

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview
Subject: Mickey McGuire
Interviewer: Alyssa Moore
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Alyssa Moore: All right. I just want to say 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 Alyssa Moore. Today is Wednesday, June 28, 2023, and I'm speaking with Mickey McGuire. We can get started with the questions and just see where the conversation goes. If you have any questions along the way or if you want to stop on a question for a while, that's completely fine. We'll just kind of let the conversation guide us. How does that sound?

Mickey McGuire: That's fine with me.

Alyssa: All right. Could you start out with talking about your career more broadly speaking? Do you mind giving an overview of your career at the National Archives?

Mickey: Yes, I went to the center in 1964, and I was a file clerk at that time. And then I became the supervisor of a file unit in 1965. And from there I went to different things. I went to the Accession unit downstairs, where we accessioned records into the center. And from there I went to the mailroom. I was supervisor of the mailroom then. And then from there, I went to the chief of the Army correspondence section. And I retired from there.

Alyssa: Okay. It sounds like you wore a lot of different hats throughout your career.

Mickey: Yes, I did.

Alyssa: How many years in total did you work for the National Archives?

Mickey: 35 years.

Alyssa: 35. Okay. That's some dedication, I would say, to the agency. Can you talk about what your responsibilities were at your different jobs that you did for the National Archives?

Mickey: Okay. When I was a file clerk, when records were pulled to be sent to the correspondence units to answer correspondence, then they had to be returned to the files. My job was to put them back in the files where they came from, whether it was Army, Navy, or whatever files they came from. And when I was supervisor of that, then I was the supervisor of getting the records from the correspondence section, having people get them from the correspondence units, and putting them in order and getting back in file. Also we filed loose papers that needed to be inserted in the records. Maybe documents that were sent from the Department of the Army or Navy, and they needed to be put in the person's record. Then from there, I went to the accession downstairs where you accessioned the new records coming into the center. They had to be keypunched in and put into the computer system at that time. Then we had a registry file, and it didn't make any difference what service you were in, Army, Navy, Coast Guard, Air Force, you were assigned a number and put in order in this file. That was the registry file. That's where I was at the time of the fire.

Alyssa: Okay. I think you mentioned in our earlier conversation that you were actually in the Navy prior to joining the National Archives. Is that correct?

Mickey: I was in the Navy, yes. From 1958 to '61 on active duty.

Alyssa: Great. Can you talk about what it was like transitioning from the Navy to working at the National Archives? Was there anything about being in the Navy that influenced your decision to work at the National Archives?

Mickey: It helped me. When I got out of the service, I started at the Post Office, really, when I got out of the service. I had nothing but day and night shifts, and I didn't particularly like that change. So there were openings at the center, and I applied for it. I thought that was interesting the more I got into it. It was very interesting and also enlightening as to all the stuff that goes on in the military that you don't even think about.

Alyssa: What sorts of things? Do you remember? Do you recall what those things were?

Mickey: Well, I mean, all the records that you get from all over, and they're the files of all the people that served in the service. And it just brings to light how great a country it really is.

Alyssa: Can you talk a little bit about your impressions when you first started working at the agency? I know you just said it kind of expanded how you thought about the military, the U.S. military, and their operations and the manpower that it takes to do all of that. Do you mind

talking a little bit about some of your other impressions that you had of the National Archives, in particular?

Mickey: Yes. The day that I was interviewed, it happened that the supervisor took me through there. We went to the Marine Corps and the Navy section, and he showed us the files. Here these files were nine shelves high in cabinets. And the records were filed by the person's service number. That was the Marine Corps. And I'm thinking, "Wow!" These records went back to, I mean, in the Marine Corps, went back into the 1800s and then came forward. I'm thinking, "Wow!" And then as you went along, you just found out that it went up to the present time. And then the Navy files were similar, only they were filed alphabetically by your name. I'm thinking, "Oh, wow! Look at all these people." And you could tell at that time people were identified by their service numbers.

Alyssa: Yes, I'm sure the amount of records that they had even back then was pretty astounding to see.

Mickey: It was! For somebody that was not used to seeing such a thing, it really opened your eyes as to what it really, really takes to put things together as far as your military.

Alyssa: Right. And I'm sure you probably felt a little bit like you're part of a long line of people that have been in the military and have served in the military.

Mickey: Yes!

Alyssa: Can you talk about the sort of training that the National Archives provided you when you first started?

Mickey: Well, they taught me the record systems of how they were filed and how they got started. As you went along, you learned different things. My first ones were with the Marine Corps and in the Navy section where the medical records for the Navy, for example, they were separate from the personnel file. And so you had two files for a Navy person. The Marine Corps, their medical records were in that, too, because they were part of the Navy system. It was just interesting how that was put together. As you went along, you learned a little bit about each year and how they retired these records.

Alyssa: Got it. In terms of the actual work itself, I know you did quite a few different things. It sounds like you had a lot of different experiences at the National Archives. Can you talk about the parts of the work that you really enjoyed and your day-to-day going into the office?

Mickey: I really, really enjoyed the accessioning of the records because you got the records in and then you keypunched them into the computer and they were labeled, and then they would go on the shelves for service, and you felt you were actually putting records to make them available for people to respond for correspondence. I thought that was pretty good because you had to make sure they were keypunched in right and they were filed right. And you have some interesting things there.

Alyssa: It sounds like it was very precise work. As in you had to be very, as you said, things were keypunched in correctly. Everything is dotting your I's and crossing your T's.

Mickey: Right. Then the people had to label them up. And then the people that were putting them together had to be conscientious and get that done. I had a good group of people that did that and then had some young men that took the files up and put them in file order. They did a remarkable job of getting that done because you have to lift and put the boxes on the shelves in order. That was good.

Alyssa: We'll get to more stuff about the fire in a minute. But just to round out your history of your career with the National Archives, can you talk briefly about what were some of the fire-related challenges that you faced in your career with the agency? Because I know you were there both before and after the fire occurred.

Mickey: I'm wondering exactly what you're asking about.

Alyssa: That's okay. Were there any challenges related to the fire that impacted your career?

Mickey: Other than the fact that you'd seen a whole lot of records that were burned, and you just wondered, a lot of their personal Army history was lost. There was not a whole lot that could be done and bring that back. That was awful sad.

Alyssa: Yes, I can imagine. Losing that many files, and there's really nothing you can do to replace them and bring them back is, I'm sure, really frustrating for someone whose life is about preserving these files and making sure that they continue into the future. Could you talk about any changes in Presidential administrations or administrations of the Archivist of the United States? Did that have any impact on your work at all, or do you recall any of those changes, specifically?

Mickey: I don't recall any changes like that. It seemed like whatever they needed to get things done, it seemed like they provided the funds to do whatever needed to be done. Where I was, I got almost anything that was practical and necessary to get the job done.

Alyssa: Okay. That's good to hear. Did you make any interesting discoveries through your work at the National Archives? I know, for instance, you said earlier that seeing all of those military records was really eye opening. Were there any other interesting discoveries that you feel like you made?

Mickey: Oh, it was interesting. This is just funny. One of the things in the correspondence section, for example, when I worked, people used to write in and want copies of something from Elvis Presley's records. His records were at the center, but they were with the Department of the Army. But they could get certain documents from that. So you'd have to get his records and they would answer it and you'd send it back. And I'm thinking, "Wow, all the people in the world and here's a person that you'd just seen in the thing..." But there were others like that. I remember that, I didn't see it, but they had to pull records of anybody that made national news, like when Kennedy got shot. They pulled the records and sent them to Washington. But I wasn't in on any of those as far as pulling the records are concerned.

Alyssa: That's funny, though, that a lot of people wanted Elvis Presley's records.

Mickey: Right! Yes, it was interesting because I never even thought about things like that.

Alyssa: Right. Of course. Did you observe any major technological advancements during your career? How did you see those impacting the National Archives?

Mickey: Oh, I saw a lot! One of the things is that being computerized helped things an awful lot because you could search on a computer and find out if you had a record on file rather quickly and then you could go and get it. Otherwise, you had to get a name and walk out there and find it alphabetically or numerically and that took a little more time. Sometimes with records where, for example, if you had Navy, you had a medical and you had a personnel record. Sometimes if you needed them both, you had to go to two different files to get it. You would still have to do that, but on a computer search, they would both come up and tell you where they were.

Alyssa: Oh, wow. That's much more convenient.

Mickey: Yes.

Alyssa: I'm sure that saved you a lot of time. Do you remember around what time things were computerized in the National Archives?

Mickey: They started the registry file, I think, in 1964. It started off kind of slow. That was for people that were discharged after 1964.

Alyssa: Got it.

Mickey: That was the year that they started the registry system, and they were just getting started. And then they kept adding to that as we went along. The Air Force and the Navy and Marine Corps and Coast Guard made up the first part of that, and then eventually we started getting more Army records.

Alyssa: Okay. Do you remember if people and staff in general really embraced the computerization of the records? Or was it tough to adjust to changes like that?

Mickey: I think they really embraced it, except that it was new and most of us were not in the computer age and how this was working. That was interesting how that was going to work. But, I mean, you get a record in and you assign a number to it and you put it in the computer and it tells you to go out and look at record 11, and that's where that record would be. Then you had to just get familiar with that instead of going out and looking alphabetically or numerically for this file, because you needed to know the person's full name and maybe a service number. And at that time, a lot of people did not always know their service numbers.

Alyssa: Oh, I see. Okay. Got it. Can you talk about your relationship with other federal agencies? Did changes with those agencies impact your work? I'm thinking maybe the VA or the Army.

Mickey: I didn't really have a lot. I worked mainly with CPR, the civilian side, because they were in the computer system, too. So you could touch base with them and see if they knew things. But mainly the records were sent from the thing and received from the departments. I had no real contact with those people that retired the records there.

Alyssa: Got it.

Mickey: We just got them by shipments and worked them from there.

Alyssa: Okay. You were at the National Archives when it became independent of GSA in 1985, correct?

Mickey: I was.

Alyssa: Did you notice any differences or any changes when that happened? Did that impact your work at all?

Mickey: It didn't impact anything that I was doing other than that you knew all the supervisors and center director directly. And that was nice.

Alyssa: I see. Okay. Well, I think now would be a good time to start talking about the fire. Because you were there both before the fire and after the fire. You were involved in the immediate aftermath of that. Can you talk about what you recall about the fire?

Mickey: The morning after the fire had been put out I received a call that my boss, he wanted me and another fella to come up to the center and that we would have permission to get on the lot, because it was all closed off. And I said, "Well, we can do that." So we went up there and then he told us what the plans were, that and to basically go home and get some work clothes on and come in, and we're going to go inside and make a survey of what the building looked like on the inside because some of them had been inside, but not a lot of people had been inside at that time. So we went and did all of that, and we got back and we went inside of the building. You saw the water in the hallways. It was water from the sixth floor, which had drained all the way down to the second floor and through the stairwells and the escalators. You kind of walked around this. On our second floor, there were correspondence units and files, and we just surveyed a little bit of that floor. Then later on, we got to go down and look at our areas to see if water damage or anything was bad or got the records.

Alyssa: And was it? Had the water damage been pretty bad during your survey?

Mickey: No, my section was on the first floor. It was down in the basement, sort of. And there was water on the floors in areas, but for the most part, no records were really damaged with water. But naturally, the musty smell was there. A little bit of water had to be cleaned up. But, fortunately, no records were damaged that was in that area.

Alyssa: Well, that's good. Can you describe what the building looked like when you arrived? You said that there was water all in the hallways, and obviously it did not smell very good.

Mickey: Yes. When we got there, there was a lot of broken glass on the sixth floor. There was a lot of glass at the National Archives on Page Avenue there, and a lot of the windows were

broken because the firemen were trying to put out the fire and broken windows just from probably the heat of the building. It just looked like, "Wow, there's a lot more damage in there than you really know." You couldn't see anything and the smell outside was still there.

Alyssa: I'm sure. Did you mention that your boss had called you to tell you basically to come in with work clothes? Was it you and one other employee? Or how many were there?

Mickey: Well, that morning he just called me and a fellow named Felix. Felix worked in the A and D section. He basically was organizational records. He helped access and dispose of our organizational records, such as hospital records.

Alyssa: I see. Okay. And it's Felix, correct? You said Felix?

Mickey: Yes. Yes.

Alyssa: What did your boss have you and Felix doing that day in the immediate response to the fire?

Mickey: We were just looking for the water damage in some of the areas. Felix, he came to the center when it was originally put in the St. Louis area there. I'm not exactly sure of the exact year that they got there, but he came there and he knew all the organizational records pretty good.

Alyssa: I see. Okay. Are there any other anecdotes about the impact of the fire in the National Archives that you can recall? How it impacted the operations of the National Archives?

Mickey: At the beginning of it, it made it hard to respond to some of these people that wrote in to the center, because first of all, you had to find out if you had a record, number one. Number two, the files weren't complete, so it took you a long time to process all the burnt records and get all the burned files together. A lot of times you didn't have anything to go on to help verify their service or create things. So you weren't really able to help at times.

Alyssa: I'm sure that was a frustrating experience.

Mickey: I think it was awful, that, because, at that time, a lot of the records in that burned area, they needed service numbers and different things, and a lot of people didn't know their service numbers. You had to get the right information to know whether you had a record or not, names and what have you. That wasn't always easy to get.

Alyssa: I know that immediately after the fire, I think there was a really big tent operation essentially set up in the parking lot of the building. Can you talk about what that was like? What was your involvement in that? At the time, you were the supervisor of the accessions records unit, right?

Mickey: Right. I didn't have a lot to do with what we called "Tent City" out there. They had tents out there where they helped shade them. Basically, they got the boxes from the records from the burn area, and they would go through them, and the records that had enough material to make it a record or any documents that made a record, they put it in a box to say, "This is this is a record. We're going to accession this in." Over time, they would accumulate so many boxes of this stuff. How many boxes, I don't know. But, then they loaded them on a truck and they took them out to McDonnell Douglas or Boeing. They put them in their freeze-dried area, which helped get the moisture out of the files and made them easier to handle in Accessions because the more you handle them, sometimes the burn edges would get off.

Alyssa: They would crumble a little bit.

Mickey: Yes, right. It was kind of dirty, but then when they would come back and they were records, then they would come down to our area and then we would keypunch them in from that standpoint. Then we loaded them into the burnt file, that's what we called it, the burnt file. You keypunched whatever they sent, whatever we could keypunch in, we did. Sometimes it was a record, so we keypunched it in. We didn't know exactly what was there.

Alyssa: Right. I mean, what was it like handling those burned files? Were they still extremely fragile when you were keypunching them in and accessioning them in?

Mickey: Yes. Every time, because you handled them, you had to turn them to do that and the burn edges were off. Most of the time, the keypunch operators, and other people also, they wore smocks or plastic smocks they could put on so the burnt ends wouldn't get on them and be as clean as possible to make sure that, if there was anything bad on it health-wise, that they were okay.

Alyssa: Right. Was there any concern about the health of the workers in your unit who were handling these?

Mickey: No, not really. It was just that you handled all of this burnt stuff on your hands. It's more stuff you haven't done in your life, maybe.

Alyssa: Right. It's kind of unpleasant to handle those types of things. Do you think that the fire impacted your work in the long term beyond just the immediate aftermath?

Mickey: I don't think it affected my thing. The center getting them accessioned in was an asset, I know. I do think that.

Alyssa: How long did it take to get all the burned files all accessioned in again?

Mickey: Oh, gosh, they were accessioning burned files for oh, months that it took them. But also they had some records that were sent from other places for the burned files to help. And we got those from other places.

Alyssa: I'm sure it was a really big task. It wasn't done in just a couple of days.

Mickey: No, it wasn't. I don't know the time frame of some of that because it is probably continuing on in different ways now, even.

Alyssa: Do you think that there were any reorganization efforts that were done after the fire? Did you see any of that?

Mickey: I didn't see any of that, but I know that towards the end of my career that a lot of the services were going to microfilms and the records and computer things. So that makes a little difference.

Alyssa: Right. Just out of curiosity, were you working in the Records Reconstruction Branch after the fire at all?

Mickey: No, I didn't work in the Reconstruction Branch.

Alyssa: Okay, great. Well, you must have been there when the records moved from the 9700 page location to Spanish Lake?

Mickey: No, I was not. I was retired.

Alyssa: That's right because that was later. But I'm sure you probably heard about the move that they made.

Mickey: Yes, I did. Yes, I did.

Alyssa: Do you feel that that was a good move to move everything to the new location? Because you were familiar with the 9700 Page location.

Mickey: Yes, I think it was probably good and probably good for the records. Give it a fresh start and all the new things that are coming along and all the computer ages that have come along with the records. I think it was probably a good thing.

Alyssa: Were there any procedures or policies that were put in place after the fire that were done because of the fire?

Mickey: Not that I am aware of. The part that I was in, it was just changes, the normal changes, the fire didn't have anything to do with them. They were just normal things. Maybe to help make better copies. Just work related, not policy.

Alyssa: Got it. Okay. Were you familiar with the decision to make the official military personnel files permanent? Because that happened after the fire, I think.

Mickey: Right.

Alyssa: Right. Were you involved in that decision? Do you think there were any benefits to that or did that bring up any new challenges for you?

Mickey: I wasn't involved in any of the decisions like that and it really didn't affect me at all.

Alyssa: Okay. Just, more generally, zooming out a little bit. Can you talk a little bit about the culture at NPRC, at the agency, and the work culture and specifically within your unit, the Accession unit, during the fire?

Mickey: I'm not sure what you're asking there, but we had data keypunch operators that punched stuff into the things, and they did their job. Then you had to take the punch cards and turn them in and get the labels for them. And then we had a group of people that we would assign to label up whatever records needed to be labeled up. They worked in teams, because sometimes you would have maybe 20 or 30 boxes of records that needed to be labeled. So they would get that done. Then the boys would know that they were ready to go to file, and then they had to make room for the next group of records that were coming on these conveyor belts.

Alyssa: Got it. Can you talk briefly about what do you think the impact was of the fire at the National Archives? Was there a larger impact that you felt there was on the agency in general?

Mickey: I'm not sure about that. I'm sure that it had an impact on the center because I can remember when I first started there that one of the things that some people said was that in the place on Page that there was no fire system in the building. I would think that the new place has the updated codes for whatever that is. I don't know why or why not they didn't have one at that time. But I did hear that conversation in the early days, and I never thought it was good, bad, indifferent because it was just conversation.

Alyssa: Right. What do you remember from what you first thought when you heard that there was a fire at the agency and that essentially your boss was calling you in to help survey the damage?

Mickey: When you heard that, I thought, "Well, they'll probably have that put out before you know it." Then as time went along and they were still working on it, I'm thinking, "Wow, this is..." And then as the news got out—I was getting my information from the news, mostly because it was still an active fire up there and still putting water on it—I'm thinking, "Oh, this is bigger than anyone thought." Then you're thinking, "Okay, what impact is that going to have on jobs? When can you get in?" Then when I did get the call and I walked there and I thought, "Whoa, whoa," because there was no really electric. There were no escalators, there was nothing. I'm thinking "By the time they check all of this out and make it work-worthy that, wow, this is not going to be overnight!"

Alyssa: Right. I think you had mentioned in a previous conversation that you guys had squeegees and you were trying to just remove as much water as possible that first day.

Mickey: Yes, that first day! First day, they had some squeegees about four feet, three, four feet wide. And several of us, we would push water down the hallway and out the front door and down the stairwells. Then down on the next floor they were doing the same thing. There was just a lot of water draining from all of the above. Standing there, you really realize that this was not going to be easy nor fun.

Alyssa: Right. Yes, certainly not fun.

Mickey: That's right.

Alyssa: I think you had mentioned, too, that you showed up and started squeegeeing and there weren't necessarily hardhats on the job either.

Mickey: No, no, at that time there wasn't. But when we went in, when we got back, they gave us boots to walk around in the building with, with the water. But on the first day, we didn't have hardhats. But then it was required that you have a hardhat after that.

Alyssa: I'm sure that walking around was probably pretty gross with all the burnt stuff. And I think you said there was broken glass as well.

Mickey: Yes, it was from the windows that were broken up above. If you were standing on the outside, every once in a while a piece of glass would fall out that you had worked loose and come down on the ground and you're thinking, "Wow, okay, don't stand too close to that." You could get hit by a piece of glass from above not even thinking of that.

Alyssa: Right. It's kind of miraculous then that you weren't injured at all during this.

Mickey: Oh, no. I mean we were pretty cautious about it. It's just that you're just standing there, and all of the things going through your head just thinking, "Wow, they have to fix all the glass and get this all back." I mean, all the pieces that you think about, seeing this building that you work in has to be put back together so you can come back to work.

Alyssa: Sure. I'm sure it was pretty astounding to see the level of damage that there was to the building itself. I'm sure it's very odd to see a building that you work in have so much fire damage to it.

Mickey: Yes. And I did not go up to the sixth floor where the fire was. They were very cautious about that because I don't know if they didn't know if there was any structural damage from the heat or how safe it was. But they had a group of fellows that worked up there that actually helped process the records out of there. That was a good team of workers up there. I don't know all of them that worked up there, but I'm sure they had some exciting days with how to get this off of the shelf.

Alyssa: I'm sure they definitely did. Well, just to close out the interview, do you mind talking about how you view your time at the National Archives, whether it's related to the fire. It sounds like you were pretty integral to being there in the immediate aftermath of the fire. But how do you view your time at the National Archives?

Mickey: Oh, I thought it was a great career! I really enjoyed that, working from the files to accessing records. I learned an awful lot and I really, really appreciate all the veterans that served no matter when they served. I have an extra thing about all the things they did. And they absolutely were in the war and they did things, they were in the service. Every once in a while, I get choked up when it's a certain thing and they play the national anthem. It means a lot more.

Alyssa: I'm sure it must be pretty breathtaking too. I mean, you witnessed firsthand taking care of their records, in a way, helping and taking care of veterans themselves.

Mickey: Yes. From my standpoint personally, everybody at the center did an awesome job of trying to help veterans and help get things that they could help, maybe get their VA benefits and things that they were looking for and provide service to them. They were just a good group of people to work with.

Alyssa: It sounds like you had a pretty long and dedicated career with the National Archives in St. Louis.

Mickey: I did. Like I say, I enjoyed every day that I went in, and I never really didn't like to go in.

Alyssa: Is there anything else that you'd like to add to the interview? Anything else that I missed asking about? Anything about the fire?

Mickey: Not really. I just hope I kind of gave an overshot of the fire. Some of the stuff that I said is from my memory and what I went through, and I hope that people could understand that.

Alyssa: I think you did a wonderful job. I think everything that you said is extremely helpful and really interesting as well. So I'm really glad you were able to do the interview.

Mickey: There's one thing that might be interesting that I just happened to think about. A lot of the states that had records on file for various reasons—a lot of states had DD 214s of people that served in the service—a lot of them had copies, and they sent them to the center so that we could create a record for a lot of veterans. And I'm sure that helped create some of the burned files. But it also put the documents in a place where they're made available for many people and for years to come.

Alyssa: Got it! Well, thank you so much for doing the interview. If there's nothing more that you'd like to add, I think we can close out the interview. So, thank you very, very much.

Mickey: You're welcome.

Alyssa: All right, well, Mickey, have a great rest of your day and thanks again. And I will be in touch through email with Mary.

Mickey: Okay. You do that and I'll try to respond.

Alyssa: Alright. Thank you so much. Have a great day.

Mickey: Thank you.

[END RECORDING]