Lewis J. Selznick:

A Preliminary Inventory of His Papers at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator: Selznick, Lewis J.

Title: Lewis J. Selznick Papers

Dates: 1896-1984 (bulk 1914-1934)

Extent: 20 document boxes, 3 oversize boxes (osb) (8.4 linear feet), 2

oversize folders (osf)

Abstract: The papers of silent film producer Lewis J. Selznick consist of

business records from various production studios, distribution companies, and theater chains owned by Selznick, as well as correspondence and manuscripts that document Selznick's other

professional and personal activities.

Call Number: Film Collection FI-54192

Language: English and Spanish

Access: Open for research. Researchers must create an online Research

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materials.

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Restrictions on

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Administrative Information

Preferred Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Lewis J.

Citation: Selznick Papers (Film Collection FI-54192).

Acquisition: Gift, 1995 (1995-03-021-G)

Processed by: Ancelyn Krivak, 2023

Repository: Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Scope and Contents

Lewis J. Selznick was born around 1870 in the Russian Empire, most likely in Lithuania, rather than in Kyiv, Ukraine, as he claimed in his own publicity materials. He immigrated to the United States in 1888, first living in Pittsburgh, where he went into the jewelry business, and later New York City. In New York, Selznick explored various business opportunities to support his wife Florence and sons Howard, Myron, and David, before entering the growing silent film production business headquartered across the Hudson River in Fort Lee, New Jersey. In 1914, he became Vice President and General Manager of World Film Corporation, a film production and distribution company with ties to the Shubert Organization that specialized in film adaptations of stage plays. After two years at World Film, Selznick was fired from the company by the board; he started his own business, Selznick Pictures, poaching one of World Film's biggest stars, actress Clara Kimball Young. In 1920, Selznick moved his business and his family to Hollywood, California, but was unable to sustain his company for long in the increasingly competitive film business; by 1923 he was bankrupt. For the next ten years, he pursued many different business ventures, including several unsuccessful attempts to capitalize on the increasing popularity of radio. Following his death in 1933, his two younger sons carried on his legacy in the motion picture business. Myron Selznick opened a pioneering talent agency, and David O. Selznick became one of the most successful and acclaimed producers of Hollywood's Golden Age.

The Lewis J. Selznick Papers consist of business records from various production studios, distribution companies, and theater chains owned by Selznick, as well as correspondence and manuscripts that document Selznick's other professional and personal activities. The bulk of the papers date between the creation of Selznick's World Film Corporation in 1914 and his death in 1933. Materials include financial documents such as accounting statements and tax forms; agreements, contracts, and other legal documents; meeting minutes; notes; correspondence and memoranda; printed material; clippings; graphic designs and posters; screenplays; photographs; and blueprints. The papers are organized into four series: I. Studio Files, 1914-1932; II. Correspondence, 1913-1934; III. Personal and Professional Material, 1896-1984; and IV. Ralph H. Blum Papers, 1930-1931.

Series I is subdivided into three subseries: A. Lewis J. Selznick Businesses, B. Other Film Businesses, and C. Actors and Films. Subseries A contains records from film businesses owned or managed by Lewis J. Selznick. In addition to correspondence, contracts, and other materials from World Film Corporation, this subseries contains substantial documentation of all the film businesses founded by Selznick, including Selznick Pictures, Selznick Studios, Selznick Enterprises, and the Selznick Corporation. Also present are records for Select Pictures Corporation, the production company that was formed after rival producer Adolph Zukor acquired fifty percent of Selznick Pictures in 1917 and the business was merged with Zukor's Famous Players Pictures; and two film-related businesses acquired by Selznick, National Picture Theatres and Republic Distributing Corporation. Records such as accounting reports; tax returns; stockholders and Board of Directors meeting minutes; contracts and trademark agreements; state

operating licenses; incorporation and dissolution papers; and correspondence and memoranda document the administrative, financial, and legal activities of Selznick's businesses between the years 1916 and 1923. A behind the scenes glimpse of the competitive corporate culture at Selznick-owned businesses is contained in the employee publications Brain Exchange and Manpower. The content of these newsletters also reflects American racial prejudices and cultural biases of the early 1920s.

Subseries B contains a small number of records from film businesses that Lewis J. Selznick did not own or manage. Most of these materials, from the Herbert Brenon Film Corporation, Triangle Pictures, United Picture Theatres, and Universal Pictures Corporation, pertain to actual or proposed business dealings with Selznick. In addition, there are materials from Metropolitan Pictures Corporation present in the collection that may be related to specific assets of Metro Pictures that were purchased by Selznick after it was merged into Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1924 or may be a completely different business with a similar name. Files related to specific actors contracted to Selznick, as well as contracts, screenplays, and correspondence related to specific films make up Subseries C. Noteworthy in this subseries are materials related to the career of actress Olive Thomas, who created a sensation as a rebellious teenage girl in Selznick Pictures' *The Flapper* (1920) and died tragically of an accidental poisoning only a few months after that film's release; and correspondence, contracts, and clippings related to the defrocked Russian Orthodox priest Iliodor, who portrayed himself in the lost film *The Fall of the Romanoffs* (1917).

Correspondence in Series II, arranged alphabetically by correspondent, is comprised of business and personal correspondence with individuals and organizations. Notable correspondents include theatrical producer Hans Bartsch; Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America chairman Will H. Hays; film producers Sam Jaffe, Joseph M. Schenck, and Adolph Zukor; and F. Scott Fitzgerald, who, in a letter filed with correspondence about 'Old World Film Plays,' writes to Selznick about a recently completed screenplay, *Transcontinental Kitty*. Contracts and other legal documents are interspersed throughout the correspondence files. Also in this series is a file titled 'Important Matters Pending,' which in addition to correspondence, contains a variety of other materials including legal documents, clippings, printed materials, and blueprints, with most items dating from 1932. This file likely contains material that was on Selznick's desk or in his office at the time of his death in January 1933.

Series III contains material related to personal matters, including biographical material, files related to household and family, financial and legal documents, medical records, and files on Selznick's Brooklyn real estate holdings. The series also contains material about Selznick's professional activities outside of his studio work, including his attempts to enter the radio business, his involvement with oil prospecting and other investments, and several unrealized ideas for film businesses. A significant volume of material documents Selznick's mid-1920s involvement with the Picture City project, a failed attempt to create a motion picture production center in Hobe Sound, Florida that would rival Hollywood. A thesis about Selznick's work at the World Film Corporation is also filed in Series III.

Series IV is comprised of files documenting projects executed by entertainment lawyer and talent agent Ralph H. Blum. Lewis J. Selznick's name is not linked to these projects, and it is unclear whether he had any personal involvement with them, although pieces of correspondence elsewhere in the collection make it clear that he knew Blum and transacted business with him. It is unknown how these materials became part of Lewis J. Selznick's papers.

Myron and David O. Selznick both worked for their father's business—Myron was President of Selznick Pictures from 1920 to 1923—and the collection contains a significant volume of correspondence, notes, legal documents, and receipts created by or related to the activities of the sons. The Lewis J. Selznick Papers overlap significantly with the content of both the Myron Selznick Papers and David O. Selznick Papers, also at the Ransom Center, and contain additional documentation of Myron and David O. Selznick during the years prior to Lewis J. Selznick's death in 1933. The Lewis J. Selznick Papers were originally acquired with the Myron Selznick Papers and were transferred out of that collection in 2023.

The original order of files has been maintained wherever possible. Many files were assigned a title based on their content, but some files are described by the original labels found on the folders. Text from original folder labels is enclosed in single quotation marks. Many folders in the collection contain documents that are stained with dirt and grime, and researchers may wish to wear gloves while they are handling materials.

Related Material

The Harry Ransom Center has numerous other collections that contain material related to the Selznick family, including the David O. Selznick Papers, Myron Selznick Papers, Daniel M. Selznick Papers, Jeffrey Selznick Collection, and Joan Selznick Collection.

Separated Material

Personal effects were transferred to the Center's Costume and Personal Effects holdings and are described separately in a database.

Series I. Studio Files, 1914-1932

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Subseries	Λ.	033710	V 0	1791017	D 1101	100000
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World Producing Corporation. Stock certificates, 1914-1915	Container 1.1
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Exhibitors Herald article and draft of letter to editor, 1917	Container 2.4
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Legal documents, 1922-1923	Container 2.6
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Selznick Corporation

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Container
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1919	Container 6.6-8
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'Important Matters Pending.' With photographs of Franklin Delano Roosevelt on the campaign trail in 1932; printed material; clippings; blueprint for building in Container Sunnyside, Queens; notes; legal documents; design for logo; canceled checks; list of furnishings at Culver City residence; and insurance policy proposal, 1916-1932

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