

MSS. Collection #255

Thelma L. O'Brien Papers, ca. 1930-1957. ½ box (15 folders), 54 items.

NOTE: The numbers cited in parentheses, e.g. 1:5, refer the researcher to the Series#:Folder# in which that name/topic will be found.

INTRODUCTION

This collection consists of materials relating to the life and work of Thelma L. O'Brien, an employee of Cone Mills' Print Works plant who worked to encourage unionization there. The most notable items in the collection are three copies of a script for a radio address she gave in that effort, five years of contracts between the Textile Workers Union of America and Cone Mills, and several letters that provide examples of the mill pushing back against the union. Researchers interested in Cone Mills, local unionization efforts, or the perspective of an average mill worker who supported the union may find this collection useful.

Arrangement: This collection is organized in four series and arranged within series by document type or subject. The series are: **Correspondence**, 1947-1952; **Financial**, 1941-1957; **Miscellaneous**, ca. 1930-1944; and **Printed Material**, 1943-1952.

Provenance: This collection was donated by Katherine Rowe in August 2022 and assigned the accession number 2022.17.1.

Processing: This collection was organized by Archivist Elise Allison and the finding aid was prepared by intern Amanda McBryde in January 2023.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Thelma L. O'Brien (1915-2007) was born in Danville, Virginia, to Mary Newman and Thomas Marshall O'Brien, and her family moved to Greensboro around 1927 when her father became a mill hand for Cone Mills at Proximity Print Works. She herself worked at Print Works from about 1934 until it closed in 1977, marrying fellow Cone Mills employee Joseph Keaton on December 26, 1956. Print Works was the first textile printery in the South, opening in 1913 and illustrating the diversification of the Southern textile industry during that time period. Thelma O'Brien served as part of the negotiating committee that worked with the Textile Workers Union of America to ensure better working conditions for her fellow employees. After her death in 2007, she was buried in Lemont Cemetery in Danville.

Biographical Sources: The biographical information was acquired from materials in the collection, the Guilford County Register of Deeds database, the Greensboro city directories, an article titled "Mill Employees Get Pay Boost" (*The Greensboro Record*, February 11, 1946),

Thelma O'Brien's obituary (*News & Record*, October 19, 2007), and the [motion of recommendation](#) to designate the Print Works plant as a Guilford County Historic Landmark.

SCOPE & CONTENT NOTE

The types of materials in this collection include correspondence, financial documents, radio scripts, a school assignment, and assorted printed materials. These items predominantly relate to Thelma O'Brien's work at Proximity Print Works and efforts to organize a union at that plant. Of particular interest are three copies of a script for a radio broadcast she made to encourage her fellow employees to see the importance of unions, five years of contracts between the Textile Workers Union of America and Cone Mills, a sheet of rules for a picket line, and a strike card. Also of note are several letters from mill personnel to the local union leader addressing worker affairs and grievances. Researchers interested in Cone Mills or unionization efforts in the textile industry may find this collection useful.

SERIES DESCRIPTIONS

1. Correspondence. 3 folders (5 items). 1947-1952.

This series contains a letter from Sydney M. Cone Jr. to the workers at Print Works informing them of an upcoming union election and explaining why they should vote against joining a union (1:1). A letter from Print Works employee M.J. Gardner to Clarence Thore, president of the local union, discusses a worker's complaint that his job had been performed by another worker while he was laid off (1:2). This would have violated the mill's contract with the union, and Gardner argues that this is not the case. Also included in the series are three letters from Print Works Superintendent W.L. Thornburg to Clarence Thore regarding grievances submitted by members of the union, a position change for an employee, and the discontinuation of third shift on the finishing machines (1:3).

2. Financial. 4 folders (31 items). 1941-1957.

Included in this series are some of Thelma O'Brien's paystubs from Print Works (2:3), her tax returns and withholding statements from 1949 (2:4), an advance payment receipt for a Hospital and Surgical Insurance Policy premium (2:2), and a subscriber's receipt card for the *Greensboro Daily News* (2:1).

3. Miscellaneous. 2 folders (5 items). ca. 1930-1944.

This series contains [three copies of a script from a WBIG Radio broadcast given by Thelma O'Brien on the importance of organizing a union \(3:1\)](#). Also included is an autobiographical school assignment by Red Caviness, who attended Bessemer High School, from which Thelma O'Brien graduated (3:2).

4. Printed Material. 6 folders (13 items). 1943-1952.

The printed material pertains primarily to Proximity Print Works and the Textile Workers Union of America (T.W.U.A.). Items relating to Thelma O'Brien's involvement with the union include instructions from the National Labor Relations Board for helping with union elections (4:4), contracts between Print Works and the T.W.U.A. for 1944-1948 (4:2-3), a sheet of rules for a picket line, a strike card, and a booklet of T.W.U.A. songs (4:5). The contracts detail the agreed upon working conditions for employees as well as the policies for dealing with a violation of those conditions. Also of interest in this series are an employee handbook and an insurance booklet for Cone Mills employees, a leave of absence request completed by Thelma O'Brien for a month off under doctor's orders (4:1), and her war ration book from 1943 (4:6).

FOLDER LISTING

<u>Series</u>	<u>Folder</u>	<u>Contents</u>	
1	1	Correspondence	-- Cone, Sydney M. Jr. to Print Works employees (1952)
	2	"	-- Gardner, M.J. to Clarence Thore (1947)
	3	"	-- Thornburg, W.L. to Clarence Thore (1948)
2	1	Financial	-- <i>Greensboro Daily News</i> subscriber's receipt card (1957)
	2	"	-- Hospital insurance (1952)
	3	"	-- Paystubs (1941-1952)
	4	"	-- Tax return and withholding statements (1949)
3	1	Miscellaneous	-- Radio scripts (1944)
	2	"	-- School assignment (Red Caviness, ca. 1930)
4	1	Printed Material	-- Cone Mills Corporation (1946-1952)
	2	"	-- Contracts (between Print Works and T.W.U.A.; 1944-1945)
	3	"	-- Contracts (between Print Works and T.W.U.A.; 1946-1948)
	4	"	-- National Labor Relations Board (1948)
	5	"	-- Textile Workers Union of America (ca. 1950)
	6	"	-- War ration book (1943)