

C Stephens, Helen (1918-1994), Papers, 1931-1995  
3552 4.75 linear feet

## **RESTRICTED**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The papers of the 1936 Olympic track champion contain her Olympic diary, correspondence, publicity clippings, and other materials related to her long athletic career, both professional and recreational. Newsletters from her employers, Curlee Clothing Company, Curtiss-Wright Corporation, and the Defense Mapping Agency, are also included.

### **DONOR INFORMATION**

According to Helen Stephens' wishes stated in a written contract of 28 May 1991, the papers were donated to University of Missouri on 1 February 2005 by Stephens' biographer, Sharon Kinney Hanson (Accession No. 5882). In accordance with a settlement agreement of May 1996 between Hanson and Stephens' brother, Robert, the Olympic diary was donated after his death to the University of Missouri on 9 November 1998 by his wife, Betty R. Stephens, and daughters Cynthia L. Ziegler and Julie E. Wade.

### **RESTRICTIONS**

Consult the reference staff about the restrictions on this collection.

### **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Helen Herring Stephens was born on 3 February 1918 to Frank and Bertie Mae Stephens near Fulton, Missouri. The Stephenses raised Helen and her younger brother, Robert Lee, on their tenant farm close to town.

During gym class in her sophomore year at Fulton High School, Stephens ran 50 yards down the cinder driveway of the school while being timed by the teacher, W. Burton Moore. Moore clocked her at 5.8 seconds, which was the current world record held by Elizabeth "Betty" Robinson. Not quite believing what he saw, he asked her run it again and she matched the time once more.

Soon Stephens was training under Moore at the Westminster College track with the high school and college men's teams. In March 1935, she entered the National Amateur Athletic Union championships in St. Louis. In a pair of running spikes borrowed from a member of the Westminster track team she easily won the shot put and standing broad jump. Then in the 50 meter sprint, she bolted past the current title holder, Stella Walsh, at 6.6 seconds for the win. Stephens' victory here would begin a lifelong rivalry with Walsh.

Stephens graduated from Fulton High School later that spring and spent the summer running races around the country and in Canada in between training sessions at the Westminster track. She entered William Woods College in Fulton in the fall, majoring in history.

At the Olympic Trials in June 1936, Stephens took first place in the 100 meter dash, shot put, and discus. In Berlin later that summer, she would finally get a rematch with Walsh, who had been avoiding her in all competitions since the AAU championships in 1935. Walsh, who had been born in Poland, ran for the Polish national team. Stephens broke Walsh's world record of 11.8 seconds by four tenths of a second in the 100 meter preliminary heat. In the final, she breezed past Walsh and the rest of the pack at 11.5 seconds for the gold medal.

After the medal ceremony, she met with Adolph Hitler in his private box where he congratulated her and she received his autograph. Stephens was the only American athlete to receive such recognition from Hitler. Five days later, she anchored the 4x100 meter relay team which also included Harriet Bland, Betty Robinson, and Annette Rogers. The Americans trailed the favored Germans as Stephens received the baton. However, the German anchor, Ilse Doerffeldt, dropped the baton while trying to switch it to her other hand and Stephens bolted past the dejected German for her second gold medal and an Olympic record.

After the subsequent celebrations and exhibition races, she returned to William Woods to complete her senior year, graduating in the spring of 1937. Unable to secure corporate endorsement deals or athletic scholarships at four-year universities, she got a job at Curlee Clothing Company in St. Louis, where she played for their softball team. She also signed on to play basketball with C.M. "Swede" Olson's All-American Red Heads, thus forgoing her amateur athlete status. After a year with the Red Heads, and with the support of Abe Saperstein of the Harlem Globetrotters, Stephens created her own basketball team, the Helen Stephens' Olympic Co-Eds. The team barnstormed the United States and Canada playing men's teams. After taking a hiatus during World War II, the Olympic Co-Eds started up again in 1946 and they continued playing until 1953. In addition to managing and playing, Stephens would perform exhibitions at halftime, challenging the fastest man in the audience to a foot race and demonstrating her other athletic skills.

Through Saperstein, she met Emory "Hambone" Olive of the House of Davidites baseball team and performed exhibitions during the 7<sup>th</sup> inning stretch of their ballgames in the early 1940s. She also ran several races against Jesse Owens during this period.

In 1941, she quit Curlee to work at the Curtiss-Wright airplane factory in St. Louis and played on their corporate sponsored sports teams. In 1945, she left Curtiss-Wright to work in the Army Audit Branch of the General Accounting Office and, in 1950, transferred to the Air Force's Defense Mapping Agency Aerospace Center where she worked as a librarian. Her supervisor was poet and literary translator Charles Guenther. At the GAO, she was president of the Recreation and Welfare Association, which organized social events and sports teams for employees. She retired from DMAAC in 1976 but took a part-time job as assistant coach of the William Woods track team from 1977 to 1981.

In her later years, Stephens was ever present at athletic competitions for senior citizens including the St. Louis Jewish Community Centers Association Senior Olympics, the U.S. National Senior Olympics, the Show-Me State Games, and other events held throughout Missouri. She was a perennial torch-bearer during the opening ceremonies of these events and continued to win medals and set records during the competitions.

Starting in the 1950s, Stephens was honored with many awards and inductions into sports halls of fame, including the Helms Association (now called Citizen's Savings Athletic Foundation), U.S. Track & Field Hall of Fame, National Track & Field Hall of Fame, Women's Sports Foundation, and the Missouri Sports Hall of Fame.

While not competing in Olympic-style events for seniors or league bowling, Stephens spent her retirement quietly in Florissant, Missouri with her long time partner, Mabel Robbe, who died in 1986. Helen Stephens died on 17 January 1994.

#### SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The Helen Stephens papers contain her Olympic diary, correspondence, publicity clippings, employee newsletters, and other materials related her to long athletic career. They are arranged into six series:

**Athletics**

**Professional**

**William Woods College**

**Appearances and Events**

**Correspondence**

**Personal**

Full series descriptions can be found in the folder list that follows.

## FOLDER LIST

**Athletics Series**

The **Athletics** series comprises the bulk of the collection and contains broadsides from the 1930s through 1950s advertising basketball games and other athletic events, correspondence, newspaper clippings, and results of competitions. The series is arranged alphabetically by athletic event and then chronologically.

Materials in this series highlight the hard work Stephens put into creating and managing her traveling basketball team, the Olympic Co-Eds, and includes schedules, player questionnaires, detailed notes on expenditures, and correspondence with suppliers of equipment, uniforms, and advertising materials.

Of special interest in this series is the diary Stephens kept during the Olympic games in 1936. The diary recounts her journey from New York to Berlin with the U.S. Olympic team on the U.S.S. Manhattan, the Olympic games, and the touring and events that followed in Europe, Canada, New York, St. Louis, and Fulton. Stephens retained other items from her Olympic experience including programs, the Olympic songbook, and an anti-Nazi manifesto calling for the release of political prisoners that was smuggled into the Olympic Village and distributed to all the athletes.

The materials on Olympic-style events like the Senior Olympics and Show-Me State Games document Stephens' lifelong interest in competitive sports and advocacy of recreation for older adults.

This series also includes correspondence, news clippings, and programs related to the many sports halls of fame to which Stephens was elected. After her induction into these institutions, her correspondence indicates she worked tirelessly for the inclusion of more women into these institutions, particularly her Olympic coach, Dee Boeckmann, and teammates from the 4x100 meter relay, Betty Robinson Schwartz, Harriet Bland Green, and Annette Rogers Kelly.

Stephens was an avid collector of autographs and sports memorabilia. Many of these items have been retained in this series, including a program from a 1943 St. Louis Browns game, broadsides and programs from men's basketball games, and several issues of *Women's Track & Field World*, a popular, but rare and short-lived publication.

- f. 1-3      Baseball
  - f. 1        Miscellaneous, 1939-1944; n.d.
  - f. 2        St. Louis Browns, 1943
  - f. 3        St. Louis Cardinals, 1962-1977
- f. 4-30     Basketball
  - f. 4        All-American Red Heads, 1938-1974
  - f. 5        Harlem Globetrotters, 1939-1960
  - f. 6-28    Olympic Co-Eds
    - f. 6        Advertisements, 1938-1953
    - f. 7-8     Correspondence, 1939-1953
    - f. 9-14    Expenditures, 1945-1951
    - f. 15      Miscellaneous, 1944-1976
    - f. 16-20   Newspaper Clippings, 1938-1953

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- f. 21 Player Questionnaires, 1948
- f. 22 Promotional Materials, c. 1939-1953
- f. 23-27 Schedules and Scorebooks, 1946-1953
- f. 28 Tickets, 1945-1952
- f. 29 Programs, 1946-1949
- f. 30 Women's Basketball Leagues, 1946-1957
- f. 31-36 Bowling
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    - f. 67 1972
    - f. 68-69 1976
    - f. 70 1980
    - f. 71 1984
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    - f. 73-77 U.S. Olympic Committee Correspondence, 1949-1980
    - f. 78-85 U.S. Olympic Committee Newsletters, 1957-1972
  - f. 86 Pan American Games, 1959
  - f. 87 Senior Games, Kirksville, Missouri, 1991
  - f. 88-93 Show-Me State Games
    - f. 88 Broadsides and Ephemera, 1985-1988
    - f. 89 Correspondence, 1985-1990
    - f. 90 Entries, Schedules, and Results, 1985-1988

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- f. 91 Newspaper Clippings, 1985-1991
- f. 92-93 Programs, 1985-1993
- f. 94-99 U.S. National Senior Olympics
  - f. 94 Correspondence, 1985-1991
  - f. 95 Ephemera, 1987-1990
  - f. 96 Newsletters, 1985-1989
  - f. 97 Newspaper Clippings, 1985-1989
  - f. 98 Results, 1986-1987
  - f. 99 Schedules and Programs, 1987-1989
- f. 100 St. Louis Women's Sports Association, 1979-1988
- f. 101 Softball, 1946-1947
- f. 102-109 Track and Field
  - f. 102 Amateur Athletic Union, 1947-1976
  - f. 103 Miscellaneous, 1936-1987
  - f. 104-109 *Women's Track & Field World*, 1967-1978
- f. 110 Volleyball, 1953
- f. 111-139 Sports Halls of Fame
  - f. 111-113 Helms Athletic Foundation, 1953-1981
  - f. 114-117 Missouri Sports Hall of Fame, 1952-1992
  - f. 118 Missouri Track and Cross Country Coaches Association, 1974
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    - f. 135-137 Newsletters, 1977-1989
    - f. 138 Newspaper Clippings, 1983
    - f. 139 Programs, 1982-1989

**Professional Series**

The **Professional** series consists primarily of newsletters from the companies which employed Stephens and is arranged chronologically. On the occasions when Stephens is mentioned in these newsletters, it is usually due to her exploits on the corporate sponsored athletic teams.

The *Curtiss-Wright-er* newsletters are particularly interesting because they document the workings of the plant during World War II and discuss the use of the company's planes in the war effort.

**Professional Series (con'd)**

Memos, sign-up sheets for sports teams, and meeting minutes from her tenure as president of the GAO's Welfare and Recreation Association show Stephens' continued interest in athletics through the 1950s.

The series also includes correspondence and newsletters from the retirees' associations Stephens joined. Most of the correspondence deals with the social activities sponsored by the organizations, however a significant portion concerns legislation to change retirement benefits for civil service employees.

- f. 140-141 *Curlee News*, 1940-1945
- f. 142 Curtiss-Wright, Miscellaneous, 1945
- f. 143-155 *Curtiss-Wright-er*, 1942-1945
- f. 156-161 General Accounting Office
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- f. 162-177 Defense Mapping Agency Aerospace Center
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- f. 179-181 Association of Aerospace Charting Seniors, 1971-1985
- f. 182 National Association of Retired Federal Employees, 1977-1985

**William Woods College Series**

The **William Woods College** series contains correspondence, newspaper clippings, and miscellaneous materials, with the bulk of materials dating from the 1970s through 1980s. Stephens corresponded regularly with William Woods' presidents Randall B. Cutlip and John M. Bartholomy regarding her relationship with the college as well as her role as assistant track coach. The correspondence details some of the inner workings of the college administration, observations of campus goings-on, and the financial strain private colleges were under during the 1980s when the federal government made severe cuts to higher education funding.

The series also includes a list of items Stephens donated to the college for an exhibit on her athletic career.

- f. 183-194 Correspondence, 1954-1991
- f. 195 Donations, 1986-1995
- f. 196 Exhibit, 1984
- f. 197 Helen Stephens Award and Stephens Scholarship, 1968-1991
- f. 198-199 Newspaper Clippings, 1936-1992

**Appearances and Events Series**

The **Appearances and Events** series consists of newspaper clippings, correspondence, programs, and advertisements from events at which Stephens was invited to appear.

### **Appearances and Events Series (con'd)**

Events for which there is much information are arranged chronologically at the beginning of the series. Materials relating to smaller, miscellaneous events are contained in several folders at the end of the series and are also arranged chronologically.

- f. 200 Congressional Baseball Game, 1953
- f. 201-204 Multiple Sclerosis Society's Dinner of Champions, 1976-1990
- f. 205 Kingdom of Callaway Chamber of Commerce Dinner, 1976
- f. 206 Midwest Race Discrimination Conference, 1979
- f. 207 Leukemia Society of America, Breakfast of Champions, 1990-1991
- f. 208-216 Miscellaneous Events, 1937-1993, n.d.

### **Correspondence Series**

The **Correspondence** series is arranged chronologically and contains letters received by Stephens as well as some carbon copies of letters she sent out.

Much of the early correspondence consists of well wishes and congratulations for her Olympic triumphs. She continued to receive requests for autographs, especially from Germans, throughout her life, although they tended to peak during Olympic years.

The correspondence from 1937 and 1938 documents her struggle to find funding and employment while still maintaining her amateur athlete status. She solicited tobacco and sports equipment companies for endorsement deals to no avail. The correspondence from Swede Olson details the arrangement he laid out for her to play basketball with the All-American Red Heads while imploring her to destroy all the letters so as to not endanger her amateur standing.

In one interesting letter dated 1947, the woman who was Stephens' masseuse during the Olympics wrote asking for financial assistance because her family was suffering in post-war Germany.

Much of the correspondence from the 1970s through 1990s is with Stephens' former teammates and coaches including Helen Onson, of the Olympic Co-Ed basketball team, Olympic teammates Betty Robinson Schwartz and Annette Rogers Kelly, and her high school coach, Burt Moore. The correspondence between the Olympians details Stephens' efforts to get them into the U.S. and National Track & Field Halls of Fame. In one letter, Kelly expresses her bewilderment at the organizations which elect only one woman each year while inducting several men at the same time.

Stephens also corresponded with legislators regarding civil service retirement benefits, and with President Carter, voicing her support of the Olympic boycott in 1980.

- f. 217 1934-1935
- f. 218 January-July 1936
- f. 219 1-11 August 1936
- f. 220 12 August-15 September 1936
- f. 221 16 September-13 November 1936
- f. 222 16 November-December 1936
- f. 223 January-April 1937



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- f. 224 May-December 1937
- f. 225 January-July 1938
- f. 226 August 1938-1947
- f. 227 1950-1955
- f. 228 1956-1961
- f. 229 1962-1969
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- f. 253 June 1991-April 1992
- f. 254 August 1992-April 1993, n.d.

**Personal Series**

The **Personal** series consists mainly of newspaper clippings documenting Stephens' achievements. Also included are contracts she was offered by film companies upon her return from the Olympics, newspapers from Fulton High School while she was a student there, and miscellaneous items such as award certificates and information concerning Burt Moore. The series is arranged topically and then chronologically.

- f. 255 Contracts, 1936-1937
- f. 256 Fulton High School Newspapers, 1931-1936
- f. 257 Miscellaneous, 1950s-1980s
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