



“A Challenge a Day”: Pam Henson, Smithsonian Institution Historian

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In her job at the Smithsonian, Pam Henson has several titles: historian in the Institutional History Division of the Smithsonian Archives, director of the Institutional History Division, and associate director of the Office of Smithsonian Archives. But to many people, Henson is simply the Smithsonian encyclopedia. Want to see what the anthropology staff looked like at the turn of the century?

Henson has a photo at her fingertips. Curious about some of the most interesting characters associated with the Institution? Henson will regale you with stories. Fascinated by oral histories of people who worked here for 50 or 60 years? Henson can show you some of the 362 transcripts of taped interviews she and her staff have completed over the past 22 years. Part historian, part folklorist, part detective, Pam Henson thrives on the challenges that a career at the Smithsonian can produce.

Henson feels privileged to have interviewed a wide variety of interesting retirees for an oral history project begun under Secretary S. Dillon Ripley in the 1970s. Ripley recognized that the institutional memory represented by former Smithsonian employees was remarkable and too important to lose. “Someone in 1973 could tell you what it was like when he came here in 1895,” Henson points out. The first person interviewed for the project, Charles Greeley Abbott, had been working at the Smithsonian at that time for 78 years! Henson has routinely interviewed people who worked at the Institution for 50-60 years; many of them still come



in every day on an emeritus or volunteer basis. By these standards, she is a mere newcomer, having only been here 22 years herself.

From her interviews, Henson has gained a sense of why some people stay here so long: “What we have here is exactly what they want to do. There’s enough freedom and enough scope. Some of them started working here part time when they were in high school — they basically grew up here.”

One of Henson’s favorite stories came from Watson Perrygo, former taxidermist at the National Museum of Natural History.

When Zoo animals would die, the Zoo would call the taxidermist and say, “Come get the animal.” One time Perrygo went up, and got this big snake. It was in the winter, and they had just put it in a bag. He tossed [the bag] on the floor of the front seat next to him. When the heat came on, it turned out that the

In 1990, Pam Henson got a taste of the rigors of field research during a visit to the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama to interview scientists at work. Here Norman Duke explains the effects of an oil spill on a mangrove community.

Photo courtesy
Smithsonian Institution Archives



In Brazil in 1933, Mary Agnes Chase, curator in charge of grasses at the United States National Museum, adds to the collection. Chase often traveled alone in the field. At home, Chase was an active suffragette, who demonstrated in front of the White House during the Woodrow Wilson administration.

Photo courtesy
Smithsonian Institution Archives

snake wasn't dead, it was hibernating. This thing started moving around. He thought, "Well, I just have to make it cold again." So he turned off the engine, opened the doors, let it get real cold in the car, and the snake sort of settled back down again. A cop came along, and Perrygo said, "No problem, no problem, just having a little trouble with the car." He didn't want to tell the policeman what was happening. It was a bitter cold day, but he drove the rest of the way with the win-

dows wide open and no heat on, chattering away a mile a minute. When he got down here and called up the Zoo, he laid them out in lavender for giving him a live snake. I think there were always things like that, a challenge a day, on the job.

Henson meets some of the most interesting Smithsonian employees through archival research. For years, oral history interviewees kept telling her, "Of course, you've heard of Harrison Gray Dyar, or 'Digger' Dyar, as they called him." She had heard stories of a notorious curator of butterflies and mosquitoes who had two different families at the same time, and dug extensive tunnels under both of the neighborhoods he lived in. Henson admits, "I thought this was sort of folklore hyperbole. But, I was intrigued by it." Gradually, she began uncovering information about Dyar. And she found that the stories about him were "moderate" versions of Dyar's escapades.

Dyar (1866-1929), Henson discovered, did have two families simultaneously, having married a second wife under an assumed name. One of the families lived near Dupont Circle, the other virtually across the street from what is now the Arts & Industries Building. Legend had the tunnels connecting the two homes (a distance of almost two miles), but, although they were dug 6 feet deep and 6 feet across and extended hundreds of feet in length, they apparently didn't have any practical purpose. One tunnel went out behind his home on 21st Street; the other led from the back of his B Street house. According to Henson, when Dyar finally came forward to claim his handiwork (after the tunnels collapsed, causing serious structural damage to the streets above and a great deal of speculation as to their creator), he explained, "I simply liked the smell of fresh earth."

Through research in the Archives and oral history interviews, Henson and her assistants have begun to piece together the histories of lesser-known groups of workers at the Smithsonian, such as early women and African-American workers. The first woman employee,

Working at the Smithsonian

Jane Turner, worked at the Smithsonian in the 1850s, soon after its founding. Henson has tracked a number of women who had successful careers at the Institution before this was common. "Which is not to say that women ever had it easy here, but they really did blaze the way for a lot of other women."

The first African-American employee was Solomon Brown, who, like Jane Turner, had a white-collar job at the Institution in the 1850s. As Henson says, "One of the interesting things to me is that in 1852 ... you have a staff of seven ... one of which is a woman who has a white-collar position, and one of which is an African American, who also has a white-collar position. And the laborer is Caucasian." Brown, a respected member of the community, worked at the Smithsonian for over 50 years. Henson's assistant, Terrica Gibson, has done extensive research on the history of African-American employees at the Institution.

Henson is also interested in the social lives of early employees. "People used to work on Saturdays. You worked half a day and then you went out to lunch and shopping when the big department stores were the place to be." Many Smithsonian staff members lived in Southwest Washington before it was developed, within easy walking distance to their work. Where L'Enfant Plaza is now were "just little row houses." There was even a tennis court behind the Castle.

The Archives has an extensive collection of photographs, and Henson keeps copies of some of her favorites piled around her desk. She often uses photos as props in her oral history interviews, and extends the collection even further by borrowing photos from her interviewees to copy for the Archives. "You can ask someone, 'What did you do in 1930?' but you're not going to get much response," she explains. "If you show them a picture of what they were doing in 1930, the stories start rolling."

Which types of employees around the Institution have the best stories? Henson has found that registrars do. "It takes enormous expertise to get an object here safely," she

explains. Helena Weiss was the registrar at the Natural History Museum when the Hope Diamond arrived. Weiss told Henson that the diamond was delivered to the museum through a rather unlikely method: the U.S. Postal Service!

According to Henson, the people who do well at the Smithsonian are "the ones who just don't give up." In this category Henson would place G. Arthur Cooper, retired invertebrate paleontologist, who was a master at "making do." Henson tells this story about him:

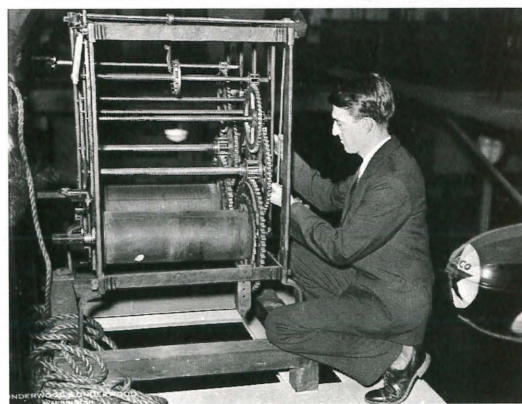
He was showing me his photographic apparatus, which is something that he put together. He got different pieces of a camera from different people and constructed this thing himself. But it does beautiful photography. Then he proceeded to show me how he would take a piece of film, and block off five-sixths of it, and take a picture of one of these fossil shells, and expose another area and another area, so from one piece of film, he will get six photographs. I said to him, "Well, why do you do that?" He looked at me and said, "Well, when I grew up here, we didn't have any money."

For many Smithsonian curators, collecting began at an extremely early age. "They didn't just have a collection," marvels Henson, "they had a museum." Fenner Chace, for example, told Henson the following:

My interest in museum work really developed very early in my life, when I was five or six.... We had

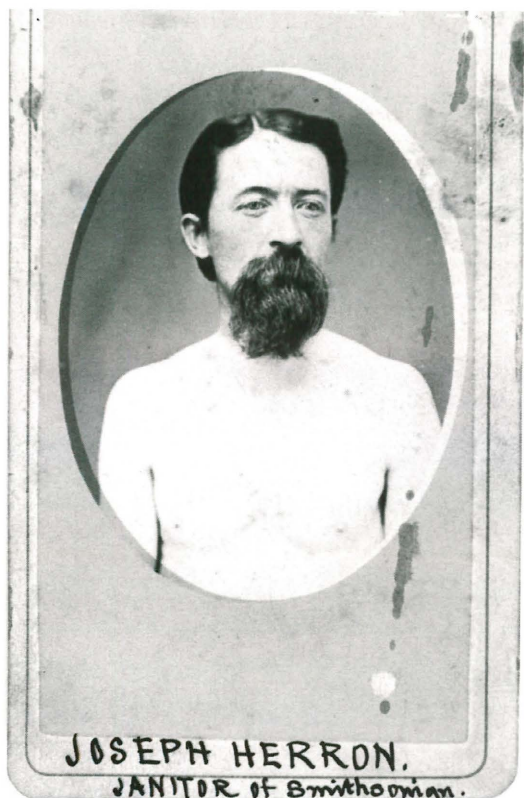
G. Arthur Cooper, an invertebrate paleontologist, works side by side with his wife Josephine, a dedicated volunteer who helped to prepare and sort specimens for many of his years at the National Museum of Natural History.

Photo courtesy
Smithsonian Institution Archives



Frank A. Taylor was hired as a laboratory apprentice at the United States National Museum in 1922. He went on to become the director of the National Museum of History and Technology in 1958, and retired in 1971 as director general of museums.

Photo courtesy
Smithsonian Institution Archives



Joseph Herron, nicknamed the "Naked Janitor" by Archives staff, worked from 1866 to 1883 in what is now the Arts & Industries Building.

Photo courtesy
Smithsonian Institution Archives

an extra room that I used as a museum.... I even called it the Wabsacook Museum.... I furnished [it] ... with secondhand showcases and so forth, filled with curios of various kinds. I even had labels printed with the name of the museum.¹

Henson has had some other revelations about employees during her work at the Archives. While preparing for interviews with an astrophysicist at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Henson kept coming across requisitions for computers.

"All this discussion of getting computers and more computers. But they seemed very cheap. The other thing I found puzzling was often it was a personnel form rather than for an object.... One day, I came across this memo which listed the computers. I realized that computers were *people* in the 1940s and '50s. These were people that you hired, and they sat there with adding machines and number-crunched for these astronomers, for huge sets of calculations that had to be done."

And then there was the Naked Janitor. "That is a photo that we found in the collection, and there is also information about him in the files. This Mr. Herron worked here as a janitor at night but liked to work absolutely naked. He's always been one of our more favorite characters in the Archives."

Clearly, Pam Henson enjoys her work. When asked what working at the Smithsonian means to her, she replies:

Even after 22 years, I still love coming to work every day. I've learned a tremendous amount — I think I am very lucky to do the sort of interviews that I do, because I think I've learned a lot about life and coping with life from other people, from these older people, who really share their wisdom with you. You also feel this tremendous responsibility to the public in everything you do, so I think sometimes it's an intimidating job, especially when you do things for the public. But if you like challenges, which I do, it's been very good.

Suggested Reading

Conaway, James. 1995. *The Smithsonian: 150 Years of Adventure, Discovery, and Wonder*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Books.

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¹ Fenner A. Chace Jr., interviewed by Pamela Henson, October 1977, Oral History Interview, RU 9514, Smithsonian Institution Archives, p. 1.