



Smithsonian
National Air and Space Museum

Vera Simons Papers

2016

National Air and Space Museum Archives
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<http://airandspace.si.edu/research/resources/archives/>

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Collection Overview

Repository:	National Air and Space Museum Archives
Title:	Vera Simons Papers
Identifier:	NASM.2016.0013
Date:	(bulk 1960s-1980s)
Extent:	23.5 Cubic feet ((22 boxes))
Creator:	Simons, Vera
Language:	English

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Don Crowell, Gift, 2015

Preferred Citation

Vera Simons Papers, Accession 2016-0013, National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution.

Restrictions

No restrictions on access.

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Biographical / Historical

Vera Simons (1920-2012) played an important role in balloon development and exploration. Born in Germany, she grew up in Detroit, Michigan and married Otto Winzen; together they created Winzen Research Inc., one of world's first plastic balloon companies. Simons held over two-thirds ownership of the company and became its vice president. She supervised and trained her "balloon girls" to handle polyethylene and build the giant balloons, and obtained four patents for her work improving construction techniques and envelope redesign. During the 1950s and 1960s, Winzen created balloons for the United States Navy Projects Helios, Skyhook and Strato-Lab and for the United States Air Force Project Manhigh, and Simons was a central figure in planning and executing those manned research flights. Simons earned her gas balloon license in 1957 and she represented the United States at the 30th Annual International Gas Balloon Races in Holland where she received a gold medal for her contributions to balloon research.

When Simons divorced Otto Winzen, she sold her interest in Winzen Research and enrolled in art school. By the early 1970s she had made a name for herself in international art circles by combining art and ballooning. In 1972, Simons began planning a series of balloon flights called "DaVinci" that combined science with original kinetic art. She spent two years designing and supervising the construction of a two-decker fiberglass gondola and an 11 story tall polyethylene balloon in which she eventually set a new overland distance record in the U.S. in 1979. During the same flight, Simons dropped tiny tetrahedron balloons carrying Douglas Fir seedlings into cleared areas, took time-lapse photographs, made sound recordings, and used mirrors to create special lighting effects in the clouds for the spectators on the ground. During other "DaVinci" flights, Simons collected temperature and airflow data, and tracked the mix and movement of urban air pollutants, while also photographing landscape and cloud images that she later used in producing works of art. In 1984 Simons launched another flight, "Project Aerolus," in which three plastic balloons were launched simultaneously into the nighttime sky; one of the balloons was piloted by Joe Kittinger.

Scope and Contents

This collection consists of approximately 23 cubic feet of material relating to Vera Simons' ballooning and art careers. Types of materials include: newspaper articles, flight covers, photographs, slides, audio recordings, and reports relating to Simons' time with Winzen Research, inc. and her "Da Vinci" and "Aerolus" projects.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Aeronautics
- Balloons
- Kinetic art

Types of Materials:

- Audiotapes
- Color slides
- Newspaper clippings
- Photographs
- Press releases
- Reports
- philately