

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History interview
Subject: William "Bill" Davis
Interviewer: Jonathan Dickey
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MR. JONATHAN DICKEY: Good morning. My name is Jonathan Dickey. I am an intern with the National Archives and Records Administration History Office. It is 9:00 a.m. on January 22, 2016. This interview is being conducted for NARA's Oral History Project at the National Archives Building in Washington, DC. Please state your full name and spell it for the record.

MR. WILLIAM H. DAVIS: William H. Davis. W-I-L-L-I-A-M H. Davis, D-A-V-I-S.

MR. DICKEY: What is your affiliation with NARA at the moment?

MR. DAVIS: I'm with the Center for Legislative Archives.

MR. DICKEY: Okay. What is your position?

MR. DAVIS: Archivist.

MR. DAVIS: Some might say unofficially a senior archivist, but officially, the title is archivist. There isn't an official job title of senior archivist. We're all archivists. Whether you're a 13 or a 12 or an 11 or what have you, you're an archivist. There isn't a job title that reflects one's longevity. There are archives specialists, there are supervisory archivists, but there aren't senior archivists. I'm an archivist. But since I've been here for over 30 years, sometimes people will say senior archivist just to be polite. [Laughter]

MR. DICKEY: Now, for some background information on you before we get into the meat and potatoes of your time here. Where were you born?

MR. DAVIS: New York City, Manhattan. Raised on Long Island.

MR. DICKEY: Quite a bit of distance from there to here. What got you interested in the archives?

MR. DAVIS: I did my undergraduate work at Washington and Jefferson College in southwestern Pennsylvania. Then I went to the University of Maryland as a graduate student. I learned about what was called the Hills Program, where one can earn a degree in history and library science in the Library School. So I enrolled in that, and one of the classes I took was taught by Frank Burke, who was then an adjunct professor there. I learned about the National Archives through him. I could've done an internship anywhere in Washington at the time, but I wound up doing an internship here at the Archives. While I was an intern here in the fall of 1982, they offered me a job as an intermittent archives technician. I accepted it, and have been here ever since.

MR. DICKEY: Okay. So why were you interested in that specific program at the University of Maryland?

MR. DAVIS: When I was graduating from college and going into graduate school, I was told that teaching positions in history were very difficult to find. They're even more difficult to find now. When I learned about that program, where the emphasis is on archives and manuscripts and special libraries, I thought, wow, that's fascinating because I love historical libraries. I knew that others were involved in it. I just

thought it was something to try, and I loved it from the start. I knew that it was a very good fit for me because I loved history and historic libraries. History was always my strong subject, and it was always my main interest throughout my growing up years. It was a foregone conclusion that I would major in history.

MR. DICKEY: Was there a specific time period of history you were interested in, or just history in general?

MR. DAVIS: I was always particularly fascinated with the Age of Enlightenment, 17th-and 18th-century French history in particular, the early modern period. I always enjoyed American history also. But certainly since I've been with the Archives, I've learned a great deal about all of American history. It's all fascinating to me.

MR. DICKEY: Have you come across any documents from the 17th-century or 18th-century in the Archives?

MR. DAVIS: No. Of course, our records at the Archives go back to 1775 in Record Group 360, the pre-Federal records, Records of the Continental Congress, Confederation Congress, and the Constitutional Convention. So our records go back to the 18th-century, but none from the 17th-century. I have not spent a great deal of time working with original documents from that period of time. Now that you mention it, when I was a graduate student, one of my favorite classes was on doing exhibits with rare books from the (University of Maryland's) McKeldin Library Rare Books Collection. I think the books were 17th-century, I don't remember exactly, but it was quite an experience working with those.

We had to create book cradles, and I had no idea how to do it, and the instructor didn't really give us a great deal of instruction on how to do it. But we had to figure it out and somehow we did. We mounted exhibits that went on display in the McKeldin Library. We also had to make placards for our exhibits. So that stood out as quite an interesting experience. I enjoyed that. It was a real learning experience on how to do something that you really didn't have any background or experience doing. That was a long time ago.

MR. DICKEY: Do you work on exhibits here very much?

MR. DAVIS: I help the exhibit staff if they have questions about our records and need to find an interesting document for an exhibit. So yes, I have helped many of the exhibit staff, and in the education area. We all do what we can to help our fellow staff members who are working on special assignments. We've played a role in all of the major exhibits going on here. They usually include legislative records—which are the records I work with—because Congress is involved in every conceivable subject. That makes working with congressional records interesting.

MR. DICKEY: You said that initially you were an intern. What was the first position you had here after the internship?

MR. DAVIS: As an intern, I was assigned to what was then called the Legislative and Diplomatic Branch, and I worked with State Department records. When I was offered a position as intermittent archives technician, intermittent means part time, I believe I was assigned also to what was then called the Legislative Diplomatic Branch. But I worked with State Department records, which were very, very interesting. I enjoyed that. I worked with Record Group 59 and Record Group 84. Record Group 59 are

the General Records of the Department of State. Record Group 84 are the Consular Post Files that document activities in the different posts around the world and the countries as they existed then. So I learned a great deal about the internal affairs activities of all these countries. It's quite interesting. I was assigned to the Legislative and Diplomatic Branch to work with diplomatic records. Legislative was a part of that unit.

Milt Gustafson was the branch chief in those days. Ron Swerczek was the diplomatic record supervisor, and Ken Harris was the legislative record supervisor. There were other staff members, like Dane Hartgrove, and I can't remember the other names right now. My mentors were Frank Burke, Milt Gustafson, Ron Swerczek, and Dane Hartgrove. I learned a great deal from them and I liked the way they focused their work here. I used them as examples to follow in shaping my role as an archivist, which was a more historical approach. I think they thought of themselves more as historians working in an archives more than as archivists in the pure sense of the word. I don't think that they were as interested in archival theory or what a series is, versus a subseries, and all of those technicalities. Other archivists here were pure archivists, fascinated by the technical aspects of what an archivist does; how an archivist arranges records and describes them; and what's a series and what's not, and what's a record group and what's not; and how to divide things up and all of that. So my mentors' approach was pleasing to me.

MR. DICKEY: And how long did you work in that department?

MR. DAVIS: I was there from 1982 to 1984.

MR. DICKEY: So what were the most interesting records that you came across during that time?

MR. DAVIS: I can't remember anything specifically. I remember I did a lot of microfilm publications, which were done a lot in those years. I surveyed records and prepared them for microfilm publication. I wrote little descriptions about them for a microfilm pamphlet. I put in target pages that let the film person know when to stop a section and to start another. I must've done other processing as well. But I always found the Consular Post files to be absolutely fascinating. The State Department records have their own classification scheme that they devised, so you can study it and see how things were arranged so you can focus on the areas that interest you the most. The State Department records were very well organized. They had good records management practices. The General Records of the State Department also were very interesting, but I don't remember much about those. I remember the Consular Post files were particularly interesting.

MR. DICKEY: I was listening to an interview with another archivist here last week who currently deals with State Department records...

MR. DAVIS: David Langbart?

MR. DICKEY: No, it was Paul Wester.

MR. DAVIS: Oh, yes, yes.

MR. DICKEY: And he was talking about the problems they're having with Hillary Clinton's emails, not just hers, but the early years with emails, and how they were being handled, what to do with them. Were there any similar kind of problems with records, whether people weren't necessarily keeping them, or filing them like they're supposed to, or—

MR. DAVIS: Yes. I'm thinking back about State Department records, which I haven't worked with in many, many, years. I remember in the early 1980s, the newer State Department records that were just coming in to the Archives, that classification scheme that had worked so well for State Department records up through the early- to mid-20th-century, was no longer being used. So that presented problems for the archivists here on how to decipher them, how they should be filed. The fact that the old classification scheme was no longer useful, was presenting a new problem. We didn't have email issues because there was no such thing. To organize the newer records, we needed a new classification scheme, because the old one was no longer useful; it had broken down.

MR. DICKEY: Were you involved in decisions about how to start reclassifying this stuff when it was coming in, or was that at a higher level?

MR. DAVIS: That was a higher level—but I know certain discussions were going on. I don't think I was involved in anything that important. But I know that those issues were going on at the time. There are always new issues, new challenges to what we do here, no matter what records we're working with.

MR. DICKEY: So in 1984, you left that office?

MR. DAVIS: Yes. In 1984, I was an intermittent archive technician position. I think you could work as many as 39 hours in a week. It was flexible. You could work 30 hours or 20 hours, whatever you chose, but no more than 39. So I wanted a permanent position, and applied for one. I remember in those days there was difficulty, not just with me but with many intermittent archives technicians who wanted to become fulltime career archivists.

And so they created, with OPM (Office of Personnel Management), something called Schedule B, which was a mechanism to transfer someone from being an intermittent archives technician, a non-career government employee, to being a fulltime government employee as an archivist at the Archives. So I applied in 1984 and in January 1985, I became a fulltime archivist. They had some difficulty and controversy about the Schedule B mechanism, but it worked out. We all became archivists at that time. So I became a fulltime career employee. Not a career conditional or a temporary career status, but a permanent government employee with all the benefits.

At that time, I was assigned to what was then called the Library and Printed Archives Branch, if I remember correctly. And that was a unit where the library here in this building; everything was in this building. This was it. There were other satellite facilities but this was the heart of the whole agency. So there was the Archives, there was the Library, and part of it was called Record Group 287, Publications of the U.S. Government, and I was assigned to that unit. I don't remember why, but I was. There must've been some reason. I think there was an opening, and I thought it'd be interesting.

In those days they had a CIDS Program for newly hired archivists. It was not very formal, and much less formal than what it became in later years. And so you were assigned to take some classes, and then you were assigned to do what they called rotations to different units in the agency so that you became familiar with how the whole agency functions. So that was very interesting. You would do a month or two in one place, a month or two in another place, then come back to your home unit and spend some time there, over a two-year period, if I remember correctly. As a beginning archivist you were automatically promoted from a 7 to a 9 to an 11. The 11 was the ceiling. I remember my first salary as an archivist was \$17,500, something like that, back in 1985. I did these rotations, some were more

interesting than others, but I got very good exposure. I learned a little bit about military records. I did a rotation to the Preservation Unit. I did a rotation to the Administrative Unit that was then called NA, the Office of Administration. NN was the Office of the National Archives, where all the custodial units were located. Jim Moore was the head of that office in those days, and then Frank Burke became the head of it temporarily. When we became independent in 1985, Frank Burke became Acting Archivist of the United States, and I think Trudy Peterson became the head of the Office of the National Archives.

I did these rotations to different units, and it was very good. I remember one interesting class that I took with Frank Evans, a long time archivist who was really into archival theory. He liked to focus on things that archivists used historically, like “respect des fonds” and “provenance.” That was quite an interesting class because not too many other people focused on that. He was an interesting guy. He’s long since retired.

When I was with the main Library Archives Branch, my desk was downstairs in 3E2A. This was long before the renovation. We had stacks going down to the first tier. The building had 21 stacks. Our area was underneath the Constitution Avenue steps. They had installed what they called movable shelving, a new, very innovative thing in those days, the first example of that in the Archives. They installed a special floor, and then movable shelving. They used that area to house Record Group 287, Publications of the U.S. Government. My desk was in a little office area down there among the stacks underneath the steps. It wasn’t anything fancy.

The building has changed over the years with the renovation, with shuffling, wing shelving, and other things, some of which I’m not happy about.

I’ll give you one example. The renovation was well handled; they did a beautiful job in the Rotunda, although I don’t think that was necessary. I thought that the building was already wheelchair accessible. It wasn’t the perfect situation. You just had to come in the Pennsylvania Avenue entrance, take the elevator, go through the gate, and you’re in the Rotunda area, with a little ramp to the Charters of Freedoms. So I thought that worked out fine.

Anyhow, they’d renovated the building and they made the Rotunda the way it is now, and it’s okay. It looks fine. People are pleased with it, and it still has that beautiful grand look. I’m sad that they did away with the entrance coming up the steps into the Rotunda area. That’s the way the building was designed for people to enter, so I think it’s a shame that they did away with that. But I understand for security reasons they had to restrict it, and change the way people enter the building.

But I think that they really cut corners in the stacks areas, which they shouldn’t have done. It’s a shame because the stacks were beautifully designed with terracotta tiled walls, and they replaced those with drywall, which is just not as good quality. The light switches that they put in are very inexpensive and so they’re breaking all the time. I know there was a big discussion over the years about how staff would leave stack lights on. Now, with the new switches, the lights are still on, as they break so easily. They are just very poor quality. So those are two objections to things I don’t think were handled very well. But it’s okay, everything worked out just fine.

While we’re on some negative things, I could never understand why, after they built the new building at College Park, they did not handle the space issue better. We quickly ran out of space. Archives II stacks quickly filled up over the years much faster than they ever expected. Of course, this is still very much a

paper-based government. People don't realize that. Although everything's done on computers, people still print things out. Less so today, but still it is. But they've never gone to Congress and honestly said that we preserve the historically valuable records of the United States Federal Government; we've got to have more space; this is still a paper-based government; we've got to have another building. They didn't want to admit that they miscalculated. I never quite understood that line of thinking. So now, we're still scrambling for new space. This is a very serious issue for the Archives. That's unfortunate.

MR. DICKEY: So how do you deal with this space issue here in this building?

MR. DAVIS: We've run out of space and one way we've dealt with it is what we call wing shelving, which is another thing that I had strong objections to. This is the National Archives; we are supposed to set an example; we're supposed to do things correctly. So, to make the most use of the space that we do have, they devised this wing shelving practice. Normally, you have seven boxes to a shelf in a stack area. You have rows of shelves divided into compartments, and each shelf can accommodate seven boxes. That's three linear feet. But sometimes, you can push those seven boxes back and get two more boxes in the front, to make nine boxes to a shelf. They did that to save a lot of space. But the problem with it from an archival and preservation point of view, is that in order to see the boxes behind, you have to take one or two boxes off, and not often is there a place in the stacks to rest the boxes, so it's extra wear and tear on those winged boxes. It's not an ideal situation. After all, we're the National Archives, not just an archive. It's unfortunate that we've had to resort to that. But it's okay, you do what you have to do.

MR. DICKEY: So once you started in your permanent position, doing the rotations, was there any particular division in the rotations that was more interesting than the rest?

MR. DAVIS: I remember one interesting assignment, when Japanese Americans were writing to the Archives for confirmation from our records that they were, indeed, sent to specific internment camps out West during the war. They needed documentation so they could get compensated for that terrible situation. Congress had decided that the Japanese-Americans were going to be compensated for being interned in these camps. So I was detailed to that unit for a while. We would take these letters and look up their names in registers for each of the internment camps. There were four or five or six or seven of the camps out West. That stands out as an interesting assignment. I met people I would not have met otherwise, Mary Walter Livingston, and Bill, I can't think of his name, and others.

I remember another quite interesting rotation, to the Office of the National Archives, learning about the administrative running of the agency. I remember the preservation unit stood out, but the others are vague in my memory, but it was a good experience. Later on, the CIDS Program became more formalized, where the archivists were asked to write a paper and try to publish it, but that wasn't expected of us in those days. We took those classes. I think we wrote a paper for one of them, but nothing came of that. Once we were done with that program, I think that's when we graduated to the 11 Level. Also in that period of time, I learned about Record Group 287, Publications of the U.S. Government, which was quite interesting because it has publications from all the different agencies, like all the annual reports, and it has its own classification scheme for government publications. So that was interesting. And I spent some time helping out at the library.

Then, in 1987, after I finished the CIDS Program, I was assigned to what was then called the Archival Publication Staff in the Offices of the National Archives. That was very interesting. It had an over-arching responsibility for description in the National Archives. Virginia Purdy was the head of that unit then.

That was very good. I was very happy about that. That was very interesting because computers were just starting to become part of everyday life. I don't remember the name of the computer system. My job was to take descriptions of records from all of the different units in the Archives and enter information about them into this database. That was very good experience because I learned about all of the different record groups, more than I had been exposed to before, and I learned about this database. That was a very interesting because it gave me an over-arching view of the Archives. I wasn't focusing on just one unit, I was sort of at an administrative level, receiving information from all the different custodial units in the Archives, whether they were in the regions or here in this building, whether military or courts or legislative or diplomatic, what have you. So that was an interesting assignment.

Description's a whole other area that's evolved over time since I've been here. There's been quite a progression or evolution of description practices here at the Archives.

Every step of that evolution has been the greatest innovation of all. Then something else comes along that's even better, so it's the greatest until it's overtaken by a new greatest.

What we're doing now is the best thing to come along until something else comes along that'll subsume it. But that's human nature.

It's hard to improve upon the traditional PIs (Preliminary Inventories). Those old PIs were pretty much before my time. They were the main way to understand our records when I started here. PIs were very well organized. You'd see what records we had. All the series were lined up, and they had indexes. Then, that started to break down. As computers started to come in and become more part of our lives here, different systems were developed. At one time, there was a Format X, a Format Y way to describe records. Format Y was the organizational unit. The Format X was the actual series or subseries, and there were other things that I'm not remembering. Now, we call them file units in the National Archives catalogue. A file unit is basically what we used to call a series or subseries. That's where you get to the actual description about the records, with these file units that we enter, send out to Archives II, where they review it and it's entered into the National Archives catalogue. So that description has really evolved over the years.

The Archival Publications staff also had people working on what was then called the Guide to the Records of the National Archives. It was a hard copy publication that described every record group in the National Archives. That was a big project, in addition to what I was doing. We were entering description information about the records into this database. Other staff members were gathering information on every record group in the National Archives for this publication. That would be a big, multi-volume guide to all the records in the National Archives. That still exists. It was quite a big thing at that time. Now it's on our website and you can access it

MR. DICKEY: Now, these catalogs are used for researchers coming in and trying to find information?

MR. DAVIS: Yes. The National Archives catalog is how people find out about our records. It's a beginning. It has a lot of information, but it's not comprehensive. Nothing is ever comprehensive, that's why they used to call it preliminary inventories. Preliminary because the ideal was that they were never complete, so that's why they were called PIs, Preliminary Inventories. Even though they were published, they were never considered complete. Continually, more information is always being entered into the National Archives catalogue. In Legislative, where I work now, we've been adding information into the National

Archives catalogue, about the records previously described in the PIs. That's all the older records, plus the newer records that are just becoming available to researchers.

When I was with the Archival Publications staff, I was an 11. One had to apply for a 12. One didn't automatically become a 12 in those years, when a 12 opening occurred—now...I have to interrupt that story because at the end of that period when I was with the Archival Publications Staff, I was assigned to the White House Office of Records Management on a detail with other archivists here in the building. We were assigned in the latter part of 1988 to the White House Office of Records and Management for an eight- or nine-month period at the end of the Reagan Administration. That was a wonderful sojourn for me. It was just great, being at the White House; learning how the White House functions; being in what was then called the Old Executive Office Building; becoming familiar with the web and with the computer system that they had there. A bunch of us were to begin the processing of the Reagan materials before they were to be sent to the temporary Reagan Library in California. He was still President, of course. We were given groups of records that we processed and entered information about them into a database. We did that for a number of months. Toward the end of 1988, when the Reagan Administration was coming to an end, our job was to help the various White House offices with the packing process.

That was very interesting. Many of the staff didn't realize who archivists were, that we were professionals. I think they looked at us as sort of box boys, people who just boxed up things. But still, we had exposure to the different offices and we helped them out, but the bulk of our time was spent processing these. The bulk of those months we spent at desks looking at these materials, entering the information about them. I remember one series of records was very interesting to me because they were letters on various topics, sent to the President, from various state capitals. So it was interesting to see the various state seals.

The Old Executive Office Building was a beautiful building to work in, and very historic. It had beautiful terra cotta tile floors, and marble, so that was a very nice experience. Of course, we got to eat in the cafeteria in the basement, and I ran into the President on occasions, and Vice President Bush. I almost ran into him in the hallway. Also, we were invited to some White House Head of State welcoming ceremonies, and we got to go to a Christmas party for the staff in the White House. That was a very nice experience.

When Reagan left office, we came back to the Archives. I think it was at that time that I got the position as a 12 in what was then called the Legislative Archives Division. I wanted a promotion. I wanted to be a 12. Lew Bellardo was the head of that division in those years. Shortly after that, legislation was introduced to give Legislative Records more prominence, which it deserved, not just part of Diplomatic Records or just a division within the Archives. They created the Center for Legislative Archives in 1989 or 1990. I've been with Legislative since the end of 1988. That's what you call stability.

Now, some people might say, 'Oh, it's not good to stay in one place too long.' But on the other hand, I always thought that gaining subject area specialty, knowledge about a group of records would be a good thing and would result in some sort of promotion, but that hasn't happened. But I have developed a great deal of knowledge, and I think researchers appreciate it. And I've always enjoyed working with the records and I've always enjoyed helping researchers. I get a pleasure out of that. You never know what a researcher is going to ask you. So I've enjoyed that aspect of it. At some point, I thought I would enjoy getting into management, but then I learned that the grass always seems greener. I don't think I

would've enjoyed it because, especially nowadays, there are so many meetings and discussions, and so little really changes over time. So I'm glad I've been able to work with the records and the researchers. That's worked out very well.

MR. DICKEY: You said you work with researchers a lot, and in my research for our interview today, I noticed you're acknowledged in several monographs. How does that come about?

MR. DAVIS: Researchers come to the Archives and our job is to help them find where we think they'll find the materials. Or we tell them that we don't have the information that they're looking for. We are not adequately staffed to do research for people, but we do what we can. We're able to give a higher level of assistance in this office than people in other units are able to do because we don't have as high a volume of researchers as do archivists working with military records or with all of the civilian agency records. Researchers are usually writing a book or an article or a dissertation. They usually acknowledge the assistance that they've had from the Archives. That's how my name has wound up in the acknowledgement sections of many of these books that have been published over the years. I've never kept a list, or kept track of all of them, but it adds up over time. Usually, there isn't an acknowledgement section in scholarly articles, so they wouldn't have acknowledged people, because they just don't do that. But yes, over the years, I've worked with many, many, many researchers here.

Sometimes we can be quite busy, and other times it's slow. There's usually a pattern to how busy we are, although that's broken down now with the computer. I think there's a level of busy-ness that's steadier now over the years than in the past. Now, it seems that we're busy all the time. With the computer, more and more people know about us, more and more people see what we have through our description on the website, so that's brought in more business, which is good. In addition to helping researchers, I do other things too, although reference always has been my main focus because I enjoy that. But I have also done description, I do preservation work, organize the preservation activities that go on here with our records. And I have advised them, guided them, given them an introduction to our holdings and such. So, I do a whole variety of things.

MR. DICKEY: For the researchers you've helped, were there any areas of interest that have stood out more than others, or places where you think you did more work helping them than others?

MR. DAVIS: We have many genealogists who come in here. I'll focus on two things that have stood out over the years. Number one are the petitions that we have here. Few people realize that one of the main activities of Congress, from the beginning, 1789 up through the mid-20th-century, was responding to petitions. Petitions can take the form of expressing a viewpoint about an important issue of the day, or requesting compensation of some sort, either a pension, or because of disability, or their property was stolen during wartime, or a land issue with the federal government. We've had many, many, many researchers over the years looking at these petitions in various ways, either as a broad examination of anti-slavery petitions, for example, or petitions relating to Indian issues, or petitions relating to navigation or irrigation, commerce, all of these things can be touched upon. That's been quite interesting to see, because these petitions can cover such a broad wealth of topics, as could Congressional records generally because Congress can examine any conceivable subject, and they have. This makes it quite interesting. We have all of these petitions. A huge part of our collection is petitions.

Another area that has stood out, it's not just these two, but I'll focus on the investigative records that we have.

Before the 20th-century, Congress did all of its work in the Capitol Building. That's all there was. But in the early 1900s, congressional office buildings were built. The House Office Building, the Senate Office Building, all of a sudden Congress had committee rooms available to them. They had more space, and they began to hold more and more hearings. And they began to have more and more investigations because of the big issues of the time, mostly dealing with crime, and anti-Communism, and all the child pornography. All kinds of investigations were held. These so-called investigative records are very interesting, the details, the level of investigating, the level of examination that these Members of Congress and their staffs, the committee staffs, would go into is just amazing. And our records reflect that in terms of their organization and the indexing. That level of indexing you just wouldn't see today. These investigations covered a full range of topics, such as airmail, labor issues, unions, crime, pornography, among other things. So we've had researchers looking at these records.

The other issue is our access to these records. Basically, Senate records are closed for 20 years, and House records are closed for 30 years. In my early years here, all congressional records were closed for 50 years, but they liberalized the access rules. The Senate decided 20 years was adequate, and the House decided 30 years. Each decided its own rules of access. Also, the National Archives' relationship with congressional records is different from our relationship with the executive agency records.

When the records from any executive agency, whether the State Department, Labor, Commerce, Agriculture, Defense, War Department, and the other executive agencies, come to the National Archives, and are deemed to be historically valuable, the National Archives becomes the legal owner of them. But that's not so with congressional records. Congress continues to own the records that they have sent to us. The House and Senate committees decide what to send to us. It's completely up to them. We have no control over that. We have physical custody of them, but the House and Senate retain legal ownership of their respective records. So we have a little less latitude in what we can do in terms of disposing of them or rearranging things. House records come to us in a little more organized fashion. For Senate records, it's a little more complex because each committee makes its own decisions.

On the House side, at the end of a Congress, which lasts for two years, the various committees send their records to the Office of History, Art & Archives. They will have organized the records, boxed them, labeled them, and we receive the whole two-year Congress at one time, as what is called an accession.

The Senate side is different. Each committee does its own thing, its own boxing, its decision when to send, so we receive accessions from the Senate committees all the time. It's up to them completely. So that's a difference between the House and the Senate.

We have the 20 years of the Senate side, 30 years of the House side, and then for investigative records, they are closed for 50 years. Many of these investigative records have become available in recent years because a lot of these investigations were done in the 1950s, and these records have been heavily used by researchers such as the McClellan Committee, which focused on labor and union practices; and the Kefauver Committee, which focused on organized crime; and the Special Subcommittee to Study Juvenile Delinquency in the U.S., in the 1950s and 1960s, that focused on juvenile issues. These are the sorts of records that researchers want to get into to see what Congress was studying; investigating; what their conclusions were; what the interactions were between staff members and executive agency personnel; or what kind of correspondence they were receiving from the general public, or all of these things.

So our records are organized. We have these petitions, and we have what we call committee papers, and sometimes these records can be very substantive, and other times they're not. It depends on the Congress, and it depends on the committee. There's no rhyme or reason to it. You can't say, oh, yes, all of these records are going to be useful, or substantive. It just depends on what we have or don't have, and it varies greatly from Congress to Congress, from committee to committee. But generally speaking, in terms of the investigative records from the mid-early to the 20th-century, these records are very substantive. As I said, they had a great deal of authority to investigate whatever the issue was; and to gather information on whatever it was, whether it be an individual or an organization or a practice, or what have you; and those records are very substantive. The committees provided us with very good indexes to them.

For example, for the McClellan Committee on organized labor and unions, we have this huge three by five index card file. We can't make that accessible to researchers because it has information on records that are still closed. But the level of indexing is amazing, that these committee staffs were able to maintain an index of this volume and quality. We have about five filing cabinets with little three by five cards, four rows to a tray, to a drawer, filled with these index cards arranged alphabetically. It's absolutely amazing. You wouldn't see that today. They're all on cards. A secretary would take the card out, type the information on it, and put it back in. That's all there was, that's how things were done in those days. It's interesting that things were done so well in that regard. I don't know if a computer can improve upon that.

MR. DICKEY: So are the McClellan Committee records the ones that seem to be used more than anything else right now?

MR. DAVIS: We get a fair number of questions about it, but we also get a fair number of questions about other committees, such as the Kefauver Committee, which looked into organized crime, and the Juvenile Delinquency Committee from the 1950s and 1960s. That was a subcommittee of the Government Operations Committee, if I remember correctly. We get a number of questions about that. We have this collection of comic books from it. That's up in the vault. The hearings looked at all these practices of society's influences on food, and on children. That was a particularly interesting thing.

Over the years, we've created a treasures vault. It has items that are extremely valuable and have great historical significance. They were culled from our regular stacks. The treasures vault has all of these very interesting documents from the records of the Congress, the House and the Senate Joint Committees. And we conduct tours of those treasure vault items for people, Members of Congress mostly, and committee staffs, to build good rapport with Congress. Congress gives us our money, our budget, and so we give them tours and show them our historically interesting documents. It's a way for us to show off our more interesting items, and hopefully build better relations with the Congress so that they'll give us bigger budgets. We've been doing that for quite a few years. That's grown into a bigger part of our operation, having a larger number of materials in this treasure vault area, giving these tours. We used to do very little of that. I think is a good evolution.

When the Center for Legislative Archives was created, Mike McReynolds left, and Lew Bellardo, who was also Deputy Archivist for a while when we first became independent, became the first Director of the Center for Legislative Archives. Then, Mike Gillette became the director after Lew Bellardo became Deputy Archivist. He was considered to be Archivist at one point, but he wasn't chosen, he didn't get

that position. Don Wilson became Archivist of the United States after Frank Burke had been the Acting Archivist for a while.

Lew Bellardo was our first director, then Mike McReynolds came back and expanded this treasure vault area. I think that was very good.

Another issue that we deal with is the expanding concerns with electronic records. I am not so involved with that, but it will impact me somewhat as we start to have to preserve electronic records. That's a whole other ballgame, how do you handle that, how do you process these records, how do you save them? Is it on a disk? What computer do we use to do that? How do we screen the records to protect personal privacy? That's another issue that we deal with, screening records. We have to protect personal privacy information and national security information for records that are less than 50 years old. For example, the records of those two investigative committees, the McClellan Committee and the Kefauver Committee, require screening because some of the people mentioned could still be alive. The Juvenile Delinquency Subcommittee records could have a very personal story about a juvenile's being mishandled in some form or fashion. We have to protect that information if we think the people are still alive, so we use our good judgment. There are no hard and fast rules to these things. You have to trust your good judgment. And even if a record is old enough and you think the person is not alive anymore, you can make the record available. But we use our good judgment.

Screening income tax returns from the IRS, those have to be closed permanently, no question about it, no matter how old they are—if they are from the IRS. But if the income tax information comes from an attorney or an accountant, it can be released. Federal Grand Jury information has to be withheld permanently.

MR. DICKEY: For the electronic records, how do you deal with screening them and taking out information, because 30 years ago when you first started working, you had mainly tape drives but now you have all this digital stuff, and it's instantly available.

MR. DAVIS: Yes. I haven't personally had to deal with much of that. But we have recently received a great many records on disk, electronic records, electronically born records, and we will have to start to process those. They are going to be open, and researchers will be requesting those in the near future. So we're discussing how to do that. I assume that these records are all on a disk, a CD of some sort. They'll be organized in some way. I will have to put it into my computer, look at it, see what it is, what screening issues are involved, because these are very recent records. One example is the records of the Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission, I think was this congressional investigation, [a legislative branch commission; independent, 10-member panel composed of private citizens, according to NARA press release 3/11/16] examining the financial crisis of 2007-2008. Normally, they would be closed but there's a special rule with these that they can be opened now that we have them here. They were sent to us immediately after the commission went out of business. So there are always exceptions to every rule; very few things are set in stone.

Like with these financial crisis records, I haven't seen any yet but I know we have them and they're going to become available soon and a lot are in electronic form, so we'll have to figure that out. I assume we'll have to figure out how to segregate the things that we can release versus the things that we can't. We may have to redact information if we think personal privacy is an issue. We'll have to learn to do that on the computer. I have not done that before.

I am still thinking of retiring this year, so I may not have to worry about it. This is for the future archivists to worry about.

MR. DICKEY: Why retire now?

MR. DAVIS: I've been here for, all told, 32 years officially this coming April (2016). Some people say I'm too young to retire. But a change might be a good thing, we'll see. Nothing has been signed yet on the dotted line. But I'm thinking I might do some volunteer work, maybe do some tour guiding? I've done a little of that and always enjoyed it. I love Washington. I love the Capitol building in particular. It would be ideal to give tours in the Capitol building.

Years ago, Washington was much more accessible than it is today. You could go into the White House; you could go into all the agency buildings along Pennsylvania Avenue. The buildings were not as restricted as they are today. You didn't see all the concrete flower pots. September 11 really changed Washington in a negative sort of way. Washington was just prettier, because you didn't have all these bollards, and the flower pots and such, but I know security is important and you have to protect the buildings.

We used to be able to eat in the Justice Department building. They have a lovely cafeteria in the basement. I understand it's not what it used to be either. We used to be able to go into these buildings by showing our badge to the guards. We could even use the library on the upper floor. These buildings are beautiful. In those years, you could walk up, get in line, and take a tour of the White House. You didn't have to reserve it months in advance like you do today with your Representative. Tours were given during certain hours each day, except for Saturday and Sunday. You got on line and went through the White House. That ended with September 11. So it's not as easy as it used to be to give tours in Washington. It's more of a logistical thing, you have to make sure people are at a certain place at a certain time. The Capitol, though, has the advantage that once you're inside, you're there, you have groups of people in there, and there's so much to talk about in all of the spaces. So I think giving tours in the Capitol is sort of an ideal situation. Anyhow, we should focus on the archives.

MR. DICKEY: Yes, what about this building, with the changes that came up, that—

MR. DAVIS: I think the renovation wasn't handled very well. I just think that in the stack areas they took some cost cutting measures that I think went too far. I think that could've been handled better, but there's always the budget situation here, so they had only a certain amount of money to use, so they had to cut corners. I understand, but it is unfortunate that the renovation was handled as it was in the stack areas, that left it less than what it was before in my opinion in certain ways. But it's okay. It works, it worked out just fine.

MR. DICKEY: Yes, was the Archives' renovation done to try to make more space and modernize, or was it done because of security after September 11?

MR. DAVIS: Oh, no, it was done to make more exhibit space available, and to modernize certain infrastructure systems, such as air conditioning and lighting, and to improve wheelchair access to the Rotunda. It wasn't for security.

One change was that the Charters of Freedom now are put into a vault every evening. That was reconfigured. But security wasn't the main goal here, it was not the main reason for the renovation.

MR. DICKEY: Okay. How would you describe the intellectual and institutional value of the records that you work with?

MR. DAVIS: All of the records are very valuable, especially congressional records. I'm sure you can say that for all of the records here. That's what an archives is, it reflects the organization that created them. The archives reflects the structure of the government, and the administrative handling of it. You can look at the archives' records, and see the way the government is organized; how the government was structured over the years; what the agencies were called; what their subcategories were; the bureaus; what their functions were. The records in the archives are described in inventories and our databases. The quality of the records varies from record group to record group, and from time period to time period, but overall, the records are very valuable.

That's how we differ from a library. A library has various subjects organized according to a classification scheme. An archives has a specific mandate to do a specific thing. In the case of the National Archives, our mandate by law is to preserve, protect, and make available the historically valuable records of the U.S. Federal Government. The Library of Congress is a Library of Congress. It can collect whatever it feels a Library of Congress should collect, and it does. And because of that, the Library of Congress has become the largest library in the world, and has some of the most magnificent collections you can imagine. But it's a library, and it can decide what the Library of Congress ought to hold, and it does.

The Archives has a specific mandate. We can't just decide to do whatever we want. There's a law saying that we preserve the historically valuable records of the U.S. Federal Government. And that's what we do. An archives has to reflect the way the records are created so that people can go back and understand how they were created, and what activities were undertaken by the people who created them. They are very valuable.

MR. DICKEY: Is there anything that we haven't touched on that you'd like to discuss?

MR. DAVIS: To be honest with you, I think we've touched upon a lot of things. If you have other specific questions, that may jar my memory. But at the moment, I don't have anything specific to say. What haven't I touched on that I could? I'll say this, I think this is a great agency. This is a wonderful place to work. We do very important work here, and I think that not everything has been handled well, but as I've always said the positives have way outweighed whatever negatives there have been.

One of the negatives—and I know I'm not the only person who says this sort of thing—the National Archives was part of the General Services Administration, the GSA, for many years. Before 1948, when they reorganized the government, the National Archives had been an independent agency. In 1948, it was subsumed under the GSA. They didn't know where else to put the Archives. They had to put it somewhere relating to the handling of paper, and so we were part of the GSA from 1948 to 1985. That was not a good relationship. That was not a good place for us to be, administratively speaking. That suppressed the Archives in terms of its potential to be a leader in the archival community and an innovator in archival practices. Once we became independent, which was a hard-fought battle, it took us a long time to evolve into an innovative, ground-breaking, leadership agency. Bob Warner was Archivist when I started here. It was he and his deputies who really fought for the independence of the Archives, and thank goodness President Ronald Reagan finally agreed to it, and we became independent in 1985. That was a very good thing. Then Bob Warner left, Frank Burke became Acting Archivist for two or so

years, and then Don Wilson became Archivist. It took us a long time to overcome the mentality of being part of GSA, and I think we've made great strides in that regard.

I think our current Archivist is probably one of the best-prepared archivists we've ever had, and certainly in my time here. He did wonderful work at the New York Public Library. This is a very entrenched agency, with some very long-held practices. It's hard to overcome that. Of course, it's slow because of budget constraints, but we've made good progress. But it took a while to overcome some of this inertia because people tend to stay here a very long time. That is not unusual in the government. Some people have stayed here for many, many, many years, even longer than my 32-year official stay. But change is sometimes a good thing, and I think good strides have been made, and I think that we're moving forward.

They say morale here is very low. Morale is known to be low here at the Archives. It was very low here when I started in the early 1980s. When I started, I thought, do I really want to be in an agency where the morale is low? But I was so excited to be at the National Archives, working with the historically valuable records of the U.S. Government. So I wound up staying. Nowadays, morale has continued to be a problem. The main reason is lack of promotion potential. But even with the low morale, people stay, because they recognize the uniqueness of what we do here, and the importance of our work, and they enjoy it, because people who work here usually have a love of history, or a background in history, so it's a very good fit for people who like history. And of course, you have a government job, and good stability and good benefits. As archivists, we do very well here. We don't want to tell OPM that, but compared to history faculty in academia, our salaries are equivalent to a full professor's. Very few archives can pay as well as the National Archives can. It's good to keep that in mind.

But the lack of promotion potential is a big issue here. Over the years, decisions were made that appraisal archivists' work with agencies was considered at a higher level than the work of a reference or description archivist, and that rubs some people in the wrong way. I never agreed with that decision. I think the work of a reference archivist and a description archivist is just as high a level, just as intellectually challenging, just as valuable as the work that an appraisal archivist does, with an agency records manager deciding what series of records are valuable, which series of records are not valuable. So there have been those kinds of issues, where certain areas have seen more promotion potential than other parts of the agency.

MR. DICKEY: What would you say has been your biggest positive accomplishment, personally, for the National Archives?

MR. DAVIS: For me personally, the work I've done with researchers has been a very positive part of my job. I've always enjoyed working with the researchers, seeing that they've been successful with what they've done, seeing my name acknowledged in publications. That's all very positive.

And also giving tours. Those have been the highlights of what I've done here. On a more general level, I think it's very good that the Archives is better-known than it used to be. To this day, some people still think I work for the Library of Congress or for the Smithsonian. People just did not know about the National Archives. The Library of Congress and the Smithsonian are so much better-known. But more and more people now know about the Archives, and understand what we do. So the public outreach has really improved here. They've expanded the exhibits area. That was a good thing. There is much more

activity in terms of lectures and such, and we give tours for Members of Congress and their committee staffs. But for me personally, working with the researchers is my biggest positive accomplishment.

MR. DICKEY: Okay. Is there anybody else that you would recommend that I interview for this oral history project for?

MR. DAVIS: I think my colleague Rod Ross has already been interviewed. I heard that Bruce Bustard is going to be interviewed, or was.

MR. DICKEY: Bruce?

MR. DAVIS: Bustard, B-U-S-T-A-R-D. He works in the exhibits section. He's been at the Archives just about as long as I have. My colleague Richard McCulley, the historian here in the Legislative, I believe he's going to be interviewed or already has been. He's very nice. David Langbart, who has been here longer than I have, works for State Department records. I would think he would be a very good candidate for an interview. All of the long-term employees here you can consider. Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler is the head of Preservation, a supervisor there. Greg Bradsher is another long time staff member. I forget his name right now, Jessie will know. But I'm sure interviews have been done with them. Bill Cunliffe, has been here for over 50 years. He still works out of Archives II. I'm sure an interview has been done with him. Or maybe he's not interested, I don't know. Richard Hunt, in our unit, has been here a very long time. I don't think he's retiring yet. I think you want to focus on people who are thinking about retiring. He's probably going to work another five years or so, although he's older than I am. He is 60 or 61. But the others in our office are still mid-career. Janet Davis I know is planning to retire, but I don't know if she'd be interested in doing an interview. She's been here a long time, longer than I have. There are other people in other units, I just can't think of their names at the moment.

So, is there anything else that I've left out? Have I rambled on too much?

MR. DICKEY: You're not rambling on too much. If there's nothing else, then that would conclude our interview.

MR. DAVIS: Wonderful. Wonderful.

[End Recording]



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