

P-029

**Harry Frantz Rile Photographic Collection, 1880s-1940s**

Finding aid, collection arrangement, and metadata description by Barret Havens, MLIS, San Jose State University iSchool intern.

**Repository:**

Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County

**Span Dates:**

1880s-1940s

**Extent:**

1.5 linear feet

**Language:**

English

**Conditions Governing Use:**

Permission to publish, quote or reproduce must be secured from the repository and the copyright holder

**Conditions Governing Access:**

Research is by appointment only

**Preferred Citation:**

Harry Frantz Rile Photographic Collection, 1880s-1940s. Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County

**Related collections:**

Autry's Collection Online. The Autry National Center

California Missions, Towns, and Buildings: Pictorial material from the Aubrey Drury Papers. Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley

California Views and other Travel Photographs. Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley

Del Valle Collection, ca.1870s - 1900. Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County

Roy D. Graves Pictorial Collection, Subseries 8: Southern Pacific Railroad. Ca. 1862-1970. Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley

Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection. Los Angeles Public Library

Pacific Palisades Historical Society Collection. Santa Monica Public Library

Picture Catalog. California State Library

San Francisco Maritime Museum Classified Photograph Collection, 1575-1984. San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park

Santa Monica Public Library Image Archives. Santa Monica Public Library

### **Abstract:**

Rile was a professional photographer from Philadelphia who moved to Southern California during the mid to late 1880s. The P-029 collection comprises photographic prints and negatives depicting a variety of subjects set in and around Southern California, including buildings, landscapes, ocean views, and people at work and at leisure. Some of the images in the collection were likely to have been produced for sale at Rile's gallery, or, in the case of the portraits, directly to the subject(s). However, many of the images are of a personal nature, and provide a candid and detailed glimpse into the worlds of H.F. Rile, his family, and friends. There is evidence (see biographical note) that his wife Georgetta was also a skilled photographer, and a young woman likely to have been one of Rile's daughters is depicted holding a camera in a photo featured in this collection. In light of this, and the fact that some of the images in the collection are distinct from those attributable by signature to H.F. Rile in terms of technique and quality, it is possible that some of the unsigned photos were taken by members of the Rile family other than H.F. Rile.

### **Biographical Note:**

Harry Frantz "H.F." Rile was born in Philadelphia on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1860. He learned photography in his late teens and made his way west earning a living as a commercial photographer, taking jobs in Chicago, Kansas City, Portland, San Francisco, then Santa

Monica.<sup>1</sup> Biographical sources conflict as to the exact year when he arrived in Santa Monica, suggesting a range of dates between 1885 and 1888. Voter registration records list his place of residence as Santa Monica as of September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1888.<sup>2</sup> After settling in Santa Monica, he set up his “Pacific Photograph Gallery” in a tent on the beach, just north of where the Santa Monica Pier stands today.<sup>1</sup> Among other services, he offered “photos taken on the beach and in the surf,” as well as “views of picturesque Santa Monica, the Mammoth Wharf, the Old California Missions, Soldiers’ Home, Uncle Sam’s Navy, and Southern California...” (Series 1).

In 1889 Rile married Georgetta May Heimer of Galesburg, Illinois and the couple had two daughters: Maud Frances and Caroline Inez.<sup>4</sup> It is possible that Rile’s wife Georgetta shared his interest in photography, as an issue of *Pacific Coast Photographer* published in February of 1893 states that a Mrs. H.F. Rile, “one of the most expert of amateur photographers, has lately procured a number of beautiful views with her camera along the line of the Santa Fe Railroad near Needles.”<sup>3</sup> At least one image of a rail line and railroad bridge in that same area was produced that bears the statement of responsibility “H.F. Rile, Photo,” (Series 4) though its date of creation is unknown.

During his time in Santa Monica, Rile was a member of the Royal Arcanum and the Woodmen of the World.<sup>4</sup> His status as a citizen of Santa Monica, and that of his family, was prominent enough that *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Los Angeles Herald* often mentioned the Riles in its society pages. Brief updates detailing Rile’s photography projects and accomplishments, the travels of his family, and visits from out-of-town guests were among the activities reported by the papers between 1890 and 1902.<sup>5, 6, 7, 8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Callarman, B. D. (1993). *Photographers of nineteenth century Los Angeles County: A directory*. Los Angeles (p. 81): Hacienda Gateway Press.

<sup>2</sup> Ancestry.com. (2011). *California, Voter Registers, 1866-1898* (p. 346). Retrieved from <http://www.ancestry.com>

<sup>3</sup> Backus, M. (1893, February). News of the studios. *Pacific Coast photographer: Devoted to photography as an art*, (2)1, 288.

<sup>4</sup> Ingersoll, L. A. (1908). Harry Frantz Rile. In *Ingersoll's century history, Santa Monica Bay cities: Prefaced with a brief history of the state of California, a condensed history of Los Angeles County, 1542 to 1908: Supplemented with an encyclopedia of local biography and embellished with views of historic landmarks and portraits of representative people* (p. 443). Ingersoll's Century Series of California Local History Annals (Vol. 2). Los Angeles: Luther A. Ingersoll. Retrieved from <http://books.google.com>

<sup>5</sup> Santa Monica. (1894, December 2). *Los Angeles Times*, p. 11. Retrieved from Proquest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times database  
Text referring to Rile reads: “H.F. Rile is in Mojave, taking snap-shots at government wards in the Indian school there.”

Rile moved his business to 4 Ocean Front Walk in Ocean Park, a neighborhood close to the beach just south of the present location of the Santa Monica Pier.<sup>1</sup> In 1899 the family bought a home near the corner of Oregon Avenue (which would eventually become Santa Monica Blvd.) and 8<sup>th</sup> St. where the family lived until 1912.<sup>1</sup> Though it is not known why the family vacated the house in 1912, the Los Angeles Times reported that Rile's business sustained damage from the Ocean Park fire of early September of that same year.<sup>9</sup>

In 1916, Rile left Santa Monica to reside in Los Angeles, where it is known through census records that he owned a home at 1841 West Jefferson Avenue where he and Georgetta lived for many years.<sup>1, 10, 11</sup> At least one image (Series 4) that Rile produced bears the stamp "H.F. Rile Photographer 1893 W. Jefferson, Los Angeles, Cal.," and the 1916 Los Angeles City Directory lists the 1893 W. Jefferson Address after his occupation as photographer along with his home address, so for a time he may have had a studio close to his residence.<sup>12</sup> Though few details are known about his life during the period after he moved to Los Angeles, biographer Barbara Dye Callarman states that later in life, he was "increasingly afflicted with blindness."<sup>1</sup> Census records and the Los Angeles City Directory report him as having taken a variety of jobs in addition to

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<sup>6</sup> Santa Monica. (1894, April 12). *Los Angeles Times*, p. 9. Retrieved from Proquest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times database  
Text referring to the Riles reads: "H.F. Rile and wife are in San Francisco."

<sup>7</sup> Santa Monica. (1890, July 16). *Los Angeles Times*, p. 3. Retrieved from Proquest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times database  
Text referring to Rile reads: "H.F. Rile, who photographed our fire laddies on the Fourth, has them finished and on exhibition at his gallery. They make a fine group."

<sup>8</sup> Santa Monica. (1902, January 6). *Los Angeles Times*, p. 11. Retrieved from Proquest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times database  
Text referring to Georgetta Rile reads: "Mrs. George Barney of Williams, Ariz. was entertained Saturday by Mrs. H.F. Rile."

<sup>9</sup> Latest estimates of chief fire losses: Counting the cost. (1912, September 5). *Los Angeles Times*, pp. 1,11. Retrieved from Proquest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times database  
Text referring to Rile reads: "The following sustained losses ranging from \$50 to \$1500...H.F. Rile, photographer..."

<sup>10</sup> Ancestry.com. (2010). *1920 United States Federal Census* (p. 9451). Retrieved from <http://www.ancestry.com>

<sup>11</sup> Ancestry.com. (2012). *1940 United States Federal Census* (p. 11B). Retrieved from <http://www.ancestry.com>

<sup>12</sup> Los Angeles City Directory Company. (1916). *Los Angeles City Directory: 1916* (p. 1668). Los Angeles Directory Company Directory Publishers: Los Angeles.

photographer during the years he lived in Los Angeles including porter and night watchman at a department store.<sup>13, 14</sup> However, it is unknown whether he took jobs unrelated to photography for economic reasons or due to the fact that his deteriorating vision may have interfered with his ability to work as a photographer. As late as 1942, at which time he was in his early 80s, his occupation is listed as photographer in the Los Angeles City Directory as it was sporadically throughout his Los Angeles years.<sup>15</sup> The 1930 census indicates his status as a veteran, though little, if any, information about his possible military service is known.<sup>13</sup> Though some biographical sources report his date of death as October 26<sup>th</sup>, the California Death Index indicates that he died on October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1949.<sup>16</sup> His remains were interred in a tomb at the mausoleum at Angelus Rosedale Cemetery.<sup>17</sup>

Early in his career, Rile produced albumin prints from glass plate negatives, some of which were mounted on cards bearing elaborate advertisements for his gallery on the backs that include images and poems (Series 1). Sometime during the 1890s, when the process was gaining popularity, he began working with silver prints.<sup>1</sup> Though he documented the ways of life and the landscape of much of Southern California, the detailed body of work related to Santa Monica that he produced chronicles the growth of the city from "seaside resort to port city."<sup>18</sup>

### **Scope and Content:**

Rile was a professional photographer from Philadelphia who moved to Southern California during the mid to late 1880s. The items that form the P-029 collection at the Seaver Center for Western History Research comprise photographic prints, some of which are mounted on cards, glass negatives, and gelatin negatives. They depict a variety of subjects set in and around Southern California, including buildings, landscapes, ocean views, and people at work and at leisure. Some of the images in the

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<sup>13</sup> Ancestry.com. (2002). *1930 United States Federal Census* (p. 31B). Retrieved from <http://www.ancestry.com>

<sup>14</sup> Los Angeles City Directory Company. (1918). *Los Angeles City Directory: 1918* (p. 1659). Los Angeles Directory Company Directory Publishers: Los Angeles.

<sup>15</sup> Los Angeles City Directory Company. (1942). *Los Angeles City Directory: 1942* (p. 2018). Los Angeles Directory Company Directory Publishers: Los Angeles.

<sup>16</sup> Ancestry.com. (2000) *California Death Index, 1940-1997*. Retrieved from <http://www.ancestry.com>

<sup>17</sup> Ancestry.com. (2012). *U.S., Find A Grave Index, 1600s-Current*. Retrieved from <http://www.ancestry.com>

<sup>18</sup> Murphy, C. (1984, August). Souvenirs of Early Santa Monica. *Westways*, 76, 40-42.

collection were likely to have been produced for sale at Rile's gallery, or, in the case of the portraits, directly to the subject(s). However, many of the images are of a personal nature, and provide a candid and detailed glimpse into the worlds of H.F. Rile, his family, and friends. There is evidence (see biographical note) that his wife Georgetta was also a skilled photographer, and a young woman likely to have been one of Rile's daughters is depicted holding a camera in a photo featured in this collection. In light of this, and the fact that some of the images in the collection are distinct from those attributable by signature to H.F. Rile in terms of technique and quality, it is possible that some of the unsigned photos were taken by members of the Rile family other than H.F. Rile.

The collection consists of 152 unique images that span the period of circa 1880s through 1940s. The images depict a variety of subjects set in and around Southern California including professional portraits, buildings, landscapes, ocean views, and people at work and at leisure, including Rile's own friends and family. There is evidence (see biographical note) that his wife Georgetta was also a skilled photographer, and a young woman likely to have been one of Rile's daughters is depicted holding a camera in a photo featured in this collection. In light of this, and the fact that some of the images in the collection are distinct from those attributable by signature to H.F. Rile in terms of technique and quality, it is possible that some of the unsigned photos were taken by members of the Rile family other than H.F. Rile.

The 152 folders in the collection are arranged primarily by geography with photos of unidentified geographical origin coming at the end of the collection in series organized into "family" and "miscellaneous" categories. Most of the individual folders contain a single print or negative, but approximately one third of the folders house duplicate images in more than one format. For instance, a single folder may contain a negative and corresponding derivative print, more than one duplicate negative, or more than one photographic print of the same image. For the most part, the arrangement of the containers (5 boxes) reflects the order of the collection at the time of accession. However, for the purposes of enhancing navigation of the collection, it has been recategorized into the following seven series:

- Series 1: Santa Monica & Pacific Palisades
- Series 2: Topanga
- Series 3: Los Angeles & Los Angeles County
- Series 4: San Bernardino County
- Series 5: San Diego
- Series 6: Family
- Series 7: Miscellaneous

**Series 1: Santa Monica & Pacific Palisades (Box 1)**

This series contains 42 folders housing photographic prints and negatives depicting beaches, tourism, buildings, people, parks, and gardens of Santa Monica and Pacific Palisades. Many of the prints in this series are mounted on cards and bear advertisements for Rile's studio on the backs.

**Series 2: Topanga (Box 2)**

This series comprises 8 folders containing glass plate negatives depicting the terrain of, and around, Topanga Canyon. These images offer glimpses of roads, landforms, rustic buildings and human subjects.

**Series 3: Los Angeles & Los Angeles County (Boxes 1, 2, 3)**

This series includes images of various locations within Los Angeles County other than Santa Monica, Pacific Palisades and Topanga, which have their own series. Series 3 includes views of Pasadena, Griffith Park, Chatsworth, as well as the City of Los Angeles. Subjects depicted in those locations include buildings, parks, rock formations, gardens, trains, train tunnels, and rail yards. Image formats in this series are prints mounted on cards and glass negatives (along with derivative prints in some cases).

**Series 4: San Bernardino County (Box 1)**

Series 4 comprises 3 images taken in San Bernardino County depicting a garden, a palm-lined street, and a railroad bridge over the Colorado River. Two of the images are likely to have been misidentified as having been taken by Rile at the time of accession and may have been captured instead by Benjamin Franklin Conaway. All images in this series are card-mounted prints.

**Series 5: San Diego (Box 1)**

Series 5 consists of a single card-mounted print of the grounds and exterior of the Hotel del Coronado.

**Series 6: Family (Box 4)**

This 60 folder series includes negatives and prints depicting human subjects in a variety of contexts, some of whom are identifiable as members of Rile's immediate family, others whom are likely to be members of Rile's extended family, along with possible friends and acquaintances of the Riles. This "Family" series also contains some images of subjects whom are not readily identifiable as Rile family members. They have been included in this series for the sake of respect des fonds—to preserve the original order of these items as they were received at the time of accession. The contexts of the

images in this series include subjects pictured in portrait, at home, and outdoors in urban settings and in nature.

### **Series 7: Miscellaneous (Box 5)**

This series comprising 12 folders preserves the original grouping of these images at the time of accession. Many of these items were likely placed into the miscellaneous category because they do not fall easily into the geographical or family categories due to the fact that not enough was known about the subjects or terrain depicted in the images in order to assign them to another category. Some photos in the miscellaneous category that do depict recognizable subjects or locations have been kept in this grouping to preserve the original collection order at the time of accession. This series contains both negatives and prints.

### **Name Variants:**

Library of Congress Name Authority File: Rile, H. F., 1860-1949

Library of Congress Name Authority File Variant: Rile, Harry Frantz, 1860-1949

Rile, Harry F.

Rile, Henry

### **Indexing Terms:**

Automobiles.

Bathhouses.

Beaches.

Boats and boating.

Boulders.

Buildings.

Cactus.

Cameras.

Canyons.

Cats.

Chatsworth (Los Angeles, Calif.)

Children.

Christmas.

Courthouses.

Dogs.

Dwellings.

Families.

Flowers.

Forests & fields.

Formations (Geology).

Fourth of July.

Garden walks.



Gardens.  
Horse-drawn vehicles.  
Horses.  
Hotels.  
Infants.  
Jones, John P. (John Percival), 1829-1912.  
Landscape & garden.  
Los Angeles (Calif.)  
Los Angeles County (Calif.)  
Men.  
Mountains.  
National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers.  
Needles (Calif.)  
Ocean.  
Older people.  
Pacific Ocean.  
Pacific Palisades (Los Angeles, Calif.)  
Palms.  
Parks.  
Pasadena (Calif.)  
Pedestrians.  
Pets.  
Photographers.  
Photography.  
Piers.  
Picnics.  
Porches.  
Portraits.  
Post office buildings.  
Poultry.  
Rabbits.  
Railroad bridges.  
Railroad tunnels.  
Ranching.  
Recreation.  
Rile, H. F., 1860-1949.  
Rivers.  
Riverside (Calif.)  
Roads.  
Roses.  
San Bernardino (Calif.)  
San Diego (Calif.)  
Santa Monica (Calif.)  
Sidewalks.  
Stone walls.

Swimmers.  
Toll roads.  
Topanga (Calif.)  
Trails.  
Trains.  
Trees.  
Wagons.  
Windbreaks, shelterbelts, etc.  
Women.  
Young women.