

Letters to the Stars—Synopsis

Introduction

Fan mail to Hollywood movie stars is known from 1918 to the present day, from every corner of the globe. During this time, an extensive network of fan mail logistics has been developed by Hollywood studios, by the Screen Actors Guild, and by private firms. A fan letter is identified by the addressee being an actor or actress; usually in care of a movie studio in Hollywood or a nearby Southern California city.

Importance & Research

This 6 frame, display class exhibit traces the social, philatelic, and entertainment history illustrated by “Letters to the Stars”. Fan mail was important to fans, the studios, and to the stars. Fans connected with the stars by writing letters, often requesting autographs or photos. This was a world-wide phenomenon; fan letters are shown from many corners of the globe, from Australia to Fiji, to Zanzibar.

The Hollywood studios actively encouraged fan letters, and gauged their content to assess a star’s popularity. A star that received significant amounts of fan mail could receive better wages and better roles.

All references to “Earliest Known Use”, “Discovery Copy” etc. are documented in:

“Movie Star Mail—More Than Meets the Eye”, Regis Hoffman and Thomas J. Richards, *The American Philatelist*, April 2001. P314-323.

“Development of the Hollywood Fan Mail System”, Regis Hoffman and Thomas J. Richards, *The Congress Book 2002*. P21-41.

Many of the military-related covers are described in the “Stars & Strife” column that appears in the *Military Postal History Society Bulletin*.

Frames 1-2: History of Fan Mail

The initial section demonstrates the importance of fan mail to the studios and to the stars. Shown are publicity photographs of stars receiving their fan mail, and a release form from actress Jane Powell allowing her photograph to be used in fan mail responses. **A key item is an inter-office memo from the Paramount Pictures Fan Mail Department to actress Betty Hutton, listing the amount of fan mail received during the week of February 17, 1945.**

Subsequent pages trace the development of fan mail starting with the silent film era. **A highlight is the first recorded fan mail cover from 1918, addressed to Douglas Fairbanks at Lasky Studios.** Many of the studios from the silent era no longer exist; this is illustrated by a cover addressed to Charlie Chaplin at Chaplain Studios.

During the early 1920’s studio publicity departments were located in New York City – this is exemplified by letters addressed to the New York offices of the studios. Several of these have forwarding handstamps to the Hollywood studios.

Fan mail peaked during Hollywood’s “Golden Years” (1930-1955) - during this time an

extensive fan mail logistic system was created by the studios. After this, fan mail began to be processed by private firms and celebrity fan clubs.

Frames 3-5: Fan Mail Auxiliary Markings

Fans addressed their letters to a star at a particular studio, often guessing at the studio. If the guess was incorrect, the letter was forwarded, sometimes with a studio marking (reading “Not At ...”, or “Uncalled for At ...”). Examples of such markings are:

**NOT AT
PARAMOUNT
STUDIOS**

NOT AT UNIVERSAL

Examples of auxiliary markings used by the Hollywood studios

Only about 1-2% of fan mail bears these markings. **Shown are the earliest recorded studio marking** (“Not At Fox” applied in 1920), and 30+ markings—**many the only recorded or discovery copies** from firms such as Pathe Studios, Metropolitan Studios, M.G.M., Warner Brothers and United Artists. **A spectacular piece is a postal stationery card from Yugoslavia to actor Farley Granger with three studio markings.**

Auxiliary markings also forwarded the letters to private fan mail firms, agencies that represented the stars, or more rarely to a hotel or club frequented by Hollywood stars. Examples shown from each of these categories include re-direction handstamps for “United Fan Mail”, “General Artists Corporation”, and the “Los Angeles Athletic Club” (a temporary and inexpensive home to movie stars). These types of auxiliary markings are very scarce.

**LOS ANGELES ATHLETIC CLUB
LOS ANGELES, CALIF.**

**THE STANDARD CASTING DIRECTORY, INC.
616 TAFT BUILDING, HOLLYWOOD, CALIF.**

Examples of auxiliary markings used to forward Hollywood fan mail

Frame 6: Unusual Uses

Most fan mail originated from humble circumstances, but fan mail is also known from extreme locations. This frame illustrates fan mail showing unusual usages from:

- Members of the armed forces during WWII, with an intriguing cover from a member of the Chinese Air Force training in Pueblo, Colorado, to actress Ginger Rogers.
- Allied POWs in German camps to movie stars with an example of a letter held by the British censors until the conclusion of the war.
- A fan letter from an Italian internee at Fort Missoula, Montana to actress Deanna Durbin.
- A Japanese-American worker on a Dole pineapple plantation camp during WWII.
- Examples of fan mail that were involved in train wrecks and were damaged/burned in the accident.