

First Oral History Interview

with

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

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by Pamela M. Henson  
Interviewer

for the Smithsonian Institution Archives

HENSON: I just wanted to begin with where you were born, and who your parents were, and what they did, and if you had any brothers and sisters. A little family background would be good.

WEISS: Well, I was born in Shipman, Illinois, which is a small village. I can locate it best by saying that it was not very far from Alton, Illinois; which is just across the river from St. Louis. That, I think, gives a little idea of what part of Illinois. So often, if I say Illinois, people say, "Oh, Chicago, I know someone in Chicago." But downstate, we feel that there's more than Chicago.

HENSON: Well, there is!

WEISS: My father was Gerald Bisset Weiss, and my mother's name was Marie Brueggemann, of course, a very German name. And Weiss is a German name, but interestingly, my grandfather, my father's father, was perhaps partly British. He was born in Northern Ireland. His father was in the British Royal Navy, and they were stationed up around Belfast, I think he was born there. My grandfather's father had come to England from Germany, so there were about three generations there. I don't know when my grandfather came to the United States. My grandmother, whom I remember vaguely, my father's mother, was English, a little English woman; she was his second wife.

I grew up in Shipman as a child, graduated from high school. My mother died when I was five years old. I had a sister, an older sister [Geraldine Marie], I had a brother [Eugene Herbert], and I had a younger sister [Anna Leila]. There was another brother in between my older sister and myself, who died as an infant. My father then eventually married again, and I grew up with a stepmother, whom I called "Aunt Freda," because I had known her before as Aunt Freda. My mother had had a very good friend, whose name was Helena Smith, for whom I was named. She had grown up in and lived in Shipman. Soon after I graduated from high school she wanted me to come to where she was living, which was in Connecticut. I went from Shipman to Darien, Connecticut. Later, I went to Butler Business College, in Butler, Pennsylvania, and I graduated from Wheeler Business College in Birmingham, Alabama. That was where I took the Civil Service examination. I very briefly had positions as a stenographer in construction offices.

HENSON: Where was that?

WEISS: Well, I started in Bessemer, Alabama. Aunt Helena's husband was Superintendent of Construction for United Engineers of Philadelphia and they were doing work for Bessemer Pullman Company, I think it was. I worked for the purchasing office there. From there, I went up to Pennsylvania on a job where I worked for Milo Singer. I had passed the Civil Service examination and he said that, as it was the beginning of the Depression, he was afraid all the construction jobs at that time were going to close, there was going to be very little of that kind of work. He was worried about his own future, and recommended very strongly that I should come to Washington and take a government job, which was very honorable work for a woman to take at that time.

HENSON: Had you ever been to Washington?

WEISS: I had never been to Washington. I didn't know anyone in Washington, but Milo Singer had a friend here in Washington, and he got in touch with her. She was supposed to find a place for me to live, and help me get started. I arrived in Washington and she had gone to Canada. . .

HENSON: Oh, dear!



Portrait of a young Helena Weiss, date unknown.  
Image Number: SIA2013-02865

WEISS: [LAUGHTER] ...but she lived in... I don't know if it was an apartment or just a room... it was in the All States Hotel, which to me was, what I'd call today an old ladies' home. It was where a lot of elderly people lived. They had apartments. I think she had an apartment, really. I felt very blue and unhappy there. In fact, I cried myself to sleep a couple of nights, and decided, "I'm going to find a place." So I went to the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association]. The YWCA was very helpful in locating places at that time, and they were very careful about sending young ladies to proper places. While I was waiting there I met a young lady who was from Minnesota, and the two of us decided that we would look together for a rooming house, and we did. We found a room on "O" Street. She worked for the government and was just reporting, so we lived together for quite a while. During that period of time, I became very well acquainted with Washington because I walked every place that I had to go. I walked to work, from about 20th and "O" Streets, N.W., and every place that I went. I learned Washington very well. But I presume that it was the transportation at that time, I don't really recall, and I didn't have the money to spend on. . . .

HENSON: Did they still have streetcars then?

WEISS: They did have streetcars, yes, and I don't remember... there was a streetcar that went out Connecticut Avenue, because later, when I lived out that direction, I took it. Anyway, I started work in the Veterans Administration [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs].

HENSON: Okay, so that's where you got your start. I can tell from your records, you started the twenty-first of November in 1930.

WEISS: It was?

HENSON: That's what it says. That's your service compensation date. That would not have been an easy time to get a job.

WEISS: It was very difficult. I started in what was called the stenographic pool.  
Are you acquainted with the stenographic pool?

HENSON: What would that entail, working there?

WEISS: Well, there would be a section, with a supervisor and a number of stenographers, who were sent out to different staff members. At that time, not very many of the staff had their own stenographers. They would draw someone from the pool. I was sent to different people, took their dictation, did their letters, and so forth. I think I was about the youngest one in that pool, because most of them had been there for many years. The supervisor was having difficulty with an elderly woman, and I happened to be put at the desk next to her, which was a little hard on me. But, every now and then, when an office wanted a stenographer we went on loan to work there temporarily. I was sent to the top Publicity Office several times, when their secretary was away, which was interesting. I think it was the only thing that helped me survive during that time. [LAUGHTER] It was good experience because I learned to take dictation and transcribe my notes from all kinds of different individuals in various sections of the V.A. [PAUSE] I don't remember how long I was there.

HENSON: I presume it couldn't have been more than. . .

WEISS: . . .about six months, I think, was it. . .

HENSON: . . .or eight months, because I have that as of May 22, 1931, you were a CAF 2-6 junior clerk stenographer, in the Office of Correspondence and Documents, at the Smithsonian.<sup>1</sup> Now how did you make that change? Were you looking for a different job?

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<sup>1</sup> The Office of Correspondence and Documents at the Smithsonian changed names multiple times. The office was established in 1886 as the Department of Correspondence and Records. In 1898, the name was

WEISS: That was when I came to the Smithsonian. No, well, I really was not happy in the Veterans Administration; it wasn't the kind of work I had been. . . . Even the little job that I had when I left Wheeler Business College was as an independent stenographer or secretary. I was really doing secretarial work in that office, and that was my inspiration, at least. So, it was good experience, but it was difficult for me to adjust to that kind of work. It wasn't the kind of employment that I wanted. I hadn't reached the point that I was going out and looking... one didn't look for a job in those times: one was glad to have a job, whatever it was. [LAUGHTER] If you could get a paycheck, that was the most important thing, as it is today, I'm sure. But the supervisor called me one day to her office, and said that her uncle worked in the Smithsonian Institution, and that he needed a stenographer, and would I be interested. Well, I really didn't know very much about the Smithsonian Institution. I probably had done some sightseeing, but purely sightseeing, I knew nothing about it. But I was glad to take anything away from V.A. And I said, "Yes, I would." So she was going to set up an appointment. Then she called me in again and said that she was sorry, but there were two other persons in this pool that she supervised who had seniority, and who were qualified to apply for this position. They would be interviewed, and eventually, if they weren't selected, then I would be called. So, that was a disappointment. I don't remember how long it took, but she finally called me in and said that I was to go over for an interview. I took the streetcar, I remember, to Tenth Street, and walked down Tenth Street right into the Natural History Building. That was my first experience, and only the beginning of [LAUGHTER] walking down Tenth Street to the Natural History Building to see Mr. Herbert [S.] Bryant, who was the chief of Correspondence and Documents.

HENSON: Was that her uncle?

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changed to the Department of Correspondence and Documents. In 1947, the name changed back to the Department of Correspondence and Records. The office finally became the Office of the Registrar in 1951.

WEISS: That was her uncle. I'll think of her name, but right now, I cannot remember her name [Georgia Alexander]. Anyway, I got the job.

HENSON: Great!

WEISS: Mr. Bryant had a secretary and I was the stenographer in the office, at that time. That was in Correspondence and Documents.

HENSON: There were just the three of you, to turn out all that correspondence? How many staff were there in the office?

WEISS: Not very many. Let me see... there was a woman [Mrs. Mary C. Shuman]... I guess she reviewed correspondence that came in, and I think she directed some of it. Many of the routine letters were written in the office. Mr. Bryant would dictate, and some of the letters would become almost form. After I'd been there a while, I got so that some of the letters I wrote from experience, the same repeated inquiries would come in, you know. Correspondence was always sent... any technical questions asked concerning the work of curators in divisions were referred to the curators. At that time, we had a form used for giving the information. Letters were not written in the divisions. The divisions did not have stenographers, individually. Information would come through the head curator's office, and many of them came straight to Correspondence and Records. We would take the information that curators gave us and write the letters.

HENSON: Where did the letters come in to?

WEISS: They came in through the mail room. All mail was delivered to the SI Castle, and any mail that was addressed to the Smithsonian Institution, U. S. National Museum, or any of the departments, would be sent to Mr. Bryant's office. That was the central point for receiving this mail, and the distribution to the curators or to the departments of the museums was from there. I don't think, at that time, there was very much mail that was delivered directly to the divisions and departments. We would take information that came from the curators, as I said, write the letters in C & R. The letters were usually written for the signature of the director of the museum.

HENSON: So [Alexander] Wetmore, for example, would sign. . .

WEISS: Well, yes, Wetmore was the director, you're right.

HENSON: Now where was your office physically located?

WEISS: It was in the Natural History Building, in the west wing, third floor, right next to the director's office. Mr. Bryant worked very closely with the director of the museum because of the work that he did and his contact with all of the staff. I soon found that Mr. Bryant was considered to be the fount of all information in the Smithsonian! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Oh, really? I guess because he'd seen so many of these letters?

WEISS: At that time, the shipping office was under his control. There was one truck that handled the collections, any specimens, or movement of materials that the curators requested. There was one truck that did that for the Smithsonian Institution. There was one truck under Mr. Bryant's supervision, to handle all of that work for the Smithsonian Institution. There was no first aid room and no place to take care of emergencies. Mr. Bryant was the first aid room of the Smithsonian. What he had was a first aid kit, and a little cabinet with a few items and bandages and things like that.



HENSON: I understand that if there was a major injury that occasionally the curators in [Division of] Physical Anthropology who were medical doctors would be called upon.

WEISS: They would be called as persons who could help or advise on something like that, that's right, and that continued. When I went into that office, much later when Mr. Bryant retired, I had this little first aid cabinet, one of the first things I thought we should get rid of. It was interesting, Mr. Bryant, at that time, as part of his curative... what should I say... liquids, [LAUGHTER] had a bottle of bourbon, or something of that kind... I'm getting ahead in time, but at his retirement party, when I was called into the office, briefly (I thought), acting, until they found someone to take his place, he looked so embarrassed, and showed that he had... this, and he pulled out this bottle. [LAUGHTER] He said that he didn't think that should remain in the office, with a lady in charge! [LAUGHTER] So the bottle was removed, but all of the other curative medicines and first-aid items remained.

HENSON: Would people come in frequently for them?

WEISS: Yes, if they were cut or something happened that needed attention; or if they felt sick or dizzy, we'd find something to help them, then tried to refer them elsewhere if necessary.

HENSON: That's a big responsibility, actually.

WEISS: Yes, it was. [LAUGHTER] Fortunately, it wasn't very long, this is going on beyond Mr. Bryant's time, that the arrangements were made with the [United States] Department of Justice to have access to their first aid room at 10th and Constitution Avenue. We used to do that.

HENSON: Did they have an actual nurse on duty?

WEISS: Oh, yes. And, I believe, a doctor on call. That was really a step forward.  
[LAUGHTER]

HENSON: I'm sure! Well, I know Dr. [T. Dale] Stewart worried even about the medical care that he dispensed.

WEISS: I'm sure he did. He was a medical doctor, as well.

HENSON: Interesting responsibility for Correspondence and Records. Now what was Mr. Bryant like?

WEISS: He was a very kind, likeable person. I think he was very efficient in his work. He liked people, and people liked Mr. Bryant. I think he was very well-liked and respected throughout the U. S. National Museum, which extended beyond what would now be the two museums because, again, his responsibility at that time included the collections that were transferred to other bureaus later on.

HENSON: So that would be the natural history collection, the history collections, the art collections, the air and space collections, all of that. You would be handling the correspondence for all those groups?

WEISS: That's right.

HENSON: That's a big job. It seems that at any central office it's sometimes hard to work out the authority with the units that you have to deal with. How did he go about doing that? Was it because of his personality he could deal with people? How did he get people to work with him smoothly?

WEISS: Well, I presume--I haven't thought of that before--in handling the correspondence, and in working with them, and of course with the Shipping Office, I don't know if I mentioned that was also under his jurisdiction, and all the collections, theoretically, came through his office. I say "theoretically," because naturally, collections did not, but the handling of the collections through the shipping office, as well as the correspondence for the U. S. National Museum; in that way, he couldn't help but have contact with staff members in all of those departments. And they had to work with Mr. Bryant. He was a very agreeable person and a very knowledgeable person in what he was doing, so that all staff knew Mr. Bryant.

Also, it used to be common, when I first went there, to say, "If you want to know anything, call Bryant," and they'd call Bryant, and Bryant would have the answers; and if he didn't, he could find out. That's something I've always said when I've been asked about answering questions that came in letters. I said we'd always answer them. I felt very strongly that we should answer all inquiries, because I think it was important that we serve the public in that light. I said that we could always give them an answer. For one thing, we had specialists in almost any science. We had the authority here in the Smithsonian. Also if we didn't know, we usually could tell them where they could find the information. This is the important thing.

HENSON: It was probably, in some ways, a very interesting operation, to see all these inquiries coming in and out. . . .

WEISS: Oh, it was fascinating.

HENSON: Did you learn much, handling this?

WEISS: Well, I've always said that really my education continued from business college through the Smithsonian Institution, and was more diverse than I would have had at any college. I can't remember how long I was in Correspondence and Documents. . . .

HENSON: The first point at which I have you in [Department of] Geology is 1934; so I guess 1931 to 1934.<sup>2</sup>

WEISS: Well, there was an opening in the Department of Geology. But in between time I worked in... the Department of Anthropology. I think I have my papers on that, because Dr. [Walter] Hough was the head curator of anthropology at that time. I reported to him, but I was assigned to the Division of Ethnology where Mr. Herbert Krieger was curator. But the work I did primarily, in the beginning, was for Dr. [Henry Bascom] Collins.



Photograph of Helena M. Weiss at work, acquired from her personal scrapbook, c. 1930s.  
Image Number: SIA2018-109866E

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<sup>2</sup> The audio states the year as 1935, but Helena Weiss corrected the year to 1934. The scheduled salary rolls (RU 46, Box 45) from 1934 confirm that she was working in the Department of Geology in 1934.

HENSON: And then what were you doing for him?

WEISS: Translating his field notes from his excursions and his research up in Alaska. He worked up in Point Barrow; he was way up in the most northern part of Alaska. He was one of the first, he and James Ford, to go up there and do this kind of work among the Eskimos. Of course, I thought it was fascinating, although it was really "translating" his field notes that were written in pencil in the field notebooks.

HENSON: You learned his handwriting well, I take it.

WEISS: Right. So from there, when Dr. Bassler was the head curator of geology, I moved to the Department of Geology.

HENSON: Along here you were moving along because you had moved up to a CAF-4. So I guess you'd moved up in steps a little bit.

WEISS: Oh, yes, that was really moving up. You can imagine I thought I'd just about reached the peak. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Go back a little bit. In these years, how badly was the Smithsonian affected by the Depression? Did you have enough supplies, and staff, et cetera? Or was it hard to get by during those years?

WEISS: No, I don't think the Smithsonian had supplies and staff problems. In a way, I don't want to talk about something in which I don't have all the information, but the Smithsonian did a lot of work during the war for the military. I guess you know that. They had the War Background Series, do you remember that?

HENSON: . . .which Henry Collins was involved in.

WEISS: Various staff members did certain sections of the War Background Series. Through that, they were sometimes able to get a little more assistance with stenographic and clerical help. Now, I really shouldn't say this, because I'm not certain just how much came from outside, but I do know that there were some of the officers from the military who came over and briefly had offices in the Natural History Building, and of course, they brought help with them. But it was very difficult with supplies and everything was screened carefully, and, certainly, not enough help.

The curators, really, did all of their own work. They received their collections; they cataloged. Usually, there would be a cataloger, as I recall, for a department. If you had a department, anthropology, for instance, had ethnology, archeology and physical anthropology, I think were the divisions, and there would be a cataloger that would do the cataloging, for a while. But I think they eventually got their own catalogers. It was the same way in the Department of Geology, when I moved there. I remember one time, one of the staff members wanted me to take the job of cataloger, in invertebrate paleontology, or vertebrate paleontology, but I didn't think I wanted to be a cataloger.

HENSON: I don't think it would be quite as interesting.

WEISS: It would be interesting, and I think I could have found it interesting, in learning more about the collections, and so forth, but I like people too much. A cataloger is not involved with people and doesn't have the association with the staff as much.

HENSON: How heavy was the workload in Correspondence and Records in those early years? Were you able to keep up with it, or did you always feel that you were behind?

WEISS: I think that Mr. Bryant, remarkably, was able to keep up with it very well. Actually, there was just Dorothy [P.] Etheridge, I think was her name, his secretary, and I, the two of us did all the correspondence. You asked in the beginning how many, and I don't know whether I answered that. There was Mrs. [Mary B. C.] Shuman in charge of correspondence. Then there was a man [Phillip N. Wisner] in charge of the shipping, and the shipping papers, and that part of the office.

HENSON: Now was he Lester Commerford?

WEISS: No, Lester... that's the documents part. That's right, it was the Office of Correspondence and Documents. At that time, documents, would you believe, referred to the distribution of all the publications of the Smithsonian Institution.

HENSON: So was that like the International Exchange Service?

WEISS: The International Exchange Service was different. This was what really is your editors' office....

HENSON: Yes, so it was an extension of [Paul H.] Oehser's type of work. [Webster P.] Web True was there.

WEISS: Well, now, editor... I don't know what it would be called today. The Smithsonian publications, for instance, their annual reports and that sort of thing, what office handles that?

HENSON: [Smithsonian Institution] SI Press.

WEISS: Well then, it was the press. It was what would today be press, but I think.

HENSON: It was called Editorial and Publications Division, back then.

WEISS: That was documents, and that was all handled through Mr. Bryant's office. Lester Commerford was the assistant chief of [Office of] Correspondence and Documents.

HENSON: I had just the names of some of the... Dorothy P. Etheridge, so she was assistant clerk-stenographer. There's Helena Weiss!

WEISS: You found her!

HENSON: Oh, yes!

WEISS: There was Mrs. Shuman, who handled correspondence with a firm hand.

HENSON: All right, yes, Mrs. Shuman, now she was in your office as well?

WEISS: She was in Mr. Bryant's office at that time.

HENSON: Mary B. C. Shuman?

WEISS: Mary B. C. Shuman.

HENSON: And what about Mabel [P.] Hollister? Was she in your office?

WEISS: Not that I know. She may have been before I was there.

HENSON: Then in shipping there was Lawrence [L.] Oliver, was a clerk then.

WEISS: Oh yes, can you believe?



HENSON: And Lewis [E.] Perry, it says his name was, a shipper?

WEISS: Yes, Perry. When I went in Mr. Bryant's position, Perry was the shipping clerk, at that time. And soon after that, I think he. . . . [PAUSE]

HENSON: Did you have much contact with Dr. Wetmore's office? You mentioned they were right next door. Was he someone you would see very often?

WEISS: When Louise [M.] Pearson went on vacation or was absent, I was usually sent in to his office, and helped him.

[BEGIN REEL II]

HENSON: We are just picking up with the fact that you would be sent over every once in a while to Dr. Wetmore's office to work with him. What was he like to work with?

WEISS: I admired him very greatly. Of course, I was rather awed to be doing the work in his office but he was such a perfect gentleman, and so agreeable to work with, that I felt rather at ease. I've always been a great admirer of Dr. Wetmore.

HENSON: What was the workload like in his office?

WEISS: Workload was tremendous! And he had a secretary who was really the tops. She was known as the fastest typist in the Smithsonian. You could come to the door of her office, and her typewriter... and it was old-fashioned type, kind of typewriter, you know. . .

HENSON: . . .manual. . . .

WEISS: And she could really make that typewriter talk! I've never heard anything like it! And this was the thing that worried me when I went in there, because I couldn't type like that in the first place. But she was just terrific. She did all of his manuscripts, and Dr. Wetmore continued his research, his manuscript work and publications during his tenure in office as director. She did all that, she did all his correspondence, and handled it, and was a terrific person to work with the staff. But there was a lot of work in that office. That was for the U. S. National Museum, which eventually became the Museum of History and Technology and the Museum of Natural History. It was divided into the two museums.

HENSON: And he was in charge of essentially the whole thing, then, which was a real different set-up than now.

WEISS: The museum that became the Museum of History and Technology, really was where the offices were here at the [Arts and Industries] A & I Building. [Department of] Engineering and Industries was one, the Department of History, which included military history, well, all of history, actually. It was finally divided into military history, later. But at that time, it was just Department of History. So we actually worked with the curators of those departments. That was when I first knew Mr. Frank [A.] Taylor.

HENSON: How much contact would you have with the curators?

WEISS: You always had contact, I guess, through the telephone as well as in handling the papers. It was their central office for what would be office work in connection with the Smithsonian correspondence that came in through Mr. Bryant's office.

HENSON: So there was constant contact. Now you think of there being a lot of older people. Were there many younger people around the Institution at that time?

WEISS: No, there really were not very many. The day when Mr. Bryant retired, they were having a retirement party, he didn't want it, but they were having one, and he invited Grace, her name is Cooper now. . .

HENSON: . . .Rogers.

WEISS: He invited Grace Rogers and Margaret Brown, who became Margaret Brown Klapthor, over to his party. We all had business with them, but I had never met them. He said that he thought I should meet some younger people in the Smithsonian, and of course they were younger. [LAUGHTER] I don't know how long Grace had been there, but I got acquainted with them, and we became very good friends, since. I was so glad to meet them. But even in the curators' offices, especially in natural history, where my office was located, there were older women in those offices. They were very nice women, and I enjoyed knowing them, and everything, but there really were not very many young people.

HENSON: It doesn't seem like there were all that many around that period of time. But there were some of the younger curators. T. Dale Stewart wasn't that old, or Henry Collins. . . .

WEISS: He was still taking courses at G. W. [George Washington University], I know. I was living in a boarding house on "K" Street, and I took some classes in geology over there, when I was in the Department of Geology, and I used to run into T. Dale Stewart racing there from "K" Street to G. W. and back. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: He kept busy, in those years.

WEISS: Well there were probably some younger curators, but I did know a lot of the older ones, and I'm glad that I was able to become acquainted with them, and some of the well-known scientists, some of the geologists that worked with Dr. Bassler. It's interesting now to think that I knew a lot of the older ones.

HENSON: When you were in Correspondence and Documents, there was apparently a lot of contact with Dr. Wetmore. How much contact would you have with Dr. [Charles Greeley] Abbot's office, and the [Harry W. and Nicholas W.] Dorseys?

WEISS: Not a great deal. We did to a certain extent, Mr. Bryant probably had. I knew Dr. Abbot. I can tell you an interesting story on that. I'll tell you later.

HENSON: Now I understand, in those days, [Nicholas W.] Dorsey used to literally give out the pay himself.

WEISS: There were two Dorseys. Harry Dorsey, and Nick. Also, of course, the Personnel Office... I'm trying to think who. . . .

HENSON: Mr. Traylor? And Bertha [T.] Carwithen?

WEISS: There was a Mrs. Carwithen. Bertha Carwithen. I think she took my fingerprints. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Processed you. . .

WEISS: . . .went through that process. . . . But there was always Mr. Bryant, of course. In those days, I feel like the whole Smithsonian was like one big family, in a way, as far as the top staff was concerned, because they all had to work together rather closely, maybe because they were not spread out as much as today and they did not have the stenographic help. The curators did their own work and had to work with anybody that could help them with their collections. They didn't have museum aides, in the beginning, in that side of things. So everybody got more acquainted, well, at least with Mr. Bryant's office. I did hear criticism later that often when younger women came into the divisions as stenographers, they felt like they were more or less isolated in those offices. They had no way of getting out and getting acquainted. But in Mr. Bryant's office, which was the central office, that wasn't true.

HENSON: You were meeting almost everyone. That was a very unusual function.

WEISS: Yes, it was kind of a conglomeration.

HENSON: But, interesting for that reason. How did you come to switch to the Department of Geology? Had that been a promotion, or just a different kind of work? When you switched over to geology, how did that job come about?

WEISS: I'm afraid that Dr. Bassler worked that. [PAUSE] He needed a secretary, he had to have somebody in his office, and I guess. . . . Did I get a promotion when I went there? I can't remember.

HENSON: I don't see one immediately.

WEISS: No, I don't think I did. Anyway, somehow there was a possibility that it was going to be a step up for me, and Dr. Bassler worked that out.

HENSON: Eventually you did, not immediately, but eventually you went up to a five.

WEISS: It wasn't that I, personally, wanted to leave any office. My feeling, my recollection, is that I went to the Department of Geology from the Department of Anthropology, instead of directly from Correspondence and Records.

HENSON: I simply pulled that from what I could find, so that it's quite probable that I could be missing something.

WEISS: And of course, there would be the one advantage that I'd be moving up, because I was assigned to the division, I was working for Mr. Krieger in the Division of Ethnology, and I was going to step up to the head curator's office in geology. Dr. Hough had his secretary... some man that had been there for years. I can't remember his name, but he'd been with Dr. Hough for so long. . . .

HENSON: Was that George [D.] McCoy?

WEISS: That's who it was. George McCoy. I think he had been there for years and years, and they got along very well. So I presume, without a real firm recollection, that in a way, it was a step up for me to be able to go into the head curator's office, because there was the Division of Mineralogy, Vertebrate Paleontology and Invertebrate Paleontology, and the head curator. Dr. Bassler, also, was the head of the Department of Geology of George Washington University, and so, on the side, I did a little bit of his work in connection with that. I attended some of his classes, and I went on field trips with his classes, and things like that.

HENSON: So you got to learn something about the field?

WEISS: I had a real course in geology! Dr. [William Frederick] Foshag was the curator of mineralogy at that time.

HENSON: I put a list of names together, who I think were there early on. It would have been Bassler, and then [Charles Elmer] Resser.

WEISS: Oh, Dr. Resser, yes. He was curator of invertebrate paleontology.

HENSON: . . .and Foshag. . .

WEISS: He was mineralogy.

HENSON: . . .And then [G. Arthur] Cooper. . .

WEISS: Well, Cooper, yes. He was curator in invertebrate paleontology.

HENSON: . . .And [Edward Porter] Henderson. . .

WEISS: . . .Henderson, in Division of Mineralogy (meteorites).

HENSON: And I don't think [George S.] Switzer was there yet, or [Alfred Richard] Loeblich [Jr.]; they came in later.

WEISS: Not then, but Switzer followed Dr. Foshag. Dr. [Charles] C. W. Gilmore was vertebrate paleontology. I worked with him, for a while there. All that staff in vertebrate paleontology, that was always fascinating, their laboratory.

HENSON: And there were several people... Theresa Blumenthal. . . .

WEISS: She was the secretary to Dr. Foshag.

HENSON: And then Marion [F.] Willoughby?

WEISS: I think that she was what would be known as the cataloger. She did the cataloging work, and I think it was almost department-wide. I don't know that she did it for vertebrate paleontology, but she was the cataloger. I'd forgotten. I never remember her name.

HENSON: And then there were two aides in the department, Jessie [G.] Beach and James [H.] Benn. Now Jessie is almost an apocryphal character... [LAUGHTER] is this true?

WEISS: I think so. I don't know what you heard, but I think that's true.  
[LAUGHTER]

HENSON: What was she like?

WEISS: You know, it isn't very easy for me to describe people. For one thing, I have never been a person who gossips about anybody, I can't do that. She was a difficult person to get along with, just like the lady in the Veterans Administration that I had such a hard time getting along with, but we did. Jessie Beach, I think, resented me coming into that job, although I don't know who was Dr. Bassler's secretary before. Maybe Theresa Blumenthal was, but she was assigned to Dr. Foshag. I don't know. Jessie, I guess she resented me, a younger person coming into that position. So it took quite a while for us to have a good congenial association, which we did, finally. There was somebody else there in the department, and that was Margaret [W.] Moodey; do you know about her?

HENSON: Right.

WEISS: What was her title?



HENSON: As far as I could tell she just worked on some indexes. Let me see if I can find a title.

WEISS: I knew her very well, and we got along fine, and she kind of helped me. She was an older person, and I became very fond of her, because in a way, she was helping me during the difficult time with some of the people I had to work with.

HENSON: I know that she worked on an indexing project, I believe with Bassler.

WEISS: With Bassler, it must have been. Well, Jessie Beach did, too, did something like that. I think she really was put under his office because of difficulties in other places that she worked. It's one of those things that happens. Probably Dr. Bassler accepted her. . .

HENSON: . . .could, at least, work out some way to work with her. What did Jessie Beach do in the department?

WEISS: Well that's the thing I'm trying to think of. I thought she had something to do with the collections. I don't think she did cataloging.

HENSON: Jessie Beach's title was "aide." She was an aide in the department.

WEISS: Well then she must have worked in some way with the collections. Her problem was getting along with people. You know there were, not really part of the staff of the museum, but there were people there from USGS [United States Geological Survey] and the [United States] Department of Agriculture. . . . I think Jessie came through this group from Agriculture. If I'm not mistaken, that's the way she came. Let me see that... [PAUSE] She had some work with the collections... but frankly. . . .

HENSON: . . .And Jimmy Benn?

WEISS: Now, he was an aide, also, for mineralogy.

HENSON: Now, Margaret Moodey was a scientific aide. That what's her title was. Then, Norman Boss was the preparator. . .

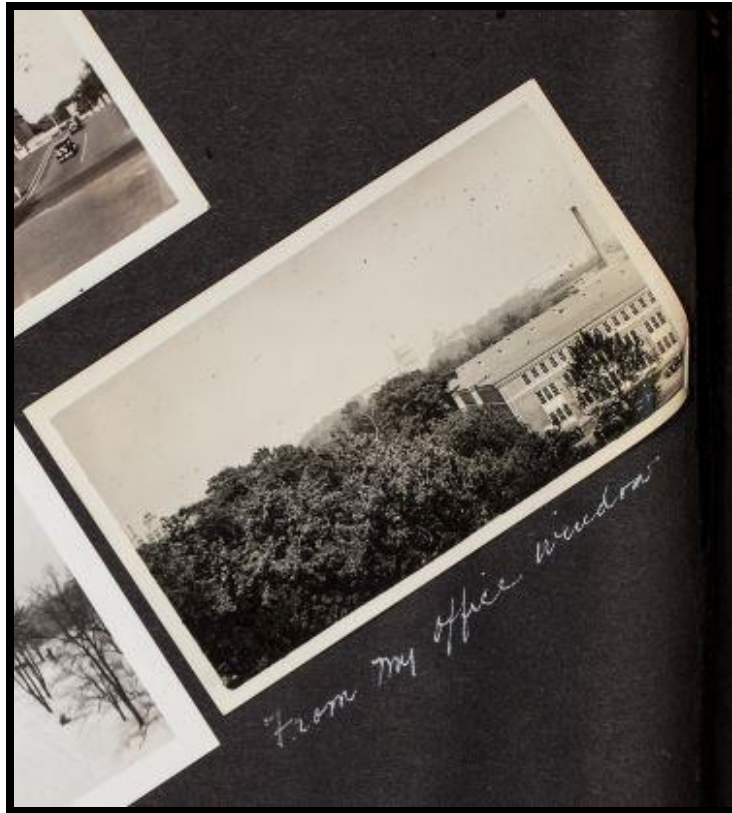
WEISS: . . .in vertebrate paleontology. He was in the laboratory, the head of the laboratory in vertebrate paleontology. That was very interesting at that time. Mr. [Bertel O.] Reberholt had the lab where they polish minerals and specimens, and where they cut slices out of the minerals, and that sort of thing. That was fascinating. He did that for years and years and years. It was down in the same area as vertebrate paleontology, with the laboratory for assembling the fossils. That's where they assembled the big dinosaur. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: So, you got to see that stuff going on. Then there was somebody named Betty Kellett, for a brief period of time, but she may have been there after you left. And someone named Enna B. Uphoff.

WEISS: Yes. I think she was the secretary of invertebrate paleontology.

HENSON: That was most of the people in that department then. Where was that department located?

WEISS: Geology? It was in the east wing on the top floor, third floor. East wing of the Natural History Building. At that time I had the corner office, looking out at the Capitol. I got to look out at the Capitol from my office, and I loved it. I thought I had a really nice office. That was the head curator's office in that corner. Then, invertebrate paleontology, Dr. Resser, who was the curator, was right next to that, in the hall. The other way, down the other hall, was mineralogy. Then on down were the offices of the USGS staff. We worked with them, too. I knew all of those men.



View from the office of Helena M. Weiss, probably at the Department of Geology, c. 1930s.  
Image Number: SIA2018-109830C

HENSON: So that would have been, let's see, Dr. [Edward Oscar] Ulrich, [Hugh Dinsmore] Miser, and [Rector Duvall] Mesler, and Josiah Bridge, and Roland [W.] Brown. Mr. [August Frederick] Foerste, I guess, was a research associate.

WEISS: Foerste, yes. He was very elderly, and probably around retirement then.

HENSON: I think he had already retired but. . .

WEISS: . . .they finished, but they continued their work. Then there was Dr. Kirk, Edwin Kirk.

HENSON: He was the one who died there, wasn't he?

[RECORDER TURNED OFF]

HENSON: We have most of the staff. I don't know if [John Bernard] Reeside [Jr.] and [Timothy William] Stanton, they were the supervisors?

WEISS: Dr. Reeside was the head of that group.

HENSON: That was actually a fairly large group of people then.

WEISS: Yes, down that hall, which would be... I don't know if you know Natural History [Building], but on that third floor, the corner room would be here and then the hall this way would be going to the north, and all the way down the hall that led into anthropology. That was all geology in there and invertebrate paleontology. Then there was a hall in between, and that was mineralogy. Connected with that was the office that, I haven't any idea what they called it, but have you heard of the "beetle pit"?

HENSON: Is that where they had the dermestids? Oh, so that was on your floor?

WEISS: Well, I don't think they actually had the beetles there. The place where they had the dermestids was out back of the Smithsonian Institution [Building], but in connection with that, they used to clean the bones in another way, which was by, I'll say "boiling." I don't know what they did, but they did it in water, steaming it. That was right next to mineralogy, and it caused a great deal of difficulty when I first went there... [LAUGHTER] because it could be kind of odorous, around there. So eventually the whole operation was moved over back of the Smithsonian next to Dr. Abbot's little laboratory, out there, his sun. . .

HENSON: . . .his solar observatory. Dr. Cooper mentioned he got into trouble because he was doing some acid stuff, which eventually leaked. [LAUGHTER]

WEISS: That was a project of his which eventually became very famous, I mean, he was really doing some excellent work, and he fought hard on that. He really did a great job, but I guess he had his problems.

HENSON: [LAUGHTER] The piping wore out!

WEISS: [LAUGHTER] He told you about that! Well, this was sort of the same thing. But it just crossed my mind when I said that this was the hall of mineralogy; down the end was this. . . . [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Probably not the most charming part of your work area, right?

WEISS: No!

HENSON: What was the workload there? Were you fairly busy, or was it quieter?

WEISS: Fairly busy, because Theresa Blumenthal did the correspondence and worked for Dr. Foshag for that division, and then there was someone down in vertebrate paleontology. Vertebrate paleontology was down in the basement, below our office. But the correspondence that was referred over to those divisions from Mr. Bryant's office came through Dr. Bassler's office, and then we'd send it to the divisions. They would write the information on an information sheet, we had a regular form for that, and then, finally, I wrote most of those letters. They came from the divisions to me. In that way, I worked with all the staff. And from there, the letters would go back to Mr. Bryant's office.

HENSON: And would Wetmore still sign them then?

WEISS: That's a good question. I'm not sure. I wouldn't be surprised if they were.

HENSON: It was for a good many years. I may just look some of them up. We have Wetmore's correspondence.

WEISS: A lot of the inquiries and things that came in, we had so many that would come from schools, I can tell you more about that when I get into my office... they were just a general run of questions, routine questions. They weren't the type of things you would keep as permanent. In Correspondence and Records we had what we called our temporary files, so that many of those letters were never kept. It would be interesting, that's what I'm wondering, if they were still signed by the director. I'm not sure about that.

HENSON: I wonder when that changed.

WEISS: I'd like to know. Maybe I can give some thought to that. See if I can remember when there was a change.

HENSON: As the secretary in the department, would you have handled, for example, procurement for the department, as well, if you needed supplies, and that sort of thing?

WEISS: I really didn't handle the procurement. In a way, I think that the curators' offices, and that was, say, Theresa Blumenthal, or whoever was handling the individual office, would make up the requisitions. But they always came through the head curator for approval, and then on to the supply division.

HENSON: Did you have a fairly centralized supply division for office supplies and things in those days?

WEISS: The Office of Supplies, I think it was called. It was as simple as that.  
[LAUGHTER] As far as I recall, that's what it was called.

HENSON: . . .Because they don't maintain very much in the way of supplies here, anymore. You go through GSA [General Services Administration] now.

WEISS: Oh, do they?

HENSON: That's fairly different, because then, most of your office supplies. . .

WEISS: . . .for your general run of supplies, of office supplies, yes. But of course, the things that had to be bought outside were finally purchased through GSA. But I think, way in the beginning, before GSA, what was there in the government? I don't know. It'd be interesting.

HENSON: Not as much competitive bidding, perhaps. You just got what prices you could.

WEISS: No, but they did have certain guidelines, and certainly Lawrence Oliver was in charge of that. They had their guidelines and they had certain places where they would do their purchasing, and they had certain standards that they had to follow. Sometimes they weren't always the best--they used to complain because they couldn't get the best--but they had to keep us within budgets, and whatnot, too.

HENSON: How was the financing in that department? Did you have enough money to function, or did they need more cases and equipment?

WEISS: Always.

HENSON: Always? [LAUGHTER]

WEISS: I don't think I've ever known a time in the Smithsonian when they haven't needed more cases and more supplies! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Now, how was it space-wise, then? Were you fairly well crowded in, or did they have enough space, because this is before the wings were put on, right?

WEISS: Yes, oh yes. I guess that it was the same story that everybody wished for more space. Collections have a way of outgrowing the space, wherever they are. Dr. Bassler always told the story about when he first went in as head curator, I guess, for geology. The geology collections that were brought in from the field in the beginning were stored under the floor here in the A & I Building. Have you heard that?

HENSON: No!

WEISS: And one of the first things when he became head curator was to get those boxes out from under the floor in the A & I Building, and get them over to the Natural History Building. Now that was before my time. I think it was before I was here on this earth. [LAUGHTER] But I presume it was after the Natural History Building was built. I don't remember the exact dates of that, but it was nineteen. . .

HENSON: ...-eleven; last year was the seventy-fifth anniversary. It would be 1911 when it opened up.

WEISS: That was it. Well, I presume it would have been after that, you see. But that's going way back, and that's only repeating what he told me, which I thought was quite an interesting story. They had to take up the floors. These were the collections that were brought in from the field. They didn't have space for them. They didn't have space, even if they took them out of the boxes, to work with them, until they got the new building.



HENSON: I don't know if this occurred during the years when you were in the department, but at one point I came across some memos that the dome was cracking, the dome to the Natural History Building. I don't know if you remember that at all.

WEISS: No.

HENSON: They wanted geology to move things down from the third floor because the stone was too heavy.

WEISS: Oh, yes, I think I've heard about that, but I don't think I experienced it.

HENSON: That wasn't in the years you were there.

WEISS: I have heard about that, when everyone worried about the weight.

HENSON: Yes. They actually did have to work on the dome for a couple of years to close that up.

WEISS: That's one thing before my time. I'm beginning to think I'm Methuselah!  
[LAUGHTER]

HENSON: No! See, not all these things! Now, would the curators in your department during those years go out in the field very much, in geology?

WEISS: I don't think curators ever go in the field as much as they would like to, but [LAUGHTER] they did go into the field, and they brought in collections and that work was very interesting. I used to, in the head curator's office, work on some of the papers in connection with their fieldwork.

HENSON: How about manuscripts? Would they, in those years, have the time to do much scientific publication?

WEISS: You know, I think that Jessie Beach did some of the manuscript work. I really think that may have been what she did. I've been trying to think, but, yes, they had to have their manuscripts done. I did some of Dr. Bassler's, but I really didn't have time to do a lot of that. I think she did. I think she typed more manuscripts and did that kind of work. I did some editing. [PAUSE]

HENSON: Was there a lot of contact back and forth with the USGS people and the National Museum people? How was that worked out? Did they have their own secretaries?

WEISS: Yes, I think they had their own secretaries. So far as I know, I don't think that they could really use museum secretarial and clerical help, except if it was in some way related to the collections. But I don't think they did. As far as I know, the relationship between the two, the USGS and the museum staff was very good. They were almost... actually, when you worked in a department like that, you almost felt like they were part of the staff of the museum. And I think that a lot of them, some of them, were here during their entire career. I know some of the agriculture people were, who were in entomology, and so forth. While they weren't really museum employees, they worked in the museum for their whole career.

[END INTERVIEW]