
Guide to the Henry Lesser Collection

Finding Aid Authors: Adam Burkhart.

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2016-10-25

5500 Campanile Dr. MC 8050

San Diego, CA, 92182-8050

URL: <http://library.sdsu.edu/scua>

Email: askscua@mail.sdsu.edu

Phone: 619-594-6791

Guide to the Henry Lesser Collection 1928/1994

Special Collections & University Archives

Overview of the Collection

Collection Title: Henry Lesser Collection

Dates: 1928-1994

Identification: MS-0534

Creator: Lesser, Henry, 1902-1983

Physical Description: 4.55 linear ft

Repository: Special Collections & University Archives

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Biographical Information:

Henry Lesser (1902-1983) was a prison guard, advocate for prison reform, and men's clothing salesman who formed a friendship with convicted murderer and career criminal Carl Panzram, corresponding with him until Panzram's execution in 1930. He is known for having persuaded Panzram to write his autobiography while in jail, which along with the two men's correspondence established Panzram's reputation as a violent and misanthropic criminal.

Lesser was born in Fall River, Massachusetts, the youngest of four children. His father, Lazar Lesser, worked as a door-to-door salesman to support the family.

Lesser dropped out of school in the 10th grade to follow his brothers to Washington D.C. There he found work in a men's clothing store, but was later fired for his efforts to unionize the salesmen, an event which prefigured his lifelong interest in social reform and progressive causes.

After working as a hospital attendant, Lesser was recommended for a job as a jail guard. He began his career as a guard on March 1, 1928, reporting to work at the D.C. district jail.

In August of that year, Carl Panzram was incarcerated at the district jail on charges of housebreaking. While awaiting trial, Panzram was twice beaten by guards. Taking pity on the prisoner, Lesser had another guard pass a dollar to Panzram, and the two men began an unlikely friendship.

Intrigued by the prisoner's provocative statements and anti-social attitude, Lesser encouraged Panzram to write his autobiography and provided him with writing materials. In his manuscript, Panzram detailed the abuses he suffered as a child — at home and in a boy's reformatory school — and his early crimes, including theft and arson. He claimed to have went on to commit 21 murders and thousands of acts of sodomy, espousing a hatred of humanity that has made him a case study among criminologists and psychiatrists, and an object of fear and morbid curiosity to the general public.

Panzram was eventually transferred to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where he killed Robert Warnke, a foreman in the prison laundry room. For this crime, the only murder for which he was convicted, he was executed by hanging on September 5, 1930.

Lesser had already begun trying to publish Panzram's manuscript before his execution. He would spend the next four decades doing so, until significant parts of it were eventually published in 1970 in the book *Killer: A Journal of Murder*, co-written by Tom Gaddis and James Long. In the interval, a typed copy of the manuscript was loaned to various journalists and criminologists, who returned it either because they found the subject matter unpublishable or simply could not commit to the venture due to personal constraints, even as they acknowledged the manuscript's value. Among those with whom Lesser corresponded were the journalist H.L. Mencken, criminologist Sheldon Glueck and psychiatrist Karl Menninger, who had evaluated Panzram in prison and declared him sane at the time of Warnke's murder.

Lesser rose in the prison profession, working for several years as a parole officer, and later as the junior warden's assistant at the federal reformatory camp in Petersburg, Virginia. However, he grew despondent over the lack of improved conditions for prisoners and the slow rate of prison reform. He resigned from his position in 1935, while the country was still in the midst of the Great Depression. After a period of unemployment, he returned to work as a men's clothing salesman the following year. That same year he met and married Esther Brookes, and their son Richard was born a year later. The family

later settled in Los Angeles, where Lesser found work in a department store.

In 1955, having exchanged hands many times, the Panzram manuscript came into the possession of Tom Gaddis, who had written *Birdman of Alcatraz*, a biography of the convict and ornithologist Robert Stroud. For the next fifteen years, Gaddis struggled to produce a book based on the manuscript, as work, school and family commitments called him away. Twice Gaddis had to return the manuscript to Lesser, who was growing despondent over the delay and feared he would not see a book about Panzram published in his lifetime. Finally, Lesser's literary agent brokered a deal in which Gaddis would write the book, and it was eventually completed with the help of co-author and *Oregon Journal* reporter James Long.

Published in 1970, the book was not a commercial success and soon went out of print. However, its reputation continued to spread through word of mouth until in 1995 a film adaptation brought the story of Panzram to a wider audience.

In his later years, Lesser continued trying to secure a film adaptation of the book, but without success. In 1979 he made the first of two visits to San Diego State University to speak before students in the criminal justice program. He was invited by criminal justice professor Thomas Gitchoff and Joel Goodman (1954-), a graduate student and employee of the Federal Bureau of Prisons. During this visit, Lesser, Goodman, Gitchoff and criminal justice professor Ron Boostrom conducted a filmed interview, "Killer's Guard: An Interview with Henry Lesser."

In the last years of his life, Lesser carried on a correspondence with Goodman, exchanging items of interest on criminological matters until an extreme bout of depression — with which he struggled off and on all his life — left him incapacitated. Before his death Lesser donated the Panzram papers and related correspondence to San Diego State library, where they are held in Special Collections & University Archives.

Access Terms

This Collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Personal Name:

Goodman, Joel, 1954---Archives

Lesser, Henry, 1902-1983--Archives

Panzram, Carl, 1891-1930

Topical Term:

Prison reformers

Custodial History:

Goodman inherited Lesser's papers, to which he added his own files. The whole of the papers were then given to filmmaker John Borowski while he was conducting research for a documentary film about Panzram. Borowski then donated the papers to San Diego State Special Collections & University Archives.

Accruals:

2013-001

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Conditions Governing Access:

This collection is open for research.

Preferred Citation:

Identification of item, folder title, box number, *Henry Lesser Collection*, Special Collections and University Archives, Library and Information Access, San Diego State University.

Related Materials:

Carl Panzram Papers

Arrangement of Materials:

I. Henry Lesser Files, 1928-1981

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1. Prison Career, 1928-1935
 2. Literary Projects, 1944-1981
 3. San Diego State, 1979-1981
 4. Criminology Research, bulk 1970s

II. Joel Goodman Files, 1979-c.1994

Scope and Contents

The *Henry Lesser Collection* (1928-1994) consists of Lesser's personal papers as well as those of Joel Goodman, Lesser's friend and a graduate of San Diego State's criminal justice master's degree program.

Lesser's papers span his time working in the prison profession in the 1920s and '30s, the four subsequent decades he spent trying to publish the *Panzram* writings, and his final years, in which he donated the *Panzram Papers* to San Diego State and lectured there on two occasions. These papers offer a look into Lesser's life and character beyond what can be learned from his correspondence and reminiscences included in the *Carl Panzram Papers*, particularly his roles as a prison reformer and promoter of Panzram's story. Goodman inherited Lesser's papers, to which he added his own, including his correspondence with Lesser, Lesser's wife, the filmmakers of the 1995 adaptation of *Killer*, and others.

The collection is divided into two series, the Henry Lesser Files (1928-1981) and the Joel Goodman Files (1979-1994). The Lesser Files are further divided into four subseries: Prison Career (1928-1935), Literary Projects (1944-1981), San Diego State (1979-1981), and Criminology Research (predominantly 1970s). The first three of these subseries document certain periods in Lesser's life, falling in roughly chronological order. The fourth comprises press clippings and publications on matters of criminological and penological interest, with Lesser's annotations.

The Prison Career (1928-1935) subseries documents Lesser's work as a prison official as well as his involvement in prison reform. Lesser's efforts as a reformer are revealed through letters to the press and documents pertaining to his union activity. The depth of his involvement is shown by a 10-page letter written to Director of the Bureau of Prisons Sanford Bates and signed by 26 prisoners at the Federal Reformatory camp in Petersburg, Virginia, listing the abuses suffered by the prisoners and appealing for a redress of grievances. In another letter addressed to prison reform advocate and author Jesse O. Stutsman, guards at the Federal Road Camp in Fort Wadsworth, New York, testify to the cruelty of their superiors. Lesser's work as a parole officer is shown through correspondence with his parolees as well as their case files and psychological evaluations. Of particular interest is a notebook Lesser kept during his time as a guard. In it Lesser recorded prison protocols, notes on his co-workers, anecdotes and reflections on the state of the prison system.

The Literary Projects (1944-1981) subseries covers the roughly four decades Lesser spent seeking a writer and publisher for the *Panzram* manuscript. The bulk of the correspondence details his partnership with Tom Gaddis and James Long and the process of seeing the project to completion, as Lesser pitched the manuscript to various publishers and writers and sought to enlist interest in a television or film documentary. Also present are documents the writers obtained in the course of their research, literary contracts, book reviews, letters from readers and contemporaneous correspondence not strictly related to the book. Later documents in this series include correspondence from the author and playwright Frederick Hunter, who adapted Panzram's story for the stage.

The San Diego State (1979-1981) subseries documents Lesser's two visits to San Diego State to lecture to students in the criminal justice program, as well as his decision to donate the *Panzram Papers* to the university's library. A good deal of the subseries consists of dozens of notes written by students in response to Lesser's talks, and in a couple of instances a sustained correspondence between Lesser and a student.

The Criminology Research (predominantly 1970s) subseries consists mostly of press clippings, magazines and trade publications with items of general criminological and penological interest. The press clippings and other published material bear Lesser's annotations as well as handwritten indexes, either on the folders or loose sheets of paper. Lesser's interest in helping a particular prisoner, Leo Lewis, is shown through a small amount of correspondence between Lesser and prison officials regarding this prisoner's case. An early notebook contains extracts Lesser copied from the published proceedings of the American Prison Association (later the American Correctional Association), and notes on mental patients Lesser worked with while he was employed at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington D.C. An alphanumeric filing system devised by Lesser has been retained in the labelling of some of the folders, otherwise the folders are labelled according to the subject of their contents or with a title, as in the case of a publication or article.

The Joel Goodman Files (1979-1994) begin chronologically near the end of Lesser's life and contain correspondence between Goodman and Lesser, Lesser's wife Esther and their son Richard. Esther steps in to continue the correspondence on Lesser's behalf when Lesser is incapacitated by a serious bout of depression and after his death. Later correspondence between Goodman, Gitchoff and screenwriter Tim Metcalfe involves the making of the film adaptation of *Killer*. Also in this series is a folder containing photographs of Lesser's visit to San Diego State and some taken on location during the filming of *Killer*.

Henry Lesser Files, 1928-1981

Prison Career, 1928-1935

Box 1, Folder 1	Correspondence regarding Panzram, prison work, and activism 1928-1934
Box 1, Folder 2	Correspondence from Carl Panzram to Henry Lesser 1929-1930
Box 1, Folder 3	Correspondence between Lesser and H.L. Mencken, and press clippings regarding Mencken 1929
Box 1, Folder 4	Typescript of Panzram manuscript and correspondence c. 1930s
Box 1, Folder 5	Henry Lesser's prison notebook c. 1930s
Box 9, Folder 1	Envelope for Box 1, Folder 2, 'Correspondence from Carl Panzram to Henry Lesser'
Box 9, Folder 2	Envelope for Box 1, Folder 4, 'Typescript of Panzram Manuscript and Correspondence'

Literary Projects, 1944-1981

Box 1, Folder 6	Correspondence regarding the Panzram literary property and <i>Killer: A Journal of Murder</i> 1944-1968
Box 1, Folder 7	Correspondence regarding <i>Killer: A Journal of Murder</i> 1968-1971
Box 1, Folder 8	Correspondence regarding <i>Killer: A Journal of Murder</i> 1971-1978
Box 1, Folder 9	Contracts and registration receipts for <i>Killer: A Journal of Murder</i> and the Panzram manuscript 1944-1967
Box 1, Folder 10	Reviews of <i>Killer: A Journal of Murder</i> 1970-1973
Box 1, Folder 11	Typescript extract from <i>Killer: A Journal of Murder</i>
Box 1, Folder 12	Correspondence regarding <i>Panzram's Revenge</i> (play) and unproduced projects 1972-1981
Box 9, Folder 3	Envelope for Box 1, Folder 11, 'Typescript extract of <i>Killer: A Journal of Murder</i>'

San Diego State, 1979-1981

Box 2, Folder 1	San Diego Union and Daily Aztec articles on Lesser's visits to San Diego State 1979-1980
Box 2, Folder 2	Correspondence between Lesser and criminal justice students and faculty 1979-1981

Criminology Research

Box 2, Folder 3	Correspondence from Lesser to prisoner Leo Lewie 1980-1981
Box 2, Folder 4	Notes on American Prison Association meeting minutes and case histories of mental patients -- notebook 1938
Box 2, Folder 5	Notes on published articles 1970s
Box 2, Folder 6	Unusual cases -- press clippings AC
Box 2, Folder 7	press clippings A50 (folder 1 of 2)
Box 2, Folder 8	press clippings A50 (folder 2 of 2)
Box 2, Folder 9	press clippings A51
Box 2, Folder 10	press clippings A53
Box 2, Folder 11	press clippings A55
Box 2, Folder 12	press clippings A55
Box 3, Folder 1	press clippings A56
Box 3, Folder 2	press clippings A57
Box 3, Folder 3	press clippings A58
Box 3, Folder 4	press clippings A59
Box 3, Folder 5	Unusual cases -- press clippings A60

Box 3, Folder 6	press clippings, pamphlets A61, A63
Box 3, Folder 7	press clippings A66
Box 3, Folder 8	press clippings A67
Box 3, Folder 9	press clippings, articles A68
Box 3, Folder 10	press clippings A90
Box 3, Folder 11	press clippings B1
Box 3, Folder 12	press clippings and notes on Panzram B40
Box 4, Folder 1	press clippings B66
Box 4, Folder 2	Capital Punishment -- press clippings, pamphlets, articles D1
Box 4, Folder 3	Unusual cases, homicides and rape -- press clippings D2
Box 4, Folder 4	Unusual cases -- press clippings D6
Box 4, Folder 5	press clippings G5
Box 4, Folder 6	Capital punishment -- press clippings and government papers X1
Box 4, Folder 7	Unusual cases -- press clippings Y1
Box 4, Folder 8	press clippings Y2
Box 4, Folder 9	Unusual cases -- press clippings Y5
Box 4, Folder 10	press clippings Z1
Box 4, Folder 11	Terrorism -- press clippings Z50
Box 4, Folder 12	Terrorism, hijacking, hostages -- press clippings
Box 4, Folder 13	Terrorism, hijackings, hostages, race riots -- press clippings
Box 4, Folder 14	Unusual cases, methods of treating prisoners -- press clippings and academic publications
Box 4, Folder 15	Unusual cases -- press clippings
Box 4, Folder 16	Unusual cases -- press clippings
Box 5, Folder 1	Unusual cases -- press clippings
Box 5, Folder 2	Unusual cases -- press clippings
Box 5, Folder 3	press clippings
Box 5, Folder 4	press clippings
Box 5, Folder 5	press clippings
Box 5, Folder 6	press clippings
Box 5, Folder 7	press clippings
Box 5, Folder 8	press clippings
Box 5, Folder 9	press clippings
Box 5, Folder 10	press clippings
Box 5, Folder 11	Youth offenders, juvenile delinquency -- press clippings
Box 5, Folder 12	John Murton, Arkansas prisons and unusual cases
Box 5, Folder 13	book reviews
Box 5, Folder 14	Problems of the Death Penalty and its Administration in California
Box 6, Folder 1	The Delta Prisons: Punishment for Profit
Box 6, Folder 2	The Penitentiary and Paranoia, Ernest Hamburger, MD
Box 6, Folder 3	<i>Federal Probation</i> June 1969, June 1970, March 1971
Box 6, Folder 4	<i>Federal Probation</i> June 1971
Box 6, Folder 5	Black Caucus Report and jail scandals
Box 6, Folder 6	<i>The Catholic Worker</i>, July-Aug. 1977 and <i>The Jerusalem Post</i>, Nov. 22-23, 1977
Box 6, Folder 7	Directions television program -- script
Box 6, Folder 8	<i>L.A. Magazine</i>, vol. 1 no. 2
Box 6, Folder 9	'Protest -- Sacco-Vanzetti and the Intellectuals,' review by Justice Michael A. Musmanno
Box 6, Folder 10	'The Academic Criminologist and His Responsibility for Social Action,' by Negley K. Teeters
Box 6, Folder 11	'When \$50,000,000 Goes to Jail' excerpt and 'Man Against Himself' by Karl Menninger excerpt
Box 6, Folder 12	'The Psychology of Violence' -- article concerning Panzram
Box 6, Folder 13	Carl Panzram murder of R.G. Warnke report of investigation
Box 6, Folder 14	<i>Fortune News</i>, May - July 1977 ; Nov. - Dec. 1977
Box 6, Folder 15	<i>Los Angeles Times</i> Clippings
Box 6, Folder 16	<i>The Freeworld Times</i>, Feb. - March 1972 ; June 1972
Box 6, Folder 17	<i>New York Times</i> Clippings

Box 6, Folder 18	Playboy, March 1968
Box 6, Folder 19	'Thirty-Six Hours at Santa Fe.' by Roger Morris
Box 6, Folder 20	Publishers' Weekly, Aug. 31, 1970
Box 7, Folder 1	The National Observer, Aug. 31, 1970 ; June 15, 1974
Box 7, Folder 2	Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency - Reports and Statements
Box 7, Folder 3	Arkansas State Police - Case Report
Box 7, Folder 4	American Prisons in Turmoil (Part 1): Hearings Before the Select Committee on Crime, House of Representatives
Box 7, Folder 5	'The Rise of the Penitentiary in New York' - A Review by Harry Elmer Barnes
Box 9, Folder 4	Envelope for Box 2, Folder 7-8: 'press clippings A50'
Box 9, Folder 5	Envelope for Box 2, Folder 9: 'press clippings A51'
Box 9, Folder 6	Folder for Box 2, Folder 10: 'press clippings A53'
Box 9, Folder 7	Envelope for Box 2, Folder 11-12: 'press clippings A55'
Box 9, Folder 8	Envelope for Box 3, Folder 1: 'press clippings A56'
Box 9, Folder 9	Envelope for Box 3, Folder 2: 'press clippings A57'
Box 9, Folder 10	Envelope for Box 3, Folder 3: 'press clippings A58'
Box 9, Folder 11	Envelope for Box 3, Folder 4: 'press clippings A59'
Box 9, Folder 12	Envelope for Box 3, Folder 6: 'press clippings A61'
Box 9, Folder 13	Folder for Box 3, Folder 6: 'press clippings, pamphlets A63'
Box 9, Folder 14	Folder for Box 3, Folder 7: 'press clippings A66'
Box 9, Folder 15	Folder for Box 3, Folder 8: 'press clippings A67'
Box 9, Folder 16	Folder for Box 3, Folder 10: 'press clippings A90'
Box 9, Folder 17	Folder for Box 3, Folder 12: 'press clippings and notes on Panzram B40'
Box 9, Folder 18	Folder for Box 4, Folder 1: 'press clippings B66'
Box 9, Folder 19	Folder for Box 4, Folder 2: 'Capital Punishment - press clippings, pamphlets, articles D1'
Box 9, Folder 20	Folder for Box 4, Folder 4: 'unusual press clippings D6'
Box 9, Folder 21	Folder for Box 4, Folder 16: 'unusual cases - press clippings'
Box 9, Folder 22	Folder for Box 5, Folder 3: 'press clippings'
Box 9, Folder 23	Folder for Box 5, Folder 10: 'press clippings'
Box 9, Folder 24	Envelope for Box 6, Folder 11: 'When \$50,000,000 Goes to Jail' and 'Man Against Himself'
Box 9, Folder 25	Envelope for Box 7, Folder 2: 'Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency'
Box 9, Folder 26	Envelope for Box 7, Folder 3: 'Arkansas State Police Case Report'
Box 9, Folder 27	Four Folders
	Joel Goodman Files, 1979-c.1994
Box 7, Folder 6	Correspondence from Henry Lesser to Joel Goodman (1979 - 1980)
Box 7, Folder 7	Correspondence from Henry Lesser to Joel Goodman (1980)
Box 7, Folder 8	Correspondence from Henry Lesser to Joel Goodman (1980 - 1981)
Box 7, Folder 9	Correspondence from Esther Lesser to Joel Goodman (1981 - 1985)
Box 7, Folder 10	Correspondence regarding Lesser, Panzram and feature film (c. 1988 - 1994)
Box 7, Folder 11	Correspondence regarding Lesser, Panzram and feature film (1990s)
Box 8, Folder 1	Killer by Tim Metcalfe, Script (1992)
Box 8, Folder 2	Photographs
Box 8, Folder 3	Killer's Guard: An Interview with Henry Lesser (VHS)