

**J. Robert F. Swanson (1900-1981)
and
Pipsan Saarinen Swanson (1905-1979)**

Papers, 1900-1983
11.5 linear ft.

Acquisition Number: 1990-01

Acquisition: This collection was a gift to the Cranbrook Archives by Robert Saarinen Swanson and Ronald Saarinen Swanson on September 18, 1990, with several additions thereafter.

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Photographs: Boxes 10 through 16

Index: See end of finding aid.

Processing: James Luzenski & Lori Smith Hoogasian (inventory)
Sylvia Cantoni, 1996 (processing boxes 1-8, finding aid)
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History

J.[ons] Robert F.[erdinand] Swanson (Bob) was born on June 14, 1900 in Menominee, Michigan to Swan Swanson, a lumberjack, and Anna Nordquist, both of whom were natives of Sweden. The Swanson family moved from northern Michigan to Grand Rapids, and later to Adrian, MI, where Bob graduated from high school.

Eva Lisa Saarinen (Pipsan) was born in Kirkkonummi, Finland on March 31, 1905. Pipsan was the daughter of Eliel Saarinen, an internationally distinguished architect, and Loja Gesellius, an accomplished sculptor, weaver, fabric and textile designer. Pipsan attended the Atheneum Art School and the University of Helsinki where she studied weaving, ceramics, and fabric design.

Bob was a student of architecture at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor when he met Pipsan through her father, who was a guest faculty member. Bob also met and became a close friend of Henry (Harry) Scripps Booth. In 1924, after graduating, Bob and Harry began work at Cranbrook and created the architectural firm of Swanson and Booth. The firm for many years also included Eliel and his son Eero.

Bob broke away to establish his own firm of Swanson Associates, and in 1933, moved the firm to the Guardian Building in downtown Detroit. It was at this time that Pipsan joined Bob as interior designer. Eliel was a partner for a number of years as the company developed. Pipsan became a partner in 1944. Notably, theirs became the first architectural firm that included interiors as part of the organization.

In 1935, the firm moved to the Wabeek Building in Birmingham, and in 1946 relocated to the old Circle School building on Long Lake Road near Woodward Ave. in Bloomfield Hills. The firm remained on this site through several building expansions.

The Swansons, married in 1926, were lifelong design partners, and their work encompassed exteriors and interiors of many types: residences, schools, universities, churches, airports, banks and government, industrial, and commercial developments. They traveled extensively and raised two sons, Robert Saarinen Swanson and Ronald Saarinen Swanson. Pipsan passed away on October 23, 1979; Bob on March 13, 1981.

Scope and Content of Collection

This collection is a portion of a larger set of documents pertaining to the Saarinen family and donated to the Cranbrook Archives by Robert Saarinen Swanson and Ronald Saarinen Swanson between December 1989 and September 1990. Two separate

collections were created as the set included documents relating to: 1) the Saarinen family—Eliel, Loja, Pipsan, and Eero; and 2) the Swansons—Bob and Pipsan.

The Papers of J. Robert F. Swanson and Pipsan Saarinen Swanson are organized into four (4) series: **Projects**, **Topical**, **Photographic Materials**, and **Oversized Materials**. At the folder level, documents are arranged in chronological order, with undated material grouped before those with dates. Selected envelopes have been retained for the information they provide.

The **Projects** series (Boxes 1-6) represents the bulk of the collection and consists of the records and individual projects of the Swanson's architecture and design business. Included are notes and correspondence relating to design, construction, customer accounts, research sources, clippings, and reviews.

The **Topical** series (Boxes 6-8) is divided into three subseries: business records, personal documents, and professional documents. The arrangement is alphabetical order within each subseries. A distinction is made between business and personal correspondence and these documents are foldered as subheadings under the appropriate main heading.

Photographs, slides, transparencies and negatives can be found in the **Photographic Materials** series (Boxes 9-14). Project materials are arranged by date; all other materials are arranged alphabetically. Of special interest is the collection of glass negatives in Box 14, containing works created by members of the Saarinen Swanson Group, and copies of architectural drawings from selected Swanson Associates projects.

The **Oversized Materials** series (Boxes 15-18) contain oversized photographs, project materials, and a University of Michigan scrapbook belonging to Bob Swanson.

Related Collections

- Saarinen Family Papers, Acc. # 1990-08
- Cranbrook Architectural Office Files, Acc. # 1989-01

Box Number--Description

Series I PROJECTS SERIES

Box 1

1. 1924-36, Mendelssohn residences
2. 1924-36, Mendelssohn residences
3. 1924-36, Mendelssohn residences
4. 1924-36, Mendelssohn residences
5. 1927, Towerknoll
6. 1930, Bloomfield Hills School
7. 1930, Packard Motor Company, steering wheel patent
8. 1935, Swanson (Everett C.) residence
9. 1936, Bloomfield Hills School addition
10. 1936, Calingaert residence
11. 1936, Calingaert residence
12. 1936, Jeffries residence
13. 1936, Stalker residence
14. 1937-40, piano design
15. 1937, Salmon residence
16. 1937, Stern residence

Box 2

1. 1939, Cranbrook Academy of Art
2. 1939, Hassberger residence
3. 1939, Koebel residence
4. 1939, Koebel residence
5. 1939, Koebel residence
6. 1939, Koebel residence
7. 1939, Koebel residence
8. 1939, Koebel residence
9. 1939, Koebel residence
10. 1939, Patten residence
11. 1939, Sepeshy residence
12. 1939, Wayne University, campus competition
13. 1942, Alexander Hamilton Memorial
14. 1942, Willow Run townsite development

Box 3

1. 1945, General Motors Technical Center
2. 1946, Veterans Memorial Building, Lapeer, MI
3. 1947, Drake University
4. 1947, Saarinen Swanson Design Group

5. 1947, Saarinen Swanson Design Group
6. 1947, Saarinen Swanson Design Group
7. 1948, Birmingham National Bank
8. 1948, Des Moines Art Center
9. 1949-50, Champaign-Urbana, IL city plan
10. 1949, Sol-Air Furniture
11. 1950, Wilmette, IL Planning Board
12. 1951, Torry Elementary School
13. 1952, First Baptist Church, Flint, MI
14. 1952, Birmingham High School
15. 1952, University of Michigan, Children's Hospital Psychiatric Unit
16. 1952, University of Michigan, Children's Hospital Psychiatric Unit
17. 1952, University of Michigan, Children's Hospital Psychiatric Unit

Box 4

1. 1953, flexible classrooms
2. 1953, MacManus, John and Adams, Inc.
3. 1953, patent, stackable chair and table
4. 1954, Best Elementary School
5. 1954, patent, farm gate
6. 1954, Swanson Associates building addition
7. 1955, Hickory Grove School District survey
8. 1955-56, Eastern Michigan College dormitory complex
9. 1957, National Cowboy Hall of Fame and Museum competition
10. 1957, Traverse City State Hospital survey
11. 1958, Eastern Michigan College
12. 1958, Oakland County Planning Commission
13. 1958, Oakland County Planning Commission
14. 1958, Oakland County Planning Commission

Box 5

1. 1958, University of Michigan, Student Activities Building addition
2. 1959, Holy Cross Lutheran Church
3. 1959, Michigan College of Mining and Technology
4. 1959, Michigan State University, Oakland
5. 1960, Countryside Town House development
6. 1960, Sacred Heart Seminary
7. 1961, West Bloomfield Township development
8. 1962, Bloomfield Hills development (also the 1947 plan)
9. 1962, Oakland County Aviation Committee
10. 1963, Pontiac Municipal Airport
11. 1967-69, Oakland-Orion Airport
12. 1968, Detroit Bank and Trust (Ferndale, MI)
13. 1969, Oakland County Service Center

14. 1970, Governor's Committee of 21
15. 1971, Harbor Springs, MI, various projects
16. 1971, Muskegon Mental Retardation Center
17. 1971, University of Michigan, Architecture and Design Building

Box 6

1. 1971-72, Business prospects
2. 1972, Business prospects
3. 1973, Business prospects
4. 1973, Business prospects
5. 1973, Business prospects
6. 1971-73, Universarium, San Diego Hall of Science
7. 1974, Lone Pine Office Building

Series II TOPICAL SERIES

Business Records subseries

8. Accounts Payable, 1970-72
9. Accounts Receivable, 1947

Box 7

1. Employees, 1959-74
2. Expense Reports, 1969-71
3. Expense Reports, 1969-71
4. Expense Reports, 1969-71
5. Expense Reports, 1969-71
6. Expense Reports, 1969-71
7. Organizational History, 1954-69
8. Taxes, 1965-71
9. Vendors—Mutual Sunset Manufacturing Company, 1948-55
10. Vendors—Raphael Company, Inc., 1953-71
11. Vendors—textiles, 1948-59, 1971
12. Vendors—U.S. Glass Company, 1951-62

Box 8

Personal Documents subseries

1. Correspondence—general, 1949-80
2. Correspondence—Finland, 1966-68
3. Correspondence—J. Robert F. Swanson and Pipsan Saarinen Swanson, 1925-[49]
4. Correspondence—Swanson family, n.d., 1918-84
5. Cranbrook Academy of Art, 1966-68

6. J. Robert F. Swanson, biographical materials, 1900-83
7. J. Robert F. Swanson, confirmation certificate and prayer book, 1915
8. J. Robert F. Swanson, high school yearbook, 1918
9. J. Robert F. Swanson, sketchbook [European tour], c.1922
10. Marriage, J. Robert F. Swanson and Pipsan Saarinen Swanson, 1926
11. Pipsan Saarinen Swanson, biographical materials, 1933-83
12. Pipsan Saarinen Swanson, address book, n.d.
13. Swanson Family—children, 1962-83
14. Swanson Family—deed to land in Marquette, MI, 1905
15. Swanson Family—genealogy, 1976-77

Box 9

1. Travel—Itenaries and correspondence, n.d., 1952-79
2. Travel—Passports, various dates
3. Travel—Souvenirs, n.d., 1954-62

Professional Documents subseries

4. American Institute of Architects—Awards—J. Robert F. Swanson, 1956, 1968
5. American Institute of Architects—Awards—Pipsan Saarinen Swanson, 1969-71
6. American Institute of Decorators—Awards—Pipsan Saarinen Swanson, 1947-49
7. American Institute of Interior Designers—Award—Pipsan Saarinen Swanson, 1961-62
8. American Society of Interior Designers, 1975
9. Bibliographies of published works, 1934-39
10. Correspondence—general, 1969-75
11. Fine Hardwoods Association—Award—Pipsan Saarinen Swanson, 1956
12. Interview transcripts—J. Robert F. Swanson, 1957, 1980
13. Publications—correspondence, 1939-74
14. Publications—J. Robert F. Swanson, 1945-52
15. Publications—Pipsan Saarinen Swanson, 1931

Series III PHOTOGRAPHIC MATERIALS SERIES

Box 10

Family Photographs subseries

1. Photos, J. Robert F. Swanson—Portraits, various dates
2. Photos, Pipsan Saarinen Swanson—Portraits, various dates
3. Photos, Swanson family, various dates

4. Photos, Swanson family, various dates
5. Photos, Swanson family, various dates
6. Photos, Swanson family, various dates
7. Photos, Robert Saarinen Swanson home, with visitors from Hvittrask, 2001
8. Photos, Towerknoll, various dates
9. Photos, Travel, various dates
10. Photos, Travel—Finland, c.1970s

Projects subseries

11. Photos, J.R. Adams residence, n.d.
12. Photos, Flynn Memorial Skating House, Belle Isle (Detroit), n.d.
13. Photos, Tom Green residence (New Castle, IN), n.d.
14. Photos, Wabeek Country Club (Bloomfield Hills, MI), n.d.
15. Photos, Vaughan School (aka Bloomfield Hills School), 1930, 1936
16. Photos, Kingswood School, 1930-31

Box 11

1. Photos, 1936 Mendelssohn residence
- 1A. Photos, 1939 Koebel residence
2. Photos, 1939 Worlds Fair
3. Photos, 1940 C.G. Eden residence
4. Photos, 1941 Linda Vista defense housing (San Diego, CA)
5. Photos, 1942 Kramer Homes defense housing (Centerline, MI)
6. Photos, 1945 General Motors Technical Center
7. Photos, 1945 General Motors Technical Center publicity
8. Photos, 1948 Des Moines Art Center
9. Photos, 1949-50 Champaign-Urbana, IL city planning
10. Photos, c.1950 Louisiana State University development plans
11. Photos, 1951 Torry Elementary School
12. Photos, 1952-52 Birmingham High School (Seaholm)
13. Photos, 1952 First Baptist Church (Flint, MI)
14. Photos, 1958 Eastern Michigan College [University]
15. Photos, 1959 "Look Homeward America" exhibit
16. Photos, c.1961 Oakland University student center
17. Photos, 1965 University of Michigan, North Campus student center
18. Photos, c.1967 Swanson building
19. Photos, Book *Memoria Descriptiva y Constructiva*

Box 12

1. Photos, Ceramics (Lydia Winston)—Saarinen Swanson Group
2. Photos, Chairs—stackable and unistack
3. Photos, Flatware
4. Photos, Furniture general

5. Photos, Furniture general
6. Photos, Furniture general
7. Photos, Furniture general
8. Photos, Furniture—Sol Air
9. Photos, Lamps
10. Photos, Pianos
11. Photos, Rugs
12. Photos, Rugs
13. Photos, Sculpture (Bob Swanson)
14. Photos, Textiles
15. Photos, Textiles

Box 13

Family subseries

1. Slides, Swanson family, various dates
2. Slides, Towerknoll, 1960, 1972, 1978
3. Slides, Vacation (architecture), various dates

Project subseries

4. Slides, J.R. Adams residence, n.d.
5. Slides, 1939 Koebel residence
6. Slides, 1958-59, 1962 Michigan State University, Oakland
7. Slides, 1959 “Look Homeward America” exhibit
8. Slides, 1962 Countryside Development
9. Slides, 1963 Circle School addition
10. Slides, 1965-72 L’arbre Croche annex
11. Slides, 1967 Swanson Associates Building
12. Slides, 1971 Helen Eden apartment interior (New York, NY)
13. Slides, 1971 Plymouth Hilton
14. Slides, Projects misc. (Pipsan interiors), various dates
15. Slides, Projects misc., various dates
16. Transparencies, Advertisement for Pittsburgh Paint, Life Magazine, c.1950
17. Transparencies, “Look Homeward America” exhibit, 1959
18. Transparencies, Textiles, n.d.
19. Negatives, family photographs and Pipsan’s work, not complete

Box 14

(All 4x5 glass negatives)

1. Saarinen Swanson Group organizational chart
2. Group display layout, Johnson Furniture Company, Grand Rapids, MI
3. Bedroom #2, Johnson Furniture Co.
4. Group display model, Johnson Furniture Co.
5. Living room #1, Johnson Furniture Co.
6. Bedroom #9?, Johnson Furniture Co.

7. Living room #10, Johnson Furniture Co.
8. Dining room #11, Johnson Furniture Co.
9. Boys room #12, Saarinen Swanson Group, Johnson Furniture Co.
10. Den #13?, Johnson Furniture Co.
11. Dining room #14, Johnson Furniture Co.
12. Group exhibit, Saarinen Swanson Group, Johnson Furniture Co.
13. Group exhibit, Saarinen Swanson Group, Johnson Furniture Co.
14. Group exhibit, Johnson Furniture Co.
15. Textile display, Johnson Furniture Co.
16. Candelabra, Saarinen Swanson Group
17. Candlestick holder, Saarinen Swanson Group
18. Place setting, Saarinen Swanson Group
19. Ashtrays/bowl, Saarinen Swanson Group
20. Glassware, Saarinen Swanson Group
21. Glass bowls, Saarinen Swanson Group
22. Pottery, Saarinen Swanson Group, Johnson Furniture Co.
23. Pottery, Saarinen Swanson Group
24. Desk lamp, Saarinen Swanson Group
25. Lamp, Saarinen Swanson Group
26. Floor lamp, Saarinen Swanson Group
27. Serving cart, Swanson design. Photo taken on screen porch of Saarinen House
28. Vase, Saarinen Swanson Group
29. Vase, Saarinen Swanson Group
- 30-46. Champaign-Urbana city planning, Swanson Associates
- 47-54. Birmingham High School, models and floor plans (now Seaholm)
- 55-62. Torry Elementary School, floor plans, site plans, perspectives, Swanson Associates
- 63-73. First Baptist Church, site plans, floor plans, perspectives, Swanson Associates

Series IV OVERSIZED MATERIALS

Box 15

1. Photos, Rug design, Pipsan Saarinen Swanson
2. Photos, Rug design, Pipsan Saarinen Swanson

Box 16

1. Photos, Cranbrook Educational Community, n.d.
2. Photos, from J. Robert F. Swanson's European tour, c.1922
3. Photos, General Motors Technical Center, Hugh Ferriss renderings, c. early 1940s.
4. Photos, Oakland University, Student Center, c.early 1960s

5. Photos, Piano design, c.1930s
6. Photos, Kramer Homes, defense housing project, Centerline, MI, c.1942
7. Photos, Hassberger residence, 1941

Box 17

1. J. Robert F. Swanson, high school and college materials, 1918-24
2. Swanson Associates organizational history, c.1960s
3. Champaign-Urbana, IL city plan, 1949-50
4. New Castle, IN, 1944
5. Oakland University, c.early 1960s
6. Project lists, Swanson Associates, 1948-74
7. Smithsonian competition, 1939
8. Sketchbook, n.d.

Box 18

1. J. Robert F. Swanson—University of Michigan photo album and scrapbook, c.early 1920s.
2. Quito, Equador - *Memoria Descriptiva y Constructiva* (1943-1944)
3. The Stephens College Campus Development Plan, Saarinen Swanson & Saarinen, May 1947
4. *Today-Tomorrow* (Philadelphia), 1945

Index

Adams, J.R. residence [photos] 10:11 [slides] 13:4

Airports

-Oakland-Orion, MI 5:11

-Pontiac, MI 5:10

Alexander Hamilton Memorial, Chicago 2:13

American Institute of Architects, Detroit chapter 9:10

American Society of Interior Designers 9:8

Arango, Jorge 8:1

Aviation, Oakland County 5:9-11

Awards 9:4-7, 9:11

-American Institute of Architects 9:4-5

-American Institute of Decorators 9:6

-American Institute of Interior Designers (V'soske Rug Design Competition) 9:7

-Fine Hardwoods Association 9:11

Baldwin, Ben 12:9

Begrow, Harold Jack 4:9

Belle Isle, Flynn Memorial Skating House [photo] 10:12

Best Elementary School (Ferndale, MI) 4:4

Birmingham High School (Seaholm High) 3:14

-negatives 14:47-54

-photos 11:12

-slides 13:15

Birmingham National Bank 3:7

Bloomfield Hills development plans 5:8

Bloomfield Hills [Elementary] School 1:6, 1:9

-photos 10:15

-slides 13:15

Booth, Henry Scripps

-account of marriage of Bob Swanson and Pipsan Saarinen Swanson 8:10

-Eliel Saarinen Memorial 8:1

Buckingham, Kate Sturgis 2:13

Business prospects 6:1-5

Business records

-accounts payable 6:8

-accounts receivable 6:9

-employees 7:1

-expense reports 7:2-6

-organizational history 7:7

-taxes 7:8

-vendors 7:9-12

Calingaert, George 1:10-11
Calingaert residence 1:10-11, 9:13
Ceramics [photos] 12:1
Champaign-Urbana, IL city plan 3:9, 17:3
 -negatives 14:30-46
 -photos 11:9
Circle School [photos] 11:18, [slides] 13:9
City Planning 9:14
Countryside Development 5:5
 -slides 13:8
Cranbrook Academy of Art (CAA) 2:1, 2:11
 -exhibition of home furnishings 8:5
 -furnishings for various academy buildings 2:1
 -Glen Paulsen reception 8:5
 -Sepeshy residence 2:11
 -Women's Committee of CAA 8:5
Cranbrook Educational Community (CEC) [photos] 16:1

Davidson, William 8:1
Des Moines Art Center 3:8
 -photos 11:8
 -slides 13:15
Detroit Bank and Trust (Ferndale, MI) 5:12
Drake University (Des Moines, IA) 3:3

Eastern Michigan College (now Eastern Michigan University) 4:11
 -dormitory complex 4:8
 -photos 11:14
Eden, C.G. residence [photos] 11:3
Eden, Helen residence, interiors [slides] 13:12

Farm gate patent 4:5
Fashion design [photos] 12:15
First Baptist Church (Flint, MI) 3:13
 -negatives 14:63-73
 -photos 11:13
Flatware [photos] 12:3
Flexible classroom furniture 4:1, 4:3
Flynn Memorial Skating House, Belle Isle [photo] 10:12
Furniture design
 -photos 12:4-8
 -slides 13:14

-Sol-Air 3:10, 12:7-8
-stackable tables and chairs 4:1, 4:3, [photos] 12:2

General Motors Technical Center 3:1

-photos 11:6-7, 16:3
Gerard, John (interview transcript with Bob Swanson) 9:12
Governor's Committee of 21 5:14
Green, Tom residence [photos] 10:13

Harbor Springs, MI (various projects) 5:15

Hardwoods Industry exhibit, Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago 9:11
Hassberger, John B. 2:2
Hassberger residence 2:2, [photos] 16:7
Herman Miller Co. 9:10
Hickory Grove School District survey 4:7
Hilton Hotel, Plymouth [MI?] 13:13
Holy Cross Lutheran Church 5:2
Hvittrask 8:2
-visitors from Hvittrask, Spring 2001 10:7
-Swansons at Finland/Hvittrask 10:10

Jeffries, Edward J. 1:12

Jeffries residence 1:12
Johnson Furniture Company 9:13, 12:4, 14:2-22

Kingswood School [photos] 10:16

Koebel, Charles 2:3-9
Koebel residence 2:3-9, 9:13
-fabric sampler 2:9
-photos 11:1A
-slides 13:5
Kramer Homes defense housing [photos] 11:5, 16:6

L'Arbre Croche [slides] 13:10

Lamp design [photos] 12:9
Linda Vista defense housing [photos] 11:4
Lone Pine Office Building 6:7
Look Homeward America exhibit [photos] 11:15, [slides] 13:7, [transparencies] 13:17
Louisiana State University campus plans [photos] 11:10

MacManus, John and Adams, Inc. 4:2
Memoria Descriptiva y Constructiva [photos from book] 11:19
Mendelssohn, Gordon 1:1-4
Mendelssohn residences 1:1-4
 -photos 11:1
 -slides 13:15
Michigan College of Mining and Technology 5:3
Michigan State Capitol Building, Committee of 21 5:14
Michigan State University, Oakland [now known as Oakland University] 5:4, 17:5
 -slides 13:6
 -student center [photos] 11:16, 16:4
Milliken, Gov. William 8:1
Moody, Martha M. 9:13
Muskegon Mental Retardation Center 5:16
Mutual Sunset Manufacturing Company 7:9

National Cowboy Hall of Fame and Museum 4:9
National Geographic Society 8:1
Negatives of photographic images (not complete) 13:19
New Castle, IN project 9:14, 17:4
 -Tom Green residence [photos] 10:13

Oakland County Aviation Committee 5:9
Oakland County Service Center (county offices) 5:13
Oakland County Planning Commission 4:12-14
Oakland-Orion Airport 5:11
Oakland University 5:4, 9:13, 17:5
 -slides 13:6
 -student center [photos] 11:16, 16:4
Organizational history 7:7, 17:3, 17:6

Packard Motor Company 1:7
 -steering wheel patent (Pipsan) 1:7
Patents
 -farm gate (Swan Swanson) 4:5
 -stackable chairs and table 4:3
 -steering wheel 1:7
Patten, Marc T. 2:10
Patten residence 2:10
Piano design 1:14
 -photos 12:10, 16:5

Pittsburgh Paint advertisement in *Life Magazine* [transparency] 13:16
Pontiac Municipal Airport 5:10
Project lists, Swanson Associates 17:6
Publications 9:14-15
 -bibliographies 9:9
 -correspondence 9:13

Quito, Ecuador 18

Rainer, Anelma 8:2
Raphael Company, Inc. 7:10
Residential Housing 9:14
Reuben H. Fleet Space Center, San Diego Hall of Science 6:6
Rug design [photos] 12:11-12, 15:1-2

Saarinen, Eliel 9:14
 -Alexander Hamilton Memorial 2:13
 -bust of at Helsinki University 8:2
 -Des Moines Art Center 3:8
Saarinen, Loja 2:1, 12:14
 -Obit 8:2
Saarinen Swanson Design Group 3:4-6, Box 12, 14:1-29
Sacred Heart Seminary 5:6
Salmon, J. Wendel 1:15
Salmon residence 1:15
School classrooms 9:14
Sculpture (Bob Swanson's only) [photo] 12:13
Seaholm High School (Birmingham) 3:14
 -photos 11:12
Sepeshy, Zoltan 2:11
Sketchbook, artist unknown 17:8
Sloan, Alfred P. 3:1
Smithsonian competition 17:7
 -slides 13:15
Sol-Air Furniture 3:10, 12:7-8
Stackable chairs and tables 4:1, 4:3
Stalker, Dr. Hugh 1:13
Stalker residence 1:13
Stern, Bernhard 1:16
Stern residence 1:16
Strengell, Marianne 3:4
Swanson, Everett C. residence 1:8
Swanson, J. Robert F.
 -75th birthday party [slides] 13:1

- biographical info 8:6
- birth certificate 8:6
- confirmation certificate and prayer book 8:7
- correspondence with Pipsan Saarinen Swanson 8:3
- high school diploma 17:1
- high school yearbook, Adrian High School 8:8
- interview transcripts with John Gerard and D. Taragin 9:12
- marriage license 8:10
- memberships and awards 8:6, 9:4
- passports 9:2
- photo from 1922-23 European tour 16:2
- portraits 10:1
- sketchbook (European tour with Henry Booth?) 8:9
- University of Michigan Architecture program 17:1
- University of Michigan scrapbook and photo album 18:1

Swanson, Janet M. 8:13

Swanson, Karen P. 8:13

Swanson, Peter D. 8:13

Swanson, Pipsan Saarinen

- address book 8:12
- awards 9:5-7, 9:11
- biographical info 8:11
- citizenship papers 8:11
- correspondence with J. Robert F. Swanson 8:3
- drivers license 8:11
- marriage license 8:10
- passports 9:2
- portraits 10:2
- social security card 8:11

Swanson, Robert Saarinen 4:9, 8:13

- photographs of home 10:7

Swanson, Robert Saarinen Jr. 8:13

Swanson, Ronald Saarinen 8:13

Swanson, Swan 4:5, 8:4, 8:14

Swanson Associates

- 1954 office addition 4:6
- organizational history (partial) and project lists 17:3, 17:6
- photos of construction and Circle School demolition 11:18
- slides of building 13:11

Swanson family 8:4, 8:13

- deed to land in Marquette, MI 8:14
- genealogy 8:15
- photographic material 10:3-10, 13:1-3

Swanson Lifetime Gate 4:5

Swanson, Saarinen and Swanson office addition [slides] 13:9

Taragin, D. (interview transcript with Bob Swanson) 9:12
Textile design [photos] 12:14-15, [slides] 13:14, [transparencies] 13:18
Textile vendors, misc. 7:11
Torry Elementary School (Birmingham) 3:12
 -negatives 14:55-62
 -photos 11:11
Towerknoll 1:5
 -1928 *Architectural Digest* article 1:5
 -photographs 10:8
 -slides 13:2
Travel (business and personal) 9:1-3
 -photographs 10:9-10
 -slides 13:3
Traverse City State Hospital 4:10

U.S. Glass Company 7:12
Universarium, San Diego Hall of Science 6:6
University of Michigan
 -Architecture and Design Building 5:17, 9:13
 -Children's Hospital Psychiatric Unit 3:15-17
 -Student Activities Building addition 5:1
 -Student Center, North Campus [photos] 11:17

Vaughan School 1:6, 1:9
 -photos 10:15
 -slides 13:15
Veterans Memorial Building, Lapeer, MI 3:2
V'soske Rug Company 9:10
V'soske Rug Design Competition 9:7

Wabeek Country Club [photos] 10:14
Wayne University (now Wayne State University) 2:12
Weese, Harry 12:9
West Bloomfield Township development 5:7
White, Lee A. 9:12
Willow Run Townsite development 2:14
Wilmette, IL planning board 3:11
Winston, Lydia 3:4, 12:1
Worlds Fair, 1939 11:2

