

Guide to the Charles S. Sprague and Benjamin Gill Papers on Nevada Mining

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Summary Information

Repository:	University of Nevada, Las Vegas. University Libraries. Special Collections and Archives.
Creator:	Gill, Benjamin
Creator:	Sprague, Charles S.
Title:	Charles S. Sprague and Benjamin Gill Papers on Nevada Mining
ID:	MS-00570
Date [inclusive]:	1906 to 1925
Physical Description:	4.08 Cubic Feet (4 boxes)
Physical Description:	3.46 Linear Feet
Abstract:	The Charles S. Sprague and Benjamin Gill Papers on Nevada Mining (1906-1925) are comprised of various records from the mining companies owned and operated by businessmen Charles S. Sprague and Benjamin Gill who were active in the central Nevada boomtowns of Goldfield and Tonopah in the early decades of the twentieth century. Documents include correspondence, receipts and invoices, detailed records and copies of government legislative bills relating to the mining industry, and other business correspondence. Sprague's collection consists of his mining business correspondence dating from 1906-1925. Gill's papers are comprised of his business correspondence 1916-1922.

Preferred Citation

Charles S. Sprague and Benjamin Gill Papers on Nevada Mining, 1906-1925. MS-00570. Special Collections and Archives, UNLV Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Las Vegas, Nevada.
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Biographical Note for Charles S. Sprague

Charles Sprague was born in Ohio in 1865, the son of W. P. Sprague, a United States Congressman. After graduating from college, he bought and edited a local newspaper. In 1890 he moved to Colorado Springs, Colorado where he founded the *Colorado Springs Evening Telegraph*, and the *Mining Investor*, and served in the state legislature. In 1904 he was the editor of the *Denver Rocky Mountain News*. He came to Goldfield, Nevada in 1905 and leased the *Goldfield News* in 1906 from its then owner, J. P. Loftus, and served as its editor and manager of its parent Goldfield Publishing Company, which built the Goldfield News Building, a \$100,000 office building in downtown Goldfield. Sprague was President of the Goldfield

Chamber of Commerce, ran unsuccessfully for Congress as a Democrat in 1910, and served as a state bank commissioner. In 1912, he went into the mining brokerage business. As the self-proclaimed head of the "Sprague Interests," and "largest individual property owner in Goldfield," he acquired interests in and served as executive officer for a number of mining companies in Goldfield and Tonopah. After the collapse of mining in the 1920s, Sprague invested in cotton growing in the Las Vegas and Pahrump Valleys.

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Biographical Note for Benjamin Gill

Benjamin Gill arrived in Goldfield from Seattle, Washington around 1905. An accountant, Gill worked for a number of mining and brokerage companies. From 1906, he was secretary and local agent for the Begole Mining Syndicate, owned by mining financier, F. H. Begole, of Marquette, Michigan. He also acted as secretary for the Nevada Registration and Trust Company of Goldfield. A friend and business partner of Charles Sprague, Gill served as Secretary-Treasurer for a number of mining companies of the "Sprague Interests," as well as Sprague's brokerage firm Charles S. Sprague Company. As Sprague himself explained to a New York broker to whom he was promoting his own Goldfield stock, "Mr. Ben Gill is secretary-treasurer, as he is for all the Sprague companies, and is known everywhere in mining circles as the best mine and corporation accountant in the business." Sprague's partner Robert Schweikert (with whom he fell out) said about Gill in the context of a corporate reorganization, "I was not averse to having Ben Gill on the Board, as I feel that Ben is upright and honorable, and will execute the duties of secretary of the Jumbo to the best of his ability and belief, regardless of the opposing factions." Like his associate Charles Sprague, Ben Gill also moved to Las Vegas where he and Sprague had purchased a tract of land in 1915 intended for agriculture.

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Historical Background

The close business partnership and associations of Charles S. Sprague and Benjamin Gill creates a substantial overlap in the general content of the collection. Although each had their own individual and business interests, their papers combine to make one coherent collection, and were likely filed in the same office or suite of offices in Goldfield. The most significant portion of Benjamin Gill's correspondence are the carbon copy letters he wrote weekly (and sometimes more frequently) from Goldfield to F. H. Begole in Michigan reporting in detail not only on the progress and activities of the local Begole mines but on conditions in general in Goldfield. Through his usually dry and objective reports a personal observation will sometimes peek, "House moving is booming around 5th Ave. The Railroad Company is selling the cabins they have bought and they are being moved the shortest possible distance and if a convenient place cannot be found they are dumped on another man's lot. Then some other fellow moves a house onto the vacant

lot and tries to hold the Railroad Company up again. Every man has a chip on his shoulder and a gun in his pocket so you can imagine the condition."

These reports reflect the perspective and interests of the mine owners (among his other secretarial duties Gill was secretary of the Goldfield Mine Owners Association) and operators. His views on the sometimes violent labor unrest in Goldfield were decidedly hostile to the Miners Union. These regular and sometimes lengthy letters span the period of Goldfield's greatest prosperity from 1907 to 1910, and provide a unique first-hand account of life in the golden days of Goldfield, from a businessman intimately engaged in mining operations, financing, and the stock market. The Begole correspondence also includes correspondence from mine manager Thomas Hooper, a mining engineer who had worked for Begole in iron mining in Michigan. Hooper regularly corresponded with both Gill and Begole, providing yet another layer of professional narrative on mining operations in Goldfield. In addition to the correspondence there are the more mundane business records and a cash book/journal from the Goldfield White Rock Mining Company part of the Begole Syndicate.

After Begole withdrew from active mining in Goldfield in 1912, Gill joined Charles Sprague as secretary treasurer of Sprague's various mining companies, the most important and best documented in this collection being the Great Bend Mining Company in Goldfield and the Re-organized Pioneer Mining Company in the Bullfrog Mining District. Sprague and his partners took over the Great Bend from J. P. Loftus in 1915 (George Wingfield was the majority stock holder) but were never able to make the mine profitable. The Re-organized Pioneer was, as its name implied, an attempt to revive a moribund mine by capitalizing on an issue of new assessable stock, under a new corporate name. "There has been a wonderful improvement in mining conditions in southern Nevada during the past few months," Gill assured a potential investor in 1919," and we feel that the shares of this Company offer a splendid chance for a profitable speculation. We also feel that the Pioneer mine will make good in a mining way when depth is attained, but as one man can see just as far into the ground as another, we much take our chance on what will be found."

These records consist of Gill's correspondence with stock holders, transferring stock, and providing information on the companies' development activities (or lack thereof) and the value of the stock and on the market in general for mining stock in Goldfield. There are similar documents for smaller mining companies, including the mines that Sprague was attempting to develop in the Tonopah Divide district after George Wingfield made a hugely profitable strike there in 1919. There is personal correspondence between Gill and his various associates, including Sprague's mining engineer and manager, J. K. Turner, as well as the records he kept for various civic organizations to which he belonged, such as the Mine Owners Association and Hospital and the Goldfield Board of Education.

The collection contains Charles Sprague's business correspondence as President of the Charles S. Sprague Company, "Brokers in Mines and Stock." Sprague was not directly involved in the management of the mines he owned or controlled; Gill handled the stock and corporate matters, and the daily management of the mines was in the hands of J. K. Turner of whom Sprague wrote to an investor, "Mr. J. K. Turner is vice-president and consulting engineer of the 'Sprague Interests'. He is probably the most widely-known engineer in the west and has been exclusively connected with the Sprague Interests for seven years. He was chosen by the government as their representative upon the Federal Exemption Board during the war, and was a 'Dollar-a-year-man.'"

Sprague's correspondence is primarily with individual stock holders, and with other brokerage firms in San Francisco, Philadelphia and New York, the major financial centers where mining stocks were bought, sold

and traded. Sprague first and foremost promoted the stock of his own mining companies, but because the value of that stock was dependent on the perceived value and potential of Goldfield and Tonopah mines in general he also was a promoter of all Goldfield and Tonopah Mining stock and of the district. Sprague's mining interests were of the period of Goldfield's bust as opposed to the boom, it provides a unique picture of that slow decay and persistent albeit ultimately fatalistic optimism that characterized the district through the 1920s. In 1921 when most of the mines were closed, Sprague's optimism was undiminished as he wrote to an investor, "Goldfield is very quiet just at present – the prospects we admit are not very encouraging. The Consolidated has laid off considerable of their work force during the summer – in fact it has been rumored that over 150 men have been laid off in the last few months. The Jumbo Extension has had to lay off about 30 men and the Florence has completely closed down, pending a financial reorganization, so you can see that the prospects here are not very bright. We trust, however, that something will occur soon to bring in new mines and men. There is quite a bit of development work going on at present and something is liable to be opened up at any time."

The success of Sprague's mining interests depended not only on the discovery of new ore bodies by "deep mining" in old mines but on new technology that would make milling and processing lower grade ore profitable. Unfortunately for Sprague and his associates this did not happen, as he explained to an investor in the Jumbo Extension Mine, "sorry to say that the proposition is proving a disappointment. The mine is all we claimed for it, but it looks as if the company has made a bad mistake in their mill. It does not seem to handle their ore properly. However this may be rectified in time." In fact, it wasn't. Despite repeated attempts to re-capitalize companies through re-organization and issuing new stock, on which the company could assess stock-holders a per share "tax," the resulting cash raised to pay for new development work at greater depths often produced little in return, to the disgruntlement of the stock holders who then dumped their stock on the market at a loss. It was the play of the market, based as much on speculation, risk and confidence (or lack thereof) as on the often disheartening facts of the actual production of the mines, that made the brokerage business so volatile. When brokers in New York and San Francisco lost confidence in Goldfield, which they passed on to their clients, no amount of boosterism by the likes of Charles Sprague could shore up the sagging market. And when the big mining men like George Wingfield stopped mining development and then operations altogether, and started to sell off their own stock - Wingfield was a major-stock holder of one of Sprague's companies - it started a run on the stock that nothing could stop. Sprague consistently criticized George Wingfield for paying out the profits of his mines in large dividends rather than re-investing in further mining development that might restore the public's confidence in the future of Goldfield. As it was, Wingfield was much the shrewder businessman who knew when to cut his losses.

Sprague's correspondence reflects his multiple hats, selling and promoting stock of his own companies both to individual stockholders and to other stock brokers. He also supplied general news of the state of mining in Goldfield and Tonopah and the current and potential value of their stock. As president of a brokerage firm he also had to insure that his clients were paid up when they invested "on the margin," that is buying shares on credit. When the value of a client's shares bought on margin fell below their purchase price, the client was obliged to pay into his account with Sprague to keep his account out of arrears – hence the series of dunning letters to stock holders. When a new company was incorporated new stock had to be issued, the old stock transferred, and assessments collected. An annual meeting had to be held, stock holders notified, and a board of directors and officers elected, which might prove fractious as different "interests" vied for control of the company and its stock.

One of the most interesting series of letters relates to Sprague's partner Harry Schweikert, an old friend from their early Goldfield days who then moved to New York to broker stock on the street or "Curb," the informal market in stocks too small to be carried on the New York Stock Exchange. Sprague and Schweikert created a new company Sprague and Schweikert to operate in New York. Unfortunately for both Schweikert and Sprague by this time there was little interest in New York in Goldfield mining stock and despite Schweikert's best and increasingly desperate efforts to sell stock, the New York business collapsed, Schweikert went bankrupt, and sold the New York business to a Philadelphia broker who in turn went bankrupt. Sprague spent most of the period between 1913 and 1915 trying to extricate himself from this disaster, restore his reputation, and pay off the debts that Schweikert had incurred to the large number of clients who had never received stock they had paid for. Schweikert's despairing letters to Sprague about the business for which he constantly complained that Sprague was not supporting or providing any of the information he needed to sell their stocks are the litany of a businessman on the brink of a nervous breakdown, which he indeed suffered. Sprague struggled for years to clear off the debts through the trading of old worthless stock with new stock he was promoting from silver mines in Arizona. "I never spent such a trying year in all my life as during the past year, sometimes I wish I had never heard of the Jumbo Extension nor of the brokerage business." Sprague, like many others, tried to ride the boom of the last great silver strike in the Tonopah Divide district in 1919 and much of his later correspondence was directed to promoting his mining companies there which he assured investors would prove as profitable as those of George Wingfield. "Divide offers the greatest opportunity for making money of any district since Goldfield and there is more real money coming in and more real mining done than in any new district that I ever knew of. I believe East Divide will be the next mine in the district."

But ultimately it was to no avail, even Wingfield's Tonopah Divide Company, which controlled the bulk of the Divide's silver, stopped operations in 1920, by which date Charles Sprague had also given up and moved on to a new illusory project of raising cotton in Las Vegas.

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Scope and Contents Note

The Charles S. Sprague and Benjamin Gill Papers on Nevada Mining (1906-1925) are comprised of various records from the mining companies owned and operated by businessmen Charles S. Sprague and Benjamin Gill who were active in the central Nevada boomtowns of Goldfield and Tonopah in the early decades of the twentieth century. Documents include correspondence, receipts and invoices, detailed records and copies of government legislative bills relating to the mining industry, and other business correspondence. Sprague's collection consists of his mining business correspondence dating from 1906-1925. Gill's papers are comprised of his business correspondence 1916-1922.

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Arrangement Note

Materials are arranged chronologically by author.

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Administrative Information

Access Note

Ccollection is open for research.

Publication Rights

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Acquisition Note

Materials were purchased from Gregory Bock of Vigilante Rare Documents in 2010; accession numbers 2010-07, 2010-08, and 2011-26.

Processing Note

The Sprague and Gill papers were separate collections, but they were merged based on their shared provenance and subject matter. Material was processed by Aaron McArthur in 2012. In 2014, as part of a legacy finding aid conversion project, Lindsay Oden revised and enhanced the collection description to bring it into compliance with current professional standards. In 2015 Joyce Moore added additional records and Peter Michel wrote the historical background for the finding aid. In 2017 Joyce Moore added additional photographs and revised the finding aid in ArchivesSpace.

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Names and Subjects

- Gold mines and mining
- Mining districts -- Nevada
- Mineral industries

Collection Inventory

Title/Description	Containers
Begole Mining Syndicate: Begole/Gill/Hooper correspondence, 1906 to 1912 Physical Description: 2 Files	box 01
Begole Mining Syndicate business records, 1906 to 1920	box 01
Great Bend Mining Company correspondence, 1910 to 1923 Physical Description: 8 Files	box 01
Re-organized Pioneer Mining Company correspondence, 1916 to 1921 Physical Description: 5 Files	box 01
Re-organized Pioneer Mining Company assessment notices, 1916 to 1921	box 01
Registration Trust Company (Nevada Registration and Trust) correspondence and stock transfer records, 1906 to 1912 Physical Description: 2 Files	box 02
Diamondfield Black Butte Mining Company correspondence, 1910 to 1924	box 02
Jumbo Extension Mining Company (Sprague, Turner, Gill) correspondence, assay reports, and various other records, 1915 to 1916	box 02
Atlas, Alto, and Dixie Divide Mining Companies correspondence, 1920	box 02
Silicate Products Company/David Nelke/Nick Theo correspondence, 1920 to 1924	box 02
Gill/J. K. Turner correspondence, 1921	box 02
Grandma Mining Company correspondence, 1921	box 02
Miscellaneous mines correspondence and records, 1921	box 02
Pacific States Mining and Milling Company and Tonopah Kawich Mining and Milling Company correspondence, records, and articles, 1904 to 1925	box 02
Goldfield Board of Education correspondence and invoices, 1915-1916, 1920	box 02
Goldfield Mine Operators Association/Hospital correspondence and invoices, 1919-1921	box 02
Nevada Cooperative Mining Company correspondence, 1914 to 1916	box 02
Personal correspondence and accounts, 1910 to 1921	box 02
Charles S. Sprague Company correspondence, 1906 to 1919 Physical Description: 7 Files	box 02
Charles S. Sprague Company forms, 1906 to 1919	box 02
Goldfield White Rock Mining Company, cash book, 1907 to 1909	box 03
Photographs, approximately 1904 to 1925	box 04

