

COLLECTING WOMEN'S INGENUITY

Sandra A. Brick and Fred M. B. Amram

Women's History Month is an appropriate time to explore how we have honored – or neglected – woman inventors. At the outset of the twentieth century less than 1 percent of U.S. patents annually included the name of a woman. That number has grown, and currently about 12 percent of U.S. patents are granted to women each year.

In April of 1890, on the occasion of the Patent Office Centennial, the Commissioner of patents received a petition requesting

“...that a room be set aside in the present Patent Office, to be used exclusively for the benefit of Woman Inventors, that there be exhibited models of the woman inventors only, that the same be properly labeled, giving full particulars of each invention....”

The women who signed that petition were not bemoaning the fact that so few patents included the name of a woman. Rather they were celebrating that, despite the challenges faced by women in the culture of the time, there existed a significant number of inventions created by women.

It took 100 years before the petition request was fulfilled!

For the Bicentennial Celebration in 1990 the Patent and Trademark Office commissioned a museum quality exhibition to honor woman inventors. “A Woman's Place Is in the Patent Office”^{*} featured hundreds of artifacts reflecting the patented inventions by women as well as a mini-history of women who worked as clerks and patent examiners – including Clara Barton, the first woman in the federal government's employ who earned equal pay for equal work. That exhibition remained at the PTO for six months after which it moved for another six months to the National Inventors Hall of Fame.

At that time we determined to build our mini-accumulation of artifacts and ephemera into a disciplined collection documenting the hardships and successes of American woman inventors. Like most serious collectors we became obsessed with the task, doing endless research and attending auctions as often as possible. In the process of scouring every corner of the country we met many inventors who agreed to donate not only the products of their ingenuity but, more importantly, their prototypes and papers. Future scholars would be able to see how the invention emerged from an idea and what marketing and manufacturing obstacles these inventors faced. Our collection now includes over 800 artifacts, thousands of slides and photos as well as boxes of ephemera and historical papers.

The Amram/Brick Woman Inventor collection provides an opportunity to preserve history, to exhibit artifacts that have aesthetic and social import, to educate youngsters and adults in diverse settings and to provide research opportunities for others interested in women's ingenuity. The collection includes, for example, several versions of the

“Tommy Iron” as well as a file of documentation about the invention. The story begins in 1921 when Frederick Kern was granted a design patent for a milliner’s iron. In 1922 he was granted two utility patents for variations of the same invention. Bertha Thompson was enraged. She had hired Kern as her patent agent and the cad had stolen her profitable idea. During litigation Thompson’s colleagues spoke on her behalf arguing that they had seen her invention developing and were using the tool. They had nicknamed the product a “Tommy Iron” in honor of the true inventor. Kern was required to make a public apology and include that apology in every box containing the iron. Subsequently the “Tommy Iron” name was trademarked.

We recently donated our collection to the Hagley Museum and Library (www.hagley.lib.de.us) so that students, educators and scholars can access the history that the collection represents and so artifacts can be on display, on a rotating basis, to inspire future woman inventors and the men with whom they must work. For more information contact Debra Hughes, Hagley Museum curator.

Other noteworthy collections include artifacts and papers in the care of the Lemelson Center for the Study of Invention and Innovation and many magnificent patent models at the Rothschild Patent Model Museum (www.patentmodel.org).

Like the 1890 petitioners, we do not want to bemoan the fact that almost 90 percent of patents granted each year do not include the name of a woman. We want to applaud and celebrate the progress made and to assure that opportunities for innovation and inspiration are available.

*Fred Amram was curator of “A Woman’s Place Is in the Patent Office” and Sandra Brick was the designer.