
The Register of Reverend Aaron Allen Heist Papers, 1910-1964

Collection number: MSS 088

Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research

Los Angeles, California

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Reverend Aaron Allen Heist Papers,

Date (inclusive): 1910-1964

Collection number: MSS 088

Creator: Aaron Allen Heist

Extent: 1 legal half box and one clam shell box, ½ cubic foot

Repository: Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research

Los Angeles, CA 90044

Abstract: A small, but rich collection of correspondence, articles, clippings and sermon notes of Reverend Aaron Allen Heist, a Methodist minister driven by his Christian faith to lead a life of activism for social justice in the mid twentieth century.

Language: English

Access

The collection is available for research only at the Library's facility in Los Angeles. The Library is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday. Researchers are encouraged to call or email the Library indicating the nature of their research query prior to making a visit.

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Preferred Citation

[Identification of item], Reverend Aaron Allen Heist Papers, Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, Los Angeles, California.

Provenance

Donated to the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research by Rochelle Santiago, granddaughter of A.A. Heist.

Biography

Reverend Aaron Allen Heist was an activist Methodist minister whose devout Christian faith demanded he live a life dedicated to causes of social justice. Heist's study of the teachings of Jesus led him to believe that Christian ethics were directly opposed to capitalist business practices and that a Christian society required economic democracy assured to all individuals. For Heist, Christian faith had to be lived and acted upon, not just professed within the church. In accordance with Methodist church doctrine of the time, Heist advocated the idea that each individual is entitled to economic security. He thought that such security could only be obtained when workers owned the businesses in which they worked. His embrace of church doctrine led Heist to defend workers' rights to organize, and to select the representation of their choice. Throughout the depression, Heist worked on behalf of the unemployed and underpaid, championing worker owned businesses as the solution to the economic hardships created by capitalist business practices. Christian morality and a belief in simple justice moved Heist to campaign for the guarantee of Constitutional rights to all citizens, including denouncing the internment of U.S. citizens of Japanese ancestry and the segregation of the military. Heist was a man of seemingly boundless energy when it came to fighting for human rights. He was unusual in that his motivations were never political, but came from a profound faith and practice of Christian teachings.

Aaron Allen Heist was born January 10, 1885, on farm near Middleville, Michigan. He attended Northwestern University, graduating in 1908, after which he joined his family who had moved to Oregon. He took a Methodist Home Mission position at the sawmill town of Warrington, Oregon. He performed pastoral duties in St. Helens and worked for the Oregon Anti-Saloon League during its first campaign for state-wide prohibition in 1910. Also while in St. Helens Heist met Elsie Philip (born 1886 in Maine), whom he later married on June 20, 1917. Heist entered Garret Biblical Institute, Evanston Illinois in 1912, graduating in 1916. During that time he served as a student pastor in Sheldon, Illinois. Upon completion of theological studies, he returned to Oregon, serving as pastor in Rose City Park (1916), Portland, Astoria (1918), and Aberdeen, Washington (1921). In Astoria and Aberdeen Heist became involved with local labor groups, contributing to the labor publications: Astoria Labor Press and the Southwestern Washington Labor Press. His series for the latter was entitled "The Church and Social Betterment; How Organized Christianity Makes Common Cause With Labor". His success in winning over Aberdeen community sentiment to support the civil liberties of lumber workers in their right to be organized by the I.W.W. led to his 1923 appointment as Field/Associate Secretary of the Methodist Federation for Social Service.

In 1926 Heist moved his family (son Philip Heist born May 16, 1918 in Portland, Oregon, died April 12 1988; and daughter Kathlyn Heist Robinson born April 11, 1922 in Aberdeen, Washington, died November 1, 1994) where he became pastor of Grace Community Church in Denver, Colorado. He turned the church from a congregation of the well to do to an activist church that served minors and laborers, hosted the Denver Labor College, the local Open Forum (ACLU) chapter., activities which Heist continued and expanded. Heist was head of Colorado Workers' Summer School . As an advocate of birth control, Heist sponsored courses on human sexuality at the church. His non-pastoral activities included serving on numerous national directorships, leagues, unions, commissions and clubs some of which were: the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Church Committee on Mooney and Billings, the Centralia Publicity Committee, the Committee on Industry, National Conference of Social Work, the Commission on the Penetration of Western Commerce Into All the World, the Significance of Jesus Christ in Modern Times, the League for Industrial Democracy, the Conference for Progressive Labor Action, the League to Abolish Capital Punishment and the Denver Inter-Racial Commission.

During his pastorate in Denver Heist once again became an advocate of miners' rights to organize and be represented by the I.W.W. During the Colorado coal strike of 1927-1928, Heist hosted labor meetings at Grace church. He worked to bring the parties together and to encourage community understanding and support of the miners' situation. He challenged the reporting of the 1927 Columbine massacre in the Denver Star. Heist's use of the church to advance social activism brought Grace church to national attention. In recognition of his work on behalf of the miners' free speech rights and civil liberties, a committee of the Progressives of America, chaired by ex Colorado Governor William E Sweet, held a National Recognition Dinner on June 15, 1928. Clarence Darrow was the laudatory speaker for the dinner.

Heist accepted the position to head the Social Services Department of the Columbia Conserve Company, Indianapolis, Indiana in 1931. This worker owned soup canning company put into practice many of the economic democracy ideals that Heist championed in his writings. He returned to the ministry in California, serving in the Los Angeles area at Woodcrest (1933), Florence (1936) and Wilmington (1938-1940) Methodist churches. He resigned from the Florence church when he was tapped to be field representative in charge of education and public relations for Southern California Committee for Industrial Organization. While in Los Angeles he served as Secretary of the Inter-Religious Conference of Industrial Relations, composed of Catholic, Protestant and Jewish clergy. Heist was assigned to the First Methodist Church Santa Maria in 1941. He used the Santa Maria church bulletin, The Call to denounce the internment of Japanese American citizens. The Call

was distributed far beyond the church membership and the advocacy for civil rights for all citizens received national attention. Heist campaigned for the right of interned citizens to return to their homes after the World War Two, testifying before a hostile California Assembly Committee that was gathering information on "the Japanese problem". In 1946, Heist was appointed director of Southern California American Civil Liberties Union. As director, he joined with A. Philip Randolph in 1948 to promote civil disobedience in protest of the segregation of the military. Heist retired from the ministry in 1950, but continued as director of the Southern California ACLU. In 1952 he was a founder of the Citizens Committee to Protect American Freedoms, becoming chair in 1953. This organization worked to abolish HUAC committees as being unconstitutional. Heist died July 29, 1963, survived by his wife Elsie, son Philip, daughter Kathlyn, and three grandchildren.

Scope and Content

Materials in the collection include correspondence, articles, bulletins, reports, brochures, fliers, clippings and the sermon notes of Reverend Aaron Allen Heist.

Box one contains the non-sermon materials arranged in seven folders: 1) Biographical and personal, 1923, 1926, 1930-1931, 1939, 1946, 1965, n.d., contains brochures, correspondence and clippings; 2) Published articles, 1928, 1930-1931, 1944, n.d.; 3) Grace Community Church and Colorado coal strike, 1927-1928, 1931, contains correspondence, clippings, and reports; 4) National Recognition Dinner, 1928, contains six items of correspondence from Clarence Darrow, clippings, dinner journal; 5) Columbia Conserve Company, 1928, contains brochure and clippings; 6) First Methodist Church Santa Maria, California, 1944-1945, contains bulletins and fliers; 7) Desegregation of U.S. military, 1948, contains correspondence between Heist, Senator Wayne Morris and A Philip Randolph, bulletins, fliers, and clippings. Materials within folders are arranged chronologically.

Box two contains Heist's notes for approximately 200 sermons 1910-1946, [1939-1946 bulk] arranged in chronological order.

Title: Citizens Committee to Preserve American Freedom Records,

Date (inclusive): 1947-1971

Physical Description: 1 2/3 linear feet

Title: American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Records (unprocessed)

Physical Description: 2.5 cubic feet