

# Missouri State Archives

## Finding Aid RG998.292

### Manuscript Collections

#### Harry Snodgrass Collection

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*Abstract:* Harry M. Snodgrass sheet music and sound recordings by Brunswick Record Co. Snodgrass was famous for his piano radio broadcasts as a Missouri State Penitentiary inmate nicknamed “King of the Ivories.”

*Extent:* 0.24 Cubic Feet.

*Record Description:* Lacquer Acetate Records; Paper.

*Alternative Formats:* .mp3, .flac, .pdf, .tif

*Location:* Missouri State Archives.

### Administrative Information

*Access Restrictions:* Due to the format, access to the original records is restricted. Contact staff with questions.

*Publication Restrictions:* Copyright is in the public domain. Items reproduced for online or physical publication should carry the credit line: Courtesy of the Missouri State Archives.

*Preferred Citation:* [Item description], [Date]; [Box and Folder]; [Series]; MS292 Harry Snodgrass Collection, Record Group 998.292; Missouri State Archives, Jefferson City.

*Acquisition Information:* Donations with Deeds of Gift; Accession #2002-0041, #2022-0320 and #2023-0050.

*Processing Information:* Processing completed by EW on 05/19/2017. Last updated by EW on 02/23/2023.

### Historical and Biographical Notes

Harry M. Snodgrass of St. Louis pled guilty to assault with intent to rob in June 1923 and was sentenced to three years in the Missouri State Penitentiary (MSP). He and Joseph Dritsch held up a confectioner in mid-April 1923. Dritsch was shot during the holdup and died on April 14. Snodgrass entered the MSP on June 11, 1923.

Not long after entering prison, it was discovered that Snodgrass was a fine pianist. Radio broadcaster J.M. Witten heard of his talents as a member of Virgil Coombs's Missouri State Prison Band/Orchestra, authorized in full by Warden Sam Hill. Witten leaped on the story and nicknamed Harry Snodgrass "The King of the Ivories." Radio station WOS – "Watch Our State" – was run out of the Capitol Building. Every other Monday night starting in late 1923, Snodgrass and the other musicians would be allowed to go to the Capitol and broadcast their music live to listeners. By December of that year, he was rather famous and listeners from all over the country would tune in to hear him play. Snodgrass was voted most popular radio entertainer in October 1924 in a nationwide New York radio magazine contest. His promoter J.M. Witten placed second in the most popular radio announcer category.

In January 1924, he appeared before the Parole Board asking for early release. The Board denied his request. However, by the end of that same year, Governor Sam A. Baker had decided that Snodgrass deserved a commutation of sentence based on his good behavior. Snodgrass was scheduled for early release on January 16, 1925.

On the eve of his release from prison, the radio broadcast equipment was brought down from the small studio in the Capitol dome to the House Chambers so that a large audience of hundreds could watch Snodgrass perform live. He played many songs and concluded with "Home Sweet Home."

Snodgrass was released from the MSP on January 16, 1925, after serving roughly 19 months of his three-year sentence. Fans had been sending in gifts over the last few months of his incarceration and he accumulated over \$3,500 from the public, which was presented to him upon his release. Moreover, J.M. Witten resigned his position at WOS Radio in order to become Snodgrass's full-time manager.

Starting in 1925, the recording company Brunswick Balke Collender Company began making recordings of Snodgrass's piano solos at the behest of his manager. Witten introduced most of the pieces on the records. The pair traveled to Chicago at least twice to make these recordings (once in 1925 and again in 1926). Snodgrass began earning \$600 a week (roughly equivalent to \$9,541 in 2021 dollars) with 25% of that going to Witten.

Not all the public was enamored with Harry Snodgrass. *The Indianapolis Daily News* said of concert attendees of his in 1926, "it is the association of crime and criminals with an art, for nine out of ten who attended in Indiana probably were led there by the publicity given Snodgrass' criminal life. When music must take a back seat for the exhibition of a criminal, the theater-going public is in need of education." (reprinted in *The St. Joseph Observer*)

On February 3, 1928, Snodgrass's citizenship was restored so that he could once again join the musicians' union. Snodgrass's vaudevillian tour did not last long. By late 1928, he was back to irregular work in small nightclubs in and around the Midwest. He also spent time as a hot dog vendor. He received a brief re-emergence of fame when the 1929 hybrid talkie/silent film *Weary River* directed by Frank Lloyd was released. The film was loosely based on his life and featured Richard Barthelmess as a gangster who goes to prison and achieves fame as an incarcerated radio singer and pianist.

After the film buzz died down, Snodgrass returned once again to relative obscurity. His wife Louise filed for divorce in January 1933 claiming abandonment. Ultimately, he became suddenly ill and died at his ex-wife's home in Springfield, IL on September 2, 1937. He had one son.

#### Discography:

##### Brunswick 78rpm discs:

BRN 2850 released 02/18/1925: "Three O'Clock in the Morning" / "The Moonlight, a Waltz and You"

BRN 2852 released 02/18/1925: "Dusting the Keys" / "Blue Evening Blues"

BRN 3137 released 02/07/1926: "Canadian Capers" / "The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise"

BRN 3138 released 02/07/1926: "Land of My Sunset Dreams" / "The Prisoner's Song"

BRN 3238 released 04/xx/1926: "Melody of Love" / "Mighty Lak' A Rose"

BRN 3239 released 04/xx/1926: "Along Miami Shore"\* / "Maple Leaf Rag"

unissued BRN: "Sabbath Chimes" / "Melody of Love"

\*also available as a Victor 78rpm disc

##### QRS Piano Rolls:

QRS 3113, released ???: "Farewell (Marimba Ballad)"

QRS 3114 released April 1925: "Land of My Sunset Dreams (Waltz Ballad)"

QRS 3115 released ???: "Three O'Clock in the Morning (Waltz Ballad)"

QRS 3163 released August 1925: "In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree"

QRS 3164 released August 1925: "Down By the Old Mill Stream"

QRS 3165 released August 1925: "Garland of Old Fashioned Roses"

QRS 3482 released June 1926: "Along Miami Shore (Ballad)"

QRS 3614 released September 1926: "My Wild Irish Rose"

QRS 3615 released September 1926: "Mighty Lak' a Rose (Ballad)"

QRS 81243/3092 release date unknown: "I Found a Way to Love You (Now I Can't Find a Way to Forget)"

##### Wurlitzer Concert Piano Orchestra roll:

WCPO 9197 released ???: "Farewell, a Ballad" / "I Found a Way to Love You, But I Can't Find a Way to Forget, a Waltz" / "Land of My Sunset Dreams, a Waltz Ballad"

## Additional Descriptive Information

### Bibliography

"Freedom." The MissouriNet Blog. N.d. Retrieved May 19, 2017.

<http://blog.missourinet.com/harry-snodgrass/freedom/>

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Laird, Ross. *Tantalizing Tingles: A Discography of Early Ragtime, Jazz, and Novelty Syncopated Piano Recordings, 1889-1934*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. 1995.

“Missouri State Prison Pianist Is Gaining a Nation-Wide Reputation.” *Shelby County Herald* Vol. LIII No. 47. Shelbyville, MO: 19 December 1923. P. 3.

“Not Glorifying Him: Snodgrass the Pardoned Criminal Is Criticized by Many Leading Papers.” *The St. Joseph Observer* Vol. XX No. 26. St. Joseph, MO: 05 March 1926. P. 1.

“St. Louis Man, in Prison for Robbery Wins Fame by Playing Over Radio.” *Daily Democrat Tribune* Vol. 47 No. 186. Jefferson City, MO: 07 March 1924. P. 2.

Witten, J.M. “When the Prison Band Goes on At WOS: How the Missouri State Prison Musicians Captivate Their Radio Audiences to the Extent of 2000 Letters a Concert, Not to Mention Sympathy, Cigars, and Cigarettes.” *Radio Broadcast* Vol. 4 No. 1. New York: April 1924. Pp. 205-206. <http://www.vacuumtubeera.net/RadioBroadcast-Vol-04-1924-01.pdf>.

RG114 Department of Health and Senior Services. Missouri Death Certificates. Joseph Dritsch, Jr. Certificate #3907, dod 04/14/1923.

[http://www.sos.mo.gov/images/archives/deathcerts/1923/1923\\_00016323.PDF](http://www.sos.mo.gov/images/archives/deathcerts/1923/1923_00016323.PDF)

RG211 Missouri State Penitentiary Numerical Register. Vol. JJ p. 186, inmate no. 25852.

RG005 Commutation of Sentence. Vol. 3 p. 123, inmate no. 25852. 01/15/1925.

RG005.20 Restoration of Citizenship. Box 119 Folder 3, inmate no. 25852. 02/03/1928.

## Other Finding Aids

None

## Related Material

RG005 Secretary of State – Commutations of Sentence

RG005.20 Secretary of State – Pardons & Restorations of Citizenship

RG213 Missouri State Penitentiary

RG998 MS297 Mark Schreiber Collection

RG998 MS369 Bob Priddy Collection

The State Historical Society of Missouri in Columbia maintains collection [#C3971 Robert P. Christeson Collection, 1808-1995](#) and [#C4035 University of Missouri-Columbia, Missouri Folk Arts Program Records, 1982-2012](#).

## Series

The records are organized into the following series:

Records, 1925-1926

Sheet Music, 1925

## Records, 1925-1926

*Extent:* 7 Records; 0.23 Cubic Feet

*Arrangement:* Chronological

### Scope and Content

This series contains seven 10-inch Brunswick 78rpm lacquer acetate disks of Snodgrass's piano recordings. Several of the songs have introductions by Snodgrass's manager J.M. Witten. Due to the format, **access to the original records is restricted**. Researchers should use the digital versions instead.

George Blood, L.P. digitized these tracks off other archives' records and placed them on the Internet Archive for free public access: <https://archive.org/details/georgeblood>. The Missouri State Archives downloaded the tracks in February 2023 and burned them to a DVD, which is in the container list below. Access copies are located on the Z Drive and on DVD in Reference. According to Blood's notes, the records were "digitized at 78 revolutions per minute. Four stylii were used to transfer th[ese] record[s]. They are 3.8mil truncated conical, 2.3mil truncated conical, 2.8mil truncated conical, 3.3mil truncated conical. These were recorded flat and then also equalized with Turnover: 250."

### Container List

Location	Folder	Contents	Date
	2-3	<u>Brunswick #2850:</u> Side A: "Three O'Clock in the Morning" by Terriss & Robledo. Includes an introduction by J.M. Witten: "W.O.S. Jefferson City, Missouri. The King of the Ivories will play his famous interpretation of 'Three O'Clock in the Morning.'" Side B: "The Moonlight, a Waltz and You" by Snodgrass, Koehler & Hird. (2 copies)	02/18/1925
	4-5	<u>Brunswick #2852:</u> Side A: "Dusting the Keys" by Killalea & Claypoole. Includes an introduction by J.M. Witten. Side B: "Blue Evening Blues" by Rose, Kahn & Burton. (2 copies)	02/19/1925
	6	<u>Brunswick #3137:</u> Side A: "Canadian Capers" by Chandler, White & Cohen. Includes an introduction by J.M. Witten. Side B: "The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise" by Lockhart & Seitz. Includes an introductory announcement by J.M. Witten.	02/07/1926

Location	Folder	Contents	Date
	7	<p><u>Brunswick #3138:</u></p> <p>Side A: "The Prisoner's Song" by Massey. Includes an introduction by J.M. Witten: "Harry M. Snodgrass, who gained fame as King of the Ivories while broadcasting from W.O.S. Jefferson City, Missouri, will play 'The Prisoner's Song.'"</p> <p>Side B: "Land of My Sunset Dreams" by Hall. Includes an introduction by J.M. Witten: "And now Harry will offer this marimba arrangement, 'Land of My Sunset Dreams.'"</p>	02/07/1926
	8	<p><u>Brunswick #3239:</u></p> <p>Side A: "Along Miami Shore" by Hirsch, Alman, Snodgrass &amp; Warren. Includes an introduction by J.M. Witten.</p> <p>Side B: "Maple Leaf Rag" by Scott Joplin. Includes an introduction by J.M. Witten.</p>	April 1926
		<p>DVD with digital conversions of Snodgrass's records. All tracks digitized by George Blood, L.P. from the Kahle/Austin Foundation and saved as .mp3 and .flac files:</p> <p>"Three O'Clock in the Morning," added to <a href="#">Internet Archive</a> on 12/18/2021. 03:14</p> <p>"The Moonlight, a Waltz and You," added to <a href="#">Internet Archive</a> on 12/20/2021. 03:00</p> <p>"Dusting the Keys," added to <a href="#">Internet Archive</a> on 01/18/2019. 03:07</p> <p>"Blue Evening Blues," added to <a href="#">Internet Archive</a> on 01/18/2019. 03:17</p> <p>"Canadian Capers," added to <a href="#">Internet Archive</a> on 12/28/2022. 02:51</p> <p>"The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise," added to <a href="#">Internet Archive</a> on 12/28/2022. 03:00</p> <p>"The Prisoner's Song," added to <a href="#">Internet Archive</a> on 07/16/2019. 03:20</p> <p>"Land of My Sunset Dreams," added to <a href="#">Internet Archive</a> on 07/16/2019. 02:58</p> <p>"Along Miami Shore," added to <a href="#">Internet Archive</a> on 08/18/2020. 02:56</p> <p>"Maple Leaf Rag," added to <a href="#">Internet Archive</a> on 08/18/2020. 02:53</p>	Downloaded 02/23/2023

## Sheet Music, 1925

*Extent:* 0.01 Cubic Feet

*Arrangement:* N/A

### Scope and Content

Piano sheet music "On the Air," a fox trot composed by Harry M. Snodgrass, "King of the Ivories." Cover has photo of Snodgrass at the piano. Music is four pages. The sheet music has been scanned and is available in .TIF and .PDF formats on the Z Drive, in the Reference DVD cabinets and on the same DVD as the music above.

### Container List

Location	Box	Folder	Contents	Date
	1	1	"On the Air," Published by South Bend Music Publishing Company, Inc., South Bend, IN, 1925. Music by Harry M. Snodgrass, words by Howard M. Casteel. Back cover is a short fox trot song "Come on Now Lindy," written by Grace L. Ingram and George Hill, published by same as above, 1924.	1925