



The New York Public Library
Billy Rose Theatre Division

Guide to the

Jitney Players records

1914-1977 [bulk 1920s]

*T-Mss 2014-122

Compiled by Valerie Wingfield, 2015

Summary

Creator: Jitney Players, 1923-1938

Title: Jitney Players records

Date: 1914-1977 [bulk 1920s]

Size: 1.5 linear feet (3 boxes, 4 volumes)

Source: Unknown.

Abstract: The Jitney Players were an American travelling theatre troupe founded in 1923 by Horace Bushnell Cheney (1899-1930) and his wife Alice Keating Cheney (1894-1981). The records, dated 1914 to 1977, mostly document the Jitney Players' theatrical performances through photographs, scrapbooks, clippings, correspondence and playbills.

Access: Some collections held by the Dance, Music, Recorded Sound, and Theatre Divisions at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts are held off-site and must be requested in advance. Please check the collection records in **the NYPL's online catalog** for detailed location information. For general guidance about requesting offsite materials, please consult:
<https://www.nypl.org/about/locations/lpa/requesting-archival-materials>

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Processing note: Compiled by Valerie Wingfield, 2015

Creator History

The Jitney Players were an American travelling theater troupe founded in 1923 by Horace Bushnell Cheney Jr. (1899-1930), and his wife Alice Brayley (Keating) Cheney (1894-1981). Horace B. Cheney (professionally known as Bushnell Cheney) was a Yale graduate, who recruited many of the original actors from the alumni of Harvard University.

Cheney may have been impressed by the fact that these actors attended Harvard's Workshop 47, a class that focused on all types of stage crafts. This would be especially important because the actors were expected to handle stage work behind the scenes.

The Jitney Players included among their performing artists Ethel Barrymore, Hume Cronyn, Shepperd Strudwick and Monty Woolley.

The word "jitney" was coined by a New York Times reporter in reference to the troupe's truck that opened up and converted into a stage. This troupe drove the truck around the United States, Mexico and Canada, with the exception of the West Coast. They feared that the truck would not be able to traverse the mountains.

The troupe usually performed one to three-act plays and, if the weather proved inclement, the local town hall served as the stage. In 1929, the troupe travelled to New York City, and performed the play *A Trip to Scarborough* at the Cherry Lane Theatre.

Bushnell Cheney served as the managing director from 1923 to 1930. He often performed with his wife in the theatrical productions. Upon his death, Alice Cheney assumed directorship until the company disbanded, in 1938.

Their headquarters was a building on the Cheney's property in Madison, Connecticut called "The Little Red House."

Alice Keating Cheney died in Connecticut in 1981.

Scope and Content Note

The Jitney Players records, dated 1914 to 1977 (bulk dates 1920s), document the troupe through clippings, letters, playbills, photographs and scrapbooks.

The clippings were brief announcements about the Jitney Players under the directorship of Bushnell Cheney. Some clippings are in-depth articles that discuss the actors, the history of traveling troupes, and how the truck opened up into a stage.

The letters were mostly written by aspiring actors to Alice Keating Cheney requesting the opportunity to become a member of the Jitney Players. Several of the correspondents already had stage experience and hoped to work in summer stock. Several letters have copies of typewritten responses.

The playbills publicize the plays and casts. These files include one of the earliest playbills issued by the company with a drawing of the jitney stage theatre. Later playbills have a more streamlined appearance.

The photograph files (including one volume of photographs) hold pictures of the Cheney's wedding, their family, friends, "The Little Red House," and theatrical productions. Some of the photographs are identified but have not been dated.

Alice (Keating) Cheney created three scrapbooks of clippings, ephemera, letters and photographs about the Jitney Players and the Cheney's.

The collection also includes a typewritten report about the Jitney Players by Ilsa Bloede, a former member of the troupe, entitled "But the Play Went On."

Arrangement: The collection is arranged by format.

Key Terms

Occupations

Actors (performing artists)
Directors (performing arts)

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Clippings
Correspondence
Photographs
Programs (documents)
Scrapbooks

Geographic Names

Madison (Conn.)

Subjects

Tent shows
Theatrical companies
Theatrical companies -- 20th century
Traveling theater

Names

Cheney, Alice Keating
Cheney, Horace Bushnell

Container List

- b. 1 f. 1-8 Clippings 1923-1930s, 1967
 - Correspondence
 - b. 1 f. 9 General Correspondence 1923-1977
- b. 1 f. 10-12 Job Applications 1929-1939
- b. 1 f. 13-14 Playbills 1923-1936
 - Photographs
 - b. 2 f. 1 *Alice in Wonderland* circa 1923
 - b. 2 f. 2 Barrett, Kay Louise undated
 - b. 2 f. 3 Benedict, Barbara circa 1923
 - b. 3 f. 1 *Bourgeois Gentleman of Moliere* undated
 - b. 3 f. 2 Buell, Frances (Keating) undated
 - b. 3 f. 3 *Caste* 1923
 - Cheney, Alice (Keating)
 - b. 3 f. 4-6 circa 1923-1930
 - b. 2 f. 6-8 1923-1929
 - b. 2 f. 4 Berlin 1914
 - b. 2 f. 5 Wedding 1923
 - Cheney, Bushnell
 - b. 2 f. 9-12 circa 1915-1923
 - b. 3 f. 7-9 1923
 - b. 2 f. 13 Crocker, Antoinette (Cheney) undated
 - b. 3 f. 10 Crowe, Lee undated
 - Jitney Players
 - b. 2 f. 14 circa 1923
 - b. 3 f. 11-12 1923-1928
 - b. 2 f. 15 Keating, Caryl undated
 - (The) Little Red House
 - b. 3 f. 13 Exterior
 - b. 2 f. 16-17 Interior and Exterior
 - b. 3 f. 14 *A Woman Keeps a Secret* undated
 - b. 3 f. 15 Unidentified Photographs undated
 - v. 1 1923-1929
- b. 1 f. 13-14 Playbills 1923-1936
 - Scrapbooks
 - v. 2 1919-1922
 - Red House
 - v. 3 1922
 - b. 1 f. 15 Untitled Poem undated
 - v. 4 Summer of 1923 1923

Assorted Materials

- b. 1 f. 16 Bloede, Ilsa. But the Play Went On 1930
- b. 1 f. 17 Cheney, Bushnell Obituary 1930
- b. 1 f. 18 Jitney Players Facts undated