Guide to the Earl S. Tupper Papers

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by Mimi Minnick

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Collection Overview

Repository: Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Creators: Tupper Corporation.  
Tupper, Earl Silas, 1907-1983
Title: Earl S. Tupper Papers
Quantity: 14 cubic feet, 36 boxes, 1 oversize folder, includes audio recordings
Abstract: Papers documenting inventor Earl S. Tupper, his invention, Tupperware and the Tupper Company.
Language: Collection is text is in English.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information
The materials were donated to the Archives Center in 1992 by Glenn O. Tupper, Earl Tupper's son.

Related Material

Materials in the Archives Center
Leo Baekeland Papers (AC0005)
DuPont Nylon Collection (AC0007)
J. Harry DuBois Collection on the History of Plastics (AC0008)
Celluloid Corporation Records (AC0009)
Albany Billiard Ball Company Records (AC#0011)
Brownie Wise Papers (AC0509)
Ann and Thomas Damigella Collection (AC0583)

Materials at the National Museum of American History
Biographical Note

Earl Silas Tupper was born in 1907, to a New Hampshire farming family of modest means. During his youth and boyhood in New England, his mother Lulu Clark Tupper, took in laundry and ran a boarding house, while his father, Earnest Leslie operated a small family farm. Earnest Tupper loved to tinker, developing labor-saving devices for the farm and family greenhouses; one of his devices, a frame to facilitate the cleaning of chickens, was granted a patent. It is from his father that Earl Tupper is said to have developed a love for invention. Even as a boy, Tupper showed an enterprising and entrepreneurial spirit. At the age of 10, Earl discovered he could move more of the family's produce by selling door-to-door, bringing the product directly to the customer.

After high school graduation in 1925, Tupper continued to work in the family greenhouses in Shirley Massachusetts for two years. Tupper was an ambitious young man, though, and he was determined to earn his first million by the time he was thirty. During the twenties, he set out on a number of different paths, including work as a mail clerk and on a railroad labor crew. In 1928, he took a course in tree surgery, with the idea of setting up his own tree surgery and landscaping business. He continued to help out with the family business, and got married in 1931. Through the early thirties, the landscaping and nursery business continued to grow and thrive, despite the Depression, enabling Tupper to pursue some of his ideas and inventions. His scientific notebooks for this period reflect the diversity of his interests. Even after Tupper Tree Doctors was forced into bankruptcy in 1936, Tupper remained optimistic about his ability to develop and manufacture some of his inventions.

In 1936, Tupper met Bernard Doyle, the inventor of Viscoloid, the plastics manufacturing division of DuPont, located in nearby Leominster, Mass. He went to work for DuPont in 1937, but stayed there only one year. Later, Tupper would say it was at Dupont "that my education really began." Tupper took the experience he had gained in plastics design and manufacturing at DuPont, and struck out on his own. In 1938, he formed the Earl S. Tupper Company, advertising the design and engineering of industrial plastics products in Leominster, Massachusetts. Much of the fledgling company's early work was performed under subcontract to DuPont. Business was good during the war, because despite the difficulty of acquiring the raw materials necessary for plastics production for the domestic market, Tupper Plastics was able to garner several defense contracts, molding parts for gas masks and Navy signal lamps.
After the war, Tupper turned his attention to developing plastics for the growing consumer market. Many of his earliest designs, which included plastic sandwich picks, cigarette cases, and an unbreakable tumbler for the bathroom, were offered as premiums with other products. For example, Tek toothbrushes offered the tumbler with purchase of a toothbrush, and cigarette companies and other businesses offered cigarette cases imprinted with their logo.

Plastics was still in its infancy in the forties, and the commercial market for plastics product was limited by plastic's reputation for being brittle, greasy, smelly and generally unreliable. Tupper's contributions were twofold. First, he developed a method for purifying black polyethylene slag, a waste product produced in oil refinement, into a substance that was flexible, tough, non-porous, non-greasy and translucent. Second, he developed the Tupper seal, an airtight, watertight lid modeled on the lid for paint containers. Together, these innovations laid the foundations for the future success of Tupperware. Nevertheless, marketing the new product presented a challenge. Tupper experimented with department store sales, but as Businessweek reported in 1954, "in retail stores it fell flat on its face." It seemed clear that the new lid required explanation or demonstration.

In the late 1940s, Thomas Damigella (in Massachusetts) and Brownie Wise (in Florida) were selling household products through Stanley Home Products. Purchasing through local plastics distributors, both began offering Tupperware as part of their product line, and were moving enough Tupperware to attract Earl Tupper's attention. In 1948, Tupper met with Damigella, Wise, and several other local distributors at a Sheraton in Worcester Massachusetts to discuss a new distribution plan. Modeled on the home party plan pioneered by Stanley Home Products and expanded and refined by Brownie Wise, the home party plan became and remains the exclusive outlet for Tupperware. Wise was named Vice President of the company (named Tupperware Home Parties) in 1951, a position she held until 1958, when Tupper sold the company to Rexall for $16 million.

Tupperware's success stems from the combined genius of Earl Tupper, the self-styled Yankee inventor and entrepreneur and Brownie Wise, the consummate saleswoman and motivator. If Tupper personified reverence for the product, Wise personified respect for the sales force. "If we build the people," she was fond of saying, "they'll build the business." Almost half a century later, their legacy remains an important part of Tupperware's continuing success.

Earl S. Tupper died on October 5, 1983.

Scope and Content Note

The collection documents the life of inventor Earl S. Tupper through correspondence, notes, photographs, drawings and sound recordings.

Arrangement

The collection is organized into five series.

Series 1: Personal Papers, 1910-1989
Series 2: Early Business Papers and Scientific Notes, 1930-1965
Series 3: Tupper Corporation/Tupperware Business, 1908-1983
Subseries 4.1: Research Files, 1926-1989
Subseries 4.2: Original Masters, 1987-1989
Subseries 4.3: Research Copies, 1987-1989
Subseries 4.4: Research Copies, 1987-1989
Subseries 4.5: Preservation Copies, undated

Series 5: Center for Advertising History, Oral History Interviews, 1992
Subseries 5.1: Original Masters, 1992
Subseries 5.2: Research Copies, 1992
Subseries 5.3: Research Copies, 1992
Subseries 5.4: Preservation Copies, 1992
Subseries 5.5: Abstracts and Transcripts, 1992, 2003

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:
Advertising
Business--History
Inventors
Marketing
Plastic container industry
Plastic tableware
Plastics
Product demonstrations

Types of Materials:
Advertising fliers
Business letters
Business records--20th century
Clippings
Family papers
Interviews
Letters (correspondence)--20th century
Notes
Personal papers--20th century
Photographs--20th century

Names:
Tupper, Glenn O.
Tupper, Miles
Tupperware (Firm).
Container Listing

Series 1: Personal Papers, 1910-1956

This series contains material documenting aspects of Earl Tupper's personal life, particularly his boyhood and youth in New England. School papers, personal correspondence, and a family scrapbook make up the bulk of this series, which also includes a photographic and written appraisal of the family home.

Box 1, Folder 1  Elementary School materials, circa 1914
Box 1, Folder 2  Elementary School materials (artwork), 1924, undated
Box 1, Folder 3  Fitchburg, Massachusetts High School, 1923-1925, 1930
Box 1, Folder 4  High School notes and papers, 1923-1925
Box 1, Folder 5  High School compositions and tests, 1924
Box 1, Folder 6  High School notebooks and papers, 1923-1924
Box 1, Folder 7  High School notes, 1924-1925
Box 1, Folder 8  Fundamentals of Advertising, International Correspondence Schools, 1932
Box 1, Folder 9  Personal Correspondence, circa 1920s
Box 1, Folder 10 Personal Correspondence, 1943-1946
Box 1, Folder 11 Miscellaneous writings, 1937, 1943
Box 1, Folder 12 Written Appraisal of the Tupper family home, office and lab, 1956
Box 1, Folder 13 Photographs for appraisal, 1956
Box 2, Folder 1-2 Tupper Family Scrapbook, 1919-1921
Box 2, Folder 3  Earl S. Tupper, personal historical materials, 1910-1944
Box 2, Folder 4  Earl S. Tupper, personal historical materials, 1920-1938
Box 2, Folder 5  Earl S. Tupper, personal historical materials, 1968, 1987
Box 2, Folder 6-8 Assembled historical research files, 1933-1989
Series 2: Early Business Papers and Scientific Notes, 1930-1965

This series highlights the business ventures and scientific endeavors in which Tupper was involved in the 1930s, prior to the invention of Tupperware. The business ventures include a greenhouse and tree removal service, while his scientific interests lie largely in the area of containers. Of particular interest are his invention diaries and sketch books.

Box 3, Folder 1    Tupper's Greenhouses, 1930-1934
Box 3, Folder 2    Tupper Tree Doctors, 1926-1932
Box 3, Folder 3    Tupper Tree Doctors, 1933-1938
Box 3, Folder 4    Notes on Inventions, circa 1930s
Box 3, Folder 5    Inventions, 1936
Box 3, Folder 6    Inventions, 1937
Box 3, Folder 7    "Inventions Now Ready to Sell" undated
Box 3, Folder 8    Notes on Visits to Interest Manufacturers in Inventions, 1935-1936
Box 3, Folder 9    Marketing Inventions, circa 1930s
Box 3, Folder 10   Marketing Inventions, 1935-1939
Box 3, Folder 11   Marketing Container Inventions, 1935
Box 3, Folder 12   Non-refillable bags, 1935
Box 4, Folder 1    Invention Diary and Sketch book, 1935-1939
Box 4, Folder 2    Miscellaneous notes on products, 1949, 1954, undated
Box 4, Folder 2    "Earl S. Tupper, U.S. Grants" (1 volume), 1946-1965
Box 4, Folder 2    Diaries (four volumes), 1933-1934, 1936-1937
Series 3: Tupper Corporation/Tupperware Business Records, 1908-1983

This series contains business records, marketing publications and publicity, and photographs for Tupper's most successful endeavor, Tupperware. Most of the photographs are of company personnel and facilities.

Box 5, Folder 1  Tupperware Business Records, circa 1940s-circa 1950s
Box 5, Folder 2  Tupperware/Navy Contract, 1948-1949
Box 5, Folder 3  Tupperware Business Records, circa 1950s
Box 5, Folder 4  Tupperware Business Records, circa 1950s
Box 5, Folder 5  Tupperware Business Records, circa 1950s
Box 6, Folder 1  Price Lists, 1948
Box 6, Folder 2  Tupperware catalogs, 1949, 1957, 1958, undated
Box 6, Folder 3  Tupperware Home Parties, demonstration script, 1951
Meeting of franchise distributors, 1951 September
Box 6, Folder 5  Tupperware Home Parties, Inc., "Know How"1954
Box 6, Folder 6  Tupperware Home Parties, "Public Relations News"1954
Box 6, Folder 7  Tupperware Home Parties, Homecoming Jubilee, 1954
Box 6, Folder 8  Tupperware Home Parties, Earl S. Tupper resignation, 1958
Box 6, Folder 9  Tupperware Home Parties, correspondence, 1959
Box 6, Folder 10  *House Beautiful* "Plastics" issue, 1947
Box 6, Folder 11-13  *Modern Plastics*, 1948 January-1948 February, 1948 September
Box 6, Folder 12  Plastics Industry Publications, 1947-1950
Box 6, Folder 15  DuPont Plastics Bulletin, 1948-1949
Box 6, Folder 17  Business Week, 1954
Box 6, Folder 17  Sandwich Picks and Bar Tools samples with advertisement, undated
Box 7, Folder 1  Publicity, 1950
Box 7, Folder 2  Magazine clippings, circa 1950s
Box 7, Folder 3  Print ads, circa 1940s-circa 1950s
Box 7, Folder 4  Advertising ephemera, undated
Box 7, Folder 5  DuPont exhibit, 1952
Box 8, Folder 1  Press clippings scrapbook, 1947
| Box 8, Folder 2 | Sentinel magazine, Jubilee Special Issue, 1957-1958 |
| Box 8, Folder 3 | Tupperware Jubilee Journal, 1954 |
| Box 8, Folder 4 | Tupperware Sales Sentinel, 1956-1958 |
| Box 8, Folder 5 | Tupperware Sales Sentinel, 1964-1965 |
| Box 8, Folder 6 | Tupperware Sparks, 1951-1955 |
| Box 8, Folder 7 | Tupperware Topics, 1956-1958 |
| Box 9, Folder 1-4 | Print ads, 1946-1958 |
| Box 9, Folder 5 | Advertising scrapbook, 1946 |
| Box 9, Folder 6 | Advertising scrapbook, 1946-1947 |
| Box 9, Folder 7 | Promotional scrapbook, part 1, circa 1940s |
| Box 9, Folder 8 | Promotional scrapbook, part 2, circa 1940s |
| Box 10, Folder 1 | Tupper family greenhouses, 1930, undated |
| Box 10, Folder 2 | Blackstone, Massachusetts manufacturing facility, exterior and interior views, 1908, 1954, undated |
| Box 10, Folder 3 | Farnumsville, Massachusetts manufacturing facility, exterior views, 1944, undated |
| Box 10, Folder 4 | Farnumsville, Massachusetts manufacturing facility, interior views, circa 1950s, 1944, undated |
| Box 10, Folder 5 | Cuero, Texas manufacturing facility, exterior views, 1943, 1949 |
| Box 10, Folder 6 | Orlando, Florida, headquarters, exterior views, 1954, undated |
| Box 10, Folder 7 | Tupperware events, Jubilees, 1956, undated |
| Box 10, Folder 8 | Tupperware people, 1943, 1956, undated |
| Box 10, Folder 9 | Tupperware products, 1947, undated |
| Box 10, Folder 10 | Signing the Dart sale, 1958 |
| Box 10, Folder 11 | Hospital bed designs, 1978 |
| Box 10, Folder 12 | Stove designs, 1982 |
| Box 10, Folder 13 | Earl S. Tupper and H. Holz, Fitchburg, Massachusetts, 1983 |
| Box 10, Folder 14 | Negatives, undated |

Map-case 3, Drawer 15, Folder 1 | Design drawing, by Earl S. Tupper, notarized, possibly an automobile convertible top, 1932 June 15 |

*4 drawings (visual works)*
Map-case 3, Drawer 15, Design drawing, signed Marcus Coolidge, undated
Folder 1  
1 drawing (visual works)

Map-case 3, Drawer 15, Measured drawings, Memory Hill Farm, Earl S. Tupper, designer, 1962
Folder 1  
November  
2 drawings (visual works)

This series consists of material assembled by Neil Osterweil, a writer/researcher commissioned by the Tupper family to write Earl Tupper's biography. Most of the materials assembled here as research files are duplicates of materials found in Series 1, 2 and 3. This series also contains the early outlines and drafts of this autobiography, which was never finished. In 1988 and 1989, Osterweil conducted oral history interviews with Tupper's daughter and four sons, along with other family members and longtime friends, and former Tupperware executives. The original tapes (Subseries 4.2) have been dubbed onto audiocassettes (Subseries 4.3) for researcher use, and master reel to reels for preservation (Subseries 4.4). There are transcripts available for some interviews.

Subseries 4.1: Research Files, 1926-1989

Box 11, Folder 1  Tupper family history, genealogy, undated
Box 11, Folder 2  Farnsworth, Shirley, 1978
Box 11, Folder 3  Tupper, Myles, 1987-1988
Box 11, Folder 4  Tupper, Earl, 1964-1988
Box 11, Folder 5  Earl S. Tupper (obituaries), 1983
Box 11, Folder 6  Pre-Tupperware business and inventions (photocopies), 1926-1932
Box 11, Folder 7  Tupperware marketing, primary materials, circa 1950s-circa 1980s
Box 11, Folder 8  Tupperware marketing, secondary materials, 1947-1989
Box 11, Folder 9  Tupperware product development, secondary materials, 1948-1988
Box 11, Folder 10 Tupperware business records, 1949-1958
Box 11, Folder 11 Wise, Brownie, 1951-1961
Box 11, Folder 12 Dart/Rexall purchase, 1958
Box 11, Folder 13 Post Tupperware inventions, 1976 July 29
Box 11, Folder 14 Charitable contributions and philanthropy, 1984-1985
Box 11, Folder 15 Earl S. Tupper honors and awards, 1940-1977
Box 11, Folder 16 Society of the Plastics Industry publications, 1988-1989
Box 12, Folder 1-2A Biography drafts, undated
Box 12, Folder 3  Research correspondence and notes, 1972-1989
Box 12, Folder 4-6 Research notebooks (5 volumes), undated
Subseries 4.2: Original Masters, 1987-1989

36 sound recordings, Not for research use.

Box 14, Folder 1  John Ansley (president of Tupperware manufacturing 1956-1986)
Box 14, Folder 2  John Ansley, 1989 January 29
Box 14, Folder 3  Gladys Cook and E. Creiger
Box 14, Folder 4  E. Creiger
Box 14, Folder 5  E. Creiger
Box 14, Folder 6  E. Creiger (side 2)
Box 14, Folder 7  Thomas Damigella (successful early distributor, 1948), 1988 September 16
Box 14, Folder 8  Punk Farnsworth and Everett White
Box 14, Folder 9  Sandy Farnsworth, 1988 October 13
Box 14, Folder 10 Iver Freeman
Box 14, Folder 11 Jim Hagan
Box 14, Folder 12 John Keville, 1989 January 27
Box 14, Folder 13 John Keville
Box 14, Folder 14 Levine
Box 14, Folder 15 Lightbown, 1987 January 24
Box 14, Folder 16 Lightbown, 1989 January 24
Box 14, Folder 17 R. Parenter and G. Flagg
Box 14, Folder 18 1941(established)
Box 15, Folder 1  Glenn and Myles Tupper, 1989 February 08
Box 15, Folder 2  Glenn, Mark and Myles Tupper, #1
Box 15, Folder 3  Glenn, Mark and Myles Tupper, #2
Box 15, Folder 4  Glenn, Mark and Myles Tupper, #3
Box 15, Folder 5  Myles Tupper
Box 15, Folder 6  Glenn Tupper
Box 15, Folder 7  Mark Tupper, 1989 February 07
Box 15, Folder 8  Glenn, Mark and Myles Tupper
Box 15, Folder 9  Ronald Tupper
Box 15, Folder 1  Ronald Tupper, #1
Box 15, Folder 2  Ronald Tupper, #2
Box 15, Folder 3  Ronald Tupper, #3
Box 15, Folder 4  Ronald Tupper, #4
Box 15, Folder 5  Ronald Tupper, #5
Box 15, Folder 6  Ronald Tupper, #6
Box 15, Folder 7  Ronald Tupper, #7
Box 15, Folder 8  Starr Tupper
Box 15, Folder 9  Starr Tupper

36 sound recordings, With time code.

Box 16, Folder 1  John Ansley (president, Tupperware manufacturing, 1956-1986)
Box 16, Folder 2  John Ansley, 1989 January 28
Box 16, Folder 3  Gladys Cook and E. Creiger
Box 16, Folder 4  E. Creiger
Box 16, Folder 5  E. Creiger
Box 16, Folder 6  E. Creiger (side 2)
Box 16, Folder 7  Thomas Damigella (early distributor), 1988 September 16
Box 17, Folder 8  Punk Farnsworth and Everett White
Box 17, Folder 9  Sandy Farnsworth, 1988 October 13
Box 17, Folder 10  Iver Freeman
Box 17, Folder 11  Jim Hagan
Box 17, Folder 12  John Keville, 1989 January 27
Box 17, Folder 13  John Keville
Box 17, Folder 14  Levine
Box 17, Folder 15  Lightbown, 1987 January 24
Box 18, Folder 16  Lightbown, 1989 January 24
Box 18, Folder 17  R. Parenter and G. Flagg
Box 18, Folder 11  R. Parenter and G. Flagg, #1
Box 18, Folder 12  R. Parenter and G. Flagg, #2
Box 18, Folder 13  R. Parenter and G. Flagg, #3
Box 18, Folder 14  R. Parenter and G. Flagg, #4
Box 18, Folder 18  1941 (established)
Box 19, Folder 15  #5
Box 19, Folder 16  #6 (Tupper family singing and playing musical instruments)
Box 19, Folder 17  #7 (Tupper family singing and playing musical instruments)
Box 19, Folder 9  Ronald Tupper
Box 19, Folder 18  Starr Tupper
Box 19, Folder 19  Starr Tupper
Box 20, Folder 1  Glenn and Myles Tupper, 1989 February 08
Box 20, Folder 2  Glenn, Mark and Myles Tupper, #1
Box 20, Folder 3  Glenn, Mark and Myles Tupper, #2
Box 20, Folder 4  Glenn, Mark and Myles Tupper, #3
Box 20, Folder 5  Myles Tupper
Box 20, Folder 6  Glenn Tupper
Box 20, Folder 7  Mark Tupper, 1989 February 07
Box 20, Folder 8  Glenn, Mark and Myles Tupper

Subseries 4.4: Researcher Copies, 1987-1989
36 sound recordings, No time code.

Box 21, Folder 1  John Ansley
Box 21, Folder 2  John Ansley, 1989 January 28
Box 21, Folder 3  Gladys Cook and E. Creiger
Box 21, Folder 4  E. Creiger
Box 21, Folder 5  E. Creiger
Box 25, Folder 7  Mark Tupper, 1989 February 07
Box 25, Folder 8  Glenn, Mark and Myles Tupper

Subseries 4.5: Preservation Copies, undated

Box 26  Ansley to Creiger
Box 27  Damigella to Keville
Box 28  Keville to Parenter
Box 29  Glenn, Mark and Myles Tupper
Box 30  Mark Tupper and Starr Tupper
Box 31  Neil Osterweil, 1-4
Box 32  Neil Osterweil, 5-7 (established 1941)

This series consists of interviews conducted in 1992 by John Fleckner with two Tupper sons, Glenn and Myles. The original tapes (Subseries 5.1) have been dubbed onto audiocassettes (Subseries 5.2) for researcher use, and master reel to reels for preservation (Subseries 5.3). There are also abstracts for each interview (Subseries 5.4).

Subseries 5.1: Original Masters, 1992

Box 33, item 1  Glenn Tupper, 1992 January 22-1992 January 23
Box 33, item 2  Glenn Tupper, 1992 October 23
Box 33, item 3  Myles Tupper, 1992 October 23
Box 33, item 4  Myles Tupper, 1992 October 24

Subseries 5.2: Researcher Copies, 1992

Box 34, item 1  Glenn Tupper, 1992 January 22-1992 January 23
Box 34, item 2  Glenn Tupper, 1992 October 23
Box 34, item 3  Myles Tupper, 1992 October 23
Box 34, item 4  Myles Tupper, 1992 October 24

Subseries 5.3: Preservation Copies, 1992

Box 35, item 1  Glenn Tupper, 1992 January 22-1992 January 23
Box 35, item 2  Glenn Tupper, 1992 October 23
Box 35, item 3  Myles Tupper, 1992 October 23
Box 35, item 4  Myles Tupper, 1992 October 24


Box 36, item 1  Damigella, Thomas (includes letter from Neil Osterweil), 1988 September 16, 2003 December 22
Box 36, item 2  Tupper, Glenn, 1992 January 23
| Box 36, item 2 | Fleckner, John, 1992 October 23 |
| Box 36, item 3 | Tupper, Glenn (Neil Osterweil) |
| Box 36, item 4 | Tupper, Mark (Neil Osterweil) |
| Box 36, item 5 | Tupper, Myles, 10/23/92, 1992 October 23 |
| Box 36, item 6 | Tupper, Ronald (Neil Osterweil) |
| Box 36, item 7 | Tupper, Starr/E. Creiger, no. 1 (Neil Osterweil) |
| Box 36, item 8 | Tupper, Starr/E. Creiger, no. 2 (Neil Osterweil) |