. Steinkraus dinner, undated

Subseries B, Philanthropy

17. Boys' Club of Bridgeport, 1960
18. Bridgeport Area Chamber of Commerce, 1971
19. Bridgeport Hospital, 1966
20. Carlson Foundation, Inc., undated
21. Investment Capital Corp., undated
22. JCC, 1953-1960
23. Junior Achievement, 1953-1956
24. Milford Hospital, 1955
25. Park City Hospital, 1967
26. University of Bridgeport, 1949-1971

Subseries C, Personal materials

27. Ephemera, 1961, undated
28. Biography, 1968 – 1970
29. Humor and inspirational literature, undated

Series III, Photos

30. Metropolitan Carriage Co., 1908
31. William Carlson, misc., 1949-1962, undated
32. Barnum Festival, 1952, 1958, undated

Box 2

1. Barnum Festival, 1952, undated
2. Ruth Carlson Horn, January 1971
3. Luncheon meeting at Carlson Bros., undated

Series IV, Carlson Library

4. "Carlson Library, University of Bridgeport," 1954, 1955, 1959, undated
5. "Carlson Library, University of Bridgeport," 1950, 1952, 1954, undated
6. "Carlson Library, University of Bridgeport," 1959, 1960, undated
7. "Carlson Library, University of Bridgeport," 1952, 1955-1958, undated
8. "Carlson Library, University of Bridgeport," photos, undated

Series V, Scrapbooks and oversized materials

Box 3

1. Barnum Festival, 1951
2. William Carlson, Ringmaster, 1952
3. International De Luxe Delivery Trucks, 1940
4. Tributes to William Carlson, President of the Investors Capital Corporation, 1966, undated