

∞ The Ward M. Canaday Center ∞
for Special Collections
The University of Toledo

Finding Aid

➤ Etheridge Knight Papers, 1964-1995 ◀

MSS-016

Size: 4.5 linear feet

Provenance:

The University of Toledo Libraries purchased these papers from Etheridge Knight in 1978 and subsequent purchases have been made since that time from both Mr. Knight and Mary McAnally. Dr. Melba J. Boyd of Wayne State University donated a Dudley Randall videotape in 1996.

Access: open

Collection Summary: The Knight papers consist primarily of correspondence with family, fellow writers and publishers, audio-visual materials, photographs, typescripts and proofs of works, and writings by prisoners. Subjects include prison life, "toasts" (long narrative poems) and the African-American experience. The majority of the correspondence comes from Knight's second wife, Mary McAnally. Includes correspondence from Sonia Sanchez, Robert Bly, Dudley Randall, Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, Donald Hall, Don Lee, Herbert W. Martin, Judith Minty, and Noel Stock.

Subjects: [African-Americans](#), [Crime & Criminals](#) and [Literature](#)

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Completed By: Barbara A. Shirk, November 1987. Sara Wise, February 2004. Item-level inventory completed by David Hartwig, December 2009; last updated: June 2014

Biographical Sketch

Etheridge Knight was born in Corinth, Mississippi on April 19, 1931. He was the son of Etheridge "BuShie" and Belzora Cozart Knight. His early childhood was spent in Mississippi but when his father got a job as a worker on the Kentucky Dam, his mother, four sisters and two brothers moved to Paducah, Kentucky. Although a good student, Knight dropped out of school after the eighth grade, and spent his teenage years, among other things, learning various "toasts" (long narrative poems in rhyming couplets) from men in the streets, juke joints, poolrooms, and bars. He was physically abused by his father and had run away from home many times, but by the age of 16, he left home for good. He faked his age at 17 to join the army in 1947 and served until 1951. While in Korea, he saw active duty as a medical technician but suffered a "psyche/wound" from shrapnel and developed a morphine addiction. That addiction would lead to further drug addictions as well as problems with alcohol and the law throughout the following decades. While he was in the service, his family had moved to Indianapolis, Indiana.

He re-enlisted in the army in June of 1960, but in that same year was convicted of armed robbery in Indianapolis. He was sentenced to a 20-30 year prison term and spent over 6 years at Pendleton Indiana Reformatory, Indiana State Prison. While in prison, he refined his toast-telling skills and studied poetry as well. By 1963, he was writing poetry and submitting it for publication. His first published poem "To Dinah Washington", prompted praise from the poet Gwendolyn Brooks and also initiated contact with other significant figures of the Black Arts movement including Sonia Sanchez, who would eventually become his wife. His first book, *Poems From Prison*, was published by Broadside Press in 1968 while Knight was still in prison. Almost immediately upon being released on parole in 1968, his second book, *Black Voices From Prison*. (*Voci Negre Dal Carcere*) was published in Italy. In 1970 the book was released in English by Pathfinder Press. It was a compilation of Knight's poetry and prose as well the work of other inmates.

Mr. Knight worked in a factory in Indianapolis as a punch press operator during the five months of his parole and then moved on to take the position of Poet-in-Residence at the University of Pittsburgh. The following years were plagued with marital difficulties and substance abuse. Throughout the next decades Mr. Knight would be in and out of numerous alcohol and drug treatments centers for years and arrested on various charges of theft, writing bad checks, driving while intoxicated, etc. In commenting on the struggles that he faced throughout those years, Mr. Knight is quoted as saying, "I died from a shrapnel wound and narcotics resurrected me. I died in 1960 from a prison sentence and poetry brought me back to life."

In 1969, he married Sonia Sanchez, and from 1969-1970 served as poetry editor for *Motive* magazine, located in Nashville, Tennessee. In 1970, he took the position of Poet-in-Residence at the University of Hartford, Hartford, Connecticut but also was divorced from Ms. Sanchez. In the summer of that year, he was introduced to Mary Ellen

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McAnally who would eventually become his second wife. From 1971-1972 he was co-editor for *Black Box* in Washington, D.C.

In 1972-1973, he was Poet-in-Residence at Lincoln University, Jefferson City, Missouri. In 1972 he was the recipient of a \$5,000 National Endowment for the Arts Award; and in 1973, his book of poetry entitled, *Belly Song and Other Poems* was published by Broadside Press. The book was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. That same year, he was named director of the "Self Development Through the Arts" project for Indianapolis.

In 1974, he received a \$12,000 Guggenheim Fellowship Award and married Mary Ellen McAnally who, the year before, had adopted Mary Tandiwe and Etheridge Bambata. Their tumultuous marriage was marked by periods of separation, and after problems with money and care of the children proved to be irreconcilable, they divorced in 1977. From 1977-1982 there were common-law marriages to Charlene Blackburn, Evelyn Brown, and Elizabeth McKim. Charlene Blackburn gave him a son, Isaac BuShie Blackburn-Knight, in 1978.

Throughout his later years, Mr. Knight continued to be occupied with poetry readings at various colleges and universities throughout the country as well as organizing and participating in various festivals, seminars and workshops. In 1980, Houghton Mifflin published Mr. Knight's book, *Born of a Woman: New and Selected Poems*, and in 1985, he received the Shelley Memorial Award by the Poetry Society of America in recognition of distinguished achievement in poetry.

Mr. Knight was seriously injured by a hit and run driver in Philadelphia in November of 1988. He was treated at the veterans hospital in Indianapolis and not long after he was diagnosed with lung cancer. On March 10, 1991, at the age of 59, he died in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Mr. Knight's poems and short stories have appeared in numerous publications, some of which include:

(Anthologies) *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, *Giant Talk*, *A Comprehensive Survey of Black Writers of America*, *Dices and Black Bones*, *Modern Black Poets*, *The Essential Etheridge*, *The Light From Another Country: Poetry from American Prisons*, *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist*, and *Mississippi Writers: Reflections of Childhood and Youth*, *Poetry of Prison: Poems by Black Prisoners*, *Deep Rivers: A Portfolio of 20 Contemporary Black Writers*.

(Periodicals) *The American Poetry Review*, *The Free Lance*, *Black World*, *Nimrod*, *Black American Literature Forum*, *Black American Literature Poetry*, *Journal of Black Poetry*, *New Letters*, and *New Canadian-American Poetry*.

Scope and Content Note

The Etheridge Knight Papers document the substantial correspondence and writings of Mr. Knight dating from his prison years until his death. The collection is divided into six series which have been arranged and titled by subject.

An item-level inventory of the collection was completed by UT student David Hartwig in December 2009. This inventory notes the type of document, date, correspondent, and subject matter for each item in the collection. Included are both a spread sheet and a narrative inventory. Researchers interested in accessing this inventory should contact the Canaday Center staff.

(S.1) Correspondence is comprised of letters, cards, and various business or official statements sent to Mr. Knight. Also included is correspondence from Mr. Knight, especially with his second wife Mary McAnally. Other items of interest in this series are the correspondences with other poets and writers such as Sonia Sanchez, Robert Bly, Dudley Randall (Broadside Press), Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, Donald Hall, Don Lee, Herbert W. Martin, Judith Minty, and Noel Stock. The correspondence is arranged alphabetically by last name (if given), as are the individual folders within the series.

(S.2) Writings consist of drafts, proofs, and collections of Mr. Knight's poetry and manuscripts. It also includes galley proofs and typescripts for Mr. Knight's major publications *Born of a Woman* and *Belly Songs and Other Poems*. The series also contains Other's writings, again including the writings of Ms. McAnally.

(S.3) Photographs contains images of Mr. Knight, of friends and family, as well as negatives.

(S.4) Publications consists of various poetry periodicals and magazines arranged chronologically. Also included are publications of prisoners' writings.

(S.5) Ephemera consists of various materials relating to Mr. Knight's writing and professional activities. Among other things included are Mr. Knight's address book, applications, awards, program fliers, newspaper clippings and reviews. The series is arranged alphabetically by subject.

(S.6) Audio-Visual consists of reel-to-reel tapes, cassettes, and videotapes of Mr. Knight's poetry readings, interviews, and other recorded events.

Folder List

Box	Folder	Arrangement
		S. 1 Correspondence
1	1	A
1	2	American Poetry Review, (1973-1977)
1	3	B
1	4	Blackburn, Charlene, (1977-1980)
1	5	Bly, Robert, (1972-1977)
1	6	Broadside Press, (1966-1972)
1	7	Broadside Press, (1973-1975)
1	8	Brooks, Gwendolyn, (1965-1972)
1	9	C
1	10	D
1	11	E
1	12	F
1	13	G
1	14	Giovanni, Nikki, (1975-1976)
1	15	H
1	16	Hall, Donald, (1969-1978)
1	17	Houghton-Mifflin Co., (1972-1982)
1	18	I
1	19	J
1	20	K
1	21	Knight, Bennett Clyneese, (1966-1969)
1	22	Knight, Charles, (1965-1975)
1	23	Knight, Floydell, (1965-1968)
1	24	Knight, Janice, (1964-1968)
1	25	Knight, Kazuko, (1965-1968)
1	26	Knight, Lois I. (Honey), (1965-1982)
1	27	L
1	28	Lee, Don, (1968)
1	29	Lotus Press, (1979)
1	30	M
1	31	Martin, Herbert Woodward, (1972-1973)
1	32	Mayfield, Julian
1	33	Mbembe (Milton Smith), (1976)
1	34	McAnally, Bombata and Tandiwe, (1977-1984)
1	35	McAnally, Mary, (1970-1977)
1	36	McAnally, Mary, (1978-1980)
1	37	McAnally, Mary, (1981-1982)
2	1	McAnally, Mary, (1983-1984)

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2	2	McAnally, Mary, (1985)
2	3	McAnally, Mary, (1986-1990)
2	4	McAnally, Mary, (n.d.)
2	5	Merit Publishers, (1968-1969)
2	6	Minty, Judith, (1975-1980)
2	7	Miscellaneous
2	8	Motive Magazine, (1971)
2	9	N
2	10	O
2	11	P
2	12	Pathfinder Press, Inc., (1972-1979)
2	13	Q
2	14	R
2	15	Ray, David, (1972-1983)
2	16	S (1 of 2)
2	17	S (2 of 2)
2	18	Sanchez, Sonia, (1966-1978)
2	19	Stern, Gerald, (1977)
2	20	Stock Noel, (1975-1978)
2	21	T
2	22	Taylor, Mrs. Belzora Knight, (1965-1966)
2	23	Taylor, Mrs. Belzora Knight, (1967-1968)
2	24	Taylor, Mrs. Belzora Knight, (1970-1982)
2	25	U
2	26	V
2	27	W
2	28	Y
2	29	Z
2	30	With Prisoners
2	31	First names only (1 of 2)
2	32	First names only (2 of 2)
2	33	Incomplete/Unsigned (1968-1981)
		S. 2 Writings
3	1	Poetry, Born of a Woman, Typescript
3	2	Poetry, Born of a Woman, Galley Proof
3	3	Poetry, Belly Songs and Other Poems, Galley Proof
3	4	Poetry, Miscellaneous, 1 of 4
3	5	Poetry, Miscellaneous, 2 of 4
3	6	Poetry, Miscellaneous, 3 of 4
3	7	Poetry, Miscellaneous, 4 of 4
3	8	Poetry, Mary McAnally
3	9	Poetry, Sonia Sanchez
3	10	Poetry, by Others to EK (1 of 2)

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3	11	Poetry, by Others to EK (2 of 2)
3	12	Poetry and Writings by Prisoners
3	13	Writings
3	14	Writings, Mary McAnally
3	15	Writings, Mary McAnally's mother, M. Ruble
3	16	Writings, by others
		S.3 Photographs
3	17	Photographs, EK
3	18	Photographs, people
3	19	Photographs, place
3	20	Photographs, negatives
		S.4 Publications
3	21	Publications, 1965-1966
3	22	Publications, 1970-1972
2	23	Publications, 1973-1976
3	24	Publications, 1979
3	25	Publications, by prisoners (1 of 2)
3	26	Publications, by prisoners (2 of 2)
		S.5 Ephemera
3	27	Address Book
3	28	Applications and Awards
3	29	Clippings, (1966-1991)
5	1	Clippings, (1969-1990, n.d.)
3	30	Clippings, (Obituaries/Memorials)
3	31	Contracts and Agreements
3	32	Exhibit Cards
3	33	Fliers and Programs, (1968-1992) (1 of 3)
5	2	Fliers and Programs, (1968-1991, n.d.) (2 of 3)
4	1	Fliers and Programs, n.d. (3 of 3)
4	2	Invoices, Statements, Misc. (1975-1977)
4	3	Licenses and Wills
4	4	Newsletters, (1972-1991)
5	3	Periodicals, (1971-1974)
5	4	Periodicals, (1975)
5	5	Periodicals, (1976-1991, n.d.)
4	5	Posters
OS*		Poster, M. McAnally and EK poetry reading
4	6	Reviews, (1986-1981)
4	7	Miscellaneous
OS^		Miscellaneous oversize material

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S.6 Audio-Visual		
4	8	Reel to Reel Tapes, (Reading at San Jose State University)
4	9	Reel to Reel Tapes, (2 nd Annual Conference on the Great Mother)
4	10	Reel to Reel Tapes, (Poetry Reading)
4	11	Cassettes, (Black Box Recording of Five Poems)
4	12	Cassettes, (EK at Westboro, MA Public Library)
4	13	Cassettes, (Conversation in Poolroom in Binghamton)
4	14	Cassettes, (Funeral of Mag. Richardson, Poetry Workshop)
4	15	Cassettes, (EK Interviewed by Jeb Carter, Poetry)
4	16	Videocassettes, Interview at Muskegon College
4	17	Videocassettes, Interview with EK in bar
4	18	Videocassettes, Unknown, (1970s)
4	18	Videocassettes, The Black Unicorn: Dudley Randall and the Broadside Press

OS^ Located in manuscripts oversize drawer 1
Box 5 located on range 66