



Smithsonian

National Museum of American History Kenneth E. Behring Center

Guide to the Billings-Merriam Family Vaudeville Scrapbooks, 1890-1913

NMAH.AC.0079

Barbara Kemp and Robert S. Harding

1984



Archives Center, National Museum of American History
P.O. Box 37012
Suite 1100, MRC 601
Washington, D.C. 20013-7012
Business Number: Phone: 202-633-3270
Fax Number: Fax: 202-786-2453
archivescenter@si.edu
<https://americanhistory.si.edu/archives>

Table of Contents

Collection Overview	
Administrative Information	1
Biographical / Historical	2
Scope and Contents	3
Names and Subjects	
Container Listing	

Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title:	Billings-Merriam Family Vaudeville Scrapbooks
Date:	1897 - 1902
Identifier:	NMAH.AC.0079
Creator:	Plunkett, Billy, Mrs. Merriam, Eva Billings (Creator) Merriam, Billy (Creator) Christiani, Norman, Mrs. Billings, Gay (Creator) Billings, Essa (Creator)
Extent:	2 Cubic feet (6 oversized folders, 1 folder)
Language:	English .
Summary:	The collection documents four scrapbooks containing photographs, programs, flyers, business cards, periodical illustrations, and letterheads of vaudeville and medicine shows from 1897-1902. Also included are two audiotapes containing comments by the donors about the scrapbooks.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

This collection was donated by Mrs. Billie Plunkett and Mrs. Norman Christiani to Richard W. Flint, Division of Performing Arts (now the Division of Culture and the Arts) in August, 1982.

Provenance

The scrapbooks were transferred by Flint in July 1982 to Carl Scheele, Division of Community Life (now Division of Home and Community Life). The scrapbooks were transferred to the Archives Center in January 1984.

Processing Information

Processed by Barbara Kemp and Robert S. Harding, archivist, Spring, 1984.

Preferred Citation

Billings-Merriam Family Vaudeville Scrapbooks, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

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

Gay and Essa Billings, the first generation represented in these scrapbooks, were managers of vaudeville acts. They also sold medicine occasionally which was called "Knox All Remedies". Gay was also a comedian. Essa was known for her "serpentine dance and poses plastique". Their daughters, Eva and Ethel, did singing and dancing soubrettes (i.e. were saucy, coquettish actresses and/or singers in comedies or comic operas).

Billy Merriam, married to Eva, was a trapeze artist and juggler. He also formed acts. Presumably, the collection of letterheads is a result of correspondence in which acts were secured and bookings were made.

From Billie Plunkett, a granddaughter, we learn that the Billings had Gay's Electric Company and Gay's One Horse Circus. Daughter, Ethel, married Fred A. Stock and together they had a medicine show and sold something called "NU Tone".

One of the letter heads of Gay Billings advertised startling novelties funny comedians and songs which opened September 29, 1904 and closed January 27, 1905. Another letter head advertised "The Three B's Esa Billings serpentine dance and poses plastic; Gay Billings picture operator and song illustrator; and Eva Billings song and dance artist and soubret and gave their permanent address as Bellevue, Iowa.

In December 1904, Gay's Electric Company presented Essa Billings and Billie Merriam. In January 26, 1912, Gay Billings presented Clark's Dog and Pony Circus. At an undated time, it was the Billings Trio Novelty Sketch Artists with Gay All Round Comedian; Ethel Singing and Dancing Soubrette and Essa versatile Performer.

In 1906 there is a newspaper write up of Gay's Players and Billy and Eva Meriam. In a small article it was said that the act was good, the customers got their money's worth, that it was a clever team on the vaudeville circuit and described Eva as being a ring contortionist and Billy as an acrobat and trapeze artist.

The Merriams were known as the "Flying Merriams" and also the "Merriam Merry Makers" with 7 people in the company. Another flyer advertised that Billy Merriam was the owner of the show and Gay Billings the Manager. Included was Gay, Essa and Ethel as singers, dancers and sketch artists; Billie and Emma as trapeze artists, jugglers and contortionist. Two reels of moving pictures were also presented.

Another flyer (undated) speaks of "Merriams Tent Show" with 12 people in the act. Another flyer referred to himself as "Juvenile Adonis of the flying rings and trapeze and marvelous upside down act...Walk the ceiling head down, without the protection of a net." Another flyer said that Billy and Eva Merriam had spent two years with the Ringling Brothers, and had worked 10 years in Iowa.

Evidently moving pictures were often shown at these shows, usually with two reels. The companies had their own electric light plant and picture machine.

One letter head read: "The Merriams: Billy Eva Zoe Novelty Aerial Artists: and continued: "Not Best, But Two of the Good Ones." The act was a comedy acrobatic and contortion act on a vaudeville program which also included motion pictures. Generally the titles of the motion pictures were given but no other information was. One time Billy fell and injured himself when chairs and tables collapsed. Another time in Phoenix, the theatre burned and they lost their trunks and new rigging. Once in Seattle there was fire but not loss of their belongings. In Iowa the State prohibited fight films to be shown. "The general public does not believe in instilling in the minds of the youth the instincts of pugilism", a newspaper article stated.

Eva and Billy Merriam had their own vaudeville show which eventually turned into a medicine show. Eva dressed as an Indian Princess and called herself Princess Lola (which was her middle name). During the winter months they played in halls and theatres and in the summer they used a large platform stage with a "runway" on outdoor lots. Billy

and his daughter, Billie, did aerial numbers and Billy did juggling acts, escape acts, black face numbers and song and dance. The show included hired acts. Lots of Princess Lola's remedies was sold. Then Eva tried selling cosmetics and the show's name was changed to "Vanity Fair Company". The product was packaged in their hotel rooms.

Scope and Contents

The four scrapbooks which make up the Billings Merriam Family Vaudeville collection cover the period from about 1890 to 1913. They were actually kept by the parents and grandparents of Billie Plunkett who contributed them to the Smithsonian in 1982.

The four scrapbooks each contain personal photographs, programs of minor plays and comedies, flyers for specialty acts, business cards, magazine photos, and letterheads advertising acts.

Presumably, as a way of advertising, each performer or act would have printed on letterhead a picture of themselves and occasionally a picture of them in performance, the name of the act, a description of what the act included, and sometimes a listing of references and places where they had performed.

The letterheads and flyers advertised persons who were aerialists, contortionists, comedians, did wire walking, had a dog and pony show, magicians, pantomimists, trick cyclists, dancers, jugglers, singers, impersonators, gun manipulators, hypnotists, mental telepathists, blackface comedians, and living statues.

Several agents and booking agencies used letterheads in the same way. Medicine shows were also advertised on the letterheads some naming the products they were hustling and the diseases that could be cured.

The items have been pasted in scrapbooks a couple of which were old hotel ledgers in which pages have been pasted together. The paper is deteriorating. Very few items have dates or locations.

There are also two audio tapes. One contains comments by two half sisters: Norma Christiani and Billie Plunkett on the scrapbooks in this collection. The other consists of reminiscences by Norma Christiani of her life in the vaudeville shows mentioned above (bad audio quality).

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

Entertainment
Vaudeville

Types of Materials:

Business cards
Fliers (printed matter)
Programs
Scrapbooks -- 1890-1930

Names:

Doutrick's Theatrical Exchange.
Stubblefield Trio.

Container Listing

Box 1, Folder 1	Merriam Trio scrapbook, pages 1-86, 1897 Notes: pages 1-86
Box 1, Folder 1	The Billings Trio Novelty Sketch Artists: [advertisement], Circa 1905 1 Item (Ink on paper.; 13.9" x 8.5".) Collector: Billings, Essa Language: English. Notes: AC0079-0000001 (AC Scan) Images of Vaudeville artists Gay, Ethel and Essa Billings. Advertisement is glued into a ledger used as a scrapbook. Names: Billings, Gay Billings, Essa Topic: Vaudeville Acrobatics Genre/Form: Scrapbooks
Box 1, Folder 1	The Merriam Vaudeville Co.: [newspaper clippings], Circa 1910 1 Item (Ink on paper.; 13.9" x 8.4".) Collector: Billings, Essa Language: English. Notes: AC0079-0000008 (AC Scan) Miscellaneous clippings about the Merriam's act, appearances, birth announcement, and fire loss. Clippings are glued into a ledger used as a scrapbook. Names: Merriam, Eva Billings Merriam, Billy Topic: Vaudeville Acrobatics Aerialists Genre/Form: Scrapbooks
Box 1, Folder 1	Stubblefield Trio: [advertising flier], Circa 1905 1 Item (Ink on paper.; 7.1" x 8.4".) Collector: Billings, Essa Language: English. Notes: AC0079-0000009 (AC Scan) Illustrated by images of the trio and four insets of performance tricks. Glued into a ledger used as a scrapbook. Topic: Vaudeville Acrobatics Aerialists Genre/Form: Scrapbooks
Box 1, Folder 2	Merriam Trio scrapbook, pages 87-171, 1897 Notes: pages 87-171

Box 1, Folder 2	<p>Billy and Eva Merriam the team with the changes: [advertisement], Circa 1905 1 Item (Ink on paper.; 13.9" x 8.4".) Collector: Billings, Essa Language: English. Notes: AC0079-0000002 (AC Scan) Two images of vaudeville artists Billy and Eva Merriam, one in acrobatic costume and one in street clothes. Advertisement is glued into a ledger used as a scrapbook.</p> <p>Names: Merriam, Billy Merriam, Eva Billings Topic: Vaudeville Acrobatics Genre/Form: Scrapbooks</p>
Box 1, Folder 3	<p>Merriam Trio scrapbook, pages 173-284, 1897 Notes: pages 173-284</p>
Box 1, Folder 4	<p>Merriam Trio scrapbook, pages 289-301, 1897 Notes: pages 289-301</p>
Box 2, Folder 1	<p>Billings-Merriam scrapbook, pages 19-224, undated Notes: pages 19-224</p>
Box 2, Folder 2	<p>Merriam Trio scrapbook (includes loose material), pages 225-398, 1897 Notes: pages 225-398; loose material</p>
Box 2, Folder 2	<p>Gem Theatre Tonight: [advertisement], Circa 1905 1 Item (Ink on paper.; 11.3" x 7.8".) Collector: Billings, Essa Language: English. Notes: AC0079-0000004 (AC Scan) Featuring Billy and Eva Merriam and Gay and Essa Billings with illustrations of three children balancing on chairs.</p> <p>Names: Merriam, Billy Merriam, Eva Billings Billings, Essa Billings, Gay Topic: Vaudeville Aerialists Acrobatics Genre/Form: Advertisements</p>
Box 2, Folder 2	<p>Doutrick's Theatrical Exchange / "The Flying Merriam" tonight at "The Lyric" / Trapeze Victim Improving: [newspaper clippings], Circa 1910 1 Item (Ink on paper.; 13.8" x 8.2".) Collector: Billings, Essa Language: English. Notes: AC0079-0000005 (AC Scan)</p>

Miscellaneous clippings about the Merriam's act and appearances and the injury of another trapeze artist. Clippings are glued into a ledger used as a scrapbook.

Names: Merriam, Eva Billings
Merriam, Billy

Topic: Vaudeville
Acrobatics
Aerialists

Genre/Form: Scrapbooks

Box 2, Folder 2

[The Dancing Ashwells / Mr. and Mrs. Blessing & Co. presentng their dramatic comedy: \[newspaper clippings\], Circa 1910](#)
1 Item (Ink on paper.; 13.8" x 8.2".)

Collector: Billings, Essa

Language: English.

Notes: AC0079-0000006 (AC Scan)

Miscellaneous clippings about vaudeville acts. Clippings are glued into a ledger used as a scrapbook.

Topic: Vaudeville

Genre/Form: Scrapbooks

Box 3, Folder 1

[Billings-Merriam Family Vaudeville scrapbook, pages 1-26, undated](#)
Notes: pages 1-26

Box 3, Folder 1

[Smith Bros Equilibrists / Martino - World's Greatest Boy Artist / DeMello's Trans-Oceanic Vaudeville Company: \[newspaper clippings\], Circa 1910](#)
1 Item (Ink on paper.; 14.0" x 9.0".)

Collector: Billings, Essa

Language: English.

Notes: AC0079-0000007 (AC Scan)

Miscellaneous clippings about vaudeville acts. Clippings are glued into a ledger used as a scrapbook.

Topic: Vaudeville
Acrobatics
Aerialists

Genre/Form: Scrapbooks

Box 3, Folder 2

[Loose pages](#)

[Another big special week in vaudeville by the Gay's players at the Lyric: \[advertisement\], Circa 1905](#)
1 Item (Ink on paper.; 12.0" x 6.0".)

Collector: Billings, Essa

Language: English.

Notes: AC0079-0000003 (AC Scan)

In Box 1, Folder 2.

Featuring Billy and Eva Merriam with illustrations of three arial tricks using gymnastic rings.

Names: Merriam, Billy

	<p>Topic: Merriam, Eva Billings Vaudeville Aerialists Acrobatics</p> <p>Genre/Form: Advertisements</p>
Box 3, Folder 3	Hotel register, 1902 June 30-1902 August 16
Box 4, Folder 1	<p>Billings-Merriam Family Vaudeville scrapbook, (includes front cover), pages 1-26, undated</p> <p>Notes: front cover, pages 1-26</p>
Box 4, Folder 2	<p>Billings-Merriam Family Vaudeville scrapbook (back cover), pages 27-49, undated</p> <p>Notes: pages 27-49 and back cover</p>
Box 5, Folder 1	Scrapbook covers
Box 6, Folder 1	Loose materials (from box 4)
Map-folder 1	Loose materials (from box 4, Rifner Brothers advertisement)
	Audio tapes?