

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview
Subject: MaryAnn McSweeney
Interviewer: Daria Labinsky
Date: March 23, 2021

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Daria Labinsky: This is Daria Labinsky and I am doing a NARA oral history interview with MaryAnn McSweeney, and today's date is March 23, 2021. Hi, MaryAnn.

Mary Ann McSweeney: Hello!

D: Why don't you start just by giving us your background, how you ended up working for a National Archives facility?

M: Well, I had three boys, three children, and I don't have a college degree, so I was looking for something that I could do part time, and that was in, like, 1983, I think. And so, a friend of mine who knew a friend from the regional archives in Atlanta, a friend of hers, a secretary, told her about an Intermittent [program] opening. But when she found out it was only 20 hours a week, she said, "No, I need more money." So she said, "Hey, why don't you do it?" [Laughs] So I went in and got that little thing. That's how I started. And so I just started off doing the basic preservation, refolding court cases, and etc., for about the first, I don't know, two or three years I was there? Yeah.

D: So what kind of court cases were they?

M: They were everything from bankruptcy, to criminal, "lewd and lascivious behavior." [Laughs] Yeah, they were just the basic, and I was working on the Georgia courts.

D: OK, so that was, you said, 20 hours a week?

M: Yeah, that was 20 hours a week. And then we ran out of money because they only allowed a salary cap, right? Which was fine for me, because it always happened in May, and the kids were out of school. So to pay money for somebody to watch them would have been just barely breaking even. So, then, I would start back over again. And so I stayed there.

And then, I think at the same time I was doing the court cases, my boss put me in charge of the Tennessee Valley Authority records, which I really enjoyed doing those because it was the Depression era. And so, fortunately for me, I gained a lot of experience, because we had the negatives of these wonderful pictures, just incredible pictures of the people standing in front of their little, poor houses, and in front of their stills with guns, churches, all kinds of great pictures. So I had reported to him that I'd noticed some of them were bubbling up, and so on. And we started a huge contract to get the—I can't remember what it's called, those particular photos that bubble up like that—is it acetate?

D: Yeah, I think that's right, cellulose acetate.

M: They were acetate. So we started this big contract with somebody in Chicago, a company, and I started having to send those, describe them, and then, post that—if you can remember, I don't know what it was called then. Was it EAP [Electronic Archive Project], with Dan Jansen where we started having to put those first photos, anything that went online digitally. I don't know if you were there then.

D: That was before me.

M: So that's sort of how I got started in ARC [Archival Research Catalog] because that was before ARC. So I had to select photos, I had to put them in this database, and I had to send them to Dan. And then they were posted somewhere in NARA [laughs], I'm not sure, because the catalog wasn't available yet.

D: Wow, so you were one of the first, like, digitization people, huh?

D: Yeah [laughs], I knew nothing about it, but we had specific instructions, and I did that, and we sent them up there, and they'd digitize them, send it back, etc., etc. What was interesting, I was also put on the Tuskegee Syphilis Project with CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] and those photos, which means their photos, the people were in full view. And they had been available to the public for a long time, which is kind of sad. But then, of course, NARA realized that that was a mistake, so we had to take them and block out the eyes, and we did all that. And that was really interesting, just to see the case files.

So, and then the segue from Dan was, the next thing that got me experience was the ARC project, where Deb Wall and six other people came down. I think they went to every facility and explained what they wanted to do. And when it started to roll out, nobody but me.

[Laughs] My kids were so much older then, and you know what I mean, in high school, so I really had a lot of free time. I didn't have to worry about it, so. And I wasn't intermittent then. I think I'd gone to permanent, part-time. And I was the only one that volunteered to do the project up in Washington for the training.

So when I came back after the training, they started to put me on descriptions of the TVA series, so I started doing all that. And just one thing led to another, and I took all the Microsoft classes, I did as much as I could to promote myself for promotions. And I think I finally got up to like a [GS] 5 or something. And then the appointment came up in the library for a [GS] 7-9-11 specialist. And I had already made inroads with Bob Bohanan and Dave Stanhope, because they were both involved in the ARC training up there. So I saw a lot of them, I guess they liked me, and I had a good segue into that job. And I got that position and started from there into the library.

D: About when was it when you started working on the TVA stuff?

M: Oh, probably '88, '89.

D: OK. And then the Tuskegee stuff?

M: Same.

D: OK, that's really, so that's interesting. So they realized after the fact, that they needed to protect these people's privacy?

M: Yeah. Well, their faces. And so not only that, but the whole case files were open, which was really, you know, a total invasion of people's privacy, to talk about their sex life, you know.

D: Right.

M: And the whole thing—it was amazing to me that that ever happened. And to see it firsthand was something else.

D: Yeah, I can imagine. It must have been a bit disturbing, you know?

M: It was disturbing. Well, we know there was penicillin available, and that was horrible, just to know it was withheld.

D: Yeah.

M: So, yeah, that was bad. And even with the Tennessee Valley Authority records, those were also open—the case files, which I complained about not too long after I started. I said, “you know, these government officials went out to these homes, and they interviewed, and they wrote down this case file, and they’re calling them morons, or ‘they’re retarded,’ or just went on and on about how dirty they were.” I just didn’t feel like that needed to be in the public eye, or at least take the name out. I think it was a good 10 or 15 years later where they decided to do that.

D: Wow.

M: So you could get all of that. And I mean, it is history and I understand it, but it was to me, the way they described people, they would’ve been fired now. So it was weird. Yeah.

D: So was that, was that also put online?

M: No, they weren't online, but they were open. The regions don't have, like we do, restrictions. So you can come in and say, “I want to see all the case files.” And so researchers did that, yes.

D: Wow. That is pretty disturbing. So, how long were you at the records center then—or at the archives?

M: [Thinking] Probably ‘83 to ‘96, maybe, ‘97.

D: And that was 20 hours a week, usually?

M: No. Well, I was, like I said, I would do part-time, permanent part-time. I’m not sure what year that was, but then my husband died. And it wasn't a matter of emergency, but I needed to get more hours, so they put me at full-time.

D: I see.

M: And that was in 1995, when he died.

D: Wow. So how old were your kids? In high school?

M: Yeah. Yeah. The twins, the youngest ones, yeah. They were seniors when my husband died, so.

D: So that was a different building, correct? So where was that building?

M: Oh yeah [laughs], you've never been there?

D: I went to the Atlanta archives, now, the new one.

M: The new one. Yeah. That was an old military supply depot in East Point. It was really kind of nasty. And I was so scared to go to the library because we always said, "You're going from the slum to the country club. [Daria laughs] You're not going to fit in. [Laughs] But I found that not to be the case, real quick.

D: So who was working? Who on staff was there, that's there now, when you started at the library?

M: Let's see, now. Ceri [Escodi, now McCarron], Youlanda [Logan]. Keith [Shuler]. I think that's it, as far as the archival staff.

D: OK, I thought Betty [Egwenike], maybe.

M: Oh, Betty. That's right, Betty was there.

D: OK. I just happened to see a list of employees from '96 somewhere. Anyway, OK, so you were doing processing. You were hired to do processing?

M: I was there doing processing. I wasn't expecting to be thrown into A/V right off the bat. So they put me on this, I don't know, project back there with indexing, where I had to listen to the First Lady [collection] tapes. And most of them were a minute or five-minute introductions, what she said at every event, I had to write all that down. And I have to tell you I was about in tears after two months of working there. I was used to doing a lot of different activities at the region. And I wasn't used to sitting in the same chair and doing the same thing for eight hours a day.

D: Yes.

M: So, I finished that project for Dave, and I went to Bob Bohanan, who was supervisory archivist at that point. And I said, “Look, I don't know, but I've got to have some other things to do.”

It wasn't just that. But even the first textual project they put me on, I was just shocked that they wanted me to read every page. And I said, “I just simply don't get this.” Anyway, there were some problems in the beginning, and Bob agreed with me. He felt sorry. And he says, “Well, do it the way you think is most efficient. And then Martin [Elzy]”—who was the deputy director—“he'll go over everything with a fine-toothed comb when you're finished, anyway.”

And so that's what I did, and Martin had to admit to Bob, “Well, you know, she did a damn good job, and I couldn't find any errors, as far as what she should have closed [for security or privacy reasons].” So basically, that was that.

And then I asked Bob, I got frustrated—there was no electronic stack inventory. So every time we got a new accession, Martin would make me type up 16 pages just to add that one in the middle. [Laughs] So I said it was kind of weird, because I came from the region where we'd already electronically done all that. And there, they had done nothing. They were still doing typewriter folder labels. We hadn't done that in years at the region. We had Avery, the laser labels. We've been doing that for a long time.

So when I got there, I brought that up to Bob, and, I guess there was pushback, some new person comes in saying, “Oh, why can't we do it this way?” Right? But, yeah, eventually we did sort of go to all the electronic stuff, they did let me do a whole inventory, I spent time going through, stack level by stack level, and putting it into the inventory.

D: So that was the stuff that was unprocessed, as well as the processed stuff?

M: Yes, it was, but mostly it was the unprocessed that I had to work hard on. And that's how I kind of got to know the records inside and out. And then, as you recall, there was the at-risk survey that came along, and nobody had looked at those unprocessed records, ever (ugh). So I was assigned that, of course, and that took a long time to do. I really just got to know a lot of the records that nobody looked at.

D: So you did a lot of processing?

M: Oh, yeah. My first processing was the anti-inflation adviser, Alfred Kahn, records. I went from there to doing the very first of the First Lady's Office, and that lasted years, before we even got to the end, or close to the end, of that. And then I just did whatever processing I could—DPS [Domestic Policy Staff], I did almost probably everything I can think of, every collection, I did one or two series in.

D: Wow. So what was your favorite part of the job?

M: At the library?

D: Yeah.

M: At the library, I think that once I got involved in accessioning, doing the inventory. I liked the fact that I didn't have to process all day, but I could do two hours here, I could get up and move around. And I really enjoyed that, moving around. And once I was in that part, I was a lot happier. I'm just not the type of person that can do processing eight hours a day. I just can't do it.

D: Was everybody doing that, was everybody on one task?

M: I think for the longest time, I can't remember the exact years, but at some point it was just me and Youlanda processing, because they put everybody in the vault. They just left the two of us.

D: Oh, wow.

M: Yeah, so like Keith, Chuck Stokely, Betty, all of them, they had a huge staff down there, because they were so far behind. And I knew nothing about their processes, I didn't really pay it much attention. But, yeah, eventually there were just a couple of us upstairs. Even, yeah, James Herring went down to the vault. And they weren't happy about it, but, you know.

D: But who was doing the Research Room, then? Did everybody split that up?

M: The Research Room was rotation. I think it was on a daily thing, actually, like, on Tuesdays, I would do it—yeah. And then they switched to Keith and somebody else, Chuck Stokely, maybe, splitting it. And that was really great. [Laughs] And then it was Bert Nason—he was

there, by the way, I didn't think about that. But Bert started doing it full time. And when you were in there, you would, if you were full-time Research Room, you did all the requests, researcher requests, while you were sitting there.

D: But somebody else had to do the pulls?

M: Yes. So there was a pull person, and a person in there, and I can't remember. But I think that's how it worked. Like, if my day was Tuesday, then somebody else did the pulls on Tuesday. And Keith and somebody else had Wednesday, etc., etc., and then later we switched to weeks, and then stuff like that.

D: So how many supervisors did you have at the library? Can you remember, can you think about it? Supervisory archivists, I mean, direct supervisors.

M: [Counts] Four.

D: Oh, that's pretty good. I mean, you were there a long time, so that's not that high of a turnover.

M: It was Bob, and then Dave, and then Sara [Mitchell], and then back to Dave, and then Aisha [Johnson-Jones].

D: So Dave was a supervisory archivist for, like, most of the time you were there?

M: I can't remember. It depends, because Jay Hakes was the director...first when I got there, Don Schewe was the director and I can't remember exactly when he left and Jay came. And when Jay came, Bob was promoted to deputy director, right? So then Dave came in and took his place. And I'm sure it was at least five or so years, yeah, for Dave to be the supervisor. So if you count Brittany [Parris, who had just become supervisory archivist at the time of the interview] then that's six. [Laughs]

D: That's true. How has the library changed over the years? Positives and negatives?

M: [Thinks] Well, to be honest with you, I've always told everyone about a year after I started, I had a lot of different things that I could do. The first year, I just wanted to leave and run away, because I was so bored. But after that, I would tell everyone for the next probably 10 or 12 years, that I had the best job in the whole world. And I really enjoyed working there. We had

these great Christmas parties, there was good feelings among people, there was good cooperation. And I don't know what really changed, just little by little, with the new director or with different things going on, I just—. Of course, electronic social media came into play, which was different, but—yeah, there was a time where I was so happy, for 10 or 15 years, and then I was miserable to the point of ridiculous, basically.

D: Wow.

M: I mean, I was literally miserable, because we had new people come in, there was a lot, there was a conflict, and it was really, really difficult.

D: But you still enjoyed the work, right?

M: Oh, yeah, I've always enjoyed the work. I'm sort of anal retentive. I love to organize and go down to the detail level. So, yeah. I like what I did, and I just wish I hadn't gotten involved in the other political aspects that came into play.

D: Right. Which you can't, you know, you can't really help, right? They come, things change.

M: Things change, and I tried to make the best of it, I did go through the, what is it, the—

D: RESOLVE?

M: RESOLVE program, trying to help out, and that helped quite a bit. We got some things settled at that point. But yeah, I just wish that had never happened.

D: Right. So, what are some of your favorite collections that you've worked on?

M: I think that my favorite collection was the unprocessed, pre-Presidential Carter Family Papers. That was stuff from his gubernatorial era and also his state Senate [career], and you got to see him before, as he was moving through politically up the ranks. More candid, more annotations, more handwriting, a whole different period. And I think also, after that it would be the First Lady's Office, that was pretty good, too.

D: Did you work personally with Mrs. Carter, Rosalynn?

M: I would see her when I first started doing the papers, I probably met with her, like, maybe like three times, maybe once a year. And she would tell me things that she was worried about being seen, and I assured her that I had not seen those, and that I would take it into consideration. Of course, not open them. So that's how that went.

D: And then you worked a lot with her assistant, right?

M: Yes, Melissa [Montgomery]. Because we started getting into the post-Presidential [papers]. I don't know how they slopped that on me, but one day they said, "Oh, now you're the Carter Center post-pres liaison." I was like, "Really?" So that was a whole mess. And I did as much work on it as I could. Because it's not our records [i.e., not accessioned], so I didn't really feel like we should be spending a ton of time. It's courtesy storage, as far as I was concerned.

D: But I guess the idea is that eventually, that will become part of the library, is that right?

M: Correct. And to this day, I don't know the status of that. I've asked many a time. I've even talked to Phil Wise [Carter Center vice president of operations and development], I said, "Hey, you can hire me as a contractor when I retire, for, you know, maybe one day a week, and I'll come in and start processing that stuff on Floor Two." And when I told him what my salary was, he said, "No way." [Laughs] We didn't go further than that, it was sort of like a joke, you know. At some point, that's going to be a huge to-do over there, because we are now closing all Presidential handwriting, correct?

D: Right.

M: Well, if you see what's down there, it'll be a disaster area. That's going to be, really—if they continue with closing everything, I don't know. It's going to be hard, really hard. There's going to be a lot of decisions to be made, basically.

D: Can you talk a little bit about how description has changed, since you started there? Well, even before that, starting, when you were at the Atlanta archives, how—not just electronically, but also like, at the library, you have paper finding aids, etc.

M: Yes. The paper finding aids. Then they went online. The worst part was, every supervisor had a different format. So, the format, we finally had a big committee, where we came up with the final format, probably in 2007, somewhere around there. But that was a problem—every supervisor had a different format of how they wanted description done. So that caused a

problem in the legacy finding aids that they'd done before I ever got there. Everything was so much different, and we had to switch everything over to the new format, electronically, and then print them out, put them back in the notebooks. And it was very labor intensive. And I was always wanting to collaborate with other libraries to see what they were doing, but I was told not to do that, and did not do that.

D: And then, of course, now they're trying to standardize it across all the libraries.

M: Oh, they are?

D: Yeah, well, processing. Yes, a recent memo came out, and it's pretty much—standardizing processing is what it's about. There's not a lot of detail yet, but there's a thing about basic and augmented processing.

M: Right.

D: Was there an electronic archives before ARC? A catalog, I mean, before ARC?

M: Yeah, that was NAIL [NARA Audiovisual (later NARA Archival) Information Locator].

D: That's right. I heard about NAIL.

M: First it was NAIL, and that's why I did my training, and then that stayed in for about four years and then five and then went to ARC, and so on and so forth.

D: Do you have a preference over those, which one you liked working with the most?

M: Oh yeah, I think ARC was so much better and easier than DAS [Description and Authorities System], which we have now. It just was. And the printouts in the catalog from ARC were so much easier, better, they were more concise. It was so much easier. Yes.

D: I think what I was impressed with NARA, with the ARC program, when they rolled it out—was they actually had a team of archivists—they'd have one archivist from every region and one from every library. And for a solid year, before they came out with the platform, and how it was going to look, and the input system, they collaborated, right? And I think that's what made ARC work so well, is because you actually had input from people who were going to use the system.

D: Right.

M: And so with DAS, I don't think there was any input, it just—boom, they were working on it. And then we just rolled it out. And to me, that shows how important it is to talk to the people that use the system every day, and what researchers want, and what they want, right?

D: Yes.

M: So, yeah, ARC was definitely much better.

D: So do you like working with researchers?

M: I did, for a while. [Laughs] I think the older I got, the less I wanted to be interrupted. So it was fine with me, if people [other staff] were in the research room. I couldn't care less about going back in there [post-pandemic]. Uh. I don't know, it just wasn't my thing.

D: So how has the library building changed?

M: You mean the structure?

D: Inside, you know, the offices?

M: We actually had more space when I first got there, and then of course, they had to make accommodations, and then we had the whole renovation. And I think a lot of people were a little upset over that, because there wasn't enough staff input. And I can't think of many people that like the way it's arranged in Suite A [archival staff office] now, because it's just, we're on top of each other, one right behind, and phone conversations and all of that gets skewed. There's no panels. There's no nothing. And I understand that that was the Google way to do it, but we're not Google. [Laughs] So, yeah, I think I even found out that Google is now going away from all that.

D: Right.

M: They're actually going back to cubicles and such, for privacy.

D: So before, you had more like cubicles with walls?

M: Yeah, they weren't cubicles, but they were, like, really full walls, wooden walls with a top. And they were about, I guess, they came up to just below my neck, so I could always look over and see the next person. But they were a much bigger area. And, yeah.

D: So what are you going to miss about the job?

M: I'm going to miss a lot of not being able to control things [laughs], because I know where there's a lot of errors in DAS, and in describing, and cubic footage, and I'll miss not being able to finish those kinds of things, you know, make it right.

D: Yes, unfinished business.

M: Unfinished business. And I hope that moving forward, somebody will dig in, and be anal. and just say, "hey," you know, do it. You don't get paid extra for doing those things, but it's very frustrating to go to my series, and I have .504 cubic feet, DAS says I have .252. And I'm like, "How'd that happen?" And you start delving in and comparing those discrepancies. It's really difficult, and it's also detailed.

We had that problem of people putting the same series in the same box, which has really caused a problem. So you have one series, "Subject Files," it's Box One through Seven. Then you started "Correspondence," but you put half of the Correspondence in Box Seven. You're basically counting everything twice, which it's not that much cubic feet, but it does add up after a while.

D: Yes.

M: Yeah. And I don't know really where they are, with how important that is, that's my point. How important is it, is my thing.

D: I know what you mean, we're still not using HMS [Holdings Management System], so that's when you would think it would be important. I don't know.

M: But if you look at other libraries, they're way behind us, you know, especially the older libraries. And I always wonder, you know, "Well, if they're not enforcing certain things with this library, then why do they enforce it on everybody else?" I mean, to me, the most

frustrating thing, working at the library, was the way everything was done differently at every library. Right?

D: Right.

M: And at the regions, you had these forms, when you added cubic feet—I don't know, it was a 14044, or something like that. And you had to put it down precisely, it had to go up to somebody, you had accessioning forms when new material came in, you had a database. And all the regions, as far as I know, pretty much had to do it the same way. And then when I went to the library, I said, “Well, where's your loan database?” or “Where's your this?” And they had nothing. And that part is weird, strange.

D: Yeah, I mean, for the regions, they're federal forms right? They're actually, yeah, part of the federal record to have these official forms. But they don't have those at the library, or didn't. I guess they might have some more now than they did before.

M: I think for even loans that we took out to other libraries, I don't even think everybody was using the same loan form back then. And I said, “Well, how do you record when nothing comes back, if it's not dated somewhere?” You know, there were just different things that were really different. Because [in the region] we could get in big trouble, like putting the wrong amount of cubic footage on a form. And maybe that's because we had the agency records. And if the agency wanted something, and you couldn't find it, well, then you were in a lot of trouble.

D: Yeah, yeah.

M: And so maybe with the library, it's all donor deed, at least in our library. And maybe things are more copasetic among the PRA [Presidential Records Act] libraries. I don't know, I haven't worked there, so I'm not sure.

D: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about, as far as work?

M: No, I'm just going to miss a lot of my work. And as I told Brittany, I'm not a winter person. So maybe when it's raining, and freezing cold, and I'm bored, I'll come in and do some crap work. And nobody has to train me.

D: That's true. You're ready to get started.

M: [Laughs] Yeah. And then, like I said, the biggest problem with volunteers is having to train them—or interns. And at least if I come in and do something, I don't need any of that.

D: That's right, that's right.

M: So I'm hoping everything goes well for the library moving forward.

D: Well, I guess the library's almost done with a lot of their collections, right? How much still needs to be processed?

M: And that's going to change a lot of what you guys are doing, of course. The most stuff left is that Presidential Personnel Office [Collection], which is probably pretty boring and a lot of Social Security numbers. And then, if that's done, I mean, you're pretty much, I think it's only like a thousand cubic feet that are left to be processed.

D: Yeah.

M: So that'll change what everybody's focus is, and I'm sure it'll be going back to checking mistakes previously and stuff like that.

D: And maybe doing some rehousing of stuff that's in older boxes.

M: Yes, there's some problems with that. But again, as when I came from the region to there, that part was the country club. The way the records [in the region] were stored in the most horrific FRC boxes and all over the place. That was nice, to come into that environment where everything was in a little Hollinger box.

D: Right, right.

M: So moving forward, I think that's kind of the way it's going to go, yeah.

D: OK, I can shut off the recording now. Nice talking to you.

M: Thank you. I'm just a little nervous about being retired, but that's OK.

[END RECORDING]



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Daria Labinsky
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