



The New York Public Library
Billy Rose Theatre Division

Guide to the

Neil McFee Skinner papers

1921-1957

*T-Mss 1959-003

Compiled by Robyn Hjermsstad, 2014

Summary

Creator: Skinner, Neil McFee

Title: Neil McFee Skinner papers

Date: 1921-1957

Size: 3.61 linear feet (9 boxes)

Source: Gift of the Estate of Neil McFee Skinner, 1959.

Abstract: The Neil McFee Skinner papers date from 1921 to 1957 and document his career as an actor and managing director of the Wharf Theatre and the Martha's Vineyard Playhouse. The collection holds correspondence, programs, reviews, photographs and business records.

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Related Materials:

Neil McFee Skinner papers. Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

Creator History

Neil McFee Skinner was an American stage actor, director, and theater manager. After attending the University of Michigan and Northwestern University, Skinner toured briefly with a Chautauqua circuit show. In 1925, he was chosen by writer George Kelley to perform in the touring production of *The Show-off*. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, Skinner acted with several companies on the east coast under the name Neil McFee, including the Capitol Players and the Cormican Players in Albany, New York and the Morgan Wallace Players in Richmond, Virginia. On Broadway he appeared in *The Passing Present* (1931), *Wild Waves* (1932), and *False Dreams, Farewell* (1934).

From 1937 to 1939, Skinner was managing director of the Wharf Theatre in Provincetown, Massachusetts. The theatre, which was built by Mary Bicknell's Wharf Players in 1925, hosted Summer Stock shows every year until the theater was destroyed by a blizzard in 1939. The theater was the home of the professional Wharf Players and the Wharf Theatre School, which was comprised of student apprentices who performed as the Junior Group. Faculty was made up of directors, producers, actors, and educators from around the United States. Skinner's wife at the time, Edith Warman Skinner, directed the school and many of the school's productions, while Neil McFee Skinner and NBC announcer Jean Paul King produced shows for the theater's professional company. Skinner also managed the Martha's Vineyard Playhouse from 1940 to 1941. During the late 1940s into the 1950s, Skinner had roles in regional productions in Rhode Island, Illinois, Massachusetts, Maine, and New York.

Neil McFee Skinner died in 1959.

Scope and Content Note

The Neil McFee Skinner papers date from 1921 to 1957 and document his career as an actor and managing director of the Wharf Theatre and Martha's Vineyard Playhouse. The collection contains correspondence, programs, reviews, photographs, and business records.

Wharf Theatre Files document the activities of the theater from 1927 to 1939. Material relates to productions and programs presented by both the Wharf Players and the Junior Group. The files contain correspondence, announcements, reviews, biographies of staff and actors, programs, staff applications, contracts, equipment and supplies inventories, expense reports, and summer school program descriptions. Correspondence is arranged by year and consists of ticket, program, and schedule requests; audition requests; letters of recommendation; and thank-you letters from former students of Edith Skinner. Communications between Neil Skinner, Edith Skinner, and associate manager, Jean Paul King, concern program design, advertising, the distribution of information for theater critics and directors in New York, accounts and budgets, and other business matters. Several letters from Edith Skinner to Neil McFee Skinner in preparation for and during the 1938 and 1939 summer seasons are present and detail administrative issues at the theater during that time. One file holds programs and articles concerning the Wharf Players prior to Skinner's directorship, from 1927 to 1936.

Files for the Martha's Vineyard Playhouse date from 1939 to 1942 and consist of correspondence, programs, advertisement and program mock-ups, advertising contact lists, staff and actor biographies, contracts, press releases, reviews, and ticket sales records. Correspondence chiefly discusses advertising and promotion of the theater and its productions, and is generally accompanied by documents and forms to which it refers. Schedule change notifications to companies that advertise in the Playhouse's programs, calls for advertisers, and production announcements to newspapers are included. Other topics of correspondence include employee compensation and legal and financial matters. Primary correspondents include Martha Davis Coe, the theater's publicity director; Maria M. Coxe, production manager; business representatives; and newspaper editors.

Acting files in the collection document Skinner's early career from 1924 to 1934, and his later performances during the late 1940s and early 1950s through programs, reviews, contracts, and correspondence. Productions represented include those he performed in while a member of the Capitol Players and the Cormican Players in Albany, New York, such as *An American Tragedy* (1929), *Hawk Island* (1929), *Repertory* (1930), and *Jonesy* (1930). Programs and reviews are also present for *What Anne Brought Home* (1928), *The Mystery Ship* (1928), *Wild Waves* (1932), and *The World Waits*

(1932). Files for Alley Cat (1934) contain correspondence, book sale agreements and memoranda, show announcements, production account logs, and prop lists. Also present are programs for Skinner's later acting work from 1949 to 1950 at the Lakewood Theatre in Maine, the Salt Theatre in Chicago, and the Newport Casino Theatre in Rhode Island. Among these programs are a limited amount of acting notes.

While a large quantity of the correspondence in the collection is located in the files for the Wharf Theatre and Martha's Vineyard Playhouse, some correspondence was previously arranged alphabetically by correspondent. Because the letters in these files are similar in content to those described in the Wharf and Vineyard files, researchers interested in either or both of the theaters should also consult the Correspondence Files in addition to the respective theater files. Personal letters from Edith W. Skinner are also held in the alphabetical correspondence files. Skinner's personal correspondence is also separated into its own chronological run. Many of these are love letters from Margaret ("Maudgy") McDuffee and date from 1929 to 1930.

Photographs are mostly headshots of Skinner and actors who performed at his theaters or that he admired, such as Blanche Ring, Helen Kaiser, Raymond Hackett, Osgood Perkins, and Lillian Gish. A limited amount of photographs documenting students and actors at the Wharf Theatre are included, as well as production photographs for the Wharf Theatre's 1937 production of *White Cargo*. The collection also holds programs for regional and Broadway shows Skinner attended. These programs date from 1921 to 1938 and may be accompanied by Skinner's remarks on performers.

Arrangement: The collection is arranged into the following categories: Wharf Theatre Files; Martha's Vineyard Playhouse Files; Acting Files; Correspondence; Photographs; and Programs.

Key Terms

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Correspondence
Photographs
Theater programs

Geographic Names

Martha's Vineyard (Mass.)
Provincetown (Mass.)

Subjects

Theater -- Production and direction
Theaters -- Massachusetts

Names

Wharf Theatre (Provincetown, Mass.)

Container List

Wharf Theatre Files

- b. 1 f. 1-12 1927-1938
- b. 2 f. 1-11 1938-1939, Undated

Martha's Vineyard Playhouse Files

- b. 3 f. 1-16 1939-1941
8-MWEZ + n.c. 1939
- b. 4 f. 1-5 1941-1942
- b. 9 f. 1 1941

Acting Files

- b. 4 f. 6-10 1924-1934
- b. 5 f. 1-4 1948-1950, Undated

Correspondence

- b. 5 f. 5-19 A-S 1934-1942
Correspondence from Edith Skinner can be found here and in the Wharf Theatre Files.
- b. 6 f. 1-3 T-Z 1936-1941
- b. 6 f. 4-9 Personal Correspondence 1928-1930
Includes Margaret McDuffie letters.
- b. 7 f. 1-5 Personal Correspondence 1930-1936

Photographs

- b. 7 f. 6-7 1925-1949
MWEZ + n.c. 18290
- b. 7 f. 8-9 1927-1957
- b. 9 f. 2-4 1932-1937
- b. 8 f. 1 Colt, Ethel Barrymore 1937
- b. 8 f. 2 Dinehart, Alan 1933
- b. 8 f. 3 Gish, Lillian 1921-1939
- b. 8 f. 4 Shannon, Effie 1932
- b. 8 f. 5 Skinner, Edith W 1937
- b. 8 f. 6 Skinner, Neil McFee 1925-1930
- b. 8 f. 7 Varden, Evelyn 1950s
- b. 8 f. 8 *We Die Exquisitely* 1934
- b. 8 f. 9 *White Cargo* 1937
Wharf Theatre production.
- b. 8 f. 10-12 Programs 1921-1938