

# Vardis and Opal Fisher Papers, 1934-1996

## Overview of the Collection

<b>Creator</b>	Fisher, Grant;Fisher, Opal L. (Opal Laurel), 1913- ;Pollack, Sydney, 1934-2008;Swallow, Alan;Warner Bros.
<b>Title</b>	Vardis and Opal Fisher Papers
<b>Dates</b>	1934-1996 (inclusive) 1934 1996
<b>Quantity</b>	4.0 linear feet, (10 boxes)
<b>Collection Number</b>	MSS 159
<b>Summary</b>	Correspondence and other papers of Idaho author Vardis Fisher and his wife, Opal Fisher. Personal and family concerns dominate Vardis Fisher's papers; republishing his books and protecting his literary reputation are the main themes of Opal Fisher's. The collection also contains hundreds of newspaper columns by Fisher and many reviews of his works. Opal Fisher's papers date mainly after Vardis Fisher's death.
<b>Repository</b>	<a href="#">Boise State University Library, Special Collections and Archives</a> Special Collections and Archives 1910 University Drive Boise ID 83725 Telephone: 208-426-3958 <a href="mailto:archives@boisestate.edu">archives@boisestate.edu</a>
<b>Access Restrictions</b>	Collection is available for research.
<b>Languages</b>	English
<b>Sponsor</b>	Funding for encoding this finding aid was provided, in part, by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities

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## Historical Note

Vardis Fisher, novelist, essayist, and short story writer, was born on March 31, 1895, in Annis, Idaho. He was raised in the Antelope Hills of eastern Idaho, graduated from Rigby High School, and received a bachelor's degree from the University of Utah in 1920. He received a master's and doctorate from the University of Chicago. After teaching at the University of Utah and New York University, he returned to Idaho in 1931 to devote full time to writing. During the Depression Fisher served as the director of the Federal Writers Project in Idaho. Under his editorship, the project produced the acclaimed Idaho guide and other works. In 1940 Fisher married Opal Laurel Holmes, his third wife. They built a home in the Hagerman valley of southern Idaho and lived there until Vardis Fisher's death in 1968. A fuller biographical sketch of Vardis Fisher can be found in the finding aid to the Library's Clore collection (MSS 2).

Opal Fisher was born in Laurens, Iowa, on October 14, 1913. Raised by her grandparents, she met Vardis Fisher in 1936 when she went to work for the Federal Writers Project in Boise. After Fisher's death in 1968 she moved back to Boise to devote her life to protecting Fisher's literary reputation and reprinting his novels under her own imprint, Opal Laurel Holmes (her maiden name). Vivacious

and strong-willed, Mrs. Fisher was not loath to castigate publicly scholars whose interpretation of Fisher's life and work did not coincide with her own. Nor did she shrink from doing battle with publishers in her efforts to recover publication rights to her husband's works. In December 1972 she presided over the Boise premiere of the motion picture *Jeremiah Johnson*, a movie based in part on Fisher's novel *Mountain Man*. The premiere was attended by both director Sydney Pollack and its star, Robert Redford. Between 1972 and 1977, Mrs. Fisher reprinted several of Fisher's books but did not have much success in distributing them. Tim Woodward, author of a biography of Vardis Fisher, interviewed her several times in 1985, but she was little heard from publicly after that. Opal Fisher lived the last years of her life as a recluse in her home in the Boise Foothills. She died at home in 1994, surrounded by thousands of copies of Vardis Fisher's books.

## Content Description

Vardis Fisher's papers consist of circa 300 letters (1945-1968) from Fisher to his son, Grant; other miscellaneous correspondence, including letters (1959-1968) to and from publisher Alan Swallow; reviews of his books clipped from newspapers across the country (1939-1966); copies of his newspaper columns (1946-1955); and financial account book (1939-1968). Opal Fisher's papers relate chiefly to the republication of Vardis Fisher's books and the making of the movie *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972), based in part on Fisher's novel *Mountain Man*. Her correspondents include Sydney Pollack and Warner Brothers.

Forms part of the Idaho Writers Archive.

## Use of the Collection

### Preferred Citation

[item description], Vardis and Opal Fisher Papers, Box [number] Folder [number], Boise State University Special Collections and Archives.

## Administrative Information

### Arrangement

The collection is divided into three series: 1. Papers of Vardis Fisher, 2. Papers of Opal Fisher, and 3. Photographs and tape recordings.

### Acquisition Information

Gift of Grant Fisher, 1996-1997.

### Processing Note

For preservation purposes, the letters were photocopied and bound in chronological order. Researchers are asked to consult the photocopies rather than the originals.

### Related Materials

See also: [Mabel Clore Collection on Vardis Fisher](#)

[Dorys Crow Grover Papers and Collections on Vardis Fisher and Ernest Hemingway](#)

[Fisher Family Papers](#)

[Joseph M. Flora Papers and Collection on Vardis Fisher](#)

[George E. Brown Jr. Correspondence with Vardis Fisher](#)

[Lloyd Jensen Collection on Vardis Fisher](#)

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### 1: Papers of Vardis Fisher

The largest portion of this collection consists of approximately 300 letters written by Vardis Fisher to his son Grant, chiefly in the 1950s and 60s. The letters discuss personal and family concerns and the business of writing and publishing, but little of literary matters. (Vardis Fisher donated most of his literary papers to Yale University.) A few other letters, including some by Vardis Fisher's son Wayne and some by Opal Fisher, are intermingled with Vardis Fisher's.

The collection contains a few other letters by Vardis Fisher, including one (dated 1953) to the Caxton Printers, publishers of his *Testament of Man* series. Fisher responds to the publisher's objections to his yet-unpublished novel, *Jesus Came Again* (Box 1, Folder 2). Their differences could not be resolved, and Caxton quit publishing the series.

Perhaps the most important single item in this group is Vardis Fisher's account book (Box 6), begun in 1940 when he and Opal moved to Hagerman. Entries continue until June 1968, three weeks before his death. In the book Fisher recorded income and expenses, including the expenses in building the cabin and home place in 1940. Fisher's income fluctuated from year to year, but over the time he kept the account book, his income was derived from five main sources: stock dividends, interest, book royalties, sale of his newspaper column, and farm operations. In 1960, Fisher made a record of the status of rights to all of his books. He noted that he did not want three books ever to be reprinted: *Sonnets to an Imaginary Madonna*, *Forgive Us Our Virtues*, and *Neurotic Nightingale*. Loose clippings, as well as clippings taped into the book, reflect Fisher's continuing interest with the state of the American economy, particularly the rate of inflation and the consumer price index. So concerned was Fisher with the inflation rate, that when he sold some land to a neighbor and financed the sale himself, he inserted an inflation clause into the contract. If inflation exceeded ten percent before the principal of the loan was paid, the purchaser would have to pay an additional ten percent above the agreed-upon purchase price. Vardis and Opal Fisher also made entries in a diary during part of 1963. That book is located in Box 7. In it, they mainly recorded professional expenses, including the costs of food and drink for entertaining visiting scholars.

Vardis Fisher's papers also include more than two hundred reviews of his books, principally *Mountain Man*, *Orphans in Gethsemane*, *Pemmican*, *Suicide or Murder?*, and *Tale of Valor*. Most of these reviews were clipped from newspapers across the country by a clipping service. For preservation purposes, the Library has made photocopies of these reviews on archival paper. The collection also contain copies of Fisher's weekly column from the Idaho newspaper *Statewide* from December 1946 until September 1952 (the entire year 1950 excepted), and a few later columns from the Gooding, Idaho, *Leader*. These clippings have also been photocopied.

NOTE: Box 5 contains letters from Vardis Fisher to his son, Grant Fisher, and other family correspondence. Includes letters written by Opal Fisher after Vardis Fisher's death.

Container(s)		Description	Dates
Box	Folder		
1	1	Correspondence: Gates, Dale	1942-1952
1	2	Correspondence: Gipson, J.H.	1953
1	3	Correspondence: Lewis, B. Roland	undated
1	4	Correspondence: Manfred, Frederick	1956-1965
1	5	Correspondence: McMurtry, Larry (photocopies)	1965
1	6	Correspondence: Milton, John	1965
1	7	Correspondence: Oboler, Eli	1956-1960
1	8	Correspondence: Pead, Richard	1967
1	9	Correspondence: Swallow, Alan and Swallow Press	1959-1968
1	10	Correspondence: Miscellaneous	
10	4	Correspondence: Katy Murphy	1960
10	5	Correspondence: Bob Fisher	1960-1963
10	6	Correspondence: Grant Fisher	undated
10	7	Correspondence: Irene Fisher	1959
10	8	Correspondence: Steve Fisher	1964, undated
10	9	Correspondence: Wayne Fisher	1963-1966
10	10	Correspondence: Edward	1964
10	11	Correspondence: Lavaida	1962-1963
10	12	Correspondence: Opal and Vardis	1965, undated

Container(s)	Description	Dates
1 11	Writings: Alan Swallow Interviews Vardis Fisher... (from A Way Out)	1965
1 12	Writings: Amigo Mio!	1954
1 13	Writings: Fact or Fiction	undated
1 14	Writings: The Great Pemmican Hunt	1956
1 15	Writings: Human Prejudice and Ignorance (reprint of column)	undated
1 16	Writings: A Pinch of Advice (from The Writer)	1940
1 17	Writings: Profanity in Fiction (souvenir reprint	1983
1 18	Writings: [Roman Catholic Church]	[1950]
1 19	Writings: Vardis Fisher Says (columns)	1960s
1 20	Writings: What is the Evidence: Comments on the Testament of Man Series	
1 21	Loose items from account book: Dieter Bookbinding	1967
1 22	Loose Items from account book: Financial	
1 23	Loose items from account book: Miscellaneous	
1 24	Reviews: Excerpts	
1 25	Reviews: <i>Mountain Man</i>	1965-1966
1 26	Reviews: <i>Mountain Man</i>	1965-1966
1 27	Reviews: <i>Orphans in Gethsemanae</i>	1960
1 28	Reviews: <i>Pemmican</i>	1956
1 29	Reviews: <i>Suicide or Murder?</i>	1962
1 30	Reviews: <i>Tale of Valor</i>	1958

Container(s)		Description	Dates
1	31	Reviews: Other books	1934-1962
1	32	Miscellaneous	
1	33	Miscellaneous, recovered from the Hagerman home	
1	34	About Vardis Fisher: Brochures and promotional materials	
1	35	About Vardis Fisher: "Dear Mr. Fisher/Dear Mr. Schwartz: A Correspondence"	
1	36	About Vardis Fisher: "Idaho Individualist"	1962
1	36	About Vardis Fisher: Obituary, <i>American Book Collector</i>	1968
1	38	About Vardis Fisher: "Vardis Fisher and the Idaho Guide"	1968
1	39	About Vardis Fisher: "Vardis Fisher's Children of God: A Second Look"	1979
1	40	About Vardis Fisher: Miscellaneous clippings	
1	41	Listings of music recorded by Vardis and Opal Fisher	
10	21	Expose, Three West: Conversations with Vardis Fisher, max Evans, Michael Straight by John R. Milton	1973
10		Business Papers: Newspaper Columns/Swallow	1961-1967
		<b>Correspondence</b> Letters from Vardis Fisher to his son, Grant Fisher, and other family correspondence. Includes letters written by Opal Fisher after Vardis Fisher's death.	
<b>Box</b>	<b>Book</b>		
5	1		1945-1958
5	2		1959-1963
5	3		1964-1965
5	4		1966-1967

Container(s)	Description	Dates
5 5		1968-1975 undated
6	Account book (Loose items in Box 1, Folders 16-18)	1940-1968
<b>Box</b>		
10	Diary book	1963
10	Rubber stamp: For Deposit Only / Vardis Fisher	
10	Publication, <i>Sea Temperature in the Gulf of Alaska and in the Northeast Pacific Ocean, 1941-1952</i> , by Margaret K. Robinson. Autographed "Margaret" and inscribed "To Vardis".	1957
8	Newspaper columns (Photocopies), mostly titled "Vardis Fisher Says": From <i>Statewide</i> [1946 Dec 13-1952 Sept 11 but none in 1950] and from <i>Gooding Leader</i> , mostly undated, various	1953-1955

## 2: Papers of Opal Fisher

Most of the papers of Opal Fisher date from the period after Vardis Fisher's death, although there are a few files that contain earlier material, and four that contain papers of Vardis Fisher intermixed with Opal's own. (Her correspondence files for George F. Day, Joseph M. Flora, the Authors Guild, and Doubleday contain some letters to and from Vardis Fisher.) Opal Fisher's papers, on the whole, relate mainly to the reprinting and marketing of Vardis Fisher's books, recovering publication rights, and to her dealings with Warner Brothers regarding the movie *Jeremiah Johnson*.

In a 1977 letter to book review editors (Box 3, Folder 4), Opal Fisher explained why she entered the publishing business. Reprinting Fishers books was a means of "keeping Vardis close in a most satisfying way." She saw it as her duty to "protect the books as well I could....For me, the books were alive and warm, a part of Vardis that lived on, and deserved my best effort on their own merit, quite aside from my deep emotional investment in the man who wrote them." Under the imprint Opal Laurel Holmes, Mrs. Fisher reprinted *Children of God*, *Dark Bridwell*, *The Mothers*, *Mountain Man*, and *Sonnets to an Imaginary Madonna*. She wrote and designed the book covers and contracted for the printing of the books herself. Her files on *Children of God* and *Mountain Man* are the most extensive. Opal Fisher did not sell many of the books she reprinted, however. When she died, there were more than 20,000 books in her garage and in storage, most in unopened cartons. When her estate was settled, these were divided between the Idaho Center for the Book (at Boise State University) and Albertsons College of Idaho.

In 1972, Pocket Books issued *Mountain Man* in a mass-market paperback edition that was linked to the release of the movie *Jeremiah Johnson*. It featured a photo of Robert Redford on the cover. By 1979, slightly more than 500,000 copies had been sold. Opal Fisher earned more than \$56,000 in royalties (Box 3, Folder 26). Included in her papers relating to *Mountain Man* are royalty statements and

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a bibliography she typed of the books Vardis Fisher consulted while writing the book (Box 3, Folder 20). Other posthumous printings of Vardis Fisher books included a mass-market paperback edition of *City of Illusion* (Ace Books) and a trade paperback edition of *The Mothers* (Swallow Press).

The correspondence files with Warner Brothers concerning the motion picture *Jeremiah Johnson* (Box 2, Folders 28 to 31) reveal Opal Fisher's determination to see her husband's work recognized. The surviving files are apparently incomplete, because the papers contain references to letters and documents that are not present in the existing record. From what survives, however, it appears that director Sydney Pollack's acknowledgment of a debt to the Fisher novel *Mountain Man* came rather late in the production process, and only after an exchange of correspondence and telephone calls with Opal Fisher. Pollack asserted that the motion picture was based "loosely on the novel *Crow Killer* by Raymond W. Thorp and Robert Bunker" (Box 2, Folder 30), but after letters and talks with Mrs. Fisher, he requested rights to use "portions" of *Mountain Man* in exchange for \$5,000 and a premiere showing in Idaho. The letters in the files between Mrs. Fisher, Pollack, and Warner Brothers officials are, on the whole, friendly, but in a letter of August 24, 1972, Opal Fisher refers to an early charge of plagiarism (Box 2, Folder 29).

Opal Fisher also challenged scholars and writers when she did not agree with their interpretations of her husband's life and work. Her papers contain strongly-stated disagreements with Di Bowler (Box 2, Folder 4), Mick McAllister (Box 2, Folders 9 and 10), John Milton (Box 3, Folder 1, and Box 7), and Leonard Arrington (Box 3, Folder 3). In Milton's case, Mrs. Fisher was critical of his editing of the tape-recorded interview that appeared in the book *Three West: Conversations with Vardis Fisher, Max Evans, Michael Straight* (1970). She drafted a detailed response to the published interview and created a mock-up of a booklet in refutation entitled "Expose". In Arrington's case, Mrs. Fisher responded to his reference to Fisher's Mormon background by publishing a pamphlet entitled *Vardis Fisher Was Not A Mormon* (1979).

Also included in the papers is a numbered listing of 200 purchasers and potential purchasers of Vardis Fisher's books (Box 3, Folder 6). The numbers appear to correspond to those in the numbered editions of Fisher's books published by Alan Swallow.

Container(s)		Description	Dates
Box	Folder		
2	1	Biographical material; Obituaries; Estate	
2	2	From Vardis Fisher	
2	3	Correspondence: Attebery, Louie	1970
2	4	Correspondence: Bowler, Di	1975-1976
2	5	Correspondence: Clore, Mabel	1972
2	6	Correspondence: Day, George F.	1968-1982



Container(s)		Description	Dates
2	7	Correspondence: Flora, Joseph M.	1963-1978
2	8	Correspondence: Jones, Mattie	1973-1983
2	9	Correspondence: McAllister, Mick	1982-1983
2	10	Correspondence: McAllister, Mick	1983
2	11	Correspondence: Nash, Lee (Authors of the West)	1974-1983
2	12	Correspondence: Pollinger, Laurence	1972-1974
2	13	Correspondence: Redford, Robert	1973
2	14	Correspondence: Stegner, Wallace	undated
2	15	Correspondence: Strong, Lester	1976
2	16	Correspondence: Strong, Lester	1978
2	17	Correspondence: Teater, Patricia	1959
2	18	Correspondence: Thelma	1978
2	19	Correspondence: Woodward, Tim	1985
2	20	Correspondence: Grandparents	1952
2	21	Correspondence: Miscellaneous	1952-1983
2	22	Correspondence: Annie Laurie Williams, Inc.	1969-1972
2	23	Correspondence: Authors Guild	1963-1983
2	24	Correspondence: Doubleday	1963-1969
2	25	Correspondence: The New Yorker	1972-1973
2	26	Correspondence: Pocket Books	1972-1981
2	27	Correspondence: Swallow Press	1969-1976

Container(s)	Description	Dates
2 28	Correspondence: Warner Brothers: Kafafian, Eddie	1972-1973
2 29	Correspondence: Warner Brothers: Legal counsel	1972
2 30	Correspondence: Warner Brothers: Pollack, Sydney	1971-1973
2 31	Correspondence: Warner Brothers: Miscellaneous	1972
2 32	Correspondence: William Morrow & Company	1971-1972
10 13	Correspondence: To Vardis and/or Opal	1962-1963
3 1	Writings: Expose (about <i>Three West</i> )	1981
3 2	Writings: Vardis Fisher Memorial Room	1970
3 3	Writings: Vardis Fisher Was Not a Mormon	1979
3 4	Book promotion: Letter to book review editors	[1977]
3 5	Book promotion: Miscellaneous	
3 6	Book promotion: Swallow subscription list	
3 7	<i>Children of God</i> : Book production.	1975-1976
3 8	<i>Children of God</i> : Dust jacket copy	
3 9	<i>Children of God</i> : Introduction, by Joseph M. Flora	
3 10	<i>Children of God</i> : Introduction, by Joseph M. Flora	
3 11	<i>Children of God</i> : Introduction, by Joseph M. Flora: Revised and retyped	
3 12	<i>Children of God</i> : Introduction, by Joseph M. Flora: Condensation	
3 13	<i>Children of God</i> : Introduction, by Joseph M. Flora: Variant	
3 14	<i>Children of God</i> : Introduction, by Joseph M. Flora: Variant	

Container(s)	Description	Dates
3 15	<i>Children of God: Vardis Fisher and the Mormons</i> , by Joseph M. Flora	1969
3 16	<i>Children of God: Miscellaneous</i>	
3 17	<i>City of Illusion</i>	1981-1982
3 18	<i>Dark Bridwell</i>	1978-1979
3 19	<i>The Mothers</i>	1978-1979
3 20	<i>Mountain Man: Vardis Fisher's bibliography</i> (retyped by Opal Fisher)	
3 21	<i>Mountain Man: Cover mock-ups</i>	
3 22	<i>Mountain Man: French rights</i>	1981
3 23	<i>Mountain Man: Jeremiah Johnson movie premiere</i>	1972
3 24	<i>Mountain Man: Publicity</i>	1972
3 25	<i>Mountain Man: Proposed reburial of "Liver-Eating" Johnson</i>	1974
3 26	<i>Mountain Man: Royalty statements</i>	1971-1979
3 27	<i>Mountain Man: Student papers</i>	1977
3 28	<i>Pemmican</i>	
3 29	<i>Pemmican: Book production</i>	1975
3 30	<i>Tale of Valor</i>	
3 31	Boise Christian Outreach	1982
3 32	Clippings: Quotations and humor	
3 33	Financial: Bank statements and checks	1978-1979
3 34	Foster Parents Plan	1980-1984

Container(s)		Description	Dates
3	35	Golden Spur Award	1968
3	36	House plans	
3	37	Imperial Plaza apartment (Boise)	1972-1973
3	38	Imperial Plaza apartment (Boise)	
3	39	Imperial Plaza apartment (Boise): Article by Opal Fisher	1973
3	40	Miscellaneous	
3	41	Miscellaneous notes	
3	42	Western Literature Association	1974-1975
3	43	Western Literature Association	1976-1978
3	44	Who's Who publications	
3	45	Letters (drafts) recovered from the Hagerman home	
3	46	Notes about <i>Children of God</i> recovered from the Hagerman home	
3	47	Notes about <i>Three West</i> recovered from the Hagerman home	
3	48	Miscellaneous, recovered from the Hagerman home	
7		Mock-up of booklet entitled <i>Exposé</i> (about <i>Three West</i> )	
Folder			
10	14	Boise State University: Vardis Fisher Memorial Collection	undated
10	16	Once Upon a Wifetime	undated
10	17	Fragments	undated
10	18	Typescript fragment	1906

Container(s)	Description	Dates
10 19	Miscellaneous	1958-1970

### 3: Photographs and tape recordings

Boxes 4 and 9 contains photos of Vardis Fisher, his home, some miscellaneous subjects, and stills from the motion picture *Jeremiah Johnson*. Rights for the movie stills remain with Warner Brothers; the copies in these files are for reference purposes only. Permission to copy and/or publish them must be obtained from Warner Brothers. Photos 014-028 were among the papers taken from the Hagerman home returned anonymously to Grant Fisher.

Also included are still prints that were reproduced in the book *Rediscovering Vardis Fisher: Centennial Essays* (University of Idaho Press, 2000). Consult a copy of the book to view the images. Rights to photos lent by other repositories are retained by those institutions. Consult an archivist for further information.

Photocopies for reference use have been made of the photographs listed below. Patrons are asked to consult these copies rather than the originals in Box 4.

Container(s)	Description	Dates
Box	Photo	
4	#001-003 Portrait photos	
4	#004-012 Snapshots, unidentified individuals	
4	#013 Negative, unidentified scene	
4	#014 Snapshot, individual	
4	#015-026 Snapshots of Hagerman house and grounds	
4	#027-028 Postcards	
4	#029-030 Opal Fisher and Frederick Manfred	
4	#101-102 Portrait photos	circa 1939
4	#103 Vardis and unidentified individual at Caxton Printers	
4	#201-240 Boise premiere of <i>Jeremiah Johnson</i> ; photos of reception and theater party, including Robert Redford, Sydney Pollack, and Opal Fisher	

Container(s)	Description	Dates
4	#241 <i>Jeremiah Johnson</i> still	
4	#242-245 <i>Jeremiah Johnson</i> stills	
Folder		
4	6 <i>Rediscovering Vardis Fisher</i> (Book): Prints from Grant and T. Roberts Fisher	
4	7 <i>Rediscovering Vardis Fisher</i> (Book): Prints from Ricks College	
4	8 <i>Rediscovering Vardis Fisher</i> (Book): Prints from other repositories	
Photo		
9	#301-311 Oversize photo - Stills from <i>Jeremiah Johnson</i> featuring Robert Redford (most 11x14)	
9	#312 Oversize photo - Unidentified scene (11x14)	
9	Rolled photo - Vivian Fisher's Army unit, World War I	
Folder		
10	20 Photos	undated
9	Poster announcing preview of <i>Jeremiah Johnson</i> in Pocatello, Idaho	1972 November 17
10	Photo album of snapshots, European trip	
10	Tape recording - Vardis Fisher reading "A Novelist and His Characters," published in <i>Thomas Wolfe as I Knew Him and Other Essays</i> [cassette and reel-to-reel]	

## Names and Subjects

### Subject Terms :

Authors, American--20th century

Finding aid prepared by Collection processed by Alan Virta

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