

A Guide to the
ELMER S. IMES COLLECTION, 1902—1942

Fisk University Archives

Processed by

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Born on October 12, 1883 in Memphis, Tennessee, Elmer Samuel Imes was the son of Benjamin A. Imes and Elizabeth W. Imes; his parents were significantly involved in the Home Missionary Movement. Imes' father, a graduate of Oberlin College and Theological Seminary, was a pivotal pioneer in the American Missionary Association's (AMA) southern fieldwork where he engaged in educational and religious endeavors towards the advancement of African Americans. These educational and religious genes surfaced through the extended Imes clan that established firm roots at Fisk University. Mabel Lewis Imes, 1858—1935, was one of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers; Dr. G. Lake Imes, 1883—1957, served as special assistant to Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee Institute and received his M.A. from Fisk in 1910; Elmer Imes' brother Dr. William Lloyd Imes, 1889—1986, earned his B.A. and M.A. degrees from Fisk in 1910 and 1912 respectively, before serving as president of Knoxville College and as a member of the Fisk Board of Trustees from 1925 to 1952. Elmer S. Imes proved to be a compliment, not an exception, to the rule.

Elmer Imes attended grammar school in Oberlin, Ohio and subsequently finished high school at Alabama Agricultural & Mechanical College's preparatory school. He graduated from Fisk with an A.B. degree in 1903, and, like his parents, taught in AMA schools from 1904 to 1915. Teaching stints during this period included Fisk, but most of his time served was at Albany Normal School, in Albany, Georgia. Full-time doctoral studies began in 1915 and Imes secured his Ph. D. in physics from the University of Michigan in 1918, becoming the second African American in the United States to earn a physics Ph. D. His dissertation *Measurements on the Infra-red Absorption of Some Diatomic Cases* is still regarded as the definitive work in the field. He worked as a research physicist for Burrows Magnetic Equipment Corporation, New York, New York, from 1918 to 1926, and from 1926 to 1929 as a research engineer for the Edward A. Everett Firm, New York, New York. Imes was an American pioneer of international acclaim and respect in research in infrared spectroscopy, a way of investigating the structure of the molecules that make up all kinds of matter in the universe. Such experiences inevitably functioned as the foundation for what would become the Physics Department at Fisk under his direct tutelage from 1930 to 1941.

Imes was well-rounded, and by most accounts truly a renaissance man. Not only was he a pure scientist, but his conceptualization of the sciences incorporated religion, the arts and philosophy as well. Widely read and versed in literature, Imes possessed a poetic disposition and maintained an intense appreciation for music. Such sensibilities contributed to Imes' marriage on May 3, 1919 to Nella Larson, Harlem Renaissance novelist, author of the critically acclaimed *Quicksand*, 1928, and *Passing*, 1929, and the first African American woman to win the famed Guggenheim Fellowship for creative writing in 1930. The two divorced on August 30, 1933. Imes was a member of Sigma Xi, the American Society for Testing Materials, the American Institute of Electrical Engineers, the American Physical Society, and the American Association for University Professors, Sigma Pi Phi Boule, and Theta Sigma graduate fraternity. In addition to his dissertation published in *Astrophysical Journal*, in 1919, he co-published with H.M. Randall "The Fine-Structure of the Near Infra-red Absorption Bands of the Gases HCL, HBr, and HF $\frac{1}{4}$ " in *The Physical Review* in 1920. Elmer Samuel Imes died of cancer on September 11, 1941 in New York, New York.

SCOPE AND CONTENT

The Elmer S. Imes Collection encompasses two boxes, and consists of eight series: **Biographical Information; Correspondence; Course Material; Drawing Notes and Plans; Photos; Professional Affiliations; Writings; and Miscellaneous**. The **Correspondence** series is divided into four subseries: **Equipment Supply Companies; Faculty Recruitment/ Recommendations; Fisk External Affairs; and Fisk Internal Affairs**. The **Course Material** series is divided into six subseries: **Distribution of Grades; Examinations; Field Trips; Guidelines; Lecture Notes; and Proposals**.

Series I: Biographical Information

The **Biographical Information** found in this collection consists of Imes' official obituary and a biographical questionnaire he filled out in 1929.

Series II: Correspondence

The **Correspondence** contains four subseries: **Equipment Supply Companies; Faculty Recruitment/ Recommendations; Fisk External Affairs; and Fisk Internal Affairs**. All correspondence is arranged alphabetically. The **Equipment Supply Companies Correspondence** mostly contains incoming and outgoing letters to company representatives regarding the feasibility of using respective services in the Fisk physics department. There are letters for, and to, former students pursuing career advances, and potential new hires at Fisk in the **Recruitment/ Recommendations** subseries. Fisk University's physics department engaged in cooperative activities and projects with other educational institutions that constitute **Fisk External Affairs**. Networks with the Chicago Tumor Institute, Livingstone College, Louisville Municipal College for Negroes, Meharry Medical College, the University of Kentucky, and Vanderbilt University, for example, document the respect Imes was afforded from black and white institutions in the 1930s and early 1940s. Those interested in researching Fisk's infrastructure will find the **Fisk Internal Affairs** subseries of particular value. Correspondence between Imes and the offices of Alumni Affairs, buildings and grounds, the cashier, the comptroller, the academic dean, and the president gives insight into pertinent matters that impacted the overall development of the physics department, and Imes' personal passions regarding his obligations as the chairmen.

Series III: Course Material

The **Course Material** contains six subseries: **Distribution of Grades; Examinations; Field Trips; Guidelines; Lecture Notes; and Proposals**. The **Distribution of Grades** document class records in 1934 and 1938. The **Examinations** retained are of three distinct forms: The Cooperative Test Services of the American Council on Education, 1933—1938; the Cultural Reading Comprehensive Examination, 1930, 1932, n.d; and Departmental Comprehensive Exams, 1933, 1935, 1938. Outside class exposure to the Muscle Shoals Power Plant, Wilson Dam, Alabama in 1940, for example, is documented in the **Field Trips** subseries. Proper procedures for one of Imes' Engineering Drawing classes are contained in the **Guidelines** subseries, and varied lessons and class proceedings from 1934 are documented in the **Lecture Notes** subseries accordingly. The **Course Material** series concludes with **Proposals** by Imes covering Biophysics, Music & Acoustics, Research in Infrared Spectroscopy, and X-Ray

Installation. The X-Ray Installation **Proposal** is the only one documented with applicable years, 1938-1939.

Series IV: Drawing Notes & Plans

This series consists of blueprints and drawing plans of a laboratory distributing board, the physics department in Chase Hall, and of a metal x-ray tube. The Dietze & Dietze Company, Henry C. Hibbs and Imes himself are the creators of the respective plans. The dates covered are 1928, 1929 and 1930.

Series V: Photographs

One copy of Imes working inside an unidentified laboratory is documented in the **Photographs** series. The date is unidentified as well.

Series VI: Professional Affiliations

Organizations to which Imes belonged, and publications he was aligned with, are found in the series **Professional Affiliations**. This series has three folders, American Association of University Professors, 1938; American Institute of Physics, 1940, 1941; and the *American Journal of Physics*, 1940.

Series VII: Writings

"A Physicist's Picture of a True Education," by Elmer Imes, n.d., is the only document found in the **Writings** series. Though small in number, this one document is extremely insightful into the well-rounded nature of Imes and his philosophical views centered on human interaction with himself/herself, other human beings and forces of nature.

Series VIII: Miscellaneous

The **Miscellaneous** series makes up the final series and includes a copy of the 1902–1903 Fisk University College Department catalogue; unidentified colleague group notes; unidentified pictograph notes and unidentified scratch notes of the physics department, 1931, 1939.

BOX LIST

Box Folder

Series I: Personal Information

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|---|---|---------------------|
| 1 | 1 | Obituary, 1941 |
| | 2 | Questionnaire, 1929 |

Series II: Correspondence

Subseries I: Equipment Supply Companies

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| 3 | Abbe Engineering Company, 1935 |
| 4 | Amber Mines Inc., 1937 |
| 5 | American Chain Company Inc., 1937 |
| 6 | American Instrument Company, 1939 |
| 7 | Cambasco Scientific Company, 1939 |
| 8 | Carborundum Company, 1936 |
| 9 | Central Scientific Company, 1936—1937 |
| 10 | Central Scientific Company, 1938—1941, n.d. |
| 11 | Chemicolloid Laboratories, Inc., 1936 |
| 12 | Chicago Apparatus Company, 1937, 1941 |
| 13 | Columbia Broadcasting Systems, 1939 |
| 14 | Dietze & Dietze Company, 1938—1939 |
| 15 | Durion Company Inc., 1939 |
| 16 | Eastern Science Supply Company, 1932 |
| 17 | E.R. Johnson Company, 1940 |
| 18 | Gaertner Scientific Corporation, 1942 |
| 19 | General Electric X-Ray Corporation, 1941 |
| 20 | Jewell Electrical Instrument Company, 1930 |
| 21 | John S. Swift Company, Inc., 1938, 1940 |
| 22 | John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1940 |
| 23 | Polychrome Corporation, 1940 |
| 24 | R. Fuess Inc., 1936 |
| 25 | Rubicon Company, 1938 |
| 26 | S. & H. X-Ray Company, 1938 |
| 27 | Shure Brothers, 1937 |
| 28 | Standard Scientific Supply Corporation, 1940 |
| 29 | Sundt Engineering, 1937, 1938 |
| 30 | Tennessee Valley Authority, 1938 |
| 31 | Underwood Elliott Fisher Company, 1937 |
| 32 | War Department United States Engineer Office, 1939 |
| 33 | Weston Electrical Instrument Company, 1939 |
| 34 | Wilbur B. Driver Company, 1939 |

Subseries II: Faculty Recruitment/ Recommendations

- | | |
|----|------------------------------|
| 35 | Bartberger, Charles L., 1940 |
|----|------------------------------|

- 36 Collier, N.W., 1941
- 37 Debenham, W. William, 1940
- 38 Grossley, R.S., 1941
- 39 Sawyer, Ralph A., 1940

Subseries III: Fisk External Affairs

- 40 Chicago Tumor Institute, 1939
- 41 Franklin Institute, 1939
- 42 Livingstone College, 1941
- 43 Louisville Municipal College for Negroes, 1939
- 44 Meharry Medical College, 1938
- 45 Talladega College, 1938
- 46 University of Kentucky, 1941
- 47 Vanderbilt University, 1935
- 48 Wigan & District Mining & Technical College, 1940

Subseries IV: Fisk Internal Affairs

- 49 Allison, Andrew J., 1941
- 50 Beals, Jesse F., 1929; 1931; 1938; 1940; 1941; n.d.
- 51 Bowles, Luanna, 1939
- 52 Calloway, N.O., 1939
- 53 Cox, B.F., 1937, 1938, 1939, n.d.
- 54 Creswell, Isaiah T., 1939, 1940
- 55 Dean's Office, 1932
- 56 Hawkins, W.D., 1938, 1941, 1942
- 57 Johnson, Charles S., 1941
- 58 Jones, Thomas E., 1938, 1939
- 59 Park, Robert E., 1939
- 60 Schmidt, Harold C., 1938, 1940
- 61 Van Horn, C.E., 1938
- 62 Wood, L. Hollingsworth, 1941
- 63 Unidentified, 1941

Series III: Course Material

Subseries I: Distribution of Grades

- 2 1 1934, 1938

Subseries II: Examinations

- 2 Cooperative Test Service of the American Council on Education, 1933-1938
- 3 Cultural Reading Comprehensive Examination, 1930
- 4 Cultural Reading Comprehensive Examination, 1932
- 5 Cultural Reading Comprehensive Examination, n.d.
- 6 Departmental Comprehensive Exams, 1933, 1935, 1938

Subseries III: Field Trips

- 7 Goldston, Walter R., 1940
 8 Muscle Shoals Power Plant, 1940
 9 P.B. Swoops Custom Tailor, 1940
 Subseries IV: Guidelines
- 10 Engineering Drawing, n.d.
 Subseries V: Lecture Notes
- 11 1934, n.d.
 Subseries VI: Proposals
- 12 Biophysics, n.d.
 13 Music & Acoustics, n.d.
 14 Research in Infra-Red Spectroscopy, n.d.
 15 X-Ray Installation, 1938—1939
- Series IV: Drawing Notes & Plans**
- 16 Chase Hall Physics Department; Distributing Board for Laboratories;
 Metal X-Ray Tube Apparatus; 1929, 1930, n.d.
- Series V: Photographs**
- 17 Elmer S. Imes in Laboratory (Copy), n.d.
- Series VI: Professional Affiliations**
- 18 American Association of University Professors, 1938
 19 American Institute of Physics, 1940, 1941
 20 *American Journal of Physics*, 1940
- Series VII: Writings**
- 21 "A Physicist's Picture of a True Education," by Elmer S. Imes, n.d.
- Series VIII: Miscellaneous**
- 22 Colleague Group Listing; College Department Catalogue; Notes in
 Pictograph Form; Scratch Notes, 1902—1903, 1931, 1939, n.d.