Steffi Abbott and Bernard Sims Personal Papers

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Steffi Abbott and Bernard Sims Personal Papers

Dates: 1932-2000

Collection Number: 2006-48

Creator/Collector: Sims, BernardSims, Steffi Abbott

Extent: 3 linear feet plus scrapbooks

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Abstract: Scrapbooks and files of Steffi Abbott Sims and husband Bernard Sims, documenting their social activities and work with charitable organizations around Saratoga and San Jose, as well as Abbott Sims’ career as a fashion correspondent and essayist.

Language of Material: English

Access
The collection is open to the public for research by appointment.

Publication Rights
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Preferred Citation
Steffi Abbott and Bernard Sims Personal Papers. History San Jose Research Library

Acquisition Information
Donated to History San Jose in two parts by a family member, in 2006 and 2010.

Biography/Administrative History

Steffi Abbott Sims was born Velma Gilarden circa 1920. Adopted at birth by her aunt and uncle, Robert and Clara Gilarden, she was raised in their home at 195 North 12th Street, San Jose. The city directory lists Mr. Gilarden’s occupation as meat cutter, and Mrs. Gilarden’s as forewoman at the California Prune & Apricot Growers Association. Velma Gilarden attended San Jose High School when it was located on the campus of San Jose Normal School. As an editor on the school paper, she got her first taste of newspaper work. Gilarden went on to San Jose State College, pledging to Kappa Kappa Sigma sorority. Friendships made in high school and college were maintained throughout her life. During her college years, Gilarden developed her talents in art and journalism. A gifted designer and painter, she turned out dozens of cartoons and sketches, many illustrating her newspaper columns. Over the years, she created brochures, program covers, invitations and other graphics for the many organizations to which she belonged. Her college years were also when Gilarden started using the name “Steffi.” She married Burton Abbott, a business manager at Stanford University, around 1938, and bore two children: Stephanie (1940) and Burton, Jr. (1943). Burton Abbott Sr. was a PhD candidate at Stanford when he died suddenly, circa 1945. Now a widowed mother, Steffi created a niche for herself in the business world, writing a newspaper column aimed at shoppers looking for new and interesting items. Always on the lookout for a bargain, she contacted local merchants to hunt down the best deals, and befriended the downtown San Jose business leaders. KLOK Radio featured her chatting about her latest shopping finds. Around 1948, Abbott married Bernard Sims. A Nebraska native and World War II Navy veteran, Sims settled in San Jose after the war, pioneering the equipment rental business with his “Rent Rite” store on Park Avenue. Sims and Abbott had one child, Lisa Jane (born circa 1950). In the early 1950s, the family moved to Saratoga, where they lived at Rancho Bella Vista, designed in 1917 by California architect Willis Polk. Bella Vista had originally been the Farwell family’s 160-acre homestead, and had been left to the Farwell’s Chicago cousin Blaney. When the Blaneys died, the property passed to another set of cousins, the Kirkwoods. All three socially-prominent families were influential in local and regional politics. In the early 1950s, the Bella Vista property was subdivided and the carriage house became a two-acre property, modified into living quarters. After the Sims purchased the carriage house, Bernard Sims built a four-car garage next to it to house his collection of vintage automobiles. The Sims lived here for more than fifty years. During their long marriage, Steffi Abbott and Bernard Sims were noted leaders in San Jose society and business, in particular the San Jose Symphony Auxiliary, Villa Montalvo, and the Valle Monte League.

Scope and Content of Collection

The Sims family were well-acquainted with many other leading San Jose business families, and the collection at History San Jose chronicles their many activities. Among the notable names are Mr. and Mrs. James Boccardo (attorney), Mr. and Mrs. Don Goldeen (furniture company), Mr. and Mrs. Barry Swenson (construction), Mr. and Mrs. Alex Hart (department store), and Mr. and Mrs. Pierce. Marjorie Pierce was the society editor of the San Jose Mercury News for many years, and the two
families spent summers at adjoining houses in the Santa Cruz area. This collection includes scrapbooks of personal and society events (1950-1990), clippings and correspondence files on charitable/community organizations (1950-1990), Steffi Abbott Sims’ Mercury News articles, and Rent Rite scrapbooks, awards and brochures.

**Indexing Terms**

Women journalists
Fashion writing
Charity organization
California—Social life and customs--20th century
Saratoga (Calif.)
San Jose (Calif.)
Santa Clara County (Calif.)
scrapbooks
clippings files
printed ephemera
photographic prints
manuscripts (documents)

[Steffi Abbott and Bernard Sims Papers Container List](#)