



Smithsonian Institution Archives

A. Gilbert Wright Oral History Interviews, 1983

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., osiaref@si.edu
Title:	A. Gilbert Wright Oral History Interviews
Identifier:	Record Unit 9523
Date:	1983
Extent:	9 audiotapes (Reference copies).
Creator::	Wright, A. Gilbert, (Arthur Gilbert), 1909-1987, interviewee
Language:	English

Administrative Information

Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9523, A. Gilbert Wright Oral History Interviews

Historical Note

Arthur Gilbert Wright (1909-1987), was a zoologist and exhibits curator, with diverse interests in natural history, exhibits preparation, and writing. Born in Carthage, Illinois, in 1909, Wright developed an interest in natural history, taxidermy, and museum curatorship in his youth. After receiving a B.A. in biology from Carthage College in 1932, he was appointed Zoologist at the Illinois State Museum (ISM) in 1933. Wright gained broad museum experience as a Rockefeller Foundation intern at the Buffalo Museum of Science in 1937-1938. During his ISM tenure, he published two volumes, *The Illinois State Museum, Guide to Exhibits*, and *Common Illinois Insects*. He received the M.S. degree in zoology from the University of Illinois at Urbana in 1946. Wright served briefly as Chief of the School Service Department of the Peabody Museum of Natural History at Yale in 1947-1948. In 1953 he left the ISM to accept a position as Curator of Exhibits at the Florida State Museum (FSM) in Gainesville. During the fifties, Wright prepared exhibits for the main FSM building, a "museumobile," and historical site museums throughout the state. In 1961, Wright was appointed Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis. The project was abruptly terminated in 1963 due to cost overruns for the Gateway Arch. Wright then joined the staff of the Office of Exhibits Programs at the Smithsonian Institution, as Assistant Chief with responsibilities for planning exhibits renovation in the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH). In 1971-1972 Wright was Assistant to the Director of the NMNH for exhibits planning and during this time developed the Insect Zoo. When the Office of Exhibits was reorganized in 1972, Wright became a writer/editor in the Office of the Exhibits Editor until his retirement in 1975.

In the early 1970s, Wright began teaching courses in museology at George Washington University. After his retirement, he directed their new Museum Studies Program until 1978. Throughout his career, Wright was an active member of the American Association of Museums and the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

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.

Wright was interviewed for the Oral History Collection because of his long and wide-ranging experience in the museum field.

Descriptive Entry

Wright was interviewed by Pamela M. Henson on five occasions between May and November of 1983. The interviews cover Wright's youth; early interests in museums, natural history, and taxidermy; his education; museum career at the Illinois State Museum, Peabody Museum of Natural History, Florida State Museum, National Park Service, and Smithsonian Institution; internship at the Buffalo Museum of Science; teaching at George Washington University; reminiscences of colleagues such as Arthur Sterry Coggeshall, Ralph H. Lewis, Alexander Wetmore, and John E. Anglim; and his publications and professional activities.

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

- Entomology
- Interviews
- Museum curators -- Interviews
- Museum techniques
- Oral history
- Zoologists
- Zoology

Types of Materials:

- Audiotapes
- Transcripts

Names:

- Anglim, John E.
- Coggeshall, Arthur Sterry
- Florida State Museum
- George Washington University. Museum Studies Program
- Henson, Pamela M., interviewer
- Illinois State Museum

Lewis, Ralph
National Museum of Natural History (U.S.). Assistant to the Director for Exhibits Planning
National Museum of Natural History (U.S.). Exhibits Editor's Office
Smithsonian Institution. Office of Exhibits Programs
United States. National Park Service
Wetmore, Alexander, 1886-1978
Wright, A. Gilbert (Arthur Gilbert), 1909-1987

Geographic Names:

Jefferson National Expansion Memorial (Saint Louis, Mo.)

Container Listing

Interviews

Interviews

Interview 1: May 26, 1983

Interviews

Covers his youth, education, and first museum position at the Illinois State Museum, c. 1909-1940, including: his youth, living in the Carthage Jail Museum; early interests in museums, natural history, and taxidermy; volunteer work at the Carthage College Museum with Earl Lambert and Alice Lovina Kibbe; visits to the Field Museum of Natural History; undergraduate education at Carthage College and the University of Iowa at Iowa City, c. 1929-1932; employment in 1933 as a zoologist at the ISM under the direction of Arthur Sterry Coggeshall; reminiscences of Coggeshall's life as a dinosaur hunter and paleontological preparator; exhibit work at the ISM and Illinois State Fairground; production of *The Illinois State Museum, Guide to Exhibits* in 1937; his role as acting chief of the ISM after Coggeshall's departure in 1937 for the Santa Barbara Museum; Rockefeller Foundation internship at the Buffalo Museum of Science in 1937-1938 and summer at the Allegany School of Natural History; reorientation of the ISM to anthropology by its new director, Thorne Deuel, after 1938; relationship of the ISM to the Illinois Natural History Survey in Urbana; reminiscences of the Marchand family of museum preparators.

Interviews

Transcript, pp. 1-39, of audiotape recording, 1.0 hour.

Interviews

Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 1.0 hour

- Note:
- Original Masters: 1 5" reel-to-reel analog audiotape
 - Reference Copies: 1 cassette audiotape

Interviews

Interview 2: June 1, 1983

Interviews

Discusses his career at the Illinois State Museum and Peabody Museum of Natural History, c. 1933-1948, focusing on: reminiscences of the staff of the ISM; his work on exhibits and the *Guide to Exhibits* in the 1930s; reminiscences of Coggeshall, including his mediating role between Othniel Charles Marsh of the Peabody Museum and Henry Fairfield Osborn of the American Museum of Natural History, his paleontological work at the Carnegie Museum, and his exhibits renovation at the ISM, c. 1885-1937; trips with Coggeshall to American Association of Museums meetings; preparation of the bird exhibit at the ISM; effects of the Great Depression on the museum and employment of WPA workers in the 1930s; relationship of the ISM to the state government; Wright's summer at the Allegany School of Natural History in 1938; his entomological work, especially with Lepidoptera, Odonata, and Arachnida; activities with an explorers' club for teenagers; publication of ISM bulletin, *The Living Museum*, by V. S. Eifert; graduate program at the University of Illinois at Urbana culminating in an M.S. in zoology in 1946; field work with botanist, George Damon Fuller in the 1940s; publication of Wright's

Common Illinois Insects in 1951; impact of World War II on the museum and its staff, including transfer of historical collections to New Salem Village and arrival of German refugee paleontologist, Heinz A. Lowenstam; acquisition of the Barnes collection of natural history specimens; ISM art exhibits curated by Frances Summers Ridgely; Wright's departure from the ISM in 1947 to accept a position as Chief of the School Service Department at the Peabody Museum; reminiscences of F.S.C. Northup and S. Dillon Ripley at Yale; return to the ISM in 1948.

Interviews Transcript, pp. 40-89, of audiotape recording, 1.5 hours.

Interviews Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 1.5 hours

- Note:
- Original Masters: 2 5" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
 - Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes

Interviews **Interview 3: June 28, 1983**

Interviews Discusses his career as curator of exhibits at the Florida State Museum and chief of the Museum Planning Branch, Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis, Missouri, c. 1953-1963, including: his appointment as Curator of Exhibits at the FSM in Gainesville in 1953 by Director, Arnold B. Grobman; development of a "museumobile"; exhibits planning for historical site museums for the Florida Parks Service; appointment of Joshua C. Dickinson, Jr., as Director after Grobman's departure to the American Institute of Biological Sciences in 1958; close relationship between the FSM and University of Florida; contacts with the National Park Service during the 1950s; exhibits planning for the FSM Seagle Building with assistance from graduate students; Dickinson's efforts to secure a new building; Wright's appointment by the National Park Service as chief of the Museum Planning Branch for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis in 1961; planning for the historical museum beneath the Gateway Arch; sudden decision to abandon the museum project because of cost overruns for the Arch; Wright's interview with Leonard Carmichael for a position with the Smithsonian's Office of Exhibits Programs in 1963.

Interviews Transcript, pp. 90-143, of audiotape recording, 1.5 hours.

Interviews Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 1.5 hours

- Note:
- Original Masters: 2 5" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
 - Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes

Interviews **Interview 4: July 7, 1983**

Interviews Covers Wright's career at the Smithsonian, c. 1963-1975, focusing on: his arrival at the Smithsonian in 1963; work on the Exhibits Modernization Program in NMNH in the 1960s; working relations between the curatorial, exhibit design, and exhibit production staffs; exhibits R&D by Rolland O.

Hower; work on temporary exhibits and non-NMNH exhibits; liaison for an NBC television series; Wright's supervisory duties, especially personnel management and contracting for exhibits work; reminiscences of Alexander Wetmore and John E. Anglim; preparation of David J. Hasinger tiger.

Interviews Transcript, pp. 144-197, of audiotape recording, 1.5 hours.

Interviews Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 1.5 hours

- Note:
- Original Masters: 2 5" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
 - Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes

Interviews **Interview 5: November 15, 1983**

Interviews Discusses Wright's career at the Smithsonian, publications and teaching at George Washington University, c. 1963-1978, including: reminiscences of Office of Exhibits Programs, especially accommodations in the Quonset hut and relations with taxidermists; Rolland O. Hower's development of freeze-dry techniques for exhibits preparation; development of the *It All Depends* ecology exhibit; planning for the *Dynamics of Evolution* exhibit; liaison for an NBC television series and subsequent creation of the Motion Picture Film Unit in the Office of Exhibits; preparation of *by-word* exhibit scripts; decentralization of the Office of Exhibits; responsibilities as senior museologist, Office of the Director of the NMNH in 1971-1972; transfer to the Exhibits Editor's Office as a writer/editor after the reorganization; his writing projects, including *Antwerp's Golden Age*, *Festival of American Folklife* scripts, *Freeze-Drying of Biological Specimens*, and *We the People* scripts; biography of Karl Patterson Schmidt; teaching and coordination of the Museum Studies Program at George Washington University in the 1970s; natural history photography of Kjell B. Sandved; development of the Insect Zoo in 1971; Wright's retirement from the Institution in 1975.

Interviews Transcript, pp. 198-252, of audiotape recording, 1.5 hours.

Interviews Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 1.5 hours

- Note:
- Original Masters: 2 5" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
 - Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes