Preisler, Paul (1902-1971)
Papers, 1858-1972
222 Folders, 93 Photos

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The papers of Paul William Preisler—biochemist, union organizer, lawyer and photographer were deposited in the University of Missouri-St. Louis Archives and Manuscripts Division by the executors of his estate in the Spring of 1972. The collection has been processed and organized; it is now open to the public.

Preisler dedicated his life to bettering his community and protecting the civil liberties of its citizens. His life included many causes and interests, ranging from the American Civil Liberties Union and his opposition to the proposed Food and Drug Act of Congress in the nineteen thirties to founding Local 420 of the American Federation of Teachers, to the political redistricting of the City of St. Louis and the State of Missouri. He was active in the campaign to change the 2/3 majority vote needed to pass school taxes. Although he was a veteran campaigner for public office, having run eleven times he never won an election.

Preisler was honored several times for his dedication and work in the community. Among his honors were the Page One Award, granted by the St. Louis Newspaper Guild, and certificates of appreciation from both the Easter and Western Chapters of the American Civil Liberties Union. In many organizations, Preisler was elected to offices such as the president or vice president or vice president. (See list at end.)

Paul William Preisler was born May 31, 1902. His father, Ernest Preisler, was an architect and realtor in St. Louis. Many homes designed by him are still standing in South St. Louis. Martha Witter Preisler, mother of Paul, was a descendant of an old St. Louis family which owned and operated Witter's Book Store, a locally famous store and a literary salon. Preisler had three brothers and two sisters.

As a young boy, he attended Sherman Grammar School, followed by McKinley High School. During the summers, the Preisler family would vacation at Elkhart Lakes in Wisconsin. It was here that Preisler developed a life-long interest in turtles. Later as an adult, Preisler would entertain the vacationers with turtle races. In the fall of 1919, he entered Washington University. He graduated four years later with a Bachelor of Science in Chemical Engineering. He continued his education receiving his Ph.D. in Biochemistry in 1927. The same year he married Doris Bausch, a botanist and physiologist. Preisler then worked as a post doctoral fellow in Washington, D.C., Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. After finishing his work on the west coast, he returned to St. Louis and was hired by the Washington University School of Medicine as instructor. He remained with the University until 1941 when he joined the army. After the war, he returned to the University staying until 1950 when he began to study law.

During the thirties, Preisler campaigned vigorously against the proposed Food and Drug Act in Congress. he gave lectures with slides (some of which are in the collection). He spoke to
the academic and science community, as well as to the general public. Preisler demanded more stringent rules for the sale of drugs, listing of the contents on cans and bottles, and the removal of quacks in the business.

In 1935, Preisler helped found the St. Louis Chapter of the American Federation of Teachers, Local 420. He was elected its first president. His first and most important task was to force the Board of Education to allow teachers to unionize, something fiercely opposed by the Board. Two years later, as the result of a court suit to force a non-partisan board election, the teachers were allowed to unionize. On the national level, Preisler became influential in the union and was elected International Vice-President for two terms (1938-1940; 1940-1942). An avid anti-Communist, Preisler was helpful in ousting three locals from the national federation for alleged Communist infiltration. However, there were repercussions from his duties with the Federation. Washington University did not endorse Preisler's union activities, but they did not wish to fire him, so they kept him at the level of instructor. (For further information please consult the Supplement to the Papers, the taped oral histories interview with Mr. Bostic Franklin, member of the AFT, and 2 part article, Walter Ehrlich "Birth Pangs of a Teachers Union: The St. Louis Story" MHR Vol. LXXIX numbers 1 and 2, 1984).

Also in the Depression decade, Preisler joined the Socialist Party. He was elected Chairman of the City Central Committee, a position held until 1952, when he resigned from the Party. One of his major concerns in the Party was that the Board of Election Commissioners refused minority parties and non-partisan candidates the right to have challengers and watchers at the election polls. As chairman, Preisler filed suit against the Board. In the early fifties, the case finally reached the Supreme Court of Missouri which ruled in Preisler's favor. Minorities could now have challengers and watchers at the polls. (For more information see the Preisler Collection, Series 4, Socialist Party, UMSL Archives and Manuscripts Division). In 1934 after the death of his father, Preisler assumed the presidency of the Preisler Realty Company, in addition to his duties as chemistry instructor, his labor activities and his socialist causes. Preisler stayed with the company until 1943 when the company was sold.

Besides all of the above activities, Preisler also ran for public office in the thirties. In 1937, two years after the St. Louis chapter of the American Federation of Teachers had been founded, Preisler ran for the Board of Education as a non-partisan. The Board refused his candidacy since, by its constitution, it was bi-partisan. In a landmark decision by the Missouri Supreme Court, the Board was forced to accept Preisler's candidacy. The court order was handed down three days before the election which meant all the ballots had to be remade. Preisler was not running to win (which he didn't) but on principle.

When World War II broke out, Preisler entered the United States Army as a captain. He was stationed at Fort Sam Houston in Texas at the Brooks General Hospital. His assignment was to the Sanitary Corps. In January 1946, he was discharged as lieutenant colonel. After the war, he returned to St. Louis. Again, he was in court. This time in 1947, he organized a suit against the Board of Education, because they did not permit married female teachers to work. Again the court ruled in favor of Preisler and women were allowed to retain their positions.

In 1950, at the age of forty-eight, Preisler entered St. Louis University School of Law. He was retained as Research Associate at Washington University with no salary. In 1969, he was awarded Professor Emeritus. he was also still active with the teachers union, but the issue
consuming most of his time at this point was the one of redistricting. In 1952 while still a
law student Preisler filed his first redistricting suit. It was against the Board of Election
Commissioners for improper drawing of the election districts. He lost in the lower court but
on second appeal to the Missouri Supreme Court, he won. St. Louis was forced to redraw her
election maps.

Next he turned his attention to the United States Congressional Districts of the state. He filed
in 1962, on the grounds that the districts were not as compact and "nearly equal in population
as may be." In 1965, the issue was brought before the Missouri General Assembly, which was
responsible for legislating the districts. The General Assembly proposed a plan and the
electorate voted for it in 1965. Early in 1966, Preisler refiled the suit for he did not think that
the 1965 plan was fair enough. Late in the summer of 1966, the Missouri Supreme Court
declared the 1965 plan unconstitutional. By 1969, the difference in Congressional
representation was less than 2000 in population per district. At the time of his death in 1971,
he was involved in another redistricting suit. In 1975, the court voted against Preisler's suit.
(For more information on the Redistricting Cases, please consult the Supplement to the
Papers-Taped oral history interviews with Mr. David Hemenway, Mr. Charles Blackmar, Mr.
David Grant. Also Series 6, Paul William Preisler Papers). As a lawyer, Preisler served
gratuitously as a Counselor for the ACLU. He defended the right of students to wear long
hair, hold anti-war demonstrations, and the publish uncensored newspapers. He also defended
prisoners and women against discrimination.

He was also involved in municipal affairs. he filed suit against the City of St. Louis when it
proposed the roadway through Shaw's Garden. Due to the vehement protest from Preisler and
the other citizens, the plan was dropped. Another case was that of the License collector's job.
Preisler contested it claiming it was patronage. However, he lost this case.

Often, Preisler's fight against discrimination took the form of running for office. He ran as a
Socialist for the Missouri legislature in 1934 and 1936. He campaigned for the Board of
ran for the Board of Alderman also as a non-partisan. In 1954, Preisler ran for the United
States Congress. This campaign was another one contested in the courts. The dispute
revolved around the filing fee. The Secretary of State of Missouri, Walter Toberman, refused
to accept the Preisler candidacy as a non-partisan; his argument was that a statute was
designed to stop Communist and splinter parties from filing unless they had a substantial
number of votes in the proceeding election. Preisler argued that he could run as an individual
and not as a representative of a party. The case went before the Missouri Supreme Court
which ruled in favor of Preisler. Preisler did not win any of these elections. However, he
successfully defended the rights of other non-partisan candidates, many of whom were
subsequently elected. (See Paul William Preisler Papers, Series 3).

Outside interests of Preisler included bridge playing, cooking and photography. (Please see
the Preisler Photo Collection, also in the Archives of the University of Missouri-St. Louis.
For further information regarding Preisler, please consult the Supplement to the Collection;
taped oral interviews with various people who knew and worked with Preisler).

Preisler was a member of many organizations, both professional and non-professional. In
some of them, he was elected to high office and was presented with awards for his dedication
to others. Because of the many organizations and honors, it is easier to simply list them.

**Professional Organizations:**
American Association for the Advancement of Sciences
American Chemical Society
Counselor, 1949-1950
Secretary-Treasurer, Division of Biological Chemistry, 1948-1951
American Electrochemical Society
American Federation of Technical Engineers
American Society of Biological Chemistry
Association of Military Surgeons of the United States Engineers Club of American Societies for Experimental Biology

American Bar Association
Bar Association of Metropolitan St. Louis

**Non-Professional Organizations:**
American Civil Liberties Union Counselor, 1968-1971
American Federation of Teachers, 1935-1971
President, Local 420, 1935-1942
International Vice-President, 1937-39; 1940-42; 1950
Chairman of Legislative Committee
Executive Secretary, 1965
Central Trades and Labor Union
Chairman of the Education Committee and Delegate
Federation of Economic and Political Education
2nd Vice President
Gamma Alpha
Missouri State Historical Society
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
Member-Executive Committee
St. Louis Labor Education Project
National Geographic Society
National Organization on Legal Problems of Education (NOLPE)
Phi Sigma
Public Education Association
Treasurer
St. Louis Labor Council
Sigma Xi
Socialist Party
Chairman of the City Central Committee, 1934-1951
State Committee of Missouri
Workers Defense League

**Awards:**
1952-Appreciation from the American Chemical Society
1957-Page One Award-St. Louis Newspaper Guild
1960-Appreciation Honor from the American Federation of Teachers, Local 420
1968-ACLU Award from Easter and Western Missouri Chapters
1969-Award from the American Jewish Congress
1972-Posthumously-Meritorious Service Award from St. Louis Metropolitan New Democratic Coalition In 1971, Preisler died at his home in St. Louis.

See also:

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