

Fifth Oral History Interview

with

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

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HENSON: We had been talking last time about shipping things in and out. One of the last items that I wanted to ask you about was, after 1969, the moon rock came to the Smithsonian. Were there any special arrangements you had to make for transport of that, or was that handled pretty smoothly?

WEISS: I don't know if I have any recollection of that, but I think that that was handled primarily by staff members in geology who were going to receive the moon rock in the meteorite division. I think that they worked on that in bringing it in, and I wasn't personally involved... that's my recollection. It was a very exciting time because, naturally, there was the excitement of being able to bring back to earth something like that. Of course, the people who were working with our meteorites were trying to get everything they could that would help their collections, were very much excited about it, and it was a big event in the history of the Smithsonian. I don't know whether this was at the same time, but the what was it called, Lunar Module, the back-up was received here. It's over in [National] Air and Space [Museum].

HENSON: Oh, the landing vehicle!

WEISS: The landing vehicle, right. It wasn't the buggy... they also had one that was called the "buggy," I think. But it was the back-up of Lunar Module that we received, which was very exciting. I remember when that arrived at the Air Museum, the air material received at that time was held here in the [Arts & Industries] A & I Building. It was delivered here to the A & I Building. The Lunar Module was set up in the rotunda. That was exciting. I came in one day, and the men were going to crawl up in this thing, so they allowed me to crawl up the ladder and have a look on the inside. [LAUGHTER] It was very exciting, to have this arrive also, and then the moon rock. Of course, right away they wanted to make a special exhibit of that. To me, all of this was a natural depository for these things that were connected with this historic event in our history.

HENSON: Then you had had more of a connection with that, really, because you had worked in geology, and you knew [Edward P.] Henderson, who'd done the work on the meteorites.

WEISS: He was very excited. The meteorite people were always very interesting. We had so many of these little "Examination and Report" letters that would come in with pieces of rock. Lots of times I would think, "That couldn't be a meteorite," but the sender would be sure that they had a meteorite. But Mr. Henderson and his staff always took a good look to be sure that they hadn't found a piece of a meteorite. Their attention to these "rocks" made me realize how important it was, this study that they were doing....

HENSON: Well, apparently, an awful lot of meteorites that they have found have come in by just chance. . . .

WEISS: Just by chance, that somebody has found them out in the field. I used to say that there were certain periods in our correspondence that we received, from out through the country and the world that we could expect by the seasons of the year. I'm sure that's true now. When spring came, and farmers were out in the field, plowing and working up their fields, you could always be sure that we would begin to receive certain types of things. It might be bone samples or rocks and stones and all sorts of things like that would be turned up and sent in for identification. Then in the summertime, of course, from beaches, we received the kinds of things that the beachcombers would send in. That was interesting. They'd come from all over the world, too. In the spring or the fall, when women were cleaning their attics and cleaning their houses, the MHT [Museum of History and Technology] would receive a lot of odds and ends that were thought to be very valuable. Sometimes they were not that valuable, but they were things that were of particular interest to them, or had sentimental value. So we would know that it was house-cleaning time when all these interesting little items were received.

[LAUGHTER]

HENSON: That makes sense in a way, though, yes.

WEISS: Yes, it really does. We could follow the seasons. Then at the beginning of school, we'd get the letters from the students who were planning their careers, their careers in archeology, anthropology, particularly. They also inquired about geology, and sometimes biology, it seemed that our most popular subjects were archeology and anthropology. It seemed that every young student wanted to be an anthropologist or archeologist for some reason. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: It had that aura to it, romanticism. . . .

WEISS: I haven't really answered your original question. . . .

HENSON: No, you have. But you don't recall any special incidents....?

WEISS: I cannot recall a special incident in connection with that. I would say that probably Mr. Henderson worked on it. I remember when it came in, but I don't think I had much to do with having it delivered. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: You had to accession it, though, which would be fun all by itself, to get to accession something from the moon!

WEISS: From the moon! I thought that whole thing was... of course, everybody did. . . .

HENSON: When you came to the Smithsonian, would you ever have thought that someday you would be accessioning objects from the moon?

WEISS: Never. It would have been a dream! [LAUGHTER] Dr. [Fred L.] Whipple... when they were setting up their satellite tracking stations, I remember I had to attend those meetings. Sitting around the table, I would listen to his talk, and to me it was something in the outer world, dreaming of something that I didn't see how it would ever come to pass. But they were serious, they were noted scholars, they were people that knew what they were doing, and they were going ahead with it. So I finally had to realize that this was really going to happen. This was serious business! [LAUGHTER] I remember finally when Dr. Whipple was talking about setting up a station out there. After they reached the moon and after they got to these places, they were going to set up this station. Well, of course, they have the station now, but I remember coming away from that meeting and I said, "I just can't imagine!" I said, "I think Dr. Whipple is really dreaming!" [LAUGHTER] I guess all advances in history and science are made up of dreams!

HENSON: Well, it seems like science fiction. It's something you'd read in a science fiction novel.

WEISS: "How can they ever do that?"

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: That was very interesting when they accomplished it. I guess, when people begin to work and do the proper research, anything can happen! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: But to be a part of the planning of it, even, gives it a greater reality, probably, for you.

WEISS: Yes, it really does. That's right.

HENSON: Just to see it ahead of time, that would be a funny perspective.

WEISS: Yes, it was. Well, just setting up those satellite tracking stations... I wish now that I had gone to more of them. I could have gone to the one in Spain, and I didn't go. I did go to the one in Hawaii. I think we had nine satellite tracking stations.

HENSON: That was a big operation for a while.

WEISS: But, of course, that was handled, really, from Cambridge, [Massachusetts], at the [Smithsonian] Astrophysical Observatory.

HENSON: Why don't we lead directly into that? One of the things I wanted to ask you about were your responsibilities for foreign travel. Why don't you describe, basically, let's say, Dr. [Alexander] Wetmore was going to head off to Panama, which was a fairly standard thing he did for a number of years. What would you have to do if somebody was traveling? What were the kinds of things you would do for them?

WEISS: The procedures?

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: Each scientist was responsible for getting his gear together and his collecting equipment, and packing it, and having it ready. My office had nothing to do with the packing. We might have, working with the persons who were packing, some questions, but we really had nothing to do with assembling or packing at that time. The curators really took a personal responsibility as far as that was concerned. Dr. Wetmore certainly did. He knew every little item that he took, and he knew exactly what he wanted, but of course he worked with [Watson M.] Perrygo. Perrygo worked with Dr. Wetmore and knew exactly what Dr. Wetmore liked. In the same way, Mr. [S. Dillon] Ripley... I can't remember the one who was doing his packing. I know he used to call a lot when he was getting Dr. Ripley all ready to go.

HENSON: Was that Gorman [M.] Bond?

WEISS: Yes, Gorman Bond, that's the one. Gorman Bond, he would have really the full responsibility of getting Mr. Ripley's gear packed, getting it ready, and getting it off on time. When they had it ready, my primary responsibility was to see that the boxes were marked properly, that they knew how they were addressing them so that they would get to the proper destination. Then I would work through... usually, going from here... the U.S. Despatch Agent in New York; Howard Fyfe was his name. He'd been there for years and years and years. He was another "Mr. [Herbert S.] Bryant" in that job. [LAUGHTER] I think he was known all over the world. You'd mention the name of Howard Fyfe, and everyone knew him. So we worked together on foreign shipments, and he was great. Most of the people who worked in [U. S.] Customs [Service] and with the U. S. Despatch Agent were fascinated with the Smithsonian because the things that they handled and the shipping that they did was so entirely different from anything that they had to deal with otherwise. There would be everything from natural history gear and equipment as well as unusual specimens, to outer space things or artwork, that was another thing. It was interesting to them, and they were always very cooperative, and we worked together. I would get in touch with him, to take care of necessary actions at the port to get the things started. Usually from there on we had made arrangements for someone to receive the shipments, either staff members themselves or their colleagues.

Now, with Mr. Ripley, when he wanted to go to Bhutan, we had to ship through India, and he had a colleague in India who. . . .

HENSON: Salim Ali?

WEISS: Yes, that's the one. Do you know about him?

HENSON: Just a little bit, yes, that they worked together.

WEISS: He was at the Bombay Natural History Society? When Mr. Ripley first planned that trip, outsiders had not been allowed into Bhutan. You probably know about that. Mr. Ripley was going to be one of the first ones to go into that country. The first year, we were not able to get clearance for his equipment. We cleared just about all the way through, particularly with the help of Mr. Ali who was going to take care of it at that end, once it reached the port in India. But there was a little problem at that time. Mr. Ripley was taking a photographer, a commercial photographer, and Bhutan refused the clearance. So the second year everything went through smooth as clockwork. Everything worked out very well, including his equipment (Mr. Ripley and a photographer). Most of the time we were working with the despatch agents and the customs people in the countries so there was not much of a problem. Then the [National Museum of] Natural History men who were travelling would usually arrive in the country about the time that the equipment arrived, so that it was timed pretty well, the obtaining clearances.

HENSON: Now, they would often be carrying guns and rifles. Did you have to get permits?

WEISS: Yes, we took care of the things that would be difficult to get through.

HENSON: Who would arrange for permits, for example, so that a gun could enter a foreign country?

WEISS: I had to arrange for permits for a lot of the different types of material, and I could do that through customs people. We had a good rapport with the customs people, which was very helpful for bringing things back, also.

HENSON: So let's say, they collected birds or... let me think of a more difficult one... the archeologists, where people would start to worry about national treasures leaving the country. Who would have to make the arrangements for the permits to get the materials out of the country, back to the United States?

WEISS: Very often, I would get those permits through the customs people. All it required for items taken out of the country and to be returned, was to have registered them with the Bureau of Customs; what they were taking, and to have their papers in order; this was very necessary. We had to know in advance if the travelers needed the special items. Permits were not required for all equipment, but for, as you said, guns and cameras, etc. The papers were obtained through the customs here, and the permits would be submitted on the return of the items registered.

To answer your question specifically: we worked with the staff members on such cases. The staff member usually knew from their work with colleagues whether permits were required and would ask for help. My recollection is that procedures for clearances or permits, if necessary, were obtained through the desk officers of the country to be visited at the [United States] State Department. I was the contact with the State Department. I believe anthropologists were most likely to need such permits and occasionally birds or endangered species were involved. I remember particularly, Dr. Robert [M.] Laughlin in connection with his study of language in Mexico, and probably Dr. Clifford Evans [Jr.] for some of his archeological work in South America. There may have been others.

HENSON: Now once there began to be more concern about endangered species, and things like that, did it become more difficult to get certain types of animals or plants or whatever?

WEISS: The plants and animals were brought through [United States Department of] Agriculture, the Plant Quarantine Service [Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine]. There was someone over there I worked closely with, too. Those collections would usually be held at port until the plant quarantine inspectors could pass them. Fortunately, the Smithsonian had a very good name. Whenever we declared specimens, we made honest declarations and did not attempt to bypass their regulations in any way. The plant quarantine person would pass those things, and after that, the shipment would be delivered to the Smithsonian. But sometimes we could have delivery here, and the inspector would come over. It depended on the kind of items we were bringing in. The Customs Inspector always inspected our shipments either at the point of entry or more often at our shipping deck. Often it was a cursory examination.

HENSON: How about, for example, their passports?

WEISS: The passports?

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: I took care of all the official passport work for official travel.

HENSON: That's a lot.

WEISS: It's a lot. It was very interesting because, in obtaining their official passports, I had one person that I worked with in the passport division [U.S. Department of State]. She understood us, and I understood her, what was required, and it was really sort of routine. [PAUSE] We really had no problems with passport work. Of course, the other thing, certain countries required visas, some did not. But in my earlier years, we had to have visas almost every place they went, so that we had to go to the embassies for the visas, of course, as well as obtain the passports. We'd get the official passports and then the visas. That was interesting, especially when I think of special cases. [Edwin A.] Ed Battison decided he was going to Russia. I believe he was one of the first ones. It was interesting to go to the Russian Embassy at that time. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Yes, Henderson went to Russia at that point.

WEISS: Yes, Henderson went to Japan and Russia on that trip, as I recall.

HENSON: That's right, good memory! What was it like to get people in the Iron Curtain countries? Was that more difficult?

WEISS: I don't know that it was so difficult, usually we could do it. There might be more questions, but I usually knew how to write letters in a way that they would be accepted. If you knew how to approach something like that, there wasn't too much of a problem, with the name of the Smithsonian. It's great to have the name of the Smithsonian in back of you, in anything that you do. So that worked out. It was just a lot of work, but, as I say, it was interesting work.

HENSON: And I guess also, then, they would need to have letters of introduction prepared for them.

WEISS: Yes, we prepared the letters of introduction as part of the official travel. I remember some staff members were surprised to receive the letter with the passport.

HENSON: I've seen some of them, with the official seals on them and everything.

WEISS: Yes. Do they do that now?

HENSON: I think they still do.

WEISS: I would think they would have to for certain official work that they do. It certainly is very helpful to have that.

HENSON: How much geography did you learn in the course of all this?

WEISS: I learned quite a bit about the world. [LAUGHTER] Some of our travelers... Dr. Waldo [LaSalle] Schmitt went to Africa, you know, in the Belgian Congo, he was one of the first. We had a number of our natural history scientists who went to Africa, anthropologists, too. The countries that they visited, at the time that I was handling them, have changed their names now. When I hear the names of some of the countries in Africa, as well as the Far East, they're strange to me, and all I can do is try to orient them to the names of the countries that I knew.

HENSON: In the years that you were in that job, did anyone ever go to China, that you know of?

WEISS: I don't know, I'll have to think about that, because we would have been working, and some of this work [was] before China was really a closed country, I would say. I can't remember what year that was. Yes, Ed Henderson visited China and Japan. I recall his report on the contrast of those two countries.

HENSON: I should look that up. I was wondering if, in your experience, there was any country you had not dealt with. Do you think there is?

WEISS: There probably would be, but right now, I don't know. . . . [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Just, in my mind, thinking about the different types of fieldwork. Even the Pacific South Sea islands, we had so many people going there [John Frederick Gates Clarke].

WEISS: Yes, oh, yes. Jack Clarke, to the inaccessible Island of Rapa, Phil Humphrey went all over the Pacific.

HENSON: So I was wondering, in my mind, if there was any place, really, that you didn't send somebody.

WEISS: It was interesting. I'm sure I obtained passports, visas, permits, etc., for countries on every continent and many remote islands. Also, the [Pacific Islands] Trust Territory, over in the Polynesian Islands. Saul Riesenber was stationed over there, for quite a while. Did you know that?

HENSON: I don't know much about that.

WEISS: Well, he was in that area as an ethnologist and anthropologist. He was stationed there in an official capacity, I believe. I really would have to refresh my memory on that, but he and his family lived there for quite a while. Sometimes it was helpful if we had a person who had been in a place and who could make certain contacts when you needed, which I found to be very helpful, especially when we brought in that money. Have you ever seen this big Yap money on exhibit? Stone money... this huge thing, you know it's about... what is it... six or eight feet tall, something like that. We brought that in, but it took a lot of work. Over in those islands they didn't have money like we do, but they had stone money. It was a stone that was placed in a certain place and never moved. This particular piece of money had been on the island of Yap [Federated States of Micronesia], I think, and it had been in this place for a couple of generations of the family. All they did was... I don't know how they made their money exchange, but this huge thing was never moved. It was sort of at the side of the body of water there. I don't whether it was a lake, or if it was really right there [on the] ocean, on the beach. From this little island, we had to get it to a central place for shipping, where it could be picked up at a good port, you know. I don't know how we would ever have done that, but Saul Riesenberk knew somebody there in the Trust Territory who could get in touch with the man who owned this, and who... was giving it to the Smithsonian. But it was a matter of what are you going to do, how are you going to move this thing? It was quite a project. Arranging that, I think about all I had to do was write a couple of letters to this person, and assure him that they would be paid any expenses in connection with moving it. It was quite a project to have it moved to the port. Then I asked the U. S. Navy to bring it from there. That was about the only transportation we could get to bring it here to this country, and naval authorities agreed that they would bring it to the West Coast. In those days, it was close enough... I think it was right after the war, actually, when we got the Yap money specimen. The military was very much aware of what the Smithsonian had done for them, so they could agree to a reciprocal job like that, and I was able on several occasions to get in touch with them. If it was intriguing enough, they would help us out. I think today, going through their channels and procedures, it wouldn't be that easy.

HENSON: Yes, I don't. . . .

WEISS: I don't think so, because then there was a matter of funds. I think it was understandable at that time, and there's no reason why it shouldn't be known, that the Navy gave us this courtesy several times.

HENSON: When Dr. Wetmore would go to Panama, the [U. S.] Air Force would take very good care of him, didn't they?

WEISS: Very often they did that, too. So we had a good reciprocal relation with the military in different instances. But, to go back to Yap, the Navy brought that specimen into the United States. I forget what that weighed, but it was really a heavy one, and huge. They brought it into the port in... I think it was L.A. [Los Angeles, California], I'm not sure. I got a call from the captain of the ship, believe it or not, about nine o'clock one night at home. I still, to this day, don't know how he found me!
[LAUGHTER]

HENSON: But he did!

WEISS: I was so surprised! Can you imagine getting a phone call saying that, "I'm the captain of such-and-such a ship." [LAUGHTER] Anyway, what I did was get in touch with the Despatch Agent out in San Francisco, Steven Leyto was his name. He was able to get the clearances there to satisfy the entry for the Navy. Then we got it shipped across the country. It was brought across the country by rail, I believe we did that, if I'm not mistaken.

HENSON: Big job!

WEISS: It was the different stages along the way, of keeping in touch, following a case through like that, that made it very interesting.

HENSON: And you'd have any number of objects going on like that, simultaneously, right?

WEISS: Oh, could be! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: That would keep you hopping. Now, one of the stories I've heard about the South Seas is Dr. Clarke going out there.

WEISS: Oh, yes.

HENSON: I guess, one of the first times he went out there, he tells the story, that on the way out, his equipment was lost, when he was going to Kusaie [now Kosrae Island, Federated States of Micronesia].

WEISS: Yes, he got [LAUGHTER] there and the equipment was not there. I can't tell you definitely just where this happened, but it had got to port... it may have been Hawaii, I don't know... and it was sent to the wrong destination... where was it sent? Anyway, it was sent someplace that it wasn't supposed to be sent [I think it was Japan]. We had to trace that, and find out where it was, and then get it back on course again, so that it finally reached Ponape [now Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia]. But we were able again to do that with the help of the despatch agents and the customs people in those areas, got in touch with them to find out just what happened and got it back on regular course, so that Clarke finally received it. But it was really a very, very difficult time, because, you know, one thing, they were wasting time, when they arrived in Kusaie. This was important, to try to coordinate the shipping of the equipment that staff needed... they couldn't do anything without their equipment... to coordinate that with their arrival at these various islands, or wherever they were going, countries. With him, he finally got it and everything turned out all right. But [LAUGHTER]....

HENSON: A drama!

WEISS: ...it was quite a dramatic experience when this was happening! You know how upset... how you can really... I mean, you feel like you're wasting an entire collecting trip of that kind.

HENSON: Yes, to get that far out. . . . Now, he had an even worse experience. . .

WEISS: . . .going to Rapa [Bass Islands, French Polynesia].

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: Yes.

HENSON: Were you aware of him being lost at sea... or was that something... while it was going on?

WEISS: Not the whole story, but I did get word along the way. I knew something had happened like that, but I don't think I really knew the whole story until he got back and could tell us about it. But that was must have been an experience that was out of this world.

HENSON: A wild experience.

WEISS: Very interesting, because this was a little-known island, actually. He was trying to trace these particular butterflies.

HENSON: Yes, *Microlepidoptera*.

WEISS: Micros, yes, from an area in South America, I think, and how their migration had taken place. He was trying to tie that into this island of Rapa and on to another area that they knew that species had been found. For his study, it was very important, of course. But that was really an experience. He went to Rapa twice, as I recall.

HENSON: Yes, he never got there that year. . . .

WEISS: He didn't get there the first time. I guess he didn't get to the island, did he? That's right, this storm, and all of that. So it was the next experience that he did get there, and his wife [Thelma Miesen Clarke] went with him that time....

HENSON: And that time they relied on Navy transport.

WEISS: Yes, they got the Navy, and they had to wait, of course, for the Navy to bring them back to Tahiti. They were delayed on their return, waiting, because I think the Navy touched down there only maybe twice or three or four times a year, or something like that, [on] that island. So that also is a matter of timing, to be ready when the ship arrived, and if the ship arrived. I think it would be fascinating and frustrating to be there trying to get some word on that. [LAUGHTER]



Jack and Thelma Miesen Clarke, 1967.
Image Number: 91-14038

HENSON: Would you worry about these people when they went off at all?

WEISS: Yes, you always have it in mind. You've got somebody off here, and wonder how they're getting along, and when am I going to hear that they're in trouble! [LAUGHTER] But after that first experience, yes, I was very worried, and then when Thelma went along with him. She was a very good friend of mine. That was really a wonderful experience for them.

HENSON: Yes, apparently, when they finally got there, it was a fascinating collecting experience.

WEISS: Yes, I think it was.

HENSON: She, I guess, was rearing a lot of them.

WEISS: Yes, I think so, and then working with those people. I mean, they must have really been fascinated to have someone coming into their island like that, seemingly, from outer space!

HENSON: The story he told me was when he got there the second time, they told him a story about a scientist who was supposed to have come the year before, but who had died at sea.

WEISS: I didn't know that they thought... or that was the word they got.

HENSON: And so then he had. . .

WEISS: . . .resurrected, and he came the next year! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: He had to explain that was him, that he wasn't completely lost at sea, only partially lost at sea. I think he said that he was never quite sure that they believed that there wasn't another one who had actually. . . .

WEISS: That's understandable, I think.

HENSON: Communication was so poor, but it just. . . . I had asked Henry [B.] Collins [Jr.] about that, sort of getting deposited off in the Aleutians. . .

WEISS: Yes.

HENSON: . . .in the twenties. You know the boat's going to come back in the fall for you, and you're on your own till then... how that felt, just to be waiting. But I guess these guys are so interested, they don't think about it much. . . .

WEISS: I don't think they do.

[BEGIN REEL II]

HENSON: You were saying that they were not too worried about their personal safety when they went out.

WEISS: No, I don't think they were. I think most scientists who are devoted to their particular field of science are so devoted to it that this is first and the most important thing in their lives. I really don't think that most of them that I've worked with have a concern for their own personal safety, not even when there might be... maybe not violence of any kind, but where they'll pick up certain diseases, or that sort of thing. That didn't seem to bother them. This was one thing that worried me. Another thing we had to do on their travel, of course, was to get their immunizations. I would prepare their letters for them to go to the U. S. Public Health Service, and I kept in touch with the Public Health Service on what types of immunization they needed for various countries. At that time, when I was doing this, they really had to have inoculations for almost everything. They got smallpox even for European countries, and everything like that. Now we travel so much without having any inoculations, it seems impossible when I think about how strict they were. I kept a current account of what inoculations were needed for different countries, so that they would be prepared, and they'd get their inoculations from Public Health Service. Some of them objected to certain inoculations, but it was either get them or they don't go, so. . . . [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Let's say you had a fairly junior or new curator coming in. How much advice would they be given about what to bring, et cetera?

WEISS: What to bring, you mean, not for their collecting, but for their....?

HENSON: For collecting gear and permits and things like that.

WEISS: For permits, collecting permits, and anything, they worked very closely with colleagues in many of the countries and the places that they went. They had already worked with colleagues who knew something about the work there, and someone who could be helpful. They might even have had correspondence with someone who could help them, to a certain extent. So I don't recall that we ever had any real difficulty, as far as that was concerned.

HENSON: But sometimes, for example, people would get hurt or get ill out in the field.

WEISS: Oh, yes, that happened.

HENSON: And I think that Gates Clarke, now, he hurt his leg when he down on... was it Dominica [Commonwealth of Dominica]?

WEISS: Oh, yes, he hurt his... was it his ankle or his heel?

HENSON: His Achilles tendon, is that it?

WEISS: Yes, it was his "Achilles' heel," I think. [LAUGHTER] That's right, that was a serious thing, really. And of course, the men really don't want to come back. It takes quite a while sometimes for them to make up their mind that they actually have reached the point [that] they should return home. He also picked up something else when he was in South America.

HENSON: That's right. Was that Argentina, he was in? He got good and sick.

WEISS: Yes, he did. I think he finally had to come home because he was advised by the doctor. And he had to stay at home for quite a long time, which scientists don't like to do, either.

HENSON: No.

WEISS: Oh, I don't know what that was, I can't think. . . .

HENSON: Was it just dysentery that he got, or something else?

WEISS: It was a liver thing; what is that? I believe it was hepatitis. Anyway, that can happen. Ed Battison picked up an amoebic infection when he was in Russia, and he ended up very sick. We had to send him out to NIH [National Institute of Health], and I think that was a good study for them. . .

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: . . .because he picked that up in Russia. And he thought it was an interesting experiment. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: That detached view that they have!

WEISS: They take that... that's a wonderful thing about people with this mind of science. Anything like that is an interesting study. You can make a research project out of almost anything that happens! [LAUGHTER] At least, that was my experience with our fascinating professional staff.

HENSON: That seems to be the case, yes. One more dangerous thing, we've talked about this a little bit off the tape, was the diving. We did have that one very sad accident, with [E.] Yale Dawson.

WEISS: Yes, that was over in Egypt, I think. Wasn't that the Nile [Red Sea]?

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: I recall that, that was so serious. It was really sad. But we worked through the embassy, and through the consulate over there. It was a matter of having his body brought back, because he was. . . . But we got very good help. I could always go to the State Department [U.S. Department of State], and lots of times I would work with the desk officers in the State Department, for certain countries where I really needed to have their advice and their help. They were always very helpful. Of course, everybody knew the Smithsonian, so it was easy to get help.

HENSON: They set up a formal sort of diving program, I guess, after that.

WEISS: I guess they did, yes, I think so. But that was one of the first... that was really very terrible... to have us all upset over that... it was a tragic shock to have happen.

HENSON: That seems to be one of the more dangerous types of field work that Smithsonian scientists do, is the diving.

WEISS: Yes, I would think so. It sort of frightened me when I first knew they wanted to take this without any experience of that kind. The Navy offered training in diving... some of our staff members, you know, took this training. At the time, it frightened me, but, of course, that's the future. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Yes, they're not going to stop going down there. When these people go out on trips, human nature being human nature, would you tend to get enough advanced warning that you could do it all smoothly, or would there tend to be a rush at the end?

WEISS: Probably, no matter what happened, there would be a rush at the end. [LAUGHTER] But very often, the seasoned explorers would usually give us a pretty good length of time so that we had time to work with them and know what you were doing and what they were doing, and so the paperwork and this sort of thing could be handled. Those who had travelled knew they had to have certain things. They knew they had to have their inoculations, and they knew that they had to ship this equipment out when they took equipment. Very often they would try to work with us in advance. A lot of work goes on in planning of such expeditions, in the first place. Fortunately, it got so that they would let us know well in advance so that we would be able to know what they needed. They'd immediately begin to think, "What do I need? Do I have everything? Do we need passports, or what do we need?" And I'd say, "Yes, you have to have your inoculations, and all that." Most of the time, we got along pretty well.

HENSON: But I imagine, it probably kept you pretty busy. If you got letters back in in foreign languages, who would you go to translate?

WEISS: That was a problem, because I'm not a language student myself, and this worried me. Interestingly, sometimes I could read... I knew enough French and Spanish to read a bit! While I might not speak, I could translate to a limited extent. But we had somebody in the library, I believe, who could do some translating for us, if I recall. I really don't remember exactly how we did this, but we were able to find staff members... I just don't remember know who could do certain languages for us. Down in the library, they gave a course in Russian, one time. Did Ed Henderson tell you about that? He took it. He, and... I forget, there were several of them... they wanted me to take it. I would have, but I didn't think I had time, and really, there were some other languages [LAUGHTER] I would rather spend time on.

HENSON: It was either George Kushan or [James] Leo Conners, I guess, worked there, that spoke Russian. I can't remember which one it was, but he had been in geology and then he went to the library.

WEISS: Yes, I knew there was somebody in the library who helped us with some of the languages.

HENSON: I'm not sure if this is before your time, or not. I wondered if you worked on this... we were talking about working with the Navy and the [U. S.] Army. But 1946 and 1948, there was something called Operation Crossroads, in which Smithsonian scientists went out to survey and then resurvey Bikini Atoll after the atomic bomb test there. I guess it was [Joseph Paul Eldred] Joe Morrison and Leonard [P.] Schultz went out on that on those. Did you have to deal with that, at all?

WEISS: I remember Operation Crossroads vaguely. That would have been about the time that I was coming back into this office. I remember Joe Morrison going out, I remember him returning. I can't recall that I had very much to do with their departure, but I remember when he returned and... who was the other one?

HENSON: Leonard Schultz.

WEISS: Leonard Schultz, yes, that's right. I remember that. He was one who hadn't done as much foreign travel and was a little more nervous about it, as I recall.

HENSON: That's true, he hadn't.

WEISS: My recollection on that would be... but I really am afraid I can't tell any details on that.

HENSON: And Morrison was a real seasoned field man, wasn't he?

WEISS: Yes, he'd been out before, and he seemed to know how to find his way around without any problems. I remember when he came back from one of his trips, and this was before men wore whiskers very much like they do now. Joe Morrison came back, and the first day he came in, he came into my office. The door opened slightly, and then this head was came in. He had... he was very hirsute anyway [LAUGHTER]... he had whiskers all over his face, big, bushy, black! They were all over his face, and the only thing you could see was his eyes, actually. And he looked in and he said, "Miss Weiss?" I thought, "Who in the world is this character?" And I looked and he came all the way in, and he smiled, and I recognized his eyes. I said, "Joe Morrison! I wouldn't have known you if I hadn't seen your eyes!" [LAUGHTER] They had more fun doing things like that. [LAUGHTER] Before, when they'd come back, with their growths of hair, whatever, they would come in to see me, so I could see them first and then they sometimes got shaved. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Check back in again! And then also, in 1948, the year you're taking over, we had a very big expedition going on, it went on for a period of time, to Australia, called the Arnhem Land Expedition.

WEISS: Yes, Frank [M.] Setzler, and. . . .

HENSON: Yes. Now, were you involved much in that?

WEISS: Yes, yes, very much involved in getting them off to Australia with their equipment. They carried a lot of equipment, because they were going to be there for quite a long time, and they were going to live with the native. . .

HENSON: . . .aborigines. . .

WEISS: . . .aborigines, there. They lived with them and they were doing photographing. There's quite a file on that.

HENSON: That was a very problematic trip, right?

WEISS: Yes, it was, all the way through. . .

HENSON: . . .from the time they left to the time they came back.

WEISS: That's right. I went over to that country after I retired, and saw some of the aborigines. It was very interesting to me, having known about this first exploration into that area, in the outback country. The Smithsonian worked up farther in the northern part from where I was. I was down in the outback country. At that time, their children were in school... they had a school that I was able to see. But that was a very problematic adventure, Arnhem Land.

HENSON: I guess it was groups from several different organizations, coordinating together.

WEISS: Yes.

HENSON: Now, in a case like that, and it would happen fairly often, where you would be joint National Geographic [Society], or joint with the American Museum of Natural History, or whatever, how would you work those things out? Would Smithsonian handle most of the paperwork?

WEISS: I think the Smithsonian, as far as the equipment and getting their permits and everything... I think we did it, because some of those organizations weren't equipped to do that or, at that time, hadn't done much of that. So we used to do that, when our staff members were involved and the Smithsonian would benefit by receiving collections and information.

HENSON: That one, in particular. . . .

WEISS: There were about four or five scientists from the Smithsonian, on the Arnhem Land, from different departments or divisions, anyway...⁸

HENSON: Or even departments, because, wasn't Handley [Charles O. Handley Jr.]....

WEISS: Handley went, and I was trying to think of the various ones that went. Did somebody go from marine invertebrates? No, they didn't go, not on that one. I can't remember, but I know there was someone else. I know there were quite a number of them. I would say there were about three or four of them. I think one of them came back ahead of time.

HENSON: Yes, right. [Laughter] Didn't last the whole trip. Now also 1948, Mr. Ripley had something called the Yale-Smithsonian-National Geographic Society Expedition to Nepal. I wondered if you were involved with that at all?

⁸ Frank M. Setzler, Herbert G. Deignan, David H. Johnson, and Robert R. Miller were SI staff sent on the Arnhem Land Expedition.

WEISS: I think I was to a certain extent, or we were, because Mr. Ripley was here, in the Division of Birds several years before he came as Secretary. He was assistant curator.

HENSON: Did you know him then?

WEISS: Yes.

HENSON: You did.

WEISS: My office at that time was in [the] Natural History [Building], and the Division of Birds was just down the hall from me. So Dr. [Herbert] Friedmann often would stop by on his way to his office, and I knew Mr. Ripley then. Actually, after Mr. Ripley got up to Yale [University], a couple of years or so later, I got a telephone call one morning. They said that Mr. Ripley was calling me. I wondered, "Why is he calling me?" Well, he was going on a trip someplace, and he wanted me to get him a passport.

HENSON: He knew you would know how to do it, right?

WEISS: Yes. Knowing who he was and everything, I tried to help a person like that as much as I could. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Would you have to have, though, an official Smithsonian connection?

WEISS: The only way I would do that... I had every now and then, someone who would request an official passport if they were doing something ostensibly for the Smithsonian. But I absolutely refused to get official passports unless I knew that there was some connection with the Smithsonian, whereby the Smithsonian was going to receive the collection or part of the collection. So I could say to the State Department that the Smithsonian was the beneficiary of this trip, and that we were receiving part of the collections. Then, if the State Department would agree that they could give them an official passport that was their decision to make. But I would not do it, really, personally, unless I knew that this was true.

HENSON: I would imagine that there would be a lot of pressure to do that, because, I suspect when you travel abroad, if you have the Smithsonian name behind you. . .

WEISS: . . .it was very, very helpful. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Extremely helpful, yes. You had met Mr. Ripley while he was here... One of the people you mentioned briefly, I want to talk a little bit more, who went out a lot, was Waldo Schmitt.

WEISS: Yes. He took that big trip. Let me say though, that I did not hesitate to ask Mr. Ripley if the S. I. would benefit and receive collections. Then, I agreed.

HENSON: Then Waldo Schmitt had gone on the Presidential Cruise, with Franklin [Delano] Roosevelt?

WEISS: Yes, yes. Now, I wasn't involved in that in any way, Mr. Bryant handled that, but I knew about [it]. Waldo Schmitt, he was an interesting person to work with, too.

HENSON: Would he be prepared fairly well in advance?

WEISS: Pretty well, yes. He knew pretty much what he wanted to do, and what he needed to do. He was very nice to work with.

HENSON: In the late fifties... 1956, 1958, 1959, 1960... there were a whole series of Smithsonian-Bredin Caribbean expeditions, which I guess he was on, for the most part, and a lot of other Smithsonian staff. . . .

WEISS: Yes, a number of staff members went on those expeditions, from different departments and divisions who went with him. I guess they were quite successful. I think they accomplished a lot on those trips. They were very interesting. They collected and they studied under good conditions and the trips were very interesting. In fact, staff liked to go on those trips, because they did feel. . . . But they worked hard. I know every one of them that came back told about how hard Dr. Schmitt worked. He was really... he would drive himself, as well as the rest of them. [LAUGHTER] They really got good information, I think, from those expeditions.

HENSON: But I guess some of them seemed to like field work more than others.

WEISS: Yes.

HENSON: I think Fenner [A.] Chace [Jr.] wasn't crazy about sailing, as I remember.
[LAUGHTER]

WEISS: No, I don't think he ever cared to go out very much. I think he was satisfied to study and do his work with the collections here. I don't think he liked to go out on his own, or to travel.

HENSON: Whereas Clarke seemed to be out a good bit. Schmitt seemed to just absolutely love being out in the field.

WEISS: He loved it, yes, wherever he went. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Other ones that I was thinking were somewhat problematic. For example, Dr. [T. Dale] Stewart went several times to Iraq for extended periods of time.

WEISS: Yes, he did. And there was another member of anthropology. . .

HENSON: Ralph [S.] Solecki.

WEISS: . . .Solecki. I think Ralph Solecki went. I remember working with them. Ralph Solecki was a nice person to work with too. He went up to New York when he left... he left soon after his work in Iraq, I think. Yes, they had several trips over there. They were interesting, too....

HENSON: In these cases, when you were mentioning Riesenberg, when he was out, and Dr. Stewart, you have these people out for extended periods of time, really extended periods of time. Would you handle that much differently? The other one I think of is [William F.] Foshag, in Mexico. It's almost not like a two-week, or three-week field trip, but it's the course of several months. Would you have to make such different arrangements for those sorts of things?

WEISS: That's a good question. I have to think about what we did. Usually a visa may be restricted to a certain period of time, and, I'm trying to think, we may have had to have their visas extended. In certain places, depending on where they were, if there was a consulate, they could have extended the visa at the consulate in the country where they were. I don't think we had too many like that, but [for] those that we knew were going to be away, we could, really, make provision so that they would be able to stay.

HENSON: Now the other thing... over a period of time, like that, for example, would you have to make special arrangements for their paychecks?

WEISS: I did not make special arrangements for their paychecks. That was up to the individual to do what he wanted to do. I guess their arrangements were made... I imagine that each one had his own way of arranging whatever he wanted to do, and they also worked with [Edgar L.] Ed Roy, in the Fiscal Division on that. He became involved in these. Of course, any business section in the Smithsonian that might be in any way concerned would know about all of these trips that were taken. Are they still taking trips and doing this? They are still handling all this work in the same way, I guess, aren't they? I would think that it would be a little bit easier, because most places that they go today would be areas that have already been explored, and easier to get access to what they want to do there, than it would have been in the earlier time--my time!

HENSON: Easier and harder.

WEISS: Is that right?

HENSON: Because, I think, there are many more restrictions on taking things out of countries now.

WEISS: Yes, I'm sure of that.

HENSON: And you will have some of the small Third World nations who, now that they are independent, are not as willing to let people come in and do research from the outside, perhaps, as the British were when they were ruling the place.

WEISS: That's right.

HENSON: You could go to the British or the Dutch colonies, or any number of, let's say, all these small islands in the past, whereas now you're negotiating personally with each of these small governments. I think that can make it more complicated now.

WEISS: Well, that's true. I could see, in some areas, Africa would be one of them, and then some of the islands. . . . I think as far as access to these places, it would be easier, but I could see that. . . . Well, I know that Cliff Evans was concerned about stealing or illegal robbery. Not the Smithsonian, but some other organizations or persons were probably trying to bring out materials from those countries that he felt should not be taken from the countries... that they should remain. I think he was very careful about anything that he was involved in. He recognized their rights and laws, and so he didn't exceed them. And of course, that could happen, that people would take advantage of opportunities to take out ancient or historical materials that may have been restricted.

HENSON: Which could be problematic, and then create problems for the next person who wants to come along. Then they don't want to let them out with it.

WEISS: Their national treasures of any kind, I think.

HENSON: Also, during these years, for example, [Harald A.] Rehder started going to Fiji.

WEISS: Yes.

HENSON: Do you remember those?

WEISS: Yes, that's right. His last one, or maybe it was earlier.... he sailed, I think, from the Hawaiian Islands to Fiji, which was quite a trip. I think I'm right on that. It was really... it must have been fascinating, because that's quite a little jaunt! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: And [R.] Tucker Abbott was another one who went out collecting in the Pacific [Ocean] area.

HENSON: That's right, I forgot about him, the shell man.

WEISS: Tucker Abbott... I enjoyed working with him. He was in the Pacific several times, and he did a lot of publishing on his work out there, too.

HENSON: He went up to Philadelphia, right?

WEISS: He went to Philadelphia, the Academy. . .

HENSON: . . .of Natural Sciences [of Philadelphia]. He has that beautiful shell book.⁹

WEISS: Yes, isn't that lovely? That was part of his work that he did while here. I enjoyed Tucker.

HENSON: I also wondered if there was more activity during the International Geophysical Year?

WEISS: Yes. Actually, I think the center of activity on that was up in Cambridge in the [Smithsonian] Astrophysical Observatory and the offices up there. And they really could handle a lot of the work that was done in connection with it up in that office, because they were equipped, had the funds, and were ready to do that.

⁹ Tucker R. Abbott, *American Seashells* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1954).

HENSON: In 1946, the Canal Zone Biological Area had come under Smithsonian aegis.

WEISS: Was that 1946, that that came on? Is that right?

HENSON: It was that late.

WEISS: Mr. [James] Zetek was down there.

HENSON: Right. Now, did you deal much with them? Would have to make a lot of arrangements?

WEISS: Yes, we dealt with them quite a lot... and staff members going down there, of course, too. Of course, Dr. Wetmore, in his explorations in Panama would always be in touch with them, too.

HENSON: Now would they need, for example, supplies and things that you would ship down to them from here?

WEISS: I can't remember that I did very much of sending them supplies. They were quite near the military base there and they may have worked through there themselves. Mr. Zetek, of course, was down there for so long, he knew how to take care of whatever he needed to do in that area. When Martin [H.] Moynihan went down he came from up here.

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: I remember when he came to my office, and was getting ready to go down there... [when they] first sent him to CZBA. I visited them down there, later, then before I retired.

HENSON: Did you? I've never been there. It must be interesting to see.

WEISS: It was. I'll tell you, the way it was an interesting one for me. I don't know whether I did any of it officially. No, I did not. I really took it as part of a vacation. I went down with [Annie Beatrice Thielen] Bea Wetmore. I saw that Dr. Wetmore's equipment went out before he left, and he flew down, because he had some things he had to do in advance to get ready for work there. Bea and I took a freighter down, and Dr. Wetmore met us at the pier with the jeep, and we took off in the jeep from the dock. [LAUGHTER] Then I went with them... he wanted me to have the experience as an observer with him to get some last-minute field equipment in Panama. His other equipment had arrived from here by that time. And he got what he needed to finish up his supplies, namely food-type items that he could buy there, and packed up and was ready to go off on his field trip. So that was interesting, and he and Bea took off while I was there. I stayed then longer and visited the island. Martin Moynihan was the director then. Anyway, that was quite fascinating and informative. You should go down there some time.



Bea Wetmore (left) and Helena Weiss (right) in Panama La Vieja, Panama, February 18, 1962.
Image Number: SIA2016-008218B

HENSON: Yes, one of these days I will. But you actually got out to Barro Colorado [Island]?

WEISS: Oh, yes. I went to Barro, Colorado. . .with Adela [A.] Gomez as my guide.

HENSON: Did you go out there by the train? I guess there's a little train that takes you to a launch?

WEISS: The train took us to the launch, and we took the launch from there, and then we went up... I think I climbed those steps. They have... what was it... some kind of little track that went up and a strange little vehicle to ride in, because that's quite a climb.

HENSON: I wouldn't have gone on that little cart thing that pulled up. I've seen that movie of it. I would have gone up the steps, too! [LAUGHTER]

WEISS: I thought it would be interesting to climb the steps! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: It's quite a climb!

WEISS: [LAUGHTER] It was a climb, yes. Yes, that's quite a project down there. Having helped staff now used to those who visited there, I enjoyed seeing the facilities, meeting the staff there, a glimpse of the beautiful island, and hearing the howler monkey! Who's the director now?

HENSON: Someone by the name of Ira Rubinoff.

WEISS: Ira Rubinoff... he's been there, then, quite a while.

HENSON: Yes, he's still there. Since Moynihan, it's just. . . .

WEISS: He was there, earlier... he was there and on the staff while I was at the Smithsonian.

HENSON: That's right.

WEISS: Then, I know, he became director, but I didn't know whether he was still there or not.

HENSON: I guess Michael [H.] Robinson used to be down there, and he's now director of the zoo [National Zoological Park]; he's come up and taken over the zoo. I wondered how much back-and-forth there would be between Smithsonian... were they fairly closely connected to us, or was it fairly loose at first?

WEISS: I don't know whether in the beginning. . . . I think they really were, not with my office particularly, but with the Assistant Secretary's office. I think a lot of their work was handled... their contacts were with Mr. [James C.] Bradley's office.

HENSON: There would be a lot of back-and-forth.

[END OF INTERVIEW]