S0471 Von Romer, Harry (1906 - )
Collection, 1880-1981
150 Folders

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Related collections:
S0184 Camp Solidarity Inc. (1937- ), Records, 1937-1978
S0171 Von Romer, Harry (1906- ), Autobiography

Harry Von Romer donated his collection of union buttons, badges and memorabilia to the Western Historical Manuscript Collection on May 2, 1983.

Von Romer was born on August 11, 1906. His father, a German immigrant named Adolph Von Romer, raced horses as a jockey at tracks around St. Louis. The elder Von Romer also helped organize Teamsters Local 600 in St. Louis in 1900. Adolph Von Romer died in 1928.

Harry Von Romer first joined a union, the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers in Granite City, Illinois, when he became an apprentice millwright in September 1924. He began work at the St. Louis General Motors Plant in 1929. Workers at the GM plant organized under the American Federation of Labor in 1933, and Von Romer joined the federally chartered Local 18366. The GM workers switched to the independent Federated Automobile Workers of America Local 1 the following year. They remained with the independent union through its strike at the Fisher Body plant in 1935, but rejoined the AFL local a year later. "We'd had a strike," Von Romer told the St. Louis Labor Tribune, "but we won it on paper only. A lot of men didn't get their jobs back."

During the 1930s, Von Romer fell into a pattern familiar to working people during the Depression. He got jobs, got fired, went on strike and agitated to organize workers. Von Romer became the chairman of the St. Louis City's Central Committee of the American Workers Union in 1935 and 1936. Unemployed workers had organized the AWU in 1935 to work for better welfare benefits. When a fellow employee at the Fisher plant wore a AWU button to work, a plant supervisor who had previously threatened to dismiss any employee wearing a union button mistook it for a UAW pin. The employee lost his job and two weeks of AWU picketing failed to get it back. The incident inspired Von Romer to become a lifelong collector of union buttons. "If union buttons were so important," Von Romer decided, "someone should start saving them." Von Romer's collection later expanded to include union badges, pins, convention delegate ribbons and other labor memorabilia.

Von Romer continued to participate in strikes, walkouts and lockouts throughout the 1930s and 1940s. He was involved in strikes against GMC in 1934 and 1937, Laclede Gas in 1934 and the Kroger company in 1937. In 1941 Von Romer supported his wife during the Luggage Workers Local 25 strike against the Gardner Pocket Book Company. Police beat and arrested both of them, but the union prevailed in the strike. Von Romer also belonged to Camp
Solidarity, a recreational farm founded by the St. Louis Workmen's Benefit Fund (see collection S0184). Von Romer ran unsuccessfully as a Socialist Party candidate for St. Louis alderman in the 1950s.

WHMC collection 171 contains Von Romer's autobiography. It includes descriptions of Von Romer's involvement with strikes and lockouts, the daily life of St. Louis workers, working conditions at local auto plants, criticism of union and auto industry leadership. WHMC also conducted three oral history interviews with Harry Von Romer, in May and August 1973 and in September 1983.

Von Romer affiliated with nine unions over the course of his career. He joined the Wire and Corrugated Glass Worker's AFL Local 59 in 1942. The following year he became a member of the United Steel Workers. The army drafted Von Romer in 1944. He served as an artillery man in Europe.

After leaving the Army, Von Romer joined the Upholsterers International Union and became a member of the Carpenters Local 1596. He remained with that local until his retirement in 1970. Von Romer also was elected as a delegate to the Central Trades and Labor Union, renamed the St. Louis Labor Council in 1957. After his election, Von Romer's collection of union buttons grew enormously. He had previously relied on donations of buttons from fellow workers in St. Louis and around the country. As a delegate, he began to travel more and made a habit of collecting buttons, badges and memorabilia from union halls in other cities. Von Romer added to his collection during his entire 22 year service with the Labor Council. He continued to collect buttons and memorabilia after his retirement. Von Romer strengthened his collection by trading with an ever diminishing number of button enthusiasts, and by continuing to receive donations from other union members.

"In 1935," Von Romer recalled, "The superintendent actually instructed the guards at the gate not to allow any worker in who was wearing a union button, so some of the guys pinned them to their underclothes until they got through the gate. " Von Romer later lamented that,"I just don't think union members nowadays care as much about union buttons as they once did."Von Romer retired to a suburban home in north St. Louis in 1983. His son, Harry E. Von Romer, became a St. Louis County Councilman. In 1983, Von Romer's buttons were displayed at UM-St. Louis in an exhibit entitled "Symbols of Solidarity."

**SCOPE AND CONTENT**

"Historically," Von Romer told a reporter in 1979, "men have worn or used symbols to identify themselves with various issues. In the 1930s, to wear a union button in the auto industry was to show everyone, especially management, that you were proud to be a union member." The Von Romer collection documents union pride as expressed in the lapel and shirt sleeve pins, buttons and badges created by unions for conventions and on-the-job visibility. It also traces the history of labor in the United States. The collection documents strikes, struggles to organize workers, union anniversaries and events, and campaigns over issues from collective bargaining to the defeat of the right-to-work amendment. Buttons also signified eligibility and voting privileges at conventions.

The Von Romer collection also reflects labor's affirmation of rights of self-expression and
solidarity with the union cause. The Von Romer collection spans more than one hundred years of organized labor history. It contains over 1000 buttons, badges, ribbons, and other artifacts documenting the activities of over 53 unions. The oldest item is a beer mug from the Knights of Labor Hall, c. 1880 (folder 22). The collection also contains a pin from the Golden Jubilee of the Freie Gemeinde von St. Louis, the German Free Thinkers, 1900 (folder 62, see also collection 37), and an 1895 ribbon for the Amalgamated Wood Workers International, a predecessor of the Carpenters and Joiners, to which Von Romer belonged for the majority of his career in organized labor.

The collection also includes pins and badges from the other nine unions Von Romer associated with during his life, as well as unions from around the country acquired by Von Romer during his travels or received as trades from other button collectors, or as donations from other union members. The buttons are pinned to 8x10 cushion pads for easy removal and display.

In addition to buttons, badges and ribbons, the Von Romer collection contains a variety of materials generated by local unions, including: negotiated agreements; constitutions and by-laws; membership books, cards and dues books; souvenir address books and artifacts; and bumper stickers, decals and labels. Von Romer's personal papers include his convention delegate credentials, veterans' ID, union and Camp Solidarity membership cards, copies of a Longshoreman's newsletter published in St. Louis, and correspondence. Copies of the St. Louis Labor Council Minutes, AFL-CIO, collected by Von Romer, also comprise one series.

The collection contains two photographs, a postcard photo of Socialist presidential candidate Eugene Debs from 1926 (#12309) and a glossy 8x10 print of representative buttons from the collection (#12310). Mounted captions from the 1983 "Symbols of Solidarity" exhibit are filed in the personal papers series. The last box of the collection contains duplicate union buttons.


SERIES DESCRIPTIONS

1. Agreements, 1942-1981. Copies of contracts negotiated between St. Louis corporations and unions. Companies include General Motors, Sterling Aluminum, the Airplane Division of Curtiss-Wright Corporation, Associated General Contractors of St. Louis, Associated Garment Industries, Associated Cabinet Makers, Aluminum Storm Windows and Door Manufacturers, the St. Louis Display Builders Association, Home Builders Association and Area Millwork Employers. Unions represented in this series include the St. Louis division of the International Association of Machinists; the United Auto Workers; the United
Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, AFL-CIO; United Automobile, Aerospace Agricultural Implement Workers; Bridge Structural and Ornamental Iron Workers; and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Arranged chronologically.

2. Badges, 1895-1978. The badges reflect delegate status at conventions and are generally more ornamental than buttons or pins. This series contains the third oldest item in the collection, the 1895 ribbon for the Amalgamated Wood Workers International. The series is divided by the type of occupation reflected on the badges rather than union names ("Steelworkers" instead of "United Steelworkers of America," with two exceptions: the American and Missouri State Federations of Labor) and arranged alphabetically.

3. Buttons, 1900-1981. This series comprises the bulk of the collection. It contains buttons, pins and ribbons reflecting Von Romer's membership in nine unions, the unions he visited while traveling as a delegate to the Central Trades and Labor Union, and the union membership of others who donated to his collection. The earliest item in this series is a Bus Drivers and Street Car Men button from November 1914. The most recent buttons date from 1981; produced by UAW and by the General Teamsters of Salem and Vicinity in addition to documenting labor history of the last eighty years, the series also reflects an evolution of union button styles, from the more ornamental early buttons to the more perfunctory identification cards housed in folded lamination. Arranged alphabetically by work-type subjects ("Longshoremen," not "International Longshoreman's Association.")

4. Cards, 1944-1979. Contains Von Romer's working cards with the United Automobile, Aircraft and Agricultural Implement Workers, the Carpenters District Council, the Building and Construction Trades Department, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners and the Carpenters' District Council; and Calendar Cards of the Carpenter's District Council, the Labor Trades Council and UAW; and Convention and Delegate Cards. It also contains counterfeit Cigar Makers Union labels from 1906 that Von Romer received from a collector in Pennsylvania, and a 1909 label from the Universal Cigar Makers and Packers Union. Arranged alphabetically.

5. Constitutions and By-Laws, 1941-1979, folders 87-91. Contains constitutions and by-laws of the Carpenters District Council, International Molders and Foundry Workers Union, the United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers; the Upholsterer's International; the Central Trades and Labor Union; the Paint, Ink, Plastic, and Allied Products and Warehousemen; the International Brotherhood of Longshoremen; the St. Louis Labor Council; Journeyman Pipefitters; and the United Autoworkers. Arranged chronologically.

6. Personal Papers, 1941-1979. Includes Von Romer's delegate credentials; veteran's identification card; UAW membership receipts; issues of The Flour Mill Organizer, the International Longshoreman's Union newsletter (1948) published in St. Louis; newsclippings about the button collection; captions from the 1983 "Symbols of Solidarity" exhibit; correspondence documenting Von Romer's acquisition of the Cigar Makers labels; political endorsement cards; and Camp Solidarity Membership card. Arranged chronologically.

8. Souvenir Notebooks and Address Books, 1953-1979. Memorabilia produced by Carpenter's Locals, the Amalgamated Meat Cutters, the UAW, the St. Louis Union Label Trades Council, Boot and Shoe Workers Union, and the St. Louis Auto Employees Credit Union.

9. Union Literature, 1947-1976. Includes the 100th Anniversary booklet of the Cabinet Makers and Machine Hands local; issues of The Carpenter, published by the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners; event programs, calendars, insurance plans, apprentice programs, sample ballots and pension plans of the Carpenters locals; a CIO serviceman's manual; a memorial to Ludwig Steinmacher; the proceedings of the Missouri State Labor Council Convention, 1964; UAW literature; and Workmen's compensation laws literature. Arranged alphabetically.

10. Union Membership Dues Books, 1919-1975. Folders 143-148. Contains membership and dues books, some belonging to Von Romer, for the following unions: Brotherhood of Railway Car Men; Leather and Luggage Workers; United Steelworkers; Upholsterer's International; Stove Mounters; and the Carpenters and Joiners


12. Artifacts, 1880-1978. The rest of the series consists of three-dimensional artifacts commemorating union anniversaries, campaigns and other observances. It includes plaques, can openers, pencils and pens, ash trays, a tool box memento and a strike umbrella. All items contain insignias of individual unions and some reflect the names and dates of anniversaries. Arranged alphabetically by union name.

BOX 1 (047602)

SERIES 1 - AGREEMENTS, 1942-1981

1. 1942-1960
   International Association of Machinists, District 9 and Curtiss-Wright Corporation, Airplane Division, St. Louis Plant, April 27, 1942.
   Sterling Aluminum Products, Inc., and International Molders and Foundry Workers of North America Local 59 and the International Association of Machinists, District 9, June 23, 1942.
   General Motors Corporation and the International Union, and the International Union, United Automobile, Aircraft and Agricultural Implement Workers of America-CIO, October 19, 1942.
   United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America and the International Association of Bridge Structural and Ornamental Iron Works, 1953.

2. 1960-1966
   Collective Agreement, St. Louis Joint Board International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, AFL-CIO, with Associated Garment Industries of St. Louis (Press Branch), 1960-1963.
   Associated Cabinet Makers of St. Louis and the Carpenters District Council of St. Louis and
Local Agreements between Warehouse Parts Division, General Motors Corporation and Shop Committee of Local 25, UAW, October 1964.
General Motors Corporation and the UAW-AFL-CIO, October 5, 1964.

3. 1964
Supplemental Agreement on Unemployment Benefits, General Motors and UAW, October 5, 1964.
Supplemental Agreement on Pension Plan and Insurance, October 5, 1964.

4. 1966-1974
Local Seniority, Wage Roles, Shift Preference, Agreement on the Administration of Paragraph 71, Chevrolet Division, General Motors Corporation St. Louis Plant, April 13, 1968.
Aluminum Storm Window and Door Manufacturers of St. Louis and the Carpenters District Council, 1965-1968.
St. Louis Display Builders Association and the Carpenters District Council, 1965-1968.

5. 1969-1975
Pension Plan Supplement, GM and UAW, November 19, 1975.
Area Millwork Employers, 1970-1975

6. 1973-1976

Local Agreements between Warehouse Parts Division, GM and UAW, November 22, 1976.

8. 1979
SERIES 2- BADGES, 1895-1978

(Due to a previous archival numbering system, folders 9-74 have been incorporated into the Badges, Buttons and Artifacts series)

AFL-CIO, 1937-1956
Boiler Makers, nd., 1944-1946
Bookbinders, nd., 1944
Carpenters, 1941-1970

BOX 2 (047608)

Missouri State Federation of Labor, 1941-1956
Missouri State Labor Council, 1941-1974
Steel Workers, 1940-1950
Stove Molders, nd., 1949-1954
Upholsterers, nd
Woodworkers, 1895-nd

SERIES 3 - BUTTONS, 1900-1981

Building Service Employees, 1950-1957
Building Trades, 1939-1953
Building and Construction, 1954-1974
Bus and Streetcar Men, 1914-1973
Cab CIO Cleaners, Chemical and Coffee Workers, 1939-1950
Carpenters, 1941-1974

BOX 3 (047666)

Carpenters District Council, 1959-1973
Electrical AFL, 1939-1951
Electrical CIO, 1937-1939
Engineers, 1942-1961
Gas House Workers, Gasoline Service and Warehouse Workers, 1935-1951
Grain Processors and Millers, 1939-1951
Laborers and Letter Carriers, 1941-1972
Leather and Luggage Workers, ILGWU and Fire Fighters, 1937-1938
Longshoremen, 1936-1954
Machinists, 1937-1974
Meat Cutters, 1937-1972
Multiple Unions, 1900-1980

BOX 4 047685

Multiple Unions, 1900-1980 Molders and Packing House Workers, 1938-1951
National Postal Office, Oilers, Paper Workers, Freemen, Quarry, 1938-1952
Painters, 1947-1954
Railway Car Men and Telegraphers, 1931-1966
Retail Clerks, 1938-1956
Right To Work, Amendment 23, 1973
Rubber, Seamen, State, County and Municipal Employees, 1942-1952
Steel Workers, 1937-1951
Teachers, Tobacco Workers, Upholsterers, 1937-1941
Waitresses and Bartenders, 1936-1937
Warehouse Workers, 1937-1942

BOX 5 (047732)

United Autoworkers, 1935-1979

SERIES 4 - CARDS, 1944-1979

75. Labels, 1886-1906
76. Working Card, United Automobile, Aircraft and Agricultural Workers, 1944
77. Working Card, Carpenters District Council, 1953
78. Working Cards, Building and Construction Trades Department, 1954-1959
79. Working Cards, Building and Construction Trades Department, 1960-1964
80. Working Cards United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, 1964-1971
81. Working Cards Building and Construction Trades Department, 1969-1977
82. Working Card, Carpenters' District Council, 1969-1971
83. Carpenters District Council Calendar Cards, 1970-1979
84. St. Louis Label Trades Council Calendar Card, 1954
85. UAW Local 25, Calendar Cards, 1973
86. Convention and Delegate Cards, 1958,1970

SERIES 5 - CONSTITUTIONS AND BY-LAWS, 1941-1979

87. 1941-1943
88. 1945-1949
89. 1951-1959
90. 1961-1966
91. 1970-1979

SERIES 6 - PERSONAL PAPERS, 1941-1979

92. "Before The Union Came," by Doris K Stockwell
93. Paraphernalia Listing
94. UAW Convention Delegate Credentials, 1941-1944
96. Veteran's Identification Card, 1955
97. United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, 1948
98. UAW Membership Receipts, 1942-1943
99. The Flour Mill Organizer, 1948
100. Newsclippings, 1952-1979
102. Correspondence, 1953-1969
103. Endorsement Cards, 1961-1964
104. Camp Solidarity Membership Cards, 1956-1973

SERIES 7 - ST. LOUIS LABOR COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES, 1965-1974


BOX 6 (047742)

SERIES 8 - SOUVENIR NOTEBOOKS AND ADDRESS BOOKS, 1953-1979

111. Souvenir Notebooks and Address Books, undated
112. Souvenir Notebooks and Address Books, undated
113. Souvenir Notebooks and Address Books, undated

SERIES 9 - UNION LITERATURE, 1947-1976

114. Cabinet Makers and Machine Hands Local 1596, 100th Anniversary, Booklet, 1971
115. Cabinet Makers and Millman Apprenticeship Standards, 1946
116. The Carpenter, United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, 1974-1980
118. Carpenters' District Council of Greater St. Louis, Testimonial Dinner of Richard Adams and Edwin Meinert, 1967
119. Carpenters' District Council Calendar, 1973
120. Carpenters District Council of St. Louis, "Your Group Insurance Plan", nd
121. Carpenter Joint Apprenticeship Program, 1967-1971
122. Carpenters Local 1592 Sample Ballot, June 16, 1976
123. Carpenters' Pension Trust Fund of St. Louis, Pension Plan, 1969
124. Carpenters' Pension Trust Fund of St. Louis, Pension Plan, 1977-1979
125. CIO Servicemen's Manual, 1940s
126. "The Great Kool-Aid Conspiracy," AMMO, 9/77
127. Ludwig Steinacher Memorial, 1968
128. Miscellaneous, 1936 and undated
129. Miscellaneous, 1946-1976
130. Missouri State Labor Council, Proceedings of the Fifth Annual and Second Biennial Convention, Kansas City, Missouri, September 21, 22 and 23, 1964
131. Missouri Workmen's Compensation, 1940s, 1961
132. UAW, "Garnishment of Wages," 1974
133. UAW Missouri State News, July 1979
134. UAW Publications, AMMO, AMMUNITION and SOLIDARITY, 1976-1980
135. UAW-GM Report, March, 1982
136. UAW-GM Strike Negotiations, 1970
137. UAW Local 25 Litter Bag, undated
138. United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, Sixtieth Anniversary Celebration, 1941
139. United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, Stewards Report, undated
140. UAW Local 325, Thirty Years of Progress, 1967
141. "We Work at Fords: Before and After The UAW-CIO, A Picture History," 1955

SERIES 10 - UNION MEMBERSHIP AND DUES BOOKS, 1919-1975

143. Union Membership and Dues Books, 1919-1934
144. 1941-1945
145. 1946-1952
146. 1955-1959
147. 1968-1975
148. Workmen's Benefit Fund Book, 1945

SERIES 11 - PHOTOGRAPHS, nd, 1920

149. Photographs 471.1-471.7

BOX 7 (047743)
Artifacts

SERIES 12 - ARTIFACTS, 1880-1978

Amalgamated Woodworkers, Wooden Plaque, American Federation of Labor Banner.
"Boycott J.P. Stevens" Cup
Carpenters Credit Union Brush
Insurance Workers International Union Pencil
International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Pencil
International Ladies Garment Workers Union Apron
Plaque
St. Louis Labor Council Paperweight
St. Louis Labor Council Pen
St. Louis Union Label and Service Trades Council Pens and Letter Opener
United Autoworkers Pens and Emery Board
United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners Rules and Pen
United Steelworkers Pencil
Workmens Fire Insurance Society, St. Louis Branch, 1909-1967
St. Louis Union Label and Service Trades Council Golden Anniversary Pen, 1910-1960
Carpenters Local 1596, 100th Anniversary Ash Tray, 1971.
United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, 33rd General Convention Tool
Box Memento, October 2, 1978.
Bumper Stickers, nd, 1981
Decals, 1967-1969
Duplicate Buttons

**Pipefitters Local 562, AFL-CIO, On Strike Umbrella (in package)

**Knights of Labor mug on permanent loan to Missouri History Museum

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