Collection Overview

Repository: Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., osiaref@si.edu
Title: Oral history interviews with Helena M. Weiss
Identifier: Record Unit 9587
Date: 1987
Extent: 8 audiotapes (Reference copies).
Language: English

Administrative Information

Preferred Citation
Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9587, Oral history interviews with Helena M. Weiss

Use Restriction
Restricted.

Historical Note

Helena M. Weiss (1909-2004), was born on February 6, 1909, in Shipman, Illinois. She earned her clerical degree from Wheeler Business College in Birmingham, Alabama, before moving to Washington, D.C., in 1930, where she began her career as a stenographer for the Veterans Administration. In 1931, she was appointed Junior Clerk-Stenographer in the Office of Correspondence and Documents (renamed the Office of Correspondence and Records in 1947) of the United States National Museum (USNM) and in 1935 transferred to the Department of Geology. She returned to the Office of Correspondence and Records in 1948 as an Administrative Assistant and later that year advanced to Chief, after the retirement of Herbert S. Bryant. In 1956, her title was changed to Registrar and she remained in that position until her retirement in 1971.

As one of the first women managers at the Smithsonian, Weiss was responsible for the central filing system of the USNM, public inquiry mail, mail service, accession reports, loans and exchanges, shipping, foreign travel, customs regulations, insurance, and workman's compensation. She was involved in the acquisition of such famous museum artifacts and specimens as the Wright Brothers' plane, Kitty Hawk, the Hope Diamond, and the Fenykovi elephant. She was also a recipient of the Secretary's Exceptional Gold Service Award.
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.

Weiss was interviewed for the Oral History Collection because of her long and distinguished career as the Smithsonian museum registrar and an administrator, and because of her many memories of life and colleagues in the United States National Museum.

Descriptive Entry

The Weiss interviews were conducted by Pamela M. Henson, Historian for Smithsonian Institution Archives, and discuss her work at the Veterans Administration and career at the Smithsonian, including her work as a stenographer for the Office of Correspondence and Documents and secretary for the Department of Geology, tenure as Registrar for the USNM, and role as one of the first women managers at the Smithsonian. Also included are reminiscences of many colleagues, notably Ray S. Bassler, Herbert S. Bryant, Louise M. Pearson, and Alexander Wetmore, and stories about her responsibilities for important artifacts and specimens.

This collection is comprised of eight interview sessions, totaling approximately 8.0 hours of recordings and 291 pages of transcript. There are three generations of audio for each session: original 7” reel to reel tapes, preservation .wav files, and reference .mp3 files. In total, this collection is comprised of 16 original 7” reels, 16 preservation digital audio .wav files, and 16 reference digital audio .mp3 files.

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:
- Geology
- Museum registrars
- Museum techniques
- Women -- History
- Wright Flyer (Airplane)

Types of Materials:
- Audiotapes
- Interviews
- Oral history

Names:
- Bassler, Ray S. (Ray Smith), 1878-
- Bryant, Herbert S.
Department of Geology (NMNH)
Fenykovi elephant
Henson, Pamela M., interviewer
Hope diamond
National Museum of Natural History (U.S.)
Office of Correspondence and Documents (USNM). Office of Correspondence and Records (USNM)
Office of Correspondence and Records (USNM). Office of Correspondence and Documents (USNM)
Pearson, Louise M.
Registrar (USNM)
United States National Museum. Office of Correspondence and Documents (USNM)
United States National Museum. Office of Correspondence and Records
United States National Museum. Registrar (USNM)
Veterans Administration
Weiss, Helena M., 1909-2004
Wetmore, Alexander, 1886-1978