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Coll. 463
Ernie (1919-1962) and Thomas Kovacs (1911-1988)
Family Collection
1880-2020 (bulk 1940s-1990s)

By Ellen R. Callahan
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Biography

Ernest “Ernie” Edward Kovacs (1919-1962) was a pioneering comedian, actor, writer, and television personality who became a favorite son of Trenton during his short life and long after his death. Ernie was born in Trenton on January 23, 1919, the son of Andrew J. Kovacs (1890-1967) and Mary Chebonick Kovacs (1896-1981). Andrew and his first wife, Helen Tomka (1893-1917), had three children between 1910 and Helen’s death from Tuberculosis in 1917, but only Thomas J. (1911-1988), Ernie’s much-loved half-brother, survived.

Ernie married Bette Lee Wilcox in 1945 and the couple had two children, Bette (b.1947) and Kip Raleigh (1949-2001). Ernie and Bette divorced in 1952 and after a protracted fight, Ernie won custody of his daughters. In 1955, Ernie married actress and comedienne Edie Adams who was his partner in television productions. The couple had a daughter Mia Susan Kovacs (1959-1982). Ernie and Edie were enjoying a successful career, living in Los Angeles, producing television specials when Ernie was killed in a one-car accident on January 13, 1962, just 10 days shy of his 43rd birthday. Pall bearers at his January 15th funeral included Hollywood stars such as Jack Lemmon, Frank Sinatra, and Dean Martin.

On January 14, 1962, the *New York Times* said of Kovacs: “He worked with equal ease and persistence in movies, theatre, radio, and writing. But he flowered on the nation’s television screens with his highly improbable and flammable humor, the kind that used the camera as a prop and could never be adequately described.”

Ernie’s older half-brother, Thomas J. Kovacs married Mabel M. Eggert (1917-1998) in 1936 and had one son, Thomas E. Kovacs. Tom spent his career as a civilian in management and

processing supply at McGuire Air Force Base, Burlington County, N.J. Tom and Mabel remained in the Trenton area their entire lives, eventually settling in Allentown, N.J. After Ernie's death, Mabel and Edie Adams continued to correspond and Edie, Mabel and Tom remained interested in the celebration of Ernie's legacy.

After Ernie died, Edie Adams won custody of her two step-daughters, raising them as well as Mia. Edie went on to marry Martin Mills in 1964, with whom she had a son, Joshua Mills. They divorced in 1971. She married Pete Candoli in 1972, but they divorced in 1988. Edie continued her career until her late 70's and died in 2008 at age 81. Edie was pre-deceased by her daughter Mia Kovacs, who was killed in a car crash in 1982, as well as her step-daughter Kippie Kovacs Lancaster who died in 2001.

Scope and Content

The original materials in this collection include correspondence, documents, photographs, memorabilia, books, videos, and films that were, for the most part, collected by Thomas and Mabel Kovacs. There are also newspaper clippings tracing Ernie's life and information about Trenton's celebration of his 75th birthday which took place in January 1994, as well as material collected by the Trentoniana Department for the 100th anniversary celebration in 2019. The most personal part of the collection, the letters that Ernie sent Thomas, Mabel and young Tommy, and postcards he sent to his father, demonstrate Ernie's deep love for his family as well as his quirky sense of humor. The newspaper clippings and other memorabilia document efforts over the years to keep Ernie Kovacs' comic legacy alive. It also includes mementoes of interest to Tom and Mabel Kovacs.

The collection consists of 3 boxes and 1 oversized folder.

Series Description

Series 1. Correspondence, 1943-1995

This series consists of three folders. One containing letters to Thomas, Mabel and Thomas, Jr., with the chief correspondent from ca. 1943 to 1960 being Ernie Kovacs. On January 14, 1962, Thomas and Mabel received a telegram explaining funeral arrangement for Ernie. After this, there are some letters from Edie Adams and Mia Kovacs as well as some from other friends of Tom and Mabel. Of note is an undated letter from Ernie to "Dearest Bud and Sis" where Ernie expresses his great love of Tom and Mabel, thanks them for a hat and then provides Tom with instructions on how to use his new camera. There is also a letter from the secretary of Jacqueline Kennedy to Mabel thanking her for her letter of sympathy at the death of President John F. Kennedy in November 1963.

The second folder consists of letters and postcards written by Ernie and Edie to his father Andrew in 1960 when they were traveling in Europe and Andrew was in California looking after

their daughters Bette and Kippie. Finally, there is a folder of empty envelopes addressed to Thomas and Mabel that could not be matched with any correspondence.

Series 2. Documents, 1910-1964 [with gaps]

This series includes Thomas and Mabel's 1936 marriage certificate and Tom's 1944 U.S. Army discharge papers. Also included are documents of Mabel's family, the Eggerts, including a booklet commemorating her parents' marriage, and a 1964 certificate signed by President Lydon B. Johnson honoring the memory of Mabel's brother George (1915-1964) for service in the Army during WWII. Finally, there are maps that provide the location of George's grave in the Beverly National Cemetery in Beverly, N.J.

Series 3. Photographs, ca. 1880s?-1960

This collection includes Kovacs family photographs, professional portraits of Ernie and Edie, and shots of Ernie working (including one at radio station WTTM in Trenton). Included in the Kovacs family pictures are four from the marriage ceremony and reception of Kippie Kovacs to William Lancaster, son of actor Burt Lancaster and Norma Anderson. For unknown reasons, someone has crossed out the Lancaster name and replaced it with Lawford, but this is incorrect. Finally, since not all the photographs are labeled or identifiable as being of the Kovacs family, it is possible that some of the very early photographs could be from the Eggert family.

Series 4. Memorabilia, 1927-2019

Included in this series are promotional flyers and cards regarding various Trenton tributes to Ernie (2012-2019), and theatre programs which document Edie Adams' career (1954-1966, 1991). Objects in this series are two cigar boxes with "Made Expressly for Ernie Kovacs" printed on the cover and two match books; one with a sketch of Ernie holding a cigar on one side and "Ernie Kovacs" in script on the other; the second with "Edie [heart] Marty" in silver print on the cover, probably dating from Edie and Martin Mills' 1964 wedding. There are also miscellaneous materials collected by Tom and Mabel including a 1927 booklet titled, "Lindbergh's Own Story of his New York - Paris Flight." Another item assumed to have been sent to Tom and Mabel is an invitation to the Inauguration of John F. Kennedy in January 1961.

Series 5. 75th Birthday Celebration, 1994

In January 1994, a week-long celebration of Ernie's birthday was held in Trenton. This series includes promotional material, news clippings and other documents related to the event. Of particular interest is a folder labeled "Kovacs on Paper" which has the script of a program of various readings from some of Ernie's writings that was performed as part of the festivities. Copies of some of the source material used, including some of his *Trentonian* newspaper columns and a series called "Strangely Believe It," written for *Mad Magazine* are included. The source material dates from the late 1940s to the late 1950s.

Series 6. Clippings and Magazine Article, ca. 1923-2020

This series contains five folders of newspaper and magazine clippings that date from 1923 (a copy of a newspaper picture of Ernie on a pony celebrating his 4th birthday) to 2020 (a tribute to Ernie published in *US1*). There is also a complete and partial copy of the April 15, 1957 issue of *Life* magazine with the cover story, “Ernie Kovacs, Inventive Comic.” The clippings follow Ernie’s rising career, tragic death and efforts made over the years to celebrate his legacy. They also document Edie Adams’ life after Ernie’s death and topics of interest to Tom and Mabel Kovacs. Included in Tom and Mabel’s folder is *The Holiday Bulletin*, December 1901 which is a Christmas holiday paper full of local Trenton advertisements.

Series 7. Miscellaneous

There are three folders of miscellaneous material including a short biography of Ernie, and lists of his films, shows, etc.; Issue 1 of a newsletter from the Ernie Kovacs and Edie Adams Fan Club, and membership cards [assumed to be reproductions] to one of Ernie’s gag creations, “The Early Eyeball, Fraternal and Marching Society.” Finally, there are two copies of *The Ernie Kovacs Zine* (2022) produced by the Trenton Free Public Library.

Series 8. Books

The collection includes three books, *Zoomar: A Sophisticated Novel About Love and TV*, written by Ernie in 1957; *Sing a Pretty Song: The “Offbeat” Life of Edie Adams, Including the Ernie Kovacs Years*; and *Nothing in Moderation: A Biography of Ernie Kovacs*. The Trenton Authors and Imprints Collection in the Trentoniana Department also contain another copy of *Sing a Pretty Song*, two copies of *Zoomar*, and *How to Talk at Gin*, written by Ernie in 1962.

Series 9. Audio / Visual Material

This series consist of VHS tapes of some of Ernie’s shows that were released in 1991 and a film copy of his movie “Go North to Alaska.”

Container List

Box / Folder / Folder Title

- 1 / 1 / Correspondence to Tom, Mabel and Tom, Jr., ca. 1943-1995
- 1 / 2 / Correspondence from Ernie Kovacs and Edie Adams to Andrew Kovacs, 1960
- 1 / 3 / Correspondence (empty envelopes)
- 1 / 4 / Documents - Marriage certificate of Thomas John Kovacs to Mabel Matilda Eggert, 9/25/1936; Thomas Kovacs’ U.S. Army discharge papers, 6/15/1944
- 1 / 5 / Documents - Eggert family, 1910, ca. 1918, 1964
- 1 / 6 / Photographs - Kovacs Family, undated (1880s?), 1940s-1960s
- 1 / 7 / Photographs - Ernie Kovacs and Edie Adams - Professional Portraits, ca. 1950s, 1960s
- 1 / 8 / Photographs - Ernie Kovacs at work, ca. 1940s, 1950s
- 1 / 9 / Photographs - Edie Adams marriage to Martin Mills, 1964
- 1 / 10 / Memorabilia - Thomas and Mabel Kovacs, 1927-1986

Container List (cont'd)

Box / Folder / Folder Title

- 1 / 11 / Memorabilia - Kovacs Production Company Stationery, ca. 1952-1953
- 1 / 12 / Memorabilia - Match Books, ca. 1960, 1964
- 1 / 13 / Memorabilia - Invitation to 1961 Inauguration of John F. Kennedy [assumed to have been sent to Thomas and Mabel Kovacs]
- 1 / 14 / Memorabilia - Edie Adams Theatre Programs, 1954-1966, 1991
- 1 / 15 / Memorabilia - Promotional flyers, cards, etc. regarding Trenton tributes to Ernie, undated, 2012, 2018-2019
- 2 / Memorabilia - (2) Cigar boxes (8-1/2" x 6-1/2" x 2-3/4") with "Made Expressly for Ernie Kovac" stamped on top and inside cover; one box has closing clasp
- 1 / 16 / 75th Birthday Celebration - Printed Program and Promotional Material, 1994
- OS 1 75th Birthday Celebration - Poster (11 x 17") – "Nothing in Moderation! Ernie Kovacs' 75th Birthday Celebration" sponsored by Trenton Museum Society and The City of Trenton, January 17-23, 1994 - proceeds to benefit the Ernie Kovacs Educational and Scholarship Fund for Trenton High School students. Poster (11 x 17"), hand-colored and mounted on board (same as above) - colored by R. McKim.
- 1 / 17 / 75th Birthday Celebration - miscellaneous material including a proposal by Kate Esposito for funding the celebration, ca. 1993-1994
- 1 / 18 / 75th Birthday Celebration - "Kovacs on Paper" - Scripts and copies of source material, 1994 (source material dates ca. 1940s-1960s)
- 1 / 19 / 75th Birthday Celebration - Newspaper Clippings, 1994
- 1 / 20 / Clippings - Ernie Kovacs, 1923-1924, 1934, 1951-1961
- 1 / 21 / Clippings - *Life*, 15 April 1957 - Cover story, "Ernie Kovacs, Inventive Comic" [includes cover and Kovacs article only]
- 3 / 1 / Clippings - *Life*, 15 April 1957 - Cover story, "Ernie Kovacs, Inventive Comic" [entire issue of the magazine]
- 1 / 22 / Clippings - Ernie Kovacs, January - February 1962 [coverage of his death, funeral, and legacy]
- 2 / 1 / Clippings - Ernie Kovacs, 1968, 1970s
- 2 / 2 / Clippings - Ernie Kovacs, 1980s
- 2 / 3 / Clippings - Ernie Kovacs, 1990s, 2011, 2020 [see also Box 1, Folder 19 for 1994 clippings of Trenton's 75th Birthday Celebration]
- 2 / 4 / Clippings - Thomas and Mabel Kovacs, 1901, 1950s-1990s
- 2 / 5 / Clippings - Edie Adams, 1960s-1991
- 2 / 6 / Miscellaneous - Ernie Kovacs & Edie Adams Fan Club Newsletter, Issue #1, Summer 1998, Fan Club Post Card, ca. 1998
- 2 / 7 / Miscellaneous - Short biography of Ernie and lists of his films, shows, etc. used as an exhibit in 2019; *The Ernie Kovacs Zine*, 2022 (2 copies)

Container List (cont'd)

Box / Folder / Folder Title

2 / 8 / Miscellaneous - Membership cards [assumed to be reproductions] to one of Ernie's gag creations, "The Early Eyeball, Fraternal and Marching Society."

3 Books:

Edie Adams & Robert Windeler. *Sing a Pretty Song: The "Offbeat" Life of Edie Adams, Including the Ernie Kovacs Years*. N.Y.: William Morrow & Co., 1990

Ernie Kovacs. *Zoomar: A Sophisticated Novel About Love and TV*. N.Y. Doubleday, 1957

David G. Walley. *Nothing in Moderation: A Biography of Ernie Kovacs*. N.Y.: Drake Publishers, 1975

3 Audio Visual Material:

Ernie Kovacs: A Collection of Sketches from the Hit T.V. Series. Burbank Video, 1991 [label on case: Mabel Kovacs, Allentown, N.J.]

The Best of Ernie Kovacs. White Star, 1991. 5 volume set

"Go North to Alaska," Kodachrome, October 1960. Film, 8mm, 25 feet - [written on box: Uncle Ernie, 20th Century Fox]

Provenance

Much of the original materials (letters, memorabilia, photographs) were donated to the Trentoniana Department by Ted Russell, whose mother Marie Russell, was Mabel's first cousin (Accession # 2017.31). Many of the clippings have been gathered over the years by Trenton Free Public Library staff and previously placed in a subject file (vertical file).

Bibliography

"Ernie Kovacs Killed in Coast Car Crash." *The New York Times*, January 14, 1962, p. 1.

"Many Stars Attend Funeral for Kovacs." *The New York Times*, January 16, 1962, p. 33.

Related Material at Other Institutions

Ernie Kovacs Papers, Collection 1105, University of California at Los Angeles Library Special Collections

Ernie Kovacs Archives, National Comedy Center, Jamestown, N.Y.