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SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION AND THE US  
EXPLORING EXPEDITIONS,  
*or.*  
HOW THE NATION'S ATTIC WAS CREATED

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Smithsonian Institution

Have you ever wondered how the Smithsonian Institution was able to increase and expand its collections to such a point that they have become the largest in the world, and its museums (19, let alone the 9 research centers and the National Zoo) among the most visited every year? [1] Ever asked yourself how this Institution has been able to reach the number of over 140 million artifacts and specimens, which are cared for daily by almost 7,000 employees?

The *Smithsonian Institution Archives* (SIA) can answer these and many more questions about the Institution. They are an incredible tool to deepen our knowledge about the creation and expansion of the Smithsonian. They are also an invaluable source of information on American history; for many historical events are linked in one way or another to the Smithsonian, and many of the people who played an important role in building America were, at one point or another, involved with the Smithsonian. From these archives, we realize that most of these collections came from expeditions to the four corners of the world. [2]

The Smithsonian Institution was officially established by an Act of Congress in August 1846, after the donation of \$508,318 by James Smithson (1765-1829), given to "*the United States of America, to found at Washington, under the name of the Smithsonian Institution, an Establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge...*", as stated in a clause of his will. (The equivalent donation in today's dollars would be about \$14<sup>1</sup> million.) An English scientist, Smithson was born in France, raised in England, and passed away in Genoa, Italy. While during his life he never visited the United States, he has been resting in this country since Jan 25, 1904 (75 years after his death), when Smithsonian Regent Alexander Graham Bell [3] brought Smithson's remains from Italy to Washington D.C., where they were interred in a crypt in the Smithsonian

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<sup>1</sup> using web converter <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/> Consumer Price Index method

Institution Building, better known as the Castle. He is the only (known) person buried on the National Mall.

For its part, the Congress had a hard time for several years before finally getting the money. Congressmen were divided between those intrigued and fascinated by the generous donation of this English gentleman and eager to receive and use that money, and those who instead felt that the Congress had no right to accept this donation, all the more so as the donor was a stranger. But eventually the former prevailed. The reasons behind such a bequest to the United States are still unknown, but if Mr. Smithson was hoping to become famous through his eccentric offer, he succeeded!

The Smithsonian's first Secretary, Joseph Henry (1797-1878), was determined to develop it into the first major research institute for science. Spencer Fullerton Baird (1823-1887), who became the second Secretary upon Henry's death in 1878, managed to establish the Smithsonian as the National Museum aimed at conserving and exhibiting all the Nation's treasures. Although Baird was a collector and naturalist himself, and brought to the museum his own collection, the first official collections of the newly created museum were constituted by the specimens gathered during the explorations led by Commander Charles Wilkes in the years 1838-1842 [4].

After the Wilkes Expedition, the U.S. government organized a series of expeditions within the country, led by the Army, to map and survey the many national territories still unknown. Secretary Baird facilitated them with instructions and instruments to collect specimens during the explorations. Animals, plants, minerals, fossils, every specimen collected in the field ended up at the Smithsonian Institution, which soon became the great repository of natural history in North America. It immediately appeared that the "Castle," the first building of the Institution and still its symbol, was too small and in many ways not adequate to contain the ever growing collections, which, in 1881, were moved to the magnificent building created by the German architect Adolf Cluss and now known as Arts and Industries Building. The official United States National Museum had been created. [5]

The first official Smithsonian Expedition dates back to 1859, to Alaska. Many other expeditions followed this one, sometimes sponsored solely by the Smithsonian, sometimes organized with other partners. Among them, we can mention the United States Army, the Field Museum

in Chicago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the National Geographic Society. As the collections grew, the Smithsonian borders expanded accordingly: the object of the expeditions became the exotic and at that time almost unknown parts of the world, such as Africa, Australia, Brazil, China, the Galapagos Islands, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, Siberia, and Venezuela, to name but a few. Each time, the U.S. National Museum acquired huge amounts of artifacts and specimens, all of which greatly helped to strengthen the collections for which the Institution is famous worldwide. In some instances, the Museum would receive, in exchange for lending its scientists to analyze and identify the species, half of the specimens brought back from an expedition. This allowed deeper knowledge in all branches of natural history, besides building good relationships and partnership with the governments of other countries. [6]



Figure 1 Visitors outside the U.S. National Museum, now the Arts & Industry Building, c. 1900

[Courtesy: Smithsonian Institution Archives, RU 95, Neg. # 5787]

Those were times of great discoveries and scientific ideals, but also times in which both scientists and government officers believed that the few traditional cultures scattered in isolated geographical areas would soon disappear, fading away by either dying or assimilating into the wider Western society. There was therefore an urgency to analyze, study, and measure individuals from these communities, as well as to gather information on all aspects of their traditional life and their skills for surviving in often harsh environments. This urgency enabled the Smithsonian to save their goods and products from oblivion, and at the same time secured a great amount of ethnographic material that reinforced the ever increasing collections.

This, in a nut-shell, is the history of the creation and early growth of the Smithsonian collections and museums.

The long, fascinating story of the Smithsonian expeditions deserves a series of books. However, since this Journal has a limited number of pages we focus on one expedition that embodies the essence of its time, when passionate scientists and nonscientists ventured into new, wild worlds to see and describe them and to bring back thousands and thousands of unknown specimens. By happy coincidence, 2009 marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this expedition, which gives us a good cause to remember it.

### **The Smithsonian-Theodore Roosevelt African Expedition, 1909-1910**

Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) became the 26<sup>th</sup> American President in 1901 and was reelected in 1904. Shortly after his second term expired, he embarked on an African safari (March 1909–March 1910) sponsored by himself, a group of friends, and the Smithsonian Institution. This became known as *The Smithsonian-Theodore Roosevelt African Expedition* and covered British East Africa (nowadays Kenya), the huge German East Africa (nowadays split into Burundi, Rwanda and Tanzania), Uganda, and finally up to the Nile to reach Khartoum, where they took the train to Cairo.

At that time, the paleontologist Charles Doolittle Walcott (1850-1927) was the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution (1907-1927). It is interesting to mention here that he had been president of the AAAS in

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1923, and from 1899 to 1910 he was president of the Washington Academy of Sciences. He published at least two articles in this journal when it was still called *Proceedings*: one in the first issue (1900), the other in volume 7 (1905). [7]



Figure 2 Theodore Roosevelt dressed in expedition attire, 1909.  
[Courtesy: Smithsonian Institution Archives, RU 95, Neg. # 2002-32244]

President Roosevelt was the commander of the expedition, which included the following members:

Newland & Tarlton, Safari outfitters in Nairobi

R.J. Cunninghame, leader

Leslie J. Tarlton, adjutant

Edmund Heller, zoologist, age 34

J. Alden Loring, zoologist, age 38

Edgar A. Mearns, physician and head scientist of the expedition, age 52

Kermit Roosevelt, photographer, age 21 [son of Theodore]

The Smithsonian raised some \$50,000 to cover the expenses of its three scientists (Heller, Loring, and Mearns), while Roosevelt covered the expenses for himself and his son. The rest arrived from generous friends, among others Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919), who donated \$25,000. Carnegie was the founder of the *Carnegie Institution of Washington* (CIW) established in 1902, as well as of the *Carnegie Mellon University* and the *Carnegie Corporation of New York*. [8]

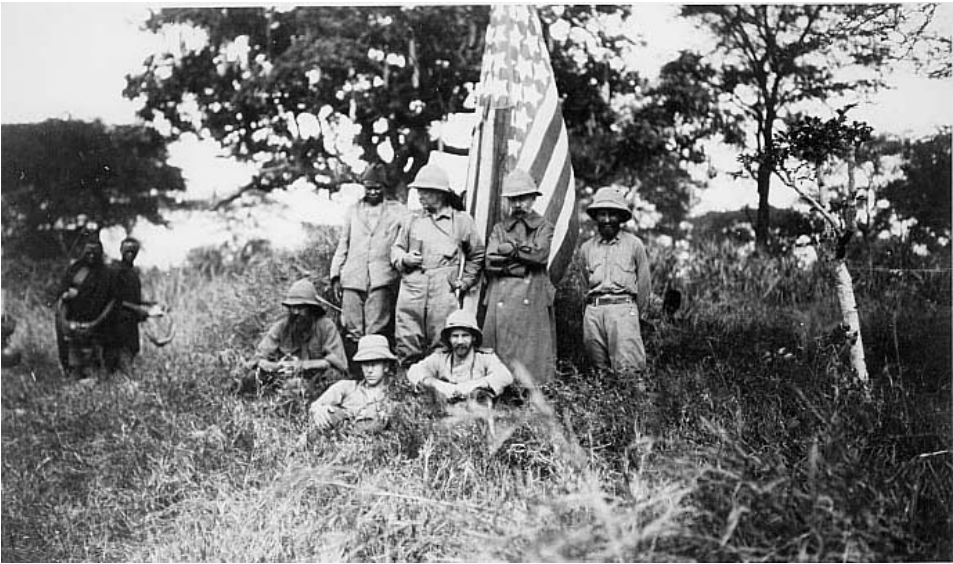


Figure 3 Theodore Roosevelt and members of the Smithsonian-Roosevelt Expedition, 1909

[Courtesy: Smithsonian Institution Archives, RU 95, Neg. #21452]

We should also mention that Roosevelt received \$50,000 from the publisher Scribner's to write articles from the field for *Scribner's Magazine*. The October 1909 issue containing the first of his African hunting articles reached the magazine's highest circulation ever: 215,000 copies. [9]

Roosevelt's energy (at that time he was only 50 years old) and voracious passion for hunting produced an immediate increase of the Smithsonian collections. According to the brief description in the records, the Institution received "1,000 skins of large mammals, 4,000 of small mammals, and other specimens totaling approximately 11,400 items. About 10,000 plant specimens were also obtained, as well as a small collection of ethnological objects." It took several years for the Smithsonian staff to mount and catalogue all these specimens, and some other museums also benefited from this expedition, as they received the duplicates. [10]

In the same records – boxes and boxes of papers, notes, maps, scrapbooks, inventories and reports of species collected (animals and plants, many still undescribed), photographs of animals, as well as of African villages and Indigenous communities – we find also press releases from the *Associated Press*, reporting in full detail the progress of the

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expedition to the “*Dark Continent*,” with a special focus on the President’s adventures.

The huge amount of correspondence between Roosevelt and the Smithsonian Institution (through various representatives, from Secretary Walcott to the taxidermist in charge of the treatment of the animals collected) exchanged before, during, and after the expedition, tells us a lot about the preparation and the planning of this safari. It also supplies us with precise information on the African species captured alive for the National Zoo (founded in 1891), on the methods of conservation of the skins, on the preservation of the animals and the many plants collected, and even on how to ship and care for the live animals.



Figure 4 In April of 1913, Atlas Lions from the Theodore Roosevelt African Expedition are placed on display in an exhibit in the new National Museum of Natural History

[Courtesy: Smithsonian Institution Archives, RU 95, Neg. # NHB 24881]

We like to mention here that among the holdings of the *Theodore Roosevelt Collection* – a small component of the National Film Collection in the Library of Congress, consisting of 381 titles – there are four fragments of the movie “Theodore Roosevelt in Africa” by Cherry Kearton (1871-1940), probably shot in Kenya in 1909 and released in 1910. The frames are posted on the Library website, and can be watched freely on any computer. Though very short, they give us a glimpse of the safari: the contrast between the naked or barely dressed natives and our American explorers in their colonial outfits, equipped with all the possible

paraphernalia, is striking. A dance of the rainmaker is included in Part 2, but not to be missed is Part 4, which presents the Roosevelt party crossing a river. [11]

On his return to the United States, Roosevelt published the two-volume book *African Game Trails: An Account of the African Wanderings of an American Hunter-Naturalist. With More than Two Hundred Illustrations from Photographs by Kermit Roosevelt and Other Members of the Expedition, and from Drawings by Philip R. Goodwin* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1910). A few years later, he published *Life-histories of African Game Animals, by Theodore Roosevelt and Edmund Heller: With Illustrations from Photographs, and from Drawings by Philip R. Goodwin; and with Forty Faunal Maps* (C. Scribner's Sons, New York, 1914). Alden Loring, one of the Smithsonian scientists who accompanied Roosevelt, authored a volume entitled *African Adventure Stories*, also published by Scribner's, in 1914 (reprint in January 2009 by Kessinger Publishing, LLC). Of course, many more wrote about Roosevelt's successful safari, until recent times, and a movie on his life has been announced by director Martin Scorsese. [12]

Only three years after the African expedition, in 1913, President Roosevelt and son set out on another expedition to Brazil, this time to collect specimens for the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and to map uncharted rivers. As in the first expedition, he signed a contract with Scribner's for a series of articles and a book. The expedition – called *Roosevelt-Rondon Scientific Expedition* from the names of the two leaders (the other one being Colonel Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon) – proved much more dangerous than the first one, as they all seriously risked their life descending white waters and rapids for days and days. In Roosevelt's own words:

*...forcing our way down through what seemed a literally endless succession of rapids and cataracts. For forty-eight days we saw no human being. In passing these rapids we lost five of seven canoes with which we started and had to build others. One of our best men lost his life in the rapids. Under the strain one of the men went completely bad [sic], shirked all his work, stole his comrades' food and when punished by the sergeant he with cold-blooded deliberation murdered the sergeant and fled into wilderness.... We have put on the map a river about 1500 kilometers in length...Until now its upper course has been utterly unknown to every one, and its lower course although known for years to the rubber men utterly unknown to all cartographers.* [13]



The numbers of specimens collected in the first expedition and the enthusiasm with which Roosevelt jumped in this second, more hazardous one reflect his craving for adventure, and his ambitions to become one of the greatest explorers of his time. Weakened by this trip, Theodore Roosevelt never fully recovered from the malaria and dysentery he contracted in Brazil. A serious infection from a wound and, even more, the sudden death of his youngest son Quentin in 1918 contributed to the decline of his health. He died at the age of sixty, in January 1919.

### Epilogue

After the Smithsonian-Roosevelt Expedition to Africa, other Smithsonian-sponsored expeditions followed. In recent times, improved means of transportation, communication and exchange of information allow exploration and research to go on in less expensive and less demanding ways.

Nowadays, Smithsonian curators and scientists continue the mission of the Institution of *increase and diffusion of knowledge*, which includes collecting not only specimens of plants and animals in the most remote areas of the world, but also information on traditional knowledge and unwritten lore, as well as texts in archival documents and handwritten old books. This is all the more necessary because, while many biological species are threatened with extinction, traditional cultures and their languages are exposed to the same risk of disappearance. Fieldwork is now complemented by the recording and archiving of these endangered languages and of the cultural information still available, taking advantage of the most advanced technologies now at our disposal. Slowly but surely, the Nation's attic is moving toward a new phase of its original mission and soon might become the World's attic, something that James Smithson probably never envisioned.

## NOTES

1. In 2008, more than 25 million people visited the Smithsonian Museums, aptly nicknamed “The Nation’s Attic.”
2. Website of the SIA: - <http://siarchives.si.edu/>. The following link lists the major events of the Smithsonian since its creation: <http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/thisday/>
3. Smithsonian Regent Alexander Graham Bell (1847-1922) was also one of the founding members of the National Geographic Society and later its president (1896-1904). He is also the one who, by accident, sent the first sentence to his assistant, “Watson, come here; I want you,” on March 10, 1876, thus “inventing” the telephone. In fact, it has been now proved that the Italian Antonio Meucci (1808-1889) was the first real inventor of the telephone, namely the one who created the instrument, but Bell was the first to apply to fully patent it (United States Patent No. 174,465).
4. Charles Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition During the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842*, 5 volumes and 1 atlas, Lea & Blanchard, Philadelphia, 1845.
5. Later on, (in 1910), the natural history collections were moved to the brand new National Museum of Natural History across the Mall, and the United States National Museum building was renamed the Arts and Industries Building.
6. The *List of Smithsonian Expeditions, 1878-1917*, is available at: <http://siarchives.si.edu/findingaids/faexplist.htm>
7. Walcott’s papers are conserved in the SIA, *RU 7004: Charles D. Walcott Collection, 1851-1940 and undated*. Of the 117 boxes, boxes 41 and 42 include correspondence related to the WAS. See also: Ellis Leon Yochelson, *Smithsonian Institution Secretary, Charles Doolittle Walcott*, Kent State University Press, Kent, OH, 2001. Yochelson’s papers also are conserved in the SI Archives. She published a few articles in the *JWAS*, one bearing the interesting title *The Washington Academy of Sciences: Background, Origin, and Early Years*, *JWAS*, vol. 4, n. 4, 1996, pp. 184-221. In 1998, she was honored by the Academy with the award in History of Science.
8. Andrew Carnegie supported this expedition probably because he was very close to Charles Doolittle Walcott, Smithsonian Secretary in those years, whose help was instrumental in the creation of the CIW, of which Walcott himself was the first secretary.
9. To know more about this, see the catalog of the Exhibition *Theodore Roosevelt. In his own right, 1904-2004*. An Exhibition Prepared by Naomi Pasachoff, Chapin Library, Williams College, October-December 2004. See also: *Archives of Charles Scribner’s Sons, A Guide by John Delaney - C0101*, Manuscript Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
10. *Smithsonian Institution Archives: Record Unit 45*: Office of the Secretary, Records, 1903-1924; *RU 74*: National Zoological Park, Records, 1887-1966; *RU 192*: United States National Museum, Permanent Administrative Files, 1877-1975; *RU 208*: National Museum of Natural History, Division of Mammals, Records, circa 1867-1971; *RU 7083*: Edgar Alexander Mearns Papers, circa 1871-1916, 1934 and undated; *RU 7179*: Edmund Heller Papers, circa 1898-1918; *RU 7472*: Theodore Roosevelt Collection, Newspaper Clippings, circa 1901-1928, 1933, 1936 and 1958; *RU 7420*: John Alden Loring Papers, 1889-1897. The Theodore Roosevelt Collection

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in the Library of Congress contains some 150,000 Roosevelt letters, in addition to drafts of state papers and speeches. The same Library holds in its manuscript collections the papers of Kermit Roosevelt (1889-1943) and of his wife, Belle Wyatt Willard Roosevelt (1892-1968), given to the Library by Belle herself, between 1954 and 1967. *Kermit Roosevelt and Belle Roosevelt papers, 1885-1975*, Call # 0471E, Part I, and II. For the curious, the *circa* 56,900 items are stored in 189 containers that occupy 75.4 linear feet of shelf space.

11. The link is: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mbrsmi/trmp.4102>. The locals are mistakenly called Zulu, but they were most probably Masai or Kykuyu, as rightly noted in the short description.
12. Among the many publications devoted to this expedition, we quote one of the very first, by James Martin Miller, *Hunting Big Game In The Wilds Of Africa-Containing Thrilling Adventures of the Famous Roosevelt Expedition- In Search Of Lions, Rhinoceri, Elephants, Hippopotami, and other Ferocious Beasts of the Jungle and Plain Including Journeys in Unknown Lands, Miraculous Escapes, Curious Customs of Savage Races, and Marvelous Discoveries in the Dark Continent, Together with Graphic Descriptions of Beautiful Scenery, Fertile Valleys, Vast Forests, Mighty Rivers and Cataracts, Inland Seas, Mines of Untold Wealth, etc. etc. - The Whole Comprising A Vast Treasury Of All That Is Marvelous And Wonderful In Darkest Africa* [National Publishing Co., Philadelphia, 1909, reprint by Lewis Press, 2007]. Providentially, the size of the title page did not allow the author to list **all** the marvels and wonders in *Darkest Africa*... More recently: Patricia O'TOOLE, *When Trumpets Call. Theodore Roosevelt after the White House*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2005. Movie in production: *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, adaptation of the Pulitzer Prize winning biography by the same title, written by Edmund Morris (Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, New York, 1979; with a revised and updated edition published by Modern Library, New York, 2001). Two useful web sites about President Roosevelt are: <http://www.theodore-roosevelt.com/tr.html> and <http://www.theodoreroosevelt.org/index.htm>
13. Theodore Roosevelt, *Through the Brazilian Wilderness, 1913-1914*, Appendix C: *My Letter of May 1 to General Lauro Müller*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1914, pp. 370-371; reprint edition by Bartleby, New York, 2000. Available online: <http://www.bartleby.com/174/>

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