



Ellen “Nell” Quinlan Donnelly Reed Papers (K0444)

Collection Number: K0444

Collection Title: Ellen “Nell” Quinlan Donnelly Reed Papers

Dates: 1919-1972

Creator: Reed, Nell Donnelly, 1889-1991

Abstract: The Ellen “Nell” Quinlan Donnelly Reed Papers contain correspondence, printed and published advertisements, and photographs related to the life of Nell Donnelly Reed, prominent Kansas City businesswoman and cofounder of the Donnelly Garment Company. The papers also cover topics including politics and travel.

Collection Size: 4 cubic feet
(165 folders, 4 oversize folders, 55 photographs)

Language: Collection materials are in English.

Repository: The State Historical Society of Missouri

Restrictions on Access: Collection is open for research. This collection is available at [The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Kansas City](#), kansascity@shsmo.org. Collections may be viewed at any research center.

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Preferred Citation: [Specific item; box number; folder number] *Ellen “Nell” Quinlan Donnelly Reed Papers* (K0444); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Kansas City [after first mention may be abbreviated to SHSMO-KC].

Donor Information: The papers were donated to the University of Missouri by David Q. Reed on July 15, 1994 (Accession No. KA0771). An addition was made on June 8, 2018 by Pat Evans (Accession No. KA2413).

Related Materials: Additional materials related to the Ellen “Nell” Quinlan Donnelly Reed Papers can be found in the following collections:

James Alexander Reed Papers (K0443)

Processed by: Processed by Whitney Heinzmann, July 2018

Historical Note:

Raised near Parsons, Kansas, Nell was the twelfth of thirteen children. In order to help the family, Nell attended Parsons Business College where she learned stenography. In 1905, Nell took her new stenography skills and moved to Kansas City. Shortly after her arrival, she met a fellow tenant of her boarding house, Paul Donnelly. They married the following year. Although Nell had attended Parsons Business College, she was interested in furthering her education. With the support of her new husband, Nell enrolled at Lindenwood College near St. Louis. In 1909, Nell graduated and the couple resettled in Kansas City.

Nell had learned to sew at an early age but it was not until 1916 that Nell began working commercially, sewing fashionable housedresses in her home for retail stores. Nell's clothes quickly became popular and by the end of World War I, Nell had expanded her business to include employees and \$250,000 in sales. With the rapid success of the small initiative, Nell and Paul recognized the potential of the business and established the Donnelly Garment Company. By 1931, the Donnelly Garment Company employed 1,000 people and gathered \$3.5 million in sales. Nell was regarded as a successful and well-respected businesswoman but the success drew unwanted attention to her wealth and status.

On December 16, 1931, Nell and her chauffeur were kidnapped and held for ransom. Word of Nell's abduction was sent to Jefferson City to a family friend, and well-known attorney, former Senator James A. Reed. The case became an instant media sensation. Upon his arrival in Kansas City, Reed contacted John Lazia, a major figure in the organized crime of Kansas City. Although Lazia claimed no responsibility in the abduction, Reed threatened Lazia to help track the whereabouts of Nell, and after 34 hours, the kidnappers were apprehended. The four kidnappers stood trial, with Reed serving as prosecutor; two were sentenced to life in prison, one was given a 35-year sentence, and one was acquitted.

Less than a year after her kidnapping, Nell divorced Paul and bought his share of the company, making her the sole owner. Nell married James A. Reed in 1933.

Nell left the Donnelly Garment Company in 1956, and its name changed to Nelly Don. Nell remained active in local and national politics, supported the arts, and traveled. She died on September 8, 1991.

Arrangement:

The collection has been arranged into the following 8 series with 15 subseries:

Correspondence

 Scrapbook

Personal

 Finances

 Guest Lists

 James. A Reed

 Newspaper Clippings

Business

 Advertisements

- Finances
- Newspaper Clippings
- Speech
- Political
 - Political
 - Dwight D. Eisenhower
 - Lem T. Jones
 - James P. Kem
 - Roger C. Slaughter
 - Robert A. Taft
- Travel
- Photographs
- Publications
- Oversize

Scope and Content Note:

Correspondence

The Correspondence series focuses on the personal correspondence of Nell Donnelly Reed and the business correspondence of the Donnelly Garment Company. Topics of interest include Nell’s kidnapping, wedding congratulations, and “The Golden Needle,” an episode of the NBC show “Cavalcade of America.” Correspondence is arranged chronologically.

The Scrapbook subseries contains telegrams previously removed from scrapbook pages. The telegrams were sent to Nell from her employees over the 1937 holiday season. Some telegrams indicate which section or unit in which the employee worked. Telegrams are arranged in the order in which they were received which is indicated by an LDA number in the top left-hand corner of the message.

Personal

The Personal series contains information concerning Nell and her husbands. Subseries are arranged alphabetically. The Finances subseries concentrates on personal finances, including final settlement papers of Nell’s divorce from Paul Donnelly and James A. Reed’s security list. Additional final settlement papers from the Donnelly divorce are located in the oversize series. The subseries is arranged chronologically. The Guest Lists subseries contains several lists of people, some with addresses. It is speculated that these lists were names to be invited to Nell and James A. Reed’s wedding reception. The James A. Reed subseries contains information regarding James A. Reed research, *Jim Reed Senator Immortal* by Lee Meriwether, and biography notes. The subseries is arranged chronologically. The Newspaper Clippings subseries contains several newspaper clippings concerning Nell. Of interest are clippings from Nell’s kidnapping in 1931 and the Reed’s wedding in 1933. The subseries is arranged chronologically.

Business

The Business series contains advertisements, financial records, newspaper clippings, and a speech related to the Donnelly Garment Company. The Advertisement subseries highlights clothing designed, manufactured, and sold by the company. The subseries includes promotional advertising pages and booklets as well as mockups for some of promotional material. Of special

interest are fashion plates of clothing designs. The Finances subseries contains a transfer of bonds and stocks from Nell's personal account to the company and receipts for expenses of the company. The Newspaper Clippings subseries contains newspaper clippings concerning the Donnelly Garment Company. Of interest are announcements of upcoming events, visiting designers, personnel, and the Nell Donnelly Center fire in 1951. The Speech subseries contains a single speech by Nell concerning the company.

Political

The Political series contains materials gathered by Nell concerning campaigns, civic affairs, and current events. The Political subseries serves as a general politics field. The subseries includes materials from Katharine Kennedy Brown's visit to Kansas City, research on Joseph McCarthy and communism, and extensive documentation on Republican activities at the local, state, and national levels of government. The subseries is arranged alphabetically. The remaining subseries highlight some of the many campaigns in which Nell took part. These subseries include Dwight D. Eisenhower, Lem T. Jones, James P. Kem, Roger C. Slaughter, and Robert A. Taft. Each subseries documents activities Nell orchestrated and participated in, as well as campaign materials for each candidate. Of special interest is the Robert A. Taft subseries, a campaign Nell worked on passionately in 1952.

Travel

The Travel series consists of materials collected in Nell's trips domestically and abroad. Many of the papers relate to a trip to Europe in 1924. Additional trips include New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1951, and an All Mediterranean Cruise in 1956. The series is arranged chronologically.

Photographs

The photograph series contains personal, business, political, and travel photographs. The personal photographs are of Nell, family, and friends. Of special interest are two portrait photographs of Nell, one younger and one older. The business photographs are taken inside the Donnelly Garment Company factory, and show workers in different sections and stations of work. The political photographs pertain to the burial and memorial of Robert A. Taft, a politician for which Nell extensively campaigned. Also included in the political photographs are an unidentified photograph and a photograph of the Republican Centennial Dinner, dated 1954. The travel photographs depict locations Nell visited while travelling for business and pleasure. Photographs are unidentified and undated. The series is arranged chronologically.

Publications

The Publications series contains various publications Nell collected, including several political newsletters and magazines. Of special interest are the Committee for Constitutional Government publication "Spotlight" and the "Economic Council Letter."

Oversize

The Oversize series contains four folders of oversize materials. Folder 166 contains Final Settlement Papers for the Donnelly divorce, dated 1932. Folders 167-168 contain a scrapbook covering the visit and performance of Lillian Murphy, sponsored by the Kansas City Women's Chamber of Commerce, dated 1951. Folder 169 contains Miscellaneous Oversize Materials,

including a poster from *Cavalcade of America* featuring "The Golden Needle," an episode portraying Nell's life. The series is arranged alphabetically.

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