

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION  
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History interview  
Subject: Bruce Bustard  
Interviewer: Eric Rhodes  
Date: December 11, 2015

[START RECORDING]

MR. ERIC RHODES: Bruce, could you state your name and spell it out for, you know, posterity?

MR. BRUCE BUSTARD: Sure, it's Bruce Bustard, B-U-S-T-A-R-D. Bustard like mustard with a B.

MR. RHODES: All right, and I'm Eric Rhodes, E-R-I-C R-H-O-D-E-S. I'm an intern at the History Office, it's December 11, 2015, and we're in the Basement 5 office conference room at the National Archives. Bruce, please tell us where you grew up, and a little bit about your childhood.

MR. BUSTARD: Well, I grew up in an area southwest of Cleveland, a little town called Olmsted Falls. I like to make a distinction that it was a small town, more than a suburb at that point, of Cleveland. I grew up in a family where my mom was a journalist, and my dad was a purchasing agent within an engineering firm. He also was an immigrant from Scotland, and he had lived through the Great Depression, and he had been in a tank battalion in World War II in Europe. When I was growing up, I heard all kinds of stories about all these kinds of things, and I kind of date my interest and love of history to my dad's discussions of history with me. He loved to read history, too, so I think that's probably how I got interested in history.

Then, when I was about 15, he was transferred to New Jersey, and we moved there. I finished high school in New Jersey in a town called New Providence, and when it came time to look for colleges, I was interested in going back to college in Ohio. Eventually, I ended up at Hiram College in Ohio, and majored in history. After graduation, I got married, and we ended up in Iowa City, Iowa, where, after a year of selling clothes at Montgomery Ward, I applied to, and was accepted by, the History Department at the University of Iowa. I did my Master's and my Ph.D. at the University of Iowa.

MR. RHODES: It is one thing to have that sort of childhood nascent love of history, and it's another to really make the decision that you'd like to make this your career. So during your time at Hiram, what made you decide that you wanted to major in history? And then, if you could speak a little bit about making the decision to go for the Ph.D. in history.

MR. BUSTARD: I think when I came to Hiram, I intended to major in history. But my idea was that I would major in history, and then be certified to teach, probably at the high school level, and then I was going to get a job teaching high school and probably do some coaching, too. That was kind of the only model I had for people who were interested in history. I'm not sure I really knew that there were people out there who were called historians. Then, when I went to Hiram, I had a series of wonderful teachers, and they not only kind of stoked my interest in history, but provided a new set of role models for me. In one of those classes, I had a professor by the name of John Strasburger, and he taught a course called "Interpreting the American Experience," which was the basic American history course at Hiram.

But it wasn't the survey course, it was an introduction basically to historiography, and he introduced you to the idea that historians didn't always agree, and that there were these changing interpretations of a lot of different events, and we read different interpretations—this just blew my mind. It turned history, which I was interested in, into this much livelier kind of subject that allowed me to really engage with the sort of debates.

One of the first things we read was Charles Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*, which is a horribly dry, dull book, and there's no question about that. But John Strasburger compared it to a lot of other interpretations of how the Constitution was formed, and I think that was at least one of the big moments—the light turned on, and I began to think that I was interested in following history as a career path. Also, I just got a lot of encouragement from him and the other professors for things like my writing. I wasn't really a very good writer, but they saw something in me, and encouraged me, and helped me with that, and got me thinking that maybe I was a little bit better scholar than I had been in high school, where I was a decidedly mediocre student.

MR. RHODES: What was the initial thrust in your moving to Iowa City?

MR. BUSTARD: My wife Tori and I had just gotten married. We graduated in June, we got married in August, and we packed up the back of our yellow Pinto station wagon—

MR. RHODES: [interposing] What year was the Pinto?

MR. BUSTARD: This was 1976. The Pinto was 1974. The Pinto was, of course, the famous exploding car. But obviously, we managed to survive two Pintos, actually.

We put all our earthly belongings in the back of the Pinto station wagon, and drove out to Iowa City, where we lived for the next eight years. Initially, my wife was pursuing a Master's degree in statistics there, and I got a job selling men's clothing at a Montgomery Ward department store for a year. Then, I applied to graduate school, and got into several graduate schools. But in the end, we really liked Iowa City, and decided to stay there.

MR. RHODES: That's great. So Iowa City in 1977. What was the town like?

MR. BUSTARD: It was a terrific place to go—

MR. RHODES: [interposing] Master's or Ph.D.?

MR. BUSTARD: I started within the Master's program, and then basically there was what they called your Master's essay, and then they kind of evaluated you, and said yes, you could go on for the Ph.D.

It was a terrific place to go to graduate school. It was not a huge department, which was nice for somebody coming from a very small school. The graduate students were a pretty close-knit group. That was helpful. My professors were terrific, and it was in a very nice town. We found a community of people there that we enjoyed.

We lived in married student housing for, I believe, \$97 a month for a one-bedroom apartment, and I can't remember what percentage rebate on our electricity. So we were able to kind of thrive there with friends in an enjoyable community.

The winters were horribly harsh, just harder than anything we had ever experienced before, especially the first two winters, 1977 and 1978, were terribly hard winters. But we survived, and after the first one, I think we were ready to move, initially, but then I think we decided we liked the town and didn't really want to pick up and move all over again. So we spent eight years there total. I finished my degree in 1984, which is when we moved to Washington DC.

MR. RHODES: By your fourth year, or whenever you started to write your thesis, were you aware of a community of historians who were doing work that was meant to be consumed by the general public? And what was the state of public history in the early 1980s? Did you know that you were going to be able to enter this line work?

MR. BUSTARD: I may have been vaguely aware that there were archivists and there were historical editors, and I think I probably saw some of the early issues of the *Public Historian*. But I was pretty focused on being a college teacher, and the University of Iowa was, and I believe still is, a somewhat traditional department in the sense that they see their role as training historians who will teach college history. That may be a little short-sighted, considering the prospects for jobs in college teaching, but that's the position they took. However, Iowa does have a long tradition of also having some of the founders of what we now call public history, people like Benjamin Shambaugh.

But by the time I got there, it was pretty focused on college teaching, and that's what I thought I was going to do. So as I finished my dissertation, I started applying around the country. First of all, there weren't that many jobs, and that included one-year positions. I applied even for a job in New Zealand, and I did apply for a couple of jobs that were not traditional.

I think I applied for a job with the Samuel Gompers papers because I had used his papers in my dissertation. My wife and I had a big map of the United States pinned up in our bedroom, with pins in all the different places that I had applied. Slowly, those pins started coming down, and my wife, very wisely, said to me at one point, "You know, you need a plan B." She was right, as so often she is. So I started thinking about what else I might want to do, and eventually, we came up with the idea to move to Washington, DC. At that point in her career, she was in what we now call IT, data processing, systems analysis, coding, and that kind of thing. We thought she could get a job pretty easily in Washington DC, and that I would look for history-related employment there.

So, once again, we packed up our Pinto—fortunately, we did have a moving van that time—and the Monday after my graduation from Iowa, we drove out of Iowa City to Washington DC.

MR. RHODES: Wow, it's kind of a leap, right?

MR. BUSTARD: It was, and we had friends who said, "Are you sure you know what you're doing?" But we were pretty confident because she had these in-demand skills, and in fact, I think she got a job in a month or less. So that allowed us not to have to sell apples on the street or anything like that.

MR. RHODES: So, once you land in Washington, there are all these institutions: the Smithsonian, the Museum of American History, was that there, actually?

MR. BUSTARD: The Museum of American History was there. At the time, it may have been the Museum of American History and Technology, I don't know if it was before it became the Museum of American History.

I looked for a lot of different jobs. Smithsonian was a good example. I also looked for jobs at the Library of Congress. I was in for a little bit of a rude awakening because I had never applied for federal jobs before, and I soon realized that there were a number of jobs out there that sounded interesting to me, but I couldn't apply because they wanted you to be a government employee before you could apply. So there was a catch-22.

I looked for a job for about eight months—we arrived here in August and I started at the Archives on April 1. I had several interviews, a number of interviews with the National Archives, I interviewed with NHPRC [National Historical Publications and Records Commission], I actually had an interview with the Exhibits Office at the Archives, and then also had an interview with the Federal Register, and that seemed to be the only place I was getting any nibbles.

Eventually, I got an interview for an archivist position, and was hired for that archivist position, and started on April 1, 1985, which is an important date in National Archives history. It is the date that the National Archives broke free of General Services Administration. I don't think there are too many people still in the Archives, who started on that particular date. So I spent my whole career working for the Archives as an independent agency.

MR. RHODES: That's amazing. Were people happy about that?

MR. BUSTARD: People were delighted. I've heard people were delighted, and one of the things they did was take a gigantic staff photograph of the people who worked for the National Archives out in front of the Constitution Avenue steps. That has relevance to me only because it was my first day.

I was waiting around for people to break free of their celebrations so I could start my career. The funny thing is, I arrived at the National Archives early in the morning, I walked in through the Pennsylvania Avenue entrance, and they told me to go to a particular room, and I was standing there, and there was actually another guy who was starting that particular day. We stood there for a while, and nobody came to greet us, and so we stood there for a little bit longer and eventually, somebody came out of the motion picture reference room, right near there. He said he'd seen me standing there for a while, and what were we doing there? We said, "Well, this is our first day, and we were told to come here, but nobody's come to get us." He said, "Oh well, I'll call over to Personnel," and he called over to Personnel, and came back and he said, "Well, you're supposed to go across the street to the Personnel Office," which was in the Patrick Henry Building across the street on Indiana Avenue.

So we walked on over there, and we went into the room and sat in the lobby for another, I don't know, half an hour, 45 minutes, something like that, and eventually somebody came into the room and said, "Well, what are you doing here?" And we said, "Well, we're starting our first day, and they told us to come on over here, and we—" The person said, "Oh, well, I'll go find out what's going on." When she came back, she said, "Why are you here? You should be across the street on Pennsylvania Avenue." So we walked back across the street, and walked into the same place where we were, and we waited another 15 or 20 minutes, and finally, this woman came around the corner and said, "Why are you here? You should be across the street at Patrick Henry." So we walked across the street with her one more time, and eventually, at that point, we both signed our papers and took our oath of office and got fingerprinted, and all that kind of stuff. So that was my introduction to government service.

Then I said to the person, “Well, I’m supposed to be working for the Cartographic and Architectural branch,” which is out in Pickett Street in Alexandria. “So what should I do now?” She said, “Well, I guess you should go out there.” By this time, it’s 11:30 in the morning or something like that, in the middle of the week, and so it took me a long time to take the bus back. What I didn’t know is that there was a shuttle that ran between Pickett Street and the National Archives Building.

So eventually, about 1:30 or so in the afternoon, I reach Pickett Street in Alexandria, walk into the office, and the secretary is sitting there, and I told her who I was, so she called John Dwyer, who was the head of the branch there. He walks out, and the first thing he says to me is, “What are you doing here? You’re not supposed to be here ‘til tomorrow.” So once again—anyway, I don’t know how I managed to stay 30 years after that, but I did.

MR. RHODES: Wow.

MR. BUSTARD: That was my first day at the National Archives.

MR. RHODES: So this was pre-College Park, right?

MR. BUSTARD: Yes. There were offices in Alexandria—the Cartographic, the Nixon Project, and some motion picture storage. And then there was the Suitland National Records Center, which also at that point not only had records center material, but also it was an archival branch, with a lot of modern military records there. And there were other scattered offices, like the Personnel Office, the Federal Register was on Farragut Square, or one of the squares nearby, and NHPRC had rented space. There were kind of little pods of the Archives all over the place, which is one of the reasons why we needed to have Archives II.

MR. RHODES: So, that was your first day at the National Archives, and what about your second day? What about the next, I guess—

MR. BUSTARD: [interposing] Twenty-nine years?

MR. RHODES: Well, yeah, it looks like you were at the Cartographic and Architectural branch for three years—

MR. BUSTARD: Interestingly enough, my dissertation was in 20th-century labor and political history, so it sounds like the ultimate joke at the Federal Government that, of course, they put me in the Cartographic and Architectural branch. I have made that joke several times, but one of the great things about working there was that it was very new to me.

I hadn’t thought about latitude and longitude since about 6th grade, and I realized a couple of things while working there. One was that I enjoyed learning about new things. I had the opportunity to learn about things like geography, and architecture, and aerial photography, which I knew absolutely nothing about. So that was great. I also learned that I enjoyed working with visually interesting material, as opposed to some of the typical archival reference work, or project work, where you’re basically going through memos and boxes of correspondence, and things like that.

So my experience there was very useful to me. I did project work. I started off by doing a project on the Army maps from World War II, which was a very nice, interesting project. I actually got to work with the maps that were used in planning the Normandy invasion, for example.

MR. RHODES: Which may have been housed on the fourth floor here, in the current history Office, the communications office, the OSS?

MR. BUSTARD: Yes, there was a cartographic branch originally here in Archives I. I'm not exactly sure where it was, somewhere on the first floor, somewhere around where the researcher orientation area is. Anyway, I got to work with those maps, which was very interesting, especially considering my dad had been in World War II, and he was still alive, so I could tell him the kinds of things that I was finding. I also got to do a variety of reference-researcher assistance. Eventually, I worked with aerial photographs, and that too was a good thing for me to do because I would argue that it's one of the more challenging reference jobs that someone can do at the Archives, in the sense that people write in and say they want an aerial photograph of a part of Mississippi, or a part of, you know, Korea or something like that. What they would do is send a map to you with a highlighted space, and then it was up to you to locate that particular geographic place, to see whether we had coverage of that particular place, and then write back to them and say, you know, "We have these four photographs of this area." It's kind of a complicated process going from the latitude and longitude to the indexes to the aerial photographs, to actually looking through the aerial photographs frame by frame, and then finding the place by following rivers, or streets, or whatever it might be.

MR. RHODES: How were these stored?

MR. BUSTARD: We have both original rolled aerial photography, the negatives, and there was a special viewing device that you used to roll that film out and look at it frame by frame, and then in some cases we had individual prints. For example, there was a series, within the captured German records that were captured German aerial photographs of a good part of Western and Eastern Europe. That was pretty fascinating, too.

I mean, everything, from photographs of London that were taken by the German air force; to photographs of the parts of Warsaw that were the ghetto that was eventually razed; to people who were looking for their family homestead in some tiny little town in Russia. People would actually sometimes say, you know, "It's at this crossroads," and you'd get a photograph of the town, and they could actually look at it and say, "Oh yeah, that's the house that my great grandfather was born in," or something like that. So it's pretty amazing, the kinds of questions you can answer through aerial photographs. Genealogy questions, but also issues that ended up being parts of legal cases, environmental research that could be done through those photographs.

The other thing I was doing during this whole time at Cartographic, was the Archives training program, which was called the CIDS program, the Career Intern Development System—a horrible name. One of the things they did was, it was both classroom work and also you did various training rotations around the Archives. For example, I did a training reference rotation with social and political records. I did a rotation with still pictures, and at that point, you were required to do either a rotation through Education or Exhibits, and I chose to do Exhibits. I spent a six-week training rotation with the Exhibits Office, and it was at that point that I got very, very interested in doing exhibit research. At the end of that, I thought to myself, "Hey, this is really fun and interesting." I thought this would be something I could see myself doing, and a few years later, a job came open, and I applied for it and got the job.

MR. RHODES: Before we move on from the Cartographic branch, were there digital technologies that you were using at this point? GIS? In a proto-stage? Or was it kind of eyeballing it, and things like that?

MR. BUSTARD: It was a lot of eyeballing it. I said I hadn't learned latitude and longitude, or used it since 6th grade, and so suddenly I was trying to figure out the latitude and longitude of a town in Estonia, or something like that. I'm trying to think of the state of what we now call digital. We had a Trash-80 Radio Shack computer stuck off in a corner. I used it to write my reference letters, and to do any kind of lists I was working on in projects.

There was a dedicated word processor system that the Archives used, it was called Datapoint, and it was basically just a word processing system. It didn't do anything else. They were beginning to work with electronic records, and actually I had a training rotation through the Electronic Records Office, which was at that point called Machine-readable Records. People knew that this was going to be a huge issue, but they were just then beginning to deal with it. For example, they knew that we were going to be accessioning digital maps for Cartographic, but nobody quite knew what that meant at that point. At least I didn't at the beginning of my career.

The maps were kept in big map cases, as they still are, and if you were trying to find, for example, an aerial photograph of a town in Texas, you found the USGS quad, and you found that particular town, and then you went from that quad to the aerial photographs, and then tried to match the two things up. So it was not very high tech.

MR. RHODES: No. But when pilots were flying over places, would they have marked the lat-long data?

MR. BUSTARD: What they had—the different agencies created indexes, either photographs, where they laid out all the aerial photographs and then took a picture of those. Or, in the case of some of the intelligence agencies, there were clear plastic indexes that you would put over the top of a map, and line up the latitude and longitude, and it would show that there are three photographs of this particular area, where there might be coverage. Just because something was indexed, it didn't actually mean that the Archives had the coverage.

MR. RHODES: The majority of your holdings were from when? Did you have records from dirigibles and things like this?

MR. BUSTARD: No, the records started roughly in the late 1920s. I think there were some aerial shots of, for example, I think there was a big flood in Washington DC in the late 1920s. Most of the shots were from the New Deal agencies like the Soil Conservation Service. It was called the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service. Those were two New Deal agencies, and they did a lot of aerial photography in the mid- to late-1930s. And then, in World War II, there was a lot of photography, for example, military photography of D-Day, or Iwo Jima, things like that.

Then, in the fourth coverage of the United States, which are most or our holdings, we had started to get some aerial coverage from intelligence agencies, like the Defense Intelligence Agency, which had done training missions over a lot of the United States, so it had coverage of the United States.

But you'd need to talk to somebody who stayed longer than I did in Cartographic. I think the big jump started happening after I left in 1989. You started getting more domestic photography from the 1940s and into the 1950s and 1960s, and then you also started getting more and more foreign aerial photography from the defense intelligence agencies too.

MR. RHOADS: Because there would have been a 50 year, 40 year, 30 year cap?

MR. BUSTARD: I'm not sure exactly when they start. I know that one day as part of my training, I went through some of the aerial photography that was still at the Suitland Records Center that hadn't been accessioned yet by the National Archives. I was blown away at this. Basically, an entire stack area, which are roughly about the size of a football field, and the place was filled with cans of aerial photography. I thought, "How are we ever going to get a hold of this?"

MR. RHODES: So after Cartographic, you worked on the Reagan Project, and this project came about in the immediate wake of Reagan's leaving office, versus maybe like, Nixon.

MR. BUSTARD: This was a detail I had to the White House Old Executive Office Building, to the White House Office of Records Management. Trudy Peterson, who was the head of the old Office of Record Services, called me up and said, "I need to put some people on this detail and I want you to do this."—It was Thursday—"and you need to show up at the White House on Monday morning."

The idea behind it was that the Archives would start processing the Reagan papers before he left office. They would do the initial review for privacy and for Presidential Records Act in the Freedom of Information Act. And you would read through box after box from the White House central files, marking, tabbing the documents that you think would need to be withheld, and marking what the restriction was, whether it was law enforcement or personal privacy or national security, which I didn't look at much, but things like that.

MR. RHODES: Yeah, and was this highly publicized?

MR. BUSTARD: No, the line was—and I don't really know whether this was true—that Nancy Reagan had gotten it into her head that she wanted Ron's papers processed efficiently and fast, faster than other previous Presidents had theirs processed. So they created this detail to start the process even before he left office. I don't know if that's really true or not, but that was the story I had heard.

So we came into this one office in the Old Executive Office Building (EOB), and there were big tables, and six or seven of us sat around the whole day reading box after box, certain topics within the White House central files. It would have been great if I had a security clearance so I could have read more interesting kinds of things, but I ended up reading things on topics like housing and religion, which actually was somewhat interesting, and petitions.

It was fascinating to work in the old EOB and the White House. We got some incredible perks. We got to see the Fourth of July fireworks from the South Lawn of the White House, and we got to go to Kennedy Center and sit in the Presidential box and watch a performance. That was incredible, we're talking about once in a lifetime kinds of experiences. But the work was horribly boring. It just boring to tears.

Sometimes, you do a job and you realize "I don't ever want to do this again," and that kind of review, I realized, I don't ever want to do again.

MR. RHODES: What was the state of Reagan's Presidency at that point? I mean, Iran-Contra had already broken—

MR. BUSTARD: [interposing] This was 1988, the Presidential election year, before George H.W. Bush was elected. So yes, Reagan had made it through Iran-Contra, and he was, in a sense, coasting, I guess—if a President is allowed to coast in his last year. So I didn't have any sense that there were crises taking place.

MR. RHODES: After this detail, you had been to Exhibitions, really enjoyed it, so you were going to re-enter somewhere. How did that come about?

MR. BUSTARD: Yeah, that summer there had been a job announcement for a curatorial position in Exhibits, and I applied for that position. I was applying to the person I had worked with, Emily Soaps who was a curator with the Exhibits Office. In the year and a half or two years after I had done the detail, she had become the branch chief, and she had thought highly, I guess, of my work and eventually hired me. I started in 1989 on my birthday, January 23. It was the Monday after George H.W. Bush was inaugurated. So I left my detail at the White House, and moved on over, and started to work in what was called the Exhibits Branch within Exhibits and Educational Programs. The old acronym was NE, and my office was down in what was then called 3E1A, which is on the east side of the building. The offices were where the National Archives Foundation offices are now, and if you go down that hallway toward the stacks, that's where the Exhibits Office was.

MR. RHODES: How were Exhibitions understood, when you arrived there? I saw that there were sort of interesting things like the Freedom Train? In 1950 or something like that?

MR. BUSTARD: Right, that had been a big deal. By the time I started in Exhibits, Exhibits were starting to grow again, but it was still a pretty small operation. We tried very hard to be professional, but you know, we were kind of jacks of all trades.

My technical title was "Exhibits Information Specialist," although we called ourselves curators, and my job was basically research and writing on exhibits, which is what I do today. But we did a little bit of everything.

When there was an exhibit that was going to be opened up, it was all hands up in the gallery. You moved the cases in and out, you took the vitrines off the cases, you helped to mount the documents, you did some actual screwing in of things that were mounted on the wall, and it was a little bit of everything. Our exhibits were, I think, well done, but they were very traditional exhibits, in the sense that we were working in a gallery that we called the Circular Gallery, which was actually semicircular, that was a hallway that went around the outside of the Rotunda. So we had to mount things on these sort of round walls, and that was challenging.

Some of the cases were these old-fashioned cases that we re-used over and over again. And then, over the next five or six or seven years, we started to have a more professional look, and do exhibits that were a little bit more complicated.

But the exhibits that we did were pretty simple. They had things mounted on the wall, and cases with documents in them, and we often had an AV segment to the exhibit too, but very kind of traditional, straightforward. The text was longer, much longer, than we ever would have today. That's one of the things I notice when I look at my old exhibit scripts, how much longer the text is, compared to today. If there's a main label that has 200 words, that's kind of long. Maybe I've become a more efficient writer, too. But we would have 260- to 300-word or longer labels that I'm sure nobody read.

MR. RHODES: In your first couple of years there, how did you decide what topics exhibits would focus on, and how the exhibit would coalesce, and whether or not you had any guidance from the Foundation at that point?

MR. BUSTARD: The Foundation existed, but it was not the lively, fundraising entity that it is today.

As far as topics are concerned, my impression—and of course, I was just starting—is that the decisions about exhibit topics were being made by the managers, and a lot of times they were driven by anniversaries.

For example, my first exhibit, I was the co-curator of an exhibit called “Washington Behind the Monuments.” My boss came to me and said, “Well, you know, we’re working on this exhibit...” because it’s the anniversary of what was called the 1791 Residency Act, which is where the precise boundaries of Washington DC were drawn. So for the anniversary of this, we thought we’d do an exhibit about Washington DC. I worked with Claudia Nicholson, who was the co-curator of the exhibition with me. We came up with different exhibits, we did the research, and we did the writing.

One of the big difference from today is the collaborative process that you have with an exhibit designer. In those early days, before computer-aided design, you wrote the script, in the word-processing age, so you were typing out multiple copies of the script at that point, which is good. I’d never had to experience that. But you chose your items, you created the script, the script was reviewed by your bosses, and then you began to work with a designer. The designer would look at your script and look at, typically, photocopies of the exhibition items, and then the designer would go off, and in a few weeks come back with his or her design, and then the two of you would sit down and go over the design.

But it was very difficult to change anything. I could say to a designer, “Oh, this doesn’t really work, this photograph is too big, or this needs to be in a separate case by itself.” Often the designer, somewhat understandably, would get mad, and say, “Well, you know, I spent, you know, two weeks drawing this design by hand and, you know, yeah, I can make a few little changes, but you know, it’s hard to make changes at this point.” I’m exaggerating a little bit there.

But today, when we have a much more collaborative relationship with designers, we start working with a designer earlier. We start sitting down with him or her, and they can put some initial ideas together, they can do an initial design, and I can sit there with a designer and say, “Well, how about if we blow that photograph up and use it as a photo mural?” And he or she, within ten seconds, can move that around on the computer screen, and see what it looks like as a photo mural. Or, “What if we move this exhibit case over to the end of the exhibition instead of the beginning of the exhibition?” And you can do that again in ten seconds or less, and try out different things. I think it really does promote a lot of creativity. It allows the curator to have a hand in the design. It allows the designer to understand the content of the exhibition a little bit more, and so it’s been a tremendous boon to exhibit development. I got off track there a little bit.

MR. RHODES: No, no, it’s great. I’m wondering about anniversaries, like the West, closing the Frontier was 100 years before, right?

MR. BUSTARD: It was our effort to do something for the anniversary of the Columbus quincentennial, I think. So it’s 1492, 1992, and I don’t know whether our management decided we needed to commemorate this, or there was some pressure from the outside to commemorate the Columbus quincentennial. But the National Archives doesn’t have a lot of material about Columbus.

But what we do have is material about the exploration of the West, the Frontier, things like that. So I was asked to be the curator of that exhibition, which eventually became “Western Ways: Images of the

American West.” My idea—and I don’t think it worked all that well, but it was okay—instead of having an exhibition where you have documents, and the images support the documents, I wanted to do an exhibition—and this is a theme that I think probably does run through my whole career—where I would use mainly images, and occasionally have a document that would support the image. So at first, I thought I might limit myself to photography, but I couldn’t help myself, once I started seeing some of the other materials. So I used maps and I used some of the wonderful prints that we have, and, of course, the photographs. I created this exhibition that looked at the West, and tried to use our records to interpret the West through the lens of some of the more modern or contemporary historiography that was starting to come out on the American West.

One of the first things I read was Patricia Nelson Limerick’s *Legacy of Conquest*. That set me off in a direction of trying to think about an exhibition of the American West that didn’t focus on traditional themes like the Frontier; that dealt with Native Americans more sensitively; that appreciated the diversity of the people of the West; that wasn’t stuck with the end of the Frontier in the 1890s; that looked for continuities within Western American history; that continued into 20th century. Those are all themes in Limerick’s book, and also one of the things that I try to do with every exhibition. I try to incorporate what I see are some of the historiographical changes or trends or controversies into the exhibition that I’m working on. So I tell people that when I do an exhibition, I don’t necessarily start with “Oh, what records do we have in the National Archives?” I try to familiarize myself not only with the topic that I’m working on, but also, I think because I’m a historian, I want to know what is the historiography. Until I feel familiar and comfortable with the historiography, I don’t feel comfortable choosing an organizational structure of an exhibition, or the content.

MR. RHODES: I do want to come back to that and talk a little bit about how the workflow played out, from inception to completion. But as anyone who’s looked at historiography knows, politics can come into history, right?

MR. BUSTARD: Mm-hmm.

MR. RHODES: It would be foolish to assume that it doesn’t, you know. We all come with our biases, and no matter how much the discipline would like to say that we’re being objective—

MR. BUSTARD: [interposing] Mm-hmm.

MR. RHODES: So, that approach was it you know, was it kind of controversial at the time? Have you run into—I mean, historiography and contemporary historiography, sometimes what makes it interesting is that it’s sort of controversial, and it’s taking a radically new look at things. When you’ve incorporated those sort of, you know, lenses, have you found that either because of personalities, or because people see it as a conflict of—you know, the—a conflict with the Archives sort of, what is supposed to be, you know, politically neutral institution as an agency of government. Have you run into, you know, into controversies about that?

So, was it kind of controversial at the time? Historiography and contemporary historiography, can be sort of controversial, taking a radically new look at things. When you’ve incorporated those sort of lenses, have you found controversies, either because of personalities, or because of a conflict with the Archives, although it’s supposed to be a politically neutral institution as an agency of government.

MR. BUSTARD: To tell you the truth, we've rarely had those kinds of controversies that took place at the Smithsonian around the Enola Gay exhibition, for example. We tend, first of all, to be a little less interpretive than some of the Smithsonian museums. I may have an interpretation in my head sometimes, but what we do, and the way we see our exhibitions here at the Archives is that we are presenting the records, the documentation that we have in the National Archives, and these are the records. You, and we, may not like what the records say, but there are records, and I think that has allowed us to avoid a lot of the controversies throughout my career. And I have to say too that management has been supportive of some of the new directions that we've gone in.

I can't think of very many times at all when somebody said, "You've got to take this document out," or, in effect, I don't think I've ever had somebody say that to me. I may have done a little self-censoring from time to time. But when I worked on the development of the Public Vaults, and then the Civil War exhibition, we started to emphasize that we were hoping that people would discover the records, or discover for themselves what's in the records, and that approach has taken us a long way, I think.

MR. RHODES: Can you talk about the origins of the idea for the Public Vaults? What type of audience were you trying to reach? What is its purpose? Why did you take this approach in doing the sort of centerpiece, it seems now, to the visitor experience at the Archives? If that's a fair characterization.

MR. BUSTARD: Yeah, I think in some ways it is. I'm going to have to go back and give you deep background, I guess. My understanding is that Archivist John Carlin, at a certain point, somewhere around 2000 or so, was convinced by someone in the museum community that a lot of his legacy was going to be tied up in not just how he managed electronic records, or how he dealt with declassification issues, and things like that, but would be tied up in what the public spaces looked like after the planned renovation that was going to take place. At least according to my former boss, Chris Rudy Smith, Carlin called together a group of wise people in the museum profession, and they again convinced him that the exhibitions that were going to be done in the public spaces, the way the Charters were going to be presented, that that would have a large effect on how he was going to be seen. In that meeting, and Chris was there, Carlin was convinced that they needed to bring in a museum professional, a kind of high profile person to oversee that process.

Four or five people applied for the position, and ultimately the person who got the job was Marvin Pinkert. He was a vice president at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. And that's important because his background is in science museums, which is a very different kind of world than the world of the history museum, especially at that point.

Science museums were seen as being places of discovery, being heavily into interactive exhibits, kind of kinesthetic experiences and things like that. So that's where Marvin came from, and he started at the National Archives in, I think it was January 2001 [December 18, 2000]. He really brought a revolution with him. I don't know if anybody's done an oral history with Marvin, but they should because he really was the prime mover behind what he eventually named "The National Archives Experience." The National Archives Experience included the new theater; it included what became the Public Vaults; the new Learning Center; the new temporary exhibition gallery; the new Rotunda; the whole sort of new visitor experience. I think every bit as important as those physical structures, it was Marvin who said that we need to take the Foundation and move it from what was, I don't know how to characterize it, an honorary kind of position, where people met about twice a year, and they had a little budget, and they doled out a little bit of money, and it was not very thriving. He said, "This needs to become a standard

501(c)(3) entity that will fund our exhibitions and our educational programs, and that will raise money for the National Archives,” and even if we move beyond the Public Vaults and do something new in that space, and get rid of the Learning Center or whatever, that is going to be one of the major changes that we’re going to be living with for a long, long time here in this agency, is the creation of that National Archives Foundation. At that point, it was called the “Foundation for the National Archives,” and is now called “The National Archives Foundation.”

So Marvin came in in early 2001, and as I said, kind of brought a revolution with him. He wanted us to think differently about exhibitions; he wanted us to think about using interactives in exhibitions; he wanted to get away from the old traditional, here’s a display case with two or three documents in it; and he created one group that worked on the re encasement of the Charters and the exhibition there. There was another group that worked on what would become the Public Vaults. He and I were both on that group.

The other thing that Marvin did: it was Marvin who convinced the Archivist and the management of the National Archives that if we were going to raise money for a new theater in the National Archives, we needed a different plan. The plan when he came in was that the theater was going to be basically an auditorium, and you’d use it for internal events, and maybe the occasional film, and things like that. But Marvin said, “You’re trying to raise \$5 million for this, nobody’s going to pay \$5 million for this. You have to have a whole public program, and you have to have a different looking theater.” So it was Marvin who really was the person who pushed that idea. He, with the National Archives Foundation, got the money from the McGowan family to have what we now call the McGowan Theater.

MR. RHODES: Wow.

MR. BUSTARD: So anyway, you were asking me about the Public Vaults.

MR. RHODES: That’s right. How did you feel about that big change?

MR. BUSTARD: It was a major, major change. Marvin is also quite a powerful personality, and so there were a lot of frustrations. With Marvin, it’s kind of like a train coming down the tracks. You have two choices: you can step off the track, or you can get run over. So he was very much the dynamic force behind that process. We went to different museums around the country, we started going to professional meetings like American Association of Museums (AAM). Most of us had never been to those meetings before, but he wanted us to think of ourselves as exhibit developers rather than just content specialists. I’m sure he would say that there was a fair amount of resistance, especially early on. We thought that we also did bring a knowledge of the National Archives with us, people like Chris and myself, and the records. So when he would come up with some brainstorm, which he did often, we could kind of pull him back and say, you know, “No, we don’t think we can do an interactive around medical discoveries from the records of the National Archives,” for example. “But maybe we can come up with an interactive that lets somebody go through the genealogy, the process of discovering records about genealogy. They may not get some sort of medical discovery out of it, but maybe they would get their grandfather’s Social Security benefit, or something like that.”

So it was a very creative time period. It was also really stressful because we were really under the gun. They were trying to raise the money, really, as we were creating the exhibition. There were times when we didn’t think the money was going to be there.

Another big change was, we worked with an outside design firm, Gallagher and Associates, as opposed to the in house designers that we had. So this was a massive, multi-million- dollar contract. There were new players from the outside. Marvin was new. So it was pretty stressful.

I think what we came up with, with the Public Vaults, was really a good exhibition. I think it pleases the visitors. One of the most rewarding things for me, when we finally opened it in 2004, was the staff members who came through and told us that they thought that we had captured the records of the National Archives and the things we do in the National Archives in a good way, in a thorough way. I think that's a little bit of a change, in the way the staff has viewed exhibitions. When I started at the Archives, and really first started at Exhibitions, there wasn't a great deal of support for Exhibitions on the staff. You'd hear a lot about, "Well you know how many Hollinger boxes you could buy for the amount of money it would take to mount that exhibition," or, "We could take your full-time employee and could put you with the Reference staff, and get a lot more use out of you than in Exhibitions." There wasn't an appreciation that we had those million visitors who came through the Exhibition Hall every year, and that they needed to be served too.

I think that has changed dramatically over the 30 years that I've been here at the National Archives. I can remember being told by an archivist whom I worked with early on, that he didn't like Exhibits. He didn't even like Reference. He thought that you should just take the documents, keep them in boxes, or keep them in the big map cases, and maybe bring them out occasionally to showcase them. But that was our role. I remember an actual quote from one of the deputy archivists, the person who became Deputy Archivist of the United States. He said something like, "In a perfect world, no one would see the records." But the attitudes have changed.

MR. RHODES: I wondered if there was one of your major exhibitions that you would want to give some background to, and explain how it came about, from inception to final manifestation, so that people in the future understand how this works, and all that goes into it.

MR. BUSTARD: Okay. I guess one of my favorite exhibitions that I did was "Attachments: Stories and Faces from America's Gates." It was about the people who came to this country and found themselves at the gates of America, and their stories. Whether they eventually came into the United States, or whether they were blocked from coming into the United States, or whether they came in and then left again. That exhibition came about because I was working on the exhibition that became the Records of Rights exhibition.

I was working on the immigration section, and we had a hole in our schedule, and Chris Rudy-Smith came to me and said, "We don't want to have the Exhibition Hall dark for about three or four months during the summer, so can you think of some exhibition you'd like to do, and we could do something on that topic?" I said, "Well, I've been doing a lot of research on immigration, and I keep coming across these case files, the actual stories of people who were trying to come into the country or trying to stay in the country." I said, "Some of these stories are just really fascinating, and a lot of times they have photographs attached to the paperwork, and so I look at these people and I wonder whatever became of them." I wanted to have more information about them. I said, "Do you think I could do something along those lines?" And she said yeah, she thought that was a great idea. So, as I think I said earlier, I started doing research in the sense of reading secondary sources about immigration and deportation and Nativism, and that led me to, for example, the Chinese Exclusion Act, and I realized what great records we have here about Chinese Exclusion. Especially case files around Chinese who were coming

into the country and who eventually, by law, had to have a photograph taken of them. And I started playing around with the idea of attachments. The physical attachments to the records, like the photograph being attached to the record. The attachment of the immigrants coming into the country to their former lands. And then, the attachments that they formed to their new country, the United States. The attachments they had to community and to family. Eventually, I came up with about 25 or 28 different stories, and documents that I think had both compelling photographs and compelling stories. I chose those people, and started to write the script, and then also started to work with a designer.

The designer was Ray Ruskin, a tremendously creative person. Ray and I decided very early on that one of the things we wanted to do was to mount large-scale photographs of the people on the walls near their stories and the documents about them. We wanted visitors to look into the eyes of these people. So that's what we did, and that also led me to organize the exhibition around themes, like arriving in the United States, and leaving the United States, and staying in the United States.

We had a gigantic photo-mural of Angel Island, which was the main processing point for Asian immigrants coming to this country on the West Coast. Angel Island was very different from Ellis Island, which was basically a processing place. Angel Island was a detention center, basically. We wanted to challenge people by this different sort of idea of immigration into the United States. Ray had a great idea of creating an actual gate that visitors would walk through in the exhibition. Then, we based that gate on the gate that is in the Rotunda of the National Archives. That is, of course, the gate up to the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Into our exhibition gate, Ray inserted photographs of the different people featured in the exhibition. So you had to kind of pass through a gate yourself, and pass the faces of these folks.

I discovered some just incredible stories. One was the story of a woman who is now a distinguished professor of immigration and Chinese-American history, Erika Lee, who teaches at the University of Minnesota.

I read her story in a book that she wrote about her grandparents, who came into this country—I won't go into the whole story—but came into this country and 70 or so years later, she asked to see her grandparents' case file when she was a graduate student working at our San Bruno office. They brought that case file out, and her grandparents' wedding photo literally fell out of the case file.

So we used her story. We brought her in to talk to the press when the exhibition opened. We used her grandparents' photographs on the big banners that were outside. She talked to us about how moving it was for her to walk up to the National Archives and see her grandparents' photo on the banner.

We had another incredible story. I had an intern working for us one summer, while I was still doing research, and I said, "You know, there are these case files of refugees out at Archives II." There were about 25 boxes, and I didn't know a lot about the boxes. I said, "Could you go out there and take a look at some of these, and see if there are any good stories there?" She did the research and she came back with four or five really good stories. I chose a couple of them for the exhibition. One was the story of a man by the name of Michael Pupa.

Michael Pupa was a young boy, about nine years old, who was living in Poland during World War II. His family—again, I won't go into all the details—but his family was eventually killed by Germans who came into his town. Michael and an uncle and a cousin escaped into the woods of Poland, and spent the war

hiding there from the Germans. He eventually goes into a deportation camp in Germany, and eventually comes to the United States as a refugee. Those were the records that our intern found.

When the exhibition was just about to open, I asked one of our Public Affairs officers, Miriam Kleiman, to come down, and we talked about the different stories in the exhibition. I usually do this with her, give her some story examples, when an exhibition is going to open. I know Miriam has an interest in the Holocaust. So I started off by telling her about Michael Pupa, and she looks at me and she says, "Is he from Cleveland?" I said, "Yeah." And she said, "I went to high school with his daughter."

So she got in touch with her high school friend, who then got in touch with the father, Michael, who was in his early 70s. He had rarely spoken to his family about his experience, either in the Holocaust or the deportation camps, or displaced persons camps. So we started working with him, and with the rest of his family, to incorporate him into the opening of the exhibition, and he came to the opening of the exhibition.

Well, as I said, he'd rarely spoken about this. His family wasn't sure he wanted to talk about this, and in what has to be one of the most moving parts of my career, he began to warm to this idea, and he began to talk to his family about his experiences, and he went from talking to his family about his experiences to doing an interview with the Holocaust museum and then doing interviews with the press about his experience. He has gotten to the point now that he goes around to schools, and talks about the Holocaust and his experience.

So this is an incredible coincidence, I don't know what to call it, of the intern picking the four or five stories out of the 25 boxes of material; my picking his story from the four or five that she brought back; the fact that Miriam had gone to high school with his daughter; then he went through what his family says is a life changing experience.

You know, that wasn't something I signed up for when I started on April 1, 1985. But it's been one of the best parts of my career.

MR. RHODES: Thanks, that's fantastic. Is there anything else you'd like to speak about? That's a great little capstone, isn't it?

MR. BUSTARD: Yes. I have had a fantastic career here. You know, I haven't cured cancer or stopped terrorism, or anything like that. But for somebody who came into the Archives wanting to work with historical records, and wanting to work as a historian, it's been fabulous. I've been challenged; I've felt like I've been able to be creative; and I've had fabulous colleagues all the way along who have helped my career and have stimulated me; and I think that the work that we do here at the National Archives is incredibly important; and that the Archives needs to get a whole lot more credit than it does. I've had a very happy, exciting career. And as I move in the next few years into the next phase of my life and retirement, that's going to be the big challenge, finding something as stimulating and as interesting to continue to do. So that's it.

MR. RHODES: Bruce, thank you very much—

MR. BUSTARD: [interposing] You're welcome.

[END RECORDING]





NATIONAL  
ARCHIVES

National Archives History Office  
700 Pennsylvania Ave. NW  
Washington DC 20408  
Tel: (202) 357-5243  
Email: [archives.historian@nara.gov](mailto:archives.historian@nara.gov)

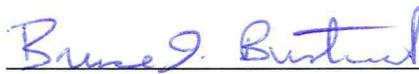
**DEED OF GIFT TO THE PUBLIC DOMAIN**

I, Bruce Bustard, do hereby give to the National Archives History Office the recordings and transcripts of my interviews conducted on Friday, December 11, 2015.

I authorize the National Archives History Office to use the recordings and transcripts in such a manner as may best serve the historical objectives of their oral history program.

In making this gift I voluntarily convey ownership of the recording and transcripts to the public domain.

Eric Rhodes  
Agent of Receiving Organization

  
Donor (signature)

12/16/2015  
Date