

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION  
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview  
Subject: Seventh Archivist of United States Don Wilson  
Interviewers: Rebecca Brenner and Jessie Kratz  
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MS. REBECCA BRENNER: This is Rebecca Brenner and Jessie Kratz here at the Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library and Museum. We're about to conduct an oral history of former Archivist of the United States, Don Wilson. Today's date is August 20, 2015. Mr. Wilson, what was your background in?

MR. DON WILSON: Well my background was pretty much Presidential Libraries. My education was community college, Kansas University for a year, and then transferred to Washington University where I thought I was going to be a lawyer and they had the three/four plan during those years, three years undergraduate and four years of law school. I got sidetracked in history and stayed there, and then was given a National Defense Scholarship to the University of Cincinnati, and there I went straight through for my PhD. I got a Master's and a PhD because they made you split it. So I received the PhD in 1972, but I finished my roles and everything in 1968, went back to Kansas, to the Kansas State Historical Society, where I was curator of my own dissertation collection. I was a manuscripts curator at the beginning of my career, and while there I pretty much did all of my research and wrote my dissertation on the first governor of Kansas.

MS. BRENNER: What exactly was your dissertation?

MR. WILSON: It was Charles Robinson of Kansas, the first governor of Kansas, and he was a free-state activist—part of the abolitionists' movement and came into Kansas and then was elected first governor of the State of Kansas. That was later published by the University of Kansas Press. And so my early, well actually my early emphasis was 19th Century American West. I was kind of a second generation James Monaghan student. He was one of the early writers in the West.

MS. BRENNER: What were your interactions with the National Archives before becoming involved with the Presidential Libraries?

MR. WILSON: I left Kansas and when LBJ left office, as he used to say, he wanted his library to be fully staffed, and so by creating an additional staff for his library, basically they created other positions in other Presidential Libraries. So in 1969, shortly after, well it was actually three weeks after Eisenhower's death, I went to the Eisenhower library. I was hired as the historian at the Eisenhower Presidential Library in Abilene. I graduated from Abilene High School. So I was kind of going home in that sense. They used to say that Eisenhower's class was the class that stars fell on because of all of the generals and other things. We used to call our class also the stars fell on us. And Marlin Fitzwater was a classmate, he was former press secretary of Reagan and Bush, and we had several judges, ministers—it was a special class, small, maybe 120 in our class. But at any rate, I went back to Abilene, and eventually I became the associate deputy director of the Eisenhower Library. In 1978 I was hired as the Associate Director of the Wisconsin State Historical Society in Madison, which was kind of the Harvard of historical community in that period. And so I went up there as the Associate Director and was there when they moved the museum. We were on campus of the University of Wisconsin. We were the American History Library for

the University of Wisconsin. And during that time we acquired property through the legislature, and developed the museum—began development—I wasn't there for all of it, but began development of the museum downtown, which was separated from the campus. But they had several historic sites around the state, and it was a great experience. It was a tough time budget-wise and economically, but it was an interesting time at a big agency. So from there I was asked to come back, well, they did a national search for the Director of the Ford Presidential Library. Because it was going to be located at Ann Arbor and Grand Rapids—it was only split because the President wanted it split—but because it was at Ann Arbor they wanted to have an association with the university. Therefore, they were really wanting a PhD who could be on the faculty, or adjunct faculty with the University of Michigan. And so, I was interviewed. I was encouraged by the Archives to pursue it. I really didn't know if I wanted to be the Director of a Presidential Library where he wasn't elected President, but I had also been there before—before I went to Wisconsin in fact, the Office of Presidential Libraries was trying to get me to take a Nixon project. And after due consideration and deliberation, and part of the reason was that I was close to the Eisenhower family. David and I had become close when he was doing his research. We're about the same age. And he was doing his research at the Presidential Library on his grandfather and in fact he and Julie would be in Abilene, and David and I would play golf. And they celebrated one Thanksgiving with us because they couldn't get out of the town. It was snowing. But anyway, we had a good relationship, and so the Presidential Library really wanted me to become Director, and I just looked at it and I said I don't want to spend the rest of my life in litigation and I didn't see a great future there. So I turned it down and went to Wisconsin instead. In 1980, '81, they began looking for a permanent Director of the Ford Library. Again I was encouraged to rejoin the National Archives. And so I can recall going to New York City to interview with President Ford. I mean, I'm a kid from Kansas. I had never been to New York [laughter]. At this point in my life I was 32. So I went to New York. I remember staying at the Holiday Inn, which was a long ways away from the hotel where I was being interviewed. David Matthews, who was the former secretary of HEW under President Ford, and was the former president of the University of Alabama. David wasn't much older than I was. But at any rate, he was kind of the rising star of the Republican group, kind of the new candidate, good looking, very smart, but David was a little tedious in his academic ways [laughter] and couldn't quite get into the popular, you know, political realm. A very bright guy and a wonderful man who was a friend of mine. But he was the head of the National Search Committee for President Ford. And so I went over to meet with President Ford and David Matthews, I can't remember the hotel, the Waldorf Astoria Hotel, which was blowing my mind any way going into that, and then going up to see the former President at the same time. And so I went in, and I got there a little early, thank goodness, and David and the President were conversing inside. And so the Secret Service just kind of held me in the hallway. And it was really good because they were cutups. I mean they were joking and laughing and had me laughing and basically put me in a pretty relaxed mood. And I've always had that associated with the Secret Service agents, you know, they were crazy people, but and back in those days they would stay with a President. They wouldn't rotate them around very much. If they roomed with a former President that was pretty much the group that stayed with. So any way, when I went into the interview meeting I still had my doubts, but I became really convinced of what the President wanted with his library and how involved he would be and the relationship with the university. And David was good at convincing me there too, and I emerged saying this is a real opportunity and—

MS. BRENNER: [Interposing] What exactly did he want for his library?

MR. WILSON: Well, it was interesting. He wanted to look forward and to look at public affairs, and to look at different aspects of what was going on in the country, and how could he have a role, not personally, because he was an individual who had no ego. President Ford was one of these rare individuals in political life that was self-deprecating and but could also play a role with the library and try to solve public problems. And I know term limits was a big issue during that time, and the budget. He was always a big person on the budget and national defense, he served for 25 in the Armed Services. And so he had these expectations and these ideas and this philosophy that was really intriguing, plus the challenge of a split facility was intriguing too—the campus of the university, a major university in the heart of the Grand Rapids, and downtown to be a part of that whole community. So it worked out eventually. It was the President's decision to determine finally who was hired—with the Archivist's approval—but it's the President's choice. I mean I certainly always felt that way as Archivist, because you had to have the Foundation happy, and you had to have the former President who was living happy, or you were doomed to failure. So I did accept eventually, and became the first permanent Director of the library, and on the eve of the dedication of the museum, which was an interesting experience. So, I moved to Ann Arbor and part of that was to be an associate, or an adjunct professor at the University of Michigan. So, we really kind of built the library up. We had a pretty small staff at the time and I think it is still small, and part of it was because we were divided. And so you had a really challenging situation staff-wise with some of your staff here and some of it over in Grand Rapids. I made a lot of trips across the state. About once a week or so I would drive from Ann Arbor to Grand Rapids, 162 miles I think it was—

MS. BRENNER: [Interposing] Could you speak to the process of deciding which materials to bring to the library?

MR. WILSON: Sure, a lot of the materials coming to the library automatically from the White House. I mean, anything that was in the White House goes to the Presidential Library basically. And then whatever the President's personal papers are also in the transfer. Of course this is in the shadows of Watergate, and what I discovered, interestingly enough, is you had an entirely different kind of record beginning the with Ford library. You had, say with the Roosevelt Library, a lot of diaries, a lot of personal experiences, a lot of personal papers that were included with the Presidential Library materials. We saw that at Eisenhower too, his diaries, his other things that were maintained. But when you got to the Ford papers, by and large, they were bureaucratic. They were decision papers. They were things written by his staff that had approval, disapproval, further discussion. It was no less valuable in many ways, but you had to learn to look at them differently and appreciate them differently than the kind of the personal papers of the President that were more common in the older Presidential Libraries. And a good example is Dick Cheney's papers—I don't have any. He said, "If the President wanted to know something he would ask me and I'd give it to him. I wouldn't write anything down." And that was the fallout of Watergate. I think you had a real loss of history in the circumstance—Dick Cheney is just one example, but a lot of them, now of course he ended up having some personal papers with the University of Wyoming, but they weren't necessarily White House papers. And they weren't necessarily reflecting that he was the Chief of Staff. And so he didn't feel that he had a policy position, and he didn't necessarily write down a lot of things that might come across his desk, or determinations—

MS. BRENNER: [Interposing] What year did you say it was when you became the Director?

MR. WILSON: 1981.

MS. BRENNER: Okay.

MR. WILSON: And I spent four years in Ann Arbor, and then in 1985 the curator left. He was kind of the Deputy Director as well. And so I moved to Grand Rapids and based out of Grand Rapids because in Ann Arbor we were pretty well integrated into the university, and we still had some integration issues over in Grand Rapids. And I think everybody felt in the end that it was probably better if I was in Grand Rapids. About a year after I was in Grand Rapids the process of selecting the next Archivist of the United States started bubbling and I was approached by some Reagan people. Actually it was Charles Palm, who was the Associate Director of the Hoover Institution. Charles and I had been friends for a number of years. We kind of came up through the Archives together and then he left the training program and went to the Hoover Institution as the archivist. But he was very close with a lot of the Reagan California group, Shultz, Secretary of State Shultz, Ed Meese—what I call the California group. And they were the ones most concerned about who was going to be that first Archivist named, mainly because of the library, you know. They didn't want any problems going through Congress with the Presidential Library. I'm giving you a lot inside stuff here.

JESSIE KRATZ: Oh that's what we want.

MR. WILSON: [Laughter].

MS. BRENNER: Thank you.

MR. WILSON: And it was interesting because earlier, I think it was late '86, early '87, Ed Meese visited the campus, spoke at the University of Michigan, met with President Ford and me, and—

MS. BRENNER: [Interposing] Just for clarification, you were then meeting with Ford and Reagan?

MR. WILSON: Ford and Meese.

MS. BRENNER: Ford and Ed Meese.

MR. WILSON: He was the Attorney General at the time. And he was kind of taking the point on a lot of the Presidential Libraries, I mean he is also a great friend of the Archives. Bob Warner and he had also had a good relationship. And you know, and in all fairness, I would say Bob was kind of a mentor to me. I had of course, during that time, turned him down for a couple of positions in the Archives, including the after the death of an archivist [laughter] at one point. And—

MS. BRENNER: [Interposing] When was that?

MR. WILSON: '85.

MS. BRENNER: Okay, so we haven't gotten there yet really.

MR. WILSON: So I was very happy being the Director of the Ford Presidential Library. It was an ideal job. I mean you couldn't ask for a better President to work with, for one, who was not there all the time, but still available. I never had any issues in the field because nobody would challenge it. If the President wanted that we were going to get that—not that we were asking for anything, we wouldn't do that, but they weren't going to go after me, making demands on my time, or my staff, from the Archives, because they weren't going to chance upsetting the President in any way. And that's true of any of the Presidential Libraries. But President Ford was great to work with. He was one of these people who

would immediately put you at ease. And to go back to the first interview. He immediately put me at ease going into that interview. It was just very relaxed. There wasn't any tension at all. It was just here's who I am, what I am. And yet, only later did I realize there was always this formality about him. And there was, I think it was the Dutch Reformed background—that whole Dutch Reformed idea—the kind of background that he grew up in in Grand Rapids. And there is always kind of you got so close, but you didn't, you know? And maybe it's like most Presidents. They typecast you early on—you are the Archivist and that's what you're going to be. I didn't play golf with President Ford. I didn't go to dinner at his house necessarily. But he never put you at any discomfort. It was always, "Oh you're doing a great job. I really appreciate what you're doing. I like what you're doing." And we'd sit down and go over the budget each year and he would have ideas—the idea that he was not extremely bright is wrong. He was extremely bright and he had a terrific memory. And we'd sit down and go over a budget and he said "but Don last year this budget was reflected here and it was this amount." And that's 25 years on the Armed Services committee I'm sure, in Congress. But you never tried to pull one over on him either, because he was very direct. He was very open. And he expected you to be very direct and open too. And so we had a great relationship. I wasn't all that close with Betty. She had her own thing going at the Betty Ford Clinic. And so she wasn't too involved in the library although the other First Ladies did a number of programs. And one of the things that really challenged me on those programs and doing a lot of programming was the Johnson Library, and primarily Harry Middleton who was Director of the library there, who was my idol and one I always looked up to. He is also a fellow Kansan in the end, but I always thought that if Harry could do that I can do that. If Harry can have this I can do it better, or we can do it, you know, it was always a competition there I guess, with what was going on at the Johnson Library. So we'd do a lot of that and she [Betty] would participate in something like that. But he was the principal [Gerald] and this was his thing. And he had such a tremendous loyalty among his White House staff and he brought such great people into the White House. Phil Buchan, who was his general counsel, and his law school roommate I think, and later a partner in law up in Grand Rapids. Buchan had moved to DC, but Phil was an interesting, and a very strong member of that inner group. But he was surrounded with very strong people. At the time very young people. And a lot of them ended up being in several administrations, including Rumsfeld and others.

MS. BRENNER: Could we pause for a second? Around 1985, 1986, how did the National Archives becoming an independent agency influence your work with the Presidential Libraries?

MR. WILSON: That was really the leadership of Bob Warner. Bob really was the driving force in independence. The independence issue was all over Watergate. And GSA's handling the tapes. There was a large cry from the historical agencies and organizations for independence. Bob built on that, and developed a lot of congressional inroads there, and GSA was kind of their own worst enemy on a lot of these issues. It's interesting to note that the National Archives is the only independent agency created by the Reagan administration. I was of course out in Grand Rapids so I wasn't intimately involved, although Bob kept me well informed on what was going on. And part of the agreement he came up with and the deal he made was that he would step down as Archivist once independence was achieved.

MS. BRENNER: How exactly did that deal work? Was that his official deal or—

MR. WILSON: [Interposing] He cut that deal, yeah. And part of it being, you know, Bob is perceived by a lot that current Reagan administration as being more of a Democrat than a Republican, although it really didn't come into play all that much. I think Bob really wanted to step down too. He kind of took this on

as a challenge. And he wanted to go back the University of Michigan. That was his love. And so that was playing into it. Independence was 1985, and then when he stepped down, Frank Burke became Acting Archivist. Frank's still living isn't he?

MS. KRATZ: Yes.

MS. BRENNER: So you were almost in DC at this point. How did you come to DC?

MR. WILSON: That's in 1986, the movement began in earnest for the appointment of a new Archivist, the first Presidentially-appointed archivist. Now the legislation was very tricky and cumbersome at the time, because the Senate really wanted a term, and most of the organizations wanted a term. The House wouldn't accept a term. And so it was supposed to be more like a judgeship, more like the FBI Director, you know, that it would be a 10 year term or something that—

MS. BRENNER: [Interposing] Can you speak to the conversation about whether it should be a term, like why did the House have that opinion?

MR. WILSON: Ah, you know, I don't know why they had to have it, although the House has always kind of been much more, I guess, in terms of the Executive Branch, jealous of any kind of thing like that. They wanted to make sure there wasn't somebody locked in necessarily. And so the language of the legislation really said that it shall not necessarily step down at the end of an administration, which came to haunt me later. Shall not necessarily step down but may be removed at the pleasure of the President, or serves at the pleasure of the President. So that was an interesting example there. It really came down to the California group who was very concerned about Reagan's legacy. And they knew they had to have a professional appointment and the legislation also addressed being professional, or a professionally qualified person. So that became a real challenge then. And frankly speaking, there probably weren't a lot of academics out there at the time who would be acceptable to the Republican or conservative base. They were mostly pretty liberal leaning, people in academia. I mean that's just always been the case, not anything wrong with that, it's just that's how the academia worked. My background was pretty much all public history. I mean I've been on faculties, but I never was permanent faculty or anything. And so, now interestingly enough, one of the big challenges there was the fact that I was Director of the Ford library, seeking an appointment with Reagan. And there was a lot of unfriendly blood between the Reagan and Ford people within the party.

MS. BRENNER: For clarification, why exactly was that?

MR. WILSON: Well that goes back to the 1976 election and the conference where Reagan challenged him, and Ford was convinced he cost him the election. And in 1980, of course he was asked to be the Vice President and turned it down, which is how Bush became Vice President. The Reagan people were a little offended by that. They—

MS. BRENNER: [Interposing] Does that animosity carry over into the Presidential Libraries?

MR. WILSON: I don't see it. No. I mean I never saw it. And in fact that was pretty well healed later on. But, as an example, when I went to President Ford and said, "I'm being more or less recruited by the gallant array of Reagan people to have my name put in nomination for Archivist of the United States." And I remember the day very clearly. He was in his office at the library and we were at the museum at that time. And he sat there, and he was smoking his pipe, and he kind of looked at me and he said, "Don,

I think you'd be a great Archivist." He said, "I'd hate to lose you, but I think it would be a good thing for the Archives." But he said just one, one word of caution. He said, "Do you really want to get into bed with those bastards?" [laughter]

MS. BRENNER: [Laughter]

MR. WILSON: But you know, that was his take. There was still a sense of I don't trust him back then. Well, then this progressed, and in many ways I was, you know, really happy being out there away from all the intrigue. And I kept thinking to myself, how am I going to tell my wife? This is not the Secretary of State, no this is not the Secretary of Defense. What is all the conflict about? And what is all the angst over here? Well it turned out a lot of it was within the White House, because Donald Regan was Chief of Staff. And Regan didn't like the California people and he was saying, "I'm running the White House. This is my appointment." And so Bill Bennett had put forth John Agresto. And John, at the time, I think was Deputy Director of the National Endowment for Humanities. And John was Bill Bennett's deputy when he was NEH, I believe. Well, the Detroit Press, News of Detroit, I guess the Detroit Free Press, one of them, it was a big Detroit paper, announced in 1986 that I was going to be the nominee. Well the next day it came out John Agresto had been nominated. So it was betwixt really John Agresto and myself. John Agresto had never been in an Archives in his life, I don't think. It was very much political in that sense.

MS. BRENNER: Was he a PHD historian? Did he say?

MR. WILSON: I think he was a political scientist. I can't remember. I think he had a PhD. But I don't know. I don't recall. At any rate I never met him. But, I had built up this idea—you think you're going to go there and then bam it's just gone. Well I resolved to myself—you got a great job. I'm happy out here. We love Grand Rapids. You know, I could retire here. I'm only 43 years old. And so I thought it was over. And I had a lot of supporters going to bat for me in the Archives, and all of the SAA, AHA were all backing me. I mean they had all had resolutions out there, and so they were incensed about this and I just kind of sat back, I was out of the limelight, fine. And so Agresto's name went forward and met with a whole lot of opposition. And Senator Mathias and Senator Eagleton of Missouri, led the charge against it. And after about nine months of this Agresto withdrew. They weren't going to confirm him. And all of a sudden Don Regan was out. He was no longer Chief of Staff. Howard Baker became Chief of Staff. Howard Baker and President Ford were very close. So Howard Baker calls Ford and it says, "what about Don Wilson?" President Ford said basically the same stuff. And next thing I knew in August, 1987 I was nominated without any opposition. So then the whole confirmation process started, and thank goodness I don't know how anybody goes through that process, I mean I couldn't have done it if I had been someplace else. But I was already a part of the Archives. So it wasn't like I had to change anything, or move to Washington, or do anything different during that whole process, because there was a lot of preparation. There was the whole FBI background checks, all of this had to happen. So I was nominated in August and the hearings were set for November, I guess early November. Of course Congress was in recess. And so I had a lot of prep work to do, and a lot of prep work was being done. John Fawcett, who was head of Presidential Libraries, and Claudine Weiher who was the Deputy Archivist, spent a lot of time prepping me. And I had worked with John for years. And I knew Claudine as well. There is no question she was going to stay as Deputy Archivist. And she was a very tough woman, and a dragon lady as she was known in the Archives—

MS. BRENNER: [Interposing] So what was the office of Archivist of the United States like when you got there?

MR. WILSON: Very interesting. The whole confirmation process actually went very smoothly. It turns out Senator Sasser was the head of the General Affairs Committee. My wife is from Tennessee. My wife's uncle was a former law partner with Sasser. And so I breezed through the confirmation. I mean it was a love fest. Nancy Kassebaum was my patron. She introduced me from the Senate and Bob Dole supported me because I was from Kansas. And so I think my confirmation lasted 25 minutes. I was there with three judges and went right through it. So that was not a problem, and then they wanted to do a fairly big deal at the swearing in since I was the first Archivist appointed, we did a rather awe-inspiring swearing in. Reagan was there. I don't know if you've seen the picture—

MS. Kratz: [Interposing] I've seen the picture.

MR. WILSON: And it was a major event, a major event in my life, certainly. It was the first time I met President Reagan. I was not political. I was not an activist. I mean obviously I had been typecast early, I mean Eisenhower, Ford, and if I had served those Presidents I was obviously okay with Reagan. Their only real concern was making sure that they had a professional person they could send to the Hill that was not going to be challenged on the Presidential Library. And, because there had been a lot of conflict over Presidential Libraries coming out of Watergate, coming out of the construction of the Johnson library—that was this huge thing and then the Kennedy Library, a huge thing. Senator Chiles in Florida was really the archenemy of the Archives, or rather the Presidential Libraries. Most of the rest of Congress would never challenge it because they thought well, I may have one someday if the egos came into play, or have a role in one. But Senator Chiles was really always after it. And that's why you had the Presidential Libraries Act amendment in 1986. That was Chiles supporting that, which limited the size and put a number of other things on the Presidential Libraries. But it couldn't take place until after Bush—

MS. BRENNER: [Interposing] With all of your experience up to that point, what was your opinion of the Presidential Libraries Act amendment?

MR. WILSON: Well I found it rather limiting, it went too far as a lot of legislation does. I thought there was probably a need for some clarification, but on the other hand you these were built with private funds entirely. Yeah, they're staffed, as they have to be, with National Archives employees. But they are facets of it that evolved that don't necessarily require that. And I think it put a lot of restrictions, now I got to admit, as Archivist I expanded some of those. I admit I interpreted some of those like net versus gross square feet. We made the decision very early that we would determine the net, not gross, in terms of size limitation. That made a huge difference. It would have been entirely too restrictive. You couldn't put the papers in place that was gross square feet of 72,000. It wouldn't have worked. And then the idea that we could separate some functions—throw it onto the university rather than have it all be exclusive in the National Archives, as the Reagan is, because of where it's built, but beginning with Bush some of that was determined earlier. And the interpretation of the law was that you build a conference center that housed the Foundation and don't put that in the library. That's part of the Foundation. And you build this public policy program school. That's part of the university. It's not part of the archives.



MS. BRENNER: So, and feel free to add anything if you wish, but I think we're at the point where you've become Archivist of the United States, and I was just wondering what were some of your original impressions of the culture of the agency? What was your daily routine like?

MR. WILSON: Well this all pre-computer, or certainly pre-electronic record, shall I say, in 1987. When I went in 1987 interesting fact there was not a fax machine in the whole archives system. And this is fax, you know. We put in fax machines in as one of the first things for communications purposes. So there was always a lag in communications in the field. And having spent most of my career in the field, I brought that field perspective into the National Archives. That wasn't always welcomed. So there were challenges from the beginning with some of the older staff who looked down on Presidential Libraries and the Record Centers. They thought those weren't central to the mission of the National Archives. You know, the main mission was the National Archives corpus in DC, military records, Charters of Freedom and all of this stuff, which are all very important, but I think I brought a new perspective. And it was challenged. There had to be some shuffling around. The frustrating thing about government is you can't fire people. You just shuffle them. But we had a pretty good nucleus of a team. The real challenges were separating from GSA. And I guess, as I always say, in a lot of talks I have given we made mistakes. There is no question. But I am very proud of what we accomplished, a lot of which is never going to really be considered germane. But you know, from security systems, from hiring independent contractors to do certain things, to all of these things had to be dealt with. And on top of that we saw a real opportunity a year and a half into my tenure—we needed space, terribly, we needed space. We saw an opportunity that was through a window about like this to get a new National Archives building. And I will give credit to Jim Megronigle, who was the head of administration at the time, who had the relationship with Steny Hoyer, as a Maryland constituent, to take advantage of that. And I can remember the day—it was when we could bond. It wasn't appropriation. It was bonding for \$40 Million—I can't remember the figure now, pretty significant at the time—to build an Archives II. And I can remember the day very clearly that I said to do it, "Let's go for it." What have we got to lose, except for a lot of money and some patrons? But we did, largely through the help of Congressman Hoyer who wanted it in his district. It became reality, but that bonding ceased after we did it. I mean there wasn't any more of those kind of public building activities. That's not well known particularly, and what they told us was a need perceived by Congress was a fight that we had to take to them. So that was one of the early challenges, but a lot of the small issues of fleet management and trying to become an independent agency was huge. And even though we were a small agency. It's still a small agency. It's one of the smallest in the Federal government. We were starting in many ways from ground zero. And we still had to work with GSA. We still had to work with a lot of the people over there. And many of them were very good to work with. But it didn't always translate to the top that way because there was jealousies. There was hurt that they took away their little flower, you know, because toilet paper and [laughter] and warehouses aren't very glamorous. Presidential Libraries are pretty glamorous in their mind.

MS. BRENNER: In that climate of transition, how were the interactions between the National Archives as an agency with other Federal government agencies?

MR. WILSON: Challenging because a lot of them we had to get to take it seriously, and a lot of that was in records management, and trying to make sure that we achieved good records management policies. Now, one of the differences, well one of the things I brought in, and Bob Warner was pretty high on this too, but he was really wrapped up in independence and didn't get a lot done. But I felt as an independent agency we needed to take our place alongside the Smithsonian and the Library of Congress

as a major part of the cultural and historical legacy of the country. We had not been perceived that way at all. And public programming is very important to me. Educational programs is very important. These are high priorities to me, and not everybody liked that. A lot of people didn't like that. And so we gradually, in the beginning, had some real opportunities, one with the bicentennial and the Bill of Rights, and first the bicentennial and the Constitution—and working with some pretty powerful commission people on that. We gained some traction there. Jim Billington had not been there very long. He was at the Library of Congress at that point. And I had a good working relationship with Jim. We got along well. He gave me a lot of good advice and good thoughts, and couldn't believe that I was so naive and young [laughter] coming into the Washington environment. He understood the Washington environment far more than I did. I learned later but never did get over the naivety, the fact that they could make allegations. I didn't do that. What do you mean? Go ahead and go after me. I didn't do anything.

MS. BRENNER: What exactly was that Washington insider culture then?

MR. WILSON: Oh it was getting rough. If you were on top they were going after you in some way or the other. I mean they wanted to take down the person on top. And you had a sense, a growing sense, and part of this came through Iran contra. Part of it came as a result of Watergate. Part of it was the whole congressional environment up there was starting to change. It hadn't when I first got there. You still had some really class act people up there. Senator Kassebaum, Senator Mark Hatfield was terrific. You had Lindy Boggs. Congressman Boggs was one of strongest supporters, and one of my strongest supporters. You had a lot of people who really cared about the National Archives, who cared about our records, who cared about our heritage. But you had this other element that who sought what and when. Everything was evidenced, and that was an environment that I had a hard time dealing with, particularly with Presidential records. There are a lot of stories related to that. But I mean, that's where I was really attacked, and in electronic records. It was all brand new. I mean I can remember Frank Burke was set on having a super computer. I'm not a techie. And in fact, I won't even show you my cell phone.

MS. BRENNER [Laughter].

MR. WILSON: There was just a sixth sense that you had to look at, that this was moving so fast, that if we put in a huge computer system to handle the records it was going to be outdated without two years. And so I did make the decision to go with the PCs, the standalones, and then gradually develop the electronic records area. But I left it to the experts to say what. It was nothing but instinct that said don't put in a super computer. They had already looked at various options and I killed it. That's one of the first things I did, besides putting in fax machines. And so we were just beginning to struggle with that whole environment and working with other agencies to try to come up with solutions because they were creating, you know, well what is a record? Well that's a good question. I always had a feeling that something had to rise to the level of a record and not everything that was on the computer is a record. Not every email is a record. We had some judges at the time that felt that everything was a record because it might show who knew what and when they knew it. The investigative reporters, I mean the National Security Archives was after me from day one over access to records. Coming out of the Presidential Library experience I think probably made a difference in my perspective on that. I never agreed with the idea that everything Nixon did was a record. His funeral plans, that's not an official record. His daughter's wedding plans, that's not an official record, even though they might be in his desk or something like that. And that's what they were trying to create—an environment that everything was a record. And I opposed that. I testified—remember the movie came out with the Kennedy

assassination. And there was this whole movement about opening everything from the First Lady Lady Bird Johnson's diaries to Caroline, you know all of these things, and I said no. I wrote an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*, I don't remember where it went. But an op-ed piece saying look you can't do that. You're losing history if you do that. If you can't guarantee some privacy, some restrictions that says we're going to take this but we're going to put a restriction of 20 years after the death, or protect the reputations and the names of people who might be included in that kind of record, then they aren't going to keep it. You're going to lose it. And you're going to lose history. So I guess part of that comes down to my philosophy as Archivist which was we were a cultural institution as much as we were a warehouse.

MS. BRENNER: Who opposed your philosophy on that and why?

MR. WILSON: Well most of the journalists, particularly the investigative journalists opposed that. They wanted immediate access or certainly within a short period of time. You had some members of Congress who just by nature wanted to further restrict the Executive Branch in any way they could. Some historians who, particularly those writing the Nixon, wanted immediate access, or they should have immediate access, not everybody [laughter], the academic, you know, club. So you had a lot of this going on. And one of my favorite sayings was you get four historians in a room, you get seven different opinions. And on that note, my best constituency, the most supportive constituency I had were the genealogists. They were grateful for everything we did, anything we could give them. They were always there supporting me, whether it be letters to Congress, or on the Hill. And a lot of them were pretty wealthy, pretty sophisticated, certainly well-educated hobbyists basically, in many cases. But tremendous support from the genealogy community in general, as a whole.

MS. BRENNER: What parts of being Archivist did you most enjoy?

MR. WILSON: I most enjoyed trying to make a difference with a perception of the Archives, as a cultural agency. I enjoyed working with the staff. And I enjoyed building up the field. The Regional Archives was very important to me because that's where we really interacted with the American people most. They didn't have to come to Washington, DC, and look at the records. Giving them some more respect and thought, and I think we did a pretty good job of creating a good working environment out there. And even the Record Centers, I'd visit a lot of Record Centers. They played an important role, and I had to go out there and tell them that. And to see their faces light up was very rewarding on that. Taking the Bill of Rights out to the people, a very controversial move on my part. Mostly because I didn't want Philip Morris to do it.

MS. BRENNER: Who is he?

MS. KRATZ: Philip Morris, the company.

MR. WILSON: Philip Morris the cigarette company, but it wasn't the cigarette company. It was Kraft Foods. But everybody focused of the cigarettes. And I was really ahead of my time, and believed strongly in public-private partnerships, that in order to accomplish anything we couldn't rely on appropriations alone, that we needed to build some partnerships. Well they approached me on this idea and they wanted to take a copy of the Bill of Rights out to the American people and make it available to every classroom. And we reached millions of children with it. We reached millions of schools. And there was this whole public exhibit that traveled around the country. And hundreds of thousands of people visited

during the Bill of Rights centennial. And we took \$500,000.00 in order to do it, and they paid for all of it. Now we ended up not using any of our copies of the Bill of Rights. We used the Virginia copy, because they supported this. So the Virginia State allowed their copy to be used, but we authorized the program going into schools. I think it was a great program. I'm still proud of it, even though I got criticized strongly in Congress—

MS. BRENNER: [Interposing] And what was Congress' opposition to the traveling Bill of Rights?

MR. WILSON: That I took money from Philip Morris.

MS. KRATZ: Did this play into your decision to want to have a Foundation for the National Archives?

MR. WILSON: Yes.

MS. KRATZ: And what was your role in that?

MR. WILSON: [Laughter] Interestingly enough [laughter], I wanted to create a National Archives Foundation. And the one who came to me with the idea of how to create it was Karl Rove. [Laughter] Most people aren't going to like that. This is before Karl became very political. And at the time he had a direct mail company in Texas. And Karl was providing services to all of the big museums, state museums, and organizations and historical companies, various non-profits, and was very successful at it. He came to it through the Johnson Library connections, because he was based in Austin Texas. So Karl came to me with the idea of creating a National Archives Foundation so he could get some resources to help build it up. And I thought it was a good idea, and I still do. Well, you know obviously it has been. So we drew up a charter but before that, I had created the Presidential Library Advisory Committee. Talk about the opposition giving themselves clout. But it was a clout and from my experience with Presidential Libraries I said these people can really help us with Congress and help us gain all kinds of activity. And if we can get it working together and seeing the common elements of all Presidential Libraries, rather than these fiefdoms out here, if we can have an organization that brings them together, I think it could be powerful. And I would say, that's probably one of my most successful ventures in the Archives, was the creation of that. I got David Eisenhower. I got Caroline Kennedy, Ambassador Kennedy now. I got one of the Hoover grandsons. We had Johnson, the head of CNN, the former head of CNN. I can't remember his first name, but he was a Johnson, no relation, but he was the president of CNN at the time. He was president of the Foundation down there too. And from the Eisenhower we had of course David. We had every library represented. And I convened them and we met twice a year. And we'd meet at one of the Presidential Libraries and they would host it. I can remember the meeting in Johnson library, and I took Caroline Kennedy out to buy her cowboy boots. She wanted to know where to buy cowboy boots. So I said come with me.

[Laughter]

MR. WILSON: And we got them thinking collectively. We got them to work together. So it was a very powerful group, and we would meet, and they would talk, and they would come out of those meetings amazed at how much they had in common and how common their issues were, and I think that's where we really kind of laid the ground work for a lot of projects—well one of the first things was the joint exhibits that would travel around, and the other major public/private partnership was World War II 50th anniversary. I got USAA to put \$1 million to travel the exhibit around and it went to all of the Presidential Libraries, as well as a couple of other places. But General McDermott was the head of USAA

at the time and that was a great program. I didn't get as criticized on that one as I did on the first one. But you know, it was ironic that one of the criticism was, well a Federal agency shouldn't do that. You know now the Smithsonian is taking money from Orkin to put on an insect exhibit. Talk about cause marketing. And you know the Library of Congress has all kinds of private support. And so, you know I think that's now an accepted fact. It's just it was brand new at the time.

MS. BRENNER: Was that before or after the decision to create Archives II?

MR. WILSON: Oh that was after. Archives II was early in the administration. By the time we started that wasn't actually signed off on until '90 or '91—

MS. BRENNER: [Interposing] I'm just trying to see the timeline in my head. Did they relate to each other at all or—

MR. WILSON: [Interposing] No, no, no. They didn't cross. Archives II wasn't controversial in a sense, other than the way we funded it, and how we got it through. And that was kind of under the radar as well. I don't think anybody argued with the fact that we didn't need the space, or that there wasn't a need for additional archives facilities. We were overflowing downtown. But, and I was there for the groundbreaking. But I wasn't there for the dedication so—

MS. BRENNER: [Interposing] You've mentioned some, but what would you say were the high points or successes of your tenure as Archivist?

MR. WILSON: Well one—I think we laid all the groundwork for becoming an independent agency. Two—the higher visibility of the National Archives public programming and a recognition that we were a major cultural agency. Three—some of the education programs had a tremendous impact during the centennial years. World War II was an important conscious-raising activity. We got a lot of visibility for that. Certifying the 27 amendment [laughter], again, under the radar, because it was so controversial, particularly among certain members of Congress. This is one of the original 12 Bill of Rights, actually the 12th Bill of Right that was never passed at the time, during the original constitutional struggle. And so it lingered for over 200 years with five states approving, seven didn't take action at the time. So it was one of the two. When this issue came up and kind of laid there for a long time and then there began to get rumblings of controversy because Congress kept raising the pay. And then interestingly, a graduate student at the University of Texas wrote this as a senior paper I think, or at least a classroom paper, arguing that this amendment was still alive. He got a C on his paper. So obviously his professor didn't agree with him. And so he really started pushing it with some legislatures and creating a stir about it, and several state legislatures started taking it up and began passing it. I think at the time 23 states had maybe passed it or 18 states had passed it. So between 1987 and '91 about 15 other states took it up and passed it, because they were angry with the Congress by and large. So what happened was all of a sudden when Michigan passed it as the 38th state, two-thirds had approved the amendment. The controversy was, had it died? Was it still legal? Because some states had to go back over 200 years to say they had passed it, the original states. Three or four other states passed it immediately thereafter, but Michigan was the 38th state. It didn't help that I came Archivist out of Michigan. That was used against me. It had nothing to do with it. My dilemma—and you had constitutionalists speaking for both sides of it, and some of the most powerful said yeah, it's still valid. Others argued against it. Senator Byrd had started a Resolution in Congress saying that it was dead. Tom Foley, Speaker of the House at the time, had kind of come out against it but nothing had actually taken place. And so, it became an

issue because by executive order legislation, normally it would have been a function of the Secretary of State, but with the creation of the National Archives that function was delegated to the Archivist of the United States to certify an amendment once a proper number of states had passed the resolution. That it was therefore a valid constitutional amendment. Well my problem was I couldn't take a side—some said you've had succession by these southern states in the Civil War and that meant they gave up all their rights and it was no longer valid. The states would have to pass it again. But of course it wasn't while they were succeeded. It was passed while they were a state. You had others arguing that there is an implied deadline to constitutional amendments, which there now is but there wasn't at the time. I think that came out in 1938 or '39. And then you had several of these kind of arguments that said no this would be invalid. And Senator Byrd's position was that it was up to Congress to decide. And so at one point I wrote that article in the *New York Times*, and it was the only time I made front page of the *USA Today*. But at one point Senator Byrd ordered me up to the Hill for a meeting with some legal counsel and I went up. And he held the meeting in the appropriations room of the Senate, sending me a subtle message, not so subtle message, and lectured me on the Constitution and senatorial rights, and senatorial courtesy that I should be aware of. And I listened patiently and calmly and said, "Yes, sir, yes sir," and went back certified it because if I didn't I was interpreting the Constitution. If I did, then I was just simply following through on what was then in place. And it was up to the Senate and the House to take other action. And that kind of implied that if Congress wanted to take other action they are certainly free to do so. But I have an obligation and a commitment, something I have to do. Legal counsel all agreed that this needed to be signed and so I did. And so I'm proud of that. Not many Archivists can say I was part of the Constitution. And that was a highlight.

MS. BRENNER: What was the signing ceremony like?

MR. WILSON: Very low key, in my office with about six people there. And we didn't even take a photograph. Did we?

MS. KRATZ: We finally found a couple in—

MR. WILSON: [Interposing] Oh did you?

MS. KRATZ: —in your papers at the Bush Library.

MR. WILSON: They were down there.

MS. KRATZ: We found some, yeah. We found a couple.

MR. WILSON: Well thank goodness. I remember that I kept, I'm going to have to write them because I don't have them.

MS. BRENNER: To what extent—

MR. WILSON: [Interposing] I kept them in my papers—I'll be darned.

MS. BRENNER: To what did you receive criticism after you signed?

MR. WILSON: Not much, I had a lot of people come out and say that's the right thing, Constitution scholars, that's the right thing to do. And it kind of died then. And in Congress they said it is part of the Constitution now. And so it became a non-issue. Tom Foley kind of backed off completely. Senator Byrd probably always held it against me. But he was already senile. I don't know if I should have said that.

[Laughter]

MS. BRENNER: Just sort of a side question, what was Senator Byrd like? Dealing with him? Obviously a controversial figure for a very long time.

MR. WILSON: Well he was pontificating, arrogant, self-anointed scholar of the Constitution. But a powerful force to be reckoned with in the Senate because he'd been there for so long. And, you could, probably better to ask the FBI, or CIA, or somebody like that who has satellite agencies in West Virginia that question. I didn't have that many problems with him other than that.

MS. BRENNER: I was just curious. Thank you. But—

MR. WILSON: [Interposing] I had far, a far more controversial person in my mind was Senator Ted Stevens. That's why we have the Alaska Record Center. And that was, you know, we weren't particularly in favor of that. But that was pretty much imposed.

MS. KRATZ: That's closed now.

MR. WILSON: Is it closed now?

MS. KRATZ: It got closed this last year.

MR. WILSON: Yeah, and I figured, I could understand the rationale, but because people traveling would have to go to Seattle to do anything. But it was tough to manage, and it was tough to open up. And we had to scrape some budget money out to do it, and it was pretty small, even in its prime. We opened another one in Western New York. Again, a congressional mandate, and another proud thing, one of the proudest things I think I can say of my administration was I had no schedule C's. There were no political appointees in the National Archives, except me.

MS. BRENNER: Going back to the—

MR. WILSON: [Interposing] That didn't last. [Laughter]

MS. BRENNER: Going back to the amendment for a second, did you consult with the President of the United States at all? Was there any—

MR. WILSON: [Interposing] I consulted the White House counsel.

MS. BRENNER: Okay.

MR. WILSON: He said do what you need to do but as far as we're concerned, it's legal. I mean that helped, but I didn't take direction very well at all. It was interesting. Another proud moment I had was at the end of the administration, the Bush administration. And this came up at the end of the Reagan administration. I've only been in office a year, a little over a year. Was I supposed to resign? And there were some people who thought I was a political appointee and that I should turn in my resignation. It was never requested. It was never a question by the Bush administration. And so I went through the first term without controversy and it was just assumed. Nobody ever raised the question are we going to appoint a new Archivist? It was it was good. At the end of the Bush administration when Clinton won the election almost immediately there was a call for me to resign, mostly by Senate staffers, and Senator Glenn's committee. One of the biggest problems I had was Senator Glenn was he didn't have a clue what was going on. His staff was running it, there was an oversight committee. And they tried to run the

agency. They told me who I had to fire, but I didn't, and that's why they went after me. But the day after the election the story came out about, if you look at the paper, "absentee Archivist." I mean I was accused of being an absentee; that I had turned to Claudine, which was not true. But because I was visiting our 33 sites I was supposedly not running the show, which was all a planted story. I had also been out with a knee surgery. So I can remember begin called up to the hill by the Senate oversight staff and trying to explain this story. Well they planted the story. I was on crutches, and they made me come up to the Hill and lecture me on how I should have listened to their advice on who should be the Deputy Archivist, and who should be the head of the administration. They didn't like Jim Megronigle. They didn't like Claudine because they were independent. They were civil servants. They couldn't touch them. I was supposed to unilaterally fire them for some trumped up reason. There was no reason to give other than they didn't like them.

[Laughter]

MS. BRENNER: I'm a bit confused actually, about whether the National Archives is partisan or not. I have heard both sides.

MR. WILSON: Well I think, let me continue then, because I was really under the gun and, right after the election I was in this dilemma. I didn't really want to continue serving in that kind of environment. At the same time if I resigned I politicized the agency because it meant each future Archivist would have to resign under a new administration. Basically, they can interpret it that way. If I didn't resign, I was going to get a handful of trouble. They weren't going to sit back.

MS. BRENNER: For clarification, where was this trouble coming from and why?

MR. WILSON: Mostly from the Senate's oversight committee staff. And you know some on the House, but not much on the House. Mostly Wolfe wasn't a problem. But the Senate was. And I was asked point blank to resign at one point, and I said no. I can't. And so they turned the IG on me and said "okay, you've falsified travel information." I did not falsify, I had gone to Texas to look at the Bush, and they said I had met with the President, and cut a deal or something. First of all it was at the end of the administration and they were turning over of the tapes and the computer stuff. Well at that point Ray Mosley was the Acting Deputy Director. And Ray had really worked with the White House people and our legal counsel, and worked out the agreement for turning over the White House—I can't remember the particular, it was sensitive records. And were they Presidential records, or were they agency records? That was at the heart of the controversy. At that point I was living fairly closely, and Ray was clear out in Maryland. They finally reached agreement the night before the swearing in, or the inauguration, I guess. And so at 11:00 at night I went down and signed the agreement. I said "is this what I'm supposed to sign?" "Yeah." Everything has been worked out. Well then they claimed that there was some collusion, like I had a meeting with the President to work out the—like the President is going to call me up there and say well you may want to make sure that these White House records are not archived, which was ludicrous, but, enough of it got traction that the critics could claim that I was doing something wrong. Then I was approached later and asked to go down to Texas A&M to help with the Bush Library. And of course then I had to cut a deal. I had protected the President from the Iran Contra records in exchange for being named Executive Director, which wasn't true because the university hired me. I can't imagine going through it again, but it was a very tough time when I had to go through a public deposition and the press was invited into my deposition, which was almost unheard of. I mean we could reject it, but I didn't have anything to hide. So I didn't object. But the National Security Agency was



suing, National Security Archives was suing me. And at that point they wouldn't give me counsel, for conflict of interest, I think it was. And so I had no legal counsel. I had to go out and hire my legal counsel, which was Fred Fielding upon the recommendation of a friend of mine, who was very expensive. And it was all based on a lot of the charges by the IG, which weren't true. And they were later proved not to be true. I mean it just didn't happen. The timing was out of sequence and everything else. Frankly it cost me a lot of money to be Archivist of the United States. My wife was furious. And so it hounded me all the way—even first year of my tenure down there I had to come up for a Justice Department sit in on deposition that I had to give to the IG, who was hand-picked by—well I think the worst legacy of the Carter administration was the IG system. It enables Congress to do all kinds of things in the Executive Branch, because they don't report to anybody, except for Senate staffers on the hill. And so they create these false things, but at any rate after the deposition, the four hour deposition, with the Justice Department sitting in, they said there is nothing here. We aren't doing anything. And it was a civil thing. It wasn't criminal. It was civil. So it was dropped and that was it. Did I ever get an apology? Did I ever get any compensation? No. But at least it was done. And at one point, I remember my legal counsel saying do you want to fight this to preserve your reputation or just get it over with? And I said get it over with. My legacy would be what my legacy is. And you know, I know what I did. I can look at myself in the mirror every day and I feel good about what I did. And I know I didn't do anything illegal or dishonest. But beyond that, I'm not going to spend years fighting the bureaucracy to do it. And at that point I had some pretty strong enemies in the Archives who were feeding this.

MS. BRENNER: Well it doesn't mean anything from an intern who was born around the time that this happened, but I'm sorry that you had to go through that.

MR. WILSON: Well it was. I had, I had five great years as Archivist and six months of hell. But I wouldn't trade it for anything. I've had a very privileged career. And to go down there and then finish up building the Brush Library was a great sinecure. That eliminated all the pain because the Bushes were so great to work with. I do a class at the University of Virginia about working with the Presidential families from my experience. And I talk about the insider view—I had a rare privilege to work with former Presidents and really get to know the characters. And what you had with President Bush was again, a person with no ego, like Ford, and there were many comparisons. But unlike Ford, who had this kind of formality to him, I was embraced as part of the family with the Bush's. I was always Mrs. Bush's archivist. I don't know if you know, but that was her pet name for me. And to have the privilege of working, and he so appreciated everything we did. And he was just a class act. He was the last of an era, the last of a generation of politicians, and he said "Don, don't, never use the word legacy around me." "Give the other person credit and never be a braggadocio," as he used to say. And he said, "I'm not worried about my place in history. It'll take care of itself and I'll be judged however. I won't be here to worry about it." And similarly with President Ford, I got to go back and give you one example of, well there are two poignant, or one poignant in my career—Ford and Carter used to do what I call the Jimmy and Gerry show because Carter and Ford became very close because of the Sadat trip, the funeral trip. And they all of a sudden realized that even though they were bitter political enemies they realized they shared so much. And they became very close friends. I never had the appreciation for Jimmy Carter that I had for Gerald Ford, mostly because Carter had a bigger ego than, he still does—he thought he was the only one that could solve the Middle East's problems and a lot of these things. But they became good friends, and one of the trips up there to Grand Rapids, President Carter and President Ford, and President Ford asked me to take him through the exhibit, and I did. He got to the Oval Office recreation. And we walked into

the Oval Office and I started to talk and turned to him and there was just a solemnness to them. And I looked at them both and I decided that I won't say a word. And it seemed like 15 minutes. It was probably four or five minutes. And I looked back at them and tears were in both their eyes. And I just got chills, it was so poignant at that point, and I just turned and walked out and led them out through the rest of the exhibit. But what it meant for both of them to be President of the United States and their shared experience, it was just so moving at the time. I will never forget that. And another example of another poignant moment with Ford was, Fred Friendly, who used to be president of CBS News, for years he was president of CBS News. He came out and he did a constitutional—as he retired he did these constitutional forums and he did one for the Ford Library at the time in the 80s. And he came to the museum and I took him through the museum. And when we got to the Nixon pardon, and he looked at it for about a couple minutes, he just stared. And he turned to me and he said “Don, I got to tell you something. I was adamantly opposed to pardoning Richard Nixon, and I took Gerry Ford to all kinds of levels of criticism and broadcast, and we really pounced on him.” And this was, this was in '87 or '86. And he said, “But you know, I got to admit, I was wrong. Gerry Ford was right. He had to heal the country. And the only way to do that was to pardon Richard Nixon.” I thought man, is that some revelation. And then, another is, Brent Scowcroft, General Scowcroft was on the Foundation and was very close to Gerry Ford and to President Bush, he was President Bush's closest friend. He still is. I mean he is his closest friend. But he was also very close to President Ford. And we were planning the exhibit. We were still building a component. And I think it was Mayaguez. It was the Mayaguez Crisis. And of course Scowcroft was with the National Security Council, so he was very involved in the Mayaguez episode, and I said well General Scowcroft I got a real problem here. I said, President Ford said this was the timetable that his happened here and here, and your papers and you indicate that it was this, and there was a time difference of maybe four or five hours or something like this. And he looked at me and he said “Don, President Ford said that? The President is always right.”

[Laughter]

MR. WILSON: Go with President Ford. So it was a wonderful experience. And with President Bush, it was a very hands on experience with building the library. And he hated to raise money. He said, “I've spent my whole, political life raising money. I don't want to do it anymore. You got to raise the money.” And, but it wasn't hard, because I, they knew I was representing him. And, we raised \$50 Million in three years and built the library.

MS. BRENNER: Okay, you just shared a few, but I was, and by asking are there any anecdotes that would be valuable?

MR. WILSON: Well I got a few with President Bush because they're so funny. And one of them, and it's not even necessarily first hand because, well it's first hand from one of the sources, but at the end of the administration, I wasn't at the meeting, but there is always a meeting and I would subsequently do a lot of them. But there was always a meeting with the Department of Army for funeral plans. They've got to lay out the operation for planning inevitably the funeral. And so they met in the White House, and it was Barbara Bush and her Chief of Staff and the President, and the Colonel who was in charge of the plans for the funeral. And he said, Now Mr. President, this is a delicate thing to try to have to do, but we have to do this as part of the requirements.” And this is all a result of after the Kennedy assassination. They weren't ready and so they had to be planning all this stuff. So, we always referred to him as Colonel Death. [Laughter]

But I can't remember what his real name was. So he was telling me this fairly soon after the meeting, he said, "I just need to request of you some of your thoughts." President Bush sat there and he kind of thought for a minute and he said, "I want to be buried at sea. A burial at sea for a state funeral." [Laughter] You know, and his mouth kind of dropped and there was just this dead silence for about 20 seconds. And finally he looked and Mrs. Bush and said, "George, the hell you are!" And Bush said, "I guess not." [Laughter] And so they originally had decided on Kennebunkport and Robin's had been moved there, and they had plots. Well it was about '96 or '97, I was invited down to Houston right after Nixon's funeral, and President and Mrs. Bush had been at Nixon's funeral. And so there was this black tie affair at the MD Anderson Center and there were only two things that President Bush would do, one is Points of Light and two is MD Anderson Cancer Center in terms of being an honorary board member. So we were down to that and I was at the table with President and Mrs. Bush and four or five other people, and I was sitting across the table from Mrs. Bush and about a half an hour into the dinner somebody had asked her about the funeral and she looks over at me and she said, "Don, we need to talk. George needs to be buried in College Station at the library." And I said, "Well Ms. Bush, we can discuss that but this wasn't really the forum I thought was appropriate to discuss funeral plans." And, so the President kind of looked up a little sheepishly and said, "Barbara was quite taken by the ceremony out there." And he said "maybe you need to come down next week to the office and we'll talk about this." So I did and it turns out they decided they wanted to create a plot at the library. Well as the Executive Director of the Foundation of the library at the time, I had the responsibility to design and build the whole thing, but in order to do so we had to get a bill passed by legislators because it sits on state land. Well, interestingly the governor at the time was his son. And I said, "You've cleared all this right? You've explained it to the family and everything." He said, "Don't worry about it." [Laughter] So the bill is introduced and it's by affirmation but then it goes to the governor for signature. And the phone rings one day in my office, and I pick it up the phone and he says, "Don." I recognized his voice and I said, "Yes governor."

MS. BRENNER: [Laughter].

MR. WILSON: And he said, "What the hell is this?" [Laughter]

MS. BRENNER: [Laughter].

MR. WILSON: I said, "You mean your father and mother haven't talked to you about it?" He said, "No. This is the first I heard of it." [Laughter] I said, "It is okay governor. You can sign it though. This is what they want." He said, "All right, I just didn't know what the hell was going on." And so I had to become a certified cemetery keeper in order to build the cemetery I guess. And also because they transferred Robin's remains down there, and that's a long story with Robin.

MS. BRENNER: Well based on your extensive experiences with the Presidents and with the Archives, what words of wisdom can you share with us?

MR. WILSON: Well I think you just have to take life as it comes, and take advantage of it. I've been blessed. I was very fortunate. I'm very proud to be the first Presidentially-appointed Archivist. I think the Archives has a lot of challenges ahead of it. I was being sued every other day practically, and not as personally, but as Archivist because of electronic records issues, I think those are still out there, email, you know. What rises to the level of record? I think Presidential papers are a real controversy and it's a fine line there about what's personal, and what's private, and what's public. And I think a lot of thought has to be given to that over time, and I can't imagine why anybody wants to run for that office now,

personally, but I think that to be Archivist of the United States now is a real challenge because of the atmosphere in Washington generally. And everything is criminalized. If you disagree with someone, the first thing they want to do is criminalize it, rather than try to reach a core compromise. I was fortunate I think, in the early years, that we had some real statesmen up there who would work together. Tip O'Neill was more partisan but he would work with you and you had both sides of the aisle working together. One of the interesting things, the first Foundation board meeting we had, and the President wanted several Democrats on there, and one of them was Tip O'Neill. He was on the Foundation. And we met at Kennebunkport. This was right after I became Executive Director of the Foundation. We met at Kennebunkport at the big hotel there and they talked about raising the money for the library and other things. And Speaker O'Neill stepped out into the hallway and motioned me out there. And he said, "Don, you know I'm a great admirer of George Bush. I want to give you a check for \$2,000.00 for the library. It's not going to be a big check but it's a token, I want to be the first. I want to be the first to contribute." And I thought man that speaks volumes about what their relationship was. It was interesting, Gerry Ford didn't have any enemies. I really don't think he had any enemies on the Hill because he was there for so long and had been admired for many things, and even afterwards he had very few. Except one, and that was Schlesinger, Secretary of Energy Schlesinger. He found him arrogant and pompous. I had recommended him once for a speaker and he said, "No, anybody but James. I don't want him. I had enough to deal with him for the administration." And with President Bush there were critics, Mitchell being one of them, who really kind of sideswiped him on the tax thing, and blasted him afterwards for raising taxes, and he broke his pledge because that is what was best for the country. He had to do it, raise taxes. And Mitchell said, "No new taxes," and made political hay out of it. But I think the whole atmosphere kind of changed and was changing a little bit, and the Reagan administration helped create a level of tension. But after Newt Gingrich was elected to the House—the so-called Gingrich Revolution, Congress became so split and so partisan. And I always to this day thank God I wasn't there during that time because it would have been almost impossible. I think subsequent Archivists have done a remarkable job in building the budget. When I left office I think our budget was \$120 Million. I don't know what it is \$400 Million, \$500 Million now or something like that. I don't think staff has increased that much. We had about 2,800 employees. It's probably maybe 3,000.

MS. KRATZ: 3,000.

MR. WILSON: So it's a heck of a burden to carry and the number of records, pages of records has probably quadrupled since I left office. So it's a horrendous task and I wouldn't criticize, or I wouldn't second guess any of my successors because they have to deal with a whole set of problems I never dealt with. But I'm very proud of my association with the National Archives. I spent 20 years with the National Archives, and it was very fortunate that even kind of forced out, I can retire [laughter] glad 20 years early. And I was a Presidential appointee.

MS. BRENNER: [Interposing] Thank you so much for your time.

MR. WILSON: You're welcome.

MS. BRENNER: And anything else you want to add?

MR. WILSON: Not right now, we'll probably talk more over lunch.

MS. KRATZ: Yes.

MS. BRENNER: Sounds great.

MR. WILSON: Anything else will be off record!

[END RECORDING]

WOODROW WILSON MUSEUM





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Rebecca Brenner, Intern, History Office  
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