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He Took Smithsonian Out of Attic

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WASHINGTON, March 2 — When the head of the search committee announced recently that Robert McCormick Adams would become the ninth secretary of the Smithsonian Institution next Sept. 1, the eighth secretary corrected him.

"Sept. 16," said S. Dillon Ripley, the current secretary, the title for the institution's chief officer, which masks with its quaintness the power and prestige of the post.

Not one day sooner than absolutely necessary, the 70-year-old Mr. Ripley is to retire from the secretaryship after holding it for 20 years. He will retain a connection with the Smithsonian, where he will continue his research in ornithology and will continue to provide, when needed, an institutional memory. He has presided over great changes in the Smithsonian, and in the last 40 years has been a witness to great change in Washington.

"As far as Washington is concerned, I think no one can deny that it has become a city," Mr. Ripley said the other day in an interview in a Victorian parlor next to his office. "It's crowded, quite urban, but still has its elegance and sleepy-time-down-South in the outskirts of the city itself and in parts of the neighborhoods. But suburbia has taken over Washington, so it's now vast, staggered, sprawling shopping malls, which I find rather lifeless, unlike the Southern farms and horses and relaxed cow barns and things of that sort that used to be in Fairfax, Arlington and places of that sort."

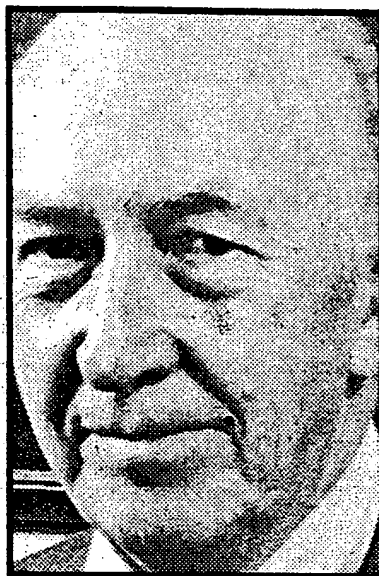
Vital Changes Registered

But for some, especially blacks, it was suggested, they weren't the good old days.

"That is certainly true," Mr. Ripley said. "It was far more segregated in those days and one of the things I rejoice in now is the fact that after those sad riots in the 60's, the city has come together in a far more positive way."

The Smithsonian, Mr. Ripley said, played a part in helping the city come together. It has begun a museum of black history in Anacostia, a predominantly black neighborhood of the city. It is part of an attempt to reach out to blacks and other minority groups, Mr. Ripley said, to get the word out that the Smithsonian's museums downtown are open to everyone, not "great palaces on the Mall" where they are unwelcome.

Mr. Ripley, an Ivy Leaguer, both Yale and Harvard, and a product of



S. Dillon Ripley

privilege, said he viewed his contribution to the Smithsonian as not so much for the new museums he built but rather for whatever success he has had in encouraging more people — the poor and the minority groups — from all over the city and the country to visit it.

"I hope to have increased the sense of participation between people and the museums," he said. "When I came here, I was very much conscious of the fact that the museums were slightly closed. They had a cathedral-like quality to them. People went in and became slightly somnolent. They were stunned with the viewing of large objects and major exhibitions, and there was no real feeling that this was part of everyday life."

Broadening of Institution

If numbers are a measure, Mr. Ripley would seem to have succeeded. The Air and Space Museum, built in Mr. Ripley's tenure, reported it had 10 million visitors last year, making it the leading tourist attraction in the world. Since the museums have no admission charges, there are no ticket sales to audit to confirm the 10 million figure, which was arrived at by counts of people going through the doors.

Even given the fair number of active youngsters who went in and out through more than one door in a single visit, there can be no doubt that the number of visitors there is vast, attracted by a museum that includes the Wright Brothers' first plane, the

latest space gadget and just about everything in between.

The Air and Space Museum is near the Hirshhorn Museum of modern art, also built in Mr. Ripley's tenure and which has an appeal that is as selective as the aviation museum's is broad.

The latest Smithsonian museum, which may some day be considered Mr. Ripley's greatest contribution, is the Quadrangle. That museum, now under construction, will house the art of Africa, the Middle East and Asia, the only large part of the world that has not been well represented by the Smithsonian.

"Except for the Freer," he said, speaking of one of the other Smithsonian museums, "we have never had a meaningful representation of the traditions and culture of this vast part of the world. Their art is fantastic and their culture is fantastic, but none of this is still quite on the mark as far as most Americans are concerned. We don't realize what makes half of the world's population tick, their roots, their family life, their traditions, their art objects."

Birds and Intelligence

That part of the world is of personal interest to Mr. Ripley, who is an authority on the birds of India and Pakistan, and it was that interest that brought him to Washington in 1942 as an assistant curator in the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History. From the museum, he went to the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency.

A spy in the disguise of a bird watcher?

"I started off doing research," Mr. Ripley said. "I was never an actual spy in the sense that I was rushing about trying to get secrets. But I did wind up in charge of the secret intelligence division which had to do with the war against the Japanese in Burma, Southeast Asia, Vietnam."

Did he ever slip into those areas under cover of bird watching to see what the Japanese were up to?

"Curiously enough," Mr. Ripley said, "the British, and I suppose the Indians, Pakistanis, Ceylonese and so on, thought that it was such a marvelous part of an old-fashioned cover. Their theory was that most obviously we were spies. It never seemed to me to be realistic because I never could discover what someone out in the bushes could discover in the way of secrets. Geologically interesting perhaps, but, of course, anyone who knows anything about the geology knows that there ain't much gold in them thar hills."