

**Subject: Interview with Max Evans, former director of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC)**

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**John: By way of introduction, tell me a bit about your previous positions at the Wisconsin and Utah State Historical Societies. At what point did you decide what you did was what you wanted to be “when you grew up?”**

**Max:** I am still not sure I know the answer to that question. I guess it started actually with my first job which was at the same organization I work for now, I've gone full circle. But my first job out of graduate school was working at the LDS church archives and before I took that job I sat down for twenty minutes with my major professor and he told me everything I needed to know about archives. That didn't quite hit me when I took the job; I still thought of myself as a historian during archives work. Within about a year, maybe within the first two years at least they sent me to the National Archives Institute in Washington. I spent two weeks there and it really changed my life. I really understood it and at that point developed a passion for archives. My passion has always been in the area of access to archives and I've always tried to work in that area. I think that's when I decided that's what I wanted to do, but of course it took a few different paths along the way. I was there for six years.

I took a job at the Wisconsin Historical Society primarily because it had a great reputation and I'd also spent a little time in Madison when I was an LDS missionary and knew it, loved it, and thought it was a great place. Never regretted going there. I thought it was a great experience and professionally I wouldn't have been able to do most of the things that I've been able to do if I had not had that experience and the association with all the great people in Wisconsin. I was there for almost ten years. Last year they asked me to be the director of the history library so I left the archives for a little while and headed to Utah to be the director of the historical society. That all took place in 1986. I spent sixteen years and I was the longest serving director of the historical society. After sixteen years it was probably long enough I didn't know it but I had a new boss. He knew it and he came for business and he told me, “We never let anyone stay in our business for more than five years in the same job.” I told him, “Ok, I get it.”

So I spent the next six months after I left that job actively looking for other opportunities. At the end of that period I had four solid opportunities, so I just had to pick. That was the time when the NHPRC job had opened up, applied for that, and fortunately was offered the job and thought that it was one of the best archives jobs in the country. You're not really doing archives but you have a great opportunity to really influence the way the archives profession goes. It was very gratifying to see the ceremony the other day at the plenary where they talked about the NHPRC. Reminded me once again of the great opportunities you have there that's what it took. So five years I was old enough to retire, ready to retire, and had other opportunities come my way. I decided not to retire and leave the NHPRC and go back to Utah and take this job as one of the directors in the church history department.

**John: You have the perspective of many enormous staff, sort of starting at the bottom and had to work their way up through the hierarchy, you have the perspective that you came in**

**right at one of the senior levels. Talk for a minute about your impressions of the agency, as you say, “It was one of the premiere jobs” ways before you decided to take it. What were your impressions of the agency both that really led you to believe this is the job I want, and then once you got there, the impressions of the agency as a whole?**

**Max:** I had formed impressions of the National Archives long before I got there and I had the impression that it was a wonderful organization with rich resources and very dedicated people. Also, my impression was that early on they were the leaders for standard archives but in recent years it became clear to me that they didn't much care about the rest of the profession. They didn't care much about standards, they had their own way of doing things, and they didn't really participate very much in the dialogue. In the discussions individuals did sometimes but institutionally you didn't see much real commitment to that kind of thing. I always thought that was a bit of a disappointment even before I got there and it's a real opportunity lost, I think. I didn't change that opinion when I was there, maybe I brought it with me but it seemed clear to me that we would have discussions about things in our senior staff meetings. I would sometimes point out that we were making grants to states, to universities, to archives, to do precisely the things that people were talking about. I'd say, “You may want to find out what's going on at these other places, consult with them, and see what their experience was.” It was apparent to me that there was absolutely no interest in that; there was not much sense in wanting to belong to a larger community, that's my impression.

**John: The NHPRC itself is often regarded as this stand-alone unit of the National Archives than your impressions of NARA as a whole. Then when you decided “I'm going to be the director of the NHPRC, what sort of goals and ideas did you have for the NHPRC and how successful do you feel you were as you say, in getting these people to go along with what you were thinking.**

**Max:** What I wanted to do was reestablish the NHPRC as a leader in the profession. I think it had gotten away from that, from the days of Frank Burke and Larry Hackman and all these people who were really leading the profession in a lot of ways. I wanted to get back to that, I kind of felt that the NHPRC had kind of ground to a routine of let's make grants with the same fifty organizations. This is one of the things about having a performance objective; sometimes they have an intended consequence. We have 90%, 95%, 96% of our rates next year will be successful. We can do that; we can make sure that every grant is successful by choosing organizations that are always successful but the unintended consequence is that if you don't take any risks you don't have any rewards. I wanted to move us in a direction where we could be a little more innovative.

Some of the specific things...I don't know if I had all these ideas in my head when I was there, but they soon developed some of the ideas that we should stop this silly notion that we weren't going to fund digitization projects anymore or ever. Well we don't have enough money and we don't know how to do it. I mean the whole point is let's figure out how to do it. We don't want to fund it forever, but we do want to fund innovative projects that will teach us how to do it. That was one of the ideas. I very quickly decided the electronic records grants program needed to be turned around. We had been funding that, we had been supporting that effort. In fact, the first grant for electronic records went to the Wisconsin Historical Society, when I was there and I was the project director for that. Ten years later they started having a formal project in research and

development which was also a wonderful thing, and for fifteen years they did that very well, but in the end we hadn't preserved any electronic records.

I wanted to move us into the direction of implementation, what can we do to precede money, to turn projects into programs. So that's one of the things that we did and I was successful in both of those things. I wanted to change our state grant program. What I really wanted to do was change our PAHR program (Preserving America's Historical Records), and I kind of cooked up that idea almost from the very beginning. I've worked in state libraries. I knew how they were funded. I've actually written a thesis actually on the history of state libraries. So I knew about the funding pattern, I knew about the state history preservation program because I knew how they were funded. I knew how you could leverage a little bit of money and get a whole lot of response and so I was very aggressive about pushing that idea and of course it still hasn't passed, but at least it's moving forward and I'm still hopeful that it will. But in the meantime, we changed our state's grant program to make it kind of into a mini PAHR so that instead of having every state apply, I'd justify what they want from their state boards, which were often, "we need money to travel so we could hold meetings." I looked at that and anybody taking a good at this would say you know this is the road to nowhere. Let's have programs that do things. I turned it around so now every state that applies can get a small amount up to twenty thousand dollars, which is not a bunch of money. But we just analyzed all the money given to the states given over the years and said, we have enough. Now we can fund every state that wants it and a little bit of money to run their own grants program. A lot of the states are really leveraging that, in New York and California it's not much money, but in states where I came from you can take that little bit and it goes a long way. Those are some of the things that I wanted to promote.

I also wanted to see if we could figure out a way to move the documentary editing projects along more quickly and that was a huge flop. I still think it needs to be done. I think there are ways to do it but the inertia on the part of the editors it's just weighing it down, it keeps it from happening.

**John: The NHPRC often winds up on the budgetary chopping block. How did you deal with those and other challenges and issues that you faced while you were the director?**

**Max:** Well that was probably the most frustrating part of the job. It was really very discouraging, very demoralizing, and the worst thing about it was how most of our energy was focused. It was dealing with how we are going to get our budget restored. We can't lobby but we can certainly provide information to people who can speak on our behalf so we spent a lot of time doing that. It really kept us from being as forward thinking as we could have been. I can't tell you what the magic formula is for dealing with that, it's just persistence and persistence. Fortunately I appointed Kathleen Williams to be deputy and she's now the Executive Director. Her really strong point is all these legislative issues and she's staying on top of them. She's in a good position now to move us to the next level. So I am very happy about some of my choices.

**John: Give the 30-second commercial for the NHPRC.**

**Max:** You know I saw that on here, and I thought, "How do I do that?" Let's see, we saw a twenty minute one the other day. You know some of the folks on that presentation I thought were really good and I would probably use one of those. The NHPRC is a small agency with a very large mission, to promote innovation and archives and does so successfully.

**John: As a member of the senior staff, as NARA prepares for the appointment of the Tenth Archivist, take a moment and talk about the two Archivists under whom you served and what you think are their successful characteristics of being archivists.**

**Max:** Of course I was appointed by John Carlin. I had known Lew Bellardo for a long time, and I think Lew liked me and thought I would do a good job so he influenced John quite a lot. I worked under Allen [Weinstein] after John left and personally I found that John was difficult. He was not really much of a people person and seemed to try too hard probably because he didn't know what he was doing. I think his heart was in the right place and he tried really hard. He did a few good things. The ERA initiative was very, very much needed, I'm not sure that it's being done the right way but at least he called attention to it.

Allen was very different, very supportive of the NHPRC at least verbally, very active with the commission, spent time with me and listened to concerns, but it didn't really add to very much change. I think you need somebody very different from both of those to be a director. I think you really need somebody who number one understands the discipline and number two has experience and background as an administrator. Did they need to be an archivist? I don't think so, but they need to have an appreciation for it and I don't think John did, I think Allen did. John was a so, so administrator, he had been a governor; Allen had run an organization of 40 people so he didn't really have the administration background to handle the job.

**John: What, if anything, prompted your decision to leave the National Archives? Looking back, how do you view your time at the National Archives?**

**Max:** When I went there, I promised John I would give him five years and it turns out in five years I can retire, so that became an easy target for me. I probably would have stayed another year or maybe more and retired there if I hadn't had some other offers come my way. About a year or so before I was eligible to retire I was approached by The Hoover Institution at Stanford. They recruited me and actually offered me a job as the director of the Hoover Institution Library. I thought this was great! Now, they wanted me right away, we kept trying to work a deal so I wouldn't lose my federal retirement, which isn't very much in dollars but it's worth an awful lot in terms of time if held...me and my wife didn't want to lose that.

We kept trying to go back and forth. In the meantime the people that I knew at church came and we would have lunch together. They would come to Washington and visit and talk about what they were doing and talk about what I was doing. One time they said, "Would you like to come and work for us?" I said, "You know, I can't imagine why I would." There's no way you're going to get me back there. Those were their last words.

I was in California actually looking at real estate and flew back to Salt Lake to attend a wedding and they managed to have me talk to one of the leaders of the department, who was one of the leaders of the church. That's how they organize things there. He was very persuasive. His persuasion and my steer of shock having met in Palo Alto and having gone there convincing myself that I could afford a million dollar house, and getting there and finding out that all the million dollar houses were tear downs. I was a little discouraged about that, so I thought it was an easy choice. We kept our house in Salt Lake City; I got family there, so it was an easy choice in the end to do that. The other thing is that they had read some of the stuff I had written and they

said, “This is what we want you to do and so we want you to come here and do it.” So that felt like they were going to give me some flexibility to do some of the things I wanted. When you’re in the NHPRC you have a lot of brilliant ideas, you can’t write about them, I was at the point where I wanted to try to do them. I could have done so at Salt Lake, I could have done so at Stanford.

**John: What do you think that people will say about Max Evans legacy at the NHPRC?**

**Max:** I wouldn’t even dare guess that. I don’t know, I have no idea, I hope they say good things. But who knows?

**John: Switching gears a little bit, as why we are here at the Society of American Archivists, What role do you see professional organizations playing in our profession? Do you think that NARA does enough to support them? Should they be doing more (either the organizations or NARA) to make these things work well?**

**Max:** No, short answer. I think Allen was trying to move in that direction when I heard Adrienne [Thomas] say she has a weekly conference call with the heads of all these professional organizations. Now that to me felt like it was something of a step in the right direction. I think that’s an opportunity that I hope everyone will build on and others. As I said, there is much about the National Archives that is really kind of ossified so it’s going to be kind of hard to really turn that into anything much more than tokenism but I think it is a good step.

One of the things that I had talked to Allen about was the idea that the NHPRC because it has representatives of all professional organizations would be a perfect vehicle to become sort of an outreach and relationship building arm of NARA. Now we have David McMillen who has that job, but why that couldn’t be rolled into the NHPRC was something that was not quite clear to me. It was actually presented to senior staff, and I’m sure they said it was a power plan on my part but I still think it’s an opportunity missed not to use the context, the network that the NHPRC has ultimately for the profession but to benefit what goes on with it at NARA.

**John: Did you play a role in the creation of the Archives Leadership Initiative?**

**Max:** That was one of my other ideas and I did that after I got there when I looked at the role of the Archives (Editing Institute) the camp edit. I thought you know we could do a better job than camp edit does because they are entry level. The Archives Leadership Institute sounded to me like something that we needed particularly at this time because of the grain and the profession and the number of people that are retiring. We really need to bring in leaders who will replace all of us and who really have some kind of formal training in leadership and not just learn it as we all did, you know by the seat of our pants. So that was my idea and got it done. You know it’s amazing all the things I’ve been told have been happening after I left.

**John: You have been away from NARA for about just a few years. Comment if you can as to what you think (you sort of touched on it briefly) but what are the biggest challenges and issues that are facing the organization today?**

**Max:** I read that question and tried to boil it down to a short answer. It’s very complicated. I think on the one hand it’s kind of the political environment that it’s in and I don’t have an easy

answer to this. Independence, well we got independence but of course government agencies are never independent, can it ever be more independent, should the National Archives have more authority to require agencies, to require the President? I don't think so but require certain things from other record creators and is that the direction that we should go. I know a whole lot of people believe that we should do that. We should have a stronger record law that gives the archivist more authority to just say "this is what we're going to do" and go off and do it.

I think that's probably not the answer though because my experience is that persuasion and good service is what gets things done. It's not becoming the records police. In fact, I think that is precisely the wrong thing because I think that would create a political backlash. There needs to be an institution that is very much service oriented and here is part of the problem, it has got so many customers. It has got all the federal agencies, Congress, the courts, the White House and everybody creating these demands and asking tough questions. And then it has got a vast public that we serve and the vast public that we don't serve but ought to serve.

So, that will become sort of a resource issue and we just need more money? Can we fix this? Can we spend ourselves out of this fix? I don't know if you can without some fundamental thinking about rethinking. And I don't know what that is; I don't have a glimpse answer but I think there needs to be maybe within ten years, five years, of doing a new strategic plan. Sort of feels like an exercise, sort of slow in the making, but never really becomes really strategic in the way I think of strategic. I really think there needs to be some of that. The critical short term problem is going to be replacing people that retired and finding leaders, and it's going to be a fundamental philosophical question that somebody is going to answer and that is "What's the balance between promoting people within and bringing people from the outside," and I think there needs to be balance I really do; it's demoralizing for you to bring everybody from the outside and you never promote from within. I understand that but on the other hand, if you just promote from within you simply reinforce and continue to continue with the status quo. I think the National Archives needs to rethink what it's all about in very fundamental ways. I'm not sure that the people that are there now or the people perhaps that will replace them in the next five years are really capable of doing that. I guess that's what I think the problem is. I won't say to present problems without solutions but I don't have any hope the new guy will.

**John:** From my perspective as someone who was outside the agency, came to the agency in not sort an entry level, been in the profession for about ten years, and I immediately saw this dichotomy of people who were in positions and sort of saw these positions above them and said, "Well that's mine," but then there's someone outside who is clearly capable of moving in that position. You're right there is no good solution.

**Max:** Well you know when I went there I sort of felt that like the guy who moved to a small town. You know my family hasn't been there for three generations so you know I'm an outsider there and I felt that the whole time. I don't know how you felt. Tom, he was the one only person there that had come from the outside. After a short stay with the National Archives too, he wasn't quite as outside as I am. I don't know if he felt the same way, but there's a lot of that kind of feeling "them and us." I referred to it before, you know the reluctance to kind of pick up new ideas and investigate what others are doing. I think that's all, this sort of systematic insider approach to things that's there.

**John:** Finally, the question that I always ask, “What didn’t you get asked about?” Some story, some nugget of wisdom, something that Max Evans wants to impart with people that they won’t see until after you declared itself?

**Max:** You know, I read that question too, and couldn’t think of a thing. It’s ok.

**John:** Ok, I thank you for coming, you had some great questions. I know you were a little bit reluctant to sit down for this.

**Max:** Well, I wasn’t there very long. I don’t think I have a very good view of things.

**John:** As I pointed out in the introduction as a member of senior staff you certainly have a perspective to offer and I think you’ve conveyed that today. I thank you for it.