

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives Office Oral History Interview
Subject: Chuck Piercy
Interviewer: Rebecca Brenner
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REBECCA BRENNER: This is Rebecca Brenner. I'm here at All about to interview Charles Piercy.

CHUCK PIERCY: Chuck Piercy.

REBECCA BRENNER: Chuck Piercy, and it is July 14, 2015, and we are in room 5100. So, Mr. Piercy, could you please provide a brief overview of your career at the National Archives?

CHUCK PIERCY: I've worked here since about September of 2008 and will be retiring, and moving to another position on July 25, 2015.

REBECCA BRENNER: Have you held multiple positions here? Or what positions have you held?

CHUCK PIERCY: Yes, I originally came here to be the Deputy Chief Information Officer and then while I was in that position the Chief Information Officer retired and so I was acting CIO for about 10-11 months and then I was offered the position I'm in now which is the Executive for Business Support Services.

REBECCA BRENNER: How did your education and previous work experience influence your decision to work for the National Archives?

CHUCK PIERCY: My previous work experience was with NOAA, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and I had worked there for a number of years in engineering and program management, and those were skills that were deemed to be useful by the Chief Information Officer for the Electronic Records Archives and some of the other big electronic records projects that were going on.

REBECCA BRENNER: What were your original impressions of NARA?

CHUCK PIERCY: I guess I originally expected to see much more in the way of electronic records, storage, and preservation. And I was initially surprised to see that many, most of the records here at the archives were in paper and other analog formats.

REBECCA BRENNER: Any particular reason? Or could you provide some more context as to why you expected there to be more digital than more paper?

CHUCK PIERCY: Well, I've been in the working world for about 35 years, and maybe in the first five of those years we actually had born-analog records on typewriters and things, but for the last 30 years all records have been created from electronic sources, and therefore it just seems like it would be more efficient to accession the electronic version of the record rather than a paper version of it. They're essentially all created electronically—we used to the term born digital—almost everything is born-digital—it's just that we archive the analog version.

REBECCA BRENNER: How has the balance between paper and digital records evolved during your time here?

CHUCK PIERCY: I've been here for almost 7 years and I haven't seen any real breakthroughs in terms of a movement toward electronic records. Except possibly for the Presidential Memo and the update to the Federal Records Act, which I think has the potential for some real movement.

REBECCA BRENNER: What exactly is the Federal Records Act?

CHUCK PIERCY: The Federal Records Act is the act of Congress that controls the preservation and management of Federal records.

REBECCA BRENNER: What successes have you achieved here at NARA?

CHUCK PIERCY: Well, I think a big one was helping to make the Electronic Records Archives system program operational with the initial operating capability. The program was in real danger of being killed by OMB (Office of Management and Budget) and Congress, and we worked very hard to keep that from happening; it was shortened but it was not killed, and at one time it was about 20% of the NARA budget, so that's a pretty important thing.

When I was in the CIO shop we had quite a few successful projects, including the network attached storage that added about two petabytes of storage here that was critically needed. Both for email file storage, shared drive file storage, but also for scanned image storage, and we updated all the servers and since I've been in Business Support Services, we've had a couple of historic building renovations including the National Archives Experience Phase II or NAE II in the National Archives Building in Washington, DC and the Customs House renovation for the National Archives space and the Customs House in lower Manhattan. So quite a few accomplishments, I think.

REBECCA BRENNER: You mentioned sort of the friction in the budget with congress and in the importance of the ERA—could you speak to the urgency of the electronic records archive?

CHUCK PIERCY: Yeah, the electronic records archives program had been going on for quite a few years, and Congress and OMB grew impatient for signs of success and milestones that would point to our success, and so one thing we had to do was we were given a firm deadline—I believe it was the end of calendar year 2011—to complete it and make it operation. And we met that deadline and were able to preserve the funding for the program

REBECCA BRENNER: What aspects of your work do you most enjoy?

CHUCK PIERCY: I really like working with people and sort of forming teams to get projects accomplished. And I have a project management background and I would really like to be able to point to something as a firm accomplishment.

REBECCA BRENNER: What's the greatest team you've worked on here?

CHUCK PIERCY: I would say probably the team associated with Electronic Records Archives; also the storage area network was a pretty large project: it was a four or five million dollar project and had hardware at both College Park and Rocket Center, and that was a pretty large and successful team.

REBECCA BRENNER: What is Rocket Center?

CHUCK PIERCY: Rocket Center is really two things; it's our continuity, or COOP, Continuity of Operations site. So, in the event of a catastrophic event in the Washington, DC area we could go to Rocket Center

and resume operations of the agency. I hold the position called the continuity coordinator, which is one of my many hats. And so we annually have a continuity drill at Rocket Center. In addition, the base instance and the EOP instance of ERA are at Rocket Center, and so we have a full-time contingent of staff that are up there to maintain that.

REBECCA BRENNER: Where is Rocket Center?

CHUCK PIERCY: It's in West Virginia, really in the middle of nowhere, really. In the panhandle of West Virginia and that's sort of by design, as we wanted it at least 50 or 60 miles out of Washington, DC in a relatively unpopulated area. It actually is on a Navy base in West Virginia.

REBECCA BRENNER: Have there been any instances where it seemed possible that you would have to go there or were there any near cases of that?

CHUCK PIERCY: I can't think of anything that was catastrophic enough that we would need to go there since I've been working here. We did have a pretty severe earthquake in—

REBECCA BRENNER: (interposing) Summer 2011, right?

CHUCK PIERCY: 2011, and we've had the possibility of tornadoes that could have affected the College Park facility, possible flooding in the National Archives, but, no, we've never had any actual events that where we've had to actually activate the COOP plan.

REBECCA BRENNER: And the name of that particular hat is the Continuity Manager, you said?

CHUCK PIERCY: Continuity Coordinator.

REBECCA BRENNER: Continuity Coordinator. And how did you take on that position?

CHUCK PIERCY: It's position that all agencies have to have, and as the head of Business Support Services I have many hats that I wear that are requirements of law or requirements in executive orders. We'll get a new executive order that says we need a senior official in charge of X, Y, Z and sometimes that comes to me in Business Support Services.

REBECCA BRENNER: And what are some examples of your other hats? I like that analogy.

CHUCK PIERCY: You see my hats over there on the desk. I am the Senior Official for Historic Facility Preservation Policy here at the Archives. I am the Designated Agency Safety and Health Official or the DASHO. I am the Senior Agency Security Official, and there's several other ones, as identified in NARA 101.

REBECCA BRENNER: What do you do for the policy one?

CHUCK PIERCY: It has to do with historic preservation, and we have several NARA properties that are significant historic buildings, such as the national historic archives building in Washington, DC, and these buildings cannot be modified without going through a number of steps to make sure that certain facades or certain spaces within the building are left in their current historic state, and so that's what the position has to do with.

REBECCA BRENNER: Going back to your daily activities: can you describe a typical day in your unit?

CHUCK PIERCY: Pretty typical day is I arrive at about 7:30 in the morning and I have a cup of coffee and then will read emails. I get quite a few emails, even overnight I'll have quite a few emails, so I will scan those first to make sure that nothing urgent, and then I'll read them basically in chronological order. Fairly busy schedule, sometimes meetings back to back all day, and then will end my day with more emails, after noon. And sometimes there are crises. We've had a garage fire while I've been here, which had four fire trucks that responded. Two cars completely burned up and the possibility of many more cars being burned and possibly losing the entire garage. There's always something going on, always some sort of exciting crisis to solve.

REBECCA BRENNER: Hopefully the garage fire isn't a typical day, but that leads right into my next question, which is, what were some of the challenges and issues that you faced in your career with the agency?

CHUCK PIERCY: I think events like the garage fire and the earthquake were pretty challenging. We did have some shelving collapses at Suitland during the earthquake, and we had to make some emergency repairs to the building. We had to quickly assess impact to the College Park facility and Archives I and I think those things are probably some of the biggest challenges.

REBECCA BRENNER: What has been your relationship with other Federal agencies?

CHUCK PIERCY: We have a pretty close relationship with Federal agencies, particularly with the CIO council I've worked a lot, and that is primarily the CIOs of the cabinet-level agencies, work closely with them and with OMB and in some cases with staffers on the hill to help meet our objectives.

REBECCA BRENNER: How so? Can you provide some examples of working with congressional staffs?

CHUCK PIERCY: Well, we've had meetings with them on budgetary issues, particularly a lot of interaction during the ERA, something called the tech stat, technical status review, which were done government-wide and identified ERA as a program in trouble or a program that was not meeting its objectives, and so I had to work close with both OMB and the Hill in terms of that, in terms of making sure that we identified milestones that we could meet and keep the program going.

REBECCA BRENNER: What are some of those milestones?

CHUCK PIERCY: Well, the milestones would be completing the last software release that would enable the system to become operational and other milestones were in terms of the volume of records that we got into the system and the number of agencies that were able to utilize it.

REBECCA BRENNER: And what exactly is the mission of the ERA?

CHUCK PIERCY: Well, the mission of ERA is to store and preserve and provide access to the records of the Federal government in electronic form, so the records that get accessioned and ingested into ERA are completely in electronic form; we never see the paper versions of those records.

REBECCA BRENNER: Correct me if I'm wrong, but it does not include the records that were paper and then become digital?

CHUCK PIERCY: No, it does not.

REBECCA BRENNER: Okay.

CHUCK PIERCY: It includes a digital surrogates, which are essentially digitized paper records, although it could, it could be expanded to include those, and may in the future.

REBECCA BRENNER: How do you foresee the future of the ERA? Especially as more, let's say, agency records become more and more digital.

CHUCK PIERCY: Well, I'm not involved in it, but there are plans for a replacement of ERA that are being made now. I don't know if they're going to call it ERA 2 or next-generation ERA, but those plans are coming together now from an architectural standpoint. And that's the future of the archives, I think. It may be a slow transition, but I think eventually our job will transition to full Electronic Records Archives.

REBECCA BRENNER: What technological changes over time have you observed?

CHUCK PIERCY: That's an interesting question.

REBECCA BRENNER: I'm actually writing a research paper on it too.

CHUCK PIERCY: Oh, okay.

REBECCA BRENNER: (interposing) But it's also on my sheet.

CHUCK PIERCY: Well, I'm an electrical engineer by training. And I've seen massive change in computer technology in my career. I was working in the Navy in the early days of the internet, and we would have this massive minicomputer that will fill this entire room almost. And that was our connection to the internet. And people would access the minicomputer by dial-in modem. Seems almost primitive by today's standards, but we also, at that lab, had supercomputers and, you know, some of these computers had less computing power than my smartphone does now.

REBECCA BRENNER: That's interesting: the analogy you made between computers and what your smartphone can do now.

CHUCK PIERCY: Yeah, in fact, the Android smartphones run the Linux operating system, which was the same one, Unix, Linux, same operating system these massive old computers used to run like 30 years ago, so the more things change, the more they stay the same.

REBECCA BRENNER: More broadly speaking, what other changes have you witnessed at your time at NARA?

CHUCK PIERCY: I've seen one sort of constant change is the need to acquire more storage space for analog records, and that was a priority when I first came here, seven years, even though I was working more on the electronic side, but it remains a big challenge today and we're constantly looking for ways to acquire new space to store analog records.

REBECCA BRENNER: Are you involved with any other professional organization such as SAA or OAH or any of those those?

CHUCK PIERCY: Not to any great degree. I have attended some of the conferences though.

REBECCA BRENNER: Have you attended any particularly interesting conferences for your work here?

CHUCK PIERCY: Yeah I've actually attended some of the sort of forward-looking technological symposiums that discussed new approaches to electronic archives such as the LOCKSS approach: Lots Of Copies Keep Stuff Safe. Which, we propose an electronic archives that is in many geographical locations and data are simply copied from one spinning disk—one array of spinning disks to another array of spinning disks in a different geographical location and perhaps you wouldn't even need to keep the data on tape because you have so many electronic copies scattered throughout the country. So, I've heard some really interesting approaches to electronic archives. We've also I will also say that I've also seen some interesting innovative approaches to traditional archives as well, in particular the Library of Congress facility up in Fort Meade, Maryland, which was quite interesting.

REBECCA BRENNER: And how would those-- I don't really understand it, but that's okay. Those spinning reels and the changes in geography, how would that affect daily operations, let's say, in the research room?

CHUCK PIERCY: Well, the current operations in the research room is original—original records are presented to researchers and they have the option of copying those original records. If the original record is electronic, then the access copy is electronic, and my thing—I'm not an archivist, nor do I claim to be an archivist, but my feeling is that that has to result in less wear and tear on the original, particularly if you can get into a mode where your access copy is electronic; whether the preservation copy is paper or digital, you have less wear and tear on the original.

REBECCA BRENNER: Interesting. How do you view your time overall at NARA?

CHUCK PIERCY: Very positive. I've had a lot of opportunities working here that I wouldn't have otherwise. I think, in particular, a big benefit of working at NARA is its status as a mid-sized to small independent agency, and so you're able to participate in a lot of activities that you may not be able to participate in a larger cabinet-level agency.

REBECCA BRENNER: What are some examples of those activities?

CHUCK PIERCY: well, interactions with OMB, interactions with the Hill, interactions with the GAO (Government Accountability Office) and other things like that that might in a larger agency be handled in the headquarters by political appointees.

REBECCA BRENNER: Can you speak to your significant contributions to the National Archives such as the ERA or the historic preservation field?

CHUCK PIERCY: Well, I think a big contribution was the oversight of the NAE II project that really-

REBECCA BRENNER: (interposing) Can you define what did that acronym stand for one more time?

CHUCK PIERCY: National Archives Experience, Phase II, which at a visitor orientation plaza in the National Archives Building it provided the Rubenstein Gallery, which houses Magna Carta, and I think it just makes the museum portion of the building work much better. Much more user friendly, much more inviting to guests. I think it increases the throughput of the museum, it makes the learning easier and natural for visitors with the Rubenstein Gallery, and overall I think it has been a very big improvement to a very historic and important building on the Washington mall.

REBECCA BRENNER: what year did you say that was?

CHUCK PIERCY: That was completed about 2 years ago, I think, in about 2013.

REBECCA BRENNER: Does that include the Public Vaults?

CHUCK PIERCY: No, the public vaults were existing were actually part of the NAE I, the original National Archives Experience renovation, part of the original renovation of the building.

REBECCA BRENNER: When was that, the first preservation?

CHUCK PIERCY: That was before my time. I believe it was about 10 or 12 years ago.

REBECCA BRENNER: And where will you be going next?

CHUCK PIERCY: I will be retired for one day on Sunday on the July 26 and I will start a new job with the Harris Corporation on Monday, July 27.

REBECCA BRENNER: To what extent has the National Archives influenced that move?

CHUCK PIERCY: I basically got a very nice offer from a private-sector firm and I happened to be able to retire, so it was just a good move. And I like to not stay in the same place for too long. I think seven years is a pretty good run here at the National Archives, and I really appreciate the opportunities I've had to advance my career here and learn.

REBECCA BRENNER: Absolutely. Well, thank you so much for your time, and do you have anything you would like to add to the interview such as anecdotes or words of wisdom?

CHUCK PIERCY: Well, I think that the National Archives staff really needs to strive to embrace the future and move toward an electronic records as soon as possible, and not only follow the trend, but lead the trend towards electronic records, archives preservation, and access.

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