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

NMAH.AC.0079
Barbara Kemp and Robert S. Harding
1984
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Collection Overview

Repository: Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title: Billings-Merriam Family Vaudeville Scrapbooks
Identifier: NMAH.AC.0079
Date: 1897 - 1902
Extent: 2 Cubic feet (6 oversized folders, 1 folder)
Creator: Plunkett, Billy, Mrs.
Merriam, Eva Billings
Merriam, Billy
Christiani, Norman, Mrs.
Billings, Gay
Billings, Essa
Language: English
Collection is in 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.

Other Finding Aids
Inventory available.

Processing Information
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 alos 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 Iola (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 Plunckett 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
  Image(s)
  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”.)
  Image(s): The Billings Trio Novelty Sketch Artists: [advertisement].
  Billings, Essa, Collector
  Images of Vaudeville artists Gay, Ethel and Essa Billings. Advertisement is glued into a ledger used as a scrapbook.
  Local Numbers
  AC0079-0000001 (AC Scan)
  Names:  Billings, Essa
           Billings, Gay
  Topic:  Acrobatics
          Vaudeville
  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”.)
  Image(s): The Merriam Vaudeville Co.: [newspaper clippings].
  Billings, Essa, Collector
  Miscellaneous clippings about the Merriam's act, appearances, birth announcement, and fire loss. Clippings are glued into a ledger used as a scrapbook.
  Local Numbers
  AC0079-0000008 (AC Scan)
  Names:  Merriam, Billy
           Merriam, Eva Billings
  Topic:  Acrobatics
          Aerialists
          Vaudeville
  Genre/Form:  Scrapbooks

Box 1, Folder 1  Stubblefield Trio: [advertising flier], Circa 1905
  1 Item (Ink on paper.; 7.1” x 8.4”.)
  Image(s)
  Billings, Essa, Collector
  Illustrated by images of the trio and four insets of performance tricks. Glued into a ledger used as a scrapbook.
Local Numbers
AC0079-0000009 (AC Scan)

Topic:
Acrobatics
Aerialists
Vaudeville

Genre/Form:
Scrapbooks

Box 1, Folder 2
Merriam Trio scrapbook, pages 87-171, 1897

Image(s)
pages 87-171

Box 1, Folder 2
Billy and Eva Merriam the team with the changes: [advertisement]. Circa 1905
1 Item (Ink on paper.; 13.9" x 8.4").

Image(s): Billy and Eva Merriam the team with the changes: [advertisement].

Billings, Essa, Collector
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.

Local Numbers
AC0079-0000002 (AC Scan)

Names:
Merriam, Billy
Merriam, Eva Billings

Topic:
Acrobatics
Vaudeville

Genre/Form:
Scrapbooks

Box 1, Folder 3
Merriam Trio scrapbook, pages 173-284, 1897
pages 173-284

Box 1, Folder 4
Merriam Trio scrapbook, pages 289-301, 1897
pages 289-301

Box 2, Folder 1
Billings-Merriam scrapbook, pages 19-224, undated
pages 19-224

Box 2, Folder 2
Merriam Trio scrapbook (includes loose material), pages 225-398, 1897

Image(s)
pages 225-398; loose material

Box 2, Folder 2
Gem Theatre Tonight: [advertisement], Circa 1905
1 Item (Ink on paper.; 11.3" x 7.8").

Image(s): Gem Theatre Tonight: [advertisement].
Billings, Essa, Collector
Featuring Billy and Eva Merriam and Gay and Essa Billings with illustrations of three children balancing on chairs.

Local Numbers
AC0079-0000004 (AC Scan)

Names: Billings, Essa
       Billings, Gay
       Merriam, Billy
       Merriam, Eva Billings

Topic: Acrobatics
       Aerialists
       Vaudeville

Genre/ Form: Advertisements

Box 2, Folder 2
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").

Image(s): Doutrick's Theatrical Exchange / "The Flying Merriam" tonight at "The Lyric" / Trapeze Victim Improving: [newspaper clippings].
Billings, Essa, Collector
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.

Local Numbers
AC0079-0000005 (AC Scan)

Names: Merriam, Billy
       Merriam, Eva Billings

Topic: Acrobatics
       Aerialists
       Vaudeville

Genre/ Form: Scrapbooks

Box 2, Folder 2
The Dancing Ashwells / Mr. and Mrs. Blessing & Co. presenting their dramatic comedy: [newspaper clippings], Circa 1910

1 Item (Ink on paper.; 13.8" x 8.2").

Image(s): The Dancing Ashwells / Mr. and Mrs. Blessing & Co. presenting their dramatic comedy: [newspaper clippings].
Billings, Essa, Collector
Miscellaneous clippings about vaudeville acts. Clippings are glued into a ledger used as a scrapbook.
Local Numbers
AC0079-0000006 (AC Scan)

Topic: Vaudeville
Genre/ Form:

Box 3, Folder 1
Billings-Merriam Family Vaudeville scrapbook, pages 1-26, undated
Image(s)

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''.)

Image(s): Smith Bros Equilibrists / Martino - World's Greatest Boy Artist / DeMello's Trans-Oceanic Vaudeville Company: [newspaper clippings].
Billings, Essa, Collector
Miscellaneous clippings about vaudeville acts. Clippings are glued into a ledger used as a scrapbook.

Local Numbers
AC0079-0000007 (AC Scan)

Topic: Acrobatics
Aerialists
Vaudeville

Genre/ Form:

Box 3, Folder 2
Loose pages
Image(s)

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''.)

Image(s): Another big special week in vaudeville by the Gay's players at the Lyric: [advertisement].
Billings, Essa, Collector
Featuring Billy and Eva Merriam with illustrations of three arial tricks using gymnastic rings.

In Box 1, Folder 2.

Local Numbers
AC0079-0000003 (AC Scan)

Names: Merriam, Billy
Merriam, Eva Billings

Topic: Acrobatics
Aerialists
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