

Second Oral History Interview

with

Helena M. Weiss  
Registrar, 1948-1971  
United States National Museum

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Interviewer

for the Smithsonian Institution Archive

HENSON: We're going to pick up with your work in the Department of Geology. From about 1934 to 1948, you worked there. I wanted to ask you, first of all, how did the war affect the department? Did it have much effect, or did things pretty much go on as usual? A broad question there!

WEISS: I would say that it did not go on as usual. It made quite a change in the work patterns, as well as staff, and also, the assistance that the staff were able to use at that time.

HENSON: How about supplies and things? Was it harder to get supplies that you needed during those years? There was a lot of rationing, I know, for paper and things like that.

WEISS: Well, yes. I don't know that I have a clear memory of that. My memory in those years would be that we went through a period where I felt that it was always difficult. We found ways to get along with what we had, rather than worry about getting things that we couldn't have. I think that everyone had a sense of the urgency of the war and what was taking place in the world, so that in a way, while it was disrupting and it really frustrated, I'm sure, especially the scientists and the people who were trying to do something, I think they had a sense this had to be taken care of. We might think that this kind of work would be on a lower priority, so that in a sense, everyone tried to do the best they could. You might say they tightened their belts and went on. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Now, one of the projects that was undertaken, I noticed in the curators' annual reports, the chairman, Dr. [Ray Smith] Bassler, wrote, "The good services of Helena M. Weiss, and G. I. [Isidore] Sohn, of USGS [United States Geological Survey], who respectively recorded and packed the material, is gratefully acknowledged." He was referring to the move of the type specimens, out to I guess it was Virginia, but near West Virginia.

WEISS: It was out around Blacksburg, or someplace like that, as I recall. Who was the other person?

HENSON: Isidore Sohn, of USGS.

WEISS: I don't know that I have great recollection of that. I seemed to do whatever came along at that time, and sometimes there wasn't just head curator work. Dr. Bassler was the head curator of geology at that time before the title became chairman. Yes, I remember working with the collections quite a bit, and that was one of the fascinating things to me because I was learning a lot about the collections, especially with some of Dr. Bassler's work with fossil material of invertebrates. Also the minerals, I enjoyed that. I thought it was fascinating to see some of those specimens. It was just a matter, probably, of recording, as much as anything, that I was involved in. Of course we tried to keep very good records, and I hope we did, of everything that went out, so that we were hopeful everything would come back, and we wanted to have the proper records.

HENSON: Did you have a lot of time to do this, or was this done fairly quickly?

WEISS: I would say quickly. Everything was done quickly at that time because there was an urgency about getting the type materials taken care of as soon as possible. While everyone objected to them leaving the Smithsonian, particularly the curators, the people who felt they couldn't work without their types, everyone realized that there was a possibility that they might not survive if they stayed in Washington. This had been decided by the top staff, that it was the best thing to do in order to preserve them. So the project went on, and they finally were taken care of, and we got them out. It was hard on all of the staff, I'm sure. There were other things that came along during that time. The staff got involved, professional staff, in writing the War Background Series [Studies].<sup>3</sup> Do you know about that?

HENSON: I've seen that. Henry [Bascom] Collins did a little bit of that.

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<sup>3</sup> War Background Series (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1941-1945).

WEISS: Henry Collins, oh, any number of them. I had the whole series in my office when I went to [the Division of] Correspondence and Records. But they were prepared here, in the department, and that was done to help the War Department, at that time. They were going into areas that were unknown. Really, at that time, there hadn't been travel all over the world like there is today. They were sending our men into areas where there was very little knowledge of what it would be like to live there, or what the people were like, or what the circumstances would be when they got there. This was commissioned by the War Department for them to do, and I think it was probably a good thing. The professional staff got involved in really working on that. I know Mr. [Herbert] Krieger was one. I know there were any number of staff that were involved. It was a very good series. I'd like to go back and read some of them again, and see what it would be like today, when, actually everyone travels now, and has a good idea of what the world is like. At that time, they really didn't. They were sending these young men out in areas where our people had not been before.

HENSON: Like in Henry Collins' case, up near the Aleutians.

WEISS: The Aleutians... and that was a critical area when Japan got into the war, you know, very critical. That was the thing. The Pacific, too, at that time, was where some of the anthropologists, ethnologists, and others got involved.

HENSON: [Matthew Williams] Matt Stirling had been in New Guinea, people like that, that had expertise. Also, I remember Herbert Friedmann mentioning him working on something called *Survival on Land and Sea*.<sup>4</sup> Do you remember that?

WEISS: Yes, that's right. That was very good. He could do that.

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<sup>4</sup> Ethnogeographic Board, *Survival on Land and Sea* (Washington, D.C.: United States Navy, 1943).

HENSON: He was a sharp man. It seemed to be using the botanists and the zoologists telling people in certain areas what they could eat, if you were in a survival situation... what to do climate-wise and what to do food-wise.

WEISS: It was really something that I think a lot of people didn't realize, that the Smithsonian would come into a phase of the war in that way. There were a lot of military staff that were stationed in the Smithsonian, at that time, who had offices here. Not stationed here... what I mean is, some of those that were working in this particular area of the War Department, or the [United States] Navy, or whatever, had a few of their staff members here that could work with our staff members.

HENSON: Yes, there was also that Ethnogeographic Board.

WEISS: Oh yes, I think their offices were in the Smithsonian, the Castle. George [McClellan] Foster was in on that. I knew him well. I don't know if someone preceded him.

HENSON: [William] Duncan Strong, I think was someone's name.

WEISS: Yes, I think so.

HENSON: Matt Stirling, I think, was involved with that. There were a lot of different things, a variety of things. I remember Paul [E.] Garber was saying that he also provided the [United States] Army, the [United States] Air Force, with silhouettes of what the enemy planes looked like... Now did any staff, in your department, go off to war? Do you remember if you lost anyone out of your department?

WEISS: [PAUSE] I don't know whether anybody actually went into the military service. Offhand, I can't say.

HENSON: In geology, I don't know of anyone who did.

WEISS: I can't think of anyone. Al Loeblich [Alfred Richard Loeblich Jr.] came right after the war.

HENSON: Whereas, in entomology, people like [John Frederick] Gates Clarke did go into the service.

WEISS: Oh yes, there were several in entomology, and probably botany. For geology, I can't think offhand of anyone.

HENSON: I think because they were all a little older.

WEISS: There might have been somebody from the vertebrate paleontology laboratory, though I don't know, because there were some younger men who were working in the laboratory. . .

HENSON: . . .that might have gone off, then. What was wartime in [Washington] D. C. like? Did it really change the atmosphere just in the whole city?

WEISS: Well, yes, I think it did. [LAUGHTER] For one thing, my recollection of Washington when I came here... I came originally from a small town, and I was acquainted with small cities, and Washington was more like that. In a way, it was because there were people here from all over the country, it was quite a while before I met anybody that was born and raised in Washington, D. C., because people were coming from all over the country. Just like our mad dash to get the materials out of here, there was a mad dash to get personnel here in Washington to take care of the military in different areas. So I would say there was quite a change. In Washington, before that, it was hard at night to find a good restaurant that would be open after dark. I used to say that, well that isn't my own remark, that they "pulled in the sidewalks at sundown." You've heard that. Anyway, it was quite different, and gradually it was changing and becoming. . . . Just like now, I think it's growing by leaps and bounds, and this is the next phase of Washington growing. Right now, I think it's different, technological industry coming in that's making the change. At that time it was probably an enlargement of the government.

HENSON: Yes, substantial. Now how about living arrangements? Did you suffer any from the housing shortage?

WEISS: I didn't because I guess we were wise enough that we got ourselves settled. . .



Helena Weiss (first from right) with her friends on a winter day in 1937, probably in Washington, D.C.  
Image Number: SIA2018-109845A

HENSON: . . .ahead of time.

WEISS: We had an apartment.

HENSON: That seemed to be a problem for people.

WEISS: It was a big problem. The military did a quite a good job of taking care of young people who came in because they set up offices that could advise them and help them to get into.... at that time they still had boarding houses, I guess, more than individual apartments. Of course, people would share apartments, if they had apartments at all. At that time, I think, there were four or five of us sharing an apartment. It was hard. I'll tell you, the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association] did a lot at that time. The YW had quite a section that advised young people when they came in and tried to help them find a place to live, and what to do, and how to get around, and that sort of thing. It was a big help.

HENSON: I guess there would have been a fair amount of rationing, even for gasoline and things like that, just personally.

WEISS: Yes. Of course, I didn't have a car at that time. I rode... I don't know whether we had streetcars or buses then... [LAUGHTER] when I first came, it was streetcars. I always lived where I could have public transportation.

HENSON: I remember Waldo [LaSalle] Schmitt was very opposed to getting rid of the streetcars.

WEISS: Yes, he really was. He didn't like buses. I've seen him go out in the street, going up Tenth Street from the Natural History Building, and the light would change, a bus would come along, and he'd just put up his hand to stop that bus while he went across the street! Scared me to death! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: It's funny, they've now put in the subway to do essentially what the streetcars were doing then.

WEISS: That's true. I really liked the streetcars, and I sort of wish that they could have continued, because they seemed to be larger, airier, cleaner, in a way, and you knew you could always get around sometime when buses couldn't.

HENSON: Such as the last couple of weeks [LAUGHTER] when we have all suffered with our snows!

WEISS: Of course, they would have had iced rails, too.

HENSON: Yes, maybe. Did you always work a five day work week, during the war, too?

WEISS: No. We always had, I guess, five-and-a-half. We worked until noon on Saturdays. We may have worked six days, for a while. Now I can't tell you for sure about that, but for years we worked five-and-a-half. We worked until noon on Saturdays. That was our day that we could stay downtown and have lunch and really play!  
[LAUGHTER]

HENSON: That's interesting because it would get you downtown.

WEISS: We were downtown, and we got acquainted with different places to eat, where we hadn't been able to go, you just didn't have time. We could go to the stores and do our shopping. It was really great. I didn't mind that half-day on Saturday, really.

HENSON: It seemed, also, that there would be a lot of public service-type things on Saturday mornings... Boy Scout troops coming in, or things like that... so the routine may have been a little different.

During those years as well, did Bassler or other curators in the department have graduate students coming in to work with them? You mentioned Bassler taught at G. W. [George Washington University].

WEISS: Yes, he did. I can think of some that used to come in and work. Sometimes we'd have volunteers, these people wanted to have a chance to work with the collections. It wasn't necessarily for pay, even though people didn't have much money in those days. [LAUGHTER] Maybe this is a little later, it wasn't right in the war period, we used to get students who came in and worked. But there was some of that, yes.

HENSON: I was wondering if this was as far back... do you ever recall Ellis Yochelson coming in as a graduate student of Dr. Bassler's?

WEISS: Yes, I do. He was a student of Dr. Bassler's. In fact, I remember his mother coming in, with Ellis Yochelson, and talking to Dr. Bassler about her son, and that he was so determined to, really, become a geologist, a paleontologist, or something in that field, and he wanted to pursue it, so definitely that his mother was helping him.

HENSON: Serious students! Then you also had some of what we now call research associates, although I don't know if they had those titles, people that would come in and just volunteer their time, as you were saying. For example, it seems that Josephine [P. Wells] Cooper would come in and do a lot of work with Dr. [Gustav Arthur] Cooper. Do you recall that?

WEISS: Yes, but I think that was all voluntary. Anything like that was voluntary if they came in, and they could do some of the little jobs we were talking about that the curators really did not have time to do; there were no aides for each division. Someone like that could come in and help and do some of the little jobs, housekeeping jobs, shall we say, on the collections.

HENSON: She apparently also sometimes did translations, so I guess she knew Russian. And Dr. [August Frederick] Foerste... now, he was completely retired, so I guess he was one of these people who was volunteering his time.

WEISS: Well, I think the retired.... I knew several of those old geologists that were here, but they did it because of their love for their profession. So I don't think that that was a hardship for them, but it certainly helped the staff to have them. I don't think there was any idea or feeling that they shouldn't do that, or they'd have no feeling that this was something beyond what they should be doing. It was just an accepted situation. . .

HENSON: . . .that people would do a lot of that. Also, it would have been a little earlier than this, that we did get some WPA [Works Progress Administration] workers in the division. Do you recall that?

WEISS: Yes, I don't know if I can recall who they were, at this time.

HENSON: There was a George [P.] Kushan and a [James] Leo Connors, a couple of the names, I don't remember all of them. There were apparently several of them who were hired for different... I think Connors was good at translation. They had different areas of expertise.

WEISS: I wouldn't remember the names of those who came in, but I know there were WPA workers, in different departments. I do remember Connors now and his language assistance.

HENSON: What kinds of things would they do? Would it be just helping with the collections?

WEISS: I think it would be whatever the curators would have that they could do, without actually disturbing the collections in any way. There are always lots of little jobs that can be done by people that come in, young people who are qualified people. It was good training for them, and also an education for many of them, and may have affected them in the future in their lives.

HENSON: I mentioned this off the tape a little bit... do you recall, also during the thirties, the radio program, "The World Is Yours"?

WEISS: I recall that. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Vaguely, right?

WEISS: I don't know whether I can identify any particular program, right now. It's been so long since I thought of that.

HENSON: Was it something that the staff would listen to? Do you remember making an effort to listen to it?

WEISS: You mean in the offices?

HENSON: No, I mean just when it was on at home.

WEISS: You mean, they would be interested in listening to it? I would think so, yes. Who set that up?

HENSON: That was Webster [P.] True, who was in the Editorial and Publications [Division]. Apparently he was in charge of the whole thing. Apparently Austin [Hobart] Clark, whom you may recall, who seemed to know a lot about public relations...

WEISS: He really would. He's the person who would do that. Actually Waldo Schmitt might be one who would be interested in it, too. But Austin Clark, I can believe that he would.

HENSON: Then there was apparently an old-timer who would ask questions, and then information would come out about different aspects of science or history or whatever. It was educational.

WEISS: Wouldn't that be interesting to hear some of those now? My recall isn't very good on that.

HENSON: We don't have a recording, but we do have a set of the scripts.

WEISS: Oh, you do? Isn't that interesting? Did the staff members, themselves, take part in that?

HENSON: They wrote the scripts, and then actors, essentially out-of-work actors, were employed by the WPA.

WEISS: That was it. I didn't remember that staff members were really involved. Probably what it was, was that Mr. True would work with staff members in writing his script. The editor's office did that a great deal in my days in the Smithsonian.



Helena Weiss standing on the steps outside the U.S. National Museum, c. late 1930s.  
Image Number: SIA2018-109861B

HENSON: Do you think, prior to that time, when you had a radio program going out, that most people knew what the Smithsonian was, or what people then called the United States National Museum? Do you think back where you came from, all that many people were familiar with the Smithsonian?

WEISS: I don't think people generally, throughout the country, were that familiar with it. I think that they knew that there was a Smithsonian Institution, especially any of them that had done any travelling. I remember a cousin of mine, before I ever came here, used to say that I should come to Washington. She thought that it was just wonderful, and sent me pictures of the Capitol and the White House, and all of that, and the Smithsonian. She and her husband were just thrilled to pieces when I came because of the fact that I had actually come to Washington. So I took pictures and sent her, and then, to think, that I worked at the Smithsonian! So they were aware. How well the Smithsonian was known all through the country, I can't tell you, but having worked there, I've always felt that the Smithsonian has been known, every place! We always felt like, "everyone knows the Smithsonian," and I think that everyone does know the Smithsonian now. Dr. Bassler used to say that when he went to Europe, lots of times there was more understanding about the Smithsonian and the work that it was doing than in this country. The people there really appreciated the research accomplished in museums and art galleries. This kind of work had been done for many years in those countries. They had organizations, they had academies, and they had museums, so they were familiar with it, while our country was younger and hadn't really reached that point.

HENSON: A lot of foreign countries have, for example, a ministry of culture... a different type of thing. In the museum in those years, when you had the head curator structure, there is something which I have heard referred to as the "chain of command," which was a lot clearer than it is now. How would decision-making work, within the department?

WEISS: Decisions for what?

HENSON: I guess, for almost anything, just say, for the budget. It seems that the divisions are a lot more autonomous now than they were then. Would the curator of a division have his own budget, or would that be handled by the head curator?

WEISS: No, I doubt if the curators of divisions had their own budgets. Actually, there wasn't that much money. [LAUGHTER] The money that might be assigned to a department would be difficult to divide into every division, so that each division could manage its own fund. The divisions, as I recall, would submit their budgets to the head curators, then the head curators would prepare the budget, made up of what the divisions had submitted. Then that was forwarded to the director's office from the head curators. So the entire budget of the Smithsonian was brought together. I was quite sure, from my recollection, that there was not individual budgeting. Do the curators have their own budgets now?

HENSON: Divisions would, yes.

WEISS: And they're responsible for submitting their own... and managing their own funds and everything? No, I'm sure it wasn't that way.

HENSON: Let's just say, for example, working with the Correspondence and Documents, that an information request came in. Would that go directly to the curator in the division, or would that go through the head curator's office?

WEISS: You mean professional information? I have to think about that. I don't think we sent it to the head curator's office. We sent them to divisions.

HENSON: And then the division would send it back?

WEISS: Yes, I'm quite sure. I think when I worked in geology, we had forms for recording the information to inquiries which were prepared by the curators, and very often the divisions did not have secretaries at that time. Sometimes one might and then maybe not. The forms were sent through the head curator's office; I know I used to work with some of those and prepare the letters which were sent on up.

HENSON: So it would have been even almost more a typing function... that it would go through the head curator's office. Then at some point, it changed from Dr. [Alexander] Wetmore signing the letters, that then the curators, themselves, would sign them.

WEISS: Yes, that was a gradual change. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Do you think, in early years, that the curators preferred it, or did they have any objections to the letters going out under Dr. Wetmore's signature? Why would it have changed, do you think?

WEISS: I wouldn't be surprised if there were some who would have preferred signing the letters themselves. But that would be a little difficult if you had no stenographer, or no clerk, or did not have a typist in your own office to do that... to have it typed someplace and then have it sent back to the curator to sign. I don't see how the directors of museums had time to do it, but this was all prepared.

As I told you, Dr. [Charles Greeley] Abbot, when I first came, used to sign my efficiency ratings, [LAUGHTER] and he was the Secretary of the Smithsonian! I still don't know how that happened! I must have been rated by the head curator or the person for whom I was working. That must have been sent on up, and they were prepared in a central office. I cannot tell you how that was done, but I have some memos of ratings that Dr. Abbot signed and that Dr. Wetmore signed.

HENSON: They must have spent their whole day signing!

WEISS: [LAUGHTER] Well, we didn't have that much staff at that time!

HENSON: I guess! But there were enough that that would take you a little while. Now, how about Bassler as the head curator? Would he have supervised the divisions very closely, or did they work pretty much on their own?

WEISS: I don't think that he supervised very closely. I don't know about in paleontology... of course, he was a paleontologist. Whether he did, whether the paleontologists felt that he did, I don't know. I don't think that in mineralogy. . . . I don't know that it was real supervision. I wouldn't call it supervision.

HENSON: Did he just tend to give people a free hand to just go ahead and do their job?

WEISS: I think so. They each had their own special area in which they were working, and I don't know whether there was any overlapping in that or not. I know Dr. [Charles Elmer] Resser was then curator of invertebrate paleontology, and I guess he was succeeded by Dr. Cooper. Dr. Resser, his field was Cambrian, and I don't think that Dr. Bassler would have given him any advice on that. Dr. Cooper, of course, Devonian brachiopods were always his main forte. Dr. Bassler's was crinoids and bryozoans. [Laughter]

HENSON: So they each had their own area.

WEISS: They all had their own special fields of knowledge. I imagine there was consultation, when they got into different areas of the geological periods of time.

[BEGIN REEL II]

HENSON: I want to ask you a little more about Dr. Bassler as head curator. How heavy was his administrative load then? Did he have much time for his own research or did he mostly do paperwork? Do you recall at all?

WEISS: I think he certainly carried on his own research. He was working on a couple monographs on, probably, bryozoans, with Dr. [Ferdinand] Canu. He was over in France, and the two of them were getting out this volume. So he really did continue his own work, and I don't think Dr. Bassler spent a great deal of time doing supervisory or administrative work. . .

HENSON: . . .paperwork.

WEISS: I really don't think so. I think he wanted to keep everything moving in his department. I think the department work moved along quite smoothly, as far as I could tell. There might be some personality differences, but this is true of every area. I think that as far as the work was concerned, I would say that each curator knew his area of work, and Dr. Bassler expected it to just move along. As I say, he did have his own work, and he also, at that time, was still head of the Department of Geology at G. W., so he did have that work in addition. I think he had enough to do without really giving personal supervision to what was going on in the department.

HENSON: Was there a lot of paper to move along, just in terms of budget submissions and requisitions and things like that?

WEISS: I think when I first went in the department the accessions for the divisions, especially maybe vertebrate paleontology, I'm not sure whether they had a girl down there or a secretary, the accession memoranda were made up in the head curator's office. I think I'm right on that. It may have been for all the divisions. I can't say for sure. They did, before I left there. I know Dr. Resser had a girl working in his office, so that his work could be done there. At that time I think the accession memoranda did come through the head curator's office after they were prepared, and then they went on to Correspondence and Documents.

HENSON: During this period of time, do you recall the curators working much on exhibits?

WEISS: I think that especially during the wartime that was more or less static. There wasn't time, and maybe interest, in doing that kind of work; probably there was not. But, before I left geology, they were beginning to work on some of the halls. They were beginning to work on meteorites. Each hall was trying to bring their exhibits more or less up-to-date. I'm sure curators had ideas of how they'd like to have exhibited, but there was always this little matter of money in the background, not only for staff, but for getting this work done. You had to have supplies and equipment and everything else in order to do very much in exhibits work. I'm not sure there was very much change in geology, particularly, until an exhibits office was established.

HENSON: Yes, in the 1950s. What were the exhibits like? Would you have gone to see them?

WEISS: Yes. When Dr. Bassler came in very early in the morning, his regular routine was to walk through the geology exhibit halls, they were over here in the east... we didn't have the wing yet... the east section of the Natural History Building. He always came, walked through the department, and checked the specimens to see that everything seemed to be in order. He also noticed any dust or anything. There was dust around, but he tried to see that things were kept fairly clean. I remember very often, he'd come in the office and he'd seen a specimen that might have fallen, was down, or something had happened, and he tried to have it taken care of. That was his regular routine, I remember. I thought it was interesting, to me it was, that he would take the time, but he always came in early, of course. And he often worked late so that he could watch something like that himself. I imagine a chairman wouldn't have time for that today.

HENSON: Were our exhibits similar to other museums, or were we behind the times then?

WEISS: I really wouldn't have any way of giving a valid answer on that. I don't know whether other museums had moved ahead or not. I know that somehow the Smithsonian had got in print that it was a musty old museum. I never found it musty or uninteresting, it was always fascinating to me. I do know that perhaps the cases were old-style and the manner of exhibit hadn't changed radically, but it couldn't during this period of time.

HENSON: With the mineral collections, what was security like for them? It's fairly rigid now. Were things a little. . .

WEISS: . . .very loose. I used to worry, well not so much when I was in geology, it was when I'd moved on farther, that I used to worry about the public having access to elevators and able to come up to office floors. Sometimes [I'd] find them in the hall. I used to stop people and ask them if they were looking for someone or could I help them, when I'd see someone wandering. This worried me, because there was always a possibility that they could be a person that. . . . But I don't know that we had very many incidences.

HENSON: I came across one, but just one small one. Right now we have quite a gem collection. Was there as flashy a gem collection back then?

WEISS: Yes, there was a gem collection, but, of course, some outstanding pieces have been received since the thirties and forties. They did not have the security for the gem collection that they have now, of course. I think when the Hope Diamond came in, that was when I was in the Registrar's Office, by that time it was necessary to have more security. That was when they set up special security for the Hope Diamond. Then that extended to the other collections. As far as the other, thinking of [Museum of] Natural History and MHT [Museum of History and Technology], there probably wasn't the security that they should have had.

HENSON: I think that it was fairly typical, back then. Do you recall when the Hope Diamond came in? That's probably a thing to remember.

WEISS: Oh, yes. I arranged getting it here after I became Chief of Correspondence and Records. . . [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: You did?

WEISS: . . .along with Mr. [Harry] Winston. Harry Winston gave it, you know, to the Smithsonian.

HENSON: So you knew it was coming in advance?

WEISS: Oh, yes. There was a question of how it would be transported. It scared me to death, but Harry Winston himself decided the best way to send it was by registered mail. The Smithsonian agreed, and it was handled through top officials of the Registry Departments at the United States Post Office and the New York Post Office Registry Department. As far as the public was concerned, it came by mail. It was delivered to the Museum of Natural History. The little package was opened and the contents verified as authentic in the director's office in the presence of the Director of Natural History, Dr. [A.] Remington Kellogg; the Secretary of the Smithsonian, Dr. Leonard Carmichael; the Curator of the Division of Mineralogy, Dr. George [S.] Switzer; the top official of the Registry Department of the U. S. Post Office Department; and myself. There were many signs of relief when Dr. Switzer assumed responsibility and walked out with it.

[LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Would they have gotten, for example, a special safe or anything to keep that in?

WEISS: They did very soon. Now whether they had it immediately, I'm not sure. They must have made some arrangement, probably with the advice of Harry Winston, because, naturally, of the donor's interest in this. I'm sure arrangements were made for the best security that could be arranged at that time.

HENSON: It's amazing that it got in okay! [LAUGHTER]

WEISS: There have been a number of experiences like that. When it was loaned, the first time, I objected to that; I didn't think it should be loaned. I guess that shows that I'm an old-fashioned sort of person.

You know the history of the Hope Diamond, of the effect that it had on everyone who had ever owned the Hope Diamond. We had... I'm skipping over in time again... in the Office of the Registrar, at that time, an influx of mail, that came, not only from the U.S., but from all over the world. It came in, predicting all these dire things that would happen to the Smithsonian. In the beginning I laughed it off. I thought this is, well, you know. . . . But as they kept coming in I began to worry myself! [LAUGHTER] "Do you think... I wonder what could happen to the Smithsonian?" And I'd think, "I wonder if that could happen?" [LAUGHTER] These predictions kept coming in until I really wondered what in the world would happen! Fortunately, we [the Smithsonian] survived all these years! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Nothing has, fortunately! When you loaned it out, what sort of arrangements would have been made for transporting it? Were they still fairly simple?

WEISS: It was transported personally and it was brought back personally, by a staff member. Every precaution was taken along the way. But it was a very, very distressing thing for everyone that was involved with it and much relief when it finally came back to the collection. Then the second time, when it was lent to South Africa, to the diamond... what was that company called? It's a big diamond company. They sent a courier.

HENSON: Kruger? That's one of the big ones. And de Beers?

WEISS: Oh, that's very familiar, de Beers. Anyway, it had gone out once, and there wasn't as much controversy about it, at least, and the borrower took full responsibility for taking it and bringing it back. A company of that size, and with their experience, and everything... at that time Dr. Switzer and Dr. Kellogg were involved, and the Secretary, particularly, felt that there wasn't that much danger, putting it in de Beers' hands would be all right. The courier did come here, and he was a great big fellow [LAUGHTER]. . .

HENSON: . . .nobody would mess with!

WEISS: [LAUGHTER] I had to arrange, then, in the first place, to get it out of the country, in each case. I did this through the Customs inspector, at [United States] Customs [Bureau]. He came over here at the time so that everybody could verify that it was the Hope Diamond that was being transported out of the country. "Everybody" means Dr. Switzer, this courier, the Customs inspector, and myself. There were four of us. We knew and felt assured of safety in this case. This lovely, beautiful man finally reached the point... we had had all the Customs papers signed to show that the Hope was going out and that it would be returned by a certain time. He looked over and said, "Miss Weiss, if you'll excuse me." And, so, he went out. The Customs inspector and Dr. Switzer went with him. He was going to carry the specimen on his person some way, so that Miss Weiss wouldn't be present at the time. . . [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: . . .to know exactly how!

WEISS: Miss Weiss was kind of in the way at that particular point, otherwise it would have been done right there! So he came back; everything was all taken care of, and he was ready to go. He came, shook my hand, and said, "Miss Weiss, good show, good show, Miss Weiss!" [LAUGHTER] That was so funny! And it [the Hope] got there and back, very safely.

HENSON: Very safely. But boy, that would keep you awake nights, worrying about it.

WEISS: It did. In fact, I was on call, if there was ever a call on it, I would get the notice.

HENSON: My God! I wondered if back then, now, I know it's fairly high security over there...

WEISS: Oh, I imagine. Don't you think so? Of course, they had the special case made here for the Hope Diamond, eventually. I think the whole gem collection is very tightly protected. At that time they kept a guard on the diamond, which meant taking one of the members of the guard force for that one particular job, which was a problem, too, I'm sure.

HENSON: Now, also, during this period of time, [William Frederick] Foshag went to Mexico, to study a new volcano.

WEISS: He was studying Paricutin. He went to Mexico and was very much involved in recording the beginning of a volcano. I think I have the paper that was written by him and... I can't think of the name of the little man [R. Jenaro Gonzalez] who was involved there. Later on, after Dr. Foshag's death, I saw this volcano. Dr. Foshag's wife [Merle Crisler Foshag] happened to be on the same plane going down to Mexico. I was very fortunate to be in her company as we went on to this little village and observed Paricutin from horseback at night. With the flashing flames and light, it was really an eerie thrill! It was tremendous! This was a vacation trip on my own, it was not official. It was thrilling to me to know that this was one of Dr. Foshag's great experiences and projects.

HENSON: He was down there quite a while.

WEISS: Yes, he was.

HENSON: Was it fairly unusual for somebody to be away that long?

WEISS: It probably was, I imagine. But it was such an exciting thing, and this probably was the first time that the Smithsonian had an opportunity to be involved in firsthand information on the birth of a volcano. He may have been criticized for that, I don't know, but I think it was a great thing that he did.

HENSON: Fascinating to keep records of. . .

WEISS: . . .to have really a firsthand record. Now, it's so easy. People can fly to place like that, and they can get there very rapidly. At that time, they could not. This was way out in isolated country--travel was partly by horseback. There was no regular transportation.

HENSON: There are still eruptions, but I don't recall recently any birth of a volcano. That was the one that came up out of the cornfield, right?

WEISS: Yes. It was really isolated country out there, and, as I remember, there were no nearby villages; but by "villages," I'm talking about maybe five or six, or maybe a dozen, shanty-like houses. There was a church there, I recall, and we saw that. This was the thing that really thrilled the native Mexicans. The church was completely destroyed, and the lava flowed up as far as the altar in the church and had stopped right there. The altar remained with this beautiful statue, and that was all that was left of the church. The natives felt, of course, that this was the hand of God that had preserved this particular area.

HENSON: Interesting. Do you recall, also, Roland [Wilbur] Brown?

WEISS: Yes.

HENSON: I understand that he had something called an encyclopedia project. Do you recall that?

WEISS: I can't tell you the title of that now... You'd probably know.<sup>5</sup> It was a study of, I guess, the origin and development of words. He worked on it--I guess it must have been a lifetime project, I wouldn't be surprised--as a sideline. He was a paleontologist in fossil woods, if I'm not mistaken.

HENSON: But he was USGS right?

WEISS: He was employed by the U. S. Geological Survey. There were a lot of Geological Survey people, as you know, who had their offices here, during their whole careers. Dr. [John Bernard] Reeside [Jr.], I think, was here most of his career, and Dr. [Edwin] Kirk, Dr. [Josiah] Bridge, Roland Brown.

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<sup>5</sup> Roland Wilbur Brown, *Materials for Word-study; A Manual for Roots, Prefixes, Suffixes and Derivatives in the English Language* (New Haven: Van Dyck & Co., 1927).

HENSON: Someone named David White came in after he retired, essentially as a research associate.

WEISS: Anyway, they had their offices here, and they worked on the collections. This was the place where the specimens vital to their professional work were located, and they were assigned to these offices from the Department of Interior. Roland Brown. . .the book was his own project, a sideline.

HENSON: It seemed to be his hobby. Unusual.

WEISS: He spent most of his time at the Smithsonian. I mean, not just in working hours, but I used to think that he probably almost lived there.

HENSON: As did Jessie Beach, apparently, for a while.

WEISS: Jessie Beach, yes, I think she did, too, likewise.

HENSON: It has not necessarily changed, even today, there are still a few of those!

WEISS: Really? Is that right?

HENSON: But then in July of 1943, Dr. Resser died, while you were still there. Was that expected? Was he older, or was that fairly sudden?

WEISS: No, I think that was sudden. In a way, I felt badly about that. Dr. Resser's office was adjacent to Dr. Bassler's, and of course I used to see him all the time. Sometimes he would come into the office and say, "I just don't feel good, and I think I'm going to have to go home." I didn't think anything about it, he and all curators reported to the head curator's office at that time. But as time went on, it seemed like more frequently he was saying, "Well, I don't feel good; I think I'll go home." I used to think, "Gee, I don't know whether he's really. . . ." He was a robust-looking man, rather large, and he never had an appearance of any illness which I could tell. Of course, I was young enough to think that everybody, if they were sickly, had to look sick. Anyway, it wasn't my judgment, but I felt badly when very suddenly Dr. Resser had died. I can remember now how I felt. I had wondered if he was taking time off that he really didn't need to take. Isn't that a terrible thing to think about anybody? Wasn't my business.

HENSON: But you don't know. You really don't know.

WEISS: I liked him, and I didn't have any criticism of him, but I often wondered if he didn't have a real illness that he wasn't communicating to anyone.

HENSON: Yes, just regrets that you even thought that. Now, the next year, also, Dr. [Edward Oscar] Ulrich died.

WEISS: Did he? I wouldn't remember the dates. Yes, I remember. Dr. Ulrich was a very good friend of Dr. Bassler's. I think he had probably been his mentor, in Dr. Bassler's early years, because he really was very, very fond of Dr. Ulrich. He was a big, kind of gangly man, and very interesting, very gentlemanly, and had a courtly, foreign type of approach to a person. I don't know anything about his death or his illness.

HENSON: Towards the end of the World War II period, it seemed like the department began to grow a little bit. Do you recall that happening before you left, people like [Alfred Richard] Loeblich [Jr.] came in...?

WEISS: Oh, yes. Dr. Loeblich was there before I left.

HENSON: And was it, [Arthur Leroy] Bowsler [Sr.] came in?

WEISS: I do not remember him. Dr. [C. Lewis] Gazin was down in vertebrate paleontology and Dr. David Hosbrook Dunkle. Who was in invertebrate? Dr. Cooper was the head curator then. I can't tell you offhand.

HENSON: It seemed like fairly soon after World War II, the department began to . . .

WEISS: . . .expand.

HENSON: Yes, finally get some support, and begin to expand, a little bit.

WEISS: Well, I should imagine that about that time it would begin to because funds became more available, and also it would have been a good time to pick up people qualified for such positions. People were coming back from the war, and they were looking for work in their field, so that was happening probably throughout the Smithsonian.

HENSON: Now, I have a perception that, at the Smithsonian, when people came to work here they stayed for long careers. Do you think that's true?

WEISS: Oh, I know it's true. That's right, they came and they stayed. When I reported to geology, Dr. Leonhard Stejneger was still working in the Department of Biology at age ninety! He was a former Head Curator. He never took the elevator but walked the stairs to his third floor office at the end of our hall. I don't think they do that as much, though, today.

HENSON: To a certain extent. . . .

WEISS: I do see *The Torch*, and just from reading that, I have a feeling that people move along. Before I left, they were, to a certain extent, especially in the clerical and stenographic areas, because they would see opportunities to advance outside of the Smithsonian. I think, as far as government funds were concerned, the Smithsonian did not keep up with the advance in the salaries, like other government departments did. I think, before I left, they were beginning to, but there was a period of time when they really were not. I know I lost a couple of good stenographers and one good secretary who had an opportunity to go on. You can't stand in the way of someone if they can improve. But the Smithsonian couldn't advance people like that.

HENSON: I had wondered if this was also true of the administrative staff. The curatorial staff just sort of came here for life, but I wondered if the administrative staff did, as well.

WEISS: Some of them did. When I first came, there were women, in head curators' offices and places like that, who had been here for years and years and years, and they were still here! [LAUGHTER] But I don't know if that was generally true... it may not have been true all over. But the professional staff, definitely, I think they stayed.

HENSON: Did you ever consider leaving the Smithsonian?

WEISS: I couldn't remember what I did. I know I used to feel, after the war years progressed, that I wasn't being very patriotic by staying in the Smithsonian. I didn't know whether what I was doing was helping the country very much, and maybe I should leave. I didn't remember that I ever made an attempt to, but I did find in some of my records not long ago an application for transfer to some war department. . .

HENSON: . . .like the Defense Department?

WEISS: Not the War Department; it may have been intended for the defense, someplace. Whatever it was, it was never forwarded.

[END OF INTERVIEW]