

Finding Aid to the Vern Martelle scrapbooks

(#2003-25)

Repository: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society

Collection Title: Vern Martelle scrapbooks

Collection Number: 2003-25

Physical Description: .25 linear feet (one half-size manuscript box)

Creator: Vern Martelle

Date (inclusive): circa 1910-1970

Language of Material: English

Abstract: Vern Martelle was a female impersonator whose fifty-year career began in vaudeville; his act was built around lip-synching, which he claimed to have invented, as well as up to twenty-five costume changes per performance. This collection is composed of two of Martelle's scrapbooks, which contain clippings, photographs and ephemera.

Preferred Citation:

[Identification of item], Vern Martelle scrapbooks (2003-25), The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.

Conditions Governing Access:

Collection is open for research.

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Acquisition Information:

The collection was donated to the GLBT Historical Society by David Peckman in 2003.

Processing Information:

Finding Aid created by Isaac Fellman in 2019, based partly on earlier catalog entries.

This finding aid uses terminology for LGBTQ people that was in current use at the time of its creation. Descriptive language for queer identities evolves quickly and some of these terms may now be dated or even offensive. Finding aids are themselves historical documents; they reflect the moment in which they were written and often reflect the terms that subjects used for themselves. Please contact the GLBT Historical Society Archivist with questions or comments.

Biographical/Organizational History Note: Vern Martelle (sometimes Verne Martell) was a female impersonator who performed in Europe, North Africa (USO during World War II), Las Vegas, Seattle (Garden of Allah Club), San Francisco (Finocchio's), and other locales. He enjoyed a fifty-year career – which began in vaudeville, and incorporated occasional modeling and Hollywood stunt work – and claimed to have been the first drag performer to lip-synch on stage. His act featured lip-synch and up to twenty-five costume changes per performance. In 1951, he was billed as “The man with a thousand voices and a thousand gowns.”

Scope and Content: This collection is composed of two of Martelle's scrapbooks, which contain clippings, photographs and ephemera. He collected material relating to his performances, to camp icons such as Tallulah Bankhead, to cross-dressing in the theater and society, and to transgender people. The collection also includes a 1951 Northern California Players Directory in which Martelle is listed as a variety act and a letter from the San Francisco *Chronicle's* columnist, Millie. Most material appears to date to the 1940s-1960s, with some photos and an early review of Martelle's act appearing to date to the 1910s or 1920s.

Indexing Terms:

Female impersonators