



Helen Onson Papers (C4043)

Collection Number: C4043

Collection Title: Helen Onson Papers

Dates: 1938-1994

Creator: Onson, Helen, 1915-2002

Abstract: The Helen Onson Papers contain photographs, diaries, newspaper clippings, and a scrapbook documenting Onson's career as a basketball player in the 1930s and 1940s. Also included are clippings and correspondence related to Helen Stephens and her Olympic Co-Eds traveling basketball team, and material on the Harlem Globetrotters and its founder, Abe Saperstein. The collection also includes a DVD with an interview of Onson discussing her basketball career and friendship with Olympian Helen Stephens.

Collection Size: 0.65 cubic feet, 1 oversize volume, 1 DVD
(14 folders)

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-Columbia](#). If you would like more information, please contact us at columbia@shsmo.org. Collections may be viewed at any research center.

Restrictions on Use: The donor has given and assigned to the Society all rights of copyright, which the donor has in the Materials and in such of the Donor's works as may be found among any collections of Materials received by the University from others.

Preferred Citation: [Specific item; box number; folder number] *Helen Onson Papers* (C4043); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Columbia[after first mention may be abbreviated to SHSMO-Columbia].

Donor Information: The papers were donated to the State Historical Society of Missouri by Onson's nephew, Robert Knutson, on January 20, 2008 (Accession No. CA6171). An addition was made by Knutson on November 22, 2010 (Accession No. CA6253).

Related Materials: Additional materials related to the Helen Onson Papers can be found in the following collections:

[Helen Stephens Collection](#), (C3552)

Processed by: Processed by Nikola Baković on April 29, 2009, and by Nicholas Raya on August 15, 2023.

Biographical Note:

Helen Onson was born in 1915 in Two Harbors, Minnesota, the youngest of five children. At the age of four she moved with her family to Rhinelander, Wisconsin. After graduating from high school in 1933, she worked in the Oneida County Court House. Onson was also active in sports.

In 1937, she joined Grover Cleveland Alexander's "Stars of the World" basketball team, despite her family's disapproval. In 1938, Onson also played on the Helen Stephens Olympic Co-eds team. With these two teams, she traveled across the United States and Canada, playing on the same circuit as the Harlem Globetrotters. During the 1938-1939 season, she joined the Ozark Hillbillies. At times, she also filled in on C.M. Olson's All-American Redheads. Her team was forced to come off the road in 1940 due to gas rationing.

She returned to her hometown and worked in various capacities at the Oneida County Courthouse until her retirement in 1984. She also instructed young people in basketball, baseball, tennis, archery, golf, and bowling. She remained good friends with Helen Stephens. Correspondence between the two can be found in the Helen Stephens Papers (C3552). Helen Onson died on December 17, 2002.

Arrangement:

The collection has been arranged into the following three series:

Basketball
Audiovisual
Oversize

Scope and Content Note:**Basketball**

This series covers Onson's years playing basketball with the Stars of the World, Helen Stephens Olympic Co-eds, and Ozark Hillbillies. The collection includes photographs taken with these teams while on the road across the United States and Canada, as well as some photographs taken during their games. It also includes photographs of Onson and Helen Stephens from later years, Onson's diaries from 1938 to 1940, an issue of *Allsports* magazine from November-December 1944, two books on the Harlem Globetrotters, and a portrait of Abe Saperstein. These materials have been arranged chronologically by type of material.

Also included in this series are two disbound scrapbooks. The first scrapbook contains material relating to the life and career of Helen Stephens. Items include newspaper clippings and correspondence between Stephens and Onson. The second disbound scrapbook contains material pertaining to Onson's good friend, Abe Saperstein and the Harlem Globetrotters. It includes newspaper clippings, photographs, souvenir programs, and postcards from Saperstein to Onson. The materials within these two scrapbooks have been left in their original order.

Audiovisual

This series contains an interview conducted by Robert Knutson, Onson's nephew, with Onson in which she discusses women's professional basketball and her friendship with Helen Stephens.

Oversize

This series contains a scrapbook with newspaper articles on Stephens and women's basketball in general, hotel postcards, and souvenir leaflets.

Container List:**Basketball Series**

- f. 1-2 Photographs, 1938-1940
- f. 3 Photographs, 1948-1964
- f. 4 Diaries, 1938-1940
- f. 5 *Allsports* magazine, 1944
- f. 6 Abe Saperstein portrait, 1964
- f. 7 *Around the World with the Harlem Globetrotters*, 1953
- f. 8 *Go, Man, Go!*, 1958
- f. 9 Scrapbook, Helen Stephens, 1938-1994 (disbound)
- f. 10-14 Scrapbook, Harlem Globetrotters, 1958-1983 (disbound)

Audiovisual Series

- DVD 1 Interview with Helen Onson, 1993

Oversize Series

- v. 1 Scrapbook, 1938-1940

Index:

Index Terms	Folders	Other	Image
Basketball	1-14		
Basketball	1, 2		Yes
Harlem Globetrotters	7-8, 10-14		
Helen Stephens Olympic Co-Eds (Basketball team)	1, 2		Yes
Helen Stephens Olympic Co-Eds (Basketball team)	4, 9	v. 1	
Onson, Helen (1915-2002)	4, 9-14	v. 1	
Onson, Helen (1915-2002)	1-3	DVD 1	Yes
Ozark Hillbillies (Basketball team)	1, 2		Yes
Ozark Hillbillies (Basketball team)	4-5	v. 1	
Saperstein, Abraham, 1902-1966	6-8, 10-14		

Index Terms	Folders	Other	Image
Saperstein, Abraham, 1902-1966	10		Yes
Stars of the World (Basketball team)	1, 2		Yes
Stars of the World (Basketball team)	4	v. 1	
Stephens, Helen Herring (1918-1994)	4, 9	DVD 1, v. 1	
Stephens, Helen Herring (1918-1994)	1-3		Yes
Women basketball players	1-3, 5		Yes
Women basketball players	4-5, 9	DVD 1, v. 1	