

Warren K. Billings Papers

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Prepared by Allan Teichroew and David Mathisen

Collection Summary

Title: Warren K. Billings Papers

Span Dates: 1899-1973

Bulk Dates: (bulk 1920-1939)

ID No.: MSS56614

Creator: Billings, Warren K., 1893-1972

Extent: 2,600 items ; 14 containers plus 1 oversize ; 506 linear feet

Language: Collection material in English

Location: Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Summary: Laborer and union organizer. Family and general correspondence, legal files, printed matter, newspaper clippings, and other papers relating primarily to the 1916 bombing conviction of Billings and Tom Mooney and papers relating to the Industrial Workers of the World, Billings's activities in the union movement, especially in California, his life in Folsom State Prison, and his activities on behalf of the civil liberties of Vern Smith and Communist Party leader Earl Browder.

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

People

Baldwin, Roger N. (Roger Nash), 1884-1981--Correspondence.

Baron, Rose--Correspondence.

Billings, Josephine Rudolph--Correspondence.

Billings, Warren K., 1893-1972.

Browder, Earl, 1891-1973.

Davis, George Thomas, 1907-2006--Correspondence.

Finerty, John Frederick, 1885-1967--Correspondence.

Gallagher, Mary, 1883-1965--Correspondence.

Gross, Madeline Wieland--Correspondence.

Hunt, Henry T.--Correspondence.

Lawler, John G.--Correspondence.

Lewis, Lena Morrow--Correspondence.

Marcantonio, Vito, 1902-1954--Correspondence.

Mooney, Thomas J., 1882-1942.

Older, Fremont, 1856-1935--Correspondence.

Resner, Herbert--Correspondence.

Ritchie, Paul--Correspondence.

Scharrenburg, Paul, 1877-1969--Correspondence.

Smith, Vern, 1892-

Organizations

Communist Party of the United States of America.

Folsom Prison.

Industrial Workers of the World.

Subjects

Civil rights.

Labor disputes--California.

Labor unions--California.

Prisoners--California.

Prisons--California.

Radicalism--United States.

Occupations

Laborers.
Union organizers.

Administrative Information

Provenance

The papers of Warren K. Billings, laborer and union organizer, were given to the Library of Congress by Gertrude Anderson in 1975. A small addition was received as a gift of Leon MacLean in 1980.

Processing History

The Warren K. Billings Papers were processed in 1976 and revised and expanded in 1984. The finding aid was revised in 2009..

Transfers

Photographs have been transferred to the Library's Prints and Photographs Division where they are identified as part of the Warren K. Billings Papers.

Related Material

Other collections in the Manuscript Division relating to Billings include the papers of [Felix Frankfurter](#), who was appointed by President Woodrow Wilson in 1918 to head a commission to study the Mooney-Billings case, and the papers of Lewis Graham Hines, which includes a letter of April 1918 from Mooney to Hines describing and defending Billings's credentials as a laborer and union organizer.

Copyright Status

The status of copyright in the unpublished writings of Warren K. Billings is governed by the Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17, U.S.C.).

Access and Restrictions

The papers of Warren K. Billings are open to research. Researchers are advised to contact the Manuscript Reading Room prior to visiting. Many collections are stored off-site and advance notice is needed to retrieve these items for research use.

Preferred Citation

Researchers wishing to cite this collection should include the following information: Container number, Warren K. Billings Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Biographical Note

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
1893, July 4	Born, Middletown, N.Y.
1906	Moved with family to Brooklyn, N.Y.
1908	Graduated from high school
1908-1912	Worked at numerous odd jobs between frequent stints of unemployment
1911	Convicted and given suspended sentence for possession of burglar's tools
1912-1913	Lived on the road while traveling to San Francisco, Calif.

1913	Convicted and imprisoned for one year on a charge of possession of dynamite during an electrical workers' strike
1914-1916	Blacklisted by employers because of his union activities
1916	Convicted on a charge of planting a homemade bomb during a San Francisco, Calif., Preparedness Day parade Given a life sentence and sent to Folsom State Prison, Folsom, Calif.
1926	Warren K. Billings Committee for Pardon organized
1939	Billings Defense Committee organized Billings' sentence commuted by Governor Culbert L. Olson of California
1940	Married Josephine Rudolph
1941	Chairman, Northern California Citizens Committee to Free Earl Browder
1947-1949	Chairman, Vern Smith Defense Committee
1955	Delegate, AFL-CIO convention
1961	Pardoned by Governor Edmund G. Brown (1905- 1996) of California
1972, Sept. 4	Died, Redwood City, Calif.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of Warren Knox Billings (1893-1972) span the years 1899-1973, with the bulk of the material concentrated in the period 1920-1939. Consisting of [Family Correspondence](#), [General Correspondence](#), [Legal File](#), [Subject File](#), [Miscellany](#), [Addition](#), and [Oversize](#) material, the collection is focused on Billings's arrest, trial, and conviction for planting the 1916 Preparedness Day bomb that killed ten persons and wounded forty others during a Market Street parade in San Francisco.

The Mooney-Billings case, with Tom J. Mooney, Billings's fellow laborer as codefendant, became a cause célèbre of radicals and civil libertarians who argued that the men were the victims of a politically inspired effort to break the union movement in San Francisco and to destroy the militant International Workers of the World. For over twenty years, various defense committees worked to release the pair, but despite post-trial information that cast doubt on the credibility of the state's case, Billings did not go free until California governor Culbert L. Olson commuted his sentence to time served in 1939. Out of prison for the first time in twenty-three years, Billings took up the watchmaking trade he had learned in Folsom State Prison and became active in San Francisco Bay area labor councils. He also continued the campaign for a full pardon that he began in prison, and he served on the defense committees of individuals he believed had been unfairly treated by internal security agencies during the Cold War. In 1961, eleven years before his death, Governor Edmund G. Brown (1905- 1996) granted him the pardon he had sought since his conviction nearly a half century earlier.

The Billings Papers reflect all aspects of his life after 1920, but the emphasis is on the period between 1920 and his commutation of sentence. During this time, Billings seemingly kept all incoming and most outgoing letters with correspondents who varied from solicitous pen pals of prisoners to lawyers and radical friends who represented his case before the courts and the American public. Chief among his advocates were San Francisco newspaper publisher Fremont Older, radicals Mary Gallagher and Madeline Wieland Gross (who was also his cousin), and attorneys George Thomas Davis, John Frederick Finerty, Henry T. Hunt, and John G. Lawler.

The collection contains only a few letters from Mooney to Billings, and none from Billings to Mooney, so that information on their relationship must be derived from a clippings file, from letters Billings wrote to the public, and from his correspondence with associates such as Madeline Gross and Mary Gallagher. The two women alternately served as secretaries of his defense committees, and their letters to and from Billings are personal and revealing. Also significant are communications with lawyers and his exchanges with Josephine Rudolph, the woman whom he later married and whose letters are found in the [Family Correspondence](#). From these papers it is possible to trace the reasoning behind Billings's decision to petition for a writ of habeas corpus, to break from Mooney and organize his own defense committee, to request and then withdraw an appeal for parole, and to campaign for a commutation and a pardon. Other notable correspondents include Roger Nash Baldwin, Rose Baron, Lena Morrow Lewis, Vito Marcantonio, Herbert Resner, Paul Ritchie, and Paul Scharrenburg.

By the time Billings received his commutation of sentence from Governor Olson in 1939, he had collected a store of transcripts relating to the history of the case. Arranged in the [Legal File](#) and encompassing Mooney's trial as well as his own, the transcripts contain testimony from the original trials, exhibit materials, and copies of his and Mooney's near-print and printed applications for pardon and for writs of habeas corpus. In the file is the transcript of the preliminary examination of Tom Mooney on a charge in 1914 of possessing explosives during a California electrical workers' strike.

In the [Subject File](#) are files pertaining to Billings's defense committees and to his personal and financial affairs while in Folsom State Prison. Also in the collection are writings by Billings and records concerning his participation in organizations to aid Vern Ralph Smith, a fellow Californian, and Earl Browder, Communist Party leader, in their fight for civil liberties during the 1940s.

Arrangement of the Papers

This collection is arranged in seven series:

- [Family Correspondence, 1916-1971](#)
- [General Correspondence, 1920-1972](#)
- [Legal File, 1914-1965](#)
- [Subject File, 1922-1949](#)
- [Miscellany, 1899-1973](#)
- [Addition, 1957](#)
- [Oversize, 1971](#)

Description of Series

<i>Container</i>	<i>Series</i>
BOX 1	<u>Family Correspondence, 1916-1971</u> Letters between Billings and his wife, sister, and mother. Arranged by name of family member.
BOX 1-4	<u>General Correspondence, 1920-1972</u> Letters received and drafts and copies of letters sent by Billings, with miscellaneous attachments. Arranged chronologically. Undated material included at the end of the series.
BOX 4-8	<u>Legal File, 1914-1965</u> Applications for pardon and writs of habeas corpus, legal reports, catalogs and an index to Mooney-Billings case material, trial transcripts, texts of court rulings, transcripts of court testimony, and other material accumulated by Billings as part of his defense. Arranged by type of material, title, or subject.
BOX 8-9	<u>Subject File, 1922-1949</u> Minutes and financial reports of committees that defended Billings and Mooney, material pertaining to the Vern Smith Defense Committee, copies of papers assembled by Senator Tom O'Mahoney on the Mooney-Billings case, and files kept by Billings while in Folsom State Prison. Arranged by subject.
BOX 9-13	<u>Miscellany, 1899-1973</u> Miscellaneous personal and financial papers; items relating to Billings's wife, Josephine Rudolph Billings, and the Rudolph family; writings by Billings and others; clippings and printed matter; and memorabilia. Arranged by type of material.
BOX 14	<u>Addition, 1957</u> Typescript of oral history interview.
BOX OV 1	<u>Oversize, 1971</u> Honorary resolutions and petition of support. Described according to the series, folder, and container from which the material was removed.

Container List

<i>Container</i>	<i>Contents</i>
BOX 1	Family Correspondence, 1916-1971 Letters between Billings and his wife, sister, and mother. Arranged by name of family member.
BOX 1	Billings, Mrs. A. G. (mother), 1916, 1939-1940
BOX 1	Billings, Josephine Rudolph (wife), 1931-1942 1967, undated
BOX 1	Gardner, May (sister), 1939-1940
BOX 1	Others, 1939, 1965-1971, undated
BOX 1-4	General Correspondence, 1920-1972 Letters received and drafts and copies of letters sent by Billings, with miscellaneous attachments. Arranged chronologically. Undated material included at the end of the series.
BOX 1	1920-1938 (9 folders)
BOX 2	1939, Jan.-Aug. (8 folders)
BOX 3	1939, Sept.-1967 (10 folders)
BOX 4	1968-1972, undated (6 folders)
BOX 4-8	Legal File, 1914-1965 Applications for pardon and writs of habeas corpus, legal reports, catalogs and an index to Mooney-Billings case material, trial transcripts, texts of court rulings, transcripts of court testimony, and other material accumulated by Billings as part of his defense. Arranged by type of material, title, or subject.
BOX 4	Application for pardon and dissenting report
BOX 4	Application for pardon, miscellaneous supplementary evidence, and testimony
BOX 4	Application for writ of habeas corpus
BOX 4	Pardon report, Feb. 13, 1931
BOX 5	<i>The Case of Thomas J. Mooney and Warren K. Billings</i> by Henry T. Hunt (1929)
BOX 5	Catalogs of Mooney-Billings case materials, 1965
BOX 5	Index to reports and evidence in Mooney-Billings case, "x" series, by Billings
BOX 5	In the Matter of the Application of Thomas J. Mooney for Pardon, July 26, 1929
BOX 5	In the Matter of the Application Made on Behalf of Thomas J. Mooney for a Pardon, April 1932
BOX 5	"In the Matter of the Application of Thomas J. Mooney for a Writ of Habeas Corpus"
BOX 5	"In the Matter of the Application of Warren K. Billings, for Certificate of Rehabilitation for a Pardon," Sept. 14, 1945
BOX 5	In the Matter of the Application of Warren K. Billings, for a Pardon, Petition for a Rehearing, 1930

Legal File, 1914-1965

Container

Contents

BOX 5	"The Mooney Case: As Told to the Camera by Tom Mooney," movie script, circa 1936
BOX 5	"In re Mooney for a Writ of Habeas Corpus," <i>California Decisions</i> , Nov. 4, 1937
BOX 5	Notes on rebuttal, circa 1936
BOX 5	Notes on rebuttal, circa 1936
BOX 5	Pardon, Warren K. Billings, Dec. 21, 1961
BOX 6	"The People of the State of California against Thomas Mooney, Joe Brown and H. G. Hanlon," Jan. 5, 1914
BOX 6	"The People of the State of California v. Thomas Mooney," May 23, 1921; and court's opinion, May 27, 1921
BOX 6	The People of the State of California vs. Warren K. Billings, Appellant's Opening Brief, Feb. 1917
BOX 6	<i>A Review of the Facts in the Case of Thomas J. Mooney</i> , Dec. 1, 1931
BOX 6	"Review of Transcript, Mooney on Habeas Corpus, List of Objections Made by Counsel for Petitioner and for Respondent . . .," testimony
BOX 6	Charles Goff
BOX 6	Charles M. Fickert
BOX 6	Edward A. Chunha
BOX 6	James F. Brennan
BOX 7	"John MacDonald, in re the Petition of Warren K. Billings, for a pardon," July 19-Aug. 20, 1930 (11 folders)
BOX 8	Stephen V. Brunner
BOX 8	Walter J. Peterson
BOX 8	"Text of Court Ruling Denying Pardon to Warren Billings," July 3, 1931
BOX 8	Thomas J. Mooney: briefs, petitions, and motions before the Supreme Court of the United States, 1935-1938
BOX 8-9	Subject File, 1922-1949 Minutes and financial reports of committees that defended Billings and Mooney, material pertaining to the Vern Smith Defense Committee, copies of papers assembled by Senator Tom O'Mahoney on the Mooney-Billings case, and files kept by Billings while in Folsom State Prison. Arranged by subject.
BOX 8	Billings defense committees
BOX 8	Financial reports, 1931-1932
BOX 8	Minutes and financial reports, 1939
BOX 8	Receipts and expenditures, 1939
BOX 8	Folsom State Prison, Folsom, Calif.
BOX 8	Correspondence lists, letters sent and received by Billings, 1930-1939
BOX 8	Communications regarding parole, pardons, and finances, 1923-1939
BOX 8	Personal account book
BOX 8	San Francisco Bay Area A. F. of L. Committee for the Freedom of Mooney and Billings, 1937
BOX 8	Senator Tom O'Mahoney's file on the Mooney-Billings case, copies, 1937
BOX 8	Tom Mooney Molders' Defense Committee, press releases and miscellaneous financial reports, 1922-1939
BOX 9	Vern Smith Defense Committee
BOX 9	Correspondence and miscellaneous, 1948-1949

Subject File, 1922-1949

Container

Contents

BOX 9	Financial reports and bank statements, 1947-1949
BOX 9	Receipt books and checkbook stubs, 1947-1949
BOX 9	Warren K. Billings Committee for Pardon, minutes, 1926
BOX 9-13	Miscellany, 1899-1973 Miscellaneous personal and financial papers; items relating to Billings's wife, Josephine Rudolph Billings, and the Rudolph family; writings by Billings and others; clippings and printed matter; and memorabilia. Arranged by type of material.
BOX 9	Cabin home in Tuolumne County, Calif., directions, sketches, copy of deed, and related matter
BOX 9	Financial and legal papers, including wills and property settlements, 1944-1973
BOX 9	Income tax papers, 1970-1972
BOX 9	Josephine Rudolph Billings papers
BOX 9	Loss of Civil Service position because of Communist Party affiliation, 1942
BOX 9	Miscellaneous Rudolph family papers, 1905-1929
BOX 9	Patent applications and related material, 1899-1949
BOX 9	"Justice for Salcido," by Guy Endore
BOX 10	"The Montenegro Case," by Guy Endore
BOX 10	"The Mooney-Billings Case," by Linda Rodrigues
BOX 10	"The Mooney Case," by Francis V. Watson, 1929
BOX 10	Notes, scraps, and addresses
BOX 10	Poems by Billings
BOX 10	"Speech of Tom Mooney, Madison Square Garden," June 5, 1939
BOX 10	Writings by Billings, 1931-1953, undated
BOX 10	Clippings
BOX 10	Billings's pardon, 1961-1962
BOX 10	Billings's parole, circa 1930-1939
BOX 10	Book review of <i>Frame-up</i> , by Curt Gentry, 1967-1968
BOX 10	San Francisco <i>Daily News</i> , Preparedness Day Bombing, 1916-1918
BOX 11	Danish newspapers, 1962
BOX 11	Free Earl Browder, 1941-1942
BOX 11	Mayor James J. Walker and the Mooney case, 1931
BOX 11	Mooney-Billings case
BOX 11	circa 1917-1965 (4 folders)
BOX 12	circa 1929-1970 (3 folders)
BOX 12	Mooney's pardon, circa 1930-1939 (2 folders)
BOX 12	Obituaries, Warren K. and Josephine Rudolph Billings, 1972
BOX 12	Rosenberg, Ethel and Julius, and miscellaneous, 1909-1953
BOX 13	Printed matter
BOX 13	Mooney-Billings case
BOX 13	1917-1929
BOX 13	1931-1949
BOX 13	Lecture broadsides, circa 1930-1942

Miscellany, 1899-1973

Container

Contents

BOX 13	<i>Precedent, a Play About Justice</i> , by I. J. Golden, 1931
BOX 13	Memorabilia
BOX 13	Chess score cards and related material, 1929-1935
BOX 13	Drawings and paintings by Billings, 1920-1937, undated
BOX 13	Greeting card, calling cards, and programs
BOX 13	Honorary resolutions and petition of support, 1971, undated <i>See <u>OverSIZE</u></i>
BOX 14	Addition, 1957 Typescript of oral history interview.
BOX 14	"The Story of a Rebel," oral history typescript, 1957
BOX OV 1	OverSIZE, 1971 Honorary resolutions and petition of support. Described according to the series, folder, and container from which the material was removed.
BOX OV 1	Memorabilia
BOX OV 1	Honorary resolutions and petition of support, 1971, undated (Container 13)