Gladys Knight Harris Papers

Autry National Center
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2013
Descriptive Summary
Title: Gladys Knight Harris Papers
Dates: 1941-1970
Collection Number: MS.245
Creator/Collector: Harris, Gladys Knight, 1892-1975?Helmerick, BudHelmericks, ConnieCarrighat, SallyOrdway, Laura P.
Extent: 3 linear feet (6 boxes)
Repository: Autry National Center
Los Angeles, California 90027
Abstract: The Gladys Knight Harris Papers document Harris's personal interest in domestic science, household affairs, child rearing, or what could be characterized as "women's work" in a harsh, unspoiled environment.
Language of Material: English
Access
Collection is open for research. Appointments to view materials are required. To make an appointment, please visit theautry.org/research or contact library staff at rroom@theautry.org.
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Preferred Citation
Gladys Knight Harris Papers. Autry National Center
Acquisition Information
Donated by Mr. Knight Harris to the Southwest Museum of the American Indian and Library, 1983 May 21.
Biography/Administrative History
Gladys Knight Harris was born in 1892 in Gualala, Mendocino County, California. Ms. Harris started college in 1919 and graduated with a BA and later an MA in Home Economics in the 1920's. She married in 1920 and became a teacher but stayed at home with her two sons until she was widowed and had to return to work in 1928. She continued to teach in high schools and community colleges until the early 1940's and attended Pomona City College to study nutrition. When Harris retired, she enrolled in Frank Wiggins Trade School in Los Angeles to learn photography, a career that her son Knight Harris pursued. She borrowed equipment from her son and studied for two years. During her stay in Alaska from 1946-1949, she used the following cameras: 4x5 Speed Graphic, 2 ¼ Rolleiflex, 35mm Contax, and Bell and Howell movie camera. Harris left for Alaska in 1946 intending to work and stay as long as she needed to document the Eskimo way of life. She stayed in Anchorage from 1947-1948, working at Fort Richardson, staying in the BJL barracks, Juneau, and moving there in 1948. After researching alternative locations, such as Nome, Alaska, and taking advice from friends, in 1949 she was able to make arrangements to stay in a room attached to Archie Ferguson's store in Kotzebue, above the Arctic Circle. She arrived on April 24 1949 and left in August 1949. Her contemporary, the anthropologist Frederica de Laguna was working in Yakutat in 1949, documenting women engaged in subsistence economy activities. Harris's son, Knight Harris, told Molly Lee that she was preparing to make slide show presentations of the work, There is a newspaper clipping that mentions a slide show, scheduled for her return, and notes to the Kodak company referring to images needed for a presentation shortly after her return in 1949. She returned to Los Angeles in 1949 and lived until the 1970s.
Scope and Content of Collection
The Gladys Knight Harris Papers document Harris's personal interest in domestic science, household affairs, child rearing or what could be characterized as "women's work" in a harsh, unspoiled environment. The collection consists of six boxes containing personal papers, correspondence, newspaper and magazine clippings and drawings almost exclusively pertaining to Harris's travels and lifelong interest in Alaska. From 1947-1955, Harris collected newspaper and magazine articles that reflected her interest. The clippings collection includes many advertisements that feature line drawings, paintings, and illustrations of Alaskan animals in silhouette. Animals and other Alaskan icons such as sleds and totem poles, appeared as popular motifs in advertising, cartoons and as decorative motifs throughout the 1940-1950s. Harris copied or traced animal silhouettes onto parchment or tracing paper and the collection contains many of her original line drawings. These appeared in the national general interest picture magazines such as LIFE, Colliers and the Saturday Evening Post. The collection includes a number of articles about the Helmericks, Bud and Connie, adventurous 'pioneers' who wrote articles and books about their experience between 1942 and 1953. She also followed the writings of the naturalist Sally
Carrighar. Even Harris’s friend, Laura P. Ordway, joked with her about the possibility of homesteading in a letter written in 1948. There are some transparencies of studio still life studies and personal pictures of family and friends that have not been incorporated into the Gladys Knight Harris Photography Collection, and are also housed in the Braun Research Library. These images are black and white and color, and in diverse formats. There is irreparable damage to 18 of the negatives. The notebooks combine thoughts, conversations, addresses, accounts, lecture notes, newspaper clippings and technical notes to aid Harris’s photography. One notebook contains notes on a course on nutrition taken at Pomona City College in 1941-1942. The collections also includes the “Release and Consent” forms that Harris asked her models to complete during her three years in Alaska, including the extensive work during her four month stay in Kotzebue in 1949. These releases include hand written notes about age, physical description, livelihood, family history and connections among the models. The smallest portion of the collection consists of personal ephemera such as greetings cards, recipes, menus, and articles clipped for her grandchildren Michael and Lucinda Harris. Final processing of collection and publication of finding aid made possible by a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC).

Indexing Terms

Arctic Peoples
Aleuts
Indians of North America -- Alaska
Signs and symbols
Portrait photography
Alaska -- Description and travel
Photographs
Correspondence
Notebooks
Clippings
Drawings
Maps
Postcards
Illustrations

Full finding aid