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# Can You Dig It? Diamonds in Your Own Black Yard: Excavating and Preserving Audiovisual Gems Within the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company Records


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# Can You Dig It? Diamonds in Your Own Black Yard: Excavating and Preserving Audiovisual Gems Within the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company Records

## **Abstract**

UCLA Library Special Collections is home to the records of the Golden State Mutual (GSM) Life Insurance Company, one of the first Black-owned and operated insurance companies in the country. Among the company's rich documentation exists a large selection of audiovisual materials that tell a story of African American entrepreneurship and Los Angeles history, and which have recently started being digitized to be made available online through generous grant funding from the National Film Preservation Foundation and the John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation.

## **Keywords**

African Americans, home movies, moving image, sound recordings, digitization, archives

## **Author Bio & Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

UCLA Library Special Collections is home to the records of the Golden State Mutual (GSM) Life Insurance Company, one of the first black-owned and operated insurance companies in the country. This VRA Bulletin submission is an expansion of our August 2016 five-minute Lightning Round Presentation given at Endless Images: A SoCal Summer Program organized by the Visual Resources Association (VRA), Society of California Archivists (SCA), and the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA). The title of our presentation was derived from GSM co-founder George A. Beavers, Jr.'s 1970 letter to his employees, uncovering the beginnings of the company and ending with the inspiring words:

“Your successful performance gives you the rewarding satisfaction that comes only from a job well done; it provides financial security for your family; it helps to accelerate the progress of your company and it contributes to the increase of the economic strength of your race and country.”

In 2014 UCLA Library Special Collections reprocessed the records from the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company, received over the course of two donations, with the support of a Haynes Foundation grant. This reprocessing project and subsequent grant-funded initiatives to preserve the audiovisual components of the collection have uncovered and highlighted the collection's invaluable research potential.



The image used in this employee communication shows the company's first home office groundbreaking in 1928 when GSM was known as the Golden State Guarantee Fund Insurance Company.

## Founding Golden State Mutual

Golden State Mutual founder William Nickerson, Jr. moved to Los Angeles from Texas in 1921 as an official representative of the Texas-based insurance company American Mutual Benefit Association. After he arrived in California, he soon discovered that the state's existing insurance agencies viewed its 40,000 Black citizens as either "uninsurables" or "extraordinary risks." Black residents were only accepted at discriminatory premium rates, or denied insurance coverage altogether.



Still from Company Picnic Films, 22<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary  
Val Verde Park 1947



The Founders of GSM: George A. Beavers, Jr.,  
William Nickerson, Jr., and Norman O. Houston

Nickerson formed a new company with Norman O. Houston, a young insurance salesman from Northern California and George A. Beavers, Jr., a Georgia-born Los Angeles businessman and church leader. Together, in 1924, the three began to shape their dream of creating a Black-owned and operated insurance company.

## Home Office

Originally, Golden State Mutual operated out of a 12 by 14 foot second story office at 1435 Central Avenue leased by Board Member and Medical Director Dr. H. H. Towles. The company was comprised of President William Nickerson, Jr., Secretary and Treasurer Norman O. Houston, Vice-President and Director of Agencies George A. Beavers, Jr., Clerk Helen E. Batiste, and a few agents such as Edgar J. Johnson.



Home Office on Central Avenue.

GSM expanded rapidly. After 79 days, the company moved to a storefront office at 3512 Central Avenue. By the end of 1925, GSM had paid its first death claim and transferred Johnson up north to open and manage its first District Office in Oakland. Groundbreaking ceremonies for the company's first Home Office building were held on August 7, 1928. This two-story building was located at 4111 Central Avenue. Between 1926 and 1929, GSM established District Offices in Pasadena, Bakersfield, San Diego, Fresno, El Centro and Sacramento. Changing its name from the Golden State Guarantee Fund Insurance Company to Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company in 1931, the firm continued to expand. This necessitated that the company build a final Home Office in 1948. Designed by architect Paul Revere Williams, the five-story structure was completed in the heart of Los Angeles at the intersection of Western Avenue and Adams Boulevard in 1949.



West Adams Home Office architect Paul Revere Williams pictured between District Manager Edgar J. Johnson and Co-Founders Norman O. Houston, and George A. Beavers, Jr.

## Processing

UCLA Library Special Collections received its first donation from GSM Chairman Ivan J. Houston in 1986. After the company's liquidation, the second and final accession was received from the Insurance Commissioner of California in 2014, after which began a period of reprocessing. Today the collection in its entirety consists of 307 boxes and the finding aid is over 100 pages long. The imposed arrangement and enhanced description have allowed researchers greater access to these records, which span from 1909-2009.



Helen E. Batiste



Verna A. Hickman

The enhanced description illuminates the women who contributed to the company's success, women such as Helen E. Batiste and Verna A. Hickman. Batiste was the company's first clerk in 1925. Twenty-four years later, she became the first woman to serve on the Board of Directors. She also served GSM as its corporate secretary, statistician, treasurer, personnel officer, controller, and auditor. Hickman went to work for GSM at the age of 18 in 1926. She began as George A. Beavers, Jr.'s secretary, went on to lead GSM's award-winning Public Relations Department, and became the company's second woman senior officer.

## Historical Murals

Artists Hale Woodruff and Charles Alston were commissioned in 1948 to paint the murals titled "The History of the Negro in California" for GSM's Home Office. Librarian Miriam Matthews and historian Titus Alexander led the research forming the basis of selection of the mural subjects. The artists worked closely with Architect Paul R. Williams to have the color and style of the murals in harmony with the architecture and design of the building. The murals were unveiled during the opening week ceremonies for GSM's new Home Office on August 19, 1949 and hang on opposite walls of the building's lobby. These murals are currently still available for

viewing, preserved for posterity as a result of the building's designation as a City of Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument (HCM) in 2011.



This photograph documents a conference held with the artists, Matthews, and company officials to select the mural subjects.



Unveiling the murals.

### **Preservation and Access Challenges**

Among the 175 linear feet of GSM collection materials exists a wide variety of accompanying audiovisual materials, on obsolete formats that have made safe access challenging. Film can rip during projection and magnetic media has its own playback risks

including signal loss and creasing or tearing of the physical recording tape. Coupled with the fact that these audiovisual materials are in most cases unique and unavailable in other collections, access has previously not been possible.



Many of the GSM home movies were in early stages of vinegar syndrome. Note the buckling visible in this example.

A wide variety of AV formats also means a number of preservation challenges. Two of the most common are vinegar syndrome and sticky shed syndrome both of which can cause irreversible content loss. In instances of acetate film deterioration better known as vinegar syndrome, the film base shrinks, embrittles, and eventually the emulsion containing the image can flake off. Magnetic media such as video and audiotape are at risk for soft binder syndrome or sticky shed syndrome, which occurs when the iron oxide particles containing the recordings detach from the base and content is lost—either due to hydrolysis of the recording medium’s base or the deterioration of lubricant in the base which increases friction during playback.<sup>1</sup>

### **NFPF Preservation of Home Movies**

Fortunately, the Golden State Mutual Collection’s audiovisual materials make the collection an excellent candidate for grant funding, presenting us with the ideal trifecta: the content is unique and difficult to access in its current form; it documents a historically marginalized community; and we own the copyright so content can be shared online. The first grant we received was in 2015 from the National Film Preservation Foundation (NFPF) to preserve and provide access to four 16mm home movies.

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<sup>1</sup> Hess, R. (2008). Tape degradation factors and challenges in predicting tape life. ARSC (Association for Recorded Sound Collections) Journal, 39(2), 240-274. Retrieved from: [http://www.richardhess.com/tape/history/HESS\\_Tape\\_Degradation\\_ARSC\\_Journal\\_39-2.pdf](http://www.richardhess.com/tape/history/HESS_Tape_Degradation_ARSC_Journal_39-2.pdf)





Home movie stills clockwise from upper left: “Home Office Construction and Dedication,” Lena Horne and Norman Houston in “Home Office Daily Operations,” “GSM Company Picnic Movie 1958,” and “Company Picnic Films, 22<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary Val Verde Park 1947.”

The first film preserved was “Home Office Construction and Dedication” which covers events from the groundbreaking to the grand opening of the company’s historic West Adams, Los Angeles Home Office. “Home Office Daily Operations” was shot shortly after the home office opened. Footage shows staffers at work in various departments. A number of key personnel appear as do notable African American public figures such as actress Lena Horne, seen here with co-founder Norman Houston. Two company picnic films were also preserved. The picnic was an annual outdoor event held for staffers and their families. This footage documents local recreation areas frequented by African Americans in Los Angeles during segregation such as Val Verde (known as the “Black Palm Springs”) and Lake Elsinore.

### **Haynes Grant 2016-2017**

In the Spring of 2016, UCLA Library was awarded funding by the John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation to digitize 166 additional moving image and sound

recordings and 1,000 photographs and slides. GSM's tendency towards extensive self-documentation translates to a massive volume of material and the unavoidable presence of duplicates that calls for careful review and preparation. To help us manage everything we budgeted for a part-time project coordinator who is currently executing vital steps from selection to digital preservation activities. It is critical to consider staffing needs when writing grant proposals. This is an area often overlooked and is as important as the actual funding and digitization involved.

### **Insurers of the Dream**

Civil rights activist and journalist Almena Lomax created a GSM corporate history book, titled *Insurers of the Dream*. GSM opened many doors for the black community by providing employment opportunities and unprecedented security, but they also actively supported and emphasized much of their community's achievements and contributions. Accordingly, researchers have used the rich collection to study many areas of Black Los Angeles including the civil rights movement, former slave Bidley Mason, the Historical Murals, the First African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, and basketball legend Raymond Lewis.

Perhaps one of the most rewarding outcomes of the GSM audiovisual digitization projects has been the ability to share the content with the collection's donor, who turned 90 this year. Ivan J. Houston, CEO of GSM from 1970 to 1990 and the son of company co-founder, Norman O. Houston, originally gifted the GSM collection to UCLA Library Special Collections. Per a telephone conversation with Mr. Houston, many of the films were shot for internal use by the corporation's staffers and only infrequently screened for company staff at the Home Office auditorium. Once we received the digitized films from our NFPF project, Ivan was able to view the films for the first time in several decades and comment on additional background information and metadata. We look forward to continuing a conversation with Ivan as we make more of the collection available in the year ahead. In the meantime, the home movies already digitized are currently available online for viewing on the UCLA Library Digital Collections website.

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