

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION  
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview  
Subject: Thelma Martin  
Interviewer: Caroline Shanley  
June 22, 2023

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**Caroline Shanley:** Thank you so much 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 Caroline. Today is June 22, and I'm speaking with Thelma. So let's just get started here, and we'll see kind of how the conversation goes. If you have questions along the way or you want to stop on a question for a while, that's totally fine. We don't need to get through all of these questions. We're just going to kind of let the conversation guide us. Does that sound good?

**Thelma Martin:** Okay.

**Caroline:** Can you just provide a brief overview of your career at the National Archives?

**Thelma:** I started working for the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC), Military Personnel Records (MPR) on September 20, 1972, as a GS-4 archives technician. I worked for the Army Reference Branch as a GS-4 work-in-file technician.

**Caroline:** Could you tell me a little more about that?

**Thelma:** Yes. A work-in-file technician responds to reference requests mainly from the Veterans Administration that are submitted on the VA 3101 form. The request is completely processed in the file area rather than in the office at a desk. I searched and withdrew the pertinent military record, completed the form, and refiled the record.

Several months later I was promoted to a GS-5 management assistant position for the Military Management and Technical Staff (MMTS). I mainly wrote and made changes to the instructions that correspondence technicians used to respond to requests. About a year later I was promoted to a GS-7 management analyst position. I worked on various studies and projects. One of the most interesting projects was working with a team to

develop engineered standards for the reference branches. I worked for the MMTS for about three years.

After that, I spent the next five years at MPR in various supervisory positions: GS-9 Section Chief for the Air Force Reference Branch, GS-9 Section Chief for the Navy Reference Branch, GS-11 Assistant Branch Chief for the Navy Reference Branch, GS-11 Assistant Branch Chief for the Air Force Reference Branch, GS-11 Assistant Branch Chief for the Army Reference Branch, GS-11 Assistant Branch Chief for the Navy Reference Branch, and GS-12 Branch Chief for the Navy Reference Branch.

So, from 1972 to 1980 I worked at NPRC [MPR] for eight years. Then from 1980 to 1991 I worked at the Civilian Personnel Records facility of the National Personnel Records Center [NPRC, CPR] for 11 years as a GS-12 Branch Chief for the Civilian Reference Branch. Then I returned to NPRC [MPR] for a brief time as Branch Chief of the Army Reference Branch and the rest of the 11 years as the Branch Chief of the Records Reconstruction Branch, then as Manager, Reference Core Two and Manager, Reference Core Five. Cores Two and Five while I was Chief provided reference on fire-related requests just like the Records Reconstruction Branch. Then in 2002 I returned to the Civilian Personnel Records facility for five years as the Assistant Director. I retired in September 2007. So, was that totally confusing?

**Caroline:** No not at all. That is a really awesome trajectory. And it sounds like you got to work in a lot of different areas.

**Thelma:** Yes, that is true. In varying degrees I learned about all the operations at MPR and CPR either through studies and projects [e.g., mailroom, accessioning and disposal of records] or working in them [e.g., management staff and reference branches].

**Caroline:** Wow. Just zooming out a little bit. Can you tell me a bit about what you were doing before you came onto that role or kind of what got you interested in this line of work?

**Thelma:** You mean what caused me to apply for the GS-4 archives technician position?

**Caroline:** Yeah.

**Thelma:** I graduated from the University of Missouri at St. Louis (UMSL) with a BA in English and received a lifetime certificate to teach secondary English. However, during

my senior year I decided I wasn't really interested in teaching. I met with a guidance counselor in UMSL's placement office who told me to check out the bulletin board that had listings for job opportunities and application forms for the civil service exam. I took the Junior Federal Assistant exam that qualified me for a GS-4 position with a federal agency. Sometime after that, I got a phone call to report to the National Personnel Records Center for an interview, which at that time was at 9700 Page Avenue. The Assistant Director interviewed me for a GS-4 archives technician, work-in-file position for the Army Reference Branch. I didn't know anything about the National Personnel Records Center, but the job sounded interesting and I needed a job, so I accepted the opportunity. Little did I know that job would be the beginning of a 35-year career with NARA.

**Caroline:** So tell me a bit about after you came in after the civil service tests and such. What kind of training did your unit provide you? Like what kind of stuff did you learn and do?

**Thelma:** During orientation, I received a general overview of the mission of the National Personnel Records Center and its two facilities, MPR at 9700 Page Avenue and CPR at 111 Winnebago Street. The training I received for the GS-4 work-in-file position in the Army Reference Branch involved learning how to search for the military record needed to answer the request, how to respond to the request, and how to refile the record. That was the beginning of learning what it meant to provide reference service on a request that was received by the Center.

But, it wasn't until I became a management assistant and management analyst working on studies and writing standard operating procedures that I learned about the other positions in the Center that were indirectly or directly involved in providing reference service. By interviewing the best technicians, I learned how the higher level requests were processed, which helped me recommend changes to the current procedures that ultimately led to improved productivity or eliminated redundancies.

The transition to supervisory positions in all of the reference branches at MPR and CPR led to more training and learning about records management, records center operations, fiscal and human resource management, and customer service operations. With each subsequent promotion, the expectations became higher for me to "get the job done" as efficiently and effectively as possible by proposing, developing, and implementing ideas with those goals in mind.

**Caroline:** So that was a great overview of sort of your day-to-day tasks. What aspects of the work did you particularly enjoy?

**Thelma:** Although I learned a lot about the Center doing studies and writing memos, what I enjoyed most was talking to the technicians about their work, which ultimately led me to enjoy supervision.

**Caroline:** Great. Just kind of on the note of working and the time that you were doing your work, I am kind of curious about working in military records specifically, and did changes in politics or the Presidential administration change the nature of your work at all? Did you feel like there was an effect with what was going on in terms of current events and political circumstances? Or did you feel like you were sort of insulated from that?

**Thelma:** I think I was insulated during most of my career until I became an Assistant Director at CPR.

**Caroline:** Okay, great. Do you want to say anything more about that?

**Thelma:** There were two instances where politics or current events may have played a role in the decision-making process concerning two projects at CPR, but I can't be certain because even at the GS-14 level I wasn't always privy to discussions between the Center Director and the Central Office leadership team. Also, keep in mind these projects pertained to civilian records, not military, so my response may not be pertinent to your question. But, here goes.

The first instance involved us trying to get the necessary funding to create and deploy a digitizing operation at CPR which would have converted the paper OPF into an electronic record that could be accessed using a personal computer. The Office of Personnel Management [the legal custodian of most records of former federal employees] became our first client. OPM signed a contract with CPR and funded us \$100,000 to get our "new" business started. However, based on our cost projections, we needed another \$60,000 for equipment. Leadership at the time wouldn't approve it. At a center director's conference that the Archivist attended, all directors and assistant directors from the records centers system were given an opportunity to talk about what was going on at their centers. When it was my turn, I explained the cost savings benefits of having a digitizing operation at CPR and added that I couldn't get \$60,000 to buy the necessary

equipment to get it started. I truly was in “hot water” for bringing that up at the conference, but it did result in the money being approved shortly after the conference.

In the second instance, I became aware of the possibility of CPR’s records and operations being relocated to a different records center that would have shut down CPR in St. Louis and resulted in many employees losing their jobs if they couldn’t or wouldn’t relocate to a different city/state. I wasn’t told whose idea this was or the motivation behind it since CPR was, at the time, meeting or exceeding all performance goals and for the first time in several years was operating at a profit rather than a deficit. The only reason I could think of that made any sense for finding a “new” home for CPR was that the building was at 95% capacity for its records holdings.

Knowing that NPRC, years before, had been checking out a cave in Valmeyer, Illinois, as a potential future site for NPRC’s records but not knowing the status or if the idea had been dropped, the Director approved my staff and certain MPR staff to evaluate the cave as a new home for CPR. When it proved doable, my staff and I prepared a position paper that included a cost analysis prepared by an MPR analyst proposing that CPR relocate to the cave in Valmeyer and keep its operations in the experienced and skilled hands of the St. Louis employees.

Our proposal was approved. CPR relocated to the cave in Valmeyer, Illinois. Moving to the cave solved the building capacity problem for our records holdings but also ensured there would be enough office space to expand our “new” business of converting the paper Official Personnel Folder to electronic not only for the Office of Personnel Management but other agencies who were interested, such as the U.S. Postal Service (USPS). We were close to getting a contract with USPS when I retired. I don’t know the status of that initiative.

I worked on most aspects of the move and even worked on the fun part of helping to design the office spaces, select paint colors and order furniture. But, I retired before the physical move.

**Caroline:** Well what a great way to cap your career. You’ve given me a lot of really great details so far, so we’ll just go a little bit longer. We’re kind of turning gears here, going back to the very beginning of your career. I know we spoke about this briefly on the phone, but just wanted to get it on the record as well if you could tell me a little about where you were during the fire and what you remember about it.

**Thelma:** At the time, I was reporting for work as a management assistant, and I saw smoke coming from the building. And I could see that there were a lot of people and firemen on the complex. I called my supervisor, who told me to go home and call again the next day for further instructions. So I did, and I was told to report to the Civilian Personnel Records facility, CPR. I got a crash course on how to respond to GS-5 level correspondence requests. In processing those cases I learned about some of the records at CPR that would eventually become an alternate source for information necessary to reconstruct military records that were involved or destroyed in the 1973 fire.

When I was finally able to return to MPR, one of my earlier assignments on staff was to find and document alternate sources for military information. A few of us were on the telephone daily, calling local, state, and county offices to find out if any of them had military records information that could be used to reconstruct records. We documented all the alternate sources we could determine to include sources at MPR [e.g., organizational type records such as morning reports, sick reports, etc.] and CPR [GAO pay vouchers, Entrance and Separation X-rays, etc.]. We compiled the information and wrote the first procedure on how to respond to requests that were involved in the 1973 fire. We also created pattern paragraphs that explained which records were involved in the fire and developed appropriate forms which facilitated responding to the fire-related requests.

Since then studies have been done to find other sources of information, the procedures and various forms have been refined. Using the Case Management Reporting System, requests can be answered electronically. Archives.gov documents fully the progress that has been made regarding the fire-related records procedures. I was on that site today, and it was gratifying to see that some of the initial statements that were written in 1973/74 by the staff haven't changed.

**Caroline:** Totally, I appreciate it. My follow-up question anyways was just going to be how did some of these procedures change and evolve in the years following the fire. But I think you answered that perfectly unless there's anything else you wanted to add about your day to day work, what changes you saw.

**Thelma:** The biggest change was when NPRC started the Business Process Re-engineering (BPR) in the early 2000s. We were moving away from being a paper-based operation to electronic. Technicians did their work on PCs utilizing procedures that could be accessed electronically. The procedures were modified to no longer be branch specific. In other words, a GS-5 correspondence technician who used

to process just Army records requests could now use the same instruction to process Navy and Air Force records requests. The fire-related requests required specialized knowledge and training, but even those cases could be processed more timely and efficiently using the CMRS.

**Caroline:** Yeah, that makes sense. So we will wrap it up. But I wanted to just ask kind of one final open-ended question. Would love to hear overall, how do you view your time working at the National Archives, and is there anything else you want to add in general?

**Thelma:** It was a very interesting and rewarding experience starting out as a GS-4 archives technician working in the stack areas to leading CPR as the Assistant Director. I had the privilege of working with some of the best and most capable people at both MPR and CPR throughout my career. Equally important were the friends I made along the way. I met them shortly after the fire, and we are still friends today.

**Caroline:** Great. It's awesome to hear that. And you know, as someone who's working here right now, I love to hear about your experiences. I study history myself, so I've done quite a bit of archival research and talking with the techs who pull my materials and help me find the materials I'm looking for. I'm always very grateful for the staff who do that.

**Thelma:** The National Archives impacts a lot of people throughout the world. What we do is important.

**Caroline:** Totally. So that concludes our interview. Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today.

**Thelma:** Okay. Thank you.

**Caroline:** Yeah, thanks. Have a good one. Bye bye.

[END RECORDING]