Finding Aid for the Spade Cooley papers, 1940-1970

Processed by Morgan Woolsey in 2013 in the Center for Primary Research and Training (CFPRT), with assistance from Jillian Cuellar; machine-readable finding aid created by Caroline Cubé.

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Descriptive Summary
Title: Spade Cooley papers
Date (inclusive): 1940-1970
Collection number: 2128
Extent: 25 document boxes (10 linear ft.)
Abstract: This collection includes photographs, business documents, media, and memorabilia relating to the entertainment career of the “King of Western Swing,” Donnell “Spade” Cooley, as well as correspondence and other personal materials, and periodical coverage of his 1961 murder trial. After being “discovered” by Roy Rogers in 1934, Cooley went on to appear in over forty Westerns, front a successful Western swing big band, and enjoy a brief period of popularity as a local television personality in Los Angeles in the 1940s and 1950s. His song “Shame on You” enjoyed the No. 1 spot on the country billboard for several months in 1945. After a series of real estate ventures—including the ill-fated “Water Wonderland” project which sapped Cooley’s financial resources—Cooley was convicted of the murder of his second wife, Ella May Cooley. He spent eight years at the California State Prison Medical Facility in Vacaville before suffering a fatal heart attack during a three-day furlough in 1969.

Language: Finding aid is written in English.

Language of the Material: Materials are in English.

Repository: University of California, Los Angeles. Library Special Collections.
Los Angeles, California 90095-1575

Physical location: Stored off-site at SRLF. Advance notice is required for access to the collection. Please contact UCLA Library Special Collections for paging information.

Restrictions on Access
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Processing Note
Processed by Morgan Woolsey in 2013 in the Center for Primary Research and Training (CFPRT), with assistance from Jillian Cuellar.
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Biography/History
Donnell “Spade” Cooley was an American actor, television personality, and Western swing big band leader and musician. Born in Oklahoma, 1910, Cooley was relocated to Salem, Oregon by his parents, John and Emma Cooley, in 1914. There he attended the Chemawa Indian School, picking up both the fiddle and cello under the tutelage of music teacher Hans von Sietz. At Chemawa he also picked up the nickname “Spade” (supposedly for his propensity to win poker games with flushes of spades). In 1930, the family relocated again, this time to Modesto, California, where Cooley worked as a farmhand and continued to fiddle. This was also the year Cooley married his first wife, Anne. After a few failed attempts to establish himself as a musician in Los Angeles, he took a variety of small jobs in Western bands (Chuck Woods’ Southern Stars and the Colorado Hillbillies), and eventually made his way back to southern California.

In 1934, Cooley was hired as a stand-in for Roy Rogers, and gradually built up his career as a fiddler. The Venice Pier Ballroom booked a series of Western bands, and after playing a number of engagements there, Cooley formed his own band and began recording. During this time, he appeared in numerous Westerns (including an uncredited role in Destry Rides Again, George Marshall, 1939), and following the success of “Shame on You” in 1945 he was able to play larger engagements at the Santa Monica Ballroom, presaging his brief but wildly successful television career. In 1945, Cooley also
divorced his first wife, and married Ella May Evans, a vocalist in his band. In 1947, the ban on union musicians’ performing on television was lifted, and shortly thereafter Cooley’s first show, “Hoffman Hayride,” went on the air. Its wild popularity—fueled by the then-current craze for “hillbilly music,” Cooley’s kinetic stage presence, a variety of novelty acts, and outrageous stunts—led to its eventual repackaging as “The Spade Cooley Show” in 1948.

When the show went off the air in the mid-50s, Cooley had amassed enough wealth to embark upon a second career in real estate and development, setting his sights on the construction of a recreation center in Antelope Valley: Water Wonderland. This project resulted in failure, and drained Cooley of his funds. The Cooley family also began to disintegrate—Ella May moved out, the children went to live with friends of the family, and Cooley became increasingly jealous—and in April, 1961, Ella May was found dead in the family’s Willow Springs home. In August, 1961, following a highly sensationalized trial, Cooley was convicted of the first-degree murder, “by torture,” of Ella May, and was sentenced to life in prison. Despite the brutal nature of his crimes, he was slated for parole starting February, 1970. In November, 1969, he was granted a furlough to give a concert in Oakland, after which he suffered a fatal heart attack.

Scope and Content
The collection includes photographs, business agreements and contracts, audio recordings in various formats, personal and business correspondence, joke, lyric, and song sheets, personnel and production documents, publicity and promotional materials, and a variety of scripts and script fragments from film, radio, and television projects. It also includes documentation of Cooley’s “Water Wonderland” venture, a collection of awards and other objects, extensive periodical documentation of Cooley’s murder trial, and a large quantity of sheet music from several musicians in Cooley’s band (bass, drums, trombone, trumpet, saxophone, and a small assortment other parts). Of particular interest may be Cooley’s handwritten musical documents (arrangements, manuscripts, orchestrations) and the ten complete scripts from the Spade Cooley Show’s 1951 season.

Organization and Arrangement
Arranged in the following series:
1. Photographs, 1910-1970
2. Career Materials, 1940-1970
5. Sheet Music, 1910-1970

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

Subjects
Cooley, Spade, 1910-1969 --Archives. 
Country musicians --United States --Archival resources.
Television personalities --United States --Archival resources.

Genres and Forms of Material
photographs.
sheet music.

Scope and Content
This series consists of personal and professional photographs, both in black and white and color. The personal photographs depict Cooley and his family, as well as various properties and vacations. The professional photographs include images of Cooley with other individuals; images of guest artists performing with his band and on his television show; and professional portraits of Cooley himself. There is one box of oversized photographs.

Box 1, Folder 1
Box 1, Folder 2
Box 1, Folder 3
Box 1, Folder 4
Box 1, Folder 5
Box 1, Folder 6

Box 1, Folder 7  Professional: Guest Artists (2 of 2). 1940-1960.
Box 1, Folder 8  Professional: Portraits (1 of 2). 1940-1960.
Box 1, Folder 9  Professional: Portraits (2 of 2). 1940-1960.
Box 24  Oversize Photographs: Personal, Professional. 1948-1061.


Scope and Content
This series comprises a range of materials from Cooley's career in film, music, radio, and television: agreements and contracts; audio recordings in various formats; business correspondence; joke, lyric, and song sheets; personnel and production documents; publicity and promotional materials; and a variety of scripts and script fragments from film, radio, and television projects.

Organization and Arrangement
Creative documents relating to Cooley's career in film, radio, and television are arranged alphabetically by subject at the beginning of the series, followed by administrative documents, also arranged alphabetically.

Physical Characteristics and Technical Requirements
Formats include 3 ¼" reel, 5" reel, 7" reel (1/4" tape), 8-track audio cartridge, grooved discs.

Box 2, Folder 1  Jokes. 1948-1959.
Box 2, Folder 2  Lyric Sheets. 1940-1960.
Box 2, Folder 3  Production Documents. 1948-1959.
Box 2, Folder 4  Scripts: Film: "Go West". 1930-1970.
Box 2, Folder 5  Scripts: Film: "Outlaws of the Rockies". 1945.
Box 2, Folder 6  Scripts: Radio. 1940-1959.
Box 2, Folder 12  Scripts: Television: Other Shows. 1947-1951.
Box 2, Folder 13  Scripts: Television: "Spade Cooley Show" 1-2. 1951.
Box 2, Folder 14  Scripts: Television: "Spade Cooley Show" 3-4. 1951.
Box 3, Folder 1  Scripts: Television: "Spade Cooley Show" 5-6. 1951.
Box 3, Folder 2  Scripts: Television: "Spade Cooley Show" 7-8. 1951.
Box 3, Folder 3  Scripts: Television: "Spade Cooley Show" 9-10. 1951.
Box 3, Folder 4  Script Fragments (1 of 5). 1948-1959.
Box 3, Folder 6  Script Fragments (3 of 5). 1948-1959.
Box 3, Folder 7  Script Fragments (4 of 5). 1948-1959.
Box 3, Folder 8  Script Fragments (5 of 5). 1948-1959.
Box 3, Folder 9  Song Lists (1 of 4). 1942-1944.
Box 3, Folder 10  Song Lists (2 of 4). 1945-1946.
Box 3, Folder 11  Song Lists (3 of 4). 1945-1946.
Box 4, Folder 1  Agreements, Contracts, Royalties. 1953-1961.
Box 4, Folder 2  Business Correspondence. 1953-1962.
Box 4, Folder 4  Publicity, Promotions. 1940-1960.
Box 25  8-Track Audio Cartridge (1), Grooved Discs - 7" diameter (52), 1/4" Open Reel Audio Tape - 3 1/4" diameter (1), 1/4" Open Reel Audio Tape - 5" diameter (3), 1/4" Open Reel Audio Tape - 7" diameter (15). 1930-1970.

Scope and Content

This series consists of all documents not directly connected to Cooley’s entertainment career. This includes business and financial documents from his “Water Wonderland” park project, as well as financial documents and records of a more personal nature, and documents relating to the estate of his second wife, Ella May Cooley. There is also assorted personal memorabilia such as a scrapbook, materials from his son, and awards and other honors, including a key to the City of Santa Monica. There is also correspondence Cooley received while in prison.

Box 4, Folder 5  

Box 4, Folder 6  

Box 4, Folder 7  

Box 4, Folder 8  

Box 5, Folder 1  

Box 5, Folder 2  
Correspondence (2 of 6). 1961.

Box 5, Folder 3  
Correspondence (3 of 6). 1961-1963.

Box 5, Folder 4  

Box 5, Folder 5  
Correspondence (5 of 6). 1961-1963.

Box 5, Folder 6  

Box 5, Folder 7  
Estate of Ella May Cooley. 1963.

Box 5, Folder 8  

Box 5, Folder 9  

Box 26  

Box 27  
Awards (2), Certificates (2). 1951-1954.

Box 28  

Box 29  
Awards (4), Badges (5), Key to the City of Santa Monica (1), Toy gun (1). 1949-1955.


Scope and Content

This series mainly consists of newspaper clippings from the summer of 1961, following Cooley’s murder trial. Most of these clippings were collected and labeled by Allen’s Press Clipping Bureau, but there are several folders of clippings of unknown origin, and a folder of clippings from prior to 1961.

Box 5, Folder 10  

Box 6, Folder 1  

Box 6, Folder 2  

Box 6, Folder 3  

Box 6, Folder 4  

Box 6, Folder 5  

Box 6, Folder 6  

Box 7, Folder 1  

Box 7, Folder 2  

Box 7, Folder 3  

Box 7, Folder 4  

Box 7, Folder 5  

Box 7, Folder 6  

Box 8, Folder 1  

Box 8, Folder 2  

Box 8, Folder 3  

Box 8, Folder 4  

Box 8, Folder 5  

Scope and Content
This series consists of sheet music and handwritten manuscripts from the folders of several musicians from Cooley's band (Bob, El & Lee, Gus, Joe, Lon, Muddy, Paul, and Wally) as well as Cooley's own printed and handwritten musical documents, giving an interesting, if incomplete, look at how Cooley created and rehearsed music with his band.

Organization and Arrangement
Cooley's handwritten musical documents (manuscripts and orchestrations, as well as an index of the some nine hundred odd songs contained in his musicians' folders) and several folders of unsorted parts are grouped at the beginning of the series, and the rest of the music is arranged alphabetically by musician's first name or nickname. The folders labeled "El" and "Lee" (the trumpet parts) were received in the same box. It was unclear whose music was whose, so they have been foldered together.

Box 9, Folder 1  Index. 1948-1959.
Box 9, Folder 8  Music Clearance Binder. 1930-1960.
Box 9, Folder 9  Orchestrations. 1958-1959.
Box 9, Folder 10  Vocal Scores (1 of 2). 1910-1960.
Box 10, Folder 1  "Bob" Saxophone (1 of 2). 1948-1959.
Box 10, Folder 7  Unsorted: Reed Parts (1 of 3). 1948-1959.
Box 10, Folder 8  Unsorted: Reed Parts (2 of 3). 1948-1959.
Box 10, Folder 9  Unsorted: Reed Parts (3 of 3). 1948-1959.
Box 11, Folder 1  "Bob" Saxophone (1 of 2). 1948-1959.
Box 11, Folder 2  "Bob" Saxophone (2 of 2). 1948-1959.
Box 11, Folder 3  "El and Lee" Trumpet (1 of 5). 1948-1959.
Box 11, Folder 5  "El and Lee" Trumpet (3 of 5). 1948-1959.
Box 11, Folder 7  "El and Lee" Trumpet (5 of 5). 1948-1959.
Box 12, Folder 1  "El and Lee" Trumpet. 1948-1959.
Box 12, Folder 2  "El and Lee" Trumpet. 1948-1959.
Box 12, Folder 3  "El and Lee" Trumpet. 1948-1959.
Box 12, Folder 4  "El and Lee" Trumpet. 1948-1959.
Box 12, Folder 5  "El and Lee" Trumpet. 1948-1959.
Box 12, Folder 6  "El and Lee" Trumpet. 1948-1959.
Box 12, Folder 7  "El and Lee" Trumpet. 1948-1959.
Box 12, Folder 8  "El and Lee" Trumpet. 1948-1959.
Box 12, Folder 9  "El and Lee" Trumpet. 1948-1959.
Box 13, Folder 1  "El and Lee" Trumpet (1 of 2). 1948-1959.
Box 13, Folder 3  "Gus" Saxophone (1 of 5). 1948-1959.
Box 13, Folder 4  "Gus" Saxophone (2 of 5). 1948-1959.
Box 13, Folder 5  "Gus" Saxophone (3 of 5). 1948-1959.
Box 13, Folder 7  "Gus" Saxophone (5 of 5). 1948-1959.
Box 14, Folder 1  "Gus" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 14, Folder 2  "Gus" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 14, Folder 3  "Gus" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 14, Folder 4  "Gus" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 14, Folder 5  "Gus" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 14, Folder 6  "Gus" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 14, Folder 7  "Gus" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 15, Folder 1  "Gus" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 15, Folder 2  "Gus" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 15, Folder 3  "Gus" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 15, Folder 4  "Gus" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 15, Folder 5  "Gus" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 15, Folder 6  "Gus" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 15, Folder 7  "Gus" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 15, Folder 8  "Gus" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 15, Folder 9  "Gus" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 16, Folder 1  "Gus" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 16, Folder 2  "Joe" Trombone (1 of 8). 1948-1959.
Box 16, Folder 3  "Joe" Trombone (2 of 8). 1948-1959.
Box 16, Folder 4  "Joe" Trombone (3 of 8). 1948-1959.
Box 16, Folder 5  "Joe" Trombone (4 of 8). 1948-1959.
Box 16, Folder 6  "Joe" Trombone (5 of 8). 1948-1959.
Box 16, Folder 7  "Joe" Trombone (6 of 8). 1948-1959.
Box 16, Folder 8  "Joe" Trombone (7 of 8). 1948-1959.
Box 16, Folder 9  "Joe" Trombone (8 of 8). 1948-1959.
Box 17, Folder 1  "Joe" Trombone. 1948-1959.
Box 17, Folder 2  "Joe" Trombone. 1948-1959.
Box 17, Folder 3  "Joe" Trombone. 1948-1959.
Box 17, Folder 4  "Joe" Trombone. 1948-1959.
Box 17, Folder 5  "Joe" Trombone. 1948-1959.
Box 17, Folder 6  "Joe" Trombone. 1948-1959.
Box 17, Folder 7  "Joe" Trombone. 1948-1959.
Box 18, Folder 1  "Joe" Trombone (1 of 5). 1948-1959.
Box 18, Folder 2  "Joe" Trombone (2 of 5). 1948-1959.
Box 18, Folder 3  "Joe" Trombone (3 of 5). 1948-1959.
Box 18, Folder 4  "Joe" Trombone (4 of 5). 1948-1959.
Box 18, Folder 5  "Joe" Trombone (5 of 5). 1948-1959.
Box 18, Folder 6  "Lon" Saxophone (1 of 3). 1948-1959.
Box 18, Folder 7  "Lon" Saxophone (2 of 3). 1948-1959.
Box 18, Folder 8  "Lon" Saxophone (3 of 3). 1948-1959.
Box 19, Folder 1  "Lon" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 19, Folder 2  "Lon" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 19, Folder 3  "Lon" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 19, Folder 4  "Lon" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 19, Folder 5  "Lon" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 19, Folder 6  "Lon" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 19, Folder 7  "Lon" Saxophone. 1948-1959.
Box 20, Folder 1  "Lon" Saxophone (1 of 2). 1948-1959.
Box 20, Folder 2  "Lon" Saxophone (2 of 2). 1948-1959.
Box 20, Folder 3  "Muddy" Drums (1 of 4). 1948-1959.
Box 20, Folder 5  "Muddy" Drums (3 of 4). 1948-1959.
Box 20, Folder 7  "Paul" Bass (1 of 2). 1948-1959.
Box 20, Folder 8  "Paul" Bass (2 of 2). 1948-1959.
Box 21, Folder 1  "Paul" Bass. 1948-1959.
Box 21, Folder 2  "Paul" Bass. 1948-1959.
Box 21, Folder 3  "Paul" Bass. 1948-1959.
| Box 21, Folder 4 | "Paul" Bass. 1948-1959. |
| Box 21, Folder 5 | "Paul" Bass. 1948-1959. |
| Box 21, Folder 6 | "Paul" Bass. 1948-1959. |
| Box 21, Folder 7 | "Paul" Bass. 1948-1959. |
| Box 21, Folder 8 | "Paul" Bass. 1948-1959. |
| Box 21, Folder 9 | "Paul" Bass. 1948-1959. |
| Box 22, Folder 1 | "Wally" Saxophone. 1948-1959. |
| Box 22, Folder 2 | "Wally" Saxophone. 1948-1959. |
| Box 22, Folder 3 | "Wally" Saxophone. 1948-1959. |
| Box 22, Folder 4 | "Wally" Saxophone. 1948-1959. |
| Box 22, Folder 5 | "Wally" Saxophone. 1948-1959. |
| Box 22, Folder 6 | "Wally" Saxophone. 1948-1959. |
| Box 22, Folder 7 | "Wally" Saxophone. 1948-1959. |
| Box 23, Folder 1 | "Wally" Saxophone. 1948-1959. |
| Box 23, Folder 2 | "Wally" Saxophone. 1948-1959. |
| Box 23, Folder 3 | "Wally" Saxophone. 1948-1959. |
| Box 23, Folder 4 | "Wally" Saxophone. 1948-1959. |
| Box 23, Folder 5 | "Wally" Saxophone. 1948-1959. |
| Box 23, Folder 6 | "Wally" Saxophone. 1948-1959. |