



Smithsonian
National Museum of American History
Kenneth E. Behring Center

Guide to the Sonora Carver Papers

NMAH.AC.0521

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Collection Overview

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| Repository: | Archives Center, National Museum of American History |
| Title: | Sonora Carver Papers |
| Identifier: | NMAH.AC.0521 |
| Date: | 1891-1994, undated 1891-1994 |
| Extent: | 3 Cubic feet (8 boxes, 1 oversize folder) |
| Creator: | Carver, Sonora Webster, 1904-2003 |
| Language: | English . |
| Summary: | Collection documents Sonora Carver's career as a diving horse rider and her advocacy work with the Lighthouse for the Blind. |

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

The collection was donated to the Archives Center by Sonora Carver, 1994.

Related Materials

Archives Center, National Museum of American History

Archives Center Wild West Collection (AC1466)

Warshaw Collection of Business Americana (AC0060)

L.F. Foster Wild West Scrapbooks, Photographs, and Copy Negatives (AC1289)

Duncan P. Schiedt Photograph Collection (AC1323)

Processing Information

Collection processed by Kelly Sanford, intern, 1996 and Vanessa Broussard-Simmons, archivist, 1996.

Preferred Citation

Sonora Carver Papers, 1891-1994, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

Restrictions

Collection is open for research.

Conditions Governing Use

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Biographical / Historical

Sonora Webster was born on February 2, 1904, one of six children, in Waycross, Georgia. In 1923, she became a performer with Dr. William Frank "Doc" Carver's carnival act. Dr. Carver, a trained dentist, acquired target shooting and horseback riding skills that led to his success as a world-class marksman. By 1924, Sonora began performing a stunt created by Dr. Carver, an act that required her to mount a running horse as it reached the top of a forty-foot tower and lie on the horse's back as it plunged into an eleven-foot-deep pool of water. She and other female performers traveled the country with Dr. Carver eventually settling in Atlantic City, New Jersey. After Carver's death in 1927, his son Albert (Al) Floyd Carver assumed responsibility for the show. Sonora Webster married Albert Carver in 1928. That same year Sonora's sister Arnette Webster French joined the show. It was in 1931 that Sonora's life dramatically changed when she became legally blind as the result of retinal detachment. This condition was caused during one of her dives when she hit the water off balance with her eyes open. Determined to continue with the show, Sonora performed the diving horse act until 1942. Later that year that she and her husband Al Carver moved to New Orleans. She learned Braille and worked as a Dictaphone typist. In 1961, Sonora Webster Carver published her autobiography *A Girl and Five Brave Horses*. She retired from her position as a Dictaphone typist in 1979. Walt Disney Pictures released the movie *Wild Hearts Can't Be Broken* in 1991 which was loosely based on Sonora Carver's autobiography. Sonora Webster Carver died at the age of ninety-nine on September 21, 2003 in Pleasantville, New Jersey.

Scope and Contents

Collection consists primarily of materials relating to Carver's career as a diving horse rider and her advocacy work for the Lighthouse for the Blind. It is arranged into six series. Series one contains biographical information about Sonora Webster Carver and her family and dates from 1924-1994. Series two includes material relating to Carver's career as a diving horse rider on the Steel Pier in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Series three documents Carver's later life and work on behalf of people with visual impairments dating from 1953-1977. Series four contains material relating to the creation of the Walt Disney Pictures film *Wild Hearts Can't Be Broken* dating from 1990-1993. Series five consists of materials relating to Dr. William Frank "Doc" Carver and the Wild West dating from 1891-1975. Series six contains miscellaneous materials dating from 1962-1991.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged into six series.

Series 1, Biographical Information, 1924-1994, undated

Series 2, Diving Horses Career and Atlantic City, 1924-1986, undated

Series 3, Visual Impairment and Advocacy, 1953-1977, undated

Series 4, Walt Disney Wild Hearts Can't Be Broken Movie, 1990-1993, undated

Series 5, Dr. William Frank "Doc" Carver and the Wild West, 1891-1975, undated

Series 6,: Miscellaneous, 1962-1991, undated

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Blind athletes
- Blindness
- Diving
- Horsemen and horsewomen
- Horses
- Steel Pier (Atlantic City, N.J.)
- Women in horse sports

Names:

- Lighthouse for the Blind.

Geographic Names:

- Atlantic City (N.J.)
- New Jersey

Container Listing

Series 1: Biographical Information, 1924-1994, undated

Primarily consists of unpublished drafts of Carver's manuscript *A Girl and Five Brave Horses* documenting her career and memories of being a diving horse rider in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The manuscript was published in 1961 and was later used as the basis for the Walt Disney fictionalized film *Wild Hearts Can't Be Broken*. Also included among these materials are diaries dating from 1929-1930. There are some magazine articles relating to Sonora Webster Carver and her sister Arnette Webster French, who was also a diving horse rider. In addition to the articles there is an interview with Carver dating from 1994. A genealogy and photograph album of Sonora Carver and her family are also included among these materials. Materials are arranged in chronological order.

Box 1, Folder 1 Genealogy, undated

Box 5, Folder 1;
Box 5, Folder 2 Photograph album of Sonora Webster Carver and family, circa 1924

Box 6, Folder 1 Scrapbook of newspaper clippings and photographs, pages 1-30, 1924-1961
[Image\(s\)](#)

Red Lips' first diving picture---Houlton, Maine, 1929 / Sonora riding [black and white photoprint], 1929
1 Item (9.75" x 7.75").

[Image\(s\): Red Lips' first diving picture---Houlton, Maine, 1929 / Sonora riding \[black and white photoprint\].](#)

Porter Studios, The (Houlton, Me.), Photographer
English.

Diving horse with woman rider (Sonora Carver).

Unrestricted research use on site by appointment. Photographs must be handled with cotton gloves unless protected by sleeves.

Silver gelatin on paper.

Local Numbers

02052102.tif (AC Scan)

In Box 2, Folder 4.

Names: Carver, Sonora Webster, 1904-2003

Topic: Diving
 Women athletes
 Women in horse sports

Place: Maine

Genre/
Form: Photographs -- 1920-1930

- Box 6, Folder 2 Scrapbook of newspaper clippings and photographs, pages 31-60, 1924-1961
- Box 6, Folder 3 Scrapbook of newspaper clippings and photographs, pages 61-90, 1924-1961
- Box 6, Folder 4 Scrapbook of newspaper clippings and photographs, pages 91-114, 1924-1961
- Box 6, Folder 5 Scrapbook of newspaper clippings and photographs, pages 115-141, 1924-1961
- Box 1, Folder 2 Diary, 1929 January 1-1929 February 9
- Box 1, Folder 3 Diary, 1929 February 9-1929 March 28
- Box 1, Folder 4 Diary, 1929 March 28-1929 June 13
- Box 1, Folder 5 Diary, 1929 June 14-1929 August 6
- Box 1, Folder 6 Diary, 1929 October 17-1930 January
- Box 1, Folder 7 Draft of Unpublished manuscript, *A Girl and Five Brave Horses*, pages 1-9, circa 1961
- Box 1, Folder 8 Draft of *A Girl and Five Brave Horses*, pages 10-103, circa 1961
- Box 1, Folder 9 Draft of *A Girl and Five Brave Horses*, pages 104-181, circa 1961
- Box 1, Folder 10 Draft of *A Girl and Five Brave Horses*, chapter one, circa 1961
- Box 1, Folder 11 Draft of *A Girl and Five Brave Horses*, chapter two, circa 1961
- Box 1, Folder 12 Draft of *A Girl and Five Brave Horses*, chapter three, circa 1961
- Box 1, Folder 13 Draft of *A Girl and Five Brave Horses*, chapter four, circa 1961
- Box 1, Folder 14 Draft of *A Girl and Five Brave Horses*, chapter five, circa 1961
- Box 1, Folder 15 Draft of *A Girl and Five Brave Horses*, chapter six, circa 1961
- Box 1, Folder 16 Draft of *A Girl and Five Brave Horses*, chapter seven, circa 1961
- Box 1, Folder 17 Draft of *A Girl and Five Brave Horses*, chapter eight, circa 1961
- Box 1, Folder 18 Draft of *A Girl and Five Brave Horses*, chapter nine, circa 1961

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| Box 1, Folder 19 | Draft of <i>A Girl and Five Brave Horses</i> , chapter ten, circa 1961 |
| Box 1, Folder 20 | Draft of <i>A Girl and Five Brave Horses</i> , chapter eleven, circa 1961 |
| Box 1, Folder 21 | Draft of <i>A Girl and Five Brave Horses</i> , chapter twelve, circa 1961 |
| Box 1, Folder 22 | Draft of <i>A Girl and Five Brave Horses</i> , chapter thirteen, circa 1961 |
| Box 1, Folder 23 | Draft of <i>A Girl and Five Brave Horses</i> , chapter fourteen, circa 1961 |
| Box 1, Folder 24 | Draft of <i>A Girl and Five Brave Horses</i> , chapter fifteen, circa 1961 |
| Box 1, Folder 25 | Draft of <i>A Girl and Five Brave Horses</i> , chapter sixteen, circa 1961 |
| Box 1, Folder 26 | Draft of <i>A Girl and Five Brave Horses</i> , chapter seventeen, circa 1961 |
| Box 1, Folder 27 | Draft of <i>A Girl and Five Brave Horses</i> , chapter eighteen, circa 1961 |
| Box 1, Folder 28 | Article about Carver, <i>Inn Dixie</i> , 1961 February |
| Box 1, Folder 29 | "How to Plan a Valentine's Party", 1961 |
| Box 1, Folder 30 | Article, <i>Publisher's Weekly</i> , 1962 January 1 |
| Box 1, Folder 31 | Article about Carver, <i>Tourovues</i> , 1968 July 8 |
| Box 1, Folder 32 | Article about Arnette Webster French, <i>Outdoor Whirl</i> , 1987 May |
| Box 2, Folder 1 | Interview with Carver, 1994 November 3 |
| Box 2, Folder 2 | Unpublished manuscript, undated |

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Series 2: Diving Horse Career and Atlantic City, undated

Documents Carver's career, social activities with other women performers, and images of the Steel Pier in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The photographs date from the late 1920s through the 1930s and are supported by magazine articles and newspaper clippings. These textual materials provide context on the history of Atlantic City and its role in the amusement industry. The materials are arranged in chronological order.

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| Box 6 | Scrapbook of newspaper clippings and photographs, 1924-1961 |
| Box 5 | Photograph album of Sonora Carver, Dr. Carver and diving horses, 1927-1931 |
| Box 3, Folder 1 | Photographs of Carver as a young woman and as a horse diver, 1927-1930 |
| Box 3, Folder 2 | Photographs of Carver with diving horses, circa 1927-1930s |
| Box 3, Folder 3-4 | Photographs of diving horse acts , 1927-1930s |
| Box 3, Folder 5 | Photographs of Steel Pier and diving horse acts including images of Sonora Carver, 1929-1931 |
| Box 3, Folder 6 | Photographs of Steel Pier, 1929-1931 |
| Box 3, Folder 7 | Photographs of Steel Pier water sports, 1929-1931 |
| Box 3, Folder 8 | Photographs of Steel Pier, general acts and attractions, 1929-1931 |
| Box 3, Folder 9 | Article, Atlantic City's Circus, Steel Pier Parade, 1937 May 31 |
| Box 3, Folder 10 | Correspondence, 1938-1940 |
| Box 3, Folder 11 | Article, Atlantic City's History and Carver, Philadelphia, 1979 June |
| Box 3, Folder 12 | <i>Atlantic City: One Hundred and Twenty Five Years of Ocean Madness</i> , 1979 |
| Box 3, Folder 13 | Article, Atlantic City's Horse Diving History, Atlantic City, 1981 August |
| Box 3, Folder 14 | Article, Atlantic City's Horse Diving History, Atlantic City, 1986 June |
| Box 3, Folder 15 | General information on Atlantic City, <i>The Atlantic Flyer</i> , 1986 July - August |
| | <i>Return to Table of Contents</i> |
| Box 7, Folder 3 | Cover of scrapbook with article relating to diving horse act, undated |

Series 3: Visual Impairment and Advocacy, 1953-1977, undated

Include materials relating to the LightHouse for the Blind and its work with the visually impaired community. Materials include Carver's identification card, news bulletins, leaflets, photographs, a scrapbook, and speeches. There are some correspondence and TV guides for the Longstreet miniseries. The materials are arranged in chronological order.

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| Box 7, Folder 1 | Scrapbook, 1953-1965 |
| Box 7, Folder 2 | Cover of scrapbook, 1953-1961 |
| Box 3, Folder 16 | Identification cards, Seeing Eye Incorporated, 1959-1977 |
| Box 3, Folder 17 | Photographs of "Carnival Ball," Lighthouse for the Blind, 1960-1961 |
| Box 2, Folder 3 | News Bulletins, Lighthouse for the Blind, May 1963-Summer 1967 |
| Box 3, Folder 18 | Speeches at the Roosevelt Hotel, 1964 |
| Box 3, Folder 19 | News bulletin and photographs of "Melpomene Ball," Lighthouse for the Blind, 1965 |
| Box 3, Folder 20 | Correspondence and television guides for Longstreet miniseries, 1970-1971 |
| Box 4, Folder 1 | Leaflet, Lighthouse for the Blind, undated |
| Box 4, Folder 2-7 | Photographs, undated |

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Series 4: Walt Disney's *Wild Hearts Can't be Broken* Movie, 1990-1993, undated

Documents the creative process and logistics of making the motion picture film about Sonora Webster Carver which debuted in 1991. The film is primarily based on her life as a rider of diving horses, as told in her memoir *A Girl and Five Brave Horses*. Even though Carver was invited on the set while filming the movie she later commented that she was disappointed in the movie's portrayal of her life and career. Materials include the screenplay, call list, correspondence between the production company and Carver, publicity photographs, travel itineraries, magazine articles, and newspaper clippings. The materials are arranged in chronological order.

| | |
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| Box 4, Folder 8 | Screenplay, circa 1990 |
| Box 4, Folder 9 | Call list, circa 1990 |
| Box 4, Folder 10 | Correspondence, 1990-1993 |
| Box 4, Folder 11 | Publicity photographs for movie, circa 1990 |
| Box 4, Folder 12 | Publicity photographs of Sonora Carver and Arnette French, circa 1990 |
| Box 4, Folder 18 | Article, <i>The State</i> , September 22, 1990 |
| Box 4, Folder 13 | Itinerary, print and national television press junket, 1991 |
| Box 4, Folder 19 | Article, <i>Entertainment Weekly</i> , 1991 May 24 |
| Box 4, Folder 14 | Travel accommodations and activities for screening, 1991 |
| Box 4, Folder 16 | Fan Mail, 1991 |
| Box 4, Folder 17 | Newspaper clippings, 1991 |
| Box 4, Folder 19 | Article, <i>Disney Channel Magazine</i> , 1992 October-1992 November |
| Box 4, Folder 19 | Article, <i>Disney Channel Magazine</i> , 1992 December-1993 January |
| Box 4, Folder 15 | Public appearances, 1993 |
| Map-folder 1 | Movie poster, undated |

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Series 5: Dr. William Frank "Doc" Carver and the Wild West, 1891-1975, undated

Include materials on Dr. William Frank "Doc" Carver and the Wild West, primarily through magazine articles, photographs, a scrapbook of newspaper clippings, an unpublished manuscript, and personal experience narratives dating from 1923. The materials are arranged in chronological order and provide a wealth of information on Native American stories and western American folklore.

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| Box 8 | Scrapbook of newspaper clippings, 1891-1975 |
| Box 4, Folder 24 | Narratives and personal experiences of the Wild West, 1923, undated |
| Box 4, Folder 20 | Photographs, 1926 |
| Box 4, Folder 21 | Article, <i>Field and Stream</i> , 1929 September |
| Box 4, Folder 21 | Article, <i>Field and Stream</i> , 1929 October |
| Box 4, Folder 22 | Article, <i>Outdoor Life</i> , 1930 May |
| Box 4, Folder 23 | Article, <i>Frontier Times</i> , 1961 February-March |
| Box 4, Folder 24 | Blake's Western Stories: The Truth about Buffalo Bill (William F. Cody), Wild Bill, undated |
| Box 4, Folder 24 | J. B. Cody and California Joe (Dr. Carver), undated |
| Box 4, Folder 25 | Unpublished manuscripts, undated |

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Series 6: Miscellaneous, 1962-1991, undated

Consists of an article on circus and rodeo history, and a newspaper clipping defending the care of horses. There is also correspondence to Sonora Carver from Ripley's Believe It or Not requesting a photograph. The materials date from 1962-1991 and are arranged in chronological order.

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| Box 4, Folder 26 | Article, Circus and Rodeo History, true, 1962 July |
| Box 4, Folder 27 | Newspaper clippings relating to the care of horses, 1991 |
| Box 4, Folder 28 | Miscellaneous Materials |

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