

Fourth Oral History Interview

with

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

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by Pamela M. Henson
Interviewer

for the Smithsonian Institution Archives

HENSON: We're going to pick up with loan policy in the museum. I was going to ask was there a museum-wide policy for loaning type specimens, or was it department-by-department, or division-by-division? Were there rules? How would you determine if a type specimen could go out?

WEISS: I would say that when I first came into the office, the policy was rather firmly established that we did not loan type specimens. That's my recollection. It was difficult to adhere to that all the time because many of the curators would feel that there were instances that it was very important to loan type specimens. I think that we did adhere to it in most cases, that types did not leave the Smithsonian, but it finally came to the point that there were some exceptions. A colleague would come here to study, and later they had to see certain type specimens. Of course, our staff wanted to borrow type specimens, and I think that this entered into the final decision, so that in some instances we, really, almost had to overlook this ruling. In that case, I would say... and I would hate to be firm about that... I would think that we left it to each individual instance, or depending on each individual circumstance, the curator strongly making his recommendation. I can't say whether that was finally approved by the director, or if the curator went ahead and made his decision. I am quite certain that before we actually sent the specimens out, it was approved by the directors, too. For the most part, I would say the policy was that we did not loan type specimens. It would be a case of the exception, rather than the rule.

HENSON: You wouldn't just send them out. Was there much distribution of specimens to other museums or to schools, if we had extras?

WEISS: It's kind of hard for me to think of the sequence in that, but I think that when I first came in, my understanding was that all the collections that were actually accessioned could not be sent out. They were permanently in the collection. Maybe this was true more in [the National Museum of] American History or the Museum of History and Technology, because there they didn't have the vast collection of materials being brought in that were collected from the field, as in natural history. This was entirely different. In the Museum of History and Technology, for the most part, we did not give away any specimens. Especially, it was felt, that we would run into the circumstance of a donor having given an item believing it would be kept. Donors might come in at any time saying either they gave, their mother gave, their grandmother gave something to the Museum of History and Technology and they wanted to see this item. Of course, in the first place, we would know where it would or should be, and secondly, it was a question of whether we could find it... So there was a little trepidation about actually giving away anything from those collections at that time. It may be that as the collections were built up and individual items could not be identified--I think my memory fails me. . . I'm not sure.

In natural history collections, there were vast collections that were collected in the field. Our curators went into the field, and of course brought in large amounts of miscellaneous materials that were sorted and classified in the offices and labs here. The relevant specimens were retained in the permanent collections for further study and identification. That left the question of what to do with the duplicate materials. The museum finally started the program of making up school collections, triggered undoubtedly by the correspondence received from school children. Many small schools out in the country at that time were not accessible to materials that would be helpful to them--communication and transportation not being what it is today. The school collections were made up, and that was quite a program. I do not remember just how it was handled. However, I believe that when I first started in the Office of Correspondence and Documents in 1931, the Assistant Chief, Lester [E.] Commerford, handled the shipping out of those collections. I do not believe it continued up until the time I retired, but I'm not sure.

HENSON: I know Dr. [Harald A.] Rehder has mentioned that they did them in his department.

WEISS: Seashells, and some fossils, and some collections, such as minerals and botany, would tend to build up duplicate materials. Instead of throwing them away, it would be easy to make them up... not easy, it took time and it took someone to do this, but it was really a very worthwhile thing to do, I think.

HENSON: Yes, it seemed to be a big program for a while; then it did taper off.

WEISS: It did taper off. That's my recollection, really I was happy about it, because I always had a strong feeling that schoolchildren out through the country needed help. We always tried especially to answer their questions, even though they might be routine. Sometimes we could refer them to the *National Geographic* [Magazine] to get their answers [LAUGHTER], which was one of our sources of information... these were the routine questions that did not have to be referred to the scientists. I felt that the children needed help, because in those early years they did not have access to libraries, they did not have access to collections of the kind that we could give them. I thought that this was an important program for the Smithsonian to do in its dissemination of knowledge! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Absolutely, it's our mandate! It seemed to really hum along there for a while.

WEISS: But it did end... is that your information that it did end?

HENSON: Oh, yes.

WEISS: I'm sure. By the time I retired, I think that program died out.

HENSON: It's something that seemed to be really big around the War [World War II], after the war.

WEISS: It was probably a part of that time, when it was hard for people to. . . .

HENSON: It may be, after the schools got all the extra financial support after *Sputnik*, that they didn't need that kind of help, they were able to purchase things themselves. That's around the time it appears to have died out.

WEISS: It filled a period of time when we thought it was necessary, and I thought it was really very helpful.

HENSON: Valuable, yes. Now, I noticed that your office, for these loans and exchanges, of course there were loans for exhibits as well, had also to deal with the problem of insurance. How did insurance work? Did we have insurance on the specimens here?

WEISS: In the Smithsonian? Not to my knowledge, no, not for the vast collections.

HENSON: But if something were going to be loaned out, what would you do then about insurance?

WEISS: Well, this is something that sort of grew up, I guess, from necessity. I'm thinking about loans that were made. . . . The matter of transporting specimens-- particularly art collections and things of monetary value--was a problem, because we were taking a chance to send these things out by whatever means we had to use. It became necessary to have insurance, so I think then it was decided that we would look into insurance. We would insure in cases where it was necessary during transportation.

My recollection of the first contact we had for valuable items was with Huntington [T.] Block. He was with an insurance company... right now I can't remember the name. It seems to me it was McLaughlin, but maybe I can think of that. Then he later became independent. That was probably around the time when I was leaving... I'm not sure... when he had set up his own insurance company. He was particularly interested in art items and insurance, so he was able to be very helpful when we needed help in insuring art collections or art pieces that were sent out on loan. I'm not sure with the [Smithsonian Institution] Traveling Exhibition Service, whether he may have helped with their insurance... in sending out their exhibits. He probably insured for them when Annemarie Pope was in charge of traveling exhibits.

HENSON: That would be a problem because they have so much going out all the time. It seemed that there was more of this going on once NCFAs [National Collection of Fine Arts] was revitalized and was moving out of Natural History [Building].

WEISS: I wouldn't be surprised if that was the period when it was necessary. Of course, NCFAs collections had been in the Natural History Building, and their office was there. When they had to move all their collections and offices, then they did become more active, as you say. It was probably at that time... the exact period, it would be hard for me to remember.

HENSON: Now, if someone loaned something to us, would we arrange to insure it while we had it? Do you remember offhand?

WEISS: That's a good question. [PAUSE] I don't remember that we insured items held here. Our office would have been involved probably only with shipping or transportation problems.

HENSON: You could think of smaller museums that might not be able to afford to insure. It seemed like one of the problems was in 1969 when we shipped a statue from Italy called the *Europa*. It was damaged, and you seemed to have handled all of the claim forms and everything for that.

WEISS: *Europa*, that should ring a bell with me, probably, but I do not remember it. I have a recollection of one instance of a lovely ancient Greek vase, an amphora, that had been sent for the collections. It arrived in a substantial box that seemed to be proper for safe shipping, but on opening it, the vase had been set into the box without support or packing materials of any kind and was broken to bits. We called in a shipping representative, took pictures, and made a report of inadequate attention to packing.

HENSON: Did many loans go out for exhibits?

WEISS: I don't think there was a program of loaning items regularly at all. Actually, it was something that sort of grew up, I think, as transportation and everything else became more available, or more secure, let's say. In the beginning, I can't remember that we would loan valuable collections. This was a growing thing as a demand for it increased more and more, I think, as smaller museums became established out throughout the country. Also, as museums planned their larger exhibits and wanted to borrow materials. That whole phase is a little dim in my memory. I would say that I was not involved in the insurance except during transportation.

HENSON: You were also in charge of the Shipping Office?

WEISS: That's right.

HENSON: What did that entail? What types of shipping would they do?

WEISS: When I first came in, there was one Shipping Office in the Smithsonian, and that was in the Natural History Building at the west entrance. The Shipping Office, I would say, was busier bringing in materials than shipping them out. In shipping out, we had our collecting equipment for the staff who went out on collecting and field trips here and abroad, the materials coming in for all the departments of the museums, and on things going out. In the beginning, when I first came in, we really did not ship out collections to any great extent. It was felt that the collections were property of the Smithsonian, that the Smithsonian must protect its collections in every way, and that we did not send them out. I don't think that there were any great loan programs at that time that I can remember. This is something else that built up. As these things expanded, we had to meet certain problems as they evolved. Again, I'm a little vague as to how much shipping out was done. When we started loaning collections, particularly for exhibit and that sort of thing, the Shipping Office handled it. But primarily, when I first came in, the Shipping Office received materials into the museum, collections that were offered to us, and we would have to make arrangements for receiving them.

HENSON: Today, you can get people, movers, who specialize in, for example, moving fine art, or sculpture, or something like that. Did you have that sort of specialization, back then, or is that something that has developed?

WEISS: We did. I remember there were certain shipping companies that we felt we could rely on very well, and there were some that had the experience of handling art materials. For the most part, we had no real problems. I could think of a few problems that we had of bringing in some collections, but on things going out, I'm not sure. I remember one collection of glass that was coming from California. It was called the Amelung Collection. I recall that we were not involved in insurance on that, but I believe that it was insured. It was a donor collection, but I do not remember the name of the donor. It was a truckload of glass, very rare glass, coming to [Division of] Cultural History. There was an accident on the way, the truck lopsided, and a large part of that collection was damaged, not only damaged, but lost. It was really a great disaster, for the [Division of] Cultural History. I remember [C.] Malcolm Watkins was in charge of that, and it was Malcolm, at that time, who was just sick about it. We couldn't believe it!

HENSON: How did you arrange, for example, to ship the *Kitty Hawk*?

WEISS: Oh, dear! [LAUGHTER] I think that the British people helped us with that quite a bit! That whole subject was a very delicate one to handle, all the way through. When it was time to have the *Kitty Hawk* shipped in to the U. S., the British had a great deal to do in working with our people here. I believe Paul [E.] Garber had a big hand in making the arrangements to receive the *Kitty Hawk*. As I recall, I don't think there was any damage done to that. I think it came through in good shape. Am I right? Do you know?

HENSON: Yes, as far as I know that one came in okay.

WEISS: I think it did. I don't think I can remember all the details, but for a long time I remember that *Kitty Hawk* file was on my desk, and very important! [LAUGHTER] I also remember writing the letter of acknowledging its safe arrival, for the signature of the Director or Secretary, of course.

HENSON: What were the strangest types of objects you had to handle?

WEISS: I had several strange ones. One of them was, of course, bringing the elephant in.

HENSON: The Fénykővi elephant?

WEISS: That's one of my favorite ones, yes.

HENSON: What did that entail?



Wright Flyer in A & I Building, December 1948.
Image Number: 2002-10643

WEISS: Well, you know Mr. [Joseph J.] Fénykövi--I can tell you a whole lovely story on that! [LAUGHTER] I won't tell it on this! But anyway, when the letter first came in, I was excited over it because of his description of how he had tracked this animal for two years. Of course, he described how they shot it, and how he had it moved. He had had a track built out to this place, (a watering hole where elephants gathered) and a rail car that moved it from where it was shot, skinned, and temporarily treated with preservative. It was from Angola, you know. Then he had it taken to Spain, and that was when we first heard about it. Of course, Dr. [A. Remington] Kellogg wanted it. So it was a matter, in the first place, of having it released from Spain. Mr. Fénykövi had taken care of it from Angola to Spain, but we had to make arrangements from there. In that case we got in touch with Ambassador John [Davis] Lodge, who was our ambassador to Spain at that time. He helped us to get the permit to release it from Spain, and to ship it here. Mr. Fénykövi, himself, had a crate, or chest, I guess you'd call it, made that was copper-lined, I believe. It was quite a box that brought it! The skin... they had skinned this animal in one piece! Our taxidermists and mammologists could scarcely believe this when it arrived. They shipped the skin and the feet and the tusks and the tail [LAUGHTER], I think. When this arrived, it was opened down on the west platform of the Natural History Building. We knew of its arrival all over the building. . .

HENSON: Uh-oh!

WEISS: . . .because the skin had not been tanned and it was "ripe"! It was a fresh skin, but they had [LAUGHTER] given it some temporary preservative treatment in the pit before they had moved it. So that was quite an event when this arrived. Of course, the taxidermists immediately felt that, first thing, it had to be tanned before anything could be done toward exhibiting it. But the taxidermists did cut that hide in three pieces before they sent it to the tanners. I believe at that time the mammologists were sending skins out to a place in California. But with this huge thing, they found a tanner in the Carolinas. I think it was North Carolina, which was the nearest suitable one. The skin was sent down there and tanned. Bringing in the elephant was quite an event, and it was almost two years before the exhibit was ready.

Another one that was interesting, and it also came from Spain, was one that T. Dale Stewart wanted. I can't tell you what period of ancient man that had been discovered over there. It was on a beach along the east coast of Spain. I remember we were able to arrange transportation from a certain city on the coast, but it had to be moved from this little village, wherever it was, along the coast. I remember it was quite a feat to finally find somebody who could move it. I worked with the Spanish Desk in the State Department on that. Dr. Stewart was so worried that it wouldn't come intact, or would be destroyed in some way in transit. I can't remember the details, but we did find a way to have it transported up the coast to this point where it could be picked up by ship. However, I think it was brought here by air, finally. I remember the day it arrived, everybody gathered at the receiving platform to see [LAUGHTER] in what condition it would be, and they held their breaths. It really came through in pretty good condition!

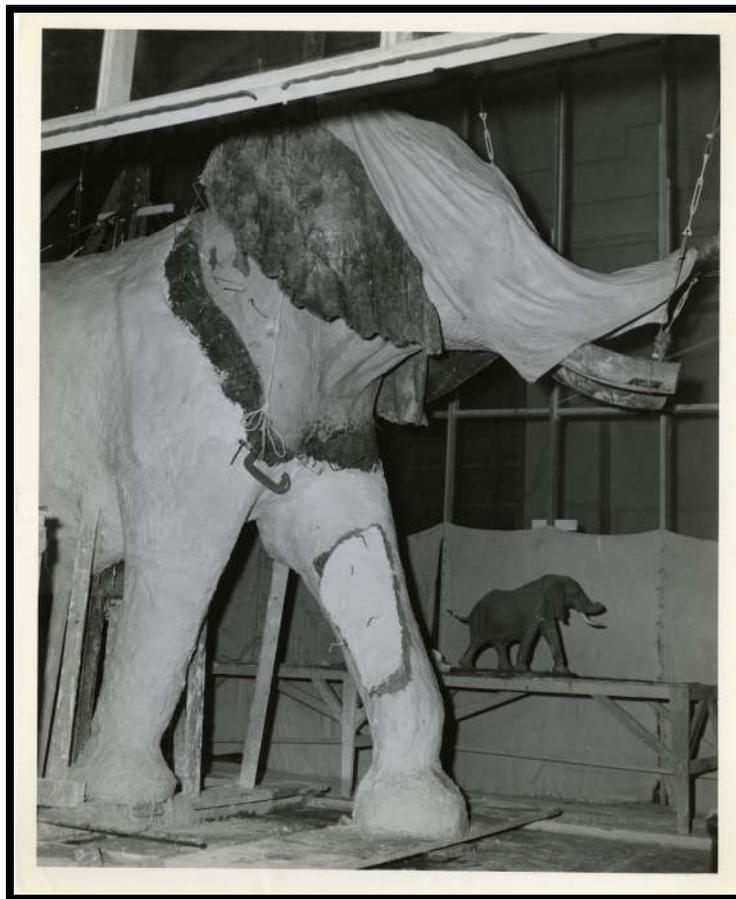
HENSON: Those ancient skeletal remains would be fairly delicate.

WEISS: Yes, they are very delicate, and they could actually deteriorate. They had to be packed and wrapped in such a way that they could be handled properly, and not deteriorate, until they reached our facility here.

HENSON: How many specimens did you ever get that were in deteriorated condition? Was that fairly common?

WEISS: No, I don't think so. I remember one morning, coming in in the morning quite early... well, that was "Swanky Dan." Did you ever hear the story of Swanky Dan? Do you want to hear this?

HENSON: Oh yes!



Preparing the Fénykövi Elephant for Exhibit, 1958.
Image Number: SIA2010-0608

WEISS: I don't think I should spend too much time on this. I came in very early, it must have been about 7:30 in the morning. I could get a lot of work done before the phones started to ring and the scientists and staff arrived. But this was around eight o'clock when a call came in from Chicago. It was from the Peter Chocolate Company. [Curtiss Candy Company] They said that they were all excited, and they had this skeleton that they wanted to give the Smithsonian of "Swanky Dan." It wasn't the skeleton, I guess it was the animal, that they wanted to send. Well, I had never heard of Swanky Dan. I guess some way I fudged through that, and they said, "Oh, you know it was written up in *Life* magazine." It was a prize bull, and Swanky Dan had won something like a hundred prizes or more... this is all off the top of my head, and I'd have to check a lot of details. Anyway, the bull had died, and they felt that he was so famous, that he should be preserved some way, his hide, and his bones, or something. So I said that the staff hadn't come in, and I would check with the mammologists and with our taxidermists and let them know. Well, I asked the taxidermists about it... and one thing they said was that it was very important that it be moved, because Swanky Dan had just died, and he was in a slaughterhouse, there in Chicago. [LAUGHTER] So anyway, it turned out that... [Charles O.] Charlie Handley [Jr.] was the curator of mammals then... Handley and the taxidermists decided that they would like to see this critter. So they were very happy when the company called back, and they said that they would take care of all the arrangements for shipping. They would send it by air, which was great. It arrived, and it was a fresh deceased animal, which was put immediately in our "beetle pit." Do you know about the dermestid pit?

HENSON: I've heard a little bit about it.

WEISS: At that time we had what they called the dermestid pit, and it was back of the Smithsonian [Institution Building], near that small building where Dr. [Charles Greeley] Abbot did his solar research. It was a place that bones could be safely cleaned. I don't know how many thousands of beetles were in there, but they could clean bones without damage to the bones in any way. It was the best way to clean animal bones for the collections. The end of the story is that of course, Peter Chocolate Company had hoped that Swanky Dan would be exhibited. Well, it turned out that Swanky Dan had rheumatism, or arthritis, I guess you'd say, and his bones were very arthritic. It turned out that Dr. T. Dale Stewart was finishing a study on arthritic skeletons and bones, of course, mostly ancient man, but he was interested. So Swanky Dan wasn't lost entirely, his bones became a subject of research in Dr. Stewart's study on arthritis! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: That's true, he did a lot of research on arthritis in the Neanderthals.

WEISS: Yes, he was working on that at this time, I know. I remember talking to him when he learned of this animal, and he said he'd like to see those bones, so that's what happened. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: But things would come in like that. It's an interesting story just in the sense of how a call would come to you, and you would refer to people, and the specimen would come in. You see the process of how it all would work.

WEISS: My recollection of the Shipping Office, primarily, at least in the early days, was of collections coming in, more than going out. I did get involved with some of the traveling exhibition [Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service] exhibits, particularly in bringing things into the country. I was involved in bringing in the Winston Churchill exhibit... that was through [U. S.] Customs [Service].⁷ The U. S. Despatch Agent was having difficulty in New York on that. I think that the proper arrangements hadn't been made in advance, so I was called... Usually, I didn't get involved in traveling exhibits very much, but the customs people in New York called me, I had to take over with that one. There were a lot of interesting things that happened like that.

HENSON: Would things show up, without you knowing they were coming, fairly often?

WEISS: Yes. I think very often I wouldn't know, particularly things that came in from abroad. One morning the U. S. Despatch agent, Howard Fyfe... how did I remember his name? I worked with him for years, and he was an institution up in New York in the Customs Service, the same as Mr. [Herbert S.] Bryant was in my office. Howard Fyfe called, and said... this is early in the morning too... "Miss Weiss, what's this...?" It was a turtle. I can't think of the word he used now... I think he said "deceased," but that doesn't seem right. He said, "What is this deceased turtle that's coming in?" [LAUGHTER] It happened to be one that I knew about, that Doris [Mable] Cochran was expecting to come from Brazil, I think. And I said, "Well, it's not really just fresh deceased." [LAUGHTER] I said, "It really is a specimen for our collections and there has been some preparation on it. It is all right to bring it in, it is not a live or fresh deceased specimen!" So he finally accepted that. It was in the ship... they hadn't even brought the ship into harbor because they didn't know what kind of thing this was that they were bringing in! [LAUGHTER] I wish I could remember more of the details.

⁷ "Paintings of Sir Winston Churchill," Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, 1958.

HENSON: Might they have had to quarantine if it were alive?

WEISS: Probably, it was still out there in quarantine, and that was the question, because they didn't know what they had.

HENSON: You could see him going, "What in the world have we got?" Now, did you handle any of the shipping for the Zoo [National Zoological Park], or was that done separately?

WEISS: The zoo did handle its shipping itself. I became involved in some... like when the pandas came in. I got passports and visas for the men who travelled to other countries to bring the animals in, and then they would follow through, you see. But the actual handling of the animals, I did not usually become involved because the zoo people worked with the zoo staff in other countries in making arrangements.

[BEGIN REEL II]

HENSON: You were saying, that with the pandas, you had to make what arrangements?

WEISS: They were accompanied by two of the caretakers from China, their keepers, I guess. Also, Dr. [Theodore H.] Reed had gone over to China to make arrangements and accompany the animals in transit. Where I became involved, I got his official passport and visa, then had followed this all the way through. He was so excited about getting the pandas, and of course, everyone was. When they actually arrived with them, and all of the preparation, which was very interesting, they called it "pandamonium." We had another... you want one more story?

HENSON: Absolutely!

WEISS: We had another interesting one that I remember. That was an air shipment of snakes that were coming from South America... no, they were coming from the Middle East, someplace... and they were poisonous snakes. They were live, and the exhibits people wanted them live because they wanted to study their movements for exhibit purpose. They were going to freeze-dry these snakes. Did you ever hear of that, freeze-dry method?

HENSON: A little bit.

WEISS: When they arrived at the airport, I got a call from the airline, and they said they had this crate, and it was marked "POISONOUS SNAKES." And I said yes, I knew about it.

They said, "Will you come out and get them right away?" They didn't want to keep them. See, they had to come through customs, and the customs people didn't want to get near them either.

I said, "Well, where are they?"

They said, "They're over in the farthest corner of the hangar, and nobody is going near the place!" [LAUGHTER]

Well, I was worried, too, but I decided I should go out on that one. I got in touch with [Francis] Frank Greenwell, who was then taxidermist. He was also working on the freeze-drying process... I believe he was helping with that. So we got the Smithsonian truck, and Frank came along. I remember when I went down, here was Frank, and he had a big club of some kind, he had on big rubber gloves that came up almost to his shoulders. He was so prepared... I'm not sure whether he had a gun too, or what he had, but he was equipped! I was amazed. Up to that point, I knew that it was not the easiest thing in the world to bring in poisonous snakes, but I didn't realize how dangerous it could be. He said, "You have to be ready for any event. If we should have an accident on the way, or something would happen, this crate we were bringing with live snakes would cause a problem." So we were prepared. [LAUGHTER] We went out, and I entered them through customs, and we came back, quite without incident. I knew it was a problem, and I knew particularly because the airline was worried. After I saw Frank's preparations for it, I was even more worried. All that trip back, I just held my breath that traffic was going to be all right, that we weren't going to be held up, that nothing would happen [LAUGHTER], and that we'd get there safely!

HENSON: . . . That no one would tail-end the truck, right!

WEISS: I couldn't wait. I wanted to see them after they finally arrived. When the taxidermists opened them, they found out they were perfectly all right. I did see the live snakes. They were studied, and they became freeze-dried specimens that could be arranged for exhibit, eventually.

HENSON: So they'd know how to pose them naturally. Snakes are always an interesting topic, especially in that museum. Wasn't there a curator in geology who had snakes? I heard a story once about one of them bringing them in and opening them up to show to you. I'm trying to remember who that would be. [Richard G. Paine, aide, Division of Reptiles and Amphibians, had a pet boa constrictor that he brought in.]

WEISS: In geology? Oh, I'll tell you somebody... [Donald Ray] Don Davis in entomology. I think it must have been Don Davis. He was very young, he was right out of college when he came to work here. Actually, he first came to the museum as a high school student to show his science exhibit. We used to have them at the Natural History [Museum]... the young scientists, or the high school children, what do they call the junior science exhibit? Do you know about that?

HENSON: No, I've never heard that.

WEISS: Yes, it was the National Science Fair Exhibit shown in the Natural History Building and composed of the top exhibits from schools all around the country. Don Davis came to show his exhibit selected from his school in Oklahoma. Out there, he told me, he used to go out on rattlesnake hunts. Nests of rattlesnakes were so dangerous when there were too many of them. They were destroyed. The state would sponsor an annual hunt. Don accompanied them on these excursions, and he loved snakes. [LAUGHTER] When he came with his exhibit, he so impressed our scientists here that they advised him on continuing his education. He finished his education, his advanced education, and came back as a curator at the Smithsonian. But when he came, Don brought his snake with him. And I remember he lived with his snake for a while.

HENSON: He had a pet snake?

WEISS: A pet snake, right.

HENSON: There was also someone by the name of Grace [Olive] Wiley. Did you ever hear of her? She was never on the museum staff... she apparently came in and did research. She was friends with Doris Cochran. She had two pet snakes: Huckleberry Finn and, I think, Mark Twain.

WEISS: [LAUGHTER] I don't remember that specifically, no.

HENSON: She had a paper bag she kept them in. She would open it up and call them, and they would slither into the bag.

WEISS: I remember stories like that. I used to go down and visit with Doris Cochran now and then because she was one who loved her work. I could never understand how someone could love working with snakes [LAUGHTER], but it was fascinating. There was a man who worked for her at that time, Barry Hampton. Have you ever heard of Barry Hampton?

HENSON: Yes.

WEISS: The reason that I remembered that. . . . In those early days when I had visitors, someone in my family or a dear friend would come, it was a great pleasure to be able to take them and show them something behind the scenes at the Smithsonian. Our security was not very secure, at that time. It wasn't necessary for it to be as secure-- for one thing, I don't think, as time went on, it had to be. But one of the places for children, if I had children visit me, was to take them to see the snake collection preserved in alcohol; you know the collection? There was one room where these specimens were held. I have grown people today; not long ago... I think it was a cousin of mine... that mentioned that the only thing he remembered of their trip to Washington was that I took them to see the snakes at the Smithsonian! [LAUGHTER] That brought it to mind, I had forgotten all about it! Wasn't that fascinating? This was a grown man, and this was the thing that impressed him as a child! He probably was seven, eight, nine years old, and it made such an impression on him.

HENSON: It would! Most people have very strong feelings about snakes.

WEISS: And Barry Hampton was so good, he loved the snakes also. He had certain ones that were very colorful, or were posed some way in the alcohol, that he could bring out. And I know he had one two-headed snake that he always brought to show the children, and he'd take it out of alcohol and hold it up for them to see. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: That was a really interesting. . .

WEISS: . . .it was a real treat!

HENSON: Apparently a few people had snakes. There's someone named, I think, Earl [V.] Shannon, in geology.

WEISS: Well, Earl Shannon, that was before my time, but I've heard stories about him.

HENSON: He apparently had some pet snakes.

WEISS: He probably would. I've heard many stories about him.

HENSON: Actually, he didn't have the pet snakes. Somebody else did [James E. Benn], and he found them in his office one morning.

WEISS: Oh really?

HENSON: He thought he was hallucinating, but actually he wasn't. There were really snakes there! [LAUGHTER]

WEISS: They were there, were they? That was somebody that wanted to play a little joke on him. . . ?

HENSON: No, apparently it was an accident... they had gotten out, which always seems to be a problem with snakes. They seem to be very hard to handle. I know that during the war, we apparently got rid of all of our poisonous snakes. If we had a bomb, small cracks might appear which they could get out of. So we disposed of all of our poisonous snakes for the duration of the war. Apparently they're a bigger problem than, for example, a lion, which would probably be killed in a bombing. Curious, the things that you have to watch out for.

WEISS: I know it, and you sort of learn that as you go along.

HENSON: When some of these things would come in, would there be much press interest? Would you have reporters show up?

WEISS: Sometimes, but it seems to me when I first came into this office, we did not encourage the press. I remember sometimes reporters would show up in my office because they knew that this was where correspondence and specimens went through. My recollection is that at that time, I don't think curators, or anyone really, would give out a story of any kind without checking with Paul [H.] Oehser or someone in the press office, editor's office [Editorial and Publications Division]. Sometimes one would wander in that he [Paul] sent over, if they wanted a certain story. But I would say that for the most part, the Smithsonian would not solicit publicity in any way at that time. As time went on, there was more and more of it, of course.

HENSON: There seemed to be someone named [Thomas R.] Tom Henry.

WEISS: Tom Henry was one from the [*Washington Evening*] *Star*. Any time he came around, I guess, the Smithsonian people trusted him to use discretion in his reporting. So they were quite willing to let Tom Henry go and interview almost anyone in the Smithsonian.

HENSON: Yes, he seemed to be the one that most people remember.

WEISS: He is? Well, he was there very early. He was there, actually, I think, during Mr. Bryant's time and when I first went in. Later on, John Sherwood was with the *Star*. John Sherwood was the one that I knew better than Tom Henry. Mary McGrory was another one who came in, years ago. I think she was just starting as a fledgling reporter.

HENSON: . . .Cub reporter, as they call them.

WEISS: Cub reporter, that's it. Thank you!

HENSON: I noticed at one point, I guess, you argued a special case against this, but GSA [General Services Administration] was looking at procedures. They were saying that you were apparently using railway express, and they said that we should be shipping everything by parcel post. I don't know if you recall that at all.

WEISS: I don't know. I'll have to think about that. We should be using parcel post instead of railway express? Perhaps the case was one that we felt could be handled more expeditiously by express. GSA may have argued from the standpoint of cost without consideration or knowledge of the range in the variety of items moved by the Smithsonian, as well as the matters of expediency and security. We tried to use the methods of moving materials by the most expeditious manner that suited to the content. Of course, we had to watch cost because the Smithsonian was always short of funds in those early days. By today's standards, we were probably misers!

HENSON: Yes. It seemed to be the argument back then that we were arranging, really, special--this was not normal shipping most of the time. I know Dr. [G. Arthur] Cooper, apparently, when he would go out to the Glass Mountains in Texas, would ship back blocks of rock that were several tons.

WEISS: Oh, yes, he did. That's what he used for his etching work. He'd bring in the blocks, like that.

HENSON: How would you ship something like that?

WEISS: Actually, some things could come in better by freight, or trucks, when finally trucking business became more accessible than it was earlier. I would say that very early, in Mr. Bryant's time, express rail was used because that was one of the most reliable means of shipping certain specimens. You know there was quite a collection of [National] Air Museum material out in Chicago, at O'Hare Air Base. When we shipped that, we made arrangements for I don't know how many rail cars that brought that accumulated material, all in one shipment. That was quite an event, trying to move those things. The thing back of everybody's mind when this was going on when they were opening the [Paul E. Garber Preservation, Restoration, and Storage] Facility to take care of the things... was how in the world are they going to be moved from O'Hare? That's where a lot of materials and items, had been collected, stored.

HENSON: And they were probably too big even to be put on planes, right?

WEISS: All of that heavy material was shipped by rail. I don't know how many carloads we had. You'd have to go back in the records to find that, because I don't remember, but I know it was quite a project.

HENSON: It was a huge collection.

WEISS: Of course, Eastern Airlines had an airplane that they held out here in the hangar, at National Airport for quite a while. Whenever I'd go out to clear something through customs, Eastern Airlines would remind me that they had this plane that belonged to the Smithsonian and if we didn't find space for it soon, they were going to fly it out here on the Mall [LAUGHTER] and set it down on the Mall! That is what they threatened. Every time I see that plane, it's over here in the [National] Air and Space Museum, I think of that! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Almost landed on the Mall! That would have been quite an event! It seems that it would be a very complicated process to keep track of, when you think of all the different types of things those curators were collecting. . .

WEISS: I know, yes.

HENSON: . . .from little bugs to. . .

WEISS: . . .little tiny things to airplanes. Speaking of these big hunks of material that Dr. Cooper would ship in. . . . The vertebrate paleontologists, when they collected fossils, all that material came in the matrix; it was all surrounded by the earth and everything that they dug out of the ground--nothing was really disturbed when they brought in the fossil remains. Those would come in in great big blocks. The men would do the packing and have them ready in the field, and they would make the arrangements. The shipments would come in usually by freight. We didn't use air that much in those [days].

HENSON: Did it change much, once you were able to use air?

WEISS: Some, but not a great deal. Of course it was more expensive.

HENSON: We should probably break now so you can meet Mary [E.] Case.

[END OF INTERVIEW]