

Working at the Smithsonian



Alfred Simon has been maintaining the Carnegie Mansion, home of the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, for thirty-eight years, long before it became part of the Smithsonian in 1967.

Photo by Caitlin Cahill,
courtesy Cooper-Hewitt,
National Design Museum



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Working at the Smithsonian has been made possible by the Smithsonian Institution 150th Anniversary Committee and with funds from the Smithsonian National Board.

Roxie Laybourne, a renowned expert on birds, has been at the National Museum of Natural History since 1944. Her ability to identify a species of bird from minute remains has been instrumental in helping aviation authorities determine the causes of airline accidents.

Photo by Chip Clark, courtesy
National Museum of Natural History

Betty J. Belanus & Marjorie Hunt

On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Smithsonian Institution, the Festival of American Folklife celebrates the culture of the Smithsonian work place. The Festival has celebrated the folklife of many different occupational groups in the past, from cowboys to trial lawyers. In this program, we focus not on one occupation, but on the diverse jobs that make up the Institution: from astrophysicists to animal keepers, security officers to exhibit preparators, registrars to administrators. All are involved, one way or another, with carrying out the Smithsonian's mission: the increase and diffusion of knowledge.



In the following articles about working at the Smithsonian, you will notice that the traditions of Smithsonian workers, like other cultures we present at the Festival, reflect skill, knowledge, and critical abilities. These traditions are displayed in the masterful cabinet-making of Cornell Evans, the interviewing know-how of Pam Henson, and the care of historic costumes by conservator Polly Willman. They are expressed in narratives about particular experiences, like Amy Ballard's "other duties" and security officer Preston Herald's "lost vacation."

While each job at the Smithsonian embodies its own skills and culture, it is also necessarily entwined with other complementary jobs. To sort and label specimens, the entomologist relies on the museum technician, who in turn relies on the engineer to keep the building at a stable temperature and humidity conducive to housing the collections. The art curator works closely with the conservator who prepares a ceramic jar for exhibition, as well as with the designer who creates a context for the jar that is pleasing to the eye. The astronomer depends on the engineer to ensure that scarce time on the Multiple Mirror Telescope is spent efficiently. The ecologist uses data from the environmental engineer who maintains the CO₂ chambers on the shores of the Chesapeake. Researchers in the field rely on administrators to secure travel arrangements and meet visa requirements. Each worker has his or her "way of knowing" at the Smithsonian, but also must know whom else to rely on to get things done in a proper and timely fashion. And each way of knowing illuminates a different dimension or sector of the Institution as a whole.

The mission of the Institution is specific yet broad enough to engage a wide variety of occupational perspectives, imaginations, and aspirations. Indeed, the Smithsonian is part government, part museum, university, and business, and reflects the organizational culture of each. However, in talking with workers in jobs such as security officer, transport driver, metalworker, plasterer, and administrator, one often hears the same themes

emerge: working at the Smithsonian means doing a variety of tasks, or serving a variety of needs, in ways that clearly contribute to the functioning of the whole.

The Smithsonian is certainly not a perfect place to work — like any work place, the Institution has its share of personality conflicts, misguided plans, and other such ills. But, at its best, it can be an extremely interesting place to work — and, as Marc Pachter points out, a place where many people can build a career niche unlike any other, anywhere. A place with some of the richest resources for research in the world, but one where a researcher, as Pam Henson observes, may have to "make do" with sheer ingenuity, like paleontologist G. Arthur Cooper. A place where many people "grow up" in a career, working for fifty or more years at the Institution.

It has been a privilege to organize this Festival program, coming to understand the wonderful diversity and fascinating paradoxes of working at the Smithsonian.

Suggested Reading

Byington, Robert H., ed. 1978. *Working Americans: Contemporary Approaches to Occupational Folklife*. Smithsonian Folklife Studies Series, No. 3. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press. Reprinted from *Western Folklore*. Vol. 37, No. 3 (1978).

Hunt, Marjorie. 1992. *Workers at the White House* exhibition catalogue. Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies.

Marjorie Hunt and Betty J. Belanus are educational specialists at the Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies, and co-curators of the Working at the Smithsonian program. They thank Peter Seitel for sharing with them his insights on occupational folklife and the culture of work at the Smithsonian.

