

Engerer Family Papers, c. 1920 – 1964, 2008

Special Collections Department/Long Island Studies Institute

Contact Information:
Special Collections Department
Axinn Library, Room 032
123 Hofstra University
Hempstead, NY 11549
Phone: (516) 463-6411, or 463-6404
Fax: (516) 463-6442
E-mail: LISI@hofstra.edu
<http://www.hofstra.edu/Libraries/SpecialCollections>

Compiled by:	[Natalia Sucre]	Last updated by:	
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Engerer Family Papers, c.1920-1964, 2008
1.5 cubic ft.

Collection Note

Captain Ernest Engerer immigrated to the United States from Germany circa 1914, where he settled on Long Island and worked as an animal trainer and animal act performer for fifty years. During his career work with animals, mainly wild cats, ponies, and police dogs, Captain Engerer ran a kennel and dog training academy on Long Island as well as a small circus show that traveled both regionally and abroad.

The collection includes family and business photographs; performance flyers, programs, posters, advertisements and other promotional material; business papers; news clippings; and an oral history. These provide information on how a small-sized, family owned animal training and show business operated in New York state over a period that saw the national rise and decline of the big-top corporation circus and the development of new approaches to animal training.

Noteworthy among the collection's news clippings is a story that relates a circus performance Captain Engerer organized exclusively for the entertainment of Jewish children in Brooklyn in 1935.

Scope and Content Note

The "Engerer Family Papers" consists of family and business papers relating to Captain Ernest Engerer's career in the United States circa 1914 to 1964 as an animal trainer and animal act performer. During his career work with animals, mainly wild cats, ponies, and police dogs, Captain Engerer ran a kennel and dog training academy on Long Island as well as a small traveling circus. The collection includes family and business photographs; performance flyers, programs, posters, advertisements; business papers; news clippings; and an oral history. These provide information on how a small-sized, family owned animal training and animal show business operated in New York state over a fifty-year period that saw the national rise and decline of the big-top corporation circus.

Noteworthy items: News story on a circus performance Captain Engerer organized exclusively for the entertainment of Jewish children in Brooklyn in 1935; brochure on the Works Progress Administration Federal Theater Circus 1939.

Biographical Sketch

Captain Ernest Engerer was a wild animal trainer, born in Germany in 1893, who immigrated to the United States circa 1914 where he settled along with his brother, William Engerer, on Long Island.

Born into a Bavarian family with a long tradition in wild animal training, Captain Engerer began his vocation as a child, trained at the famous Hagenbeck Training School in Hamburg, and on graduating worked as a wild animal trapper for the Hagenbeck Company. A stint with the German imperial army in South West Africa earned him the title he would use throughout his career as a trainer and performer in the United States. After 1918, he also became known professionally as “the one-armed” lion tamer, due to an incident during a performance in which a wild cat attacked him and chewed off his arm.

After losing his arm, Captain Engerer turned from working exclusively with wild cats to raising and training dogs, specifically German shepherds. As a trainer of both dogs and wild cats, Captain Engerer was an advocate of the late-nineteenth century method known as “kindness training,” popular at the Hagenback Training School. During the 1920s, he established a kennel and dog training academy in Laurelton, Long Island and became involved in training dogs for police work, offering his own dogs’ services to the police in several criminal cases. Throughout the decade Captain Engerer traveled around the east coast with his young son, Ernest Engerer, Jr., performing in acts that showcased his dogs’ training. Several of his dogs became among the first canines to work for the American stage and film industry.

In 1930, Captain Engerer returned to his initial focus on wild cats, winning the World Championship in Wild Animal Training held in Cleveland and going on to perform widely with his lions, including regular appearances with the Works Progress Administration Federal Theater Circus after its creation in 1935. He continued to perform wild animal acts for the rest of his career, traveling throughout the war years to entertain the troops in army camps and taking his show abroad in the fifties to Cuba, Latin America, and Spain.

In his later years, Captain Engerer settled in North Carolina and continued his wild cat performances in various small shows and amusement parks. As the years passed, Captain Engerer experienced an increasing number of attacks from his wild cats, often during performances. The Captain found his death in 1964 during a wild cat act when Monte, a lion he had worked with for 12 years, attacked and killed him in front of 25 spectators during a performance in an amusement park in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Indexing Terms

Names:

Engerer, Ernest, Captain, 1983 -1964.
Federal Theatre Project (U.S.).
Shepherd Dog Club of America
United States. Works Progress Administration.

Subject terms:

Animal training.
Animals in the performing arts.
Animal welfare.
Circus animals.
Circus--United States--History.
Lion attacks.
Kennels--New York (State)--Long Island.
Menageries.
Police dogs.

Geographical terms:

Laurelton (N.Y.).
Long Island (N.Y.).
Queens County (N.Y.).

Forms and genre terms:

Advertisements.
Commercial correspondence.
News clippings.
Photographs.
Playbills.
Posters.
Theater programs.

Occupational terms:

Circus owners.
Circus performers.
Dog trainers.
Lion trainers.

Series Titles

The papers are divided into the following 4 series:

- I. Auto/biographical Material
- II. Dog Training and Performances
- III. Wild Animal Training and Performances
- IV. Photographs

Box 1

- I. Auto/biographical Material

Folder	Inclusive dates	Title/Description
1	1927, 1928, 1937	Biographical sketches: news stories, program notes
2	1930	First-person newspaper chronicle on World Animal Trainer Championship
3	1964	Facsimile copy of death certificate
4	2008	Brief Engerer family biographies compiled by Amanda Tupper; oral history: Amanda Tupper interviews her grandfather, Ernest O. Engerer, Jr.

- II. Dog Training and Performances

Folder	Inclusive dates	Title/Description
5	1926 – 1941; n.d.	Captain Engerer's Police Dog Academy: promotional material, bills, receipts, forms, correspondence
6	1924-1935; n.d.	Circus animal shows: programs, flyers, news clippings
7	1931, 1935	Circus animal shows: facsimile copies of news clippings
8	1925, 1926, n.d.	Captain Engerer's police dogs in the media: news clippings and advertisements

9	1925, 1926, n.d.	Captain Engerer's police dogs in the media: facsimile copies of news clippings and advertisements
10	1925, 1930, n.d.	Captain Engerer's philosophy on animal training and animal rights: news clippings
11	1925, 1920, n.d.	Captain Engerer's philosophy on animal training and animal rights: facsimile copies of news clippings

III. Wild Animal Training and Performances

Folder	Inclusive dates	Title/Description
12	1933 – 1962; n.d.	Wild animal acts: news clippings, program, correspondence
13	1933-1962; n.d.	Wild animal acts: facsimile copies of news clippings
14	1939, n. d.	WPA Federal Theater Circus: brochure, flyers, news clippings
15	1939	WPA Federal Theater Circus: facsimile copies of news clippings
16	1939 – 1964; n.d.	Lion attacks: news clippings, news article printouts; related performance flyers, posters (see separate in map case 1-10)
17	1939 - 1964	Lion attacks: facsimile copies of news clippings

Box 2

IV. Photographs

Folder	Inclusive dates	Title/Description
18	Early 1920s; 1930s	Portraits of Captain Engerer
19	1920s	Captain Engerer: Kennels and circus
20	1920s	Ernest O. Engerer, Jr. with dogs and ponies
21	1930s	Captain Engerer: Kennels and circus

22	1930s	Ernest O. Engerer, Jr. with dogs and ponies
23	1930s	Circus performances and shows
24	1930s	Circus people
25	1930s	Circus animals
26	1950s – 1960s	Captain Engerer and his wild cats on the road