Finding aid to the Wilna and Robert Onthank papers, circa 1910-1995
Coll2015-024

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ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, USC Libraries, University of Southern California
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Language of Material: English
Contributing Institution: ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, USC Libraries, University of Southern California
Title: Wilna and Robert Onthank papers
creator: Onthank, Wilna J., 1921-2004
Identifier/Call Number: Coll2015-024
Physical Description: 0.6 Linear Feet 2 boxes.
Date (inclusive): circa 1910-1995

Biography
Wilna Jane Onthank was born December 11, 1921 to Fred R. and Grace E. Onthank. She was raised in the middle-class suburbs of Chicago until the Depression forced the Onthank family to travel west. Wilna attended high school in Glendale and then majored in commercial art at Frank Wiggins Trade School, now known as Los Angeles Trade Technical College. Wilna was the first woman employed in the Technical Illustration Department at Douglas Aircraft in Long Beach, California. Wilna joined the WWII war effort by enlisting with the Navy Waves and attended the Chicago School of Aircraft Instruments. She was later stationed in San Diego and Hawaii. After being discharged from the Navy, Wilna received her bachelor's degree and acquired teaching credentials at the Immaculate Heart College in Hollywood. Converting to Catholicism, she completed novitiate with the Immaculate Heart Sister, then joined the staff at Immaculate Heart College, where she taught alongside Sister Corita Kent and Sister Magdalen Mary, the head of the Art Department.

In 1955 she enrolled at California State University, Los Angeles, and received a master's degree in painting. For 12 years, she was Artist Illustrator and Assistant Supervisor for the Jet Propulsion Laboratory while privately selling her own artwork. She then moved to Desert Hot Springs and opened her own art gallery, Potter's Point.

Wilna's older brother, Robert Milton Onthank, was born on October 29, 1915. He served in the military and trained in aerial navigation, becoming an airspace captain, and then a PAD sales training supervisor who in 1955 was noted for achievements in the technical training phase at major Pacific stations. In 1948, he wrote about his military experience as a closeted gay man. On August 31, 1957, Robert committed suicide at the age of 42.

In the 1990s, 37 years after her brother's death, Wilna sought to get her brother's writings published, a decision based on political issues regarding gays in the military.

Wilna began her retirement in Mesa, Arizona, then moved to Hemet, California. Wilna passed away July 18, 2004 and is interred at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in the Hollywood Hills of Los Angeles, where her brother also lays.

Source: Box 1, Folder 4-6, Wilna and Robert Onthank Papers, Coll2015-024, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

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Immediate Source of Acquisition
Gift of Riley Black, June 4, 2010.

Preferred Citation

Processing Information
Collection processed by Loni Shibuyama with assistance from Helen Ly, January 2016.

Scope and Contents
This collection comprises manuscripts, photographs, correspondence and other papers, circa 1910-1995, of Wilna Onthank, who in 1994 wrote Born Gay, an unpublished book based on the diaries of her brother Robert Onthank, a gay World War II veteran. The collection includes family photographs, particularly of Wilna and Robert as children growing up in Chicago, Illinois, and later in Southern California. The collection also includes a biographical leaflet about Wilna, created by Joan Corbin and Joan's partner Gingere Blakely.
Arrangement
This collection is arranged alphabetically.

Related Materials
Joan Corbin Papers, Coll2013-012, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, USC Libraries, University of Southern California

Subjects and Indexing Terms
California, Southern -- Photographs
Cook County (Ill.) -- Photographs
Gays in the military -- United States
Manuscripts
World War, 1939-1945 -- Personal narratives
Onthank, Wilna J., 1921-2004
Onthank, Robert M., 1915-1957

Box 1, Folder 1  Born Gay corrected copy 1994
Box 1, Folder 4  Born Gay correspondence and excerpts 1994
Box 1, Folder 2-3  Born Gay manuscript undated
Box 1, Folder 5  Onthank, Robert papers 1955-1957
Box 1, Folder 6  Onthank, Wilna papers circa 1975-1995
Box 1, Folder 7  Other correspondence and clipping circa 1910-1960
Box 2  Photographs circa 1910-1995

Scope and Contents
366 photographs, mostly circa 1915-1960. Included are photographs of Wilna and Robert Onthank and several unidentified individuals presumed to be family members. The bulk of the photographs were taken in Cook County, Illinois or Southern California, and several photographs include people in military uniforms during World War II.