

U.S. National Archives and Records Administration
National Archives History Office
Oral History Interview
Subject: Barbara Larsen
Interviewer: Jennifer Johnson
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MS. JENNIFER JOHNSON: My name is Jennifer Johnson and I am conducting an oral history interview for the National Archives and Records Administration with Barbara Larsen today. Barbara worked as an archivist at the National Archives in Kansas City and retired in 2012. Barbara, can we start with what you were doing before you came to the Archives?

MS. BARBARA LARSEN: I was a stay-at-home mom doing the volunteer work and that sort of stuff. At that point I still had little kids, but it was, like, okay, maybe I need to start thinking about going back to work.

MS. JOHNSON: Did that involve any school or you knew about the National Archives?

MS. LARSEN: Actually, I knew about it because my husband had done lots of research out here. He was good friends with Alan Perry and Reed Whitaker and Diana Duff. Diana was a student of his. I knew people out here and they said we've got volunteers. We can do preservation. It's not genie work. If you'd like to do it, I think you'd enjoy it. So I started volunteering and then a year and a half later they said would you like to get paid a small pittance for doing what you're doing for free and I said, well, why not. So that started being part-time. Eventually I ended up with a full-time job.

MS. JOHNSON: What year would you say you started volunteering?

MS. LARSEN: I think it was probably in 1987. My 10-year-old was in fifth grade at that time.

MS. JOHNSON: Can you talk a little bit about what your impressions were of the agency when you started your career or when you started coming on-site to volunteer and do work with the records?

MS. LARSEN: As I said I knew some stuff about it—maybe because my husband did research and stuff like that and was also an archivist besides his other real job. I kind of knew, you know, and I thought, okay, a little chance because I had not gone back to school. I talked about it. I had thought about going back into computer science. I just never did. We had the kids and they were small and they did not have a computer science program at U of KC at that time. And so it just kind of, I had done indexing for books—my husband's books and stuff like that. And I did have a history major besides.

MS. JOHNSON: What was a typical day or week for you?

MS. LARSEN: I did a lot of processing. The early on reference was done completely different than it is now. There was one person in charge of reference and basically did it or might dole something out. She wanted control. I won't go into that. It was done differently so I didn't do a lot of reference. It was mostly processing out of the FRC boxes, into the Hollinger's. Some of it, the first project was just strictly out of the brown boxes to Hollingers. I was going through the 135's to make sure everything was there. Most of what I've done has—a lot of it was working with the Indian agencies. We've got a lot of BIA records and I think they have finally finished the last processing.

MS. JOHNSON: And, you were co-editor of the Guide to Records at the National Archives at Kansas City?

MS. LARSEN: It was an update on the—I got a copy if you would like to see.

MS. JOHNSON: I would love to see it.

MS. LARSEN: I didn't know whether I still had one because back then there was no internet. So this was the finding aid. It was an update and I don't know if you knew Nancy Malan. She was in Washington.

MS. JOHNSON: She was my first boss when I moved to Maryland.

MS. LARSEN: She was the lead out of Washington working, I think, with all of the regions on updating your guides.

MS. JOHNSON: So how long did this take you?

MS. LARSEN: We were using the old guides. It was basically going through the old guide and checking, you know, do we have additional records? Did we want to change something? Updating the footage. We didn't start from scratch. But if we had new record groups then they had to be added in, and at the time I just helped doing it and Alan ended up sticking my name on it. He didn't ask. I didn't expect it but I thought that was very nice of him. Not everybody would have done that. He said, well, you did most of the work.

MS. JOHNSON: Did you have to write finding aids?

MS. LARSEN: We had paper finding aids.

MS. JOHNSON: Did you have to do new descriptions?

MS. LARSEN: On some, yes. A lot of it was just rechecking the guide, you know, to have the information that's there. Every region had one.

MS. JOHNSON: You mentioned Native American records. Any interesting discoveries that you remember or a particular item?

MS. LARSEN: The student case files were interesting, out of Haskell, because they went way back. Sometimes you found interesting things. I was trying to think, there was an employee and there were letters back and forth from having been in Russia. There was a Native American who went to work in D.C. and - - anyway. At the time I felt maybe, you know, I never did anything with it. But they were kind of interesting and those came out of the Haskell records because I processed Haskell. The original first one I completely processed and wrote descriptions for.

We have the Standing Rock records, at the times of the killing. Some significant events. And the telegram to go bring him in. In fact I carried that telegram home from Washington, D.C. in 2009. It had been loaned out. I was going out there. Alan asked would I pick it up and something else and bring them back. I said sure. So they met me and we signed the paperwork and I thought, oh god. This was after 9/11 and I had to let it go through security. I'm thinking, oh no, when is this going to come out on the other side? And I got back and I said I'm dropping it off.

MS. JOHNSON: Were you allowed to—did you have to put it under your seat or did you—was it always near you?

MS. LARSEN: I had to—yeah. It was a folder type thing. I didn't have to stick it above. Nobody knows you got it. They don't know what it is.

MS. JOHNSON: Right, right. We're going pretty fast. Please don't let me rush you if you have other things you want to talk about. You were working here during the big move from Bannister?

MS. LARSEN: Yes.

MS. JOHNSON: Do you want to talk at all about that?

MS. LARSEN: I would have to say not only was it an interesting time but it was stressful because we were all—everybody—going through and finding stuff. Either it was forgotten about, we didn't know it was there, or you didn't know where they belonged. I went through a lot of Corps of Engineers old records because when they closed the Army Records Center they moved all that stuff over when the Archives was brand new here, basically without a lot of paperwork. I would go into Reed's office and ask him. He was here but even he didn't know. We tried to tie back into the early paperwork, the accessioning files, and find out what they were because we had to do that. We had to, you know, get it.

MS. JOHNSON: Do you remember roughly how long it took?

MS. LARSEN: I'm trying to think how long it was when we first started. I mean because we had—then we had to move the microfilm. It consumed, basically, months and months of time to get it done from the time that we knew that we were going to move and when they had this building. Then people had to figure out what could come down here, discussions on what did we want down here as opposed to out at Lee's Summit.

MS. JOHNSON: So that was my follow-up question. Before Union Station, it was Bannister? And Lee's Summit?

MS. LARSEN: And it was Lee's Summit. And when we moved out of Bannister, the record center moved to Lenexa. And we moved down here. We knew we didn't have the space for all of the records and so, first, it was to try to figure out what we wanted to bring down here. What is the most referenced stuff, to bring down here? We still had to cover everything and check it all off and box it up and Jake was just, like, a man possessed. He was pretty much in charge of a lot of the stuff then and getting, telling, asking, you know, people to do this, that or the other thing. And to go back to and check everything against all the finding aids, checking is everything actually here? Do we have stuff that we don't really know where it belongs, where it came from? All this stuff as far as a lot of old Corps records dating from the closing at the Army Record Center. It was here in town and they just moved them all over here.

MS. JOHNSON: From your memory, do you remember what those conversations were about—was it pretty clear cut on records?

MS. LARSEN: A lot of it was. We wanted the Native American records down here. We definitely wanted that. And so then figure out the cubic footage on that and of course you're still dealing with a lot of stuff that wasn't out of FRC boxes and when you take out of the FRC boxes the space grows. It takes up more space when you get it all out of the FRC boxes. You can't put what's in an FRC box in Hollingers and put it in the same space on a shelf. It just does not work. You have to allow for that.

We knew we were processing Indian agencies one at a time. And stuff was going to grow too. And the most used court records and I think a lot of the smaller agencies that didn't take up that much space and so it was a matter of what was being used and an efficient use of the space, besides what is referenced the most.

We wanted the naturalization records, of course. We want them down here because that's court records and they're very family history oriented. Genealogy. Then the Leavenworth prison records. And they were processed slowly. Someone had to figure out how much empty space to leave. So when we processed the stuff it can still fit. Jake was amazing at getting it done. Everybody moving stuff and then finding stuff that,

like, why do we have 10 typewriters back here? Because Mark said he felt we could keep them. Too bad, Mark.

Originally we thought everything could go to Lee's Summit but stuff ended up going to Lenexa because they filled the space at Lee's Summit. And you knew there would be incoming accessions belonging to a record group you're keeping here. You want to have room to put them on shelves. I was glad I was not in charge of having to figure all that out.

MS. JOHNSON: I saw on what you sent me that you have several publications. You and your husband...

MS. LARSEN: Yes, with my husband. He insisted. He writes. I don't write. I do not write well at all. I'll be the first one—and you can ask anybody around here that my handwriting is lousy and my writing skills are not terrific. I was not an English major. I avoided English like the plague actually.

MS. JOHNSON: Looking at some of the titles I just wondered. Did any of those articles benefit from you working here?

MS. LARSEN: Yes, there's one. It took me a long time. I convinced Larry we ought to just do a paper on it. And Corps of Engineer records actually. I turned it into the book. He said we can do this and that was really my contribution. It was the steamboat trip. There's a diary in the steamboat records in the Corps of Engineer records, Kansas City records, and it comes from this trip up the Missouri River in 1859. The diary of a passenger. He was a passenger and we managed to finally track down what the heck they were doing in the Corps records. He had a son who worked for the Kansas City Corps district and he had somebody transcribe his dad's diary and dropped them into the Corps records under the correspondent's file. I don't remember exactly which one, under exploration or exploring, or something like that. I happened to be processing that group of correspondence, making the box list and there was this diary just there. I made a photocopy of it, took it out and said this looks like fun.

Well, we found two more diaries. We found the Federal records that go with it. There was a doctor who wrote a journal of the trip and it was published in a South Dakota journal a long, long time ago. We combined all that information and got it published as a book and it was fun. We found, with help, the location of both original journals and, we tracked genealogy stuff, information on families, and I got some of the volunteers to help to piece this stuff together, and try to figure out why the original journal of the one from our records is in the Library of Congress, their manuscript section. And the other journal is what used to be the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis, which has got a different name now. It's not the state historical society. The doctor was from New Jersey and why the family ended up putting that in the Library of Congress? You know. And he went back to New Jersey. He was young, out of medical school. He took the trip as a job, as a medical officer on this trip. And he went back to New Jersey and apparently had a really good practice but somehow rather his journal ends up in Missouri.

MS. JOHNSON: Wow.

MS. LARSEN: That stuff was all my husband's favorites—the archives and theaters, which means they're in a little Safeway building in Columbia I think. Those are the records I got out of the house. It was all my husband's stuff. So it was fun and it turned into a book. That was a find in the Corps of Engineer records, which you would not expect. It was in the Kansas City correspondence. And tracking the family and learning it had just been dropped in a correspondence file. The doctor's journal had been known about and because it was published and we asked South Dakota and she said, no, you really don't need our permission to do it. You found the original anyway and the guy in St. Louis said, no, you don't need our permission because you've got the other stuff to publish it. It was fun to work on and it was interesting when we finally got the copies of both the original diaries, going back through the proofs and picking up the stuff we couldn't discern or making changes. It did help much getting the originals.

MS. JOHNSON: The original record is important.

MS. LARSEN: It really—both original records were very, very important. You see you don't know what's in there because nobody has ever looked at them and even when you take them out and you folderize it, you can't spend your time going through it. So lots of finds and people who found old wonderful posters and everything folded up. Maybe court cases and whatever, you don't know. They're still there and there's a lot of records that have never.... Again, because you don't have the time unless it's something big and bulky when you're processing, like, okay, what is this? Then you can get it out. Nobody would ever know what that folder was entitled. That was fun and we did a bunch of, a series of conference papers on it before. He was busy doing other things and working on other things. I finally said, okay, did you run out of things to do? I just wanted one paper. I wasn't looking at a book.

MS. JOHNSON: So was there a point where you both sat down and said this is way more than a paper. We should...

MS. LARSEN: He just said—yeah. He said after that we did a series of papers we can see if we can find somebody to publish this. Okay. You've got the contacts. Press contacts.

MS. JOHNSON: Do you want to speak to any challenges and/or issues that you faced in your career with NARA? I assume the move presented all kinds of challenges, which we talked about a little bit.

MS. LARSEN: There was just one time and I basically kind of repressed it. Morrow was doing their thing, the archives are here. The records centers are here. Then they're squashed together and we take them apart again, but then we don't allot the position so that the people who are really doing this get back doing what they were. So I sat for a while in the microfilm lab, which I was not happy. We were prepping some records to be microfilmed. Alan came over. He said, I didn't know you could work that slow because I was so long in getting them done. And that goes back to personnel and people. Anyway I won't get into that. But that was just one of those things that NARA does occasionally do things that you think are weird, just as an overall agency-thing, when you're out in the field.

MS. JOHNSON: The period that you did microfilm—does that mean you actually made the microfilm for the record or you prepped or identified records?

MS. LARSEN: I did a lot of prepping. There were people who were paying to have records microfilmed. I also photocopied the Yellowstone records that we have here in the Park Service with another staff person. Yellowstone wanted us to give them the records and we said no, of course. Then they paid to have a photocopy. So we photocopied them all and pulled some. We said, okay we can't obviously photocopy these. Do they want to send them out to have somebody copy them?

So we did that and that was during that crazy, nutty time too that went on, just involving getting another position. I kept—so-and-so - - got her promotion. It comes through and then that job opens up and you can—but, you know, things are—and those are things that are agency-wide...and just because of other things, well, it's not good to speak of this, but I almost quit. I really did. They said don't let her win. I said I know. I'm not going to get into the personnel, more of the backstory.

MS. JOHNSON: So you started in 1987 as a volunteer. When would you say you were full-time? I know you retired in 2012.

MS. LARSEN: Well, I went part-time I'd say from '88. So it would have been, oh, gosh, when did I go full-time? It would have been ninety—do you have a copy of...

MS. JOHNSON: You have '94 to '98 at Grace Cathedral. Do you think '94 is when you started here full-time?

MS. LARSEN: It was probably December 1998 I started full-time. Because then I quit the cathedral it would have been the Fall of '98. That would be right. All those health issues started crashing down around him.

MS. JOHNSON: I'm sure that was difficult. Is there anything else you want to add? Any anecdotes or words of wisdom?

MS. LARSEN: Oh, I don't have any words of wisdom. It's kind of fun. Usually, practically all—most people you work with as even on reference and stuff—we're very nice. By phone and then eventually mostly everything came in by email. I can remember when the internet was first starting up and I think the first one of those things was MySpace. We were told in no unequivocal terms, nobody should be on MySpace. Nobody. And now it's, like, yeah, Facebook, Twitter. Get it out there.

MS. JOHNSON: You're right. There's whole, there's whole groups devoted to social media now.

MS. LARSEN: Right. No, there was to be absolute no presence at all. Then all of a sudden it's, like, get on. Can you get on Facebook? Can you get on Twitter? Now, you've got everything everywhere. Ones you don't even know about anymore. That was a funny one.

MS. JOHNSON: Oh, I love that.

MS. LARSEN: And the one researcher, who was an East German and Joyce was the last one to work with him. I gave him to her. Diana had started with him. It was before the wall fell and he would write and ask for records. Everybody would send stuff. He's also been in contact with people in D.C. We sat down and of course we never sent it, but we wrote our tongue-in-cheek letter telling Hans to get himself onto an airplane and get over here. This was right after the wall fell. It never happened. He's never shown up. He doesn't want to pay for anything. The last time I talked to Joyce she had actually got Hans to pay for something. I think I got him to pay something once. Invariably, we would just ship it off and forget about it and D.C. apparently had done the same thing. It was the Native Americans. Germans have a thing for the American West, Indians. We never knew what his project was. Everything was always very important to his project. He's been researching this since probably the 1980s or back. Nobody has ever known what he's doing. Or why? What his focus was, he would never tell anybody whether he thought somebody was going to do something with it. It's just one of those crazy researchers. Decades-long with the same person. He always writes. No email. Personal letters come in English. He's not writing in German. Nobody knows how old he is. Nobody has any idea. But it was in East Germany, or what was East Germany.

MS. JOHNSON: Wow.

MS. LARSEN: We'd all get foreign researchers. He was unusual. Most of them come to do their thing. And either you get it to them or they come and do research. There was one time when we thought we were going to shut down and they had a researcher coming in from France, I think. I thought, oh my god, she spent all this money to get here. Then the government didn't shut down, fortunately. That's a reality.

Most researchers you deal with, you know, you get occasion ones. The crazy ones, who get snowed in on the side of the highway coming down from Minneapolis.

I'd say, by and large most of them correspond ahead of time. They find out. They let you know what they want and point out what you tell them, but be nice to your archivist. You don't know what they know and if you're not, they will never tell you that there is this sitting over here in a different record group someplace. If you're nice somebody will say, oh, well, we've got this other stuff. But if you really are nasty to people, and that's true whether it's Federal archives, state, any kind of genealogy research. Be nice to people. If you go

to a courthouse, take them a box of candy or some flowers. Ask them because you're looking for records that are probably buried in the back and ask for the oldest person there because they're going to know where they are. Be nice to them. Otherwise they don't have to tell you.

Some of the Native American researchers come down unprepared and some of them are well-prepared. They know exactly what they're doing on their tribal stuff and where everything is. And they're from the tribes. Other times you get tribal members that just...there was one that would come down here and never could remember what he looked at and we had files. I think the last time I left I gave the file to Jennifer. I said maybe he won't show up again, but here's a list of what he really actually looked at that I have compiled from everybody else's slips. So if he says he hasn't seen this stuff, he has. He tried to drive down from Minneapolis and apparently without paying any attention, apparently got snowed in on the side highway in southern Minnesota or Iowa. Literally got plowed in, I guess. Crazy.

They were trying to prove that they could become a separate little entity, a band in the Chippewas. Because there is White Earth and Grand Port, and they've always wanted their own and they don't get it.

MS. JOHNSON: So federal records are often a source that they use...

MS. LARSEN: Well, yeah. They were looking back at voting records when things were splitting up and stuff like this. But looking at the ballots. But just constantly not remembering what they had done. And then others were, yeah, just wonderful people. And so nice. But that's true anyplace.

MS. JOHNSON: Indeed. Well, is there anything else you want to speak to? It's hard to capture all your years at the archives in just a handful of questions.

MS. LARSEN: Oh, I don't know. Let me think what else. Oh, the other one that was interesting was Standing Rock recovery that Tim Reeves was involved in, who is now out of Eisenhower Library. Somebody notified him that there were some Standing Rock items going up on an auction website, and there are always a lot of items. There were letterpress books from Standing Rock and no one had any idea how, I think, or were convinced they did went missing from here. But they filled in the gap around Wounded Knee and with the Standing Rock stuff. Tim notified and we got them back and we have it. We got it. And another one was from—I don't remember where that was. But at that time, I think, the Federal Records Act maybe. Did this Indian agent just keep it? Because there are other records that fill in and match that are North Dakota. Someplace and we know they're there. We know what they have and we've never tried to claim that because we know they're okay. But this—yeah, we got, got this and something else back because somebody noticed it was there. And I know he came up and said to me do we have it? I said no. I said in fact there's a gap of, like, two books that you would think they were, like, two letterpress books missing that fill in this timeframe. I said I don't think we probably ever had them, you know, seriously. I know they didn't disappear from here. But back in that day they just kept them. But somebody notified Tim, someone on the auction side and he got ahold of the IG and they stopped the auction. Because they were. They'd fit just like a perfect slot. That was really important we got it back. So it has been interesting. As I said and I started doing math. My first job out of college.

MS. JOHNSON: That's the reason why I asked you what brought you to the Archives because I did see that you worked for Clark. Right?

MS. LARSEN: I worked for Kimberley Clark. I did psychological statistics. I didn't have any psych but I had statistics and my boss was the industrial psychologist.

MS. JOHNSON: I would have to think having statistical background would help in an archival background just organizationally or something.

MS. LARSEN: So I like puzzles too.

MS. JOHNSON: Maybe your—just your brain is wired that way.

MS. LARSEN: Yeah. It's wired that way. That's why I didn't do English and stuff and then when I married a history professor who was also an archivist, I just sort of, I guess I had been ordained. When I finally went back to work when the kids got old enough and I wasn't running around with tiny children.

MS. JOHNSON: But archival work requires a very, like, kind of rigid or specific organization.

MS. LARSEN: Yeah, I like puzzles and putting things together and that kind of stuff. So I just slid into it by volunteering. Working on large documents and doing some help in various things and I got into it. I stayed around. I finally left—finally decided to retire. You'll just realize. It's time. It's time to go.

MS. JOHNSON: If you don't have anything else we can end the interview. I really appreciate your time today. It's been so nice to have you here and to...

MS. LARSEN: Well, I guess it's nice to know that somebody thinks you might have something to contribute.

MS. JOHNSON: Thank you for talking with me.

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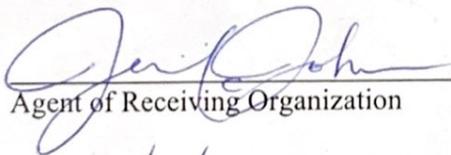
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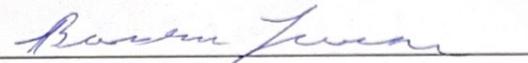
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