



Smithsonian
National Museum of American History
Kenneth E. Behring Center

Guide to the Marion O'Brien Donovan Papers

NMAH.AC.0721

Lauren Kata

2000

Archives Center, National Museum of American History
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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title:	Marion O'Brien Donovan Papers
Identifier:	NMAH.AC.0721
Date:	1949-1999
Extent:	7 Cubic feet (17 boxes)
Creator:	Dodd, Sharon Donovan Donovan, Christine Donovan, James F. Jr., Dr. Donovan, Marion (Marion O'Brien), 1917-1998 (inventor) Rabinow, Jacob, 1910- Walters, Barbara
Language:	English .
Summary:	Correspondence, patents, photographs, newspaper clippings, and subject files about various inventors and ideas. Collection documents women inventors, American culture, 1950s-1970s, and products designed for women and the home. Donovan's papers offer a near complete invention record, including both successes and failures, as well as patent and trademark correspondence.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Ms. Donovan's daughters, Christine Donovan and Sharon Donovan Dodd, and son, Dr. James F. Donovan, Jr., donated the collection to the Archives Center, March 2000.

Related Materials

Artifacts were donated to the National Museum of American History in March of 2000. The "Boater" diaper cover (1949), a key chain bracelet, and "The Zippity-Do" (1970) were donated to the American Costume Collection of Social History Collection. "DentaLoop" (1993) materials were donated to the Science, Medicine, and Society Division.

Processing Information

Collection processed by Lauren Kata, 2000.

Preferred Citation

Marion O'Brien Donovan Papers, 1949-1996, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

Restrictions

Collection is open for research.

Conditions Governing Use

Collection items available for reproduction, but the Archives Center makes no guarantees concerning copyright restrictions. Other intellectual property rights may apply. Archives Center cost-recovery and use fees may apply when requesting reproductions.

Biographical / Historical

Twentieth-century inventor, Marion O'Brien Donovan (1917-1998), made a career of designing solutions to everyday, domestic problems. Her career is framed by her invention in 1949 of the "Boater," a diaper cover made of surplus parachute nylon, and her invention in 1993 of DentaLoop, individual precut circles of two-ply dental floss. As an inventor and entrepreneur, Donovan created products that addressed problems in personal health, beauty, and household needs.

Marion O'Brien was born into a family of inventors on October 15, 1917, in South Bend, Indiana. Marion's father, Miles O'Brien, with his identical twin brother John, developed an industrial lathe for manufacturing gun barrels and founded the South Bend Lathe Works in 1906. After her mother died when she was seven, Marion spent a majority of her time at her father's factory, even inventing a "tooth powder" while in elementary school. She graduated with a B.A. in English from Rosemont College in 1939, and worked briefly for both Harper's Bazaar and Vogue. In 1942, she married James F. Donovan and moved to Westport, Connecticut.

A Connecticut housewife and mother of two in 1946, Donovan was unsatisfied with the options available to her to keep her babies dry. To her, cloth diapers "served more as a wick than a sponge," and rubber pants assured a nasty case of diaper rash. Looking for a way to hold the dampness in without keeping air out, she experimented by clipping a panel from her shower curtain, sewing a moisture-proof diaper cover, and replacing safety pins with snaps. Three years later, she introduced the "Boater." Donovan's attempts to sell her idea to leading manufacturers failed, but her product became an instant sensation and commercial success when she began selling the Boater at Saks Fifth Avenue in 1949. In 1951, Donovan sold both her company, Donovan Enterprises, and her diaper patents to children's clothing manufacturer Keko Corporation, for one million dollars.

Marion Donovan's interest in design and invention manifested itself in a Master's degree in architecture which she received from Yale University in 1958, at age forty-one. According to her obituary, she was one of three women in her graduating class. In the decades that followed, Donovan would go on to invent "The Ledger Check," a combined check and record-keeping book; "The Big Hang-Up," a garment hanger and closet organizer; and "The Zippity-Do," an elasticized zipper pull.

Marion Donovan was involved in every aspect of product development, serving as creator, designer, manufacturer, and marketer. Often, designing the product also meant designing the machinery that could construct the product to her unique specifications. While working on the development of DentaLoop, for example, she and second husband, John Butler, traveled to a factory in Germany to explore floss-producing machinery ideas. Donovan also went to great lengths to market her floss product. Between the years 1991 and 1995, in collaboration with daughter Christine, she launched her largest promotional campaign, marketing DentaLoop directly to hundreds of dental professionals and pharmacists all over the country. Always envisioning improvements, she continued to correspond with companies specializing in oral hygiene products until her husband suffered a stroke, and she focused her attentions on caring for him. Following his death in July, Marion O'Brien Donovan Butler died four months later on November 4, 1998.

Scope and Contents

The Donovan papers offer a near complete invention record, including both successes and failures, and include correspondence, photographs, patents, newspaper clippings, and subject files about various inventions and ideas. This collection documents direct marketing techniques for products designed especially for women and the home. It may be useful for researchers interested in women inventors and entrepreneurs, American culture from the 1950s through the 1970s, and advertising history.

Series 1: Personal Papers and Biographical Materials, 1917-1999

Subseries 1.1: Biographical Materials, 1917-1999 includes newspaper clippings, biographical materials, and memorabilia relating to Marion Donovan's early life, family, and social activities. Note: Original clippings have been photocopied, and researcher copies are available.

Subseries 1.2: Magazine Publications, 1953-1999 includes original magazines which featured articles on Marion Donovan.

Series 2: The Boater, 1949-1995

Includes United States and foreign patents, notes, clippings, correspondence, photos, press releases and scrapbooks that document the invention of the Boater diaper cover.

Series 3: Other Ideas and Inventions, 1941-1993

Subseries 3.1: Marion Donovan's Subject Files, 1941-1995 are arranged chronologically and contain advertisements, articles, correspondence, sketches, notes, United States and foreign patents, photo materials, press releases, publications, and some artifacts documenting her ideas and inventions.

Subseries 3.2: Barbara Walters' Television Special, Not For Women Only, [1975] features an episode highlighting "Inventors and Invention," with a panel that includes Marion Donovan, Jacob Rabinow, and Henry Kloss, demonstrating their inventions.

Series 4: DentaLoop, 1979-1996

Subseries 4.1: Manufacturing Files, 1979-1996 contains files relating to the manufacture and packaging of DentaLoop, and includes photo materials, correspondence with various manufacturers including Johnson & Johnson, clippings, craft materials, and reports.

Subseries 4.2: Patents and Patent History, 1985-1996 contains files kept by Marion Donovan documenting the patent history of her and others' dental inventions.

Subseries 4.3: Marketing Files, 1989-1995 includes a substantial mailing list compiled over the years by Marion Donovan Associates, various order forms, advertising drafts, press releases, correspondence with Procter & Gamble, photo materials, personalized questionnaire responses, and a "How-To" videotape demonstration.

Arrangement

The collection is divided into 4 series.

Series 1: Personal Papers and Biographical Material, 1999

Series 2: The Boater, 1949-1999

Series 3: Other Ideas and Inventions, 1941-1993

Series 4: DentaLoop, 1979-1996

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

- Dental hygiene -- 20th century
- Diapers
- Inventions -- 20th century
- Inventors -- 20th century
- Trademarks
- Women architects
- Women in advertising
- Women in marketing
- Women in technology
- Women inventors
- Women inventors -- 20th century
- advertising

Types of Materials:

- Advertising mail
- Birth certificates
- Clippings -- 20th century
- Color prints (photographs)
- Correspondence -- 20th century
- Dye diffusion transfer prints
- Marriage certificates
- Patent drawings -- 20th century
- Photographs -- Black-and-white negatives -- Acetate film -- 1900-2000
- Photographs -- Black-and-white photoprints -- Silver gelatin -- 19th-20th century
- Publications
- Publicity photographs
- Scrapbooks -- 20th century
- Sketches
- Videotapes -- 1970-1980

Names:

- Keko Corporation.
- Saks Fifth Avenue.

Container Listing

Series 1: Personal Papers and Biographical Materials, 1917-1999

Subseries 1.1: Personal Papers and Biographical Materials, 1917-1999

- | | |
|------------------|--|
| Box 1, Folder 1 | Biographical Articles and Obituaries, 1939-1999
Image(s) |
| Box 1, Folder 2 | Early Personal Papers, Birth and Marriage Certificates, 1917-1982 |
| Box 1, Folder 3 | Resumes and Correspondence with Harper's Bazaar and Vogue, 1939-1941
Image(s) |
| Box 1, Folder 4 | Resumes and Certificates, 1946-1976 |
| Box 1, Folder 5 | General Patent information filed by Christine Donovan, 1998 |
| Box 1, Folder 6 | Miscellaneous Personal Papers and Stationery, 1969-1985
Image(s) |
| Box 1, Folder 7 | Article: Zalmon Wakeman House, 1989 (House in which Donovan family spent time, 1950s) |
| Box 19, Folder 1 | Original Clippings, 1939-1998 |
| Box 17, Folder 1 | Yale Diploma, 1958 |

Subseries 1.2: Magazine Publications, 1953-1999

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| Box 1, Folder 8 | <i>Today's Woman</i> , January, 1953
Image(s) |
| Box 1, Folder 9 | <i>Money</i> , August, 1973 |
| Box 1, Folder 10 | <i>Good Housekeeping</i> , September, 1984 |
| Box 1, Folder 11 | <i>Mature Outlook</i> , September/October, 1987
Image(s) |
| Box 1, Folder 12 | <i>Glamour</i> , January, 1988 |
| Box 1, Folder 13 | <i>Spotlight</i> , May, 1997 |

Box 1, Folder 14	<i>Newsweek Extra</i> , Winter, 1997-1998
Box 1, Folder 15	<i>U.S. News & World Report</i> , August 17-24, 1998
Box 1, Folder 16	<i>People Weekly</i> , December 7, 1998
Box 1, Folder 17	<i>New York Times Magazine</i> , January 3, 1999
Box 1, Folder 18	<i>Your Company</i> , February/March, 1999
Box 19, Folder 3	<i>Metro Santa Cruz</i> , March 10-17, 1999

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Series 2: The Boater, 1949-1995

Box 2, Folder 1	Patents, 1949-1952 Image(s)
Box 2, Folder 2	Advertisements/Clippings, "The Boater," 1949-1952
Box 2, Folder 3	Press Releases, 1949-1951
Box 2, Folder 4	Correspondence: Saks Fifth Avenue, Customer Orders, 1949-1954 Image(s)
Box 2, Folder 5	Advertisements/Clippings, "Competition," 1951-1953
Box 2, Folder 6	Vogue Pattern Book, 1951 Image(s)
Box O/S Fldr. 1	Oversize Laminated Advertisements/Clippings, ca. 1949-1951
Box 18, Folder 3	Boater scrapbook 1, 1949-1951 Image(s)
Box 18, Folder 4	Boater scrapbook 2, 1949-1951
Box 18, Folder 5	Boater scrapbook 1, 1949-1951 (NOT FOR RESEARCHER USE) Image(s)
Box 18, Folder 6	Boater scrapbook 2, 1949-1951 (NOT FOR RESEARCHER USE) Image(s)
Box 6, Folder 1	Photographs, 1949-1951, 1949 - 1951 Image(s)
Box 6, Folder 2-3	Advertisements and Clippings, ca. 1949-1951 (NOT FOR RESEARCHER USE) Image(s)
Box 19, Folder 5	Oversize Advertisements and Clippings, ca. 1949-1951
Box 14, Folder 6	Correspondence: Procter & Gamble, 1995

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Series 3: Other Ideas and Inventions, 1941-1995*Box 14***Subseries 3.1: Marion Donovan's Subject Files, 1941-1995**

Box 3, Folder 1	Discussion of Patents, 1995
Box 3, Folder 2	Key Bracelet, 1941
Box 3, Folder 3	"Facial Tissue Materials," 1951-1968 Image(s)
Box 21	"Facial Tissue," 1951-1968, Artifacts
Box 3, Folder 4	"Dispensing Container for Flowable Material," 1955-1957
Box 3, Folder 5	Nursing Bottle Marker, 1956
Box 3, Folder 6	"Incredible Tulle," 1957-1982
Box 3, Folder 7	"Tea Bag Envelope," 1961-1981 Image(s)
Box 3, Folder 8	"Shoe Box/Storage Container," 1962
Box 3, Folder 9	"Two-Way Envelope," 1965-1981: Clippings and Correspondence
Box 3, Folder 10	"Two-Way Envelope," 1965-1981: Correspondence and Patents Image(s)
Box 3, Folder 11	"Two-Way Envelope," 1965-1981: Craft Materials Image(s)
Box 3, Folder 12	"Two-Way Envelope," 1965-1981: Craft Materials and Samples
Box 3, Folder 13	"Index Cards/Index," 1966-1985
Box 4, Folder 1	"The Ledger Check," 1969-1983: Clippings, Correspondence, Notes Image(s)
Box 4, Folder 2	"The Ledger Check," 1969-1983: Patents
Box 21	"The Ledger Check," 1969-1983: Artifacts

Box 4, Folder 3	"The Big Hang-Up," 1969-1988: Notes, Patents, Patent Searches Image(s)
Box 4, Folder 4	"The Big Hang-Up," 1969-1988: Clippings, Correspondence, Customer Orders Image(s)
Box 6, Folder 6	"The Big Hang-Up," 1969-1988: Photos Image(s)
Box 18, Folder 1-2	"The Big Hang-Up," 1969-1988: Photos
Box 17, Folder 3	"The Big Hang-Up," 1969-1988: Mock-Up Photo Board for Ads
Box 4, Folder 5	"Zippity-Do," 1970-71 Image(s)
Box 4, Folder 6	Hair Products Search, 1972
Box 4, Folder 7	"Turtling-A-Ling," 1972-1991: Clippings and Correspondence
Box 6, Folder 7	"Turtling-A-Ling," 1972-1991: Photos
Box 5, Folder 1	"Towel Holder," 1977
Box 5, Folder 2	"Umbrella," 1979-1983
Box 5, Folder 3	"The Snoozer," 1979
Box 5, Folder 4	"Handbags," 1980: Clippings
Box 19, Folder 4	"Handbags," 1980: Oversize Magazine Clipping for Material Example
Box 5, Folder 5	"Raincoat/Rainwear," 1980
Box 5, Folder 6	"Weight and See," 1980
Box 5, Folder 7	Calendar/Diary Idea, 1985
Box 5, Folder 8	"Bar Harbour," [1993?]
Box 5, Folder 9	General Information and Idea Folder, 1969-1997
Box 5, Folder 11	General Sketches and Doodles, 1980-1988

Subseries 3.2: Barbara Walters' Television Special, 1975

- Box 20, Item OV
721.1 Not For Women Only, Barbara Walters' Television Special, 1975: 3/4" U-Matic
Tape, original copy
1 Videocassettes (U-matic) (Poor quality)
- Box 20, Item RV
721.1-2 Not For Women Only, Barbara Walters' Television Special, 1975: two 1/2" VHS
Tapes, researcher copies
2 Videocassettes (VHS) (Fair to poor quality.)
Digitized from 1/2" VHS. Majority of the footage is poor quality.

Digitized in 2018. Available through the Smithsonian Institution Digital Asset
Management System. See repository for detail.
- Box 5, Folder 10 Not For Women Only, Barbara Walters' Television Special, 1975:
Correspondence

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Series 4: Dentaloop, 1979-1996

Subseries 4.1: Manufacturing and Packaging Files, 1979-1996

Box 7, Folder 1	Manufacturing Files: "Yarn," 1979-1993
Box 7, Folder 2	Manufacturing Files: Manufacturing Report, 1981-1982
Box 7, Folder 3	Manufacturing Files: Trip to Germany, 1989-1990
Box 6, Folder 7	Manufacturing Files: Trip to Germany: Photos, 1989-1990
Box 6, Folder 8	Manufacturing Files: Correspondence with JVM Industries, 1990-1996
Box 6, Folder 9	Manufacturing Files: Miscellaneous Craft Materials, undated
Box 7, Folder 4	Manufacturing Files: Correspondence, Notes, Sketches, 1989-1992
Box 7, Folder 5	Manufacturing Files: Correspondence, Drawings, Photos, 1993-1995
Box 7, Folder 6	Packaging Files: 1991 Image(s)
Box 7, Folder 7	Packaging Files: Barcode File, 1992
Box 7, Folder 8	Packaging Files: New DentaLoop/FlossLoop Johnson&Johnson Packaging, 1996
Box 6, Folder 10	Packaging Files: Photos, New DentaLoop/FlossLoop Johnson&Johnson Packaging, 1996
Box 6, Folder 11	Packaging Files: New DentaLoop/FlossLoop Johnson&Johnson Packaging, 1996: Computer Diskette

Subseries 4.2: Patents and Patent History, 1985-1996

Box 8, Folder 1	U.S. Patent, 1985 Image(s)
Box 8, Folder 2	U.S. Patent File History, 1989
Box 8, Folder 3	U.S. Patent File History, 1989
Box 8, Folder 4	"Improved Floss" Patent File, 1996

[Image\(s\)](#)

Box 8, Folder 5 Patent Search: Other Dental Floss Patents, 1980-1989

Box 8, Folder 6 Patent Search: Other Dental Floss Patents, 1960-1994

Subseries 4.3: Marketing Files, 1989-1996

Box 8

Box 9, Folder 1 Articles/Clippings, "DentaLoop," 1993-1994

Box 9, Folder 2 Press Releases and Drafts, 1991-1993

Box 17, Folder 2 Drawings, ca. 1991-1995

Box 9, Folder 3 Brooks Rogers Incorporated, Press Release, 1994

Box 9, Folder 4 DentaLoop Photos, ca. 1991-1993

[Image\(s\)](#)

Box 9, Folder 5 Articles/Clippings, "Oral Hygiene," ca. 1989-1994

Box 17, Folder 5 Oral Hygiene Publications, 1994-95

Box 10, Folder 1 Greater New York Dental Meeting, 1992

Box 10, Folder 2 Greater New York Dental Meeting, 1993

Box 6, Folder 12 Photos: Greater New York Dental Meeting, 1993

Box 10, Folder 3 Greater New York Dental Meeting, 1994

Box 11, Folder 1 Various (Blank) Order Forms, ca. 1991-1995

[Image\(s\)](#)

Box 11, Folder 2 Collected Business Cards, Dental Professionals

Box 11, Folder 3 Blank Questionnaire Order Forms, September 17-22, 1992

Box 11, Folder 4 Blank Questionnaire Order Forms, September 24-25, 1992

Box 11, Folder 5 Blank Questionnaire Order Forms, October 5, 1992

Box 11, Folder 6	Mailing List Information, 1992-1994
Box 11, Folder 7	Checked Mailing Lists, 1991
Box 11, Folder 8	Checked Mailing Lists, 1992
Box 11, Folder 9	Phone Mailing List, 1992
Box 11, Folder 10	Master Binder Mailing List, 1991-93
Box 15	1991-92 Card Index: Mailing List, "Before May 26"
Box 16	1991-92 Card Index: Mailing List, "After May 26"
Box 11, Folder 11	Typed List of Responses to DentaLoop, ca. 1991-1993
Box 11, Folder 12	Manufacturer's Representative Agreement, 1991
Box 12, Folder 1	Consumer Viewpoint Interview, October 1989
Box 12, Folder 2	Correspondence with Johnson&Johnson, 1989
Box 12, Folder 3	Dental Merchandise Sales Report, 1991
Box 12, Folder 4	Letter to Art Athens, WCBS Radio, September, 1992
Box 12, Folder 5	Correspondence with Flagship Health Systems, October, 1992
Box 12, Folder 6	Correspondence with Cumberland Neighborhood Family Care Center, March, 1993
Box 12, Folder 7	Personalized Questionnaire Responses, December, 1991 Image(s)
Box 12, Folder 8	Personalized Questionnaire Responses, February 19-June 11, 1992
Box 12, Folder 9	Personalized Questionnaire Responses, June 12-27, 1992
Box 12, Folder 10	Personalized Questionnaire Responses, July 1-8, 1992
Box 12, Folder 11	Personalized Questionnaire Responses, July 14-29, 1992
Box 12, Folder 12	Personalized Questionnaire Responses, August 6-September 3, 1992

Box 13, Folder 1	Personalized Questionnaire Responses, September 14-October 1, 1992
Box 13, Folder 2	Personalized Questionnaire Responses, October, 1992
Box 13, Folder 3	Personalized Questionnaire Responses, November 5-27, 1992
Box 13, Folder 4	Personalized Questionnaire Responses, January-July, 1993
Box 14, Folder 1	Personalized Questionnaire Responses, 1994
Box 14, Folder 2	Personalized Questionnaire Responses, 1994
Box 14, Folder 3	Personalized Questionnaire Responses, 1994
Box 14, Folder 4	Personalized Questionnaire Responses, 1994
Box 14, Folder 5	Personalized Questionnaire Responses, 1994
Box 14, Folder 6	Correspondence with Procter&Gamble, 1995
Box 14, Folder 7	Orders, Pricing, and Income and Expenses File, 1995
Box 20, Folder RV 721.3	DentaLoop Demonstration by MOD, September 29, 1991, (reference)
Box 20, Folder OV 721.2	DentaLoop Demonstration by MOD, September 29, 1991, (original)

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