

Al Emmett Fostell:

An Inventory of His Papers at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Fostell, Al Emmett, 1856-1920
Title:	Al Emmett Fostell Papers
Dates:	1879-1920
Extent:	3 document boxes, 1 oversize box (1.51 linear feet), 6 flat files
Abstract:	The papers consist of letters, playbills and programs, clippings, stationery, and ephemera documenting the career of this minstrel show and variety performer.
Call Number:	Performing Arts Collection PA-00033
Language:	English
Access	Open for research

Administrative Information

Acquisition	Purchase, 1956
Provenance	The Al Emmett Fostell Papers were purchased in 1956 as part of the Albert Davis Collection.
Processed by	Helen Baer, 2000
Repository:	Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Biographical Sketch

Al Emmett Fostell (born Foster), minstrel show and variety performer, theatrical manager, and operator of a traveling dime museum, began his career in 1872 performing for New Yorkers at clam bakes and picnics with the monologist Frank Bush. As a teenager in the 1870s he appeared with Birch, Backus, Wambold, and White's Junior Minstrels (named after the senior troupe), worked in a musical and slack wire act, and changed his name to Fostell. In the early 1880s he toured the American South and West, particularly Texas, and later claimed to have performed in Mexico in the 1880s. For a time he managed a theater in New Orleans where he produced the opening acts and afterpieces of each evening's entertainment.

In 1885 Fostell joined Keith & Batcheler's stock company in Boston where he met his wife, the singer Florence Emmett. By 1887 the couple was appearing together as Fostell and Emmett, the Dutch [German dialect] Musical Comedy Team. Fostell played Fritz the German Musician, accompanied by his wife's comedic yodeling. The Fostells' daughter Gilberta Fostell (stage name Vesta Gilbert) joined her parents' act in 1913. Fostell and Emmett was by far the family's most successful act, performed for twenty-eight years until Fostell's retirement from the stage in 1915.

In addition to his work in the family troupe, Fostell worked in show business in a variety of other capacities. He lent his name to several variety ensembles, among them Fostell's Refined Minstrels and Fostell and Tourjee, and joined The Novelty Trio, a "military comedy musical" replete with instruments including bagpipes, concertina, and "two novelty instruments." With Joe Eckl and Minnie DuPree he appeared as The Three Brilliants; later, in the early 1910s, he toured western Canada as The Four Brilliants with the puppeteer Zera Semons and The Two Bees (Harry and Flora Blake). It was an idyllic trip for Fostell, for he had a reliable source of income and plenty of time for sightseeing.

During his half-century career, Fostell formed business partnerships with Eckl and the minstrel show performer Joseph M. Norcross. He also worked for several theatrical management companies as a booking agent and secretary, and set himself up as a freelance theatrical agent. In addition to his performance-related activities, Fostell assembled a collection of historical memorabilia. For twenty years he toured his "Museum of Natural History" and Abraham Lincoln relics around the United States and loaned his materials to various newspapers for publication. Fostell died in February 1920 following a nervous breakdown.

Scope and Contents

The Al Emmett Fostell Papers, 1879-1920, consist of letters, playbills and programs, clippings, stationery, and ephemera documenting the careers of Al, Florence, and Gilberta Fostell, as well as the personal interests of the family patriarch. The papers are arranged in two series: I. Fostell Family, 1887-1920 (34 folders) and II. Fostell the Collector, 1879-1920 (43 folders), with materials arranged alphabetically within each

series by name of performer/ensemble or subject.

The Fostell Family series contains material relating to each of the Fostells in their capacities as entertainers, managers, or entrepreneurs, as well as material of a personal nature collected by Al Fostell. Subseries A. Performers and Ensembles, 1887-1915, contains programs, clippings, and other materials relating to each member of the Fostell family and the various ensembles to which they belonged. Al Fostell's variety ensembles are represented, along with a small amount of material on Vesta Gilbert's brief career in variety. Highlights of Subseries B. Dime Museum, 1888-1909, include detailed catalogs of Fostell's exhibitions in their various manifestations, and Fostell's query to and reply from Tony Pastor regarding the date of one of Pastor's shows. Fostell's managerial activities are the subject of Subseries C. Theatrical Management Stationery, ca. 1900-10. Many of the materials in Subseries D. Personal, 1890-1920, were compiled by Fostell in the last few years of his life. Included are photographs of Fostell with family and friends, notes in Fostell's hand, and a poem he may have written. Also present is a brief autobiographical sketch which, though marred by tall tales and inaccurate dates, nevertheless provides a wealth of information about his life.

Series II. Fostell the Collector, 1879-1920, contains letters, clippings, programs, and ephemera relating to twenty-five performers and ensembles, most of whom were minstrel show or variety performers. Like the Personal subseries above, Series II was compiled primarily in 1919 and 1920 when Joseph Fox and William H. Ward of Fox and Ward sent their friend Fostell letters and clippings about the age of minstrelsy. Other correspondents were the variety performer Major Burk, who wrote to Fostell while on tour in 1919, and former colleagues of Fostell then living in the Actors' Home. Of particular note are the materials relating to Frank Dumont's death in 1919, an event which, along with the death of George H. Primrose, spurred a flood of nostalgic letter-writing amongst the old-time minstrels; the McIntyre and Heath material, most of which relates to the musical comedy *Hello, Alexander!* in which the duo starred in 1920; and the material relating to Abraham Lincoln's assassination which was the topic of one of Fostell's early traveling exhibits. Also present in significant quantities are clippings about Primrose and Hughey Dougherty.

Researchers will find related material in the Minstrel Show Collection and the Popular Entertainment Collection.

Sources:

Variety Obituaries. New York: Garland Pub., 1988-.

Abbreviations in the List:

b---box

ff---flat file

ob---oversize box

Index Terms

Correspondents

Burk, Major

Fox, Joseph, b. 1852

Smith, Edgar

Ward, William H., b. 1852

Organizations

Fostell and Emmett

McIntyre and Heath

Subjects

Dougherty, Hughey, b. 1845

Dumont, Frank

Emmett, Florence

Gilbert, Vesta

Primrose, George H.

Blackface entertainers--United States

Dime museums--United States--1890-1910

Vaudeville--United States--1880-1920

Document Types

Photographs

Playbills

Programs

Stationery

Series I. Fostell Family, 1887-1920

Subseries A. Performers and Ensembles, 1887-1915

Emmett, Florence. Fliers, 1899, nd	box-folder b 1.1
Fostell, Al. Photographs, 1909, nd	box-folder b 1.2
Fostell and Emmett	
Playbills, 1887-1913, nd	box-folder b 1.3; ff 5
Stationery, 189-, 190-	box-folder b 1.4
Programs and fliers, 1891-1915, nd	box-folder b 1.5
Clippings, 1909-10	box-folder b 1.6; ob 4.1
Poster, nd	box-folder ff 6
Fostell and Emmett with Vesta Gilbert. Flier, 1913	box-folder b 1.7
Fostell and Tourjee. Stationery, nd	box-folder b 1.8
Fostell, Gregory and Cransel's Pantomime and Specialty Company. Flier, nd	box-folder b 1.9
Fostell's Refined Minstrels. Stationery, 190-	box-folder b 1.10
Gilbert, Vesta. Photographs and program, 1914-15, nd	box-folder b 1.11
The Novelty Trio. Stationery, 191-	box-folder b 1.12
The Three Brilliants	
Photographs, 1912, and reproductions of photographs, nd	box-folder b 1.13
Stationery, [ca. 1912]	box-folder b 1.14
Subseries B. Dime Museum, 1888-1909	
Clippings, 1890-1909	box-folder b 1.15; ob 4.2
Pamphlets and fliers, 1888-1904	box-folder b 1.16

Pastor, Tony, correspondence, photographs, and clipping, 1907-8, nd **box-folder b**
1.17

Publication of dime museum materials: letter from Fred Waldmann, salary sheet, **box-folder**
flier, and clipping re, 1892-1902, nd b 1.18

Subseries C. Theatrical Management Stationery, ca. 1900-10

Al Fostell, Theatrical Agent, 190- **box-folder b** 1.19

Great Eastern Amusement Company, 190- **box-folder b** 1.20

Knickerbocker Theatrical Enterprises, nd **box-folder b** 1.21

Subseries D. Personal, 1890-1920

Clippings, 1912-20 **box-folder b** 1.22; ob 4.3

Clippings re lost dogs, 1919 **box-folder b** 1.23

Excised program for *America's Best*, 1918 **box-folder b** 1.24

Holograph autobiographical sketch, 6 pp, nd **box-folder b** 1.25

Holograph notes, nd **box-folder b** 1.26; ob 4.4

Photographs, 1890-1911, nd **box-folder b** 1.27

Reproductions of poems, nd **box-folder b** 1.28

Series II. Fostell the Collector, 1879-1920

Backus, Charles. Clipping, 1883	box-folder b 1.29
Baldwin, Thomas Scott. Clippings, 1920, nd	box-folder ob 4.5
Barlow, Wilson, Primrose, and West's Minstrels. Playbill, 1879	box-folder b 1.30
Benedict, Lew. Clippings, 1920	box-folder b 1.31
Bryant, Dan. Clippings, 1920	box-folder b 1.32
Burk, Major	
Church leaflet, 1920	box-folder b 2.1
Letters, 1919	box-folder b 2.2
Poster, 1919	box-folder ff 1
Christy, Edwin P. Clippings, 1920	box-folder b 2.3
Daly, John. Clipping, 1920	box-folder b 2.4
Demonio, Harry. Flier and holograph notes, 1910, nd	box-folder b 2.5
Dougherty, Hughey. Clippings, 1918	box-folder b 2.6
Dumont, Frank	
Clippings, 1914-20, nd	box-folder b 2.7-8; ob 4.6
Leaf from the wreath at Dumont's funeral, [1919]	box-folder b 2.9
Programs, fliers, and stationery, 1908-19, nd	box-folder b 2.10
Emmett, Dan. Clippings, 1920	box-folder b 2.11
Fox and Ward (Joseph Fox and William H. Ward)	
Clipping, 1920	box-folder b 2.12
Letters, 1919-20	box-folder b 2.13-3.1
Empty envelope, 1918	box-folder b 3.2

Gibson, Alfred S. Clipping, 1920	box-folder b 3.3
Howard, May. Photograph, nd	box-folder b 3.4
Lincoln, Abraham. Clippings and holograph notes re the assassination, [1915], nd	box-folder b 3.5; ff 2
McIntyre and Heath	
Clippings, 1919-20, nd	box-folder b 3.6-7; ff 3
Programs, fliers, and promotional postcards, 1918-20, nd	box-folder b 3.8
Morris, Charles A. Letters, 1919	box-folder b 3.9
Murphy, John. Clipping, 1920	box-folder b 3.10
Norcross, Joseph M.	
Flier, 1903	box-folder b 3.11
Letters, 1919, nd	box-folder b 3.12
Peacock, Bertram. Program, 1920	box-folder b 3.13
Primrose, George H. Clippings, 1918-19	box-folder b 3.14; ff 4
Runnells, Fred. Letters, 1919	box-folder b 3.15
Stuart, William. Letter, 1919	box-folder b 3.16
Wheeler, Mat. Clipping, 1918	box-folder b 3.17
Composites	
Clippings, 1918-20	box-folder ob 4.7
Tintype, 1906	box-folder b 3.18
Piece of original packaging, nd	box-folder b 3.19