

AN EXTRAORDINARY LIFE REMEMBERED: THE LILLIE MAE KING (RANSOM) FAMILY COLLECTION

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In 1998, a single banker's box of photographs and ephemera was donated to the History Center at the San Francisco Public Library from Leland House – a homeless shelter run by the Catholic Charities of San Francisco. The box contains the remnants of the life of Lillie Mae King, a single mother who raised four sons in the Fillmore district in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Lillie Mae worked as a nurse, an apartment manager, and was treasurer of the Western Addition Community Organization (WACO), which successfully sued the City of San Francisco's Redevelopment Agency to stop the displacement of Fillmore residents as the area underwent aggressive redevelopment. The box includes Lillie Mae's communications, rosters of WACO members, pamphlets about relocation, community organizing materials, tax documents, meeting minutes, zoning study plans, and the organizational ledger.

The most recent document in the collection is a letter addressed to Lawrence Ransom, Lillie Mae's youngest son, from the San Francisco Board of Supervisors informing him that they had adjourned their scheduled meeting in respect of Lillie Mae's memory. The letter was dated March 19, 1986 – Lillie Mae King had died of a heart attack, a week earlier, at the age of 66. Lawrence died 12 years later at Leland House, a shelter for the chronically homeless, who then donated his jumbled box of belongings to the library. The irony that Lillie Mae's youngest son died in a homeless shelter was not lost on me. The possibility that the history of Lillie Mae King—and everything that she stood for—may have faded out of memory in that shelter, too, horrified me. In many ways Lillie Mae King stands for all the ordinary, yet extraordinary, community members who organized themselves against the postwar rush towards redevelopment in American cities during the latter half of the twentieth century.

The following is a small sampling of images, which can be found in the Lillie Mae King (Ransom) Family Collection of Photographs and Papers, (SFP 92), San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library. The authors and dates of these photographs are unknown. Many thanks to Christina Moretta, San Francisco History Center Photo Curator, for the opportunity to process this collection and the encouragement to bring it into public discourse. The finding aid is here: http://pdf.oac.cdlib.org/pdf/csf/sfpl/SFP_92_ead.pdf



Lillie Mae King as a young woman



Lillie Mae King and Jesse Ransom, Sr.

Born in Texas in 1920, Lillie Mae King joined the Great Migration of African Americans – who traveled from the south to California – as a young girl. She graduated from San Francisco’s Girl’s High School in 1937 and met a sailor named Jesse Ransom, who appears in snapshots and on birth certificates, but seems to have disappeared from the family before Lawrence’s birth.



Lillie Mae King and sons

Lillie Mae King was a diligent conservator of her children's histories. As the processing archivist, I read through their birth and baptism certificates, well- baby books, report cards, folders stuffed with newspaper clippings in which they appear winning spelling bees, scoring touchdowns and breaking records at track and field events. Class pictures, diplomas, prom photos, and certificates of completion of various vocational training programs pepper the collection.



Lillie Mae's youngest son, Lawrence, front center



*Boy Scouts in the Fillmore. Jesse Ransom, Jr. far right.
Possibly Leonard and Christopher Ransom, middle*



Selection of news clippings featuring Chris Ransom, Lillie Mae King's third son, 1960s.



Lillie Mae King became a registered nurse, received a certificate in apartment management, and became the treasurer of WACO – an umbrella organization which represented 52 organizations, businesses, and churches threatened by redevelopment in the Fillmore in the 1960s.

1968 Expenditures			1968 Cash Credits		
		Dr.			Cr.
July 16	Brought Forward	12.18 00	July 16	Brought Forward	075 68
16	Mary V. Hall (Salary)	261 30	" 16	Cash	30 00
19	Mary V. Hall (Donations)	200 00	" 16	Kennedy Action Corps (membership)	5 00
Aug 1	Mary V. Hall (Salary)	261 30	" 16	Howard Pres. Church (dues)	5 00
" 1	Cesar Chavez (donations)	163 95	" 16	Howard " " (donations)	100 00
" 1	Kenneth Brown (")	239 40	" 16	Howard " " (")	5 00
" 1	Budget Funnels (")	87 50	" 16	1st Unitarian Society, S.F.	60 00
" 1	Mary V. Hall (Office Expense)	260 00	Aug 5	Cash (dues)	24 00
" 1	John Board (Office Expense)	337 60	" 5	W. Montgomery (")	15 00
" 1	Ray W. Dyer (")	10 00	" 5	W. W. W. (")	21 00
" 1	Cesar Chavez (donations)	100 00	" 5	Episcopal Church (donations)	100 00
" 6	Parsons Tel. Co.	46 52	" 5	Episcopal Church	5 00
" 12	Classified to Dept. (Cher Books)	2 86	" 5	Madison (donations)	17 00
15	Mary C. Hall (Salary)	261 30	Sept 8	John Board (")	25 00
15	Kenneth Brown (")	239 40	" 8	Howard Presbyterian Church	100 00
" 15	Budget Funnels (")	87 50	" 8	Howard " " (")	5 00
" 15	Department of State of Calif.	78 00	" 8	Howard " " (")	100 00
" 21	WACO (Membership)	216 00	" 10	Waco (")	74 00
" 21	Cesar Chavez (Salary)	163 95	" 10	Total	17 724 68
" 31	Budget Funnels (")	87 50			
" 31	Mary V. Hall (")	261 30			
" 31	Kenneth Brown (")	239 40			
Sept 1	Department of State of Calif.	37 80	Sept 16	Cash Credit	0 15 94
" 1	Mary V. Hall (Office Expense)	100 00	" 16	Expenditures to date	17 724 68
" 1	Mary V. Hall (Salary)	261 30	" 16	Balance	0 15 94
" 1	Budget Funnels (")	87 50			
" 1	Cesar Chavez (")	163 95			
" 1	Kenneth Brown (")	239 40			
" 1	Telephone	18 58			
" 1	Phone Service	15 00			
" 1	Chairman's Expense (Adm.)	225 00			
" 1	Office Expense	100 00			
" 1	Adm.	10 00			
Sept 16	Total Expenditures	70 000 00			

November 17, 1970

I am
 concerned
 that I have been a
 committee, I
 would like to
 be, I am
 glad to call
 me, I would
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 you.

I am
 glad to call
 me, I would
 like to see
 you.

WACO ledger, 1968.

Expenditures include donations to a local school and to Cesar Chavez

While WACO was not successful in stopping redevelopment in the Fillmore, they did succeed in slowing the process and provided staunch advocacy for existing residents in their struggle for housing.



Lillie Mae King at work

As WACO's treasurer, Lillie Mae put countless hours into organizing and advocating for her community. On December 26, 1968 WACO filed a lawsuit against the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency which resulted in the withholding of agency funding until a satisfactory relocation plan was in place for community residents.