



Smithsonian

*National Museum of American History Kenneth E. Behring Center*

## Guide to the W. Oscar Sullivan Papers

NMAH.AC.0072

Robert Harding and Don Darroch

1985

Archives Center, National Museum of American History

P.O. Box 37012

Suite 1100, MRC 601

Washington, D.C. 20013-7012

[archivescenter@si.edu](mailto:archivescenter@si.edu)

<https://americanhistory.si.edu/archives>

# Table of Contents

Collection Overview .....	1
Administrative Information .....	1
Arrangement.....	3
Scope and Contents.....	3
Biographical / Historical.....	2
Names and Subjects .....	4
Container Listing .....	5
Series 1: Publicity, Scripts, Routines, Songs, 1910-1947.....	5
Series 2: Photographs, 1912-1960.....	6
Series 3: Correspondence, diaries, appointment books, 1909-1956.....	7
Series 4: Books, 1863-1942.....	8
Series 5: Miscellaneous, 1900-1959.....	9

## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
<b>Title:</b>	W. Oscar Sullivan Papers
<b>Date:</b>	1900-1960
<b>Identifier:</b>	NMAH.AC.0072
<b>Source:</b>	National Museum of American History (U.S.). Division of Community Life (Collector)
<b>Creator:</b>	Sullivan family (Author) Sullivan, W. Oscar, 1891- (Collector)
<b>Extent:</b>	2.6 Cubic feet (8 boxes )
<b>Language:</b>	English .
<b>Summary:</b>	Papers and photographs document the careers in show business (traveling medicine shows, vaudeville acts and acting in stage shows) of Mr. Sullivan, members of his family and associates.

---

## Administrative Information

### Acquisition Information

Collection donated by William Jerry Eagle, October 15, 1980.

### Provenance

Collection transferred from the Division of Community Life (now the Division of Cultural and Community Life) to the Archives Center.

### Processing Information

Processed by Robert Harding and Don Darroch, 1985.

### Preferred Citation

W. Oscar Sullivan Papers, Archives Center, 1900-1960, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

### Restrictions

Collection is open for research.

### Conditions Governing Use

Collection items available for reproduction, but the Archives Center makes no guarantees concerning copyright restrictions. Other intellectual property rights may apply. Archives Center cost-recovery and use fees may apply when requesting reproductions.

---

## Biographical / Historical

The Sullivan collection (1900-1960) consists of advertisements, publicity materials, photographs, letters, appointment calendars, and work papers of W. Oscar Sullivan, his wife, Aline Moore and his daughters, Laverne and Virginia. Sullivan and his family were vaudeville, medicine and tent show performers who entertained in small towns, especially in the Southeast. Their act included monologues, singing, dancing, acrobatics, and comedy, including blackface. The Collection documents their careers as small-time entertainers who managed to eke out a living through their talents.

W. Oscar Sullivan was born in Georgia about October 10, 1891. He left school after the 6th grade. In 1909 he was known as Ruscara Sullie, "the Phenomenal Boy Assistant" to Lee Hubert & Co., "Magic, Mental Telepathy, Spiritualistic Phenomena."

Sullivan was encouraged by his brother, Lee, to stick with show business. Lee often dissuaded Oscar from writing home-sick letters to his mother who evidently wanted him to stay in Savannah, Georgia and get a steady job.

In October 1912, Sullivan became an agent for The Southern Ruralist, a semi-monthly farm journal, soliciting subscriptions. Also in October 1912, he applied to J. Frank Denton & Co., dealers in Lightning Rod and Fixtures in Spread, Georgia, for a salesman's job. He was told that the arrangement would be payment by commission and a horse and rig. The horse would have to be fed out of the commission. The company believed that being paid on commission would spur him on to work.

In November, 1912, Sullivan wrote to Archie Fournie's Show which advertised that it presented up-to-date vaudeville and moving pictures. Sullivan's brother Robert a dentist, previously managed the Lyric Theater in Macon, Georgia where he met Ollie Hamilton, the stage manager for Fournie. Fournie offered Sullivan a job as straight man for Negro acts and to talk about the moving pictures and make announcements. He would receive \$12 per week and all expenses. The terms were accepted, but delays followed. Another letter told him that he was expected to do "Nigger act show on type of Over the River Charlie"? and two acts a night. Fournie cancelled on December 5 because he had previously wired money to another man who had finally arrived.

On December 6, 1912, Sullivan got an offer from Russell Craner to join "The Irish Piper", a play. But Sullivan turned the offer down because he had a contract with the Paul Anderson Stock Co. to handle general business and juvenile parts.

In 1912, Sullivan advertised himself as a "Character Elocutionist" for a twelve minute act. In 1913, he advertised that he could do a fifteen minute show presenting "Mighty Moments from Great Plays". He added he could do light comedy, juvenile leads, low comedy and heavy character roles.

On May 1, 1913, Sullivan was offered \$12 per week for two acts a night-a specialty and closing act-by the R.L. Russell Show. He was to cut out the "nigger acts". Evidently he did not take it but went with another show to New England.

Sullivan did plays with the C.F. Haraden Show for the 1913 and 1916 seasons. In the early years, Sullivan wrote songs and poetry. His spelling was very bad. Some of the work was quite racist and nasty. Some of the poetry and writings were rather risqué.

There is no information when Oscar and Aline Moore were married. In 1917, their letterhead stationary announced "Sullivan-Moore" were experienced in drama, vaudeville, musical comedy and that they were "sober and reliable." The collection contains many programs printed in local newspapers showing them acting in plays at the Empire Theatre in Ironton, Ohio in 1918-1919. In May 1922, the family including two daughters, lived in Savannah, Georgia. Both were members of Actor's Equity. In January, 1924, Sullivan was offered a job at \$35 a week for 30 weeks with the Princess Floating Theatre of Beverly, Ohio. There is no indication of whether he took it.

By 1927, the Sullivans were living in Ironton, Ohio again. The children went to school there. Presumably, when Laverne was 11 and Virginia was 7, they had an act called "Sullivans and Their Knick Knack Kids."

In 1931, the Sullivans were looking for work and not eating well. The family in Savannah helped when they could. In 1931, Sullivan's mother died. Through these years, their show people friends offered them a variety of jobs. During the depression years, much unemployment was reported in letters from friends, relatives, neighbors and show people.

On February 16, 1933, Aline Sullivan died at age thirty eight after an operation and influenza. The family had been performing in Knoxville, Tennessee. Laverne was then eighteen and Virginia was fifteen years of age.

After her death, Sullivan and his daughters played in stage shows between movie shows and were known as "Flashes of 1933". After performing in Dallas in 1934, they became the "Dancing Cowgirls" or "Sullivan's Cowgirls with Diving Dog". The diving dog was Buddy who did a high dive before each performance in front of the theatre to draw in crowds. They received \$100 for seven shows and a midnight performance.

Their show was a vaudeville act consisting of singing, dancing, acrobatic acts, roller skating, and comedy in blackface. The publicity and letter of reference described the act as culture, refined and usually clean. They toured small Southern towns and CCC camps where the commanders gave them good references. In 1937, they played at the Chicago World's Fair. By 1941, Nell Brenizer, the pianist for the act, had become Oscar's second wife. On May 1, 1941, Buddy died at the age of seventeen. He was buried in a Pet Cemetery in Atlanta at a cost for the funeral of \$55. The family visited his grave whenever they were in Atlanta.

On May, 1941, Virginia Sullivan appeared in Ripley's "Believe It Or Not". The caption under her drawn picture read: "Virginia balances three lighted lamps while bending backward from a standing position - lies flat on floor - and rises again."

During 1941, Sullivan drove around Georgia trying to book the act into schools and other locations. At the time it was considered a "tent" show with a trailer and a company of three performances.

There is no information concerning the family during the war years although in 1945, Virginia Sullivan received thanks from the Savannah Junior Chamber of Commerce for putting on many "Shows for the Boys".

In 1947, the family played as Eddie's Medicine Show with Virginia and Oscar. On occasional weekends, Laverne and her husband, Ken helped out. Nell played the accordion and Eddie lectured on the human body. They played in vaudeville at movie houses and dance halls, at fairs and expositions, at medicine shows and on empty lots. An incomplete 1951 diary shows income from candy and snow cones. The group still traveled frequently noted that his eyes needed an operation.

In 1955, they were still traveling - generally in small Southern towns. Sometimes they would spend \$1 to advertise on the local radio.

---

## Scope and Contents

These papers and photographs mostly relate to the careers in show business of Mr. Sullivan, members of his family and associates. Their activities included traveling medicine shows, vaudeville acts and acting in stage shows. Most of the photographs are unidentified and undated. The publicity releases, theater handbills and newspaper clippings are often undated as are numerous handwritten scripts, ideas for jokes, and songs. Many diaries and daily account books are included but often do not indicate the identity of the record-keeper or his/her associates. Some racist materials contained in the comedy acts reflect the prejudices of Oscar Sullivan's time and his Southern background. His reference to black persons in his diaries and his songs concerning blacks were degrading. His comedy routines involving black characters portrayed them with, the usual stereotypes.

---

## Arrangement

Collection is arranged into five series.

Series 1: Publicity, Scripts, Routines, Songs, 1910-1947

Series 2: Photographs, 1912-1960

Series 3: Correspondence, diaries, appointment books, 1909-1956 Series 4: Books, 1863-1942

Series 5: Miscellaneous, 1900-1959

Arranged roughly chronologically within each series.

---

## Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

### Subjects:

- Entertainment -- 1900-1960
- Minstrel shows -- 1900-1960
- Racism -- 1900-1960
- Vaudeville

### Types of Materials:

- Appointment books
- Books
- Correspondence -- 1930-1950
- Diaries -- 20th century
- Photographs -- 20th century
- Scripts (documents)

### Names:

- National Museum of American History (U.S.). Division of Community Life

---

## Container Listing

### Series 1: Publicity, Scripts, Routines, Songs, 1910-1947

Box 1, Folder 1	Publicity - Oscar and Aline Sullivan, 1910-1931
Box 1, Folder 2	Publicity - Dancing Cowgirls, 1933-1934 and undated
Box 1, Folder 3	Publicity - advertisements, flyers, newspaper ads with Laverne & Virginia, 1933-1947
Box 1, Folder 4	Work papers - script, songs, routines, 1912-1945 and undated

*[Return to Table of Contents](#)*

## Series 2: Photographs, 1912-1960

Box 2, Folder 1	1912-1935 and undated
Box 2, Folder 2	1945-1960 and undated
Box 2, Folder 3	Undated
Box 2, Folder 4-5	Albums, undated
Box 3, Folder 1-3	Albums, undated

*[Return to Table of Contents](#)*



## Series 3: Correspondence, diaries, appointment books, 1909-1956

Box 4, Folder 1	<a href="#">Correspondence: business, 1909-1945</a>
Box 4, Folder folder 1	<p><a href="#">[From Joseph S. Carmack, commander of Civilian Conservation Corps Company 1404, Georgia [letter], March 23, 1934</a></p> <p>1 Item (Ink on paper.; 8.4" x 5.4")</p> <p>Collector: Sullivan, W. Oscar, 1891-</p> <p>Language: English.</p> <p>Notes: AC0072-0000001 (AC scan number)</p> <p>Review of Dancing Cow Girls performance.</p> <p>Names: Civilian Conservation Corps (U.S.)</p> <p>Topic: Dancers</p> <p>Genre/Form: Correspondence</p>
Box 4, Folder 2	Correspondence: personal, 1907-1944
Box 4, Folder 3-6	Diaries, appointment books and financial information, 1918-1956 and undated
Box 5, Folder 1-2	Diaries, address books, 1949-1953

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

## Series 4: Books, 1863-1942

Box 5, Folder 1	Wells, David A. Wells' Natural Philosophy, New York, Ivison, Phinney & Co., 1863, 452 p
Box 5, Folder 2	Garrett, P. (editor) One Hundred Choice Selections No. 28, Philadelphia, The Penn Publishing Co., 1888, 240 p.
Box 6, Folder 1	Standard Recitations by Best Authors, New York, NY Ivers & Co., 1888, 48 p.
Box 6, Folder 2	Montgomery, Robert H. (editor) The American Business Manual, P.P. Collier & Son, 1911, 1519 p. (Volume 1)
Box 6, Folder 3	Montgomery, Robert H. (editor) The American Business Manual, P.P. Collier & Son, 1911, 1519 p. (Volume 3)
Box 6, Folder 4	New Red-Hot Jokes, Baltimore, MD, I & M Ottenheimer, 1913, 58 P.
Box 6, Folder 5	Kearney, Paul W. Toasts and Anecdotes, New York, Edward J. Clode, 1923, 299 p.
Box 7, Folder 1	Turner's Carolina Almanac, Winston-Salem, NC, Turner's Almanac Co., 1936, 128 p.
Box 7, Folder 2	Strong, L.A.G. Common Sense About Drama, New York, NY, Knopf, 1937, 117 p.
Box 7, Folder 3	Ulsh, Don. The Gag Builder, Chicago, 111., Oct. 1939, 28 p.
Box 7, Folder 4	Moulton, Powers. 2500 Jokes For All Occasions, New York, NY, The New Home Library, 1942, 480 p.
Box 7, Folder 5	Henius, Frank. Italian Dictionary for the Soldier, Washington, The Infantry Journal, 1943, 218 p.
Box 7, Folder 6	Copeland, Lewis, ed. The World's Best Jokes, New York, Halcyon House, 1948, 401 p.
Box 7, Folder 7	Kipling, Rudyard. Barrack Room Ballads and Recessional, New York, Dodge Publishing Co., 150 p.

*[Return to Table of Contents](#)*

## Series 5: Miscellaneous, 1900-1959

Box 8, Folder 1	Poem and photograph for training, undated
Box 8, Folder 2	Certifications of Edwin L. Gould as disabled veteran, 1944; miscellaneous papers 1927-1959
Box 8, Folder 3	Scrapbook including photos, 1908-1914 and undated
Box 8, Folder 4	Newspaper clippings, etc., 1900-1945 and undated
Box 8, Folder 5-6	Scrapbook of theater notices 1914-1919 and undated
Box 8, Folder 7	Newspaper clippings, etc., 1910-1954 and undated

*[Return to Table of Contents](#)*