

Nell Donnelly Reed

Dress Designer and Manufacturer
1889-1991

by Barbara Magerl

If Ellen Quinlan had been an only child, it would have been Kansas City's misfortune. The twelfth child in a Parsons, Kansas, family, she redesigned without any patterns the hand-me-downs she wore. This natural talent led to a famous career.

As Mrs. Paul Donnelly she moved to Kansas City in 1906. Appalled at the shapeless, cotton dresses for housewives, Nell whipped up her own stylish frocks. Urged by neighbors, who were wearing her creations, she took a sample to a downtown store. When she delivered 218 finished dresses, they sold out in a few hours. That was the beginning of Donnelly Garment Company which grew to \$3.5 million in sales and 1,000 employees by 1931.

Nell divorced her husband in 1932, buying his share of the business. She became sole owner of a multi-million-dollar firm at a time when few women even held executive roles. The company survived the Depression by offering high style at low prices and became the largest of its kind in the world. It was said that every seventh woman in the United States wore a Donnelly dress made in Kansas City.

Her company was highly recognized for its employee benefits. She was the first local employer to offer hospitalization, scholarships for employees' children, and tuition aid for employees. She had the first fully air-conditioned factory in town. Employee loyalty was so deep that efforts by the garment union to organize were rejected.

In 1933 she married James A. Reed, a former Kansas City mayor and former U. S. senator. He passed away in 1944, and she remained as head of Donnelly Garment Co. until her retirement in 1956. Retirement allowed her time for civic involvement and to serve on many boards of directors, including the Kansas City Art Institute, Starlight Theater, the Kansas City School Board, and as the first woman on the board of the Midwest Research Institute.

Her gift of 840 acres began the James A. Reed Wildlife Area in



Jackson County, an appropriate gesture from a woman who loved to hunt and fish. She lived to 102.

Sources

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