

Sixth Oral History Interview

with

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

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by Pamela M. Henson
Interviewer

for the Smithsonian Institution Archives

HENSON: We're just going to finish up today with arrangements for expeditions. We had talked the last time about all the varied and assorted things you would do with people going out and coming back in again. There were a couple more I wanted to ask you if you remembered much about. In the late sixties, early seventies, [Edward P.] Ed Henderson and Brian [H.] Mason went a number of times to Australia to look for meteorites. I wondered if you were involved or remembered those at all, or were they fairly routine?

WEISS: I think that, in a way, they were routine. My recollection would be that they were among the first to go to Russia of the Smithsonian staff. I think I'm right about that. They're the first that I remember. It was interesting from that standpoint for them to come back and tell us what they had to do. What I had to do, my part, was getting their official passports and visas. It was interesting for me, from the standpoint that I went personally to the Russian Embassy... in fear and trembling, in a way.

[LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: I didn't know what my reception would be. It was stern and rather cold, but they were polite. I always had my official letter that I prepared, which was official and showed what the Smithsonian was planning to do. Always in a case like that, the scientists have been in touch with their colleagues in the countries themselves. With what they had already communicated to their colleagues, I am sure the Russians were well aware of that. They had to give me this cold reception, but we got our visas, and really, with no difficulty. They were able to go, and they had a wonderful trip. Then bringing what they had to bring back was really no problem. I think Ed Henderson went to Thailand about that time too, didn't he?

HENSON: Yes, he did a real circuit.

WEISS: Probably Japan... I remember him coming back and telling about Japan, how clean Japan was, for one thing. Japan... and then Thailand, I remember, because when I went over to Thailand after I retired; he knew of a meteorite that he wanted me to find over there that he had seen on exhibit. [LAUGHTER] After all those years, he remembered this meteorite that was very important, and I had to find someone who could show me and tell me in our language exchange [LAUGHTER] about this meteorite, or where it was. I had a little report [on it] that wasn't very significant when I came back. But I thought he had touched in Thailand. Of course, someplace like that was no problem as far as visas were concerned or anything.

We did have to have visas for every place that our staff went to in my early years in that office... all European countries and every place. Now we go in and out of these places without any problem. But when they first started traveling, every country required a visa, and every country required all sorts of inoculations. The [U.S.] Public Health Service would determine... I always had to check with them first... the inoculations that would be required. Some of them objected to the inoculations, but this was it, so they'd finally take them. Then bringing the materials back, they always came in through customs [U.S. Customs and Border Protection] for the Smithsonian as an official shipment. I usually didn't have a problem.

HENSON: One story I know is that [Richard H.] Dick Lytle was supposed to go to a conference in Russia and had to go get inoculations. I think it was typhoid...

WEISS: Did he?

HENSON: ...that he got so sick from that he wasn't able to make the trip.

WEISS: Really? Oh my! They used to say that if anyone really got sick, or if they were affected by the inoculations, it was an indication that they really needed to have the inoculation for an immunity to it, because otherwise they may have been more seriously ill. That is what I always told all of our scientists so that they'd understand!

[LAUGHTER]

HENSON: ...and do what they needed to do. We had mentioned the Arnhem Land Expedition to Australia. Henderson later made a series of expeditions there as well. Do you remember those, or was that after you retired?

WEISS: It may have been after I retired, about the time I was retiring. I don't remember his trips there. . . . Did he go among the aborigines there?

HENSON: I don't think so. He and Brian Mason, who at the time was at the American Museum of Natural History, I think more than one year, made a series of several trips around different parts of Australia, following where they had heard of meteorite sightings.

WEISS: My recollection isn't very good on that one... I'm not sure. We wouldn't have had any problem, as far as Australia was concerned, or with the specimens or anything.

HENSON: This is an expedition I don't know much about... I noticed in 1955 there was something called the Vanderbilt Palau Expedition. Do you remember that at all, who that was?

WEISS: Do you remember who it was that went on it?

HENSON: No, I don't know very much about it at all. That's not something that rings a bell with you?

WEISS: Palau... I know of Palau, but [George] Vanderbilt... they must have financed the trip.

HENSON: Yes, probably, in all likelihood.

WEISS: I don't know, I'd have to have a better recollection of who from the staff went on that. That might give me a clue. Otherwise, I'm afraid my memory has left me.
[LAUGHTER]

HENSON: There were so many of them, yes. In 1962... I just wanted to ask you how you were involved in it... for a number of years we had a large contingent going out, I guess it was every summer, to the Pacific, under [Philip S.] Phil Humphrey. That was the Pacific Ocean Biological Survey Program, which we got a grant from the Department of the Army [Department of Defense], and they were doing surveys of bird migration patterns in the Pacific. Did you have to help with travel papers on that, and that sort of thing?

WEISS: Yes, I think I helped with the travel papers on it, and I don't remember whether I helped with the return of specimens. I may have, but it wouldn't have been very much of a problem to bring in the type of materials, the birds that they were sending back to the collections. I would have had to handle their official papers. I remember working with Phil Humphrey on travel. It was in a part of the world that wasn't known very well scientifically at that time, and I had no information on the project. But I don't remember any particular problems in getting their papers together, or anything like that.

HENSON: That is one of the first ones, and we start seeing more and more of the larger money coming in for science now, getting bigger projects. The next big one I wanted to talk about, exactly what you did do with it, was the Satellite Tracking Program. This is earlier, actually, in the 1950s. By 1956, Fred [L.] Whipple is setting up this series of Baker-Nunn cameras around the world, and observing stations.

WEISS: We had nine... I think it was nine, is that right? Satellite tracking stations around the world... That was fascinating too. I felt very honored to be able to be involved in it, in a little tiny way.

HENSON: What did you have to do to help them, for that? What were you doing?

WEISS: In the first place, the official office was set up in Cambridge [Massachusetts] at the [Smithsonian] Astrophysical Observatory, the office for staffing and here the main work was done. But a lot of the planning was done down here at the Smithsonian, as I understand, and they needed to assign somebody. . . . I had a woman from Cambridge [Mrs. Eileen C. Cavanaugh] assigned to my office for about a year, I guess... maybe it was longer than that. I also worked with several of the men. The planning was coordinated through a contact down here for the whole operation. One time it was Mr. [J. J.] Love. There were two of them that I had worked with. [James C.] Jim Bradley, Mr. Bradley, was the one who was the principal contact in Washington. Several times we had trips up to Cambridge. One time, they asked me to help and I was involved in one of the sessions in discussing our part of the work in shipping, and handling shipping, and getting equipment out and materials back into the country, and that sort of thing, which would be necessary to develop their program. So I did a study session on that. But we were greatly involved, down here as well as in Cambridge, on that program, and I remember sitting in... do you want to hear this?

HENSON: Yes, absolutely.

WEISS: [LAUGHTER] I remember sitting in on some of the planning sessions, with Mr. [S. Dillon] Ripley, and the whole staff over in the Smithsonian, sitting around the table, planning the launching of this "thing" up in the sky! The main thing... I could go so far, but when they decided to have a station up there, someplace, and this would remain there, it was something that I couldn't believe! It just sounded like a fantastic dream... we could write a fairy tale on that, or something. But it took place, and I realized how small my mind was. It was really fascinating, and the Baker-Nunn camera... we lived with that for a year. . . . I guess that's when [Mrs. Cavanaugh] was assigned to me for a year or more, and then went back to Cambridge. She trained in our office here. I had her help with a lot of other work also in the office, it was sort of a training period to help her working with records, shipping, paperwork, etc., in getting the cameras out. The stations were set up, and the cameras were sent, and everything seemed to go very well as planned. It was a wonderful program. I would love to have been to Spain. I did visit one station on vacation. It was on Hawaii. I might have gone to Spain, but for some reason, I couldn't get away, and I didn't go, and now I regret it.

[LAUGHTER] It would have been interesting to have seen another one of the stations. But I did see the Baker-Nunn in action in Hawaii... it was on the island of Maui.

HENSON: That got established pretty rapidly, didn't it?

WEISS: Yes, it did. More or less it was the International Geophysical Year, that this was planned as a big event for that year. Everything went very rapidly with funds available. I took care of all the passport and visa work for everybody at all those stations. I collected their pictures at that time. I have quite a collection of them, but I don't think that I could name most of them unless they put their names on them, because they really had a big staff, as you could imagine.

HENSON: How, in this instance, would your office absorb a new work load like that?
Were you getting additional staff?

WEISS: We did have one woman assigned from Cambridge and we had her help in handling the shipping papers, as well as passport and visas. Although she was assigned from Cambridge, she also helped us with our workload. She was a competent and efficient person. Later, Cambridge provided funds to employ another clerk for our office, Mrs. Mary Oldfather, who was also helpful in obtaining passports, visas, and preparing official papers, such as official introduction letters for the travelers on the Satellite Tracking Program. Their staff always carried an official introduction letter from the Smithsonian.

HENSON: Then the other thing is, *Sputnik* goes up, and then we get an even larger grant, to actually track satellites. Setting up the Baker-Nunn cameras was a preliminary thing, and then *Sputnik* goes up, and we track it, and then we get the large satellite tracking grant, which was even a bigger thing. And then we also set up something... I wonder if you remember... called "Moonwatch."

WEISS: Yes, I remember, but I don't. . . .

HENSON: It was teams of volunteers, all over the country, tracking the satellites. I wondered if... you had to work with that at all? Did it increase the general correspondence... people writing in, about observations of satellites and things? Do you recall?

WEISS: I think it did, but we had no other work in connection with Moonwatch. Because it was under the aegis of the Smithsonian Institution, we did receive some public response, but actually, we tried to direct most of those inquires up to Cambridge, because that was the central office. They could provide the information, and what we could give correspondents would have not been very helpful. Most of the inquiries were redirected up there. So we did not answer too much of that down here. Mr. Love was over in the Smithsonian Building, with Mr. Bradley. A lot of mail we just directed to him, and he carried it up to Cambridge.

HENSON: How hard was it to work, managing administrative details, with a remote location like Cambridge? Was it harder than doing things [than] if people in town, or just a telephone away?

WEISS: It's farther away, of course, and I guess our communication system wasn't quite as sophisticated as it is today, but I don't think it was too difficult.

HENSON: The size of it is just huge, in comparison to what Smithsonian was used to.

WEISS: I knew those men very well, those who were in charge of certain projects, so that I could work with them very well. I don't recall that we had any particular difficulties, and they were a fine group of men dedicated to their work. Why not--it was a thrilling piece of history to be involved in!

HENSON: Fascinating project. Another one that's kind of curious, that always comes up in any sort of newspaper article... I think there's a lot of popular interest in this... is that you apparently kept separate records on the identification of dead bodies, for the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation]. Do you remember that? Because that was something unusual.

WEISS: I'd forgotten that. Have you found something on it? I'll tell you why I did that. It was because we had quite a period of time when we were getting correspondence, or we were receiving requests from the Department of Justice. They required the services of physical anthropologists in identifying, particularly, the bones of the bodies that had been probably interred someplace for years. Some of them could be very old. The identifications were made from the bones or from the tooth structure, the teeth. That seems to have been a great. . . . This was fascinating to me, and particularly the reports that would come through our office on them. I decided that we were getting so much of it, I guess, that we should keep a separate file, particularly if there should happen to be any follow-up. I really have forgotten about it. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: Every now and then, in working with the file, as we would go along, we'd find some reason that we thought it would be easier to find records, not having computers... that we would set up our own system of quick and ready reference files. I really had forgotten that. It just seemed like it was going to be so much better to have that correspondence easily accessible.

HENSON: Yes, an interesting little piece of work that the Smithsonian was doing again.

WEISS: Yes. I think they still do that to a certain extent. I'm sure they do. Just recently I read of a case involving the FBI. They were going to refer it to the Smithsonian.

HENSON: In 1965, you were apparently busy making a lot of travel arrangements because that was a celebration that Mr. Ripley planned for the 200th anniversary of James Smithsonian's birth. That was the Smithsonian Bicentennial, which was a rather big party on the Mall, with caps and gowns, et cetera. I wonder if you recall a little bit about what kinds of work you did with that project and what all that entailed.

WEISS: I remember the planning on that and the excitement over this happening. Actually, I think, my entire office was excited over the project. I don't remember all the details of what we had to do. I think probably one of the main things was to help the scientists who came in, and that would have been through the [U.S.] Immigration [and Naturalization] Service, to help with immigration papers for them. We were working very closely with Immigration at that time, because there were a lot of exchange students also coming in at that time who required special visas that needed to be watched closely, so we really knew certain Immigration staff members that we worked with closely on that type of work. We really didn't have any problems with it. These people came in and we knew how to handle their problems, as far as what type of entries they would have to make, and we helped them. I don't recall that we had any difficulty. It was a little more work, but....

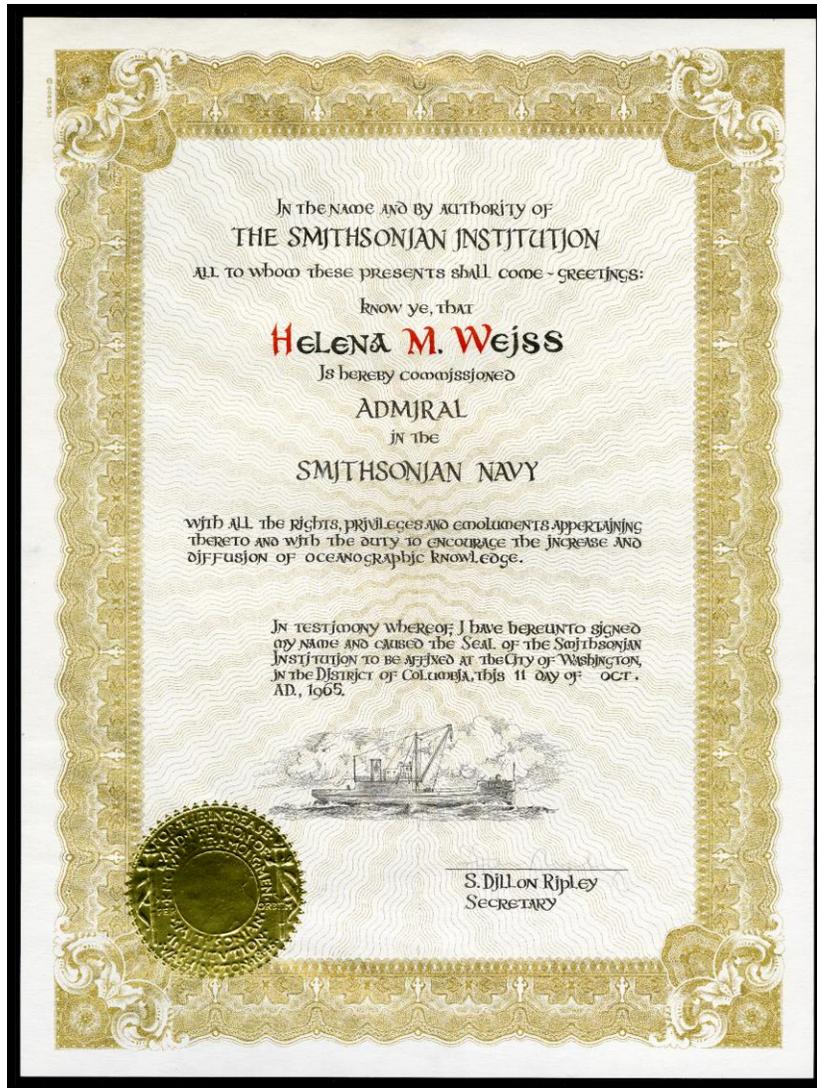
HENSON: Yes. [LAUGHTER]

WEISS: ...we're accustomed to having more work in that office! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Did you participate in the celebration?

WEISS: Yes, I did. I was in the march across the Mall, you might say. [LAUGHTER] [My office was under Mr. Taylor's jurisdiction then, I remember, because I walked immediately behind him and he followed Mr. Ripley]

HENSON: Procession, right. It seemed like that was quite a big deal for the Smithsonian.



Certificate Given to Helena Weiss by Secretary S. Dillon Ripley, October 11, 1965.
Image Number: SIA2013-02864

WEISS: I think it was. I think Mr. Ripley was really excited about it. It was planned in great detail. For instance, speaking of their caps and gowns, they had all of those assembled in the A & I Building on this side of the Mall. The procession started on the Smithsonian side of the Mall, and proceeded in a solemn and stately manner across to the front of the Natural History Building, where the reviewing stand was set up. President Lyndon [B.] Johnson was the speaker, you know, and that added to the festivities. It was well organized, and everything went very smoothly, in timing and the whole thing. I can't tell you who was in charge of the entire planning on that. It might have been Mr. Bradley or. . . .

HENSON: Bradley was? I know [Paul H.] Oehser, I think. . .

WEISS: Oehser, was it?

HENSON: . . .played a fairly big role in it.

WEISS: But they did a good job. And probably Frank [A.] Taylor helped with that too. I think he may have had something to do with assembling the caps and gowns and to facilitate the assembly of the procession to be ready on time and so forth.

HENSON: Yes, get it off, get it all done.

WEISS: The march was assembled according to the organization of the Smithsonian, beginning with the administration of the Smithsonian and then through all of the bureaus. The top staff of each.

HENSON: You mentioned something in passing. Around this time, we do start increasing the number of visiting scientists from other countries, and we start having graduate students come in to do work in the museum. If they were from a foreign country, would you help with those arrangements as well?

WEISS: Sometimes, but as I recall, I was involved in not necessarily monitoring their immigration papers, but if Immigration had a question about any person that was here... assigned to the Smithsonian... I think my office was the contact on that, and I would keep in touch with them. And then if any of them had any difficulty as far as their exit papers and getting out of the country were concerned, I could help them with that.

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: I remember several cases like that. Also, some of them would take out some collections if they were here studying, that they wanted for research [background noise], they'd be borrowing or had collected specimens. Some of them collected while they were here. I know some of the [National Museum of] Natural History staff would take visiting colleagues on field expeditions, and they might have specimens. I remember several times helping them get their equipment out of the country, and helping them with their exit papers. Then, if any of them overstayed the time they were here, we might be involved in their paperwork with Immigration.

HENSON: It seems as if it just gets bigger, and the work gets bigger and bigger all the time.

WEISS: When I left here, I think I had a staff of thirty-one. That included all of the mail messengers who served all the buildings on the Mall, mostly clerical and mail messengers. So it was not a large staff, considering what we did. We had our correspondence and shipping clerks, the whole mail system for the Smithsonian, and the files, accessions, the immigration work, passport and visa work, travel papers... that wasn't a large staff.

HENSON: At one point, you switched the name from "Office of Correspondence and Records" to "Office of the Registrar." Do you remember why that was done?

WEISS: When I first came in, it was Office of Correspondence and Documents. The document part was separated and moved partly to the Editor's Office and partly to the office of distribution of Smithsonian publications. That was done at the time that Mr. Bryant retired and I was placed in charge. Lester E. Commerford was assistant chief of Correspondence and Documents, in charge of the document section. When that section was withdrawn, the title was changed to Office of Correspondence and Records, which again, was deceptive because it was more than correspondence and it was more than records, but that was the name. So it remained for many years. I do not know that there was any particular reason for the next change. While I was there I don't think anything was withdrawn after the trucking service and first-aid service were placed elsewhere. Instead, I think there were a few additions! Perhaps the name change was a matter of trying to bring us up-to-date with a museum structure in other museums. I would say that it was about the time that, I think, we were becoming more aware of museum work throughout the country. Little museums were being established. I remember the [American] Association of Museums, they had their meetings every year. Is that what it's called?

HENSON: American Association of Museums.

WEISS: American Association of Museums, right, that's it. One year, Dr. [Herbert] Friedmann [after he became Director of the Los Angeles County Museum] wanted me to attend a meeting in Los Angeles [California], and participate in a panel on keeping our records here. But I refused, I just didn't see.... I was so tied up and had too much to do, and I just didn't have time to work on the input that I would have had to prepare, so I didn't do that. I sort of regret that I didn't. I would say it must have been about that time it was decided that it should be called "Office of the Registrar" instead of "Office of Correspondence and Records," and it was just changed. Now, that's all I can remember about it. I don't know whether those are the facts of the case or not, but I think "Registrar" is more descriptive of the office than "Office of Correspondence and Documents."

HENSON: Absolutely, yes. About this time, I guess, the American Association of Museums was established with offices over in the Castle building. Was that correct? Do you remember that? I think their offices were actually over there.

WEISS: It could be, I'm not sure about that. [HMW note: Yes, he did!] I bet Frank Taylor would know more about that.

HENSON: And that's about the time... is her name Arminta Neal, who wrote *Museum Registration Methods*?¹⁰ Did you ever see that?

WEISS: Yes, that was when they were really doing quite a study of registration and recordkeeping in museums, and it was a good thing, I think. Dorothy Dudley is right because she was part of the panel in Los Angeles.

HENSON: There's sort of a trend towards professionalization of what you do in a museum, I guess.

¹⁰ Dorothy H. Dudley and Irma Bezold, *Museum Registration Methods* (Washington: American Association of Museums and the Smithsonian Institution, 1958).

WEISS: I really felt that... what our office was doing, and the way we had grown up like Topsy... I didn't know what we could do in participating in that. I think our work was more widespread and was sort of a relic of the past instead of the future.

[LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: It really was.

HENSON: It's easier to establish or change a small system than to change something that was a huge as what you had. It would be very, very hard to do. Did you report to anyone different when you changed from Correspondence and Documents to Registrar? Do you remember?

WEISS: I think the office that... I don't remember the title... I think Frank Taylor may have been. . . . Was that when I first reported to him?

HENSON: I think it's before that.

WEISS: Was he Under Secretary, or what?

HENSON: He was something called "Director-General of Museums." That was his job title.

WEISS: It was before that.

HENSON: You became registrar at least as early as 1956.

WEISS: Yes. It was before that, and I think my office was under someone over here in the Smithsonian, but I don't recall who it was.

HENSON: Maybe director of the United States National Museum, still.



George B. Griffenhagen, Helena Weiss, and a man identified only as "Bane," August 24, 1956.
Image Number: SIA2009-4253

WEISS: That's what it was, I guess... the museum before separation.

HENSON: This also seems like an aside, but other little tasks you were doing. . . . I don't know if this is wrong or not... it appeared in 1951, for example, that you were actually working on the whole budget for the director's office for the United States National Museum. Did you used to do budget preparation work for them? Does that ring any bells?

WEISS: No.

HENSON: That's not?

WEISS: I don't recall that I did full budget work, not for the director. I hope I didn't. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Yes, I wasn't sure. . . .

WEISS: It was enough to try to work a budget for my poor little office that always was at the end of the row [LAUGHTER] and never got any money! I had two feelings on that. I thought we needed it and I wanted to improve our office, but I did not have a strong argument. I always felt that the staff, the professional staff, always needed more money because their work was so important, and I thought that I was just sort of carried along. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: I do not recall preparing the director's budget. If I did, it must have been a one-time thing [if that was before Mr. Bryant retired, I may have been detailed there to help].

HENSON: If you needed support for something new, and it was something you absolutely needed, was it difficult or easy to get?

WEISS: It was difficult.

HENSON: Would it be hard to get support within the Smithsonian, or at the Bureau of the Budget, or both?

WEISS: As far as I was concerned, it would have been within the Smithsonian.

HENSON: Yes. Would you say, in your tenure, were you ever adequately. . . .

[BEGIN REEL II]

HENSON: The question we ran off the tape with was, whether in all your years here, as the head of that office, you ever felt it was adequately staffed to do the really wide variety of jobs that you needed to do?

WEISS: I'm going to say that by all standards of efficient office work, we were never adequately staffed. I think on looking back, I was very fortunate to have good, able staff much of the time, and that we were able to get our work done, and I think we got our work done. I guess the staff was interested. It was an interesting office, and the work was widespread, and I think from that standpoint, the people who worked in the office would develop this interest in doing a good job, doing their work. We were involved with staff over all the Smithsonian, which was another interesting thing. It certainly was for me, and I think that my whole office felt that way. But I don't think, actually, you could say we were adequately staffed. If we could have really organized segments of the office as they should have been and had the staff, we could have made a better showing in the Smithsonian, I think, than we were able to do.

HENSON: From 1957 on, you start seeing a lot of growth around the Smithsonian. Growth and splitting. In 1957, United States National Museum splits into the Museum of Natural History and the Museum of History and Technology. Even within, for example, the Natural History Museum, over the years that you were there, biology splits into botany and zoology, zoology splits into vertebrate and invertebrate and then entomology splits off.

WEISS: And then botany was split off.

HENSON: Yes, botany goes off. And then geology splits into paleontology and mineral sciences.

WEISS: Invertebrate paleontology and vertebrate paleontology, and the vertebrate lab.

HENSON: Right. So, these little units keep proliferating. Given your systems for tracking, et cetera, et cetera, how did your office cope with that kind of splitting and change... and growth, as well?

WEISS: I had forgotten about that. That's very interesting. It was difficult, as far as our files were concerned. And another thing that I don't think I mentioned... very often I fell heir to practices Mr. [Herbert S.] Bryant had more or less started. Any staff members in the Smithsonian, if they had a question about a person in the Smithsonian, of where they were, or even if a staff member had died, we'd get a call and they'd say, "I understand so-and-so died. What year was that?" And after time, I think I started that before Mr. Bryant left, I set up a little card file [LAUGHTER] of staff. We had a card file of staff members, and on their cards would put the date of their death. Our file clerk did that, just as a matter of a "bureau" of information, I guess, because I know, so many people told me, when I went in there, "Well, we always call Bryant." I can hear Dr. [Waldo LaSalle] Schmitt say that now. Bryant always knew the answers, so I decided, well, Weiss has to know the answers, too [LAUGHTER], so I tried to find a way that I could have some answers! I'd forgotten all about that.

In answer to your question, that was one way that we had of trying to keep abreast of what was happening in the Smithsonian. Whenever there was a branch, like when we had had the Department of Biology, biology was then our main break, and that was divided into the departments, and then the departments into divisions. We had had divisions before, but then finally, many of those became departments. . . . I guess botany was about the first division that broke off and became a department, I've forgotten, but I think that was. Was it?

HENSON: Correct, yes.

WEISS: Botany was over in the Smithsonian Building, and the others, as far as natural history was concerned, were over in the Natural History Building. And then in MHT [Museum of History and Technology], there had been a Department of History, and that was divided into cultural history and military history. Then also philately, I believe, was set up before that, and numismatics. Numismatics grew quite a bit, became a much larger division, with that little change there, we handled it the same way. We'd set up a card file, primarily of such changes, so that we had a reference, to help us in answering questions relating to the museum and the staff. Perhaps we assumed too much but, for me, when I went into the office, it was important to find a way to continue a practice already started.

HENSON: How would you handle it within the files? Do you recall?

WEISS: On accession records... [PAUSE] actually, I don't think we kept our accession records by museums. We kept them only by our accession numbers, and through our card system we were able to trace accessions. On correspondence, the general correspondence file, I think you mentioned one time the temporary file system that was for the day-to-day inquiries, mostly from school children or ordinary little questions. We set that up as a temporary file, and we set up a period of time, over, say, five years or so, those papers would be destroyed. It grew too rapidly. You couldn't possibly keep all those records. With the Examination and Report files, that was more or less a temporary file. We did not keep those. The only time that they fell into the permanent file would be if an accession resulted from previous correspondence, and then that would be added as part of the accession records. The accession records were our primary file. Then we did have a general correspondence file, but very often, if I remember correctly, much of the correspondence would finally result in accession-type of correspondence, which would be involved with specimens.

The main thing that we were concerned with, as far as permanent records, were the accession files, and trying to keep all the correspondence together. Sometimes that was a little difficult, because we may have started a case some years before in correspondence, and then tried to draw that together. I always felt that any correspondence concerned with a particular accession that all the papers should be drawn together. I think it's one of those things that, as changes took place, we tried to meet the changes in the best way we could. Our main purpose was to be able to find papers. When our staff wanted the papers, we were to find them. I remember when Dr. [Leonard] Carmichael said at a professional staff meeting, that Miss Weiss' office could find anything in the Smithsonian, and I thought that was quite a thing to live up to, so.... [LAUGHTER] He expected us to find items too, even if divisions could not!

HENSON: [LAUGHTER] Is it ever! Now, when they established the separate Museum of Natural History and Museum of History and Technology, did they immediately establish separate registrars' offices, or no?

WEISS: No.

HENSON: Did you consider that?

WEISS: I may be wrong on this, but the first registrar that I remember was in the art galleries. I can't remember when MHT had set up a registrar, but it was not right away... 1973, after I retired!

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: It was some time after, I would say, after MHT was established, before that was set up. The first papers that we withdrew from our files were for the National Collection of Fine Arts. The National Collection of Fine Arts today is the National Museum of American Art, but at that time was located in the Natural History Building, and we had all their records. We had worked with their staff for some time. We had no difficulty at all. But then when they were separated, and they were finally moved out, it was a matter of withdrawing those papers. That was really a job. I don't know how we did that, and I don't think I'll be able to dig that from my memory... [HMW note: NCFA papers were withdrawn while I was working for Mr. Bryant; one of my first jobs when I returned to the office.] [LAUGHTER] Getting the papers out and finding the index cards, which was our key to all our files... we couldn't live without our index cards! Sometimes to the dismay of my staff, I was insistent that we have enough cross-references [LAUGHTER] so we could find things! I would ask them to be sure to cover whatever we thought would be needed in order to find the file. But it was helpful when we started to withdraw files. And that's the first that I remember, and then the next one was the [National] Air Museum. That's the big one that I remember, trying to withdraw those accessions. To dig out of our main accession file, all of the papers was something of a job.

I have a feeling that the only way we got through that was, at that time, I believe, we used to have summer staff. And we were able to get some very good people. In the beginning we got high school graduates and young people who were just going into college, or first-year college students, and they had to go through their recruiting process. Fortunately, it was recognized that my office needed that kind of help, so for several years, during that time, I had summer help, and I always had a program laid out for them. I knew exactly what I wanted them to do. That was the only way I got the files into larger envelopes. When I went in, the files were folded into these small narrow jackets. I don't know what you call them. Have you ever seen them?

HENSON: No.

WEISS: You haven't? Well, they're about the size of... I wish I had kept some as a souvenir [LAUGHTER]. They weren't this wide, they were probably about this wide and that long, and all the papers were folded into that jacket... I could hardly stand it to withdraw some of the papers. Can you imagine papers from the 1800s, withdrawing those papers, and you'd feel like they were going to crumble? And then, the professional staff always wanted to look at these papers. They felt they should see the original papers. So the first project that I wanted to do was to be able to have flat folders for these original, important papers. It meant getting all new file cases, it meant getting the jackets for the papers, and making the transfer--a sizeable job. We had some good backing on the program and, fortunately, the funds provided for summer employees. With[out] the summer help, we would never been able to accomplish that job. I know of two summers, maybe three summers we worked on that, but it was certainly worthwhile, because we were able to straighten those papers out!



Smithsonian staff at the opening of First Ladies' Hall in the Arts & Industries Building. Pictured from left to right are "Buttons" Garber, Paul Garber, Mabel Byrd, Lawrence Oliver, Anne Murray, Helena Weiss, Maria Hoemann, and Charles Sinclair.

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HENSON: What kind of cases were these smaller folders kept in?

WEISS: They were in drawers of the same dimensions as the jackets. Haven't you ever seen those cases? I guess they got rid of all of those. The cases, they were taller than our present standard file cases, they were taller and they were narrow, the size of the sample jacket. The multiple folded papers were stored in those jackets. I think that you may find some if you have our earliest records. On some of them, I suggested that they cut the face of the file folder and attach it on the new flat jacket. I don't know whether any of those have been retained or not.

HENSON: I see.

WEISS: I thought they were interesting because that would retain an example of the earliest files. It would be interesting from the standpoint of the history of Smithsonian filing. I'd like to know if any of those... if you have any of those.

HENSON: Yes, I'll take a look. I'll see.

WEISS: I think [William E.] Bill Boyle was one of the first that worked on that project. We had a number of good people... they were college students, and they became interested in the Smithsonian, by the time they had worked with those papers, so that the temporary help did a good job.

HENSON: I'm looking at the people who were down in 1958 in your office, and it was Lucile McCain, Charlotte Walker, Margaret [B.] Wadsworth, Tilghman [A.] Hawkins, Alice Dunston, Mary Oldfather, and then the shipping group. Oh, Mary Oldfather, that's what it says, paid from Satellite Tracking Program.

WEISS: Yes, I had Lucile McCain, Assistant Chief of C & R; Walker, Secretary; Wadsworth, in charge of files; Hawkins started as a messenger, but I was able to place Tilgham in charge of the files before I left; Dunston, a stenographer; Oldfather, a clerk-stenographer during STP program. Added to these and the shipping clerks, we had mail messengers. Now, what year was this?

HENSON: 1958.

WEISS: I had, later on, several good persons who were in charge of the correspondence, the chief of correspondence. Amy Holland was one very late in my time there, and she was preceded by... I can't remember... but, Alice Dunston was good, and there was some[one] following her.

HENSON: In later years, the clerks were Margaret [A.] Santiago, Anselmo Baez, Betty [J.] Robinson, Tilghman Hawkins, and Leroy Jefferson.

WEISS: In some of those positions there would be quite a change of staff. I'll tell you one reason. The grades were very low and it was most difficult, at that time, to be able to classify clerical type of work into higher grades. I don't know how it is now but it was very difficult. And the person that was ambitious at all was not satisfied to stay in a grade 3 job, or grade 4 job, very long, and so I had a turnover.

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: There's Amy Holland. She was a well-qualified person, in charge of mail distribution, correspondence, etc.

HENSON: Right. This is 1961, and so you're registrar, assistant registrar is Lucile McCain, clerk-stenographer is D. Allen.

WEISS: Dorothy Allen.

HENSON: Dorothy Allen.

WEISS: Dorothy Tonic [Allen], she came in right out of high school, and she turned out to be... she was a lovely little black girl, one of my very good clerk-stenographers. She was very good, she married while she was there. I went to her wedding. And, let's see. . . .

HENSON: And there was a messenger, [Thurman] T. Jackson, and J. Baker. I don't think I'd ever seen these before, but you have several GS-1s.

WEISS: I know. Isn't that amazing? Are there any GS-1s now? They were mail carriers that were gradually provided when mail deliveries extended to several buildings off the Mall.

HENSON: I have no idea, but I've never seen anyone actually listed as a GS-1 before. And then you had. . .

WEISS: . . .Margaret Wadsworth, Margaret Santiago, and Tilghman Hawkins, and P. Copeland... well, now, she wasn't there very long, I think that was Patricia Copeland.

HENSON: And then Amy Holland, and....

WEISS: . . .and Ann Boyle... I'd forgotten about her. Ann Boyle was a very competent person and I was sorry... she really should have had a higher grade. She had good education, she was very good, and she was a good worker. It was too bad, sometimes my best help would be employed in a low grade, and they just couldn't stay. So another one of our problems would be our turnover. Some of the positions were what you might call routine type of jobs, but they required a person with some intelligence to handle your work.

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: But it was hard to get the grade structure for them. . .

HENSON: . . .so that you could keep them. Okay, I'll still look further for the SAO person.

WEISS: I didn't see the one that was sent down from Cambridge. Mary Oldfather, she was hired here because we needed extra work done. She was an older woman but an experienced worker.

HENSON: Around this time they got rid of, in the sixties, the name "United States National Museum." I was wondering what you thought of that change. Was that something you supported, or were sorry to see go?

WEISS: I have to tell you the truth. When I came here, I'm afraid that many people thought of the United States National Museum... were more familiar with that name than they were almost with the Smithsonian. I think Dr. [John L.] Keddy was the one who came in and, really, he said that, "the tail was wagging the dog," and he went to work to change that. We had to stop saying "U.S. National Museum" and change to "Smithsonian Institution." Much of our correspondence was that way: "U.S. National Museum, Smithsonian Institution." There was quite a long period, I suppose several years, before that was really readily adopted. I think now we think of the Smithsonian Institution first, and then we think of the museums. But it took some years to change that because it had been called the United States National Museum for many years. I think it was absolutely right. It should have been the Smithsonian. I must say that some of the older staff used to say, "We are the United States National Museum, why do we have to be the 'Smithsonian Institution?'"

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: Interesting.

HENSON: It gets serious.

WEISS: That's true. And then the U. S. National Museum became the Museum of Natural History and the Museum of History and Technology. For a while it was just "Museum of Natural History" and "Museum of History and Technology," then they became "National Museum of Natural History" and "National Museum of History and Technology." Now History and Technology has been changed to... what is it now?

HENSON: National Museum of American History.

WEISS: National Museum of American History, but that's been in the last, what, few years?

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: That's since I left. I think it was still NMHT.

HENSON: That's fairly recent, yes. It was done shortly before Ripley left.¹¹

WEISS: And the art museum changed too. NCFA [National Collection of Fine Arts] was changed to the [National] Museum of American Art.¹²

HENSON: So all of these were changed.

WEISS: That had to be changed because it was originally the National Gallery of Art.

HENSON: That's right.

WEISS: Did you know that?

HENSON: I have heard that. . . .

¹¹ The Museum of History and Technology became the National Museum of American History in 1980.

¹² The National Collection of Fine Arts became the National Museum of American Art in 1980 and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2000.

WEISS: I was here at the time that was changed. It was the National Gallery of Art and when Mr. [Andrew W.] Mellon left his fortune and his collection, it was established in connection with the Smithsonian, in a way. His will, or his statement, required that it be named the "National Gallery of Art" and not the "Mellon Gallery." About the time it was established, people were beginning to call it the "Mellon Gallery." It was known as Mellon Gallery for some time, but he had stipulated that it was not to be called the Mellon Gallery. That meant that the NCFA, National Collection of Fine Arts, had to change its name. It was established as the "National Gallery of Art" and it was necessary to change to the National Collection of Fine Arts. That was another thing that we had to change on all our records. I'd forgotten about that. Our office was changing at the time then they became National Collection of Fine Arts, and that was one of my first traumatic experiences, when I returned to C & D. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Because that would have been shortly after you came.

WEISS: Yes, very shortly after I came in. One of the first things. Followed by the establishment of the Air Museum.

HENSON: Yes, huge jobs, both of them. And the split has never been done now with those accession records, yet they still talk about it occasionally. . . .

WEISS: It could be, very. . . . There was no way, in the early records, that we could simply identify and pull out all the accessions that might have been, or should have been, part of those two organizations, Engineering and Industries and Air Museum. The only way that we were able to do, naturally, of course, the NCFA records were identifiable and could be quite easily separated. It was easier than it was with the Air Museum, because the collections of the Air Museum actually, I guess, had been part of and interspersed with the Engineering and Industries Division. Wasn't that it? Division of Engineering and Industries.

HENSON: Absolutely.

WEISS: Paul [E.] Garber was in the Division of Engineering and Industries, and he was very energetic and instrumental in the Air Museum, he and Mr. Taylor.

HENSON: So the art museum had always been separate, in a way. At least a separate department.

WEISS: Yes, It was separate in the way it was organized. That was much easier. . .

HENSON: . . .in going back and finding. . .

WEISS: . . .with their records. The National Collection of Fine Arts had been organized as a separate entity for some time, and their collections were unique insofar as museum records were concerned. The office was well organized, the files and activities were well defined, which helped in identifying their accession papers. Apparently our office held only some of the accession records. NCFA had directors, as you know. Mr. Ruel P. Tolman was director when I worked in the Department of Geology. I believe he was followed by Mr. Thomas [M.] Beggs, whom I knew very well. I had always thought that NCFA was misplaced, especially in the natural history building, but, of course, I did enjoy "storing" some of their favorite paintings on the walls of my office!

HENSON: Did you ever consider splitting the . . . Natural History and History and Technology records?

WEISS: No. No, not while I was here, I don't think.

HENSON: Never seriously?

WEISS: Thank goodness. [LAUGHTER] I think I retired when I felt that was coming. [LAUGHTER] It was a very good time to leave! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Hasn't been done yet! [LAUGHTER]

WEISS: There'd be an overlap in many of those records and accessions, I know, particularly in anthropology, and the Division, or was it Department, of History. There was always a little problem on that, even when we were still the U. S. National Museum, because there could be an overlap. Especially, [Division of] Cultural History would have some things that they felt belonged to them, and [Department of] Anthropology thought that certain items belonged to Anthropology, and so we always had a little thing going on that.

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: I would think, in trying to separate the papers entirely, it would really be a problem.

HENSON: At this point, once MHT [Museum of History and Technology] opened, there's more staff. Was your staff at least growing somewhat, commensurate with that?

WEISS: What year was that?

HENSON: Well, MHT is funded as a separate museum in 1957, and then it opened in 1964.

WEISS: I know, it opened when. . .

HENSON: . . .Ripley was in.

WEISS: Yes, and [Lyndon Baines] Johnson was President. So it was right after [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy [Jr.]'s assassination... I think, because President Johnson and Lady Bird Johnson came to the opening of that building, I remember.

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: So that was 1964. [PAUSE] I don't think we had any additional staff. I don't have any recollection of having additional staff assigned there. That was just the normal work of the office to [LAUGHTER] carry on as usual, I guess.

HENSON: Just keep going. . . .

WEISS: The only thing was, now I'm not sure, but I believe I got extra help in the shipping office and probably in the mail, because after that building... I don't know, it wasn't immediately within the next year or two... but MHT had the first branch shipping office that I was able to set up, outside of the Natural History Building. Up to that time, the only shipping area where shipments were delivered and where shipments were sent out was at the Natural History Building's west platform. Finally, I put Clarence Douglas over in MHT. He had worked in our shipping office, and was a reliable person. Of course, at that time, and rightfully, the staff over there was much concerned about trying to have materials sent to that building, which was really imperative from our standpoint. You couldn't have collections sent over there when there was no office to receive them or any place to put the shipments. It was very difficult to even find space to put up a little tiny office. It was a tiny one. Anyway, that was definitely needed. I am of the opinion that in planning that large building, a space should have been provided for a shipping office, especially to handle the wide variety of items involved, such as glass, clocks, furniture, etc. Space problems was a "bone of contention."

But then when the two art galleries were established, over in the old Patent Office, when that planning was done, fortunately I was able to have some input in planning the shipping entrance and a good shipping office. And they needed it. I mean, we explored the sizes and kinds of art pieces that might be received, and how they would be handled and all that. In working with the reconstruction or reworking of an old building, I think it may be not as good as it would be in a modern building today, but considering what they had to work with, I think it turned out very well. That was the second shipping branch that was set up and I assigned another clerk there. The Hirshhorn [Museum] and [National] Air and Space Museum also had their own shipping offices. By that time, they were able to take care of their own. They got their own staff.

HENSON: Shipping of the air and space stuff is a . . .

WEISS: Fantastic. . . . [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: . . .mind-boggling prospect for me! [LAUGHTER]

WEISS: I was on that when we moved the things from Chicago, from the O'Hare [International Airport], because we had big storage out there.

HENSON: Yes, a lot of work. Now, I noticed also, this period of time, you were doing orientation sessions periodically for the administrative personnel for the museum. I noticed you had almost like a little curriculum sheet for many years as to what the correspondence procedures were and the registrarial procedures were. Do you remember doing those?

WEISS: I'd forgotten about it.

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: I'd forgotten about it. It's very difficult to go back in my mind and remember. Everything just sort of developed and went along, and I went along with it [LAUGHTER], I guess. I guess we did have that.

HENSON: Apparently. . . .

WEISS: That was for bringing in some of the clerical help, in the correct procedures. That's right. I don't think that lasted too long, I hope. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Would you think it would be very helpful, or did it take a lot of time to do that sort of thing?

WEISS: It took time, with our limited staff and trying to keep up our work. It would be all right if it could be set up as an adjunct to the office. It would be, I think, helpful for any registrar to plan an orientation program of that kind for clerical staff recruited in the various divisions. Maybe it should depend on the size of the bureau or the organization. But I would think that Natural History and. . . .

[END OF INTERVIEW]