



Smithsonian Institution Archives

Oral history interviews with Helena M. Weiss, 1987

Finding aid prepared by Smithsonian Institution Archives

Smithsonian Institution Archives
Washington, D.C.
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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).
Creator::	Weiss, Helena M., 1909-2004, interviewee
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

Container Listing

Box 1

Transcripts of Interviews

Box 1 of 1

Interview 1: 21 January 1987

Note:

- Covers her youth, early career at Veterans Administration, including:
- family history and youth;
- Butter Business College in Pennsylvania;
- Wheeler Business College;
- early years living in Washington, D.C.;
- work as stenographer at the Veterans Administration;
- work in the Division of Correspondence and Documents;
- reminiscences of working for Herbert S. Bryant and Walter Hough;
- workload challenges at the Smithsonian during the Great Depression;
- reminiscences about Correspondence and Documents colleagues;
- recollections of colleagues, Lester Commerford, Lewis Perry and Louise Pearson;
- reminiscences of sixth Smithsonian Secretary Alexander Wetmore when substituting for his assistant;
- appointment as private secretary to Ray S. Bassler, Head Curator of Geology Department;
- reminiscences of Department of Geology and United States Geological Survey staff;
- working in Natural History Building near the Mineralogy and Invertebrate Paleontology Departments;
- and the Correspondence and Documents routing system.
- Transcript, pp. 1-34, of audiotape recording, 1.0 hour.

Box 1 of 1

Interview 2: 3 February 1987

Note:

- Covers period during and the effects of the Great Depression and World War II on the museum and Washington, D.C., including:
- housing shortages;
- street-cars;
- staffing and work-schedule at museum;
- growth of the city;
- Works Progress Administration;

- national image of the Smithsonian;
- Smithsonian management chain of command;
- budget control;
- control over information requests;
- Dr. Bassler's supervisory style;
- exhibits in museum;
- security for mineral science gem collection;
- change in security with arrival of the Hope Diamond;
- transportation arrangements for the Hope Diamond to an foreign exhibition in South Africa;
- Dr. William F. Foshag's trip to and study of Paricutin Volcano in Mexico;
- death of Dr. Charles E. Resser;
- staffing changes in Geology after the war;
- and thoughts of leaving the Smithsonian during World War II.
- Transcript, pp. 35-67, of audiotape recording, 1.0 hour.

Box 1 of 1

Interview 3: 11 February 1987

Note:

- Covers appointment as Administrative Assistant at the Office of Correspondence and Records in 1948 to the 1950s, including:
- reminiscences of Mr. Bryant and Lester Commerford at the time of her promotion to Chief;
- Alexander Wetmore becoming Secretary;
- reminiscences of Louise Pearson as assistant to Alexander Wetmore and subsequent Secretaries;
- changes in responsibilities and staffing of the office including mail service, telegrams, timecards, and response to general inquiries;
- transfer of responsibilities from the central correspondence division to individual curators in the 1950s;
- reminiscences of types of information inquiries, especially from children, and types of objects sent in for examination;
- process and management of records pertaining to accessions;
- National Air and Space Museum storage at Park Ridge, Illinois, and its move to Suitland, Maryland;
- splitting up accessions and differences between Museum of History and Technology (MHT) and Natural History Museum (NHM);
- reminiscences of MHT Registrar, Virginia Beets;
- and records for loans and exchanges.

- Transcript, pp. 68-104, of audiotape recording, 1.0 hour.

Box 1 of 1

Interview 4: 10 March 1987

Note:

- Covers changing responsibilities of the departments, shipments of notable works in the Smithsonian collections and interactions with staff, including:
 - strict loan policies for specimens;
 - commitment to the support of rural schools;
 - requirements, including insurance, for loaning of specimens;
 - responsibilities and challenges of shipping collections including the Amelung collection and *The Kitty Hawk*;
 - shipping and preparing of the Fenykovi Elephant;
 - "Swanky Dan" and the Peter's Chocolate Co.;
 - assisting National Zoological Park ship in pandas and snakes;
 - Donald Ray Davis of the Entomology Department;
 - department interactions with the press;
 - shipment of Dr. G. Arthur Cooper's Glass Mountain blocks;
 - and shipment of planes from O'Hare Airport, Chicago, Illinois, for National Air and Space Museum.
- Transcript, pp. 105-131, of audiotape recording, 1.0 hour.

Box 1 of 1

Interview 5: 16 March 1987

Note:

- Covers details of shipping new objects in collections, as well as details and procedures for curators and scientists traveling abroad, including:
 - shipping of and public interest in lunar roving vehicle;
 - objects sent in by the public for examination;
 - work with Dr. Fred L. Whipple of the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory (SAO) and planning of satellite tracking stations;
 - tracking scientific equipment for foreign travel;
 - details about travel preparations of Alexander Wetmore and S. Dillon Ripley;
 - reminiscences of Smithsonian staff, Watson M. Perrygo and Gorman M. Bond;
 - customs requirements for objects and specimens collected during foreign travel;
 - Saul Risenburg and Yap money specimen;
 - Dr. Wetmore in Panama;

- John Frederick Gates Clarke's challenges working in the field;
- relations with military during travel;
- dangers of field work;
- Arnhem Land Expedition;
- and challenges of transportation, permits, and access to foreign expedition sites.
- Transcript, pp. 132-171, of audiotape recording, 1.0 hour.

Box 1 of 1

Interview 6: 27 March 1987

Note:

- Covers arrangements for expeditions during the 1960s and 1970s, planning and equipping of SAO Satellite Tracking Program, and challenges in staffing and records management with the growth and proliferation of Smithsonian departments, including:
- work with the Satellite Tracking Program office in Cambridge, Massachusetts;
- work with the U. S. Department of Justice;
- travel arrangements of foreign scientists and students for Smithsonian Bicentennial;
- change in departmental duties in 1970s to include entire mail system, files, travel, and correspondence;
- name change to the Office of the Registrar;
- reminiscences about Office of the Registrar staff;
- and complexities of accession records with changes in the Smithsonian structure.
- Transcript, pp. 172-208, of audiotape recording, 1.0 hour.

Box 1 of 1

Interview 7: 20 April 1987

Note:

- Covers challenges of legal requirements of accessioning new collections, office move to new location, and recollections about Smithsonian staff, including:
- departmental contributions to the *Smithsonian Annual Reports*;
- results of 1966 John F. Jameson audit of Office of the Registrar;
- planning for separate registrar's offices for museums;
- collections from Marjorie Merriweather Post;
- legal issues surrounding Deeds of Gift prior to Office of General Counsel;
- de-accessioning collections and Museum of Natural History's school collections;
- establishment of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service;
- reminiscences about Leonard Carmichael, seventh Smithsonian Secretary;

- effect of the Hoover Commission on the Reorganization of the Federal Government on modernizing offices;
- issues with mail service for Smithsonian;
- office move to Art and Industries Building;
- and reminiscences of John [Jack] E. Anglim, as first professional exhibitions staff.
- Transcript, pp. 209-246, of audiotape recording, 1.0 hour.

Box 1 of 1

Interview 8: 12 May 1987

Note:

- Covers the changes and increase in public inquiry mail as Smithsonian became better known, recollections of Smithsonian staff, and beginnings of the Smithsonian Institution Archives, including:
 - public reaction to *Radio Smithsonian*;
 - popularity of meteorites;
 - process of responding to an increase in public inquiry letters;
 - early methods of paycheck distribution;
 - the Arthur M. Greenwood House donated to the Smithsonian, housed at NMNH;
 - recollections of Watson M. Perrygo;
 - work with International Biological Program;
 - delivery of missiles outside the Arts and Industries Building;
 - challenges of working with curators;
 - lack of procedures for managing accession files between curators and Office of Registrar;
 - and her retirement in 1971.
- Transcript, pp. 247-291, of audiotape recording, 1.0 hour.

Audio Recordings of Interviews

Box 1 of 1

Interview 1: 21 January 1987

Note:

- Total Recording Time: 1.0 hour
- Original Masters: 2 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
- Preservation Masters: 2 digital audio .wav files
- Reference Copies: 2 digital audio .mp3 files

Box 1 of 1

Interview 2: 3 February 1987

Note:

- Total Recording Time: 1.0 hour
- Original Masters: 2 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
- Preservation Masters: 2 digital audio .wav files
- Reference Copies: 2 digital audio .mp3 files

- Box 1 of 1 Interview 3: 11 February 1987
- Note:
- Total Recording Time: 1.0 hour
 - Original Masters: 2 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
 - Preservation Masters: 2 digital audio .wav files
 - Reference Copies: 2 digital audio .mp3 files
- Box 1 of 1 Interview 4: 10 March 1987
- Note:
- Total Recording Time: 1.0 hour
 - Original Masters: 2 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
 - Preservation Masters: 2 digital audio .wav files
 - Reference Copies: 2 digital audio .mp3 files
- Box 1 of 1 Interview 5: 16 March 1987
- Note:
- Total Recording Time: 1.0 hour
 - Original Masters: 2 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
 - Preservation Masters: 2 digital audio .wav files
 - Reference Copies: 2 digital audio .mp3 files
- Box 1 of 1 Interview 6: 27 March 1987
- Note:
- Total Recording Time: 1.0 hour
 - Original Masters: 2 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
 - Preservation Masters: 2 digital audio .wav files
 - Reference Copies: 2 digital audio .mp3 files
- Box 1 of 1 Interview 7: 20 April 1987
- Note:
- Total Recording Time: 1.0 hour
 - Original Masters: 2 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
 - Preservation Masters: 2 digital audio .wav files
 - Reference Copies: 2 digital audio .mp3 files
- Box 1 of 1 Interview 8: 12 May 1987
- Note:
- Total Recording Time: 1.0 hour
 - Original Masters: 2 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
 - Preservation Masters: 2 digital audio .wav files
 - Reference Copies: 2 digital audio .mp3 files