



# Smithsonian

*Institution Archives*

## History of Smithsonian Institution Computing Oral History Interviews, 2016-2021

Finding aid prepared by Smithsonian Institution Archives

Smithsonian Institution Archives  
Washington, D.C.  
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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., <a href="mailto:osiaref@si.edu">osiaref@si.edu</a>
<b>Title:</b>	History of Smithsonian Institution Computing Oral History Interviews
<b>Date:</b>	2016-2021
<b>Identifier:</b>	Record Unit 9637
<b>Creator::</b>	Smithsonian Institution
<b>Extent:</b>	
<b>Language:</b>	English

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## Administrative Information

### Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9637, Smithsonian Institution, History of Smithsonian Institution Computing Oral History Interviews

### Use Restriction

Restricted. Contact [SIHistory@si.edu](mailto:SIHistory@si.edu) to request permission.

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## Introduction

The Smithsonian Institution Archives (SIA) 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 and volunteers conduct interviews with current and retired Smithsonian staff and others who have made significant contributions to the Institution. There are also reminiscences and interviews recorded by researchers or students on topics related to the history of the Smithsonian or the holdings of the Smithsonian Institution Archives.

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## Descriptive Entry

Computer technology has been employed for more than fifty years at the Smithsonian. Information Technology (IT) currently supports every facet of the Institution's operations. The Smithsonian was often a leader in scientific/research use of IT, use of IT to manage museum collections and use of the internet to make collections and research data more publicly available. Thus the history of computing at the Smithsonian is an important component of the history of the Institution. Working with the Institutional History program, three retired longtime IT staff members, David Bridge, John H. Churchman and Carla I. Roeper, volunteered to review existing historic documents (at SIA and other sources), conduct additional research, compile additional documentation including oral history interviews, and prepare an overview of the history of computing at the Smithsonian.

The History of Smithsonian Computing interviewees include David Bearman, David Bridge, Melanie Cameron Dann, Thomas Garnett, Brooke Henley, John P. Howser, James F. Mello, Dante Piacesi, Rusty Russell, and Ching-hsien Wang.

These interviews discuss their contributions to information technology at the Smithsonian from the 1960s to 2000, including the evolution from mainframe computers to desktop to the internet, and applications ranging from scientific data processing, collections management systems, financial and administrative systems, and office applications. The interviews also trace the history of central computing and unit specific support staff across the Smithsonian.

The History of Smithsonian Computing Oral History Interviews collection is comprised of 15 interview sessions, with 10 individuals, totaling approximately 25.75 hours of recordings. In total, this collection is comprised of 35 original digital audio .wav files, 5 original digital video .mp4 files, 35 reference digital audio .mp3 files, and 5 reference digital video .mp4 files, as well as c. 750 pages of transcripts. The interviews were conducted in 2016-2021 by volunteers David Bridge, John H. Churchman, and Carla I. Roeper.

David Bearman attended Brown University and received his Ph.D. in History of Science from the University of Pennsylvania. In the late 1970s, he became involved in issues surrounding how archival information is structured, including work with a Society of American Archivists task force, led by Richard H. Lytle of Smithsonian Archives. In 1982 Lytle became director of the Smithsonian Office of Information Resource Management and Bearman joined him as Assistant and then Deputy Director. Both Bearman and Lytle left the Smithsonian in 1986 to pursue new developments in the field of information technology.

David Bridge attended the University of Maryland, and then Bridge began his career at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. Bridge began working in the Division of Birds at the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History in 1964 and retired in 2006. In 1967 he became involved in a Department of Health, Education, and Welfare grant project, one of the earliest efforts to automate information on collections. He worked for Natural History's Automatic Data Processing program from 1970 to 1983, for the Museum Support Center from 1983 to 2000 and for the National Museum of the American Indian from 2000 to 2006.

Melanie Cameron Dann received a bachelor of arts degree in administrative science from Yale University in 1979. Dann first worked for General Electric Information Systems as a programmer analyst; then from 1983 to 1991, she was a senior manager with Price Waterhouse, implementing financial systems for government clients. She joined the Smithsonian in 1991 working on implementation of automated financial systems and then became director of advancement operations and systems in the Smithsonian Office of Advancement.

Thomas Garnett participated in a Buddhist program called Karmê Chöling from 1972 to 1976, and obtained a bachelor's degree in Religion at the University of Colorado (1979) and a Masters in Library Science from Catholic University (1980). He worked as an Information Specialist at the General Accounting Office just before being hired by the Smithsonian Institution Libraries (SIL) in October, 1982. He also taught at the Naropa Institute in 1977. After coming to SI, he soon was appointed Systems Administrator and oversaw the acquisition, installation and maintenance of three different major library automation software products. He was also program director for the Biodiversity Heritage Library until his retirement in 2012.

Brooke Henley was Chief of the Catalog Records Unit for Smithsonian Institution Libraries and oversaw much of the work of retrospective conversion of card catalog data to machine-readable form in OCLC in the 1980s.

John P. Howser received a degree in accounting at Strayer University in 1959 and worked as an accountant at Safeway from 1961 to 1968. He began his career at the Smithsonian in the Fiscal Division in 1968 and subsequently held managerial positions for many other offices, including the Accounting Division, Treasurer's Office's Financial Systems Division, Office of Accounting and Financial Services, Office of Financial Management and Planning, and Office of Contracting and Property Management. He was chairman of the [Data Processing] DP Manager's Roundtable on two occasions.

James F. Mello graduated from Yale University in 1962 and joined the United States Geological Survey as a paleontologist, stationed at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC. In late 1969, he was recruited by Dr. Richard S. Cowan, Director of Natural History, to lead a new office. Mello became Assistant to the Director in January 1970 and was in charge of the Automatic Data Processing Program and contributed greatly to the development of the SELGEM computer system. When Dr. Porter M. Kier became

Director of Natural History in 1973, he recruited Mello to be Assistant Director. Mello continued to be deeply involved with computers and data processing issues, and the Under Secretary of the Smithsonian, Robert A. Brooks, tapped him to lead an Institutional study of computer services at the Smithsonian in 1975. He also played an important role as the five-year Congressionally-mandated collections inventory which began in the late 70s, and was followed by the planning to occupy the new Museum Support Center (MSC) and the move of tens of millions of specimens and objects to Suitland, Maryland.

Dante Piacesi joined the central computing organization of the Smithsonian as the manager of the Scientific Applications Division in 1967. Piacesi played a critical role in the development of computer applications in support of Smithsonian researchers and was assistant director of the Office of Information Resource Management from 1982 to until his retirement in 1986.

Rusty [George F.] Russell attended the University of Maryland and then joined the Department of Botany, National Museum of Natural History in 1975. He became Collections Manager in 1979, the same year his department began a massive inventory of the collection and was deeply involved in the development of collections management systems. In the year 2000, he set up an imaging lab which has resulted in the digitization of some 300,000 specimens. He also initiated the Smithsonian's Field Book project, a very successful program to digitize field notebooks from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and retired in 2017.

Ching-hsien Wang emigrated from China in 1979 and then attended the American University and Montgomery College where she learned English. At the University of Maryland, she obtained a Bachelor of Science in Computer Science degree in 1982. After graduating, she went to work for GEAC which marketed a library automation system and the Smithsonian was a GEAC customer. In 1988, she began working for the Smithsonian providing technical support for GEAC and then for its successors, NOTIS and Horizon. After the departure of the Smithsonian Institution Research Information System (SIRIS) director in 1998, Ching-hsien became branch manager. She spearheaded the effort to digitize Smithsonian images for fourteen archives units and to build the first Smithsonian central repository of Smithsonian metadata of libraries, archives, and museums. This repository was the basis for the first Collections Search Center, which enabled the public to search across many Smithsonian assets. She retired in 2020.

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## Names and Subject Terms

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

### Subjects:

- Computer systems
- Computers
- Information resources management
- Information storage and retrieval systems
- Information technology
- Information technology
- Interviews
- Museums -- Collection management
- Museums and the Internet
- SELf GEnErating Master (SELGEM)
- SIRIS (Information system)

### Types of Materials:

- Compact discs
- Digital images
- Electronic images
- Electronic records
- Sound recordings

## Transcripts

### Names:

Bearman, David  
Bridge, David  
Churchman, John H.  
Dann, Melanie Cameron  
Garnett, Thomas  
Henley, Brooke  
Howser, John P.  
Mello, James F., 1936-  
Piacesi, Dante  
Roepel, Carla I.  
Russell, G. F. (George F.)  
Smithsonian Institution. Office of Computer Services  
Smithsonian Institution. Office of Information Resource Management  
Smithsonian Institution. Office of the Chief Information Officer  
Wang, Ching-hsien

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## Container Listing

Interviews	
Interviews	Interviews 1-5: March 21, 2016 to June 13, 2016
Interviews	Five interviews of David Bridge by John H. Churchman and Carla I. Roeper cover his role in developing collections management systems at the Smithsonian, 1960s through 2015.
Interviews	Transcripts, 228 pp.
Interviews	Audio Recording of Interviews: Total recording time: 09:00 hours Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Original Masters: 16 digital audio .wav files</li><li>• Reference Copies: 16 digital audio .mp3 files</li></ul>
Interviews	Interview 6: January 4, 2017
Interviews	Interview of Rusty Russell by David Bridge and John H. Churchman covers his role as automating collections management and digitization collections information in the Department of Botany, National Museum of Natural History from 1975 to 2017.
Interviews	Transcript, 58 pp.
Interviews	Audio Recording of Interview: Total recording time: 02:27 hours Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Original Masters: 4 digital audio .wav file</li><li>• Reference Copies: 4 digital audio .mp3 file</li></ul>
Interviews	Interview 7: August 9, 2017
Interviews	Interview of David Bearman by David Bridge and John H. Churchman covers his role in information systems at the Smithsonian from 1980 to 1986.
Interviews	Transcript, 41 pp.
Interviews	Audio Recording of Interview: Total recording time: 01:58 hours Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Original Masters: 2 digital audio .wav files</li><li>• Reference Copies: 2 digital audio .mp3 files</li></ul>
Interviews	Interview 8: November 20, 2017
Interviews	Interview of Dante Piacesi by David Bridge covers his role as manager of scientific computing at the Smithsonian from 1967 to 1986.
Interviews	Transcript, 56 pp.
Interviews	Audio Recording of Interview: Total recording time: 01:44 hours

	Notes:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Original Masters: 4 digital audio .wav files</li><li>• Reference Copies: 4 digital audio .mp3 files</li></ul>
Interviews		Interview 9: December 5, 2018
Interviews		Interview of James F. Mello by David Bridge and John H. Churchman covers his role as a museum administrator guiding collections management systems development at the Smithsonian from 1969 to the 1980s.
Interviews		Transcript, 81 pp.
Interviews	Audio Recording of Interview: Total recording time: 02:57 hours Notes:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Original Masters: 5 digital audio .wav files</li><li>• Reference Copies: 5 digital audio .mp3 files</li></ul>
Interviews		Interview 10: March 22, 2019
Interviews		Interview of Thomas Garnett and Brooke Henley by David Bridge and John H. Churchman covers their roles as in library automation at the Smithsonian from 1982 to 2012.
Interviews		Transcript, 58 pp.
Interviews	Audio Recording of Interview: Total recording time: 02:30 hours Notes:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Original Masters: 4 digital audio .wav files</li><li>• Reference Copies: 4 digital audio .mp3 files</li></ul>
Interviews		Interview 11: September 14, 2020
Interviews		Interview of John P. Howser by David Bridge and John H. Churchman covers his role in automating Smithsonian financial systems from the 1970s through the 1990s.
Interviews		Transcript, 43 pp.
Interviews	Video Recording of Interview: Total recording time: 01:38 hours Notes:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Original Masters: 1 digital video .mp4 file</li><li>• Reference Copies: 1 digital video .mp4 file</li></ul>
Interviews		Interview 12: September 23, 2020
Interviews		Interview of John P. Howser by David Bridge and John H. Churchman covers his role in automating Smithsonian financial systems from the 1970s through the 1990s.
Interviews		Transcript, 56 pp.
Interviews	Video Recording of Interview: Total recording time: 02:06 hours Notes:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Original Masters: 1 digital video .mp4 file</li></ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reference Copies: 1 digital video .mp4 file</li></ul>
Interviews	Interview 13: January 25, 2021
Interviews	Interview of Melanie Cameron Dann by David Bridge and John H. Churchman covers her role in automating Smithsonian financial systems from 1991 to 2000.
Interviews	Transcript, 36 pp.
Interviews	Video Recording of Interview: Total recording time: 01:14 hours Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Original Masters: 1 digital video .mp4 file</li><li>• Reference Copies: 1 digital video .mp4 file</li></ul>
Interviews	Interview 14: February 22, 2021
Interviews	Interview of Ching-hsien Wang by John H. Churchman and Carla I. Roeper covers her childhood in China, education, and role in automating Smithsonian archives, libraries, data and object collections management systems and facilitating public access, 1988-2000.
Interviews	Transcript, 33 pp.
Interviews	Video Recording of Interview: Total recording time: 01:46 hours Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Original Masters: 1 digital video .mp4 file</li><li>• Reference Copies: 1 digital video .mp4 file</li></ul>
Interviews	Interview 15: March 3, 2021
Interviews	Interview of Ching-hsien Wang by John H. Churchman and Carla I. Roeper covers her role in automating Smithsonian archives, libraries, data and object collections management systems and facilitating public access, 1988-2000.
Interviews	Transcript, 46 pp.
Interviews	Video Recording of Interview: Total recording time: 01:35 hours Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Original Masters: 1 digital video .mp4 file</li><li>• Reference Copies: 1 digital video .mp4 file</li></ul>