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Second Oral History Interview

with

Alexander Wetmore
Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1944-52

held May 8, 1974
in his office in the Museum of Natural History

by Miriam S. Freilicher
Interviewer

for the Smithsonian Institution Archives

FREILICHER: Dr. Wetmore, just to get started here and make sure
that we're coming across loud and clear, why don't
you talk a little bit about what we discussed before we turned on
the tape--the gradual development of change within the U.S.
National Museum.

WETMORE: When I came here as an Assistant Secretary, into an
entirely new office, the first steps were to get my-
self placed, to look over the organization rather carefully, and
to make sure as to its condition. I have told you previously that
I'd been long familiar with the National Museum and the work that
goes on here, when I was in other services. For a number of years,
I had desk space in the Division of Birds which is my own field of

investigation, and so had had full facilities in my scientific work in that branch. Also through other connections, I had considerable acquaintance among the staff in other branches. . . . Really, there was not too much new to me when I became established here permanently. The background situation was not good because of the low scale of pay for the scientific staff, and also of the fact that the various activities, the various branches in the museum, were understaffed. They had perhaps one, occasionally two, individuals scientifically trained to carry on the work of each particular branch, but little in the way of secondary help, clerical assistance, mechanical operations, and so on.

FREILICHER:

Well, now, when you say that it wasn't good, what. . . would the general public be aware that it wasn't good? I mean, could you see this from the state of the exhibits?

WETMORE: No, the general public would know nothing about it.

Those who. . . came to the various branches on some specific item of business were cared for. . . . But a majority of the scientific staff were getting along in years. They had had no significant adjustments in salary scale for a long period. So that they were scraping along in pretty poor status, as far as living conditions--personal living conditions--were concerned. One of the first things to do was to try to make some improvement in that.

FREILICHER: Well, were scientists paid better in other places?
Was it just the Smithsonian that was so underpaid,
or was it the general professional problem?

WETMORE: Well, the general professional status as a whole had
had some adjustments, but the Smithsonian as a whole
had gotten behind. And as I told you the other day, the Bureau of
the Budget had no initial understanding of what we were doing, or
what we represented here. Their first idea was to come in and to
see where the small appropriation we had could be still further
reduced.

FREILICHER: Yes, I remember you told us that.

WETMORE: We came through that period without too much difficulty,
and gradually more and more funds became available.
Our Board of Regents were very much interested and very helpful.
Of course, they included especially the members of Congress who
really. . .were in a position to do something about the situation,
and they did help us. This began immediately when they understood
the situation fully, and, little by little, we came along to a sal-
ary level that was comparable to that, for example, in positions of
similar status in the Department of Agriculture.

FREILICHER: I see.

WETMORE: This is one of the main comparisons I may make because a number of men engaged in their scientific research actually had space, or worked regularly, here in the Smithsonian on our collections. . . .After a year or two, there was a small overall increase in salary level. And little by little over a period of years, it was possible to make adjustments in duties and in appointments to a point where the general level was higher than it had been.

FREILICHER: So you're really talking about the need, at that time, to improve the quality and status of the staff, the scientific staff, so that really good work could begin to be done at the Smithsonian.

WETMORE: Of course, there is no criticism, please understand, of the staffs that were here. They were competent, but there were not enough of them!

FREILICHER: Yes, and I take it you needed some younger people with new ideas and new training.

WETMORE: Little by little, they began to come in. Of course, this is something that took a period of several years before it was actually appreciable or visible, in a sense. But conditions did improve immediately and became better and better as time went on. We added additional staff as seemed appropriate or possible. And also we began to have some funds available that would permit research in the field, which is always necessary to keep the staff alive with new ideas and to get away a little bit, you know.

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FREILICHER: Well, increase your collections, too.

WETMORE: Increasing collections came, of course, and there was a steady improvement in other ways, that continued.

FREILICHER: As you look back at those years, what would you say was the--and I know you're a modest man, you don't want to talk about your own personal achievements--but I think just for the record on this occasion that you might waive that privilege and tell us what you think was the. . .what you recall as the most significant contribution that you yourself made, what happened, what events or occurrences are you most proud of?

WETMORE: Really, the individual contact that developed with our Board of Regents, and also with other individuals who were interested, including not only those in Congress but elsewhere.

FREILICHER: Now you personally saw to getting that on its way? What did you do, what did you do?

WETMORE: Well, . . .my main contact, of course, was always the Board of Regents. I had very friendly relations with

them. They were completely understanding of the situation and were always willing to do what was possible to bring improvement.

FREILICHER: Well. . .I mean, there was always a Board of Regents, how was it that they had sort of lost contact, if I understand what you're saying, they had begun to lose contact with the Smithsonian, and when you came into the National Museum, you saw that it was necessary to revitalize that relationship.

WETMORE: As I said, we began to advise them in more detail as to what we were doing, what the necessities were, and what, actually, our position was relative to the general public, and also with those who came to us continually for information. The other thing, as I say, was that we began to have small funds available for research in the field. That always revitalizes the staff a bit, as it went on. And there were also additional funds available for publication, which always helped. . . .Of course, there were ups and downs, naturally, but there was a steady growth, an improvement, not only in the salary levels for the staff, but also through the additional assistance that we were able to bring in, in part through trained men in special branches, in part through the secondary help in the curatorial work in the arrangement of the collections--many, many things of that kind.

Of course, there was also a great deal of reorganization of space. There had been a whole ground floor of this Natural History Building where we are talking that had been given over more or less to a post-war exhibition organized by the military. This was interesting, but had served its purpose. And, in fact, it was getting just a little bit dusty here and there--needed something done with it. We arranged for a military man to come in and advise as to the disposal of this mass of material. . . in which, fortunately, the various branches of the military were well represented. By good fortune, I was assigned a colonel in the cavalry, a branch which was practically on its way out at that time. He was all ready for retirement but was well informed. His advice was most helpful in determining the value of the exhibits--whether they should be returned, or whether they should be discarded. Being a cavalryman, at that stage in our military he had no particular personal irons to guard, so we got useful and well-balanced advice. Well, that took a considerable period. We were nearly a year getting this cleaned up and the material out of here, organized wherever it would be most useful or where it should be kept. That was one of the first tasks, and then came the development of other exhibitions to take the place of what we'd had there--something that would be useful and interesting to the public. At this time also, we had a considerable area on the ground floor (first floor) given over to the art exhibits that later were transferred in good part elsewhere,

as the National Gallery of Art developed, and so forth. In other words, there were many changes made in the physical arrangements and the space that they occupied. This continued.

FREILICHER: Now, you're indicating that exhibits certainly were an important function of the museum work.

Did your scientists, did the scientists want to do exhibits or did they want somebody else to do them? Did they prefer to do their research?

WETMORE: Well, that matter varied greatly individually.

Some were interested and some were not. The younger men coming in, most of them were quite interested in it. We made many, many changes, of course. And also there was a slow expansion in the staff. Some of the older men through age dropping out were replaced by younger men. And then also, little by little, there were additional positions available that were very helpful to us.

The regents were much interested in this. They were kind enough to feel that I was a scientist myself and therefore while I handled the administrative end of it, I needed a little help. So gradually the regents instructed that we take on another administrative man who would be working directly under me but would take care of a great deal of the details that had been coming more and more into my own office. Fortunately, in this, I was able to

arrange for Mr. John [Enos] Graf, who had been the assistant chief of the Bureau of Entomology in the Department of Agriculture, a man that I had known personally for years. He and I understood one another thoroughly. He came in as an assistant directly under me and was very helpful, as he was a man of knowledge and understanding, and also one who had the faculty of getting along well with others. And finally. . . as the appropriations grew and as our connections with the Bureau of the Budget increased, I was told to bring in another man in that field. In this we were successful in arranging for [John L.] Mr. Jack Keddy, to come here from the Bureau of the Budget. Mr. Keddy was thoroughly familiar with the Institution because we had appeared. . . before him regularly in our request for funds and in our discussions as to how money was to be placed and how it was to be used. We had had many arguments with him in this field but no quarrels, so this worked out very well. We developed much under the assistance of those two men. . . .

FREILICHER: This is fine. As far as building and so on, the wings were finally begun after World War II sometime, and by then you were Secretary, by then or very nearly. . . .

WETMORE: Well, no, they came along later. Of course, at about this time the so-called Depression hit and everything was downgraded considerably so far as public funds were

available. Mr. [Herbert] Hoover, a very, very competent man, brought in a businessman to go over details for the monies that had been available to organizations like ours and to tell us exactly what we could have in lesser amount! The first proposal made was completely ruinous. . . . This was at a meeting at the Treasury Department, Bureau of the Budget, for discussion. We were told what we had to expect and to adjust our operations accordingly. We weren't given a flat sum but we. . . had two days to figure this. Graf and I sat down and figured to the bare bones the amounts that would get us over this crisis. Following, we had another meeting, when we were fortunate in having one of our prominent regents [Mr. Frederic A. Delano] sit in with us, which was very helpful. He was recognized and, through his assistance, we were given a lump sum that would let us get by this crisis without complete destruction. We went on from there, increasing again slowly from this base. Mr. Hoover himself was interested. I knew him personally, and I knew his principal assistant very well, so that they understood our problems and were not arbitrary regarding them.

FREILICHER: What happened when the administration changed and the Depression went on for more than a few years? Were there further crises at the Smithsonian?

WETMORE: Well, nothing like this one. Of course, there was always pressure with any change "above" to see what and where they could reduce expenses. That was inevitable, but through the assistance of the Board of Regents, we were able to increase somewhat.

Of course, there were various things that didn't develop. We had the plans for the wings on this building. In fact, I developed those with the assistance of Graf and others. They were finally arranged in two wings, a competent architect assisting in this. We had various difficulties with the agencies who controlled such building construction here in Washington. But we were able in due time and course to arrange to have our viewpoint made clear so that there was some understanding of our necessities. Cut this off and I'll tell you one story. . . .

FREILICHER: Why don't you tell us on, we can restrict it afterwards, do you really want it off?

WETMORE: Well, we went to an early hearing before the Fine Arts Commission, told them the scheme of plans and, immediately, there was objection from an out-of-town member to the fact that this might make this building longer than the National Gallery of Art which had just been constructed; therefore, it would spoil the symmetry. In reply, I told the architect, "Well, we'll need to consider this further so maybe we may terminate the

hearing at this point without any decision being made until we could go away and look into the matter still further." Of course, my feeling was that only someone in the heavens could determine the lack of symmetry in these buildings. [Laughter] We finally came along and got the approval. And also. . .the agreement was made by Congress that this should be done, although no funds were made available right then. . . .

Dr. [Charles Greeley] Abbot had been retired in the meantime and I'd become Secretary. I had decided previously after watching the Washington scene over a period of years that it was a mistake for an individual with scientific interests to remain in an administrative position beyond the age of sixty-five. The man himself would run down a little bit in his impetus and operations and so forth, and also new ideas coming in were needed. I felt this was not good for the organization nor for the man. So at age sixty-five at the annual meeting of the Board of Regents, I gave expression of this feeling and said that with their permission I would like to have them consider my retirement. This was an entirely new idea, as Secretaries of the Smithsonian had been appointed for life, and that was it. In fact, Dr. Abbot had been the only one who had been retired. They said, of course, they'd meet my wishes and they were very friendly in expressing this. It took a little time before they found Dr. [Leonard] Carmichael and he agreed to come. And so he was my successor in 1952, and things went on very well under him. . . .

I'll tell you one thing, if you'll turn that off, that I don't
want on the record and I wouldn't care to have it. [Recorder
turned off.]

FREILICHER: Why don't you just continue then with what we were
talking about.

WETMORE: One of the interesting additions to the operations
here has been the laboratory on Barro Colorado Island
in the Canal Zone. This began purely as an outside operation on
the part of a few men who were interested in the natural history of
that area and saw the opportunity there for increase in knowledge
through it. In fact, the Department of Agriculture had an entomolo-
gist located in the Canal Zone to take care of some of their inter-
ests there, James Zetek, a competent man, who had developed close
contacts with the various administrative operations of the Canal
Zone. Dr. Thomas Barbour of Massachusetts, a strong member of the
staff of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard, was younger
at that time and active. He was much interested in the American
tropics--down there somewhere every year. Also a man of means, so
that he was independent. He and Zetek learned of this island,
formed when Gatun Lake was established. It had just been a ridge
. . .and so became an island, isolated by the water and in its
natural condition. It was arranged to have it set aside. . .as a
laboratory where individuals interested in natural history might

study natural life as it was and so profit from it. . . .For a time the reserve was handled more or less independently. Zetek, through his professional connections, arranged the sanction to use this area for scientific study. And Barbour, with his own personal means and his many friends, was able to provide the money. Finally it was set up as a . . .special activity under a board composed of the Secretary of Agriculture, the Secretary of the Army, the Secretary of the Smithsonian, and so on and operated in that way. I came into it then, through the Smithsonian angle. The operation had a certain amount of income but not enough. Dr. Barbour and I, who were closely associated in many ways, got the Bureau of the Budget to agree to an appropriation.

FREILICHER: Let me stop you there while we turn the tape over, okay?

[BEGIN SIDE II]

FREILICHER: . . .And you were talking about the Bureau of the Budget. . . .

WETMORE: We. . .were really discussing Barro Colorado Island and its financial situation. . . .

FREILICHER: Yes.

WETMORE: . . .The island had certain income but far from its needs, particularly with increasing costs and more and more interest in the place, with more people wanting to go there. So, as a first thing, the island was set up by act of Congress as an entity (but still with no money). Dr. Barbour and I thought something should be done about this, so we got the Bureau of the Budget to submit an authorization for an appropriation. This was to be a special act of Congress. Of course, it didn't pass, though we got it through the Bureau of the Budget three different times! Finally, the Bureau of the Budget agreed that it should not stand as it was but should be turned over to the Smithsonian Institution. In other words, it came to us and we had to do something about it. And that was its beginning under the Institution, strictly as an orphan with no special funds! But time took care of that. It's been a very successful operation, completely so.

FREILICHER: Indeed. Well, I. . . .

WETMORE: I'm sorry, my voice is bad today.

FREILICHER: That's okay and I think we'll, you know, bring this to a conclusion here because I don't want to overtax you here.

WETMORE: Let me take another one of these things, they'll help me a little bit. Honey and lemon!

FREILICHER: Sounds good.

WETMORE: They're very good.

FREILICHER: Well, you'll need that sunshine in Virginia Beach tomorrow. Well then, let's just. . . I don't know how we can sort of sum up what we've talked about. We've talked about a lot of different things. Maybe if you would just give a personal feeling about what it has been like--what it has meant for you to have been associated with the Smithsonian for these years.

WETMORE: Well, to me it's been a tremendous thing. From the time I finished my studies at the university and came here to Washington, I've been really a part of the Smithsonian. This became closer and closer as time went on, until finally I came on the staff. It has been a truly wonderful association for me. I enjoyed the administrative contact for a number of years. And when I felt it was necessary, both for me and for the Institution, to retire administratively, I was allowed to remain to carry on my research and writing, and also to travel in the name of the Smithsonian. It has been really my life, as I came into contact with the Institution in my early 1920's, I've had over fifty years of close association here.

FREILICHER: Did you never think of leaving? Were there ever opportunities when you could have gone somewhere else?

WETMORE: No, I've never thought of leaving here, except I did consider going elsewhere when I was in the Biological Survey. I had traveled widely for them, made various studies for them in the field and did research of various kinds, but I kept completely away from any administrative responsibilities other than those that concerned my own work. Such duties in that service were too tied down, so impossible for me. When finally it came to a point when I couldn't avoid the matter, I was offered an opportunity here at the Smithsonian. So I decided then that as I knew the administration here, I knew I would get along with it happily. And so I made the change.

FREILICHER: It is often said that the Smithsonian is almost a magical place, that there's a certain special quality about things that are associated with the Smithsonian. Did you ever feel in your experiences that you were directly benefited by that kind of special consideration?

WETMORE: Oh, definitely, no question of that whatever! That feeling has always been with me. . . .In the old days when traveling for agriculture, we were under

the five dollar per diem. Then I regularly estimated in my plans for travel on losing a dollar a day in this country and in foreign travel always at least two dollars, and that was it. I traveled a year for the Biological Survey. . .in southern South America after the passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. There was no information available whatever as to what happened to our migrant birds that got down into that part of the country. My assignment was to go down there and see what I could learn. Of course, at the same time I had a wonderful opportunity to study the local species of birds that were resident there.

I began in the Chaco in Paraguay and continued on down through Argentina, in northern Patagonia. I was in wild country a good bit of the time; in the Chaco, I had contact with a huge American ranching operation up in northern Paraguay. They had a station eighty kilometers west of the Paraguay River, with a little railroad running out to it. They allowed me to locate there for over a month. And from there, I went further back into the Chaco, into the Indian country, where. . .the Indian boys, teenagers, told me they'd heard of white men but they'd never seen one before! [Laughter] I enjoyed that thoroughly, I can assure you.

FREILICHER: In more recent years, as governments began to grow and become more active and political things

became more controversial, did you, in your travels, ever find yourself in difficulties because of a political situation, or did you have a special status as a scientist and as a Smithsonian scientist?

WETMORE: I was traveling for the Smithsonian and for the U. S. government. I never let matters of that kind interfere. I went to Argentina in 1920, soon after the war. Of course, Argentina had been pro-German and, as an American traveling alone, I was far from popular in many, many areas. But when people would tell me that, I asked, "Well, what do you expect to do about it?" Of course, I had my authorities, my identification, who I was and what I was doing. And they said, "No," they didn't think they would, to which I said, "Thank you."

FREILICHER: And they gave you safe passage! Well, it seems to me that you've had. . . .

WETMORE: Of course, I was traveling officially for our government, gathering information. I was received in a very friendly way by the officials down in Buenos Aires. I established contacts with them through the American embassy there, and with no difficulty whatever, they gave me my authorities, identification as to who I was and what I was doing. At various times, when I'd get into a new area, I

would call on the officials, whatever they were, to present my papers, tell them what I was planning to do. Usually they were cooperative, though occasionally I was told, "Well, we don't care much for men like you traveling down here." And I replied, "I understand that. Do you expect to do anything about it?" And they said, "No,". . . .

FREILICHER: . . .You went about your business. [Laughter]
Well, it seems to me you've had really a very exciting, adventuresome career.

WETMORE: Well, I've had a good bit of fun. I've enjoyed it in every way. Of course, while I was getting this information on our migrant birds that go down there for the winter to spend their cold weather season, it was at the same time a wonderful opportunity to make a study and collections of the native species.

FREILICHER: And this is really where you began to develop your specialty, your special interest?

WETMORE: No, I had that since I was fifteen or sixteen years old.

FREILICHER: I see. I don't think I asked you this before. What prompted you to become interested in birds as a young person?

WETMORE: I've always been interested in them since I was five years old.

FREILICHER: Yes. They just fascinated you?

WETMORE: Well. . .my father was a physician and I thought that I would follow his footsteps until I got into the beginning of my university life, when I could see that there was a livelihood in scientific work, which hadn't occurred to me before. So I gave up the other completely.

FREILICHER: Well, these experiences are certainly very interesting and very, very exciting really, and perhaps on a future occasion we can have a session just talking about your travels which would be very worthwhile.

[END SIDE II]

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION ARCHIVES--ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS

A. Wetmore 5/8/74

Procedures followed in the preparation of this manuscript:

- ☒ Typist instructed to make a verbatim transcript
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