



# Smithsonian Institution Archives

## Watson M. Perrygo Interviews, 1978

by Smithsonian Institution Archives

Smithsonian Institution Archives  
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## Collection Overview

Repository:	Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., <a href="mailto:osiaref@si.edu">osiaref@si.edu</a>
Creator:	Perrygo, Watson M. interviewee
Title:	Watson M. Perrygo Interviews
Dates:	1978
Quantity:	26 audiotapes (reference copies). 52 digital .mp3 files (reference copies).

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## Administrative Information

### Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9516, Perrygo, Watson M. interviewee, Watson M. Perrygo 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, Velva 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 "Eilerslie," 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 8 & 16 August, 8 & 25 September, 30 October, 13 & 16 November, and 4 & 11 December 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 RU 7306, The Watson M. Perrygo Papers; RU 7006, The Alexander Wetmore Papers, which contains photograph albums from their Panama trips; and RU 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  
Mammalogy  
Museum techniques  
Taxidermy

Types of Materials:

Audiotapes  
Interviews  
Oral history

Names:

Botanical Museum (Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic)  
Charles County (Maryland). Historical Society.  
Division of Mammals (NMNH)  
Exhibits Modernization Program. United States National Museum  
Henson, Pamela M. interviewer.  
Kellogg, Remington, 1893-  
Maryland Historical Trust  
National Museum of Natural History (U.S.). Division of Mammals.  
Perrygo, Watson M., 1906-1984  
Taxidermist (USNM)  
United States National Museum.  
Wetmore, Alexander, 1886-1978

## Container Listing

### Box 1

#### Transcripts of Interviews

Interview 1: 8 August 1978

Interview 2: 16 August 1978

Interview 3: 8 September 1978

Interview 4: 25 September 1978

Interview 5: 30 October 1978

### Box 2

#### Transcripts of Interviews

Interview 6: 13 November 1978

Interview 7: 16 November 1978

Interview 8: 4 December 1978

Interview 9: 11 December 1978

### Box 3

#### Audiotapes of Interviews

Interview 1: 8 August 1978

Interview 2: 16 August 1978

Interview 3: 8 September 1978

Interview 4: 25 September 1978

Interview 5: 30 October 1978

Interview 6: 13 November 1978

Interview 7: 16 November 1978

3 5" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes

Interview 8: 4 December 1978

Interview 9: 11 December 1978