



Smithsonian Institution Archives

G. Arthur Cooper Oral History Interviews, 1984

Finding aid prepared by Smithsonian Institution Archives

Smithsonian Institution Archives
Washington, D.C.
Contact us at osiaref@si.edu

Table of Contents

Collection Overview	1
Administrative Information	1
Historical Note.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Descriptive Entry.....	2
Names and Subjects	2
Container Listing	4

Collection Overview

Repository:	Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., osiaref@si.edu
Title:	G. Arthur Cooper Oral History Interviews
Identifier:	Record Unit 9524
Date:	1984
Extent:	6 audiotapes (Reference copies). 10 digital .mp3 files (Reference copies).
Creator::	Cooper, G. Arthur (Gustav Arthur), 1902-2000, interviewee
Language:	English

Administrative Information

Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9524, G. Arthur Cooper Oral History Interviews

Historical Note

Gustav Arthur Cooper (1902-2000), was a invertebrate 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 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
- Interviews
- Oral history
- Paleontology

Types of Materials:

Audiotapes
Transcripts

Names:

Cooper, G. Arthur (Gustav Arthur), 1902-2000
Geological Survey (U.S.)
Henson, Pamela M., interviewer
National Museum of Natural History (U.S.). Department of Paleobiology
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
United States National Museum. Department of Geology
United States National Museum. Division of Stratigraphic Paleontology
Wetmore, Alexander, 1886-1978
Yale University

Container Listing

Interviews

Interviews

Interview 1: January 5, 1984

Interviews

Covers his youth, education, and career at the USNM, c. 1902-1965, including: family and childhood in Flushing, New York; mineral collecting with Arthur Payne; undergraduate major in chemistry at Colgate University, 1921-1924; stratigraphic research for the M.S. degree from Colgate in 1926; doctoral program at Yale University under supervision of Carl O. Dunbar and Charles Schuchert, 1926-1929; initial work on brachiopods with Schuchert at the Peabody Museum of Natural History, 1928-1930; doctoral dissertation on the stratigraphy of the Hamilton formation, 1929; continuation of brachiopod research at the USNM, 1930s; establishment of acid-etching program for silicified fossils; Ozarkian-Canadian dispute between Ulrich, Foerste, Bridge, Resser, and Cooper, 1934; reminiscences of his supervisor, Charles Resser, 1930-1943; state of the brachiopod collection upon his arrival in 1930 and its subsequent development; effects of the Great Depression including Work Progress Administration assistants, 1930s; field work in the United States and Canada; reminiscences of his early years at the USNM, including museum services, curatorial responsibilities, and USNM director Alexander Wetmore; field work in Mexico during World War II; relationship between paleontology and stratigraphy, and the switch to the name "paleobiology"; relationship of the United States Geological Survey (USGS) to the USNM; acquisition of specimens from the Smithsonian Oceanographic Sorting Center, 1960s.

[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. \[Image no. 84-4051\]](#)

Interviews

Transcript, pp. 1-67, of audiotape recording, 2.0 hours.

Interviews

Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 2.0 hours

- Note:
- Original Masters: 2 5" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
 - Preservation Masters: 4 digital .wav files
 - Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes, 4 digital .mp3 files

Interviews

Interview 2: January 12, 1984

Interviews

Covers his curatorial career at the USNM, c. 1930-1967, especially: reminiscences of colleagues at the USNM and USGS, especially Bassler, Resser, and Ulrich, 1930s and 1940s; Devonian work with A. S. Warthin, 1930s and 1940s; primary importance of collections in relation to research; contribution to the *Treatise on Invertebrate Paleontology*, 1950s; collections and management, including segregation of type specimens, loans, and

cataloging; reminiscences of Department of Geology staff; use of the Walcott Fund for collections acquisition and field work; split of the Department of Geology in to the Departments of Mineral Sciences and Paleobiology in 1963; acquisition of an electron microprobe for the Department of Mineral Sciences from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration; development of a sedimentology group, 1965; planning for the move to the wings of the NHB, 1960-1965; exhibits modernization in the fifties; development of his darkroom for photography; contributions of Josephine Wells Cooper to the department as a collector and translator.

Digital Content: [Edward Oscar Ulrich stands on a bridge holding a geologist's hammer at Buffalo River, Arkansas. Ulrich was a geologist and an invertebrate paleontologist, 1937. \[Image no. 84-11281\]](#)

Digital Content: [In search for the Permian brachiopods in the Glass Mountains of Texas, G. Arthur Cooper, paleobiologist at the National Museum of Natural History, stands beside his car, nicknamed the "Emerald Queen," used in the field, 1961. \[Image no. 85-16956\]](#)

Digital Content: [G. Arthur Cooper and C. Lewis Gazin of the Department of Vertebrate Paleontology gaze at an exhibit in Paleontology Hall, National Museum of Natural History, on its opening in June 1961. \[Image no. MNH-601-D or MNH-601D\]](#)

Interviews Transcript, pp. 68-117, 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
 - Preservation Masters: 3 digital .wav files
 - Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes; 3 digital .mp3 files

Interviews **Interview 3: January 26, 1984**

Interviews Discusses his views concerning the profession and science of paleobiology, and his administrative career, c. 1930-1967, especially: his assessment of the field of paleobiology; establishment of a paleobiology subgroup within the Geological Society of America; stimulus to science by John F. Kennedy and from the oil industry, 1960s; "monographic bursts" vs. "evolutionary bursts" in paleobiology; attempts to acquire the Ninninger Collection of Meteorites with National Science Foundation funds; acquisition of an electron microprobe for meteorite research; his responsibilities as Head Curator and Chairman, 1957-1967; his appointment as Senior Paleobiologist in 1967; role of the NMNH as a "national" museum; field work in the United States with colleagues.

Digital Content: [G. Arthur Cooper \(left\), and Carl Owen Dunbar shake hands as they stand beside a painting of Cooper by Robert Ades, 1965. \[Image no. 59075-A\]](#)

Digital Content: [G. Arthur Cooper, stands beside a Cholla cactus. Cooper is 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, and his wife, Josephine stand beside a painting of Cooper by Robert Ades, 1965. [Image no. 59075-D]

Digital Content: G. Arthur Cooper, stands gazing up at a century plant at the Hess Ranch near Marathon, Texas, c. 1960. [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. L to R: Porter M. Kier, G. Arthur Cooper, Thomas J. Dutro and Richard E. Grant. Portrait now hangs in the Cooper Library of the Natural History Building. [Image no. 59075-E or MAH-5907E]

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]

Interviews

Transcript, pp. 118-165, 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
- Preservation Masters: 3 digital .wav files
- Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes; 3 digital .mp3 files