

U.S. National Archives and Records Administration
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview
Subject: Joyce Burner
Interviewer: Jennifer Johnson
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MS. JENNIFER JOHNSON: My name is Jennifer Johnson and I am conducting an oral history interview for the National Archives and Records Administration with Joyce Burner today. Today's date is February 20, 2020. Joyce was an archivist at the National Archives in Kansas City for nine years. Joyce, can you talk about what you were doing before you came to the National Archives?

MS. JOYCE BURNER: Sure. I'm kind of a poster child for where a Master's of Library Science degree might take you in life because I meandered through a number of different positions before I wound up at NARA. My undergrad degree was a Bachelor of Science in Education in social studies. I had a social studies comprehensive major with an emphasis in history. So I consider history as my undergrad major. I had a minor in journalism and I also took enough hours of library science for a certification because when you do an education degree in secondary ed, you want to be certified in as many areas as you can to teach. So I taught junior high social studies in Carrollton, Missouri, for one miserable year and knew that was not what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. At the end of that year I got married and relocated to Kansas City so I needed to look for a new job anyway. I was offered a middle school library position in Spring Hill, Kansas, which is one of the really outer ring suburbs of the Kansas City metro area. It's a little more rural than some of the other suburbs, but it has been a strong school district and is known for its technical prowess even now. It was a much better fit, which I knew immediately going into it and I really enjoyed it but I also realized I did not know what I was doing. I started right into graduate school taking night classes through Emporia State University towards a Master of Library Science degree. I took night classes and I did a couple of summers on campus. It took me about four and a half years to get through that degree, but it was a very practical degree. I came in every day after class and used what I learned the night before and it was a really good situation. It was a good program. I was the middle school librarian there for about seven years. I quit when I had my first child. I was actually a stay-at-home mom for 12 years.

During that time I looked for things to do professionally so that my résumé would not just be a big black hole. I volunteered at the local elementary school library even when my kids were

very small, before they were in school yet. I was very active in PTA once they were in school. I did things like I started a publishing program—a book publishing program and also a book discussion program at their elementary school. I also was asked to come in and work on the library in the church where we were attending. That library was kind of a disaster when we started but there was a person on staff who had a vision that it could be something better. So they gave me the authority to throw things away and buy things and also a team of people to work with. We really went in and renovated it and it became one of the hubs in the church that was very popular. We added different kinds of audio/visual media. We started a separate children's library as well. After I had been a volunteer in that position for, I think about eight years, we decided we wanted to open a bookstore in conjunction with it. So I learned book retail from the ground up all on my own. That was really interesting. It was a small book store. It was open to the public in conjunction with the library and we had a pretty good outreach into the community around us in the neighborhood and from other churches as well. I did that for, I think, 12 years. I was on staff there as a paid employee.

During that time, I was very involved in a local professional organization, the Church and Synagogue Library Association, which is actually a national organization. I was president of the local chapter. I also won a national award as Outstanding Congregational Librarian from that organization. I chaired a national conference that was held here in Kansas City. So again looking for those professional kinds of things that related to library science or information management.

I kind of hit a point after I was in that job for about 12 years where I just was ready to do something else. I was in my mid-fifties and I knew I had time for a final act in my career. I knew I did not want to go back and work in a school library again. I noticed on the Emporia University website for the library school that they had added a certificate in archive studies that was about 20-22 graduate hours. I called them up and just asked if I could do that certificate since I was an alum already and they said sure. You wouldn't have to redo anything. You can just do the certificate and by the way, if you want to start this fall, the application has to be in tomorrow. I got online and put in my application as a non-degree seeking student to start that fall and then I went down the hall and told my boss I was giving my year and a half notice on that job that I was in.

I started back to school. They were weekend intensive classes and graduate school had certainly changed since I'd finished my MLS in 1982. But it was a great challenge. I met some fabulous people, made some friends—people I continue to be friends with now. It was just a lot of fun and it was very challenging. The job I was in, we hired my replacement and I actually trained her. She worked alongside me over about six months and I phased out as she

increased her hours. So we had a very smooth transition there.

It was just a great experience going back to school and earning that certificate. I think I did about 24 graduate hours. It included classes in just the introduction to archives, arrangement and description, doing archives reference, lots of preservation work, records management. There was a hands-on class. We actually got to go out to Estes Park, Colorado, and worked in the archives at Rocky Mountain National Park as well as in historical archives around Estes Park. It's a very historic community up there in Colorado. We got to do all kinds of preservation and it was just a very good experience and hands-on, plus what better place to go than Colorado to go to school, you know, up in the mountains.

MS. JOHNSON: That's very interesting. How long was it?

MS. BURNER: It was a week.

MS. JOHNSON: Do you remember what year you were doing your certificate?

MS. BURNER: I went back to school—I think it was about 2008/2009.

MS. JOHNSON: I see. Okay. So then you worked as an intern, contractor, and volunteer before you worked full-time?

MS. BURNER: Right. As part of the certificate, I did have to do at least one internship and I'm enough of an overachiever that I decided to do two. One of the classes, the intro to archives class, was taught by Mark Corriston, who was Director of Records Management here at NARA Kansas City at that time. I had a bit of an introduction to NARA through that experience because he taught a little bit of a NARA-centric class approach to that. We met at NARA when it was out at the old Bannister location in the Bannister Federal Complex before NARA moved downtown.

I got to go through the stacks and spend some time out there and kind of got to know him a little bit. He talked about their internship program. I thought, well, this seems like a slam dunk that I should just do an internship or apply for an internship with NARA. I sent a letter to Steve Spence, who is an archives specialist here, and was the internship coordinator at that time. I sent a letter to Steve and he responded. He said, well, we're getting ready to move to our new facility in downtown Kansas City by Union Station. So, you can either do this now (and I think it was early 2009). He said you can do this now or you can wait until the summer after we move. I don't really know what you want to do, but he said, well, seeing an archives

move is kind of like Haley's Comet. It's sort of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and I said I think I want that. So they brought me in as an intern and it was at the old Bannister location.

They were in the process of packing things up and organizing for the move. All of the oversized volumes were being shrink-wrapped by this crew of student employees. Packing things up, trying to plan strategically. There was a massive amount of overtime and comp time going on just to get this move done. It was really very interesting. About a week into my internship, which went over four weeks, they shut down the reference service because things were getting packed up and they couldn't answer reference requests anymore.

My first week I did get to help with some reference requests and screening some Leavenworth files and re-boxing and just some of the different things that were going on. By the second week I was there, Lori Cox-Paul, who was the education specialist at that time, and is now the Director of Archival Operations at NARA Kansas City, and her officemate Mary Burtzloff, who was an archivist, realized, oh, we have a librarian in the house. We have all of these books because everybody's office had books that they'd accumulated that they wanted to put into one central reference library. Let's let her do her librarian thing. I organized all of these books and went through and weeded out the duplicates and questioned things that just looked too old or asked if these things could be weeded out. I organized them by subject and then when they moved into the building here at Union Station, they were just unpacked onto the shelves by those subject categories and they are still that way in the research room. So that's one of my lasting legacies here is the organization of everybody's cast-off books that's down there. Over time doing reference, doing processing, I've gone down and consulted those books time after time. It is really a very valuable resource.

MS. JOHNSON: Yes, I know the library. I use it myself a lot. How long did the move take?

MS. BURNER: Well, the whole thing, I think, was months. I'm not sure exactly how long the physical move itself took because I wasn't on site during that. But it was months of planning just because you have to know where everything is to maintain physical and intellectual control of all your records at all times. They had the added challenge that there was some disorganization in the stacks at Bannister. So there was a lot of identification of "What is this?" going on at the same time that continued for a while after the move, I think. It was just a very interesting time. Lots of moving parts.

Lori Cox-Paul and Jake Erslund were really in charge of it and they were off huddled in the stacks most of the time just trying to get control of what was going where because some things were also going to Lenexa and some things were going to Lee's Summit, I believe. Not

everything came downtown because there's only 20,000 cubic feet here in the stacks. So even though the total holdings were maybe a third then of what they are now, you're still talking a massive amount of stuff. It was just a mind-boggling undertaking to do that kind of a move.

MS. JOHNSON: I can only imagine.

MS. BURNER: I was so glad that I came in as an intern at that point and really got to see that. I spent a lot of time putting volumes through the shrink wrap machine with the rest of the students and, you know, just doing all kinds of different things. They were still doing some kind of webinar education events and I got to sit in on some of those things. It was just a very interesting time to observe.

MS. JOHNSON: I bet. I saw you did a mix of archival and preservation work for NARA. Did that internship involve preservation work or was that later? Past your internship, can you walk through what your path was?

MS. BURNER: Sure. Well, actually the following month I did an internship at the Truman Presidential Library and Museum in Independence, Missouri. It was a very traditional internship. That is a manuscript collection. It's not an archives of federal records as such. Things are not organized by Record Group. It's much more of a traditional manuscript collection.

MS. JOHNSON: What a nice variety for internships.

MS. BURNER: It was a big contrast and I was so happy I did that because I really made good friends over there. Those were our colleagues as well. Through these two internships I got to establish relationships with people at both major NARA facilities here in the Kansas City area. I got to do a different kind of processing and writing descriptions and different kinds of preservation work at the Truman Library. I got a tour of the Truman home one afternoon.

The interesting thing there was that my tour guide was Elizabeth Burnes who later came here as an archivist. She was hired as an archivist here at NARA a few months before I was and it took me a while to figure out where I had seen her before. Finally, I had to put a Park Service hat on her head and I said were you at the Truman Library? She goes, yes, oh, that's where I've seen you before. So it was interesting that we kind of crossed paths. She was working for the Park Service over there before she came to NARA. Anyway, that was just a different kind of internship and it was really good. It balanced out the more chaotic one that I had at NARA.

While I had been at NARA, there was a preservation contract position they had that was re-upped annually at that time. The person who was in that position—their contract was about up so they were getting ready to fill it again and this was doing oversized record preservation out in Lee's Summit, Missouri in the cave facility. While I was at NARA they encouraged me to apply for that job and so I did. I was awarded that contract. I had my NARA internship in February, Truman in March. I think starting in about April maybe—it was pretty quickly—or May maybe—I started this contract, which went for five months. I actually worked in the preservation room at Lee's Summit dealing with oversized records. I started out working through a lot of record groups, RG 30 Bureau of Roads. It was a project that had been started downtown. Then they moved the records to Lee's Summit. So I finished up with that. Mostly they just needed to be humidified and flattened, a little bit of encapsulation maybe. Then just created a database because it was pretty much an item-level database of what was in there. I finished that up and then they started bringing piles of things that were mostly Record Group 77, Army Corps of Engineer's records that had been on shelves at Bannister and were not too well identified. There were some old finding aids. A lot of it had just come in from the Corps and trying to figure out what these things were and they were huge and some of them were very old. That was more challenging because I really had to go through and identify what these things were and my knowledge of Corps of Engineers records was a little sketchy at that time.

I had to talk with other people on staff and Jake would come out from time to time. Jennifer Audsley-Moore was on staff as an archives technician at that time and she was actually my supervisor because she was the preservation liaison at that time and would come out and help me figure out what some things were. But it was really interesting—just old maps mostly. Old maps and charts and one of the cool things that we did find in there was a set of Missouri River charts from 1870, 1880-something that were rolled up. They're mounted on linen, rolled up and had been rolled up for decades, more than a century probably, and could not even be eased open to see what they were without the paper cracking and they were huge. I mean they were, like, I don't know seven feet, six or seven feet wide. And maybe 20 to 30 feet long. They were enormous. So those were really one of the cool things that we found.

MS. JOHNSON: Did you have the space and equipment to be able to unroll them?

MS. BURNER: Yeah, that preservation lab has really big humidification tanks. And lots of big counter space. Those maps had to humidify for about a week before they were pliant enough that they could be safely unrolled. Then it took two of us to unroll them and, you know, I had to kind of jigger some furniture around and extend my counter space so that there would be

enough room. They were very exciting to find. We figured out what they were and it was just a set of charts of the Missouri River going across the entire State of Missouri. One of the cool things in there—my hometown where I finished high school is Boonville, Missouri, which is right on the Missouri River right in the middle of the state and it's a very historic, old town. Well, Boonville showed up on this map and it showed the streets and where churches were and things like that and it was very cool. I could see the church where I got married. It was marked on there and I could see where schools had been or other buildings that were there. It was just a very interesting personal find.

That was an example I used when I was doing talks to the public about preserving things and what you could find in federal records—I used to pull up my picture of my hometown that I'd found on this ancient map and, you know, your history is here. Your personal stories are here. So anyway I worked as a contractor for about five months and at that point there were banks of map cabinets in the archival bay in Lee's Summit. Those were all moved up to the Subtropolis facility a couple of years ago now. But at that time I was going through this stuff and then putting it in the map drawers and keeping an item-level list of what was in the drawers.

MS. JOHNSON: Was HMS (Holdings Management System) in existence at this point?

MS. BURNER: No. This was pre-HMS. This was still what was called the MLR. Master Location Register. Which was just a massive set of Excel spreadsheets. Actually, what I created was a database that was sort of parallel to that. It had the same kind of information. It was not really part of the MLR. At the offsite facilities these things were a little non-standard. We had our own set of databases that we knew that if you got a reference request you were going to have to spend some time looking, searching through Excel spreadsheets for this. I included as much physical detail and also intellectual detail about what was in the records. Very interesting work. Toward the end of that time, they also started having me come downtown and work in the afternoons on what was called the ARD or the At-Risk Database. It was a process of going through all of our records and determining what kind of physical condition they were in. What was at-risk? And I think this was all done kind of in preparation knowing that something like HMS would be coming. That wasn't actually rolled out for a few more years. But all of this data went into that in the end.

It brought me downtown working with the staff side-by-side more and more. I finished that contract in September of 2009. And so I'd finished my certificate, I'd finished all my internships, I finished my contract. What do I do now? Now I was looking for a job. So I was applying for jobs and had some interviews for some different kinds of jobs, but I knew what I

really wanted to do was work at NARA. I just kept coming in as a volunteer about 20 hours a week. I kept working for free, putting my eggs in that basket increasingly. I was getting plenty of encouragement to do so. Mary Burtzloff, who had been one of the senior archivists, left that fall and went to work at the Eisenhower Library in Abilene, Kansas. Her backfill was coming open. Diana Duff who was the Director of Archival Operations and Reed Whittaker who was the Regional Administrator—the hierarchy was a little different then—were working on getting her backfill. They were hoping that I would be able to come into that position. You never know until you get the whole pool of applicants.

It was written so that the job started at a GS-9 instead of a GS-11, which made it a little bit easier. They also started giving me archivist-level work to do as a volunteer. I wrote the descriptions for the Catalog for all of Record Group 75 Turtle Mountain Agency records. Barbara Larsen who was a technician here at that time had gone through and done the physical arrangement and re-boxing of those, and she had identified the series and she had made wonderful copious notes about what was in them, but she did not write descriptions herself. I am actually a good writer. I've written professionally for School Library Journal a lot and I had a journalism minor as an undergrad. That was one of the strengths that I brought. Lori had me start writing descriptions for the Turtle Mountain Agency records. There was a whole set of oversized volumes from Record Group 58, which is the Internal Revenue Service and those were actually the first descriptions that I wrote. It was a pretty big series of volumes of records that you might find information that was useful in.

I always questioned why they were permanent records. They were on a form and writing the description was pretty easy because the headings on the columns going across the page pretty much gave you your scope and content. It was an easy thing to do as a first description assignment. Ever since that, after my whole nine years here, anytime anybody wanted anything out of those records, I was the one that had to go up and find the specific volume and answer that, but those requests are very rare. Then I did the Turtle Mountain descriptions. There was a lot of that. I was also being pulled in to do preservation work and also helping teach people how to do preservation work like humidification and flattening and encapsulation because once you've been the contractor out of the cave you know how to do that. You're kind of the onsite person. So I did a lot of that. I helped with special events. I just kept coming in for about 20 hours a week and kept my face in front of them, and did get through the interview pool. Then at the end of that year, 2009, Reed Whittaker, the Regional Administrator, John Allshouse, who was the Assistant Regional Administrator, and Diana Duff all retired on the same day at the end of the year.

It was at the end of the year after the move in the spring of 2009. They all got us through the

move and had completed their mission and moved on to retirement. Well, the whole interview process ground to a halt because there's nobody here who is a permanent director. Lori was named as interim director and so I just kept coming in knowing that my name was in the pool and I had a good shot at it and, actually that spring they said if you want to take a class some place you could be a student employee and you could actually get paid for being here however many hours a week.

I went up to the junior college in Johnson County here, which is a very good one, and just took some classes in word processing, you know, something that had a transcript and actually worked as a student employee for about six weeks. I got to answer the phone and sit at the consult desk and it was just a little bit closer in the circle of contacts and responsibility. Finally, that spring Lori was named as permanent director and the first thing she did was start this interview process up because they really needed to fill the position. I got an interview in March and was offered the position. I started in April of 2010. It was in retrospect a little bit of an arduous process to actually get on staff, but I just worked the connections and the system that I had, and I was applying for and interviewing for other jobs and looking for things. This was such a better job that anything else that was coming up out there that it was worth waiting for and it worked.

MS. JOHNSON: And you started having had so much variety and you were introduced already to the system.

MS. BURNER: Yeah. I did come in being pretty familiar with NARA, how records worked, how federal records worked. Which is different from anything else in the world, I've realized. Having some good connections and I really was able to pretty much hit the ground running.

MS. JOHNSON: So speaking of that—I don't want to skip over anything—but I did notice you did several large processing projects. Can you talk...

MS. BURNER: Sure. Well, that was one of the things that Lori tasked me with pretty early on. Our Record Group 75, Bureau of Indian Affairs records are some of the most frequently requested records here, sometimes by individuals working on their own genealogy, more frequently by academics. There are so many professors and graduate students who are working on research in some level of Native American culture.

We hold the records for the reservations in North and South Dakota, so Pine Ridge, Standing Rock, very significant—historically significant places where things—we have the Wounded Knee records. Also, in Nebraska and in Minnesota and there's one reservation out in Kansas,

nothing in Iowa, nothing in Missouri. Most of those records were really not processed. At the time of the move into this building a lot of those agencies had not really been set up in a final form where the individual record series had been identified and housed together, described. The intellectual and physical control could be a little hazy on things. Some of them had, as I said, Barbara Larsen was a technician who did a lot of that processing. She was very knowledgeable and had gone through and kind of done the arrangement on a lot of things but had not written descriptions. The labels could be a little wonky sometimes. There was some variety. Some of those agencies' records had already been in DC and had been regionalized and sent out here. The Pine Ridge records for instance, the Rosebud Agency records, were in that situation where they actually had been described and were in pretty good shape.

Then the requirements for description and labels once we got into HMS, the holdings management system, all these systems that have to match up and things didn't match up anymore. There was some retroactive processing that needed to go on and description updates and such that needed to go on with those. Then there were others where it was just a thousand boxes of folders, that in a single box, maybe the folders in this box related to each other and maybe they didn't. Maybe what was in the folder actually related to what the folder title was and maybe it didn't. I mean there was just some kind of random hodgepodge going on.

There were a couple of different agencies that were really the worst. The Fort Berthold Agency records were bad and the Cheyenne River Agency records were bad. Each one of those, I just called it a thousand boxes of chaos when we started out because that's just kind of where it was. There were also lots of records that weren't even foldered. Tri-folded things that had never been, once the agency tied a string around them 100 years ago, they've never been touched since. They were just in a box. Some of the boxes weren't acid free. Finding anything was just a real adventure. As I said there's a lot of academic demand for those records.

It can be very challenging when you're working with a professor who is on a grant and they're on limited time and they need to find specific things. There is going to be an awful lot of work just to try to help them find the specific thing they're looking for. It really was just a process of being organized in approach and over time we kind of learned. We streamlined our process and learned some things. I think the Winnebago Agency was the first one that we did and the Cheyenne River Agency was the last one that I finished about a month before I retired. Each one of them, if it was just a massive agency, a thousand boxes or so, it could easily take a year to get through it depending on how bad it was when you started out.

Over time we really learned that just to go through and do an initial inventory of what was in the boxes really made all the difference in the world. I kind of got to where I was and on some of the agencies I actually just did that myself. When we did the Minneapolis Area Office agency records I went through about 500 or 600 boxes and just did that, made a massive spreadsheet of folder titles. And from there you can start to identify series. One thing that's helpful in all these BIA agencies is they all tend to have the same kinds of records.

They all tended to have the same forms that showed up over and over, the same types of correspondence. In different time periods, the correspondence would be organized in a specific way. One of the big things was before 1925, there were a bunch of weird ways that they would organize their correspondence. Starting about 1925 they actually assigned what they called a decimal correspondence system, which as I always told people if you can find a book in the library using the Dewey Decimal system—it's the same kind of thing. A number is assigned to it, to a subject and everything with that number on it will be about the same subject. So all the land records will be 400 something. That was actually very helpful and it was something the Bureau of Indian Affairs did—the Office of Indian Affairs at that time—to try and get some consistency across their agencies. That ran from about 1925 to about 1960.

Then local agencies would go through and put earlier things into that system. Or continue to use it afterwards. But before that also there were just massive runs of just chronological correspondence and they were in bound letterpress volumes. In one volume, you could have any subject in the world. You just needed to know what timeframe you were looking at and then you just had to sit and look for it. Anyway, over time, as I started to work with different agencies and seeing what tended to happen consistently between agencies, you see some patterns and you know what to look for. So, anyway, that just kind of helped. Knowing what I was likely to find. Every agency did their own thing to some extent. They took the systems that were given to them from the headquarters office, tweaked it for their own use. People will come in and out over time. There's not necessarily a lot of consistency. There's just all kinds of odd things that you can run across and uncover and you can't make any assumptions about what you'll find mostly.

MS. JOHNSON: Well, speaking of uncovering, do you have an example, like the Boonville. Are there memorable records that you remember just randomly discovering as part of your processing...

MS. BURNER: Yes, yes. You had to look for them. And, one of my things is that I like to find those personal stories in records. Sometimes, especially in the old correspondence, oh, you'd learn about all the personnel problems that they're having. There was one really memorable

run of records we found in the Fort Berthold records that there was just a fight going on between the field matron and somebody else, who was in the administration of the agency and just calling each other names in these letters back and forth to the superintendent. It was, from our perspective now, pretty funny. I'm sure it was horrible to be stuck out there, you know, on the prairie in the late 1880's and life could be pretty miserable, but...

MS. JOHNSON: And what's the name?

MS. BURNER: That was Fort Berthold. It's in North Dakota by the Canadian border. There were just those kinds of things. But also I was interested to see the relationship that the superintendent of the local agency would have with the Indians on the reservation. We always say Indians and we say Indians in the descriptions because that's what it says in the records. I know that now we only say Native Americans. But, I'm sorry, we say Indians because that's what's in the record.

They could be very warm and especially when there were young men who had gone off to war in World War I and World War II and were writing home. It was almost a paternal relationship a lot of the time. It was very nice. Then there would be other records where the attitude toward these "savages" and "we have to get rid of this Indian problem" was just blatant. I mean it spilled out there.

So you really get both. Looking for those personal stories was cool. Sometimes the photographs could be very interesting. I didn't do the arrangement on the Haskell Institute student case files. Those were already done. I did a lot of reference work out of them and finding the individual stories in those files could be heartbreaking. It could be really encouraging. There's funny stuff, but again those are those personal stories. I've never made any pretense that I came to this work as a historian. I do have this history major as an undergrad. That was a really long time ago. My work is as a librarian and I came in as a librarian, and I never made any bones about that. It meant that I brought a lot of organizational skills and information management skills. When you're dealing with

these massive amounts of records that really have to be processed down to sometimes an item level, that was very, very useful.

MS. JOHNSON: I bet. As an agency, my understanding is we've gone...

MS. BURNER: The other way.

MS. JOHNSON: Did you have specific Record Groups you were focused on throughout your nine years or was it a variety?

MS. BURNER: Well, I could get reference on anything. I was in the general reference rotation. One day a week I got all the emails and all the phone calls and all the walk-ins no matter what they wanted. If it's a naturalization or a court record or BIA or whatever, that would be my responsibility to find or answer that request. There were also things that Lori would send requests to specific people on staff depending on their knowledge of a subject area. I frequently would get BIA requests that were from academics just because I had worked with those records so much.

What happens just as practical fallout of the work is that if you're the one that's led a team of people processing a thousand boxes of chaos and so that you have discrete record series that you have written the descriptions and you've made sure the labels are right and match up with HMS and you handled all this stuff, you are by default the expert on what's in those boxes. So anything that I had processed I frequently got the reference requests on. Knowing that and knowing that I would not be here for 30 or 40 years, I really tried to make detailed folder lists and finding aids so that my colleagues, once I was gone, would be able to help people just as efficiently. From what I understand, that has really worked out well. There were some of those though, especially the Cheyenne River records we left for last mostly because we knew it was kind of the worst and I just put them off as long as I could. Finally, I had to do it.

There actually were lots of records that I just had to go through stacks of correspondence and what is this about and do I have, have I identified the series that this would fit in logically. One problem with this, as archivists we try to maintain that original order as one of the bases. Original order so that you maintain that institutional evidence of how the records were created. Sometimes you just can't do it, because the original order is gone. The files and boxes or whatever have been cleaned out and dumped into boxes and brought here and make some sense out of it. So at that point what I always found was, well, you just have to think like a researcher. If I'm an academic and I'm working on a specific topic then the records

have to be organized and the folders have to be identified in a way that would help me get to those specifics. It's a bit of an artificial arrangement compared to what the original would be. But at this point we have let people have access. So it's that "make access happen" thing.

MS. JOHNSON: We had to gain intellectual control.

MS. BURNER: Exactly, exactly. So that's really what we went after. And, I would talk through that with Lori and she was always, like, you think like a researcher and so go for it. Because it just makes so much more sense that way and for chronological things, at least if somebody comes in and they've got a date span that they're looking through I can bring out less boxes for them to go through. So, you know, that's just kind of where you are. Because sometimes it is what it is but we can help identify as much detail as possible to give researchers a boost.

MS. JOHNSON: You mentioned court records, naturalization records. Did you ever have much interaction or relationship with other federal agencies, that you would need to consult with them?

MS. BURNER: Kind of limited. Occasionally, we had contacts at the local district courts. So there's one thing. People would call and want a copy of their own court records. And are they old enough that they've come to the National Archives yet or are they still in the Federal Records Center? So often to the public, it's just one big thing. To try and explain to them, well, they're still on the Federal Records Center side. We know that's part of our agency, but we don't, as Research Services, have access to them. We would have to call the Clerk of the Court or whoever the records managers were at the courts and just have them look in their system. Has this particular case been accessioned over or not yet? So we did that. I did that to some extent.

More than that, I worked with the Alien files on research and reference a lot, which are USCIS, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service records. I'm sure it's only increased since I retired but they were the most frequently requested records. They have surpassed the Leavenworth inmate case files. Again, this is genealogists who are looking for their family history. We would have to call people at USCIS, which is located here in Lee's Summit, to try and help patrons sometimes who were just hitting a brick wall with USCIS on getting records that had not been accessioned over.

Sometimes we tried to act as a liaison a little bit and find out what's going on over there that you're getting this automated response and you've paid money, but you're not getting anything. Again there were specific contacts we have over there that we had created

relationships with and we know who is good to work with.

Other than that, you know, people from agencies come to look at their own historic records that have been accessioned over. I had some researchers from the Army Corps of Engineers who would contact me directly because I guess I helped them on something and researchers will come back to the archivist that helped them in the first place and that was kind of good. They were more researchers but because they were from the agency we wouldn't have to get into screening their records as much and they were good to work with.

MS. JOHNSON: Do you want to speak to any challenges or issues that you faced, either on a project or...

MS. BURNER: Just as far as challenges go it was keeping up with the massive amount of stuff. Even since I've retired I've heard from my colleagues about tens of thousands of cubic feet of records that continue to come in, and as the bankruptcy records were all consolidated here. I know there's an ongoing project to get all of the appellate court records from the whole country. It's just because real estate costs less in Kansas City. I think it's really an economic move as much as anything. And we have so much cave storage in Kansas City. So it's a good locale for that. But just the sheer amount of stuff is overwhelming and to keep up with what's coming in was kind of overwhelming at times.

MS. JOHNSON: Would you say the staff here in Research Services have the amount of records exponentially increasing but maybe not staff levels increasing?

MS. BURNER: Yes, exactly. When I retired they've not been able to backfill my position. When I started with NARA, there were three of us who were archivists downtown. Jake Erslund who is now deputy director, Elizabeth Burnes is still an archivist but also a subject matter expert, so she's really only halftime here as archivist, and me. There were three of us. Well, when Jake was promoted, which was needed because we have archivists at all three offsite facilities, we didn't get his backfill. Now we're down to two people downtown. I've retired. Now we're down to Elizabeth downtown. I know what that's like because I filled in for Elizabeth while she was on maternity leave twice. There were two stretches of five or six months where I was the only archivist downtown. It just really does become overwhelming and very stressful. It's hard to provide really good one-on-one service to individual researchers when you've got so many requests coming in. There were months that I had a hundred reference requests.

MS. JOHNSON: Wow.

MS. BURNER: It's a lot and when you're only on reference one day a week, it's a lot.

MS. JOHNSON: I know we can't even begin to cover everything, but is there anything else I haven't asked you about that you want to speak to?

MS. BURNER: One thing that was interesting for the time that I was here, it was a time of local cultural shift because of the move to the new facility. When I started we had four to six student employees at any time who covered the phones and helped with processing. And we hit a point where we were no longer able to hire student employees. The union complained that the students were doing permanent work as temporary employees. So we gained more technicians but it was not a one-to-one replacement. We had non-student staff having to cover the phones. It was a real culture shift. Just in the way work was lined out and we had a couple of people downtown who were long-term, long-time employees. Jennifer Audsley-Moore was a technician. Jessica Hopkins was a specialist. Both were promoted to be archivists and work at Subtropolis. So people who have been here a long time that are out the door.

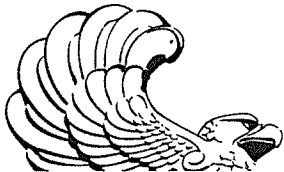
MS. JOHNSON: I see. Well, any anecdotes or words of wisdom? I think I've covered everything I wanted to ask you.

MS. BURNER: It really was a great place to work. It was very challenging. I really enjoyed my work a lot. I learned a lot. It was really kind of a cool thing to end my career in the hardest job that I had. It's taking that non-traditional student work in your mid-fifties and taking a real switch at the end is not the "ride it out into the sunset" sort of thing that some people think of. But it was really good. I really, really enjoyed it. I got some great benefits to take into retirement too. This is not to be sneezed at. And really made some great relationships and good friends and I just think it's worth it. If you think you can try something else; if you're not happy with what you're doing, you can take on a new challenge, you shouldn't let it stop you. Time keeps ticking. So you gotta do it.

MS. JOHNSON: I would say what an exciting last half. Well, I do appreciate your time very much. Thank you for doing this.

MS. BURNER: Sure.

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