

LIGHTBULB MOMENT: ELECTRICITY IN THE YWCA SCRAPBOOK

Kyle M. Pope
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Lightbulb Moment: Electricity in the YWCA Scrapbook

Between 1915 and 1917 the Young Women's Christian Association at the State Normal and Industrial College (presently the University of North Carolina at Greensboro) created a scrapbook that largely focused on summer retreats in Black Mountain, NC.¹ Photographs of the members posed in groups along with more candid pictures showing the girls participating in a variety of outdoor activities dominate a majority of the pages. However, about three-quarters of the way through the scrapbook there is a conspicuous collage of clippings which relate to electrical lighting. Even more peculiar than its placement, is the fact that during the creation of the scrapbook, the lightbulb was nearing forty years old.² However, electricity did not spread evenly or as quickly through different regions of the United States, and many people were not exposed to it in their domestic lives until the 1930s. Those who experienced electricity for the first time often responded with awe, and incorporated it into their ideas of progress and modernity. The electricity-centric clippings in the YWCA scrapbook demonstrate this, as they show a personalized view of the technology that illustrates the societal impact of lighting in the early 20th century.

A look at the institutional history of the State Normal and Industrial College shows that the author's clippings were not in reaction to new installation of electricity during her years as a student. Although established in 1891, the State Normal did not appear to have electrical

¹ *YWCA Scrapbook 1915-1917*, UA11 University Archives Scrapbook Collection, Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC.

² Thomas A. Edison, "Electric-Lamp," US Patent 223 898, January 27, 1880.

lighting until sometime between 1900 and 1910.³ Photographs of the interior of buildings up to 1900, including several classrooms and the auditorium in the Main Building, show gas lighting fixtures. [Fig. 1] The science classrooms during this period relied strictly on natural light via windows. [Fig. 2] Instruments on the tables suggest that the women of State Normal often practiced scientific experimentation. It is likely that the lights were excluded due to the hazards of an unwanted, potentially dangerous reaction caused by open flames or a gas-filled environment. By 1910, photographs of the institution show a rapid conversion from gas to electricity. The classrooms no longer contained one or two fixtures, but are crowded with lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling.⁴ The science laboratories on campus also received the safer, electric lighting during this time. [Fig. 3]

By the time the author of the YWCA scrapbook created her page of clippings, the State Normal—along with many urban areas—had become electrified, however a large portion of rural America had not. Providing electricity in the late 19th and very early 20th centuries fell into the realm of small private businesses. High costs, attributed to pricy investments in such items as copper wiring, allowed only the urban high-class to bring electricity into their homes and factories.⁵ As businesses developed ways to reduce costs, more and more urban households began to become electrified, however rural areas still suffered from significant obstacles. The lower population density inherent to rural areas made companies much more prone to focus on

³ The most extensive history of the college, written by Allen W. Trelease, makes no mention of lighting in the school's early years, and the archives do not have any written documents that refer to the initial installation of lights at State Normal, which makes a definitive date of electrification for the institution illusive.

⁴ *McIver Memorial Building Laboratory*, 1910, UA104 Photographic Prints Collection, Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC.

⁵ David E. Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), 5, 138-140.

better markets. Even if they wanted to expand, the businesses often sought to cut their losses by having potential customers pay to bring the lines to their homes. In addition to the start-up costs, they were given higher fees. In 1919, N.C.'s rural residents were charged between 9-10 cents an hour as opposed to 4-5 cents in the urban areas.⁶ These deterrents were enough to prevent those that lived in the countryside from actively seeking out electricity. Such costs continued to remain high well into the following decade. In 1923, a survey by the NC Committee on the Relation of Electricity to Agriculture (CREA) found that less than 1 percent of NC farms had electricity.⁷ Although the survey revolved around farms, it provides a staggering picture of how limited electricity was in rural NC.

With the survey results in mind, it is important to understand where the author of the YWCA scrapbook came from.⁸ The scrapbook appears to have been compiled by at least three authors between the years of 1915 and 1917. There are three distinctive handwriting styles and what looks to be three separate retreats to Western NC. As the clippings are situated in the latter half of the book, it is likely that the author created the page in either 1916 or 1917. The 1917 yearbook, *The Carolinian*, contained information on seniors at State Normal which included hometowns and club/group associations. [Fig. 4] Out of the eleven seniors who were identified as being part of the YWCA only two listed their hometown as urbanized cities, such as Winston-

⁶ Clayton D. Brown, "North Carolina Rural Electrification: Precedent of the REA," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 59, no. 2 (April 1982): 111.

⁷ Brown, "North Carolina Rural Electrification," 116.

⁸ None of the contributors wrote their names in the yearbook. This anonymity might be attributed to the scrapbook's intention to represent the group rather than the individual or simply because the creators felt as if the scrapbooks were for use in their own time and that those who wanted to know who authored the scrapbook already knew.

Salem, whereas a majority listed unincorporated communities such as Rougemont, NC.⁹

Although the sample size is fairly small, it should represent roughly one quarter (freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior) of the members of the YWCA at State Normal during the 1916-1917 school year. Although not incontestable, it is reasonable to conclude that the author who created the electric-centric page hailed from a rural area lacking in electricity.

The nature of the clippings depicting lighting also support the idea that the author had not grown up experiencing the technology. The top of the page contains multiple newspaper or magazine clippings of electric lightbulbs (one pasted on top of a poem). On the left side of the page there is a colored art-nouveauesque illustration depicting a woman reading at night under an electric light. In the middle—the focal point—there is a clipping of a picture of a theater/auditorium with several large stage lights prominently featured, along with numerous other lighting fixtures in the background. [Fig. 5] In his book, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology*, David Nye writes that theaters in major cities such as Paris and New York were the first to incorporate electric light.¹⁰ One of the major reasons that theaters were able to afford the technology is that they found that shows featuring light displays garnered high attendance. People who were not used to the technology were enthralled by the aesthetic spectacle. Edith Bollinger, a Buncombe County native and subsequent editor for the State Normal *Alumnae News*, writing about the then newly completed West Dining Hall on campus in

⁹ *The Carolinian 1917*, Pine Needles, UA42.4.03, Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts. University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Greensboro, NC.

¹⁰ Nye, *Electrifying America*, 29-30, 382.

1922, describes its electrical lighting fixtures as “beautiful” and “attractive.”¹¹ [Fig. 6] In comparison, rural America suffered aesthetically. At a conference of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association in the 1920s, a guest speaker remarked, “The oil lamp and the dangerous lantern in the barn have a depressing effect on rural life.”¹² Historian Clayton Brown quotes a leading North Carolinian member of CREA’s similar observation about the lack of electrification, saying that he sought to “restore the attractiveness” of rural living.¹³ The scrapbook author’s clipping choices show a similar affinity for the appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of electric lighting.

In addition to the visual appeal, the author’s scrapbook page represents American ideals of freedom and progression. The poem pasted on the page (which, in turn, has a lightbulb pasted on top of it) highlights an example of popularized sentimental poetry.¹⁴ [Fig. 7] In the *American Journal* article “Sentimental Aesthetics,” Dr. Elizabeth Dillon, an English professor at UC Berkley, argues that sentimental poetry reflected the ideal of American liberalism.¹⁵ She explains that during the early 20th century Americans associated freedom with the family and the home as opposed to the older ideas of public fraternity. People began to see their duties at home not as drudgery, but being done out of a sense of growing intimacy. The scrapbook author’s clipped

¹¹ Ethel C. Bollinger, “Improvements at the College,” *Alumnae News*, January, 1922, UA43.6.01 Alumnae/Alumni News and UNCG Magazine, Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts, University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Greensboro, NC, 5. It is possible that Bollinger was writing in such complimentary language as to encourage alumni contributions for funding expansions. However, there is no blatant request for such donations in the publication.

¹² Nye, *Electrifying America*, 301.

¹³ Brown, “North Carolina Rural Electrification,” 111.

¹⁴ Although marked as “Author Unknown,” the poem is widely attributed to Edgar Guest who was a prolific poet in the early 19th century.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, “Sentimental Aesthetics,” *American Literature* 76, no. 3 (September 2004): 511-512.

poem, which focuses on a man's happiness to coming home and being with his kids seems to support Dillon's assertion. The picture on the bottom right of the page—with a large American flag extolling freedom—also focuses on a single home dwelling. Nye, in a social interpretation similar to Dillon, writes that with electrification, Americans began to associate the home as a place of relaxation rather than one of production.¹⁶ Traditionally, in addition to living at home, women also labored continuously at their residences. But, with the coming of electricity—especially electrical appliances such as sewing machines and irons—work in the home was believed to be simpler and less time consuming. The scrapbook author's clipping of the woman relaxing in a rocking chair on a porch in her house, reading a magazine, under the light of a new technology ties in directly with the idea of more freedom through modernity in domestic life.

The idea of electrification as progression helps to explain why the clippings are in between the covers of the YWCA scrapbook. As electricity became the center of many fairs and expositions, a growing trend became to create displays promoting its benefits. One of the most popular ways was to show the human experience in the absence of technology. They did this by showing cultures of different races living in poor conditions. According to Nye, this fit a social Darwinist view as, "darkness was a metaphor for the primitive; light was an exemplification of Christianity, science, and progress."¹⁷ Although the author's clippings are not as insidious as the displays, there is support of an association between Christianity and electricity. A program for the religious service of the Fifteenth Anniversary of the Jubilee of the YWCA, dated 1916,

¹⁶ Nye, *Electrifying America*, 258-259 Nye does not delve deep into the subject of if electrification actually made domestic life easier, although he does state that he doubts it. Brown, on the other hand, tends to look and the electrification process as one which brought an ease of living to those who lived in rural areas.

¹⁷ Nye, *Electrifying America*, 35-36.

makes five comparisons with religion and light. One of the responsive readings, for example, states:¹⁸

To open the blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the prison and them that sit in the darkness out of the prison house.

To loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burden and let the oppressed go free.

To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the way of peace.

The implication is that non-believers are in the darkness of sin, separated from God, and the only way they can get out is to be given the light of God's guidance. Given the date of the of the program, and the dates where the scrapbook were made, it is likely that the author attended the YWCA Jubilee service. Regardless, the frequent nature of the comparison of Christianity and light, points to an inescapable metaphor that the scrapbook author would have been exposed to regularly. The author, consciously or subconsciously, created a page in the scrapbook that was a representation of the beliefs of the YWCA.

In an era where daily lives are immersed in electricity, from components in motor vehicles to cell phones capable of high speed internet, it is difficult to imagine a world without something as simple as an electric light. However, that was the experience of many of those who lived in rural America during the early 20th century. As electricity began to spread, with its ability to cancel out night and to provide a safe alternative to gas, it is easy to imagine how it could be heralded as a beacon of progress. For a young woman attending the State Normal and Industrial College, it represented ideas of freedom, values, and beauty. Her electric-centric

¹⁸ *Fifteenth Anniversary for the Jubilee of the Young Women's Christian Associations*, 1916, YWCA Collection, Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC, 5.

clippings in the YWCA scrapbook shed light on the impact of the growing electrification of America.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Bollinger, Ethel C. "Improvements at the College." *Alumnae News*, January, 1922. UA43.6.01. Alumnae/ Alumni News and UNCG Magazine. Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts. University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Greensboro, NC.

This article helps to provide a student's perspective on lighting at the State Normal and Industrial School. The author, although writing in 1922, also went to school at State Normal, graduating in 1913. She describes new construction at the school, with a particular focus on electric lighting.

The Carolinian 1917. Pine Needles. UA42.4.03. Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts. University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Greensboro, NC.

The Carolinian served as the school's yearbook for 1917. It contains a list of seniors who were members of the YWCA along with their hometowns or counties. This information helps to provide a general picture of the amount of members who may not have been exposed to electricity prior to attending the school. In addition, *The Carolinian* also contains a map of North Carolina that shows student numbers by county of origin.

Edison, Thomas A. "Electric-Lamp." US Patent 223,898. January 27, 1880. http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/american_originals_iv/images/thomas_edison/patent_drawing.html

This is Edison's patent for his electric lightbulb. The date gives a starting point, and in the confines of the paper, helps to demonstrate how long it took electricity to spread across the United States.

Fifteenth Anniversary for the Jubilee of the Young Women's Christian Associations. YWCA Collection. Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts. University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Greensboro, NC.

The *Jubilee* pamphlet details a service that the YWCA members attended in 1916. It contains a prayer, hymn, bible verse, and responsive reading that all deal with a comparison of God and/or Jesus to light. The source helps to create a possible bridge between the rest of the YWCA scrapbook and the pages containing clippings of electricity.

Main Building Auditorium. 1900. UA104 Photographic Prints Collection. Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts. University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Greensboro, NC.

Main Building Library. 1900. UA104 Photographic Prints Collection. Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts. University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Greensboro, NC.

McIver Memorial Building Laboratory. 1910. UA104 Photographic Prints Collection. Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts. University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Greensboro, NC.

Postcard of Dining Hall. 1935. UA104 Photographic Prints Collection. Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts. University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Greensboro, NC.

Science Laboratory in Main Building. 1900. UA104 Photographic Prints Collection. Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts. University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Greensboro, NC.

YWCA Scrapbook 1915-1917. UA11 University Archives Scrapbook Collection. Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts. University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Greensboro, NC.

Secondary Sources

Brown, D. Clayton. "North Carolina Rural Electrification: Precedent of the REA." *The North Carolina Historical Review* 59, no. 2 (April 1982): 109-124.

This journal article provides information about North Carolina and its history, dating back to 1914, dealing with rural electrification. The article is a little dated, but provides very specific information about NC's history with electricity in the early 20th century that does not appear to have been written about in detail since. It helps to establish a picture of the NC that the creator of the scrapbook would have live in.

Dillon, Elizabeth Maddock. "Sentimental Aesthetics." *American Literature* 76, no. 3 (September 2004): 495-523.

Dillon's article deals with sentimental poetry during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She argues that the poetry reflected the idea of American liberalism. This work helps to explain a poem by popular poet Edgar Guest that appears on one of the pages surrounded by the clippings focused on lighting. Using her assertions, the poem finds its place with the then modernity of electricity.

Nye, David E. *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992.

Nye's book provides a broad historical background on electricity in America, with particular focus on the technological and social aspects. This book shows the great impact that electricity had on society from the late 19th to the mid 20th centuries. It helps to provide good historical context for the time period in which the scrapbook was written, along with giving a sense of a dynamic feeling of progress that the scrapbook's creator would have experienced during her time at the State Normal.

Figures



Figure 1. Gas lighting in the main Library, 1900.
[*Main Building Library*. 1900. UA104 Photographic Prints Collection. Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts. University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Greensboro, NC.]



Figure 2. Science laboratory before electric lighting, 1900.
[*Science Laboratory in Main Building*. 1900. UA104 Photographic Prints Collection. Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts. University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Greensboro, NC.]



Figure 3. Science laboratory after electric lighting, 1910.
[*McIver Memorial Building Laboratory*. 1910. UA104 Photographic Prints Collection. Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts. University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Greensboro, NC.]

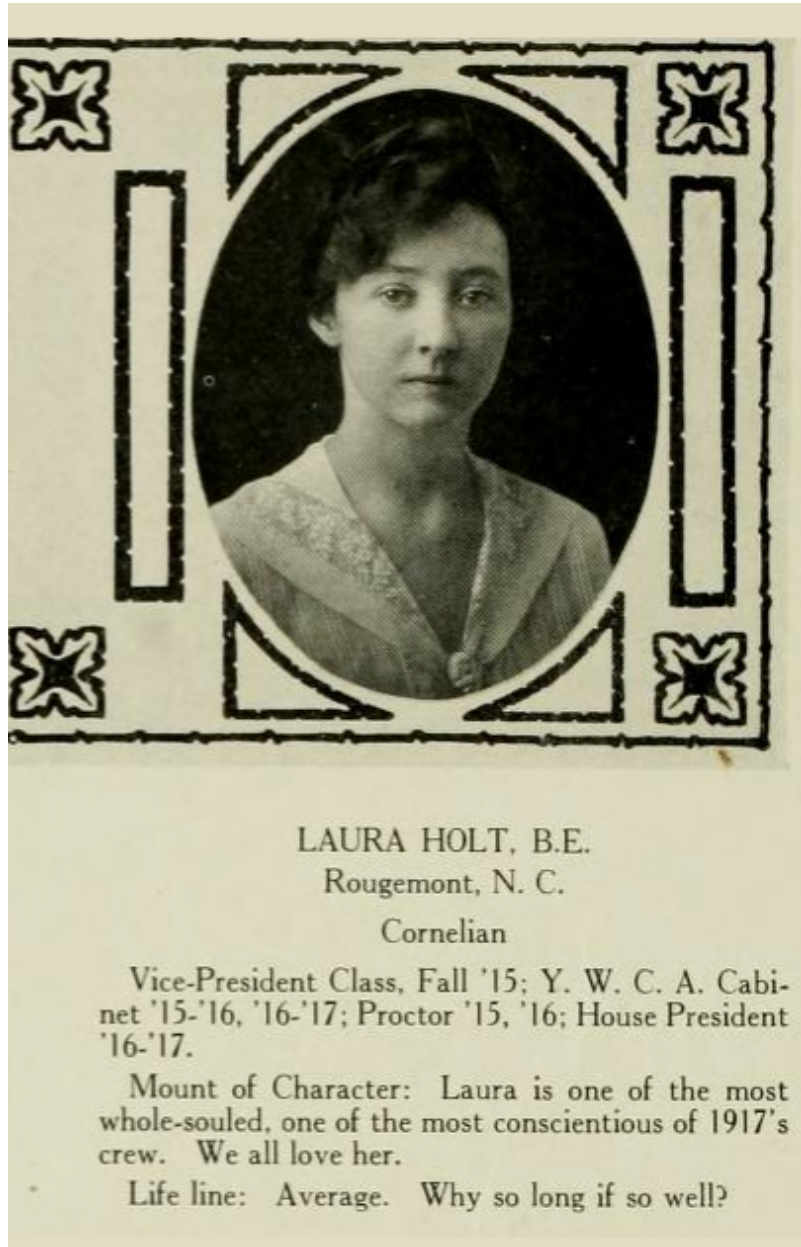


Figure 4. A senior picture from *The Carolinian* in 1917.
[*The Carolinian* 1917. Pine Needles. UA42.4.03. Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts. University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Greensboro, NC.]



Figure 5. The electric-centric YWCA Scrapbook page.
[YWCA Scrapbook 1915-1917. UA11 University Archives Scrapbook Collection. Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts. University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Greensboro, NC.]



Figure 6. “Beautiful” and “attractive” lighting in the dining hall as described by Edith Bollinger in 1922.

[*Postcard of Dining Hall*. 1935. UA104 Photographic Prints Collection. Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts. University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Greensboro, NC.]

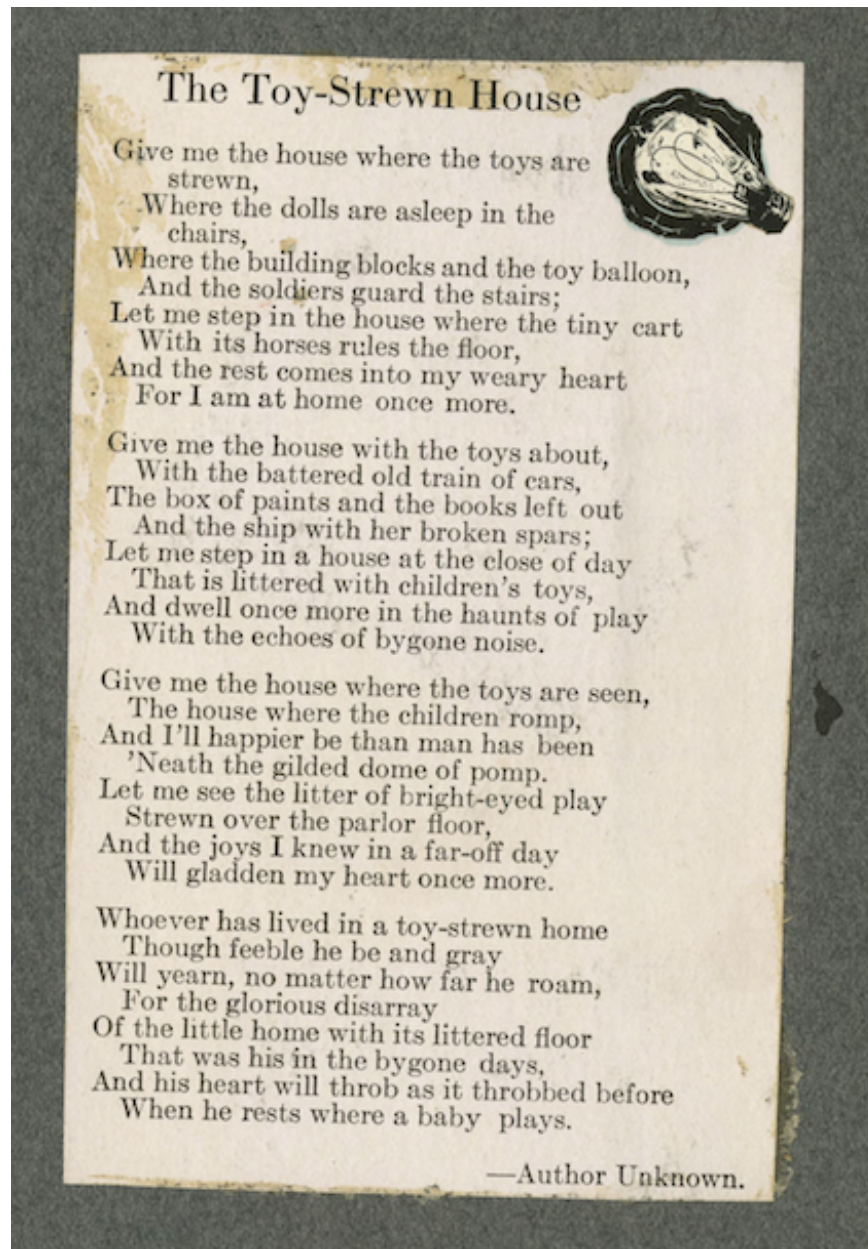


Figure 7. "The Toy-Strewn House," by Edgar Guest, circa 1917. Enlarged from the YWCA scrapbook.

[YWCA Scrapbook 1915-1917. UA11 University Archives Scrapbook Collection. Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives and Manuscripts. University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Greensboro, NC.]