Melvyn Maxwell and Sara Evelyn Smith Papers

1925-2017
15.76 linear ft.

Acquisition Number: 2017-10

Acquisition: Gift of the Towbes Foundation, Anne Smith Towbes, Tim Jones, and Dorie Shwedel.

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Photographs: Retained with the collection.

Architectural Drawings: Catalogued on the Horizon database.

HISTORY

Melvyn Maxwell Smith (1914-1984) was born on March 12, 1914, in Detroit, Michigan, into an orthodox Jewish family. Upon graduation from Northern High School in Detroit, he was accepted to the School of Architecture at the University of Michigan, where his brother, Marty, was already attending the School of Dentistry. Due to the economic depression of the 1930s, Melvyn’s family suggested he attend Wayne University College of Education for two years until they could afford to send him to the University of Michigan. By the end of his first semester, Melvyn had decided to become a teacher – a decision inspired by Miss Boyer, his English teacher and an expert on transcendentalism, who demonstrated to Melvyn how a teacher could change a student’s values. He remained at Wayne University and in 1936, began work on his doctorate at the College of Education. While attending an art history class taught by Professor Jane Betsy Welling, he learned of Frank Lloyd Wright and resolved that he was going to have a home designed by the architect. Henceforth, Melvyn had an interest in Wright, gathering a vast collection of materials about Wright’s philosophy and architecture. After graduation, he became a teacher at Cody High School in Detroit where he remained for his entire career (38 years), and where he established and maintained the Comet yearbook. He also owned a joint venture called G.G. & S. Realty, which later became G.G. & W. Realty, with his sister, Jennie Goldberg.

Sara Evelyn Stein (1907-2005) was born in 1907, in South Fork, Pennsylvania, one of six children. After a move to Johnstown, Pennsylvania, the family settled in Detroit, Michigan. Although Sara dreamed of becoming a professional actress, she trained to be a kindergarten teacher. Her parents had both immigrated from Lithuania in the late 1880s and were deeply religious Orthodox Jews. Sara attended the B’nai Moshe Sunday School, where she met Melvyn in 1937. Melvyn and Sara were married on March 21, 1940. In 1941, they traveled to Lake Louise and Banff National Park, Alberta, via Wisconsin. On their journey through Wisconsin, they noticed a sign to Taliesin, which lead to them meeting Frank Lloyd Wright. Melvyn, inspired by Wright’s $5,000 design for a house for the journalist, Herbert Jacobs, asked the architect to do the same for him, and he later recalled that Wright advised him to find a piece of property that no one else wants with the idea that a less desirable piece of land would be more likely to have an interesting natural site for Wright to respond to. In February 1942, Melvyn joined the US Army and was sent initially to Wichita Falls, Texas. After he was transferred to Atlantic City, New Jersey, Sara joined him until a subsequent transfer to Gulfport, Mississippi. Sara, in her seventh month of pregnancy, returned to Detroit until she could join Melvyn again, now in Biloxi, Mississippi, this time bringing their son, Robert Nathan, “Bobby” (1945-2003). After one final transfer to Fort Worth, Texas, they returned to Detroit in 1946.

After experiencing some difficulty in securing land for their home, Melvyn acquired the property on Ponvalley Road. Melvyn’s brother-in-law, Irving Goldberg, helped him to acquire Tidewater red cypress and hardware supplies for construction at little cost. A unique feature of the house is its radiant floor heat system in which hot water is carried in piping underneath concrete which is scored with a two by four feet indentation. Completed in 1950, the Smith House is an excellent
example of Wright’s Usonian ideal, which aimed to build quality houses for the American middle class. On a visit to the house in 1951, Wright called it “My Little Gem.” In 1968, the house was modified to add a garden room and expanded terrace with the architectural project lead by Wright’s chief assistant and head of the Taliesin Associated Architects, William Wesley Peters, who also became Frank Lloyd Wright’s son-in-law. Peters also provided designs for a tea house/gazebo but the project was not built. The Smiths welcomed countless visitors and guests to their house, giving many house tours to local community groups as well as architecture schools.

The Smiths were involved in many community organizations and especially participated in promoting the arts in the local community, both being active members of the Arts Council Triangle, a tri-city organization of Bloomfield, Birmingham, and Troy. Melvyn was a board member of the Wayne State University Alumni Association and was instrumental in the creation of the Betsey Welling Memorial Court, for which he donated the sculpture, In Lieu, by Robert Schefman. Sara was active in the performing arts and contributed to the Cranbrook Summer Theatre programs, as well as teaching the Popcorn Players Theater group at Birmingham Community House.

Their son, Robert (Bobby), married Anne Fuchs (b.1947) in 1972, and they had two children, Jennifer (b.1975) and Michael (b.1977). Sara retired from teaching in 1974, and Melvyn retired from teaching in the Detroit Public Schools in 1975. They both remained very active in community activities. Melvyn passed away on July 30, 1984. Sara continued to live in the house until 1994, when health problems necessitated a permanent move to Santa Barbara to live with Robert, Anne and their children. In 1997, the Melvyn Maxwell and Sara Smith Foundation was formed, and the house was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1998. Robert Smith died in 2003 and Sara Smith died in 2005. Anne Smith later married Michael Towbes (1929-2017), in 2005, and the Towbes Foundation, now the owner of the house, funded a renovation project in 2012 under the supervision of Tim Jones, Vice President with the Farbman Group. Marvin Shwedel, Sara’s nephew, and his wife Dorie helped Sara take care of the house after Melvyn’s death. When Marvin died in 2014, Dorie continued the upkeep of the house. In 2013, Cranbrook was awarded a three-year grant with the Towbes Foundation to make an inventory of art objects and to create a researched script to transition house tours from being family-member led to Cranbrook staff led. In 2015, a second three-year grant was awarded to continue tours and conduct oral histories. After Michael Towbes died in 2017, the Frank Lloyd Wright Smith House was donated to Cranbrook Educational Community by the Towbes Foundation.

SCOPE AND CONTENT

The bulk of this collection was created, collected, and maintained by Melvyn Maxwell and Sara Evelyn Smith and reflects their individual and married lives. It includes biographical information about Melvyn, Sara, and Robert Smith; materials relating to Melvyn’s teaching career and alumni activities with Wayne State University; correspondence and publications related to their participation with community organizations; materials relating to the construction and use of the house as the Smiths’ residence, and its renovation under the Towbes Foundation, and includes information on house tours and visitors, and academic studies of the house. There is a large
collection of printed materials collected by the Smiths related to Frank Lloyd Wright and his work, plus other interests such as art, architecture, and the performing arts.

The collection is divided into eight series based on subject or material format: Biographical, Professional, Community Organizations, Frank Lloyd Wright Smith House, Printed Materials, Guest Books, Photographs, and Oversize.

The Biographical series (1925-2005, boxes 1-3) is divided into four subseries: Melvyn M. Smith, Melvyn and Sara Smith, Robert N. Smith, and Sara E. Smith and includes correspondence, vital records, life events, army records, and clippings.

The Professional series (1951-1991, boxes 4-6) is divided into two subseries: Cody High School and Wayne State University. The Cody High School subseries contains materials related to Melvyn’s career as a teacher at the school. It is divided into two sub-subseries: Comet Yearbook and Teaching. The Comet was innovative for its time and won awards and press attention. This sub-subseries contains guidebooks, news clippings, and photographs. The Teaching sub-subseries contains administrative and instructional documents, as well as printed materials related to education and teaching English language and literature. The Wayne State University subseries documents Melvyn’s continued relationship with the university through the Alumni Association Board of Directors, Phi Delta Kappa membership, and the Smiths’ contribution to the Betsey Welling Memorial Court and the sculpture, as well as Sara’s involvement with the University Theatre.

The Community Organizations series (1970-1994, boxes 6-11) has three subseries. Arts Council Triangle was a collaborative organization including the cities of Troy, Bloomfield and Birmingham, which aimed to promote the arts in the community. This subseries contains meeting minutes, programming, and newsletters. The General subseries holds the same materials for numerous other ventures that do not have sufficient material to require a subseries. The Theatre subseries contains materials related to speech and diction, and many play scripts for performances that Sara Smith was involved in, primarily with the Popcorn Players Theater School at Birmingham Community House.

Frank Lloyd Wright Smith House series (1949-2017, boxes 11-15) is divided into two subseries: Smith Residence and Towbes Foundation, which reflect the phases in both the legal holding and the use of the house, first as the Smith family residence then its renovation and preservation as a historic house. The Smith Residence subseries (1949-2004) contains materials related to the construction and additions to the property, including the garden room and lake, art objects for the house, and for the gazebo/tea house that was never built. It also contains thank you letters from participants of house tours, including Brookside School children, as well as materials reflecting the maintenance of the house under the Melvyn Maxwell and Sara Smith Foundation after its cessation as an active residence. The Towbes Foundation subseries (2007-2017) contains materials relating to the renovation and maintenance of the house, correspondence regarding house tours, and materials related to the transition to Cranbrook staff leading house tours between 2013-2017.
Printed Materials series (1938-2013, boxes 15-23) contains announcements and flyers, booklets, catalogs, news clippings, periodicals, and ephemera predominantly related to Frank Lloyd Wright and Taliesin, but also covering other architects, artists, education, and performing arts. The ephemera includes postcards, some featuring Frank Lloyd Wright designs; and postage stamps featuring Frank Lloyd Wright.

The Guest Books series (1951-2017, boxes 23-24) holds five guest books which cover the entire life of the house from 1951 through 2017 when it was donated to Cranbrook.

The Photograph series (c.1950-2011, boxes 25-26) contains many photograph albums collected by the Smiths, as well as loose photographic materials which were found with the printed materials.


There are additional pamphlets and periodicals relating to art, architecture, and travel remaining in the collection located at the Smith House. Printed material that pertains directly to the Smith House or Frank Lloyd Wright and his work was removed from the house and made a part of this collection at the time of the house’s acquisition by Cranbrook in order to make these materials more readily available.

Additionally, a complete inventory of the books (many concerning Frank Lloyd Wright) and record albums within the Smith House library and collections is available from the Center for Collections and Research Registrar. These materials are available for use in the Archives Reading Room, by request.
Box Number--Description

SERIES I. Biographical

Box 1

**Subseries 1: Melvyn M. Smith**

1. Death Certificate, 1984
2. Ephemera, n.d.
4. Family – Legal, 1983
7. G.G. & W. Realty Co. – Legal, 1983
8. Graduate Education, 1948-1957
9. Kindergarten and Intermediate Schools, 1925, 1929
12. Memorials, 1984
13. Northern High School, Detroit, MI, 1932 (found in Viking Semi-Annual, 1932)
14. Province of Alberta Snapshot Contest, 1940-1941
17. US Army Service, Prayer Books, 1941

Box 2

1. US Army Service, Prayer Books, 1941-1942
2. Viking Semi-Annual, Northern High School, Detroit, MI, 1932
3. Viking Semi-Annual, Northern High School, Detroit, MI, 1934

**Subseries 2: Melvyn and Sara Smith**


Box 3

**Subseries 3: Robert N. Smith**

1. Memorial and Obituaries, 2003

Subseries 4: Sara E. Smith

4. Aunt Rose Ferber’s Book, 1959
6. Detroit Public Schools Certificate of Service, 1974
7. Greeting cards from family, n.d.
8. Greeting cards from friends, n.d.
10. Letters from friends, 1934-1994
11. Letters from parents, 1931, 1939
12. Memorial and Obituaries, 2005
14. Oral History Interview Transcript, 1984
17. Retirement, 1971, 1974

Box 4

SERIES II. Professional

Subseries 1: Cody High School

Sub Subseries A: Comet Yearbook
2. Guidelines – Columbia Scholastic Press Association, 1953-1959
5. Guidelines – National Scholastic Press Association, 1956
9. Guidelines – Quill and Scroll Society, Apr 1956
10. Guidelines – Quill and Scroll Society, Apr 1957

Box 5

3. Twenty Year Reunion, 1981

Sub Subseries B: Teaching
4. Administration and Memoranda, 1957-1960
5. Jewish Community Council of Metropolitan Detroit, 1953-1955
7. Letters from Students, n.d.

Subseries 2: Wayne State University
13. Alumni Board of Directors, 1974-1977
17. Betsey Welling Memorial Court, 1970-1977

Box 6
2. Betsey Welling Memorial Court, News Clippings, 1977
3. Ceremonial Mace, 1984
4. Community Arts Auditorium, 1984
5. Correspondence, 1969, 1975, 1983

SERIES III. Community Organizations

Subseries 1: Arts Council Triangle
11. Correspondence, 1975-1978
12. Events, Gallery 22, 1975
13. Events, Michigan Opera Theatre, 1974-1975
16. Membership, 1974-1975

Box 7

5. Newsletter - Action, 1976
6. Partner Organizations, n.d.
7. Planning and Review, 1974-1976

Subseries 2: General

9. Birmingham Temple, Dedication, 1971
11. City of Birmingham, Certificate of Appreciation, 1976
12. Detroit Concert Band, 1976
14. Frank Lloyd Wright Affleck House, 1983
18. Michigan Council for the Arts, 1974

Box 8

4. Oakland County Arts Council, 1970-1975
5. Oakland Youth Orchestra and Symphony, 1976, n.d.
6. Wayne State University, 1973-1986

Subseries 3: Theatre

7. Abe Lincoln Goes to School, n.d.
8. A Father’s Pride, n.d.
10. Another Cinderella, n.d.
12. Bud for President, n.d.
18. Diane’s Dream Date, n.d.
22. Fearless One, The, n.d.
23. Flowers for Mary, n.d.
27. Hassle in the Castle, n.d.

Box 9

1. Language Arts – Art Appreciation, n.d.
2. Language Arts – Composition, n.d.
10. Little Women, n.d.
11. Midnight Burial, n.d.
18. Our Own Four Walls, n.d.
22. Poetry, 1 of 2
23. Poetry, 2 of 2

Box 10

1. Princess from Norway, n.d.
2. Proud Princess, n.d.
5. Return of Christopher Columbus, n.d.
7. Secret Garden, n.d.
8. Sibling Switch, n.d.
10. Sophocles, n.d.
15. Ten Worst Things about a Man, n.d.
17. Thanksgiving – Mr. Snow White’s Thanksgiving, n.d.
22. Tom Sawyer, Pirate, n.d.

Box 11

2. Wanted: One Fair Damsel, n.d.
3. Wayne State University, 1973-1986
4. While Trolling Through the Park One Day, n.d.

SERIES IV. Frank Lloyd Wright Smith House

Subseries 1: Smith Residence

8. Appliances and Products, 1951, 1973
10. Construction - General Ledger, 1949

Box 12

1. Construction - Waiver of Liens, 1949
2. Correspondence, 1959-1986, 2004 [not inclusive]
4. Educational Studies – Burt Shurly, 1966
5. Educational Studies – Dr. Seymour Gold, 1983

Box 13

3. House Tours – Stories by Brookside School Children, 1982
4. Lake Development, Correspondence, 1978-1980
11. Taliesin Associated Architects, 1982-1984

Box 14

Subseries 2: Towbes Foundation

1. Albough Masonry Stone and Tile, 2010
4. Correspondence – Anne Towbes and Dorie Shwedel, 2006-2007
5. Correspondence – Cranbrook, 2003-2004
6. Correspondence – Cranbrook, 2012-2017
7. Distinctive Interiors, 2010
8. Duross Painting Company, 2010
9. Electrical, 2010
10. Farbman Group, 2008-2011
13. Huntington Construction Company – Correspondence, 2009-2011
15. Huntington Construction Company – Legal, 2009
17. Open House Event, May 2011

Box 15

1. Vendors - Landscaping, 2009-2010
2. Vendors – Miscellaneous, 2008
3. Young and Young Architects, 2008, 2010

SERIES V. Printed Materials


Box 16

3. Announcements and Flyers, Smith House Events, 2001-2013
4. Announcements and Flyers, Taliesin Associated Architects, 1953-1974
9. Catalogs, Auction, 1976

Box 17


Box 18

2. News clippings, Frank Lloyd Wright, 2001-2016
10. Periodicals, American Institute of Architects, Dec 1959
11. Periodicals, Architectural Digest, Nov. 1982

Box 19

2. Periodicals, Architectural Forum, Jan 1938 [RESTRICTED – FRAGILE]
3. Periodicals, Architectural Forum, Jan 1951
4. Periodicals, Architectural Forum, May 1953
5. Periodicals, Arizona Highways, Feb 1956
8. Periodicals, Art in America, Jul/Aug 1969
9. Periodicals, Arts in Society, 1975

Box 20

1. Periodicals, Detroit Home, 2012-2013
2. Periodicals, Flair Magazine, 1950-1951
9. Periodicals, Frank Lloyd Wright Update, Mar-Nov 1993
11. Periodicals, House and Home, Jun 1953
12. Periodicals, House Beautiful, 1946
13. Periodicals, House Beautiful, 1951

Box 21

1. Periodicals, House Beautiful, 1955
2. Periodicals, House Beautiful, 1956
3. Periodicals, House Beautiful, 1957
4. Periodicals, House Beautiful, 1959
5. Periodicals, House Beautiful, 1963
6. Periodicals, House Beautiful, 1967
8. Periodicals, Let’s See, 1962

Box 22

1. Periodicals, Prairie School Review, 1964
2. Periodicals, Prairie School Review, 1965
3. Periodicals, Prairie School Review, 1966
4. Periodicals, Prairie School Review, 1967
5. Periodicals, Prairie School Review, 1968
6. Periodicals, Prairie School Review, 1969
7. Periodicals, Prairie School Review, 1970
8. Periodicals, Prairie School Review, 1971
11. Periodicals, Prairie School Review, 1976
12. Periodicals, Preservation, Spring, 2017

Box 23

1. Periodicals, Science and Children, Nov 1969
2. Periodicals, Style, Fall/Winter 1994
4. Periodicals, Time Magazine, 1953
5. Periodicals, World Week, 1959
6. Periodicals, Wright Angles, 1979-1994
7. Periodicals, Wrightian, Oct 1989

SERIES VI. Guest Books


Box 24

2. Guest Book, 1987
SERIES VII. Photographic Materials

Box 25

24 Photograph Albums, n.d.

Box 26

1. 5 Photograph Albums, n.d.
2. Artwork, n.d.
5. Bob Roberts, 1979
6. Chrysler Corporation, 1959
12. Sara and Anne Smith, 1992
14. Viking Semi-Annual, 1932
15. Wayne State University, 1975
16. Wayne State University Jane Betsey Welling Memorial, 1977

SERIES VIII. Oversize

Box 27

Photographs

Box 28

1. Prints (3) of a Proposal for a Sculpture by John Chaffee with brochure, 1977
2. Holiday greeting from the Smiths on sheet metal
3. Landscape prints (12)
4. Paper triptych of Japanese designs (3) with envelope from Kunizo Sohara, Architect
5. Poster: Michigan Opera Theatre, Lugia di Lammermoor
9. Prints (6) from the National Gallery of Art
10. A Portrait of a Wedding, Observer Newspapers, 1973
11. A Scale Model of Pope Leigh House, 1975
13. Copy of Taliesin gazebo design
14. Coeur d’Alene Lake / National Bridges Monument
15. Scrapbook

Box 29

1. Gardens are for People, Thomas D. Church, 1955 [Signed and dedicated to the Smiths by Thomas Church, 1957]
2. Bloomfield Blossoms, Kay Smith, 1976

Box 30

1. Frank Lloyd Wright: An Autobiography (signed by Frank Lloyd Wright), 1943
2. In the Nature of Materials: The Buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright, by Henry Russell Hitchcock (Signed by Frank Lloyd Wright), 1942