

Carl Panzram Papers MS-0007

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Contributing Institution: Special Collections & University Archives

Title: Carl Panzram Papers

Creator: Panzram, Carl

Identifier/Call Number: MS-0007

Physical Description: 0.84 Linear Feet

Date (inclusive): 1928-1980

Date (bulk): 1928-1930

Language of Material: English .

Scope and Contents

The *Carl Panzram Papers* document Panzram's experience in America's prison system as well as his reflections on and assessment of his own violent behavior. The collection includes Panzram's handwritten autobiographical manuscript, photocopies of annotated typescript of the manuscript, correspondence between Lesser and Panzram, reviews and promotional material for *Killer*, and correspondence with several criminologists, psychologists, and writers, including H.L. Mencken and Sheldon Glueck. The collection also contains copies of some of Panzram's prison files, which Lesser obtained through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). These files include Panzram's death certificate, the prison case report for the murder of R.G. Warnke, as well as correspondence between psychologist Karl Menninger and prison warden T.B. White. The collection is arranged chronologically.

Panzram's autobiographical manuscript details his various crimes, as well as the abuses he received in reform school, jail, and prison. He often theatrically describes a crime or event, and then provides the reader with information on how to verify its authenticity. Of particular interest are Panzram's justifications and explanations for his behavior. He blames his treatment in reform school and prison for his violent actions outside of those institutions claiming, "I have done as I was taught to do.... You taught me how to live my life and I have lived as you taught me." Since Panzram wrote his autobiography a few pages at a time and gave it to Lesser incrementally, not all pages are numbered consecutively and the exact original order is unknown. Once Lesser received the pages, his wife typed transcripts of them and organized the work into three parts with several sections. Lesser then went back over the transcript, making various annotations and notes on the pages, often citing if he had verified a particular event or crime described by Panzram. The collection contains photocopies of these transcripts.

Other highlights include correspondence between Lesser and Panzram in which Panzram describes daily prison life, trinkets he made in prison, inventions he had devised, his feelings on prison and his crimes, and more. In one letter, Panzram casually mentions that he killed his boss in the prison laundry. Panzram's final letters allude to his attempted suicide and his contentment at receiving the death penalty. Also included are letters that Panzram wrote to the Society for the Abolishment of Capital Punishment and President Herbert Hoover urging them *not* to ask the government to repeal his sentence because he *was* sane when he committed his crimes.

Please note that while portions of this collection have been digitized (click on the Virtual Folder icons), some materials remain unavailable online due to copyright restrictions.

Thomas Gitchoff and Joel Goodman interviewed Henry Lesser at San Diego State University. Video of this interview (*Killer's Guard: An Interview with Henry Lesser*) is available on [YouTube](#) .

In 2012, the documentary [Carl Panzram: The Spirit of Hatred and Vengeance](#) was released, based on the Carl Panzram Papers in Special Collections.

Conditions Governing Access

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When referencing this collection, Henry Lesser must be cited as the donor. Please see the preferred citation below.

Source of Acquisition

Henry Lesser, Thomas Gitchoff, Joel Goodman

Accruals and Additions

1980-006, 1995-008

Related Publications

Gaddis, Thomas E. and James O. Long. *Killer: a journal of murder*. New York: Macmillian, 1970. HV6248.P26 G32

Gaddis, Thomas E. and James O. Long. *Panzram: a journal of murder*. Los Angeles: Amok, 2002. HV6248.P26 G34 2002

Preferred Citation

Identification of item, folder title, box number, Carl Panzram Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, San Diego State University Library. The collection was donated by Henry Lesser.

Other Descriptive Information

Please note that only photocopies are available for research. Permission must be granted by the Head of Special Collections to view the original documents.

Biographical Note

Carl Panzram was born 28 June 1892 in East Grand Forks, Minnesota. When he was about eight years old his father abandoned the family, leaving Panzram's mother to raise Panzram and his six siblings alone. At age 11, he robbed a neighbor and was sent to the Minnesota State Training School where he was beaten and sexually abused. This experience was the first of many at various reform schools, jails, and prisons.

Panzram left home at age thirteen or fourteen, traveling around the Northwest. He was arrested for larceny and sent to the Montana State Reform School in 1905. Upon his release, he joined the military, but was imprisoned at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas for violation of the 62 nd Article of War. After serving a three-year sentence, Panzram found work as a railroad guard and strikebreaker. He then went to Mexico to join the Foreign Legion of the Constitutional Army of Northern Mexico, and a single month before returning to the United States where he resumed his life of crime and did prison stints in Oregon and Montana. He eventually went east where he obtained a seaman's identification card and worked on the *James S. Whitney* of the Grace Line, which sailed to Panama. From there he travelled to Peru to work in the copper mines, then to Chile and back to Panama. In Panama, Panzram became the labor foreman for the Fortification Division of the US government and later worked for the Sinclair Oil Company. In 1919, he sailed for Scotland, where he also spent time in jail. After travelling around Europe, he returned to the United States. According to Panzram, he robbed William Howard Taft's home in Connecticut and used the spoils to buy a yacht on which he purportedly robbed, sodomized, and killed ten passengers. After wrecking the yacht, Panzram returned to Europe and from there, proceeded to Africa. He spent time in Loanda, Angola (where he allegedly killed six locals in Lobito Bay), Portuguese West Africa, and the Congo, again working for the Sinclair Oil Company. In 1922, Panzram returned to the United States and spent time in both Sing Sing and Dannemora Prisons.

In 1928, Panzram was charged with burglary in Washington, D.C. and sent to the Washington Asylum and Jail. There, he met Henry Lesser, a prison guard. Lesser encouraged Panzram to write down his life's story. Panzram wrote a few pages at a time, and Lesser smuggled them out of jail. Panzram was later transferred to Leavenworth Prison in Kansas to serve a twenty-five year sentence, but he continued to correspond with Lesser. In 1929, Panzram beat a civilian foreman to death in the laundry of the Leavenworth prison. As a result, he was tried and condemned to death by hanging. Famed psychologist Karl Menninger assessed Panzram and determined that he was indeed of sound mind when he committed the murder, and therefore the sentence should not be overturned. On September 5, 1930 Carl Panzram was hung by the neck. Panzram used several aliases including Jeff Davis, Jefferson Baldwin, Jack Allen, and John O'Leary. He justified his crimes by claiming he was only doing to others what had been done to him. Although Panzram often boasted of killing twenty-three people, committing thousands of robberies and larcenies, and sodomizing a thousand men, his prison records indicate that he was only ever jailed for acts of burglary and larceny with the exception of the murder at Leavenworth Prison.

After Panzram's death, Henry Lesser dedicated his life to prison reform and attempted to publish Panzram's autobiography. He travelled around the country lecturing to audiences on America's prison system and its treatment of prisoners, using Panzram's story as an example of the system's failures. In 1970, parts of Panzram's manuscript were published in Thomas Gaddis and James Long's *Killer: A Journal of Murder*. In 1979, Lesser spoke to Thomas Gitchoff's criminal justice class at San Diego State University, and was later interviewed ([Killer's Guard: An Interview with Henry Lesser](#)) by Gitchoff. In 1980, Lesser spoke again at Scripps Cottage and donated the Panzram autobiography, including the Panzram correspondence and related documentation, to San Diego State University.

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**Panzram's Autobiographical Manuscript
1928-1929**

Correspondence from Panzram to Lesser Folder 2 **April 1929-June 1930**
Typescript of Panzram Manuscript: Part I, Section 1 Folder 3 **c. 1928-1930**
Typescript of Panzram Manuscript: Part I, Section 2 Folder 4 **c. 1928-1930**
Typescript of Panzram Manuscript: Part II, Section 1 Folder 5 **c. 1928-1930**
Typescript of Panzram Manuscript: Part II, Section 2 Folder 6 **c. 1928-1930**
Typescript of Panzram Manuscript: Part III, Section 1 Folder 7 **c. 1928-1930**
Typescript of Panzram Manuscript: Part III, Section 2 Folder 8 **1930**
Case Report Regarding the Murder of R.G. Warnke Folder 9 **June 25, 1929**
Correspondence between Lesser and H.L. Mencken Folder 10 **1929**
Correspondence between T.B. White and Karl Menninger (from FOIA Request) Folder 11
1930
Death Certificate of Carl Panzram (from FOIA Request) Folder 12 **September 5, 1930**
"Recollections of Carl Panzram" by Henry Lesser Folder 13 **1930**
Correspondence to Lesser regarding Panzram Folder 14 **1929-1972**
Correspondence and Reviews for *Killer: A Journal of Murder* Folder 15 **1971-1973**
Correspondence regarding Lesser's Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Request for Panzram's Files Folder 16 **1977-1978**
Correspondence between Lesser and Thomas Gitchoff Folder 17 **1980**
Bound Volume of Photocopied Newsclippings and Correspondence with Annotations
Folder 18 **1930-1980**
Folder 1 Folder 1
Promotional Poster for *Killer* Item 1 **c. 1971**