

NOTABLE MISSOURIANS AND TIGERS COLLECTION

Ellen Quinlan Donnelly Reed
*Major Kansas City Apparel Manufacturer and One of the
First Self-Made Female Millionaires in the U.S.*



The story of Ellen “Nell” Quinlan Donnelly Reed is truly one of self-made success in the ready-made American apparel industry. In the early 1900s, Nell began sewing dresses for herself and friends who yearned for something more stylish and attractive than the limited everyday dress options available to women with limited budgets. She designed her first pink gingham frock in 1919 and sold her first line of dresses that same year to Peck’s Dry Goods Store in Kansas City. Peck’s ordered 18 dozen of her fresh, new designs and sold out by noon that first day. The Nelly Don label soon grew into a multi-million dollar company. By 1923 Nell employed 250 workers; by 1931, over a thousand. Her factory was making five thousand dresses per day and earning over \$3.5 million in sales. During World War II, Nelly Don was one of the largest manufacturers of women’s military and work clothing. In the late 1940s, she built one of the largest dress manufacturing plants in Kansas City. By the time of her departure from Nelly Don in 1956, Nell had become one of the first and most successful self-made women millionaires in American business.

ARTIFACT: Blue and White Striped Cotton Dress and Belt, Label: Nelly Don. 1950s.
Gift of P. Brown. Portrait image courtesy of Terence O’Malley.