



Smithsonian Institution Archives

Oral history interview with  
Richard Eliot Blackwelder, 1978

Finding aid prepared by Smithsonian Institution Archives

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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>	Oral history interview with Richard Eliot Blackwelder
<b>Identifier:</b>	Record Unit 9517
<b>Date:</b>	1978
<b>Extent:</b>	2 audiotapes (reference copies).
<b>Creator:::</b>	Blackwelder, Richard E. interviewee
<b>Language:</b>	Language of Materials: English

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## Administrative Information

### Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9517, Blackwelder, Richard E. interviewee, Oral history interview with Richard Eliot Blackwelder

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## Historical Note

Richard Eliot Blackwelder (1909-2001), received the B.A. (1931) and Ph.D. (1934) in zoology from Stanford University. From 1935 to 1938, he conducted entomological field work in the West Indies with the Smithsonian's Walter Rathbone Bacon Traveling Scholarship. He then worked briefly for the White-Fringed Beetle Identification Unit, Bureau of Entomology, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) before accepting an Assistant Curatorship in Entomology at the American Museum of Natural History in 1938.

In 1940 Blackwelder joined the staff of the United States National Museum (USNM) as an Assistant Curator in the Division of Insects and in 1942 advanced to Associate Curator. His research specialty was the morphology, classification, and nomenclature of the family Staphylinidae. During World War II, Blackwelder worked in electronics research and development while on leave from the museum. After the war he returned to the Division of Insects and was active in the development of the Society of Systematic Zoology (SSZ), as Secretary-Treasurer from 1949 to 1960, President in 1961, and Editor of its journal, *Systematic Zoology*.

In 1954 Blackwelder left the USNM and pursued his broader research interests in the principles of zoology. From 1956 to 1958 he was an Associate Professor at St. John Fisher College, and from 1965 until his retirement in 1977 was Professor of Zoology at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

## 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 student on topics related to the history of the Smithsonian or the holdings of the Smithsonian Institution Archives.

Blackwelder was interviewed for the Oral History Collection to document his career in entomology and his role in the founding of the Society of Systematic Zoology.

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## Descriptive Entry

Blackwelder was interviewed by Pamela M. Henson on 17 January 1978. The interview covers Blackwelder's education; field work in the West Indies; his career with the USDA, American Museum of Natural History, USNM, St. John Fisher College, and Southern Illinois University; his research interests; the SSZ; and his colleagues. The interview focuses on his years in the Division of Insects, USNM, his curatorial duties, research on Staphylinidae, his colleagues, relations with the USDA staff, and USNM administration. Blackwelder discusses the founding of the SSZ, his role in its development, and relations between the SSZ and the American Association for the Advancement of Science and other zoological societies. Blackwelder reminisces extensively about his friend and colleague, Waldo LaSalle Schmitt, Head Curator of Biology in the USNM and a founder of the SSZ.

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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:

- Biology -- Classification
- Entomology
- Museum curators -- Interviews
- Records of meetings, organizations, and professional societies
- Zoology

Types of Materials:

- Audiotapes
- Interviews
- Oral history
- Transcripts

Names:

- American Museum of Natural History
- Blackwelder, Richard E.
- Bureau of Entomology (USDA)

Division of Insects (NMNH). Department of Biology (NMNH)  
Henson, Pamela M. interviewer  
National Museum of Natural History (U.S.)  
Schmitt, Waldo L. (Waldo Lasalle), 1887-1977  
Society of Systematic Zoology (U.S.)  
Southern Illinois University at Carbondale  
St. John Fisher College

## Container Listing

Box 1

Transcript of Interview

Box 1 of 1

Interview 1: 17 January 1978

Audiotapes of Interview

Box 1 of 1

Interview 1: 17 January 1978