

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION  
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview  
Subject: Eric Voelz  
Interviewer: Jessie Kratz  
May 25, 2023

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**Jessie Kratz:** Thank you for participating in the National Archives Oral History Project documenting the 1973 National Personnel Records Center Fire, its impact on the National Archives, and what it was like working at the NPRC. My name is Jessie Kratz, and I'm the Historian of the National Archives. Today is May 25, 2023, and I'm speaking with Eric Voelz. Thank you, Eric, for joining me today. And actually, can you start by giving me some of your background, where you're from, and how you ended up at the National Archives and the NPRC?

**Eric Voelz:** Sure. I was born and raised in St. Louis, and I went to university at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, and majored in history. So it's kind of a natural tie-in. At some point after I graduated, I took the—and they still did this back then—I took the federal test for a government job. And that test, I guess they use that to send scores to different agencies that were hiring. The first job offer I got or interview offer I got was for an ammunition plant in Texarkana, Texas. Not moving to Texarkana, Texas. I'm sorry. So I did not apply. And the next one was for the Career Intern Development System training program at NPRC.

And that was a two-year program during which you went through different training assignments with different organizations within the NPRC, the National Personnel Records Center, and learn about the different things that the organization did. The aim being that eventually you would become an archives specialist. It was called the Archives Specialist Training Program, and as an archive specialist, you would be able to be a supervisor of various different level units throughout the organization as they were anticipating a whole lot of retirements from our World War II veteran employees.

So during this two-year program, you advanced from a GS-5 to a GS-7 to a GS-9, which was a special deal because usually you can only go one grade at a time. So it seemed like a really good thing. And as a history major, I was certainly interested in working with these records. So it was a perfect fit. So many of the initial assignments I had were where you went to a search section and saw how they pulled records, or you went to a correspondence section and you saw how they answered reference requests, or you went to our incoming mail operation and saw how they processed requests.

And then later on, you had more advanced assignments, and those started fairly quickly and included filling in for supervisors that were on maternity leave or where there was a vacancy and they wanted to have somebody there while they filled that position. But it would also be a training opportunity for me, the trainee. So during that time period, I had several opportunities to work with the reconstruction operation, which is what we called trying to come back from the fire.

I was not employed at the time of the fire. I started in March of 1977, and that was around three and a half years after the fire. So the fire was still very much on everyone's mind. No matter how well they had rehabbed the building, and it really was a mess after the fire, no matter how well they rehabbed it, you could still smell the fire at that time. Later on, that went away in areas where they kept the records that were recovered from the sixth floor, which was the floor where the fire occurred. You could smell a combination of the fire and whatever chemicals they sprayed on these to try and preserve them from mold, which in St. Louis in the summer, the humidity is high. It's a perfect place for mold to grow. Just like Washington, DC, would be. So that's kind of the background of me as a trainee.

**Jessie:** Okay. So what were your impressions of the agency when you began your career?

**Eric:** Oh, it was a lot of people that had a lot of knowledge and for the most part worked extremely hard to make sure that we answered the veterans requests with the records that we had. We were the central location for someone to write if they needed documents for the Veterans Administration, if they needed documents for a home loan, medical treatment, just various things. If they wanted to be buried at a cemetery, a national cemetery, they'd need to have a document. And it was sad because, in some ways, these veterans often got out of the service, and I don't know, they didn't maybe keep as good a track of their separation documents and other important things as they should.

But, other than the burned records, we were able to replace those documents. And luckily, at that time, we were often working with the veterans themselves, except in the case of them being deceased and needing to be buried at a government cemetery. So they had intimate knowledge of what they did, where they were, the units they belonged to, and something as minor as their military service number. Because many of these things were very important. There were millions of different records in our holdings, and you can imagine, say for World War II, the Army had 8 or 10 million soldiers. How many similar or exactly the same names would occur? And you would need to have more information in order to determine which one of those records was the gentleman you were looking for.

**Jessie:** Okay. Well, you worked in several different branches over your career, and I was hoping you could go through them and explain to us what the different branches were responsible for.

**Eric:** Sure. First off, let me tell you how things are arranged at NPRC. We'll start with the military building. And there was also a civilian building. It's somewhat related to the fire experience, and I'll get into that. But at the military building, there was the headquarters with the director, and then each of the buildings had what was called an assistant director that was solely responsible for that building. Under them, there was a—they called it the management technical staff. And they did studies, wrote reference memos, instructions on how to handle different types of reference requests, and just handled all the day-to-day running of the organization. And they did that for both the buildings.

And then at the military building—and it is not like that now—but at the military building, things were divided by branch of service. There was an Army Reference Branch that handled Army records, an Air Force Reference Branch that handled Air Force records after the Air Force became an independent branch of service. There was a Navy Reference Branch, which handled the records of the Navy, the Marine Corps, and the Coast Guard—the various sea services. And then there was an Operations Branch that handled getting records in because we also stored different types of records and personnel records, medical records, and different things like that from hospitals. And this Operations Branch also took care of the incoming mail where they took their requests. There was a very old, what we call a computer registry system, and I'm talking with a mainframe and only certain people had access to it. This was long before PCs, and they would check that system based on what was in the request and see if there was a match for a record. Some of the older records were not in this registry system.

There were old Navy and Marine Corps records that were either filed by name or the veteran's service number. And the records that were involved in the fire had been in name order. But after the fire, there was a big project to put them into this system. Now we're talking a mainframe that took up an entire room, but probably most people's PCs or laptops now have that amount of computing power or close to it. So the data that was entered into this registry was very sparse: name, service number, and then a two-letter code that indicated what branch of service or what type of record.

And when I say type of record, it's because the Navy and Marine Corps separated their personnel files from their medical files, so there had to be a code for each one. And then they gave each record a unique registry number. And that was simply the order in which these records went into a box. So each of these groupings of records had started at "1" and they used

a prefix "A" for Army, "F" for Air Force, and "N" for the various Navy ones. And then once we had the fire, they painstakingly went through these burned records and tried to separate them into this pile of, maybe singed records belongs to this guy and so on down the line. And then they entered those into the registry system because the records had been filed alphabetically. There were cases where a new record might contain documents from one or two people with the same name, which until somebody opened it to reference it, they may not realize, but it was a very rudimentary system because that's all the system could handle.

So, this Reconstruction Branch was set up. They had people that had worked with these other records we had—because you have to understand that at one time all these records and the building belonged to the various services. And they made this joint DoD record center in St. Louis, a central location, and records from the different services came in and were handled and referenced by personnel from those different military branches, whether military or civilian. I think it started out more military. This was in the early 1950s and became more civilian as time went on. And in the 60s, early 60s, we took it over.

At that time, I'm talking about the National Archives and Records Service under GSA because that's where we fell organizationally and took over these things. But each of the services had different what we called organizational records—things like pay vouchers, morning reports, medical treatment records. Some of it was paper. Some of it was microfilm on rolls. And it required a certain amount of knowledge to dig down and find what you were looking for. So that's kind of where we started after the fire.

**Jessie:** When you came and you were a trainee, did you get a particular assignment that you preferred or did they assign you at the end of your training?

**Eric:** Oh, they assigned me at the end of my training. They saw what was available. As a trainee, we had quarterly progress meetings. We had to prepare a report, which of course back then there were no PCs. You had to prepare it and then turn it over to someone to be typed because they wanted it typed. And then a review panel of four or five people from the organization—someone from our office and different people from different organizations, depending upon what you had worked on. You're in this review panel and you spent a couple of hours answering questions and explaining why you wrote what you did and that allowed you to progress.

During my training period, the two assignments I had, and I wish I had a better list of what those were, but I do not. Because of the way this training program worked they weren't documented with a personnel action. And unfortunately, at some point in my past I decided I no longer

needed these quarterly reports. So I got rid of those. But one of the first ones I did was filling in as a unit supervisor with probably 15 people working for me in the Reconstruction Branch for a woman that was on maternity leave. And they weren't going to reassign somebody. So they thought, well, this is a training opportunity. So this was probably sometime in 1977 or early 1978. I'm not sure. So I was not only learning my way around supervision—part of the training was to take supervision courses that the government offered—but also learning about the work that Reconstruction Branch did.

At that time, it was very complicated to try and reconstruct somebody's service. Luckily, as I said before, many of our requesters were the veterans themselves and they had a lot of knowledge about what when they went in, when they got out, what units they were with. And so these different organizational records, we could go in to review or find different things for this person. They were looking to get awards, and of course, the first thing we did to see if something survived the fire. And there were times nothing survived the fire or what survived the fire was so damaged or illegible that it was not very useful. So there was a desire to try and figure out how to make these different records that were not by particular people, how to make them more accessible.

So that leads to the next assignment that I know one of my colleagues has already mentioned, we call them GAO pay vouchers. They were copies of payroll pay vouchers that the Army created during the war years. And this was the set that had gone to the then-Government Accounting Office to be reviewed and I guess balanced against appropriations or to make sure the math was right. I'm not really sure what GAO did, but for some reason the building at Winnebago, our civilian reference building, had a huge stack area full of these things and finding those was very complicated, and you had to have a lot of information from the individual.

Hopefully he remembered where he was when he was separated from the military, when he was actually discharged from the military because that's where his final pay voucher would be, which would have some detailed information. Not a lot of it, but it had dates—we needed entry dates, separation dates, character, units, and so that was a very convoluted process to search, which involved two different sets of cards in like a library card catalog file. One was by the place. And then you went through these cards and found out who the payment officer was for that place, and they had a listing of who it was by particular dates and then based on the date that the individual veteran gave you. You went and looked for another set of cards for that payroll officer and found out each month, apparently, they had one number that all the things they paid were filed under. And then you took that number and went to the stack area and found it. It was very crude. They were bundles of paper records between two pieces of heavy cardboard with that number on it and the date and the name of the, I guess it was the disbursing officer,

not the payment officer. And you pulled all those bundles because there may have been half a dozen to a dozen different bundles, depending upon how big this place was and how many people and how many other things were paid that month.

And then somebody went through untying these bundles that were tied up with kind of like clothesline. And you flip through looking for the voucher number and somehow you determine the ones that said "final" were ones where people were being discharged. And this was actually a project that one of the prior trainees to me came up with. Did all the research. Put together a standard operating procedure. Had pictures of the different documents.

But these bundles would contain, of course, the final pay vouchers for people being discharged, but it would be everything else that this guy paid that month and year at the particular place. So if they bought coal, food, paid rent on a building, bought gas for a truck, and just paid the regular people that were working there. There was a voucher for all of that. So it was very time-consuming. And so this project that I was part of along with Mr. Charles Pellegrini. He was actually my supervisor in that. We put together a team of college students. It ended up being during the summer; we had a very good team of students, probably 15 to 20 to start with. I think some left because it wasn't what they wanted to do. This was for World War II, and that was the only era we were talking about.

And it was a big era because the people that served in World War II were becoming older. They needed documents for things. They needed verification of their service. So it was a very busy time, and the system was so hard to use. It just was terrible. So we set up this project and started with the year 1945 and just went through and pulled each one, and this team went through all the bundles and found all the documents that said final.

And this other trainee, her name was Deborah Haverman, had samples of what the documents looked like, Xeroxes in these SOPs. And they used that to determine just the ones to pull that would help us in reconstruction. Everything else was disposed of. These records had been disposable for some time, but after the fire, there was a freeze on any disposal of any records that might possibly have to do with military service. So these were not destroyed before that. They were not permanent records.

So after all these things were pulled, we put them in folders. As a trainee, I was kind of like the unit supervisor. So I was in the back of the stack area—we had long tables set up and went through this conveyor belt with boxes and we filled folders with these documents. And many times these were a list—everybody from a particular unit or place that was separated and got their final payments from the military. And there were just list after list or page after page, I

should say, of these documents that had basic information about the person, entrance date, separation date, where they separated. There were indications of overseas service based on a particular payment they received in addition to their final pay or as part of their final pay. And those in these folders were then sent to, as I said before, there's an Operations Branch with the civilian building. There was one also that did data entry into this large computer system, and they entered certain pieces of information off these documents, usually a service number, a name, and code.

We knew all these were "AR" for Army, and that gave it a particular registry number. Actually, I believe the code for those was "QM" and the prefix was "P" for pay. I don't know who came up with that, but it worked fine. So after this project began, the people in our Reconstruction Branch would not only get hits on something we recovered from the fire, but they'd also get a hit on this pay voucher and then send a request to have that pulled. So that was kind of the model for what we did from then on. If there was a collection of records that we could put into a registry, it made it so much easier. As primitive as these registry systems were, it made it so much easier to find the things that pertain to a particular soldier. Does that make sense?

**Jessie:** It does make sense. And I have more questions, actually. So how much coordination was there between the military building on Page [Boulevard] and the Winnebago [Street] building for the civilian records with regard to reconstructing these veterans records, in addition to these pay vouchers?

**Eric:** Well, there was a lot because some of these organizational records over time had been stored at that building just because of space issues at the building that had the fire—military building at 9700 Page Boulevard. So because they all work under one director, they really were all part of the same organization. And in fact after the fire the building at 9700 Page was not habitable for people doing requests, so they moved a lot of people down to the civilian building. There was one large stack—and this was no longer like that when I started because by then they had rehabbed the old building, the building that had the fire. But there were people, and they had set up offices, and they were doing their requests out of there. So they were very familiar with the military part of it.

The other thing is, and I think it's a question on the form, it's a Standard Form 180, which was—and I don't know if that's still the form—but at the time, Form 180 was a request for military records. They asked if you were a federal employee. Well, the main thing they stored at the civilian building was civilian personnel records that were part of OPM, Office of Personnel Management or the prior agency. And so if we had information that. This person was in the

military. They'd also look for a civilian personnel record. Some of them were in a registry, but ones older than about mid-to-early 60s were filed by the agency in usually name order.

And people in the Reconstruction Branch learned to request those records and look for documents. They usually look for a person's application for employment because, as most people working for the U.S. Government are aware, being a veteran gives you an assist in how you're rated to be hired. I can't think of the term right now, but if you were wounded, you get so many points. And if you were just a veteran, you get half that. It's like five points or ten points. And so it was very important that these former veterans applying for a job with a government agency would indicate that they had been a veteran.

I think it also maybe if you got a bad discharge, a dishonorable discharge, you wouldn't be hired by the federal government. So there was nothing that was going to help us with those people. So they worked very closely together. There were constant requests going from the military building to the civilian building, looking for documentation. And what would happen is the people at the civilian building would search for the individual's civilian personnel record and go through, and they'd pull it and make copies of these application forms and especially the page that had the information about former military service. So all these things kind of then came into the Reconstruction Branch. But it took several years—and a lot of this was done before I started—several years of people that were familiar with all these records collections and blocks of records to come up with a game plan on how we are going to get this information.

When this record is burned, and you still see this from time to time on the news, somebody couldn't get this because their record burned in the fire in St. Louis. It's not as much a problem for the former veteran because unfortunately, many of those are deceased. But it becomes a problem for people trying to do genealogy and family history. Because after the veterans are no longer with us, unless they find some things in their belongings they don't have the information that the veteran could give us about where they served, when they went in, when they got out, where they got out. So they have to pretty much go in just by name and hopefully they have a service number, which they don't always, and try to find a record on this individual.

So in the decades since the fire, all the things that could be put into this computerized system help the people doing reference requests, pull a proper record, and answer to the best of their abilities. The Reconstruction Branch also deals with the Veterans Administration because if somewhere between their service in World War II—and this is just an example because we've dealt with burnt records up through about 1960—but if at some point between the veteran's separation from the military and when the fire occurred if they had already filed for the VA, which many of them had—they wanted a home loan or educational benefits or medical

treatment or something for something that possibly was service related—they would have provided a lot of documents to the VA.

So we then contacted the VA to check their, I believe they called them claim files or claim folders, and look for documents for this person. So in a way, it could often end up being kind of a circle. We'd get a request, we'd go to the VA and get documents, we'd provide them to the veteran of the family, and they may take those back to the VA. But in many cases they'd already checked with the VA, and the VA said, "we don't have anything." So it was incumbent upon us to do our best to try and get the basic information that you needed to prove you're a veteran. And that was the name, personal identifier—it started as a service number, later on, it was all switched over to the Social Security Number—branch of service, entrance date, separation date, and what was called character of service. Honorable, under honorable conditions, general, dishonorable—there were different levels of separations from the military and most of them would allow people to get benefits. The dishonorable discharge level, I don't believe there's any benefits for the veteran that had that sort of discharge, and that's usually for a serious issue that someone is discharged that way and they're not then entitled to veterans benefits. Does that make sense?

**Jessie:** It does make sense. And this is out of order but I'm curious about this. I know that you worked through, I guess, 2014 is that when you retired?

**Eric:** 2014. Yes.

**Jessie:** I know that some veterans were discharged dishonorably for reasons that later were decided were inaccurate or unfair. I'm thinking, you know, somebody who might have been discharged for being gay. Did you notice a change? And did people come back later and try to get their discharge changed? Have you experienced any of that? Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Eric:** Yes, we weren't really the agent of change for that. But once it was determined, and this mostly was in the 1950s and 1960s, individuals could be separated and usually didn't get a good discharge for being gay. So then they had that hanging over their head. They couldn't get federal employment. It often hurt them getting regular employment. So at some point, and I'm not really familiar with the time threshold of this, but at some point the laws were changed, and they were allowed to request an upgrade to their discharge, but those were not done by us. But many times the veterans would contact us to get documents because you can imagine if you had this bad discharge you weren't too interested in keeping the documents from when they pretty well kicked you out of the military. So they'd get documents from us, and then they

would go to the review boards of the various military branches and they would then review them. And in many cases their separations were upgraded. And, you know, unfortunately, so many things dealing with the government, we live and learn in a world that has changed, and I think we're a better place for it. But it's not always easy.

**Jessie:** Right. Sorry about that diversion. Because you worked in various different branches, could you talk about after you were done with your training program, some of the more memorable assignments that you had, especially ones that may have dealt with the military records that were affected by the fire?

**Eric:** Sure. Actually, my first assignment was in the Navy Reference Branch. As I said, each branch of service had its own reference branch and I worked as a chief of a correspondence section. And most of the time people only realize that Army and some Air Force records were damaged or destroyed in the fire. But there actually were some World War II Navy records that were damaged because they were stored on the floor below where the fire occurred. And there—and I don't know if it was one end of the building or what it was—there was a particular portion of the building that a lot of water leaked down into the stack areas below the fire because they fought that fire for, I want to say it was at least four days before they got it under control, and they pumped a lot of water into that sixth floor of the 9700 Page building, and the water ended up having to go somewhere. Well, the floor below, of course, you've got records on shelves, but I have been told or had been told that in some of these stack areas, the water was maybe a foot deep. Well, that would pretty well stoke the bottom box on the shelves.

And these were paper records stored in cardboard boxes. So there were occasionally Navy records that were involved in being in what we call the "B files," elegant name for "burned." But that was part of the registry system. Even with these Navy ones, if you came up with a negative search manually by name, you checked the registry system, you said, "oh, look, it's a B file." And those records were generally stored in alphabetical order, so it was kind of an alphabetical run, but it was only, you know, the bottom shelf out of ten, say, on a shelving unit. So it skips names quite a bit. But that was, again, another advantage of having this computerized system, even though it was very basic compared to what we could do today. Very rudimentary. It allowed a way to find that there was a record. So we worked with all those records, answering requests, and in that branch you had to not only know about Navy records, but Marine Corps records and Coast Guard records. So that was my first experience actually supervising anybody who was in a permanent position. I had done that in training positions, but it was kind of different.

When you're a trainee, you know you're not going to do that for more than a month or two at a time; you're filling-in. But this was interesting. So then from there my next few positions are all

at the civilian building at 111 Winnebago. And as many people do in the federal government, you see an opportunity to maybe be promoted and you apply for a job. Or they say, "Gee, we think you should work here, so why don't you apply for this?" Even if it wasn't a promotion. So those positions were not as involved in anything fire related. Even the one position where I was a supervisor archivist in what we called our Appraisal and Disposition section, which was similar to the position I was in several years earlier. But it was considered the Accession and Disposal system office. So things changed a little bit in our recognition of these records. But that was that last position in '86 to '87, where I was a supervisory archivist; where I was really able to be an archivist and use a little bit more of my history background.

**Jessie:** Well, that's great. So I was wondering if you could talk about these branches, but then in around 2000, 2001, I think, there was a reorganization and they switched away from branches to using cores. Could you explain the cores and how they operate?

**Eric:** Sure. They operate very well, kind of similarly to the way things were with the branches. But the idea with this reorganization was to streamline the handling of requests so you didn't have to then divide them by the naval services, the Army, the Air Force. There was a particular core that was more involved in the reconstruction of records. So that was very specialized knowledge of where to go for other things and reconstruct the records.

But the routine branches, the service branches—the Army, the Air Force, the Navy—those were then made cores. And I don't know where they came up with the name core, but the core was to learn all the services and how to work with all the records. They did not want people to specialize in just what was in a Navy record or what was in a Marine Corps record or Air Force record. They wanted them to have a cross service knowledge. And then the searching operation was put into one search branch, which would search for all the records of any type that anybody needed to respond to a request from the public.

So the idea was to streamline it and to make things better at the same time, because computers had advanced so much, we had much better computer systems and we could track the requests, we could enter the request into the system. Other than preliminarily checking the registry system to see if we had anything, it was a totally paper-based system and oh my God, we used a system of colored tags with letters and numbers on them to tell us when the request was received, and those paper requests were just kind of bunched together and in the old days were sent to the particular reference branch that would handle it.

Well, along with this change of course they came up with a new computer system and they entered each request into the computer system. And the requests were then printed out at

some point because the people from the search branch had to find a record and then it had to go to a core and be assigned. But it was all done with this much more detailed computer system. Because 30–40 years between developing these old registry systems and 2000, computer technology had advanced so much that it became much easier. We still had people that did data entry in our incoming mail operation. They reviewed each request, but besides just checking the register system, they actually put it into a tracking system, and the managers at the upper levels could check in there and see what is our oldest request, or how many requests we have. Whereas before it was all a manual count of paper on shelves. So it changed quite a bit. I never worked in one of the cores, but as an archivist from 1991 until the time I retired, I was in the archival line of work. We became subject matter experts for the different cores and for complicated or unusual requests. Things that needed somebody to do some research beyond what the staff in the cores could do. If that makes sense.

**Jessie:** It does. And I was going to ask a little bit about your involvement or can you talk about the discussions that went on in the 90s and then I guess eventually in the 2000s where these records that belong to the Department of Defense were deemed permanent and transferred to the legal custody of the National Archives.

**Eric:** I was involved. Actually the person—and I know you mentioned talking to him—the person who was my supervisor much of the time I was an archivist, William Seibert. He was very involved in that process. But this is kind of the sad thing about the military personnel records—they were not deemed permanent. They were considered temporary records. And I want to say a 75-year disposal date. Well, that's—I don't want to say crazy, but that's just not right because interest in military service does not end. You have veterans' families and historians that would like to do research, and to just destroy those records? I want to say I think a similar thing was going on in the civilian side. Those civilian personnel records. But I wasn't really involved in any of that.

But making these records permanent, which you have to consider the immense cost that the government is then going to incur, because then instead of storing these records for up to 75 years you're going to store them in perpetuity. And I know at the National Archives in the DC area, they have records from the Civil War, and it's a cost because along with the fact that you're going to keep them longer, you have to store them in better conditions. I want to say climate control; I will say air conditioning because St. Louis can be a hot, humid place.

I know Washington can be a hot, humid place. You don't have these in buildings with open windows and no air conditioning or no humidity and temperature control. So again, an immense cost to do that. And I think it took a lot of wrangling between the National Archives and the

services, and I'm assuming Congress and everyone else to do this and come up with the funds to pay for it. So it took many years.

And the beauty of one of the archivists being involved in this project was we could talk about the famous records we had, you know, Charles Lindbergh or other people that were in the news. Unfortunately, many of those were destroyed in our fire. But at one point they tried to counter-propose that, well, we just go through and pull out the famous people and destroy everybody else. But, you know, that wasn't going to go with the historical and genealogical communities. I believe they got very involved in pushing for making these records permanent.

So it was a complicated thing, but it had consequences for us because once these records were then made permanent, we couldn't stay in the buildings we were in because they were not, how would you put it? They were not ready to be storage areas for permanent records. They just could not be retrofitted with the machinery, technology, what have you, to control the temperature and humidity. So that's when we started, I guess, working to get a new building.

And there was pushback saying, "well, can't you just scan all this and then get rid of the paper?" Well, they did a study. I was not involved in it, but I'm aware of it and what it would take to scan some of these records. They're old, they're folded, they're stapled. Sometimes they're glued together. There's all these different systems of record keeping that the services used. The cost of preparing these and scanning these—and then what people don't think about is once you scan it, it becomes a permanent system. So you have to migrate that system from computer system to computer system so that it continues to exist. Because if the record is permanent, the scanned images need to be permanent. So they determined this was way more expensive than getting us a new building. I think the only concession to cost was that we don't own the building, we lease it. But in a way that means somebody else has to take care of mechanical issues with the building and we no longer have to do that. It's kind of a double-edged sword because you don't own the building. But we pretty well directed exactly how it was to be built and what was to be in it.

So. That's how we ended up at One Archives Drive in a brand-new building, well brand new as of late 2000s—I think we actually moved in in 2011, but it's a far cry from where we were in the other two buildings. The biggest difference is where we store the records that were involved in the fire that had been water damaged or singed, fire damaged, or water damaged. They used to be in a stack area at the building on 9700 Page that did have air conditioning. It was kind of okay. But then at some point GSA, the organization that maintains those buildings, ran a huge steam line through that stack area to get to a new building they built next door for the Army Reserve. Well, in the winter, if you were near that steam main and it wasn't insulated, you

couldn't hardly touch it. It was so hot. So it wasn't good for those records. So they're now in a stack area that I want to say is kept at a very comfortable, well, comfortable if you'd like to be in cool temperature, probably in the 60s with the humidity controlled even in the summer. I saw searchers go in there wearing a fleece jacket or something because it was chilly. But that's what you need to do to preserve these records that have been water and fire damaged. So, is that what you were getting with the change?

**Jessie:** Yes. Yes, for sure. You mentioned the new building. So were you involved and what did moving to this new building entail?

**Eric:** Oh, my. It was a lot because we were moving over a million boxes of records, and I'm talking cubic foot cartons. And at the same time, because there were records that were not deemed permanent, we then came up with another facility—not co-located with the building on One Archives Way—across the Mississippi River in Illinois, in a town called Valmeyer. They created a record center in a former underground quarry for the non-permanent records. And they opened up and they had people working there. And I've been there. It's very nice. There are certain places where the walls look like rock, but they've fitted it out. They've got ventilation systems, and sometimes it's just to keep the air moving because this underground quarry maintains a fairly constant temperature somewhere in the 60s.

And so we weren't just sending everything to one place; we were going through and deciding which went which way. And as an archivist, there were projects at the civilian building to go through collections and determine exactly what was there and check it against the various systems that control those non-personnel type records and determine that at that building on Winnebago, there were all these civilian personnel records, which were also made permanent at some point, although I'm not as involved in the details of that. And they were moved to the building on Archives Drive in North St. Louis County. And then other things were moved to the underground facility in Illinois.

And the same thing occurred at the building in 9700 Page—there were records moved to the archives facility on Archives Drive and other things moved to the underground facility in Illinois. So the archivists were involved in that at the time, at the military building, we had a security vault. Both buildings actually had a security vault. So those of us that had security clearances were involved in going through different things. I believe the new building is no longer going to have a security vault here in St. Louis. So anything that was actually classified was sent to the DC area.

And I don't remember the particulars—there were things that were disposable that had to be disposed of as you would handle classified records. And then the vaults at each of the buildings was where we kept what we used to call our VIP collection of famous people. And it was the job of the archivist to go through our registry system. You'd see things in the news, you'd read history books, you'd find out that X movie star had been in the Army, and their movie star name was the name they served under. So in order to protect these records, you didn't want them out in the open stacks where somebody could go, "Oh, I wonder if this is the guy that was in whatever movie." So we pulled those and put them into the security vault because it was just an easy way to do it. We didn't really have any other locations.

But it required then if somebody was going to need a record of one of these people to answer a request, they had to work with the people who had clearances, and that was several of us archivists that we would then go to the vault, find the record, deliver it to the branch or, later on, the cores. And they would answer. They would respond to the request. We usually dealt with supervisors and said, "Okay, now you've got this vault record. Let me know when you're finished with it. We'll come pick it up." And then we'd put it back in the vault. So that took a certain amount of work.

But actually getting rid of the classified records, and we're talking classified records from prior to the mid-60s. Nothing current. These were things that the military services, when they ran the joint records center in St. Louis, that they had or at our civilian building. There were a couple of, well, mainly one federal agency that created classified documents. They were what was called the Defense Mapping Agency. It's now a different name—the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency, which still has a location here in St. Louis. But we had records from them. And so those had to go somewhere else. I believe the agency actually took them back for storage. And so that was also a part of what the archivist did with closing out the old buildings and moving to the new buildings. I hope that hasn't gone too astray, but that was all part of the process.

**Jessie:** It is not. All the information you're providing is helpful. It doesn't have to be all fire related. I do know we're over an hour. Do you have plans, or could you stick around just for a little longer?

**Eric:** I can stick around as long as you would like. I don't really have any firm plans today. I made sure that once you set this up that I didn't do that.

**Jessie:** Okay, good. Well, these interviews were prompted by the fire, so I was going to ask a couple more fire questions, but then I also wanted to move on to maybe a couple of the other things that you worked on after. Did you have anything in particular you wanted to share about

the fire that you think that people should know? I know you weren't there, but you definitely worked with the people who worked there during the fire. And then you were there very early—in the 70s.

**Eric:** Well, the thing I guess that amazed me the most is after the investigation into the cause of the fire, and it occurred on the night shift, as I understand it, because they used to work an evening shift and it occurred in the stack area on the sixth floor. There was reason to believe the cause involved something with smoking. Whether it was smoking in a stack area, which was not really allowed or some other reason, but for the immediate period when the building was re-inhabited after they had rehabbed it, torn off—this was terrible. They had bulldozed a whole floor off the building, cleaned that up, and turned what was the sixth floor into the roof of the new building. They had to redo piping or drainage and what have you. It was a mess. But all that was done before I started.

But also what happened before I started is they allowed smoking in the building again. This was the 70s so it was just the beginning of the anti-smoking crusade in this country. But the employees, and I guess the employee unions, I don't really know the particulars. They went from no smoking in the building, and then you had to go to a smoking area, which was kind of in an open lobby on each floor near the escalators and freight elevators. And actually you were not supposed to bring lighters or matches into the building. They had some sort of electric lighters they had installed in these areas. By the time I started, people were allowed to smoke, and those electric lighters had been dismantled and removed. But it always amazed me that you have all this paper and you're going to allow people to smoke around it after you had this fire. It just seemed a real paradox or contradiction, but part of it had to do with the fact that these weren't considered permanent, so they didn't have the elevated storage conditions required of permanent records.

So that was the thing that really got me. So I don't know. The sad thing is a couple years before I started this job my mom died of lung cancer from smoking. So I think, oh, my God, really? How important is it? But I understand it's a physiological need. People can't necessarily quit once they've started. And for that generation, smoking wasn't seen as a danger. It wasn't until later. So that was just really something that I found crazy.

**Jessie:** When you were there in the 70s, what was the culture like in the facility?

**Eric:** Oh, well I think you had a whole lot of people that worked very hard and were very good at what they did. But unfortunately, it seemed like some of the younger people, I don't know, weren't as interested. I don't know if it was a countercultural thing or what it was but they still

performed their work. They just maybe weren't always easy to deal with. So I don't know. As a trainee, my first couple of years there, I had a few people that were like, "Oh, you're a big shot cause you're a college kid, right?" I went, "I just got this job. I've got to learn how to do this." But those were very few and far between. For the most part, I think people that work there saw the job as important and we were helping people. Whether it was the veteran or their relatives or somebody. So I think it was a pretty good culture.

**Jessie:** This may be a hard one, but what do you think the biggest impact of the fire was on the National Archives and NPRC?

**Eric:** Oh, I think probably the biggest impact in my mind, and I've never had anybody tell me this officially, was that it was really one of the reasons that making these personnel records permanent actually was able to occur, because I think the decision to have better storage conditions was very important and that fire was always there as a warning. The building, this is just weird, I believe there were sections of the building that did not have sprinklers until after the fire. Because, and I'd been told that apparently the disasters in record storage facilities prior to 1973 had involved floods and water, so they were very leery about sprinkler systems.

Well, let's say that changed and the building was retrofitted with sprinkler systems, which was again part of the rehab of the facility. So now I don't think you'd have any records facility that didn't have sophisticated fire prevention methods, sprinkler systems, even the new building. We have to divide it up into a particular size bay that cannot contain more than a certain number of cubic feet of records. And again, we're, for the most part, almost entirely dealing with paper records, because if there were a fire and automatic doors closed, then hopefully you can keep that fire in just one bay. And not that it wouldn't be disastrous, but between the various fire protection systems, you hope that it wouldn't turn into something like the fire in 1973.

**Jessie:** Hope not. No. So then you left the National Archives for a little bit, and then you came back and worked in the Office of Regional Records Service. Can you talk about your last, you know, I guess the work you did when you came back and then for the remainder of your career?

**Eric:** Well, I had left. I was actually looking for a promotion and there were some openings with a particular Department of Defense office in St. Louis, and I did get a promotion, but then they rearranged things and decided I was going to have to move to Chicago and for the same pay grade. And I decided that was not good. And simultaneously with that, because I kept in touch with several people that I had worked with at the National Personnel Records Center, and I was told there was an opening. So I applied. And so the remainder of my career from 1991 on to my retirement I was as an archivist or, for the final not quite three years, I was as a supervisory

archivist because it was all part of the reorganization of how we did things in the archival branch.

But yeah, there were organizational changes. The archivists at 9700 Page had been in what was called the Military Operations Branch, which lumped, as I said, maintenance and mail, and computer data entry, and the archivists together. And then as things changed we went to the cores, and then the archival staff was moved into the Office of Regional Records Services, and my position was in what was called Research Services, which involved responding to requests from individuals and organizations. And also requests that were conveyed to me by senior management in the cores or the record center itself that they had. And it would often involve dealing with a high-profile thing that came from Congress or the news media or whatever. They wanted to make sure that we would find every record that could pertain to a particular topic, burned or not. They didn't always involve burned records, but to me it was very interesting that there was another side of the archival program that dealt with pulling records of the records collections that we had administered. So there was a little of everything.

**Jessie:** Was there any particular aspect of your job that you enjoyed the most?

**Eric:** I'd have to say I really enjoyed working with—and many of my requests would come to me in a phone call or start as a phone call. And we had veterans organizations, and we had authors writing different historical books that would come looking for things to provide background information for whatever they were doing. And I enjoyed these phone calls.

I dealt with many military people. We dealt with the—it's changed its name several times, the Defense Prisoner of War Missing in Action Office. They were doing a lot of work with Korea, Korean War deaths and missing individuals. And we provided assistance in looking at these unit records that they could use to find things that happened during the Korean War or World War II. And then that research that we did was then translated into providing information to a team that may actually go to Korea and work with the Korean government to go to a battlefield and exhume remains or what have you. I know we did similar things with Vietnam. We provided records to verify something that maybe they found in an aircraft or helicopter crash site. So those were some of the most interesting.

**Jessie:** Over your entire career, do you have any memorable experiences that you want to share?

**Eric:** Well, how would I put it? We were involved in oh, it seemed like this one election where it was Bush and other people—we were verifying their military records. And probably the most

humorous one was when Ross Perot was running for President and he had been in the Navy, and we had records and supposedly there were accusations of things being leaked and, you know, we had to verify that we pulled the records and then we immediately sent them to the branch of service, I think. And if anything happened after that, we can't control it. But these high-profile things, they kind of stick with you. So, like John Kerry and dealing with the boats and Vietnam and different things. It was just very interesting to work on something and do all this digging and then realize that, well, this ended up in the news.

**Jessie:** So that's very cool. Yeah. I always love how Perot lent us his Magna Carta and we had it on display for a couple decades.

**Eric:** I think the most humorous thing is at one point when he was upset about the supposed leaks, he personally called our director. And at the time, our director was named David Petree. And he also, like Perot, was from Texas, had a very similar twangy accent. So we often wondered what that phone conversation sounded like. Because, I don't know, it just tickled us to think that they'd be talking to each other and both have the same Texas accent and probably thinking, "Are you making fun of me?" I don't know. That seems silly, but it was a thing that stuck out.

**Jessie:** Yeah. That's so funny. Wish I could hear that conversation too.

**Eric:** We did, too, because, you know, the director sat in his office with the door closed and had a phone call with Mr. Perot. But they have very similar to me, very similar kind of twangy Texas accents.

**Jessie:** I just have a couple more questions. So you worked here for a significant amount of time and under several Archivists. Did you notice changes in how the NPRC was run or your daily work when we had a new Archivist come on board?

**Eric:** To me, the biggest change was when the National Archives became independent. Because at that point it seemed like we were more closely aligned with the Archivist and what went on in DC, it sounds weird. When GSA was involved, the General Services Administration, they seemed like—especially because we were in a GSA run building and we had those people there—it just didn't seem like we spent as much time being directly connected to the Archivist. So I guess the biggest change was maybe under Dr. Warner, because I believe he was the Archivist when the National Archives became independent. And if I'm wrong, I apologize. I don't have any of those names or dates in front of me, but that's when I noticed a change.

And then the next big change in especially dealing with the Archivist and all the archival staff in the Washington area is when these records are made permanent. In the 90s because, I don't know how to put this, but it was almost as if what we did at the National Personnel Records Center, military and civilian, didn't fit in with what the Archives did in Washington.

So we were, I won't say a mystery, but it always took a little explaining when they'd go, "Well, why don't you do this?" And we'd go, "Well, because whatever." And it always took a little, I guess, explanation, but I'd have to say at my level, I never worked directly—I do remember when David Ferriero came to visit, but he had been in the Navy. And I believe he actually visited us in the vault because by the time he visited, we had already pulled his record and had it stored in the vault. So it was protected. So he came and visited us and wanted to look at the record and we chatted about, I think he was a corpsman. Something to do with medical, I think. But that to me was kind of a highlight because most of the time if you saw one of the Archivists, you know, they came to St. Louis, you had an all-hands meeting. He was up on the podium and being introduced by the director and made a speech or gave a statement and that was about it. But Dr. Ferriero, I think he was a Dr., well, David Ferriero, the Archivist, he actually came to visit and because of his veteran status, you know, wanted to see his record. Kind of a natural thing.

**Jessie:** Yeah, you guys scanned it because I've seen it. I've seen parts of it.

**Eric:** Oh, I guess we did. Or we made copies or whatever. I don't remember the details. I just remember, you know, we didn't just pull it and bring it to him. He wanted to come and see it. So he came and we met him in our vault. We were there. He came in. We called it this VIP file because they were records that we just wanted to make sure something untoward didn't happen to. And it could have just been something innocent that it got misfiled when it was being put back. So that was kind of I thought that was kind of a very interesting thing. So. And you have a new Archivist now. That's the first permanent female Archivist.

**Jessie:** Yes. And I believe she is going to NPRC soon, next week.

**Eric:** Oh, boy. Okay.

**Jessie:** I think there's a congressional open house happening. So I think she's visiting for that. So if you're around, she'll be there.

**Eric:** Yeah, I probably will not. I mean, I may. It may be on the news. I don't know. I will say I said first *permanent* Archivist because I know Debra Wall was Acting Archivist, and I had a few occasions when I was employed to deal with her. And I always found her really easy to deal

with; a sharp person. So I couldn't think of a better person to handle some of that stuff in the interim. And I know filling these positions that have to be approved by the Senate and everything, they're just not easy.

**Jessie:** It's an understatement.

**Eric:** Yeah. Yeah, that is definitely an understatement. I haven't really kept up with all the particulars, but I just know it's never easy and it seems like those things have gotten harder.

**Jessie:** So is there anything else you'd like to add to the interview? Do you have any additional anecdotes?

**Eric:** Well, I actually have one that is kind of weird. I told you I was born and raised in St. Louis, and my dad was very active in the Marine Corps Reserve. So I had been a Cub Scout, but I really didn't want to be a Boy Scout. I don't know why. I think most of my friends weren't doing it. Well, he came to me and said, well, they have this Marine Corps League program, like a local Marine Corps veterans group. He said they have this group called the Young Marines. You could do that. So in 1967, I did that. And we had goofy-looking, little uniforms with a beret, but where we met every Saturday for spring and summer of 1967 when I was 13 was the National Personnel Records Center on 9700 Page.

**Jessie:** No way.

**Eric:** Kind of weird. And of the people that I still regularly see and we have a monthly group of retirees that get together, I think I was actually at the building before any of them, even Mrs. Bruno that I know you're going to talk to, because 1967, it was still a full six floors. And we actually met on Saturdays. And apparently Saturday work must have been common because that building was open, and we just met there and marched around and learned different things. But it's just a weird, sideline to the fact that I was there before the fire, but at the time I'm not even sure that I paid any attention to how many floors it was.

**Jessie:** Well, then, when you were in the area during the fire, do you remember it happening?

**Eric:** I remember it being on the news. I guess I was a sophomore in college and it was summer, so I was not at the university, which distance-wise was not far from the National Personnel Records Center there on Page. But I lived quite a bit further south and I actually had a job even further away that I worked at. So other than seeing things on the news, I think my dad said, "that's where you did that young Marine stuff." I went, "Oh, yeah, look at that. That's terrible."

It didn't really hit me too much at the time. More so when I went for my job interview at this building. And when I was hired, it was like, oh, yeah, right out there in that parking lot or, you know, there were offices underneath the cafeteria that still were used by the Navy and Marine Corps. And that's where we had meetings or different things, training sessions. I don't know, considering it was the period of the Vietnam War, it was kind of a weird thing to do. But it's a nationwide, or it was a nationwide program. But that's kind of my strange anecdote.

**Jessie:** It's very interesting. Well, if there isn't anything else, we will wrap up the interview. But I did want to explain what we're going to do with these interviews. Did you have anything else you wanted to add before I stop recording?

**Eric:** No, I think I've thrown out a lot because we've gone half an hour over our initial time. So I apologize if this is too wordy.

**Jessie:** Not at all.

[END RECORDING]