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Lewis' letters to mistress can be viewed online

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A collection of letters from famed Minnesota author Sinclair Lewis to his mistress are available on the Internet for the first time through the <http://www.mndigital.org> Minnesota Digital Library project, Minnesota Reflections.

The 262 letters and one poem owned by St. Cloud State University have been digitized and are searchable through the St. Cloud State archives and the Minnesota Reflections Web site.

The writings are the first comprehensive collection of Lewis' primary-source text material available on the Internet. The typed and handwritten notes offer insight into the daily life, travels and creative processes of the Sauk Centre native from 1939-1947. They also show the deep affection Lewis had for actress Marcella Powers, whom he met in 1939.

The letters and poem from Lewis to Powers total 487 pages and have been available for viewing at St. Cloud State since the university bought them in 1996 from a woman who inherited them from the Powers estate. But digitizing the documents makes them accessible to anyone with an Internet connection without having to travel to St. Cloud.

"University records aren't that sexy, but this is certainly, in my opinion, the most prominent collection we have," said Tom Steman, St. Cloud State's archivist.

Lewis won the Pulitzer Prize in 1926 for his novel "Arrowsmith," but he declined to accept it. Four years later he became the first American to win the Nobel Prize in literature.

More than 100 of the letters were sent to Powers from Minnesota cities such as Albert Lea, Brainerd, Duluth, Excelsior, Grand Marais, Minneapolis and St. Paul. Others were written from places such as Madison, Wis.; Los Angeles; New Orleans; Seattle and New York City.

Lewis had a strong connection to St. Cloud State as well, Steman said.

Lewis' brother, Dr. Claude Lewis, built and owned what is now the Alumni House at St. Cloud State.

"So he was a frequent visitor here," Steman said of Sinclair Lewis.

The idea to digitize the Lewis writings emerged at the 2008 Minnesota Digital Library annual meeting. Steman and Marian Rengel, outreach coordinator for the Minnesota Digital Library, discussed collaborative projects that would involve digitizing archival material.

The Lewis letters were an obvious fit, and Steman asked Rengel if the digital library was interested. Steman then began the process of getting permission from the descendants of Lewis, and spoke to his grandson.

"We wanted to make sure the family was on board," Steman said. "If he would have said 'No,' we would have stopped right there."

Steman worked with Rengel to get the letters scanned, transcribed and cataloged.

Rengel, a fourth-generation Stearns County resident, had a special interest in Lewis because of his ties to Sauk Centre, she said. The letters are an important part of the Minnesota Reflections repository and add valuable insight into Lewis and his Minnesota roots through his own words, she said.

"The Sinclair Lewis letters become a gem in the collection," she said.