Oral History Interview

with

Paul Louis Illg
Professor of Zoology, University of Washington

March 23, 1978

at the Smithsonian Institution Archives

by Pamela M. Henson
Interviewer

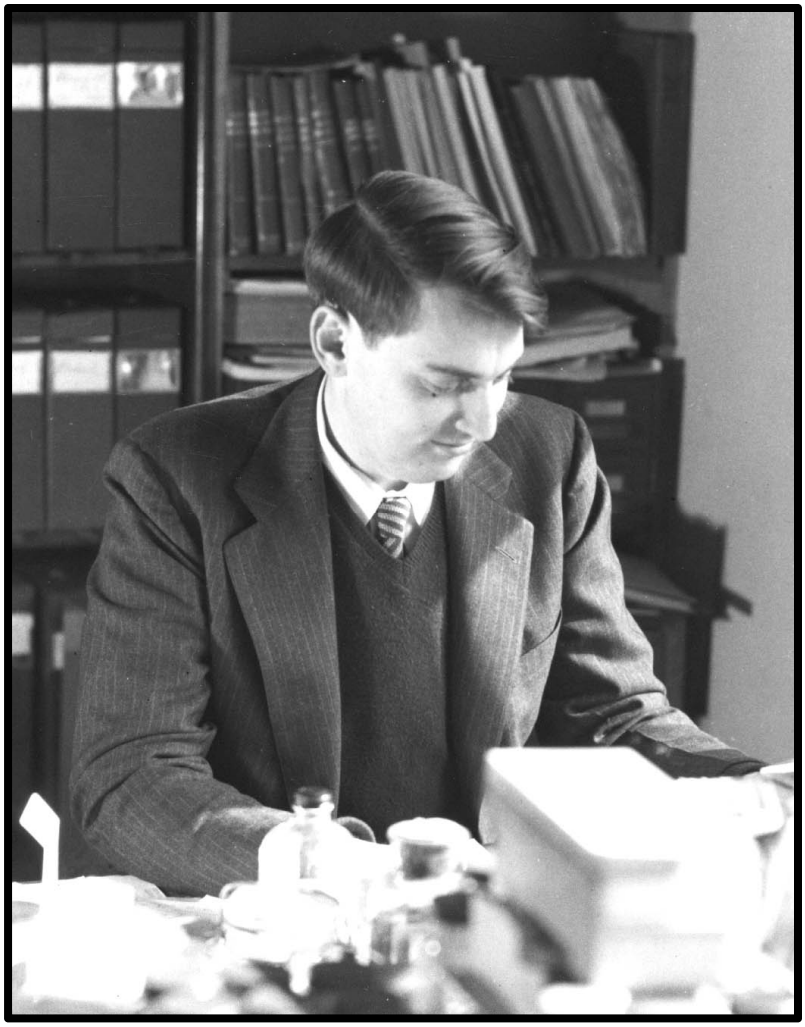
for the Smithsonian Institution Archives

HENSON: We're going to talk about your career, coming to [the Division of] Marine Invertebrates, and Dr. Waldo [LaSalle] Schmitt, and your recollections of him. I thought where we could begin was with your background, and how you first came to know Dr. Schmitt, and how you came to the [National] Museum [of Natural History].

ILLG: Well, my knowledge of him, of course, was from using his handbook as a student in invertebrate zoology and biology on the West Coast. I was a student, a teaching assistant, and an acting instructor in these fields at the University of California, under the supervision of Professor [Sol Felty] Light, who developed a quite prominent school of invertebrate biology which has given some curators to the museum over the years--Dr. [Thomas E.] Bowman, Dr. [Meredith L.] Jones, and [Jerry Laurens] Barnard,

and others. So, of course, we knew of his work. I also knew people who had supervised his work in the years he was a student--Dr. [Charles Atwood] Kofoid and Dr. [Samuel Jackson] Holmes. Because I had an interest in Crustacea, I knew Dr. Holmes, and I knew Dr. Kofoid because he was the big boss around there.

I was a candidate for the assistantship on the King Crab Survey, but my background in oceanography was deficient. I was a leading candidate just because of the "recs" from [University of California at] Berkeley, but a University of Washington oceanography student was the one who had that and worked with him--Dr. Camille [J.] Pertuit, who might have some reminiscence of that epic. I don't know where he is now.



Paul Louis Illg, 1914-1998
Courtesy of Department of Invertebrate Zoology,National Museum of Natural History

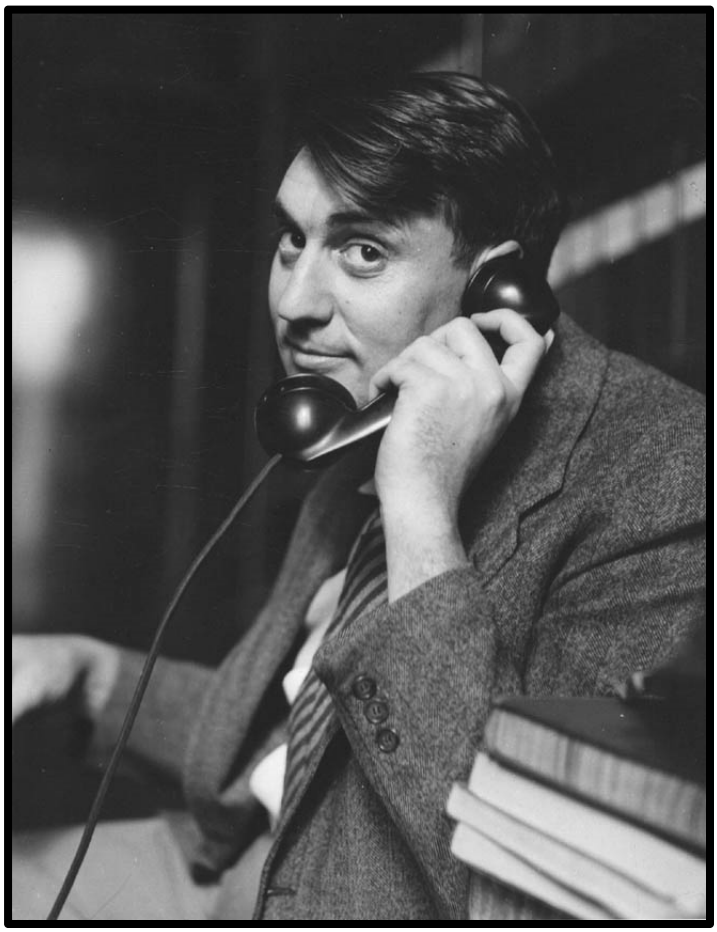
Then at the close of the war [World War II] there were changes in personnel at Berkeley, and all sorts of things happened, and a new administration decided to disencumber the quarters there of a lot of stored museum type materials. A very interesting exchange developed between the young chairman, who wrote to Dr. Schmitt and magnanimously offered the gift of materials that had been collected by *R/V Albatross* and stored at Berkeley for many, many decades. I have seen a rather tart, but always friendly letter from Dr. Schmitt that came back, saying that yes, it was about time University of California stopped abusing government property, and recognized its responsibility, and put it where it belonged in the national collection. [LAUGHTER] That sort of stirred things up, and so they rushed around and got an indigent graduate student, who was me, to pack them up. Fortunately, I did it conscientiously because the stuff interested me. We sent, oh, crates and barrels of very important material.

About two years later, the wartime appointments lapsed here, and they were looking for staff in invertebrates. So the universities were canvassed, and Dr. Light sent in my name. Dr. Schmitt was interested in a student of Light's, and so he wrote back to Light and asked what Light could say about me in addition to my bare credentials. Dr. Light said, "In addition to other things, he packed the stuff that came back from Berkeley." And Schmitt said, "I'm going to hire him. I liked the packing job! [LAUGHTER] So that's how I came, and I came for a very, very friendly reception when I arrived.

HENSON: What were your first impressions of him, do you recall at all?

ILLG: I had so many friends who had worked with him, and of course, we all had such fantastic respect for the work that he had done. I don't know when I began to pick up the vibes, but they were there, you know. You knew if you were into marine biology, you knew Dr. Schmitt. So I can't pinpoint that. I can't think of any particularly dramatic event other than that. Of course, as far back as when I was an early student, in that I had just graduated, which was a reason why I wasn't very qualified--that [Alaska] King Crab

[Investigation] thing--I knew who he was and what an opportunity it would be to have that chance.



Paul Louis Illg, 1914-1998
Courtesy of Department of Invertebrate Zoology, National Museum of Natural History

HENSON: So you came in shortly after, as far as I can tell, he became head curator of [the Department of] Zoology, and Dr. Fenner [A.] Chace [Jr.] was curator of the division.

ILLG: He became head curator of zoology, I think, in 1943, and then he had a pick up staff through the war years, including some very important people to him. Mr. [Clarence R.] Shoemaker, the wonderful man who grew up in the museum, was the right hand. Then a very intelligent woman, Mildred [S.] Wilson, who was one of his favorite protégés of all time, and who has quite unfortunately died, although her husband exists in

Alaska and knows all about every aspect of her career, had the level that I entered. Mr. Shoemaker was over age; Mrs. Wilson moved west. So his staff was wide open. His first choice, of course, was Fenner Chace because he was always interested in somebody in the decapods. So Fenner was in Washington [D.C] anyway, and had been in touch with the museum all through the war years, having worked at the [United States] Hydrographic Office. Actually, I was not the first choice for the job. Arthur [Grover] Humes from Boston came and held the job for a short time and left. I don't know, there was some combination of personal circumstances; there was no housing available in Washington at the time in early 1947. That would have been 1946 that he came here, and he left. So I was the second choice for the assistant curator. [Frederick M.] Bayer was the first choice. . . I was the choice for associate curator, Bayer was the assistant curator; we were at slightly different academic levels and experience levels.

I think I impressed him when I came in because he and Chace, having been stung by the Humes situation, recommended I leave my family home, and come find a room, and go to work, and find a place to put my family in. But I have the type of family--I had a wife [Ruth Abbott Illg] and a two-year old [Joseph Paul Illg]--that don't get left behind. So we poked around among our acquaintances, and we found a so-called hotel in Silver Spring [Maryland] that a lot of people that had done war duty all around Washington used partly as a weekend resort. I think it was pretty shady reputation-wise. [LAUGHTER] But I called the lady up and it was wide open. We could bring our pet; we had a cat. And we could have the child. I don't think we had to bring any papers certifying our relationship here to get in. [LAUGHTER] We came bag and baggage, and when I presented myself to Dr. Schmitt he said, "Now when will your wife come to Washington?" I said, "Oh, she's here." It pleased him very much, and Mrs. [Alvina Stumm] Schmitt was very good to us, and I think there was a sympathy between her and my wife, and between them as a family and between us as a family. The West Coast link was also one that was very sympathetic to her.

From then on, of course, it was just working in invertebrates, which as I say, oh, it just had to be the pet division in all of biology, which was not yet separated in early 1947 when I came. It was later in the year that the new head curatorship was established for botany.

Waldo LaSalle Schmitt, 1887-1977, at work in 1965.
Smithsonian Institution Archives, image number 92-1775.

HENSON: So that the staff would have been Dr. Chace, you, Bayer, and Miss [Lucile] McCain also, right?

ILLG: No, Miss McCain was his staff. We had a Miss Asarenko; Stella Asarenko was the secretary. And we had a cataloguer, Angelita Zeno, who was a contact of Schmitt's from Puerto Rico. She was somehow connected with some friend that he had made in one of his trips. She was a Washington resident, and she was there for a while. Then other characters--other cataloguers, excuse me--some of which were characters . . . [LAUGHTER] . . . passed through.

HENSON: Now you would have been after the WPA [Works Progress Administration] people, right?

ILLG: Oh, long. . . . That ended, you see, before the active phase of the war.

HENSON: Did you get to know Dr. Schmitt well right away?

ILLG: Yes.

HENSON: He wasn't too busy up in the head curatorship?

ILLG: He was never too busy for a new personal relationship. We right away were on a footing with him.

HENSON: Did he come by the division very much?

ILLG: Yes. He had loose ends down there, and I think at that time, well, he had a table there, actually, at that time still. I'm sure he must have. His pet microscope that he had rigged that he could work with his feet so he could dissect with two hands was there, and he would bring things down once in a while--maybe his watch to set or something. It was a part of his manipulative life; it was the place where he had used to sit down there. . . . five years before that, really. Because he had moved out of that office, really.

HENSON: Yes, as soon as Dr. [Leonhard] Stejneger retired. With your research. . . how closely did he supervise research?

ILLG: My field was not his field. I was in a different branch of Crustacea. I was picked because I was interested in copepods because the museum had inherited in the early 1940s a fantastic library of separates and volumes on copepods from [Charles Branch] C. B. Wilson, who was a very long time collaborator with the Smithsonian and published many treatises starting about 1900, and running to 1950, on copepods. There's a shelf quite a few inches long of the publications. Of course, he always worked in administrative collaboration with Dr. Schmitt. So among my prerequisites was the fact

that I worked on the copepods, which were also those of Humes. He and I are still very parallel in our interests. So Dr. Schmitt's supervision of my work was more on a sort of editorial basis and a theoretical indoctrination basis rather than practical.

HENSON: The work routine, I guess, was a little bit different than it is now.

ILLG: Totally. . . [LAUGHTER] . . . shall we say.

HENSON: Yes, because there was quite a bit of, let's say, examination and reports they were called. . .

ILLG: Which I loved! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: . . .which you enjoyed doing?

ILLG: Yes.

HENSON: There are varied opinions about doing that work. Some people seemed to enjoy it, others didn't at all.

ILLG: There was a puzzle in the mail every day, and it was a challenge every day. It was fun. There was drudgery everyday too.

HENSON: Right. How much of the workload was that?

ILLG: It was substantial. The figures are here, because as Dr. Schmitt has said, we logged in every minute for Mr. [John L.] Keddy all the time. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: That's right, you were here during the Keddy era.

ILLG: So I only have the impression that it was a fair amount of the time. There was a fair amount of time for research. And then Chace--l don't know whether it was on his own initiative or on Schmitt's--instituted a very laborious thing but which, again, I found extremely rewarding and interesting, the inventory of the stacks. The stacks had been moved out of Washington because of possibility of danger during wartime, although Dr. Schmitt, having been in California, knew about earthquakes and so he put an earthquake rack protection on all of the stacks as a bomb protection. That was there all through the days I worked there--a little wooden crate-like things that would have kept bottles from falling off all the shelves. Our aim was to spend one day a week in the stacks, Bayer, and Chace, and me, because it needed the technically trained staff to inventory the collections. We went through the type collection first. . . well, this you probably know from Chace's reports. It was valuable; I learned things about zoology that I would have learned in no other way. So it was rewarding. I think all of the work in the Smithsonian was rewarding at that time.

HENSON: And you had a fairly closely-knit division, wouldn't you say?

ILLG: Very, very, yes, we were all good friends.

HENSON: Tell me a little bit about the luncheons. I've heard them mentioned.

ILLG: Oh, they were simply wonderful.

HENSON: Were these for visiting scientists?

ILLG: They were basically for visiting scientists. Sometimes he [Schmitt] would just get together some of the museum people, but he was so busy with outsiders that I think, by and large, it was an outsider that was the stimulus for one of those. Once in a great while we had our own little lunch downstairs. The focus of that was Mr. [Austin Hobart] Clark, and that was an interesting story too.

HENSON: Austin Clark?

ILLG: Yes.

HENSON: Could you tell me about that?

ILLG: Well, he brought a bag. He was very fond of [R.] Tucker Abbott in mollusks, and Tucker was very fond of him, and he was very fond of Chace because Chace was Harvard [University]. Maybe that was the major key to Clark's heart. So most days of the week, we had the little Chace luncheon. It was in Chace's space. There would be anywhere from three or four of us up to a dozen of us. Mr. Clark would reminisce and unfortunately would repeat the same reminiscences rather frequently. It was a little bit of a drag for some people, but most of us liked him so much, and we absolutely adored Mrs. [Leila F.] Clark [US National Museum Librarian]. It was a pleasure. He used to recount old stories beginning at the beginning of his career, all sorts of anecdotes. So that was great fun, too.

Then one to two--I think on the average it had to be at least one day a week and it probably was higher than that--we would receive an invitation to come up. Since we were brown baggers already, there was nothing to bringing it up. Then the most pleasant thing about that whole thing that I remember is a phase that I hope somebody who's even closer to it than I am can record--the wonderful relationship between Dr. Schmitt and [Barry] Bar Hampton, whom we all called Barry. He was the technical assistant, whatever the grade is, for reptiles and amphibians for Miss [Doris Mable] Cochran. He was a southern black; he was from Mississippi, maybe Jackson, and as Dr. Schmitt said, had somehow been brought up in the style of the old-fashioned, aristocratic body servant. He had a sense of identification with the people who were in the supervisory grades. He was not a menial by any means. He was a very substantial person. In fact, as I understand, he was a functionary in the black masonic order [Prince Hall Freemasonry]. However, there was a wonderful basis. . . . He took the responsibility of getting the logistics of the lunches. He went out to the [Pennsylvania] Avenue, and ordered the lunches, and rounded up things, and brought them in. It was a sort of pleasant aspect of

that whole thing. . . a really wonderful man. Many of us took occasion to pay a visit to him in his stacks at least a day a week. He was a rich personality.

Then Dr. Schmitt always had his tea and his coffee, and his fruit, and these favorite mints of his, I keep forgetting the brand, but you know, were they Fannie May mints? He was a food specialty man. At the time I came, he was running a relay service for Mrs. Pepperidge Farm. He had discovered Pepperidge Farm bread--do you know that story?

HENSON: No.

ILLG: Being sort of a gourmet, it was the only decent bread in Washington, he used to say.

HENSON: I believe it.

ILLG: He used to get a personal delivery of an enormous crate one, two, or three times a week, I don't know how many, and then he had a bread route that people came in to pick up their Pepperidge Farm bread! [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: That's a riot, because that's a long way back.

ILLG: And it's a real Schmitt story, you know.

HENSON: Oh, yes. How had he found it?

ILLG: Oh, you know, all he had to do was sniff something good, and he was into it, and then he clamped onto it. And then, of course, he passed it on. He spread the gospel. So there are all these goodies, but the lunch was really to talk shop, and to meet some really prominent. . . the prominent people that I met there are just beyond belief. Then many of my subsequent personal friends, I met there as they passed through, and then I met them later on. Usually we kept pretty well to the hour, although it wasn't

necessary to. But in those days, we took annual leave to get a haircut. That's when my wife learned to cut my hair so I don't have to go to barbershops anymore. [LAUGHTER] It was to set an example for the lower orders, as the curatorial staff. . .

HENSON: . . .kept to the hours.

ILLG: And you couldn't get in a barbershop at noon, and they weren't open on Saturdays, Washington being what it is. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Yes, it's not New York City.

ILLG: Later, you know, the luncheons--and I had many of them after I left and after [Schmitt] he retired--they became much longer. I have had quite a number of four and five hour lunches with him in the 1960s, when lunch started when he got out the bottle of lotion, which was half pineapple juice and half rum. But he hadn't gone in much for drinking until after the war, certainly not in Washington. People out of Washington seem to have remembered being set up to drinks with him and so forth. I don't know whether it was his wife's influence in some way; I can't imagine it was. But it might have been the family background and the tradition of the family circle that kept him from social drinking in Washington until after the war. You didn't get a chance at the pineapple juice then?

HENSON: No, I've never had any of it! I understand he also did drink wine earlier than that. . .

ILLG: I gather.

HENSON: . . .but that was about it. So then when you came back, after you left here, you would be one of the guests who would trigger a luncheon I take it?

ILLG: No, because he no longer. . . well, I might have. That is sufficiently far back and mixed up with other things. I didn't start coming back regularly until the late 1950s, when I went on a National Science Foundation panel. So there was about a five-year gap, and he probably had retired as head curator because he retired in 1957. I left in 1952. I doubt I was. . . I was back maybe once in that five-year span, and I was very busy working in invertebrates tying up a lot of loose ends in my own research. We might have had one of those luncheons, I'm not sure. Then after he was in his retirement quarters, they were intimate lunches; they would be just Miss McCain if she were there and just a few of us. But then we would be the buddies; it wouldn't be a circle. Many times there'd be a dozen around that table at the other lunches.

HENSON: That many?

ILLG: I think so.

HENSON: Would they come from other divisions?

ILLG: Yes, very often. I met a number of interesting botanists through lunches that he had for botanists, and anthropologists, oh, yes.

HENSON: So he went beyond the departmental. . . .

ILLG: Oh, indeed. I remember once I met Harry [Aaron] Marmer, the author of a book on tides, a very important book. He used to be in the [U.S.] Hydrographic Office, and he was the national authority on tidal theory and tides, and practical tide considerations. Some oceanographer was going through. Dr. Schmitt always knew who to bring in from around town. A very frequent guest there, by the way, was this wonderful man who used to be the registrar, Mr. [Herbert S.] Bryant.

HENSON: Oh, Herbert Bryant.

ILLG: Yes. He was a gentlemanly man, and he was one of Dr. Schmitt's real cronies. They used to exchange the daily yarn with each other, and they would compare the news headlines with each other daily.

HENSON: Yes, I was going to ask you--I've heard a lot from people who were. . . he was their mentor; they were younger than he, etc.--did he have any close colleagues in his own age bracket that you recall?

ILLG: Well, Mr. Bryant, certainly.

HENSON: Yes, Mr. Bryant would have been one like that.

ILLG: Now on the professional staff, you know, relationships are complicated, and I don't know who would have been closest. They would have been a little distance away. That was almost inevitable. Mr. Shoemaker was very close to him, but they were so different intellectually that you wouldn't call it. . . well, it had to be a friendship, but it wasn't what you might call comradeship. There wasn't that much overlapping of the whole intellectual spectrum.

HENSON: Yes, of interests and things. The other role that you mentioned yesterday and I'd like to pursue is that he advised your thesis and your doctoral work at The George Washington [University]. Did he do this for other students?

ILLG: Yes, Ted Bayer--at least he was advisory on. Now there probably was a technical front at George Washington on the faculty, either Ira [Bowers] Hansen or Donnell Brooks Young. You see, I pulled this little talk together from where I'm working in Paris [France], and I don't have my own records available, and I don't have the program from my doctoral examination which would spell this out. However, whoever was on that committee from George Washington did the paperwork at George Washington. The intellectual work was done by Dr. Schmitt. There didn't have to be a great deal done. I was really a qualified Ph.D. person when I left Berkeley. My

formalities toward it had been interrupted by the war, and I had just not resumed them at the time that I left there. I should have taken my Ph.D. under Dr. Light, and it disappointed him a little that I didn't finish it up under him.

HENSON: So then you did most of your work out there, but then just received the degree actually here?

ILLG: Right.

HENSON: Harald [A.] Rehder did that also.

ILLG: I think he must have, yes.

HENSON: His degree is technically from G.W., but most of his work. . .

ILLG: Was it under [Paul] Bartsch?

HENSON: Yes, but most of the work was [at Harvard].

ILLG: Of course, Bartsch had a rather more official place on the G.W. [George Washington University] faculty. And then, of course, Schmitt was associated with the training of people at [Marine Laboratory of the University of] Miami.

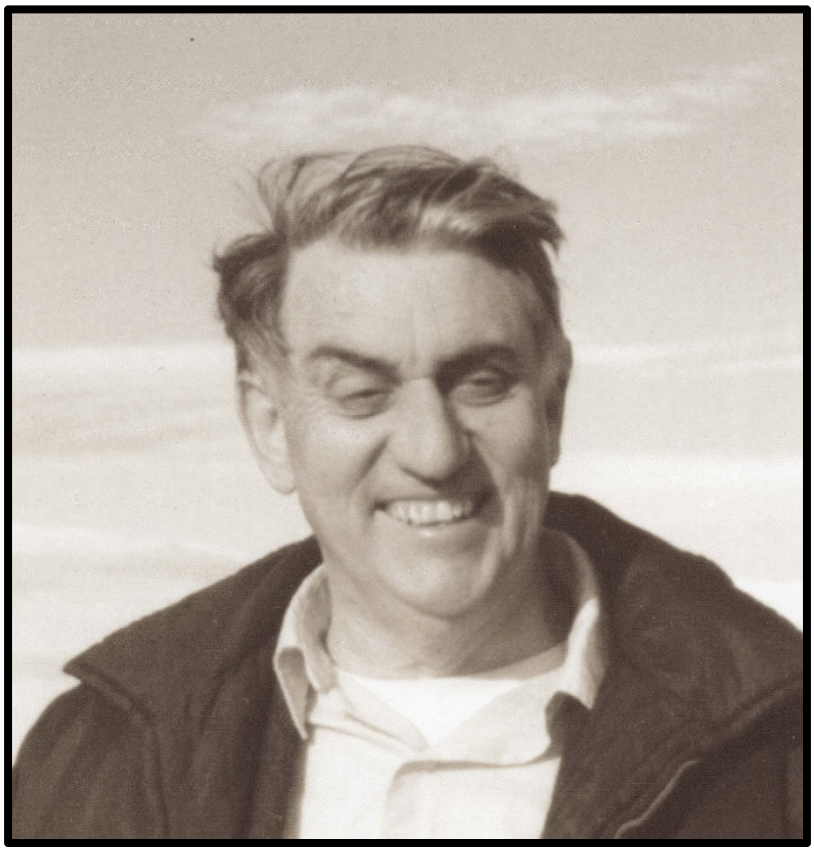
HENSON: And what did he do there?

ILLG: Well, all universities now bring in outside participants on Ph.D. committees. But he had a slightly higher level than that. He had some sort of a university recognition that he was doing that kind of service.

HENSON: Did he work with people working for other agencies around here, or were they just mostly museum people he did advising for?

ILLG: I don't know, because it was just starting when I left. I think I was the first one that he really got his teeth in. I started my program, you see, there about 1948, very shortly after I came here. Very shortly after I came here I began teaching evenings there. I taught evening biology. I think probably he recommended me for the job when they inquired for somebody. I'm a hooked teacher; I never got away from it, and I finally decided I'd better go back to it, although I really love museum life better.

HENSON: After you get your Ph.D., then you left for the University of Washington to teach. Why did you decide to leave the museum?



Paul Louis Illg in 1973, 1914-1998, by Alan Kohn.
Courtesy of the University of Washington Archives

ILLG: Well, I had spent a summer there on—what do you call it, on a detail. I had a summer leave in which the time I logged in was credited as Smithsonian time. I did research that was incorporated into my thesis. I absolutely fell for the marine lab there, and when I was given a chance to teach at that marine lab [Friday Harbor Marine

Laboratories] every summer and to live in Seattle [Washington], where all of the animals I'm interested in would come to my lab alive. It was the difference between having pickled ones and live ones to work on for a substantial bit of my career. That was the major thing. I just was unhappy I couldn't take the Smithsonian with me or bring the Pacific Ocean and put it down in the Tidal Basin. One or the other would have been very good for me. It was a difficult decision.

HENSON: Yes, I would imagine. And that was right after you did. . . no, I guess not exactly after, it was 1952?

ILLG: Very early 1952. I logged in five years and a few minutes. [LAUGHTER] I'm retired now, and I'm getting a little dab out of the federal treasury on the basis of that. I'm an official retiree.

HENSON: All those years ago.

ILLG: I think five years sort of fits congressional duties or something in a convenient way, but it does qualify you for civil service retirement.

HENSON: Yes, because after five years I don't think you can take your retirement money out. If you retire before that you can, things like that. Now were you involved at all, because you were around at the exact right time, in the formation of the SSZ [Society for Systematic Zoology]?

ILLG: I have the opinion that I'm a charter member, but as I say, I don't have my records. I was not involved in it before the centennial meeting here, which they tell me was 1948, but I attended that meeting, of course, and I attended the organization meetings of the society that took place then, so I think I date my membership from that level, which is where the charter members date from. But I was not in on the planning and so forth of it.

HENSON: What did you see and what, if you recall, did Dr. Schmitt see as its role?

ILLG: The promotion of taxonomy, and the publication of theoretical taxonomy and literature, not taxonomic reports, not monographs, which he always felt was the obligation of the Smithsonian to publish.

HENSON: Did you feel as well the importance of the taxonomy?

ILLG: I wasn't as aware then. I was a little green on it. I grew up in a university where taxonomy was extremely important, but all of my indoctrination in theoretical taxonomy came from a bird man. There was no invertebrate taxonomy where I was, except insect, and it was a little suspect for me because a) I didn't know the insects, and b) the particular brand was not a brand that I subscribed to very much and never have come around to subscribing to. So I tend to be a little more of a [Ernst] Mayr man than a [Richard Eliot] Blackwelder man. I don't know whether you know there is a. . . or a little more of a Mayr than [George Willard] Wharton [Jr.]. I probably would have voted against Wharton at that meeting where he was voted down.

HENSON: Okay, now Ernst Mayr was the one at that time who changed it to the study of evolution.

ILLG: Evolution, and I'm an evolutionist.

HENSON: Right, more so than the speciation?

ILLG: No, but I think I see through the Mayr knothole a little more than the Blackwelder. But you know, I'm not choosing up sides or anything.

HENSON: Right, it's just a difference in perspective, and probably both need to be put forth, and both need their proponents. What would you say was Schmitt's role in systematics as just a whole? Was he a well-known figure?

ILLG: I wouldn't say very well known in theoretical systematics. His big contribution, of course, was to set up absolute models of taxonomic practical works, the monographic works that he did, and the descriptive level work. Mayr would have called his work alpha and beta taxonomy, not gamma theoretical. He had a strong instinct for enlarging the sphere of theoretical systematics, and I think he was before his time in that a little bit, and the time hadn't quite arrived yet. One of the things he was absolutely ironclad about the Crustacea catalog, and I think the whole invertebrate catalog, was that a parallel geographic file be set up with the taxonomic file. He anticipated an eventual synthesis in biogeography which is now just beginning to dawn in theoretical biology. He had very good basic instincts for the evolution of biology just as he had for other processes of organic evolution itself. This was an important part of the file, it's another thing I would have mentioned yesterday except that I censored myself a little as I went along, I didn't want to be too drawn out. It's in my notes that I made for the. . . .

HENSON: . . .for the talk, yes. Because that's a very interesting point. . . .

ILLG: It's before we had computers, of course, you see. It involved just making a duplicate card carbon. I don't know what's become of that file, but it was as big as the taxonomic file, filed geographically. So you could pull out a drawer that said Puerto Rico and look up sponges, sea anemones, crabs, copepods that were in our collection.

HENSON: It was just a cross-filing system in the days before computers.

[BEGIN TAPE I, SIDE II]

HENSON: We were talking about his involvement with graduate students. One question was is there anyone else outside of the Smithsonian in that type of a focus that Schmitt had great influence on that you can think of, in terms of graduate work?

ILLG: In terms of graduate work?

HENSON: Yes, that were his students.

ILLG: Well, I don't know; I don't think I have any information on that. Try another question; that's not stirring anything up.

HENSON: What else were we talking about. . . his specific role in systematics, which is what we ended the last one with. Also what in specific terms was his role in Crustacea--in the development of the study of Crustacea during his time?

ILLG: Well, he was such a promoter. As Blackwelder said, his five-foot shelf isn't five feet. He didn't produce as much absolute concrete work on Crustacea as many other people have done, and if it's measured by the inch, it isn't as big as many current workers have in production. However, it was the level of it, the quality, and the strategic placement of it. What he did was not something ground out; it was something that was selected to really fill a need. So it isn't to be measured by weight. . . by volume but by weight. . . .

HENSON: Right, quality not quantity.

ILLG: Yes, right. Of course, then he was in a position to expedite the work of all sorts of researchers. Many people away from here he did a tremendous amount of bibliography for. In addition to ransacking Smithsonian records for people, he and his staff would spend a tremendous amount of time just doing library work, because the library in the division was so comprehensive. So he promoted the work of all sorts of people. Chace has a list of people who somehow were affected by him. I think Blackwelder will eventually come up with a list of people who owe some little segment of their research to this expediting from the division's correspondence.

HENSON: How many would show up in the division to do research on the collections? Did you have a fairly steady run of people?

ILLG: Yes, very. That would certainly be in the records around here. Some would be there for a year. Dr. [Lewis Eugene] Cronin came up after the thing yesterday from [the Chesapeake Biological Laboratory at the University of] Maryland; you probably know him, Eugene Cronin? He's rather big in. . . . He started studying blue crab, and then he directed Solomon's [Island], and then he became a state functionary for marine research and maybe fisheries, I'm not quite sure. But he spent a year here when I was here early, and many influential people would spend a year here. There were the commuters like [Horton H.] Hobbs [Jr.] that Schmitt always had his eye on and wanted to get for years.

HENSON: And Dr. [Marian H.] Pettibone.

ILLG: And Dr. Pettibone, yes. Oh, there were many that were regular visitors—Dr. [Elisabeth] Deichmann would come all the time to work on soft corals.

HENSON: Dr. [Lipke B.] Holthuis, is that his name?

ILLG: 'Holthouse' he pronounces it. It's u-i, it's that Dutch inversion. Yes, he was a pet that Dr. Schmitt spotted, I don't know how or when, but I think because he worked on shrimp and that has always been a slight deficiency. People somehow tended to go more for crab than shrimp, and Schmitt spent a lot of time trying to stir up research on shrimp because he felt it was needed to round out the picture. That was the reason he was interested in Chace, who's a shrimp man, and only rather grudgingly does crabs. And, Holthuis, he was anxious to have do up some big shrimp studies.

HENSON: Now did you ever do any fieldwork with Dr. Schmitt?

ILLG: No.

HENSON: Was he out in the field while you were there?

ILLG: I don't think he was. There was an awful lot of administration as the Institution settled down into post-war. We were temporary appointments for three years. We were not regularized until we had in three years of service. I think we were appointed as something like agricultural aids or something weird. In fact, if this hadn't come down we probably never would have picked up the signal of what to apply for to qualify ourselves. I think maybe some of us might even have been ousted if the thing had been somehow publicized as a wide-open chance for people to find slots in government. Well, there was nobody to do that; there wasn't time to do it, and we were all indoctrinated and going. But I think you might have found a better man than any one of us for the job, you know, floating around in the post-war era. But the structure of civil service was. . . . You see, so there were many things to do administratively, setting up the new administrative framework of the department, because it now had become zoology, so the botany archives and so on--that must have taken a year or more to sort out. Then getting us regularized and one thing and another. . . . Also it was just at the time he had finished playing footsie with [Allan] Hancock Foundation, and had definitively made up his mind not to leave the Smithsonian.

HENSON: All right, now that I'm not familiar with. Had they offered him something?

ILLG: They gave him a firm offer, and then he countered with a firm proposal that they didn't meet, and he declined.

HENSON: Now what would he have been doing there?

ILLG: He would have been directing the Hancock Foundation.

HENSON: It was referred to yesterday a little bit--his feistiness, in terms of administrators. How much of that was bark and how much was bite? Did he really feel that strongly about administration?

ILLG: Yes, I don't think you'd say he hated them because he wasn't a hateful man, he was a hundred percent. . . but he despised a lot of them. He felt they were craven, and many of them were, and irresponsible, and many of them were. I think he projected his own dedication and evaluated them against that and felt so many of them fell short. It led to a sort of a not exactly a contempt, but a disdain I must say, for the level they functioned.

HENSON: Was this mostly for the [U.S.] National Museum administration or just Smithsonian-wide?

ILLG: Oh, national. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Everyone.

ILLG: And some of the presidents he didn't like very much. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: It runs all through Smithsonian history--is a conflict between that, because scientists don't like to give up their work for administration, but always seem to be very chary of people who are just administrators.

ILLG: That's right, they hate administrators. All the viewpoints are different.

HENSON: Yes, very. It seems as if there's always a little tension; they're never. . . .

ILLG: Well, professors usually become suspicious of deans right away, even though deans are right out of the ranks. Then in many universities there's no rapport whatsoever anymore between the president and the faculty, although supposedly the president is a nominal faculty member. But I know several western universities where the president is simply a financial officer who has been booted up finally. Of course,

[University of] Maryland once had a football coach who became president.[1]
[LAUGHTER]

HENSON: It's been interesting here because it seems to be an ongoing problem. You need somebody who is willing to do the budget work, to do the paperwork, but on the other hand, the scientists are a little bit chary about just handing it over.

ILLG: Well, Schmitt's lack of sympathy with the higher administration was not on the paperwork level; it was on the inspiration, and perspective, and objective level. He felt their horizons were too cramped and their perspectives were too small. He just had boundless ambitions for the Smithsonian, that's all there is to it. Well, anything he identified himself with he wanted to be first rank, that's all there is to it--his country. I did kind of want to sneak that in, his sense of the national interest is rather rare among biologists.

HENSON: Well, could you talk about that a little bit more? He did see it definitely as the National Museum?

ILLG: Well, it was just one more projection of his own personality, you would have to say. He wanted his city to be great; he wanted his nation to be great; he wanted his institution to be great; he wanted his department to be great. I don't know exactly, he had a different political approach to making it great from mine, so I don't know exactly. He's in the other party from the one I vote in. I think he was; I'm pretty sure he was--he had to be. Well, that's enough, isn't it? I can't do any more with it because we never got on to that particularly.

HENSON: What was his role in the National Museum? I mean, being head curator is a fairly important role, and I guess the luncheons--he had contact with a wide variety of

[1] Harry Clifton "Curley" Byrd (1889-1970) was president of the University of Maryland from 1935 to 1954.

curators. Could you describe what you would think his place would be among the whole museum staff? Did he know pretty much everyone fairly well?

ILLG: I think he had to. I think he must have known all the [Smithsonian] Secretaries. Of course, he was in the interesting position of having a subordinate taken out from under him and made his superior, when [A. Remington] Kellogg was promoted from a curatorship--from under his head curatorship--and made director. The worst battles that ever went on around here, as battles, I think were between Kellogg and Schmitt. On the other hand, there remained a sort of a level of comrade-liness that made it a little less bitter than his antipathy toward some of the other administrators, such as poor Mr. Keddy, whom he simply detested.

HENSON: Keddy was an interesting person.

ILLG: He must have been in some ways. I know people who were tremendous Keddy fans. Where I was, of course, we only saw him through filters. We didn't see much loveable, and furthermore, we were being brainwashed all the time about how awful it all was. [LAUGHTER] Of course, you see, we were in a very sheltered position there. Dr. Schmitt was the ideal superior. He did everything he could for the people who worked under him. He always was receptive to any counter to anything that he desired to have done. He was never authoritarian. He turned out to be authoritarian; because of the way he operated, his wishes were commands, as far as his staff was concerned. [RECORDER TURNED OFF]

HENSON: You were talking about his role as an administrator.

ILLG: Most of us weren't all that interested in the higher administration, although we were very close to higher administration then, you see. There was not much framework. As curators, we were just very close to the Secretary. We even knew the Secretary, you know, and worked rather closer to the higher level than people do now.

HENSON: Yes, and that would have been Dr. [Alexander] Wetmore at the time, right?

ILLG: Yes.

HENSON: Well, and he was a scientist who came out of the museum. . .

ILLG: Exactly.

HENSON: . . . at that point and still did come by and always held to his research. Now just in terms of the administrative structure, would a curator have gone to talk or to see Dr. Wetmore at that time if a problem arose they needed to discuss?

ILLG: I don't know.

HENSON: You would never have personally gone to see him about. . . ?

ILLG: I wouldn't have dreamed of it, no. I would have talked to my curator first. He was my closest advisor, and in fact, when I left the museum that's where I started. I went to him, and discussed it with him, and he said he would write me a good letter of recommendation, and maybe not send it, and send a bad one so they wouldn't take me. [LAUGHTER] Then I went to Dr. Schmitt, and he indeed wrote my letter of application. I have the draft of it, which I treasure.

HENSON: Right, that's the type of fellow. . . . What would you say were Schmitt's strengths as a scientist?

ILLG: Well, his complete integrity. I mean, that's the most important thing a scientist can have. If you don't have it, you're not a real scientist. As far as I'm concerned, that's it.

HENSON: Would you have perceived any weaknesses as a scientist, or which areas. . . ?

ILLG: Well, everybody has weaknesses. He had his human feelings, but there he was. He was as solid as a rock. If he had to make his own worst enemy the winner in something on scientific grounds, then that would be the winner; that's all there is to it.

HENSON: Right, if he perceived that that was the correct course. Now once you left, did you continue to maintain close contact with Dr. Schmitt?

ILLG: Oh, yes.

HENSON: How--correspondence?

ILLG: Correspondence, yes, and visits.

HENSON: Now he was apparently--because we've got I can't tell you how many boxes of letters--just an incredible correspondent.

ILLG: I'm not a good correspondent, so I didn't develop the sort of correspondence that other people did. But every once in a while we would get off on something, and sometimes he approached me, and he did a few times for this and that. We sent usually Christmas cards and letters. We felt warm toward Mrs. Schmitt, and didn't know the family well, but warm toward Barbara [Ann Schmitt Lundy]. We did keep a sort of communication, and we always thought of them as good friends in Washington.

HENSON: Did he ever come out your way?

ILLG: Yes, he was there in 1957, just after he retired.

HENSON: Because he was out in the field almost constantly, but I guess, mostly in the South Pacific and West Indies.

ILLG: And the Antarctic, unbelievable. [LAUGHTER] He tried to con me into one of those Antarctic voyages. You wouldn't catch me dead spending Christmas on Antarctica. [LAUGHTER]

Liz Illg and Paul L. Illg, By P. Morse,
University of Washington, Courtesy of Elizabeth Illg

HENSON: When was that?

ILLG: The honor was too great. I don't remember exactly--in the 1940s.

HENSON: Was that while you were still here . . . ?

ILLG: Oh, yes.

HENSON: . . . that he wanted to get you out there.

ILLG: I think I disappointed him. [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: In that you didn't want to. One of the things I've noticed is that there is something of a separation in that department in terms of who was doing fieldwork. Some people were not as field inclined, which I suspect produced something of a balance in the department.

ILLG: That's right, yes. I think that's very true.

HENSON: There were people who were willing to stay home and work on the collections while he was out. Did you work at all in any way with the Bikini and Operation Crossroads materials?

ILLG: I worked on sorting the materials as they came in. I finally did identify a few things, although what came in from there was not exactly in my level of competence--in my sphere of competence. My level was perfectly all right, but it wasn't my sphere. So I didn't do much direct. . . . There was somewhere along the line, in the 1950s or somewhere, where, lo and behold, some money became available, and I did some identifications for money for National Academy [of Sciences] or something, set up by Dr. Bayer or Schmitt, I'm not quite sure. It was a very small transaction. In part it was sort of a reward for legwork I had done off and on, on the Bikini collections. I was in charge of sorting because I happen to be a very broad zoologist. Bayer is, I think, broader now because he has continued, but I think I was probably the most exposed at that time, and had a knack for spotting things.

HENSON: Was there any discussion that far back of the idea, which has developed

now, which is the [Smithsonian Oceanographic] Sorting Center?

ILLG: No, not really, because that's an administrative gimmick, and we didn't think in administrative terms. The sorting function was there, and there are many things about sorting centers I don't think you would get a lot of us to subscribe to.

HENSON: Yes, because you can lose a bit that way. I had mentioned this before, just in terms of Waldo Schmitt type of stories, is there any that you can think of which really bring out Waldo?

ILLG: Yes. I don't think I have any good toppers for most of what we have. A thing about him was his lovely kiddishness. He really had a mischief, too. But one of my fond memories was an epic of about a month when he was very embarrassed because he used to go home every night and pick cherries and make himself stewed cherries. And the first batch of that year he broke off a front tooth on a cherry pit that he didn't get out when he made it. He ran around looking like Peck's Bad Boy for a month with a missing tooth in his grin. And you know, I wish I had a picture of that because, for me, it brought the small boy back up into this venerable head curator in a way that I found very, very endearing.

His kiddishness came out once when he visited our house on a Sunday. He found my wife and me up on the roof. . . he and his wife came. They didn't telephone; they just showed up, and my wife and I were up on the roof replacing a row of roofing. And we were black with tar and whatnot! But with the Schmitts, you didn't care; we just came down and washed off. We had something to finish, so he played checkers with my son, who was four or five, which was wonderful because it kept him out of our hair; he was a devil of a kid. And I don't know what Mrs. Schmitt did, you know, it was a very short time, but it was nice. So then he visited with the kid and spent a lot of time. Then as they left the house and were going down the path, he said, "You know Alvina, that kid beat me. I want you to stop at the drugstore on the way home, and I'm going to get a set of checkers and a board. It's time I got practiced up." [LAUGHTER]

HENSON: Well, I guess he was friendly enough that he was the type of head curator who would socialize with the staff, things like that.

ILLG: Oh, yes, and pop in on a Sunday if he felt like it.

HENSON: Yes, on a Sunday afternoon. Did I hear someone say that Alvina was the chauffeur; he didn't drive himself?

ILLG: I think because of his deafness. He called her Alvina always, you know. Or Blackwelder says he called her Stummy: I didn't know that. That's her, middle name.

HENSON: That was her maiden name, right. But she would have done most of the family driving?

ILLG: I think he never drove. I'm not quite sure. But she drove him in frequently. He was a bus rider, and he used to read the newspaper on the bus and things like that. And of course, being deaf it was easy to concentrate on the bus too. Which is one of the reasons he was so interested in public transportation.

HENSON: Yes, I guess it would have been later than when you were there that he came up with the transportation plans for the city.

ILLG: Oh, no, it goes way back.

HENSON: Does it?

ILLG: Yes, in his bibliography there was something in the 1940s where he was. . . something about the railroads.

HENSON: Yes. He had a proposal for maintaining the streetcar system, from what I understand.

ILLG: Yes. Oh, and what a very sound idea it would have been.

HENSON: Yes, we know that now as they build a subway through.

ILLG: And another thing about him. He and Miss McCain often would come in--both of them had this trait--many of them would come in and work off the morning's irritation by a letter to somebody. Then it would all be discharged; you know, it was very healthy. Neither one of them ever developed ulcers among their ailments, I must say. But there'd be a letter to the Civil Service Commission or there'd be a letter to--it would only be two or three minutes out of the routine of the day, they got so they could do it automatically…. Did you know about that?

HENSON: No, not really.

ILLG: They must be in the files somewhere, or some evidence of them. These were constructive usually.

HENSON: Oh, yes, what ideas they would have for improvements and things like that?

ILLG: Yes.

HENSON: The other thing that I'd like to mention on the tape now is the portrait file that you had mentioned before, that this was an idea of his and something he developed.

ILLG: Well, it was something he pursued. Now whether it was originally his idea I wouldn't know because it went back before my time. Yes, it was something very dear to him, and he would go to great effort. Another thing he liked to do was to collect all the

works of an author. He was a great reprint collector. And he stimulated and promoted collecting all the works of an author, a complete bibliography, and filing it, particularly. . . . and binding it, excuse me, not filing it because he didn't file it; he used it then. These were very useful ideas, very useful. He had a sense of archives that any archives department could use.

HENSON: Right. Yes, well, he did pick up a couple of collections of papers here and there, [Arthur deC.] Sowerby things and things like that that he hung on to. Yes, because portrait files like that are even valuable to professional societies and things like that.

ILLG: Oh, indeed they are, yes.

HENSON: How many societies was he very active in?

ILLG: I don't know. I'm not a society person myself. . . but many. He had fantastic dedication to the Cosmos Club. I never joined it because I didn't like its membership policy when I was living in Washington, and may have disappointed him in that a little bit. And then also the Washington Academy [of Sciences] was something he was very devoted to. One of his great pleasures came just as I came in. He spent a year on that in the 1940s. He got out what was called a Red Book, and it was a directory of all the members of the Washington Academy, which would involve some very distinguished scientists.[2] It had little thumbnail biographies and pictures. It's a very interesting thing. If you have none in the archives here then you should acquire one. . .

HENSON: Yes, we should try to get one.

ILLG: . . . because it had many important Washington personalities. Chace would have one, and I may have mine still.

HENSON: I guess in those days the Washington Academy of Sciences was still

[2] *Organization and Membership of the Washington Academy of Sciences*

having meetings?

ILLG: It was very vital. The most important thing it was doing from his viewpoint was publishing data. The Smithsonian scientists were in a very strange situation of subsidizing their own research, because they formed themselves into societies, like the Entomological Society [of America], the Helminthological Society, the Biological Society [of Washington], the Malacological Society, and published the Smithsonian-supported research. Somebody ought to go up on the [Capitol] Hill someday and say, "You may think these guys publish on funny subjects and so forth, but they put their money where their mouth is." They have supported the recording of their information in the public sphere all through the history of the Smithsonian. And the Academy used to do it. It got a little lop-sided, and some kind of a clique came up that sank the publishing function, and they converted it to a social calendar publishing function that became ridiculous. Those of us who held absentee memberships were encouraged to withdraw and we did. But when I left here, I wouldn't have dreamed of withdrawing from the society because it was an avenue of publishing new species which were all based on Smithsonian-oriented research.

HENSON: Which the Biological Society [of Washington] still does. . .

ILLG: . . . continues to do, and the Helminthological Society, the Entomological Society, and maybe even a Malacological Society, I'm not quite sure of that.

HENSON: That I don't know. They come from a very similar background, I guess, the [Washington] Philosophical Society.

ILLG: Yes.

HENSON: Even the Cosmos Club is very closely interrelated. . .

ILLG: Absolutely.

HENSON: . . . and the Washington Biologists' Field Club. It's all sort of. . .

ILLG: . . . all related. And he loved the Field Club, of course, and was it Plummer's Island? Yes. I never went out there with him; I just bitterly regret it, because we lived near the Potomac [River]. I used to bring in the weekend data that I would get, because I'm sort of a naturalist too. We walked on the towpath every Sunday. That was our major Sunday event. So I would keep him clued in on things along the Potomac which he was always interested in.

HENSON: Yes, now he had a house fairly well out, I guess.

ILLG: Yes, Takoma Park [Maryland].

HENSON: Yes, and he enjoyed that. I've covered pretty much all of my things. Is there any area that you can think of that I haven't covered?

ILLG: Well, I won't now because I'm going to go, but if I think of anything that I think I ought to volunteer, I will. And if you want anything that I can help with, you can always write to me. I'll be back in Seattle in the fall. I'm easily reached there.

HENSON: Okay, well I thank you very much for your time.

ILLG: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]