



The New York Public Library  
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,  
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

**John W. Cooper collection**

1887-2001, 1897-1947

Sc MG 743

## Summary

**Creator:** Cooper, John W. (John Walcott), 1873-1966

**Title:** John W. Cooper collection

**Date:** 1887-2001, 1897-1947

**Size:** 3.33 linear feet (6 boxes)

**Abstract:** The John W. Cooper Collection documents Cooper's long career as a ventriloquist. Included are letters received from ventriloquists, magicians and other entertainers discussing their experiences, and from various organizations where Cooper performed, arranging for gigs and thanking him for his performances, including for the USO Camp shows during World War II (1906-1966). Letters from William S. Berger, president of the Vent Haven Museum in Kentucky, discuss the museum; and there is correspondence with entertainment organizations to which he belonged. There are also a few scripts of dialogue for Cooper and his figure, Sam, and writings by Cooper regarding teaching the art of ventriloquism to students. Promotional literature and programs for Cooper's performances as well as other ventriloquists and performers are in the collection. Scrapbooks about his career include programs, letters, promotional material, and news clippings (1897-1947).

**Preferred citation:** [Item], John W. Cooper collection, Sc MG 743, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library

**Language of the Material:** English

**Separated Materials:**

Related materials are also held by the Schomburg's Art and Artifacts Division, Moving Image and Recorded Sound Division, and Photographs and Print Division.

## Creator History

John Walcott Cooper (1873-1966) was a Brooklyn born ventriloquist. From 1886 until about 1890 he was a singer with a vocal group called The Southern Jubilee Singers. He debuted as a ventriloquist in the 1895-1896 theatrical season, and gave his first professional show in 1897. He began touring the minstrel circuit with Richards and Pringles Georgia Minstrels as early as 1901. In addition to

ventriloquism, with his first wife, Etta Freeman, a pianist, he told stories in dialect, did fancy paper tearing, freehand drawing, and "mind reading."

From the very outset, Cooper wrote his own material and continued to do so throughout his sixty years as a performer and also designed his scenery. In his earliest skit, *Fun in a Barber Shop*, Cooper appeared as a barber in a shop occupied by five "customers," speaking in six different voices. Until the late 1920's, Cooper took his act into the nation's leading vaudeville houses, lodge halls, and private clubs, and was billed as a "clean and wholesome" performer.

By the 1930's Cooper introduced the dummy figure Sam Jackson who was carved by the well-known figure maker Theodore Mack, the maker of Edgar Bergen's Charlie McCarthy. Cooper (under the name Hezekiah Jones) and Sam toured the country with *The Major Bowes Original Amateur Hour*. Following the death of his first wife, he married Juliana St. Bernard with whom he had a daughter Joan (Maynard) who later became the director of the Weeksville Society in Brooklyn.

During World War II Cooper and Sam toured the United States with the USO camp shows and also performed in veterans hospitals. He played many private parties and nightclubs including New York's famed Kit Kat and El Morocco Clubs. Well-known and highly regarded by his fellow ventriloquists, he taught his art to Shari Lewis, creator of *Lamb Chops*. Cooper entertained children both in New York City's hospitals and in the homes of wealthy patrons.

Upon the death of his second wife in 1960, Cooper retired from show business at age 86. His daughter, Joan Maynard, maintained his papers and figures.

## Scope and Content Note

The John W. Cooper Collection documents Cooper's long career as a ventriloquist. Included are letters received from ventriloquists, magicians and other entertainers discussing their experiences, and from various organizations where Cooper performed, arranging for gigs and thanking him for his performances, including for the USO Camp shows during World War II (1906-1966). Letters from William S. Berger, president of the Vent Haven Museum in Kentucky, discuss the museum; and there is correspondence with entertainment organizations to which he belonged. There are also a few scripts of dialogue for Cooper and his figure, Sam, and writings by Cooper regarding teaching the art of ventriloquism to students. Promotional literature and programs for Cooper's performances as well as other ventriloquists and performers are in the collection. Scrapbooks about his career include programs, letters, promotional material, and news clippings (1897-1947).

Cooper's daughter, Joan Maynard, promoted his legacy by arranging for exhibits about her father at the Brooklyn Historical Society and by lecturing about him. Files discuss the arrangements, genealogical information, and Maynard's input regarding biographical information to be published. A copy of Stanley Burns' book *Other Voices* featuring Cooper and other ventriloquists is included. Maynard also maintained an active correspondence with other ventriloquists, including Shari Lewis and Chilly Willie Reid (1982-2001). Maynard also continued subscribing to journals about ventriloquism, and issues of *Dialogue*, *The Oracle*, and *The New Oracle* are represented in the collection.

Cooper's broad range of influence for his act is represented through the subjects of books and other printed material he maintained in the fields of magic tricks, music and songs, shadowgraphy, vaudeville and ventriloquism (1887-ca. 1944), including *Jubilee* and *Plantation Songs*.

**Arrangement:** Arranged into 7 series: I. Personal papers; II. Promotion literature and programs of other performers; III. Books referring to John Cooper; IV. Joan Maynard; V. Ventriloquists; VI. Scrapbooks; and VII. Printed matter.

## **Key Terms**

### **Occupations**

Actors.

### **Genre/Physical Characteristic**

Manuscripts (documents)

### **Subjects**

Vaudeville -- United States

Ventriloquism -- United States

### **Names**

Cooper, John W. (John Walcott), 1873-1966

Lewis, Shari

Maynard, Joan

Tyler, Willie

Wences, Sen\_or, 1896-1999

## Container List

### Personal Papers

- b. 1 f. 1 Membership Cards 1916-1960
- b. 1 f. 2 Appointment Calendars (5) 1937-1951
- b. 1 f. 3 Address Book n.d.
- b. 1 f. 4 Certificates 1944
- b. 1 f. 5 Family 1937-1982
- b. 1 f. 6 Postcards 1914-1947
- b. 1 f. 6 Professional Papers
- b. 1 f. 7 Incoming Correspondence 1906-1944
- b. 1 f. 8 Incoming Correspondence 1947-1958
- b. 1 f. 9 Berger, William S 1939-1966
- b. 1 f. 10 Scripts - Dialogues for Cooper and Sam
- b. 1 f. 11 Writings by Cooper re Ventriloquism
- b. 1 f. 12 Contracts
- b. 1 f. 13-15 Promotional Literature and Programs
- b. 1 f. 16 Promotional Literature and Programs, St. Peter Claver's Holy Name Society, Brooklyn (Roman Catholic Church) 1922-1957
- b. 1 f. 17 Writings - Other Author Ventriloquists and Other Performers

### Promotional Literature and Programs for other performers

- b. 1 Promotional Literature and Programs
- b. 1 f. 20 News Clippings - Bergen, Edgar
- b. 1 f. 21 Programs and Printed Material Memberships
- b. 1 f. 22 Colored Vaudeville Benevolent Association 1911, n.d.
- b. 1 f. 23 International Brotherhood of Ventriloquists International Ventriloquists' Association - Printed Material 1953, 1997-1999
- b. 1 f. 24 Negro Actors Guild, 1958-1964 Biographical Information
- b. 1 f. 25 Obituary 1966
- b. 1 f. 26 Ventriloquism Publications and Newspapers 1953-1999
- b. 1 f. 27 Dictionary of American Negro Biography - Entry by Rayford W. Logan 1974-1999
- b. 1 f. 28 *Smithsonian* 1933-1994

### Books Referring to John Cooper

- b. 1 f. 29 Correspondence and Essay 1989-1999
- b. 1 f. 30 *Other Voices: Ventriloquism from B.C. to T.V. By Stanley Burns* 2000
- b. 1 f. 31 Elegant Films 1995
- b. 1 f. 32 Genealogical Information from Richard Dickenson
- b. 1 f. 33 Brooklyn Historical Society, etc. – Loan and Exhibition of Sam, Talks to Groups 1983-1999

### Joan Maynard

- b. 1 f. 34 Re John Cooper
- b. 1 f. 35 Biographical Information

### Ventriloquists

- b. 2 f. 1 Blake, Winnie 1982
- b. 2 f. 2 Cooper, Anthony 1995-1998
- b. 2 f. 3 Ende, Alan 1987
- b. 2 f. 4 Lewis, Shari 1983-1998
- b. 2 f. 5 Reid, Chilly Willie 1987-2000
- b. 2 f. 6 Stockman, Todd 1983-1999
- b. 2 f. 7 Tomlinson, Charlie Tyson, III 1997-2001
- b. 2 f. 8 Tyler, Willie 1982-1987
- b. 2 f. 9 Wences, Señor 1989
- b. 2 f. 10 Wilson, Winnie n.d.
- b. 2 f. 11 Williams, Aaron ca. 2001
- b. 2 f. 12 Various 1982-1987

### Scrapbooks

- b. 3 Scrapbook 1898-1913
- b. 4 Scrapbook 1921-1987

### Printed Material

- b. 5 f. 1 Ventriloquists' Figures

#### Ventriloquism Publications

- b. 5 f. 2 *Dialogue* 1986-1989
- b. 5 f. 3 *Dialogue* 1990-1992
- b. 5 f. 4 *Double-Talk* 1938-1939
- b. 5 f. 5 *The IBV Grapevine News* 1941, 1946-1950
- The New Oracle*
- b. 5 f. 6 1983-1986
- The Oracle*
- b. 5 f. 7 1950-1952
- b. 5 f. 8 1953-1954
- b. 5 f. 9 1955-1956
- b. 5 f. 10 1957-1958
- b. 5 f. 11 1959-1960
- b. 5 f. 12 *Voice of the Northeast* 1982-1986
- Vent World Association - Calendar with Contribution by Joan Maynard
- b. 5 f. 13 1986
- b. 5 f. 14 1987

#### Performance Publications

- b. 5 f. 15 Dialogue Book - Mimeograph n.d.
- b. 5 f. 16 Gags and Routines
- b. 5 f. 17 Joke Book by Harry Stewart – Mimeograph n.d.
- b. 5 Magic Tricks
- b. 5 f. 21 Music and Songs

Printed Material (cont.)

Performance Publications (cont.)

- b. 5 f. 22      Shadowgraphy
- Songs
- Jubilee and Plantation Songs*
- b. 5 f. 23      Original 1887
- b. 5 f. 24      Photocopy 1887
- b. 5 f. 25      Vaudeville 1905
- b. 5 f. 26      Ventriloquism 1944
- b. 5      Ventriloquism
- b. 6      Ventriloquism
- b. 6 f. 3      Miscellaneous
- Books
- b. 6 f. 4      Biography of Valentine Vox, Ventriloquist