

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION  
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview  
Subject: Bill Seibert  
Interviewer: Stephanie Reynolds  
June 28, 2023

[BEGIN RECORDING]

**Stephanie Reynolds:** Okay, so I just got the recording started. I just am going to start out here by saying thank you for participating in this National Archives Oral History Project. We're documenting the 1973 National Personnel Records Center, or the NPRC, fire in St. Louis and its impact on the National Archives. My name is Stephanie Reynolds, and I'm based out of our Denver, Colorado, office. And I am assisting the National Archives Historian, Jesse Kratz, on this oral history project. Today is Wednesday, June 28, 2023, and I am speaking with Bill Seibert. Okay, Bill, would you like to just start by telling us a little bit about your background, like your hometown, educational background, military service? Just a brief to start us off.

**Bill Seibert:** Sure. Yeah, I was born and raised and pretty much lived all my life in St. Louis, except when I was away at university and in the Army. I graduated, undergraduate, from William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, with a B.A. [Bachelor of Arts] in history. My concentration area was the early national period. After graduating in 1968, in the fall of that year, September of '68, I went to England, to the United Kingdom because I had a scholarship to study at the University of Oxford and was there from '68 through the end of the summer of '69, when my draft status required that I either stay in the UK and basically avoid military service or go back to the states, which I decided would be the wisest thing to do. And so from the late fall of '69 until April of 1972, I was in the United States Army.

In early '72, in the spring of '72, when President Nixon made his overture to communist China, there was a reduction in force in the military and anyone who had less than six months remaining in their service was given an early out. So I was separated from the service with an honorable discharge in April of 1972, at which time I returned to the United Kingdom and was in Oxford for another almost three years and ended up taking a degree. I was reading law and ended up with a B.A. and M.A. [Master of Arts] in law from the University of Oxford and came back to St. Louis at the end of 1974.

For a period of time there, a couple of years from well, really '75 through '78, I worked for a time on a comprehensive architectural survey of the city of St. Louis. My interest, in addition to

history, was also architectural history. So I worked on that project for a couple of years and also was involved in a family business for a time.

But in '77, I sat what was at that time referred to as the PACE [Professional and Administrative Career Examination] exam for the civil service. I can't remember what PACE stands for anymore; I should. But at any rate, I was contacted by the National Archives in St. Louis and was offered a job at the National Personnel Records Center as a trainee in the Career Intern Development System [CIDS], I guess it was called. And that was in 1978, in the fall. And I was there working for the National Archives and Records Administration, or at that time, the National Archives and Records Service, from that time until I retired in 2017.

So when I first started at NPRC, my first permanent assignment was with the Records Reconstruction Branch of the National Personnel Records Center and working in reconstructing and responding to requests that pertain to records that were affected by the 1973 fire. And I did that. I was in that position for almost three years. And then after that, I worked in the Air Force Reference Branch. At that time the Center was organized by a Military Service Branch and a Reconstruction Branch, and I applied and was selected as the assistant branch chief in the Air Force Reference Branch. And there we continued to work with records that had some, well, as you know, a good portion of the Air Force records were affected by the fire. So the experience that I had had in reconstruction was very helpful there in the Air Force [Reference Branch].

And then after several years in that branch, a position opened. There were two archival positions at the National Personnel Records Center at that time. They were appraisal archivist positions, because in the St. Louis Record Center, there was also a large collection of military—Army, Army Air Force, and Air Force—organizational records that had been retired to the records center in St. Louis. They were unscheduled records and there was a project that began, I think it started in 1976, to appraise that collection, which when they started, I think, was over 200,000 cubic feet of records. So I worked in that area for a number of years. And then eventually when an archival unit was established in St. Louis, I applied for that position and was selected as the senior archivist in the St. Louis archives, and then retired from that position in 2017. That's sort of a brief overview.

**Stephanie:** Okay. Yes, what is that, 39 years?

**Bill:** Yeah. Yeah. With military service, it was actually, I think, almost 43 years. So, yeah.

**Stephanie:** Wow! Yeah, a long, long time.

**Bill:** Long time. It was an interesting career. I have to say that.

**Stephanie:** Yes. So going back to the very beginning of your NARA service, you said that NARA contacted you. How did that work?

**Bill:** Well, at that time, when you took the PACE exam, I think you put down what sort of work you would like to do. It was so long ago. But I indicated that I was interested in working in archives. And I guess if you score high enough, you know, your name is referred to different agencies. And I think I also indicated that I was interested in staying in St. Louis. And so that also, I guess, narrowed it down. At that time, NPRC was participating pretty aggressively in the CIDS program, bringing on people. And with that, you came in as a GS-5 and, if you were successful in the training program, in two years, you were advanced through to a GS-9. And I was an archives specialist at that time. There was not an opening for an archivist at that time. Those positions were filled, but there was a need for archives specialists. And so that was the position I was offered, and I did accept it.

**Stephanie:** Okay. And where did this training take place? Was this at 9700 Page Avenue?

**Bill:** At that time, NPRC had two facilities. I guess they have two now as well. But yes, there was the military building at 9700 Page, and then there was also the civilian record center, which was at 111 Winnebago Street near downtown St. Louis. And in training, you had a complete training overview of the operations of both centers, both buildings. Yeah.

**Stephanie:** Wow. Okay. And what did they have you doing during the training?

**Bill:** Well, you pretty much shadowed supervisors of the various units both at Page and at Winnebago. I spent time in the civilian reference branch and in the search and retrieval section there, and also in the operations branch, all three branches down there—and then the same at Page Avenue. You rotated through, spending time in each of the branches of the organization. There were three military reference branches: Army, Navy, Air Force. There was the Reconstruction Branch. There also was the Operations Branch that, you know, supported all of the operations in the building. And there was the Management & Technical Staff that were basically the management analysts that were in charge of reviewing, designing, and producing operational manuals and directives, basically the regulations that the place operated under. And you spent time there with the management analysts as well. So...

**Stephanie:** Okay. So kind of a comprehensive view of...

**Bill:** Absolutely. That was the idea. Yeah, and then they were able to place you wherever there was an opening, where they had a need when you finished your two years, if you were successful. And, I think, every quarter your assignments were, if I remember correctly, they were quarterly, every three months or so, you rotated into a different operation. And so at the end of that time, you were—it was a rather rigorous program. You were brought before a group of senior managers there, and you had to basically present a paper that described everything you had learned. And then you would be grilled on all of that. And so that went on for two years, basically. And then at the end, they found a place for you where they needed you. And for me, it was in the Reconstruction Branch. And I had spent probably six weeks or a couple of months in that branch, maybe a quarter in that branch, as part of the training. So I was familiar with it. And that's where there was an opening as a GS-9, and that's where I ended up for a number of years. Yeah.

**Stephanie:** So for the training aspect of it, the CIDS, what did you think of that program, that training?

**Bill:** Like I said, it was pretty rigorous. And I mean, by the time you got through it, you understood how all the various operational units in NPRC functioned and, you know, you were sort of in a position to begin. Of course, the other aspect of it was the whole idea of supervision. I mean, that was a challenge working in a—it always is, working with people, having a requirement to evaluate people's performance and make sure that the production requirements of the unit were being met. And of course, as you know, NPRC gets thousands and thousands of reference requests weekly, and there is a huge emphasis on getting those turned around as quickly as possible. But a lot of us were also concerned about thoroughness and accuracy as much as timeliness of response.

And in reconstruction, of course, that was a major concern to try to get as much information as you could in the time allotted for responding to a request. Yeah, anyway, I think all of us that worked there at that time, and probably even today, well, there is no separate Reconstruction Branch now—records reconstruction is folded into, as I understand it, all of the reference operations. But, I mean, when we were specifically working with the recovered records and the records that had to be reconstructed, we really felt an obligation to do as thorough and accurate a job for the veterans, and their next of kin who were writing in. And I was always fascinated by, and later on, of course, it became a major concern, the research. People were coming in wanting to know about specific incidents, about people that were involved in particular operations during, especially during wartime, in the First World War and the Second World War, and Korea. So anyway, it was really interesting.

**Stephanie:** Yes, it sounds like it. So you started in 1978 with the CIDS program and then you moved over to the Records Reconstruction Branch about...

**Bill:** Yeah, that would have been in 1980, I think, about two years later. Yeah.

**Stephanie:** And so this would have been just a few years after the 1973 fire. What did that building look like and smell like when you were in there?

**Bill:** The fire took place on the sixth floor of the building. The building was a six-story building. And it was determined—I mean, this is what one learned—that the building was compromised to the extent that they were not going to rebuild that floor. I'm trying to remember. I think it was reckoned that there were 22 million individual service records stored on the sixth floor, and what was recovered, oh boy, you know, it was something like maybe not even 20 percent of the records. So they didn't necessarily need that space to store records anymore, because so many had been destroyed. But so, you know, the building's roof was rebuilt over the fifth floor. The fire did not really descend below the sixth floor, but water certainly did. And there were a lot of records on the fifth floor that were water damaged and had to be treated for that.

But in the ground floor of the building, there was an area in the basement, basically, that was turned over to storage of the recovered records, the records that had been salvaged, having suffered fire and water damage. And it was the one area—the stacks at that time were not air conditioned—but this area, we called it the B-File for burned records, was air conditioned and all of the various preservation requirements that we knew at that time were put in place, and it was a temperature-controlled stack area.

And then the other thing that happened—and of course I was involved in it over the years—was that a call went out throughout the federal government and the state and local governments to halt any destruction of records in the custody of those organizations that could help document military service...of course, the Veterans Administration, the Selective Service System, etc. All sorts of different, what we called alternate or auxiliary records, series that could help put together the individual service history of those...[SOUND CUTS OUT].

**Stephanie:** Are you still there? Oh. You dropped out for a second there.

**Bill:** I'm back. I'm back. This darn phone. So as I was saying, the service histories of those persons whose records were lost in the fire or were compromised, where only portions of the record, say, were salvaged. So at any rate, that was a huge effort and a really wonderful one. In later years when I headed up the archival unit here, a lot of my efforts were in getting those

auxiliary series of records appraised as permanent holdings of the National Archives. Of course, the service records themselves were in a contingent—you may or may not know that they were in a contingent status. Nobody was foolish enough to suggest that they be destroyed. But on the other hand, they had not been appraised as a permanent series. So that was something that I was also very much involved in as an appraisal archivist. And hold on a second. I've got to get rid of this.

**Stephanie:** Okay.

**Bill:** [ANSWERS ANOTHER PHONE CALL.] Sorry about that. It was a call that I've been expecting for a couple of days.

Anyhow, what I was saying is, I think probably the most important part of my work for the National Archives was working on a multiyear effort to get the military service records and the civil service records reappraised as a permanent series of the National Archives and bring them into National Archives' legal custody. But we had done this work at the National Personnel Records Center in the wake of the fire and brought all of these different series together. Many of them were brought into the building. Others stayed in the custody of the agencies that held them. But there was an agreement that they would not dispose of these records because they were critically needed in reconstructing the service data that had been destroyed in the fire.

One of the actions that we always talked about in recon [reconstruction] was this idea of procuring. We would procure copies of records from other agencies in order to assemble a reconstructed file, and one of the issues we had to deal with was the delays involved in that. I mean, where other reference operations were working with complete records, their turnaround time could be much faster. We would have to explain very often to our customers that we were attempting to assemble additional documentation that would hopefully result in us being able to provide a reconstructed service record to them, but that some of this would take time. We were dependent on other agencies to get us the information that was needed. And so that was always something that was a challenge because, very often, some of these requests were time-sensitive. You know, the veterans or their next of kin might be having medical issues and they needed treatment by the Veterans Administration and, in order to get that, they had to produce documentation that they had honorable service in the military.

So anyway, those were some of the challenges from day to day that we would deal with. But when I was working there, in the years that I was in Recon, there were quite a number, I would say almost a majority [of the staff], were men who had served in the Army or the Air Force. They knew the records intimately because they were veterans. And then a lot of the women

that worked there had also had government jobs during the war and were familiar with military records. And these people, boy, you just learned a tremendous amount from them. Of course, all of them have long since retired and most of them have passed on. But when I was working there, you know, in the early '80s, they were there. And it was really a privilege to work with them and to learn from them about how records were kept and where one could go to obtain information from other record sources.

One of the tremendous collections we had there were the personnel accounting records of the Army and the Air Force organizations, the “morning reports,” which were compiled daily. These reports documented who was in a given unit from day to day, and also the unit rosters, which were useful. And those were all in microfilm format. The Army had microfilmed them, and we had a unit within Recon of people that were sitting at microfilm readers, and they would follow an individual through his or her unit assignments day by day—we called those a “follow-through search.” Hopefully, the person writing in could give us some indication of a unit and a time frame in which the service member was serving at a given period. And we could start the search in the unit records at that point to attempt to find them and follow them through from entry to discharge, which again was often a very time consuming effort. But again, the people that I worked with, that were in my section, were just tremendously skilled at that. And, I mean, it was amazing what we were able to do and what people are still able to do in terms of putting record information back together.

**Stephanie:** Right. So when you were working with these records, were they all like discolored? Were they brittle, moldy? I mean, what did they look like?

**Bill:** Well, in the Recon Branch, we were on the ground floor of the building. There was no carpeting on the floor. It was linoleum tile. And at the end of every workday, the custodial crew would come through with dry mops and sweep up ashes from the floor. I mean, it was a real challenge. And I would say most of the people that I worked with were very careful and scrupulous about not losing any record information. The records were brittle in many cases. They were singed with ash. Some of them were just not legible at that time. Now, I don't know. Did it turn out that you were able to see Meg Phillips's round table on the fire? They were recording that session from a couple of weeks ago—I guess it was last week—that I told you about. And part of what the presentation there was, the head of the preservation unit in St. Louis described some of the fantastic technological advances that allow information to be recovered, which we could not do in the 1980s, from documents that were totally charred. Using infrared technology, they can recover information. So anyway, it was a major concern that we were careful with these records as they came in to us from the B-File. Of course, there was dry mold on them and that was an issue. Some people were sensitive to that. And as time went

on, it became clearer about the health considerations of exposure to dormant mold. You did the best you could. You wiped it off. But it was there at the end of every day. Ashes were swept up off the floor. I mean, yeah, the records recovered from the fire were in various stages of distress, I guess you could say. So a lot of—.

**Stephanie:** So did you have to—[CROSS-TALKING].

**Bill:** Go ahead.

**Stephanie:** Go ahead. Oh. Did you have to use special equipment then or, you know, you talked about some of the safety concerns, health concerns.

**Bill:** Yeah. Well, not a lot of attention was given to that at that time. Since then, there's been a tremendous amount. But back then, I mean, everybody had brushes on their desk and they would brush off the mold that could be removed. They would brush the ash off. And, you know, I mean, you just worked with it and tried to be as careful as possible. A lot of photocopying obviously was done, but it had to be very carefully done because, again, you were trying to avoid losing information off of the paper. So, yeah, it was a very, very interesting operation.

**Stephanie:** When you were looking at some of the burn records, how much information had to be on that original record that you could make out before you had to go somewhere else for that information? Did you try to recreate everything that was on that original document?

**Bill:** No, depending on what the request was. But, the vast majority of the requests, what was needed was verification of the total time spent in the military, when the individual went in, when they were discharged, and what the character of their service was. That was critical. Did they have honorable service? Was it something less than honorable? Yeah. I mean, you were basically, as we would say, you get them in and out and have a character of service.

Now, sometimes there were, especially when part of what was wanted was documenting injury or wounds and so forth, then you were looking at medical records, if they survived. If they didn't, you would go to the Veterans Administration in the hope that the person had been seen at a veterans hospital prior to the date of the fire and that copies of their medical records were on file with the VA. And so if they had been, NARA had an agreement with the Veterans Administration that they would send us the medical records they had on file on a given individual, and we would incorporate them into the reconstructed file. Verifying medical conditions when a record had been lost in the fire was one of the most difficult things to do. And you could go to the organizational records, again, to the morning reports. And if someone



was wounded or became ill on a given date, hopefully there was a remark on the morning report for that date or several days later when the person had been transferred to a medical unit for treatment, and you would be able to document the illness or injury.

And very often, requesters were next-of-kin family members who were interested if the service member had been awarded the Purple Heart for having been wounded in action, and we were trying to verify awards and decorations as well. So at any rate, yeah, it just depended on what was being requested.

And the other point being made, it always comes up when people learn about the fire and the tremendous loss that occurred. You know, one of the people at the program the other day was from one of the genealogical societies, and she said, "Well, this is 50 years on. When do you think you'll finish reconstructing all the records that were lost?" And we lost, I think, probably 16 million individual records. So the way reconstruction occurs is as the result of receiving a specific request for a given record. We are not systematically trying to reconstruct, and there's no way to do it because—that's the other thing I should mention is when the fire occurred, there was no index to these files. We had no idea. You know, you just went out to look to see if a record was there. They were filed alphabetically, and that's what the searching was. And after the fire, you didn't know. There was no sort of index of all of the people who had records on the sixth floor. So we could really only reconstruct based on requests by someone self-identifying, and then we would go to try to see if there was a recovered record and, if not, how we could go to alternate sources to try to verify that the person served and obtain the basic data surrounding his or her service.

The good thing that happened in the wake of the fire is that the records that were recovered were put into a database. So, when someone came in, the first thing you would do was search that database and see if there was a recovered record. And also, many of the auxiliary files, the other series that were physically brought into the center, were put into a registry. So if you didn't get a hit on the record itself, having been salvaged in the wake of the fire, you might get a data hit on an auxiliary record. Something that we brought in from—well, was it the Treasury Department or the GAO [U.S. Government Accountability Office] by that time or still the Army or Air Force Finance Branches?—but we brought in millions of individual pay records. And as those records were processed, the individual pay document was put into a registry system. So you might get a hit on a pay record, and that pay voucher would be pulled. And hopefully it was what we referred to as the final voucher, the one where the person was paid as they were discharged from active service. It would be a tremendous bit of data.

So yeah, I can tell you there were millions and millions of military pay vouchers that we were able to make accessible for reconstruction. The Air Force and the Army had both created card files, three-by-five cards, at the headquarters of the services, of awards that were made to individuals. Those came to us and we would—if it was a question of trying to verify an award, a Purple Heart or something like that. You would go to search those card files. There were records from service on the Mexican border leading up to the First World War in 1915. Anyway, just all sorts of different, as we said, auxiliary record sources that were searched in the effort to reconstruct a person's military service record if it was destroyed. Yeah.

**Stephanie:** Did you help with putting any of this information in the database that you were talking about?

**Bill:** I did not. At that time, no. It had been done and was going on. There was a unit that was doing that in those years as new groups of records were brought in, auxiliary files were brought in. But no, I did not do data entry. There was a data entry section that did that. And in the days and months after the fire, as they pulled records off of the sixth floor and brought them in and did the initial sort of drying and cleaning, those records would go to that unit and there was a computer entry made and the records were filed. They had originally been filed alphabetically when they were on the sixth floor, and there was no database for what was there. After the fire, when they entered the recovered records into a database, they were stored by that entry number. So, you know, presumably the first record that was entered was 0000001. And it went all the way up into the six millions for the recovered records. Yeah.

**Stephanie:** Did that make it a lot easier then to locate the records that you were looking for, for these requests?

**Bill:** Absolutely, for the recovered records. Like I mentioned, that area in the basement which we called the B-file or the Burn File, and then also in that stack area, were various collections of the auxiliary records and, again, they had been put into a database. So you would put a person's name and service number in, and if you were lucky, you would get a recovered record, a B-file. If not, you would get a series of hits for auxiliary records. If you were in a correspondence section, which is where I was, and my employees, they would request those, send their requests to the search section and have them pulled and delivered to their desk, where they would go through them and attempt to add them to a—if there was additional information for a record that was partially recovered, they would add those documents to that file. And if there was no record, they would start, basically, what we called an R-file or a Reconstructed File, and those auxiliary documents that proved the person's military service, you know, when they got in, when they got out, what the character of their service was, if there was information about awards, if there

was medical information—all of that would be compiled and put in that reconstructed file. And that record would then go to the data entry people, and it would be entered in as what we would call an R-file or a Reconstructed File. So, I don't know how many, but by the time I left, I think they had probably reconstructed from scratch, so to speak, over four or five million records. So, you know, a lot of work had gone on over those 45 years by the time I retired. So anyhow, yeah.

**Stephanie:** So it sounds like there were multiple teams that were working on different aspects of, say, a records request that came in. I think you were a section chief of correspondence when you were there?

**Bill:** I was a correspondence section chief. Yes. And so what my group did was they would get the request that was mailed into the Center. They would analyze it to see what was available, like probing the databases to see what was available, and then they would request whatever pertinent hits they got for the individual. They would ask either the search section, if there was a recovered record in the B-file stacks, or then there was also the organizational records unit in the Records Reconstruction Branch office—the people that went and searched the microfilm records. As I mentioned, we had the morning reports and the unit rosters.

There were other groups of records that were on film, and that request would go to them to search and to make a photocopy. And those photocopies would then come to the correspondence technician who had the case, and they would assemble it all and then generate a response to the requester and provide copies of what they had obtained. There was a document that NARA designed, which stood in the place of the separation document. And so the technician would fill in the data on that form. It was issued with the NARA seal on it, and it would give the person's name, their service number, the date they went in, the date they got out, the character of their service. And that would be in the place of the separation document.

Maybe you've heard the term “Department of Defense 214” [DD 214], which is what they call it now. But back in the Second and First World Wars, it was a different document. If that document survived, we would make a copy of that and send it. But if it didn't and we had to pull the information about the person's service history together from alternate sources, that basic data would be put on that NARA-designed form-NA Form 13038. And I'm sorry to say, but I'm blanking on the name of the form. But it was a very formal document that stood in the place of the separation document issued by the service department, by the Army or the Air Corps or the Air Force. So, yeah, that would be the product that the correspondence technician came up with, and we would furnish to the requesting party.

And again, the other issue that was a big one for us all was that the records were in the legal custody of the military services—the NPRC was simply holding them for the agency that still had legal custody—that those records were subject to the Privacy Act. So part of our requirement was to analyze who the requester was. We had to make it clear to them that by signing their letter of request, that if they were falsifying who they were, they were subject to prosecution under the Privacy Act. We had to make sure that who we were responding to with information was, in fact, the subject of the record or, if they had died, their next of kin. And beyond that, you couldn't legitimately furnish information to the individual.

Now, the records that have come into the legal custody of the National Archives, those are public records. So, it was determined as part of the agreement—again, I was involved with this...it was painful, I mean, the negotiation went on for four or five years at least—between the service departments and NARA, as to when a record would become public. And the determination was made that 62 years after separation from service is when the record would be legally transferred from ownership of the creating agency to the National Archives and then become a public record, and anyone could have the information. So.

**Stephanie:** How was that determined?

**Bill:** Well, you know, it sort of became critical to find out the separation date. When you reconstructed “when did this person get out?” Of course, now we're how many years past, certainly the Second World War, 70 years or more—so all of those records are now public records. But at the time when I was working in the Recon Branch, they were not. Even the oldest records from the Mexican border and the First World War were still in the legal custody of the Army, and they were subject to Privacy Act rules. And so it was critical for the correspondence technicians to understand the provisions of the Privacy Act and apply them and not release information that legally could not be released to the person they were corresponding with. So that was a challenge.

**Stephanie:** Right. Yeah. You talked a little bit about when you were reappraising the OMPFs [Official Military Personnel File] as permanent. Did you use some of this experience from the Records Reconstruction Branch to help in this work? Or how did you go about this process?

**Bill:** Well, if you have worked with NARA for a long time, you may be aware that for a long time NARA archivists did not view personal data records as permanent records. They felt the only records that were really legitimately archival were the records of the government organizations and that the records that pertained to people were not. And that was one of our big challenges. Of course, the history community and the genealogical community were our allies in pointing

out that that was totally fallacious. You learn a lot about how the government operated from looking at the records of the individuals who were responsible for running the government, whether they were civil servants or whether they were military people during wartime or even during peacetime, and realize that this information was hugely important. That was one of the things we had to demonstrate, and we did so. But it took a lot of persuasion. You can understand the history of an organization very often through the records of individuals that worked for that organization, especially in the earlier years when there was a lot of correspondence in the records that documented how a particular operation functioned.

I've been retired for five years now, so some of this has become a bit hazy. Some of the issues that we talked about, you know, there were four or five basic criteria that you applied when appraising government records for archival value and deciding whether they should be kept permanently. We had to apply those criteria to the individual service records, and we were successful in doing it. I think, eventually the Archives was fine with that. I mean, we convinced them...and the public certainly was on board from the beginning. But then the issue became this issue of privacy. And that's what took a lot of negotiation with the various service departments, the Department of Defense and the Civil Service Commission to say, when can we safely say these records can be open to the public—when is the government not required to protect personal privacy on all of this? So that was a huge issue. But the other things were really important. You really had to show using established archival criteria that these series were, in fact, legitimately permanent records of the United States.

**Stephanie:** Do you think that there were any takeaways or lessons learned from that process?

**Bill:** Well, yeah. I mean, I think speaking as a historian, it's the whole top-down view that the only records that really meant anything were the records created by the central offices of various departments that, you know, those were the ones that were kept and not necessarily [other] records. But as the government grew in the 20th century, and the federal government had more of a presence throughout the country in various regions, archivists had to look beyond just the records created at headquarters in DC and see what was going on in the regions. Well, then the other thing is, how about what happened to and what was done by ordinary people, not just the Secretary of Defense or the Joint Chiefs of Staff. But, you know that whole notion of social history, of what ordinary people were doing and how their service affected the history of the United States and its government—you know, all of that has changed in the last 30 or 40 years. Yeah. How archivists are looking at that sort of thing also changed.

**Stephanie:** That's so interesting that you say that. Yeah.

**Bill:** So these personal data records—I mean, obviously genealogists are most concerned, but also people doing pure historical research are using these records. Especially, well, the older military service records and the records of the civil service contain fascinating documentation. Anymore, it's all pretty much standard forms. Now it's not so interesting. But in the older records and what I'm saying is, you know, World War Two and earlier, you would find fascinating things in the individual service records that describe historical events that were taking place and the actions of those individuals who were involved. It's all there, and it can be really fascinating. So.

**Stephanie:** Mhm. I also heard that you were instrumental in coordinating with College Park to secure funding for the Preservation Program. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Bill:** Yeah. Preservation was the first archival function established at NPRC after the military personnel records were reappraised as permanent, and that happened in 1999, I believe, when John Carlin signed the transfer documentation for the military personnel records. It then became critical for NARA to decide how these records that were now in their legal custody would be preserved. And so the first archival unit at St. Louis was the Preservation Branch. And I did apply for the position to head that unit and was selected because the idea was—the NPRC director at that time, David Petree, it was his view that in order for that effort to get off the ground, the person in charge had to understand the records, how they were arranged and stored, their contents, their physical form and current condition, etc.

And so that is the basis on which I was selected because I had no personal training in paper preservation or anything, but I was able to hire two just remarkably experienced conservators—we really went for the best, and we hired two conservators to work with me and to begin to design the program first for preserving the recovered records, the burned records. How would they be handled? And we instituted all sorts of handling protocols for NPRC staff.

There was a lot of pushback because before that, people were just used to treating those records just like the records that were perfectly intact, that had never been exposed to fire and water damage. And it became clear that it was totally irresponsible to continue handling the burned records that way, or you would destroy the information in these records. So, it slowed things down. And there was an awful lot of pushback from the record center side and, frankly, their fixation on being able to show a very fast turnaround time from when requesters wrote in to when they got their answer. And the protocols that we, in preservation, felt were absolutely necessary to put in place slowed some of that down. I mean, basically, every time a record from the B-file was requested, its physical condition would be reviewed and assessed by a preservation technician, and it would be decided what could be sent on to the Reference Branch

safely. And if it couldn't be sent forth without the danger of record information being destroyed in the handling, then we took steps. We made copies of the original and sent the copies, but all that slowed things down.

And so it was a constant give and take on what would happen. For instance, generally speaking, before the Preservation Unit was established, searchers would go in, searchers—GS-3s—would go in and pull records from the B-file and they would be stacked in carts and rolled up to the technicians in the correspondence section who were to answer the cases. When the Preservation Unit came into existence, random searchers were no longer allowed in the B-files. Those allowed access to the stack area first had to be trained by preservation specialists in how to handle the records safely, and only those who were trained in those procedures were able to access the records. So that was a change. You know, before that, anybody could go in there, and they did. After that, there were restrictions put on access to the records. It was just necessary.

Before the records were appraised as permanent, NARA could basically say, "Well, they're not our records. It's the service departments, the Departments of the Army and the Air Force, that have to decide how these things are going to be done." And they didn't care. I think you understand that agencies really, until there's a legal problem, they could give a rat's ass about non-current records. They're only interested in the records they're dealing with today. Very shortsighted. And that was certainly true of the military services, the Army and the Air Force. They were concerned about the people currently serving. They were not really concerned about former service members. I mean they figured that's the VA's problem. Well, not really if you own the records. The records of former military members document eligibility to have services from the VA. The owner of the records has a responsibility. Yeah. And so, again, there was no question about preservation requirements after the records came into NARA's legal custody. So yeah, that was very interesting.

We did cleaning in the lab. I can't remember all the details. I was down there as the archivist in charge of the preservation unit from 2000, I think, to about 2004 or 2005. And that's when the other archival unit, the custodial unit that was tasked with caring for all of the accessioned records including the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard records that had nothing to do with the fire. The Navy and Marine Corps records are really the oldest records in St. Louis, and some of them go back to the Civil War. And one of the big projects we had there—one of the requirements that the Navy insisted upon if they were going to agree to convey ownership of the records over to the National Archives' legal custody, was that a database be created for those records. And that was one of the projects that I was in charge of. I can't remember the numbers, but several million records from what we call the World War One period—which actually went from the beginning of the Second World War, basically 1939 back to the

beginning, which was in some cases the mid-19th century—were entered into a database. Every record was entered into a computer database so that now, after that project—it was a multiyear project—we knew if we had a record for someone who served in the Navy in 1885 or whenever. And again, with preservation, there were protocols in how those records were handled because they are not records in flat files, but they are in tri-fold folders or pockets. And so every time those records are accessed, they have to be unfolded and then refolded. And that's a major preservation issue. So, yeah, we had to institute procedures in how those records were handled. And those procedures represented a major change from the way NPRC had been operating for the past 40 years or whatever. So a lot of challenges.

**Stephanie:** Was the preservation program in St. Louis set up or established specifically to deal with the burned records?

**Bill:** That was the start. Yes, but it eventually encompassed all of the records that came into NARA's legal custody. So as I mentioned, those Navy records that went way back into the 19th century were subject to protocols established by the Preservation Unit in terms of handling. But the first step was to address the burned records, because they were considered most seriously at risk. And that's one of the things that I had to do as head of that unit, basically identify the level of risk involved for the various collections. The woman who was NARA's head of preservation during those years was an absolutely wonderful person. I mean, hugely brilliant. She came to NARA from the Library of Congress. Her name was Doris Hamburg. I don't know if you ever had any interaction with her, but just a fantastic person to work with. And I learned a lot about preservation, both from Doris and from the two conservation specialists that we hired in St. Louis and who were the ones in charge of establishing the preservation rules and protocols for the handling of the records at NPRC. Yeah.

**Stephanie:** So, this was a new program there at St. Louis. Do you have any lessons learned from establishing a new program there?

**Bill:** Well, as I said, the main thing that it did and that was really resisted by the managers of the NPRC, was to slow down how access to records took place. You just couldn't handle them like disposable material, you know? I mean, if you were like, "We need to answer this case. We are not really concerned about what happens to the record after we answer the case." Well, that's crazy in the first place, because questions about an individual's military service don't come in once and never again. You know, very often somebody wants to know more information. And there are other members of the family. And when the records become accessioned, members of the public are interested. So, you know, these records are going to be handled over and over again. They always were. And so you had to consider that what you were doing was, basically,



destroying the physical record. So, it meant slowing things down. And that was a huge issue. I got into disagreements with a lot of people there because of that. And, we had to verify that what we were saying was in accordance with established preservation practice as mandated by the agency itself, by the National Archives. And so it took persuasion, and in some cases, it took someone mandating.

But, the issue is it depends on where you were coming from in the agency. I mean, the people in the Office of the Chief of Operations, they're looking at St. Louis as a very sensitive place in terms of dealing with the veterans. And the VA, of course, was happy to say, well, their hands were tied because of bottlenecks at NARA and the National Personnel Records Center. And of course, with COVID and all, I mean, you heard about their backlogs. They were always dealing with backlogs of 10,000...15,000 cases at the end of a given week. And that ballooned up to, I think, as high as 600,000 or something. So, I mean, it was a lot of pressure. And I know, probably some of the things that we put in place were overruled because of that. I don't know. In a way, I'm glad I'm not there today in that regard.

**Stephanie:** Right. Yeah. We gained a lot of new permanent records when those OMPFs were reappraised as permanent. Is that why the National Archives at St. Louis was established?

**Bill:** I think it almost doubled the holdings of the National Archives. Something like that. Yeah.

**Stephanie:** Wow. Very significant. Is that why the National Archives was established in St. Louis? Because of those records?

**Bill:** Yes. That's why there was an archival unit there. Exactly. When the records became permanent, they had to establish an archival unit there which had not existed before. Yeah, the only archival function in St. Louis prior to the reappraisal of the individual service records was the appraisal that I mentioned. The appraisal function that was directed at, not the personnel records, but at the military field command records that had landed in St. Louis mainly because there was room and that were unscheduled. And so that was the only archival work that happened in St. Louis up until 1999, when the individual military service records were reappraised as permanent. Then there had to be an archival unit established. Yeah.

**Stephanie:** Okay. And was that established at the new building, the One Archives Drive location? Or was that at the—?

**Bill:** No, it began at 9700 Page Avenue still. Yes. We were at 9700 Page until 2011, and the Preservation Unit was established in 2000, and the Archival Unit was established in 2004. So we

were there at 9700 Page from 2004 until 2011. What is that, seven years? And then we moved into the new building at One Archives Drive now.

**Stephanie:** But at this time, you were the senior archivist?

**Bill:** Yes. Yeah.

**Stephanie:** Did you help with the move?

**Bill:** Oh, yes. Yeah. Yeah. My staff, we did tremendous work to physically move the records. And of course, we had to plan. We had a wonderful unit within the archives. The archival—they change the name all the time—I forget. The National Archives in St. Louis is what we eventually were called. And we had a team of management analysts in the Archives at St. Louis who worked on the planning and designing of the new building, because it was to hold archival records. So I mean, yeah, that was a huge, huge effort. Did you say you interviewed Bryan McGraw? He was brought in as the head of the archives basically to develop that new building. I mean, he had had a lot of experience from working as an Air Force officer in logistics and so forth. Anyway, he hired—I think we had at least three management analysts working on the design of the new building. Yeah, it was quite an operation.

**Stephanie:** In terms of the whole archives then moving to this new building, what were some of the challenges, you know, starting fresh in a new building?

**Bill:** Well, we had to figure out how much space we needed. We needed to understand what the series were that were accessioned at that point and identify what the volume of incoming accessions would be. With the OMPF, legal transfer to NARA occurred on a rolling date—62 years after separation from active service. So, you know, we had to make sure we had room for everything. The good thing was—and it was really what convinced Congress to fund the new building—is that the military services and the civil service had switched to electronic records, that we had an end point for paper records. You know, we could now say there was a definite volume of paper of individual military and civilian personnel [records] and related records series that NARA would be responsible for. And so that's what we had to plan for in the new building.

One of the biggest challenges was when the civilian personnel records were reappraised as permanent. They were at that building, as I told you, in downtown St. Louis, 111 Winnebago Street, the civilian personnel records building. I had two of my archivists down there basically identifying and organizing those records. The older records were physically arranged by agency. And again, for the oldest records, there wasn't an inventory. So you had to go out to the stacks

to figure out where they were, what the volume was, and how you would arrange them in the new building. I had those two archivists down there for the better part of two years figuring that out. And then, of course, came the challenge of moving the records. We hired commercial movers, obviously, to carry out the physical moving, but I had my staff onsite, you know, overseeing how the records were handled and in what order they were moved. We preliminarily had to develop an order in the old building and then make sure that that was maintained as they were moved into the new building so we could find them. You know, it was a very major effort. And we're talking about hundreds of thousands of cubic feet of paper records. It was an enormous undertaking. Yeah.

**Stephanie:** Right. Just remarkable. Did you come out of that move thinking things should have been done differently or, you know, if you had another chance to do it again, would you do anything different?

**Bill:** I think it was pretty successful. I think we really rose to the occasion. Yeah. And the oldest Navy records that I told you about, you know, the ones that went back well into the 19th century, had been moved after they were appraised. They were moved from 9700 Page to a building about half a mile away where, again, that's where my staff was that basically provided the records to the Navy Reference Branch to answer requests. But also at the same time, they were generating that database and putting every record into a database so we knew what we had down to the file level. That, again, took several years to accomplish. And it was one of our proudest undertakings. Those records, by the time we moved into the new building, were in great shape. I mean, we had a database for them. But again, we were really moving records from three different major facilities into the single new building at Archives Drive. It was wild.

**Stephanie:** I bet.

**Bill:** And then we were bringing in records too, records that had been used—remember I told you that in records reconstruction, we would procure documentation from other agencies? Well, basically, those records were appraised as permanent at the same time as the OMPF that were in NPRC's physical custody—those records, held in various agencies—were also appraised as permanent. So basically, we had the job of negotiating with those agencies for the physical shipment of those records into our new building. And that was part of the planning to try to figure out what the volumes were, for instance, files that the VA held going way back, files created by their predecessor, the Pension Office, really old records, ones that were not in A1 and were still in the physical custody of the VA and not in NARA downtown in DC. Those records that were held by the VA at various places in their system, at various locations, we had to find out where they were and negotiate with the VA to get them sent to us in St. Louis. And that's

one of the collections that is of tremendous interest to family historians and genealogists, those old pension files that are now in the custody of the National Archives in St. Louis. So, yeah, it was not just moving what we physically had at the time of moving into the new building, but we also had to be projecting what should be coming to us from other agencies, the related series of records that came in. That was a decision that we had to clear with our people in DC, what was appropriate to come to St. Louis rather than go to DC. Of course, there was no room in DC. They'd run out of room in College Park and in Suitland, so it made sense to bring them to us. But all of that had to be negotiated and, in planning the new building, we had to make sure we had the space for all of that. So it was interesting.

**Stephanie:** Wow. You kind of talked about some of the technological advancements. I mean, it sounds like everything was more of a manual process to start out with, and then things were being moved into a database for tracking purposes, and then digitization. Are there any other observations that you can think of in regards to any technological advancements over your career?

**Bill:** Well, yes. When they converted to an electronic OMPF, the technicians had to become proficient in accessing them, and there was negotiation with the service departments establishing the conditions under which they could have direct access to those records. And then the issue of where and how those records would be brought into NARA and how that—I mean, I was not directly involved in all of that—but it changed how the individual correspondence technicians at the NPRC would do their work because, you know, at that point they were looking at a record that was online. But also prior to that, there was a period when the military services were microfilming, not microfilming—what's the other term? Not microfilm, but micro...the little cards...

**Stephanie:** Microfiche?

**Bill:** They were microfiching records. And of course, copies of the fiche had to come to NPRC because the records didn't exist in paper. They were on fiche. So that process gradually became subject to using different technology: microfiche readers. And then eventually, the records were on a computer and they had to be able to access those and print out documents for the customers, the members of the public that were coming in to want their records or I should say the veteran or next of kin. Those records—obviously they're still subject to Privacy Act restrictions because they're the newer record—but they are a permanent series that will eventually come into NARA's legal custody. They will transfer from the agency to NARA. So yeah, that was a major change.

**Stephanie:** Lots of changes. Let's see here. 2017. That's when you retired from the National Archives, right?

**Bill:** Right.

**Stephanie:** Do you remember your last day?

**Bill:** I think my last day—I have by me here the copy they sent me of the oral history interview. And I think I did that, it says September 20, 2017. And I think my last day was the 30th of September. So like a week later. Yeah. Yeah.

**Stephanie:** Did they do anything special for you when you retired?

**Bill:** I didn't want anything special, but my employees did. We had dinner, which was great. They insisted that we all went out to dinner. It was a lot of fun. I didn't want a big retirement ceremony in the building. I just wasn't interested in that. But I did have a wonderful retirement dinner with my staff, and we enjoyed it. And I've been in touch with a lot of them over the years since then. We get together. A bunch of us are trivia enthusiasts, and so we have a team of about eight or ten of us that very often participates in trivia events around the St. Louis area. Yeah. And we do pretty well. Yeah, we do pretty well. Archivists, you know, are full of a lot of general information, so yeah. Yeah, yeah.

**Stephanie:** That's fun! That's great! Yeah.

We're coming up on the end of our interview here. Was there anything that we didn't cover that you would like to add or any memories that you have? You know, anything that was interesting or unusual or anything that you might want to add?

**Bill:** Well, thinking back, especially working in the Records Reconstruction Branch in those early years, in the early '80s, it was just the privilege of working with people who were a generation ahead of me, people that lived through and worked through and served in the services during the Second World War, in the Korean War. They were just really a remarkable group of people. I mean, I was in my early 30s, I guess, and they were in their 50s and 60s. And you just learned a tremendous amount from them. And they were just terrific folks. So that was a real privilege. Yeah. Yeah.

**Stephanie:** I think sometimes the people you work with really make a job.

**Bill:** Oh, yeah. I mean, they knew so much. I mean, it was direct knowledge for how the military worked in those years. And as I say, the men, a lot of them, were veterans. And the women worked very often for the Army and the Army Air Corps or the Navy during the Second World War and the postwar years, the Korean War. And I mean, they just knew how records were and the reasons and the purposes for the records being created, and they had a tremendous amount of direct knowledge and that's what made, to me, the Reconstruction Branch so incredible in those years. And hopefully the people there now are benefiting from that. Well, there's our various operating procedures. It was all documented, what you were supposed to do, where you were supposed to go for record information in order to reconstruct the stuff lost in the fire. And those procedures and those reference materials are still there. And hopefully the people working there today are using them. But when I was there, there were people with direct personal knowledge. That's when those processes were put in place, and they knew a heck of a lot. Yeah, it was great.

**Stephanie:** Yeah. So when you get them written down, you can pass them on and everyone will know the steps.

**Bill:** Right. Hopefully so. Yeah.

**Stephanie:** Yeah, hopefully. Right.

**Bill:** Exactly. I guess that's about all I can think of.

**Stephanie:** Okay. So, well, hey, I want to thank you again for agreeing to participate in this oral history project. You've just had such an amazing career. You've gone through different branches and had so many different experiences. It's just been really interesting hearing about all of this. So thank you. And I'll be in touch with you soon. And I don't suppose you would have maybe a photograph that we could post along with your transcript when we get that online? You can think about it if you want.

**Bill:** I will. I'll see if there's something. I'll see what I can come up with. I think they did something at the facility there at one point, and somebody said that there's a photograph that's still up there. So, I don't know, maybe I can figure out where that is. But, anyhow, the other thing I definitely will do is see if I can come up with contact information for Wendy Hollingsworth. I think she would be a tremendous person to be in touch with, because she was there. I mean, she actively participated in the recovery after the fire. She was working there on July 12, and she was there for the next 30 years or so. Wendy would be a wonderful resource to include in this. So I'll try to find out and follow up on that.

**Stephanie:** Okay. I really appreciate that because, yeah, she was not on our list yet.

**Bill:** All right.

**Stephanie:** Well, thank you so much. And I hope you have a nice rest of your week.

**Bill:** All right. Okay. You, too. All right. Bye-bye.

**Stephanie:** Bye.

[END RECORDING]