



The New York Public Library
Billy Rose Theatre Division

Guide to the

Breen family memoirs and photographs

1993

*T-Mss 2001-063

Summary

Creator: Breen, Charles, b. 1908

Title: Breen family memoirs and photographs

Date: 1993

Size: .4 linear feet (1 volume + 1 portfolio)

Source: Gift, McConnell, John, 02/16/2001

Abstract: The Breen family was one of the popular performing families of American show business, playing the stages of America, Australia, and elsewhere during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Patriarch Thomas D. Breen, born of Irish immigrants in Massachusetts in 1868, fled his hometown as a teenager with a travelling medicine show. After a brief spell as a blackface minstrel, Breen honed his juggling skills and began touring the vaudeville circuits of the United States and the music halls of Europe. Breen and his first wife had four children, and, after her death, he remarried and had five more, one of whom died in infancy. Seven of the surviving Breen children joined their father in his stage act, either juggling, dancing, doing acrobatics, playing a musical instrument, or some combination of these skills. After the family act broke up around 1921, the younger Breens formed a number of specialty acts, either solo or with partners from outside the family, and continued performing in vaudeville, musical comedy, nightclubs, movies, and in the circus. Consists of a bound typescript written by Charles Breen (b. 1908), the youngest and only non-performing member of the Breen Family, accompanied by a portfolio of photographs of the various Breens. The typescript was apparently written during the late 1980s/early 1990s, completed in 1993, then privately bound under the title MEMOIRS AND STUFF. The text is divided into two sections, the first of which, entitled "The Show Business Breens," gives a general history of the Breens' professional careers, as a group and as solo performers. The first section is 75 pages and ends with a Breen family career chronology. In Book 2, "The Maverick," Charles Breen explains why he chose not to join the family act, and details his own career, first as a jazz musician, later as an electrical engineer. This section consists of 164 pages plus one errata slip. The portfolio of photographs includes pictures of all the performing Breens, and also includes a photo inscribed to the Breens by silent film star Ramon Novarro.

Access: Some collections held by the Dance, Music, Recorded Sound, and Theatre Divisions at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts are held off-site and must be requested in advance.

Please check the collection records in **the NYPL's online catalog** for detailed location information. For general guidance about requesting offsite materials, please consult:
<https://www.nypl.org/about/locations/lpa/requesting-archival-materials>

Preferred citation: Breen family memoirs and photographs, Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library

Creator History

The Breen family was one of the popular performing families of American show business, playing the stages of America, Australia, and elsewhere during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Patriarch Thomas D. Breen, born of Irish immigrants in Massachusetts in 1868, fled his hometown as a teenager with a travelling medicine show. After a brief spell as a blackface minstrel, Breen honed his juggling skills and began touring the vaudeville circuits of the United States and the music halls of Europe. Breen and his first wife had four children, and, after her death, he remarried and had five more, one of whom died in infancy. Seven of the surviving Breen children joined their father in his stage act, either juggling, dancing, doing acrobatics, playing a musical instrument, or some combination of these skills. After the family act broke up around 1921, the younger Breens formed a number of specialty acts, either solo or with partners from outside the family, and continued performing in vaudeville, musical comedy, nightclubs, movies, and in the circus.

Scope and Content Note

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Key Terms

Subjects

Electronics engineers -- United States
Performing arts -- United States
Vaudeville -- United States

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Photographs
Typescripts

Names

Breen, Charles, b. 1908