

Seventh 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: I want to start asking you about the *Annual Reports* [*of the Smithsonian Institution*] and what the registrar's office did for the *Annual Reports*. What did you have to compile, and how did you maintain that as the year went on?

WEISS: The primary thing... all through the years, from the time I first went in, was compilation of the accession records. We always prepared a list of accessions as were received during the year. We made up this list. We kept our records so that we could prepare the complete list at the end of the year. The interesting thing or difficult part was trying to get the accessions in from the curators before the end of the year, of all specimens or collections received during that year. Sometimes there were collections or specimens that could always be recorded later, but we would try to get as many in by the end of the year.

As I recall, I think that when I first went in the office, I don't believe that we prepared any written text on them. I'd have to check that. But then later on, we did have a written text for the registrar... sort of like an annual report. I don't know, maybe Mr. [S. Dillon] Ripley started that.

HENSON: Before that, you had done the curators' annual reports. Usually the registrar submitted something, didn't they, to that?

WEISS: Yes, I think we probably did provide information from accessions as required.

HENSON: In later years you are in *Smithsonian Year*. There is a page or so devoted to the text of what the Office of the Registrar had been doing that year. Is that sort of a good way to get the curators to get their accessions in, that you had to have the annual report?

WEISS: It helped! [LAUGHTER] We did start reminding them. The curators were aware of their annual reports. I guess they submitted theirs to the chairmen or the Head Curators, as they were known at that time, for inclusion in Departments reports. I think that probably we had some input.

HENSON: How much time would that take, in the course of a year, to get that list together?

WEISS: I don't think I can remember that. It was, in a way, an ongoing job... I don't know whether I remember exactly--but we made a card record through the year of the accessions as they were received. At the end of the year, it was a matter of compiling, going over it, editing for the *Annual Report*, and writing it up. I don't know how much time we spent on that, really.

HENSON: Probably a good bit.

WEISS: Probably more than I realized! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Would that then go over to Mr. [Paul H.] Oehser's office?

WEISS: I believe so. Let me see... how'd we do that? Yes, I think it went to the editor's office.

HENSON: Yes, I would imagine, at that point. The other thing I want to ask you is what the relationship was of your accession records and your accession numbers to the departmental catalogs. We had talked a little bit about that. In [Department of] Geology they had a catalog. Were those just separate things that each department maintained?

WEISS: They were separate. In the Smithsonian, as long as I was here, each department had its own catalog and cataloger, or someone who would do the cataloging of the specimens. All we had was the permanent accession record. We tried to keep any papers relating to each accession together. Some divisions were particular about recording catalog numbers... accessions memos, I recall, had a place to put catalog numbers. Some divisions would do that, but others didn't. Some of the divisions, I imagine, entomology and paleontology, and others where they had large collections... some of their cataloging went on for years as they studied their collections. I would say that the cataloging was not kept up to date on all accessions, the cataloging numbers, in any way. We had nothing to do with the cataloging. Handling of the collections after they came into the Smithsonian, the cataloging and all that, was done in the divisions.

HENSON: Dr. [G. Arthur] Cooper was showing me the other day the blocks that they brought back from Texas.

WEISS: We had quite a struggle over how to accession those blocks. In the beginning it was really a puzzling question. There was considerable discussion before we could agree. So we decided, and I thought it was best, to just resolve that by accessioning a block, because Dr. Cooper was collecting the material for his acid work at that time. He would bring in unprepared blocks from the field, which he wanted to record as having come in that year. We wanted a record of them, so we worked this out. Dr. Cooper was very good to work with; I think some curators would not have been as conscientious about recording the accessions in the current year.

HENSON: Because then he would accession the block... and five years later he might etch that block and get specimens out that would go up to other divisions, snails and things like that, that wouldn't just be his mollusks.

WEISS: That's right.

HENSON: So it was a complex issue.

WEISS: We had complex collections that came in initially... very often, would result in what we called "complex accessions."

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: We had what we called the "pink slip." The original white accession memo was recorded by the division that brought the material in. Then a pink slip was prepared for any division receiving specimens from the original division... I think that's the way it was. We tried to keep a central record of collections in the year in which they were brought in from the field. I think, to a certain extent, pink slips were used in MHT [Museum of History and Technology], but not as extensively as in [Museum of] Natural History.

HENSON: Yes, because when these curators go out on a field trip, they'll tend to collect... animals and birds and plants, everything.

WEISS: Lots of times, especially if a curator was going into areas that hadn't been visited before, that curators hadn't been able to get into, the curators of other divisions would actually tell them what to look for, or the specimens they wanted in their field of study. That way it really helped the Smithsonian in many ways.

HENSON: Even Dr. [William M.] Mann from the Zoo [National Zoological Park], when he would go on his expeditions, I know he'd bring back fish, and...

WEISS: Yes, of course. He liked to do that, I think.

HENSON: Yes. You'd just see these accessions going all over the place from that one trip, and you'd have to keep track of that. Once objects came in, did your office get involved at all in determining if they needed any conservation work or preservation work, or would that be up to the curators?

WEISS: That was up to the curators, and I think that was one thing that, as time went on, and before I left, we were quite concerned about, especially after the conservation office [Conservation Analytical Laboratory] was established over in MHT. For a long time, in the beginning, there was no conservation office. Then Mr. [R. M.] Organ, I think, was the first conservationist. As time went on, I think everyone realized the importance of conservation and that it really had been neglected. Mr. Organ had so much work to do, even backlog work, I imagine, when he arrived. Everyone became more aware of how important it was to have collections inspected and more work done with regard to conservation. I think in MHT, really... they were more concerned about it probably than Natural History because of the historical collections that they handled.

HENSON: Was your office involved at all, for example, in seeing if things were photographed when they came in, or measured?

WEISS: We hadn't been, but I think toward the end of my term we found that sometimes if collections came in that were opened, or had to be opened... for instance when the customs inspector came to the museum, a shipment had to be inspected by Customs [U.S. Customs Service]. It was felt that there should be some photographing done. The photograph lab also grew during this time. All of those things were in a state of expansion, and as they started doing more of the work in the lab, the photographic lab grew... all of this sort of worked together. It was an excellent idea, and I guess many registrars do inspect and photograph incoming shipments in smaller museums. It seemed to me that it would have been very difficult from my point of view to do this for the overall Smithsonian. I think it would be like an octopus or something... [LAUGHTER] to have all those arms under this one office. To me at least, and I don't know how it's done today, I thought individual bureaus should have this responsibility. That's when it became apparent that we couldn't have one central Office of the Registrar. I realized that, but it was very difficult to establish that fact, at least, while I was here. Finally, as new bureaus came in it was much easier to establish a separate Office of the Registrar in each museum at that time, than it was for the older bureaus. At least that's the way, in retrospect, the way I see it.

HENSON: In 1966, John [F.] Jameson did an audit and review of the Registrar's Office. One of the recommendations that he makes, which I think was different from what I'd seen you write before, was that he doesn't want to see separate registrars' offices in MHT and Natural History. He still wants that central office.

WEISS: He did this? I had forgotten. I do not remember what his feeling was on that after his report. This was the thing that I realized was happening. I felt, I really did, I've said this before... I don't know whether it should go on record but... that as long as I stayed there, and the Registrar's Office was set up the way it was, it was going to be difficult to make a change and in some way, to have independent registrar's offices in the older sections of the Smithsonian. As the new bureaus were established, there seemed to be no problem. Then we were able to also set up small shipping offices, a shipping office in MHT and in the art galleries, the [National] Portrait Gallery, as well as the NCFA [National Collection of Fine Arts], at that time. All this helped.

HENSON: When these new, smaller offices were set up, would you get involved in the planning and giving them advice?

WEISS: In their offices, you mean, or how they handled things? Not particularly. I tried not to. I sometimes helped their registrars. . . .

HENSON: That's what I meant, the registrars.

WEISS: When at the NCFA, the woman [Marjorie S. Zapruder] who came in there... I worked with her and I also helped with the registrar at the Portrait Gallery [Thomas J. Girard]. We got along well worked together. I almost felt like he was in my office sometimes. [LAUGHTER] He was very nice. The one that followed him... I can't remember their names now, but we worked together. The Hirshhorn [Museum]... I really had very little to do with their registrar, except when they first opened.

[Abram] Lerner came over to discuss work in my office. I remember he used to come over quite a bit, because I was here in the A & I [Arts & Industries] Building, and he could watch his Hirshhorn going up. We talked then about organization and everything during that time.

HENSON: Then the Cooper-Hewitt [Museum of Decorative Arts and Design]. . . .

WEISS: Cooper-Hewitt. . . . I did some work with them and I knew some of those people. Mostly they would come here, or we would communicate over phone. Really, I had very little to do with Cooper-Hewitt, I would say.

HENSON: And then Hillwood never actually came under Smithsonian. Did you work on that project at all?

WEISS: What one was that?

HENSON: Hillwood. It was Marjorie Merriweather Post's estate.

WEISS: I worked with Hillwood, specifically with [Marvin Chauncey Ross]... who handled all collections and records and set up this little dacha where they retained and cataloged our collection. I worked at the direction of Mr... was it... [Leonard] Carmichael? Was he the Secretary then?

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: He was very much concerned that I should be involved with these collections, mainly because he wanted to be sure that everything was cataloged and in the name of the Smithsonian. I was therefore quite strict about the recording. We tried to see that everything was cataloged and that catalog numbers... I hope, I think, were recorded into the accessions. The Secretary wanted Mrs. Post's gifts to be properly recorded, and sort of put it in my hands. I worked quite closely with Marvin Ross.

HENSON: Yes, to get it going. Each one of these new units would come up with stuff for you to do?

WEISS: I guess, in a way. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: It just seems that during this period of time, to be expanding like Topsy, to me, if you sort of look at what's going on...

WEISS: I was a notary during the time that Mrs. Merriweather Post's items came in, and I remember going over to the Secretary's office. They had a notary on the south side of the Mall, and I was asked to serve the north side. That is the reason I became a notary. I remember going to the Secretary's office as notary for Mrs. Merriweather Post's donation; she was Mrs. Merriweather Post May at that time, and Mr. [Herbert A.] May was there. I think it was her beautiful necklace. . . . She was dynamic and he was self-effacing.

HENSON: You would have been notarizing the deed of gift for that?

WEISS: The deed of gift. Marvin Ross was very active with her estate and was the one who had the care of her collection... of all the transactions with regard to the transfer of the items that Mrs. Post gave to the Smithsonian.

HENSON: There just wasn't the Hillwood itself... she also donated a lot of American Indian things, I guess.

WEISS: Yes, the tipi and other things. When Frank [M.] Setzler was here at that time, there were two staff members who went up to her place on Long Island [New York]... was it Long Island? No, where was her. . .

HENSON: Adirondacks [Mountains].

WEISS: . . .home place, up there?

HENSON: Yes, it was.

WEISS: . . .And inspected the Indian material and made the selections.

HENSON: Marvin Ross was her curator?

WEISS: Yes, Marvin Ross. He was a congenial person to work with. The things that were up in New York posed a problem of transportation because we had to have them transported by boat from the island... what was her place up there? What was her place called in New York, do you know?

HENSON: Yes, I came across it. . . .

WEISS: You're really. . .

HENSON: Taxing your memory, here, right?

WEISS: . . .taxing my memory to no end! I remember we had quite a time... I didn't think we'd ever complete the arrangements to move those things from her island house over to a point where they could be picked up and trucked down here.

HENSON: Yes, because the curators went up, at one point, to sort of pack it up, right?

WEISS: Yes, there was Frank Setzler and who else... I thought there were three of them. It was one of her weekend parties on her large es[tate]. What was that called... "Top. . . ?" [Camp Topridge]

HENSON: Yes, and I don't actually have it written down, but I can fill that in and insert it. What you were saying, with the notarizing of the deed of gift, raised another question I had asked you, or just mentioned off the tape. Who would you go to for legal advice? Let's say, to look over a deed of gift or something like that, to make sure it was legal, before we had the General Counsel's Office?

WEISS: When we had real problems, like deeds of gifts, that needed to be checked, we turned to the National Gallery [of Art] and their legal advisors there. There really wasn't a legal advisor in the Smithsonian. Can you imagine? I often tried to interpret simple questions, just from the official papers and deeds of gift, because my office had the original documents of all museum collections. When there was a legal problem we would go to the Gallery. Let's see, the historic preservation... what's the... ?

HENSON: National Trust for Historic Preservation?

WEISS: No, the legal... what was the act of preservation of historical items?

HENSON: Of antiquities [The Antiquities Act], right.

WEISS: Antiquities Act, yes. I kept a copy of that at my right hand all the time, and we would consult it to help the staff make decisions [LAUGHTER] without going for legal advice [NOTE: I was not the sole interpreter; decisions resulted, when possible, in consultation with curators and perhaps the Director.]

HENSON: Mr. [E. James] Adams [of the National Gallery] would have been the only...

WEISS: That is right.

HENSON: Yes. Were there a lot of legal questions that would come up?

WEISS: Not a lot, fortunately.

HENSON: . . .too many. . . .

WEISS: Not that many.

HENSON: But then you got into these big things. . . .

WEISS: When we got into... for instance, they wanted to move the Ward Collection. Was that the African sculptures?

HENSON: That's right.

WEISS: I think it was Ward, wasn't it Herbert Ward?

HENSON: Yes, absolutely.

WEISS: How did I dig that out of my memory? [LAUGHTER] There was one exhibition room that was devoted to that collection, and I believe that the deed of gift specified that statues should be maintained on exhibit in one room called the "Ward Room" that was specified. The Museum had adhered to the stipulation all those years. After umpteen years, there had to be change, space-wise, and especially by that time the museum had an exhibits office and had photographic offices. It was not feasible to keep one room for only one collection. Some of the men were beginning to feel, the curators, that it wasn't good policy to do that; the statues could be used more wisely and in a better way in other exhibits. . .

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: . . .in different ways. This was a real legal problem. We consulted the papers, and the Smithsonian took appropriate legal action to separate and move the collection. I think that the number of years that had passed since that gift came into the Smithsonian was finally the deciding point.

HENSON: Would they review, for example, a gift before it came in, you know, if their language was too restrictive with something like that. . . ?

WEISS: I think, yes, I would say that in later years, particularly if there was a stipulation like that... the curators themselves were more careful about accepting things with such restrictions. If it was restrictive, in the way they could handle their collections, I think that they resolved the problems at time of acceptance. Considering all those years without legal advice, we did not have too many problems. It's amazing when I think about it. There were a few others, if I had time to think. . . .

HENSON: Yes, situations like that. Then I guess, in the sixties, Peter [G.] Powers comes in and we set up a legal office.

WEISS: Yes, Mr. Ripley brought him in. I remember when he came over to my office. I don't know whether he thought he was going to find a legal office or what, but Mr. Ripley told him to come over and talk to me, and I'm sure he didn't know just what to expect! [LAUGHTER] It was not a legal office! Anyway, he was very nice, and we got along well.

HENSON: At least, then there was a lawyer on board.

WEISS: That's right, and what a relief for everyone. I guess he has quite an office now.

HENSON: Oh, yes, it's a huge staff now, when you think of none at all then.

WEISS: When he came in, he was it... and then he got an assistant.

HENSON: One of the legal things that you'd have to look at was deaccessioning and condemnation. I was wondering if you remembered how much or how formalized that was, how much your office would have gotten involved in? Let's say we decided there was something we didn't need. . . .

WEISS: All this originated with the curators. They would request it, and usually they would request it through their directors. I would say my office was not involved in it, as far as any decision-making. We were concerned mostly, again, with the accessions, and trying to keep our accession records straight. That would be my recollection.

HENSON: Did much of it go on, or were curators reluctant to get rid of things?

WEISS: I think I would say that, particularly when this was first talked about, that curators were reluctant to get rid of things. Once something was accessioned... I think we all grew up with the idea that, when the Smithsonian accessioned a collection or a specimen... it belonged to the Smithsonian, and that we had a responsibility to the donor to keep it in the Smithsonian. That was what I would say had been the policy, through most of the years that I was here. As time went on, and as museum collections continued to grow, and lack of space continued to grow, we did not have space for collections. [LAUGHTER] Curators probably became more aware of the fact that they had things that they could get rid of.

The natural history people could take care of that, in a way, when they made up school collections. Some of their collections that would contain, actually, excess material that had come into the collections as a result of their field work, or had big collections that might contain different species of natural history specimens... maybe not for just one division or department. Some of the curators were very much interested in making up school collections. That was in process when I first went into that office. I think [Harald A.] Rehder was one who often used excess seashells that way, and there were several curators who also made them... I thought that was an appropriate public service, because I felt strongly that the Smithsonian had an obligation to serve the public, and that was one way. Particularly out through the rural country, before the era of good transportation and when schoolchildren could not visit other areas as easily as they do now with school buses; this gave them considerable study material. We could tell that from the acknowledgements received. This was one way the Smithsonian could help schoolchildren and also dispose of excess duplicate materials.

HENSON: Yes, there seemed to be, for a while, quite a business in them.... In 1952, the [Smithsonian] Traveling Exhibition Service was established.

WEISS: 1952, was that it?

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: I wouldn't have remembered the date.

HENSON: It seemed to be quite a going business, fairly early on. That would entail, I guess, a good bit of shipping and insurance and things like that. So did your office get involved working with them at all?

WEISS: We got involved to a limited extent, I would say. Usually, they would make arrangements for their shipping insurance and all that. We got involved primarily with collections that came in from other countries, and there, again, it was customs work. If they needed help in any way, we could help. Otherwise, we more or less depended on them to take care of themselves. There was one shipment, I recall, where there was a little difficulty, and the Secretary called me over with the director of the Traveling Exhibition Service and stated that anything any collection or exhibit that came in from any foreign country must be entered through us. Our office had to take care of the customs work because of our contract with the U.S. Despatch Agents in New York and California. And so we did. After that, there was no problem. There was no question of entry into the country. But otherwise, the actual shipping, we had very little to do with that... unless they had a problem and wanted us to work with them.

HENSON: It would have been, yes, art. And, I guess it was originally Mrs. [Annamarie] Pope?

WEISS: Yes, Annamarie Pope.

HENSON: Annamarie Pope, and then, Dorothy Van Arsdale. . .

WEISS: Right.

HENSON: . . .after that. So it would have been primarily... that makes sense... shipping things from foreign countries. Sometimes things from the Smithsonian would then go out on loan with those exhibits?

WEISS: Yes.

HENSON: You'd have to handle these arrangements.

WEISS: Yes.



Helena Weiss (center) with the U.S. Navy's Martin KDM-1 Exhibit, c. 1949-1950s.
Image Number: SIA2018-108350

[BEGIN REEL II]

HENSON: In 1953, Dr. Carmichael came aboard as Secretary. Dr. [Alexander] Wetmore finally retired. I wondered if you remembered him very much, and what he was like to work with. Was it much different than Dr. Wetmore, or similar?

WEISS: Being different, I don't know. He had a different personality and was a different person. As far as I was concerned, Dr. Carmichael was a very fine person to work with and we got along very well. I don't know whether I can think of anything special about Dr. Carmichael. He was an intellectual and more formal person to work with, and I like Mrs. [Pearl Kidston] Carmichael. I can't remember that I ever had any particular problems when working with Dr. Carmichael.

HENSON: Would you have much contact with him? He was less a museum-and-specimen person, but he seemed to be very interested in the museums.

WEISS: He was. His interest in museums grew after he came to the Smithsonian. As you know, he came from Tufts University and held scholarly-type positions. I'm sure he knew the Smithsonian when he came here, otherwise he would not have been able to become a part of it as well as he did. I think he made an effort to get acquainted with the staff, to work with the staff, and to understand the Smithsonian to the point that he became a strong supporter of museum activities. I really was quite fond of Dr. Carmichael. He was a very fair person and a pleasant one to work with. I probably didn't work closely with him, but he included me in staff meetings and consulted me on matters concerned with my office. I visited in their home and I still hear from Mrs. Carmichael.

HENSON: Mrs. [Louise M.] Pearson continued to work for him, right?

WEISS: Yes, they got along very well. I think, probably she helped him a great deal, because she had the background and the long-term experience with all of the staff of the Smithsonian. I know that she had the respect of the professional staff of the Smithsonian. I'm sure she was a big help to him, because I know he was very fond of Louise Pearson. I wish you could have met her and talked with her. It would have been an experience because she was a remarkable person, I think. We were very good friends, and she could have helped you with interesting information on this program.

HENSON: Would Dr. Wetmore or Dr. Carmichael have senior staff meetings you would go to? Under what kinds of circumstances would you have contact?

WEISS: I know Carmichael did have meetings. He started early. I guess it was one way of becoming acquainted with the museum; and I went to those meetings at his request. It was interesting and informative, and I think it was his way of being indoctrinated into the inner workings of the Smithsonian, which I think is important for the Secretary. It seems to me it would be, especially from my knowledge of the early days, when the Smithsonian was smaller. Maybe that's impossible today, I don't know. It probably is. But I'm glad I had the opportunity to work at the time when it wasn't. [LAUGHTER] I remember the staff meeting when Dr. Carmichael quoted the estimated numbers of specimens in the collections. He looked at me and said, "And Miss Weiss can tell you where to find each of them." I think he really believed that!

HENSON: I know curators talk about their job interviews with Dr. Carmichael. He apparently would interview all the job candidates for curatorial positions. And it was sort of like a Ph.D. exam; that's how they all referred it to. Would he have taken any interest in, for example, who you were hiring in the Registrar's Office?

WEISS: I don't think so, no. I think it would be on a higher level than my office.

HENSON: Just the scholarly-type positions. One other thing around... in the late forties or mid-fifties, I had mentioned something called the Hoover Commission on the Reorganization of the Federal Government, which met. The second commission especially had an emphasis on disposition of records, including limits on file cabinets. I wondered if you recalled that, and if it affected your office any.

WEISS: I think it did. What year was that?

HENSON: 1955.

WEISS: 1955?

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: I'm sure I was very much involved in that. I'd have to go back in my mind to remember exactly what stage we were in, but I was always involved in trying to keep not only enough file cases, but try[ing] to modernize our files as much as possible. . .

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: . . .modernize them and, at that time, I think we had a ban on getting file cases, and it was really a struggle.

HENSON: Yes, your basic working tool.

WEISS: That's right.

HENSON: What do you do when. . . ?

WEISS: When you're involved in something of that kind, it's hard to understand why everybody cannot realize the hardship. I think some agencies wouldn't have had as much of a problem, but the Smithsonian had always been rather economical [LAUGHTER] as far as the tools to work with were concerned. I think that's the way I would express it. File cases were low priority because we had our professional staff requirements. An office like the Office of the Registrar that really is down, way at the foot of the [LAUGHTER]. . .

HENSON: . . .totem pole, yes. End of the line... in the budget.

WEISS: End of the line, that's good. . . . Yes, down at the bottom. Anyway, there would always be some curator or a staff member who really were understanding of that. I think that probably Mr. [John L.] Keddy helped me as much as anybody at that time. He made it his business to survey all service offices and bring them up to date on procedures as well as supplies. This may have been the reason some of the problems arose with professional staff too.

HENSON: Yes. This is a slightly different topic, but in 1965, I remember... I wondered if you remembered this, there was a fire in the Zuni hall, in Natural History [Building].

WEISS: In Natural History?

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: What hall was it?

HENSON: The Zuni hall where the kachina dolls were burned up.

WEISS: I don't know that I remember that.

HENSON: Yes. There were just some very rare... these Hopi dolls, religious dolls.

WEISS: Yes.

HENSON: I was wondering, for insurance, or for just the records of the objects, if your office would have gotten involved in that at all.

WEISS: I think we probably should have, if we didn't, as far as accession records are concerned. I'm sorry I have no recollection of that.

HENSON: Yes, specifically.... unusual occurrence for us, at Smithsonian, to lose objects. It hasn't happened very often. I noticed also during these years there seemed to be more outside visitors coming to your office, just to figure out how to run a registrar's office, that sort of thing. One year in the annual report, there was sort of a whole list of foreign visitors who were coming. Did a lot of that go on?

WEISS: There was probably a period when it did. Again, I would have to refresh my memory somewhat. I know we always had people from other countries that would more or less pass through our office if they needed help in that area.

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: We helped out just as a routine thing. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Yes. One year, this is 1969, it says, "Among the visitors have been Dr. Sampurno Kadarsan, from the Bogor Museum in Indonesia, Dr. P. H. D. H. deSilva, who was director of the National Museums in Colombo, Ceylon; Mr. A. G. K. Menon, from Calcutta, India; Mr. Wayne Davis from the University of British Columbia [Canada]; and Mr. Martin Murphy from the University of New Mexico." And they were probably all coming in to learn about how you do. . .

WEISS: . . .recording procedures?

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: They would. I don't know how much we helped them. You wonder what we could give them and show them. We would do what we could for people who came in. I often wondered how helpful it would be back in their country... whether they really learned anything from our office. I don't know.

HENSON: It probably gave them some idea of the minimum information that you need.

WEISS: Probably. I think some of them didn't quite comprehend, and maybe, some of them hadn't been involved in recordkeeping. I have no clear recollection of those you mention specifically.

HENSON: Did you work at all, because I know they were located in the Castle for a while, with the American Association of Museums?

WEISS: No, I don't think we worked with them, as I recall.

HENSON: I noticed, in 1967, now, they published that book *Museum Registration Methods* by Dorothy [H.] Dudley...¹³

WEISS: Dorothy Dudley.

HENSON: ...and Irma Bezold [Wilkinson].

WEISS: Yes.

¹³ Dorothy H. Dudley and Irma Bezold, *Museum Registration Methods* (Washington: American Association of Museums in association with the Smithsonian Institution, 1958).

HENSON: That was published jointly by the AAM and the SI. Is that something you would have worked with at all, or looked at?

WEISS: I remember Dorothy Dudley working on that and I remember talking with her, and giving some advice. I think she touched base with registrars almost every place. I can't say that I worked closely or had any input of consequence. I really don't think I did. I know the book; I was sent a copy after it came out.

Dr. [Herbert] Friedmann went out to Los Angeles [California] as Director of the L.A. Art Museum [Los Angeles County Museum of Science, History, and Art]. They set up a panel at one of the meetings of the American Association of Museums, and he invited me to come and be a part of that panel. Dorothy Dudley was on it. I refused. I had too much to do... I couldn't see myself. . . . I think, looking back, in retrospect, I should have taken advantage of some of those opportunities, and it might have helped me. It might have broadened me a little more in my work. But I was barely able to keep things going here with the staff I had, and I felt I couldn't take on something like that.

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: It would have been very interesting, in a way, I wish I had, because I think I might have made a contribution, and it certainly would have been helpful for me. Also, I suppose the Smithsonian should have been represented.

HENSON: Yes. The way things are growing, we mentioned 1966, John Jameson did a little audit. One of the other recommendations that he made was that there would be established a separate mail room and shipping unit for each museum. I don't see any change, at least while you were here, in the mail room, at all.

WEISS: There was no change.

HENSON: The only change that I see, and maybe you could talk about how you would have dealt with that, is that every year, it seemed like the mail got delivered to yet another new museum. Barney [Studio] House, the Anacostia [Neighborhood] Museum, the Renwick [Gallery], the Pension Building... you just kept adding the units that you were doing service from underneath the Registrar's Office. How did your office cope with that?

WEISS: We had problems all along the way. You know, mail is a very touchy. . . .

HENSON: Yes, it's crucial.

WEISS: Any offices. . . . Yes, personally [LAUGHTER] any infraction, as far as mail's concerned. . . . Mail was the thorn in my side. [LAUGHTER] Do you know how mail happened to be put under my office? Up to that time... now, I'm talking about the mail that came into the museums, say, in the beginning, the U.S. National Museum, which would have been Natural History and NCFA [National Collection of Fine Arts], not NCFA. . .

HENSON: . . .and MHT [Museum of History and Technology].

WEISS: Yes, NCFA, because NCFA was in the Natural History building, and MHT, this building [Arts and Industries Building]. That mail always was delivered at our shipping entrance in NHB. But the Smithsonian mail that was addressed just "Smithsonian," or some of the other bureaus, was handled... and the mail carriers were controlled from the Secretary's Office. And this was under Louise Pearson... when she first came over to the Secretary's Office, she was the one in charge of the mail service, and trying to supervise the mail carriers. In my office, I always had two mail carriers, I believe it was, and then I used to distribute the mail for the buildings that I was responsible for. But I did not have the whole mail service, and so Louise Pearson wanted it changed. I couldn't believe that the mail was under the Secretary's Office, in the first place. I hadn't paid much attention to where it was. [LAUGHTER]

But anyway, when it came time to move it, I guess they had quite a conference on what to do with the mail and where to place it. I was not consulted at that point. So, what do you think they would do with it? Just put it under the Office of the Registrar! They informed me this was a decision. They were in a quandary. Weak Helena decided, "Okay, I'll take it." We intended to set up a mail room over there. That caused a furor because there was no space for it. We had to try to take space from somebody else to set up a mail room there, or try to increase space in Natural History. Where did we take it in the first place? We took space from our poor shipping office, that didn't have much space anyway. It took a long time before we finally got the separate mail room by taking some space from what was then the Supply Office in the Natural History Building. We got a fairly good space there. That's part of the story of the mail room and the mail service under our office. Once it was established there, we were responsible for getting the mail moved, and for hiring the additional mail carriers and equipment.

Another thing that came in in the middle of that... the White House, I don't know whether they do now, but they had a policy when needing help there, they asked some of the government agencies to provide help. Do you know about that? Maybe they don't do that anymore... I imagine they can get their own help. They would "borrow" from government agencies. From the Smithsonian they pulled, at two different times, my top mail carriers. One of the mail carriers selected had been one of the best. It was supposed to be a temporary thing... they went over to help, and they were to come back. Most of the time... well, sometimes, they came back. But there were two occasions when they didn't. Actually, they could do better over there. Our grades at Smithsonian were not as high as they might have been.

But anyway, we had to arrange to have the mail taken from one building, from our building. The mail came in at the west platform at the Natural History Building; that was our main mail entrance. Finally, before I left, we set up one over in MHT. That was hard too, because, again, space... nobody wanted to give up any space. They were very anxious to have the mail come in over there; it just wasn't getting to them fast enough. They wanted the mail to be delivered there, but they did not want to release some space to set up a mail room. But we finally got that straightened out. We got a little tiny space. [LAUGHTER] Before I retired we were able to assign a mail employee to the Museum of American Arts and the Portrait Gallery for delivery service, but the P.O. delivery still came to the NHB.

HENSON: The other thing was, during these years, the Smithsonian [Resident] Associates are established, Resident Associates, and the magazine [*Smithsonian*]. Apparently, those two functions seemed to generate huge amounts of mail that your office then had to handle. Do you recall that?

WEISS: I know, the magazine and all of that... that was over here in this building.

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: Mr... what was his...

HENSON: [Edward] Thompson?

WEISS: Yes. We just had to take care of it the best we could. I think [Michael] Mike Collins in [National] Air and Space [Museum] had a period of time that he was unhappy. His mail didn't reach him as fast as it should. It was very difficult to get mail delivered immediately as it came in. And another thing, we had times, which I'm sure still happens, the mail did not arrive in our mail room from the post office on time. In the meantime, I had to attend several meetings at the main Post Office when they were changing procedures and setting up different ways of handling mail. Then when they first started to work on establishing zip codes and automated sorting, I attended those meetings at the Post Office. [LAUGHTER] I don't know how I did that!

HENSON: That's a huge amount of time!

WEISS: It took time. It worked! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Yes, got it done, right? I just thought it was humorous that on one hand, it's sort of recommended that it go out from under the registrar, but then it just seems to be getting bigger and bigger and bigger in your office every year instead of going away anywhere.

WEISS: Yes. It really needed to be separate. And John Jameson recommended that it should be a separate unit.

HENSON: Yes, shipping should be separate, and mail should be separate, and they should have separate units for those.

WEISS: Is it now?

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: I hope!

HENSON: Finally, and at long last, it went through, but yes.

WEISS: What does it come under in the Smithsonian?

HENSON: I think under John Jameson now, Assistant Secretary for Administration.

WEISS: Really?

HENSON: Yes. Facilities Services, I think both of them would come under now. A little bit different. You seemed to get a little more space, or maybe you didn't actually, in 1969, because the Office of the Registrar moved over to this building. Did that help with your space crunch any, when you moved from Natural History to A & I?

WEISS: You mean, did we have more space here?

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: No. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: No. No? Oh, dear!

WEISS: Although, I will say that they worked... I don't know what the office was called, the one that worked over here in the building. We drew up our own plan for the office, within the limitations of this building. However, previously, I had been able to get an extra room over in Natural History, which gave me more space for my accessions. I had, at that time, moved the accession records into a separate, more secure room that I felt was protective. And when we moved over here, we did not have that much space. I think we got [on] remarkably well. I didn't think we'd ever be able to make that move. You probably know how it is when you're moving archives, what it would be like to move the whole archives. I thought, "We'll never be able to do it," but we did. By following our plan, they did very well in giving us space and working with us to make our offices as nice and comfortable as they could, although the accessions again became part of the general office.

HENSON: Maximizing what little space. . .

WEISS: That's right.

HENSON: . . .you did have. Yes, because I was wondering if that had given you more space, but I guess. . . .

WEISS: No.

HENSON: Whose office was next to you then, in this building?

WEISS: Michael Collins, Air and Space.

HENSON: Right.

WEISS: I guess he was the first director of Air and Space, I think. Wasn't he?
They'd had the Air Museum before that, but I think that [S. Paul] Johnston preceded him.

HENSON: Yes, Paul Johnston preceded Collins.

WEISS: Paul Johnston. I saw him, not too long ago. He was the first director, and I had worked with him mostly on transportation and some travel.

HENSON: Right, right. For a period of time Frank [A.] Taylor was acting director, before they got Johnston. But Collins was the one, I guess, that it really got built and planned under.

WEISS: Yes, he was the one that was here during the building and planning that new building, and we were involved with them early on mail delivery.

HENSON: Did it change your relation any to the museum staff, to be actually out of the Natural History Building, did you feel?

WEISS: Of our staff and the Natural History and other staff? I don't know, I don't think so.

HENSON: No?

WEISS: If it did, I probably wasn't aware of it. I probably didn't have time to think about it. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: 'Tis true, but you didn't feel, sort of more isolated?

WEISS: No, I was happy, really perhaps because of a little isolation! I got so I liked my office pretty well, even though we were kind of all squeezed up together!
[LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Yes. In 1970, your office had to oversee the transfer of 47,000 pounds of records from the Archives of American Art, from Detroit [Michigan] to Washington. I wondered if you recall that shipment any.

WEISS: I recall. I can't recall who it was I worked with on that though.

HENSON: Sounds like it would have been a big job.

WEISS: It was a big job.

HENSON: [M.] Garnett McCoy worked there.

WEISS: McCoy. McCoy, I think he was the one who was my contact there.

HENSON: Yes, and [William E.] Bill Woolfenden was the head of it.

WEISS: Yes, yes, Woolfenden, and McCoy, I think, and then there was someone else there, later on.

HENSON: Then the archivists. . . .

WEISS: They were most agreeable to work with, but the Smithsonian and all of this was an entirely new experience for them. I think that they felt that they were coming here and things weren't ideal space-wise, or anything else for them, either.
[LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: Everybody has the same problem! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Yes, absolutely!

WEISS: That was a tremendous thing though. I couldn't believe that they were bringing in all those records and everything. But it worked, I guess.

HENSON: But it would have been just a huge amount of work, wouldn't it? Just to keep track of that much being shipped?

WEISS: [LAUGHTER] That part of it was more their problem than it was mine, thank goodness! It was a big job to arrange transportation and delivery. Mr. McCoy was an easy and well-organized person to work with. He took care of record keeping in Detroit and also helped in receiving it here.

HENSON: Also, in 1970, up on Capitol Hill, we had something called the Thompson Committee Hearings, which was sort of a general review by Congress of the Smithsonian programs. They looked at some of the problems in terms of collections management, care of the objects, and the building of the Hirshhorn. I wondered if your office played any specific role in preparing for those hearings, or responding for questions, or anything?

WEISS: I can't recall any specific role that we played. We probably provided information that was required, but not in really making up anything that would be submitted. I don't recall that we did.

HENSON: Seemed to keep the administration of the Smithsonian busy, at least for a while.

WEISS: Yes.

HENSON: Really dominating. . . .

WEISS: Yes, I know... anytime Congress calls Smithsonian, everybody gets busy. I'm sure that we had to provide information, but I don't think I was personally involved that much, thank goodness!

HENSON: Earlier, in 1966, I noticed that we began sending collecting equipment-kits to people involved in the Peace Corps. I wondered if you recalled that one at all?

WEISS: What did we send? I don't. . . .

HENSON: I guess it would have been standard, sort of, scientific collecting kits... gear... out to some of the Peace Corps volunteers.

WEISS: You know, I don't remember that. It could be that the curators and the supply divisions who were more involved with the Peace Corps handled it, and the Peace Corps itself took care of actual shipping. That I do not recall.

HENSON: Were you involved at all with anything for the exhibits modernization program that went on in the 1950s and early 1960s?

WEISS: The exhibits people were always coming to us. We all sort of worked together in anything that was required. But I didn't have any direct involvement in the modernization program, except in the consultation of our records.

HENSON: It seemed at least, to have changed the look of things around here, a bit.

WEISS: Yes, yes.

HENSON: Breath of fresh air.

WEISS: That's right. I think all museums can change now more readily than they could in the beginning when this first started, because exhibits had been planned by curators working directly with designers and contractors. Curators had certain ideas of handling collections and exhibits, doing exhibit work, so that it was harder to make that transition into the new. It's probably easier now, because I know they change more frequently. When they set up the exhibits office... that was an entirely new procedure. [John E.] Jack Anglim was the one who worked in that. I used to work with Jack Anglim every now and then. He was a very nice person, and he had his office over in Natural History at the time I did.

HENSON: That's right, yes. That was very new, to have a professional exhibits staff and. . . .

WEISS: Yes! The museum had never had anything like that. The curators, you know, they want things, and they want to be relieved of the responsibility of some things, but when it involves their collections, then they must have some control of them, and this is where you can have problems. I imagine that's worked out now, but in the beginning, that was more difficult. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: I think that's one of those issues that never changes.

WEISS: Doesn't it? [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: I can see... I can understand both sides. Jack Anglim got along pretty well with the curators. He had worked here before and he knew them. I think he worked in anthropology, if I'm not mistaken, before he took the exhibits position. And so he did know the museum and he knew the professional staff and how they felt about things, so he could work with them.

HENSON: Would your office keep track of what objects were actually out on an exhibition?

WEISS: What went on in an exhibition? No, we did not.

HENSON: But then you might be, let's say, bringing objects in from outside?

WEISS: Yes, if it was something like that.

HENSON: Yes, and I guess for special exhibitions, if things were coming in. . . .

WEISS: Special exhibitions, yes. Particularly anything that came in from foreign countries, and the customs work, or requiring special handling.

HENSON: Do you remember the Dead Sea Scrolls?

WEISS: Yes, I certainly do.

HENSON: Did you have to work on those?

WEISS: Yes, I remember that. Gus [Willard] Van Beek was the one responsible for it.

HENSON: That seemed like that was a big deal.

WEISS: It was. That was really something.

[END OF INTERVIEW]