Harry Frantz Rile Photographic Collection, 1880s-1940s

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2017
Descriptive Summary
Title: Harry Frantz Rile Photographic Collection, 1880s-1940s
Dates: 1880s-1940s
Collection Number: P-029
Creator/Collector: Rile, Harry Frantz/Rile, H.F. Pacific Photograph Gallery
Extent: 1.5 linear foot
Online items available https://collections.nhm.org/seaver-center
Repository: Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County
Los Angeles, California 90007-4057
Abstract: Rile was a professional photographer from Philadelphia who moved to Southern California during the mid to late 1880s. The P-029 collection comprises photographic prints and negatives depicting a variety of subjects set in and around Southern California, including buildings, landscapes, ocean views, and people at work and at leisure. Some of the images in the collection were likely to have been produced for sale at Rile’s gallery, or, in the case of the portraits, directly to the subject(s). However, many of the images are of a personal nature, and provide a candid and detailed glimpse into the worlds of H.F. Rile, his family, and friends. There is evidence (see biographical note) that his wife Georgetta was also a skilled photographer, and a young woman likely to have been one of Rile’s daughters is depicted holding a camera in a photo featured in this collection. In light of this, and the fact that some of the images in the collection are distinct from those attributable by signature to H.F. Rile in terms of technique and quality, it is possible that some of the unsigned photos were taken by members of the Rile family other than H.F. Rile.
Language of Material: English
Access
Research is by appointment only
Publication Rights
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Preferred Citation
Harry Frantz Rile Photographic Collection, 1880s-1940s. Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County
Biography/Administrative History
Harry Frantz “H.F.” Rile was born in Philadelphia on December 1st, 1860. He learned photography in his late teens and made his way west earning a living as a commercial photographer, taking jobs in Chicago, Kansas City, Portland, San Francisco, then Santa Monica (1). Biographical sources conflict as to the exact year when he arrived in Santa Monica, suggesting a range of dates between 1885 and 1888. Voter registration records list his place of residence as Santa Monica as of September 27th, 1888 (2). After settling in Santa Monica, he set up his “Pacific Photograph Gallery” in a tent on the beach, just north of where the Santa Monica Pier stands today (1). Among other services, he offered “photos taken on the beach and in the surf,” as well as “views of picturesque Santa Monica, the Mammoth Wharf, the Old California Missions, Soldiers’ Home, Uncle Sam’s Navy, and Southern California…” (Series 1). In 1889 Rile married Georgetta May Heimer of Galesburg, Illinois and the couple had two daughters: Maud Frances and Caroline Inez (4). It is possible that Rile’s wife Georgetta shared his interest in photography, as an issue of Pacific Coast Photographer published in February of 1893 states that a Mrs. H.F. Rile, “one of the most expert of amateur photographers, has lately procured a number of beautiful views with her camera along the line of the Santa Fe Railroad near Needles” (3). At least one image of a rail line and railroad bridge in that same area was produced that bears the statement of responsibility “H.F. Rile, Photo,” (Series 4) though its date of creation is unknown. During his time in Santa Monica, Rile was a member of the Royal Arcanum and the Woodmen of the World (4). His status as a citizen of Santa Monica, and that of his family, was prominent enough that The Los Angeles Times and The Los Angeles Herald often mentioned the Riles in its society pages. Brief updates detailing Rile’s photography projects and accomplishments, the travels of his family, and visits from out-of-town guests were among the activities reported by the papers between 1890 and 1902 (5, 6, 7, 8). Rile moved his business to 4 Ocean Front Walk in Ocean Park, a neighborhood close to the beach just south of the present location of the Santa Monica Pier (1). In 1899 the family bought a home near the corner of Oregon Avenue (which would eventually become Santa Monica Blvd.) and 8th St. where the family lived until 1912 (1). Though it is not known why the family vacated the house in 1912, the Los Angeles Times reported that Rile’s business sustained damage from the Ocean Park fire of early September of that same year (9). In 1916, Rile left Santa Monica to reside in Los Angeles, where it is known through census records that he owned a home at 1841 West Jefferson Avenue where he and Georgetta lived for many years (1, 10, 11). At least one image (Series 4) that Rile produced bears the stamp “H.F. Rile Photographer 1893 W. Jefferson, Los Angeles, Cal.” and the 1916 Los Angeles City
Harry Frantz Rile Photographic Collection, 1880s-1940s

Scope and Content of Collection

Rile was a professional photographer from Philadelphia who moved to Southern California during the mid to late 1880s. The items that form the P-029 collection at the Seaver Center for Western History Research comprise photographic prints, some of which are mounted on cards, glass negatives, and gelatin negatives. They depict a variety of subjects set in and around Southern California, including buildings, landscapes, ocean views, and people at work and at leisure. Some of the images in the collection were likely to have been produced for sale at Rile’s gallery, or, in the case of the portraits, directly to the subject(s). However, many of the images are of a personal nature, and provide a candid and detailed glimpse into the worlds of H.F. Rile, his family, and friends. There is evidence (see biographical note) that his wife Georgetta was also a skilled photographer, and a young woman likely to have been one of Rile’s daughters is depicted holding a camera in a photo featured in this collection. In light of this, and the fact that some of the images in the collection are distinct from those attributable by signature to H.F. Rile in terms of technique and quality, it is possible that some of the unsigned photos were taken by members of the Rile family other than H.F. Rile. The collection consists of 152 unique images that span the
period of circa 1880s through 1940s. The images depict a variety of subjects set in and around Southern California including professional portraits, buildings, landscapes, ocean views, and people at work and at leisure, including Rile’s own friends and family. There is evidence (see biographical note) that his wife Georgetta was also a skilled photographer, and a young woman likely to have been one of Rile’s daughters is depicted holding a camera in a photo featured in this collection. In light of this, and the fact that some of the images in the collection are distinct from those attributable by signature to H.F. Rile in terms of technique and quality, it is possible that some of the unsigned photos were taken by members of the Rile family other than H.F. Rile. The 152 folders in the collection are arranged primarily by geography with photos of unidentified geographical origin coming at the end of the collection in series organized into “family” and “miscellaneous” categories. Most of the individual folders contain a single print or negative, but approximately one third of the folders house duplicate images in more than one format. For instance, a single folder may contain a negative and corresponding derivative print, more than one duplicate negative, or more than one photographic print of the same image. For the most part, the arrangement of the containers (5 boxes) reflects the order of the collection at the time of accession. However, for the purposes of enhancing navigation of the collection, it has been recategorized into the following seven series: Series 1: Santa Monica & Pacific Palisades Series 2: Topanga Series 3: Los Angeles & Los Angeles County Series 4: San Bernardino County Series 5: San Diego Series 6: Family Series 7: Miscellaneous

Indexing Terms
Automobiles.
Bathhouses.
Beaches.
Boats and boating.
Boulders.
Buildings.
Cactus.
Cameras.
Canyons.
Cats.
Children.
Christmas.
Courthouses.
Dogs.
Dwellings.
Families.
Flowers.
Forests & fields.
Formations (Geology).
Fourth of July.
Garden walks.
Gardens.
Horse-drawn vehicles.
Horses.
Hotels.
Infants.
Landscape & garden.
Men.
Mountains.
Ocean.
Older people.
Palms.
Parks.
Pedestrians.
Pets.
Photographers.
Photography.
Piers.
Picnics.
Porches.
Portraits.
Post office buildings.
Poultry.
Rabbits.
Railroad bridges.
Railroad tunnels.
Ranching.
Recreation.
Rivers.
Roads.
Roses.
Sidewalks.
Stone walls.
Swimmers.
Toll roads.
Trails.
Trains.
Trees.
Wagons.
Windbreaks, shelterbelts, etc.
Women.
Young women.
Jones, John P. (John Percival), 1829-1912.
National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers.
Santa Monica (Calif.)
Chatsworth (Los Angeles, Calif.)
Los Angeles (Calif.)
Los Angeles County (Calif.)
Needles (Calif.)
Pacific Ocean.
Pacific Palisades (Los Angeles, Calif.)
Pasadena (Calif.)
Riverside (Calif.)
San Bernardino (Calif.)
San Diego (Calif.)
Santa Monica (Calif.)
Topanga (Calif.)
Photonegative Photographic print
Photographer

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