

# Nelly Don Collection

The Nelly Don Collection contains images of employees of this local dress making company as well as other items related to it.

## Descriptive Summary

**Creator:** Unknown  
**Title:** Nelly Don collection  
**Dates:** circa 1920-1950  
**Size:** 1 box, 35 photographs, etc.  
**Location:** P31

## Administrative Information

**Restrictions on access:** Unrestricted access.

**Additional physical form available:** Photographs have been digitized.

**Publication note:** Audio visual feature, *A Stitch in Time*, by Terrance Michael O'Malley presents the life story of Nelly Don founder Nell Donnelly Reed.

**Acquisition information:** Gift, 2001, Accession #:2001-34.

**Citation note:** Nelly Don collection (P31), Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library, Kansas City, Missouri.

## Collection Description

### **Biographical/Historical note**

Nell Donnelly Reed was born Ellen Quinlan in Parsons, Kansas, 1889, and moved to Kansas City in 1906. She began designing and sewing her own housedresses, several of which she offered for sale to the George B. Peck Dry Goods Company in 1916. By 1931 she owned the Donnelly Garment Company, which manufactured the widely known "Nelly Don" line of women's apparel.

In December, 1931, Reed became the victim of a highly publicized kidnapping. Her captors eventually were caught, and prosecuted by James Reed, former U.S. Senator from Missouri, whom she eventually married.

Nell Donnelly Reed steered the Donnelly Garment Company through the Great Depression and World War II, and was known for instituting exceptional working conditions and benefits. The Donnelly Garment Company was among the first organizations in Kansas City to provide group hospitalization benefits, and the company offered scholarships and tuition money for employees and their families. On the basis of satisfactory working conditions, a majority of the employees of the Donnelly Garment Company refused membership during early attempts by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) to unionize the company.

The first location of Nell Donnelly Reed's dressmaking concern was her own home, but the business soon moved to a location at 29th and Brooklyn due to its rapid growth. In 1919 the company incorporated and moved to the Coca Cola building at 21st and Grand. Now employing 1,000, the Donnelly Garment Company occupied the Corrigan Building at 19th and Walnut in 1928.

In 1937 the company built a new production facility on Gillham between 31st and Linwood Boulevard, the first fully air conditioned building in Kansas City. A 1943 expansion brought the company to a five story building in St. Joseph, Missouri.

During World War II, the Donnelly Garment Company produced men's shorts for the U.S. Army, mosquito netting to be placed over helmets, Army nurse uniforms, and Women's Army Corps (WAC) clothing. Annual revenues reached \$14 million by 1945.

Reed's company moved from the Corrigan Building to 3500 E. 17th St. in 1947, maintaining two locations in Kansas City and one in St. Joseph. Nell Donnelly Reed retired in 1956, and the organization's name was changed to Nelly Don, Inc. The company evolved throughout the 1960's and 70's, although the changing economic climate of the nation eventually brought its demise. The selling of fabrics was a sustaining innovation of the 1970's, but Nelly Don, Inc. filed for Chapter 10 bankruptcy in 1978.

### **Scope and content note**

The Nelly Don Collection contains 35 black and white photographic prints comprised of three sizes: 8"x10"; 5"x7"; and 4"x5." Four of the 8"x10" prints are mounted in 12"x14" cardboard frames. The donor's aunt had been an employee of the Donnelly Garment Company, and collected these photographs, many of which contain group portraits of employees.

Nell Donnelly Reed appears in several group portraits in the collection. Few of the individuals in the photographs are identified, and many of the images are undated. Dates of the events depicted range from the 1920's-1950's.

The collection also contains some miscellaneous items as a menu, pamphlet, and magazine article.

The photographs in the collection largely consist of Donnelly Garment Company employee group portraits on holiday and otherwise festive occasions. Some of the events were photographed on the premises, several took place in Nell Donnelly Reed's office, and some occurred in public places such as churches, parks, and the Pla-Mor Amusement Center at 32nd and Main. The menu in the collection probably comes from the gala event celebrating the opening of the new facility at 3500 E.17th Street.

The materials in the collection came to the department in good condition, and were placed in an acid free environment and stabilized.

### **Collection Inventory**

#### **Miscellaneous Items**

Menu. Nelly Don House Warming Dinner, October 9, 1948, at the Hotel President, celebrating completion of the Nelly Don Factory.

Article. "Hot Cargo." Tom O'Dwyer. *True Detective*, August 1943 (vol. 40, no. 5).

Pamphlet. "Nelly Don at Home." 1948. (2 copies).

## Photographs

1. Group portrait of Nell Donnelly Reed and employees seated at table, 5x7, b&w.
2. Group portrait of Nell Donnelly Reed and employees seated at table, 5x7, b&w.
3. Group portrait of Nell Donnelly Reed and employees at unidentified location, 5x7, b&w.
4. Group of employees dining at table, 5x7, b&w.
5. Group portrait of employees, several holding dolls, 5x7, b&w.
6. Group portrait of employees, 5x7, b&w.
7. Informal portrait of two unidentified women, 8x10, b&w.
8. Portrait of three unidentified women, 5x7, b&w.
9. Group portrait of employees at company Thanksgiving party, November 18, 1938, 8x10, b&w.
10. Group portrait of employees, 8x10, b&w.
11. Group portrait of uniformed employees with person dressed as Santa Claus in dressmaking plant, 8x10, b&w.
12. Interior view of company Christmas program at the Pla-Mor Ballroom, 8x10, b&w.
13. Portrait of men and women in costume at company Valentine's Day party, February 8, 1929, 8x10, b&w. (Same picture as #34.)
14. Group portrait Nell Donnelly Reed and employees at "Nelly Don Pioneers" group luncheon in Mrs. Reed's office, June 2, 1937, 8x10, b&w.
15. Group portrait of men and women in wedding attire at company Valentine's Day party, February 8, 1929, 8x10, b&w.
16. Group portrait of employees in costume at company "Hollywood Blowout" party, December 8, 1933, 8x10, b&w.
17. Group portrait of person dressed as Santa Claus with Nell Donnelly Reed and uniformed employees holding gifts at company Christmas party on 8<sup>th</sup> floor of dressmaking plant, December 24, 1936, 8x10, b&w.
18. Informal portrait of woman at desk identified as "Mrs. Reeves", 4x5, b&w.
19. Group portrait of Nell Donnelly Reed and employees, 8x10, b&w.
20. Group portrait of Nell Donnelly Reed and employees at "Nelly Don Pioneers" group luncheon in Mrs. Reed's office, June 8, 1937, 8x10, b&w.
21. Group portrait of employees identified as "instructors and floor girls" at company Christmas party, December 22, 1938, 8x10, b&w.
22. Group portrait of employees at company Christmas party, 8x10, b&w.

23. Group portrait of uniformed employees, identified as "Department 411", at company Christmas party in dressmaking plant, December 22, 1933, 8x10, b&w.
24. Outdoor group portrait of employees, 8x10, b&w.
25. Group portrait of employees, identified as "Section 521", at company Christmas Party, 1938, 8x10, b&w.
26. Group portrait of employees attending event identified as "Instructors Christmas Party" at the Donnelly Club House, 1937, 8x10, b&w.
27. Group portrait of employees at company Christmas party, 8x10, b&w.
28. Group portrait of costumed employees attending event identified as "Inspectors Halloween Party", October 23, 1941, 8x10, b&w.
29. Interior view of Christmas party given by employees in honor of Nell Donnelly Reed's son, David, at location identified as "Community Church", December 23, 1932, 8x10, b&w.
30. Group portrait of costumed employees at company Halloween party. 1932, 8x10, b&w. Same picture as #34.
31. Group portrait of employees at company Christmas party, December 22, 1933, 8x10, b&w.
32. Group portrait of men and women in wedding attire at company Valentine's Day party, February 8, 1929, 8x10, mounted in 12x14 cardboard frame, b&w.
33. Outdoor group portrait of men and women at unidentified park shelter, woman holding sign that reads "Wilson & Co. Plant Girls Picnic 1920", 8x10, mounted in 12x14 cardboard frame, b&w.
34. Portrait of men and women in costume at company Valentine's Day party. February 8, 1929, 8x10, mounted in 12x14 cardboard frame. Same picture as #13.
35. Group portrait of costumed employees at company Halloween party. 1932, 8x10, mounted in 12x14 cardboard frame. Same picture as #30.

Processed by Special Collections Librarian Dan Coleman, October, 2001.