

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview
Subject: Bob Beebe
Interviewer: Jessie Kratz
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Jessie Kratz: My name is Jessie Kratz, and I'm the Historian of the National Archives, and I'm conducting an oral history interview with Bob Beebe. Today's date is April 8, 2021. Bob, thanks for joining me. Can you just get us started by telling us about your position at the National Archives and where you're located?

Bob Beebe: I work at the National Archives at Kansas City, but my actual physical job is located at the Lenexa Federal Records Center, where we store off-site accessioned records. So I primarily work with reference as the primary goal, and then we also do a lot of accessioning. We have records from throughout our region. They tend to be the newer records that have been recently accessioned, but then we also have probably the biggest, well, the biggest physical thing we have are the patent records, patent case files, design patents, plant patents—just a number of things from Record Group 241 that are out there as well. And that's probably one of the more referenced things that we have that we handle there.

Jessie: Great, thanks. And I know you did an [interview](#) with Erik several years ago about your time in the Navy, so thanks for doing that. And I'm going to link to that as well. But can you talk a little bit about what you did after being in the Navy but before coming to the National Archives?

Bob: OK, first I attended a small state school in Nebraska called Peru State College for a history degree. Life got in the way, and I ended up getting engaged and married. So I transferred to the University of Kansas, where I finished that degree and then also got a master's in historical administration/museum studies there. I worked at a number of different places. The first one was the most related—I worked actually at a place called the Golf Course Superintendents Association, which is in Lawrence, Kansas, and there I basically set up the records management and some of their archival program. They basically didn't have any at that point. I worked there for a few years, then I went to the—we have a local science museum that was starting up, and I worked there for a few years. And then after that I went to a small historical museum in the area that was a stagecoach stop back in the 1860s along the Santa Fe Trail, and I actually drove a stagecoach for a couple of years doing that. So that was kind of fun. And then after that, I joined the National Archives in the Records Center Program in Lenexa in 2004.

Jessie: So how did you end up at Lenexa?

Bob: So, basically I hadn't worked for a few months because of a surgery my daughter had, and I was kind of looking around and I saw the GS-4 archives technician position and applied. It was fairly early. I think the facility opened in late 2003. I started, I believe, April 5, 2004, just as a general archives technician. I had always had an interest in working at the National Archives in one capacity or another. The Lenexa Center is relatively close to where I live. I live outside of the Kansas City area a little bit to the southwest, which puts the Lenexa place at a very convenient location for me. So that was kind of how I ended up there.

Jessie: So can you talk a little bit about Lenexa itself, and what it is like to work in an underground facility?

Bob: So, it's interesting, and getting there is, I think for some people, intimidating. It's a very large facility. The National Archives is a large tenant down there but by no means do we have the majority of the space, and driving in there are semi-trucks driving in and out of this cave on a daily basis many times a day. Obviously, the line of sight is broken up and just getting physically to the spot you drive in a little ways and park. When I did start, I think, the facility had five bays, but now has 16 bays plus Ice Cube, which is a whole other operation, so it's grown. It grew rapidly during those first several years that I was there. I don't really find myself thinking I'm in a cave most of the time I'm in there. I find it quite comfortable. You come in and there is no need for a coat when you get out of the car because it's always nice and warm—sometimes too warm. And then the same thing as you leave. And so I always kind of find it fun during the winter because my car is always covered with snow when I drive in and it's all melted in a puddle of water around it when I leave. So, I consider that kind of a benefit to the thing. But inside our offices, occasionally, you'll see some rock walls that they leave to support the overhead, obviously, but it's really pretty comfortable. It seems like a fairly normal office. It has large rock walls and columns every now and then breaking up things, particularly when you get out into the stacks—they break up what would be a large open warehouse space. You'll have a column every so often that breaks that up and they have to manage the shelving around that.

Jessie: Thinking back to your first day, your first time at the Archives, what were your impressions of the agency?

Bob: I don't know, it was a little overwhelming. More from the facility's size—having worked with the Golf Course Superintendents Association records, I don't think we even had a 1,000 cubic feet total and, you know, walking out into a bay that holds 250,000 cubic feet of records and knowing that there's multiples of these all over is a little overwhelming to just grasp the size difference in what you're handling and then, just wondering how are you ever going to even

remember how to get back to the office once you get out into the stacks. Learning the maps of the place and how to negotiate your way around the facility is an interesting thing. Fortunately, people are pretty good at pointing out, “here's how you get back here,” or “we're going to leave you out here to work on this and come back out, look for the sign.” And there is signage up to help you get back to where you need to go. But it's a little overwhelming in some ways.

Jessie: I can see that. So when you first got there in your first position, what were your typical days like or what were your duties and what did they entail?

Bob: So, I was an archives technician. I was in an IRS unit. At that point, our office was all just one unit, basically, and we all did IRS work or primarily—there are a few other records we did, but everyone started out doing reference requests, so pulls on IRS records. And we had such a backlog that we didn't even do refiles for quite a while. And that was primarily taking the request out, matching it up to the number that they needed, pulling the file, getting it ready, and taking it back to the office when you're done. Not the most glamorous, but certainly I find almost anything interesting and find ways to amuse myself in doing it. So, it was all right. Later on we split the office into a refiles and a requests section. And I ended up in the refiles section. So rather than spending most of my day doing requests, I switched to spending most of my time doing refiles and putting documents back that the IRS had returned to us.

Jessie: And then how long were you in that position before you moved to the archival side?

Bob: So, well, I was in that one and then I was promoted to a GS-5 technician and after a year and a half or so, I don't remember how many years, quite a few in that position. So, in 2015 I was promoted to a team lead to start up an audit team within the FRC there and then in September of 2015, I was hired on as the archivist at the Lenexa Records Center. So, I was with the FRC for 11 and a half years, roughly.

Jessie: And did your duties change when you became a GS-5 and then a team lead?

Bob: Yeah, so as of GS-5 you basically were preparing the work for the grade 4s, and so you would get the work that came in from the IRS, you would prepare a batch and get it ready and then move it on. Then the team lead, say, I was only in that position for seven months, so we had just started setting it up. I think if I remember right, just before I switched, they brought in two people to help me out because we were like, say, we spent most of that six or seven months just trying to set everything up and getting an idea of what it was going to encompass. But then I transferred out into the archives. So, I didn't have a whole lot of experience on the other side of things, so.

Jessie: What made you decide to apply for the archives position?

Bob: Well, so, I had obviously always had an interest in history with a history degree and everything. I had contemplated applying for positions at the archives before, but they were always down at the archives, which is a considerably further distance away from me. And the convenience of working at Lenexa always appealed to me. And so that position was basically the best of both worlds. I was in Lenexa and I was at the archives. And so I was like, OK, if you're going to have a position out here, I'll apply for that. So I took a swing at it and fortunately I was hired, so.

Jessie: And so what do your duties as an archivist entail?

Bob: As I said before, the first thing is always reference. The highest priority is getting reference done for researchers. During normal circumstances, that can be either pulling the files and taking them down to the archives, where our research room is, so that the researcher can look at them in person. That's actually a fairly small portion of my reference. Most of my reference is done where I'm scanning and sending the files, running the purchase through for the researcher, and doing a whole request that way. That's probably 90 to 95 percent of all the reference I have, even in normal times. Beyond that, then we have accessioning that takes up a larger and larger portion of our time every year, it seems like. So we do that in two or three different phases. And then processing of the records once we accession them, holdings maintenance, when required. We hired a specialist to work with me in Lenexa a couple of years ago, I think, when we took over the ownership of the patent files. And we're still working on just getting all of those boxes barcoded. So, that could be something I might do or I might go out and barcode new accessions because all those need to be labeled and up to date, and description, and just generally having anything to do with the records that are stored there in Lenexa.

Jessie: Is there an aspect of your job that you really enjoy?

Bob: Well, the patent files are certainly a preference, as far as a record group, but I truly enjoy reference. I enjoy working with the researchers. I have some regular researchers that generally work with companies that are looking for document retrieval services. But I've got academic researchers that contact me regularly. Most of those are for patent records. I never know what I'm going to go into, what somebody is going to ask for. And when it comes to the patent records with that, I mean, I learn things about all sorts of areas of innovation that I had no idea about before. And it's always a thrill to see what's out there.

Jessie: Those are interesting, the patent records are a very interesting record group. You're lucky to have access to those.

Bob: I consider myself very, very lucky to have those files there.

Jessie: So, thinking back on your career, even when you were working at the records center, are there any particular challenges you faced while at the archives?

Bob: Particular challenges?

Jessie: That you faced while working; you may not have.

Bob: Well so, you know. I don't know, I can't think of any particular challenges necessarily, I mean, the size becomes one of the issues, particularly prior to the archives when it was a records center. The facility, I think I kind of measured it out once, and from room 1 to room 16 is in the neighborhood of maybe a third to a half of a mile. So, if you're going from one side of the place to the other, it can be a long haul, but I don't know. I can't really think of any specific challenges beyond just the physical aspect of how big the place is sometimes.

Jessie: Yeah, the folks in the records center always did really well on those health challenges that we did.

Bob: Yeah, yeah, yeah. My brief time was the audit team because you were checking things all over the place. I mean, it was amazing how much walking I would do. And then when I switched to the archives, it was like, OK. And I still walk a fair way, but it's nothing like I used to. Because I just have basically three bays that I'm in. So it's a fairly small area relative to the whole place.

Jessie: Is there anything that you're particularly proud of that you've done at the archives or major successes?

Bob: So, one thing that I'm known for, and I should only get partial credit or certainly other people involved, was the locating of the Wright Brothers patent in 2016. That was obviously a high point. It was an exciting moment. It was one of those moments that you just can't forget parts of it. I remember when pulling the box off that it was in and opening it up and looking and seeing this folder. And once I saw the folder behind it, I was like, well, that's weird. That shouldn't be there. And you start to have an inkling. And I remember pulling it out and that particular patent number, which, again, patent numbers get seared in my mind, is 821393. And I remember as I pulled the folder out, I could see in large block letters 393. And I'm like, oh, this is it. And you know that was one of those moments. You're just like, wow, I can't believe we found

this thing. And I remember going back to my office just, you know, almost trembling at the excitement of having this thing knowing that it had been missing for so long, and then for a few moments looking through it, making sure it was what I had. And then contacting Lori Cox-Paul, our director, and sending off an email to Chris Abraham, who had been working with the recovery team that was kind of directing the search and saying, hey, I just found it.

And, you know, I think back to things that you do. You know, I had another box to take down for a researcher and grab the government vehicle and drive down to the archives. And normally we just put everything in the backseat. And I thought hmmm. I had taken the file out and slipped it in an archival box for safe transport. And I was like, I'm just going to set this in the front seat next to me. [Laughter] Like, worst case scenario, if something happens, I can grab it before I get out of the car if there's some horrible accident on the way. [Laughter] So it's just, you know, things that cross your mind.

The other thing on a reference side of things, there's one reference request that sticks with me to this day. The DC [District of Columbia] civil case files are in Lenexa from, I can't remember what the years are, but I received an urgent request one day from a lady and she needed the divorce file for her mom, which, of course, that's one of those weird things, because in Washington, DC, there was no state court system to handle divorces. So back in the 40s and 50s, divorces were handled by the U.S. District Court. And she was just in a panic. She really needed this, and it turned out that her father was in palliative care. He was going to be passing away and he had worked for the DC Metropolitan Police. And I believe he'd gone up fairly high in the ranks. But he was close to passing away, and her mom had Alzheimer's, and they were trying to make sure that his benefits would transfer to her. And when the powers that be in the DC city started looking at and said, well, their marriage isn't valid because she was married before and never divorced because they had found a marriage record for her. Well, you know, I went through and searched, and found the files. There was actually a divorce file in the records. And essentially, she'd been married through an arranged marriage, never went home with the guy, and went straight back to her parents' house. So I had to make a certified copy, run that down and get it signed, get it overnighted out to her so that she could maintain the benefits for her mom. And that's probably the most memorable request of all the things I've had, just because the way you get to touch people's lives like that. So, she was just delighted to get the file and maintain that continuity of care for her mom so that one sticks with me all the time.

Jessie: That's great. I'm sure she was very happy.

Bob: Yeah.

Jessie: That's the best part, I think, about working with the agency when you can actually help people.

Bob: Yeah, it is, and yeah, and I mean from simple things like that to just a researcher, whether it's an academic or a genealogist that's connecting with their parents or with a grandparent. It's a lot of fun.

Jessie: Do you get a lot of recurring researchers, the same ones, or is it pretty much a new one every time?

Bob: I get both. I have to say, there's a lot of document retrieval companies that deal with patent records, and so I have probably half a dozen or more researchers that it's like when I see them I'm like oh, it's another patent request or something along those lines. We've got probably three or four or five academic researchers that come back pretty regularly. Again, a lot of these are for patent records, and then sometimes associated records because we'll get into court records that involve them and sometimes they're here, and sometimes I have to direct them to another field office or somewhere where they might find the patent infringement case, things like that, so it's kind of a mix. A lot of one-off genealogists, where people have found out, you know, my grandfather had a patent, and I'd like to get copies. I had a guy, and it still baffles my mind. He flew in and out from Chicago in one day just to come and view his grandfather's patent. And I was like, wow, that's some dedication to genealogy. But I went down and sat with him and walked him through the patent case file. It was for, basically, like an early dirigible from like the 1915 or so, and it was a pretty neat patent. But he was excited because at that point, the patent office, in most of the patent files, included physical addresses that the patentee was at. And so he was able to get an address in Philadelphia, I believe it was where his grandfather had lived. So he said that was going to be one of my next trips—to go to Philadelphia and see where he lived. [Laughter] So he seemed to have a travel itinerary based on his genealogy.

Jessie: So did the archives train you, or did you just kind of get thrown in and be like you're now the patent guy?

Bob: No, I mean, there was certainly a lot of training starting with HMS and DAS and ERA and all the different programs we use so there is certainly a lot of training there. And then I didn't have a lot of formal classroom trainings, but various staff, primarily it was Jake Erslund who would come out, he's now our director in Kansas City, he would come out and work with me directly with the records. So it was kind of a training by doing but with help. So he would, you know, walk me through—here's how to find all this stuff out here, because it's very different finding things in the archives than it is finding things in the FRC. That was probably, going back to your

challenges question, that was probably one of the biggest challenges was a change of mindset of how to do what you're doing and how to get to things.

Also, just the mindset of within the records center you're there to pull the record and get it and get it back to the office so that it can go to the people that need it. And it took me a long time to get used to being able to go into the file and *look* at it, because you're not supposed to browse records within the FRC. That's not good. Within the archives, it's like, no, feel free to browse. Since I've had 11 years of you telling me not to do that, and now I get to this, and you know, that was probably one of the hardest things to get used to was that I could look at these things and see them. So that was probably the hardest challenge I had just mentally was convincing myself it was OK. I mean, I remember emailing or calling Lori Cox-Paul and asking is it OK if I pull this file just because I want to see it? She's like, yeah, OK.

Jessie: You mentioned ERA and HMS, those programs, over your career, I guess, have you seen those programs evolve?

Bob: Not appreciably. Other than, you know, I think when I started, the HMS was just in the Explorer version and then they came out with the Chrome version. I don't remember when, but as far as the programs, I don't recall any massive changes to those.

Jessie: You mentioned Lori and Jake, but did you have any other mentors while you were working at the archives?

Bob: So, at the archives, I mean, those are really the two main people. Jake ended up being our deputy director. So he became my direct supervisor for a number of years now. All the staff there are really good. Joyce Burner, who has since retired, was really helpful in description, and she was always good at description, and to say description is probably one of my least favorite things to do. But she helped me work through quite a bit of that. Within the records center system, the one person who really taught me an enormous amount is Randy Kelly. To some extent, I kind almost can give him credit for me being as qualified as I was to switch to the archives, because some of the different tasks I've taken on there required me to learn more and more about ARCIS and how to handle and how to move things around in ARCIS and how to find things in there. And I think that process, and also just working well with Randy, was very beneficial.

Jessie: So, a lot of archivists don't necessarily start in the FRC and move to the archives side, so you're probably one of the few ones. Do you think working in the FRC better prepared you for work at the archives?

Bob: Yes, I think without doubt. One—it can give you a better appreciation for what the FRC does. By and large everything that's in the archives at one point lived in the FRC, and if they don't handle it right, we don't get it. And appreciating the work they do and the difficulties they have in their job compared to ours, which I would say for difficulties, our job is a lot more complex, but the physical and time constraints that they are put under is a different type of difficulty that I don't think everyone on the archives side actually understands real well because it's a different type of pressure. I mean, we have to deal with the public. They don't have to deal with the public generally, but, you know, they have metrics of how many requests to pull in an hour. We don't have that. We have a rather almost leisurely time in some ways, comparatively. We can take our time and do things at a slower rate. And I handle a lot of requests in a year but I can tell you that I handle as many requests in a day as I handle in a year when I was in the FRC. Now obviously I wasn't scanning them, I wasn't doing all these things, but I mean the scope that they work at is so much greater than what the archives works at. I think spending time within the FRC and appreciating and learning what they do gives you a better idea of what goes on with these records and the whole lifecycle of the records as well.

Jessie: What is the relationship with the archives and the FRC in Lenexa? Do they have a good working relationship?

Bob: Oh, yeah, yeah. Since I started, I've tried to do things to engage with them. I haven't done it in quite a while but I have taken oddball antique things that have patent numbers on them and patent dates. A gasoline-powered iron was one—trying to think what else I had. A number of things that I brought in and I would find that in case file that I might find some advertisements for it and kind of a little history on this artifact, and I would bring the artifact in and set it outside my office with some scans of some of the patents and kind of what it was and what not. I've made a point of sharing things within the records center. “Hey, I've got this kind of cool patent,” and send scans of it around to your staff, maybe print out some. I've actually got a bulletin board near our office. We're kind of physically separated from the records center staff for the most part right now, but I have the bulletin board and I'll scan some patents. The same ones have been up for a long time now, obviously over a year. But that's the last one I did was the patents for *Toy Story*, the movie—the slinky dog and all these things. So, I would get images of those patents and put them up.

One other time—there's a patent file for a camera device from the 1860s. And this was one of those that kind of blew your mind because it got a request from a researcher that they wanted this document from this patent file. And it's supposed to have this letter in it that describes the day of the Gettysburg Address. I'm like what on earth would that be doing in a patent file? So I go out, sure enough, I pull it out—actually, I brought it to Jake who was there that day. And I was like, yeah, this was supposed to be the patent file that has the letter describing the

Gettysburg Address. So we're looking at it, and he has one of the documents, and he starts reading it and he's like, okay, it is. So, it turns out the guy that was issued the patent was the same guy who basically helped disinter the bodies from the battlefield and move them into the national cemetery. And he was a photographer and he actually took a lot of photographs that day. His brother lived, I think, in Philadelphia, and he had submitted this patent, and whoever was supposed to pay this fee with the patent office had presumably stolen the 20 dollars fee. And so he sent this letter to his brother saying, hey, can you go to the patent office and pay this fee for me? And then he wrote out this description of the day of the Gettysburg Address on the same letter. Well the patent clerk took that letter and there's a note from that office that the fee was paid in this and that. So ironically, there in this patent file is a one-page description of the day of the Gettysburg Address. Just mind boggling. So, with all due precautions, I'm like, "hey, come and look at this." So, it's kind of fun to be able to share because, I mean, they don't get to see these things generally. And you can see that they're like, "this is really awesome to get to actually see." So, that was kind of fun, and I really enjoy sharing what I get to see with them because I know they don't get to for the most part. And I think in general, they really appreciate that as well.

Jessie: Do you do special document tours when people come in?

Bob: Not real often, I mean, occasionally. I've taken a few people, generally nobody from the public. The FRCs are closed to the public now, so we can't have anybody come in. We do have the bring your kids to work day, and they'll tour them through the space. And I'll usually pull a few interesting patents out or some other documents for them to see. Occasionally with a staff person, if they're particularly interested and they've got time outside of their regular work, I might take them back and kind of show them what we have and whatnot. But not a whole lot of that other than when they come on it with the archives and they come out, and that'll be a little bit more in depth because they have a more of a reason to see and know more about it.

Jessie: So I think of you as the patent guy—so how about patent records? Have they gone electronic now or are they still physical pieces of paper?

Bob: I believe starting in like 2003, they went all electronic. So there are paper copies up until somewhere around 2003, we stop right now at about 1978.

Jessie: Yeah, so I was curious to see how you could see reference changing if you're not showing a physical piece of paper but you're showing the electronic record.

Bob: Yeah, yeah, all the electronic side of things is a whole different story. So, in a lot of cases, if you go to the USPTO's website, even on applications, there's lots of rules with applications, but

you can go in and see a lot of the actual documents online through the Patent Office's website on things that would be still being prosecuted or that are still in the application stage. I don't go in there very often because obviously those are outside of my scope of work for the most part. But I do end up in there on occasion. And I get links sent to me from people that are like, "hey, look, I can't find the rest of this." I'm like, "well, because it's in paper form and it's sitting out here." So, you know, we do have some newer records, but they are still College Park's ownership. We've got some trademark records that go up into the early 2000s, even I think as late as 2008 or 2009 that are trademark opposition and cancellation files, and those get into that paper-electronic transition time frame. And I'd have to look at it. I don't get in them very often, but I think the later ones you start to see where they stop filing paper records and it became an all electronic record. So you've got kind of part of the file. And the same thing happens with court records, with an all-electronic. You get these cases where it's paper up to this point. And generally you run into that with dockets where they stopped making paper dockets and they became all electronic records. I had a request like that the other day where they're like, we couldn't find the first couple hundred docket items in the docket list because they are paper ones. So I had to go out and find the paper copy so that they could pick the documents that they wanted.

Jessie: Well, it sounds like you've seen a lot of really amazing documents. Do you have a favorite record?

Bob: There's several—it's hard to pin down a favorite, but I wrote a piece for our newsletter last year, I believe it was, that involved three important patents from the 1800s that are often overlooked that I think, to me, are amazing. One of them is by a guy by the name of William T.G. Morton, who is a character in and of himself. But essentially it's a patent for anesthesia and, if you think about this, and this is from the 1840s, and if you think about anesthesia and all that it allows and it is a small patent file, but if you think about what has become of that and what medical miracles would not be possible without that invention. It's startling to me how many people whose lives have been changed and improved and saved because that patented its beginning.

The other one, and it's on a similar vein, is and this was one of those where I pulled it out and saw that it just boggles the mind to see because patent files always have signatures of the inventor. And it's the patent for pasteurization by Louis Pasteur. This guy to me was in my science books in high school and college. I'm like, there's Louis Pasteur's signature. I mean, that one still is one of my favorites to go and see. The other one, and again, that one changed lives, The other one from the 1800s that I absolutely love is Alfred Nobel's patent for dynamite. Of course, it has both positive and negative sides of things, but again, it's an impressive document to see and to handle and think, wow, to think of all that changed with that one patent. Consider

that of Edison and Bell and even Tesla and some of these guys, but in some ways you could make a case that those three patents changed the course of human history. In some ways on par with Edison's light bulb or Bell's telephone. I mean, I think they're certainly right up there with them and to see those kinds of documents. The dynamite patent, there is a little story behind that one as well that's kind of fun. We have our staff meetings, and oftentimes at the end of it, we would share interesting things we've found. And we were having active shooter training or something following the meeting, so they were up there setting up for their presentation, and I said, so I came across Alfred Nobel's patent for dynamite. I'm like, it turns out it's really not that hard to make dynamite, and it's not, it's actually very simple. Now you have to get nitroglycerin, which is a lot harder to manufacture and make it. But the actual process of making dynamite is fairly simple. And one of the officers said, "we might need to talk to you later." [Laughter] So, that was kind of amusing. But those three are my favorites. But oftentimes I say that my favorite one is the last one I looked at. I mean, I had a request for Christian Sharp's patent for a rifle, and so I was just looking at that the other day. So, pretty much the last patent I look at is almost always my favorite it seems like.

Jessie: I do want to ask you some things about COVID, but before we go there. Is there anything else, any interesting stories that you want to tell me about your time at the archives so far?

Bob: Well, not that I can think of, I've covered a lot. I could go on and on, but we'll leave it at that for now at least.

Jessie: Well, we can always have another interview, but I did want to talk to you a little bit about COVID because it sounds like you've actually been going in, which is interesting, but we'll get there. I was going to ask you when did you first hear about COVID-19/coronavirus?

Bob: Probably January of 2020, somewhere in that neighborhood. Just kind of, you know, seeing little news stories here and there, and talk about its spread. I didn't pay too much attention to it at that point.

Jessie: I know we've been in various phases, but I guess going back to the lockdown to today, have you been going in or have you been mainly working from home?

Bob: So we were open from, I believe, it was July 20 to November 6, we were in phase one, so I was going in two or three days a week, and then we just opened again March 29. So we've been in for about two weeks and again, doing two or three days a week. And then the other staff person goes in on the other days when I'm not there, so. The rest is all telework.

Jessie: So what kind of projects have you been working on during telework?

Bob: So initially, I think for a lot of people, it was kind of chaotic at first trying to figure out what to do. We did a number of finding aid projects and things of that nature. One thing that I took on because I saw it as an opportunity with our changing IT and moving away from Microsoft Access, I had always done our accessioning database, and I had created this database in Microsoft Access. I like it better than what we have now in a lot of ways. But knowing that Microsoft Access is probably going away and that we're moving towards Google and said okay, I want to learn Google Sheets and figure out how to do accessioning through Google Sheets. So, that's probably been my biggest project. And I've worked on it in the first shutdown that we had up until July. I spent a lot of time, one—learning how to work in Google Sheets. And two—creating the framework for what we had. And then after we shut down in November, again, of course, then we were heading into the December 1st list of transfers eligible for accessioning. And it's like there were parts of it that weren't quite up to snuff so I spent a fair amount of November going back and cleaning those sections up so that we can track a transfer that we've done. We did a pretty big one in April, and when it comes up in the December 1st list, we can then see all that information in that same spreadsheet. It all comes across in various tabs, and then [we] can actually track it even after we accessioned it. It's got the ability to track the processing steps as we go along. So it's become a pretty substantial spreadsheet. If I have to say, I like it. If I could go back to Microsoft Access, I probably would. But I don't think that's really going to be an option since it looks like Microsoft is going to end Microsoft Access. [Laughter] So I'm not sure we'll get a chance. So that's by far the favorite thing I've been doing. Other than that, a lot of finding aid work, and we've been putting file units into the catalog to help with reference and things like that.

Jessie: So for accessioning because I'm curious—were you able to physically assess the records, and how did that work?

Bob: No, we didn't do any such thing, really. I mean, I think we did accession a couple of transfers in that July through November timeframe, we actually were able to physically check a few transfers that are in Lenexa, and we accessioned those. But until we get the physical reviews done, we're not going to touch on something unless we've looked at it, because occasionally you come across stuff, you go out, you look at it, it's like, well, you guys said it was this but it's not that. So we don't want to create more of a headache for ourselves by accessioning something we shouldn't. So, until we get those reviews done, well, they're kind of on hold for now.

Jessie: Do you have a lot of backlogged projects that you have to work on now that you're back in the building a couple of days a week?

Bob: So we have, I forget, 70 some requests right now and they just keep coming in. As soon as we clear three or four off we get one or two in. And it seems like places are realizing that we're open again. I mean, I think we saw that when we opened the last time. People realized, "oh, they're starting to respond to us," so then we started getting more emails from researchers, particularly from those repeat researchers. They start to realize, "oh, they're back in the office," so they start sending stuff. That's the first priority, and when we do go in, it's reference or scanning. And that's what we do right now. I think our next thing will be the accessioning and trying to catch up on all the box reviews that we need to do so that we can start accessioning the stuff. And then once we do that, then there will be all the description and processing work that needs to be done on the stuff that we accession. So it's just never ending. It will be interesting to see how long it takes us to work out of this whole backlog of things.

Jessie: So what has your daily life been like during COVID?

Bob: So, I live outside of the city limits by quite a ways, on about a 75-acre farm. I don't have to worry about locking my door or running into a neighbor because my closest neighbor is about a quarter mile away. So that's been nice. And I've always loved that about where I work. I get to be by myself. My wife and daughter and I have a very comfortable and peaceful place to live. So that's been beneficial. The hazards of going into town and dealing with all of the masks and gloves and sanitizing has been challenging, as it is for everyone, but I think I've certainly had the benefit in my mind, at least to me, of being out here and away from everybody. I can wander around outside as much as I want and I'm not going to run into anybody. And even if I do run into a neighbor we can stand across the fence and chat for a while also. So in that way, I've had it kind of easy, I suspect.

Jessie: So I'm sure a lot of people, including myself, are jealous of that. You have all that space. So did you decide that you wanted to go back to the National Archives; did they give you a choice whether you wanted to continue to telework or return? And what are the local conditions like there?

Bob: Yeah, it was optional. So right now, the numbers are really good. I haven't looked at them super recently, but I know they've been pretty good for a while. I know the percent positive is down around 3 percent or so, so it's been holding pretty good. For the most part people, even though I think Kansas may have actually lifted their mask mandate, it seems like everywhere I go people are still wearing them. And it seems like people are doing the things that make sense still. It doesn't seem to matter for the most part.

Jessie: That's good. So talking about the National Archives again, are there any policies or processes that were put into place during COVID that you want to see continue after we're all back in the building again.

Bob: So, you know, I will say I was not a fan of ever thinking about doing telework partially because I miss the records when I'm not there. But having the flexibility to do it, if needed, is kind of nice. There are times when you can come home that you can just concentrate and do things here that you might not get that chance there. I can devote time to a project. I could devote a whole day to a project like working on accessioning as spreadsheets if I need to. And one, I don't have that draw of "I could get up and go and do this reference request that just came in." And, you know, because it removes that distraction. As soon as I get a request in, I might be like I'm going to run out and take a look at this and see what's going on. Whereas if I'm home, I can't do that. And it just keeps me on that task that I need to work on. So it's nice to have that possibility.

Jessie: Had you worked teleworked before or was this the first time?

Bob: This was the first time I've ever done it. And Sarah, who I work with, she was laughing at me the other day because I had checked my email on my phone, and she's like, you know, "I remember you steadfastly refused to even be able to check your email on your phone." I'm like, "yeah, I know times have changed." And I have too a little bit, I suppose.

Jessie: Did you have a NARA laptop or did you get it during the pandemic?

Bob: I got the laptop when we were open. I think towards the end of October, they rushed the delivery of all of our laptops to us because they saw that we were going to be closing down again, our numbers were such that we knew our days were numbered, so they rushed. So during the first shutdown, I was working off my own. And since then we've had a laptop to work off of.

Jessie: That's great. I know we're coming up to an hour, but I wanted to ask you if you had any other COVID stories or just any stories about the National Archives that you want to share.

Bob: So I'll tell you one. So, I have this tendency when I know I'm going to be gone for a little while. I used to do this in the Navy before we would go out for six or eight weeks. I would just write myself a note and leave it. I have done that, you know, 30, 40 years now. I've done that kind of thing. And so I was in the office on November 6, the last day we were open and just before I left, I sat down and wrote myself a note just reminding myself to stop and enjoy the records. So, when I came back, I had largely forgotten about the note and I saw it, and it's a little

poignant in that in December I was actually diagnosed with colon cancer. I'm in treatment now. I'm three-quarters or two-thirds of the way through my chemotherapy. Everything should be fine in the end but obviously, it's a long, long haul. I'll have radiation therapy for five weeks in Minnesota and then I'll go back up there for a surgery six weeks later. So it'll be the end of August or September before I'm through this initial treatment stage and then we'll go on to the rest of it.

Even talking with various oncologists—I have two different oncologists—one here locally, and one at the Mayo Clinic. And everyone is like, “your treatment's going great” and there's really not much of a concern, but it was a little startling to see that note. And I've taken my advice. But the one thing that led to that was some time ago—I've been under treatment at the Mayo Clinic for stuff for a little over 10 years. There are no patents that are issued to the Mayo brothers or to their father. The father had two sons and the three of them are basically considered the founders of the Mayo clinic. But William Worrall Mayo, the father, was a witness to a patent, and it's for a crane. So I actually went out, I think, on my first day back and pulled that patent just so that I could see. Because being a witness, he had to sign the document as well. So that was kind of a fun thing to get to see—here's this guy who founded this amazing clinic. And so that was kind of fun. That was a moment.

I had a virtual appointment with the oncologist from the Mayo clinic in early January where she kind of laid out the first stages of our treatment. My wife asked the inevitable, “so what's the prognosis?” And the treatment I'm undergoing is a fairly new one. They have only been doing it for about three years and it shows great promise. And she's like we can't even give the clinical details of exactly what we expect, because you have to be cancer free for five years before you're free of cancer. And since it's only been in use for about three years, they don't have that number yet. But she's like the recurrence rate is going to be around 10 to 15 percent, which is phenomenal. And so the oncologist was like, so you're going to have to put up with him for a lot longer. I mean, it's stage 3 cancer, so it's not great, but not stage 4, so it's a lot better than chemotherapy. So I would urge people that, you know, just go and do that, it's well worth it.

Jessie: Well, I hope your treatment goes well. You are breaking up just a little bit here. It's probably telling me that I'm taking too much of your time.

Bob: I am sure it will.

Jessie: Yeah, well, thanks for sharing your story with me, and I want to hear back from you, so let me know how everything is and if it's okay. If you think of anything else, let me know and maybe we can schedule another call later.

Bob: Sure sounds good.

Jessie: All right, well, I will talk to you later. Enjoy the rest of your day.

Bob: All right, thanks. Bye bye.

[END RECORDING]