Guide to the Solomon Adler Papers

NMAH.AC.1157

by Alison Oswald.

2011

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Collection Overview

Repository: Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Creator: Adler, Solomon, 1901-1989
Title: Solomon Adler Papers
Dates: 1916-1980
Bulk Dates: 1950-1966
Quantity: 4.5 cubic feet, 3 record cartons; 2 flat boxes; 1 oversize folder
Abstract: The papers document independent inventor Solomon Adler's work with sewing machine technology through correspondence, photographs, notes, drawings, sketches, patents, litigation records, and printed materials. The collection provides insight into both an independent inventor's process of invention and Japanese work culture during the post-World War II period.
Language: Some materials in German, French, Japanese and Spanish.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information
The collection was donated by R. Michael Adler and Diane Zoe Adler, September, 2009. Additional materials were donated by R. Michael Adler in 2012.

Related Material
The Division of Home and Community Life holds artifacts related to this collection, including several sewing machine prototypes, the Siphon-It and the combination ashtray, lighter and cigarette holder. See Accession numbers: 2009.0118 and 2009.0114.

Processing Information
Processed by Alison Oswald, archivist, March 2011.

Preferred Citation
[Title and date of item], Solomon Adler Papers, dates, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, box number X, folder number XX, digital file number XXXXXXXX

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Accruals

Three cubic feet of material was added in 2012.

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Biographical Note

Solomon "Sol" Adler is probably best known for his sewing machine inventions, but his portfolio of work also includes ideas and patents for a fountain pen, a window treatment, a receptacle tap, a telescoping umbrella, an ashtray, a retractable table, and jewelry designs. Adler wrote fiction as well (mostly short stories) that reflected his experiences during the early 1900s in New York City. He filled pages with themes on social protest, radicalism, mobs, unions, poverty, and sweatshop operators. In 1958 Adler wrote about theories of nuclear physics, noting, "Indeed a very bold attempt and definitely a long way from sewing machines." Adler’s flow of ideas was constant, and he sought to express them constantly.

Sol Adler was born on July 8, 1901, [Russian?] on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, one of Isaac and Mindel Adler’s five children. Isaac was a tailor, so sewing machines were part of Sol’s life from the beginning. As a young man, Adler apprenticed in machine shops, honing his skills until he became an expert machinist and toolmaker; these skills eventually allowed him to build the machines he visualized. Adler’s design drawings show his precision as a draftsman and engineer (he attended the City College of New York) and provide good insight into the drawing abilities that he later used in preparing patent drawings. Adler also enjoyed metalworking. His home workshop boasted a geared lathe, tilting head machine, drill press, bench grinder, and an assorted hand tools.

Adler’s work on sewing machines began in the late 1930s with tinkering with his sister-in-law Bess’s treadle-operated Singer machine. Bess wanted a lightweight, motorized sewing machine that had enough space between the frame and the needle for large projects such as quilts. Using his own basement machine shop, Adler began building simple frameworks for sewing machines to understand better the relationships between the parts and their functions. Adler’s first sewing machine (which he dubbed the "parent machine") earned U.S. Patent 2,561,643, issued in 1951. The machine was a full-size home machine, with a concealed motor and power cord that could also expand into a commercial-size machine. Six subsequent patents for subassemblies were derived from the "parent machine" over the next several years.

During the Second World War, Adler worked for Manufacturing Methods Technology (MM&T) as a development engineer and experimental machine shop supervisor.

Analyzing the evolving U.S. domestic sewing machine market gave Adler ideas for further inventions, refining the machines and adding new features. Unfortunately, success was elusive; his machine with zigzag and straight-stitch capability was rejected by several U.S. and European sewing machine manufacturers. But in 1954, Adler met Max Hugel, president of the Asiatic Commerce Corporation of New York, later known as Brother International Corporation (BIC), a subsidiary of the Nippon Company. Nippon wanted to solve certain design and operational problems it was having in developing a zigzag sewing machine for sale in the United States. Adler joined BIC, moved to Japan, and succeeded in helping correct the design issues. Adler named the machine the "Select-O-Matic" because by turning a few knobs, an operator could select one of the six patterns that the machine produced.
Adler stayed with BIC until 1959, and worked on a variety of sewing machines, including an automatic zigzag machine and the versatile “Pacesetter,” which was unveiled in the United States to great acclaim at the Sewing Machine Show in New York City on July 18, 1955 (a version of the Pacesetter is still sold by Brother). Additionally, he worked on a line of industrial and domestic sewing machines, home washing machines, home knitting machines, and other small appliances. Adler earned several Japanese patents for his work.

Among Adler’s writings is a pronouncement of his passion for invention: “When an idea is conceived by an inventor, it never leaves him in peace, it possesses him day and night until it is expressed, after which he enjoys a sense of relief and accomplishment.”


**Issued United States Patents:**

- Receptacle tap (2,184,263)
- Correlating device (2,284,843)
- Sewing machine (2,561,643)
- Sewing machine feed (2,473,934)
- Bobbin winder for sewing machine (2,455,638)
- Extension leaf for sewing machines (2,464,838)
- Sewing machine feed (2,473,934)
- Threading device (2,516,171)
- Sewing machine pressure bar (2,554,970)
- Sewing machine needle bar operating mechanism (2,554,971)
- Sewing machine (2,561,643)
- Sewing machine (2,709,978)
- Attachment for zigzag sewing machines (3,016,030)
- Sewing machine (3,053,207) assigned to Nippon Sewing Machine Manufacturing Company
- Sewing machine (3,055,325) assigned to Nippon Sewing Machine Manufacturing Company
- Method and apparatus for making non-woven fabric (3,236,711) assigned to Adler Process Corporation
- Method and apparatus for producing pile fabric (3,309,252) assigned to Adler Process Corporation
- Method and apparatus for production of pile fabric and the like (3,424,632) assigned to Adler Process Corporation
- Combined ashtray, cigarette holder and lighter (Des. 163,984)
Scope and Content Note

The papers include correspondence, photographs, notes, drawings, sketches, patents, litigation records, and printed materials, primarily documenting Adler's work with sewing machine technology. The papers provide insight into an independent inventor’s process of invention and Japanese work culture during the post-World War II period.

**Series 1, Personal Materials, 1920s-1950s and undated** consists primarily of high school chemistry and biology notes, business cards, photographs, speeches, and writings of Sol Adler. The photographs contain one black-and-white portrait of Adler, November 1958, and two negatives of him from the nineteen teens; and one scanned copy of a photograph, circa the 1920s of Sol Adler with his children, R. Michael and Diane Zoe Adler. There is a small booklet, Agreement between Manufacturers Machine and Tool Co., Inc., and Amalgamated Machine and Instrument Local No. 475 from 1941. Adler worked for Manufacturers Machine and Tool Co., Inc.

**Series 2, Inventions**, is divided into two subseries: Subseries 1, Other, 1919-1980 and undated, and Subseries 2, Sewing Machines, 1938-1962 and undated. Arranged chronologically, both subseries highlight Adler's inventive work. While the primary focus of Adler's invention work was on sewing machines, his interests were broad.

**Subseries 1, Other Inventions, 1919-1980 and undated**, contains documentation in the form of drawings and sketches, photographs, correspondence, and patents. Overall, the documentation is uneven. The inventions include a dividing head (a specialized tool that allows a workpiece to be easily and precisely rotated to preset angles or circular divisions); decorative window treatment; telescoping umbrella; can opener; question/answer machine; correlating device; radio station recording device; receptacle tap; fountain pen; television projection device; combined ash tray and cigarette holder; automatic machine gun; juice blender; thermonuclear idea; apparatus for producing pile fabric; an extensible, retractable and concealable table; and textile machinery.

Only some of Adler's inventions were patented. However, many of his ideas were well documented through drawings or descriptive text. In some instances prototypes were built.

The **question and answer machine**, 1939, was approximately three feet by four feet and was powered by a battery, the device was intended for educational use by children and adults. It used interchangeable answer cards on a broad range of subjects and informed the user of a correct and wrong answer by lights and a buzzer.

The **correlating device**, 1942, was designed for automobile use, and it combined driving directions and maps on a roll of paper data mounted on the dashboard. Although patented (US Patent 2,282,843), the device was never manufactured.

The **radio station recording device**, 1939, was a device to maintain a record of radio stations tuned on a radio receiver during a twenty-four hour period using recording disks.

The **receptacle tap (Siphon-It)**, 1939, was patented (US Patent 2,184,263). The Siphon-It was designed to fit any size bottle, can, or the like containing fluids without removing the bottle cap. The "tap" punctured the bottle cap and was then turned like a screw several times. It allowed the contents under pressure to not lose carbonation and be poured easily.

The **combined ash tray and cigarette holder and lighter**, 1951, was Adler's only design patent (US Patent Des. 163,984). Purely ornamental, the tray would light and hold a cigarette.

The **automatic machine gun**, 1952, was conceived of by Adler and his son R. Michael Adler. The drawings and accompanying narrative text detail a method for cooling the gun through the use of an
automatically operated gas turbine centrifugal air compressor and a gun of simple design with few parts and capable of an extremely high rate of fire. Adler submitted his drawings and text to the United States Army Ordnance Department at the Pentagon, but it was not manufactured.

Adler's **thermonuclear fusion proposal**, a technical paper written in 1960, was never realized. The paper, titled "Attempt to Utilize the Concentrated Magnetic Field Around a Pinched Plasma Column as the Focal Point for Particle Acceleration," details through text and schematics Adler's ideas about a thermonuclear reactor. Additionally, there is correspondence, journal articles, newspaper articles, and a notebook with notes from other publications and some loose drawings related to thermonuclear issues.

An **apparatus for producing pile fabric** (US Patent 3,309,252), was patented in 1967. The intention of the apparatus was to create a method for producing carpets and rugs in a fast, practical, and inexpensive way.

Adler's work with **non-woven textiles and fabrics** (see US Patent 3,250,655) is well documented through correspondence, drawings, notes, fabric samples, and photographs. Adler founded the Adler Process Corporation in the 1960s as a research and development organization specializing in the development of products for domestic and industrial uses. The corporation also built machinery for the commercial production of the products which included pile fabric (such as carpeting), non-woven fabrics, and leather-like material. A prospectus details the "Adler Process."

Method and apparatus for production of pile carpeting and the like (US Patent 3,424,632, 3,592,374, and 3,655,490)

**Subseries 2, Sewing machines, 1938-1962 and undated**, consists primarily of documentation about the development of the Pacesetter sewing machine and its predecessors through correspondence, drawings and sketches, photographs, guide manuals, and promotional materials. Adler constructed skeletal aluminum models to better understand the functions and internal mechanisms of sewing machines. Between 1940 and 1948, he designed and constructed a sewing machine prototype, which he called his “Parent Machine.” The Parent Machine would become known as the Pacesetter. Seven patents were awarded for the novel mechanisms contained within this prototype (US Patent 2,561,643), the most notable being for a compact sewing machine that could expand to a full-sized machine. Additional sewing machine inventions include the needleless sewing machine; a zig-zag sewing machine, and an attachment for a zig-zag sewing machine (US Patent 3,016,030).

While working as an engineer for the Brother International Corporation in Japan in the early 1950s, Adler developed the Pacesetter sewing machine. This portable machine was designed to meet the rapidly growing popularity of multiple decorative and embroidery patterns. A selector dial, which Adler called the "Wishing Dial," controlled sixteen internal cams, multiple cam selectors and followers to automatically sew thirty different basic decorative stitch patterns. Since the Pacesetter could sew both zigzag and straight stitches, varying the width and length of the basic patterns made it possible to create thousands of decorative variations. Adler introduced the Pacesetter sewing machine at the Independent Sewing Machine Dealers Show in New York, July 18, 1955.

**Series 3, Brother International Corporation, 1954-1959 and undated**

Started in 1908 by Kanekichi Yasui, the Yasui Sewing Machine Company manufactured and repaired sewing machines. The company was later renamed Yasui Brother Sewing Machine Company by Masayoshi Yasui, the eldest of Kanekichi's ten children, who inherited the company. The new name reflected the involvement and spirit of cooperation of other "brothers" in the Yasui family.

In 1934, the Yasui brothers liquidated the Yasui Brother Sewing Machine Company and created the Nippon Sewing Machine Company in Nagoya, Japan. Nippon emerged in response to a Japanese sewing machine market dominated by imported products, and it began mass producing industrial sewing machines. In 1941, Brother Sales, Ltd. was established as a sales outlet for the Japanese market,
and in 1954 Brother International Corporation (BIC) was created as an exporting company with offices established in New York City. The company actively promoted exporting in advance of other Japanese companies.

Adler joined BIC in 1954 as a consultant for their product design and development work. This work was previously done in-house by design and engineering staff, so Adler, an American, was charting new territory. The materials in this series consist of corporate histories, and annual report, correspondence, product literature, conference materials, and notebooks maintained by Adler. The latter constitutes the bulk of the material along with the correspondence.

The "conference" materials document a meeting Adler attended, presumably in Japan in 1957. The file contains detailed notes about product marketing and production factors. A flow chart for "product coordinating factors" outlines the motivations, idea sources, management control, and execution of an idea generally.

The correspondence, 1954-1958, consists of letters and inter-company communications (memorandum), patents and drawings between Sol Adler, Max Hugel and the legal firm of, Kane, Dalsmier and Kane of New York. The correspondence relates almost exclusively to patenting matters, especially by Adler and legal matters involving Singer Sewing Manufacturing Company alleging that Brother International infringed on certain Singer-owned patents.

The notebooks of Solomon Adler, approximately 1951-1958, consists primarily of materials documenting Adler's work in Japan on sewing machines. The materials were assembled by Adler and titled "notebook." Some of the materials are three hole punched (indicating they may have been in a three-ring notebook) and are both handwritten and typescript. Also included are chronologies of his work; translations of Japanese words into English; drawings in pencil on tracing paper; sketches in pencil on scrap paper and letterhead; detailed notes about mechanisms and methods of sewing machine operation; business cards; comparative data for sewing machines; and correspondence.

Of note is the "digest" or chronology of events from 1958 to 1959 maintained by Adler to detail the alleged patent infringement of BIC on Singer Sewing machine patents. The digest also notes the value, author of a document, to whom it was sent, date, and a brief description. Adler created a ranking system for his digest, assigning different values, very important, urgent, important, and general. He also compiled a chart of competitor sewing machines by brand name. Many of the Japanese documents--patents and drawings--bear Adler's "chop" or rubber stamp with Japanese characters for his surname.

In 1958, Singer Sewing Machine Company filed a lawsuit against Nippon Sewing Machine Company for patent infringement by BIC's Pacesetter and Select-O-Matic sewing machines. Adler, on behalf of Nippon, conducted extensive patent research into the allegations, working with BIC attorneys in New York as well as creating new sewing machine designs to overcome Singer's claims. In 1959, Singer filed another lawsuit alleging that Nippon was violating United States customs laws by shipping automatic zigzag sewing machines to the United States, which were alleged to infringe on Singer patents. Correspondence related to this patent infringement can be found in Series 3: Brother International Corporation.

Adler returned to the United States in April of 1959 as the representative for Nippon and the Japanese sewing machine industry to help prepare the case and act as a consultant. BIC and Singer representatives appeared before the United States Tariff Commission (USTC). Adler officially testified on behalf of BIC, explaining the three angle cam structure difference between the Singer #401 sewing machine and imported Japanese sewing machines. Adler's testimony was successful, and with patent problems resolved, Adler resigned from BIC in July of 1959 and commenced a long negotiation with the company for financial compensation for his invention work.

**References**


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**Arrangement**

The collection is arranged into four series:

**Series 1, Personal Materials, 1920-1950s and undated**

**Series 2, Inventions, 1938-1980**

Subseries 1, Other, 1938-1980

Subseries 2, Sewing, 1938-1962 and undated

**Series 3, Brother International Corporation, 1952-1961**

**Series 4, Publications, 1953-1967**

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**Names and Subject Terms**

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

**Subjects:**

- Inventors
- Sewing machines

**Types of Materials:**

- Correspondence
- Drawings--20th century
- Legal records
- Notes
- Photographs--20th century
- Printed material
- Sketches
Container Listing

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Box 1, Folder 2  High school chemistry notes, [1916?]
Box 1, Folder 3  High school biology notes, [1916?]
Box 1, Folder 4  Business card, circa 1950s
Box 1, Folder 5  Address book with loose notes, 1974–1985
Box 1, Folder 6  Photographs, 1920s, 1958
Box 1, Folder 6A Agreement between Manufacturers Machine and Tool Co., Inc., and Amalgamated Machine and Instrument Local No. 475, 1941
Box 1, Folder 7  Speeches, 1955, 1955, undated
Box 1, Folder 8  Writings, "Just a Poor Boy's Will" undated
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Series 2: Inventions, 1938-1980

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- Box 5, Folder 1: Dividing head, 1919 June 14
- Box 5, Folder 2: Decorative window structure, 1935 February 11
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- Box 1, Folder 12: Question/Answer machine, 1939
- Box 5, Folder 4: Correlating Device, 1939 March
- Box 5, Folder 5: Radio station recording device, 1939 September 9
- Box 1, Folder 13: Receptacle tap (Siphon-It), 1939 December 19
- Box 1, Folder 14: Fountain pen (with bladder), 1940 April 12
- Box 1, Folder 15: Television projection device, 1940 March 4
- Box 5, Folder 6: Combined ash tray, cigartte holder and lighter, 1951 July 24
- Box 4, Folder 1: Automatic machine gun, 1952 July 8
- Box 4, Folder 2: Juice blender (painting), 1955
- Box 1, Folder 16: Combination vertical canister tytpe vacuum cleaner, [1957?]
- Box 1, Folder 17: Combined vacuum and floor polisher, 1957
- Box 1, Folder 18-19: Thermonuclear fusion (correspondence), 1957-1969
- Box 1, Folder 19: Thermonuclear fusion (notebook with loose notes and drawings), circa 1950s
- Box 1, Folder 19A: Theronuclear fusion (paper. Attempt to utilize the concentrated magnetic field around a pinched plasma column as the focal point for particle acceleration), 1958 August 6, 1960
- Box 1, Folder 19B: Thermonuclear fusion (publications), 1942, 1957-1958
- Box 1, Folder 19C: Thermonuclear fusion (publications), 1951, 1956, 1958
  - Atmos for Peace Digest, 1958
  - Reviews of Modern Physics, 1956 July
  - General Electric Review, 1958 September
  - Mechanical Engineers Handbook (notes), 1951
Box 1, Folder 20  Carpet machine (general information), 1955-1974
Box 1, Folder 21  Carpet machine (photographs), circa 1960s
Box 1, Folder 22  Carpet machine (notes), circa 1960s
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Box 1, Folder 26-28  Adler process pile carpet system, 1966-1970
Box 1, Folder 29  Pile carpeting, 1973
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Box 1, Folder 31  Washer/dryer, undated
Box 1, Folder 32  Miscellaneous sketches, 1949, undated
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Box 2, Folder 1B  Sewing machine (#5, free arm), [1954-1962?]
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Box 2, Folder 3  Sewing machine (lateral feed), 1957-1958
Box 2, Folder 3A  Sewing machine having a displaceable feed dog, 1957-1959
Box 2, Folder 4  Needleless sewing machine, 1958
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**Subseries 2.3: Non-Woven Textiles, 1950-1980**

The Adler Process, developed by the Adler Process Corporation, is a method of orienting yarns in a transverse relationship so as to produce fabrics from a large variety of yarns with physical properties. Materials consist of reports, notes,
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Box 3, Folder 42  Apparatus for production of non-woven materials, 1969-1972


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Box 3, Folder 45-46  Fabric test samples, [circa 1960s?]

Box 3, Folder 47  Thermal and radiation protection fabrics, 1962

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Box 3, Folder 49  Project history and cost, 1962

Box 3, Folder 50  Leather-like material, 1950


Box 3, Folder 52  Comparison chart, shuttless loom, weave-ex machine production, manpower efficiency, circa 1960s

Box 3, Folder 53  Project synopsis (typescript report), undated

Box 3, Folder 54  Samples, undated

Box 3, Folder 55  Castro Convertibles, 1980
Series 3: Brother International Corporation (BIC), 1952-1961

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Box 2, Folder 15   Annual report, 1957
Box 2, Folder 15A  Pacesetter fashion Show (press materials), 1955

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Box 2, Folder 16   Correspondence, 1954
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Box 3, Folder 11  Ambassador Douglas MacArthur’s visit to the Nippon Sewing Machine Mfg. Company, 1957 August
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Box 3, Folder 20  Exhibit #9 (letter from Sumitomo Shoji Kaisha, Ltd.), 1958
Box 3, Folder 21  Exhibits #10, #10A, #10B (Operation Success, 21 Patterns of Success from the Lives of American Business Leaders), 1957
Box 3, Folder 22  Exhibit #11 (itinerary for Douglass MacArthur visit to Nippon Sewing Machine Company), 1957 August
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Box 3, Folder 34  Exhibit #28, (letter to Sol Adler from Martin Y. Hirabayashi, American Embassy, Tokyo), 1957 May
Box 3, Folder 35  Exhibit #29, (newspaper clippings), 1960 May
Box 3, Folder 36  Exhibit #30 (typescript of the limitation characteristics of the conventional rotary high speed sewing machine), undated
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Box 3, Folder 40  *New Japan Sewing Machine News*, May 1958
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