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Hilla Sheriff Papers

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Hilla Sheriff (1903-1988)
Papers, 1908-1989

Volume: 10 linear feet

Biographical Note

Born in Easley and reared in Orangeburg, where her father was a lumber dealer, Hilla Sheriff received her bachelor's degree from the College of Charleston and her Medical Degree in 1926 from the Medical College of South Carolina. Following graduation she completed an internship and residencies at the Hospital of the Woman's Medical College in Philadelphia, the Children's Hospital of the District of Columbia, and the Willard Parker Contagious Disease Hospital, New York City.

Returning to South Carolina in 1929 to establish a private pediatric practice in Spartanburg, in 1931 she took on additional responsibilities as Medical Director of the American Women's Hospital Unit for Spartanburg and, in 1932, for Greenville counties. In 1933 she became associated with the Spartanburg County Health Department, beginning a lifelong career in public health administration. Dr. Sheriff served as director of the Department until 1940, leaving her work during 1936-1937 to obtain a Master's of Public Health degree from Harvard University on a Rockefeller scholarship. Among her initiatives while with the county were campaigns to combat pellagra and diphtheria, as well as institutes for the training of midwives. Efforts to promote good nutrition and proper maternal and child health care continued throughout her career. She also worked to publicize the problem of child abuse and neglect and initiated family planning services to curb unwanted pregnancies.

In 1940 Dr. Sheriff left Spartanburg for Columbia, where she joined the Division of Maternal and Child Health of the State Board of Health as Assistant Director. She became director of the division in 1941 and held a succession of ever more influential positions with the state until her retirement in 1974. At that time she held the positions of Deputy Commissioner of the State Department of Health and Environmental Control and Chief of the Bureau of Community Health Services.

Scope and Content

During the 1930s the field of public health became an attractive area of service for idealistic and public-spirited medical personnel in the South. Doctors entering this sector were able to exert major beneficial influence upon the health of entire communities, help eradicate previously common diseases, and cut the infant and juvenile death rates. This is illustrated in the life and work of Dr. Hilla Sheriff (1903-1988), documented in this collection of ten linear feet, consisting

of correspondence, 1912-1989; topical files; speeches and writings (including high school and college notes, scholarly articles, and poetry); clippings from newspapers and journals regarding her career interests, and family; daily calendars; records of professional meetings and her travels to attend international conferences; and photographs.

Correspondence from the period 1922-1940 is especially valuable for its relation of problems a female student and doctor encounters in a male-dominated profession, her shared concerns with all medical students and fledgling doctors (such as selecting her area of specialization and deciding where to locate), and her comments on medicine in general in the Southeast. Present in the collection is a draft of a constitution, ca. 1924, for an organization of women medical students of South Carolina, the Asklepiads.

Another important part of the collection consists of the papers of Dr. George Henry Zerbst (1892-1953), an ophthalmologist who served as one of Dr. Sheriff's instructors while she attended the Medical College and whom she married in 1940. Their regular correspondence began in 1926 while she was in Philadelphia on a twelve-month internship which included work in various departments. Her letters describe the cases in which she was most interested, the internship itself, her relations with co-workers, and her ambitions. Zerbst, who like Hilla was ambitious and valued public service, maintained a private practice in Charleston at various times during the 1920s and 1930s, but found it difficult to earn a satisfactory income. For a time, 1924-1925, he worked at the Episcopal Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital in Washington, D.C. He returned to Charleston but by 1928 was convinced that he would have to go elsewhere -- "The cotton depression has knocked business out down here. It never was very much but of late it has been still worse . . . it probably will be the best thing for me to leave in the Spring. Of course I can sit and wait for my competitors to die, but that doesn't suit me at all" (26 November 1926).

Early in 1927 Zerbst took a position with the Southern Pacific Lines examining the eyes of railway workers in Texas and Louisiana. Outfitted with their own train, the examiners were particularly concerned with identifying employees who were colorblind and therefore safety manaces. During 1928-1929 he performed similar work in California, Arizona, Nevada, and Utah. But his heart apparently remained in South Carolina, and by 1930 he had returned to Charleston. In 1935 he again closed his office to work in public health, becoming Director of the Clarendon County Health Department. By 21 April 1939 Hilla wrote -- "Both of us may soon be out of S.C. -- tho I love it, it looks as if we must for a time if we are to be progressive." Among Zerbst's papers are sketch books, 1908-1909, made while attending Clemson; and a scrapbook, ca. 1913, kept while he was serving with the U.S. Bureau of Agriculture in the Philippines.

Other correspondents include Hilla's friends George W. Connor II, a Spartanburg native who worked as a clerk for the Clinchfield Coal Corporation in Dante, Va., and who wrote lengthy and descriptive letters describing his daily life and the operation of mines; and Dr. John Fabian Busch, a college classmate who found, like Sheriff and Zerbst, that during the Depression the steady income of public health was more desirable than the uncertain economics of private practice -- and who by 1936 was serving as Superintendent of the Greenville County Tuberculosis Sanatorium.

Among the photographs in the collection are portraits and snapshots of Dr. Sheriff and her husband taken throughout their lives, as well as pictures showing the work being done in both Spartanburg County, ca. 1933-1940, and the state health department.

The work of Dr. Hilla Sheriff in Spartanburg County during the 1930s, and for South Carolina's health department from 1940 until her retirement, won her the esteem of all who were associated with her -- and such honors as the Ross Award from the American Public Health Association (1969), the Order of the Palmetto (1975), the William Weston Distinguished Service Award for Excellence in Pediatrics (1983), and the Career Achievement Award of American Academy of Pediatrics (1986).

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Asklepiads, The, c1924

Awards and certificates

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Byrnes, James F.

Child Abuse

Children's Hospital of the District of Columbia

Colleagues

College of Charleston

Communicable diseases

Diphtheria

Educational Television Documentary

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Hospital of the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania

King, Wyman

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South Carolina Nurses Foundation

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Research Files for Documentaries (LOCATED AT ANNEX)

Brochures, programs, Mar 1988-May 1991, n.d.

“Carrying Health to the Country” (Documentary - 4 DVDs and 1 videocassette)

“Delivered with Love” (Documentary on 1 DVD)

Maternal and child health, Jan 1974-1988, n.d.

Newspaper articles, 1974-16 Feb 1986

Research files, 18 May 1987-1 Nov 1988, n.d.

Scripts, 22 Jan-15 Feb 1988

Transcriptions, n.d.

Administrative Notes

- **Location:** P+5N1, P0b+4W5, T75
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