

Collection #
SC 0493

**EUGENE V. DEBS
PAPERS, 1881–1940, 1972**

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March 1990, May 1994

Updated 13 May 2004, February 2013

Visuals Added by Dorothy A. Nicholson May 2018

Manuscript and Visual Collections Department

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Eugene Victor Debs (1855-1926) was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, of parents who had emigrated from Germany in 1849. He attended school until he was fifteen and then worked in the shops of the Terre Haute and Indianapolis Railroad, eventually becoming a locomotive fireman.

In 1875 Debs helped found a local chapter of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen; three years later he was made editor of their magazine. In 1880 he was made secretary and treasurer of the national Brotherhood and editor of their magazine. During the early 1880s he held all these union jobs and functioned as city clerk of Terre Haute. After 1883 he concentrated on his union duties, but found time to serve one term (1885) in the lower house of the Indiana legislature.

This was the period when labor was being shaped by Samuel Gompers into a federation of workers organized by individual crafts, the American Federation of Labor. Debs opposed this method of organization, preferring to organize a whole industry, and in the ensuing decades he operated in opposition to Gompers. In 1893 Debs helped to form the American Railway Union, encompassing all workers in the railway industry, and was elected its president.

This industrial union came into being in time to participate in the Pullman strike of 1894. Debs opposed participation, but once the decision was made he organized a boycott which led to his citation for contempt of court (for violating an injunction) and imprisonment for six months.

Debs now turned his attention to national politics. He campaigned for Bryan in 1896, but the next year he transformed what was left of his union into a Social Democratic (Socialist) Party of America. He was this party's candidate for President in the next four elections, polling 96,000 votes in 1900, 402,000 in 1904, 420,000 in 1908, and 901,000 in the Bull Moose election of 1912 (the highest the party was ever to achieve). Meanwhile, in 1907, he helped found another non-craft labor organization, the Industrial Workers of the World.

Debs refused to run in the 1916 election. World War I brought new issues for the Socialist party, which opposed participation because it saw war as a form of capitalist oppression. When the United States joined the conflict, Debs was vocal in decrying prosecutions under the Smith Espionage Act, and in September 1918 he was sentenced to ten years imprisonment. He was released by President Harding in 1921. While in prison he again ran for President, polling 919,000 votes.

Though Debs remained active, his health, never strong, was broken, and he spent lengthy periods of his remaining years in the Lindlahr Sanatorium in Evanston, Illinois. Debs, an eloquent speaker, attracted large crowds of listeners but many fewer votes. His personal

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The collection is organized into two series.

SERIES 1 consisting of the manuscript materials, fills four folders of correspondence. These were purchased from several different sources, which are listed at the beginning of the Calendar, in which the source of each letter is indicated, when known.

Folder 1 contains letters of Eugene Debs from 1881 to 1925. These include one of 1885 as an official of the firemen's Brotherhood; two Socialist aphorisms apparently written as autographs in 1904 and 1905; some routine acknowledgements; and two letters to Jack Carney, editor of *Truth* (that of 11-18-1918 is interesting as showing his attitude toward Samuel Gompers).

Folder 2 contains seven letters of Theodore Debs between 1919 and 1940 on his brother's behalf. One to Jack Carney in 1919 mentions Debs's objection to the deportation of radicals during the Big Red Scare. Three others are to George Sylvester Viereck, editor of *The American Monthly*.

Folder 3 contains letters from Eugene Debs, then living in Girard, Kansas, and working on the magazine *Appeal to Reason*, to Stephen Marion Reynolds, a friend in Terre Haute whom Debs knew after 1900 and who took an active part in the Presidential campaign of 1908. These letters should be looked at in conjunction with the Debs-Reynolds correspondence in the Reynolds collection, M 235.

Folder 4 contains Xerox copies of correspondence with Helen Keller, in terms of mutual admiration.

SERIES 2 contains the visual materials consisting of three portraits of Debs, one group portrait of him with other men, and a 1972 Socialist campaign poster with a reprinted image of Debs giving a speech, these also came from different sources.

SERIES CONTENTS

Series 1: Manuscript Materials, 1881–1940, n.d.

CONTENTS

7-24-1881

EVD, Terre Haute, to Bro. Stephens. Thanks for your boldness and frankness and your noble endeavors for the brotherhood. Here is a list of your indebtednesses to the Grand Lodge. ALS 2p J

8-14-1885

F. W. Arnold, Grand Master, and Eugene V. Debs, Grand Secretary, Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, to John Newell, Cleveland, Ohio. Please honor the credentials of our Delegates for transportation over your railroad.

TLS 1p F

10-15-1892

EVD, Locomotive Fireman's Magazine, Terre Haute, to Lloyd Bryce, New York City. My article will appear in the November issue of our magazine. Sorry that timing prevented its use in your Notes and Comments.

TLS 1p H

1-14-1895

EVD note penned from jail in Woodstock, Illinois. "The foundations of our Republic rest in the intelligence of our people and the virtues that cluster about the fireside.

ANS ½ p.

2-2-1904

EVD, Appeal to Reason, Girard, Kansas, to Nora White Simpson, San Diego, Calif. My tribute to Anna Ferry Smith has been lost. Comrade Elliott has written one which will be ready for the next issue. TLS 1p J

CONTAINER

Manuscripts: Folder 1

Manuscripts: Folder 1

Manuscripts: Folder 1

Manuscripts: Folder 1

Manuscripts: Folder 1

11-18-1918

EVD, Terre Haute (Theodore's stationery) to Jack [Carney] Please give space to the enclosed. The Socialists saved the lives of Moyer, Haywood, and Pettibone while Gompers and his crowd were indifferent and hostile. Moyer has forgotten this, and fawns at the feet of the labor misleaders. Please send 25 copies of the article; I am going to reproduce it widely, giving credit to Truth. TLS 1p C

Manuscripts: Folder 1

12-7-[1918]

EVD, Akron, Ohio, to Jack [Carney]. Here it is; make any changes you wish. You'd have had a check long ago, but I'm deeply in debt myself. Hoped to raise money this trip, but the Flu has cancelled meetings, and the Secret Service are at my heels. Thanks for your generous treatment of the Moyer article. ALS 2p C

Manuscripts: Folder 1

1-2-1919

EVD, Terre Haute, to Art [Young, cartoonist]. Thanks for your big, beautiful greeting, which sets the heart singing the song of the Revolution. I am keeping step with you to every drumbeat to "victory or death." TLS 1p J

Manuscripts: Folder 1

8-31-1922

EVD, Lindlahr Institute, Chicago, to Frank Sheridan, New York. Thanks for your kindness to Mrs. Curry and for your efforts during my prison days. TLS 1p F

Manuscripts: Folder 1

10-13-1922

EVD, Lindlahr Health Resort, Elmhurst, Ill., to Comrade [Lincoln] Phipper. I am here trying to regain my shattered health and hope to resume my activities in the movement in a few weeks. Have you a copy of the "Triology"? I remember the glowing hours in your hospitable home.
ALS 2p J

Manuscripts: Folder 1

4-5-1924

TD, Terre Haute, to George S. Viereck, New York. Thanks for your kind notes of the 27th and 29th, and for the splendid April issue of your American Monthly, filled with vital and bristling matter. My brother and I are glad to know the picture will fare so flatteringly at your hands.

TLS 1p D

Manuscripts: Folder 2

10-15-1924

TD, Terre Haute, to Isadore Fischer, Alfred, N. Y. My brother, just out of a sanatorium, will read your letter on criminology but will not be able to reply. He is treating the subject in a book. He firmly believes that criminals are created by vicious economic conditions and that they can be reclaimed. TLS 1p J

Manuscripts: Folder 2

12-28-1940

TD, Terre Haute, to Comrade Warford. Gene's ashes are at Highland Lawn Cemetery. In my life, the shadows grow longer. I wish you success in your debating experience.

TLS 1p J

Manuscripts: Folder 2

6-1-1904

EVD, Gladstone, Michigan, to Reynolds. Vignerney[?] will have proofsheets of my pamphlet, "Unionism and Socialism"; please criticize freely and hand to Theodore. You should get acquainted with Comrade Tuttle of Milwaukee and his son, who are painting the Opera House. They belong to the world's true nobility, the same spirit which inspired Whitman's "Salut au Monde." Secret meeting here of railway workers. ALS 2p E

Manuscripts: Folder 3

12-19-1905

EVD, Terre Haute, to Reynolds. Encloses letter. Article will get enormous circulation in Success. Hope to see you at barbecue next week. TLS 1p E

Manuscripts: Folder 3

3-19-1908

Manuscripts: Folder 3

EVD, Girard, Kansas, to Stevie [Reynolds], Terre Haute. Glad to get your card about the convention. It must have been glorious. You deserve great credit. Glad to see Indiana waking up. Glad you are going out to work with the comrades elsewhere. Your message conquers, and for good. Tom Harper has died; Old Walt will welcome him. TLS 1p E

3-26-1908

Manuscripts: Folder 3

EVD, Girard, Kansas, to Stephen [Reynolds], Terre Haute. Referring to yours of 1-23, the list of Indiana workers is being made up and will be sent to you. Good reports from you and your lieutenants. Glad to see obstacles overcome in Indiana. You seem to keep drinking from Old Walt's fountain. TLS 1p E

4-30-1908

Manuscripts: Folder 3

EVD, Girard, Kansas, to Stephen [Reynolds], Terre Haute. Thanks for yours of 2-28 and for my nomination as delegate to the convention. I may not be able to attend; Comrade Warren's trial begins Monday and I must be with him. Indiana is responding to your speaking and organizing. TLS 1p E

5-7-1908

Manuscripts: Folder 3

EVD, Girard, Kansas, to Reynolds. Bruce Rogers will have a message from me if I miss the convention. He is one of the finest and you must get to know him; you will gain strength from each other. I look for big things before the snow flies. TLS 1p E

5-19-1908

Manuscripts: Folder 3

EVD, Girard, Kansas, to Reynolds. Please drop a line and a copy of your "Life" to Mrs. Mae Lawson of Horton, Kansas, who has just issued a pamphlet. She wants to serve our movement, but doesn't quite know what Socialism is.
TLS 1p E

Xerox copies of correspondence with Helen Keller, in terms of mutual admiration.

Manuscripts: Folder 4

Series 2: Visual Materials, 1907–1924, 1972

CONTENTS

[portrait photograph of Debs mounted on board]
taken by Terre Haute photographer "W.A. Payne"
1907]

[group portrait photograph of Debs with four other
men. The man seated to Debs' left is William Carlyle
Hudson, the donor's grandfather from Terre Haute,
photograph is by Williams of Terre Haute, 1914]

[photograph portrait of Debs, inscribed and signed
July 30, 1920, removed from studio folder from
Monfort Studio, Goddard Bldg., 27 E. Monroe St.,
Chicago]

[photograph portrait of Debs, inscribed to George
Sylvester Viereck] "... Poet, Idealist, Humanitarian ...
March 21, 1924"

"Eugene V. / Debs / Socialist Candidate For President
1900, 1904, 1908, 1912, 1920 ..."
[Socialist Workers Campaign poster for 1972,
contains quote by Debs and image of him giving a
speech]

CONTAINER

OVC Photographs:
Box 1, Folder 1

OVA Photographs:
Box 1, Folder 1

OVA Photographs:
Box 1, Folder 2

OVA Photographs:
Box 1, Folder 3

OVC Graphics:
Box 1, Folder 1