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## **Finding aid of the Actress and Singer Photograph Collection, ca. 1850 - 1930**

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### Collection number: Actress\_B000552

The Society of California Pioneers  
San Francisco, California

Processed by:

Brenda Litzinger

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### Descriptive Summary

**Title:** Actress and Singer Photograph Collection, ca. 1850 - 1930

**Dates:** 1850-1930

**Collection number:** Actress\_B000552

**Creator:** Society of California Pioneers

**Collection Size:** 3 linear feet (3 boxes and 308 photographs)

**Repository:** The Society of California Pioneers.

San Francisco, California 94107-1272

**Abstract:** Actress and Singer Photograph Collection, ca. 1850 - 1930 contains 308 card photographs, cabinet cards, carte-de-vistes, enlarged studio portraits, photographic miniatures, and halftones. These publicity images are of some of the most celebrated female thespians and opera singers from the late 19th to early 20th centuries. In San Francisco, female performers were welcomed with open arms due to the majority of the population being male, yet only true talents like Lotta Crabtree and Adah Isaacs Menken prospered. Many of the photos in the collection are the product of popular San Francisco photographic studios. The collection is not a gift from any one person; rather it is a group of photos compiled from various donors. The collection is organized alphabetically by actresses' last name and are in fairly good condition.

**Physical location:** Stored on-site at the Society of California Pioneers

**Languages:** Languages represented in the collection: English

### Access

Collection is open by appointment for research.

### Publication Rights

Property rights reside with The Society of California Pioneers. All requests for permission to reproduce or publish must be submitted in writing to the Librarian.

### Preferred Citation

Actress and Singer Photograph Collection, ca. 1850 - 1930. The Society of California Pioneers.

### Biography / Administrative History

In the early half of the 19th century, California's population consisted mostly of Native American and Mexican inhabitants. In 1848 gold was discovered, attracting hundreds of thousands of settlers from the East Coast and beyond. San Francisco quickly grew from a rural settlement to a thriving boomtown. At first, the Gold Rush miners were satisfied with lewd entertainment supplied by brothels and saloons. Men regularly played female theatrical characters because of the lack of women living in what was still considered a wilderness outpost. Traveling acting troupes, desperate for cash, would perform in any structure that would hold a crowd - a practice later dubbed "barnstorming". Although it was risky, many women began to flock to the burgeoning city with dreams of fame and fortune. concurrently, the significant male populous started to desire more refined performances and would pay big money to see a pretty face. Even so, being attractive and able to memorize lines was hardly sufficient. Only women who possessed striking thespian talent, pitch perfect singing voices, or eccentric stage presence gained true notoriety. Some of these starlets were motivated to become playwrights or company managers, experiencing great commercial success at a time when women were generally thought of as the weaker sex. Conversely there was a serious possibility of obscurity, since local actresses and singers were often less celebrated than big

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names from Europe. The eventual completion of the Transcontinental Railroad reinforced San Francisco's status as a first-class, show business town. Women could now travel cross-country with propriety, dramatically increasing the number of female residents. Veteran and amateur actresses arrived from all over the world, triggering the construction of many new auditoriums. In the 1880's, celebrity publicity escalated due to the development of modern photographic processes and the overland telegraph. All of this hype gave birth to more photographic studios and specialized entertainment critics. Amusements were now being marketed toward specific audiences, usually separated by social class. Theater was San Francisco's favorite public diversion, with more spectator seats per capita than any other U.S. city, until the earthquake of 1906, which destroyed nearly every opera and playhouse.

1850/1930 Actress and Singer Photograph Collection

### **Scope and Content of Collection**

This collection includes over three hundred actress and singer publicity photographs and images (halftones). In the 19th and early 20th centuries, leading ladies were often referred to as prima donnas and either sang in the soprano or contralto range. Some photographs indicate the performer's voice type by handwritten inscription. The majority are standard size photographic prints, mounted on paper of various weights called card photographs. Many are smaller format carte-de-vistes, which were widely popular throughout the 1860's and into 1870's. The collection also contains larger cabinet cards, which took over as the most popular type of portrait in the late 1870's. There are also enlarged studio photographs and miniatures. Some are vignettes, which means the portrait was taken from the bust up and fades into the surrounding white background. Others show the full subject posed in stage costume or formal dress. Halftones that were likely clipped from periodicals also appear in the collection. Imprints can be found on the recto and/or verso and most commonly name the actress or singer pictured. Other imprints indicate authorship and can include the photographer's name, studio name, studio address, or all of the above. A considerable portion of the photos are inscribed on the recto with well wishes "To Pat" and signed by the pictured actress or singer. A mounted photograph of Shakespearean actress, Marie Booth Russell, reveals "Pat's" formal title with an inscription on the recto that says, "To William S Kelly ("Pat") Best wishes from Faithfully Yours, Marie Booth Russell 1910". Each of "Pat's" mementos also have a handwritten inscription on the verso (ie. Shelly #88). It is unclear whether these inscriptions say Shelly, Skelly, or possibly refer to William S. Kelly. The inscriptions on the verso could also be unrelated to "Pat", as they were obviously labeled years later with a ballpoint pen. About twenty-five photographs in the collection were a gift from Ms. Ruth McCarthy to the Society of California Pioneers and are inscribed with "Mrs. P.E. McCarthy" on the verso. The collection appears not to be that of one person or donor. Generally, the photographs are in good condition. Collection includes 3 boxes sorted alphabetically by actresses' and singers' last names. Box 1: B000552: Contains starlets A-F, begins with Emma Abbott and ends with Caroline Franklin. Box 2: B000553: Contains starlets F-M, begins with Beatrix Franco and ends with Daisy Murdock. Box #: B000554: Contains starlets M-Z, begins with Louise Natali and ends with Flora Zabelle.

### **Arrangement**

The photographs are from various files and arranged alphabetically in folders.

### **Indexing Terms**

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the library's online public access catalog.

Abbott, Emma, 1850-1891

Alhambra Theater

Baldwin Theater

California Theater

Columbia Theater

Crabtree, Lotta, 1847, 1924

Davenport, Fanny, 1850-1898

Elite (Photographic Firm)

Grand Opera House

Housworth, Thomas, 1829-1915

Menken, Adah Isaacs, 1835-1868

Modjeska, Helena, 1840-1909

Opera--California--San Francisco--19th century.

Opera--California--San Francisco--20th century.

Russell, Lillian, 1861-1922

Taber, Isaiah West, 1830-1912

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Theater--California--San Francisco--History.

Thors, Louis

Tivoli Opera House (San Francisco, Calif.)

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