



AGREEMENT WITH THE
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE
AS TO ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

I, Marcus W. Price, of Washington, DC, in accordance with the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 CFR 101-110), hereby assign to the United States for administration by the National Archives and Records Service all my rights, title, and interest, including any literary property rights that I may have in them, in the tape recording and transcript of the interview with me conducted by Philip C. Brooks on behalf of the National Archives and Records Service at Washington, DC, on September 25, 1972.

It is agreed that the tape, (or sample portion thereof), and transcript will be available under the regulations prescribed by the Archivist of the United States as soon as the final form of the transcript has been deposited in the National Archives. It is also agreed that only the National Archives and Records Service shall have the right to publish or authorize the publication of the interview in whole or in part, aside from quotation in the normal concept of "fair use," providing that I or my heirs, legal representatives or assigns retain the right to publish in other form the statements or facts set forth in the interviews.

Signed Marcus W. Price
Date 28 July, 1973.

Accepted:

Signed James B. Rhoads
Archivist of the United States

Date August 2, 1973

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with MARCUS W. PRICE

Former Assistant Director of Archival Service
and Division Director

Major Biographical Information:

Born, Danville, Virginia	1894
A.B., University of South Carolina	1916
Ll.B., University of South Carolina	1918
U.S. Army	1918-1919
Law practice, St. Augustine, Florida	1920-1935
Assistant Director of Archival Service, National Archives	1935-1941
Director of Records Accessioning and Preservation	1942-1944
Deputy Director of Operations	1944-1946
Director, General Records Division	1947-1951
Acting Director, Administrative Services	1947-1948
Director, Audiovisual Records Division	1951-1955
Chief Archivist, Audiovisual Records Division	1955-1960
Retired	1960

National Archives and Records Service

Oral History Project

Interview with Marcus W. Price
Former Assistant Director of Archival Service
Interviewed at his home

September 25, 1972

Philip C. Brooks, Interviewer

BROOKS: Marcus, one of the most important things in the history of the Archives certainly is the selection of the people that became the original important officials. I am sure we would be interested to know what led you to be interested in the Archives, and what brought you into it.

PRICE: Well, it's a rather interesting story, I believe. You may recall that the news of the pending completion of the National Archives Building and the appointment of the first Archivist of the United States appeared in the New York Times several months before the staff was appointed. The first story in the Times suggested that the most likely appointee to the position of first Archivist of the United States was Dr. Thomas P. Martin, of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. I was intensely interested when I read about the Archives because most of my life I have been very much interested in historical research. At the time I was engaged in the practice of law in St. Augustine, Florida--I was not looking for a meal ticket, having been making a reasonably good living for a young man--I determined to go up to Washington and talk with Tom Martin about the possibility of becoming a member of the original staff. I did that. Dr. Martin and I seemed to get along with each other quite well and he said at the end of a 2-or 3-hour discussion of my qualifications that he found me qualified and if he was appointed he would be glad to get in touch with me to discuss a position on his staff. I left feeling top-hole, as the saying goes. Before leaving town to go home to Florida I stopped by a restaurant for lunch. To my amazement on the first page of the Daily News I saw the headline--"First Archivist of the United States appointed by Roosevelt"--it declared Dr. R. D. W. Connor Professor of History, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, was today appointed first Archivist of the United States. Well, instead of going home I went to Chapel Hill, and sold myself all over again to Dr. Connor, whom I liked very much from the moment I met him. Dr. Connor was not in a position at that time to select personnel, of course, and it was several weeks before I heard from him offering me a position. I couldn't afford to take it as much as I would have liked to because I had a wife and two small children to support, and it didn't pay the money I had to have to do the supporting job properly. So I telegraphed

him declining the offer and saying I would come to Washington to discuss the matter with him further. So I got into my trusty automobile and back to Washington I went on a second trip. That time, after pointing out my objections to the position offered, and again refusing to consider it, I asked if he had an organization chart prepared; whereupon one of the members of the staff he had already appointed, Mr. Dorsey Hyde, produced an organization chart which I examined, and on it I saw the position of Assistant Director of Archival Service and the salary in the range of what I was willing to consider. So I suggested if they would give me that position I would agree then and there to join the staff, otherwise I must bid Dr. Connor and Mr. Hyde good-bye and go back to Florida. They said they would give the matter further consideration and I would hear from them. To make a long story short, about two weeks later I got a telegram from Dr. Connor offering me the position I had selected. I accepted by return message. So that's the way I became a member of the staff.

BROOKS: Do you want to say anything, Marcus, about your early impressions of the Archives, the building, the people who had been employed to run it, or any other phases of it?

PRICE: Well, frankly I was overwhelmed by the building the first time I saw it, and I was very favorably impressed with most of the people on the staff as of that moment. One possible problem in the future of the new organization I could and did foresee was that while many members of the staff had excellent educational qualifications, they were lacking in the experience in the supervision of others, which I could visualize as raising difficulties in the future. It did in a few cases.

BROOKS: We have been talking about selection of people, the initial appointees. Would you say that there was much political influence, or that there was more professional backing for the people that were chosen?

PRICE: I think that there was some indication that political influence had been exerted to get positions for members of the staff. I think those members were relatively few as far as the high echelons are concerned. There were undoubtedly more in the lower grade positions. I felt also that quite a number of the well qualified younger men had been selected because of strong endorsements by their former instructors and professors. I could identify, and you probably could, who those professors and instructors were in connection with almost everyone on the staff. Well, as I said to Dr. Connor, I didn't want a political appointment. I wouldn't give up a job I was in, and making a living in, for something that might be ended at the end of four years.

BROOKS: When I sent you these questions I was still uncertain about the original organization of the staff. Since then I have found that Mr. Hyde wrote a memorandum to Dr. Connor, a few days before Harris came on the staff, in which Hyde described the functions of the various divisions in considerable detail. But he did not give much attention to what he called the "custodial divisions," and I think that made a problem later. Let me ask--Would you say that the functions of the principal officials were clearly defined without overlap or conflict?

PRICE: I don't recall any great amount of overlapping or conflict in the jobs of the principal officials. I do recall that apparently whoever set up those jobs did not make sufficient investigation of when the work would start in some cases which resulted in, well, the Director of Publications having no work to do for months because he had nothing to publish; and I recall that the Division of Classification got very little classifying done because the Director of that division could not seem to agree with anybody else as to terminology. The Catalog Division was set up long before there were any substantial number of records that could be cataloged.

BROOKS: Would you want to say anything about your relationship with Dorsey Hyde?

PRICE: I don't mind saying exactly what they were. Hyde was something of a problem. He certainly was not particularly easy to work with because he had an extremely jealous disposition and was--well, he was different, that's all. But I had no real break with him at any time.

BROOKS: Do you think he was effective as a Director?

PRICE: Honestly, I would have to say I do not think he was particularly so. I think the man tried hard, but I simply do not think he knew how to work with people too well.

BROOKS: Those of us down the line felt it was hard to get anything concrete from Mr. Hyde, he changed his mind and was very vague.

PRICE: I would agree with that.

BROOKS: Would you comment on relations with other prominent people on the staff?

PRICE: By and large I got along very well with other members of the staff. I recall that I was a strong advocate from the very beginning of the decentralization of such things as the preparation of finding aids by giving that work to the divisions in which the records were housed, and such other matters

as reference services and the finding of materials in the stacks. In fact it was on my recommendation, I believe, that Dr. Connor decided to decentralize these types of work and give it to the custodial divisions. This was about the time Nelson Vance Rusell, the first Chief of the Reference Division, decided to leave the staff and before departing, it gave him some consolation I suppose, to accuse me of having been a snake in the grass in this particular matter. I have never been a snake in the grass--I was very open in my endorsement of these policies and proud of them when they were adopted.

BROOKS: There is in the file a joint memorandum signed by you and Dr. Buck recommending the decentralization of these functions, and the abolition of the Classification and Reference and Catalog Divisions, and so on . . .

PRICE: I'd forgotten that. That's one of the few things the good Dr. and I ever agreed on.

BROOKS: Well, you worked closely with Dr. Buck a good many years. You were Chairman of the Committee on Finding Mediums, Buck was a member.

PRICE: Yes, a very active member; and Dr. Posner attended these meetings.

BROOKS: He wasn't a member . . .

PRICE: No, he sat in on the meetings, and I think frankly he was asked by Dr. Buck to sit in. Certainly I agreed with it because he had had practical experience working in the Prussian State Archives and could make suggestions in a field in which certainly I was not too experienced and I don't think any of the other members of the committee were. I think it was a great help to have Ernst Posner and I was pleased when I was given the opportunity before a committee of Congress to defend Dr. Posner from charges being inquired into by the Chairman of the Committee, I refer to the late Senator McKellar who cross examined Dr. Buck, (by then the Archivist), very vigorously if not viciously about having an alien enemy of the United States Government in the National Archives building, offering him free space with all our valuable records in his reach during war time. I also recall that the heat got so hot in the kitchen, as President Truman would put it, that Dr. Buck informed the Chairman, McKellar, --"We have here this morning before your Committee, Senator, one of the members of my staff who took the lecture courses Dr. Posner has been giving in the National Archives, and I am sure he will be willing to answer your questions as to whether Dr. Posner disseminated German propaganda at those lectures. I refer to my associate Mr. Marcus Price." Senator McKellar asked me if I had ever heard any pro-German propaganda disseminated at any such meeting or elsewhere by Dr. Ernst Posner,

to which I replied--(on second thought I believe the question was put by a very good friend of mine, Senator Maybank of South Carolina, who was also a member of the Committee)--I responded to the effect that I had never heard anything of the sort, and if I had I would have been the first to report it to Senator McKellar.

BROOKS: I am glad to hear you say that because I have always thought that Dr. Posner was very influential on Dr. Buck.

PRICE: He was . . .

BROOKS: Dr. Posner appeared before the Committee on Finding Mediums in 1940, and you remember Dr. Posner and Dr. Buck started the course at the American University--Administration of Archives in the fall of '39.

PRICE: Well, I'll tell you what I think about that--I think Buck naturally had had no opportunity to learn anything much about finding aids himself, and he got Posner there so he could pump him dry, that's exactly what it amounted to, in my opinion.

BROOKS: How about the relationship with what were originally called the Custodial Divisions (I thought that was an unfortunate name, it sort of down graded them--they not very long after became known as Records Divisions). As I remember it there was constantly a certain amount of contention between the chiefs of those divisions and the "front offices." I was on both ends of this at different times.

PRICE: Well, as you say in your written questions I was in the middle and do know a little bit about it. My answer to it would be that taking the heads of the custodial divisions and the heads of the so called front offices as a whole, there was no basic trouble. There were a few crack pots both in the front and in the rear, shall we say.

BROOKS: One of the important developments, Marcus, was the resignation and actual departure in September '41 of Dr. Connor as Archivist and his replacement as Archivist by Dr. Buck. Do you remember anything in particular about how or why that came about?

PRICE: I have a very vivid recollection of those happenings. Dr. Connor was not in very good health at the time he retired and he was concerned particularly about the investigation of one of the members of his staff being conducted by the Civil Service Commission at that time. And I think the President got concerned about the investigation. I believe Dr. Connor just had a belly full and quit, because of his illness and because of his worry of the investigation and possibly other matters.

BROOKS: Dr. Grover in 1950 I believe asked you to take over the Audio-visual Records Division and you were there for 10 years. It was a field, of course you had known about before hand because it was one of the records divisions which you were responsible for, but it wasn't a matter of particular interest on your part. What were your main challenges there, and did you eventually become more interested in it?

PRICE: Well a very challenging situation had arisen just prior to the time the third Archivist, Dr. Grover, asked me to take over as the head of the division. We had in our film vaults a very large quantity of so-called nitrate base motion picture film. This is a type of film that begins to deteriorate as soon as it is made, and once it starts cannot be stopped even by good storage facilities. Dr. Grover had been worried about what to do to save some of this valuable film, covering such subjects as World War II. There was a very considerable amount of World War II footage and some of the old World War I footage, and some of Rear Admiral Byrd's exploration films. A preliminary investigation had indicated that it would cost \$6 million to construct suitable film vaults for the housing of this material outside of the National Archives building, namely at Suitland, Maryland.

BROOKS: Did the pressure for the building of the film vaults come from any particular person or quarters?

PRICE: A recommendation that the film vaults be constructed had been made to Dr. Grover, who was concerned by the cost, and was by no means certain that that was the proper course of procedure--so he stated to me. I suggested to Dr. Grover that it would be better in my opinion, since we were not really aware of the exact coverage of much of the film to be housed, that it would be desirable and money saving if we could make a survey of all of the motion picture film we had in our custody, separate the valuable film from the valueless or relatively valueless film, of which there were quite a few. We could then appraise the value of the ones that seemed to be worth copying and having reached that determination set up a film copying project in our own film laboratory and do the job ourselves. It was possible, and I so suggested at the time, that the Signal Corps of the Army would be willing to copy for us some of the material that had originated with it. Later it proved that the Signal Corps would do this and did do it. To state the matter as briefly as possible, Dr. Grover approved my suggestion. The physical inspection and historical value surveys were made, in due course the lab was set up, and the job was completed at a cost of around \$300,000, which was after all a fairly respectable saving to the Government. It was done over a period of four years at a cost of less than \$300,000.

BROOKS: Did you actually develop an interest in audiovisual materials?

PRICE: Yes, I got quite interested in the job before we finished and I was particularly pleased by the fact that Dr. Grover was sufficiently appreciative to recommend that I be given a Meritorious Service Award for having supervised, and suggested in the first place, the conduct of the survey and the planning and the making of finding mediums that may be carried along with it. The award was made at the time of my retirement, in 1960.

BROOKS: When I first met you in 1935 we thought "well, here is the lawyer on the staff--that's the special competence that he brings." How much was that brought to bear?

PRICE: Well that's an interesting question. Actually there did not prove to be as much legal work as some people had anticipated. It is true that I prepared the drafts of several bills to be introduced in Congress (and on at least one occasion I know that somebody that never studied law a day in his life made certain changes on one of the drafts which struck me as amusing), but there was not really a great deal of legal work to be done. I did discuss various legal questions that came up in the Archives during the regime of the first Archivist of the United States, Dr. Connor. I read all of the testimony taken in the Civil Service investigation of one of the National Archives employees and advised the Archivist with respect to his handling of the matter. But by and large the chief effect of my being a lawyer seemed to create suspicion in the minds of certain professors--young professors in particular--and I do not refer to Dr. Brooks.

BROOKS: How about the relations of the Archives with President Roosevelt and President Truman?

PRICE: I know of my own knowledge that President Roosevelt was intensely interested in the National Archives, and when he died you may recall that his papers to go to the Library at Hyde Park, which had not then been completed, were in my personal care in the National Archives for about two years. I dealt with Miss Grace Tully and with Sam Rosenman and various other people. I don't recall having any dealings with Mr. Truman, however, I might say more or less irrelevantly that I am a great admirer of President Truman. I think history will prove him to be one of the greatest President's we have ever had.

BROOKS: I remember your telling me that while I was at the Truman Library. Collas Harris said that Mr. Truman visited the Archives while still a Senator, in the late 30's. Do you remember anything like that?

PRICE: No, I do not. He may have--I didn't see him.

BROOKS: And, of course, Roosevelt visited in 1937, and I think that Roosevelt and Dr. Connor had a good relationship.

Well, I would be interested in any comment on Wayne Grover as Archivist, or in any other aspect.

PRICE: I was very favorably impressed with Wayne Grover as the head of the National Archives as well as a person. You may recall that Wayne Grover, in the early days of the National Archives, was one if not the lowest paid white employees on the staff.

BROOKS: He started as CAF 1.

PRICE: I found Wayne had a great deal of common sense, which is an invaluable aid to a man serving as Archivist of the United States. I think his decisions, his policies were in the main wise. I am even so bold as to say that I think his asking me to do that job on the film conversion proved to be wise, though I didn't want to do it a damn bit.

BROOKS: You worked closely with Bahmer, did you not?

PRICE: Yes, I worked very closely with Bob Bahmer and I liked Bob, I thought he was a very capable and efficient person. I have nothing bad to say about him. The team of Grover and Bahmer was an excellent combination.

BROOKS: Now it was early in Grover's administration as Archivist that we came under the GSA when it was created. Would you agree that a good many of us felt that eventually we would be absorbed by something--the Hoover Commission was determined to cut down on the number of agencies reporting directly to the President...so we weren't too surprised to be absorbed into some other organization. But there were and are a good many differences of opinion as to whether GSA was the right place or not.

PRICE: Well, I have always asked myself that question, and I have doubted it very seriously. I don't know off hand where it would have been better to put the National Archives. I could see at the time that President Truman did it that he was being worked to death by having to read the reports of and having to deal with all these independent agencies, and I can appreciate his desire to get rid of so many of them. But just what we have to do with people who buy furniture and run trucks I'll be damned if I know. I still don't think it was a good place to put the Archives. And that won't make me very popular with GSA, but I don't care a hoot about that.

BROOKS: You aren't the only one that feels that way, and there are many different points of view and approaches to that question. A while ago, Marcus, I asked you what your first impressions of the National Archives were when you came in. What would you say now as to your feelings about the National Archives?

PRICE: I never believed that I could find a place to work that I would love as I have always, and still do, the National Archives. I enjoyed my work 99% plus of the time. I had very few difficulties with others in my between 24 and 25 years on the staff. I actually was almost ashamed to take my pay check because I had such a good time working there and I have nothing but the kindest feelings toward the place and with it go my best wishes.

BROOKS: Well I am sure that was always true, I can say, because I worked so closely with you for a good many years, at two different times that I was your assistant, and it was always a good working relationship.

PRICE: Well as far as you and I are concerned there was never anything but the best working relationship. I have always thought very highly of you and of your talents and I was delighted when you got the position as Director of the Harry S. Truman Library.

BROOKS: That was really fascinating.