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Rare Book & Manuscript Library

Thomas Bonn Research Files,
1935-1983 (Bulk dates: 1939-1941)
MS# 1453

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SUMMARY INFORMATION

Creator

Thomas L. Bonn

Title and dates

Thomas Bonn Research Files, 1935-1983 (Bulk dates: 1939-1941)

Abstract

This collection consists primarily of documents relating to the founding and early years of Pocket Books, a New York publishing firm, and its founder, Robert De Graff. The collection also includes several research notes and articles written by Thomas Bonn, a librarian and historian whose work centered largely on Pocket Books in the early 1980s.

Size

0.42 linear feet (1 document box)

Call number

MS# 1453

Location

Columbia University
Butler Library, 6th Floor
Rare Book and Manuscript Library
535 West 114th Street

New York, NY 10027

Language(s) of material

English

Biographical Note

While serving during the 1970s and 1980s as a librarian at the State University of New York, College at Cortland, Thomas L. Bonn wrote regularly on the history of paperback books. In addition to co-editing the journal *Paperback Quarterly: A Journal of Mass-Market Paperback History*, Bonn wrote a number of articles on paperback history and an authoritative book titled *Under Cover: An Illustrated History of American Mass-Market Paperbacks* (Penguin, 1982). These research files contain some of the source materials that Bonn drew upon for these studies.

For Bonn, no single company in American publishing history deserves more credit for bringing mass-market paperbacks to American bookshelves than Pocket Books, a New-York based company that released its first book list in June 1939. To be sure, as Bonn explains in *Under Cover*, paperback books had existed previously. German and English publishers had begun experimenting with small paperback books as early as the mid-nineteenth century. Focusing either on dime-novel fiction or literary titles, however, those publishers never reached mass audiences. Such English publishers as Albatross and Penguin Books began reaching wider audiences in the 1930s, and Pocket Books soon extended their model of selling popular titles at low cost by adding a few key innovations.

Pocket Books' principal innovations centered around its decision to produce and distribute books in the style of magazines, a development that reflected the knowledge and experience of the company's founder, Robert De Graff. Before founding Pocket Books in 1938, De Graff had worked for fourteen years selling hardback books, reprints, and magazines. Pocket Books accordingly printed large volumes of books at high speeds and selected titles that appealed to general literary tastes, sometimes publishing books related to popular films. Releasing between five and ten new books every month, De Graff distributed this steady stream of paperbacks through previously untapped outlets, such as department stores, newsstands, chain stores such as Sears, and eventually drug stores and grocery stores. In wartime, Pocket Books established distribution agreements with the Armed Services. These innovations in distribution, Bonn suggests, marked Pocket Books as the first "mass market" paperback publisher in the United States.

This biographical note was based on material contained in the Thomas Bonn Research Files and on Thomas L. Bonn's Under Cover: An Illustrated History of American Mass-Market Paperbacks (Penguin, 1982).

Description

The bulk of Thomas Bonn's research files comprise documents related to Robert De Graff's career and to the early years of Pocket Books. The earliest documents in the collection concern De Graff's brief stint as a magazine seller for Garden City Publishing Company. Most of the documents, however, date from 1938 to 1941. These latter documents include hand-written notes and other materials relating to Pocket Books' initial publicity and distribution strategies, records of the sales figures that the company attained through its various distribution channels, and letters of praise sent both from customers and distributors. The collection also includes newspaper

clippings about De Graff and his company, documents relating to a law suit that Pocket Books filed against a company that mimicked its approach, checks from the War Department and Navy, announcements of De Graff's lectures on such topics as the state of book publishing in South America, and several notes and articles written by Thomas Bonn.

Arrangement

The materials are arranged alphabetically.

ACCESS AND USE

Access

This collection has no restrictions.

This collection is located off-site. You will need to request this material at least twenty-four (24) hours in advance to use the collection in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library reading room.

Restrictions on Use and Copyright Information

Single photocopies may be made for research purposes. Permission to publish material from the collection must be requested from the Curator of Manuscripts, Rare Book and Manuscript Library (RBML). The RBML approves permission to publish that which it physically owns; the responsibility to secure copyright permission rests with the patron.

ACQUISITION AND APPRAISAL

Provenance and Acquisition

Gift of Thomas Bonn, 2001

Accrual of Records

No additions are expected.

PROCESSING AND OTHER INFORMATION

Processing Information

This collection was processed by Daniel Vaca (GSAS 2012). Finding aid written by Daniel Vaca in June 2008.

Descriptive Rules Used

Finding aid adheres to that prescribed by *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*

Encoding

Finding aid written in English.

Preferred Citation

Identification of specific item; Date (if known); Thomas Bonn Research Files; Box and Folder; Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

Subject Headings

Avon Books
Book industries and trade--Latin America--History
Book industries and trade --United States --History
Book industries and trade--United States--History--20th century
Bonn, Thomas L.
Paperback distributors
Paperbacks--Marketing
Paperbacks--Prices--United States
Paperbacks --Publishing --United States--History
Paperbacks--Publishing--United States--History--20th century
Pocket books
Pocket books, inc., New York
Publishers and publishing --United States --History
Sears, Roebuck and Company--History
Simon and Schuster, inc.--History
Simon and Schuster, inc. Pocket Books

Box 1

- F.1 Clippings--Advertisements, 1939-1946
- F.2 Clippings--Pocket Books and Robert De Graff, 1938-1969
- F.3 De Graff, Robert--Announcements of Talks, 1939-1943
- F.4 De Graff, Robert--Garden City Publishing Company, 1935-circa 1936
- F.5 Law Suit--Pocket Books v. Avon Pocket-Size Books, 1941-1942
- F.6 Mailings--Development, circa 1938-1939
- F.7 Mailings and Publicity, 1939-1940, undated
- F.8 Notes and Articles, 1983, undated
- F.9 Research Binder--General, 1939-1960
- F.10 Sales Statistics and Distribution Strategy, 1935-1944
- F.11 Testimonials--Customers and Distributors, 1938-1940