

The Filson Historical Society

**Irvin Abell, 1876-1949
Papers, 1894-1944 (bulk: 1916-1919)**

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Size of Collection:
.33 cu. ft.

Location Number:
Mss. A A141

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Scope and Content Note

Collection includes approximately 110 letters, most written by Lt. Col. Irvin Abell, M.D., to his wife and children in Louisville, Ky., while training at the Rockefeller Institute in New York, Camp Bowie, Texas, and Camp Shelby, Miss., and serving as the commanding officer of an army base hospital near Rimaucourt, France, during the last few months of World War I. Abell's letters express his concern about the management of the household in his absence and his children's activities. The letters provide much detail concerning his personal thoughts about American involvement in the war, the administration of Base Hospital 59 and the care of injured and sick soldiers. They also include descriptions of military actions that he witnessed near the front lines in France and the demobilization of the hospital at the end of the war.

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Biographical Note

William "Irvin" Abell, Sr., was born Sept. 13, 1876, in Lebanon, Ky., the son of William I. and Sarah S. Abell. It is likely that he was named after his father, but was known throughout his adult life as Irvin. He graduated from Louisville Medical College in 1897 and interned at Louisville City Hospital. He later studied in Germany at the University of Marburg and University of Berlin. In 1900 he joined the faculty of the Louisville Medical College, later becoming professor of surgery when the college merged with the University of Louisville in 1908. He married Caroline ("Carrie") Harting October 19, 1907. In his letters to her, he affectionately addressed her as "Muddie". They had four sons: (William) Irvin, Jr. (1908-1989), William Harting ("Billie," 1911-1978), Jonathon Rogers (called Rogers or "Monk," 1913-1932) and (Joseph) Spalding (b. 1914). In addition to his academic appointment, he apparently also had a successful private surgical practice in Louisville. Following the entry of the United States into World War I, he enlisted in the Medical Reserve Corps as a major. In February 1918 he was assigned to the Rockefeller Institute in New York to undertake further study of medical issues associated with war-related injuries and diseases. Following a brief stay at Camp Bowie, Fort Worth, Texas, he was assigned to Camp Shelby, Mississippi, in June 1918 where he prepared to assume command of Base Hospital 59. In July 1918 he was promoted to Lt. Col. in the Medical Corps National Army and placed in command of the hospital. In September, Abell and hospital personnel were sent to Camp Stuart, Newport News, Virginia, where they later boarded the troop transport, U.S.S. Madawaska, for the journey to France. The day before their arrival at Brest, their convoy was attacked by a German submarine which was sunk by an American destroyer before it could cause any damage. Upon arrival, the personnel spent a few days at a rest camp near the coast and then traveled to the hospital site near Rimaucourt, Department Haute Marne. As commanding officer, Abell oversaw the day-to-day operation of the hospital during the remaining months of World War I and in the postwar period until April 1919. He received wide recognition for his exemplary leadership in the command of the hospital. Upon his return to the U.S., he resumed his duties as clinical professor of surgery at the University of Louisville where he was appointed to the Board of Trustees in 1935. In 1938 he chaired a committee that advised President Roosevelt's committee studying a proposed national health care program. In 1940, President Roosevelt named him chairman of a national committee to co-operate with the Defense Commission on Public Health. During his career, Abell led several medical organizations including the Southeastern Medical Society, the American Gastroenterology Association, the American Medical Association, and the American College of Surgeons. While on a fishing vacation in Ontario, Canada, he died suddenly of a heart attack on August 29, 1949 at the age of 72. Following a funeral mass, he was buried at Calvary Cemetery in Louisville, Ky.

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Folder List

- Folder 1: Correspondence, 1894-March 1918 [30 items]
- Folder 2: Correspondence, April-May 1918 [30items]
- Folder 3: Correspondence, June 1918 [29 items]
- Folder 4: Correspondence, July 1918 [27 items]
- Folder 5: Correspondence, August 1918 [29 items]
- Folder 6: Correspondence, September 1918 [17items]
- Folder 7: Correspondence, October 1918 [27 items]
- Folder 8: Correspondence, November 1918 [32 items]
- Folder 9: Correspondence, December 1918 [31items]
- Folder 10: Correspondence, January-February 1919 [25 items]
- Folder 11: Correspondence, 1921-1944 [16 items]
- Folder 12: Undated letters, postcards and miscellaneous materials [15 items]

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Subject Headings

Base Hospital No. 59
Bear hunting – Wyoming
Big game hunting – Wyoming
Camp Bowie (Fort Worth, Tex.)
Camp Shelby (Miss.)
Camp Zachary Taylor (Ky.)
Coal miners – Kentucky
Cost and standard of living – Kentucky – Louisville
France – Description and travel
Hunting lodges – Wyoming
Influenza Epidemic, 1918-1919
Letterheads
Liberty bonds – United States
Life insurance premiums – Kentucky – Louisville
Madawaska (Troop transport)
Paris (France) – Description and travel
Pendennis Club (Louisville, Ky.)
Prostitution – France – Paris
Reconstruction (1914-1939) – France
Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research
United States. Army – Artillery
United States. Army – Barracks and quarters
United States. Army – Military life
United States. Army – Promotions
United States. Army – Recruiting, enlistment, etc.
United States. Army - Surgeons
United States. Army – Transportation
United States. Army – Uniforms
United States. Army. Medical Corps
Vacations – Canada
Vacations – United States
Victory gardens – Kentucky – Louisville
War risk insurance – United States
Wilson, Woodrow, 1856-1924)
World War, 1914-1918 – Aerial operations, German
World War, 1914-1918 – Antiaircraft artillery operations
World War, 1914-1918 – Artillery operations
World War, 1914-1918 – Battlefields – France

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Subject Headings (con't)

World War, 1914-1918 – Casualties – France
World War, 1914-1918 – Censorship
World War, 1914-1918 – Chemical warfare
World War, 1914-1918 – Children – France
World War, 1914-1918 – Confiscations and contributions – France
World War, 1914-1918 – Deception – Germany
World War, 1914-1918 – Destruction and pillage – France
World War, 1914-1918 – Economic aspects – United States
World War, 1918-1918 – Equipment and supplies
World War, 1914-1918 – Finance – United States
World War, 1914-1918 – France
World War, 1914-1918 – France – Paris
World War, 1914-1918 – France – Verdun
World War, 1914-1918 – Health aspects – France
World War, 1914-1918 – Hospitals – France
World War, 1914-1918 – Hospitals – United States
World War, 1914-1918 – Kentucky – Louisville
World War, 1914-1918 – Medical care – France
World War, 1914-1918 – Medical care – United States
World War, 1914-1918 – Naval operations – Submarine
World War, 1914-1918 – Naval operations, American
World War, 1914-1918 – Naval operations, German
World War, 1914-1918 – Occupied territories
World War, 1914-1918 – Participation, Female
World War, 1914-1918 – Photography
World War, 1914-1918 – Press coverage – Kentucky – Louisville
World War, 1914-1918 – Prisoners and prisons, German
World War, 1914-1918 – Propaganda
World War, 1914-1918 – Public opinion
World War, 1914-1918 – Social aspects – France
World War, 1914-1918 – Transportation – France
World War, 1914-1918 – Transportation – United States
World War, 1914-1918 – War work – Red Cross
World War, 1914-1918 – War work – Young Men's Christian associations