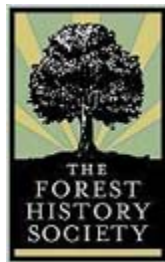


**Inventory of the
Jonathan Keith Esser Collection, 1893 - 1963**



Forest History Society
Alvin J. Huss Archives
701 William Vickers Avenue
Durham, NC 27701 USA
Phone: (919) 682-9319 / Fax: (919) 682-2349

<http://foresthistor.org/ead>

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Descriptive Summary

Title:	Jonathan Keith Esser Collection,
Dates:	1893 - 1963
Creator:	Esser, Jonathan Keith
Abstract:	<p>Pennsylvania forester and coal industry worker Jonathan Keith Esser (1893-1963) graduated from the Biltmore Forest School in 1911.</p> <p>The collection contains letters written by and photographs taken or collected by forester Jonathan Keith Esser. The materials date from 1899 to 1920 (bulk 1910-1911) and primarily document Esser's training while a forestry student under the tutelage of Biltmore Forest School director Carl Alwin Schenck (1868-1955). Esser's correspondence consists of five letters he wrote to his family while on Biltmore Forest School field trips to various forested regions of the United States and Europe in 1910 and 1911. Photographs in the collection document the training Esser received while on said field trips; his work while a member of a U.S. Forest Service reconnaissance team that surveyed forest conditions in the southern Appalachian Mountains region of the United States during 1912; and his experiences while serving in the U.S. Army during the World War I era.</p>
Extent:	6.5 linear feet(4 photo albums, 1 envelope, 1 folder)
Repository:	Forest History Society Library and Archives
Call Number:	7205
Language of Material:	Material in English

Biographical Note

Pennsylvania forester and coal industry worker Jonathan Keith Esser (1893-1963) graduated from the Biltmore Forest School in 1911.

Born in 1893 in Mauch Chunk, Pennsylvania (renamed Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania, in 1954), J. Keith Esser was the son of Isabelle (Simpson) and George W. Esser, a postmaster and prominent figure in Carbon County, Pennsylvania, politics. Esser's family had strong ties to the local coal business, which eventually would lure Keith back to the region. Keith's older sister, Mary, married Truman "Trot" Dodson II, who owned a nearby coal mine, and for a time Keith's father also owned a coke (coal) business in Wise County, Virginia.

Forest History Society Library and Archives

Unlike most of his peers at the Biltmore School who were oriented toward careers in the private sector of the timber industry, Keith was interested in working for the U.S. Forest Service. After completing his year with the Biltmore Forest School in 1911, Keith Esser continued to pursue his interests in forestry for several more years and appears to have met with success in his career ambitions. In the Fall 1911 edition of the Biltmore School's Biltmore Doings alumni notes, the following entry appears, "... and J.K. Esser who have finished their course, have begun their 'apprenticeship' with the Smith-Powers Logging Company of Marshfield [Oregon]. Mr. Esser will enter the Forest Service on the Umpqua Reserve later on." Subsequent editions of the Biltmore alumni newsletter trace several more moves by Esser. The January 1912 issue reports, "J.K. Esser (Biltmore 1911) is working for the Chestnut Blight Commission at Johnstown, Pa.," and the June 1912 issue includes the notation, "The Degree of Bachelor of Forestry was given, upon completion of the statutory conditions, to ... J.K. Esser, employed by the U.S. Forest Service." One of Esser's photo albums also documents this time, as a handwritten caption in the front of the album states, "Note - Photos taken in 1912 on forest reconnaissance work of U.S. Forest Service on lands to be included in the S. Appalachian forest reserves."

After 1912, the path of Keith Esser's life grows less clear. A number of loose photos in this collection depict scenes of World War I-era camps and military maneuvers, but there is no clear sign that Esser saw action overseas. He may have been part of the 20th Engineer Regiment (Forestry) that set up logging operations and sawmills in France to supply the war effort, but this regiment was the largest in the U.S. Army with more than 20,000 men in thirteen battalions, and the collection includes no reference to confirm Esser's role. One photo shows the crippled ship *Herbert L. Pratt*, which was mined by a German submarine on 3 June 1918 a few miles off the Delaware coast, but whether Esser actually took the photo or made it any farther east than this during the war remains uncertain.

Back in Pennsylvania, J. Keith Esser married Grace Brinton, a native of Milton, Pennsylvania, and the daughter of George Jolley. Grace was seven years the junior of her husband and proceeded to outlive him by more than thirty years. Keith and Grace Esser did not have children and left little record of Keith's post-forestry adult life. A Directory of Alumni of the Biltmore Forest School printed in 1946 includes no mention of J. Keith Esser. Obituaries reporting his death on 16 February 1963 state that Esser was a retired coal company operator who had been active with the Boy Scouts of America, serving as the first scoutmaster in Carbon County. He built a log cabin at Split Rock Lodge and later donated this to the Boy Scouts. His widow, Grace, died in 1996 in a retirement home in Philadelphia, where she had earlier been employed by First Pennsylvania Bank. Both Essers are buried in a family plot at the Mauch Chunk Cemetery in Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania.

Collection Overview

This collection contains correspondence and photographs produced by Jonathan Keith Esser (1893-1963) while he was a student on Biltmore Forest School field trips to Germany and various forested regions of United States, including the Midwest, Northeast, and Southeast. The correspondence dates from 1910 to 1911 and contains a couple of undated letters. Esser composed one of the letters on 30 October 1910 while in Cadillac, Michigan, and wrote the other letters while in Lindenfels and Darmstadt, Germany, in late 1910 and early 1911. His mother was the recipient of most of the letters, although one of the letters is addressed to Esser's sister, Mary Dodson. In the letters, Esser describes his impressions of Biltmore Forest School director Dr. Carl Alwin Schenck; his perceptions of German society; and his analysis of the forestry operations he observed firsthand in Germany and Michigan.

Forest History Society Library and Archives

There are 418 images dating from 1899 to 1920 included in the collection. The images reside in four photo albums and a single envelope in the Forest History Society Archives. Three of the albums contain photographs and postcards documenting Esser's experiences while on Biltmore Forest School field trips to Michigan, North Carolina, the Adirondack region of New York State, and forested areas in Germany, especially the Spessart, Saxony, and Black Forest regions. The fourth album contains images from a U.S. Forest Service reconnaissance survey of the southern Appalachian region of the United States; Keith Esser was a member of the survey team. Photographs housed in the envelope depict World War I-era military training scenes as well as a few images from a Biltmore Forest School field trip. All of the photographs are black-and-white images; a few of the postcards are colorized.

Collection Arrangement

Restrictions

Access Restrictions

No restrictions.

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Subject Headings

Biltmore Forest School -- History
Esser, Jonathan Keith, 1893-1963
Foresters -- United States -- Biography
Forestry schools and education
Forests and forestry -- Germany -- Black Forest
Forests and forestry -- Germany -- Saxony
Forests and forestry -- Germany -- Spessart
Forests and forestry -- Michigan -- History
Forests and forestry -- New York (State) -- Adirondack
Mountains Region -- History
Forests and forestry -- North Carolina -- History
Schenck, Carl Alwin, 1868 - 1955

Forest History Society Library and Archives

United States. Forest Service -- Officials and employees

World War, 1914-1918

Administrative Information

Preferred Citation

[Identification of item], Jonathan Keith Esser Collection, Library and Archives, Forest History Society, Durham, NC, USA.

Processing Information

Processed by David G. Havlick, May 2002

Encoded by Amanda Ross, January 2009

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Detailed Description of the Collection

1. Correspondence, 1910-1911 and undated. 5 items

Correspondence of J. Keith Esser composed while he was a Biltmore Forest School student on field trips to forested regions of Germany and Michigan in 1910 and 1911. In the letters, which he wrote to his mother (Isabelle Simpson Esser) and sister (Mary Dodson), Esser describes his everyday experiences, his observations of forests and forestry practices in the various geographic regions he visited, and his impressions of fellow students and Biltmore Forest School director Carl Alwin Schenck.

For each item in this series, a summary description is provided along with a hyperlink leading to a full transcription and digital scan of the item presented in Adobe Acrobat .pdf file format. The transcriptions include the author's original spelling and phrasing verbatim without any editorial correction.

Letter from J. Keith Esser to Isabelle Simpson Esser, October 23, 1910

Keith Esser composed this 8-page handwritten letter to his mother, Isabelle Simpson Esser, on stationary preprinted with "Hôtel 'zum Odenwald', Lindenfels i.O." across the top edge. The letter's accompanying envelope is addressed as follows: "Mrs. George W. Esser, Mauch Chunk Morea Colliery, Pennsylvania, USA, Via England." Esser was a Biltmore Forest School student on his first field trip to Europe when he composed this correspondence. In it he describes his initial impressions of Germany, commenting on such things as his accommodations, German social customs, the natural and built landscape of Germany, and some of his interactions with Biltmore Forest School director Carl A. Schenck.

Letter from J. Keith Esser to Mary Dodson, October 30, 1910

In this correspondence to his sister Mary Dodson, Keith Esser discusses such topics as: a dinner party he attended at Dr. and Mrs. Schenck's house; the accommodations he and several other students found in Darmstadt, Germany; what he learned about planting conifers through his field work; general impressions of German society; and the use of coal in Germany. Esser wrote this 14-page letter on plain paper stationary.

Letter from J. Keith Esser to Isabelle Simpson Esser, February 12, 1911

This 2-page letter Esser sent to his mother, Isabelle Simpson Esser, includes very brief sentences referring to a variety of topics, including: news discussed in his mother's previous letters to him; his mother's impending operation; plans for an upcoming weekend excursion to Switzerland; a Wagner opera he attended; and his negative impression of the German people. Keith Esser composed this letter, apparently while in Darmstadt, Germany, on stationary sized 8 12/16" x 10 10/16" and preprinted with "Hotel-Restaurant 'Darmstädter Hof', Rudolf Doll" on the top left corner.

Letter from J. Keith Esser, undated

This letter consists of four pages of stationary preprinted with "Hotel-Restaurant 'Darmstädter Hof', Rudolf Doll" in the top left corner. The first page begins with text that continues from a previous page that is missing. Keith Esser composed the letter with ink, but the first page has a number "3" and "letter to Keith's mother" written on it in pencil. The correspondence focuses on a lengthy discussion of Esser's thoughts about being a Biltmore Forest School student. Esser discusses his mental and physical health; the rigors of forestry field work; benefits of the school's emphasis on practical field work over traditional theoretical studies; his travel itinerary; and the apparent handicap of Biltmore Forest School training for students more interested in government employment than in working for lumber companies in the private sector.

Letter from J. Keith Esser, circa 1910-1911

Although undated, this letter has "In Camp #7 - Cadillac, Mich" written on the top right-hand corner of the first page, suggesting that Keith Esser composed this letter while on a Biltmore Forest School field trip there in either 1910 or 1911. In this letter that he wrote to his mother, Esser discusses his forestry field experiences in Cadillac, Michigan, as a Biltmore Forest School student. Topics covered include: traveling across country from Pennsylvania to Michigan; the size of his class; sleeping accommodations in the camp; and the daily routine of lectures and practical field work. Esser wrote this 8-page letter on plain paper stationery.

2. Photographs, 1899-1920 and undated. 4 photo albums and 1 envelope (418 items)

Photographs and postcards in this series primarily document (1) Biltmore Forest School field trip excursions in Europe and the United States during 1910 and 1911; (2) work conducted for a U.S. Forest Service reconnaissance survey of the southern Appalachian region of the United States in 1912; and (3) U.S. Army field training during the World War I era.

These photographs are available through the online image gallery for the Jonathan Keith Esser Photograph Collection.