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Collection Overview

Repository: Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., osiaref@si.edu
Title: G. Arthur Cooper Interviews
Identifier: Record Unit 9524
Date: 1984
Creator: Cooper, G. Arthur (Gustav Arthur), 1902-2000 interviewee
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Administrative Information

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Historical Note

G. Arthur Cooper (1902-2000), was a vertebrate paleobiologist in the Department of Paleobiology, National Museum of Natural History (NMNH), specializing in the taxonomy and stratigraphy of Paleozoic brachiopods. He began collecting natural history specimens and minerals during his youth in New York. He received the B.S. degree from Colgate University in 1924 with a major in chemistry and the M.S. degree in 1926. He continued graduate work at Yale University with Drs. Carl O. Dunbar and Charles Schuchert, and was awarded the Ph.D. in 1929 for his thesis on the stratigraphy of the Hamilton formation. Under Schuchert's direction, he began research on fossil brachiopods, his life's work. While at Yale, he served as an Assistant Curator (1928-1929) and Research Associate (1929-1930) in the Department of Invertebrate Paleontology of the Peabody Museum of Natural History.

In 1930, Cooper was appointed Assistant Curator in the Division of Stratigraphic Paleontology of the United States National Museum (USNM). In 1941, he advanced to Associate Curator and in 1944 to Curator of the Division of Invertebrate Paleontology. He assumed the Head Curatorship of the Department of Geology in 1957, and oversaw its division into separate departments of Paleobiology and Mineral Sciences in 1963. He continued as Chairman of the Department of Paleobiology until he was appointed Senior Paleobiologist in 1967. After his retirement from federal service in 1974, he continued his research as Paleobiologist Emeritus.

Cooper was known for his research on the taxonomy and stratigraphy of Paleozoic brachiopods. His major monographs include Ozarkian and Canadian Brachiopoda (1938 with E. O. Ulrich), Chazyan and Related Brachiopods (1956), Morphology, Classification, and Life Habits of Productoids (Brachiopoda) (1960 with Helen M. Muir-Wood), and Permian Brachiopods of West Texas, vols. 1-6 (1969-1977 with Richard E. Grant). He conducted field work in the United States, Canada, or Mexico virtually every year of his
career at the USNM, significantly increasing both the range and depth of the national collections. Under his guidance, an acid-etching laboratory was established for work with silicified fossils, notably Permian brachiopods from the Glass Mountains in Texas. He also developed his own photographic laboratory, producing over fifty thousand images from the collections.

As an administrator, Cooper presided over a ten-fold increase in the paleobiology curatorial staff, from two in 1944 to twenty in 1967. He was the driving force behind the split of the Department of Geology into two separate departments in 1963. He also planned and supervised the move into the new wings of the Natural History Building (NHB) in 1963-1965.

Among the many honors bestowed upon him are the Penrose Medal of the Geological Society of America in 1983, the Daniel Giraud Elliot Medal of the National Academy of Sciences in 1979, the Paleontological Society Medal in 1964, and the Mary Clark Thompson Medal of the National Academy of Sciences in 1958.

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.

Cooper was interviewed for the Oral History Collection because of his long and distinguished scholarly and administrative career at the Institution spanning more than half a century.

Descriptive Entry

Cooper was interviewed by Pamela M. Henson and Ellis Yochelson on three occasions in January of 1984. The interviews cover his childhood interest in natural history collections, his education, and his career as a curator of invertebrate paleobiology in the NMNH, notably his research, field work, care of the paleontological collection, administration, and reminiscences of colleagues such as Edwin Kirk, Charles E. Resser, Charles Schuchert, Edward O. Ulrich, Aldred Scott Warthin and Alexander Wetmore. For additional videotaped oral history interviews of Cooper, see Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9530, Smithsonian Institution Paleobiology Videohistory Interviews.

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:
Geology
Paleontology
Types of Materials:
Audiotapes
Oral history
Transcripts

Names:
Cooper, G. Arthur (Gustav Arthur), 1902-2000
Department of Geology (NMNH)
Department of Paleobiology (NMNH)
Division of Stratigraphic Paleontology (NMNH)
Geological Survey (U.S.)
Henson, Pamela M. interviewer
National Museum of Natural History (U.S.). Division of Invertebrate Paleontology
Resser, Charles Elmer, 1889-1943
Schuchert, Charles, 1858-1942
Ulrich, E. O. (Edward Oscar), 1857-1944
Wetmore, Alexander, 1886-1978
Yale University
Container Listing

Box 1

Transcript of Interviews

Box 1 of 1

Interview 1: 5 January 1984

Digital Content: G. Arthur Cooper and his wife, Josephine Cooper, are at work in his office in the Division of Invertebrate Paleontology, United States National Museum, now the National Museum of Natural History, in June of 1954. [Image no. 85-4051]

Box 1 of 1

Interview 2: 12 January 1984

Digital Content: Edward Oscar Ulrich standing on a bridge holding a geologist's hammer at Buffalo River, Arkansas, 1937. [Image no. 84-11281]
Digital Content: G. Arthur Cooper and C. Lewis Gazin of the Department of Vertebrate Paleontology gaze at an exhibit in the Paleontology Hall, National Museum of Natural History, on its opening in June 1961. [Image no. MNH-601-D or MNH-601D]

Box 1 of 1

Interview 3 (26 January 1984)

Digital Content: G. Arthur Cooper and his wife, Josephine stand beside a painting of Cooper by Robert Adee, 1965. [Image no. MAH-59075D]
Digital Content: G. Arthur Cooper and Carl Owen Dunbar shake hands as they stand beside a painting of Cooper by Robert Ades, 1965. [Image no. MAH-59075A]
Digital Content: G. Arthur Cooper, standing beside a Cholla cactus at Glass Mountains, Texas, where he was doing field work, 1957, photo by Richard E. Grant. [Image no. 85-16954]
Digital Content: G. Arthur Cooper on a field trip is laying on the ground picking up rock specimens to put in a bag he is holding in his right hand, c. 1957. [Image no. 86-497]
Digital Content: G. Arthur Cooper stands at the podium as he addresses a gathering at a dinner on October 28, 1965, honoring him. [Image no. MNH-1538C]
Digital Content: G. Arthur Cooper stands gazing up at a century plant at the Hess Ranch near Marathon, Texas, c. 1960, photo by Richard E. Grant. [Image no. 86-496]
Digital Content: Presentation of portrait painted by Robert Ades of G. Arthur Cooper to the Department of Paleobiology, National Museum of Natural History, at a dinner honoring Cooper on October 28, 1965. [Image no. MAH-59075E]
Digital Content: G. Arthur Cooper, paleobiologist specializing in Permian brachiopods, stands at a workstation in his laboratory in the National Museum of Natural History, 1980. [Image no. 80-10291-34]
Digital Content: Richard E. Grant and G. Arthur Cooper, paleobiologists at the National Museum of Natural History, stopped by the Big Bend Cafe,
Marathon, Texas, while on their search for the Permian brachiopods of the Glass Mountains in Texas, 1963. [Image no. 85-16955]

Tapes of Interviews

Box 1 of 1  Interview 1: 5 January 1984
Box 1 of 1  Interview 2: 12 January 1984
Box 1 of 1  Interview 3: 26 January 1984