Alice Greenfield McGrath Papers, 1942-1992

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The Register of McGrath (Alice Greenfield) Papers, 1942-1992

Collection number: MSS 69

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Descriptive Summary

Title: McGrath (Alice Greenfield) Papers,
Date (inclusive): 1942-1992
Collection number: MSS 69
Creator: Alice Greenfield McGrath
Extent: 1 legal box, 1 letter box,
2/3 linear foot
Repository: Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research
Los Angeles, CA 90044

Abstract: This is a small collection relating to the career of social activist Alice Greenfield McGrath. The materials
document her work as executive secretary with The Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, which successfully worked to free
17 young Mexican-Americans who were wrongfully convicted of murder in a racially biased case in Los Angeles, 1942-1944.
There are photographs relating to the case and the play "Zoot Suit" based on it. Also included is her FBI file, 1949-1968.
McGrath’s activism continued in the 1980s with her work for justice in Nicaragua.

Language: English.

Provenance
Donated to the Library by Alice Greenfield McGrath.

Access
The collection is available for research only at the Library’s facility in Los Angeles. The Library is open from 10 a.m. to 4
p.m., Tuesday through Saturday. Researchers are encouraged to call or email the Library indicating the nature of their
research query prior to making a visit.

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Preferred Citation
[Identification of item], McGrath (Alice Greenfield) Papers, Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, Los Angeles, California.

Biography
Alice Greenfield McGrath was born on April 5, 1917 in Calgary, Canada, daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants. She grew up in Los Angeles, California, and during the 1930s became interested in social activism. From 1942 to 1944 she was the executive secretary for the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee. In this capacity she published a newsletter and corresponded with the men who had been convicted in this case updating them on the activities of the committee working for their release. Another cause she campaigned against was the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. She became the subject of investigation by the FBI from 1949 to 1968. After a brief marriage to poet Thomas McGrath, she married martial arts instructor Bruce Tegner and for the next 25 years wrote several books on and taught self-defense for women. She worked with Luis Valdez on his play "Zoot Suit" based on the Sleepy Lagoon Case which, produced by the Center Theatre Group, premiered at the Los Angeles Mark Taper Forum in 1978. Since 1984 she has been active on behalf of Nicaragua mainly in coordinating visits of Americans to examine and report on the country's social and political situation. She has also worked since the 1980s on accessible legal services for all in Ventura, California, her home for the last several decades.

The Sleepy Lagoon Case represents the first major victory of the organized Chicano community in Los Angeles. In August 1942, a group of 22 young Mexican-Americans, members of the 38th Street Club, were accused of criminal conspiracy and murder of a young man, also a Chicano by the name of Jose Diaz. In January 1943, 17 of them were convicted and sent to San Quentin prison with sentences ranging from assault to first-degree murder. A report presented by Captain Ed Duran Ayres of the Los Angeles Police Department influenced the grand jury proceedings greatly despite the lack of proof by the prosecution of any criminal conspiracy among the club members. The report stated, among other racist statements, that Mexicans are inherently criminal and violent and have no regard for life because they are descendants of the Aztecs. Attorney Carey McWilliams and others organized The Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, formerly known as the Citizen Committee for the Defense of Mexican American Youth, a coalition of labor, progressives, civil rights and community leaders. Committee members were investigated by the California Committee on Un-American Activities charging that the committee was a Communist-front organization. Attorney Ben Margolis headed the appeal and in October 1944 the conviction was overturned and all defendants were acquitted. The Second District Court of Appeals unanimously reversed the decision of the lower court and concluded that no evidence existed linking the Chicanos with the death of Jose Diaz. The court also stated that the trial had been conducted in a biased manner and had violated the constitutional rights of the defendants.

Scope and Content
The collection includes a biographical folder on Alice McGrath (1943, 1978, 1987, 1992), her FBI file (1949-1968), correspondence with some of the Sleepy Lagoon Case defendants, 1943-1945, issues of the newsletter "Appeal News" (nos. 4,7,9, 1943), and photographs of Alice McGrath, the defendants, Carey Williams, Tom McGrath and others, and 1940s photographs of a 1989 visit to Nicaragua. The collection includes two pamphlets: "The Sleepy Lagoon Case" with a foreword by filmmaker Orson Welles (1943, 2 copies) and "The Sleepy Lagoon Mystery" by novelist and short-story writer Guy Endore (1944, 1978) with illustrations by Giacomo Patri and an introduction by Carey McWilliams. Also included are playbills and photographs from the 1978 Los Angeles production of "Zoot Suit" by Luis Valdez.

Box 2 of the collection contains 2 copies the Appellants’ Opening Brief prepared by attorney Ben Margolis.

Additional information on the Sleepy Lagoon Case can be found in the Library's Subject Files and Pamphlet Collection, and the Video Collection holds a video entitled "From Sleepy Lagoon to Zoot Suit: The Irreverent Path of Alice McGrath".