

SOUTHWESTERN WRITERS COLLECTION
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Billy Lee Brammer
Papers, 1946 -1993

Collection 007

1.5 linear feet
3 boxes

Acquisition: Donations by William Broyles, Nadine Eckhardt, Sidney Brammer, Bill Wittliff, Bud Shrake, and Paul Cullum. Some items were purchased. [Accession # 89-013, 89-115, 90-054, 92-127, 93-052] **Note:** Contact the archivist for information about additional materials from this writer that have not yet been fully processed.

Access: Open for Research.

Processed by: Gwynedd Cannan, May 1993 [Inventory Revised December, 2004]

Biographical Note

Billy Lee Brammer was born April 21, 1929, in Dallas, Texas. He graduated from North Texas State College in 1952 with a degree in journalism. Brammer was a reporter for the *Corpus Christi Caller Times* and the *Austin Statesman*, where he won a press award for excellence in writing in 1952. In 1954, he won the Texas Associated Press Managing Editors Contest for a feature sports story written for the same paper (newly titled the *Austin American-Statesman*). As the *Statesman* reported in its January 10, 1954 issue, the prize-winning story was written in Brammer's "usual unusual style."

In 1955, Brammer became an associate editor of the *Texas Observer*, a magazine of liberal dissent at a time when in Texas "the impulse for dissent scarcely existed" (*Texas Observer*, August 25, 1961). There he attracted the attention of Texas Senator Lyndon Baines Johnson, who invited him to join his staff. While employed by Johnson in Washington, D.C., Brammer began working on his first and only published novel, *The Gay Place*. The book was published by Houghton Mifflin in 1961 to wide critical acclaim.

The Gay Place (reissued by Texas Monthly Press in 1978 and by Vintage Press in 1984) is where Brammer's literary reputation rests. The book consists of three novellas, all revolving around politics, all dominated by the larger than life, omniscient, manipulative Governor Arthur Fenstemaker. Brammer told friends Fenstemaker was a composite, but the character is largely reminiscent of Lyndon Baines Johnson. Willie Morris calls *The Gay Place* a "symphony of politics and sex and ambition and the immense Texas landscape [that] remains the great authentic modern novel we have yet of the state" (*Texas Observer*, Mar 3, 1978).

In 1959, after the still-unfinished *The Gay Place* had been bought by Houghton Mifflin, Brammer left Johnson's staff to work for the economist Eliot Janeway. *Time* hired him in 1960 to cover civil rights issues from the magazine's Atlanta office. Brammer quit the *Time* job in 1961 and thereafter never held sustained employment. He began a sequel to *The Gay Place* titled *Fustian Days*, but it was never completed. Though he did write several articles, Brammer never followed up the promise of his first book. Several reasons have been put forth for his writing block: disappointment at being barred from access to

Johnson, who was displeased with *The Gay Place*; the overwhelming success of his first novel; and drug abuse. Brammer at one point gave his own explanation in a letter dated August 23, 1968 to Larry L. King - the problem was "getting hanged-up with attempts at over-perfection, compounded by uptight-making realization that [one] is really on [one's] own and has to be-god-effing mother produce as fulltime free-lance typewriter fella." (King Papers, SWWC)

Various friends tried to help Brammer produce again. Fellow Texan and writer Larry L. King lobbied magazine editors into giving Brammer assignments. Texas columnist Jay Milner hired him as a journalism professor at Southern Methodist University in 1969 and then got him a position as a writer-in-residence at Bowling Green. William Broyles signed him on as a contributing editor for *Texas Monthly*. In 1976, Brammer's former wife, Nadine Eckhardt, asked him to help her write a memoir. Brammer took these offers in earnest, but after an initial spurt of activity he always drifted off. He held numerous other jobs for short periods of time, among them rock and roll promoter, dishwasher, and cook.

Those who knew Brammer remember him fondly and with admiration. Filmmaker Robert Benton testified, "Bill was one of the most charming, charismatic people I've ever met in my life. And he could talk about anything ... "(*Austin Chronicle*, March 26, 1993). Jay Milner, in his syndicated newspaper column, portrayed Brammer as having been a "soft-spoken, gently lecherous, incredibly widely read, avid rock aficionado, ultimately rather seedy bon vivant, neurotic little man ("Remembering Billy Lee Brammer, a man of the Sixties" 1993). Willie Morris reminisced that he was "kind, unselfish, and giving of the things he knew - a sweet, gentle man, a teller of stories who never knew how to attitudinize" (*Texas Observer*, Mar 3, 1978). Brammer, tongue-in-cheek, did his own summing up in 1976: "Bestowed from birth with a lucy-in-the sky twinkle and irreverence for everything, [I] bounced around the sub-culture after leaving LBJ, writing unfinished masterpieces by the score, ingesting hogsheads of drugs and acquiring a local image as the best approximation of guru and human wonder around" (Brammer Papers, SWWC).

Brammer married Nadine Ellen Cannon (Nadine Eckhardt) on April 22, 1950 while both were students at North Texas State College. They had three

children, Sidney Gail, Shelby Ellen, and William Raoul. The two were divorced in 1961. In 1963, Brammer married Dorothy Brown; they were divorced in 1969. Brammer died of a drug overdose on February 11, 1978.

Scope and Contents Note

The archive contains book manuscripts, newspaper clippings, tear sheets, correspondence, photographs, and Brammer's high school baseball uniform pants. Included in the collection are the typed manuscripts of *The Gay Place*, and the unfinished sequel to that work, *Fustian Days*; newspaper and magazine articles written by Brammer; reviews for *The Gay Place*; and letters which describe Brammer's tenure as a Johnson staff member, his marriage to Nadine, and his writing. The material is divided into three series: 1) Writings, 2) Critical/Biographical Papers, and 3) the Nadine Eckhardt Papers. Within each series, the material is arranged chronologically, except for Eckhardt's file on *The Gay Place*, which retains the original filing system (each item is marked sequentially).

Series Description

Series I: Writings, 1959 - 1963

Box 1

This series contains Brammer's typed manuscripts of *The Gay Place* and the unfinished novel, *Fustian Days*. Both manuscripts are a gift from William Broyles, the first editor of *Texas Monthly*, who admired Brammer, hired him to write for the magazine, and encouraged him to write consistently again. *The Gay Place* manuscript is followed by the play adaptation, *Come and Join the Dance*, by Brammer's daughters, Sidney and Shelby. Included are Brammer's two *Texas Observer* articles: a tear sheet about the *Observer* editor, Ronnie Dugger, from the August 25, 1961, issue; and the January 10, 1963 edition, which contains Brammer's *Glooney*, a satire of the Kennedy White House based on J. D. Salinger's *Frannie and Zooey*. There is also a file of Brammer's jottings - a 1965 interview with a writer called Norman Maelstrom set in El End Zone; a memo of advice on running El End Zone; notes on the media, possibly written for the SMU journalism class; and a page titled "The Angst Book." (Ronnie Dugger in a reminiscence on Brammer states, "he made a bundle of journal type notes he called 'the Angst Books' [Washington Post, June 18, 1978].) These pieces were purchased from Larry McMurtry's bookstore, Booked Up, in 1988.

Series II: Critical / Biographical Papers, 1950 - 1993.

Box 2

This series contains clippings and articles about Brammer, reviews of his work, and the eulogy presented at his funeral. Also included are letters to Brammer - many from his publisher Houghton-Mifflin about *The Gay Place*, some from his agent, a few personal letters, and a dust jacket of *The Gay Place*. There are photos of Brammer with his family and friends, which were enlarged and duplicated by Bill Wittliff. The material is filed in chronological order.

Series III: Nadine Eckhardt Papers, 1951 - 1985

Boxes 2 - 3

Nadine Eckhardt (nee Nadine Ellen Cannon) was the first wife of Billy Lee Brammer and the mother of his three children. The two met as students at North Texas State College and married on April 22, 1950. Nadine Brammer worked for a time on the Lyndon Baines Johnson staff along with her husband, but later returned with her children to live in Austin while Brammer remained in Washington. In 1961, the Brammers were divorced and in 1962, Nadine married Texas Congressman Bob Eckhardt. Her papers contain Brammer's school records, his Air Force application, correspondence, and a file on *The Gay Place*. The bulk of the correspondence comes from those times during the Brammers' marriage when they lived separately - while Nadine lived in her parents' home in McAllen during her first pregnancy, and while she lived with the children in Austin when Brammer worked as a Johnson staff member in Washington. Their

letters discuss their marriage, their children, work, and Brammer's writing. Brammer writes about his Washington staff job, Johnson, and other staff aides. There are also letters to and from Brammer's McAllen in-laws, the Cannons. Photographs and clippings are interspersed throughout the correspondence. The final folders contain *The Gay Place* file, which contains a wide range of information related to the book and the author. In the divorce settlement, Nadine received one-half interest in *The Gay Place*; and the collection of these materials is related to that interest. It consists of reviews, sales records, examples of Brammer's newspaper writing, clippings about Brammer, Brammer memos to Johnson, etc. In 1976, Nadine Eckhardt considered writing an autobiography and she asked Brammer to collaborate with her, hoping to spark Brammer back into writing. This project produced a chronology and a few notes from Brammer. There is also a chronology of Johnson's activities from 1955 to 1956, which Nadine Eckhardt was given by government oral historian Michael L. Gillette to help her remember events for an interview. The material is in chronological order except for *The Gay Place* file, which is in the original filing order.

Container List

Box Folder

Series I: Writings, 1959 - 1963

1	1 - 6	<i>The Gay Place</i>
	7	<i>Come and Join the Dance</i>
	8 - 12	<i>Fustian Days</i>
	13	<i>Texas Observer</i> articles (1961, 1963)
	14	Drafts and Notes

Series II: Critical / Biographical Papers, 1950 - 1993

2	1 - 2	Clippings about Brammer and his work (1952-1978, 1993)
	3	Letters to Brammer (1959 - 1973)
	4	Photos and realia

Series III: Nadine Eckhardt Papers, 1951 - 1973

2	5 - 13	Correspondence (1951-1961)
3	1	Brammer College Records, Air Force application
	2 - 5	<i>The Gay Place</i> file (1957 - 1985)
	6	Brammer chronology (1976)
	7	LBJ chronology (1955 - 1957)