

Warren K. Billings Papers

A Finding Aid to the Collection in the Library of Congress

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Manuscript Division, Library of
Congress

Washington, D.C.

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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

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

Abstract: 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, b. 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>
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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.
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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.
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Legal File, 1914-1965

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Subject File, 1922-1949

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Miscellany, 1899-1973

Container

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