



Smithsonian Institution Archives

## Watson M. Perrygo Oral History Interviews, 1978

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Smithsonian Institution Archives  
Washington, D.C.  
Contact us at [osiaref@si.edu](mailto:osiaref@si.edu)

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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., <a href="mailto:osiaref@si.edu">osiaref@si.edu</a>
<b>Title:</b>	Watson M. Perrygo Oral History Interviews
<b>Identifier:</b>	Record Unit 9516
<b>Date:</b>	1978
<b>Extent:</b>	26 audiotapes (Reference copies). 52 digital .mp3 files (Reference copies).
<b>Creator::</b>	Perrygo, Watson M., interviewee
<b>Language:</b>	English

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## Administrative Information

### Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9516, Watson M. Perrygo Oral History Interviews

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## Historical Note

Watson Mondell Perrygo (1906-1984) was a naturalist who worked for the United States National Museum (USNM) from 1925-1965 as a taxidermist, field collector, and exhibits specialist. He was born in Washington, D.C., on 18 October 1906 and grew up in Prince Georges County, Maryland. In his youth, he developed an interest in natural history, spending much of his time at the USNM. While in high school, he began going on ornithological field trips with USNM Director, Alexander Wetmore; thus began a professional friendship which lasted throughout their careers.

Perrygo's entire career was spent at the USNM as a scientific aide and then taxidermist. His extensive field work included systematic surveys of the southeast United States and of Panama. He was first employed part-time by the USNM in 1925 to prepare specimens for the Philadelphia sesquicentennial. In 1927 he became a permanent employee, working part-time in the Taxidermy Studio. In 1928-1929 he was sent on his first field trip to Haiti, with Arthur J. Poole. The following year, he returned to Haiti as the Smithsonian Representative on the Parish-Smithsonian Expedition. During the 1930s he conducted a systematic program of field collecting in the southeast United States, traveling to West Virginia in 1936; Tennessee in 1937; Kentucky in 1938; North Carolina in 1939; and South Carolina in 1940. On his North Carolina trip he met a schoolteacher, Velve Howard, whom he married.

Perrygo accompanied A. Remington Kellogg to Rampart Cave, Arizona, in 1942 to excavate remains of extinct sloth. From 1946 to 1953, Perrygo and Wetmore collected in a different section of Panama each year in preparation for Wetmore's multi-volume *The Birds of Panama*. In 1946 they traveled through Darien; in 1947 up the Jaque River in Darien; in 1948 through Herrera province; in 1949 through the Province of Panama; in 1950 to Chiman and up the Maje River; in 1951 to Cerro Campana; in 1952 up the Rio Indio; and in 1953 through Sona.

As a taxidermist, Perrygo worked on many of the famous zoological specimens in the National Museum, such as "Martha," the last passenger pigeon, and the Fenykovi elephant. During the USNM Exhibits Modernization Program of the 1950s, Perrygo was very active in renovating the zoological exhibit halls. In 1960 he was placed in charge of the Taxidermy Studio until his retirement in 1965.

Perrygo restored a Charles County, Maryland, colonial estate in the fifties consisting "Ellerslie," the main house, adjacent barn (c. 1667) and outbuildings. After retirement, he served on the Board of Maryland Historic Trust and as President of the Charles County Historical Society. Perrygo directed the restoration of numerous structures, such as the Friendship House, Mudd House, and Cat-Slide House, reflecting his long-standing interests in history and historic preservation. He also was Director of Exhibits for the Botanical Garden Museum in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, from 1977 to the 1980s.

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## Introduction

The Smithsonian Institution Archives began its Oral History Program in 1973. The purpose of the program is to supplement the written documentation of the Archives' record and manuscript collections with an Oral History Collection, focusing on the history of the Institution, research by its scholars, and contributions of its staff. Program staff conduct interviews with current and retired Smithsonian staff and others who have made significant contributions to the Institution. There are also interviews conducted by researchers or students on topics related to the history of the Smithsonian or the holdings of the Smithsonian Institution Archives.

Perrygo was interviewed for the Oral History Collection because of his long association with the USNM, spanning some forty years, and his extensive knowledge of the history of the Institution

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## Descriptive Entry

Perrygo was interviewed on August 8 and 16; September 8 and 25; October 30; November 13 and 16; and December 4 and 11, 1978 by Pamela M. Henson. The interviews cover his youth and education; early associations and impressions of the museum; career at the USNM, notably his work as a taxidermist and exhibits specialist, as well as his collecting expeditions; reminiscences of colleagues and friends, such as Alexander Wetmore and A. Remington Kellogg; taxidermy technique; his work in historic preservation; and his tenure as Director of Exhibits for the Botanical Garden Museum.

Related collections in the Archives include Record Unit 7306, The Watson M. Perrygo Papers; Record Unit 7006, The Alexander Wetmore Papers, which contains photograph albums from their Panama trips; and Record Units 7215 and 7217, Collected Notes, Lists, Drawings and Catalogs on Birds and Mammals, respectively, which contain Perrygo's field notebooks.

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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:

History  
Interviews  
Mammalogy

Museum techniques  
Oral history  
Taxidermy

Types of Materials:

Audiotapes  
Transcripts

Names:

Botanical Museum (Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic)  
Charles County (Maryland). Historical Society  
Henson, Pamela M., interviewer  
Kellogg, Remington, 1892-1969  
Maryland Historical Trust  
National Museum of Natural History (U.S.). Division of Mammals  
Perrygo, Watson M., 1906-1984  
United States National Museum  
United States National Museum. Exhibits Modernization Program  
United States National Museum. Taxidermist  
Wetmore, Alexander, 1886-1978

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## Container Listing

### Interviews

Interviews

#### **Interview 1: August 8, 1978**

Interviews

Covers his youth and education; local field trips with Wetmore; early career at the USNM, including work on the Philadelphia sesquicentennial exhibit, in the Division of Mammals, in the Taxidermy Studio, and on field trips to Haiti in 1928-1929 and to Rampart Cave, Arizona, in 1942; recollections of colleagues; and the history of the Taxidermy Studio; c. 1906-1950.

[Digital Content: Taxidermists Julian S. Warmbath, Charles R. Aschemeier, Watson M. Perrygo, and William L. Brown work on mounting a hippopotamus for exhibition in the United States National Museum \(now the National Museum of Natural History\) in the 1930s. \[Image no. MAH 11087-A or MAH11087A\]](#)

[Digital Content: Watson M. Perrygo stands in his Taxidermy Studio located in the United States National Museum \(USNM\), now the National Museum of Natural History \(NMNH\), 1940. \[Image no. 81-13383\]](#)

[Digital Content: Velva Perrygo, wife of Watson M. Perrygo, a taxidermist at the United States National Museum, is standing outside a store on F Street, N.W., Washington, D.C., c. late 1930s or early 1940s. \[Image no. 83-9646\]](#)

[Digital Content: Lee H. Parish, who along with his parents, sponsored an expedition to Haiti to collect natural history specimens, stands holding a coconut. Watson M. Perrygo, taxidermist at the United States National Museum, was a member of the expedition, 1930. \[Image no. 83-9644\]](#)

[Digital Content: Watson M. Perrygo, on the deck of the yacht "Esperanza," holds an iguana by the tail, 1930. \[Image no. 84-8051\]](#)

[Digital Content: The sailing ship "Esperanza" captained by Lee H. Parish and used by Watson M. Perrygo and others on the Parish-Smithsonian Expedition to Haiti in 1930 to collect natural history specimens. \[Image no. 84-8054\]](#)

[Digital Content: Taxidermists Charles R. Aschemeier \(right\) and Watson M. Perrygo \(left\) are at work in a laboratory in the United States National Museum \(now the National Museum of Natural History\) preserving a sailfish caught by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 1935. \[Image no. MNH-32212A\]](#)

[Digital Content: An exhibit case in the United States National Museum, now the National Museum of Natural History, of Rocky Mountain Goats climbing on rocks, 1935. \[Image no. SIA2010-1582 and 82-8053\]](#)

[Digital Content: Watson M. \(Watson Mondell\) Perrygo \(1906-1984\) sits at a table in the United States National Museum \(USNM\) Taxidermy Studio working on a bird specimen for exhibition, January 19, 1933. \[Image no. 81-13386 or 11055E or 11055-E\]](#)

[Digital Content: Two visitors looking at the Fénykövi Elephant displayed in the National Museum of Natural History Building Rotunda, c. 1960s. \[Image no. MNH-503 or MNH503\]](#)

[Digital Content: Three exhibit workers, Harry C. Harden kneeling, Charles R. Aschemeier standing left and Watson M. Perrygo standing on ladder, preparing the White-tailed Deer in Cypress Swamp group during the Exhibits](#)

[Modernization Program in the National Museum of Natural History \(NMNH\), during the 1950s. \[Image no. 41670-B or MNH-41670B\]](#)

- Interviews Transcript, pp. 1- 105, of audio recording, 2.5 hours.
- Interviews Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 2.5 hours  
Note:
  - Original Masters: 3 5" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
  - Preservation Masters: 5 digital .wav files
  - Reference Copies: 3 audiocassette tapes, 5 digital .mp3 files
- Interviews **Interview 2: August 16, 1978**
- Interviews Includes reminiscences of Secretary Samuel P. Langley and his co-workers; establishment of the National Zoological Park; field trips with A. Remington Kellogg; the museum staff of the Bureau of Biological Survey; volunteer work for the Maryland Historic Trust and Charles County Historical Society, notably restorations of Friendship House and acquisition of Chapel Point; and his appointment as Director of Exhibits for the Botanical Garden Museum; c. 1900-1978.
- Interviews Transcript, pp. 106-215, of audio recording, 3 hours.
- Interviews Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 3.0 hours  
Note:
  - Original Masters: 3 5" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
  - Preservation Masters: 6 digital .wav files
  - Reference Copies: 3 audiocassette tapes, 6 digital .mp3 files
- Interviews **Interview 3: September 8, 1978**
- Interviews Focuses on his field trips to Haiti in 1928-1929 with Arthur J. Poole to collect *nesophontes*, a fossil shrew, and in 1930 on the Parish-Smithsonian Expedition on the *Esperanza*, and to West Virginia with Herbert G. Deignan in 1936 to collect mammals and birds; c. 1928-1936.
- Interviews Transcript, pp. 216-316, of audio recording, 3 hours.
- Interviews Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 3.0 hours  
Note:
  - Original Masters: 3 5" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
  - Preservation Masters: 6 digital .wav files
  - Reference Copies: 3 audiocassette tapes, 6 digital .mp3 files

- Interviews **Interview 4: September 25, 1978**
- Interviews Covers his 1936 expedition to West Virginia; 1937 field trip to Tennessee with Carleton C. Lingebach; 1938 trip to Kentucky with James Cole, Gregor Rohwer and Deignan; as well as reminiscences of exceptional specimens and collections; c. 1936-1939.
- Interviews Transcript, pp. 317-420, of audio recording, 3 hours.
- Interviews Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 3.0 hours  
Note:
- Original Masters: 3 5" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
  - Preservation Masters: 6 digital .wav files
  - Reference Copies: 3 audiocassette tapes, 6 digital .mp3 files
- Interviews **Interview 5: October 30, 1978**
- Interviews Includes reminiscences of colleagues such as Wetmore and W.H. Blackburne; his 1939 field trip to North Carolina with Charles L. Wheeler and 1940 trip to South Carolina with James Calhoun and J. Southgate Y. Hoyt; his marriage to Velva Howard; renovation of early exhibits in the USNM; care of museum specimens during World War II; and his first field trip to Panama in 1946; c. 1936-1946.
- Interviews Transcript, pp. 421-555, of audio recording, 4 hours.
- Interviews Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 4.0 hours  
Note:
- Original Masters: 4 5" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
  - Preservation Masters: 8 digital .wav files
  - Reference Copies: 4 audiocassette tapes, 8 digital .mp3 files
- Interviews **Interview 6: November 13, 1978**
- Interviews Interview focuses on his expeditions to Panama with Wetmore from 1946-1952, with reminiscences of Barro Colorado Island, James Zetek, Matthew W. and Marion I. Stirling, colleagues at the Gorgas Memorial Institute, and his Panamanian guides, the Hartmanns; c. 1946-1952.
- Interviews Transcript, pp. 556-670, of audio recording, 3.5 hours.
- Interviews Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 3.5 hours  
Note:
- Original Masters: 4 5" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
  - Preservation Masters: 7 digital .wav files



- Reference Copies: 4 audiocassette tapes, 7 digital .mp3 files

Interviews

**Interview 7: November 16, 1978**

Interviews

Discusses the 1950 field trip to Chimán in Panama; exhibits modernization of the bird and mammal halls; taxidermy technique; co-workers in the Taxidermy Studio and USNM; and preparation of the Fenykovi elephant; c. 1950-1962.

Interviews

Transcript, pp. 671-769, of audio recording, 3 hours.

Interviews

Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 3.0 hours

Note: 

- Original Masters:

Interviews

3 5" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes

Note: 

- Preservation Masters: 6 digital .wav files
- Reference Copies: 3 audiocassette tapes, 6 digital .mp3 files

Interviews

**Interview 8: December 4, 1978**

Interviews

Covers his field trips in the Washington, D.C., area with Wetmore beginning in 1926; the activities of the Washington Biologists' Field Club, Inc.; recollections of Smithsonian administrators, such as William DeC. Ravenel, John L. Keddy, John E. Graf, and A. Remington Kellogg; as well as care of the collections; c. 1926-1964.

Interviews

Transcript, pp. 770-817, of audio recording, 1.5 hours.

Interviews

Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 1.5 hours

Note: 

- Original Masters: 2 5" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
- Preservation Masters: 3 digital .wav files
- Reference Copies: 2 audiocassette tapes, 3 digital .mp3 files

Interviews

**Interview 9: December 11, 1978**

Interviews

Covers his post-retirement career, including restoration of Ellerslie, Friendship House, Mudd House, Habre-de-Venture; creation of Revolutionary War cemeteries; the Charles County Historical Society; the Botanical Garden Museum; and reminiscences of USNM staff in the Department of History, National Collection of Fine Arts and National Museum of Natural History; c. 1935-1978.

Interviews

Transcript, pp. 818-888, of audio recording, 2.5 hours.

Interviews

Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 2.5 hours

Note:

- Original Masters: 3 5" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
- Preservation Masters: 5 digital .wav files
- Reference Copies: 3 audiocassette tapes, 5 digital .mp3 files