

MATILDA ROBBINS PAPERS

Papers 1919-1963
1 Linear Foot

Accession Number
LP000143

L.C. Number 66-1524

The papers of Matilda Robbins were placed in the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs in March of 1965 and April of 1976 by her daughter, Vita Legere Henderson and were first opened for research in August of 1965. They were reprocessed in March of 1980. Additional papers were donated in 2013 by her granddaughter, Robbin Henderson.

Matilda Gertrude Robbins was born in Litin, Russia January 9, 1887. She arrived in the United States in December 1900. Here her name was changed from Tatania Gitel Rabinowitz. The family settled in Connecticut where she completed her education at the eighth grade level and went to work at a variety of jobs.

She became concerned with economic conditions as they affected the working class and with her brother, David, joined the Socialist Party. She was allied with the industrial union faction of that party which opposed the older craft union group. She became active in Socialist Party leadership but resigned in 1911 for a time in the dispute between the two factions, and she joined the Industrial Workers of the World.

Her career as an organizer began with an unsuccessful attempt to organize her fellow workers at the corset factory where she was employed. In November 1912 Vincent St. John, the General Secretary of the IWW sent her to Little Falls, N.Y. to lead the strike which had broken out in the textile mills there. She replaced the IWW organizers who had previously been on the scene and who had been jailed. The strike lasted three months and, when settled, resulted in some small gains for the workers.

Later she became a national organizer for the Textile Workers Industrial Union and she was sent by the IWW to other strikes to help by speaking and organizing. Among them were the 1913 Studebaker strike in Detroit and the cigar makers strike in Pittsburgh of the same year. She was briefly jailed while in Detroit. In 1914 she worked organizing textile workers in Greenville, S.C. She ceased working as an organizer for the IWW in 1915.

In 1919 her daughter, Vita Robbins Legere, was born. She later worked for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers on the Staff of Advance and for the Co-operative Society in E. St. Louis, Mo. She was also secretary of the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense League.

Robbins later moved to California with her daughter where she lived in Los Angeles, Fresno, and the San Francisco area. She remained an active socialist and served as the executive secretary of the Los Angeles chapter from 1945 to 1947. She wrote regularly for the Industrial Worker (IWW) until her death, January 9, 1963.

Matilda Robbins' papers mainly reflect her experiences as an IWW organizer and the period of her life from 1900 to 1922. Also included are reflections and writings on her personal life up until her death.

Important subjects covered in the collection are:

Anti-Semitism

Bohn, Frank

Haywood, William

Immigrants: Conditions of passage
Living Conditions in America
Working conditions

IWW: Leadership
Organizing
Strikes

Jews: Americanization

Legere, Ben

Marcy, Mary

O'Hare, Kate Richards

Speed, George

St. John, Vincent

Strikes: Cigar workers (Pittsburgh), 1913
Little Falls (New York), 1912
Studebaker (Detroit), 1913

Tresca, Carlo Women: As workers
Attitude toward unions
Exploitation in the workplace
Motherhood
Role in society

Additional material on Matilda Robbins will be found in the Ben Legere Collection (folders 7:4, 7:5), the IWW Collection (folder 25:36), and the John Nicholas Beffel Collection (folder 3:18). A small collection of photographs received with this collection has been placed in the Archives audiovisual collections.

Contents

2 manuscript boxes

Series I, Writings; Box 1-2

Published and unpublished writings in the form of stories and columns. There are also a few related clippings. They mainly relate to her childhood and the years spent organizing for the IWW.

Series II, Personal Papers, Box 2

Correspondence, newspaper clippings, certificates, and copies of articles by Richard Robbins.

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Series I
Writings
Boxes 1-2

This series contains published and unpublished writings of Matilda Robbins both fictional and nonfictional. Much of the nonfiction is directly inspired by events in her life and people she knew in the IWW. There is also an unfinished memoir spanning the years 1899 to 1923. The files are arranged alphabetically by title or name except for the later additions of folders 1:35 and 2:37 (also accounts for nonconsecutive numbering).

Box 1

1. "The Adoption"
2. "The Agitator"
3. "The Agitators"
4. Bohn, Frank
5. "Bread upon the Waters," September 14, 1934
6. "Cases"
7. "The Chief"
8. "A Christmas Story for my Grandchildren"
9. "The Clock that Struck an Idea"
10. "The Education of Shirley Shimmer"
11. "Escape" (Helene Larue)
12. "Escape" (Lexy)
13. Ettor, Joe
14. "Following the Gasoline Trail"
15. "From the Journal of Mme. LaRue"
16. "From the Life of a Wage-Earning Mother"
17. "From the Notebook of a Labor Organizer"
18. "The Harkavy Myth"
19. "J. Bates"
20. "Joe. E."
21. "Judy and the Banker's Lady"
22. "Lois Jackson's Secret Mission"
23. "Lost Leader"
24. "Magdalene of the Mills"
25. "Maida Lynn"
26. "Mr. & Mrs. Announce ..."
27. "Nantucket Island," August 15, 1919
28. O'Hare, Kate Richards
29. "On the Left" - Debs
30. "The Passing of Xenia McIntyre"
31. "R. P. Stokes"
32. "The Radical"
33. "The Red Slippers," The Call Magazine, April 1914
34. "The Rise of Mr. and Mrs. Zirkin"
35. Personal reflections, 1919-1962

Box 2

1. Robbins, Matilda: Autobiographical Notes
2. Last Column

3-7.

"My Story

8. Robbins, Matilda: Passage to America (2 versions)
9. Poems
10. "Sins of Children"
11. "A Sketchbook of Radicals" (names)
12. "The Studio Agent"
13. "They Who Come to Our Door"
14. "The Twins"
15. Untitled MS: (Dear Girl)
16. (Joseph A.)
17. (Little Falls Strike)
18. (Louise to Sylvia)
19. (Lucia Lawrence Hunt)
20. (Manka)
21. (Max Glick)
22. (Old Jacob)
23. (Paula)
24. (Robbin)
25. "Unused Wedding Ring"

37. "The New Year"; IWW postcard poem, 1951

Series II
Personal Papers
Box 2

This series consists of a small assortment of personal items. There is some correspondence; newspaper clippings; certificates of birth and citizenship; copies of articles by her nephew, Richard Robbins; and papers and clippings relating to her death in 1963. Files are arranged alphabetically, except for the later addition of folder 36.

Box 2

26. California Left Wing Socialists: Tentative Program
27. Henderson, Vita: Birth Certificate
28. Legere, Ben: Correspondence
29. Newspaper Clippings
30. Rabinowitz, Morris: Newspaper Clipping
31. Robbins, Matilda: Citizenship Certificate
32. Death Condolences
33. Miscellaneous Correspondence
34. Obituaries and Funeral Records
35. Robbins, Richard: Articles
36. The Playgarden, U.C.L.A. child care program, 1928