

Eighth Oral History Interview

with

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

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Interviewer

for the Smithsonian Institution Archives

HENSON: I thought we would pick up with whether you recalled, in 1969, the establishment of Radio Smithsonian, because that was something new for us. I guess we had previously had "The World is Yours" during the Depression, but then hadn't had a radio program since then. I was wondering if you recalled it, and what effect that might have had in terms of more mail for public inquiry and that sort of thing?

WEISS: From that standpoint... I was trying to think whether we were involved. I was not actually involved, as far as the programs were concerned. But the effect on the Smithsonian, I think it definitely had an effect in the reaction that the public had to the programs. I really have always felt that the Smithsonian was pretty well-known throughout the country, more than they realized often. I think that having this brought in, like that, into their own living room, so to speak, with radio. . . . Also, if I am right, and I'm not sure if my recollection is right, our staff members were brought into those early radio programs. I think it was probably interviewing staff, if I'm not mistaken, and trying to bring out the activities of the Smithsonian, and the broad area that the Smithsonian covered in its work. Of course, our curators always wanted to tell their research and what they were doing with the collections.

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: The mail that came in was mail that the curators were interested in, learning the reaction of the public to this.

HENSON: I can see that, yes, after they did a program.

WEISS: As far as having any direct input, or anything to do with the programs, we had nothing to do with that; as a result, again, of receiving increased mail.

[LAUGHTER] I don't know that I remember clearly, I wouldn't be surprised if the program also may have brought in some materials for identification, too, depending on the subject, because the public reacted to things like that.

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: The curators would be interested in identifying such material because of the fact that it was a result of their programs.

HENSON: Yes, like the programs on meteorites. . . .

WEISS: Yes. Meteorites... usually, when the farmers got out in the fields, or they began roaming the woods or places like that, then we would receive these little bits of things that they thought were meteorites.

HENSON: Two years earlier than that, there had been a new television program on NBC [National Broadcasting Company], about the Smithsonian. I wondered if you recalled that one at all, when that first got started. That was really an innovation.

WEISS: I think about the only thing that I remember about that is the fact that I knew that the television program started, and at the time we wondered how it would be handled. I, personally, was always concerned that the Smithsonian would be portrayed appropriately, that it was a great learning institution, and for the public. Again, the only reaction on our office would have been perhaps through mail and that sort of thing.

HENSON: I saw in one of the annual reports that they were talking about the letters that came in afterwards. One was that they liked the meteorite show on TV best.

WEISS: Really?

HENSON: Apparently, there would be a lot more interest in. . . .

WEISS: It's interesting, I think, all through, as long as I was there, meteorites seemed to be a popular interest to the public, which kind of surprised me, because I hadn't thought that much about meteorites myself. Often specimens would be received, which most of the time were odd pieces of rock, and things like that, you know. [LAUGHTER] Our staff was interested in seeing *everything*, because they always hoped that they would find something very valuable through public interest.

HENSON: Yes. That would have been Ed[ward P.] Henderson.

WEISS: Ed Henderson, that's right. And then later... who followed him?

HENSON: Is that Roy [S.] Clarke [Jr.]?

WEISS: Roy Clarke, right. Roy Clarke was there when I left, but Ed Henderson was the big man in the meteorite program, and he really did a great job in working with the meteorite collection.

HENSON: Would the curators vary at how much public interest contact they wanted?

WEISS: Yes. Some curators, this is true in the mail, we referred questions through correspondence to them, as well as specimens and the inquiries that came in. Some curators loved them. They would spend a great deal of time, and really give... especially for young people and children, I noticed. They would tell me that they really liked that contact. I know it crossed my mind at one time that maybe we should have someone in charge of the replies to schoolchildren's letters and see that they have a good, thoughtful reply that they could understand. Some curators were inclined to brush this task off because they were involved and interested in their own work and their own subject, and this was a little bit too frivolous, and time-consuming maybe, [LAUGHTER] in a way.

HENSON: . . .for them to do. I noticed it also said in one of the annual reports that there seemed to be a lot more questions now about ecology.

WEISS: Yes.

HENSON: I don't know if you recall that. I guess that in the sixties, that was becoming something of greater interest.

WEISS: Yes. I don't think I know anything specific on that, but I believe that any time a subject like that suddenly reached the public, and they're inspired with it, it always interested me how they would find the Smithsonian. This was the place that they came to as the "fount of all knowledge," I always said. [LAUGHTER] If we couldn't answer, at least we would try to give them a source for their information.

HENSON: Where else they could find it... I have here statistics... I could pull them out... of how rapidly the public service inquiry was growing.

WEISS: Oh?

HENSON: I wondered, how in the world you ever kept up with the growth rate for it. Let me see if I could reconstruct these.

WEISS: I'm going to get my glasses. I think I left them in here. I'm always dropping them. [RECORDER TURNED OFF]

HENSON: I found these figures. It said for public inquiry letters, in 1955, you got 16,355, and by 1970, which was just fifteen years later, you had 70,200.

WEISS: Unbelievable, isn't it [LAUGHTER], looking back? Undoubtedly, the radio and television contributed to that.

HENSON: How did you get that many letters in and out from your office in a year?

WEISS: It meant first receiving them in the mail and having the proper distribution, as well as replying to routine inquiries as usual. And then the general inquiries, those that were addressed to the Smithsonian, to the [United States] National Museum or other museum, all were delivered to our office. I don't think our staff increased that much. I'm astounded hearing those figures now. [LAUGHTER] How did we handle that? Somehow we were able to keep it going.

I know one thing that happened along the way. When Dr. [John L.] Keddy came in, he made his own little personal survey, I think, of mail and whatnot. And he felt that we were spending maybe too much time on some of the little nitty-gritty inquiries that should not require that much time, and also the repetitive questions that we answered within our office with our small staff. He was the one who started, wanted us to use form letters. Maybe I've mentioned this before, I don't know.

HENSON: Yes, I think we did. . . .

WEISS: So he started this on many of the subjects, and they were questions that came up, continually. This was one way that we could speed up handling them.

HENSON: Then they wouldn't have to go out to the curator and back again. You could just. . .

WEISS: That's right.

HENSON: . . .get it right out.

WEISS: While I was personally opposed to the use of form letters, a large volume could have been handled that way. I think that was one answer, otherwise, I don't know. We just did our best to keep abreast, I think. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: The other thing was in the mail service... in 1957 you processed 545,700 pieces of mail, and in 1970, over two million. That was four times as much.

WEISS: Our little mail office... really, it was miniature mail office of the Smithsonian, I was able to get increases, as this happened, as mail was increasing. Mail is a very personal thing to all the curators and to all the staff; they have to have their mail. Fortunately, I was able to increase the mail staff, sometimes a little more easily than I could the clerical staff within my own office. While we did not have a large staff, when I think of that, we had our problems that I think the Post Office [United States Postal Service] has today from the service we get! [LAUGHTER] Keeping staff and keeping them on the job. I was fortunate in getting a good core of mail people that we could usually depend on. I had staff that would rally around and help us out.

HENSON: I noticed one time there was a job freeze on, and you wrote to [Leonard B.] Len Pouliot to have the mail excepted from the freeze. I guess that would be something that you wouldn't freeze because it was so crucial.

WEISS: I don't remember that we had a freeze. We did have, as I say, the problem that they were low grade jobs, as you know, and it was difficult to keep people, and especially to keep people we could depend on. They could probably move along, particularly at that time, since the Post Office was expanding. Also, the Post Office was increasing its salaries, and at pretty good rate for a while. They still are. This was very attractive to the mail carriers that we were able to break into handling mail. Very often, the best men would leave for the Post Office. . .

HENSON: Would go to the Post Office...

WEISS: . . .because they could get better jobs and they could move up. They had a better opportunity for moving on. I'd have to be frank: we didn't have that large an operation to move people along, increase their salaries and move them up in grade and so forth, so we lost them.

I think that this was one of the frustrating things toward the end of my time there. The volume was getting too much, and I wasn't able to get the help from the people there. We needed to separate it, more or less as it is now, and that is to the various branches or bureaus of the Smithsonian and have them handle their own, within their own organization. Really, when you think about it, to try to handle it from one little mail room was more than they could handle. We did though, I think. I've come to think about it, in the galleries, when the NCFA [National Collection of Fine Art] was moved from Natural History and the [National] Portrait Gallery started, we set up our first separate mail room over in that building. I guess we also finally got one at MHT [Museum of History and Technology], but this took a long time. Otherwise, all mail was distributed from our mail room in Natural History.

HENSON: For example, in that period of time, would paychecks have been mailed through the mail?

WEISS: Yes.

HENSON: Because that always seems to be one of the crucial issues, when somehow or other the paychecks got lost in the mail room.

WEISS: Yes, right.

HENSON: And that would land in your lap?

WEISS: I remember a few cases like that. When I first went to the Smithsonian, everybody went to the fiscal division... I don't think it was called that... to the treasurer's office, or whatever, and picked up their checks. Do you know about that?

[LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Would you be paid in cash or checks?

WEISS: That was very, very early. I wouldn't be surprised, and I don't know whether I can remember that for sure, but I kind of think we were paid in cash.

HENSON: Definitely when the Dorseys [Harry W. and Nicholas W.] were there.

WEISS: Yes, that's right. Then we finally could pick up our checks. We used to go across the Mall. I was in Natural History Building then, maybe working in anthropology or geology, probably geology, and we had to go across the Mall to pick up our checks.

HENSON: Would you have to pick it up personally, or could you pick up other people's checks?

HENSON: We were supposed to pick them up personally but actually, it was sort of one big happy family. Everybody knew everybody else, and we could usually have somebody pick up our checks.

HENSON: For you.

WEISS: And Ed[gar L.] Roy, and most of those who distributed the checks knew everybody.

HENSON: So they knew. . . .

WEISS: So they knew everyone. But then they finally sent a clerk with the checks over to the library in Natural History and we could go there, which meant that we didn't have to go outside the building. At that time, we didn't have all the other bureaus spread around, so that it wasn't. . .

HENSON: ...as difficult. Did you get paid every two weeks, do you remember?

WEISS: I don't remember that. Was it every two weeks?

HENSON: I don't know, I have no idea.

WEISS: I have an idea it may have been, in the beginning, but I'm not sure about that.

HENSON: It's every two weeks now, I just don't know. . . . I wondered if, given your duties with the mail room, if you got involved at all in setting up that little post office in MHT?

WEISS: In MHT? I didn't get involved in setting it up. When we brought it in, we helped make arrangements to have it transported. It's from West Virginia I think, wasn't it? West Virginia? The curator there [Carl H. Scheele]... anyway, he found this very early post office and wanted to move it, so it was a matter of arranging transportation for it. But I can't think of the person... there was someone on the staff over there that was skilled in disassembling and assembling buildings.

HENSON: There was someone named George [H.] Watson.

WEISS: Maybe it was George. . .

HENSON: Not the bird man [George E. Watson, III]. There were two George Watsons.

WEISS: . . . Watson... was his name George? I guess, I think he was the one.

HENSON: Yes, and then there was also [C.] Malcolm Watkins.

WEISS: No, Malcolm... he was. . . .

HENSON: Also [Richard E.] Dick Ahlborn, who was doing some of that.

WEISS: Yes. Ahlborn, at that time, was more involved with the Division of Ceramics and Glass, I think.

HENSON: That's right, that far back he was. Yes.

WEISS: Wasn't that right? I think later, he may have branched out more.

HENSON: Yes, he's now in [Division of] Community Life.

WEISS: Is he? That's what I had heard. But at that time he worked with Paul [V.] Gardner. He came in as an assistant to Paul Gardner. Anyway, that was the only way that we got involved at all with the little old post office. But as far as setting it up and everything, that was handled with the staff of MHT.

HENSON: When it actually became a post office.

WEISS:        When Mrs. [Arthur M.] Greenwood's house... and I don't know what it is called, but it came in. . . . Mrs. Greenwood... that was about the first one I remember. That was before MHT was built, and it was brought into Natural History [Building] where Malcolm Watkins, Curator of History, was located. Again, arrangements were made to have all pieces marked before transporting, up at that end. I believe it came from a town in Massachusetts and brought to Natural History. Of course they wanted to set it up immediately, and so it was assembled on the second floor, I believe, in the Natural History Building, in the West Wing. The parts had to be brought up through the windows, I remember. That was quite a job, of getting [LAUGHTER] all these... because it was in bits and pieces! Everything marked... it had to be handled very, very carefully to get it up there, and then, of course, space had to be arranged to set it up. It was quite an interesting event for natural history!

HENSON:      Was it in the courts or actually in the building?

WEISS:        No, in the building. At that time, the courts were not used. The courts were open courts, and they were used for storage. I guess you knew about that.

HENSON:      Yes, well, I know they had the taxidermists there for a while, then they had the acid room.

WEISS:        All of that followed. . . . In the beginning, they were open courts, and they stored things there. They had an old boat, or... what was it?

HENSON:      I've seen, yes, it was like a huge canoe. . . .

WEISS:        It was anthropology. It was huge... what was that?

HENSON: Yes. . . .

WEISS: I can almost see it, but I cannot name it. Well, that was out, that was the only place. . . .

HENSON: And some of the building stones... didn't they have. . . ?

WEISS: That's right, that's right.

HENSON: I know exactly which picture you're talking about! [LAUGHTER] I can see that.

WEISS: That's right. That gradually developed along the way, and then, as you say, it. . . . This house was put up on the... second floor because that was exhibits, the second floor of the West Wing. They were brought up through the windows and it was assembled there. I can't remember how long it took or anything, but I could tell you a little side story. I don't know if it's a good. . . .

HENSON: Sure.

WEISS: I came in one day from lunch and the house had been assembled, and we were all thrilled over it. And I came in from lunch, and down the hall from my office was the Division of Insects, at that time it was a Division of Insects. Ed[ward A.] Chapin was the curator, and he appeared at my office. He was all flushed and excited, and he said, "You know what happened?" Actually, the elevator man, we had men on the elevators at that time, and I think a fellow called Carmichael was on, and he said, "Oh, they had a lot of excitement." Well, I didn't know what the excitement was. It turned out that apparently, I guess they were termites... were in the boards of that old house. In making their escape, they had made a path from this house, down the hall, trying to get to the elevator. The entomologists said that they were trying to get to water or get to, you know, some. . . .

HENSON: Yes, they wouldn't have had a source of water.

WEISS: But apparently, I did not see this, Ed Chapin said that it was just like a little army or stream of them. [LAUGHTER] The men who were in charge of the building didn't know what to do about it. But with the Smithsonian having experts in every field of science... [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Entomologists.

WEISS: . . .they called in the entomologists, and in a very short time everything was cleared up. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: I once heard a story at the zoo [National Zoological Park] at Holt House, they had termites.

WEISS: Did they?

HENSON: And what they did is they brought the anteater in.

WEISS: Oh?

HENSON: And the anteater just ate them all.

WEISS: Now that's an idea. I don't think they did... [LAUGHTER] I'm not sure what they did for these poor things!

HENSON: I doubt they brought the anteater down to the Mall! But I've seen photographs that they brought the anteater in and they let him take care of the problem, and he had a fine meal. He was a happy anteater that day! [LAUGHTER]

WEISS: There's another branch of the Smithsonian. They were prepared to take care of all emergencies!

HENSON: Right, exactly! [LAUGHTER] Very unusual, very unusual.

WEISS: It's interesting to have worked in the Smithsonian and think of how broad its interests and activities and skills and intelligence and everything else, when you cover the whole area of the Smithsonian.

HENSON: I know... I guess it was around 1970, there was a move to establish a separate facility, I don't know if you remember that, a national institute for systematics, out at Beltsville [Maryland]. Do you remember that, or would that have been after you left? I know that [John Frederick] Gates Clarke was very interested in pushing that.

WEISS: I know when there was agitation for moving and trying to set up something out there, yes.

HENSON: Apparently, what some of the other curators said was, they liked the mix of interests down on the Mall, that very kind of thing where you had all these curious mixtures of interests. And they didn't want to be separated from that.

WEISS: No. [LAUGHTER] That was quite a controversy, I know. I think there were happy people and unhappy people in that.

HENSON: Yes, on both sides of that one. I think that was one of what you were saying about the curious combination of interests. Apparently that was very special to a lot of the curators.

WEISS: Yes, that's right.

HENSON: Unusual character, eclectic character, Smithsonian has.

WEISS: I personally would never. . . . Any time that anything would come up, any question, I always felt that with the broad areas of knowledge throughout the Smithsonian, someone on the Smithsonian staff would find an answer. And I think we always could.

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: That was the marvelous thing about working there. I don't know whether I'd know how to work outside, where I'd have to use my own brain! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: You'd just pick up the phone and get the world's expert on that subject.

WEISS: That's right. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: I know [Watson M.] Perrygo mentioned he got involved in reconstructing some of those houses because he had done it on his own.

WEISS: Yes. I think he was actually a taxidermist, Perrygo. But I think that was his avocation, probably [LAUGHTER]. He was very good. I think that he was very respected for his knowledge of early history, antiques, and restoration. But I don't think he ever really got to work over in that area in the Smithsonian.

HENSON: Apparently, he would just sort of kibitz a bit when they were doing it, trying to help.

WEISS: He loved it. He was good. He was knowledgeable. Didn't he repair clocks, too? He did a lot. He was really quite an expert on that, I think.

HENSON: And pianos.

WEISS: And pianos.

HENSON: He restored pianos, and paintings, and silver, and furniture, just about anything you could...

WEISS: Everything. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: ...put your mind to. A slightly different topic... around this time, there was something called the International Biological Program, which sponsored a lot of oceanographic surveys... the Indian Ocean, and that sort of thing. Out of that came something called the Smithsonian Oceanographic Sorting Center. I wondered if you recalled that unit and how you would have gotten involved with that.

WEISS: We were involved with them quite a bit. I knew all the staff out there, and. . . .

HENSON: This was at the [United States] Navy Yard?

WEISS: It was out at the Navy Yard. I went out to their office several times. I knew all the people there. I'm trying to think of the one who was in charge at that time [H. Adair Fehlmann]. Do you have the names of anyone out there?

HENSON: I don't know.

WEISS: It was a big operation... there were several of them. Anyway, I worked closely with them and I don't know that I can tell you any specific activity, except I was involved in seeing that their collections came in. They did their sorting out there. I don't remember whether they divided collections and sent some out to other areas or not... it seems to me they did. Am I right?

HENSON: Exactly, yes.

WEISS: I think that the sorting was done there, and this was done to help other organizations, institutions, and....

HENSON: Yes, a lot of them would go back out to other universities...

WEISS: ...and were shipped out. And that's where we would come into the picture, in bringing collections in, and in the shipping and everything. They were a nice group of people, and they were hard-working, really, and they liked their work. It must have been interesting. It was different.

HENSON: There were several stations established abroad, as well. There was one in Tunis... I'm trying to remember the other places.

WEISS: Was there one in Florida?

HENSON: Yes, yes.

WEISS: That I can't. . . .

HENSON: Was that Fort Pierce?

WEISS: I think so, yes.

HENSON: That's how Fort Pierce got started.

WEISS: You don't know who was in charge of that, do you?

HENSON: I know Mary [E.] Rice went down there for a while.

WEISS: Mary Rice went down for a while, that's right.

HENSON: She's still there.

WEISS: She is?

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: I should stop and see her.

HENSON: Yes, she was down there... and I'm trying to remember who else was involved earlier. I guess [I.] Eugene Wallen was in charge.

WEISS: Gene Wallen, that's the one. His was the name I was trying to think of.

HENSON: Okay.

WEISS: His office, for a while, was down the hall from mine when he was there at the Smithsonian, but he was the one that set up that station in Florida.

HENSON: He was not a curator, per se. He was in something called the Office of Oceanography?

WEISS: I guess he was, yes. I don't know why he... why was he down at this office? But anyway, he did have an office in our building, in Natural History Building, I mean, one of our buildings in town, for a while. I knew him very well. Well he traveled... I also handled his travel papers.

HENSON: Yes, that's what it seemed to me, a lot of them were just out and about, all over the place, all the time. So this would have been, just, yet another load of passports and visas. . .

WEISS: That's right.

HENSON: . . .travel kits, and. . . .

WEISS: ...collecting outfits. I guess that was where I really got acquainted with some of the staff members. I knew some of the staff doing the sorting. I must have worked more actively than I realized because I really knew that particular organization very well. It was because they were traveling and they were also shipping in and out, and that sort of thing.

HENSON: Parts of those collections would come to the museum, so that would be accessioned, right?

WEISS: That's right, yes.

HENSON: You would at least initiate the accession records for those sorts of things. I guess there'd be any number of ties... and then mail service and everything.

WEISS: That's right, when you tie it all together, there's quite a lot! [LAUGHTER]  
When I think of it in fragmentation, it doesn't. . . . But that's true.

HENSON: But all these different things you would have been doing with them... It just seems like there was so much growth going on in this period.

WEISS: Oh, there was! It was really very fast, when you think about it. It was expanding all the time, which meant more staff and more activity, and more of everything... more mail, more shipping, more travel. And everybody was busy!  
[LAUGHTER ]

HENSON: Kept you hopping! Then 1967 was the first folklife festival [Festival of American Folklife] on the Mall.

WEISS: Yes.

HENSON: And I wondered if you recalled that.

WEISS: I recall that but I did not have anything to do with it as far as bringing in anything for the festival. That was handled through the Office of Exhibits... they worked with... what was that organization that...? Somebody from Exhibits, I think, it was a spin-off on that?

HENSON: Yes, well, Ralph [C.] Rinzler seemed to be involved in it. The name Ralph Rinzler... do you remember him?

WEISS: Yes.

HENSON: He was Assistant Secretary for Public Service.

WEISS: That's right, Public Service, yes.

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: I think he started the... I think he was the really key figure for a long time.

HENSON: That became part of, for a while... it no longer is... something called the Division of Performing Arts, which was up at L'Enfant Plaza. I don't know if you remember that. They had some of the concert series, and were putting out a series of records and that sort of thing. That was something that you didn't have to handle, travel. .

..

WEISS: No, I was not involved in it in any way. I'd just know that it was happening, and just sort of. . . .

HENSON: At least one of them didn't put too much more of a burden on you, right?

WEISS: Right! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: We're about to run off here, so why don't I turn this tape over before I pick up the next topic, okay?

[BEGIN REEL II]

HENSON: I was going to pick up with you being on a group, in 1968, that [William W.] Willy Warner chaired, which was the Public Information Working Group. You had to go to a lot of meetings. Let's see, Sam[uel T.] Suratt, who was the archivist, was on that; Phil[ip C.] Ritterbush; Anders Richter, I guess was over in the [SI] Press, then? Would that have been right, or would he have been. . . ?

WEISS: Yes, Richter.

HENSON: He might have been in Public Affairs, at that point.

WEISS: What was his first name?

HENSON: Anders.

WEISS: Anders Richter... I know his name, but I don't know. . . .

HENSON: No, I know that for sure, he was head of SI Press. . .

WEISS: Oh.

HENSON: . . .after [Paul H.] Oehser left, and they established a separate press.

WEISS: After Oehser, okay.

HENSON: He came in and established the Press. And then someone named [Nathaniel M.] Dixon... and then Fred Philips [Frederic M. Philips], who was with the Office of Public Affairs... and John [E.] Anglim, who was head of [Office of] Exhibits. There were some problems, apparently, with routing public inquiry mail... what would go to Academic Programs, what would go to [Office of] Public Affairs, what would go to your public inquiry service. Do you recall at all what the problems were, and how you worked them out, or what that group did?

WEISS: I don't think I can give you a very clear view of that. I remember attending the meetings and it seemed like the problem was almost overwhelming, because, again, I think the Smithsonian had grown too big, too fast. Many of these things had not been worked out without thinking about the impact. I think this is sort of representative of what happened in my own office along the way, because very often there was an impact on our office of some of this growth and expansion that wasn't realized. I mean, we tried to meet things as they went along, as any office does, that wasn't just our office, and it got so that it was too much.

With mail, as you know, mail's very important, and also it's important in timing, sometimes, and all of that. I was quite in sympathy with having a real good survey made of it. But I can't say whether or not that was very effective, whether it was properly analyzed to the point that it meant that it was solved. As far as we were concerned, we still did have to receive the mail from the Post Office, and we had to try to find some way of getting it to the proper offices.

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: When I first went into my position, would you believe it, all the mail was addressed to the Smithsonian... at that time, the U.S. National Museum, and anything there on the Mall, which wasn't very much. But you would have mail that was addressed to curators, for instance. I remember one addressed to a curator of history. I think he had signed one of the replies, and the letter came back addressed to the "Curator of Heads!" All sorts of ways things were addressed. . .

HENSON: Because he was the head curator.

WEISS: . . .and all of those would reach our mail room, and then we would have to decide where it would go. As offices were set up, it became necessary to try to deliver mail directly to the offices rather than to a central place, and then try to distribute to all these various offices on the Mall and outside the Mall. And there was a little problem with the Post Office. I had to work with the Post Office on that. We considered having different zip numbers. I was there during the era of establishing zip codes, and I remember I went to meetings at the Post Office on that and their sorting of the mail, which to me was kind of a... it wasn't my line. Mail was not my most favorite [LAUGHTER] occupation at the Smithsonian! It was just that I fell heir to it. But the Post Office did not approve of having different zip codes; they wanted to send the Smithsonian mail to one zip code. I think that's happening now, isn't it? We don't have various zip codes. Well, it's all right if you have a way of dividing the mail so it can go to, you know. . . . But it was a real problem in the beginning. And I don't know whether, in those meetings, there was really a good decision or outcome of the work that was done on it. But apparently, it gradually, as time went on, was. . .

HENSON: . . .resolved. . .

WEISS: . . .to take care of it.

HENSON: While you were there, was VIARC established... the Visitor Information and Associates Reception Center?

WEISS: That was just starting when I left, I'd say.

HENSON: Just starting.

WEISS: I think so.

HENSON: They take a lot of the sort of schoolchildren-type of inquiries now.

WEISS: Do they? Good!

HENSON: And they handle all of those letters. They have volunteers, apparently, and not much staff.

WEISS: That's good. I like that. That's very good. I always thought that... it would be good to have a central place to handle the school inquiries and the simple questions that could be answered quite easily. A person in anything that got a little bit beyond their knowledge, they would know the staff and where to go to get the information they needed. This was important, and I hope that's the way they're doing it now. I have thought recently it would be interesting to see what has happened to this mail. As I say, it wasn't my favorite occupation, but it was [LAUGHTER] something that was vital to the Smithsonian.

HENSON: Yes, now there's an Assistant Secretary for Administration, and that's John [F.] Jameson. Under him, there's a sort of communications and transportation group which includes the telephone offices, the mail, the dispatcher for Smithsonian cars, the government motor pool, and all of that. All of that is together now. And I think shipping is still actually separate, more with supply.

WEISS: I wondered... is there a separate overall shipping person?

HENSON: As far as I know, yes.

WEISS: But there are shipping offices in the . . .

HENSON: . . .different. . .

WEISS: . . .bureaus. But there would have to be a central. . . .

HENSON: Yes, over it.

WEISS: There should be. Well... we were trying to start that, but with our limited funds, for one thing, and also a problem with different bureaus allocating space, some of those buildings were not planned for this, you know. I don't know why. But fortunately, when the two galleries [National Portrait Gallery and National Museum of American Art] moved over, right there on Ninth and F [Streets], we did plan for a good shipping entrance and office. I guess it's worked out pretty well for bringing in the type of artwork that they needed. You really can't deliver artwork all over the city and try to get it to the right place. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Yes, and I think the Hirshhorn [Museum and Sculpture Garden] has its own.

WEISS: And the Hirshhorn has its own, I'm sure, and of course, [National] Air and Space [Museum], now. We had Air and Space for a long time, delivered over in the A & I [Arts & Industries] Building, and in the Quonset hut out there. You knew about the Quonset hut?

HENSON: Yes... the World War I building.

WEISS: That's where we delivered a lot of those things, then we had the missiles and all that outside of A & I.

HENSON: What do you do when you get a missile delivery?

WEISS: [LAUGHTER] You're overwhelmed with it!

HENSON: Yes. [LAUGHTER] I think it would be a little intimidating.

WEISS: Fortunately, they had people in this Air Museum, in the beginning, that were so vitally interested that they had this personal interest that we've been talking about. They would personally oversee something like that so that we really didn't have to become involved in it.

HENSON: That would be somebody like Paul [E.] Garber?

WEISS: Paul Garber, yes. They were all his babies. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Yes, somebody who really loves his collection.

WEISS:       Actually, that whole thing grew up under his eye, if not his actual supervision. But he was pretty much involved in it from the beginning, when it was just a section under... what was that called... [Department of] Engineering and Industries, in the beginning, I think. That's where Paul Garber started.

HENSON:     That would have been [Carl W.] Mitman.

WEISS:       Frank [A.] Taylor had it, and then Mitman.

HENSON:     So, he was the old. . . .

WEISS:       Just think, I knew about that... I must be Methuselah!

HENSON:     Right, yes. [LAUGHTER] But you came here after Frank Taylor and Paul Garber, so you're just a spring chicken. [LAUGHTER] You're Smithsonian youth! They predate you, right?

WEISS:       Yes.

HENSON:     They do!

WEISS:       People never give up at the Smithsonian. I said that about scientists, and I couldn't understand that when I first went there, but I do now. I gradually understood it more and more, and now I'm involved in it myself. [LAUGHTER] Especially if I'm going into the archives! That really puts me in my place! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Right, exactly. I've wondered, speaking of archives, if you remembered, towards the end of your years there, getting an archives established? Around this time Sam Suratt is hired, and he starts getting an archival program together. Do you know why that would have come about, or who was interested in it?

WEISS: I think, if my recollection's right... I'm not sure. I'm not always sure, you know, it's hard to go back and remember. But I do know that any material. . . . It was really a problem off and on through the years, if one wanted to find something of the past. And the only place that I knew was over in the SI Building, in the Castle, in connection with the Secretary's office, I believe.

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: I think there was someone connected... I don't know whether it was actually with the Office of the Secretary... what records we had and the things that were thought to be archival material were sent over there. And I know that I recall through the years, sometimes some curators objected to having their records kept, and then others wanted to have their records kept [and] wanted some way to keep them; how to keep them, how to preserve them, and certain things. Some of them never wanted to do this, but I know that there were some that were trying to keep records together. I don't know whether they call them "archives" or just history records in the SI Building, in the Castle. And I think that people became more aware of the value of retaining historical records, that this probably was an automatic outgrowth.

HENSON: Do you remember [Nathan] Nate Reingold at all? Does that name ring any bells? He came in around this time from the National Archives. He was working on something called the Joseph Henry papers.

WEISS: He did. I knew when they were working on Joseph Henry's papers.

HENSON: He seemed to be somewhat interested in the archives thing. Mr. [S. Dillon] Ripley was interested in it? I guess everybody was, in a sense.

WEISS: I think this was a gradual thing, when the people became more and more aware of the fact that something should be done to try to have a central place for these things because they were going to be lost. Some of the records were going to be lost. I'm amazed, really. . . I don't think my memory's that good, but when I first went into the [Office of] Correspondence and Documents, I guess as stenographer or something, I ran across something in the back in the records. It turned out that they were some old [Mathew] Brady negatives, glass negatives. I found this in like a file drawer, with these 3 x 5 or 5 x 8, or anyway, larger size. I found those just in with a bunch of miscellaneous material. I knew this was something. I tried to see what it was. So I took them to Mr. [Herbert S.] Bryant then, and I said that this is something that I think looks like it is early history of the Smithsonian. He took a look at it, and we decided that they were Brady, and so they went to the Photographic Division, which was delighted to receive them. Of course that made you feel like you should look around some more and see. But I have an idea that there were items like that that could have been scattered through the Smithsonian, different places, without people being aware of their value.

HENSON: I'm sure there were! [LAUGHTER]

WEISS: You're aware of that. So I think that it was a natural development. It was time to have an office of archives, to try to not only preserve and maintain such items, but to bring them together . . . try to assemble something that would give us a real history. It's amazing how staff members that were there when I first arrived, a lot of them had no real knowledge of the early history of the Smithsonian.

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: I guess that happens all the time.

HENSON: Even now, people will say to us, the newer people, they'll be here a year or two, and they'll say, "What in the world is the United States National Museum?"

WEISS: Oh? We used to think that was the. . . . Actually, the correspondence that came in... most of the public inquiries... would be directed to the U.S. National Museum. I know when Dr. Keddy came in, I may have said this earlier, he said that the "tail was wagging the dog" because the U.S. National Museum was known more than the Smithsonian. And he insisted that we write the "Smithsonian Institution, U.S. National Museum. . . ." Then, of course, the U.S. National Museum was split into Museum of History and Technology and the Museum of Natural History. Then we put "National Museum" after a time... But the Smithsonian was the Smithsonian, and I think it was well that that happened. It is the Smithsonian, all of these are arms of the Smithsonian.

HENSON: Yes, that's the cohesive bond to all of them.

WEISS: That's right.

HENSON: It's funny that the newer staff coming in sometimes doesn't know the history at all. Some of them seem to get very interested in it, very quickly. But others, I think, have no interest in going back at all.

WEISS: Isn't that funny?

HENSON: One of the things you seemed to be pushing, around this time... I don't know if that's true, at least it seemed from some memoranda... was to microfilm the accession records.

WEISS: Yes.

HENSON: Why would you have wanted to see that done?

WEISS: I became very concerned about the accession records. In the first place, I think, we probably went over this... if I'm repeating, tell me. When I first went there, the accession records were in these narrow jackets.

HENSON: We did talk about that.

WEISS: They were folded in three, well... whatever... I should check the size of that. But anyway, all the file cabinets were like that. All the original papers were handled by all of the curators, anybody that wanted the papers. The accession papers were charged out from our office. We were actually in control of them, in a way, but very often they got out from under our control. But the thing that bothered me, especially when we got to the very earliest records, some of them were beginning to become very brittle, very fragile, and fragmented in some areas, some cases. It used to just... I'd cringe when we wanted to send out some of the records.

I tried for a while to have the curators come to our office to look at some of the early records there and not really take them out, but this was very difficult to do. The curators then, I don't know how they feel now, but they felt they had to have the original papers. And this was before we really got into microfilming or anything. I had gone over to the National Archives several times to check on certain things in handling those papers, and I felt that it was dangerous. When we had to evacuate the accession papers during the war, then it was very dangerous to have these papers, which I think are very important papers of the history of the collections of the museums. This is true of the Air Museum, NCFA [National Collection of Fine Arts], and all of those.

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: To have them handled all the time, by anybody that came in, they were really being misused sometimes. And I thought that we should have a duplicate, some way.... microfilming at that time. I went over to Archives, to their microfilming, and learned a little bit about it. Then Carl Mitman set up a committee, a committee of Carl Mitman and myself [LAUGHTER], and what we wanted to do was to justify a budget for it. That's the first thing to do... and we weren't successful in the first year. I thought we wrote up a pretty good plea for it. It meant so much to me, but it was turned down. There were other things that were more important for that money. But the second try we did get started on it, and we started microfilming. At least we were going to have something where these things would be recorded, and we finally were able to do this. In our own office we were able to do it with summer help. In the summertime we had... funds that, fortunately, I was able to get for this project, not all the funds, but enough to hire a couple of people who could work on that.

HENSON: And work on parts of it.

WEISS: And that is getting the papers ready, and so forth.

HENSON: So that would have been what, putting them in some sort of order? So that chronologically. . . .

WEISS: They were put together in all kinds of ways, these old accessions. I don't know how they are now, but. . . .

HENSON: The other problem you had mentioned is, for example, with Austin [Hobart] Clark, that an accession would go out, an accession folder, for the curator to look at, but it might not always come back in a speedy fashion.

WEISS: There was no plan... or nothing, no procedure... had been set up for a follow-through on the return of accessions. We tried to do it in the beginning by just letting the curators know the importance and that we wanted them back. It was almost impossible to get them back. When curators are working on a certain project and there are papers that they want to work with, they want them right at their own elbow. And so, this was very difficult.

What we tried to do, finally, was, at the end of the year, when we were making up our accession list for the annual report, we tried at that time to make kind of a survey and find. . . . Again, it really meant... I really needed extra help to do it, which I couldn't get, to follow through and try to check up on accessions and have them returned.

HENSON: To get everything in.

WEISS: We would get a pretty good response, but there would always be some that were difficult and some of them I'm not sure we ever found!

HENSON: Never got back.

WEISS: I imagine right now that there are some that are still out. I don't know, but I believe that there were always some that were... they may have been mixed up in other papers.

HENSON: Well, it has happened. . .

WEISS: Division papers.

HENSON: . . .when curators have retired, and we go in and clean out their offices. . . .

WEISS: That's another thing. You'd probably run into that in [Smithsonian Institution] Archives!

HENSON: Yes, we'd find the accession files.

WEISS: I remember there were a couple cases like that just before I left. And again, I felt that there should have been some procedure set up so that Archives or someone would become involved so that one could be sure that the papers were the official papers or part of the archives or accession records, or whatever, that they were returned to the proper place.

HENSON: We have a charge-out system now. People have to sign for them and everything.

WEISS: We had a charge-out, of course. We always had that, but. . .

HENSON: . . .but getting them back is the tricky part.

WEISS: Right.

HENSON: . . .is the challenge, for all of these things.

WEISS: For other papers, maybe we weren't that strict about it, but for accession records we really always had a record for a charge out. We were supposed to receive a signature on the papers that went out.

HENSON: Hard to get them back in again... would be the really hard part. Did you get involved at all in setting up an archives?

WEISS: No, I didn't.

HENSON: And was there any interest, at least initially, in putting old permanent files.... Because you had a large collection of files in that office?

WEISS: I had all the files for Natural History and MHT, Museum of History and Technology, which was still Museum of History and Technology when I left there. For those two museums, and as I think I've mentioned before, in the beginning we had Air Museum and the first ones were the National Collection of Fine Arts records. We spun those off soon after I went there because they were able to set up their office so that they could really handle those papers. They could be returned to those museums. And it was kind of a job... I thought maybe it was time for me to resign when I found out we were going to have to [LAUGHTER] dig into those files and find the records relating to NCFA and then finally the Air Museum. Fortunately, a lot of that was not as difficult as I thought it would be, because I think through the catalog records in the divisions . . . .

HENSON: So you could work back from there.

WEISS: From the catalog collections. That's what they were interested in. I'm sure that's the way that we were finally able to get the records as readily as we did.

HENSON: Still, to this day, the Natural History and American History records have never been separated.

WEISS: They haven't?

HENSON: They talk about it constantly, but it's never actually been done.

WEISS: There will be some areas where it'll be impossible to ever do it because they are intertwined. This was something that bothered everybody when we first talked about it, because there were collections that came in in the early years that were probably accessioned in anthropology. And later, for some of those collections, the history people, over in civil history... Malcolm Watkins intertwined quite a bit with some of the anthropological collections. And that could go on in some of the other areas too, so that it's hard to actually divide them, entirely... completely separate them, I think.

HENSON: They've never done it successfully. They never have. . . .

WEISS: It hasn't been. That's interesting.

HENSON: No, every year it's proposed, but it's never actually been accomplished.

WEISS: Where are they now? Are they in Archives? Do you get the new accessions now as they. . . ?

HENSON: We only have pre-1957.

WEISS: 1957? 1957?

HENSON: Up to 1957, yes.

WEISS: Where are the others?

HENSON: In each of the registrars' offices in the museums.

WEISS: Well then they were divided. . .

HENSON: After that point.

WEISS: . . .after that point, they were divided then, between the two museums. Is that right?

HENSON: I wonder if that's right. That probably is not right... it must be like 1972.

WEISS: Now 1972 is when I left, 1972, 1973.

HENSON: I'm not sure about that. I should double-check on that.

WEISS: They were still together, I think.

HENSON: Yes. The most recent accessions are separated, but I'm not sure at which point they started maintaining separate ones. They didn't do it while you were there?

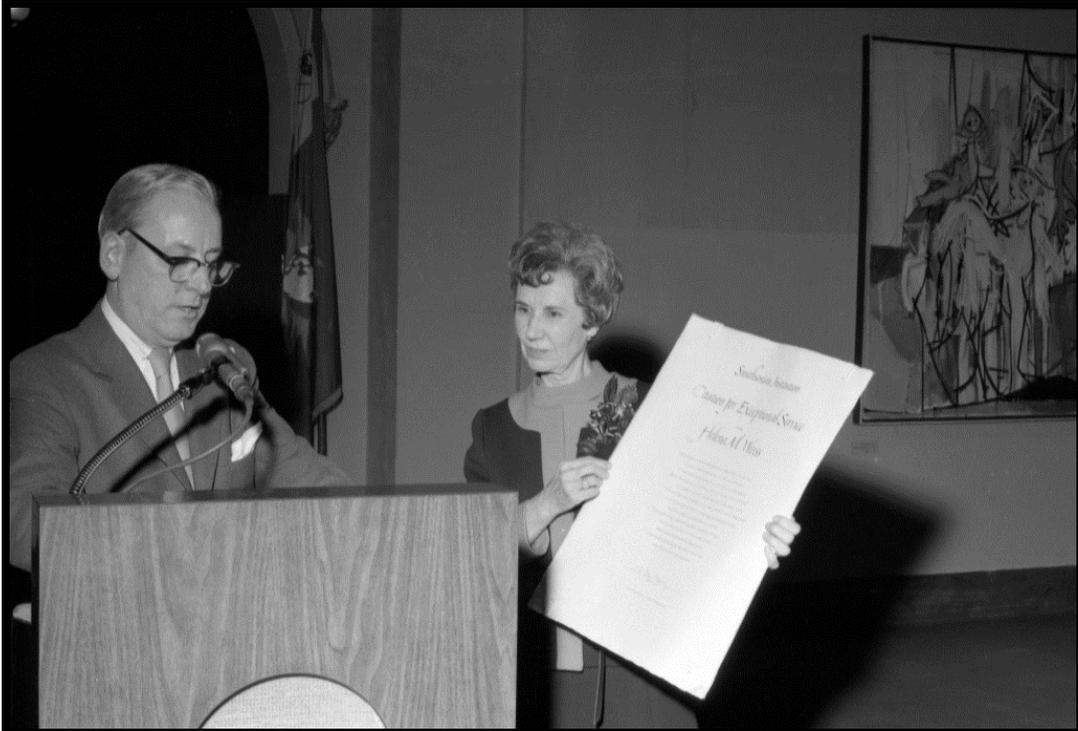
WEISS: No.

HENSON: So it must be like 1972.

WEISS: They were ready to do it. I mean, it was time to do it, but it was hard to get them to do it. In a way, I kind of felt as long as I was there... and I'm saying that from the standpoint of custom... it's easy to do what you have always been doing and it's hard to break off and start, as you know. And maybe I was wrong, but I felt that if I retired that it was going to be a lot easier to make a change there. Really it was time, for instance, to have registrars in the other bureaus. You can't have one central registrar anymore. That's way out. . . . Well, maybe there could be one that's a . . .

HENSON: A coordinator.

WEISS: . . .supervisor, coordinator. Coordinator, is the right word. But not to the extent of the. . . .



Helena Weiss receives the certificate for the Secretary's Gold Medal for Exceptional Service from Under Secretary James Bradley, December 29, 1971. Image Number: 71-3364-12

HENSON: So you did decide, then, in 1971, I think it was, to retire.

WEISS: I think so.

HENSON: Do you have any mixed feelings about that, or were you ready to retire?

WEISS: I didn't retire in 1971. I retired in 1972.

HENSON: 1972, that's right.

WEISS: Yes, 1972. I was thinking about it for a long time, but I didn't actually take an official step on it until not too long before I decided to set the date, actually.

HENSON: Really?

WEISS: I remember going over to [James C.] Jim Bradley.

HENSON: And what did he say?

WEISS: I said I was ready to retire... that I thought that I wanted to retire by the end of the year. I can't remember when that was, but it was in that year. I guess I had talked and talked about it a little bit. I don't know exactly what he said, but he said, "Well, you know, Helena," he says, "I'm going to retire, too." And he said, "I'm ready to retire about next year." Or the next year, I forget which one. But we talked a lot about the offices and the matter of retiring and everything, and I said I thought the time had come for me to retire.

HENSON: And I had November 17, 1971. Would that be right?

WEISS: In 1971? Well then that meant that I retired in the first part of 1972, right? I retired the end of 1971, right? That's it.

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: I know what happened. I was thinking... somehow I had it in my mind that it was the end of 1972, but it must have been the beginning of 1972. What happened was... I don't know if this goes on tape or not... Mr. Bradley, when they started making up my retirement papers, said that it would be to my advantage for the date of retirement to be sometime in January 1972, then. . . .

HENSON: Probably, yes, because I'm sure you had enough leave that if you left, actually on November 17th. . . .

WEISS: I had enough leave to give me almost a year [LAUGHTER] of retirement.

HENSON: Well now this is. . . .

WEISS: They added another year to my retirement from my leave. You know, at that time, they were doing that. I don't know whether they are doing it now.

HENSON: This one actually says you retired December 30th.

WEISS: Does it?

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: I think they finally, at the end, made the effective date... whatever, I suppose it would have been... the pay period in January.

HENSON: Yes. And you got a Secretary's Exceptional Gold Service Award.

WEISS: That's right.

HENSON: A rare honor around the Institution. Was that a surprise, or. . . ?

WEISS: Oh, mercy, yes! [LAUGHTER] I don't think I knew of one person... I think only two persons have it. Is that right?

HENSON: Yes, it is a rare honor.

WEISS: It was very rare, and I can't remember who we had heard before. We were so impressed. And so that, just about, was too much. I have a replica of it up here.

HENSON: Do you?

WEISS: You know, they give it to you, the gold medal... and then a bronze copy...

HENSON: And that's the bronze copy.

WEISS: You've seen it, haven't you?

HENSON: No, I've never actually seen one. Isn't that interesting... it's the owl, yes.

WEISS: That's the Smithsonian. . . .

HENSON: Oh, my. That must have been quite a treat!

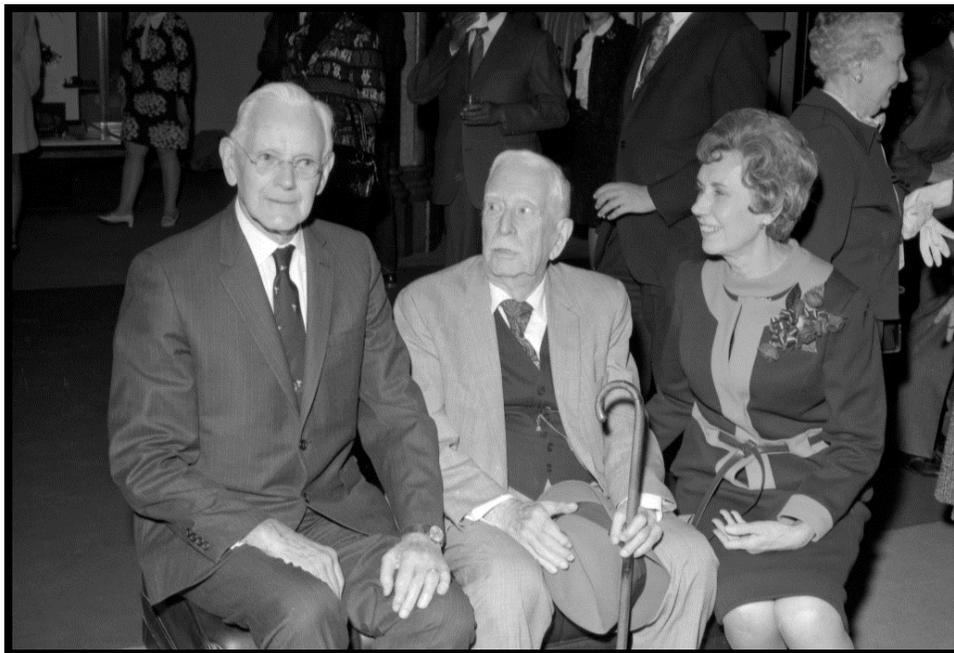
WEISS: Oh, my! I wanted to slip out of the Smithsonian with no fanfare. I didn't even want any retirement party, and I got this.... Fortunately, it being at the end of the year, it didn't have to be a big affair, but they did insist they wanted to have something. And, so, quite a few people were away because it was during the Christmas holiday. They did have it over in the Castle, and it was very, very nice. I'm glad now that. . .

HENSON: That you did.

WEISS: . . .they did have it, because it was done very low-key, and in very good taste. I'm sure Frank Taylor had a lot to do with seeing that it was that way.

HENSON: Done just right.

WEISS: And what was the most exciting part was that there were three Secretaries present. Mr. Ripley didn't get there (he was in Europe), he was the current one, but Jim Bradley, Mr. Bradley represented him. And there was Dr. [Charles Greeley] Abbot, and Dr. [Alexander] Wetmore, and Dr. [Leonard] Carmichael.



Dr. Alexander Wetmore, Dr. Charles G. Abbot, and Helena Weiss at her retirement party, December 29, 1971. Image Number: 71-3364-7

HENSON: All there?

WEISS: They were all there.

HENSON: Really?

WEISS: Yes.

[END OF INTERVIEW]