U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview
Subject: Diane Rademacher
Interviewer: Jessie Kratz
June 15, 2023

[BEGIN RECORDING]

Jessie Kratz: Thank you for participating in the National Archives Oral History Project documenting the 1973 National Personnel Records Center Fire and its impact on the National Archives. My name is Jessie Kratz. Today is June 15, 2023, and I'm speaking with Diane Rademacher. Good morning, Diane. Can you start by giving me a little about your background—where you're from and how you ended up at the National Archives?

Diane Rademacher: Okay. Well, I'm from St. Louis, Missouri, and I grew up here, went to college here with a history major, and intended to teach. But instead I got a position with the National Archives. Well, at that point, it was General Services Administration, National Archives, National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis. And I started there in 1974 as an archives technician working requests that came in for military service information. And I did that for about three months and then was transferred to a special project where I think we were relocating records, and then transferred to some other small projects, and ended up at our South St. Louis building, at that time the Civilian Personnel Records Center. And I worked there for two years in the accession and disposal area, bringing the records in and then the ones that reached their disposition date—to dispose of those. And at that point in time we were just introducing large computer systems to account for accessions. It was called NARS-5. And I was the technician that was assigned to put all the incoming accessions, their size, description, and whereabouts in the building into this computer system. So that was sort of my introduction into automation.

And when I got a promotion to a management analyst to the management system staff around the end of 1976, and I think I began the job in 1977, I was—they called it the ADP Coordinator, Automated Data Processing, because things were still done in those days with punch cards, big computer systems, big magnetic tapes, and batch processing. And those are some of the earlier days of automation at the records center, and things certainly changed as the years went by.

So for the rest of my career, from 1977 until my retirement in 2007, I worked on the management staff and just worked on various projects that covered the whole gamut of things that were needed at the records center and was able to work on some projects that related to identifying auxiliary records to supplement and replace those that were lost in the 1973 fire.

Jessie: Okay. So before we talk about your career in more depth. So you're from St. Louis. Were you there when the fire happened?

Diane: Yes, I can remember. It was before I started working at the records center. But I can remember on the news seeing the coverage of this big fire, which really wasn't close to where I live. It's probably 15 miles away and thinking, oh, my, you know, that's a pretty big disaster, never realizing that in eight months I would be working at that facility.

Jessie: So when you first started at the National Archives, can you talk a little bit about your impressions of the agency? And you were early on, were they still very much impacted by the fire then?

Diane: I always say that I probably got my job because of the fire, because they just needed a lot of people. I didn't really work with burnt records early in my career. But later on that seemed to involve, I guess, a little bit of what everybody did. But in my early years, I actually was what they called a Work-in-File clerk, a WiF clerk. And our job was to go out in the file with a ladder and find the records to answer the requests right out in the file area. And I wasn't really too thrilled with that job, but it did give me an exposure to military records and an understanding about the contents of the records. And I guess that was really good firsthand experience and connection with the people that wrote in for information, individuals as well as agencies, especially the Veterans Administration. And then, like I said, I think in the first year I had three or four different positions, kept getting transferred to other different types of work. And so I got some experience in different areas at the NPRC before I was promoted to the management staff.

Jessie: And can you talk about some of the kinds of projects you worked on as a management analyst, especially with regards to the records related to the fire and the auxiliary records?

Diane: Well, in 1985, the National Research Council's Medical Follow-up Agency (NRC-MFUA) was doing some studies and they were using some hospital admission records that were created by the U.S. Army during World War II and in the Korean timeframe. And in looking at them and knowing that a lot of records obviously were lost in 1973 at the fire, some of the officials of the National Research Council Medical Follow-up Agency contacted the archivists at NPRC and said, you know, here's all these medical records. This is something that could supplement what you lost. And so the archivists said, yeah, you know, that that probably would work but they're all in a coded form. And it was an 80-column code from the old punch cards that were used early in data processing. And the punch card data had been put in digital form, and it was, I think, on 82

big magnetic tapes. And so here you had this well, there were 10 million records altogether in 80-column coded form. And so, just off the bat, there was no way that you could decipher them because it was all in this alphanumeric code. And so doing some research, we found that there were code books at some different locations. Some were in Washington, DC. We got in touch with the Surgeon General's Office in Washington, DC, and then found out that at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, there were some of the code books down there in storage.

And so the assistant director and I, we went down to Fort Sam Houston, and there were all these code books that were in like the cellar of what I think had been a Women's Army Corps barracks. And I mean, it was like putting them down in your old basement. And so we were able to, well, borrow them, and then subsequently they gave them to us. And then some code books that were in Washington, DC—we made some connections up there, and they sent the code books and oh, my goodness, I don't know how many volumes there were. And some of them had been updated.

So going through the code books, it's like, well, the code meant this in this year, but then it was changed in the following year to something else. And so it was really kind of a challenge, hunting for the correct code interpretation for the 10 million codes that we had on these magnetic tapes. And so we had been introduced to desktop computing around 1985. We had some very early computers that were desktop. There was one called an Osborne and a Kaypro, which were like little briefcases but with a computer that used the floppy disks, the 5 ¼-inch floppy disks. So this is very early in desktop computing.

And so by 1988, I think there were IBM or Compaq desktop computers in use, and we were taking classes because I thought we really needed to know more about these database applications. So NPRC contracted with a gentleman to come in and give us a class on dBase. I think it was dBase IV, either III or IV. And that kind of coincided with when these computer tapes are found with all these coded records. And I just got to thinking, I wonder if we could set something up using this database software where we could type in this code and then have the program that would be created, decipher those codes, because you could put all kinds of tables and lists and variables into this dBase software.

That idea worked. And so we created the database processing program. But then, well, 10 million records times 80 characters. That was an awful lot of storage. And in those days a lot of storage just wasn't available. And so they put all the information, all those coded records, on microfiche and then indexed them by the service number on our computer system. If someone wrote in, we couldn't find that hospital admission record by their name because there were no names—the records had been created for statistical purposes and they only included the

service number—which was the key identifier. But there was other demographic data on the record where you could pretty much match up if somebody wrote in and said that they were stationed here and they had this type of diagnosis and they were this old and this was their company in the U.S. Army, you could pretty much match up.

We were able to index all these records on our mainframe computer system [by service number] and then identify them on the microfiche [by fiche page number, frame and line]. And then you could take that code from the microfiche and key it into this computer program that we created using database software. And it took about, oh, maybe, I don't know, a minute or two to type it in. And then within seconds, the system could decode it. And at first it's like, well, I need to verify that this decoding is accurate. So there were still some records that weren't burned, so I would probe our system and get hits on existing records and then compare the decodes with the existing records. And if they matched up, then, you know, I felt pretty certain that we had put in the proper codes for all these different years and that they were accurate.

So, it wasn't just creating the dBase program, but then it was verifying the accuracy by checking against some of the still existing records. It was quite an ordeal but, I feel confident that the output and the deciphering of the codes was accurate. It was like figuring out a puzzle, but I think we put the pieces together.

Jessie: So you mentioned you were a history major, but it sounds like you did a lot of electronic records and computer programming. Did you have experience in this or you mentioned some training? Did you get all your training at the National Archives?

Diane: Well, yeah, I was a history major. I was planning to be a teacher, and I always liked history. I guess if there was a job in government, then the National Archives was the place to be, and I didn't really have any computer training in college. I mean, computing was still kind of new in those days. I mean, people would take introduction to data processing. And I can remember going with a friend one time in college, and we put our name in on punch cards and ran the punch card through the interpreter and printed our names out on a piece of paper. And it's like, "Well, this looks like a fad." If I would have had more foresight, I certainly would have gone into IT as it's called today.

But, I got all my experience on the job and took some classes. I took a number of classes at a community college here in St. Louis just to get a basic understanding and then did take some programming classes, basic programming. But you kind of get the idea of the logic and the “if statements” and the tables and how coding works. And it's just something that I think I kind of have an ability to do. I kind of like trying to figure out, okay, I'm starting here and I want to get

to here. How can this computer program do that for me? And, with the desktop software, I mean, it just made it easy for a non-computer systems major to figure that part out.

Jessie: Well, that's great because I would not be able to do that. I was so impressed. So can you talk about, I don't know, it might be hard, but can you describe a typical day in your unit when you were working later as a management analyst?

Diane: Well, it just seemed like whatever came up, you know, I mean, things were always changing and new laws required then some sort of execution of the law in some way. I mean, we did a lot of policy writing and procedure writing, and then when it came to the computer systems, the larger mainframe systems, they were at one point created in St. Louis with a data system staff. But then these operations were contracted out for cost saving purposes to the Veterans Administration. And then there were some other contractors, too, that worked on our systems. And so then we would have to write requirements and do a lot of testing and troubleshooting and working with contractors to make sure that the systems accurately processed requests that were coming in and accounted for them and accounted for the location of records.

I also worked on a project where the military medical hospitals retired records, after the medical record was inactive for two or three years. And the old system was all paper-based, and hospitals would send in kind of like a packing list with the retired records, and it would show all the records that were in the boxes. Sometimes there was an enumerated alpha list with names, but then other times they would just send something in like, A to B is in box 1 and C to F is in box 2. And so we really never knew exactly what we had. It was always, well, if somebody said they were hospitalized, say, in 1985, well you would look up the 1985 listing for inpatient or whatever and then hope that you could find the record there.

But sometimes people's records were pulled out or sometimes the person had another health issue and their records were pulled out. And so they weren't retired in 1985. Maybe they were retired in '87 or '89. Maybe the person took that record home with them. So we really never knew exactly what we had in this manual system. I guess that was in the 1990s, when computer systems were just becoming more widespread and easier to create and maintain.

We had a project with the military services where they were the sender or, as one person said, they were the pitcher, and then at the National Archives, we were the catcher. And sending in their [inactive medical] records, they would send an electronic index and it would have the person's name, their service number, and then some basic data to identify what kind of record it was, an inpatient record and the location of the hospital and whatever. And then all of that

could be put into a system, and then somebody would write in, we would be able to probe it [the system] and get a hit on a specific record. And then it also showed the specific record location in the center. So rather than just going to a box under the paper system and hoping to find something, here you had some specific hit on a record that was actually sent to NPRC.

And I can remember one technician. I mean, she made me feel so good. She sent me an email and after this got all set up and she said, "Oh, I just love this new system" because they didn't have to hunt for something. They could just go out and get a requested record out of the box. So that was a pretty neat project. It took a while to get all that implemented because we were working with the military services, and they were funding it. And funding, of course, is always an issue. And then we were working with contractors. But it happened and it worked, and, and I think that it's still, still in production. I haven't been to the records center in a while, so I'm not sure exactly what all their procedures are. But I know that the system that was used for a long time, and I think, like I said, that it's still in use

Jessie: We've kind of alluded to this, but can you talk a little bit more about the role that technological advancements have played in making veteran's records available to them, especially ones that were impacted by this fire?

Diane: Well, you know, with the SGO [Surgeon General's Office] records, I mean, obviously people needed information for health benefits, hospitalization, disability, and it was incumbent upon the veteran to provide proof, which is kind of difficult when your record was burned up because you weren't really allowed to take that record home. And, in the World War II and Korean era, I mean, to even get a copy of your record, that was near impossible. Veterans were lucky if they kept a copy of their DD 214s, which wasn't medical, but that was their discharge certificates. And so I guess over the years, yeah, everything was manually done at the record center, even though we had from the time that I was there, a large database that showed the specific location of an official personnel file.

When someone would write in, it wasn't a real time online system where you could just type in their name or service number and see where the record of the official personnel file was located. It was batch processing and had a keypunch area and they would key up this information (service Identifier or name). I think initially it was on cards, punch cards, and then it moved on to where they could accumulate the inquiries, the keyed data on tape, and then they would run those overnight, and the next day they would get what they called a finding aid and there was an operation called "matching." And you'd have to match the finding aid form to the request. And then that was used then to provide a way to find a record through a group called "search." And so people would take these finding aid forms and go out in the file and find the

official personnel folder. But now this is different than the inpatient hospital records that I had talked about because the inpatient record was usually not in the OPF. Sometimes it was, but there were lots of variables in how the military kept their records. But everything was done like batch.

Nowadays it's all real time online. You key in someone's name or number and you get an immediate hit if there's a record in our system, in NPRC or not. So that's how technology advanced in that regard just with the records that [coded] data could be interpreted. I mean, in the olden days, if you wanted to interpret those codes, you would have had to look through all these code books and, my goodness, it would have taken who knows how long to interpret some codes, flipping through paper pages in a code book. And the code books were not, what should I say, efficiently organized. It was kind of a mish-mash of papers.

And so the computer systems just add to, I guess, organization and accountability. In the past, people would be assigned a batch of work, but there was really no way to know if everything had been completed in an efficient way. So with the current system, well, at least when I was there, if someone was assigned a batch of work and in the operations where the people answered the daily request, there would be accountability if they were assigned 50 or 25 or whatever. Well, that was all on the computer system. So if there were some that weren't worked there would be a way to monitor that. And then I guess just keeping production data, the numbers, you know, all of that was manually done and they used to put these little coded cardboard tags on cases where they could tell how old they were. Well with computer systems now, I mean, you put something in the system and you can sort by date or whatever and see which ones are the oldest and which ones weren't answered. I believe they take images of all these things now. Requests can be submitted online. In the past, all paper requests had to be signed and now you submit your request electronically. So yeah, things have changed quite a bit.

Jessie: You were also here when the National Archives got their independence from GSA. Can you talk about the impact that that had on your work or work at the NPRC in general?

Diane: Yeah. I don't really think that it impacted my work. It was just independence from GSA. And I don't know if that resulted in, I guess maybe it gave us more clout or whatever. We were this independent agency. We weren't part of GSA, which people always kind of thought is like the agency that cleaned up the buildings. So instead of saying that we work for GSA, now we can say the National Archives, and it sounded more impressive. But impacting the work for me? No. Maybe for funding, but I wasn't really involved in budgeting and things like that.

Jessie: Did when we got a new Archivist? Did that ever have any impacts on your work?

Diane: No. We didn't see the Archivists all that much. We did have inspections where people from the agency came, and they would review operations and make suggestions for improvement.

Jessie: So were you involved at all or do you know anything about the discussions to make the military personnel files permanent records?

Diane: No, that was on the archival side of the agency, so I wasn't involved in that.

Jessie: And you spent your career at the civilian personnel building, correct?

Diane: Right. About two years. Accession and disposal.

Jessie: Okay.

Diane: And then putting records into the system called NARS-5. I don't know if that still exists or not.

Jessie: Yeah, I don't think so. It is familiar though. The NARS-5. I've definitely seen that. Yeah. So can you talk about any interesting discoveries you've made during your work or any really your favorite aspects of your work?

Diane: Well, I guess it was always changing because as technology developed, we were always improving our systems. And I thought that was interesting. For me on the management staff, I mean, I did so many different things. I mean, I was an EEO counselor. On one project, I set up all the logical screens for a website to accept military records requests. I didn't do the HTML, and I thought that was interesting. I kind of liked, I guess, the aspects that related to automation because that just seemed to be figuring out a problem or having a problem and then figuring out how there could be an automated solution to it.

I even worked on, they called it—I don't know what they call it in Washington – the Combined Federal Campaign. And I set up a program where you could track all the donations and people got different incentives. It kind of did everything, and I offered that to the people that were in charge of the Combined Federal Campaign here in St. Louis. I don't know if they ever adopted it, but it worked great at the records center.

There were just many, many aspects to what I did. We, I mean, we evaluated suggestions, updated procedures and policy, worked with contractors, did training, did troubleshooting. One day was never the same as the other. There was no, "here's a pile of work. Complete this and we'll give you another pile of work."

Jessie: Yeah. So do you think that your work has changed the way that you view records or the importance of records?

Diane: I guess I'm a person who likes to maintain my own personal records because you just never know when you're going to have to go back and take a look. So yeah, I think record keeping is important. And I guess with automation maybe there's sometimes a view that it's less important to keep the paper record. But I had my little motto of the National Archives, the printed or “the written word endures.” I can't think of the Latin, but I had the corollary that the “electronic word fades away.” And so I think it is important to have paper records because we just can't be sure sometimes that the electronic record is going to be there.

Plus with any electronics, you have to have the hardware to interpret it and the software too. And I can remember someone saying that during the Kennedy administration, there were some paper tapes created and it was like holes punched in this paper tape. And they maintained that record, but they didn't have the equipment to interpret it anymore. And that related to punch cards, because we had a punch card reader from way back when. One of the gentlemen in the data systems center said that the only other punch card reader that he knew of was at the Smithsonian. So, yeah, recordkeeping is important, but then you have to have the proper means for automated record keeping to interpret it. And, you know, the written word endures. And in paper, it seems like it spans the ages.

Jessie: Going back to the fire, what do you think is the most important impact that the fire had on the National Archives? And it can be the long view because we're really looking for how the Archives adapted after the fire and what policies we put in place and then policies that we've changed and adapted over the years.

Diane: Yeah. Well, I guess, one thing that it showed was that the construction of a building for records should have sprinkler systems and firewalls. You know, I'm sure that it impacted record storage requirements. I mean, the impact was on military veterans who were needing these records. I would think that as time goes on and well, the World War II and Korean veterans, as they pass on, that those records are going to be less important from a personal use. It'll be for genealogical use primarily or if there's any studies that are ever done. It always kind of bothered me that maybe the National Personnel Records Center could have received more funding

because we had records that were affecting people's lives as opposed to archival records maybe from 100, 200 years ago that were nice to have, you know, maybe documented our history a bit, but they really didn't affect people's personal lives like the records at NPRC. So I thought that there should have been more emphasis on dollars for the records that were going to have an immediate impact rather than a scholarly impact.

Jessie: I agree with that. I think it's still an issue. [laughter] So when you look at your entire career, how do you view your time at the National Archives?

Diane: Well, I had intended to be a teacher, but I thought that my career with the National Archives was a better fit. So God had a different plan for me. And that was good. And I enjoyed my job. You know, it was a great job until I was retirement eligible. And I said, well, there's more to me than just working at the National Archives. And so I've done lots of other things. And gosh, it's been 16 years since I retired. But it was a wonderful job. I met wonderful people.

In fact, last night I was with a group of retirees. And I think that we had good leadership. David Petree, who was our director, well, he was, in fact, at our retiree group last night, too. I think sometimes if you have good leadership, it makes a job more enjoyable. And I think it was a great working group. There wasn't politics involved. One of my former bosses was there last night, too. It was a good place to work. And I think that all of us who still gather together, we think that we did our jobs and hopefully made a difference in people's lives.

I always thought that my job was worthwhile, that I was doing something to benefit veterans. I even had one veteran who would call me periodically because he knew about the SGO file and he served during a time frame when there weren't any SGO records identified because we had them up to 1954. And then I think there was a gap between '54 and I think '58. And he had served during that period, and he was hoping that something else would be identified. So I always said I had my personal veteran who would call me and "anything new, Diane?" I don't know, it was a satisfying career.

Jessie: I love how you get together with the former staff periodically. It really speaks to the culture of the NPRC. Were you really close to your colleagues? Did you do things outside of work when you worked there?

Diane: Oh, sure. Yeah. You know, every year one friend and I would use some of our annual leave and we'd find somewhere to go – vacation destinations. Yeah, we'd go places after work or on weekends, too. Yeah. It's a good group of people. And like I said last night, how many of us were there? I don't know, a dozen. There's probably about 20 people in all. They call it, well,

the men started it when some of the men retired before the women did. They called it "Boys Night Out." So now they call it "Boys and Girls Night Out." And so once a month we meet at a particular location and have something to eat, something to drink, and share what's been going on in our lives. And yeah, it's like you said, it was a positive culture that existed at the records center especially. I have to attribute that to the former director, David Petree. I think he was a good guy and that just sort of trickled down. Yeah, it was a good group.

Jessie: That's great. Yeah. The genesis for this oral history project really came from Charlie. It was his idea and he really got it started. So I have to give him a big thank you for pushing us to do this project.

Diane: Yeah, well, Charlie was my boss for a while too. Yeah, he's a good one. Crazy, crazy, funny guy. But. Yeah. And David Petree. Yeah, he was my supervisor, too. And Deborah Hilton. I don't know if you talked to Deborah or not.

Jessie: No, but we're still looking for people. So if you have contact information for Deborah or we haven't talked to David Petree.

Diane: Oh, okay.

Jessie: Well, I would love it if I could get, if you have their contact information, and we can do this offline, but that would be great because we're trying to talk to as many people as possible and get as many perspectives as possible.

Diane: Yeah. Yeah. Well, I think Deborah, she certainly would, and I'm sure Mr. Petree would. I still call him Mr. Petree. He says call me David. And it's like I can't. I'm sorry. You are my boss. [laughter] Yeah, maybe, I could send a note to Charlie. Or if you want to since he's kind of the point man here and just ask him if he wants to reach out to Deborah and to David Petree.

Jessie: Yeah, that'd be, that'd be great.

Diane: Did you talk to Marcia Haley?

Jessie: I haven't. No. Give me all these good names.

Diane: Yeah, because Marcia's been there forever, and she worked on lots of things. Well, she might tell you about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. One of the tasks that the records center had was to verify all the name spellings. And not that that seems like a super

serious task, but it really is. I mean, you don't want to have your name on a monument and have it installed, you know, "Rademacher," I don't want, you know, M-A-C-K-E-R on my monument. And so that was one of the things. And the people that were doing the monuments, they would call her all the time to verify these spellings. And, that's where the military records came in because they would have to look at the military record and see sometimes the record identifier is misspelled, but then you would look at a signature and see how somebody spelled their name or if they filled out a form, how did they spell it? So, just I mean, things like that you might not think are super significant, but they really are to the veteran or to the veteran's family.

Well, I'll send a note to Charlie and tell him that Marcia and Deborah, and Mr. Petree and gosh, if I can think of other people. There were people that actually worked with the burnt records. I have another friend. She moved on to another agency, but she was there with a mask on before masks became popular the past few years, working with the burnt records. And they would have to separate the pages and underline a service number. And then that would get keyed into a system to identify just that piece of paper out of a burnt record so that if somebody contacted us for information that there might be individual pieces of paper that were recovered after the fire. Because the records were everywhere. They were retrieved from neighborhoods. They flew away. I don't know if you've seen or read about the aftermath of the fire, but people would find record pieces in their backyards and bring them to the record center. So I don't know if you're interested in talking to anybody who did that type of thing or not, but if so.

Jessie: Yes.

Diane: Okay. I'm going to actually see that person tonight who worked in the files with the mask on and everything, and they had to wear gloves and, you know.

Jessie: Yeah, we have some pictures of how they do it now with gloves. But back then, too, because the records were so, I mean, I hate to say gross, but it seemed like you did not want to touch them or breathe them in.

Diane: Right. Yeah. Well, you know, when I was doing the verification for the SGO, when I would find an existing record and run the codes to see if they matched, a lot of times they were partially burned and I'd have them on my desk and be looking for the hospital admission card. And, it would be charred and well, they were like mold spores. So, you'd have to kind of brush off your desk afterwards because there was all this residual stuff. But now I think most of those are controlled by the archives side. And I think that they were trying to do more preservation. In the days when I worked there, we would get the records and try our best to keep the parts

together. But, you have little crusty pieces that would fall off and burnt edges that would fall off sometimes. And, you know.

Jessie: It was like you ate a piece of toast at your desk and you had to shovel off all the crumbs.

Diane: Exactly. Yeah. Yeah. There was charred chunks.

Jessie: Did they still have a smell to them, even decades later?

Diane: Oh, well, yeah. I mean, all the burned records were stored in one area called the B-file. The burnt file. And yeah, when you would go in there. Yeah. It did have kind of a—I mean it wasn't like really pungent, but yeah, it did smell a little bit. Yeah. Records smell, any old records smell. But yeah, they did have a little bit of a burnt smell.

Jessie: Yeah. Have you been to the new buildings?

Diane: I have a couple of times for the open house and retirements. Yeah, but I don't know, It just had sort of a what would I say? A sterile feeling.

Jessie: How does it compare to where you worked?

Diane: As you know, at the record center on Page Avenue, it was a big place. And there were a lot of agencies, a lot of activity. And at the new building, I don't think, well, I guess there's a few other agencies out there, but it's like you don't really see anybody. And, it just seemed kind of a more, I don't know, controlled sterile environment. And maybe that's fine. You know, it wasn't what I was used to. And I've been down to the caves, went down there for the open house and just, I guess for maybe a retirement or two down there in Valmeyer, Illinois. Have you gone to Valmeyer?

Jessie: I haven't been to Valmeyer. But I do want to go. We originally wanted to come to St. Louis and do these oral histories all in person and then just we didn't we ran out of time. But my goal is to get there and tour the caves. I'm really, really interested actually in civilian personnel records because they're very helpful for my job. I do a lot of staff highlights. And if all those records were available to me for everyone who worked at NARA, my life would be so much easier.

Diane: Oh, yeah, right. Well, you know, for active employees, I mean, if that's what you're interested in, they'd put all those in the vault if they were in the military. Well, the civilian

personnel file is kept in the personnel office or the human resources office. Um, yeah. I don't know how records are maintained now, though. I mean, if everything is done electronically. I mean, I was a paper record person.

Jessie: I try not to bother them too much, or at least the military folks because they're so busy with their backlog right now.

Diane: Oh, right. Yeah. Yeah. It seems like backlogs were always there. I don't think that there was ever a time when people got caught up.

Jessie: Right, right. So is there anything else that you would like to talk about? Any anecdotes? It could be fire related. It could be related to the National Archives in any way.

Diane: Um hm. Well, I was just curious. Are you in Washington right now?

Jessie: I am.

Diane: Are you in Maryland or where? Where are you located?

Jessie: I live on Capitol Hill, so I'm in DC.

Diane: Okay. But. Oh, do you work from home?

Jessie: Mainly, yeah. So I work from the main building. So downtown in DC, and that's my home base. And my office is there, but we have really been teleworking a lot lately, so I only go in if I need to look up records. We've been doing a lot of records management, sending records to RG 64, Records of the National Archives, so I'll go in for that kind of stuff. But otherwise, I've been doing a lot from home.

Diane: Oh, I see. Okay. Yeah. I can remember when Charlie Pellegrini was my boss and working from home became a thing. I asked if I could work from home? The answer was “No,” but, you know, that was, well, probably, I don't know, around 2000 or something. So now it's kind of normal.

Jessie: Yeah, COVID really changed things for the National Archives, which wasn't in the forefront of telework before, but now a lot of staff are 100% telework. The people who don't work with records or the public who can work from home.

Diane: Yeah. And now you have all these auxiliary locations for records like down in Mar-A-Lago and a garage.

Jessie: I should not laugh at that.

Diane: Yeah, that's kind of concerning. Yeah. Yeah.

Jessie: I mean, it is. We've been in the news for the first time. I mean, we've never been in the news as much, I don't think. [laughter]

Diane: Yeah, not a good thing. [laughter] So the Archivist has new headaches. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Oh, my. Yeah. Well, let me think if there's anything else. I don't know. I guess, I did enjoy my career at NPRC. And, I think that sometimes people thought that the record center was not a good place to work. But, I didn't find it that way at all. I thought it was a good career. So keep up the image of the National Archives positive.

Jessie: It is a positive place to work. And your work with the veterans was immensely important work. And I really appreciate you taking the time to speak with me today and especially also following up if we can have additional interviewees.

Diane: That would be great.

Jessie: Yeah. Thank you so much.

Diane: Well, it was fun. Yeah. And, you know, kind of made me think back. I know I talked to Bill Seibert, I think you're going to talk with him. And he said, Diane, it's been so long. I got to see what I can remember. So anyway, yeah, but, I guess we'd like to remember the good things. And so those two projects, medical records registry with the military services and the SGO, I think those are my favorite projects.

Jessie: I'm so impressed that you could remember things so clearly from 1985. I can barely remember last week. So you must have a great memory.

Diane: Well, I guess like you said, the things that you liked, you remember. If there were things that I didn't really like about work, I'd probably forgotten them. So.

Jessie: Right. And I guess your project was so giant and cumbersome that it's going to stick with you for the rest of your life.

Diane: Well, these weren't just week-long projects, they were years. But that's how it works in government. You got the funding, you got lots of people involved and a lot of coordination. And that's just what it takes. So.

Jessie: Yeah. Well great, thanks for talking to me. I'll let you go, and then I will follow up, like I said, with email, with the transcript. I appreciate you talking to me. And we'll talk more via email.

Diane: Okay. Well, it was nice to chat with you, Jessie, and enjoy your career with the National Archives.

Jessie: Thank you. Take care.

Diane: Okay. Thank you. Bye.

Jessie: Bye.

[END RECORDING]

ADDENDUM

The SGO File
By Diane Rademacher
Management Analyst at the National Personnel Records Center from 1977- 2007

The disastrous fire at the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) in 1973 presented a challenge for many Army and Army Air Corps veterans who were seeking medical and disability benefits—or the award of combat or Purple Heart medals—from diseases and wounds incurred during their military service in WWII and Korea. Military veterans bear the responsibility of providing documentation to support their service-connected claims. NPRC continuously sought auxiliary records to supplement what was lost in the fire to assist veterans with needed records. In late 1985 during a health study, officials at the National Research Council's Medical Follow-up Agency (NRC-MFUA) uncovered 82 reels of computer system magnetic tapes containing coded records from the Army Surgeon General's Office (SGO) enumerating hospital admissions during WWII (1941–1945) and Korea (1950–1954). The collection was subsequently dubbed "SGO." The coded SGO records were originally collected for statistical purposes and contained no names, but 60% of the 10 million records did contain service numbers and other identifying

information, and most importantly, codes for diagnosis, treatment, hospital, dates, and outcomes. Upon request and using these identifiers, the SGO records could be matched to a veteran to verify medical treatment. Archivists at NPRC reviewed the find and determined that the records would be of great value if they could be interpreted. Manually deciphering the records using code books was an insurmountable task because of the many variables involved. There were thousands of codes, which changed from year to year, differed by location where they were tabulated, and some required additional subset codes for proper interpretation. A more efficient and expeditious method was needed to avoid poring over volumes of code books.

My job was to take the 80-column SGO code that was initially collected on computer punch cards—and subsequently stored on the 82 reels of computer tape—and interpret the codes back into English. In the mid-1980s, desktop computers and database software products were coming into widespread usage. Our NPRC staff had just participated in a class using a database management system called dBase IV. It seemed to me that dBase IV offered an excellent method to decode these records with speed and accuracy. After searching for and obtaining a collection of tattered code books from the military, I created a computer program with large tables with the code interpretations for the 20 or so data fields in the 80 column records. The decoding program included all the exceptions, variables and complexities that were noted in the old code books.

Over six million SGO records were eligible for interpretation and use via the dBase decoding program. However, there was no capability for storing such a large volume of records electronically—the cloud was nonexistent in those days. The 80-column coded records themselves were copied onto microfiche (from the tapes) and indexed on NPRC's mainframe computer by service number.

When a veteran submitted a request to NPRC, the mainframe computer was probed, and if there was an SGO record matching the veteran's service number, the microfiche page, frame and row of the record entry would be indicated. A technician would then locate the service number on the microfiche and type the related coded record entry (or entries) into the screen interface of the dBase SGO program, a process that took a minute or two. Then, within a few seconds, a printout of the decoded record was available. The printout replicated the vital elements of hospital admission record, showing both the SGO codes and interpretations that detailed the disease or injury. The SGO printout was sent to the veteran as an official document from NPRC to use in support of his/her medical, disability, combat medal or Purple Heart claim.

The procedure to make the first portion of the records available to veterans took about 10 months. Upon completion, the entire collection included Army hospital admission records for 1942–1945, 1950–1954, and later a set of 1958–1959 records. Storage systems and the database program have been upgraded over the years to add new efficiencies.

The SGO records became the premier collection for providing medical record information to Army and Army Air Corps veterans whose records were lost in the 1973 fire. The SGO records provided the documentation that allowed approval for thousands of medical and disability claims from veterans as well as for the award of combat and Purple Heart medals to those who valiantly served.