Paul and Nell Donnelly Papers  
(K1389)

Collection Number: K1389

Collection Title: Paul and Nell Donnelly Papers

Dates: 1922-2006

Creator: Weeks, Frances

Abstract: The Paul and Nell Donnelly Papers contain biographical information, newspaper clippings, and photographs related to the lives of Paul and Nell Donnelly, founders of the Donnelly Garment Company.

Collection Size: 0.06 cubic foot  
(4 folders, 5 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. If you would like more information, please contact us at kansascity@shsmo.org. Collections may be viewed at any research center.

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Preferred Citation: [Specific item; box number; folder number] Paul and Nell Donnelly Papers (K1389); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Kansas City [after first mention may be abbreviated to SHSMO-Kansas City].

Donor Information: The collection was donated to the State Historical Society of Missouri by Frances Weeks on January 18 2019 (Accession No. KA2449).

Related Materials: Additional materials related to the Paul and Nell Donnelly Papers can be found in the following collections:

James Alexander Reed Papers (K0443)  
Ellen “Nell” Quinlan Donnelly Reed Papers (K0444)
Processed by: Processed by Whitney Heinzmann, May 2019

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.

Paul Francis Donnelly was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on October 1, 1882, to Edward and Mary Connors Donnelly. Paul was engaged in business ventures, including his time as credit manager of the Barton Shoe Company.

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. Paul served in World War I and by the time he returned, 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. Paul married Virginia George on February 14, 1933, in Miami, Florida. Paul died after collapsing at a private hospital in Hartford, Connecticut, on September 7, 1934. He is buried at Forest Hill Cemetery in Kansas City, Missouri.

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. She is buried at Mount Washington Cemetery in Independence, Missouri.

Arrangement:

The collection has been arranged into four folders.

Scope and Content Note:

The collection focuses on the lives of Paul and Nell Donnelly while they were married from 1906 to 1932. The collection contains biographical information about Paul, Nell, and the Donnelly Garment Company, including a booklet titled “The Story of a Modern Business
Romance,” dated 1927. The collection also contains a memorial service program and obituaries for Nell dated 1991. Additionally, the collection includes five photographs: two photographs of Nell dated 1922, and three undated photographs, one of Nell, one of Nell and her son David, and one of Paul.

**Container List:**

| Box 001 | f. 1 | Biographical Information, 1927, 1991 |
| Box 001 | f. 2 | Newspaper Clippings, 1961, 1991, 2006 |
| Box 001 | f. 3 | Photographs, 1922, no date |

| Box 002 | f. 4 | Oversize Photographs, 1922, no date |

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