

Third Oral History Interview

with

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

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Interviewer

for the Smithsonian Institution Archives

HENSON: We are going to pick up in 1948 on March first, you moved from the Department of Geology, as a clerk-stenographer, to a CAF-7 administrative assistant, in the Office of Correspondence and Records. How did that change come about? Did you apply for that job, or did they ask you to take it?

WEISS: I did not apply for it. [LAUGHTER] I think, at that time, Mr. [Herbert S.] Bryant, who was the chief of [the Division of] Correspondence and Documents, was getting ready to retire. He'd been here about forty-nine or fifty years, and I think the administration was ready to build up his office somewhat. Mr. Commerford was the assistant there, Lester [E.] Commerford, in charge of the document part of the office. So the opportunity arose for someone to take an administrative assistant position in that office. I was one who was qualified and had the experience in the office, I suppose, and was given the opportunity. I'm sure there were others qualified in the museum, but I have no information on who they were, or if there were applicants. I don't know. It was, naturally, a promotion for me, and one can't very well turn down a promotion. I thought that it could be interesting to go back to the office where I started in the Smithsonian, and where I really was familiar with the routine work involved. I thought the administrative assistant position there would be very interesting.

HENSON: Do you remember who you talked to about the job? Would that have been [John Lewis] Keddy, or Bryant, or [Alexander] Wetmore? Do you have any recollection?

WEISS: I really am not sure who talked to me in the beginning. I know, of course, I talked with Mr. Bryant before I went in, because he was still there, and he was the one who would be interviewing applicants. Dr. Keddy, I think, also was much interested in the office. He knew the structure of the office, and in fact I think he might have given me a push! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Do it! How did Dr. [Ray Smith] Bassler feel about it?

WEISS: Well, interestingly enough, Dr. Bassler, for a long time, objected to me moving any place, and he did always try to get promotions for me when he could, which did not come very rapidly in those days. When this opportunity arose, Dr. Bassler also realized that he was reaching the end of his tenure at the Smithsonian, I think, and he did not raise an objection. In fact, I think he encouraged me. He wanted to see me move on before he left, and he really encouraged me to take it. I was glad of that, because I had been with him so long. He had been a wonderful person to work with, and had done a lot to help me, to teach me, to broaden my knowledge and experience. I was glad that he really felt it was the proper step for me to take.



Helena Weiss with Dr. Ray Bassler in the Natural History Building Office, c. 1930s or 1940s.
Image Number: SIA2018-108353

HENSON: When you went over on March first, as administrative assistant, did you have any idea that you would eventually become chief of the office?

WEISS: Not at all. [LAUGHTER] I probably would have changed my mind!

HENSON: By November ninth of that year, you'd become a CAF-9 chief of Office of Correspondence and Records. How did that come about? Do you have any idea?

WEISS: The only thing I remember, and I may not remember step-by-step, my own personal thought during this time was that Lester Commerford would become chief. He was the assistant chief, he'd been around the office all this time, although his work was devoted, almost entirely, to the document part. He was in charge of the publications, the annual reports, and the distribution of the publications of the Smithsonian world-wide; he had confined most of his work to that. I think whenever Mr. Bryant was away, which was not very often, Mr. Bryant was too devoted to his work to leave it very long, but if Mr. Bryant was not there, Mr. Commerford was the one who stepped in. So naturally, my thought would be that Lester Commerford would take Mr. Bryant's place and that I would assist him. I think he was pleased to see me come there, because he also knew that I was acquainted with the routine of the office.

HENSON: Then, as it worked out, he went over into Editorial and Publications [Division].

WEISS: What happened, I don't know, and I can tell you nothing about the internal workings of that move. Apparently the decision was made to separate the two sections of the office, which was certainly a logical thing to do. I think that that part of the office really should have been moved long before. Even the International Exchange Service, it seems to me, could have stepped in with the distribution. But then it was decided, and, naturally, Mr. Commerford went along with that. Maybe he got a promotion; I don't know exactly what happened. He moved merrily along and was glad to leave that office, I discovered. [LAUGHTER] I think he had no intention of taking over. He knew the extent of the work that was involved, for one thing! He was comfortable doing the work he was doing! [LAUGHTER] At the same time, I certainly had no intention to take over the office. Perhaps the pressure of work in the office left me no time to think.

HENSON: And so there you are, left holding the bag! Suddenly you are the head of this rather large operation, really! I have now in 1949, which is that next year, that there are nine of you there. There's you, someone by the name of [Clyde E.] Bauman. . .

WEISS: He was my assistant at that time.

HENSON: . . .someone named [Erwin M.] Wade. . .

WEISS: Yes, Erwin Wade had been there for a long time working with shipping papers and files, etc.

HENSON: . . .and [Ruth E.] Nylin?

WEISS: She was the secretary.

HENSON: And then [Robert E.] Kirk. . .

WEISS: Kirk was shipping officer.

HENSON: . . .and [Charles W.] Stem. . .

WEISS: Stem was down in the shipping office. I am sure he was assistant.

HENSON: . . .and then [Tilghman A.] Hawkins, [Lorenzo] Gant, and [Roscoe C.] Johnson. . . .

WEISS: Yes, Hawkins and Gant were messengers under the supervision of the office, but were on call for professional staff members for any kind of messenger work that was necessary. . . . Johnson was actually the mail carrier. He distributed the mail throughout the museums.

HENSON: One person?

WEISS: One person, at that time. That's my recollection.

HENSON: OK. That has to be it. . . there's no more staff there, right?

WEISS: Right! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Slightly prior to this, I was wondering if you recall, Wetmore became Secretary of the Institution, so he moved across the Mall. Was that something everyone expected to happen, when [Charles Greeley] Abbot retired? Was it surprising that he got the job, do you recall?

WEISS: I really do not recall whether there was. . . . As far as I was concerned, it seemed like a logical move. I don't know whether it was a surprise to others or not.

HENSON: Did he continue to have a strong presence over there in the museum, or was he much more removed, once he became Secretary?

WEISS: Administratively, he was removed, but I don't think he was much removed professionally. I think his entire career had been related to natural history and his work in ornithology, even in his early days. Then he was director of the [National Zoological Park], before he came to the U. S. National Museum as director, which was the combined museums, what later became the Museum of Natural History and the Museum of History and Technology. That had been his life, and he was still very much interested in natural history.

HENSON: Was he a person who seemed to enjoy administration, do you think?

WEISS: Well, I'd hate to judge him on that. I think that most professional scientists, who have grown up in their profession, are much more interested in their research, their study, their collections. I know that most of the directors who came into [the Museum of] Natural History, that I knew, always retained an office for their research work. Dr. [A. Remington] Kellogg had set up an office next to his administrative office, and this is true of all of them, because they were personally compelled to continue their research. They wouldn't have been comfortable if they hadn't.

HENSON: Was he also a fairly well-known figure in Washington?

WEISS: Dr. Wetmore?

HENSON: Yes, in those days.

WEISS: I don't know that I can answer that.

HENSON: Mrs. [Louise M.] Pearson went with him, across the Mall, didn't she?

WEISS: Oh, yes. She had been his secretary, probably from the time she came to the museum. I'm not sure about that, but she came in during World War I, I believe she said, which is something! She was a most efficient secretary and administrative assistant. She had the personality as well as the ability and talent to work with staff members. She worked like a computer, as far as her work was concerned in those days. [LAUGHTER] Very efficient. And I would say that the staff all liked Louise Pearson.

HENSON: Then she stayed through [Leonard] Carmichael, in that position, and through the beginning of [S. Dillon] Ripley's first couple of years. There actually was a good bit of continuity.

WEISS: Yes, there was. She was well-respected, I think, by staff all over the Smithsonian after she worked in the Secretary's Office. I think the entire staff had great respect for Louise Pearson, her work, her abilities. As I say, she had a nice personality for getting along with people.

HENSON: She knew how to handle things diplomatically?

WEISS: Yes, very.

HENSON: When you took over the Office of Correspondence and Records, did you have time for, or did you think about a program of what you wanted to do with that office yourself?

WEISS: Not really, I fell into it. [LAUGHTER] I don't think that I had time to think of a program in the beginning at all, because here I was going back to this office, with the routine pretty well set up. There were certain things that I knew we had to do, and changes were made as they became necessary. One of the first things we sloughed off was the responsibility for the Smithsonian truck. I can't remember the truck driver's name. The Smithsonian had one truck and one driver that handled all of the local moving of specimens in the city, picking up specimens, equipment, or whatever needed to be done. I wish I could remember that truck driver's name. Anyway, that was one of the first things we got rid of. . . . It was really too much to handle, trying to keep everyone happy with one vehicle available. It was just impossible to handle along with everything else and was a service that was misplaced in that office. I always said that office was a "catch-all" office--any function that couldn't be placed elsewhere was given to "Bryant."

HENSON: Would people want to take the truck out on fieldwork, for example?

WEISS: They would have liked to, but I can't remember if they did. . . . It couldn't have been very far away, only for fieldwork done more or less locally.

HENSON: So there were things like that. . . .

WEISS: And then the second thing we got rid of was the first aid... well, you couldn't call it an office, first aid function, I guess, in the office.

HENSON: From what I could tell, you not only had Band-Aids and a first aid set up, but if also someone were injured on the job, you had to fill out the forms for them.

WEISS: Yes, well, I think we sent them to Public Health Service if there was a problem that required care beyond, say, a Band-Aid or some mercurochrome, [LAUGHTER] which is about as far as we would go... or something for a headache or things like that. Yes, we filled out those forms and told them where to go. Later on, then... and I wouldn't have any idea as to what time period, the Smithsonian arranged to have the service of the first aid room at the Department of Justice, so that we could send our staff over there. That was just across the street from the museums, actually, so that was easy.

HENSON: Yes, that's right. Now, when you initially got rid of it, right away, do you know where it went to? Is that when it went to Justice [Department], or did it go to... ?

WEISS: No, I don't think so. It was some time before... I can't say. I have no recollection, however, of any other office assuming that function. It may have been C & R until we were privileged to go to the Department of Justice.

HENSON: It's not until later that we set up our own health unit.

WEISS: Yes, much later. Then before I left, we did have our own health unit, and... it was a number of years, I guess, before I left. I know it was a great relief to me, to know that there was help available through the Justice Department.

HENSON: Now, did you have any qualms about taking over that office?

WEISS: Oh, I'm sure I did. [LAUGHTER] I didn't think I was the one to do it. I was sure there were others in the Smithsonian that would have been better-qualified than I was. But somehow, I guess I got caught up in the work and stayed there.

HENSON: Yes, you did. I wondered, because I haven't come across any, were there any other women managers at the Smithsonian, at that time?

WEISS: Not very many, no. I don't know whether I can remember now. . . . I don't know if Betty [J.] Morgan was over in the fiscal office by that time. . . She was one.

HENSON: I don't think she was yet.

WEISS: She wasn't, that was before. And Maria [M.] Hoemann had moved up to a position in finance, I think, and also Ann [S.] Campbell. For a long time, I think the three of us were probably it.

HENSON: That was it. . .

WEISS: . . .for a while. You're talking about institution-wide, not individual bureaus.

HENSON: Yes, institution-wide. I wondered when, for example, you were put in the job, were you sent for any management training?

WEISS: Not really.

HENSON: Not really?

WEISS: I learned it! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Trial by fire, right?

WEISS: I don't think, as far as I can remember, there was a program of training, at that time. We more or less trained on the job, I would say, the hard way.

HENSON: As far as I can tell, when you took over the job, there were quite a number of responsibilities that were under you. The first one was the mail, the messenger service, and telegrams. What did that entail? How did that work in your office?

WEISS: Well, as I say, there were two messengers. In the beginning when I went there, we did not have full responsibility for the distribution of all mail in the Smithsonian. We did in the museums: the U. S. National Museum mail was sent to our office for delivery within the museums. Believe it or not, this is my recollection of how the Smithsonian-wide mail was handled. Mail addressed to the Smithsonian or the other bureaus was delivered to the Secretary's Office in the Castle; the organization there I do not know. Do you have anything on that? Because this is the way the entire operation--the mail facility--was placed under my office.

Mrs. Pearson had been handling the Smithsonian mail. . .the distribution to the other bureaus and everything--from the Secretary's Office, of all places! She called me one day to say that they were going to make a change. Apparently there was no place to move the entire mail service except the Registrar's Office. So, there wasn't much I could say about it. It certainly was time to take it out of the Secretary's Office. It was placed under our office. We set up a mail room then in the Natural History Building at the west entrance near the Shipping Office. All the mail for the Smithsonian came to us.

By that time the Post Office Department was beginning to initiate zip code numbers, mechanized separation of mail, etc. I attended a number of sessions at the Post Office in connection with new procedures in handling the mail and that sort of thing. We had to expand our office, because the mail volume continued to grow, to provide distribution among all the buildings on the Mall.

HENSON: So, for example, if a letter came addressed to a particular curator, would that go directly to him?

WEISS: It did, eventually. In the beginning, I'm not sure that it would have. But actually, we tried to then have mail messengers for each building, so that the mail was sorted in the mail room in the Natural History Building and then distributed from there.

HENSON: Then I also have that the messenger service even seemed to pick up time cards?

WEISS: Oh, my word, yes, I'd forgotten about that!

HENSON: Would that have been for the whole museum?

WEISS: Yes, that's right, they did.

HENSON: And delivered telegrams?

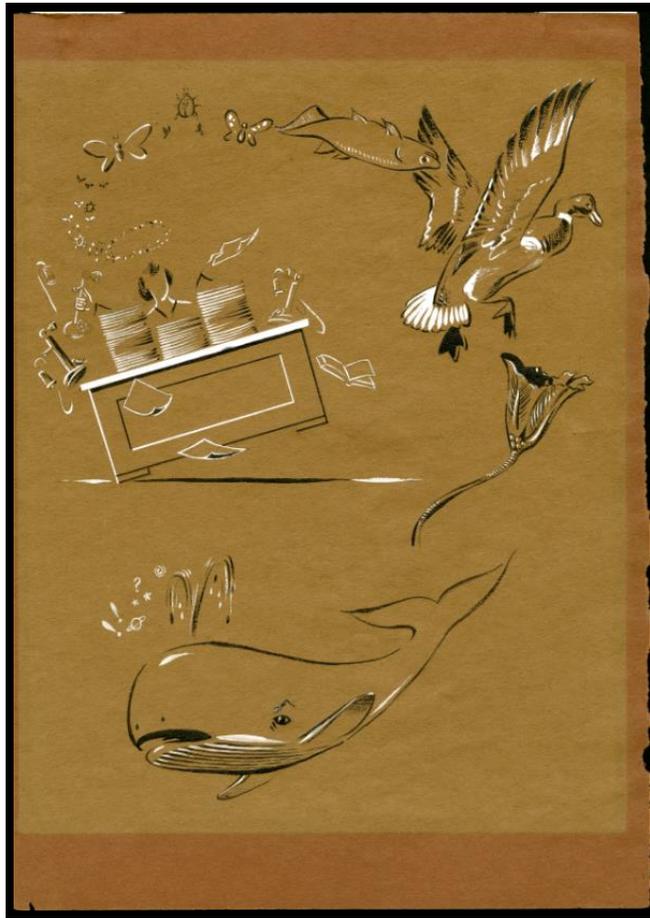
WEISS: Telegrams, that's right.

HENSON: All that would have come through your office. Seems like a lot of work!

WEISS: [LAUGHTER] Well, it was!

HENSON: Then the whole correspondence function was in your office, and that seemed to be opening letters addressed to, I guess, later, the whole Smithsonian, but at that point, the United States National Museum, routing them, and then making sure they were replied to. As I mentioned, I came across a directive, that in 1948, Wetmore said that head curators may now compose and sign letters, and mail them out through [the Division of] Correspondence and Records. So, I guess, right around the time that you're taking over, a change did take place.

WEISS: Yes, I think it did. Up to that time, there was a form that was referred to departments with letters of inquiry. Letters addressed to curators, relating to particular fields of interest, were answered by them, I'm quite sure, because I don't think we ever answered those. The general run of inquiries addressed to the Smithsonian and to museums that required information from the individual offices, were referred to C & R. A form was used to provide information for reply. Some letters were written in the Head Curators' Offices, then sent through our offices for posting. Others were returned to C & R, where replies were prepared from the information provided, probably depending on available staff in each department.



Hand-drawn birthday card for Helena Weiss from Edward A. Chapin, Ray S. Bassler, J.F. Gates Clarke, Clyde E. Bauman, and David H. Dunkle, date unknown.
Image Number: SIA2013-02862

HENSON: You had time to do all that typing!

WEISS: Yes, we managed!

HENSON: But then by the 1950s, Correspondence and Records, apparently isn't composing most of the letters.

WEISS: I'm not sure, but they may have come to our office to be mailed out, I don't remember.

HENSON: Apparently, that's what it says. They could compose them and sign them, but they mailed them out from your office.

WEISS: Yes, that's what I recall they did, probably to clear our reference. They actually reached the mail from our office.

HENSON: So then you would have, I guess, monitored whether, in fact, they'd been replied to. One of the things that someone mentioned to me is that... I think the man's name was Kincaid, who ran some sort of an information service.⁵ Does that ring any bell?

WEISS: Kincaid? In the Smithsonian?

HENSON: No, he was a private individual, who, apparently, had some information service that he ran. He would make a lot of requests to the Smithsonian, for all sorts of information.

WEISS: That may be. I'm afraid I can't remember that.⁶ We had so many instances, during the years, where there would be a large volume of mail coming in relating to some particular subject. I know the mail desk clerk would come to me and say, "Well, we've had so many of these, and they're coming in daily." Lots of the times they were just routine questions coming from schoolchildren. It may be... at that time "Kincaid" got a lot of his information from the Smithsonian, the fountain of all information, you know!

HENSON: It seems to be what he was doing, yes.

⁵ The name is Frederic Jennings Haskin, and he operated the Free Information Bureau.

⁶ Weiss did remember the name "Haskin."

WEISS: [LAUGHTER] I remember one incident when there was quite a volume of mail that came in, and we had no idea what it was about; the clerk on the desk really got frustrated. She came in to me... or he (I don't remember who it was now)... very much upset because this had been going on. Letters came in asking for a "wrecking kit" that the Smithsonian was reported to have. They had been told that the Smithsonian had a wrecking kit that we were distributing. Well, it turned out that that was from a radio program. Was it "The Joy Boys"? It was some popular program at that time. It was kind of a silly program, you know, where they reported these strange things. I may find some notes on that program, because it really was unbelievable! We continued to receive these letters... so finally, we decided they should be answered. Well, I had never heard anything about such a kit but you can't just say, "No, you've got all the museums, and we don't know what they may be doing." So I said hold them for a little bit and we'll see what we can find out about it. Well, they kept coming in in volumes, which really upset the mail desk clerk. One day a letter came in referring to that radio program and that was the first clue we had. . .

HENSON: . . .as to where all this was coming from!

WEISS: Well, schoolchildren got hold of that, an interesting thing there. Classes were writing in. We finally were able to take care of it by sending back one reply to the teacher, relating it to that program and telling her that the Smithsonian was not engaged in that kind of distribution! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: What kinds of things would you get letters on?

WEISS: Well, at the time, for a long time, the most popular subjects were the Stradivarius violin, meteorites, and anthropology as a career. Anthropology, archeology, apparently in the schools, was very, very popular at that time. I think that all through the time that I was there, this was one of the most popular subjects. Actually, the Anthropology [Department] prepared a good form letter on the subject that could be sent out. We were giving them information that would help them toward a career. Some were earnest students that were asking, you know, and you'd have to really help them if possible. There were lots of questions. Another one that came in quite frequently was on perpetual motion. Oh, we got some queer ones, though. One I remember was, "I'm studying nature, give me all that you have on it." That kind of question! [LAUGHTER] They were kind of funny.

HENSON: How do you respond to those? I guess you just get a certain percentage of letters just from nuts.

WEISS: I imagine they're still getting them. Well, they just don't know very much....

HENSON: ...or weren't very sophisticated.

WEISS: I really had a very strong feeling that we should answer these letters. I had sympathy for some of the letters that came from out through the country, because we got letters from little country schools. I discussed this with curators, and some curators quite agreed with me, and they gave the time to give a good reply to schoolchildren, because the children were in areas where they did not have access to reference books. Many of them had no libraries. I think we have some rural areas that are like that today. I felt if we had some information that we could give to help them and try to refer them to libraries, we should. One thing, we used to refer them, for certain questions, to the *National Geographic* [Magazine]. If they could get to an index of the *National Geographic*, when they had questions that were relating to geographic areas or people worldwide, that was a good source of information for school kids.

HENSON: I think of all the little reports I used *National Geographic* for, yes!

WEISS: You did! Well, this is it, we used that as a reference that would be available. We tried to give them an answer that they could work with, and this, I thought, was important.

HENSON: Would the letters come from all over the country, or did they tend to be just from this area?

WEISS: No, they were from all over the country and beyond. During the war... I don't know which war now... we would get letters from the servicemen. They would have bull sessions I guess, and they'd have arguments over something and would write to the Smithsonian to get the right answer. We knew this was important, because they probably had bets on the answers! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Yes! Now, would you say it was mostly children, or mostly adults, or very divided?

WEISS: It was divided. During the school year, it was from school children, naturally, the classes. Well, you could almost tell the seasons of the year from the correspondence we'd get. House cleaning time, we had letters that came in from women, people, who were doing their cleaning. They found these very interesting objects that they'd write about, and ask particularly about value, what they could do to sell some of their things, and things like that. Then, I would say, in the spring, at planting time, we got specimens that were sent in, or were thought to be of interest, that farmers or people working in the fields would find. Lots of times we would receive pieces that were thought to be meteorites, particularly. There was a time when everyone was interested in meteorites. Lots of little rocks came in that were thought to be meteorites.

HENSON: You'd have to do those.

WEISS: And another thing they'd find... I guess when they were plowing, and whatnot, were. . . .

[BEGIN REEL II]

HENSON: You were saying farmers would be out in the field and they'd find rocks that they thought were meteorites. What other sorts of things would they find?

WEISS: Sometimes they would come upon bones, or fragments of bones, and they'd send those in. Of course, all specimens were sent to curators. Another strange one, which I had never heard of, were hairballs. They originate in the stomach of animals and were formed from licking the hair. It forms a hairball. I think cats particularly have them, and maybe dogs, and I don't know what other animals on farms. I had never heard of them before.

HENSON: People would wonder. . .

WEISS: . . .wonder what they were! Yes, that's right. Then, of course, on beaches during the summertime, when everyone was going to beaches or travelling, we'd get shells and things that were picked up on the beach for identification. Also, little insects... one little insect you may have heard about; there were lots of insects, but this one was kind of cute. When it came in, it was in a matchbox. [LAUGHTER] I remember, the clerk on that desk brought it in--and I think this was Erwin Wade--and he was incensed. "What kind of people would send in something like that?!" He had a letter... they said that they had this bug or this insect, I guess they called it a "bug," and they wanted to know what it was. They had sent it live in this little matchbox. But the matchbox had little holes in it so that the insect could breathe, and it was not there when it arrived! [LAUGHTER] I got a kick out of that one!

HENSON: Yes. This will move us on to the Examination and Reports [E & Rs]. So you weren't getting just letters, pieces of paper. You were getting just all sorts of objects, too.

WEISS: Very interesting ones, they were very interesting. They'd come through and we would refer them on to the proper office. But those reports came back to us then.

HENSON: So that was something called "Examination and Reports." Was there a form that went along with the object?

WEISS: Yes, I think there was. We kept a separate temporary file on E & Rs. Also, we did the same thing for shipping papers on material returned, and so forth, in order to keep them separate from the general files. For the general inquiries, we had what we called our "temporary file," for answering questions. We set up a time frame on retention, so that we kept them. I don't remember exactly how long it was, now. . .

HENSON: ...for a certain amount of time. . .

WEISS: ...for a certain amount of time. It was impossible to keep all of them, but they were fascinating. Sometimes I'm sorry I hadn't kept more of them than I did.

HENSON: I noticed at one point, that I guess, to reduce the files, the suggestion was made that you would return the letter, with the response, so that you wouldn't have to file the letter. Do you remember that at all?

WEISS: Maybe we did. I'd forgotten about that. It could be we tried that. I don't know whether it was successful, really. I'm not sure that it was.

HENSON: Now, the Examination and Reports... those wouldn't just come from citizens, though, right? Would you get things from the [United States] Customs [Service] agents and the Bureau of Plant Quarantine?

WEISS: Yes, we did. In fact, some of our inquiries came from abroad... particularly with regard to some specimens or a particular object that the person was interested in. There was one I can't remember, I'd have to give a little thought to it, that came from one of the islands out in the Pacific. They were so isolated... [PAUSE] I don't think I can remember. They had an old phonograph of some kind, and I think they had only one record. And the record, oh my word, I think the record that they had was "Just Before the Battle, Mother." But they wanted records, and they really wanted a more modern phonograph. Their poor old machine was just about dilapidated. Well, of course the Smithsonian, actually, officially, couldn't be involved in anything like that. But if I remember correctly, I think a staff member became interested in the request and was able to send something to the person eventually. I was so concerned about that case. It was a pathetic letter, and I felt they needed help. I wish I could remember the full story.

HENSON: I noticed that after the end of World War II, some of the curators seemed to be sending not only specimens, but also some supplies, almost as relief, to the British Museum (Natural History). Do you recall that at all, from shipping, us doing that at the end of the war?

WEISS: I don't think I could remember that.

HENSON: Most of that may have happened before you came over. It may have been between 1945 and 1948. It seemed that the museums abroad were trying to get back on their feet.

WEISS: It could be. There was a lot of reciprocity with the professional staff of other museums and organizations abroad. It could very well be. I really can't reply to that.

HENSON: Apparently also in entomology and in botany, a lot of the Examinations and Reports would come from [Department of] Agriculture or the Bureau of Plant Quarantine, where shipments of things coming in would have bugs or plants attached to them, and needed to be identified for quarantine purposes.

WEISS: That was done at the time they came in through the customs. There were certain things they would not release until the shipment went through the plant quarantine. That was the way it was handled, actually through customs, plant quarantine, and then to the Smithsonian. We had to remember that when bringing in collections that were returned from the curators who went abroad on their research programs, collecting. Those collections, of course, all came in through customs, and we entered them through customs. Certain things, perhaps because of the area from which they originated or particular species of plant or insect, would be required to go through plant quarantine and then be forwarded here.

HENSON: Was there a backlog for the Examination and Reports sorts of things, or would those kinds of things move along fairly smoothly?

WEISS: I think they moved fairly smoothly. Let's say, considering the staff that we had and everything, I think we moved along very well. [LAUGHTER] We tried not to have a backlog. Sometimes you have little problems of staff and recruiting and that sort of thing, too.

HENSON: Let's say you sent either an inquiry letter out, or an Examination and Report, and it didn't come back, and maybe the person wrote a second time wondering what had happened. Could you go to the central administration to get support to try and get that letter moved along, or would that be something you would handle more informally than that?

WEISS: I don't remember that I ever went for support. I was able to take care of it myself.

HENSON: So you would just nudge things along?

WEISS: I really did. I think the staff, for the most part, was very cooperative. I can't recall that I had any serious problems. I really don't recall any incidents where I felt that I had to go higher up to get help to put pressure on staff.

HENSON: In 1949, I have down that Keddy revised the correspondence style manual. Do you recall that at all?

WEISS: Well, I think I can recall somewhat, but [LAUGHTER]. . . .

HENSON: I mentioned off the tape, I suspect that was the English teacher in him.

WEISS: Yes, well, I think when he came in, he felt that there were a lot of things that could be changed and brought up-to-date and maybe modernized a little bit more in the Smithsonian. He was absolutely right, but it was a very painful period of time in the Smithsonian. It's very difficult to make a change from your regular routine way of handling things, particularly with older staffers, maybe somebody like me, I was older staff, and go into a new era of handling things. But I think for the most part, he also was determined to have form letters for many inquiries. He made quite a study of how many and what kind of repeated inquiries we received that could be handled with form letters. It took a while for me to approve that, because I still felt that the personal touch was good. But finally, we realized that [with] the volume and the lack of adequate staff, that this was the way to handle it. And it was a good way, because the professional staff could prepare the appropriate information memos, and even if we just sent them out with a little note or something, we could do that. Of course, particularly at MHT [Museum of History and Technology], with the type of things that they handled, and their accumulated knowledge, they could do some of that very easily with form letters.

HENSON: So things like the Stradivarius violins. . .

WEISS: . . .and the Blickensderfer typewriter, I think was one. [LAUGHTER] Do you know the Blickensderfer typewriter?

HENSON: No, what was that?

WEISS: That must have been one of the earliest typewriters. I believe I remember Mr. Frank [A.] Taylor one time, mentioning that as a repeated question. I guess he must have had quite an influx of questions on it. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Then you also handled the accessions. What was the procedure? What were your responsibilities and what were the curators' responsibilities for an accession?

WEISS: It really was the responsibility... at least that was the responsibility that I understood, to see that all the materials that came into the two museums were received and distributed to the proper office. If they were retained for the collections they should be accessioned. We would have a record in our office of materials coming in, and we would know if it was accepted. I don't remember the exact routine, and how the procedure changed in that. I can't remember whether we made them up entirely in our office in the beginning. I don't recall. The curators, then, eventually did make up their own accessions, but they came in through our office, and were recorded. We of course had the accession records. We recorded them, in those days, on our three by five cards. [LAUGHTER] We had a clerk that did the recording of the accessions, and we kept the accession papers. Of course, they were our most valuable files.

The accession papers, back to the beginning, were in my office when I got there. They were in small jackets, narrow jackets. Have you ever seen those? I think you may have seen them when we first refolded them. Finally, that took quite a long time to get the money to be able to do that, because it meant buying new folders, staff time, and new file cases. I was very much worried about the records. They had to be folded three times to get them into these little narrow jackets, and the papers were really deteriorating very fast. Some of the oldest papers would almost crumble when opened. And curators wanted to see the original papers, which meant that they had to be kept available. We had a charge-out system on the accessions. But I worked for a long time to get flat folders. When, finally, I got approval for the jackets and the file cases, because we had these narrow file cases too, then it was a matter of staff to do this job.

Fortunately, the Smithsonian, at that time, was beginning to approve a program for summer help and hiring students. In the beginning, I think, we took high school graduate-type students, through the personnel office. I was fortunate with the type of work that I had in my office, I was able to get help during the summertime, and we had some very good help. With that help I can't tell you how long it took now, maybe a couple of years, to make that change. But we were able to unfold those papers and put them in flat folders. I thought it was a step forward to preserving them.

HENSON: There's nothing worse than folding paper!

WEISS: Well, you just can't imagine. You've probably seen some. You know what it's like. But that was one of my biggest worries when I came to Correspondence and Records. I talked to Mr. Bryant about it. Of course he had been concerned, too, but there was always the problem of money in those days. I don't think you have that problem now, do you? [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Still do!

WEISS: [LAUGHTER] You still do!

HENSON: Bigger, but the same problems. I don't think the problems ever change around here. I think they stay the same. One of the things that seem to be sort of problematic was complex accessions.

WEISS: Oh dear! I'd forgotten all about them!

HENSON: You never wanted to think of them again, right?

WEISS: That's right!

HENSON: They were apparently when a curator would bring in something that was perhaps plants and bugs and anthropology and some bones and the different departments would have to coordinate their work. How difficult was that to keep track of?

WEISS: It was difficult. I think that we had "pink slips." Do you know about "pink slips"?

HENSON: I don't quite understand how they worked.

WEISS: As I recall, and again if you hadn't mentioned that, I probably wouldn't have thought of it... I think that, say, you had three divisions involved in materials that came in. I think the one division that had the bulk of the collection would make up the original accession. A pink slip was required for each of the other divisions that were involved. Of course, all papers came to our office for recording. Sometimes we would receive the original accession, and then would check on the pink slip from the other division involved. Perhaps, the curator wasn't sure that he had accepted this material, or he was hesitant about whether to accession or not. This took time. It was time-consuming.

HENSON: Would it hold up everyone else?

WEISS: Yes, in a way, because we had to have a complete accession for our final record. Of course, at the end of the year, our office made up the accession list for the annual report. We had to have good, complete records for our annual report at the end of the year, in addition to a permanent, proper record.

HENSON: What was the volume of accessions coming through? Could you keep up with it, or was it very heavy?

WEISS: I guess it depended. Some years were heavier than others. I don't think I can give you any figures on it, but it would be several hundred accessions from the two museums. We didn't handle the papers, as you know, for the other bureaus; we did in the beginning, however. When I first went in that office... and those were some other changes that were made very quickly... all the records for NCFA [National Collection of Fine Arts] were in Correspondence and Documents. All the cards and correspondence and papers and so forth were in that office. Mr. Bryant was just starting to separate them. Coming in as administrative assistant, now I recall that that was one of my first jobs.

HENSON: Had they been maintained separately before, or were they actually within the United States National Museum records?

WEISS: They were in the general files with the museum records and it was a matter of separating them. The NCFA did their own cataloging, so they had, through their catalogs, information that had to be coordinated with their office and our office, in order to pull out the papers and get them to NCFA. But it was a job. It took quite a while to do that, naturally, and they were finally separated. The same thing happened with the [National] Air Museum, which was the next one that we separated. That was a little more difficult, because there hadn't been a separate catalog. NCFA had a central office. Mr. Tolman was there at that time.

HENSON: . . .Ruel P. Tolman.

WEISS: Remember that name? He had a secretary and an aide, I think, a small staff. They did have what would be central records for that office, but not the accessions. [National] Air and Space [Museum] was a little different. It grew out of [the Division of] Engineering in the [Department of] Engineering and Industries, I think.

HENSON: That was Paul [E.] Garber.

WEISS: Paul Garber, he was the one who started this separation. But I think that those records were integrated with the other records in that department, Engineering and Industries. It was a little more difficult to identify those records in C & R and to separate them entirely. At that time I had even written acknowledgement letters for some of the Air Museum materials that came in, for instance, for the return of the *Kitty Hawk*. And then the moving of all that material collected for the Air Museum was another one. At that time, we had storage space out at O'Hare Air Force Base in Chicago.

HENSON: Park Ridge, Illinois.

WEISS: That's right. You know about that.

HENSON: Well, I came across it, and I was going to ask you about that. Maybe we can go to that now. In 1955, they moved those collections from Park Ridge to Suitland [Maryland]. What all did you have to do?

WEISS: I had to make arrangements for the rail movement of the volume that we had. We moved by train. The staff here took care of the movement from the rail cars to their facility. I guess that was when they opened the facility at Silver Hill. It's now the Paul [E.] Garber [Preservation, Restoration, and Storage] Facility, but it was very small. They had these... were they Quonset huts?

HENSON: Butler buildings.

WEISS: Butler buildings, yes. They first constructed those at Silver Hill. Of course, the Museum of History and Technology, also, then got space out there. We used to go out there looking for specimens.

HENSON: Trying to find them, track them down?

WEISS: Yes.

HENSON: What would you say were the good features of the accessions system?
Did it seem to work fairly well?

WEISS: Under the circumstances, I guess we would say that it worked very well. By today's standards, it may have been a little awkward. Probably one of the main difficulties would have been between the two museums. After the MHT [Museum of History and Technology] had its own building and was separated, they were in the position then that they could be independent. In the beginning, all their accessions and their inquiries were still coming through our office, so that there was only one registrar. It took some years... I couldn't tell you when, but you'd probably have a record of that... before they set up their own registrar. The girl that took that started over in [the Museum of] Natural History.

HENSON: [M.] Virginia Beets?

WEISS: Virginia Beets. She started in entomology, and then she went over to MHT, and finally she became registrar there. It was an awkward situation when they had their own building. What were the departments? They had [Department of] Engineering and Industries, and the Department of History, and [Division of] Wood Technology, all of those. They were all over in this [Arts & Industries] Building. We handled all their papers, but it wasn't as difficult as it was when they expanded over into the new building.

HENSON: That would have been Mr. [Carl Weaver] Mitman, I guess.

WEISS: Mr. Mitman, and then Frank Taylor, and I don't know those curators. Dr. [Frederick L.] Lewton... what was he?

HENSON: Was he photography?

WEISS: No, no. Wood Technology was a man by the name of [William M. N.] Watkins, I think.

HENSON: And [Theodore T.] Belote was history.

WEISS: Belote was history. I remember the head curators... they were called head curators then, of the departments. We got letters, sometimes, addressed to the "curator of heads." Correspondents would have received a letter signed by the head curator, and we'd get a letter addressed to the "curator of heads," so we had to find out which head!
[LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Yes, that's true. Dr. [T. Dale] Stewart has often joked that he was the only "head curator," real head curator, yes.

WEISS: After that, the name was changed to the "chairman," after the museum expanded.

HENSON: Quite a bit.

WEISS: Of course, the Department of Botany was over in the Castle. . .

HENSON: It still was at that point?

WEISS: Oh, yes.

HENSON: . . .and the herbarium, I guess. . . .

WEISS: When I first went to Mr. Bryant's office, as administrative assistant, I'm not sure, there was a Dr. [William Ralph] Maxon, the head curator.

HENSON: Right.

WEISS: I remember, he had a real deep voice. It was rather interesting and I was always kind of impressed talking to Dr. Maxon. [LAUGHTER] Forgotten all about him! You're really making me go back and remember!

HENSON: E. C. Leonard was his assistant.

WEISS: I believe so, yes. And then [Ellsworth Paine] Killip followed him, I believe, as head of the department. E. P. Killip.

HENSON: Ellsworth Killip. So they would have been over. . .

WEISS: . . .they were in the Castle.

HENSON: Actually, it was much more dispersed, because you had all of the history and air things here, and then botany in the Castle, then you were just keeping track. . . .

WEISS: That was another place we needed truck service. Often, as things would come in to the west platform of Natural History [Building], it was a matter of moving things. If possible, they were delivered to the buildings where they belonged. It was not possible always to do that.

HENSON: For example, with the accession records, let's say you were going to split up the new Air and Space Museum records. What would you do, for example, with correspondence that was in there, related to a complex accession? So, someone sent in something for the Air and Space Museum, and Frank Taylor's shop, and Arts and Industries. How would you divide up the correspondence? Do you recall?

WEISS: I don't know whether I recall that. It seems to me, as I try to recall, that we handled it in a rather efficient manner, so I don't recall any real problems. Maybe we were able to separate such cases in a way that we could keep the two separate. I just am not sure about that.

HENSON: But you don't remember any big problems?

WEISS: Things relating to the Air Museum... of course it was just Air Museum, in the beginning, and then it became Air and Space... that's a subject that's quite separate, I think, from general questions in engineering or industry, in a way.

HENSON: You're probably right, yes. There seems to be more confusion over the MHT-Natural History ones, especially because you had the history of technology and anthropology.

WEISS: Yes, that's right. For a long time, [C.] Malcolm Watkins was in history. He worked in anthropology for a while, or at least he worked very closely. Sometimes collections would come in where there was a question whether they should be anthropology or history. Of course, Malcolm had a feeling both ways sometimes.
[LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Yes, pretty hard to decide. So you were in charge of making sure that specimens were accessioned properly and maintaining the files for the accessions?

WEISS: That's right, maintaining the files, keeping the records, and publishing the accession list in the annual reports.

HENSON: How were accession numbers assigned?

WEISS: We had a numbering system that was a continuity of numbers. We had one of these old-fashioned numbering instruments. As I recall, we just numbered them straight ahead in this numbering system, so that each accession had a successive number. As I recall, there was no way that we tried to keep them separated by departments.

HENSON: What would have been the relationship of the numbers in the accession records to the numbers in the permanent files?

WEISS: The number of transactions, you mean?

HENSON: The transaction number. For example, in the permanent files, I've often seen numbers on the letters, which seem to be similar to, or related to, the accession numbers.

WEISS: I think they probably were. That might have happened when similar numbers were involved, particularly with shipping papers, or something connected with an accession. I hesitate to give a firm answer on that, because I'm not sure that I remember exactly how we handled it. But I do know that when shipping papers were involved, we always tried to tie those in, I think we always did, with the accession records, when an accession was involved.

HENSON: Did the permanent files get a different series of numbers, or the same series?

WEISS: [PAUSE] Offhand, it seems to me that it was the same series, but I'm not sure about that.

HENSON: I had a feeling it was the same series.

WEISS: Have you seen anything on that? I'll have to think about that. Maybe I can recall, if I think about it....

HENSON: Now you also handled all of the loans and exchanges.

WEISS: Yes.

HENSON: What all would that entail? What duties did you have?

HENSON: We made up the shipping papers, and we kept the records because it was important to know about collections that were on loan, particularly. This was a real problem to keep the records and then to try to follow up on a return of the loan material. I think as long as I was there, there was always a backlog and a problem in trying to get the return of loans.

HENSON: That wouldn't just be, let's say, to another museum for exhibits. It might be, like, to another brachiopod specialist?

WEISS: This would be for study in specific fields of research, too. The curators would loan specimens. I'll tell you one thing, of course, most curators would not loan type specimens.

HENSON: Yes, I was wondering about the policy.

WEISS: Loans were made from the general collections to help professional colleagues. I'll have to think about what we did... sometimes we would have a request for types, and it was a delicate subject. It depended on the curator's decision, usually.

[END OF INTERVIEW]