



THOMAS & KATHERINE DETRE LIBRARY & ARCHIVES TREASURES

By Matthew Strauss,
Chief Archivist

Ray Sprigle Papers and Photographs

“Attached is a copy of a letter,” begins a piece of correspondence in the Ray Sprigle Papers and Photographs, “which is the latest of many efforts made by us to expose one of the most heinous acts within the imagination—the swindle of a citizen by his government.” The letter is one among many in the collection sent to Sprigle, a former investigative reporter for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, during the 1950s. Other letters detail a wrongful commitment to a mental hospital, ties between public officials and organized crime organizations, and a neighborhood speakeasy operating within full view of the police. Often unsigned and sent in envelopes without return addresses, the writers had entrusted their stories to Sprigle, rather than the local authorities, with the hopes that he might take up their cause.

By the 1950s, the colorful and opinionated Sprigle had cemented his reputation as a man willing to fight for the underdog. A reporter for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* since the paper’s inception in 1927, Sprigle wrote exposés on conditions in mental hospitals and coal mines, illegal gambling operations, and the black market for meat during World War II. Sprigle often went undercover in pursuit of his stories, donning disguises and assuming bogus identities.

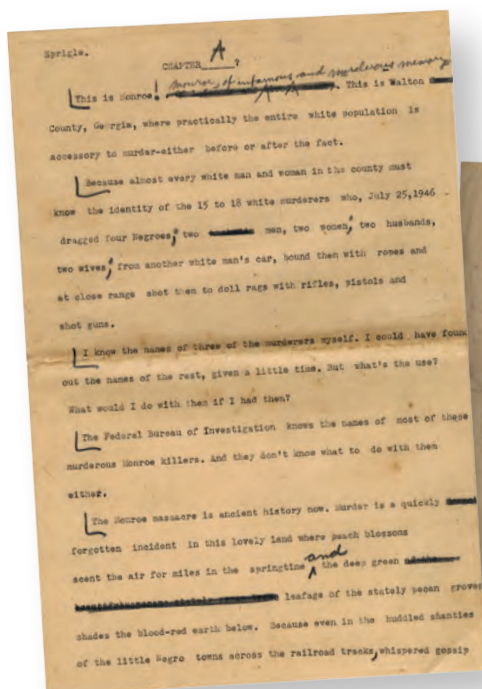
In 1937, Sprigle landed on the front pages of newspapers across the country when he broke a story about ties between Hugo Black, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s nominee to the Supreme Court, and the Ku Klux Klan. Acting on a tip from Paul Block, the publisher of the *Post-Gazette*, Sprigle flew to Black’s home state of Alabama where he met with James Esdale, a former Grand Dragon in the KKK. Reluctant to speak about the matter at first, Esdale became more forthcoming after Sprigle discovered the two shared an interest

in raising chickens. Esdale eventually turned in extensive documentation proving Black’s membership in the group. While the news didn’t ultimately prevent Black from serving a long career as a Supreme Court justice, it did lead to a Pulitzer Prize for Sprigle, the first for a *Post-Gazette* reporter.

Sprigle garnered national attention again in 1948 with a series of articles titled, “I was a Negro in the South for 30 Days,” which shed light on the Jim Crow conditions that African

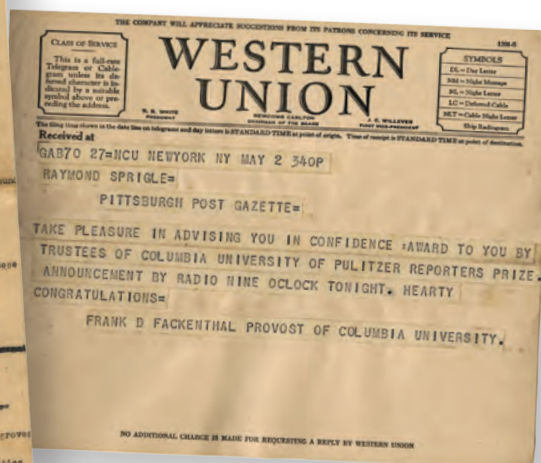


Ray Sprigle, likely on his farm in Moon Township, with his trademark corn cob pipe and Stetson hat.



First page of a draft for an article from the series, "I was a Negro in the South for 30 Days."

All HHC Detre L&A, Ray Sprigle Papers and Photographs, c1886-1973 (bulk 1930s-1950s), MSS 779.



A telegram from Frank D. Fackenthal, provost of Columbia University, informing Sprigle that he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

and cataloged through a Basic Processing grant from the National Historical Publications and Historic Resources Commission.

Sprigle continued writing until his death at age 71, the result of a car accident that occurred while he was coming home after covering a conspiracy trial in New Castle, Pennsylvania. Following his death, George M. Leader, governor of Pennsylvania, issued a statement commending the reporter's "great sense of moral indignation" and noting that Sprigle's articles on mental hospitals had led to reforms throughout the state.

Americans living in southern states were forced to endure. To research the stories, Sprigle disguised himself as an African American and was escorted through the South by J.W. Dobbs, a well-known civil rights leader from Atlanta. The trip provided Sprigle with an opportunity to experience racial segregation first-hand. The resulting 21-part series, which was published by the *Post-Gazette* and syndicated by over a dozen other newspapers, ignited a debate about an issue that was little understood in the North.

Along with letters from the public, Ray Sprigle Papers and Photographs also contain Sprigle's notebooks, research material, and drafts of articles, providing a glimpse into the reporter's writing process. Donated to the Heinz History Center's Detre Library & Archives by Sprigle's daughter Rae Jean Kurland, the collection also includes images of Sprigle in undercover disguises and on his farm in Moon Township. This collection is one of over 500 collections that has been described

¹ HHC Detre L&A, Ray Sprigle Papers and Photographs, c1886-1973 (bulk 1930s-1950s), MSS 779.

² Roger K. Newman, *Hugo Black: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 247-249.

³ Bill Steigerwald, "Sprigle's Secret Journey," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, <http://old.post-gazette.com/sprigle/Sprigleintroduction.asp> (accessed September 11, 2013).

⁴ "Tribute Paid Sprigle By City, State Leaders," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, December 24, 1957.



Smithsonian Connection

Bronze bust of George Westinghouse, marked DC FRENCH 1905

Known best for his monumental rendering of Abraham Lincoln for the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., American sculptor Daniel Chester French also created more intimate pieces. Pittsburgh's George Westinghouse—captain of industry and one of America's leading innovators at the turn of the last century—was about 59 years old when French sculpted this piece. Westinghouse had garnered significant recognition at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, awarded both Grand Prize and Gold Prize medals for his innovations. Having a premier sculptor render him in bronze solidified Westinghouse's reputation as an America treasure of science and industry.

Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History.

